

**Lazar Barać***The Institute of Ethnography SASA*

lazar.barac@ei.sanu.ac.rs

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0360-5275>

## ***Made in the Balkans: A Contribution to Understanding Balkan Trap/Trap-Folk as a Musical Genre and Cultural Phenomenon\****

**Abstract:** *Balkan trap/trap-folk* is a hybrid, glocal genre that encompasses a wide range of global and local musical practices, characterized by continuous transformations and commercialization. It emerged after 2010, following the rise of global trap and its associated technologies into the mainstream. In the local context, the foundations for the development of trap were laid through its genre predecessors, shifts in music production, and the growing influence of Balkanist discourse in popular music. Through qualitative source analysis and musical discourse analysis, this paper aims to contribute to the scholarly understanding of Balkan trap/trap-folk by a) defining the genre; b) reconstructing its historical trajectory; and c) mapping its dominant topoi and discursive formations, with particular emphasis on pre-existing discourses (which dominate the genre), as well as processes of globalization, hybridization, and gender representation.

**Keywords:** Balkan trap/trap-folk, popular music, anthropology of music, Balkanism, musical discourse, Serbia

### *Entering the Club – The Opening: Subject and Objectives of the Paper*

*Balkan trap/trap-folk* (in the following text: BT/TF) is a glocalized music genre that emerges from the fusion of the global (*American*) *trap* and local pop, folk, and hip-hop influences within the culturally diverse landscape of

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*the Balkans*. The origins of this genre can be traced back to the previous decade (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 80) and its popularity is currently at its peak.<sup>1</sup> Tied to younger generations, youth cultures, and broader musical trends, BT/TF has become an integral part of everyday life and a dominant force in the local music mainstream. Despite its undeniable cultural presence in Western Balkans, this phenomenon has received limited scholarly attention, with only a few studies addressing it (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020; Mrvoš and Frey 2024; Vukojević 2024). A particularly important and pioneering study on this phenomenon was authored by Marija Dumnić-Vilotijević (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020), in which the author examines the emerging musical genre known as *trap-folk*. This study, along with the work of Marin Cvitanović (Cvitanović 2009), addresses the complex relationship between the Balkans and popular music, emphasizing that Balkanism is often one of its key conceptual anchors. Building on the work of previous scholars, this paper seeks to enhance the academic visibility of BT/TF and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the genre as both a cultural and musical phenomenon.

After presenting the theoretical and methodological framework of the research, based on the analysis of musical discourse, I will provide a brief reconstruction of trap's emergence as a genre, followed by the process of its globalization in the local music scene. Furthermore, relying on the concepts of globalization and hybridity, I will present the key musical characteristics found in the songs selected for analysis. In the discourse analysis, I will first address the contextual-ideological topoi, emphasizing them as cultural resources exploited within the genre. Finally, in the last part of the paper, I will treat the thematic-ideological topoi centered around femininity and masculinity as primary conceptual axes.

### *Methods, Tools and Concepts:* Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Since 2018, my collaboration with the Serbian community in Vicenza has enabled me, through repeated visits, to observe the deep cultural and emotional importance that music from the homeland holds for its members. The connec-

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to garnering millions of views and resonating strongly with younger generations, turbo-folk and its newer variant, pop-folk, continue to dominate the musical mainstream—particularly through performers affiliated with Grand Production, such as Aleksandra Prijović, Tea Tairović, and others. Moreover, the connections between turbo-folk and BT/TF are considerably more intense and complex than mere artist collaborations, as will be demonstrated in the following sections.

tion between the second generation of this migrant community and BT/TF—its most popular genre—proved to be particularly strong and complex. These insights led me to undertake an anthropological study of these practices.

The research was conducted during several stays in Vicenza between January and June 2023, with a total of three months spent in the field. During this time, I carried out in-depth interviews with 15 members of the second generation of this migrant community, as well as ethnographic fieldwork in clubs and various musical settings such as celebrations, car rides, social gatherings, and similar contexts. The selected songs that will be subject to analysis, as well as the overall perspective on BT/TF, were shaped through interaction with the participants in the research presented in the master's thesis *Trap, God, Trap, Folk: Reception of Balkan Trap Among the Second Generation of Serbian Extracomunitarians in Vicenza*. In this paper, I will present a discursive analysis based on a 'top-down' approach, while the analysis of musical habitus and the reception of BT/TF among the aforementioned migrant generation — employing a 'bottom-up' perspective — will be the subject of future studies. Although the discursive analysis was conducted by myself, the perspectives of my interlocutors are interwoven throughout the text, and the topoi that will be discussed were identified and recognized by the research participants themselves.<sup>2</sup>

The theoretical and methodological framework of this paper is grounded in a qualitative analysis of relevant textual sources (literature and internet articles), as well as songs and music videos from BT/TF, with the key conceptual focus on *musical discourse* and *the concept of topoi*.

The discourse analysis is based on a selection of 100 songs and music videos by artists such as Nucci, Voyage, Jala Brat, Buba Corelli, Coby, Senidah, Zera, Breskvica, Henny, Devito, Relja, Rasta, Nikolija, Elena Kitić, Gazda Paja, Crni Cerak, Albino, Sanja Vučić, Teodora, and Mahrina. Given the diversity among these songs and videos, this paper aims to identify dominant patterns and common elements across them.<sup>3</sup>

The (musical) discourse and topoi within this paper form inseparable concepts. The term *discourse* refers to a specific referential framework within which knowledge is frequently constructed and constituted through ideological, narrative, and active dimensions, influencing and determining power relations and the ways in which we perceive ourselves and others, social practices, ideas,

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<sup>2</sup> The identified and analyzed topoi are similar to those addressed in the works of Cvitanović (2009) and Dumnić-Vilotijević (2020), suggesting a certain coherence in the ideological level of Balkan representation within regional popular music.

<sup>3</sup> Given the limited scope of this study, it will not be possible to present the full range of textual motifs found in these tracks; therefore, I will only refer to a selection of them.

and cultural content in a particular social, cultural, political, and historical context (Fuko 2007). Thus, discourse is also a form of knowledge and a means of presenting social practices, serving as an instrument for constructing social reality (Wodak 2001, 6). Furthermore, identity emerges from discourse as a practice of framing and contextualizing our life experiences, structuring our identity narratives, and imbuing them with meaning (Ruud 1997, 6). Moreover, a particularly important concept is *musical discourse*, which is rooted in a specific musical phenomenon and the ideas, representations, and practices associated with it. Musical discourse has the capacity to create collective identities in the social sphere by evoking a range of emotions and motivations (Ramírez Paredes 2006, 261). The key principle of any discourse, including musical discourse, is language and its manifestation – *the text*<sup>4</sup> – “a product of social activity, a result of interaction of social practices and social agents” (Aleshinskaya 2013, 431).<sup>5</sup> Discourse, as a concept, method, and type of analysis, is most often realized in the context of interpreting popular music in several ways: a) analyzing song lyrics as performed language; b) examining musical discourses (or discussions about music) and stars (as key actors); and c) considering whether music itself can be analyzed as discourse (Bradby 2003, 67). Building on the analytical approaches proposed by Bradby, I aim to contribute to the understanding of the BT/TF phenomenon by outlining its discourse and identifying its dominant *topoi*. In this regard, *topoi* will be understood as conceptual, contextual, ideological, and thematic hubs and threads that permeate the frameworks and contents of a particular discourse.<sup>6</sup> The key function of *topoi* is that through their mapping and contextualization, the ideological premises of BT/TF and the ideological knots proclaimed through music as a communicative medium are illuminated. Therefore, in this paper, I will attempt to outline the discourse and map its *topoi*, rather than conducting a full discursive analysis in the strict sense of the term.

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<sup>4</sup> In musical discourse, the text is divided into *the text in the narrower sense (words)* and *the musical text (musical motifs)* (Bradby 2003). The text in the narrower sense is more conventional and extrinsic, in contrast to the musical text, which is more arbitrary and intrinsic (Agawu 2009, 25–27).

<sup>5</sup> Musical discourse has been the focus of extensive research and a range of theoretical and disciplinary debates (Hemphill 1943; Nattiez 1990; van Leeuwen 2012), most of which are situated within the field of musicology. As an anthropologist approaching this phenomenon from an anthropological perspective—albeit without relying on explicitly anthropological concepts—I will concentrate on a mode of analysis that does not presuppose formal expertise in musicology as a discipline.

