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# Pseudorodnovery in Serbia: description, causes, solutions\*

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**ABSTRACT:** Paper provides description of Pseudorodnovery as a phenomena related to, but distinguishable from Slavic Rodnovery. It is helpful to introduce term Pseudorodnovery as a tool for better understanding of various communities and manifestations that were all previously lumped together under the term Slavic Rodnovery. Causes that contribute to emergence and spreading of Pseudorodnovery have been named and influences that enable it have been identified. New information on Slavic Rodnovery and Pseudorodnovery in Serbia has been presented. Paper was written on the basis of data collected through interviews, freely available data provided by various communities and organizations and monitoring content of Internet activity of social groups. It has been shown that Slavic Rodnovery can be distinguished from Pseudorodnovery if both are properly defined.

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**Keywords:** Slavic Rodnovery, Pseudorodnovery, ethnic religion, folklore, fakelore, pseudoscience, religious syncretism

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Number of those interested in Slavic Rodnovery witnessed rise in the last few decades. This interest led to significant increase in number of adherents of Slavic Rodnovery, number of publications and social visibility of Slavic Rodnovery. There is also some interest in the Slavic Rodnovery by academic circles (although still sporadic and non-systematic). However, although that number is still very low it has been noticed that great diversity of views on Slavic Rodnovery exist [Aitamurto 2007; Obšust 2013: 295]. This diversity and heterogeneity that stem from uncertainty what Slavic Rodnovery is and what it isn't present somewhat of a challenge for any researcher. For a potential researcher of the topic it might be helpful to introduce term Pseudorodnovery as another tool for better understanding and qualification of various communities and manifestations that were all previously lumped together under the Slavic Rodnovery.

If we define Slavic Rodnovery as *the restoration of polytheistic, ethnic religion of Slavs, based on written, archaeological and ethnological sources and findings* (with appropriate limitations taken into account when applicable), we'll quickly realize that in scientific literature on Slavic Rodnovery various groups, (whose practices do not fall under said definition) and publications (that are connected to Slavic Rodnovery only by the claim of the author), are more often than not perceived and studied as integral parts of Slavic Rodnovery [Petrović M. 2013; Obšust 2013: 308]<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, general population that shares interest in Slavic folklore, mythology and religion is often confused by what appears to be subtle or negligible differences between various groups of people that claim to be Slavic Rodnovers. Differences that are result of misunderstanding what Slavic Rodnovery is at the core level. One of the consequences of this misunderstanding is that number of publications that contain fakelore<sup>3</sup> and/or fictions of their authors that are read and disseminated as genuine part of Slavic tradition. Another consequence is that Slavic Rodnovery is being qualified as a New Age, eclectic and even neopagan religion.

In a sense, religious practices of the New Age movement are a vindication of hypothesis by Michael York about paganism<sup>4</sup> as a universal religion from which all other religions stemmed from [York 2003], just turned upside down. Now a universal, amorphous net of religions is being formed, to which all of them confluence or contribute to. Unitarian Universalism and Church of All Worlds are simply most articulated representatives of said phenomena. It's like a stew in which you can put everything you find in the fridge or pantry, cook it for hours and serve it as a dish – it might be tasty, but every ingredient is beyond recognition and it lost any nutritional value it had.

Such practices in correlation to Slavic Rodnovery are known as *Pseudorodnovery* (in Polish pseudorodzimowierstwo [Wilkowski 2009]; in Russian псевдоязычество

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<sup>2</sup> One example is claim that Ynglism is part of Slavic Rodnovery [Aitamurto 2007]. Another is claim that Lev Sylenko's RUNVira is part of Slavic Rodnovery [Shnirelman 2002].

<sup>3</sup> Fakelore is a term coined in 1950 by American folklorist Richard M. Dorson to denote manufactured folklore presented as if it were part of genuine culture and tradition [Dorson 1977:4; Singer 1997].

<sup>4</sup> Paganism as defined by Michael York, not by other authors. It has been argued that it is inappropriate to use terms *paganism* and *neopaganism* in scientific literature on Slavic Rodnovery, due to lack of proper definition of both terms [Petrović M. 2013].

