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Balkan Parent(s) in Short-form Videos on Social Media

Abstract

Balkanski roditelj u humorističkm video-zapisima
na društvenim medijima

This paper examines humorous short-form videos on Instagram (Instagram reels) that explore the figure of the *Balkan parent*. The first, theoretically oriented section discusses key folkloristic concepts, beginning with foundational definitions of folklore and tracing their adaptation to the digital realm, more specifically, social media platforms. Particular attention is given to transformations in format, increase in individuality, communicative modes, performative competence and context, which bring these expressions closer to popular culture and vernacular creativity. This section also illuminates the preference for the term *Balkan* over alternative designations, emphasising its glocal character and the role of nostalgia as a dominant emotional framework, especially considering that much of this

content is produced within transnational/diaspora communities. It was noticed that this content is a part of the global “ethnic” parent trend. Additionally, the study addresses socio-cultural factors that have influenced the emergence and popularity of this content, including the symbolic and social status of parenthood in Balkan and Slavic contexts, shifts in social structure, the generation gap, and the persistence of culturally recognisable patterns. The second part is more analytical, as we explore the theoretical implications on selected examples. We distinguish the roles of the father and the mother (grandmother) separately, although they are also presented in unity (as parents). The parental figures depicted in the videos are shaped by “traditional” family values, and the tension between idealised roles and the realities of contemporary society generates a humorous effect.

Keywords: Balkan parent, digital folklore, social media folklore, Instagram folklore, vernacular creativity, humorous short-form video, diaspora, nostalgia, Slavic culture, generation gap

Sažetak

U ovom radu su analizirane humoristične kratke video forme na Instagramu (Instagram „reels“) koje tematizuju figuru „balkanskog roditelja“. Prvi, teorijski usmeren deo rada razmatra ključne folklorističke pojmove, počevši od osnovnih definicija folkloru i prateći njihovu adaptaciju na digitalnu sferu, preciznije – na platforme društvenih medija. Posebna pažnja posvećena je transformacijama u formatu, porastu individualnosti, komunikativnim modovima, izvodačkoj kompetenciji i kontekstu, što ove izraze približava popularnoj kulturi i vernakularnoj kreativnosti. U ovom delu takođe se osvetljava preferencija termina “Balkan“ u odnosu na alternativne označitelje, pri čemu se naglašava njegov lokalni karakter i uloga nostalgije kao dominantnog emocionalnog okvira – posebno imajući u vidu da se veliki deo ovog sadržaja stvara unutar transnacionalnih/dijaspor-nih zajednica. Uočeno je da ovaj sadržaj pripada globalnom trendu prikazivanja „etničkih“ roditelja. Pored toga, u radu se razmatraju socio-kulturni faktori koji su uticali na pojavu i popularnost ovakvog sadržaja, uključujući simbolički i društveni status roditeljstva u balkanskom i slovenskom kontekstu, promene u društvenoj strukturi, generacijski jaz i postojanost kulturno prepoznatljivih obrazaca. Drugi deo rada je analitičkog karaktera, u kojem teorijske uvide primenjujemo na odabrane primere. Razlikujemo uloge oca i majke (bake) kao zasebne, iako su one često prikazane i u jedinstvu (kao roditeljski par). Roditeljske figure prika-

zane u video sadržaju oblikovane su „tradicionalnim“ porodičnim vrednostima, a tenzija između idealizovanih uloga i stvarnosti savremenog društva generiše humoristički efekat.

ključne reči: balkanski roditelj, digitalni folklor, folklor na društvenim medijima, Instagram folklor, vernakularna kreativnost, humoristični kratki video, dijaspora, nostalgija, slovenska kultura, generacijski jaz

Internet folklore¹, also referred to as digital folklore, electronic folklore, netlore, or medialore, has become an increasingly addressed phenomenon in recent decades, situated at the intersection of folklore and popular culture (Banić Grubišić 2023). Alongside to the proliferation of digital forms of vernacular creativity close to folklore, scholars have also noted that, in addition to drastic changes in digital folklore over the last decade, there has also been a centralisation of content on a few dominant social networks², complicating existing concepts and problematising knowledge about digital folklore (Peck 2020: 12–13). The very emergence of internet folklore has previously led to challenging the existing definitions of folklore, given that internet folklore is characterised by connectivity, the fluidity of communities, an increased share of the visual, the need for practices to be visible and shared with other users (Peck 2020: 14), and that for decades the definition of folklore as a direct artistic communication in small groups (Ben-Amos 1971) was firmly established.³ Unlike Ben-Amos’ theory, digital communication is mediated, but users (audience) can shape the content through commenting, sharing, and creating, thereby influencing transmission mechanisms and popularity.⁴ Mediated communication, in

¹ Trevor J. Blank, in his exploring of the Internet as an ethnographic field and a relevant area of folkloristic research, observes that “many of the topics traditionally explored by folklorists – such as humor, expression, tradition, narrative transmission, commemoration, religion, and ritual – have taken on new or modified lives in the digital world” (Blank 2009: 13).

² There is also a more radical view that social networks should not be viewed as a separate medium, but as a broader phenomenon of smartphone anthropology (Miller 2021: 86).

³ These questions were relevant to folklorists even before the emergence of digital folklore.

⁴ On the context of digital folklore see Mladenović Mitrović (2025).

this case digital, has already been recognised as a legitimate subject of contemporary folklore studies, as an extension to exploring various forms of interaction between oral and written, popular literature, civic song-books or books for the people. Following the development of other media types, Serbian researchers have noticed continuity with different sound carriers – “The record as a medium was a new form of representing epic, but also a continuation of the aforementioned tradition of popular ‘books for the people’” (Lajić Mihajlović, Djordjević Belić 2016: 201). Regarding the notion of naive literature, Danijela Popović Nikolić states that the positioning of certain phenomena at the interface between oral and written literature has seemingly solved the problem, “but it seems that this very duality has determined dispersivity and variability as their permanent and common components, which makes it difficult to define various emerging forms” (Popović Nikolić 2022: 107). Vernacular creativity on social networks is a related phenomenon, following a similar developmental trajectory, driven by technical and technological innovations and shifts in the communication model (Lajić Mihajlović, Djordjević Belić 2016). In the same research, which carries important indications for folkloristic study of this phenomenon, it is stated that mediated communication (in this specific case, gramophone records) leads to the “‘passivisation’ of audience and its gradual transformation into ‘consumers’ of guslars’ art” (Lajić Mihajlović, Djordjević Belić 2016: 211). Social media folklore encourages participatory practices and greater engagement of the audience; however, once again, in a mediated form. The audience participates by sharing and commenting on (and even recreating or retelling) content and shaping the community through a kind of polylogue (Djordjević Belić 2013: 179), given that digital communities are formed based on shared interests or values (Birch, Weitkamp 2010: 905). They can also be concentrated around ethnic or national identities (Wilson, Peterson 2002: 457), which is significant for follow-up research. Social media comments become a powerful connection mechanism, and can have an important function in building communities (Coles, West 2016), thus reflecting the complex dynamics of the individual and the collective.

