

5 Flexibility of Veze/Štele

Negotiating Social Protection in Bijeljina

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A parent's biggest desire is for her child to die a day before her. What will happen to our children after we are gone?

(Magdalena,¹ a parent from The Sun)

Magdalena, a mother of a teenage boy with developmental difficulties, said this during a meeting at The Sun, a NGO working with children with developmental difficulties and their parents in Bijeljina, a town in BiH, on the border with Serbia. Just like had happened in many other BiH towns, Bijeljina's social workers from the Centre for Social Protection (the Centre), a state-run institution for administering social protection, registered The Sun in the early 2000s as a kind of substitution for a day-care centre for children with developmental difficulties. This was a poor substitute, because at the time of my research in 2009 and 2010, the parents could bring their children to The Sun only twice a week for 2 hours to play with each other and to work with special pedagogues. There were between 15 and 20 parents, all mothers, who took their children to The Sun regularly. While the children were working with the special pedagogues, I sat with the parents in a separate room, where we were drinking coffee, smoking and talking. Our chats at the organisation often included racy language and revolved around parents' daily problems as much as around other people in the town. The women discussed their children's dietary regimes, medical experiences and encounters with social workers. They also shared detailed information about other people – they discussed others' failed marriages and past love affairs, birthplaces, war experiences and work colleagues, and they regularly adjudicated what kind of a person someone was and how connected this person was within the town. The Sun was a place where they engaged in relational labour (Baym 2014), especially with social workers, and gained useful information about changes in social protection through personal contacts.

The parents shared very few social positions. One had a law degree, one was a trained nurse, other women were educated up to secondary, high-school level. The majority of them perceived themselves as Serbs, but there were also women who perceived themselves as Bosnian Muslims or Bosniaks, and one perceived herself as a Croat. There were women who were in their late twenties and some who were approaching their fifties. Some of them had been victims of heavy family abuse, while others had harmonious families. Their children also had very different disabilities, and some had more than one.

Despite these differences, all parents shared the difficulties that came with the 2000s policy changes that replaced the former Yugoslav 'medical' model of social protection for people with disabilities with a 'social model of social protection' (*socijalni model socijalne zaštite*). While the 'medical model treats disability as a medical problem, and therefore puts emphasis on treatment, rehabilitation and correction', the social model 'emphasizes responsibility of society to provide adequate support and to accept disability-difference' (Anonymous 2008: 21). Or, in the words of one developmental expert during an educational seminar on this topic organised in Bijeljina by the Banja Luka Centre for Social Protection in 2009, the post-war 'social model' included dispersion of responsibility for social protection from the state towards the 'whole community' (*cijela zajednica*). The basic principle of the 'social model' was to have different actors in private and civic sectors taking responsibility for different aspects of social protection, while the state legally regulates and coordinates cooperation across sectors. The important thing for social protection now, as the same developmental expert said, was to have good managers running things, connecting people and lobbying for shared goals.

Despite developmental experts' promises of improvement, in practice the 'social model' meant that women from The Sun had almost no support outside of their families. With 41 KM (approximately €20), the basic social provision in the municipality of Bijeljina was more than ten times lower than the average salary at the time.² Most parents were unable to enter paid employment – someone had to take care of their children and many of them had been abandoned by husbands or partners after their child was born. Additionally, interpersonal relations shaped the delivery of social protection. Certain social workers from the Centre stopped their statutory visits to two different women from The Sun because of personal animosity (in the case of one woman) and a fight from years ago (with another woman). Also, Bijeljina's Centre had no technical means to distribute information about new provisions among all its users in a timely manner. As a result, the parents had to cultivate friendly relations with the social workers who ran The Sun in order to learn what they had a right to apply for. All these things formed an environment in which a desire for your child to die a bit before you could be articulated – as Magdalena's words suggest. When Magdalena said this, other parents present at the meeting agreed with her. One of them added: 'Yes... who will take care of them after we are gone?'

