Marriage and household in the Belgrade elite at the beginning of the 20th century: the Novaković family

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Abstract: After centuries of Ottoman dominance, the emergence of a Christian elite in 19th century Serbia was a new phenomenon. The princedom’s administrative, court and military staff mostly assembled Serbians from both Ottoman and Habsburg territories, joined by Tsintsar (Aromunian), German, and other minorities. Until 1900, it grew into a small urban upper class, presenting itself in a gentrified, Western-oriented, but nationally conscious manner. This article explores its marriage and household patterns in a case study. It is based on the rich collection of family letters preserved in the estate of former prime minister Stojan Novaković.

The Serbian rural family has attracted a lot of attention among family historians (Halpern 1972, Hammel 1972, Todorova 1993, 2006, Kaser 1995, 2000). However, the capital’s urban elite emerging in the nineteenth century has not been studied under this aspect until recently. As it had its firm roots in the countryside, it makes sense to first look at its origins and analyse its differences and similarities with rural families. This article starts with a survey on Belgrade’s political, urban, and demographic development, followed by a discussion of the capital’s elite and a summary of the rural Balkan family household. With all this in mind, it proceeds to explore the Novaković family letters, analysing information on household and relationship patterns in connection with the theories and facts given above.

Belgrade in the nineteenth century
The territory of Serbia was part of the Ottoman Empire since 1521, with Belgrade as a governor’s seat. In 1830, the territory was granted autonomy under vassal prince Miloš Obrenović. The princedom, now called Serbia, became an independent state in 1878, and was converted into a kingdom in 1882. In Ottoman times, Serbian towns were dominated by Muslims. The local Christian population, mainly poor peasants, lived in the countryside, with
small Tsintsar, Greek, Jewish and other minorities preferring to settle in towns as traders and craftsmen. Among an estimated 20'000 to 55'000 Belgradians in 1780, only five percent were Christians (Konstandinović 1970, p. 72; Palairet 1997, pp. 28–29). Urban settlements included several frontier garrisons at the Ottoman-Habsburg border line, the most important being Belgrade. Because of its strategic situation at the confluence of the rivers Danube and Sava, this fortress had been a military stronghold since Roman times and faced repeated wars. This situation influenced the city’s life considerably. Military, trade, and the garrison’s supply were the main occupations of Belgrade dwellers. Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived there side by side constantly, but due to the unstable conditions, their composition remained volatile.

After a short Austrian interregnum in 1790 to 1791, a pest epidemy and two major peasant uprisings in 1804 to 1815, the city’s population dropped dramatically. The Sultan tried unsuccessfully to reestablish a stable Muslim population and granted autonomy to the Christians under the guidance of Miloš Obrenović, a leader of the peasant uprising. Miloš was a skilled negotiator and convinced the Sublime Porte to expand the Serbs’ autonomy rights gradually, until in 1830, he was proclaimed hereditary prince.

From now on, Christians from all over the region started to move into the new princedom. It counted 678'192 inhabitants in 1834, rising to 1'353'890 in 1874 and 2'492'882 in 1900 (Sundhaussen 1989, p. 80–81, p. 99–101). Ottoman rule and its symbols were driven back gradually, and so was the Muslim population. Miloš, who established his first capital in the remote town of Kragujevac, stubbornly worked to get Belgrade under his control. He invested large sums to expand and improve the Christian quarters on the slopes of river Sava. He bought the marshlands outside the city and hired an Austrian architect to devise a „Neustadt“ there. The new Christian Belgrade moved closer and closer to the old Muslim settlement, indicating that the Sultan’s rule was coming to an end. Tensions between Christians and Muslims grew continuously and erupted shortly after Miloš’s demise, when in 1862, the Ottoman garrison was provoked into bombing Belgrade from the fortress after the violent death of a Christian servant. Following international protests, the remaining Muslims of Serbia, roughly 23'000 persons, were ordered to leave the country. In 1868, the last Ottoman governor and his soldiers left the country forever. It took Serbia another ten years to be awarded independence by the European powers.

