

**PhD Aleksandar Pavlović**, docent<sup>1</sup>

Department of Journalism, Faculty of Sport,  
University „Union – Nikola Tesla“, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia

## “Balkan Boy Stinks”: Traditional vs Transitional Identity in the Songs of Rambo Amadeus

**Abstract:** The article focuses on the cultural representation of the Balkan man in three songs by a Montenegrin-born and Belgrade-based rock musician Rambo Amadeus from 1989, 1993, 1997. and 2012. The songs are selected as illustrative of the transformation of the cultural self-representation of the Balkans and its relations with the West at the time of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, a period characterised by civil wars, Western intervention and the struggles of the Western Balkans to join (or be admitted to) the European Union. It is argued that, while all the songs are generally framed in common prejudices and stereotypes about the Balkans, the more recent ones show an apparent reinterpretation of the earlier content and testify to the author’s inability to keep previous culturally typical identity representations and to reproduce positive stereotypes about the Balkan man under the new economic and political circumstances.

**Key words:** *Rambo Amadeus, Balkan, West, Cultural Representation, Balkanism*

---

<sup>1</sup> apavlovic@fzs.edu.rs

**dr Aleksandar Pavlović**, docent

Odsek za novinarstvo, Fakultet za sport,

Univerzitet „Union – Nikola Tesla“, Beograd, Republika Srbija

## “Balkan boj smrdi na znoj”: Tradicionalni vs tranzicioni identitet u pesmama Ramba Amadeusa

**Apstrakt:** Članak se fokusira na medijsko predstavljanje Balkana u pesmama beogradskog rok muzičara crnogorskog porekla Ramba Amadeusa, naročito na kulturalnu predstavu o balkanskom čoveku i njegovom odnosu prema Zapadu u autorovim pesmama iz 1989, 1993, 1997. i 2012. godine. Pesme su odabrane kao ilustrativne za transformaciju kulturne samopercepcije Balkana i njegovih odnosa sa Zapadom pre, za vreme i posle raspada bivše Jugoslavije, u periodu koji karakterišu građanski ratovi, zapadne intervencije i naponi zemalja Zapadnog Balkana da se pridruže (ili budu primljene u) Evropskoj Uniji. Tvrdi se da, iako sve pesme u izvesnoj meri eksploatišu uvrežene predrasude i stereotipe o Balkanu, one novije pokazuju očiglednu reinterpetaciju ranijeg sadržaja i svedoče o nemogućnosti autora da zadrži prethodne kulturno tipične predstave o “Balkancu” i da reprodukuje pozitivne stereotipe o balkanskom čoveku u izmenjenim ekonomskim i političkim okolnostima.

**Ključne reči:** *Rambo Amadeus, Balkan, Zapad, Evropa, Balkanizam*

## Introduction

This article examines the shift in the self-representation of the Balkan man in several songs that rock musician Rambo Amadeus composed and performed in the late 1980s, and during 1990s, that is, at the time of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, civil wars and Western intervention on the Balkans, and finishing with his song *Euro Neuro* with which he represented Montenegro at the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest. I suggest that this popular and multifaceted figure and his media image offer an insight into the public transformation of traditional identity, and that the selected songs illustrate the shift in the cultural self-representation of the Balkans and its relations with the West during this period. Whereas the hero of his 1989 song *Balkan boy* was a basically self-confident and sexually potent Balkan man, in the new songs from respectively 1993 and 1997, following his encounters with the West, he ends up a damaged and disillusioned subject, bitterly recapitulating his place on the margins of European society. Finally, in his 2012 *Euro Neuro*, Rambo continues to re-articulate this ambiguity between the Balkans and Europe and, more generally, between the traditional patriarchal values and liberal capitalism personified by the European Union.