<sup>6</sup> This definition of *topoi* is considerably simplified to designate the key themes and semantic codes within a discourse. For a more complex usage in critical discourse analysis see for example Wodak et al. 2009; Žagar 2010.

*In the “Dirty South” Kitchen:  
A Brief Introduction to the Origins and  
Characteristics of Trap Music*

*Trap* is a music genre that emerged in the 1990s in the American “Dirty South” and began entering the global mainstream around 2010 as a derivative of rap (Adaso 2019; Kaluža 2020; Besora 2020). Today, it is regarded as the most popular and dominant genre worldwide. The term *trap* represents an exceptionally broad category,<sup>7</sup> as it is linked to various discursive fields. This term commonly refers to the following: a) a genre of hip-hop music; b) a subgenre of *Electronic Dance Music* (EDM); and c) the incorporation of trap elements into contemporary pop music (Kaluža 2018, 24). In a more specific musical sense, trap is characterized by several key musical elements, including: a) synthetic rhythms derived from a set of 808 rhythms<sup>8</sup> – *kick, snare, clap, and hi-hat*; b) *distortion and reverb effects* that create a sharper sound; c) a tempo ranging from 130 to 170 BPM;<sup>9</sup> d) *triple flow* (similar to triplets) and other syncopated rhythms; and e) *rolls and risers*, used for modulation and sudden changes in the musical flow (MasterClass 2021; Kreho 2022). In addition to these characteristics, trap incorporates elements such as *strings* (synthesized string instruments), often used in a “cinematic” style,<sup>10</sup> as well as the widespread use of *autotune technology*, which creates a “technologized voice” and eliminates vocal imperfections (see Provenzano 2019).

Compared to rap, the most distinctive feature of trap is its slower beat, which makes it less demanding to perform and has contributed to the success of many artists in the music industry (Jevremović 2017). Trap rhymes also tend to be less intricate than rap rhymes, often forming fragmented rather than narrative structures (Conti 2020). Positioned between rapping and singing, trap’s melodic “nature” enhances its “mantric” quality through the repetition of textual and melodic motifs, ultimately contributing to its “virality”.

To fully grasp the ideological, textual, semantic, iconographic, and aesthetic dimensions of trap, it is essential to first provide a brief contextual overview of its origins. In the slang of the African American population of Atlanta, the term *trap* refers to a place in poor neighborhoods where narcotics are produced and

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<sup>7</sup> It is not uncommon for diametrically opposed music tracks to be categorized as trap, given that the genre itself is “elusive”, hybrid, and heterogeneous.

<sup>8</sup> The 808 rhythm set is a collection of various “beats” found on the Roland TR 808 drum machine/synthesizer, after which they are named.

<sup>9</sup> *BPM* (short for *beats per minute*) is a unit of measurement for tempo, indicating the speed of a music track by counting the number of beats per minute.

<sup>10</sup> Source: <https://musicorigins.org/item/trap-music/>

distributed, serving as a hub for various illicit activities (Milevoj 2018; Adaso 2019; Kaluža 2020). On a semantic level, the word “trap” can also refer to a “vicious” social cycle that is difficult to escape, symbolizing the social entrapment of individuals within this context (Kaluža 2018, 25). This contextual framework represents the cultural background of trap stars, who have “escaped” by building a music career. As a result, the ideological-semantic foundation of trap emerged from the fusion of two extremes: the violent ghetto life (*thug life*) and the “American Dream” (Kaluža 2018, 23). The lyrical content of trap reflects the aspirations of individuals seeking to break free from a life constrained by poverty and systemic racism, striving to achieve the “American Dream” through musical success (Pointer 2021). The thematic-ideological topoi in trap tracks arise from this synthesis, reflecting the life experiences of the artists, often centered on the contrast between their *current lavish lifestyle* and their *past in the ghetto*. Therefore, the most common themes include money, consumerism, violence, individualism, success, alcohol, drugs, crime, sex, immoral behavior, the image of the suburbs/ghetto, nightlife, etc. (Kaluža 2018, 2020; Dumnić-Vilotićević 2020; Conti 2020; Barros-Grela 2022; Kreho 2022; Mrvoš and Frey 2024; Vukojević 2024).

The iconography and aesthetics in trap are intense and emphatic, designed to showcase success through text, visuals, and material symbols. Luxury fashion brands play a crucial role as status symbols and markers of identity. Additionally, trap reflects the broader trend of neoliberalism by promoting materialism and individual success (Kaluža 2018, 2020; Besora 2020), along with the branding of *the ego-trip*<sup>11</sup> which has become a common form of representation for artists and a key marketing strategy. Thus, trap (like other genres emerging from “poverty-stricken” contexts, laden with status symbols and the desire for wealth) is often seen as a “kitschy phenomenon” and “bad party music” (see Brook Bray 2019), particularly due to the “banality” and “primitiveness” attributed to it.

The origins of trap can be traced back to the 1990s when the rap collective Dungeon Family was among the first to rap/speak about their lives in the impoverished suburbs of Atlanta, where the dominant theme was drugs, particularly crack cocaine (Holt 2019; Besora 2020). Cool Breeze, OutKast, Goodie Mob, and Ghetto Mafia also addressed the same socio-economic and other issues they faced, and, along with Dungeon Family, were among the first to mention the term “trap” in their songs. As a result, fans and critics began labeling them as “trap rappers”.<sup>12</sup> This marked the shift of trap *from a place to a genre*, leading it into the mainstream. Prominent artists such as T.I., Gucci Mane, Young Jeezy,

<sup>11</sup> An *ego trip* refers to actions in which a person emphasizes their own importance and demonstrates it to others in order to satisfy their own ego. Source: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ego-trip>

<sup>12</sup> Source: <https://musicorigins.org/item/trap-music/>

Triple 6 Mafia, and producers like Shawty Redd, Drumma Boy, Mannie Fresh, and Mike WiLL Made It became some of the most notable figures, largely because their music became ubiquitous on local radio stations and in nightclubs/strip clubs.<sup>13</sup> The first wave of trap's mainstream breakthrough was marked by albums such as *I'm Serious*, *Trap Music*, *Urban Legend*, and *King*, with T.I.'s 2003 album *Trap Music* standing out as the most notable, selling 2.1 million copies (Pointer 2021). Trap continued its upward trajectory, and its "expansion" accelerated after 2010, when a new wave of EDM music and DJs began incorporating trap sounds into their tracks.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, trap reached the global mainstream in 2018 with Migos' album *Culture II* (Milevoj 2018), entering the realm of mainstream pop and featuring stars such as Beyoncé, Miley Cyrus, Lady Gaga, Rihanna, and others. This marked the beginning of trap's dominance in the global music industry. Its simplicity, adaptability, and ease of music creation led to its democratization (Adaso 2019), and its striking, modern, and urban sound carried significant globalization and glocalization potential, evident in the fact that many countries around the world now have their own local versions of the genre (Brooke Bray 2019).

### *Terrier from the Semi-Periphery: The Origins of Balkan Trap/Trap-Folk or How Trap Came to Serbia*

The emergence of American trap and the rapid advancement of technology influenced the development of the local music scene (based on folk, hip-hop, and dance culture). The formation of the BT/TF developed from multiple directions.<sup>15</sup> The hip-hop group Unija (later Novosadska Setka) was among the first to unravel the "trap thread" with their 2009 album *Sezona love* (see Dragomirović 2022). However, Juice is considered the key figure in establishing trap on the local scene, with his album *Apetiti mi rastu* (2012), which many believe marked the beginning of the trap scene in Serbia (Maksimović 2015). Elitni Odredi were founded in 2005, recording songs that combined hip-hop and R&B. Their song *Moja jedina* (2008) marked their transition toward the mainstream, gaining popularity among the teenage audience.<sup>16</sup> Soon after, they

<sup>13</sup> Source: <https://musicorigins.org/item/trap-music/>

<sup>14</sup> Source: <https://musicorigins.org/item/trap-music/>

<sup>15</sup> For a more nuanced and in-depth account of the genre's development, see Dumić-Vilotijević (2020).