Despite the loss of the entire Muslim population, Belgrade was growing even faster in the last third of the nineteenth century. Between 1866 and 1905, the number of inhabitants tripled from 24'768 to 80'747 (Radovanović 1974:1, pp. 270–271). The town now featured all signs
of an immigrant city, with a share of more than sixty percent male inhabitants. In 1900, only a third of the Belgradians was born there, another third came from Serbia or from the Ottoman territories, and a last third had immigrated from the Habsburg Empire (Radovanović 1974:2, p. 290, 297). The demographic growth was accompanied by a spacial growth and a fundamental change of the city centre’s aspect. From a military stronghold and pasha’s seat, Belgrade was to become a royal capital. The old bazaar (today’s ulica Kralja Petra) was stripped of its former function, and ulica Kneza Mihaila created, a new, broad main street in Austro-Hungarian style, which until today leads from the new Kalemegdan park to Terazije square. There, rich Belgradians started to build representative palaces, first of all the prince’s family. The former Muslim quarters were pulled down, the narrow and winding alleys replaced by new, straight streets. Mainly better off civil servants or high ranking officers could afford to buy property there and built representative one- or two-storey family homes. The migrant workers who fled underemployment and hunger in the country rented a sleeping place in the new residential areas outside the old town, in the cheap multi-storey apartment houses on the slopes of Savamala quarter, or put together a shanty somewhere. Sanitary conditions were appaling except for luxury flats, and the city authorities did nothing to improve them. Belgrade rents numbered among the highest of Europe, and the tuberculosis rate rose to a world record after World War I (Calic 1994, pp. 190–203; Đurić 1912).

Belgrade was the only Serbian town to live through a similar urban aggregation. The smaller towns tried to copy the capital’s new lifestyle, but basically retained their provincial character. The countryside, home to 86 percent of Serbia’s total population in 1900, remained deeply rural and untouched by industrial progress.

The process of rebuilding the capital was accompanied by a cultural reorientation, principally limited to the elite rejecting the Ottoman heritage, searching for „truly“ Serbian roots, and admiring European civilization. The discussion was deeply influenced by the general contemporary discourse on nationalism, the participants torn between the admiration of European progress and romantic notions of their own cooperative traditions. Under the slogan of unity in a Serbian mission to free the Balkans from Muslim rule, the elite split into a Western European friendly, liberal or conservative direction of thinking, and a rather pro-Russian, slavophile, protosocialist direction.²

**The Belgrade elite**

The Belgrade elite of 1800 and the Belgrade elite of 1900 were two very different sets of people. Until 1800, it consisted of Muslims. Sixty years later, the town had become a
Christian one, with ten percent Jews and almost no Muslims left. The core of Belgrade’s elite in 1900 consisted of the families who had led the Serbian uprisings under Karađorđe and Miloš Obrenović. They were descendants of rural local leaders, so-called „knezovi”, who acted as patrons to the Christian villagers. After autonomy, they moved to the prince’s capital with their families and became the first magistrates of the young princedom. They set up their own military tradition, sending their sons to military academies abroad and making them the elite of the arising Serbian army.

The biggest section of Belgrade’s elite in 1900 was made up by professionals. The first among them had been invited from abroad by Karađorđe or Miloš Obrenović to help them build up the country — apart from a few monasteries, there were no schools for Christians in Serbia at that time. State grants to study abroad soon became an important instrument to form a local intellectual elite (Trgovčević 2003). Simultaneously, Serbia attracted hundreds of educated immigrants, mainly Serbians from Hungary, to fill the offices of the young princedom. They brought with them Habsburg manners, dress, and ways of thinking. Not everybody in Serbia welcomed them. Bonds between members of different religious and ethnic denominations on the Ottoman side of the Danube initially were closer than those between Ottoman and Habsburg Serbs. A third section was made up by successful businessmen and entrepreneurs, usually immigrants who engaged in trade, building or food production.

Data about the size of the Belgrade elite is scarce. A good way to estimate it is perhaps by number of house owners. According to Serbia’s statistical yearbook, 2'848 (17.8 percent) out of totally 16'011 Belgrade households in 1900 possessed one house, whereas 1'041 households (6.3 percent) featured more than one house. Among the latter, 370 of the household heads were civil servants, 180 merchants and innkeepers, 59 craftsmen, 48 servants and day laborers, 59 farmers, 14 clergymen, and 240 not specified professions. This relation decreased in the following five-year-period, the share of households without property rising from 73.4 to 85.6 percent (Prošić-Dvornić 2006, pp. 116–117).