[Официальное заявление 2009] or more precise псевдородноверие; in Serbian псевдородноверје [Obšust 2013: 264]). Term Pseudorodnovery encompasses number of very different things: fakelore, promotion of certain ideologies and political agendas, syncretism (especially Christo-Slavic syncretism), monotheism, invention of new customs and rituals, borrowing myths, ideas, deities and customs from other religions, etc.

Question that immediately comes to mind: is Pseudorodnovery a stage in the evolution of Slavic Rodnovery that will eventually engulf entire Slavic Rodnovery or is it just a dead end, a side branch that will become a separate path, distinguishable from Slavic Rodnovery?

There is even more profound question underlying the issue – is the self proclamation enough to regard someone as an adherent of Slavic Rodnovery? Can we think of a person that doesn't believe in Slavic deities and honor them the way our ancestors did as a Slavic Rodnover, just because he or she says he or she is a Slavic Rodnover? The presented problem is common to all religions. Some of them employ strictly defined dogmas to resolve the issue, e. g. most of Christian churches use baptism and Symbol of the Faith or Profession of Faith, also known as the Nicene creed, to establish whether a person is a Christian or not. However, Slavic Rodnovery being not so rigid and dogmatic hasn't got such tools.

We will try to identify problems that can be grouped into category labeled Pseudorodnovery, find most probable causes, propose most likely solutions and answer the questions presented. In doing so, it will be shown that Slavic Rodnovery can be discerned from Pseudorodnovery. Presented synthesis is a result of research based on data gathered by interviews, monitoring of Internet activity of various groups and organizations that are observed as a potential source of research material on Slavic Rodnovery and material they publish and/or promote<sup>5</sup>.

Number of Slavic Rodnovers in Serbia, based on activity of social groups, can be estimated to low hundreds.<sup>6</sup> It's hard to be precise. Some of the youths that declare themselves as Slavic Rodnovers are doing that out of rebellion against societal norms perceiving Slavic Rodnovery as an alternative culture or lifestyle. Perhaps, in time, some will revisit their understanding of their ancestral faith and properly identify their religious identity, but for the most Slavic Rodnovery is just a passing phase. Others have identified Slavic Rodnovery with foreign extreme ideologies because of their ignorance of basic values of Slavic culture. There are (generally older) people that don't declare themselves as Slavic Rodnovers, but which are completely in tune with Slavic Rodnovery, but are not informed well enough to objectively define their religious affiliation [Маринковић-Обровски 2012].

Even this, rather small, number of Slavic Rodnovers seems to be enough for emergence of certain trends that exist in other Slavic countries with far larger Slavic

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<sup>5</sup> Until conclusion of this paper interviews were made only with members of groups and organizations in Belgrade and in Novi Sad. Assessments based on interviews with members of groups in other places in Serbia, e. g. Gornji Milanovac, will be added in future papers.

<sup>6</sup> So far, although contacted on numerous occasions, Office for Statistics of Republic of Serbia has been reluctant to publish precise figures. (Pending request #3483)

Rodnovery population. There are several reasons and influences that enabled Pseudorodnovery to emerge in Serbia.

Reasons that lead to the emergence of Pseudorodnovery are general pseudoscientific (especially pseudo-historic and fringe theories) manifestations, manipulations of the public, selfish interests of small number of swindlers and cranks, that lack any interest not only in folklore and customs of Slavic people in general, but also in folklore of Serbs, unless it can be used to further promote their pseudoscientific agenda.

Serbia has been without national strategy for a full century. Its budget spending for culture and science is among the lowest in the region (0.36% of GDP), lowest among all Slavic countries and eight times less than European average [UNESCO 2010]. This has direct effect on quality and quantity of scientific publications including those on Slavic Rodnovery and Serbian culture and folklore in general.

Atomization of family, individualization and advance of Western pop-culture and its values in every pore of social and cultural life are reasons that majority of population learns about culture of its people through short, dry, sterile and often misplaced elementary and high school curriculum, instead through community consisting of family, relatives, neighbors and friends. Turbulent events of XX and XXI century in which West regularly confronted Serbs caused a lot of frustration. Other source of frustration is lack of proper academic study and synthesis based on existing data and research that would yield new data. Except for few individuals, majority of academia further perpetuates artificial myth of lack of sources on Slavic ethnic religion. From these frustrations rose the need for reinventing past and reinventing Slavic religion; need which became fertile ground for all sorts of weird theories. Said situation leaves general population vulnerable to unscrupulous authors of pseudoscientific and fakeloric works who put their short term personal (mostly financial, but also political and ideological) gain over needs of the community and Slavic culture.

