

Ethnographies of Grey Zones  
in Eastern Europe

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# Ethnographies of Grey Zones in Eastern Europe

Relations, Borders and Invisibilities

Edited by Ida Harboe Knudsen  
and  
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## Chapter 4

# BROKERING THE GREY ZONES: PURSUITS OF FAVOURS IN A BOSNIAN TOWN

*Čarna Brković*

Jelena, a twenty-something law student from Bijeljina, a town in Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereon: Bosnia), told me one day in 2009 that if she ever got pregnant, she would ask Amela for help during the delivery. Amela was a medical doctor and her acquaintance living in Tuzla, a Bosnian town located less than an hour's drive away from Bijeljina across the Inter-Entity Boundary Line (that is, the internal Bosnian administrative border). Jelena's personal relationship with Amela was forged during several seminars on civil society and peace building they attended together. Discussing her lack of enthusiasm for Bosnian public healthcare, Jelena half-jokingly said: 'Naturally, I'll go to see Amela, I don't want these people here in Bijeljina to mutilate me.' Jelena did not really think there was a danger of being 'mutilated' during the future potential delivery, but she was convinced that a personal relationship with a medical doctor was a 'must' (*moranje*) in order to access decent healthcare. If something went wrong, Jelena said, Amela would do everything she could to help her because they were friends. This personal relationship carried more weight for Jelena than the fact that she and Amela lived in different Bosnian entities,<sup>1</sup> that they belonged to different ethnonational groups,<sup>2</sup> or that Jelena would most probably have to pay, officially, for the service out of her own pocket, because her official healthcare insurance did not cover procedures in Tuzla.<sup>3</sup> It went almost without saying that she would also give a gift to Amela, as a token of gratitude and as a mark of their friendship.

Most people during my fieldwork in Bijeljina, conducted in 2009–10, similarly claimed that a personal relationship with doctors (as well as with social workers, municipal officials, state bureaucrats and so forth) was the most important thing for getting anything done with a degree of quality. It seemed that whenever people in Bijeljina needed to access a public service

(a healthcare treatment, social welfare provision, an official document, a job and so on) they followed institutional procedures *and* utilised personalised relations. These personalised relations are called *veze* (singular: a *veza*, literally meaning ‘relation’, as well as ‘connection’) or *štele* (singular: a *štela*, literally meaning ‘a relation that needs to be fixed’). My interlocutors also complained about the ‘system’ and the state, which pushed them to rely on such pursuits – they frequently talked about the local welfare systems and Bosnia itself as being dysfunctional, clientelist and corrupt. Bijeljinci (residents of Bijeljina) repeatedly claimed that ‘*ne možeš naći posao bez veze*’ (you can’t get job without relations), ‘*ne možeš se liječiti bez veza*’ (you can’t get healthcare treatment without relations), ‘*kod nas sve može i ništa ne može*’ (here, everything is possible and nothing is possible), ‘*u ovoj državi ništa ne radi*’ (nothing works in this state) and so forth.

Taking the notion of grey zones as an analytical prism, this chapter does not interpret *veze/štele* as remnants of Yugoslav socialism or as side-effects of a stalled postwar and postsocialist transformation. Instead, it approaches these relations ‘as something in and of themselves’ (see Harboe Knudsen and Frederiksen’s introduction to this volume) – as relationships that allow people to actively negotiate the best possible welfare in the grey zone that marks the boundary between Bosnian ‘state’ and ‘society’. Taking a cue from Alexander’s (2002) emphasis on brokering as a practice of negotiating among different sets of knowledge and experience, this chapter suggests that Bosnians’ widespread pursuit of *veze/štele* can be understood as an attempt to ‘personalise the state’. That is, *veze/štele* include an active effort by people to locate themselves at the ‘intersections’, rather than ‘interstices’, of shifting and shrinking networks linking people to the state (Alexander 2002). Welfare arrangements, in Bosnia as elsewhere, are ambiguously positioned between a legal obligation of the state and the personal compassion of socially located persons. By pursuing welfare through *veze/štele*, Bijeljinci confirmed their (unequal) sociopolitical positions and senses of self, while navigating their way through the grey zones of intersections and interstices of the state and society.