The list of Belgrade millionaires in 1900 consisted of the royal family, five industrialists and one judge. This is extremely little: In the Swiss town of Zurich, twice the size of Belgrade at that time, 500 tax-payers declared a fortune of over a million francs (Tanner 1995, pp. 60, 77). There are no politicians on the Serbian list: Due to unstable political conditions, they were never on duty long enough to accumulate much money. Furthermore, they often came from a modest background and had no family fortune to rely on. Most successful in making money were those who engaged in the building boom from the 1880s onwards. A look at the
wage list of the Ministry of Economy in 1891 reveals a range of salaries between one hundred and 590 dinars per month, whereas the minister earned one thousand dinars (Prošić-Dvornić 2006, p. 118). Swiss top employees’ remunerations were five to ten times higher in comparison. Considering the low incomes and the high property prices, it cannot astonish that only higher civil servants could afford to buy their own houses in Belgrade.

**The Balkan family household**

Peter Laslett’s systematisation of 1972 proved very useful to analyse rural Serbian families (Hammel 1972, pp. 370ff.; Todorova 1993, 2006; Kaser 1995, 2000). Yet he failed to assign Southeastern Europe to one of the four European areas of family formation he identified (Laslett 1983). Maria Todorova took up his systematisation and applied it on Bulgarian data, without consistent results. Karl Kaser postulated an autonomous household formation pattern, which he called „Balkan family household“. He found four different patterns in the time before World War II, three of which featured a propensity to form complex households and to practise equal male inheritance. The pattern prevalent in Serbia, as well as in parts of Hungary, in Croatia, Bosnia, Hercegovina, Western Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, Northern Greece, Crete, Corfu, Cyprus, and some other areas, was patrivirilocal and usually encompassed several generations: Daughters married out, whereas sons remained in their father’s household. The partition of a household did not necessarily depend on the family head’s death or a son’s marriage, but always involved the division of the property (Kaser 2000, 166–179).

Rural Serbia before 1941 featured the following household formation characteristics (Kaser 1995, pp. 338–416):

a) Household size varied according to the family’s life cycle. The age of marriage was low. The analyse of the 1863 census for several villages near Arandelovac suggests an average household size of six to ten persons (Halpern 1972, pp. 401–402). Big families could have twenty and more members. Over forty percent of the population were children up to ten years old, and less than ten percent over forty years old: Many children died early, women died in childbirth, accidents and illnesses often had fatal consequences. Work was divided among family members, maids or servants being unusual.

b) The equipment of a peasant household completely belonged to the male collective, including the land, the houses, the livestock, and even the earnings of temporarily absent migrant workers. Women were excluded from the collective. On their wedding, they received from their family a gift in form of money or jewellery, a cow or a goat, textiles or some wool.
These personal belongings gave them an opportunity to earn some income, lending money or selling their products, and they left it to their own children. Daughters-in-law shared a sort of usufruct, receiving equal parts of food, wool and so on for their own and their children’s usage.

c) Patrilocality, male priority, seniority. Sons remained in their father’s home after marriage, whereas the daughters had to leave for their in-laws’ house. Male family members enjoyed priority over the female ones, women being looked down upon as juniors by principle. The principle of seniority implied that the elders were nearer to death and the ancestors and therefore deserving more respect. In the female hierarchy, daughters-in-law submitted to the lowest hierarchical position in their husbands’ family until they were lucky enough to have sons. Sons automatically enhanced their mother’s position, as they would help the family head to secure the patriline through mere existence.

d) Relations between relatives. Serbian language declares family relations through a detailed set of denominations. The father’s lineage is regarded as thick blood until today, evoking a strong sense of bonds. The relationship between husband and wife was not a strong one traditionally: The groom remained his parents’ dutiful son, the bride marrying into the family which had chosen her as a daughter-in-law. The first years were meant to test her behaviour and her ability to give birth to sons. To her husband, she was merely a servant looking after his physical satisfaction. She usually gained respect and influence through her sons only, and her logical reaction was to develop a strong bond to them rather than to her husband and daughters. A wife or a widow without children could be sent back to her father’s family. If a widow remarried, she was forced to leave her children with her late husband’s family. The relationship between brothers and sisters could be very close, a brother protecting his unmarried sister’s honour and sometimes defending her interests at her in-laws (Erlich 1966).

e) Honour (čast) and shame (sramota) were central moral guidelines and evoked a strong sense of identification in all family members. Although excluded from property, a daughter was deeply attached to her father’s family through honour and did everything to guard it. Shameful deeds had to be revenged to prevent the ancestors of coming back as ghosts. The family head’s most important duty was to secure, defend and remember his patriline. The yearly celebration of the family patron’s day (slava), hardly disguised as a Christian patron saint, was the ritual climax of his duties, which until today is performed in most Serbian homes (Kaser 1995, pp. 211–226).

