Humanitarianism tomorrow? Humanitarian actions in former Yugoslavia

Čarna Brković
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"We did it! Montenegro passed the great exam of humanness. In less than 48 hours it collected over 200,000EUR to help three-year-old Selena Mandic, who has neuroblastoma, a cancer that developed in her stomach and metastasized to the bone marrow".

This was one of the top news in Montenegro on 27 January 2017. Selena's parents announced the start of the humanitarian action (*humanitarna akcija*) for their daughter two days before. An impressive sum – 200,000 EUR – collected in such a short time span helped to get Selena to a specialized children's hospital in Cincinnati, US, where she is still undergoing the treatment. Various actors got involved. As her father stated, the *humanitarna akcija* for Selena brought together "the citizens, the media, the state, NGO sector, private sector, friends, acquaintances, the diaspora, medical doctors, I do not know anymore… I can see all different levels of a society getting united in front of me – and this is a new experience".[1]

Photo by Randen Pederson (flickr, CC BY 2.0).

What was this practice that united the whole of Montenegrin society towards one goal? Why was it called a *humanitarian* action – rather than charity – if it raised money for a single person within the same country? And how did it actually work? I asked myself these and similar questions during twelve months of ethnographic research in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in 2009 and 2010 and in my ongoing research of humanitarian practices in Montenegro. Humanitarian actions mushroomed in former Yugoslav countries[2] in the last twenty years. So many

such events were organized in BiH at the time of my ethnographic fieldwork that a TV and radio show dedicated solely to the humanitarian actions run every working-day for two hours.

Humanitarian actions are fundraising campaigns usually organized when a person needs medical protection abroad, if their family and/or the public healthcare system cannot cover expenses of the treatment. They are vernacular expressions of humanitarianism in the sense that there is no institution or organization behind them: a *humanitarna akcija* takes place whenever a family in need decides to start one. In the course of a *humanitarna akcija*, family members put in motion all the imaginable avenues to raise money: they organize humanitarian sport games, parties, or theatre plays; ask public and private institutions for a direct humanitarian donation to their bank account; register a humanitarian phone number; ask citizens for a small humanitarian donation (2-3EUR per person), and so forth. People do all of this through friends and acquaintances.

Humanitarian actions work through personal connections and relations: the better connected a person is, the more chances they have to raise sufficient funds in time.

Large-scale international humanitarian practices and such grassroots humanitarian actions are motivated by the same sense of "responsibility for one's fellow human beings that translates into the belief that one should help those who are in need" (Feldman and Steenbergen 2001: 660). Yet, their starkly different procedures and materialities illuminate certain issues that are invisible when we just look at the large-scale international humanitarianism. Humanitarian actions in former Yugoslav countries point to the misgivings of "humanitarianism for the citizens": when humanitarian solutions are offered to bridge the gaps opened up within the welfare system. In doing so, they also indicate the need for a more open and fair humanitarianism.

Listening – and redistributing – more and better

A frequent criticism of the large-scale international humanitarian projects is that they do not pay sufficient attention to the actual voices and needs of those who need help. Many anthropologists point out that humanitarians construct the terms under which the needy can be heard, depoliticizing and dehistoricizing them in the process (see, for instance, Malkki 1996). And indeed, large-scale international humanitarian projects pay little to no attention to the specificities and histories of places and persons. Justified by a sense of urgency, they offer the same standardized toolkits everywhere; they assume in advance the structure, shape, and needs of a refugee family; they select and push forward universalizing representations of victimization and suffering, and so forth. During and after the war in BiH, for instance, a whole parallel administrative structure was built for international aid and relief workers, functioning as a country-within-the-country. This "hyper-Bosnia" had its own legal procedures, identification cards, and social welfare system for the international humanitarian workers. It produced a set of cultural, moral, and economic boundaries between Bosnians and humanitarians, ultimately resulting in obstruction of various humanitarian goals (Coles 2007, see also Pandolfi 2003, Gilbert 2016).

One suggestion for solving this problem is to listen more carefully to those who need help. The assumption is that understanding the needy under their own terms would improve humanitarian relief. Vernacular humanitarian actions in ex-Yugoslav countries demonstrate that – counterintuitively – this is not necessarily the case. Selena's parents are a journalist and a writer who have a crispy clear voice in the Montenegrin public. They intimately know the work of the media, so they were able to shape how they were represented as subjects in need of humanitarian relief. Other people who needed this kind of humanitarian support also affected which of their personal stories, biographic details, and family memories would circulate among potential humanitarian donors. However, this was not quite enough.

Most of my interlocutors expressed dissatisfactions with their humanitarian ordeal. They criticized the state and the "system" for not providing comprehensive healthcare in the country and abroad. They complained because, suddenly, the life of their loved one depended on people's personal compassion

and goodwill – on whether an acquaintance would donate a few Euros in the course of a humanitarian action. They were sometimes outraged by temporary and unpredictable character of support that decided a person's survival. Instead of randomness of compassion, they desired systematic and predictable forms of support. Their point of view suggests that recognizing those who need help as subjects with specific needs, desires, and histories is important, but it cannot solve much on its own. Recognition of people's subjectivities needs to be followed by a systematic, reliable, and democratically agreed-upon redistribution of resources, both in the vernacular and in the more institutionalized forms of humanitarianism. Let me explain this point in more detail.