### **The Grey Zones of Welfare**

There was a widespread impression among Bijeljina’s residents that practically everybody pursued *veze/štele*, for oneself or for someone else. In a piece of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) research from 2008–09, 95 per cent of over sixteen hundred people across Bosnia said that *veze/štele* were required for access to public, state-run services (Nixon 2009, 79). The participants of the UNDP research identified job



searching and healthcare as two key fields in which *veze/štele* were important. In the eyes of my interlocutors from Bijeljina, Bosnia appeared largely to be a ‘network state’, a state in which semiformal connections and clientelist networks ‘can be found both *outside* the state institutions but also incorporated *within* and *passing through* institutional divisions such as ministries and administrative hierarchies’ (Kononenko and Moshes 2011, 6, emphasis added). They claimed that *veze/štele* worked through the state institutions, not just separately from or outside of them.

Furthermore, *veze/štele* have also come to be an important element in the work of various international actors in Bosnia. The international community has been present in the country since the 1992–95 war, and consists of various humanitarian and developmental organisations, nongovernmental, governmental and intergovernmental agencies, and so forth. Its role in the country is personified by the Office of the High Representative (OHR).<sup>4</sup> The international community has been guided by a set of goals that include the development of civil society and the return of displaced persons and refugees to their former homes, in order to create a workable, multiethnic state with a pluralistic, democratic and market-based system (Bougarel, Helms and Duijzings 2007). Bougarel, Helms and Duijzings emphasise that, in attempting to reach these goals, ‘the international community places strong political pressure on nationalists, but at the same time indirectly contributes to the financing of their clientelistic networks’ (2007, 28; see also Deacon and Stubbs 1998 and Pugh 2003). New research indicates that the international organisations and actors in Bosnia even tend to use a ‘*štele*’ way of relating in their internal affairs and decisions about employment (Koutkova forthcoming).

Numerous reasons exist for such fusion of personal relationships with the work of public actors, especially in the field of welfare. On the one hand, over the past two decades Bosnia has been undergoing postwar transformation alongside postsocialist transformation (Gilbert 2006). Under the close supervision of – and with financial assistance from – the international community, Bosnian state authorities and various international and local, public and private actors have engaged, with various degrees of success, in peace reconciliation processes (Duijzings 2007; Helms 2003), the reversal of war-related ethnic cleansing (Jansen 2011), the reconstruction and privatisation of public property (Jansen 2006), the construction of civil society (Stubbs 2007), state building and Europeanisation (Coles 2007; Helms 2006), and so forth.

The profound transformations of Bosnia have redefined the relationship between the state and society in ways that are hard to predict and control. However, attempts to personalise the state should not be understood as the results of the inconsistencies that abounded in the Bosnian postwar and postsocialist transformations. In other words, *veze/štele* should not

be understood as reasonable and sensible strategies that people use to overcome the faults of 'improper' markets or 'aberrations' in a developing democracy – because such an interpretation implicitly defines how politics and economy ought to work in a 'proper' state.

Instead, if we take them as 'something in and of themselves', the very need to broker access to public welfare and to personalise the state could be understood as a contextually specific way of enacting globalised changes in what the state is, how it relates to society and what it should be responsible for. Politics of survival and wellbeing are increasingly changing shape across the world (Fassin 2012; Fraser 2003; Ticktin 2011). In many contexts healthcare and social protection are increasingly moving away from something that the state is legally obligated to provide to all its residents and towards self-responsibility, flexibility, compassion and moral duty (Clarke 2004; Rose 2006; Stubbs and Zrinščak 2011). Du Gay demonstrates that new models of public management in UK welfare include sidelining traditional bureaucratic indifference in favour of an 'ethic of care for the other' (2008, 342), which means encouraging officials to conduct their administrative duties with a sense of compassion. In Italy responsibility for survival and wellbeing has gradually shifted from a legal obligation of the state to a matter of personal moral duty and humanitarian sentiment (Muehlebach 2012). Various actors that merge private economic and political interests with public interests are redefining the roles and responsibilities of the state, in the West as much as in Eastern Europe (Wedel 2009).