The Novaković estate
Stojan Novaković (1842–1915) was a well-known Serbian statesman, diplomat, and university professor who left an impressive work of academic books. He came from a humble background from the small town of Šabac and made a brilliant career as one of the co-founders of the neo-conservative, but Western-oriented Progressive Party. He became Prime Minister several times and was especially respected for his moderate and pragmatic views, called for in situations which required his patient and persistent negotiation skills. His papers are kept in the Archives of Serbia, in Belgrade, his books reprinted until today. Stojan’s wife Jelena Novaković-Kujundžić (1845–1908) had been a keen writer as well, at least as a young girl. After her marriage, her life passed in raising her children, managing her household, being a secretary to her husband, and entertaining his guests. She left the largest known collection of family letters by a Serbian woman born and raised there in the nineteenth century. Most of them, 104 by number, were addressed to her son Mileta during his studies in Paris in the years around 1900.

When I first started to research Jelena’s letters, I was interested in the difference between the up-start Serbian elite and the Western European bourgeoisie as described by German historians Karin Hausen (1976, 1992), Jürgen Kocka (1995), or Gisela Bock (2000). Their findings, so crucial for the study of Central and Western Europe, did not really answer the questions I had regarding Balkan circumstances, and I started to examine the recent writings on family history, notably the concept of the Balkan family household (Kaser 1995, 2000). My focus shifted to the question how the urban environment dissolved the local specifics and deviations in marriage and household formation typical for rural areas. Many characteristics seem to have been maintained in town, especially the tight bond between mother and son (Simić 1999), or the tendency to rate the interests of the family collective higher than individual wishes. Other specifics adapted to urban circumstances. For example, joint family households seem to have been abandoned quite frequently in favour of separate households combined with frequent visits. Urban conditions fostered the independence of daughters, who were allowed some education and a say in choosing a husband.⁵ On the following pages, I will give an insight into the letters, discussing Jelena’s love marriage, her relationship with her children, and her household organisation.⁶

A Serbian love-match
Jelena Novaković-Kujundžić was the daughter of a well-to-do Belgrade tailor and entrepreneur who was not happy when Stojan asked for her hand initially. The young man came from a provincial town and had nothing but his college certificate to recommend him.
He was even denied a state scholarship to study abroad like many of his fellow students. Jelena was obstinate and married the 22-year-old in 1864, when she was nineteen years old. Jelena and Stojan had met in the patriotic youth organisation Srpski omladinski pokret in the early 1860s. In this circle, students discussed their ideas about what it meant to be a Serb, preparing for future political careers. Jelena was not a student, her father did not send her to college as her brothers. But she belonged to a small minority of Serbian girls who knew to read and to write, and she was allowed to accompany her brothers to the meetings. She wrote romantic short stories and poems, publishing them in the literary journal Danica. Stojan encouraged her writing, and they fell in love. He claimed he would never marry if not her, and she dreamt of a poet’s life with a husband who shared her interests.

Jelena’s hopes were deeply disappointed. She had health problems, and after her marriage, Stojan’s income proved insufficient for a comfortable life. In a letter to her grown up son Mileta, she recalled:

“(…) Oh, what prose. A salary of one hundred dinars per month, a schoolboy as a servant, who brought some meat and vegetables from the market and did the washing up, and all the rest I had to do myself. We had as much as one hundred dinars only because your father received forty ducats as a royalty for the first part of his translation of Ranke’s History, and of this, he monthly added a small part to our salary. At the beginning of the following year, we started to edit the Vila, a new job. We had to bend the signatures, to write the addresses and to glue, but we also had a little more money to spend and received a lot of newspapers in exchange. These were my first proof corrections, and a lot more of them followed throughout my whole life. The story of Cinderella often came to my mind. When I had to bathe the child, wash the nappies, cook the meals and read the proofs. My striving for writing novels fell apart, as I had neither the training, nor my house the means, as it is the case with princesses. (…)“


Jelena had accepted the fact that her destiny was marriage. Her family’s support was too weak, her health too frail, her courage too low to struggle for education. But Jelena was not ready to follow her mother’s example, who had cared for her patriarchal husband like a servant. She expected Stojan to be a companion in life, who loved her and whom she could trust. She was desperate about the lack of money, something she had never experienced before. She felt humiliated by the harsh traditional way her in-laws made her cook the day after her wedding, when the couple spent a few days with the groom’s family in Šabac before setting up their own household in Belgrade. Jelena expressed her anger in a series of letters in
June 1870. They make four out of her seven remaining letters to Stojan; his answers are not preserved. Stojan was on a business trip through Serbia and had not asked her to accompany him. After ten days of silence, a gendarme knocked at Jelena’s door to tell her that her husband was safe. She angrily wrote a letter accusing Stojan of infidelity and unlovingness. The third letter reveals her bitterness:

„(...) Today I read a bit in one of your letters from happier days, when you reminded me that I looked poorly and should look better after my health. You told me not to be worried about my life at your parents’ home, as you had two adult sisters and a mother who would shelter me from housework. I should care for a healthier look, for how could you possibly embrace and kiss a fading picture instead of the blooming young girl I once used to be. But you did not fulfill any of your promises, first I had to stand at the hearth instantly on the second day, and secondly, you did not embrace nor kiss me but for the first few days at the beginning, two whole years long. Afterwards there was plenty of it, but it was too late. Suspicion towards you had started to spread inside me, and look how far we have got today. Yes, it is my fault that I could not let go of this feeling. First it was like a toy, but today it is settled firmly in my blood, and death only will release me from these torments of hell.
But God is merciful, and perhaps He will save me from this agony one day. Still the world is huge, and to whom will He offer his help first (...)“

(Arhiv Srbije: SN–2279. Jelena to Stojan Novaković. Belgrade, 8 June 1870.)

Stojan was hurt by these accusations and must have answered accordingly. In her fourth letter, Jelena asked his forgiveness for her previous „nasty“ letters and implored his „angellike, mild heart“ to forget her reproaches. He did not, otherwise he would not have kept the letters. He was a conscientious, pedantic person, and as a family father he worked steadily to improve his income. But then, he expected his wife to do her duty as well. Stojan was far from the traditional ways of his parents’ home. He had translated Voltaire and Leopold von Ranke and was inspired by the ideas of European bourgeois society. In a time Serbia still fought for independence, he wanted to lead a rational, urban life, with his wife caring for home and children, while he struggled in the world to gain the family’s living. He did not seem to realise that his parents’ household functioned according to the old norm, requiring a new daughter-in-law to work more than anybody else. He did not intervene when Jelena had to join in cooking. The discrepancy between the ideals he had shared with his fiancee, and reality made him helpless.
In later years, Jelena often accompanied Stojan on his travels. His career soon made it possible to lead a comfortable life. He gained his first ministerial post in 1873 and was
awarded a professor’s chair at Belgrade College two years later. In 1895, he was elected Prime Minister for the first time, and subsequently went to Istanbul, Paris and St. Petersburg as an ambassador. Jelena was now in charge of a large representative household with several domestics, in Belgrade and abroad. Her two children Milica (1867–?) and Mileta (1878–1940) had grown up, and she was free to go on cures and visit eye specialists in Paris or Vienna. Her depressiveness indicates that she still had difficulties to put up with the requirements of Stojan’s career.

In her letters to her son, Jelena openly commented on her relationship to Stojan. She told him that her marriage to his father was a failure and advised him to marry for money:

“(…) It is worth your while to marry for a million, because a marriage for love seldom remains good until the end. Before our engagement, your father told me that if our love would be destroyed and I could not be his wife, he would buy a cross, put it in the graveyard and write on it that this was his marriage. After so many years of life together, when for the first time we were separated for a few months, he flipped out totally and did everything I cannot stand, not considering his years nor my sensitivity, as if we never had meant anything to one another.“

(Arhiv Srbije: SN–2641. Jelena to Mileta Novaković. St. Petersburg, 1 November 1900.)

This short text is revealing. Jelena’s phrase: „he did everything I cannot stand“ suggests that in general, Stojan had yielded to her ideas of a well-ordered life, whereas „not considering (…) my sensitivity“ might hint that she used her state of health strategically to dominate him. Stojan was a good-natured person who reacted in a rather helpless way to Jelena’s temper and moodiness. But he knew how to organise himself some freedom behind her back.8 He gives the impression of a typical middle class husband and academic, who lived for his work, enjoyed the mothering of his wife, endured her fits of temper with patience and was not disenclined to a glass of wine and an attractive woman at times.