While a mother's desire for a child to die a bit before her may appear as a reflection of a neoliberal 'politics of failed sociality' (Giroux 2011), the simultaneous post-war and post-socialist neoliberal transformations of social protection in BiH did not simply cut off sociality, or the state, from the everyday lives of users. Collier (2011) suggests that 'critical conventional wisdom' about neoliberalism approaches it as an intellectual movement to define and transform the state into a 'post-social' entity – a dispersed and localised coordinator mediating actions of various profit-oriented actors. Criticising this perspective in his analysis of Russian post-socialist transformations, Collier approaches neoliberalism in the frame of biopolitics: 'as a form of reflection that arose precisely

in response to the problems of the social state, and a source of proposals for criticizing and reprogramming the social state' (Collier 2011: 19). Similarly, Muehlebach (2011) argues that 'the neoliberal present' in contemporary Italy did not induce a radical historical break with past welfare arrangements; instead, it is dependent on, and intertwined with, practices, logics and affects usually associated with the Fordist welfare state. Taking a cue from this, in this chapter I explore how the simultaneous post-war and post-socialist transformations in BiH (Gilbert 2006) encouraged particular forms of sociality and agency within state-organised social protection, including forms such as *veze* (literally: relations, connections) and *štele* (literally: relations and connections that had to be fixed). Read and Thelen (2007) emphasise that imagery of state withdrawal is analytically problematic for thinking about east European post-socialist transformations, because various state bodies, actors and institutions continue to shape welfare in complex and contradictory ways. In their reading, the problem is not so much that the state was lost for welfare, but that it has changed roles and responsibilities of ensuring survival and wellbeing in new ways.

Similarly, in BiH, the post-socialist transformations, alongside the complex post-war administrative divisions of the state apparatus, did not cause the state to withdraw from the life of its citizens. Instead, the state has become, in a sense, personalised (Alexander 2002). Maglajlić-Holiček and Rašidagić (2007) stress that, due to the Dayton administrative division of BiH and the resulting 13 ministries for health care and social protection, the sort of welfare support people could get depended on where they resided. None of the responsibilities for welfare were afforded to the country-level institutions by the BiH Constitution, which strengthened the role of supra-national and international, as well as entity-based and municipal institutions, for the organisation of social protection (Stubbs 2001). This means that some state social protection services and provisions became available to some BiH citizens, but not others. Furthermore, the introduction of the 'social model' of social protection, reflected in the medium term development strategy for BiH and its action plan from the mid-2000s, defined the 'local community' as the key unit in their framework for providing social protection. Since the early 2000s, funds for social protection in the entity of Republika Srpska have been transferred to the municipal budgets and the so-called third sector (Maglajlić Holiček and Rašidagić 2007).³ This means that municipal governments – and consequently the party politics – had a very important role, because the municipalities decided the amount of the basic welfare provision, whether to introduce special provisions and, if so, how high a special provision would be and how many people would get it.

Such post-war redefinitions of social protection as a responsibility of the 'local community' reinforced the ambiguity of whether this is a legal obligation of the state or a matter of personal goodwill on the part of socially located actors within public and private sectors. The ambiguous ground of

social protection pushed people to become good managers running things, connecting people and lobbying for shared goals. *Veze* and *štele* were crucial for this, because they enabled people to adapt flexibly to different expectations and to invoke personal knowledge and compassion when negotiating services and provisions they felt they were entitled to. As we will soon see, the disturbing parental question of *What will happen with the children after [we are gone]?* could as well be read as: 'Who will pursue *veze* for the children after we are gone?'. The post-war neoliberal transformations of BiH encouraged the 'intrusion' of the sociality of kinship, friendship and patronage into the state arenas. Neoliberalism has reordered sociality in BiH and created new kinds of ambivalent relations and new kinds of desires (cf. Jašarević 2012b).

Ignorance and Stubbornness

During one of our regular meetings, Ivona, the director of The Sun and a social worker, came in and announced that the organisation had received support to buy the material for the parents to make handbags. The handbags would be sold and the money raised this way would be used to fund further activities of the organisation. I came to the meeting the next week excited about this change of dynamic in the organisation. However, the parents did not seem to share my excitement. When everybody gathered at the offices, we started making coffee, smoking and gossiping, as usual. After a couple of minutes, I got up, went outside and brought the materials from another room. I said that, perhaps, we should start sewing the bags, as it would take a lot of time to make them. Magdalena, who was the informal leader of the group, said: 'Sure, we would start working on that soon'. I sat down, joined the ongoing conversation, and the sewing was not mentioned again. The bags were never made and unravelling why this had happened – or rather, why it had not happened – points to a particular structure of entitlement and expectations that this group of women placed upon the state, as citizens.

