

**Living on the margins and moving forward:
An ethnographic study of Veliki Rit,
an illegal settlement in Serbia**

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_____ (Sevdjulje Ramadani)

Abstract

This is an ethnographic study of an illegal Roma settlement, called Veliki Rit, in Serbia. In addition to my autobiographical connection and my positionality as a researcher, my data derives from the life stories of six women whom I interviewed. My main goal is to describe what it means to live in an illegal settlement. Relying on the theory of urban marginality by Loic Wacquant, I elucidate the everyday experience of some residents in the settlement.

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Introduction

Veliki Rit is located in Novi Sad, which is the second-largest city in Serbia and the seat of the autonomous region of Vojvodina. Novi Sad has developed a great deal lately and it is advertised as the European Capital of Culture in 2022 (*Novi Sad to Be a European Capital of Culture in 2022*, 2021), despite the emergence of poverty, concentrated in the urban marginalized areas of the city. Veliki Rit, a city neighborhood, has a long existence of more than 50 years (European Roma Rights Centre, 2013). My focus, however, is on an illegal part of Veliki Rit. The illegal settlement was established and developed intensely after 1990, on the land owned by the state (OSCE Mission to Serbia, 2014). According to the Detailed Regulation Plan 'Mali Beograd-Veliki Rit II' in Novi Sad (*Detailed Regulation Plan 'Mali Beograd-Veliki Rit II' in Novi Sad*, 2016), the city is planning to demolish the informal settlement, together with the settlement named Mali Beograd next to it, but there is no plan for what might happen to the people who live there. Macura (2017) describes the circle of absurdity that exists between city authorities and inhabitants in Veliki Rit. On the one hand, the city administration is planning urban projects, while on the other hand, the inhabitants are continuing to build their homes illegally without being prevented by the city that keeps planning as the inhabitants keep building (Macura, 2017, p. 70).

In figure 1., the photograph shows the entrance to the illegal settlement. On the wall, it is written 'Geto'. In the background, there are illegal houses that run far deep into the settlement. This road in the image connects Veliki Rit with the main road (srp. Temerinski put) which is directly connected to the city center, around 6.5 km away. The settlement, Veliki Rit, which I present, is not part of the formal economy, with low social mobility and with a disreputable image maintained outside the settlement.

The theoretical framework I rely on builds on Loic Wacquant's conceptualization of "urban marginality". It helps me to approach the informal settlement Veliki Rit. Wacquant states that a new regime of marginality generates forms of poverty, which are "neither residual, nor cyclical or transitional, but indeed inscribed in the future of contemporary societies insofar as they are fed by the ongoing fragmentation of the wage-labour relationship, the functional disconnection of dispossessed neighborhoods from the national and global economies, and the reconfiguration of the welfare state into an instrument for enforcing the obligation of paid work in the polarizing city." (L. Wacquant & ProtoSociology Project, 2009, p. 67). Wacquant investigated the experience of urban relegation in the West, comparing the Chicago ghetto with

the Parisian working-class banlieues (L. J. D. Wacquant, 1993), demonstrating how urban marginality follows different social and spatial dynamics on the two continents (L. Wacquant, 1999). He cautions against an easy use and adoption of concepts developed “elsewhere”, which leads to “the transatlantic diffusion of concepts, models, and sometimes ready-made theories from recent (and not-so-recent) American social science.” (L. J. D. Wacquant, 1993, p. 367). In this paper, I am not comparing Veliki Rit with the Chicago ghetto and the Parisian working-class banlieues. I am using selectively some parts of the Wacquant theory as an inspiration to investigate the experience of urban poverty and relegation. I rely first of all on the empirical data that I derive from interviews conducted in Veliki Rit. By gathering the life stories of six women from Veliki Rit, my first goal is to present what it means to live in the illegal settlement from their perspective. In my analysis, I cannot omit the Kosovo war (1999) which had a strong impact on the development and enlargement of the settlement. My other sections in the analysis are devoted to housing issues, women's everyday life, and the perceptions of women who live in Veliki Rit. My second goal is to link these perceptions, and the everyday experience of the women to spatial dynamics of urban exclusion in Veliki Rit, considering three spatial properties of urban marginality identified by Wacquant (L. Wacquant & ProtoSociology Project, 2009).