Similar changes can be traced in the welfare reforms in Bosnia as well. Public welfare has been continually changing in Bosnia since the early 1990s, as a part of broader postwar and postsocialist transformations. Efforts to 'build' the Bosnian state went hand in hand with attempts to redefine its meanings and practices. The state did not withdraw from people's lives, as much as it altered its roles, functions and relations with nonstate actors. Informed by persistent global modifications of the politics of survival and wellbeing, the internationally supervised reforms of the Bosnian public welfare system redefined the state's roles and responsibilities for people's survival and wellbeing (Deacon and Stubbs 2007). As a result, in the grey zone of Bosnian welfare arrangements, 'transformations have created a taken-for-granted reality of ambiguity' (Frederiksen and Harboe Knudsen, this volume). Instead of attempting to create a welfare system that evenly targets all Bosnian citizens, the reforms conducted within the complex administrative division of Bosnia have led to a situation where Bosnian state institutions provide some welfare services to only some citizens, based on their territorial residence (Maglajlić and Rašidagić 2007), as well as on the basis of personal relationships between public officials and citizens (Brković

2014). The ‘uneven allocation of citizenship, which confers particular rights on some whilst denying those rights to others’ (Stubbs and Zrinščak 2011, 6), is as much a consequence of the postsocialist reforms informed by various neoliberal policies as of clientelist politics or legacies of Yugoslav socialism. Leaving more than 25 per cent of Bosnians without any healthcare insurance (Maglajlić and Rašidagić 2011), the reforms have pushed many to cultivate social relations with ‘the right people’ when looking for healthcare. In such a context *veze/štele* provide a locally specific, historically meaningful way to actively manage one’s own survival and wellbeing. By enabling people to be both citizens and socially located persons, *veze/štele* offer a way to navigate ambiguous conditions of the politics of survival and wellbeing in Bosnia.

### **Lack of Formal Consistency**

Pursuits of *veze/štele* in Bosnia do not lend themselves easily to anthropological theorising, even though ‘routing relations through persons [has become] the substance of anthropological empiricism’ (Strathern 1995, 12). Speaking in very general terms, one of the most prominent analytical moves in social anthropology is to expose social relations and historically grounded practices by which the state, sex, gender, kinship, nation, body or the economy are produced and, through that, to undermine their presumable natural and self-evident qualities. The challenge with *veze/štele* is that it is almost vulgarly explicit that they are relations – they are literally called ‘relations’ in Bosnia – and that they are involved in reproduction of personhoods, of the social order and of the state (cf. Dunn 2004; Humphrey 2012). But *how exactly* they do this is often blurred when looked at through anthropological lenses. Such informal relations may challenge boundaries between ‘corruption’ and ‘friendship’ (Haller and Shore 2005), or ‘commodities’ and ‘gifts’ (Rivkin-Fish 2005; Stan 2012). *Veze/štele* have different degrees of formality and are not institutionalised, but they operate throughout institutions (Ledeneva 2006). They shape people’s sense of self, but the systems that work through *veze/štele* may be despised – as is the case in Bosnia. And so forth.

Miller (2007) suggests that there are very few anthropological analytical tools through which social relations themselves can be looked at. Miller’s argument is that anthropologists increasingly use the term ‘relationship’ without specifying what they mean by it. He suggests that the concept of a ‘social relationship’ contains a ‘basic contradiction between its own normative aspect [...] and the actual entity that constitutes that person at the time’, and argues for a dialectic approach that focuses ‘upon the discrepancy between this diversity of practice and the retained formality of [the] ideal’, of what a relation ought to be (Miller 2007, 552). Similarly, Strathern (1995) shows

that there are two disparate senses of relation – between ideas (its normative, formal sense) and between persons (its concrete, experiential sense) – and argues that anthropology draws conclusions about one (the abstract) from the other (the concrete).

This is where the challenge I have mentioned lies. Concrete pursuits of *veze/štele* do not reveal an abstract, formal consistency, since, in my experience, they depended on the person who was making the pursuit and the people he or she could get in touch with. Similarly to *blat* in Russia, what one *veza/štela* (relationship) entails another *veza/štela* does not have to (cf. Ledeneva 1998). For instance, it made sense for Jelena to plan to ask a person of a different ethnonational background (such as Amela) for help, because Jelena was very critical towards the widespread ethnonational politics in Bosnia (see Husanović 2011; Mujkić 2007). However, very few of my other interlocutors made similar assertions, while some explicitly stated that, taking into account war-related experiences and resentments, it was best not to expect Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks to provide favours ‘to one another’. Thus, *veze/štele* sometimes reproduce ethnonational categories and people’s sense of who they are as ethnonational beings – but this is not the case always and for everybody. As we will see, for Marija (another of my interlocutors, whose pursuit will be addressed in more detail later on) ethnonational identity was almost irrelevant in her attempt to secure a desired medical treatment for her mother. However, gendered relations gained importance in her pursuit, visible in the fact that her mother’s doctor started flirting with Marija and that she was not sure what to do about this. Thus, *veze/štele* can involve sexist expectations – but, again, not always and not for everybody.