While in the early 1990s quite a few of his colleagues instantly embraced and actively promoted the new nationalistic ideologies, Rambo Amadeus became one of the most severe critics of Milošević's regime. It appears that Rambo, born Antonije Pušić in the ethnically and religiously mixed Adriatic town of Kotor in 1963, and himself a child of a mixed marriage, was more immersed in the supranational Yugoslav identity. Rambo spent most of his life in Montenegro and Belgrade, apart from some time spent abroad in the nineties doing odd jobs to make ends meet. This existential crisis was partly caused by his public suicide in 1992. During the concert entitled “Belgrade Rock Winner,” which was broadcast live on national television, Rambo jumped onto the stage, grabbed a microphone and delivered a loud and extremely vulgar and offensive message to the audience (“Je..m vam mater glupo glasačko telo, zabavljate se ovdje dok bombarduju gradove!”) which, in a bit softened English translation, sounds: “While we’re here playing music, bombs are falling on Dubrovnik and Sarajevo! I don’t want to entertain the electorate! This was followed by a curse.” (Mijatovic, 2008:6)

Simultaneously, during this time Rambo also changed his musical approach. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, he combined backward rural rock and disco rhythms with popular folk melodies. From the mid 1990s, however, he moved from the mainstream to the underground, and turned to a heavier rock sound and musical and verbal improvisation in the manner of Frank Zappa.



Before



After

More recently, he appeared dressed as Elvis on the notorious Pink TV station, a symbol of populism and political opportunism in the 1990s, and publicly proclaimed his return to commercialism. At the same time, he continued with regular club performances and mocking mainstream culture and folk music in his songs.

Although this complex and ambiguous figure has rightfully attracted scholarly attention (Gordy 1999, Ramet 1994, Mijatovic 2008, Colin 2001), scholars have remained focused mostly on the anti-war aspect of his public and musical engagement. My approach is rather more general in nature, and concerns the shift in the representation of the distinctive Balkan identity and its relation to the West in his songs from 1989 to 1997, and its status in his recent Eurovision song from 2012.

### **The original version of *Balkan boy* (1989)**

The original version of *Balkan boy* from 1989 was a quasi-autobiographical reflection of a primitive provincial who becomes a musical celebrity. While he was carelessly singing one of his songs in the street, the story goes, a musical producer approached him and promised him a career. So, he made a record and instantly became a star. All of the sudden, he was treated with respect, the famous folk and pop stars Lepa Brena and Bajaga wanted to be his friends, he became accustomed to soap and toothpaste and would now “only bang women who shave their legs”. The song thus provides a fine example of the internal Balkanism as described by Maria Todorova. Namely, Todorova coined the term Balkanism as a derivative of Edward Said’s Orientalism to denote “all those interpretations by which the phenomena from Southeast Europe are framed in discourse or, if you prefer, stabile, firm system of stereotypes” constructed in the West in the past centuries (Todorova, 1997:19). Typically, this discourse treats the peoples from the Balkans as backward, less evolved than their Western neighbours, and still uncultivated and uncivilised. In

addition, Todorova describes how cases of this outside perception of the Balkans have been internalised in the region itself and calls this internal Balkanism (Ibid, 39). In Rambo's song, however, Balkanism is articulated with a certain ambiguity, since it is both internalised as a negative, pejorative self-denominator, and transformed into positive characteristics in the sexual sphere. The refrain alone should suffice to illustrate this point. The original: “Ja sam Balkan boy i smrdim na znoj, / i kad-tad, ja biću tvoj”, reads: “I'm a Balkan Boy and I stink of sweat, / but sooner or later you'll be mine”, or “sooner or later I'll have you”. In the concerts, Rambo was even more explicit, singing the refrain as follows: “Ja sam Balkan boj i veliki je moj, / ja sam Balkan boj jer sam ljubavni stroj” (“I'm a Balkan boy and I have a big d..k, / I'm a Balkan boy 'cause I'm a love machine.”