A notable feature of social media folklore is the increase in authorial and individual creativity, even to a greater extent than in other types of Internet folklore. A similar tendency has been observed before in research

on guslar practice, particularly authorial epics (see Lajić Mihajlović 2014; Djordjević Belić 2017). Thus, in that context, it is not an innovation, but rather a developmental course of contemporary folklore forms and similar phenomena. Corresponding characteristics can be observed in naive creativity (see Popović Nikolić 2022: 109) (except that in Internet folklore the content is not directed “towards functioning within the framework of the author’s personal needs,” as in the case of naive literature (Popović Nikolić 2022: 23)).

When it comes to researching digital folklore in Serbia, in her definition of internet memes, Ana Banić Grubišić states that they are:

[d]igital, i.e. they are not oral and not written down, they are the product of indirect communication, both permanent and transitory at the same time, they represent individual reading of a collective event and vice versa, they are characterised by constant re-creation, variations but also innovation, there is a conscious intention when creating, they are collective representations, they are distributed through digital channels of communication and are a part of collective memory (Banić Grubišić 2023: 157).

Some of these features extend to humorous short-form videos, although the obvious change in format (from the static nature of a template photo to the multimodality of video) must be taken into account. The rise of short-form videos was stimulated by the rise of the social network TikTok, leading to the expansion of short-form videos (such as Instagram reels, YouTube shorts).⁵ Digital *storytelling* has become a significant as the quality of video clips in marketing, especially with the rise of AI and the production of generic texts, serving as a marker of “authenticity” (see, e.g., Finkler, León 2019)⁶ – a well-known value in folkloristics. However, the content is created through a production process and is closely related to the marketing industry,⁷ which indicates the complexity of the phenomenon. *Storytelling* in marketing is equivalent to the principle of narrativity

⁵ It has been noted that humorous content is the most common in short-form videos (Shutsko 2020).

⁶ There are some other factors for the popularity of this format, e.g. short attention span, higher level of emotional engagement among users, availability of video production tools, etc.

⁷ In some videos, product placement is obvious, but we should not forget that in others, the “content” itself is the product.

(Prince 2011: 121–122), which is one of the important topics of contemporary folklore studies. Video content also often incorporates dramatization.⁸ With the growth of user-generated content (UGC), everyday users take part in popular culture dissemination, but also become consumers, led by desire for creative expression, following trends, and also gaining certain benefits (Zuo, Wang 2019). Humorous video content (most often in the form of skits or sketches) is reproduced, remixed, and adapted to different (primarily cultural) contexts and audiences. Its character is performative and is aimed at digital communities. It should also be noted that this type of vernacular creativity requires knowledge of/use of certain media and technical tools in order to create content. It has already been observed that through technological and media transformation of oral tradition, folklore has moved from direct, participatory practice to media consumption, which has caused the loss of multisensory elements of performance (see Lajić Mihajlović, Djordjević Belić 2022). In that sense, the understanding of performative competence is also changing, and the placement of folklore-related content in a digital environment requires a production process, with stages similar to film production. However, one person is usually responsible for all development phases, from an idea, creation, shaping, editing, to distribution, which implies a lower level of professionalism compared to, for example, the aforementioned example of the gramophone recordings of guslar tradition.

In this paper, we shall deal with humorous videos that deal with the image of a Balkan parent on social networks,⁹ primarily on Instagram.¹⁰ This

⁸ Folk drama does not have a dominant aesthetic function, but an “extratheatrical” one (magical, religious, ceremonial, social, national or local, etc.). The aesthetic function is directed at the message, which is conditioned by the audience, which is why it is not dominant in folk theater, similarly as in these short-form videos (see Bjelić 2025).

⁹ Since there are no clear guidelines, ethical issues of privacy and copyright are particularly challenging when it comes to digital content. Given that this paper uses the material for scholarly purposes, we believe that this does not constitute abuse or can lead to unwanted consequences. It is taken into account that the content is public and does not contain private data, as well as that users create content with the intention of promoting and “sharing.”

¹⁰ Same content is present on TikTok, however, the authors opted for Instagram (to quote a vernacular millennial humour: “No I don’t watch TikToks, I watch Instagram reels of TikTok videos that were popular two weeks ago, like a grown up”).

content is hybrid, combining the desire to represent an (ethnic) group, an individual (parent) and the desire for self-representation (performer). They can be defined as a contemporary form of vernacular creativity between folklore and popular culture, but, unlike memes, whose authors are mostly unknown, this type of creativity is often also determined by authorship. Depending on the degree of authorship and self-promotion, representations of cultural identity on certain profiles can also become a brand (the best-known example is the *@balkandad* profile, which has 1.1 million followers). Certain themes can be recreated by multiple users, meaning they can be understood as variants (e.g. how a Balkan father teaches you to swim, how parents talk about their journey to school); they can also be created through well-known viral formats (e.g. a viral two cats template (travelwith.lauri 2023) is used as a background), and thus the collective principle may outgrow the individual principle.