<sup>16</sup> During its initial phase, Elitni Odredi also collaborated with other artists such as Cvija and Ana Mašulović. In addition to these collaborators, performers like Mr. Black and Marko Radeta were also popular among teenagers.

began incorporating elements of EDM into their music and collaborating with pop-folk artists and DJs.<sup>17</sup> Along with Rasta, Elitni Odredi were among the first to use *autotune* in their songs, incorporating “trap” melodies within small vocal ranges. During this period, YouTube became a relevant platform, and the IDJ record label emerged.<sup>18</sup> Following global trends, IDJ attracted various musicians (primarily rappers and folk artists) with its distinctive production and media coverage. The fusion of folk, hip-hop, and electronic sounds became one of the defining characteristics of this record label, which remains a major trend-setter in the Balkans (see Dragojlo 2019). Additionally, a crucial shift in terms of genre and production was made by the hitmaker Coby, who, alongside his collaborator Reksona, founded the record label Bassivity Digital and introduced the catalog song sales to the local market (Nikačević 2018). Bassivity Digital began to make its mark in the media primarily through tracks by Rasta, Rimski, Korona, and others. In an effort to keep pace with contemporary trends, the new wave of production also attracted folk performers, resulting in the emergence of the first trap-folk collaborations (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020). Following the same business model, Jala Brat and Buba Corelli from Sarajevo launched the record label Imperia. Their collaborations with Maja Berović and the blending of global and German trap elements with turbo-folk segments (Dragojlo 2019) not only became a hallmark of trap-folk but also propelled them to the top of the local charts for most-listened-to songs. Finally, once the amalgamation of trap and folk fully took off, Generacija Zed emerged as a production company that brought together a group of young performers such as Voyage, Nucci, Breskvica, Zera, and Henny, whose work appropriately illustrates the fluidity, heterogeneity, and hybridity of BT/TF.

Summarizing the path of the glocalization of trap, it is evident that this process unfolds on two key levels: the ideological-musical level and the production

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<sup>17</sup> Song examples: *Beograd* (ft. Anabela and DJ Shone) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zMxlGjXtUc>), *Nisi s njom* (ft. Mia Borislavljević, DJ Silver and DJ Marconi) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPfUEuqRekg>), *Ljubavi moja* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFafv0PCN4Q>) (ft. Dado Polumenta).

<sup>18</sup> IDJ is the leading production hybrid in the region, whose dominance warrants significantly greater scholarly attention. Unfortunately, a comprehensive analysis of this production house exceeds the scope and focus of the present study. Nevertheless, it is my hope that other researchers will recognize the analytical potential of this production phenomenon. For further discussion of IDJ's relevance, see Ajduk (2025) and the following sources: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/idjvideos-dostigao-35-miliona-jutjub-pratioca/>; <https://www.poslovnih.hr/regija/andrej-ilic-slijedili-smo-svoj-instinkt-pa-sada-gotovo-da-i-nemamo-konkurenciju-4446638>; <https://idjtv.nova.rs/lifestyle/hi-tech/3-miliona-pretplatnika-idjvideos-tv-je-najveci-youtube-muzicki-kanal-na-balkanu-video/>.



level. While Juice, Bombe Devedesetih, Novosadska Setka, and others (in addition to the trap sound) adopted the matrix of the trap lifestyle, placing it within the transitional context of urban environments in post-socialist Serbia, Bassivity Music and IDJ focused on introducing production innovations. Trap music drove a new technological shift in the music industry, allowing the sound to be created entirely through computer technology. This pragmatism, the ease of sampling trap elements, and the cheaper and faster music creation process are key factors behind trap's popularity. In this way, trap introduced new principles of music creation, distribution, and consumption, becoming both a cause and a consequence of the overproductivity of the music industry today<sup>19</sup>. Once trap democratized the creative process, hitmakers recognized the blending of trap with folk elements as the key recipe for success.<sup>20</sup> The formula for this recipe was the glocalization of globally popular trends, offering the audience a new local sound that aligns with global musical currents, but is distinguished by local specificity and a modern/urban character. This musical format is particularly profitable among younger generations as consumers (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020) who are not heavily burdened by musical labels and instead consume the post-socialist-transitional context and the escapist function of music with a clubbing character.

### *Contributing to the Definition or “Splitting Hairs”: Definition of Balkan Trap/Trap-Folk and Its Key Characteristics*

Several authors have addressed the phenomenon of local commercial trap, often referring to it as *trep-folk* (eng. *trap-folk*) (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020; Mrvoš and Frey 2024; Vukojević 2024).<sup>21</sup> In my previous work, I have typically used the term *Balkan trap* to designate this genre, emphasizing its strong connection to Balkanist discourse. The genre's initial formation and glocalization were marked by a fusion of trap and folk elements, with a relatively clear distinction between the two, making *Balkan trap* a particularly fitting label.<sup>22</sup> However,

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<sup>19</sup> Interpreting music trending statistics in the region, Marija Ajduk states: “Music trending has a short lifecycle, and songs that were top hits on the lists until yesterday can absolutely become excluded from them in only a few days or weeks” (Ajduk 2025, 558).

<sup>20</sup> So far, this practice has proven to be both sustainable and economically viable, and by all indications, as Dumnić-Vilotijević notes, “it can be presumed that it will be a vital genre in the 2020s as well” (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 75).

<sup>21</sup> The term trap-folk was first used by Emir Imamović to describe the mixture of trap and folk music (Imamović 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Despite the fact that the use of the term “*Balkan*” is semantically complex and arguably problematic, labeling the genre as *Balkan trap* can also be seen in a negative

the genre's subsequent development has increasingly blurred this boundary: in some instances, folk elements are fully integrated into the trap matrix, while in others, they are virtually absent. This evolution has complicated the application of the term *trap-folk*. In everyday usage, both performers and listeners most commonly refer to the genre simply as *trap*. Meanwhile, *trap-folk* may function either as a synonym for Balkan trap or as a subcategory within (Balkan trap) as the broader genre. Acknowledging its hybrid, plural, and elusive nature, I refer to the genre in this article using both labels simultaneously as *BT/TF* (*Balkan Trap/Trap-Folk*).

This phenomenon can be understood simultaneously as both hybrid and glocal. *Musical glocalization* refers to the adaptation of global trends within a local context (Herbert and Rykowski 2018, xxvi), while *the concept of hybridity* refers to the process or result of combining two or more identities, objects, "races," languages, or other categories—whether physical, conceptual, or virtual (Alcalde 2022). In this sense, musical hybridity entails the blending of rhythms, melodies, motifs, or instruments (both electric and acoustic) originating from two or more cultural contexts (Weiss 2014; Alcalde 2017). In the formation of BT/TF, I argue that we are witnessing musical glocalization *par excellence*, as the core elements of trap music have been adapted to the local context. As the genre evolved, it gave rise to intensified overproduction and the constant emergence of new "darlings of the masses," placing performers and producers under pressure to remain relevant by adhering to the genre's formula while simultaneously introducing "something new" to stand out in a saturated musical landscape. I suggest that such practices of inventiveness have positioned hybridity not only as a central premise but also as the ultimate outcome of trap's glocalization in the region. At the same time, hybridity has significantly complicated efforts to categorize the genre; however, in BT/TF we can identify three key structural elements: (*beat matrices, instrumentals, and vocals*).<sup>23</sup>

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light, as it potentially contributes to further autobalkanization and self-exoticization. Nevertheless, I consider the term appropriate and believe it should not be avoided, even if it may reinforce stereotypical representations of the Balkans in the eyes of the "West". Why? The cultural space of the Balkans is marked by numerous conflicts, ethnic, national, and religious divisions, whereas this genre unites young people and puts these divisions aside. During fieldwork conducted in clubs in Vicenza, I observed that BT/TF brings together youth from the Balkans—regardless of whether they are Croats, Bosnians, Albanians, Montenegrins, Macedonians, or Serbs. Therefore, if BT/TF (with all its imperfections) serves as a point of connection for young people of different national backgrounds and demonstrates that all Balkan individuals are culturally linked, I will continue to use the term – especially given that I don't believe avoiding the label "Balkan" will have any real impact on dismantling stereotypes.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of musical characteristics and production, see Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020.