Influences that contribute existence of Pseudorodnovery can be divided into foreign and domestic influences. Of foreign influences none is more significant than influence from Russian Federation. All other influences combined can't measure with influx of literature and ideas from Russia. Although, in the last two years, Ukrainian influence is gaining momentum due to organized and focused efforts of Slavic Rodnovers from Ukraine. Traditionally exceptional relations between Russians and Serbs for centuries enabled easy transfer of technology, culture and ideas among these two peoples. Unfortunately, not only great achievements, but also pseudoscientific works are quickly and efficiently swapped between the two peoples, as well. Works of authors such as Asov, Hinevich and Istarhov are translated into Serbian. Lack of context and information about the authors, among average readers in Serbia, contribute to the fact that these authors are indiscriminately read. The effect is that many that claim to be Slavic Rodnovers have fundamentally wrong image of Slavic Rodnovery, their view being distorted by forgery, pseudoscience, fakelore, extreme political ideology, racism and pure fiction which are abundant in the works of said authors. Same goes for researchers that use those works as a literature on Slavic Rodnovery.

Another important influence is coming from the West. It consists of Western generic New Age religions and Western esotericism and philosophy. It's worth noticing that Hinevich spent time in USA, that Sylenko's RUNVira (probably largest Pseudorodnovery group) was created in USA and that Jovan I. Deretić<sup>7</sup> for years lived in Chicago, Illinois, USA. Western philosophers and political ideologists close to extreme political ideas are often read and cited in Pseudorodnovery circles. Although every person has a right to choose its own religion and political viewpoint, it should be pointed out that influences listed above have nothing whatsoever to do with Slavic culture and Slavic Rodnovery.

Domestic influences include, but are not limited to, various pseudoscientific works of dubious authors. Pseudorodnovery literature is a mixture of New Age philosophy, excerpts from oriental religions, extreme political ideologies, fakelore and author's fiction. Paranormal phenomena and ufology are more often than not included in these texts. Approach that can be described as antiscientific<sup>8</sup> is one of the common features of these works. Many views are taken from Christian fundamentalist creationist's<sup>9</sup> literature. From creationists are also borrowed some methods: quote mining, misstatements, misleading oversimplifications, failure to address the counter evidence, “bait and switch” technique, falsely applied or misleading analogies, false claims, etc. In a way Pseudorodnovery is an odd mixture of Western methods and ideologies and Eastern contents.

Pseudorodnovery ideas mainly propagate through Internet forums, blogs, web portals and Facebook groups, sometimes through printed editions and compilations of works of various authors. Aforementioned authors of pseudoscientific and fakeloric books and a few of Internet forums and web portals that propagate their works, or works of similar “quality”, are easily identified, which makes addressing the problems they cause relatively uncomplicated. In case of those it is (relatively) easy to make proper assessment of the “quality” of their work. Apart from insignificant number of uneducated laymen (e. g. no one sufficiently intelligent or educated ever endorsed Deretić); their influence on Slavic Rodnovery can be properly removed. But, not everything can be done so neatly with a black-and-white division. There is even larger number of Internet communities that (hopefully) inadvertently use pseudoscientific, fakeloric and fringe theories holding them to be genuine parts of Slavic culture. Some groups and associations of Slavic Rodnovers are more or less influenced by Christopagans<sup>10</sup> and Christopagan syncretism with a Slavic twist, generic New Age views,

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<sup>7</sup> Jovan I. Deretić is an infamous pseudo-historian and conspiracy theorist from Serbia. He considers himself adherent of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, a member of Serbian Orthodox Church.