The humorous videos on social networks that shall be analysed in this paper explore the figure of the “Balkan” parent, often viewed through the prism of diaspora users. This type of (conditionally speaking, folk) creativity as a form of expressive culture can be understood as the broader Internet trend of the “ethnic” parent,¹¹ where stereotypical characteristics of certain groups are perceived as distinctive in relation to another culture (the host culture), causing this narrative often to be marked by nostalgia. Given that Yugonostalgia “represents a negative ‘label’ given to any expression of positive attitude towards the Yugoslav past and any positive evaluation of some aspect of everyday, social and cultural life in the Yugoslav state” (Petrović 2020: 131), content creators more often opt for the term “Balkan”, even though the creators/consumers are mostly from the countries of former Yugoslavia, and “post-Yugoslav” would be a more precise term.¹² Folklore and similar phenomena on the Internet are glocally determined, which is more clearly reflected by the term “Balkan,” which activates local cultural references of the content while, at the same time,

¹¹ The theme of ethnic parent/humour has also been frequently addressed in cinematography and stand-up comedy from the Western American continent (e.g. the film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* or comedian Russell Peters). Other examples include Laura Ramoso’s profile, which is also popular on social media, with her clips featuring imitations of her Italian father and German mom, as well as Australian comedians Sooshi Mango.

¹² The terms “Yugoslav,” “Serbian,” etc. are also used.

being pointed towards global reception in the digital space.¹³ “Although during socialism, *Balkan* could have been substituted with *communism* or *socialism*, the postsocialist period reintroduced it as a common signifier for the region. The term has reappeared to once again provide the frame for constructing the region as Other and for the region’s self-identification as such” (Vezovnik, Šarić 2015: 239). Practically speaking, the term “Balkan” allows individuals from all Balkan countries to join in the creation of content, that is, to spread and popularise it, because the term “Balkan” is better known and more receptive to a wider audience. All this is partly determined by the platform’s requirements, and so are other features of these videos (for example, English, as lingua franca, is represented almost as much as the languages of the BCS group, according to the table with Internet sources included at the end of this paper). On the other hand, the term Balkans in the topography of the digital community is marked by a certain degree of exoticisation and self-exoticization, in which a romanticised or caricatured image of the Balkans appears (in the context of colonial studies, Maria Todorova calls this Balkanism (Todorova 1999). Most often, the humorous (and partly pejorative) connotation expressed through the caricature is combined with a romanticised one, which reflects certain sympathies towards the “Balkan” heritage (Figure 1). There are also a large number of Instagram pages that share content with Balkan/Yugoslav humour (e.g. @only.in.balkans, @balkan_memes, @squatting-slavs, @yugojokes¹⁴, @yugosiavia), which is not exclusively related to parenthood, although this type of humour is one of the most dominant ones, probably because it sublimates most of other content and is most relatable.

¹³ Slobodan Marković (2024: 181) notes that defining a common Balkan culture is a challenging task, but that such a concept would be in line with today’s European values. In this case, generations born or raised in Western European societies try to process and reconcile cultural differences between the “Balkan” and “Western” ways of life through humour, and as an opposite they construct a common Balkan mentality, which is supranational or transnational in nature, which may be related to their upbringing in the diaspora and the aforementioned European value system.

¹⁴ In the context of the aforementioned product placement, it should be noted that, for example, this site also sells clothing.

Similar content can also be marketed as Yugoslav, Slavic or Eastern European, and can also refer to the Slavic population beyond the Balkans (e.g. mattpuzitsky 2025, polina.vita 2025, toobaltictohandle 2025). In this research, we have opted mainly for content shared under the term “Balkan” because it is the most frequent and most representative. It should also be noted that similar content is made by Balkan users from non-Slavic speaking areas (e.g. from Romania: balcan.iwa 2024) but here we have

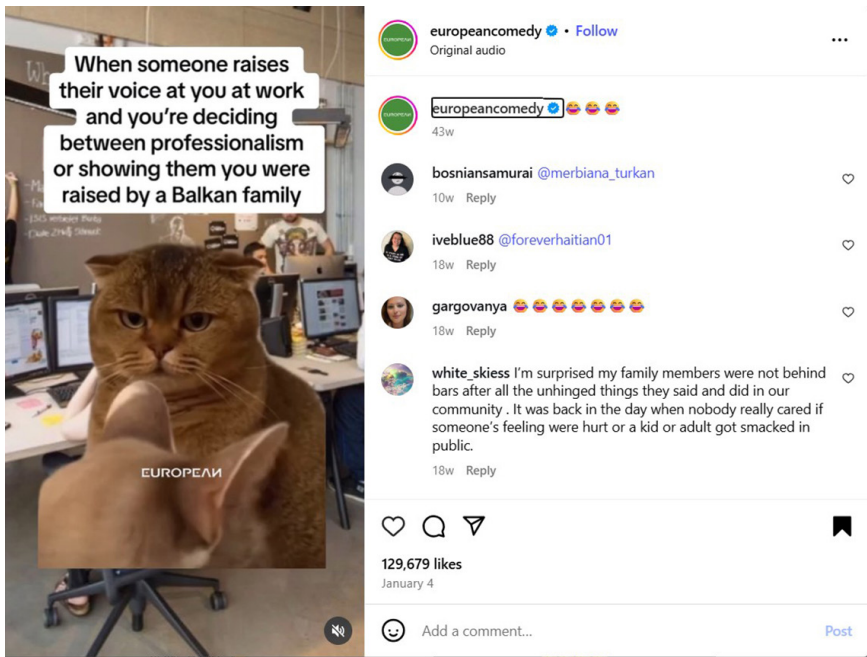


Figure 1. “Balkan” heritage

Source: europeancomedy (2025b).

chosen those from the paper authors’ speaking areas. The content was collected over a year using the hashtags #balkanparent (100+) and #balkanparents (500+), which trained the network algorithm to offer similar content. An insight into the hashtags, given at the end of the paper in the table of Internet sources, indicates that most of the content is not speci-

cally marked with these particular hashtags (only 5 out of 45 video clips presented in the paper have this hashtag, as they will alternatively appear as e.g. #balkanmom). Given that they are basically keywords, it can be concluded that terms related to the Balkans, parenting/childhood and humour are dominant, but can often be related to ethnicity, immigration or nostalgia.