In the BT/TF, it is most common to adopt matrices from the American or global trap. These matrices typically follow regular rhythms (e.g. 2/4, 6/8, etc.), but the rhythmic lines are enhanced with syncopations, adding complexity to the rhythm. Additionally, matrices are often adjusted to incorporate Balkan and Oriental rhythms, which are central to turbo-folk and related genres like *chalgga*, *mane*, *talava*, *laika*, etc. (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 77). In terms of vocal and instrumental elements, BT/TF is shaped by several key characteristics. The first key point is turbo-folk, which is seen as a certain form of heritage (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 5–6).<sup>24</sup> As such, writing lyrics and melodies in the style of turbo-folk is common, often accompanied by the recognizable sound of synthesizers. The second key point is the broader and more imprecise category of Balkan folk heritage, which serves as an endless source of inspiration. On the vocal level, the important sound symbol of BT/TF is the “ethno” voice, most commonly performed by Bojana Brdarić, one of the prominent singers of Balkan traditional music in Serbia. Thanks to her distinctive voice and ability to mimic the intonation of traditional songs from various parts of the Balkan cultural space, this singer was first recognized by Coby as a powerful tool for adding an exotic touch<sup>25</sup> and (g)localizing trap, which led to extensive collaborations with trap performers, further solidifying her influence in the genre. The third key point highlights Balkan-Oriental influences, evident in the use of instruments such as the *trumpet*, *bagpipes*, *zurla*, *darabuka*, as well as in “tight” soundscapes that range from distinctly “Balkan” to overtly “Oriental”.<sup>26</sup> The growing popularity of traditional (or traditionally inspired) music can be seen as a consequence of post-socialist transformation, retraditionalization, and the romanticized efforts to construct “new” national identities after the socialist period. However, I would assume that the popularization of local musical traditions was primarily influenced by the World Music wave (see Ristivojević 2014; Nenić 2015; Gligorijević 2021) and popularization of EDM. One of the key moments in the incorporation of traditional motifs into EDM was the track *Stanga* by Sagi Abitbul and Guy Haliva.<sup>27</sup> While no direct connection can be established, I would argue that this trend reflects a recurring global demand for a local “touch” of exotica

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<sup>24</sup> More on the characteristics of turbo-folk that have been transposed into BT/TF see Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 5–6.

<sup>25</sup> Listen to examples: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYxYTm3pEjA>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aS-339iZz-k>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOWZl-HCzOX8>

<sup>26</sup> In her study, Dumnić-Vilotijević also identifies the accordion, trumpet, and saxophone as important elements of the standardized instrumentation in this genre (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 77).

<sup>27</sup> Listen to the track at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ho3E-b07svfw>

and mysticism, with traditional musical elements serving as a powerful tool for auto-exoticization (see Dumnić 2012; Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020). In conclusion, the globalization, glocalization, and hybridization of trap are dynamic and deeply interconnected processes. More precisely, trap first emerged in the local context of the “dirty American South” establishing itself as an alternative genre within American music culture. As it entered the global mainstream, it began going glocalization, adapting to different socio-musical environments. Finally, once it took on a distinctly glocal form and its formulaic nature was established, it evolved further through hybridization with other musical traditions.

On a narrative and ideological level, the lyrical content of trap aims to “reconcile” ego-trip, consumerism, love and sexuality, nightlife, luxury, and the artist’s cultural background. All these elements are inherently tied to the concept of the Balkans, because – not only because Balkan identity is an inevitable focal point emphasized in BT/TF (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020) – but also because it encapsulates all the previously mentioned themes.

### *Balkanism and Renaissance: Outlining the Discourse of BT/TF*

The discourse of the BT/TF will be defined based on the songs that constitute the repertoire of this genre. The outlining of this discourse will be carried out on two levels and structured around two groups of topoi. The first group consists of *contextual-ideological topoi*, which represent the “legacy” of earlier discourses – *early post-socialism, Balkanism, turbo-folk and diesel culture* – that are embedded within this genre. Complementing this, the second group of topoi – *thematic-ideological topoi* – encompasses recurring themes in BT/TF, such as individual success, consumerist practices/status symbols, gender dynamics, sexuality, nightlife, substance use, and representations of the broader social context.

### *“Mafia, Banknotes, Singers, and Turbo-Folk”: Contextual-Ideological Topoi*

The post-socialist period began with the collapse of Yugoslavia and tectonic changes at the political, economic, national, religious, and broader social and cultural levels. The early post-socialist context was shaped primarily by the Yugoslav wars of dissolution, severe inflation, and widespread isolation, caused by United Nations Security Council sanctions on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. As a result of these political circumstances, the dawn of the new millennium was

marked by radical social shifts, particularly in the quest for a redefined national identity in the former Yugoslav republics (see Naumović 2009; Malešević 2011; Čolović 2014). Due to isolation, the collapse of state authority, and economic instability, the informal/"gray" economy became ubiquitous and tacitly endorsed by state structures (Papović and Pejović 2016; Musić and Vukčević 2019). This approach to economic survival established a new model of success, where illegal activities became a means of rapid wealth accumulation. With limited opportunities, many young people from the working class turned to these pathways through criminogenic activities and connections with criminals (Papović and Pejović 2016, 85), striving to embrace material wealth and the lifestyle associated with "mafia capitalism" (Musić and Vukčević 2019, 168). War profiteering and illegal activities, within the reshaped social order, gave rise to a new elite that was often closely connected to the music industry. In this context, the pop music industry of that time functioned as a reflection of societal realities, providing a framework through which the discourse of BT/TF can be outlined.

Marija Dumnić-Vilotijević posits that BT/TF can be understood as a fusion of *turbo-folk* and *diesel culture* (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 75). Building upon this premise, in this section of the text, I will endeavor to further examine these two subcultural patterns.

Turbo-folk emerged in the late 1980s as a new form of folk music, blending electric instruments, rhythmic beats, and melodies infused with Balkan and Oriental motifs, instruments, and melismas. This term was coined by the singer-songwriter Rambo Amadeus and defined in his song *Turbo-folk*<sup>28</sup> (1988), where it was portrayed as "the source of all evil". Due to the blending of musical motifs from various genres, turbo-folk is often described as a "bricolage", "mishmash" or "mega-genre", but also as a "musical mutant, hybrid, monster, or Frankenstein" (Kulenović and Banić-Grubišić 2019, 52). Moreover, the critical reception of turbo-folk typically focused on ideological concerns rather than musical ones (see Đurković 2001; Baker 2007), as its proponents (performers, financiers, and the audience) were largely supportive of Slobodan Milošević's regime (Simić 2006, 108). This regime, as many authors argue, exploited turbo-folk to advance nationalist agendas and policies (Gordy 1999; Ćirjaković 2012). Thus, turbo-folk became associated with war, war profiteering, escapism, intellectual passivism, the incitement of nationalist passions, "uncultured",

<sup>28</sup> "Folk is the people; turbo is the fuel injection system under pressure into the cylinder of an internal combustion engine. Turbo folk is the burning of the people. Any acceleration of that burning is turbo folk, fueling the lowest passions of Homo sapiens". In the eponymous song, turbo-folk refers to various elements: alcohol, Coca-Cola, roast meat, porn shops, nationalism, rave parties, ethno jazz, Adolf Hitler, human organ trade, criminals, Marlboro, silicone, cocaine, SUVs with low-profile tires, and more. Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-\\_smH1HAYWo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_smH1HAYWo).

and the phenomenon of uneducated, ignorant, and destructive “rural-urbanities”/“peasant urbanities”<sup>29</sup> (see Gordy 1999; Simić 2006; Ćirjaković 2012; Čvoro 2014; Atanasovski 2015; Kulenović and Banić-Grubišić 2019). The turbo-folk culture pattern began to embrace the subculture of the warrior brigade, where the “new war-profiteer elite” in a state of poverty and despair showcased their power through a lavish and “kitschy” aesthetic. The warrior brigade subculture included “diesel boys“ (*dizelaši*), criminal youth, war returnees, drug dealers, gold-diggers, and all those whom Kronja refers to as the “new war-profiteer elite of the 1990s” (Kronja 2006, 91). Dominant values within this subculture, as critics argue, included machismo, the sexual objectification of women, anti-civic values, the cult of the body, the glamorization of everyday life, and capitalist-consumerist cultural patterns that emphasized status symbols (Kronja 2006, 92). Simultaneously, turbo-folk became more of a cultural than a musical phenomenon, with music no longer being perceived solely as art or entertainment but as an ideological tool. It played a role in establishing a “new war-profiteer” and “urban peasant” elite, serving as a means of “brainwashing the masses”, while often acting as an escapist instrument to help individuals flee from the harsh realities of life.<sup>30</sup>

The second background of BT/TF – *diesel culture* – emerged from the foundations of hip-hop, which, in the early 1990s, was consumed by a narrow group of urban high school youth. By the 2000s, hip-hop had evolved into one of the most popular genres in these regions (Musić and Vukčević 2019, 166). Its “emancipation” from this small, privileged group to the broader youth population was facilitated by its merging with the youth diesel culture, which is