Those three properties are: territorial fixation and stigmatization, spatial alienation and dissolution of place and loss of hinterland. Territorial fixation and stigmatization refers to an aspect of urban marginality which is about isolated and bounded areas, perceived by “both outsiders and insiders as social purgatories, leprous badlands”(2009, p. 67). Wacquant explains how the stigmatized neighborhood symbolically degrades those who live there, and they degrade the neighborhood in return (2009, p. 69). Spatial alienation and dissolution of place refer to “loss of a humanized, culturally familiar and socially filtered locale with which marginalized urban populations identify and in which they feel ‘at home’ and in relative security.” (2009, p. 69). Loss of a hinterland refers to the disappearance of a viable hinterland on which “workers temporarily rejected from the labour market could fall back upon the social economy of their community of provenance.” (2009, p. 71).



Figure 1. The entrance of the settlement-'Geto'

1. My positionality as a researcher and relationships with my participants

According to Wacquant, poverty cannot be understood as a "material disposition or insufficient income" only; living in poverty, especially in rich societies, means "having a status of social anomaly." (L. J. D. Wacquant, 1993). This is the main reason why I chose to conduct an ethnographic study, trying to grasp the real experience of people who live in poverty. Given that I have not spent a long period of time on the field in Veliki Rit, spending a long time in the community one wishes to understand is the starting point of a good ethnographic analysis, this paper poses a huge methodological challenge, while I hope that my autobiographical connection and my positionality as a researcher will to some extent correct this shortcoming. My family is of Muslim origin, from the RAE (Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian) community and I lived with them in Veliki Rit for about two months after we had fled the Kosovo war in 1999. I always knew about Veliki Rit. Besides, I worked as a social mediator in an NGO¹ project from February to August 2020., connecting people with adequate institutions or give them relevant information. I talked regularly with inhabitants in Veliki Rit and visited them at home, observing them in their natural environment.

I am reflecting on my positionality as a researcher, furthermore, I am aware that the researcher's position can affect how the research question is framed, and has an impact on the study design, recruitment, and the data collection process (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). According to Olukotun and others (2021) who investigated insider/outsider researcher's positionality, no one researcher considered themselves entirely an outsider or an insider, but the study shows that having an insider understanding of the cultural norms, language and practices was primarily cited as having a positive impact on participant recruitment and gaining participant's trust. I identify myself as a cultural insider in the case of Veliki Rit, which has a positive impact on recruitment and trust between me and the participants. I carried out the interviews in Serbian, but speaking Albanian also helps to cross barriers.

Even though all the participants that I interviewed made grammatical mistakes in speaking, it was not challenging to understand them. I did two interviews online and four

¹ The project "Centers for Roma Community": Local Support to Roma Inclusion in Serbia" has started in 2017. in Serbia. The project has been providing psychological and legal support to Roma people, focused on responding to their specific needs. The aim is to improve social inclusion of Roma in society. The project is targeting Roma individuals and families, especially the most vulnerable ones.

interviews on-site. However, I have been in the houses of all my participants, and I had some visits when we casually talked, not just with participants, but with other members of the family. I carried out semi-structured interviews and I believe that I shaped questions in a way that I anticipated that they could understand and answer. I was open to listening beyond the questions that I had. Taking into consideration that all my inhabitants never had any experience of interviewing, I emphasized that their opinion is valuable to hear. The range of women's ages is from 19 to 52; they declare themselves as Roma or Ashkali or both. One participant is Muslim and Orthodox, owing to her parents' mixed religion, others are just Muslims. Years of living in the settlement range from five to 22. Four of the six live in cohabitation or are married.