Grouping together narratives based on ethnic humor Ljuboja (2001) divides them according to ethnic groups (in the study they are divided into e.g. Serbs, Jews, Macedonians) and according to their intercultural relations (e.g. relation between Serbs, Croats and Slovenes). In short-form videos explored in this paper, the construct of the Balkan community is getting close to the principles of transnationalism, which has recently been an important concept for redefining the diaspora (Bruneau 2010). Members of different, mostly South Slavic communities, are represented through common cultural patterns, with an emphasis on the dynamics of relationships within the family and their specifics in contrast to parents from Western Europe, but also to the younger generation. This implies a shift in ethnic humour compared to traditional humorous stories and jokes.¹⁵ Also, the traditional joke corpus more often addresses marital relations (e.g. adultery, laziness, stupidity), while the child is mostly passive. With the change in the family's social structure and other circumstances, the creators of vernacular content are adults speaking from the perspective of the child as a family member, which was rarely case before. In Serbia, “[t]he moment a young person starts a family, that is, when they take responsibility for their children, is considered that they have entered the world of adults” (Tomanović, Stanojević 2024: 115). This would help explain that the possible reason for some of the users to eventually stop creating videos on parental characteristics is related to their personal and family circumstances.

The results of the empirical research on identities and family values may also be significant for understanding this type of vernacular creativity in the digital environment:

¹⁵ Positive evaluation of oneself with the aim of negatively evaluating others, which is mentioned as one of the dominant characteristics of ethnic jokes, e.g. in Grubor, Hinić (2011), is also largely absent.

(...) [T]he respondents were asked to self-identify with different types of identity and to say to what extent a certain type of identification is important for them, to what extent they are indifferent to it, and to what extent they consider it unimportant. For the respondents of the Serbian sub-sample, it was most important to be known that they were parents, namely as many as 68.9% wanted to announce to the world that they had children, and that was what they wanted to reveal about themselves. (...) The strongest identification with parenthood and marital status in the Serbian sub-sample may indicate the end of big stories and “blood and soil ideology”, at least if it is judged by the results of this research (Stjepanović-Zaharijevski, Gavrilović 2009: 30, 32).

The subsamples, in addition to Serbia, were from Bulgaria and Macedonia, while the content analysed here mainly comes from users originating from Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia, which may indicate a transitional state from political-ideological foundations of identity to intimate, everyday life and existentially significant determinants among newer generations. This implies a delegitimisation of grand narratives, marked by collective trauma, meaning that family and personal stories from everyday life have greater emotional power and relevance for the community formed around these contents on the Internet rather than ethnic or national identity. Although the concept of postmemory stipulates that traumatic events can be transmitted to generations that have not personally experienced them (Hirsch 2012), this doesn't seem to be the case (at least that is the image represented on the networks).¹⁶ Most research on the post-Yugoslav diaspora has not so far been focused on values of the new generations¹⁷ who grew up in different socio-cultural environment, but some studies show that a greater degree of integration of diaspora members contributes to reconciliation and conflict resolution (Hall, Kostić 2009), which is related to the construction of Balkan identity rather than separate ethnicities. Gavrilović (2005: 211) predicted that “through integration, the new ge-

¹⁶ We offer another interpretation: “The absence of talk about trauma supports the presence of a feeling of inability to become one with narratives about the past, but also experiences such as ups, downs, disappointments and divisions. After all, all of them are constitutive for numerous communities, societies and states” (Lazarević Radak 2018: 25).

¹⁷ Typically, the focus groups are the older generation in the diaspora (e.g. Gavrilović 2007) or the youth in the home country (e.g. Žeželj et al. 2017, Tomanović et al. 2012).

neration will be able to become an integral part of the Balkan cultural diversity, without losing any of their identity.”

The videos address parenting issues, confronting the “traditional”¹⁸ upbringing with the modern era demands, causing generational differences to come to the fore.¹⁹ Balkan parents are often compared to parents abroad, and different parenting styles are being pointed out in relation to the culture into which they are integrating. Younger generations that have gone through the processes of accommodation and acculturation hold a liminal position, and are able to view these phenomena from a critical distance, simultaneously as insiders and outsiders.

From a literary analysis point of view, a certain narrative template can be identified; the characters are typified, determined by their national identity and parental role, as sociocultural foundations for the development of the characters. From these foundations arise collective representations (which sometimes approach stereotypes, both negative and positive), which function in specific mental frameworks. Humour mechanisms are often based on parody, and certain patterns of behaviour are highlighted

¹⁸ More precisely, socialist and post-socialist, which is here named traditional from the perspective of the content user, in the sense that it preserves certain traditional patterns and is perceived as anachronistic in relation to more modern models, such as gentle parenting or the Montessori method, which are characterized as Western. Gavrilović (2005: 200) notes that in the literature “during the second half of the 20th century, the term ‘traditional’ model was established” in contrast to the modern family model, “although the period of model in question was not specified, except that it was clear that it was located in the past, in the period before the survey.”

¹⁹ One example (not included in sources because the video also features a child) is titled MODERN VS OLD-FASHIONED PARENTING. In the first sequence the child scares his mother by saying “Boo”, and the mother gently tells him that it was not nice and that he has scared her, the child laughs. Then an adult is shown scaring the elderly mother in the same way, she kicks him and says “Mrš, you scum, you animal”, but the “child” also laughs, indicating this kind of behaviour is common and not threatening. Indicative (top) comments, that confirm emotional engagement of users, include: “A kick in the ass is a sign of love in the Balkans” (2,845 likes), “There is so much more love in calling the child an animal than ‘love’” (717 likes), “This is a little more extreme old-fashioned style but we turned out better than the modern generations in every way” (1,427 likes), “Hahahahah I’m a child of the era Mrš fuck your mother and a kick in the ass 😄😄😄” (941 likes), “The boy is cute who calls their children animal and scum 😄 primitives but for some people in the Balkans it’s normal 😄”.

through amplification and sometimes caricature. Humour is often rooted in disharmony/conflict, or the aforementioned misunderstanding of different generations and different value systems. Given that laughter is also directed towards oneself (and one's own family environment), its purpose is to help understand one's own identity.

Although patriarchy has long been one of the dominant themes in the study of the Balkans ("Patriarchy and masculinity, especially the persistence of traditional forms within modern societies, was one of the main research pillars of studying the Balkans" (Todorova 2023: 5)), the mother is depicted as a strong female figure, whose position in the family structure is generally not subordinate, although it should be noted that the representation of the husband-wife relationship is mostly absent (a rare example: getokrusevac 2024). Research indicates that "two ideal-typical family value patterns can be constructed: traditional, with patriarchy and archaic gender stereotypes, and modern, with liberal values of equality, independence and consensus" (Stjepanović-Zaharijevski, Gavrilović 2009: 27).