With regard to *blat* in Russia, and taking a cue from Wittgenstein, Ledeneva (1998) calls this ‘family likeness’ or ‘family resemblance’. In this ‘family likeness’ type of relationship, entities we consider to be related do not have to have a single defining feature; instead, there is ‘a complicated network of similarities and relationships overlapping and criss-crossing’ (Ledeneva 1998, 38). The same can be said about *veze/štele* – these terms do not refer to a single, distinct type of a relationship, but to a broad sum of similar and criss-crossed relations.

In order to go beyond such a lack of formal consistency, this chapter looks at what *veze/štele* do ‘in and of themselves’, as an element of a grey zone between the state and society. Instead of addressing how *veze/štele* in postsocialist Bosnia may be theorised ‘for critiquing fundamental concepts in western social science’ (Rogers 2010, 13), including the ‘state’, ‘market’ or ‘corruption’, my aim is to explore how these relations work in everyday dealings with public welfare. In the ambiguous, grey zone between the state and society, *veze/štele* can be understood as a form of brokering practice. If

they do not fit into distinct domains, it is precisely because *veze/štele* enable different people to cross domains – they allow Bosnians to actively work on getting as good a welfare provision as possible by negotiating different sets of knowledge and experience implicated in Bosnian welfare. As complex and recursive as any other kind of a relation is (Strathern 1995), *veze/štele* offer a contextually specific way to actively pursue ambiguous forms of welfare protection.

### **Different People Broker in Different Ways**

For my interlocutors, engagements with public welfare, such as a visit to a doctor, often involved a lot of effort and sometimes a transferral of trust and knowledge. For instance, Marija contacted a large number of people – her family and friends, work colleagues and acquaintances – trying to find someone who could personally link her to relevant doctors. She had no prior clientelist bond in this context; rather, she got in touch with all the people who might have been helpful in finding one. In general, even when they could not find an appropriate *veza/štela*, Bijeljinci attempted to personalise the public healthcare system. When my interlocutors discussed their healthcare issues, one of the most prominent topics in conversation were persons. People did not necessarily talk at length about the symptoms of a medical condition or about the details of a treatment, but they avidly discussed medical doctors, nursing staff, their spouses, children and so forth. Oftentimes, people even remembered the names of former professors and mentors of medical doctors. Such efforts to personalise the relationship with an institution, preferably through a *veza/štela*, are very similar to the practice of brokering.

In her discussion of relationships between the state and society in eastern Turkey, Alexander (2002) suggests that brokering presents the practice of coordinating between related (but distinctive) orders of knowledge and meaning in a way that secures the highest benefits for the broker and the actors he or she represents. In Erzurum, a city in eastern Turkey, different orders of knowledge and meaning included local village social worlds, the state apparatus at the periphery and the more centralised manifestations of the state:

Systems of meaning in villages coexist with central and local state constructions. Without a broker adept in making each system of meaning understandable to the others, villagers risk being caught in the interstices rather than the intersections of networks of communications that might connect them to the state. (Alexander 2002, 150)

The broker's role in this context was to navigate and translate across unpredictable and complex separations and comings together of the state apparatus and local sociality, in a way that enabled villagers to establish links with the state. The brokering role was institutionalised, in the sense that the broker was nominally a salaried state official, as well as a person appointed by village election, whose payment came from the contributions of villagers.

In Bijeljina, on the other hand, the broker was not a single person; most of my interlocutors pursued *veze/štele*. Everybody seemed to broker something, for oneself or someone else. Despite their lack of formal consistency, *veze/štele* had something in common – they allowed people to actively negotiate as good a provision of public welfare as possible, by translating the language of citizenship and legal obligation into a language of personal relations and moral duties, and back again. In the grey zone of quickly transforming relations between the state and society, *veze/štele* enabled people to personalise public welfare and healthcare systems and to be 'proactive', both as citizens and as socially located persons.