After a couple of weeks, I was sitting in Ivona's office, located at the shabby wooden barracks of Bijeljina's Centre. By that point, it was clear that the bags would not be made and Ivona said:

These mothers are disinterested, passive; they do not want to move, to work, to be engaged. Although, it is difficult for them, it is not easy to be a parent, let alone to be a parent of such a child.

She could not believe that the mothers did not make any handbags, although she had arranged a donation to buy the materials and created a simple plan, which the mothers should have followed in order to raise a small profit for The Sun. In utter disbelief, she continued for some time talking about how mothers needed to be active and to start moving, if they wanted to help themselves, and even added that the mothers are not

'the most capable people, intellectually, and we need to find other parents who can make things happen'. From the perspective of the organisation's leaders and volunteers, the parents seemed to be far from flexible agents who would be willing and able managerially to take things into their own hands and negotiate better social protection in various public and private arenas. However, towards the end of her outburst on mothers' inability and passivity, Ivona said something quite different: 'They are not realistic. They do not understand that everyone in the state is in a difficult situation and they refuse to see that. They behave as if they are the only ones with a problem'.

The person who was realistic, in Ivona's opinion, was a 30-something-year-old man with developmental challenges who occasionally visited The Sun and who had said that they should not expect the municipal government to help them, if they cannot help themselves. Thus, Ivona's irritation was not caused so much by the passivity of the parents, but by their refusal to be 'realistic'.

From her experience, Ivona knew well that the women were perfectly capable to organise themselves and act, when they thought it mattered and in a way they saw as meaningful. A year earlier, Ivona witnessed a situation in which the same parents managed to convince Bijeljina's mayor to push the municipal parliament to introduce a new social protection provision. She also knew that the parents were willing and able to impose their own views on the distribution of money within the organisation. Namely, after a humanitarian exhibition organised by The Sun with the help of volunteers a year earlier, the parents decided to split the (meagre) raised profit among themselves, instead of investing it in the organisation. Ivona and other people from the organisation were not too pleased by the parents' decision. It was episodes like this – deciding about money and managing to convince the mayor to introduce a new provision – that challenged the idea of the parents as incapable. In such moments, it was apparent that passivity of the parents was not the result of their 'pathological dependency' on the state, or their inability to recognise the need to be proactive. It was more the result of their belief that the state should 'do its job' and provide them with much better social protection (see Jansen 2014b). The women did not make the bags because they expected the state to take responsibility for the welfare of their children. As we will see, if they were not allowed to affect the work of The Sun under their own terms, they had no intention of giving up their short intervals of free time to generate a small profit for The Sun. Instead, when they flexibly negotiated improvement of social protection, the parents pursued *veze* and *štele*.

Managing Ambiguity

Social protection in Bijeljina was sometimes discussed as a citizens' right and a legal obligation of the state, and sometimes as a matter of personal compassion and goodwill of particular people. Indeed, a tablet on the wall

of the Centre's conference room represented a Golden Medal, which the municipality of Bijeljina awarded to the Centre in 2001, for:

Renowned work and activities of special significance for the municipality in the area of social work and especially for forty successful years and the overall efforts in an *organized humanitarian work* and assistance to the deprived population (emphasis added).