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<sup>29</sup> “Rural urbanities”/“peasant urbanities” refers to the rural population that migrated from villages to cities through internal migration, adopting modern lifestyles in an inadequate manner (see Simić 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Today, turbo-folk is no longer predominantly perceived as a stereotypical representation of nationalism, war, or as a musical form associated with “kitsch” and “cultural vulgarity”. The earlier assumption that turbo-folk is mainly listened to by uneducated and socially backward individuals has been widely challenged and largely abandoned (see Atanasovski 2015). The first author to initiate a critique of this position and open a discussion on the topic was Đurković (2001, 2004). Subsequently, the reception of turbo-folk began to shift in both academic and public discourse. This shift is largely due to new generations who have grown up without the burden of the war and nationalist stigmas attached to turbo-folk in the 1990s. As Čvoro notes, “in the 2000s, turbo-folk became a signifier for transnational ‘Balkanness’—a symbol of a regional identity that stands opposed to neoliberal global capital” (Čvoro 2014, 14). These generations are exposed to a broad spectrum of musical genres and no longer categorize reality in rigid, predetermined ways. Instead, they consume diverse musical content with a more open and less prejudiced perspective.

traditionally linked to turbo-folk, Eurodance music, and street crime (Musić and Vukčević 2019, 167). This new elite grounded its expression in fashion, particularly by embracing the globally popular clothing brand *Diesel*, which led to the term *dizelaši*<sup>31</sup> for its members (Papović and Pejović 2016; Stradnichenko 2018). Musić and Vukčević perceive the diesel subculture as “an indigenous urban youth movement shaped by the social reality of mafia capitalism in Serbia” (Musić and Vukčević 2019, 168). Mafia and criminal activities in the perception of young people became less about crime and more about success, influenced by the American hip-hop culture of that time. As a result, the diesel discourse soon began to mirror the one disseminated through American gangster culture, both in aesthetic and ideological terms, but adapted to the local context (Musić and Vukčević 2019, 182). Furthermore, these same aesthetics and consumerist values became an integral part of the turbo-folk pattern, which had already been influenced by music videos from MTV (Kronja 2001). A key element of this subcultural model was the expansion of consumerist yearnings, which, I assume, arose from: a) the transitional process of “implanting” the capitalist order onto the (former) socialist foundation during the time of isolation, declining living standards, and economic hardships; b) the representation of a luxurious and hedonistic life in global and local popular culture; and c) the emergence of opportunities for the rapid enrichment of individuals from lower class, “poverty-stricken” backgrounds, which often required an emphatic display of status symbols. In addition to these premises, the practice of nightlife was also transferred to BT/TF, a transformation that occurred precisely during the 1990s (Musić and Vukčević 2019). The rapid development of nightlife was a result of the merging of electronic/club music and the availability of drugs on the black market (Musić and Vukčević 2019, 185). This growth in the entertainment sphere of entertainment aligned with the promotion of hedonistic values in popular culture, as well as the escapism offered by an idealized or ecstatic lifestyle, in contrast to the reality dominated by war, poverty, and the collapse of the former “socialist paradise”. Over time, neither the diesel nor the turbo-folk culture lost momentum. On the contrary, new generations of youth who had never experienced the turbulence of the 1990s embraced the diesel style (Papović and Pejović 2016; Musić and Vukčević 2019, 190), and this very generation, which grew up immersed in turbo-folk, diesel and hip-hop culture, now makes up a significant portion of both the performers and the audience of BT/TF.

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<sup>31</sup> The second narrative regarding the term *dizelaši* suggests that this group was named after the diesel fuel used to power fast cars (Papović and Pejović 2016, 84)

Source: <https://blog.dnevnik.hr/maniacinfo/2006/07/1621333877/srbija-urbano-se-ljastvo.html>

*“How it hurts, my Balkan knows”:*  
The Topos of the Balkans, Balkanism, and Balkan Identity

In both geographical and cultural terms, the Balkans is associated with the Balkan Peninsula, yet it remains semantically complex and heterogeneous (Bakić-Hayden 2006, 15). This region—complex in sociocultural and geopolitical terms—has historically served as a mediator between the Orient and the Occident, with the clash of cultural influences creating a complex structure of meanings associated with it (Todorova 1999). Specific conceptual derivatives of the Balkans as a topos include balkanization and balkanism. While balkanization denotes not only the fragmentation of powerful political-territorial units but also a return to a “primitive” and “barbaric” worldview and behavior, balkanism expresses the presumed patterns of thought and behavior prevalent in the Balkans that deviate from the standards of the “civilized” world/the West (Todorova 1999, 15). Positioned in opposition to the civilized world, the Balkans becomes semantically close to Edward Said’s concept of orientalism (Bakić-Hayden 2006, 19). The construction of the Balkans and balkanism has been recreated in both foreign and domestic popular culture to describe and illustrate an atmosphere of war, poverty, passion, beauty, and pride (Cvitanović 2009, 317). Within these representational frameworks, balkanism is, on one hand, perceived as an exotic image of *the Others* who live in the Balkans, while from the perspective of the Balkans, it has become an integral part of identity formation and auto-exoticizing practices (Todorova 1999; Dumnić 2012). Representational practices have frequently stigmatized the Balkan cultural space as wild, decadent, and aggressive (Cvitanović 2009, 321). The stigma of balkanism as a synthesis of negative and paradoxical stereotypes about the region and its inhabitants was also reflected in the cultural and musical phenomenon of turbo-folk (see Mevorah 2016; Baker 2025). During the formation and popularization of the genre, one of the most prominent points of critique was its incorporation of oriental music motifs, which gradually became “a symbol of Serbian primitivism” in the eyes of the Serbian public (Kronja 2001, 12) and placed the Balkans on its presumed oriental and “regressive” side, reinforcing its association with backwardness. The heavily emphasized iconography and aesthetics of turbo-folk, along with the social contexts in which it appeared, led to its association with notions of rurality, “unculturedness” and the Balkans as a negative signifier (Simić 2006, 98). However, the relationship between balkanism and turbo-folk is more complex than a simple stigma and is best understood through the cultural intimacy<sup>32</sup> of turbo-folk listeners, particularly in nightlife settings and collective cel-

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<sup>32</sup> *Cultural intimacy* refers to “the recognition of those aspects of cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nonetheless provide in-



ebrations/parties. Ivan Đorđević argues that neo-folk and turbo-folk reinforce stereotypes of Balkan people as crazy, relaxed, wild, and hedonistic – while “Westerners” are cold, calculating, and rigid – with listening to “wild Balkan music” representing our Balkan character (Đorđević 2010, 144). In this sense, the relationship between balkanism and turbo-folk consists of numerous antagonisms that may seem irrational and illogical on an explanatory level, yet from an emic perspective, they form a paradoxical but “naturalized” and logically “meaningful” whole. The sphere of cultural intimacy established in this relationship “Balkan arrogantly celebrates itself as it is (or as it is produced) backward and oriental, bodily and semi-rural, rough, fun, but also intimate” (Kiossev 2003 quoted in Đorđević 2010, 144). The representation of the Balkans as wild, fun, and warm (Đorđević 2010, 144) reflects the auto-exotic cultural intimacy of Balkan identity, or autobalkanism as a representational practice (Dumnić 2012; Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020). As Baker notes, despite its seemingly repulsive nature, many performers engage in autobalkanism to align themselves with this image (Baker 2025, 4).

By the 2000s, Balkan identity was being more openly embraced in the music scene, while due to its semantic association with war, early turbo-folk largely avoided explicit references to the Balkans (Cvitanović 2009, 327).<sup>33</sup> During the 2000s, particularly with the rise of BT/TF, the Balkans came to be portrayed as an extraordinary place, with autobalkanism emerging as a key marketing strategy for musical artists (Dumančić and Krolo 2016; Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020).<sup>34</sup> This practice is rooted in turbo-folk and the contextual frameworks of its development, which is tied to the post-socialist and/or transitional period. Although turbo-folk has traditionally been linked to nationalism, it also diminished national differences. With the goal of attracting a broader audience, including people from various Yugoslav nationalities, the genre was marketed and produced in a way that removed national distinctions, creating a non-national

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siders with a sense of security in their inclusion in the group” (Hercfeld 2004, 20). These are the features of collective identity that offer a sense of pride and defiance in relation to the official value system (Hercfeld 2004, 21).