The work of Edmund Leach is useful for thinking about the practice of brokering. Leach (1993) makes a distinction between metonymical and metaphorical relations. In his terminology, a *metonymical link* between the entities A and B exists when A and B belong to the same 'code', or the same 'order'. The link between written musical notes is metonymical, since they belong to the same code of music notation. The link between the letters B and C is also metonymical, since they belong to the same 'context' of the English alphabet. On the other hand, a *metaphorical link* between the entities A and B exists when A and B do not share the same context, or the same order. The relation between musical notes written on a paper and the finger movements of a musician is metaphorical, since these two do not belong to the same code but require the translation of one (notes) into the other (finger movements).

In Leach's terms, *veze/štele* are metaphorical relations (rather than metonymical): people use *veze/štele* to translate the bureaucratic language of citizenship into the language of personalised relations and social positions, and back again. While nationalist Bosnian politicians often merge the two, discussing statehood in terms of kinship, the everyday dominant language in many public bureaucracies is one of 'socially produced indifference' (Herzfeld 1993) – that is, until one can find a *veza/štela* within a public institution. *Veze/štele* allow Bosnian inhabitants to actively pursue welfare not just as citizens, but also as gendered, ageing, nationalised, racialised beings. In my experience people constantly attempted to make metaphorical links: to be recognised by the state actors as citizens as well as socially located persons.

This is why people used to say that *everything is possible and nothing is possible*: what matters at one point for one person does not have to matter at another point for a different person. The grey zone at the boundary of the Bosnian state is not blurry, but rather moving and changing, depending on the person making the pursuit and the people being pursued. This might seem like a small difference, but I think it is important. ‘Blurry’ suggests a lack of distinction and a lack of shape. However, as we will see, Marija’s pursuit of healthcare was quite distinctive in comparison with the pursuits of most men: she had to kiss someone in order to get what she needed. The kind of *veze/štele* people are able to pursue depends on their social position and location. Getting access to public resources through *veze/štele* is *different for different people*. People’s social positions, personal histories and knowledge shape the ways in which they can broker access to public welfare. Keeping that in mind, let us turn to another pursuit of *veze/štele* in the town of Bijeljina.

### **Marija’s Pursuit**

One late and warm June afternoon in 2010, I was having a drink with Marija, a 28-year-old retail worker, and Marko, a 32-year-old bank employee. Marija and I had come to Marko’s new home to congratulate him on deciding to move away from his parents and to rent a nicely furnished one-bedroom apartment. While we were drinking coffee, the discussion revolved around our parents and, inevitably, Marija’s mother, who had recently had two heart attacks in a row. Since she was at a high risk of having a third and possibly fatal heart attack, Marija’s mother was on the agenda of the next *konzilijum*. The *konzilijum* was a regular meeting of medical practitioners working in the same hospital, who made decisions about demanding cases. The *konzilijum* had to decide whether Marija’s mother would stay in Bijeljina’s local hospital or go to Tuzla or Belgrade for a surgical procedure.

Marija saw this as a matter of life or death of her mother – she did not want her to stay in Bijeljina’s hospital, so she was frantically looking for a *veza/štela* to the members of the *konzilijum*. This task was difficult, since she did not know who those people were. Marija knew that her mother’s doctor was in the *konzilijum*, but she was not sure he would recommend her for a procedure beyond the boundaries of the local healthcare system. Marija said that, although the doctor was married, he flirted with her without subtlety, and that she was not sure what to do about it. As we were chain-smoking and listening to Marija’s ordeal, Marko mentioned that his mother had a cousin who was married to a doctor employed in Bijeljina’s hospital. This piece of information changed the atmosphere in the room. Marija calmly, but firmly,

asked Marko to call his mother and ask for the cousin's phone number. The next hour was spent in phone conversations between Marko and his mother, Marija and Marko's mother, Marko and his cousin, and Marija and the cousin. The cousin said her husband was away, but promised she would let him know about Marija and her mother.