The idea that a public welfare institution is carrying out work that has a humanitarian character indicates some of the ambiguities of the status of social protection in Bijeljina in the 2000s. The Sun is a case in point. Although formally registered as an NGO, the organisation did not rely on project funding. As it was registered by the social workers and funded by the Centre, everybody in the organisation talked about The Sun as 'something like a state service', a municipal effort to compensate for the lack of a day-care centre. The Sun had no permanent employees, and projects that required involvement of the parents and external funding – including making and selling bags – were organised once a year, or once in 2 years. Water and electricity bills and honoraria for two special pedagogues were covered by regular subventions provided by the Centre (and consequently by the municipality). At the same time, the women from The Sun perceived the organisation partly as Ivona's humanitarian endeavour. As they often commented, without the goodness of Ivona's heart, there would have been no organisation. Ivona invested a lot of personal and professional effort into improving the wellbeing of parents and their children, despite her occasional outbursts of irritation and disappointment. As a result of this ambiguity of The Sun, division of roles and responsibilities within the organisation was not clear: people visited the meetings when they could, they often postponed the arrangements made only a day earlier, sometimes they cancelled the meetings, and so forth.

The triple character of the organisation – as an NGO, a state service and a charity – is a fine example of the complex ways in which the 'social model' permitted ambiguity to shape social protection in everyday life. It should be noted that the ambivalent status of social protection was not the consequence of Bosnian cultural specificities or complex and fragile state sovereignty (the implication being that once the BiH state is fully developed and modernised, the status of social protection and various actors within it would be clear and unambiguous). This particular kind of ambiguity was rather the result of the internationally supervised post-socialist and post-war attempts to build BiH state in a way that dispersed responsibility for welfare from the state to the 'whole community'.

Furthermore, ambiguity was not just the outcome of the processes of social transformation – it was also a characteristic of social relationships that could be managed, intensified or turned into clarity, and thus used to push social relationships and processes of transformation towards a certain direction (Stubbs 2013; Wedel 2009). However, not everybody could do

this – being able flexibly to manage ambiguity of social protection brought influence, personal benefits and power, in various amounts and on various scales (Brković 2015b). For instance, those who could manage the ambiguity of the triple character of The Sun – as an NGO, a state service and a charitable organisation – seemed to be able to gain something out of it. The volunteers cultivated contacts at the Centre, thus increasing their chances of getting a job there. This had happened with Ivona and other leaders of The Sun: before obtaining a permanent job as a social worker, Ivona volunteered for several years at the organisation, proving herself ‘both as a professional and as a humanitarian’ as she put it, in the eyes of the director of the Centre. Milica, the volunteer from The Sun, explicitly stated she helped out the organisation in order to be ‘within eyesight’ (*pred očima*) of the people from the Centre, especially the director, hoping to find employment there in the future.

The parents, however, had almost no way of affecting and managing the ambiguity of the organisation. They had to guess to whom to direct their requests about better social protection, and in what way. Ignorance and stubbornness were two of the very few ways for the parents to ascertain some degree of autonomy and to make clear the direction of their desires and needs. Other ways often failed them. For instance, when one of the parents submitted a written plea to become a member of the governing board of The Sun, Ivona and other social workers who run the organisation rejected her application. The social workers-cum-organisation leaders wanted the parents to be more ‘active’, but in a very particular way, namely without meddling in the governance of the organisation. Thus, the parents were sometimes placed in the position of charity recipients – for instance, during the delivery of New Year’s gifts (*novogodišnji paketići*). At other times, they were expected to be proactive citizens lobbying for the wellbeing of their children in the name of their NGO and of all other parents of children with developmental disabilities – for instance, by making and selling bags. Yet sometimes – especially during the interviews for local TV broadcasting companies – they were expected to behave as citizens grateful for everything the state is doing for its poor. Having a parent at the governing board bore the chance of transforming the triple character of the organisation – as an almost-state service and as a charity, as well as an NGO – into something else, perhaps something less ambiguous. In this sense, the parental position had to be flexible – sometimes active, at other times passively grateful – ambiguous and adaptable to different needs of various actors in different moments.

Flexible Procedures

According to Gershon, the neoliberal notion of agency presupposes ‘a self that is a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manages oneself as though the self was a business’ (Gershon 2011: 537; see also Martin 2005). It means approaching people as businesses who tend to their own qualities and

traits as owned assets and who use market rationality to reflect on social relationships and social strategies. The neoliberal notion of self also involves a distance from which ‘one is always faced with one’s self as a project that must be consciously steered through various possible alliances and obstacles’ (Gershon 2011: 539). The activities of the parents from The Sun did not quite mirror such a conception of self. Although the parents did spend a lot of time reflecting on their social relationships and strategies, and they consciously steered through different obstacles and alliances, the parents did not discuss themselves as anything remotely similar to businesses and they did not see their qualities and traits as owned assets that could be turned into something financially valuable. Also, they did not talk about themselves in ethno-religious or nationalised terms. Rather, they stressed their citizenship status and their gendered roles (Helms 2003). The parents talked about themselves as troubled citizens left alone by both the state and society; sometimes as good mothers who would do anything for their children, or as fighters who had to struggle with indifference and prejudice on a daily basis.