Balkan parents are often recognised in certain roles, which they occupy/accept, and a certain typology can be drawn. In the selected corpus of short-form videos²⁰ that were the subject of our study, the roles of the father and the mother (grandmother) are represented in particular situations from everyday life, although they are often also presented in unity (as parents).

The role of the "Balkan father" is multifaceted. Videos depict him as dominant – he supervises the handyman, fixes the appliances by kicking them (Figure 2) (adriankrajcar 2025b, balcandad 2024) and comments on the referee and players at his child's soccer match (although he doesn't seem to be competent), using the inappropriate language (swearing²¹) dur-

²⁰ Several videos in our material also contain Balkan turbo-folk or other types of folk music as a background, which serves to confirm the cultural-geographical context of the recording. However, we did not notice any regularity in adding this element to the video.

²¹ According to researchers Marija Mandić and Ljubica Djurić, swearing, "along with curses, prayers, oaths, blessings, belongs to a special type of ancient formulaic expressions, the use of which is based on the belief in the magical power of words" (Mandić, Djurić 2015: 312). They see the basic function of swearing as "a duel or conflict with a real or imaginary interlocutor, either as a defense or attack, and the basic perlocutionary effect is the verbal establishment of power over the interlocutor on the basis of sexuality

ing a children's match (bored_nele 2024a). Other videos present him as arrogant, distrustful and disrespectful of his children's personal time and space – a closed door to the children's room does not give him the cue to respect one's privacy (vrlo_zabrinjavjuce 2024b). The father takes guests into the bedroom while the teenager is still sleeping, showing them the quality of windows and walls, and the mattress on which the adolescent is still sleeping does not fall behind in quality either (zeljkomalenovic 2024b).²² His extreme laziness is depicted through calling his daughter from the next room to bring him water or the remote control while he is lying on the couch watching TV (dramillah 2021c). The Balkan father also has hoarding habits, showing reluctance to throw anything away and emotional attachment to plastic candy and ice cream packaging, justifying his habits by claiming that he will definitely need these items someday (stefanooooooooooooooooo0 2024). These features comically portray the father as a central figure in a patriarchal context, while on the other hand, the need to hoard waste is linked to the collective traumas of scarcity and poverty in a historical-geographical context.

The aforementioned patriarchal role is also manifested in a lack of interest in children's social life, such as their friends' names (dramillah 2021f) or ignoring their needs, especially when it comes to borrowing his car (dramillah 2021a).

Here, the humour stems from the discrepancy between his factual position in society (and family) and the one he longs to acquire. He acts in the role of a traditional father, who is the pillar of the family and occupies the most important position as the head of the household, since he has a special status due to seniority and gender. "During the nineteenth century, the Balkan family household dominated among the Balkan population. These households were characterized by patrilocality and patrilineality, with a patriarchal structure of authority based on gender and age" (Tomanović, Stanojević 2024: 109). The Balkan father maintains this sentiment, but

(Mandić, Djurić 2015: 311). Trebješanin notes that one of the ways of educating, or punishing children in Serbian traditional culture, is to swear at the child – "Parents think that the best and most painless way to teach a naughty, restless child order and obedience is to scold him, call him derogatory names, swear at him, etc." (Trebješanin 1991: 323).

²² In the broader context of jokes on ethnic parents and video clips as variants of c. sooshimango (2025).



Figure 2. How Balkandads fix things

Source: balkandad (2024).

has genuinely lost such position in contemporary society – “throughout history, we witness the erosion of patriarchal power and authority, both in marital relations and parental (especially paternal) authority concerning children” (Tomanović, Stanojević 2024: 107). This dichotomy creates the tragicomedy and absurdity of his character.

On the other hand, he takes up the role of his children’s teacher, prone to physical punishment. His swimming lessons consist of throwing and submerging a child into the water, and if the child does not drown, it has learned to swim²³ (mamahobotnica 2024). While giving driving lessons,

²³ This narrative is close to the well-known joke about teaching Mujo/Hasa to swim.

he expects a novice to manoeuvre as a professional driver (zeljkomaleno-
vic 2024a).

It is interesting to note a male/female role reversal in the representation of a father who does not have a son, therefore, he teaches a daughter skills that are traditionally intended for a son. In that case, the daughter is familiar with tools, baling hay, or can carry six kilograms of cabbage so that the mother can prepare a traditional dish, ‘sarma’ (jelena_offline 2024²⁴). If there are children of both sexes in the family, an obvious difference in the relationship is exhibited. The father is more protective of his daughter than of his son – his son’s girlfriend is shown hospitality, while his daughter’s partner is “welcomed” with obvious resentment (vrlo_zabrinjavjuce 2024a). In parodic videos, the mother (her character) clearly prefers the son, talking to him in a soothing voice, worrying about whether he has enough to eat and whether he has money, while threatening her daughter with physical punishment if she does not do all the housework (yugojokes 2023b).

“Balkan mother” is dominantly represented through her idea of nurturing. Like the father, she believes that children are to be raised with punishments, scolding and threats, which is perceived as inherited cultural pattern in upbringing – “The mother scares the child with real people (their father, priests, the Roma people, etc.), dangerous beasts (wolves, bears), but also with demonic creature (‘baba roga’ aka bogeyman, ‘karakondzula’ aka kallikantzaros, vampires, witches, etc.)” (Trebješanin 1991: 170; see: alexkrajnovic 2023) (Figure 3). There are many more examples in which the mother is depicted as more prone to physical punishment²⁵ (alexkrajnovic 2025), compared to the father. One video shows the

²⁴ The example contains product placement.

²⁵ Žarko Trebješanin states that Vera Erlich conducted research – geographical mapping of child punishment in the Yugoslav region – “The results of her research are as follows: in Yugoslavia, parents in Serbia beat children the most (almost 90% use beatings as a means of discipline), Serbs in Bosnia somewhat less (nearly 80%), and in Croatia even less (‘only’ 75%). Parents in Serbia again beat children very frequently and cruelly the most (nearly 40%), while in Croatia that percentage is half as low, around 20%, and in Macedonia only 12%” (Trebješanin 1991: 323–324).