“Balkan primitivism” is depicted here in a literal sense and applied to the sphere of hygiene, thus activating the opposition between *pure* and *impure*. According to Mary Douglas, who explored these categories worldwide in both primitive and complex modern societies, purity stands for clear boundaries and order, while pollution represents anomaly and disorder and is associated with liminal and marginal objects, persons and social groups (Douglas, 1966). As such, the notion of purity on the one hand, and of the pollution and dirt on the other, relies on the Levi-Straussian structuralist enterprise of identifying fundamental structural oppositions that ultimately separate the spheres of the cultural or civilised from the natural and primordial realm. Being dirty, the Balkan boy thus reproduces one of the persistent stereotypes about the Balkans living in an “intermediary state between barbarity and civilization” (Todorova, 1997:130).

It is precisely in this sense that the lack of personal hygiene can simultaneously be associated with sexual efficiency and enlarged sexual capacity. Uncivilised and primitive as he is, Balkan man is also more natural. In other words, his primordial drives and urges are not suppressed by the effects of civilization and acculturation, which allows him to execute his sexuality more efficiently from the more civilised and developed. Hence, augmented sexual potency and success in this sphere serve as compensation for a lack of culture and civilization.

By emphasizing the hero's self-proclaimed masculine superiority and confidence, Rambo reproduces another stereotype or culturally typical representation of the Balkan man. Namely, at least since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century works of Jovan Cvijić, the highly influential pioneer of national characterology, characteristics such as “undisturbed, unlimited self-confidence” and “self-over-estimation, vanity and boasting” (Cvijić, 1994: 28-68) figure in Serbian scholarship as some of the essential characteristics of the Balkan man. While Cvijić's followers expanded his research and identified similar features among the popular heroes of Serbian, Croatian and Slovene literatures and cultures (Gesemann 1935, Džadžić 1994), the work of scholars outside this scholarly tradition offered a number of parallels from other Balkan literatures (Igov, 2004:214 et passim, Todorova, 38-42). Thus, though the very notion of national character today hardly retains any authority, it is nevertheless telling that cognate characteristics are commonly recognised

as culturally typical and distinctively Balkanic.

Finally, let us conclude our analysis by a brief reminder that the implied, civilised counterpart of the Balkan boy is, of course, none other than his Western neighbour. Again, this juxtaposition corresponds to the basic perception of the Balkans as a liminal zone which is neither the real Other nor properly European. Since the West here already serves as a kind of correlative for the self-identification of Balkan man, two basic presumptions about this relation should be noticed. Firstly, the Westerner is still unnamed and, secondly, there is no, at least no explicit, conflict or hierarchy between the two, as if they both govern their respective spheres of culture and sexuality. Thus in the 1989 song the relational character of Balkan identity remained implicit and essentially apolitical and non-antagonistic.

### Embargo (1993)

The next two songs that I take into consideration plainly illustrate the shift in the perception of Balkan man and his relation to the West in the war and the post-war period. In 1993, Rambo re-actualised this theme in the song with a pointing name *Embargo*<sup>2</sup> and updated the relation of the Balkans and the West according to the new political context and their conflict and antagonism. The song begins in the following manner:

Došla neka pica Švabica iz Ujedinjenih Nacija,  
da proučava na muškarce uticaj nepravednih sankcija.  
Prva liga obučena maksimalno doćerana,  
odmah se vidi da se sapunom kupa svakog dana.

A hot piece of German ass from the United Nations,  
came to investigate the effects of the unjustified sanctions  
on men. All made up and dressed to the nines,  
it's obvious she washes with soap all the time.

The hero comes on to her without a complex and self-confidently claims that no girl has ever turned him down. Then he makes a witty remark: “was Hitler your uncle? For you and for him I saved a bullet”, and asks her to come closer to see “how the fighting spirit is aroused.” The girl initially rejects his sexual proposal or, as he defines it, “she strictly obeys the sanctions”, but he becomes more and more pushy and finally gets what he wants. The refrain summarises the point: “Admit that you are glad that Bruno breaks the embargo tonight”.