2. A settlement marked by war

One cannot overlook the impact of the Kosovo war (1999) on the lives of the people in Veliki Rit. Three participants out of those I have interviewed directly experienced the Kosovo war. Two participants who are 19 years old have families who fled the war. Interestingly, some people (outsiders) even refer to Veliki Rit as Malo Kosovo (srp. Small Kosovo). The Kosovo war has far-lasting reverberations up to the present, and this affects Veliki Rit, too. Sparked by the violent rioting of ethnic Albanians throughout Kosovo on March 17th and 18th in 2004, Veliki Rit and another settlement in Novi Sad (Adice) were attacked by Serbian ultra-nationalists (Human Rights Watch, 2005). Both settlements are inhabited mostly by Roma and Ashkali, with many of them displaced from Kosovo.

A Muslim Roma woman, who was born in Novi Sad, but who lives in Veliki Rit says: I know, they (outsiders) do not like here because of those who are covered (women who wear Muslim hijab). *Although I understand, I understand everything... If the children were born here, I can understand, but not those who are displaced from Kosovo. All of us have some rights, I'm not saying that they don't, but we always suffer, those who were born here, who can speak Serbian clearly, we always suffer. That was in the 98', 99', 2000', and all years we suffered as children.* It seems that there is an internal division between those who are displaced and those who are not. This woman feels affected by living in a neighborhood, where many displaced persons from Kosovo live.

Referring to Veliki Rit as Malo Kosovo (Small Kosovo), the attack on Veliki Rit in 2004 and internal divisions between people displaced from Kosovo and those not of Kosovo origin, indicate that Veliki Rit is marked by war. The territorial stigmatization that the inhabitants of this settlement experience is exacerbated by the stigma associated with living in poverty and being Roma and Muslim. In addition to this, my empirical data shows that the stigma attached to this place is strongly affected and exacerbated by the war experience, which Wacquant has not mentioned. The Kosovo war is a distant but crucial experience with far-lasting consequences for many inhabitants in the settlement, pushed to leave their homes and forced to find another one.

The war, honestly, brought me here mostly. I lived there, it is very cheap in Kosovo, but the war brought me here with four children. There I had no opportunity to feed the children, no opportunity for my children to grow up. The children were with me. I was

a single mother. In the meanwhile, my parents were here, I had parents here, brothers. It was the easiest for me to have my children growing up next to my parents because I was alone. It was very difficult in warfare, so I could not live there.

This quote by a 52-year-old woman shows the experience and memory of war, which bears upon Veliki Rit up to this day, most directly through the family networks that run across the settlement. She relied on her family the most at that moment and she described how crucial it was that she had already her parents and cousins in Veliki Rit. The settlement was the place where she found protection provided by people who already lived there. I see the connection with my family story, my parents found shelter in a cousin's house in the settlement. Years after the war my parents relied on the support of their parents (my grandparents) for paying the rent for a house outside of Veliki Rit. In the settlement, families pursue individual strategies, where family relationships are mobilized in order to find or build a house, a home.

Veliki Rit became a place of refuge, and ultimately a new home for those relegated here by the war, which makes Veliki Rit heavily marked by the war. Losing one's home and support from the previous neighborhood where one lived, is also a form of losing a hinterland, which for Wacquant is a significant aspect of urban marginality. He referred to workers who became jobless and hence could no longer rely on the support of their neighborhood-based organizations, nor on their kin, or clique (L. Wacquant & ProtoSociology Project, 2009). In the case of Veliki Rit, those displaced by war while they are losing a home, they lost every kind of support they had in their previous neighborhood, thus they were forced to build a so-to-speak new hinterland in the place where they settled.

Nowadays, close to the settlement line up some big furniture stores, shopping stores, car stores, etc. However, many inhabitants are usually excluded from paid employment, included mostly in the "shadow economy". Having a small chance for entering the formal labor market inhabitants can barely assist each other to find paid employment. I think that those who live there, at least in the last three decades, have never had a strong enough hinterland to support them in the settlement.

3. A house is not just a building

As I mentioned above, the city has an urban plan for demolishing Veliki Rit. Even though the future is uncertain and the inhabitants are aware that their houses could be demolished, I found that they are moving on, improving house conditions which is an essential activity in the life of women I interviewed. Some describe this process as a huge venture, which is risky. The possibility that Veliki Rit could be demolished worries them, but this does not prevent them from going on. They are hopeful.