Figure 3. The mother scares the child

Source: alexkrajnovic (2023).

stand-up comedian naming her a cross between Nada Macura²⁶ and Chuck Norris, who will warn you not to get sick, but if you do, “she will break your bones” (privatetelevizija 2023). She is strict, unforgiving, and prone to excessive control, especially when it comes to her child dressing up for a night out (dramillah 2022; alexkrajnovic 2023), although as we have already mentioned, she is noticeably stricter towards her daughters. She is more inclined towards male children and, regardless of their age, makes sure their infantile needs are satisfied (yugojokes 2023a).

She is extremely critical of her son’s partner and doesn’t understand the new role division in the community in which a woman is not perceived

²⁶ A Serbian doctor and spokeswoman for the Belgrade Emergency Service, famous for advising people to dress in layers.

solely as a housewife (merigoldasic 2024). This difference in behaviour towards the son and daughter can also be interpreted by the status of a female child in a patriarchal family – “A girl is, in fact, prepared from an early age to leave her parental home and be an obedient wife. When she grows up to be a *girl*, on the one hand, she has greater obligations than a male child and less freedom, but, on the other hand, she is then relatively protected in her family circle and has an easier life than she will later have as a wife” (Trebješanin 1991: 163). The Balkan mother is also nervous and lacks communication skills, while claiming she wants to spend as much time with her children as possible and talk to them about everything (yugojokes 2024a).

The material largely depicts the mother’s established patterns in relations with the community. Thus, the Balkan mother always gives her best to present an idealised image of her home and family members (to neighbours and guests). There are numerous examples of how the mother cleans the house or prepares food before the guests²⁷ arrive, regularly warning family members not to get the house dirty or not to taste prepared meals (balcancomedyboss 2024; mada_faka_maka 2025²⁸; only.in.balkans 2025). Such content can also be found on cooking and home organisation pages (_somethingsmellsgood 2024). Videos about mother’s

²⁷ Hospitality occupies a special place in the perception of Balkan cultural patterns, given that it is an established custom that has “a clear religious character; this is best seen in the custom that is performed when the most important guest of the year, the pilgrim, visits us. For all this, hospitality should be viewed as a religious phenomenon, and an explanation should be sought in the religious understandings of primitive man” (Čajkanović 1994: 271). Čajkanović interprets the exceptional respect for the guest in terms of theophany and religious representations since deities (and demons) appear in the form of a visitor and/or a beggar and thus test the person – the reward or punishment is proportional to the host’s behavior towards him. This is where the customs for welcoming a guest come from, which “have the aim of binding the guest to the house he has come to, of forming a certain ritual alliance with him” (Čajkanović 1994: 276). A custom that has survived in modern society is to provide a guest with the best dishes and drinks – “it can generally be said that it has been completely preserved among our people. There is no Serb who will let a guest leave uninvited; the guest, for his part, must accept the offer, otherwise he will inflict the greatest insult on the host” (Čajkanović 1994: 277).

²⁸ The example contains product placement.

obsession with cleaning²⁹ both on vacation and in hotel rooms (dramillah 2021d; grckainfo 2024³⁰), even when she is sick (dino_tubic 2024), can also be categorised in the same group. Exaggeration mechanisms are used to create a humorous effect. This type of “behaviour” reveals micromanaging issues in both her own and her children’s lives, which are beyond her control.

From all of the above, it can be concluded that her role (as well as the role of the father) is positioned from the perspective of a patriarchal society – “The gender division of roles meant different sources of identity for men and women, so the identity of men rested on the ‘role of the head of the family, its breadwinner and protector’, and the identity of women on the role of a mother, wife and housewife” (Tomanović, Stanojević 2024: 110). Raising children and maintaining a household, while neglecting her own needs, is considered the mother’s main function. She is willingly glorifying and emphasising this role (dramillah 2021e). However, the Balkan mother is not subordinate but authoritative. She tends to portray herself as a traditional housewife, which occupies a high place in the value system of traditional Balkan cultures. Perhaps this can be understood as accepting some kind of archetypal or mythologised role of mother.

In the concept of Balkan parenthood, the role of the grandmother is also present, but somewhat differs from the mother. The grandmother is obsessed with crocheted decorations,³¹ making them an indispensable item in her interior aesthetics (itsjoshf 2023). She speaks in formulaic expressions about her sensitivity to weather changes (zeljkomalenovic 2024c) and is a practitioner of tradition and rituals, causing her to pour water on her granddaughter when leaving the house to wish her a safe journey (yugojokes 2024b).

The dominant content based on the cultural construct of Balkan parenthood (comprising both maternal and paternal roles) is related to disrespect for social boundaries – gossiping about the child in its presence (dramillah 2021b) or violating private time and personal space. Parents

²⁹ Broader “ethnic” mother context: fadi_maaz (2025).

³⁰ The example contains product placement.

³¹ The Instagram folklore formula “Nobody” in relation to this content (“Nobody: Absolutely no one”) is used because the Balkan grandmother can be interpreted as the sole “guardian” of the intangible cultural heritage in the family (the craft of crocheting).

accept the sacrificial model as parenting ideal, meaning “the parents direct all their resources towards the child, accompanied by a narrative of sacrifice for the sake of the child’s wellbeing, and often a feeling of guilt when parents cannot fulfill what they believe is expected of them” (Tomanović, Stanojević 2024: 115; yugojokes 2024c³²). Parental narratives about one’s own hard childhood are similar in tone, for example, walking to school every day in difficult conditions (balcandad 2025a). The family name is also considered important in their value system (europeancomedy 2025a). The portrait of the Balkan child (its personality as expected by parents), and parents’ unfavourable relationship towards child’s individuality, is given indirectly. The required values are obedience, diligence and subordination. “In this framework, the family has primacy over the individual and compliance with family goals is preferred over individual ones. All world religions postulate the importance of marriage and family as a group for the maintenance of society, tradition and religion itself. The secular variant of family ideology during the modern period was particularly shaped through the so-called ideology of familism” (Tomanović, Stanojević 2024: 112). The Balkan child, as the video creator, holds a liminal position, simultaneously respecting and accepting these patterns of behaviour in the household, but also criticising them by distorting and parodying them online.