**Household organisation**

Stojan had gone a far way from his paternal home in Šabac to his Belgrade residence at Resavska street, where he lived with is wife, children, and several domestics. In fact, his rise from modest origins to become a top politician is one of the main characteristics of many Serbian elite members. Moving to the capital and making a political and academic career meant giving up old traditions and adopting the urban lifestyle of divided space of work and family life (Kocka 1995, pp. 18–19). At father Novaković’s carpenter household, there was a
unity of work and life space, without domestics, most likely a Balkan family household which suffered from the only son’s emigration to Belgrade. Stojan’s relations to his family remained close, especially to his sister Ljubica and her husband Stanisla, who took the name of Novaković. Stanisla seems to have complied to the role of domazet, a son-in-law who moves into the house of his bride if there is no male heir.9 After Stanisla’s and Jelena’s death, Ljubica superintended her widowed brother’s household along with her niece. Contacts were also close to Jelena’s brothers and sisters, especially to Milan Kujundžić-Aberdar and to sister Nera and her husband, general Vladimir Ugričić. Apart from family members, there was a large number of friends frequenting the house.

Jelena had grown up in Belgrade and was accustomed to living in a well-to-do household with domestics. She received an education above average and wanted to become a writer. As the lady of Stojan Novaković’s household, she had full control over its management, including the incoming post. She was an important asset to her husband’s academic and political career, doing a lot of editing and secretary work for him, acting as a discussion partner in private moments, and being in charge of his representative duties at home and in public. In Belgrade, she kept a weekly reception day.

Although Stojan and Jelena lived comfortably later in their lives, their income was modest in comparison to their European counterparts. They did not have the comfort of an inherited fortune to rely on as a German, French, or British prime minister usually would have.

Winifred Gordon, a British diplomat’s wife who was a guest at prime minister Nikola Pašić’s house, was shocked to learn about the modest income and lifestyle of Serbian ministers (Gordon 1916, p. 20). She declared she would not be able to support her lifestyle on such a small sum. Serbia was a poor country, and as has been shown above, nobody was really wealthy apart from the King’s family. Several letters and two household books reveal data about the Novaković family’s standard of living. When Stojan started his career in the 1860s, he earned one hundred dinars per month, the usual salary of a young, educated clerk.10 As an ambassador, Stojan had to wait long for payments, especially during government crises and before elections. In February 1902, Jelena complained that they had not received any salary payment for two months and that she had to cut off the budget for the annual New Year’s reception and pay it from her personal account.11 Two weeks later, she informed Mileta about the receipt of five thousand dinars, which included two monthly salaries for both Stojan and the embassy’s secretary. The parents instantly transferred two hundred dinars to their son, who was then a student in Paris.12
After Jelena’s death in September 1908, Stojan’s widowed sister Ljubica and daughter Milica took over the household’s supervision. Two household books, kept by Stojan himself, date from this time, covering an interesting period. In 1909, Stojan served as a prime minister after the Habsburg annexion of Bosnia. In 1911/1912, he acted as head of the Serbian delegation at the London peace conference to settle the Balkan wars. Stojan’s accounting is very detailed. As a prime minister, he received 1'052.50 dinars monthly plus an extra 421 dinars, amounting to roughly 18'000 dinars per year. After his retirement, he had a monthly pension of 842 dinars, plus 150 dinars compensation for his services as president of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. Together with additional royalties and fees, his total revenue amounted to over 12'000 dinars per year.

Stojan Novaković’s property consisted of a town house in Resavska street 19, a so-called vinograd (literally a vineyard, meaning a cottage with some land), and savings of about 5'000 dinars, as can be concluded from the interests he earned from bank accounts and stocks and shares. The Novaković family had four servants: A cook, a manservant, a pageboy, and a driver. Apart from the cook, whose name is not mentioned, the domestics remained the same throughout the period from 1908 to 1912. The manservant received forty dinars per month. The cook’s salary increased from thirty to forty dinars, the pageboy’s from 32 to forty. The driver earned between 32 and 36 dinars per month. Even if free board and lodging are added, there is a huge gap between the earnings of the minister’s family and the employees. Mileta received one hundred dinars per month during his studies in Paris, the same sum Stojan had earned at the beginning of his career. For current expenses, Jelena disposed of 540 dinars monthly. After her death, Stojan cut short this sum to three hundred dinars during some time.

The costs for wood, coal, postal rates, as well as the food for the family’s cow came as an extra. Electricity consumed the equal of a servant’s salary, the taxes another relevant sum. Interest payments to the National Bank and to daughter Milica suggest some depts or credits.

**Jelena Novaković and her children**

Jelena’s letters reveal a lot of information about her relationship to her grown-up children. It was very close and affectionate, closer than that to her husband. To show this, I analyse three incidents which Jelena discussed with her son Mileta: the purchase of a girdle in Paris, her notion of privacy, and the marriage of her daughter.