<sup>8</sup> Antiscience movement is composed of various (mainly religious) fundamentalists and pseudoscientists that question verified scientific theories and achievements. Most prominent are antievolutionism stemming from Christian (and in less extant Islamic) creationism and antirelativism. Far end of the spectra includes claims like one of flat Earth, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Creationism connected to Christian fundamentalism has its powerbase in USA, where it yields considerable political influence [Kopplin 2013]. It represents a belief that everything was created according to Genesis, a book in the Holy Bible. Creationism often involves pseudoscience and anti-science.

<sup>10</sup> Christopaganism is a modern effort to blend (mostly European) ethnic religions or New Age religions (such as Wicca) with some of many branches of Christianity. It should be noted that term paganism is not properly defined, i.e. there is no consensus on what the term actually means, [Petrović M. 2013] and Christianity, as a term, is almost as vague, so Christopaganism can mean almost anything, depending on the author which uses the term.

ideas of Western philosophy and certain extreme political ideologies foreign to Slavic culture.

Glaring example of such practices are so-called Perun's commandments – set of commandments closely resembling Judeo-Christian Ten commandments and certain passages from Qur'an. Main proponents of those works and other fakeloric texts, in Serbia, are Christopagans and pseudo-scientists that work together with Pseudorodnovers, almost as in coordinated effort.

There are plenty of diligent Slavic Rodnovers in these groups – people dedicating a lot of time and energy to proper study of Slavic folklore and Slavic ethnic religion. It's a great waste that their work is being associated with pseudoscience, thus being degraded and discredited, while the only thing they get is their personal satisfaction of understanding better and getting closer to the Slavic tradition and folklore.

Artists have an undeniable influence on spreading of Slavic Rodnovery [Obšust 2013: 295]. Most prominent way of artistic promotion of Slavic Rodnovery is through music, painting and (to a lesser extent) sculpting and literature. Music bands, solo singers and various painters enjoy great respect among Slavic Rodnovers. Some of these artists occasionally indulge in writing articles or even books on Slavic Rodnovery in which they explain their personal view of Slavic Rodnovery and their personal philosophy. Unfortunately, because of lack of clear critical thinking, significant portion of those that declare themselves as Slavic Rodnovers take these personal accounts as universal truths and verified facts.

Pseudorodnovery is another tool of eradication of Slavic culture and its supplementation by fakelore, works of fiction, thus breaking the continuity of tradition that connects Slavs with their ancestors and their ethnic identity. Among most ridiculous manifestations of Pseudorodnovery, but also most damaging for the credibility of Slavic Rodnovery and for the successful preservation of Slavic Rodnovery as a continuation of Slavic ethnic religion, are the invention of new deities like god Serbon and goddess Serbona [Депетић 1975; Депетић 2000], or adding to Slavic pantheon deities from Egyptian, Hindu, Christian and other religions [Петровић М. 2012].

Cultural matrix of Abrahamic religions, i.e. Christian religion, for centuries influenced the way people think. Thinking patterns of Christianity are still present in many pseudoscientific publications and the way that part of Slavic Rodnovers approach Serbian folklore and Slavic Rodnovery in general. Basically it's Abrahamic religion with Slavic flavor in which Bible is replaced with controversial Book of Veles;<sup>11</sup> rituals borrow heavily from Christianity and New Age religions and ideas from extreme political ideologies are present. There is also a drift towards turning Slavic Rodnovery into monotheistic religion with one, supreme, Father God. Numerous other Christian-like tendencies exist; those include, but are not limited to, claims that Serbs were Christians before Christ, use of calendar of Christian Eastern Roman Empire, reinventing Slavic myths to correspond to Christian theology. In a sense it's a reversed engineering – turning syncretic folk faith that has Slavic Rodnovery and Christianity intertwined into a new religion. However, while

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<sup>11</sup> Issue of Book of Veles is very controversial and requires a separate study. Divisions in scientific community and Slavic Rodnovery community on the authenticity of the text are something not to be taken lightly.

syncretism of folk faith stems from Dual Faith period,<sup>12</sup> this Pseudorodnovery syncretism is based on Christian worldview.

Appeal of Pseudorodnovery lies in the fact that it offers instant “knowledge” (however inaccurate or fake it might be) to those that don’t want to get too involved in learning, but find fashionable to declare themselves as Slavic Rodnovers; it offers cultural background for those that wish to promote extreme political ideologies or their own world views and it offers unregulated soapbox from which pseudoscientists and certain political ideologists can say whatever they want and present it as part of Slavic Rodnovery or Slavic culture and tradition in general, thus giving them air of self-importance and credibility that they would never obtain elsewhere.