Jokes on ethical parents on Instagram show the “socialisation” of parents based on common “ethnic” characteristics – wearing slippers and undershirts in public, chewing on toothpicks, etc. (balcandad 2025b). Content creators are also interested in differences in the upbringing of Balkan and “non-Balkan” parents, in which all the aforementioned characteristics of Balkan parents are, in a way, concentrated and contrasted with those of parents from other geographical and political contexts. For example, an American mother tells her child that he is perfect the way he is, while a Balkan mother reacts with threats and swearing at the mistake that the child initially complained about (balcan.iwa 2024; adriankrajcar 2025a). The non-Balkan parent respects the child’s individuality and is flexible when it comes to the child’s obligations, in contrast to a Balkan parent,

³² This video uses the viral phrase of famous folk singer Haris Džinović after his divorce: “My only fault was excessive giving”.

who is very rigid and, again, prone to punitive methods in ensuring obedience (bored_nele 2024b). Such cases point to different value systems that shape intergenerational relations in different societies, and in which the concept of a Balkan parent is presented as traditional. “In contrast to the modern civil (e.g. American) value system in which the basic values are: personal happiness, individual independence, technical progress, material well-being, comfortable family life, etc., in a patriarchal society the main values are: the well-being of the community, national independence, courage, fighting spirit, asceticism, etc.” (Trebješanin 1991: 151).

Comments made by social media users make an important segment of Instagram reels. As discussed in the theoretical section, most content creators come from outside the Balkans; however, the comments reveal a broad recognition that extends beyond the Balkan diaspora (Figure 4). For instance, in a video portraying differences between Balkan and non-Balkan mothers, Balkan mothers are also identified with Italian and Turkish ones. Some users even recognise aspects of themselves in the character of the “Balkan mother.” These comments reflect a shared collective experience, reinforcing the emotional resonance of such narratives, oscillating between trauma and nostalgia, depending on the viewer’s position within the imagined family dynamic, whether as a Balkan mother or as a Balkan child.

In conclusion, by exploring humorous short-form videos on Instagram that centre on the figure of the Balkan parent, we have demonstrated the possibility of positioning them within the broader framework of digital folklore and vernacular creativity. Through a theoretical engagement with key folkloristic concepts and their adaptation to social media, the analysis has highlighted the shift in format, performativity, and context, emphasising its convergence with popular culture and individualised modes of expression. The preference for the term Balkan has been interpreted as a reflection of both glocal identity and affective nostalgia, particularly within transnational and diaspora communities, where such content frequently originates. The phenomenon was also contextualised within the global trend of “ethnic” parent humour, revealing shared structures of representation alongside culturally specific features. Socio-cultural factors such as the symbolic role of parenthood, intergenerational dynamics, and enduring cultural narratives in Slavic and Balkan contexts were identified

as key elements in the creation and reception of these videos. In the analytical section, distinct parental roles, especially those of the father and (grand)mother, were examined both individually and collectively. Their parental methods are recognised as both sources of comical situations and trauma. The humour arises from the dissonance between traditional patterns and the lived realities of modern parenting, producing culturally resonant content, especially having in mind that in spite of the public nature of social media, relatable content tends to focus on intimate themes and everyday life.

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toobaltictohandle (2025). <https://tinyurl.com/yc7necre>, 9 April.

travelwith.lauri (2023). <https://tinyurl.com/ycx3es5v>, 21 December.

vrlo_zabrinjavjuce (2024a). <https://tinyurl.com/3r94zhkx>, 2 October.

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yugojokes (2023a). <https://tinyurl.com/3w5pvxc9>, 27 November.

yugojokes (2023b). <https://tinyurl.com/ywxuyrzn>, 6 November.

yugojokes (2024a). <https://tinyurl.com/mrx65n6m>, 30 January.

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yugojokes (2024c). <https://tinyurl.com/yc8yuhj7>, 9 April.

zeljkomalenovic (2024a). <https://tinyurl.com/2s4cz4xf>, 7 December.

zeljkomalenovic (2024b). <https://tinyurl.com/4fhcv3t5>, 27 May.

zeljkomalenovic (2024c). <https://tinyurl.com/sc74abkv>, 26 August.

Appendix

Author	URL	Content description	Language	Hashtags
travelwith.lauri (2023)	https://tinyurl.com/ycx3es5v	When you visit a Balkan/ Eastern European family.	English	#catmeme #easterneurope #balkanmom #meme #cats #parents #funny #foryou #catduo
mattpuzitsky (2025)	https://tinyurl.com/5n9xr22a	Slavic parents give “compliments”.	English	#slavic #memes #funny #comedy #russianmemes #immigrantparents #relatable #compliments #immigrant
polina.vita (2025)	https://tinyurl.com/538j5taj	Slavic childhood memory – a mother beating with a belt.	English	#slavicmemes #memorylane #childhood #nostalgia #funnyreels
toobaltictohandle (2025)	https://tinyurl.com/yc7necre	Coming home to your Eastern European family.	English	#easterneurope #viral #meme #family #crazy #attitudes #latvia #estonia #lithuania #vilnius #riga #tallin #funnyvideos #relatable #home #vibes #realitycheck
balcan.iwa (2024)	https://tinyurl.com/vywakd5c	Differences between Balkan and American mothers, IG reel from Romania.	English	#iwa #romania #balkans #balkanmom
getokrusevac (2024)	https://tinyurl.com/2s3e9u6j	Average Balkan marriage.	BCS	–
adriankrajcar (2025b)	https://tinyurl.com/5dxntb7s	In the Balkans, everything is fixed by hitting.	English	#reels #balkans

balcandad (2024)	https://tinyurl.com/2jszjw7d	How a Balkan dad fixes things.	English	#balkandad #balkan #dad #tata #father #dads #slav #typical #reels #fix #reelsinstagram #reelsvideo
bored_nele (2024a)	https://tinyurl.com/5ycxuy6x	Balkan father makes rude comments at a children's soccer match.	BCS	#balkans #balkans #yugoslavia #serbia #croatia #bosnia #serbia #Croatia #Yugo #yugoslavia #slovenia #macedonia #montenegro #Montenegro #reels #reelsinstagram #reelsvideo
vrlo_zabrinjavjuce (2024b)	https://tinyurl.com/4yacy935	Father ignores privacy – enters the child's room without knocking.	–	#old man #balkans #classic #beating #very #worrying #veryworrying #milankrstic
zeljkomalenovic (2024b)	https://tinyurl.com/4fhcv3t5	Balkan father does not respect privacy.	–	–
sooshimango (2025)	https://tinyurl.com/2ujnttuf	Ethnic parents do not respect privacy – international variant.	English	–
dramillah (2021c)	https://tinyurl.com/43vmash5	Father calls the child from another room to bring him water/remote control.	BCS, Eng.	#balkanmemes #balkantiktok #balkan #bosnia #dramillah #switzerlandreels #swisscomedy
stefano-ooooooooooooooooo (2024)	https://tinyurl.com/2b56ubmp	Father keeps the packaging, emotionally attached to waste.	BCS	–