By that point, we reasoned that even if the cousin's husband was not in the *konzilijum* (and thus not a direct *veza/štela*), he knew who the *konzilijum* members were. The smallest possible benefit of this afternoon event would be gaining this information about who the members were; the largest possible benefit would be influencing the *konzilijum* to send Marija's mother to another hospital. Not knowing what would happen, Marija called Marko several times over the following days, while Marko kept calling his cousin until he reached her husband, who promised to do whatever he could to help Marija's mother.

Marko was not the only person helping Marija to find a *veza*. When Marija took her mother to Bijeljina's hospital for the first time, she called friends to keep her company while she was waiting in front of the hospital. One of those friends called me to join them. While we were sitting on the bench in the hospital's yard, Marija made a dozen phone calls to her friends and work colleagues to let them know about her mother and to ask whether they had a strong *veza* in the hospital. Some of those people had some sort of a *veza/štela* in the hospital and Marija pursued those *veze/štele* further.

In the end Marija's mother was sent to Tuzla for a surgical procedure – which was an excellent solution in Marija's opinion. Marija bought a painting for her mother's doctor as a token of gratitude and, after a couple of months, she mentioned that, once, she almost kissed him on the lips.

### **Don't Blame the Player, Blame the Game: *Veze/Štele* and Their Discontents**

Being different for different people, *veze/štele* refer to a wide array of criss-crossed social relations, from relations between close family and the closest friends, to those between people who do not know one another personally but through someone else. As we have seen, the relations Jelena planned to pursue were different from those brokered by Marija. To put it simply, Jelena and Marija had to broker in different ways because their social locations were different; they were different people. However, there was something that was the same for both Jelena and Marija. They had to actively work on brokering among different orders of knowledge and experience in order to get the healthcare they desired, while the exact shape of this brokering – the 'codes' and 'paths' that were available to them – depended on who and where they were socially.



Arguing against an interpretation of favours as a primarily economic activity, Humphrey (2012) suggests that the ‘veering’ way of doing things in Mongolia and Russia persists because it shapes people’s senses of self. Favours among Mongolians and Russians ‘bring into being indefinitely lasting relationships and circles of relations, and they confer a sense of self-worth within these arenas’ (Humphrey 2012, 37). In this, she follows the direction of Dunn’s (2004) argument that the system of favours in Poland, called *znajomości*, offers a way to interpret personhood as a composite of social relations. When people engage in *znajomości*, they reproduce their personhoods as entities embedded in and constituted from multiple links with other human beings (see also Auyero 2001; Auyero, Lapegna, and Page Poma 2009; Morris and Polese 2014). Alexander also suggests that understanding how people connect to one another requires ‘a parallel exploration of personhood’ (2002, 22) – because personhood, as a sociohistorically situated sense of self, emerges from sets of relationships. In a similar manner *veze/štele* in Bosnia cannot be encapsulated by the field of economic activity. The pursuits discussed in this chapter were more than economic strategies, for they shaped who people were and how they perceived one another. *Veze/štele* recreated people’s social positions, subjectivities and unequal power relations. But, there is an important difference from Humphrey’s case, located in the widespread criticism people directed towards the state for necessitating that things had to be done in a veering way.

Humphrey notes that in Mongolia, people ‘are used to, prefer, and value highly acting in this [veering] way’ (2012, 24). However, people do not need to appreciate or like the strings that shape them in order to be shaped by them (cf. Larson 2008). Rather than valuing it, in Bijeljina my interlocutors criticised the state, which pushed people to pursue jobs and healthcare through *veze/štele*. They discussed *veze/štele* as a strategy one used when one had to, and they criticised the ‘system’ for such ‘abnormality’. This criticism was, indeed, a way to remove the responsibility for *veze/štele* from oneself to the system, the state or society. It can be summarised by the idea to ‘not blame the player, but blame the game’. Still, this criticism revealed that while the Bosnians I spoke to may have been shaped by *veze/štele*, they did not like pursuing them. Instead, they expressed yearnings for a ‘normal state’ – that is, for predictability and certainty in everyday life (Jansen 2015).

Therefore, I suggest that *veze/štele* persist in Bosnia not because people prefer getting things done through them, but because *veze/štele* are implicated in the reproduction of power relations and, through that, subjectivities. The kinds of *veze/štele* you can access reveals how powerful you are – they

illuminate the social worlds through which you can broker and reproduce your position within them.