As it often happens those that break the illusions that people cherished and confront fiction with facts not very popular. There are groups whose members view Slavic Rodnovery as just another excuse to have a barbecue and drink in a city park and regard research of folklore as purely academic pursuit that has no practical meaning. Significant part of those that declare themselves as Slavic Rodnovers in Serbia refuse to accept facts on which consensus of academic community exists and rather indulge themselves in fantasies created by inventions of pseudoscientists. Confronted with evidence that show just how far from reality are the things they promote, Pseudorodnovers react similar as creationist – they deliberately ignore the facts, use fowl language and threats and resort to paranoid theories.

First and foremost: thorough and systematic research of folklore, then more research, and then even more research is needed – as the saying goes: “*No pain, no gain.*”<sup>13</sup> It’s not enough to simply read through various books and articles in peer-reviewed journals, or collections of fairy tales and other folklore. One has to understand that behind folklore is (among other things) complex, sophisticated and intricate system of education and spreading information. It’s not enough to simply “go through the moves” of folk customs, one needs to be clear on what one is doing and why – understanding symbolism behind the ritual and its parts is very important. As shown in number of studies, Slavic folklore is an elaborate system, which addresses number of individual and community issues [Петровић С. 2004]. It has layers of Slavic ethnic religions and myths of Proto-Indo-European religion [Јома 2002; Бајух 2008], way to keep track of time (i.e. calendar) [Јаџановић 2000], etc.

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<sup>12</sup> Dual Faith (in Serbian *двоверје*, in Russian *двоверие*) is parallel existence of two religions (most often an Abrahamic religion and an ethnic religion, but there are other examples, such as in medieval Spain with Islam and Roman Catholicism and in late medieval Serbia with Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Islam). Dual Faith period had different lengths in different regions of Slavic world and was, to some extent, replaced with syncretism. Hayes sees Dual Faith as one of four models for an encounter between an Abrahamic religion and an ethnic religion, defining it as “*two incompatible beliefs or worldviews are held side by side, with little or no interaction between them*” and syncretism as “*two different beliefs are mingled, to make a third, and new belief, which is different from either component*” [Hayes 2003]. Dual Faith practices are on the rise with growing presence of ethnic religions and emergence of new religions [Aburrow 2013]. Christopaganism is just one example of such practices.

<sup>13</sup> Original saying in Serbian is: „Без муке нема науке.” which literally means: *Without pain there is no knowledge.*



Certain Slavic Rodnovery communities (e. g. Serbian Rodnovery District “Kolo”, Belgrade and Serbian Rodnovery District “Grove of Veles”, Novi Sad<sup>14</sup>) and organizations that promote Serbian and Slavic culture and Slavic Rodnovery in particular (e. g. Information center “Svevlad”) consider Pseudorodnovery to pose a problem for understanding of Slavic Rodnovery and to have negative influence on preservation of Slavic culture and maintaining ethnic identity.<sup>15</sup> In smaller part, their activities include denouncing works of Pseudorodnovery authors [*Petrović M.* 2012] or persons that introduce Pseudorodnovery elements [Родноверју туђи обреди 2012], but for the larger part they are oriented in setting positive example, by strictly adhering to Serbian (and Slavic, in general) folklore and scientifically acceptable data on Slavic ethnic religion and cooperation with experts in fields of ethnology, culturology, archaeology, comparative religion, history, etc. This cooperation results (among other things) in publishing scientific papers which than can be accessed free of charge, thus raising visibility of scientific achievements in said fields for general public and raising its cultural awareness.<sup>16</sup> There is also cooperation with people who keep the customs and tradition alive (those that explore folklore and perform it) and various artists.