However, if the parents did not see their personhoods in business-like terms, their procedures of negotiating better social protection were highly flexible. As we will see, when the parents tried to convince the mayor to speed up the construction of a day-care centre and to increase provisions, they looked for a *vezalštela* to set up a meeting with him. Their pursuit of *veze* presented a flexible, adaptable and reflexive procedure, which allowed them to fulfil the requirement of being both a citizen and a socially located person (mother, woman, spouse, friend, acquaintance), when needed.

To assert again, this ambiguous requirement of being both a citizen and a socially located person in order to access or improve social protection was not some sort of a Balkan specificity, nor a remnant of Yugoslav socialist culture. Instead, it emerged as the locally specific manifestation of a globalised tendency to step away from citizenship rights as the grounds of welfare and replace them with notions of duty and responsibility, which socially located persons may pose to one another (Watson 2006). As Fink, Lewis and Clarke emphasise:

the thread suturing the relation between state-people-welfare... came under sustained and systematic attack through the convergence of a fiscal crisis related to the sharpened contradictions of global Fordism and the coming to power of New Right political parties in many countries of Europe and the USA. The result was a shift in the filaments suturing the people to state and welfare away from rights and towards the idea of duty and responsibility.

(Fink et al. 2001: 3)

It is no wonder (nor a transitional specificity) that social protection in BiH was ambiguously positioned between the right of a citizen and a matter of personal compassion and goodwill of particular people, if the transformations

of this field in the last two decades have not included an aspiration towards the creation of 'thick structures' (Stubbs 2014a) in the form of, for example, a country-wide 'socially blind' apparatus for distribution of welfare that would be based on equality of all citizens. Instead, the internationally supervised transformations of Bosnian welfare regularly included multiple projects working on the same or overlapping, or yet highly related, issues 'with little or no dialogue or attempts of complementarity between them' (Stubbs 2014a: 10). The result was a 'highly fragmented, unstable and crowded space of governance' (Stubbs 2014a: 9).

As the reforms of social protection across BiH required only weak involvement of the state and stressed the need to develop managerial skills, *veze* fit nicely into such requirements. The 'social model' of social protection in Bijeljina required people first to 'help themselves', before they could be helped by the municipal government. It also forced people to envision previously non-existent paths towards the improvement of social protection – to be good managers of social relations. As a developmental expert pointed out, people had to be managers creating associates and alliances where none had existed before. Pursuing *veze* provided people with just that – a way to generate alliances and to envision novel paths to the improvement of social protection. They provided a logical way to seek new associates, navigate different actors and invoke ideas of duty and responsibility towards socially located persons (rather than rights of citizens in relation to the state) as the grounds of social protection. Ledeneva (2006, 2009) suggests that *blat*, a system of favours and informal networks in post-socialist Russia, serves to overcome the flaws of an underdeveloped, transitioning market economy. In Bosnian social protection, however, *vezelštele* should not be understood as a cultural-specific way to overcome deficiencies of the developing market economy. Instead, for the parents from The Sun, pursuing *veze* was the way to manage social relations flexibly in the field of social protection. *Veze* did not emerge from the defects of the welfare transformations, but presented a way to enact the new requirements introduced by such transformations.