While one woman is very satisfied that she managed to build a bathroom and kitchen in her house, a woman with four children is in the process of building a bathroom, although she is aware that it could be demolished. She says:

I am happy that I managed to buy a house from a cousin, that I expanded myself, that I started to fix the bathroom for my children. It stopped a little, again. God willing, we will work it out. This is for me to take the children simply on the right path. ... Now we bought it and now we started to build a bathroom, where we put everything at risk. I hope they won't demolish it, it will take at least a year to be able to fix it, to fulfill the children's and my desire, to know that we managed to make it.

All this experience of building a bathroom, she describes as her and her children's wish. They often give the reason for making small improvements that there are more family members living in the same household. And it is also the family that helps in, and often the houses are bought from relatives too.

Some women stated that they could not imagine living anywhere else. One woman says: *In vain, I spent money on the house, so much money I spent on my house, now it would be a pity to leave it. But they said that Rit will be demolished.* Her description shows that she is attached to the house because she put a lot of effort to improve it. Leaving the house would be a huge loss to her. Figure 2., it is showing the house of one of my participants. In this photograph, it can be observed that the yard is very clean. Even if the house looks dilapidated, it is obvious that someone cares about it, for example, there is a new window in the house and there is a curtain. I conclude that some inhabitants care about their houses. Building a house is not simply a building where they have shelter, but for many, it is their home about which they

care. Inhabitants invest their money, time, and emotions in their houses, trying to make a better home for those who live in it.



Figure 2. The house of my participant

In this section, I conclude that many inhabitants feel at home, in relative security, relying on their community and family, motivated to improve their living conditions. They are not alienated from their own space. Family ties are essential in the community for solving housing issues. With the case of Veliki Rit, I am arguing that there are no clear indications of spatial alienation and dissolution of place, which Wacquant suppose in his theory.

3.1. The state simply does not care

The younger married girl who lives with her husband in an illegal house as a tenant, paying monthly, said how she feels: *Yes, I feel sad of course. We live on rent; I do not have my house.* Before these interviews, I was not aware that some inhabitants pay rent since I expected that living in illegal houses would not require payment. Nevertheless, rent is still demanded from these residents and to be able to pay rent is a recurring uncertainty. A further case of illegal transactions between inhabitants can be found in the need to pay for registration to a legal address, without which they have no access to health insurance, personal documentation, social benefits, children benefits, etc. To have a temporary residence, one woman pays someone every two years. In all those transactions between individuals, such as buying a house, paying rent, paying for getting an address, the state could not intervene, because all these activities happen without the state's participation. This opens room for questioning if state authorities deliberately refrain from recording people and their activities. It is shown that “states are engaged in deliberate strategies of nonrecording; strategies are selective, episodic,

and aimed at certain populations.” (Kalir & van Schendel, 2017, p. 5). In the case of nonrecording residential objects properly in the settlement, Macura presents a significant fact based on the geodetic plans in Serbia: “The plan for the area of “Veliki Rit”, settlement in Novi Sad, where residential objects of Roma people are made of solid material, does not contain any presentations of these objects as if those were objects made of not solid materials.” (2017, p. 5). Macura gives further explanation, stating that the Local Government has responsibility for initiating the design of the urban plan with the incomplete cadastral-topographic plan of the real conditions of Veliki Rit (Macura, 2017). From this point of my research, it can be concluded that there is a public abandonment of several issues that appear in Veliki Rit, which lead those inhabitants, as my data shows, to be self-organized and counted on just their individual strategies. One woman, angry because of the issue of not having regular access to electricity, says: *So, everything remained the same. It would be nice if something was organized here, to solve something here, to help, to think about us a little, but the state simply doesn't care.*

4. Women at home, teaching children

It is women who run the households. According to the interviews I have done, they are responsible for: cooking, cleaning, education and upbringing of children. Usually, women who have small children are supporting them with their homework and send them to school. Fathers are not included in doing homework with children. Women explained that their husbands do not have enough time, because they work. Mostly, husbands have precarious jobs, having a contract for few months only or not having one at all. The roles of being a mother and a housewife are the roles that they perceive as a huge step in their lives, a step which they look forward to. Based on my observations and experience generally, it is very rare for women from the settlement to work outside home.