In the following letter, Jelena scolds her son for treating personal matters in a letter to his father which she had opened by chance:
„My dear Mileta.
It is no good to mix personal with political topics, as you just now did, reporting about your visit to Mrs. Garašanin and the payment of the girdle in your letter to your father. The only thing which lacked was the detail with whom you had shared your turkey. By chance I did open the post, finding the letter to father. When I see your or Mica’s [the daughter’s] writing, I never look at the address and instantly open it. Luckily this was the case now, but I did not know later how to show the letter without father seeing the beginning. He will get to know that I bought the girdle, but only after its arrival here. I was obliged to pay for this thing, because I had ordered it, be it expensive or cheap (…).“

(Arhiv Srbije: SN–2675. Jelena to Mileta Novaković. Petrograd, 8 February 1903)

Mileta seemed to follow a strict division of topics in his letters to his parents. He had a semi-public correspondence with his father, which was read aloud in the family circle in the usual practice of family letters written during long absences. Stojan used it as a means to educate his son politically and to control his progress in studying. Jelena knew its contents and alluded to it repeatedly. Mileta’s separate letters to his mother were strictly confidential and only read by others with her special permission.

Jelena had ordered an expensive girdle in Paris with the help of a friend, but without her husband’s knowledge. This of course was no concern to her son, but she drew him into the secret to find the right shop and to help out with the money transaction. Mileta seemed not at ease with his mother’s arrangements and had to harmonise his masculinity with his readiness to please his mother, acting as an agent between Jelena and her friend. But why did he address this letter to Stojan? He might have done it more or less consciously, out of loyalty to his father, but not wishing to challenge his mother openly. Or he was not aware of the fact that his father knew nothing about the girdle. His close connection to Jelena though certainly fits into the mother-son pattern of Balkan family households.

It is quite unusual that a European lady of 1900 used the word „girdle“ in a letter to her adult son. Where were the limits of confidentiality between family members, where did embarrassment start? It seems that the members of the Novaković family were rather outspoken in their intimate affairs, despite the differing closeness in the wife-husband and mother-children relationships. They claimed much less privacy as individuals than in Swiss, British, or German families of similar standing, both in personal relations and in space. Jelena writes to her son openly about the failing marriage of her daughter Milica:
“Yesterday I received your letter of the 25th, and I am somewhat calmer, as the fight at Mica’s has weakened. She suffers a lot, I know, but if that man had chosen a wife from his own standing, he would be more peaceful as well. As it is, they are simply not made for each other, and they suffer both. One can hardly think of divorce, for how could she possibly leave him her children, she would not survive such a thing, and one has to think of such eventualities. I told father that the only remedy would be to send him away on service, they have now ordered one Captain Ostojić to Istanbul, it is a pity he [the son-in-law] cannot get such a place. Because, if he stays in Serbia and is sent to Kragujevac or Obilić, the pay would be too low to be divided into two.”


In 1900, divorce was possible in Serbia, but the children would belong to their father. Jelena complained that her son-in-law had not chosen a wife from his own, lower social class, although, or because, she and Stojan had done the same. But Milica’s trouble was bigger than her mother’s once was. She had three children after seven years of marriage, miscarriages and stillbirths not included, but her husband’s career was not as successful as her father’s, and the couple quarrelled constantly.

The frankness with which Jelena discussed marriage and money matters corresponds with the openness of her home. Usually no room was ever locked, and if so, it was seen as a sign of distrust, as the following example shows. During her marriage crisis in 1903, Milica stayed at her parents’ home. Jelena was distressed by the disorder caused by her daughter and grandchildren:

„In my small room in the [Belgrade] town house, I store all your toys and several boxes with mine and father’s old letters under my bed. There were letters reaching back to the 1860s. When I came back to Belgrade, the bed was removed, your toys were in use and scattered around everywhere. The boxes have come to my mind only recently, and I keep asking myself where they are. I had locked this room, but Milica repeatedly asked it to be opened. They finally engaged a locksmith to break it open. I do not like this at all, but for all her intelligence you cannot make this clear to her without offending her. When the letters fell to my mind, I instantly sat down to write to her whether she knew where these boxes are.“


Milica opened her mother’s locked room by force and took out her belongings without asking. She felt irritated and rejected by Jelena’s seemingly unusual wish. Jelena on the other hand was angry, but she took her daughter’s behaviour with astonishing equanimity. Her house was
open by principle, she had no secrets from her children, and possibly she considered her own desire for privacy as hardly justified. This corresponds with the fact that even the richest Belgrade homes featured a smaller number of rooms than persons living in them (Đurić 1912, p. 131).