## Conclusion

This chapter has approached *veze/štele* as a form of brokering. These relations offer people a historically meaningful way to actively work on protecting their own survival and wellbeing, and thus to ensure they will be located at the intersections, rather than the interstices, of the Bosnian state apparatus. I have used Leach's terms to suggest that *veze/štele* are not metonymical relations, those which connect entities of the same order and the same code. They are, rather, metaphorical relations that enable people to broker across state and society and to navigate various personal expectations and institutional requirements.

Among my interlocutors the success of the pursuit of *veze/štele* depended on many things – on the kind of a favour one needed (a permanent job in a state institution, a visit to a doctor, a passport, to be included on the list of welfare recipients); on the kind of already-existing relationship between the pursuer and his or her *veza/štela* (how close they were, how well connected they were, how much they appreciated one another); on the respective social positions of the pursuer and his or her *veza/štela*; on the prior relations among people connecting them, and so forth. There was no recipe for *veze/štele*, but rather a variety of possibilities. For instance, it was impossible to know with certainty whether the *konzilijum* would have made the decision to send Marija's mother to another healthcare centre without any external influence, or which of the *veze/štele* Marija pursued was the most useful. In order to increase her mother's chances of survival, Marija had to be a broker who translated institutional rules and procedures of eligibility into personal fondness and willingness to help. Marija's ordeal does not indicate a 'recipe' for a successful outcome as much as it illuminates the importance of the pursuit itself.

I have suggested that these pursuits of relations were resilient to change not because people prefer conducting them – indeed, my interlocutors openly criticised the system working in the veering way. Instead, they persist because they are implicated in power relations and the reproduction of senses of self.

That such efforts to 'personalise the state' have significant effects on the distribution of public resources reveals that the boundary between the state and society in Bosnian welfare is a grey zone, a context where 'the emergence of such forms of suspicion, doubt, uncertainty and ambiguity may gain a sense of *ordinariness*' (Frederiksen and Harboe Knudsen, this

volume). In the Bosnian ‘welfare assemblages’ (Lendvai and Stubbs 2009) exceptions and ambiguities abound, reflecting not just residues of local historical legacies – or complexities of postwar administrative divisions to entities, cantons, and the district – but also neoliberal ideas about the state’s responsibility for welfare (cf. Collier 2011; Stubbs 2014). Although *vezel/štele* are certainly shaped by legacies of Yugoslav socialist bureaucratic systems (cf. Horvat 1969), they should not be understood as traces of the ‘local’ and the ‘culturally specific’, hidden within the (internationally supervised) modernisation of the Bosnian state. Instead, they allow Bosnians to enact, in a locally meaningful way, various new ideas about self-responsible, proactive and flexible citizenry, created during the postwar and postsocialist transformation. *Veze/štele* turn the exceptional into the rule and the indefinable into the norm – and this is where their contemporary importance should be looked for.

Getting welfare protection often depends on someone’s personal will, compassion and judgement. The inability to know whether the desired state services and funds will be available – and if so, in what way – has become a rule, rather than an exception. Brokering access to healthcare and social welfare in Bosnia enables a clientelist modality of power to flourish: some people can decide whether or not to grant access to public resources to other people on the basis of good will and personal judgement. Navigating the ‘net’, that is, pursuing all people who can potentially be a *veza/štela*, is the way to deal with this uncertainty – although it recreates uncertainty every step of the way.

## Notes

- 1 The state of Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of two entities officially created at the end of the 1992–95 war: the Republic of Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bijeljina is located in the Republic of Srpska, while Tuzla is located in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- 2 Jelena sometimes talked about herself as a Bosnian Serb and sometimes as a Bosnian citizen who does not want to have any ethnonationality, while she saw Amela as a Bosnian citizen and, ethnonationally, as a Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim).
- 3 Bijeljina and Tuzla belong to different healthcare systems within Bosnia – Bijeljina is a part of the healthcare system of the Republic of Srpska, while Tuzla is a part of the healthcare system of the Tuzla canton in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia has 13 different healthcare systems, which coincide with its internal administrative entity, cantonal and district boundaries.
- 4 The OHR is an international institution set up after the 1992–95 war to oversee the implementation of the peace agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It has strong governmental functions, which include the potential to enact laws and to remove elected officials from state positions.

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