<sup>33</sup> However, when the Balkans were mentioned, the emphasis was on shared experiences among its people, such as enjoyment, entertainment, passion, taverns, and love (Cvitanović 2009, 327).

<sup>34</sup> Carrier (1992) argues that individuals within the same society possess diverse interests and perspectives that shape representational practices (Carrier 1992, 198). Therefore, it can be concluded that trap artists embrace the autobalkanized image because it reflects local specificities fused with global elements, is economically advantageous, and produces a sense of distinctiveness. However, Carrier also warns that such practices may have negative consequences, as they often assume differences that are false or do not exist in reality (Carrier 1992, 203).

neo/turbo-folk (Radović 2010, 129). This practice was further strengthened by other forms of autobalkanization, including the film industry (Dumančić and Krolo 2016) and World Music (Dumnić 2012; Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020), and became more defined with the rise of trap as it entered the musical mainstream. Thus, the dominant premise of the Balkans in the BT/TF is centered on the shared characteristics of the Balkan nations, i.e., Balkan people, and their proud celebration of Balkan identity in contrast to *the Others*. As a result, the overarching message of trap regarding national identity is focused on peacetime unity, setting aside national differences and putting “mentality”, temperament, and hedonistic-consumerist culture at the forefront (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 77). This has shaped an image in which all Balkan people share the same emotions, desires, and worldview, marked by contradictions that remain incomprehensible to outsiders.

### *Hedonism and Renaissance: Thematic-Ideological Topoi of Masculinity, Femininity, Love and Sexual Relationships, Social Alienation, Consumerism, and Nightlife*

Masculinity and femininity are the core concepts of gender and gender identity, synthesizing patterns of behavior, ideas, and representations of men and women as sociocultural categories. The most dominant gender types in BT/TF are *hegemonic masculinity* and *postfeminist femininity*. These concepts are pervasive elements of the BT/TF discourse and are closely related to other topoi such as love and sexual relationships, social alienation, consumerism, and nightlife.

Built on the idea of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, *hegemonic masculinity*<sup>35</sup> was coined to define the place and role of masculinity “in the social matrices of power, gender inequality, and the structure of gender relations” (Anđelković 2015, 50). In a narrower sense, hegemonic masculinity implies a socially accepted/normative ideal of masculinity that supports the gender hierarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Within this framework, not only women but also men who do not conform to this ideal are placed in a subordinate position (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Simply put, hegemonic masculinity represents the gender norm, or the ideal of masculinity to strive for (Banović 2011; Anđelković 2015).

In contrast, the femininity portrayed in trap music is best described by the term *postfeminist femininity*. Postfeminism represents a set of ideologies, strategies, and practices determined by liberal feminist discourses of freedom, choice, and independence, which have been incorporated into the media and consumer

<sup>35</sup> I emphasize that I will not be addressing general hegemonic masculinity in Serbian society, but exclusively the one that is dominant within the framework of this genre.

culture of contemporary times (Banet-Waiser 2018, 153). Towards the end of the 20th century, the concept of *girl power* began to gain prominence as the foundation for an ideology later termed postfeminist culture (Banet-Waiser 2018, 152). Associated with the third wave of feminism (Đurić 2015, 272), postfeminism sought to break free from patriarchal frameworks as well as from the “shackles” of the second wave of feminism, with popular and media culture recognized as the primary arena for emancipation (Banet-Waiser 2018, 152). In this context, the contributions of the second wave are seen as anachronistic and unnecessary, as young women are now capable of independently entering domains that were once battlegrounds for feminist struggles, such as education, work, and sexuality (Banet-Waiser 2018, 153), no longer confined by rigid social structures that once dictated fixed gender roles (McRobbie 2004, 260). These ideas affirmed the depiction of women in popular culture as young, attractive, sexual, ambitious, successful, and wealthy. Postfeminism is fundamentally centered on individualism, choice, and agency, with the female body positioned as the “site of emancipation” (Banet-Waiser 2018, 153). Therefore, sexual (auto)objectification is legitimized as a means of achieving personal goals (Đurić 2015, 272). Emerging within a neoliberal context, postfeminism is shaped by economic principles such as capital, entrepreneurship, markets, and choice, where wealth, consumerism, and individual success become key imperatives for action and self-construction (Banet-Waiser 2018, 154). Thus, in the spirit of neoliberalism, postfeminist frameworks view women as economic rather than feminist subjects (Banet-Waiser 2018, 155).

The image of masculinity in BT/TF is primarily defined by the individual success of the trap artist as the dominant topos. It is also shaped by the topos of collectivism, particularly male groups or “brotherhood”. Such practices embody a collectivist character and orientation toward the group, and these tendencies generally stem from the topos of social alienation. Most trap artists emphasize their past struggles with poverty, early coming-of-age experiences on the streets, where peer groups represented both authority and the primary sphere of interest. In this respect, collectivism is often stereotypically associated with “backward” or impoverished communities where strong interpersonal bonds become essential survival mechanisms. This is reflected in lyrics such as: “*I call anyone brother, even if I don't know them, because I've had a hundred problems since I was a kid*”.<sup>36</sup> From this perspective, the portrayal of masculinity from a male perspective is closely tied to this collectivist, “pack” mentality, which frequently overlaps with traits of toxic masculinity and (self)destructive behavior. These include excessive drinking and drug use, aggression, promiscuity, reckless driving, misogyny, machismo, crime, etc. While criminal activities are

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<sup>36</sup> Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEzUuwqf\\_ZU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEzUuwqf_ZU)

rarely mentioned outright, the frequent references to drugs (mainly cocaine as a marker of social status) suggest a connection to a criminogenic environment, often referred to as the “Balkan ghetto,” from which many trap artists claim to emerge.<sup>37</sup> This reinforces the “thug life” narrative as a defining element of masculinity as symbolic capital. However, there is often a recognition of the “flip side of hegemonic masculinity” i.e., the inner perspective, which involves “wounds on the soul,” pain and sorrow, suggesting that destructive behaviors stem not just from rebellion but also from deep-seated social alienation and an inability to express emotions in other ways: “*That’s how our mother gave birth to us — with the ghetto in our hearts, so misfortune became our guide*”;<sup>38</sup> “*How it hurts — my Balkan knows*”;<sup>39</sup> “*This sorrow from the Porsche*”.<sup>40</sup>

Through these topoi, the general matrix of the trap artist’s success is refracted: a journey from life in the ghetto to wealth and fame, where dreams of luxury cars, extravagant lifestyles, and hedonism become reality. This success is often framed through familiar motifs—partying with friends, casual relationships with women, and the pursuit of status and recognition. Hegemonic masculinity in this context is largely one-dimensional, embodied by the rebellious and untamed “bad boy” figure who is both flawed and desirable (“*Easy women, they love my flaws*”).<sup>41</sup> This portrayal aligns with the maxim *boys will be boys*, reinforcing toxic masculinity by excusing reckless behavior as an inherent part of “male nature”. Within this gender dynamic, the figure of the mother plays a crucial role, often depicted through themes of suffering, self-sacrifice, deep understanding, and unconditional love.<sup>42</sup> Her presence adds an emotional counterpoint to the trap artist’s excesses, as reflected in lyrics such as: “*And when I return home, my mother waits for me in tears*”;<sup>43</sup> “*For this Paccioti, my mother shed a tear*”;<sup>44</sup> “*What are you doing, my poor son? Are you trying to end your mother’s life?*”<sup>45</sup> These lines highlight the emotional burden placed on the mother figure, who endures the consequences of her son’s choices while remaining a source of unwavering support.

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<sup>37</sup> As Dumnić-Vilotijević notes: “The metaphor of war (typical of the 1990s turbo-folk) is replaced with the metaphor of the Balkans as rife in criminality” (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 80).

<sup>38</sup> Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MI288t\\_rm\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MI288t_rm_I)

<sup>39</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdJQZHodyxo>

<sup>40</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIWpXQstsLs>

<sup>41</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22A7zAZSQw8>

<sup>42</sup> Dumnić-Vilotijević, in her study, examines songs that articulate the figure of the mother through divergent meanings, where she emerges as a metaphor for the homeland and for hospitality (Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 8–9).