Although the author steadily exploits the motifs of sexual capacity and efficiency and the lack of hygiene of the Balkan man established in the previous song, several new elements introduced here reflect the shift in perception of relations between the West and the Balkans. The first one is the militarization of the discourse.

---

<sup>2</sup> The *embargo* or the *sanctions* was the official name for the political and economic isolation imposed on Serbia during the ninety-nineties.

Bruno's opening statement is already a warning, a threat, and the demonstration of force – no girl has ever rejected me. Moreover, military terminology is used to express his sexual intention. Thus “the bullet” serves as a metaphor for penetration, and the “aroused fighting spirit” for an erection. Accordingly, their relationship is described in increasingly politicised and hostile terms. For example, the initial references to Hitler and Tito draw parallels with Bruno's sexual encounter and the Second World War. In addition, the tension between her hesitation and his insistence is expressed as the opposition between obeying/breaking the embargo, and his sexual success is equated with military and political victory. As if by performing a sexual act he actually breaks the embargo and transgresses international law and the expulsion of his country.

Finally, the third innovative element concerns Western policy towards the Balkans. The United Nations are personified by the face of a German girl, which instantly provokes Bruno's association with Hitler. Such a connection suggests that Western policy is not perceived as one of good intentions, friendship or cooperation, but of domination and violence. Germany and Hitler in particular symbolise the violent past and evoke the previous history of Western brutality in the Balkans.

Certainly, the perspective expressed in the song is hardly straightforward. Rambo plays both with the official discourse of the “unjustified sanctions” and the very idea of sexual compensation for political shortcomings. Nonetheless, the fact remains that relations between the Balkans and the West are now reinterpreted in light of their conflict and antagonism. But despite its conflict with - and expulsion from - the West, the “Balkan subject” in this song still remains confident, sexually potent and in a way self-fulfilled; although, one might say, his achievement is less a product of sexual desire *per se* than an act of political revanchism and, as such, inevitably insufficient.

### ***Balkan Boy Live (1997)***

It is telling that only four years after the “Embargo”, in the 1997 concert (released as a live album the following year), Rambo thoroughly transformed the original version of the *Balkan boy*. The hero is now disillusioned and marginalised. Although Rambo continues to exploit the motif of his raw, distinctively Balkanic sexual energy, it can now hardly fill the rupture or compensate for all the failures and deficiencies:

Nekoliko puta ja sam,  
 za zadnjih sedam godina,  
 pokušao da se probijem na inostrano tržište.  
 Prao sam sudove u Londonu,  
 a Trut je prao šerpe;  
 no, međutim, shvatili smo da moramo  
 napraviti neki probaj na englesko tržište.

In the past seven years,  
I've tried to break into the foreign market a few times.  
I washed dishes in London,  
and Trut [the drummer] washed the pots;  
Then, at one point, we realised that  
We gotta get into the English scene.

Now he starts singing in English with an intentionally strong foreign accent and poor grammar:

I am clever I am not a fool,  
I learned English in elementary school.  
My grandfather he was partisan,  
He died in car accident like a hero man.  
In my country was a ethnic war,  
I don't wanna shoot I wanna play electric guitar.

Accordingly, the refrain now follows his new fate:

Balkan boy, I am a Balkan boy  
And I search for employ.  
I can wash the dishes faster then machine,  
I can babysit the babies older then sixteen,  
I have no money, I have no friends...

The shift from the original song is so obvious that it hardly requires an in-depth analysis. *Balkan boy* is now placed on the margins of the European society. His previous country collapsed, facing him with the option of either taking part in ethnic war or being unemployed, or undertaking low paid manual labour in the European capitals. Furthermore, while the original song did not insist on the hierarchy between the Balkanian and the Westerner, allowing both to govern their respective spheres, their final encounter shows clear stratification of their positions, the marginalization of the former and his economic dependence on the latter.