Such overlaps between personal relationships and professional support offered a model of how things actually got improved. For instance, one day at the organisation, Ivona talked about how a day-care centre for children with developmental challenges was opened in another BiH town. She repeatedly emphasised the proactive role the parents in that town had. One particular father of a child with developmental difficulties in that town could have been a role model for the parents at The Sun, as she said, because this man was 'educated', 'cultured' and 'persistent'. He was also lucky, she added, because 'all pieces fell into place for him' (*sve kockice su mu se složile*) – the director of the town's Centre was a spouse of the municipal mayor in that town. Having thus the support of both the Centre and the municipality, this man had easily found investors for the construction of the day-care centre. To this, the women from The Sun said that they would be persistent until they became lucky. 'Luck' was thus not just a matter of chance, but something that

could be gained or cultivated over time. Being lucky – having 'pieces falling into place' – meant that people found a way to make the ambiguity between personal empathy and legal obligation of social protection work for them. Proactive and successful people – like this father apparently was – were those who could manage ambiguity of social protection through personal relationships and favours. With this in mind, let us take a look at how parents 'started moving' in order to meet the mayor.

Meeting the Mayor

One day during a usual discussion of the problems of the existing regime of social protection, the parents decided to set up a meeting with the mayor. They wanted to convince the mayor to increase the figures of regular and special provisions and to speed-up the construction of a day-care centre. To set up the meeting with the mayor, the women pursued favours – *vezelštele*. At first, they discussed at length what to do and whom to call. During our regular weekly meetings, the women shared stories about other people in the town and cultivated personal relationships wherever and whenever they could. This relational labour 'paid off', in a way, for they knew several people who could serve as a *vezalštela* to the mayor. None of these contacts meant a certain success and some had been exhausted a year earlier. Therefore, the issue was to gauge which contact was the most promising one. Magdalena knew the doorman at the main municipal building, but the women discarded this option right away as insufficiently 'strong'. Zora knew Ratka, a woman politician who was a close associate of the mayor and the director of an orthodox religious charity in the town (in addition to having several other public roles and functions). However, the women's first choice was Mr Vuković. Maja's husband knew him in person and, as the vice president of the municipal parliament, Vuković seemed like the most promising path to the mayor. This means we were going to meet with someone who had never worked in a 'social sector' of the municipality.

A couple of weeks later, I joined the parents at the meeting with Vuković, to which they came prepared. They had proposals as how to harmonise the municipality's regulations with the relevant legislature. By the end of the meeting, every one of the women in the room had said at least once that they were not asking for charity, but for things they were *legally* entitled to. This repeated attempt to purify the legal entitlement from the personal and the charitable reasoning lost some of its strength when Vuković addressed the women as heroes, because of all the troubles they had to deal with on a daily basis. He promised to see what he could do to get us the meeting with the mayor.

A week later, Maja came to the association with bad news – Vuković has informed her husband that the mayor refused to meet with us. This failed pursuit of a *veza* confirmed the position of the mayor as an almost unreachable person and yet the only one really able to help.

After the initial disappointment, the women decided to pursue another route into the municipality. This means they pursued another favour. They again talked extensively about whom they knew who could help them – they spent some time discussing people in the town and their mutual relations. At one point, Zora decided to call her acquaintance, Ratka, a powerful woman politician who was a close associate of the mayor. This woman met with Zora a couple of days later and scheduled the meeting with the mayor for us. She claimed that the mayor had never been asked about the meeting, because he would never have said no.

After this, the parents went to meet the mayor one morning, and I joined them. The mayor said that users of the social protection programmes (*socijala*) are always in the worst position and that he had to listen to differing needs of different poor people. By this, he expressed his understanding of the women's position, while simultaneously asking them to understand his position. Such an evocation of 'understanding' presented an attempt to shape responsibilities and expectations verbally in a way that mixed personal with institutional commitments. Similarly to Vuković, the mayor also made it ambiguous whether the women were asking for something they were legally entitled to or for his personal charity. The meeting ended with his promise to see how much they – the people in the municipality – could do about increasing social provisions for the next year, and to speed up the planning and construction of a day-care centre.

The meeting itself did not change much – at the time of writing this chapter, the day-care centre still does not exist and the social welfare provisions are still ridiculously low. However, it confirmed the need to 'get things done' through *veze*. The way in which this meeting was set up – uncertainty over whether the mayor initially refused the meeting, or whether Vuković had lied – convinced the women all over again that *veze/štele* were crucial for their struggle. It suggested that one of their key problems and goals was to find the 'right' person within the municipality to be on their side. In order to do anything politically meaningful and genuinely effective, they had to have powerful *veze* to the people in the municipality. Making handbags and raising small amounts of money by selling them was not going to help them to get a day-care centre or improve their living conditions.