<sup>43</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KF-9RpwhHco>

<sup>44</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22A7zAZSQw8>

<sup>45</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KF-9RpwhHco>

The (self)representation of women in the context of romantic relationships and love takes on a radically different form compared to previous practices. Turbo-folk mostly represented women as more or less oppressed in luxurious settings, symbolizing power (primarily of their partners) through fame and status symbols. In BT/TF, we can distinguish several variations of femininity, although the boundaries are often blurred. Ultimately, however, all these representations align with postfeminist premises. From the perspective of female trap artists, the role of women may seem more complex at first glance, but it continues to sustain a submissive dynamic. The woman “endures” her toxic partner, who is indifferent to her and dishonest, yet she remains “loyal like a dog”, considers herself his “property”, defends him with her life, and accepts everything he does. In this way, the archetype of a Balkan woman is represented as the one who suffers and is submissive, yet simultaneously strong, powerful, and occasionally rules “from the shadows”.<sup>46</sup> In this thread, the essence of the female gender role can be observed as it shifts from the figure of the mother to that of the right one woman, who, despite his flaws and destructive behavior is expected to embody “unconditional love” (“*The curse is to love a scoundrel*”).<sup>47</sup>

The most dominant representation of femininity relies on a dual dynamic: she is both subordinate to him (*She:Others*) and exceptional compared to other women (*Me:Others*). *The Others* are perceived as inferior and irrelevant, while *She* is powerful, successful, arrogant, dangerous, a “snake”, and so on: “*Around you, all are snakes, but I’m the biggest of them all*”<sup>48</sup>; “*I’m a Balkan snake*”;<sup>49</sup> “*I walk by, and you tremble*”;<sup>50</sup> “*Force from the heavens – Senidah*”.<sup>51</sup> This representation aligns with postfeminist tropes, particularly toxic femininity and girl power narratives, which appear to empower women on the surface.<sup>52</sup> Toxic

<sup>46</sup> See also Cvitanović 2009, 328–329.

<sup>47</sup> As the most illustrative example, listen to the track recorded for the film *South Wind*, which represents the auto-Balkanist criminogenic Balkans: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQcjD3S0o-8>

<sup>48</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kENX9selukE>

<sup>49</sup> Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQcW\\_q6UEPc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQcW_q6UEPc)

<sup>50</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYnBoeDm2Hw>.

<sup>51</sup> A great example that combines postfeminist elements with the core of feminist aspiration and female solidarity can be heard at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOWZIHczOX8>. In contrast to other artists whose work reflects themes of toxic femininity and toxic masculinity, Senidah’s oeuvre articulates the figure of a new woman—one who disrupts inherited traditions of female subordination. Furthermore, Senidah stands out as the most prominent artist both in terms of production and creative expression, making it unsurprising that she is frequently hailed as the “queen of trap”.

<sup>52</sup> We can trace this practice back to the 2010s, with a growing number of pop-folk divas increasingly adopting a more violent approach toward men, positioning themself-

femininity is constructed around the figure of the “dangerous” woman whose “eyes are everywhere”/sees everything, is unafraid of stirring up scandals, driving men to obsession, and asserting control. As such, femininity exists in a paradoxical relationship with the hegemonic masculinity, which is embodied by the wealthy, reckless man—“who drinks away everything he earns”, indulges in drugs, is sexually promiscuous, highly desirable, and often “unavailable”. Therefore, her femininity is positioned as dominant over other women, yet it ultimately remains subordinate to the power of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>53</sup>

A similar practice occurs in the portrayal of femininity from a male perspective, where women are often understood through the opposition, she: all others, where sexualization and reduction to corporeality are almost inevitable (see also Dumančić and Krolo 2016). All others, who are most often referred to as “whores“, are depicted as depersonalized, immoral women, and fleeting adventures, whose sole purpose is to provide sexual pleasure and strengthen male potency and power. Unlike earlier practices of portraying women, BT/TF is almost devoid of euphemisms and any romanticized portrayal of sex. Instead, it employs direct, often crude language, where sex is not only explicitly described but frequently characterized by roughness and dominance: „*She wants it rough as if she doesn't feel pain*“<sup>54</sup>; „*That greasy ass got slapped*“<sup>55</sup>; „*With him, every position is fierce*“<sup>56</sup>. The female body<sup>57</sup> becomes a central theme, with emphasis placed on beauty, curves, soft skin, blonde or brunette hair, etc.<sup>58</sup> In this framework, sexual objectification is paradoxically presented both as a source of female power and as a means of affirming male superiority. Such a dynamic suggests that a woman's value lies in her exclusivity—she belongs only to him—and the superlative descriptions of her serve to magnify *his* greatness, reinforcing his status and dominance.

The economic aspect of this power dynamic gives rise to several versions of femininity. Women are typically depicted either as the rich, spoiled, “urban

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ves as dominatrix figures within a sadomasochistic framework (Dumančić and Krolo 2016, 10).

<sup>53</sup> As Dumančić and Krolo point out in their discussion of masculinity in turbofolk and pop-folk: “pop-folk's male performers, like their hip-hop counterparts in the West, objectify female bodies and define masculine success in terms of material abundance” (Dumančić and Krolo 2016, 8).

<sup>54</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vC46oEccXVI>

<sup>55</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZCXIXShEk4>

<sup>56</sup> Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02\\_6hGdDwN0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02_6hGdDwN0)

<sup>57</sup> Comparisons describing the “desirable” appearance in songs often refer to celebrities such as Naomi Campbell, Irina Shayk, Bella Hadid, etc.

<sup>58</sup> The intensity and presence of this idea are further supported by the works of earlier scholars (see Dumnić-Vilotijević 2020, 79–80; Cvitanović 2009, 328–329), which emphasize the strength and beauty of Balkan women.

girls” or as self-made women who have built their success independently—aligning with the ideals of the neoliberal subject. In both cases, *He* is most often the provider who fulfills desires and finances everything. Hence, a general matrix is observed, male narratives are primarily success stories, with everything serving as a testament of achievement, whereas female narratives predominantly revolve around male-female relationships. Romantic love, at least its common form, is not particularly present in trap music. Instead, relationships are typically characterized by toxicity, sex, hedonism, and the display of status symbols. The ultimate outcome of the relationship often culminates in a lavish, youthful lifestyle that involves partying, traveling, and similar pursuits. Thus, the topos of consumerism permeates the textual content as well as the music videos, where expensive cars, designer clothing, jewelry, and exotic destinations dominate. Brand names such as Lamborghini, BMW, Audi, Louis Vuitton, Fendi, Gucci, Dior, and Prada are frequently referenced. While turbo-folk was the first genre to prominently showcase wealth and introduce the idea of a *poverty-stricken mindset* (where status symbols are ostentatiously displayed), BT/TF has made *brand-name dropping* an essential element of self-representation and a marker of success. This emphasis on consumerism is unsurprising given that BT/TF emerged as a fusion of turbo-folk, diesel culture, and American trap, all of which are recognized for their consumerist-hedonistic characteristics and narratives of success. Moreover, these themes align with the dominant patterns of global popular culture, shaped by neoliberalism and consumerist ideals, and integral to the cultural backdrop of the trap artist, where the maxim *Be rich, young, and individual* dominates—signifying the ideal neoliberal subject.

In some ways, BT/TF disrupts the premise of *Music as a Mirror of Society*, yet it still reflects dominant cultural values and ideologies. The creators and performers of trap challenge the “biographical” nature of the songs they write, i.e., the lyrics are not their lived experiences, but they often emerge from a social context familiar to the performers. In this way, a particular narrative is “attached” to a trend to make a song to go viral and generate profit, as trap artists openly prioritize the economic aspect of music above all else. Yet, neither the artists nor their audience tend to question how these trends came about or, more precisely, why the themes of American trap easily adapted to the local Balkan context. During conversations with listeners of BT/TF, both in Serbia and the diaspora, I found myself wondering: why these topoi appear in the music when, according to the statements of my interlocutors, they do not reflect the lived experiences of most listeners? In other words, how do individuals who do not live the life depicted in the songs identify with this genre? It seems that the roots of this phenomenon trace back to the early 1990s and the period of turbo-folk’s formation as an escapist genre. A combination of economic, political, and cul-