To summarise, the original version of *Balkan boy* from 1989 offered an apolitical and non-antagonistic picture of Balkan men as culturally inferior but sexually superior to his Western neighbour. The new post-Yugoslav socio-political context practically disabled the literal reproduction of the original hit and required a quite drastic reinterpretation of the earlier content. In his song *Embargo* from 1993 Rambo had already registered the conflict between the Balkans and the West and struggled to keep the distinctiveness and dignity of the Balkan man in the new circumstances. Eventually, in his 1997 live rendition of the *Balkan boy*, the elements of positive self-representation suffered the most. Thus, while the hero of the original song was essentially a self-confident subject, in the latter the same character



bitterly recapitulates his hardships and the poverty caused by the civil war and his marginalised position in the new European order.

### ***Euro Neuro (2012)***

Finally, it might be a bit comforting in this light to make recourse to Rambo's most recent re-articulation of the Balkan/EU theme, which goes in line with the current trend of overcoming recent conflicts and promoting full membership of the Western Balkan states in the European Union.

Invited to represent Montenegro at the 2012 Eurovision song contest, Rambo readily composed a song with a telling title *Euro Neuro*. In the first two stanzas, the narrator seems to offer his evaluation of current trends and issues, implicitly criticising certain European policies in verses such as:

Euro neuro don't be sceptic,  
Hermetic, pathetic, analphabetic,  
Forget all cosmetic...  
Euro neuro, don't be dogmatic bureaucratic,  
You need to become pragmatic,  
To stop change climatic;  
Need contribution from the institution,  
To find solution for pollution.

While it seems obvious that the narrative subject is by no means disinterested in the European affairs, these concerns are nevertheless voices from an outsider's perspective, which again points to the Balkans as a liminal place neither fully outside nor inside the Europe (recently often identified with the European Union). Deixes, i.e. the words indicating the position of the narrator, demonstrate his distance towards the addressee in these verses – it is *You*, not *Us* or *We* that need to be pragmatic and stop being sceptic, bureaucratic etc.

It suffices here to compare this latent dichotomy to the famous Toto Cutugno's hit *Insieme (Together)*, an Eurovision 1992 winner and a hymn to the European unification. While Cutugno also frequently uses *You* and *I* pronouns, the whole point is that the song blends and united these two instances in a Searlian performative utterance, thereby ending their separation:

Io e te, sotto lo stesso cielo  
Insieme, unite, unite, Europe

You and I, having the same dream  
Together, unite, unite, Europe

Per noi, nel cielo mille violini  
Per noi, amori senza confini  
Io e te, sotto gli stessi ideali, mmm...  
Insieme, unite, unite, Europe.

For us, in heaven a thousand violins  
For us, love without borders  
You and I, having the same ideals, mmm...  
Together, unite, unite, Europe.

In short, both Cutugno and Rambo deliberately bring *You* and *I* into proximity in the European context, addressing the European (Br)Other from the perspective of the Italian and Montenegrin subject respectively. However, while Cutugno eventually blends them into a collective *We*, Rambo still keeps the distance between the two by juxtaposing the *You* and the *I* in his song.

In the video spot for the song, Rambo takes this distance even further and, in a way, hyperbolizes it. The protagonist arrives with a donkey from the rural, mountainous parts of Montenegro among the apparently rich Western tourists on the Montenegrin coast, and charges them for his services. In the ending scene, we see how donkey takes the protagonist's Euros from the back pocket and eats them. The donkey, even more than the protagonist, can thereby serve as a telling symbol of the backward Balkans that purposelessly eats European money. This financial aspect of the video spot is perfectly in line with the refrain:

Euro Neuro, Euro Neuro,  
Monetary break dance,  
Euro Neuro, Euro Neuro,  
Give me chance to refinance.

Nonetheless, one should not overemphasize this distance, as the narrative *I* in the remaining two stanzas affirm certain values and views that are far more appropriate to the European agenda than to the patriarchal Balkan society:

Euro Neuro I don't like snobism  
Nationalism, puritanism  
I am different organism  
My heroism is pacifism, altruism  
I enjoy bicyclism  
Liberalism, tourism, nudism, optimism  
It is good for rheumatism.