The way in which the women from The Sun made their claims to better social protection suggests that, in 2009 and 2010, the grounds of social protection in Bijeljina were ambiguous. As a responsibility of the 'local community', social protection was supposed to be 'everyone's concern' – state institutions for social work, municipalities, NGOs, businesses, charities, schools, volunteers, politicians, the media and so forth – which left room for negotiation, improvisation and *ad hoc* decision-making. This was a different kind of ambiguity compared to the Yugoslav social protection. Before the war, social protection was fraught with discrepancies between rigid state plans and categories on the one hand, and the needs and problems of everyday life on the other (Zaviršek 2008). It was an ambiguous endeavour, but this was ambiguity of

a different kind, managed in different ways, and serving different purposes from the ambiguity present in the new millennium. Let us take a brief look at the discrepancies and ambiguities of the Yugoslav social protection.

Social Protection in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Social protection had an uneasy position in most communist countries because of the belief that 'socialism would be able to eradicate the need for social work interventions and would ensure the wellbeing of every "human being"' (Zaviršek 2008: 734). In the Soviet Union, social work was ridiculed as 'an activity for petite-bourgeois women in the early twentieth century' (Zaviršek 2008). In the SFRY the status of social work was different – and rather unique for the communist states. Although there was the "sense of shame felt by some party politicians upon the establishment of social work", as a founder of the school of social work in Slovenia recalls, (Zaviršek 2008: 748), the first centres for social protection were established in 1956 and over time opened in all Yugoslav republics. The education of social workers was institutionalised throughout the country in the 1950s. Assuming at first only a portion of responsibilities for social protection from the municipalities, the centres across the country became fully administratively responsible for social protection in the early 1970s. Social work education was developed with the help of experts from the USA and so presented 'to a large extent, a product of the cold war equilibrium' (Zaviršek 2008: 738).

Ambivalence coloured the former Yugoslav social protection regime – but quite differently from the ambivalence present in 2009 and 2010. The Yugoslav social protection was ambiguous because there were discrepancies between how things were planned and how they actually took place in everyday life. The first discrepancy was that social protection services were both necessary to ensure a certain quality of life, as well as a proof that socialism had not just yet fulfilled its promises of wellbeing for all. This was enacted through a network of specialised institutions, which had replaced charitable forms of care provided by housewives and the church before the Second World War. For instance, the state opened kindergartens, public kitchens, summer children colonies, as well as boarding institutions, such as nursing homes, boarding schools for disabled children, asylums for people with disabilities, elderly homes, youth correction houses, and so forth.

Second, this network of state institutions was envisioned as the best possible framework for providing social protection, while many people preferred family and kin groups for the same task. In practice, a large portion of care for others and social protection had been done within the framework of family and kin groups and this was considered as a respected alternative to 'locking people up' in institutions. However, the common memory of women with disabled children in the SFRY was that 'social workers always encouraged or even forced them to "put" the child into long-term close institutions' (Zaviršek 2008: 743).

The third discrepancy relates to the position of people with special needs, who were included in the Yugoslav 'body politics', but under a specific condition of being 'categorised'. Zaviršek suggests that the social protection separated out particular groups of people from the 'general population', fully controlling conditions of their visibility, but also providing them with security and predictability:

People in such institutions got the symbolic status of 'state's children', which deferred them from any complaints and made them both guilty and grateful. The state defined their personalities by physical separation from the regular life and specific silence.