Other groups in Serbia that are interested in or oriented towards Slavic Rodnovery in their activities include more or less Pseudorodnovery elements, e. g. Association of Rodnovers of Serbia “Staroslavci”<sup>17</sup>, which still hasn’t crystallized its views on number of issues and sometimes include certain Pseudorodnovery elements in their activities<sup>18</sup>. Some groups are openly promoting Pseudorodnovery ideas borrowed from works of Western esoteric literature (e. g. now inactive group “Slavic circle” [*Obšust* 2013: 285], organized around publisher of esoteric literature “Esoteria”, Belgrade, that gathered people connected to Ordo Templi Orientis<sup>19</sup> and those interested in Western esotericism applied to Slavic cultural heritage).

Although the sample is very small and not nearly adequate to make definitive claim, one might argue that more knowledge on folklore person has and/or more exposed to folk

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<sup>14</sup> In Serbian српска родноверна жупа „Коло” and српска родноверна жупа „Луг Велеса”. Although they have very similar names, these are two separate, independent groups.

<sup>15</sup> This and further assessments are based on interviews with members of Serbian Rodnovery District “Kolo”, Belgrade and Serbian Rodnovery District “Kolo Velesa”, Novi Sad and foreign and domestic associates of Information center “Svevlad”, conducted between February and November, 2013. Also, contents of Internet resource svevlad.org.rs are freely available.

<sup>16</sup> Main avenue of approach to the problem is an effort to raise cultural awareness of people. “Svevlad” cooperates with institutions and experts in the fields of archaeology [*Трифунковић* 1996; *Јанковић* 1998; *Vačkalov* 2008], ethnology [*Чаусидис* 2010; *Закић* 2008], anthropology [*Petrović T.* 2004; *Mačuda* 2009], culturology [*Шиженский* 2013; *Петровић С.* 1999], etc. (both from Serbia and abroad) thus making their works easily accessible to general public, free of charge. There is also some amount of research conducted by associates of “Svevlad” [*Маринковић-Обровски* 2011; *Слепчевић* 2011].

<sup>17</sup> In Serbian Удружење родноверних Србије „Старославци”. Its members have various religious affiliations ranging from Slavic Rodnovery, over Eastern Orthodox Christianity, to atheism and New Age religions [*Obšust* 2013: 293].

<sup>18</sup> Assessment is based on interviews with two members of the association, Internet activity of the association, freely available footage from gatherings of its members and sympathizers and Pseudorodnovery publications association publishes and/or promotes.

<sup>19</sup> Ordo Templi Orientis is an international religious organization whose most prominent member was occultist Aleister Crowley. While organization with its initiation degrees and lodges is resembling Free Masonry, its teachings are mainly work of Crowley.



customs and beliefs person is, it's less likely that said person will resort to use of Pseudorodnovery elements in its activities. Also, it seems that usage of Pseudorodnovery elements or even promotion of Pseudorodnovery is more likely in those groups that have adherents of different faiths working together in comparison to those communities that are composed only of Slavic Rodnovers. It should be noted that this might not be the case in other Slavic countries or countries with significant Slavic population. Definitive claim that can be made is that ignorance on Slavic culture, folklore and beliefs is the crucial precondition for emergence and spreading of Pseudorodnovery.

In order to better understand phenomena of Pseudorodnovery further study is needed. Comparison of the situation of Slavic Rodnovery in other Slavic countries should reveal what are the common factors that contribute to emergence of Pseudorodnovery and what are specificities of certain Slavic countries. At least some sort of quantification is required to examine what are the effects (and if there are any at all) of actions made in order to curb Pseudorodnovery and related pseudoscientific and antiscientific sentiment.

Lack of proper quantification of the phenomena, very small sample and widely differing interpretations of the phenomena in scientific literature and in the general public significantly limits the scope of this paper.

Due to insignificant numbers of Slavic Rodnovers and Pseudorodnovers one would expect that social influence of Pseudorodnovery is negligible, however since Pseudorodnovery has allied itself with pseudoscientific and antiscientific sentiments its destructive role in society (regarding acceptance of science and preservation of Slavic cultural heritage) should be investigated further.

Introduced description and examples of Pseudorodnovery, together with initial assessment of potential causes that lead to emergence of Pseudorodnovery and influences that enable it spread, should be helpful for future research on Slavic Rodnovery and Pseudorodnovery, both. Clear distinction between the two can be made, if both are properly defined and understood, and has to me made [*Obšust* 2013: 266].

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