Apparently, the narrator expresses here some common European values and has the same concerns, which thus makes the visual hyperbolization of their difference presented in the video spot comic and unrealistic. One is now tempted to infer that the Balkan and European subjects here inhabit a shared space, and that their distances are blending together. While the economic inequality and dependence between the two remains apparent, this is certainly not any longer an antagonistic or hostile relation between them implied by his songs from the 1990s.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Rambo's songs were chosen since they captured quite neatly the consequences of the changed political constellation. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reshaping of Europe, the representation of Balkan/West relationship could have led, for example, in the direction of their final reconciliation or their peaceful and friendly coexistence. The Yugoslav crisis, however, moved things in a completely different direction and actually deepened the gap between the two and radicalised their differences and antagonism. Thus, I emphasised the apolitical and non-antagonistic representation of their relationship in the 1989 song and its militarization and politization in the later versions. Finally, it is equally instructive, as I hope, to refer to this cultural representation in the time of current merging between the Western Balkans and the European Union as a reminder that, although finally accepted by Europe, the Balkanians remain somewhat wounded souls with empty wallets.

It could be objected that I perhaps failed to do full justice to Rambo's songs, since his approach is hardly straightforward and involves a constant interplay of official and popular discourses and cultural stereotypes. Though I am inclined to recognise his songs to some extent as a resistant or subversive performatives in the Butlerian sense (Butler, 1990:171-180), geared at subverting the norms and stereotypes, to insist on this dimension of the author's work would miss the essential point of my analysis. Namely, what enables this interplay in the first place is Rambo's exploitation of the common, typical cultural representation of the Balkans, and it is the cultural persistence and recent transformation of these stereotypes, rather than the uniqueness of this particular articulation, that occupied a central place in my discussion of the songs.

Finally, this analysis indicated that we should perhaps take this bitter recapitulation of the Balkan boy's fate as a sign of the more devastating effect of the Yugoslav crisis on the traditional Balkan identity. Namely, Rambo's original *Balkan Boy* still displayed the traditional self-overestimation and an enormous and largely unjustified confidence characteristic for the Balkan man. From the remarks of early Western travellers, over the proponents of Balkan characterology like Cvijić and his many followers, to representative literary and cultural products from the region, one can literally follow for centuries the amazing persistency of this perception that cannot simply be ignored. Seen in this light, *Euro Neuro* brings some lively colours to the representation of the Balkan man from the 1990s as irrelevant, disillusioned European marginal broken in his traditional confidence and pride. It moves away from the recent deep psychic drama and tragedy of the Balkan subject, announcing perhaps other realms for its confirmation and emancipation than the recent regression to national fictions.

## Bibliography

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Troubles: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Collin, M. (2001). *This is Serbia Calling: Rock 'n' Roll Radio and Belgrade's Underground Resistance*. London: Serpent's Tail.
- Cvijić, J. (1994). *O balkanskim psihičkim tipovima*. Edited Petar Džadžić. Beograd: Prosveta.
- Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Džadžić, P. (1994). *Homo balcanicus, Homo heroicus*. Beograd: Prosveta.
- Gordy, E. (1999). *The culture of power in Serbia: nationalism and the destruction of alternatives*. University Park, Pa: The Pennsylvania State University.
- Igov, S. (2004). *Istorija nove bugarske književnosti*. Beograd: Filip Višnjić.
- Mijatovic, B. (2008) “*Throwing Stones at the System*”: *Rock Music in Serbia during the 1990s*, Music & Politics, Volume II, Number 2, Summer 2008. <http://www.music.ucsb.edu/projects/musicandpolitics/archive/2008-2/mijatovic.html>, Accessed: 10 November 2013.
- Ramet, S. (1994). *Rocking the state: rock music and politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Todorova, M. (1997). *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.