dramillah (2021f)	https://tinyurl.com/yy54ym9z	Father does not know the names of his children's friends.	BCS, Eng.	#balkan #balkandad #balkanparents #balkanmemes #dramillah #balkantiktok #bosnia
dramillah (2021a)	https://tinyurl.com/35z7t7pu	Father refuses to borrow the car.	BCS	#balkan #balkandad #balkantiktok #balkanmemes #dramillah #bosnia
zeljkomalenovic (2024a)	https://tinyurl.com/2s4cz4xf	Father throws his child into the water to teach him to swim.	BCS	–
mamahobotnica (2024)	https://tinyurl.com/mr3azxph	Father expects a Formula 1-like drive.	BCS	–
jelena_offline (2024)	https://tinyurl.com/y8zwv249	Father teaches his daughter to do men's work.	BCS	–
vrlo_zabrinjavjuce (2024a)	https://tinyurl.com/3r94zhkx	Father's obvious intolerance towards his daughter's boyfriend.	BCS	#balkans #father #dating #very #worrying #veryworrying #milankrstic
yugojokes (2023b)	https://tinyurl.com/ywxuyrzn	Mother prefers the son, daughter receives threats.	BCS	–
alexkrajnovic (2023)	https://tinyurl.com/93zhzdet	Mother shouts at the "child".	BCS, Eng.	#balkans #balkans #balkanstyle #balkans #balkanparents #parenting #balkanmemes #balkanhumor #nightingale #easterneuropean #easterneurope
alexkrajnovic (2025)	https://tinyurl.com/ms8xzbcx	Balkan mother – corporal punishment.	BCS, Eng.	#comedy #alexkrajnovic

prvatelevizija (2023)	https://tinyurl.com/32zcptr3	Balkan mother is more authoritative than a father.	BCS	–
dramillah (2022)	https://tinyurl.com/43xebya7	Mother controls her daughter's dressing for going out.	BCS, Eng.	#balkan#balkantiktok#balkanprents
yugojokes (2023a)	https://tinyurl.com/3w5pvxc9	Relationship of a Balkan mother and her son.	English	–
merigoldasic (2024)	https://tinyurl.com/43dh3j7a	Mother criticises her daughter-in-law for not having traditional skills.	BCS	–
yugojokes (2024a)	https://tinyurl.com/mrx65n6m	Mother wants to spend time with the children, but shows a lack of interest.	BCS	–
balcancomedyboss (2024)	https://tinyurl.com/ewkkvdkf	Mother cleans when guests are coming over.	English	#balkanmemes #balkanjokes #balkancomedy #balkanfun #balkans #exyu #yugomemes #yugojokes #yugocomedy #southbetruogo #jugomemes #bosnia #serbia #croatia #albania #macedonia #montenegro #romania #bulgaria #slovenia
mada_faka_maka (2025)	https://tinyurl.com/2c87jr3v	Similar content about preparing the house for guests.	BCS	/

_somethingsmellsgood (2024)	https://tinyurl.com/3j8y4bxd	Balkan mother always has food ready for guests.	English	/
dramillah (2021d)	https://tinyurl.com/46ur3ayv	Mother cleans the hotel room on vacation.	BCS, Eng.	#balkanmemes #balkantiktok #balkanparents #dramillah #bosnia
grckainfo (2024)	https://tinyurl.com/4688d4vn	Mother is cleaning the beach.	BCS	#greekinfo #greece #greece #vacation #sea #accommodation #summer2024 #accommodationgreece
dino_tubic (2024)	https://tinyurl.com/2kbhvb56	Balkan mom cleans when she is sick.	English	#comedy #funnyreel #funnyvideos #truestory #moms
dramillah (2021e)	https://tinyurl.com/yc7zc4dr	Broader ethnic mother context – she expresses greater distress over the soiled floor than over her son’s act of murder.	–	–
dramillah (2021e)	https://tinyurl.com/yc7zc4dr	Mother values the child’s stress less than her own.	BCS, Eng.	#balkan #balkantiktok #dramillah #balkanmemes #balkanparents
itsjoshf (2023)	https://tinyurl.com/yjvrj4re	Balkan grandmother obsessed with crocheted ornaments.	BCS	#serbia #belgrade #viral #reel #reel-sinstagram #itsjoshf #tiktoksrbiya #youtubeshorts #balkans
zeljkomalenovic (2024c)	https://tinyurl.com/sc74abkv	Grandma is sensitive to weather changes.	BCS	–
yugojokes (2024b)	https://tinyurl.com/mu97v399	Grandmother pours water on her granddaughter for good luck.	BCS	–

dramillah (2021b)	https://tinyurl.com/3w6u34kr	Parents gossip about the child while he is present.	BCS, Eng.	#balkan #balkanprents #balkanmemes #balkantiktok #swissmeme
yugojokes (2024c)	https://tinyurl.com/yc8yuhj7	Narrative of parental sacrifice.	BCS	–
balcandad (2025a)	https://tinyurl.com/4dum88f5	Parent tells how he used to travel to school.	English	#balkans #european #glory #south #easterneuropean #parents #school #reels #relatable
europeancomedy (2025a)	https://tinyurl.com/3hd67vhj	Family name as a value.	English	–
balcandad (2025b)	https://tinyurl.com/yp5txrk9	Stereotypical characteristics of ethnic parents.	English	#balkans #ethnic #european #dad #wog #glory #reels #balkan-dad #sooshimango
adriankrajcar (2025a)	https://tinyurl.com/3yv6wzw2	Differences between American and Balkan upbringings.	English	#reels #balkans
bored_nele (2024b)	https://tinyurl.com/lytaw2889	Differences between non-Balkan and Balkan upbringings.	BCS, Eng.	#balkans #balkans #yugoslavia #serbia #croatia #bosnia #serbia #Croatia #Yugo #yugoslavia #reels #reelsinstagram #reelsvideo