Among my six participants, only one woman has been working in a shopping mall as a cleaner for five years. She has two children, and she takes care of their education and upbringing. For example, her husband is not included in homework activities. She helps them do their homework, instil good habits, for example washing hands before eating, etc. She works 8 hours per day, six days per week. Besides that, she is responsible for all of the housework.

While younger women like to hang out together, those who are mothers are busy with housework and children. Sometimes, during my work in the settlement they emphasised how tired they felt. In interviews the younger women thought of hanging out together in Veliki Rit as the good aspects of living in Veliki Rit. On the other hand, others with small children are much busier with housework and caring about children. One woman told me that noise and music on the streets during the night bothered her and her children. Gatherings are usually held in summer nights or during Ramazan, the Muslim fast. In figure 3., a photograph is taken during the Muslim fast, where inhabitants gathered to have dinner provided by a Muslim charity organization.



Figure 3. A Muslim charity organization-'RAHMETI'

I am satisfied because I have my friends, I can walk, I can be outside as much as I want, if we were in some other countries, I would not be able to be outside as much as I want. You can do whatever you want in your country. You are not allowed to play music because of the noise (she meant in foreign countries), but in your house and in your garden, you can play whatever you want. And nobody will tell you anything.

The young girl's description, who is not married, presents Veliki Rit and her home as a place where you do not have limitations and where you can be free. However, she takes part in housework. She lives with her family, shares responsibility with her sister for maintaining their house. Besides, she helps her parents in making a living, collecting raw materials or selling products in their illegal store in front of their house. When it comes to education, she was not supported after elementary school to enroll high school by the community, or other youngsters in the settlement. She explained it to me that older peers from the settlement, who started high school, were required to pay for things like school supplies, which influences her to give up on continuing her education. She spends her days helping the family and hanging out with young people in the settlement. For her, the settlement is the place where she can feel freedom and where she can live her life the way she wants without limitations. However, there are some limits defined by the expectations and norms of society. If she wants to go outside Veliki Rit, she must have her father's permission.

Women also interact along the way, for example when sending children to school and kindergarten. I noticed that they help children with homework, even though they were excluded from education themselves. Some women have a positive attitude towards education and they believe that their children or grandchildren need education. Women play a substantial role in the social reproduction activities in this settlement, putting considerable effort in maintaining the house and providing a home and support their children, while men are totally absent from these activities.

In this section, I conclude that there are very lively interactions among neighbours. This supports the previous statement that inhabitants in Veliki Rit are not spatially alienated. Here in Veliki Rit inhabitants interact with each other and have a solid knowledge about other residents in Veliki Rit. Inhabitants create a very dynamic space with dense social contacts, and have a strong sense of place.

5. It is good here and it is bad

While the place is seen by many as their home, some residents also find Veliki Rit threatening. There are contradictions between how women perceive the place. On the one hand, they perceive it as a place that they like, on the other hand, they perceive the place as a threat. One perception does not exclude the other one. A single mother and grandmother who has adult children is a good example of how one can perceive this place as a home, where they are surrounded by lovely children and grandchildren, but also as a threatening place where sons are in prison, and the mother is happy to know that they are there as she thinks it is better not to live in the settlement. She says:

Well, it's good here, and it's bad. I feel better here because my children are here, I have grandchildren here. And I feel bad when they don't have a job, when they work privately, when they don't have any help. That's bad. But I'm better here, because my children grew up here, the grandchildren are here.

He's in jail. Because he hung out with bad company. So, when I am thinking, it's better to be there than to be here (in the settlement) like this, one boy at his age died from what they used, what they drank, what they did. A 25-year-old boy, his best friend.