The frankness within the family circle does not fully explain the tight bond between mother and adult children. Their relationship seems to have been a symbiotic one: Jelena’s letters show how brother and sister fought for their mother’s attention. If Mileta did not write to Jelena for some time, Milica wrote to scold and reproach him for having made their mother cry.15 After Milica’s breaking into her room, the mother gave her son a key and told him how to use it, but she did not give one to her daughter.16 Both the affection between brother and sister and the close bond between mother and son fit into the pattern of a traditional Serb family, causing the daughter’s jealousy and the father’s conspicuous aloofness.

Conclusion

The case of the Novaković family shows in an exemplary way how the young Serbian elite dealt with foreign influence and adapted to urban living conditions in the fast changing environment of post-independent Belgrade, around 1900. Stojan was among the third of Belgradians who had arrived from the interior, while his wife was born there. They grew up in a time Serbia was still part of the Ottoman Empire and had just begun to build up its own elite. As many of his generation, Stojan moved to Belgrade for an education which would enable him to start a career in public service. He was fascinated by the ideas and ways flowing in from the north and quickly adapted to the new, urban way of living. His wife was influenced by the romanticism cherished among the Omladina youth. As a young girl, she was allowed some education and freedom of movement, and she married for love. The family belonged to one of 370 households of Belgrade civil servants possessing more than one house, with a salary of one hundred dinars at the beginning of Stojan’s career, and over one thousand as a prime minister.

Despite their privileged lifestyle including domestics, travels, and worldly manners, the Novaković family features many characteristics described for rural Balkan family households. Jelena’s and Stojan’s romantic love ended straight after the wedding, when Jelena was expected to work as any other Serbian daughter-in-law. When Stojan set up his family home in Belgrade, his sister’s husband took over the role of domazet at his father’s house. The couple maintained close family bonds, their house was open to family and friends, privacy considered as something capricious. They still rated collective interests higher than individual
ones. The strict control of body and emotions characteristic for the middle classes of Western Europe had not affected them. They shared their feelings openly within the family circle and found it strange to lock a door behind their back. Jelena tied her children close to herself along with the traditional pattern: She tried to manipulate her husband by her health, but also through her children. Stojan seems more successful in living according to his bourgeois ideals: He worked out of house (or in his library) to give his wife a proper standard of living, but expected her to look after the household and the children. He controlled the family’s expenses in a patriarchal way, as the incident with the girdle shows, and remained excluded from the emotional closeness between his wife and children. But he was also a gentleman travelling in company of his wife and an absent father educating his son by correspondence. The Novaković case shows that geographic location is as important as social stratum, and that features of the family formation pattern as described for rural Serbia, notably patrilocality and family relations, have relevance beyond the confinement of Serbian villages. Indeed, living in the capital and having access to education, travels and intercourse with foreign ideas generated many possibilities for the young Serbian elite to create their own lifestyle, choosing their degree of traditionality and progressiveness.

References


### Notes
2. See also Dubravka Stojanović’s discussion of the elite’s notion of democracy (2003).
3. There are reliable statistics on Serbia for the turn of the 20th century (Sundhaussen 1989, p. 59), but no one so far has systematically collected the data on Belgrade.
4. Serbia was a member of the Latin Monetary Union since 1873, and the dinar was bound to the French Franc. The Swiss and French Francs related roughly to 1:1.
5. These adaptations of joint family households to an urban surrounding seem to be the same as for instance in Asian cities today (Uberoi 1993).
6. See also the extended discussion of these letters in my Ph.D. thesis (2008).
7. A few years later, in 1871, Draga Ljоčić enrolled at the Belgrade college and received her doctorate in medicine from the University of Zurich in 1879. She was one of the first woman doctors in Europe.
9. In 1870, Šanišа asked Stojan for permission to move into his in-laws’ house. It seems he took his wife’s family name, but it may have been his original name as well. Arhiv Srbije: SN–2289. Šanišа Novaković to Stojan. Šabac, 16 September 1870.
10. This sum equals the minimum income for liability to tax in the Swiss cantons Berne and Zurich in the 1870s (Tanner 1995, pp. 67–75).
Arhiv Srbije: SN–58, SN–59. The household books cover the income of the years 1908, 1909, 1911, 1912.

Arhiv Srbije: SN-58, SN–59. Assuming an interest of four percent, this sum increased from 4'200 dinars in 1908 to 6'500 dinars in 1912.