tural circumstances likely facilitated the development and adaptation of popular music that thrives on intense, “wild” emotions and sensations. The main appeal of turbo-folk stemmed from the “successful fusion of folklore (traditional) and new urban myths”, with the key myth being popularity, glamour, fun, wealth, and a comfortable and enjoyable urban life (Dragičević-Šešić 1994, 123). In this sense, turbo-folk functioned as a local adaptation of global and urban pop cultural elements, while on the other hand, it served as a “pressure valve”, constructing an idealized version of reality. This is where the escapist dimension of this genre is reflected. From a critical perspective, the escapist dimension of turbo-folk was one of its key features, with the idea being that almost every sociological study of the audience indicates that through the song, “a different, better life, a life full of glamour, beauty, and joy” is experienced (Dragičević-Šešić 1994, 158). Therefore, forgetting and escaping from harsh reality became the demands of all social groups at the time, and artists sought to respond to this market demand within all cultural models (Dragičević-Šešić 1994, 199). However, folk musicians expressed this most clearly, as “turbo-folk embodied a lifestyle—a set of values, attitudes, aspirations, and expectations shared by the population” (Dragičević-Šešić 1994, 199). In this way, turbo-folk’s escapist character seems to have been “naturalized” and transferred to BT/TF, the genre that is both musically and ideologically closest to it. Generations raised on turbo-folk, with its sensually intense, tavern-club aesthetic became accustomed to such a sound, making BT/TF a logical evolution of the genre. Another major influence on BT/TF came from the American mainstream, which, directly or indirectly, integrated trap sound into its musical framework. Just as turbo-folk in the 1990s served as a distinct generational marker, as the “old melody in modern attire”, it gave the impression of being modern, urban, “eccentric” and “chic”. However, from a critical perspective, it was perceived in a radically different light – as the “peasant” version of the West, “kitschy”, “trash” and so on (Simić 2006; Ćirjaković 2012; Kulenović and Banić-Grubišić 2019). A similar fate awaits BT/TF, which, from the perspective of a large part of the youth, represents modern, urban, “cool” music. From a critical perspective, visible on numerous online platforms, this genre is seen as cheap computer music created by untalented performers who, by promoting primitive and “grotesque” values, influence new generations to grow into, as it is often stated, “degenerations”.<sup>59</sup> Thus, it is observed that every newer folk form will be hated both by listeners of the previous folk form and by non-folk/anti-folk-oriented individuals and

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<sup>59</sup> This line of argumentation has, in the case of Italian trap, led to a study examining the correlation between psychopathological personality traits and trap music as a primary listening preference (Perrotta 2022). While I remain cautious toward such approaches and question their methodological reliability, I consider it appropriate to reference them as sources that illustrate this particular perspective.



groups. Furthermore, generational differences in these frameworks often appear as irreconcilable. The key reason for such polarized views lies in the flexible nature of musical texts. Unlike linguistic texts, which rely on relatively fixed conventions, music is far more arbitrary in meaning and interpretation (Agawu 2009, 25), and the very connotation of a particular genre is usually conditioned by socio-cultural and historical conventions. It is also crucial to recognize that music is primarily a sensory and intrinsic phenomenon, with varying effects from person to person. As for most young people, BT/TF is less about artistic or lyrical value and more about the experience itself, a “hype” driven by rhythm and melody rather than meaning.

### *Breaking the Club – Closing: Concluding Remarks*

This paper examines the phenomenon of Balkan trap/trap-folk (BT/TF), a genre that, despite its central role in contemporary popular culture and everyday life—particularly among younger generations—has yet to receive sufficient attention within the academic community. The aim of this study was to contribute to the scholarly understanding of this genre by building on previous research, as well as to map and preliminarily outline the main discursive, thematic, and ideological structures of BT/TF. In this work, BT/TF is conceptualized as a form of musical discourse, which serves as the primary methodological starting point. The theoretical and methodological framework was further enhanced by the application of the concept of *topoi*, with the goal of identifying and organizing the key thematic, ideological, and contextual dimensions of the genre. Particular focus was placed on two main categories of *topoi*: contextual-ideological and thematic-ideological. Among the most prominent are those related to the Balkan cultural space, Balkan identity and Balkanism, hegemonic masculinity, postfeminist femininity, love and sexuality, consumerism, social alienation, and nightlife. The interrelations among these *topoi* help define the boundaries of BT/TF, illuminating its structural and symbolic characteristics, while confirming the main hypotheses and arguments of previous academic literature.

BT/TF emerges as a highly adaptive and economically driven genre, shaped by the logic of contemporary music industries, the neoliberal cultural order in which it exists, and the complex socio-cultural landscape of the Balkans. In this region, music production and consumption are deeply intertwined with local identity politics, affective economies, and transnational imaginaries. Precisely due to its sensitivity to both global trends and local specificities, BT/TF can be seen as a paradigmatic example of postmodernism, musical glocalization and hybridity, through which young people shape, express, and negotiate their lived experiences.

This paper is part of a broader research project initiated during my master's thesis, aimed at further illuminating BT/TF as a key platform for articulating cultural identity, affective belonging, and the commodification of everyday life within contemporary popular music.

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**Lazar Barać**

Etnografski institut SANU

lazar.barac@ei.sanu.ac.rs

*Made in Balkan:  
doprinis razumevanju balkanskog trepa/trep-folka  
kao muzičkog žanra i kulturnog fenomena*

U radu tretiram pitanje balkanskog trepa/trep-folka (BT/TF) kao žanra koji više od decenije predstavlja bitan deo muzičkog mejnstrima. Ovaj žanr, kombinujući različite muzičke prakse, predstavlja hibridni i globalni fenomen tj. fuziju globalnog trepa i lokalnih muzičkih tradicija. Teorijsko-metodološki okvir rada zasnovan je na kvalitativnoj analizi izvora (relevantne literature i članaka), analizi muzičkog diskursa, te mapiranju i kontekstualizaciji dominantnih toposa. Pre same analize, u radu su prikazane opšte karakteristike (globalnog) trepa i kontekst njegovog nastanka, a potom i proces globalizacije i „dolaska“ trepa u Srbiju što je predstavljalo inicijalnu kapislu uspostavljanja žanra i uspona do muzičkog mejnstrima. Oslanjajući se na procese globalizacije i hibridizacije, ukratko sam mapirao dominantne karakteristike žanra služeći se relevantnom literaturom, (internet) izvorima i ličnim uvidima.

Diskurs BT/TF kao analitički deo rada podeljen je u dve ključne celine. Prvu celinu čine kontekstualno-ideološki toposi u kojima se tretiraju diskursi Balkana/balkanizma, turbo-folka i dizelaške supkulture. Drugu grupu toposa čine tematsko-ideološki toposi koji uključuju ljubavne i seksualne veze, društvenu osujećenost, konzumerizam i noćni život, a sveprožimajuće i ključne ose ovih toposa jesu toposi maskuliniteta i feminiteta. Žanr se dodatno tumači kao odraz neoliberalnog poretka i postmoderne muzičke hibridnosti, funkcionišući kao ključno mesto za artikulaciju kulturnog identiteta, pripadnosti i komodifikacije svakodnevnog života. Ovaj rad je deo šireg istraživačkog projekta započetog tokom master studija, sa ciljem daljeg osvetljavanja BT/TF-a kao značajne platforme u okviru savremene popularne muzike i antropologije muzike.

**Ključne reči:** balkanski trep/trep-folk, popularna muzika, antropologija muzike, balkanizam, muzički diskurs, Srbija

*Made in Balkan:  
contribution à la compréhension du trap/trap-folk balkanique  
comme genre musical et phénomène culturel*

Le trap/trap-folk balkanique est un genre hybride/glocal qui couvre un large éventail des pratiques musicales globales et locales et se caractérise par des transformations constantes et la commercialisation. Il est apparu après 2010,

lorsque le trap global et la technologie qui lui est associée ont commencé à dominer sur la scène mondiale grand public. Dans le contexte local, les fondements du développement du trap ont été posés grâce à ses prédécesseurs génériques, des changements dans la production musicale et l'influence croissante du discours balkanique dans la musique populaire. À travers l'analyse qualitative des sources et celle du discours musical, ce travail a pour l'objectif de contribuer à la compréhension scientifique du trap/trap-folk balkanique en proposant: a) la définition du genre, b) la reconstruction de sa trajectoire historique et c) la description des topoï dominants et des formations discursives, avec un accent particulier sur les discours déjà existants (dominant le genre), les processus de glocalisation et hybridisation, ainsi que sur la représentation générique.

**Mots clés:** trap/trap-folk balkanique, musique populaire, anthropologie de la musique, balkanisme, discours musical, Serbie

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