Their feelings about living in the settlement also vary. I asked them to tell me how happy they were with living in the settlement and give scores from 1 to 10. Four participants answered me by giving middle scores: 4-6. A young girl who has lived her entire life in Veliki Rit told me: *Oh, a lot 100 or 1000*. On the other hand, the woman who works in a shopping mall and has been living in the settlement for 5 years, told me: *I'm not at all happy. I wish if I could, I would leave right away, right now*. A significant difference between those two women is the way they cope with the stigma attached to the place. The young girl has a strong sense of belonging to the settlement, even though she is aware of the stigma attached to Veliki Rit. But this does not change her perception and feelings about the settlement. The woman, who is employed, has negative feelings about living in the settlement and feels ashamed. She hides her address on the job and she does not feel that she belongs there. Those women who answered with 4-6, said that they like some aspects and do not like other aspects of living in Veliki Rit.

Interestingly, focusing on women's stories, I found that some women symbolically degrade other mothers, who are not taking care of their children enough, whose children are dirty and usually on the street. Considering the role of mothers as vital in their children's life, degrading other mothers helps them to gain social dignity. However, symbolical degradation of other neighbors comes more frequently from those who consider the place rather as a threat. In one interview, I found a clear dissolution of the place in the narratives of a woman who says:

People are the problem here. You cannot leave anything outside, they steal. More frequently, women state that there are good and bad neighbors. Almost all of them told me that they have a best friend who lives in Veliki Rit.

While from an outsider's view the place looks homogeneous, for insiders Veliki Rit has many faces. In figure 4. there is a red house with a green gate. On the gate, there are carpets which means that someone cares about the house. In figure 5. the first association may be a landfill. There is a house with a dilapidated appearance. However, in the background of the picture on the right, there is a woman, washing laundry. This represents that someone cares in the dilapidated house as well.



Figure 4. Red house



Figure 5. Landfill?

Conclusion

To live in Veliki Rit means to face many uncertainties in everyday life, but those uncertainties do not stop inhabitants from planning and investing in their futures. They are moving forward, and they are hopeful, even though they are aware of the possibility that their houses could be demolished. The common characteristic I found is that many of them are continually improving their house conditions. My observations show that families rely on individual strategies and on their families to find or build houses. This leaves one to wonder why the state does not intervene and help provide housing for many of the inhabitants who moved from a warzone and who now live in the settlement in illegal houses. For future research, I suggest examining the state's role in the production of urban marginality. Solving housing issues happen mostly between family ties. Besides, there are many non-recorded transactions between inhabitants as paying for registration to a legal address, paying rent, or buying a house.

Territorial stigmatization and fixation are useful concepts for understanding inhabitants who live in urban poverty, but my findings point to three additional aspects. Firstly, my paper shows the significance of the Kosovo war in Veliki Rit. There is an indication of stigmatization of the place and of those who live in it because of its connection with the war. In addition there seems to be an internal division between residents, between those from Kosovo and those who are not from Kosovo. In the end, however, the whole settlement is affected by the stigma. Secondly, my findings that some mothers symbolically degrade other mothers, suggest further examination of gender differences in responding to territorial stigma. Thirdly, it turns out that many insiders do not perceive the place as a purgatory. Rather, they perceive bad and good aspects of living in Veliki Rit. Responses to stigma are very diverse as well, from acceptance to resistance.

Some of them do not have the desire to move somewhere else and are content with living in Veliki Rit. The interactions between residents are very dynamic, with strong social and family ties. Many have a strong sense of place. This finding challenges the concept of social alienation and the dissolution of place. Insiders' perceptions of Veliki Rit are very diverse and complex. At this point, I conclude that many inhabitants are not socially alienated in the neighborhood, because the bond between the territorial community is not weakening. Yet, there seem to be others who would like to leave Veliki Rit, who see the threatening side of it, the "dissolution of place" Wacquant speaks about, which urges them to retreat in their own space.

In the case of Veliki Rit, the loss of hinterland is about something else than it appears in Wacquant's theory. Those who fled the Kosovo war were cut from their previous community, displaced, lost the support of their previous neighborhood. At the time of doing this research, I observed that people there do not have any local support or any organization to help them find a job. They constantly face uncertainty, as Wacquant described, waiting for work which "may well never come or come only in the guise of insecure and intermittent subemployment." (2009, p. 71).

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