(Zaviršek 2006: 70)

Under such conditions, a desire for your child to die a day before yourself could not be articulated – parents knew full well what would happen to their children, if they died. Yearnings for 'normal lives' – the lives of predictability and certainty largely dependent on the state services and institutions – became possible under the post-Dayton conditions (Jansen 2014a, 2015).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I looked at how users of social protection negotiated better public services in a BiH town. In the developmental and policy worlds, Bosnians can become agents only in a pre-designated, often nationalistic, way, while other forms of agency and citizenship claims are rendered invisible (Hromadžić 2012; Mujkić 2007; Šavija-Valha 2010). Stubbs (2014a) demonstrates that BiH citizens are simultaneously denied the 'right to intervene' – and thus agentive capacity – and are expected to adapt flexibly to the new circumstances. Parental ignorance and stubbornness were part and parcel of their flexible adaptation, because flexibility includes an element of active selection from a cornucopia of possibilities (Martin 1994: 37). It does not require continuous adaptation to all possible options, but a repeated effort to meet those requirements that provide the best opportunities. This was what parents did – when it mattered from their perspective, they engaged in 'relational labour', adapted to the needs of the moment, met the politicians, gave statements for the media, and so forth. When the parents did not think that a particular route to improvement mattered, such as the making and selling of bags, they were ignorant and simply let things slip past them. Behaving in a proactive and flexible way in this context meant pursuing *veze*, rather than engaging in other kinds of activities.

Veze probably have been intertwined with public administrations in BiH for quite some time (cf. Horvat 1969). They present a socio-historically embedded manner in which to make claims to public resources in the context in which social protection is ambiguously positioned between citizenship rights, on the one hand, and duties and obligations of socially located persons, on

the other. Ong's work indicates that, in China, using kinship and friendship relations called *guanxi* for professional purposes should not analytically be regarded as a value of 'Chinese culture', because it is 'basically a structure of limits and inequality for the many and of flexibility and mobility for the few' (Ong 1999: 117). Something similar could be said about *veze*. *Veze* and *štele* offered a flexible procedure to get to the 'right people' and try to persuade them to improve social protection. As Koutková demonstrates in this volume, there is little difference between *veze* and *štele* in BiH and the practice of networking. However, although everybody may have pursued a *veza* for something, they ended up reinforcing inequalities and limiting systematic improvement of public services. Ambiguity and randomness of social protection put its users in a precarious position. Social actors with more power – from social workers all the way to the mayor – strived to maintain the grounds of social protection ambiguous and based on personal relationships. That was not only how 'things got done', but also how certain actors improved their livelihoods and social positions. Ambiguity of social protection was not guided by clear business principles, but it was grounded in struggles over positions and power, enabled by the marketisation and privatisation of welfare services across BiH. As a result, dependence on social protection was an erratic, unpredictable and 'mysterious' experience, and women from The Sun found themselves having to cultivate good inter-personal relations and to pursue *veze*. When the parents failed to do so, they sometimes simply could not access a service that they were entitled to as citizens – as was indicated by the social workers who stopped statutory visits for personal reasons.

This chapter looked at how, under such circumstances, a group of parents acted when it mattered and did not act when they did not think it would matter. It explored what constituted a meaningful political and civic act for the parents and how they negotiated their position in relation to the change of policy towards the 'social model' of social protection. Being passive, yet stubborn in their expectation of state support, the parents spent most of their time at the organisation cultivating relations with social workers and waiting for the state finally to 'do its job'. However, there were moments when they 'started moving' (*kada su se pokrenuli*) and when they 'became active' (*kada su se aktivirali*). These moments, which both the parents and the social workers recognised as movement and activity, illuminate how politics of survival and wellbeing was organised in everyday life. As we saw, when parents stopped being purposefully ignorant and stubborn and instead started 'moving' and 'acting', they did so by pursuing *veze*. *Veze* provided people with a flexible path to state services and resources. The chapter suggested that acting by seeking *veze* was not the result of a 'flawed' and 'incomplete' democratisation and marketisation of BiH, but a context-specific way of performing the new requirements of being flexible. *Veze* and *štele* in Bijeljina in 2009 and 2010 presented the socio-historically grounded enactment of the post-war, developmental expectations placed upon BiH citizens.

Notes

- 1 All personal names in this chapter are pseudonyms.
- 2 Around the time of my fieldwork, the basic social provision was increased from €20 to €30 per month, while the average salary was between €350 and €400.
- 3 There were very few public, state-run institutions that organised, financed and delivered some elements of social protection for children on an entity level, such as the Public Fund for Children's Protection, and none that worked across the whole country.