A humanitarian action

A humanitarian action is a "who knows whom system", Petar Božović told me in the midst of raising money for his son's experimental medical treatment in Moscow. With this, he summarized the key characteristic of this form of grassroots support – humanitarian actions are made possible through interpersonal relations. Who you are as a person largely determines what sort of support you can get and from whom. Unlike the international humanitarian relief, it is your particular personal history which shapes the contours of a humanitarian action. When you are a young woman raising money for your sister, humanitarian action consists mostly of humanitarian parties. When you are an engineer and your wife a piano player, your humanitarian action includes humanitarian classic music concerts and similar more "elite" events.

Your personal identity markers – age, gender, profession, hobbies, migration patterns – all of this shape who you know and, therefore, who would get involved in the fundraising campaign.

In my view, Selena's parents managed to raise more than 200,000 Euros in less than 48 hours largely because they were already a visible part of the Montenegrin public. We have known stories of the family of Brano Mandić and Aida Ramusović for years. When my family sat around the table on 26 January 2017 and sent SMS

donations to the humanitarian phone number for Selena, we discussed several of their intimate family moments: their decision to keep two family names, the snide comments they encountered in everyday life for having only daughters and no son,[3] the irrelevance of her apparent Islamic and his apparent Orthodox Christian background, and so forth. We have learned such private stories over the years through the town's gossip, Aida's fierce journalist texts, and Brano's fascinating newspaper column and fiction writing. Having a recognized voice in the Montenegrin public and knowing well how the media function, the Mandić-Ramusović family managed to raise the necessary funds. Selena is still undergoing the treatment and they regularly post updates on her overall situation and wellbeing.

In all humanitarian actions I observed, people who needed saving were not mute embodiments of bare life, figures located beyond politics and history. Elsewhere, I describe in more detail how personal identity markers shaped successes and failures of this form of vernacular humanitarianism (see Brković 2014, 2016, 2017). Here, I would like to emphasize that those who needed help were not distant others living a world over, but neighbours and friends of friends. Indeed, their humanitarian action depended on making oneself known to as many people as possible. They had to share personal stories and evoke mutual memories with potential donors. They had to navigate local social worlds and bureaucratic offices. They had to make their individual medical need visible and known to anybody who would listen. Overall, in this vernacular form of humanitarianism, those who needed help had a loud and clear voice. The success of their humanitarian action depended on locating oneself in the midst of the town's chat and gossip and becoming known and knowable, recognizable to as many people around you as possible.

Humanitarianism tomorrow?

Recognizing the person in need as a subject with a particular history – this sounds like a feature that large-scale international humanitarian projects should borrow from their vernacular counterparts. Yet, frequent criticisms of humanitarian

actions in ex-Yugoslav contexts suggest this would not be enough. Humanitarian endeavours need an even broader redefinition, if they are to treat those who need help in a relatively just way. Petar and my other interlocutors expressed a mixture of sincere gratefulness and deep resentment. They were grateful to their friends and family, acquaintances, and strangers who donated money. They were also very critical because their state, society, and healthcare system could not really help them. They were exhausted by having to navigate hundreds and thousands of people who had different expectations and conflicting opinions. They were outraged by the overall chaos, unpredictability, and uncertainty of humanitarian actions. In the course of their journey, participants in humanitarian actions complained because they had no idea who would help them and how.

The life of their loved one suddenly depended on someone's personal compassion – and this seemed very unfair to them.

We can perhaps think of this sense of unfairness as a demand to justification: people who needed help demanded justification from humanitarian projects. Marko, another interlocutor, expressed this well one day in a set of questions. Why was the humanitarian action for his child so erratic? Why was there no system in place and everything depended on his family's personal skills? Why did they suddenly have to depend on the mercy of others? Why could they not predict who would help them?

The right to justification "expresses the demand that there be no political or social relations of governance that cannot be adequately justified to those affected by them" (Forst 2011: 2). People affected by humanitarianism as a form of governance should be able to ask for justification of its materialities, infrastructures, and procedures. There should be a radically open and fair discussion about benefits and misgivings of a humanitarian project among all actors affected by such a project. It's not just about refugees having a voice and being respected as political subjects. It's more about reaching a consensus among all the relevant actors on how to make materialities, infrastructures, and procedures of a humanitarian project contextually specific and better attuned to the different needs of different people.

Such a discussion sounds utopic. A sense of emergency makes it seem impossible. Yet, humanitarian projects very often last for years, sometimes decades. A radically open and fair discussion among all those affected by a humanitarian project could shake up the unidirectional character of humanitarianism. It could

enable people who need help to stop being representatives of bare life and instead to exert socio-political agency. Placing such responsibilities upon humanitarianism, which developed its own forms of ad-hoc governance and has become an industry of aid, does not seem unreasonable.

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[1] Available at: http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/uspjeli-smo-prikupljeno-preko-200000-eura-za-selenu-922085

[2] Formerly part of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia

[3] Montenegro has one of the largest disbalances between boys and girls at birth in the world. In the period 2009-2011, for every 100 girls, 110 boys were born. Such strong disbalance at birth in Montenegro is the result of prenatal sex selection, conducted through gender-selective abortions.

You can read the snide comments and Brano's responses to them here: http://www.vijesti.me/forum/sinovi-smo-tvog-stijenja-826189

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