

Nationalism Entails Discrimination

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Writing a text on nationalism in Serbia represents a great challenge for us, considering the fact that our growing up has taken place at a time when one collective identity is being ‘torn down’ and a new one is being created, constructed. Yugoslavianhood remains to exist merely as a nice memory of childhood when the language (an imposed one, for Macedonians, Slovenians and Albanians) that was spoken had dialects that were later to be named separate and different languages. In the period of living in a shared state, it seems that the differences were accepted as the wealth of the people. Tito spoke of ‘socialism casting away minority and majority, it seeks equality between minority and majority, and then there is neither minority nor majority, there is one people...’¹ Later on, this period was perceived as a conspiratorial attempt to destroy nations and national interests. For ‘Serbs’, Tito was ‘an ustasha² traitor’, and for ‘Croats’, he ‘sold Croatia to chetniks’³.

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1 www.titoville.com

2 ‘Ustaša’ is the name for a members of the Croatian pro-fascist movement developed from the organisation ‘Ustaša – Croatian Revolutionary Organisation’ under the leadership of Ante Pavelić. The title also refers to people in power in the Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, NDH) and members of military wing of the movement, ‘Ustaške vojnice’. They implemented politics of ethnic cleansing in the region of NDH. Among many ustasha crimes, the existence of concentration camp of Jasenovac is prominent, in which the Serbs, Jews, Roma, anti-fascist Croats, Bosniaks, etc. were tortured and killed. In spite of the fact that a certain number of Croats supports ustasha ideology to this very day and consider being ustasha a part of their identity, the term ‘ustasha’ is nowadays primarily used as a derogatory term for all members of Croatian people. (editor’s note)

3 ‘Četnici’ – the title for members of great-Serbian, nationalist and monarchist movement. The official title of Četnici during the World War Two was Yugoslav Army in Homeland and they were lead by Dragoslav Draža Mihajlović. They are responsible for numerous crimes perpetrated during the World War Two against Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs who were not supporters of this movement. Nowadays, the term is used as an offensive name for all members of the Serbian people, in spite of the fact that a certain number of people still proudly demonstrates their adherence to Chetnik ideology, and the fact that a law of 2004 makes chetniks and partisans equal (the Law on Rights of Participants of Wars, Military Invalids and Members of Their Families). (editor’s note)

Construction

“The ideological matrix of current Serbian nationalists rests on the archaic nationalism of the late 18th century, anachronistic anti-communism, as well as on, perhaps the most dangerous, awoken clerical fascism propagated by the Serbian Orthodox Church.”

Zoran Petakov

The period of adolescence of the generation we are a part of, ran parallel to the beginning of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. It was a time of taking sides on the bases of ‘us’ and ‘them’, and disappearance of brotherhood and unity. Insisting on self-explanatory new-old traditional social values, such as patriotism, orthodoxy, patriarchy and heterosexuality, but also repulsion felt for ‘others’ and different, i.e. everything that didn’t fit into these criteria, was gaining ever more momentum in Serbia. These processes were intertwined and ran almost unconsciously for most.

Construction of a new-old national identity proved to be an important part of creating a ‘Serbian’ system of values in the 1980s and 1990s, when nationalism became a dominant ideology imbued with the idea of a ‘Great Serbia’ that is still a dominant fantasy and the goal of radical nationalists. In Serbia, notions such as nationalism and national feelings are even nowadays often identified with each other and not perceived as negative.

In theories of nationalism, a distinction is made between nationalism and national feelings. National feelings are based on the need to feel belonging to a certain people, culture, society, region. Like national feelings, national identity is in itself a construction – it is neither biological, genetically given or innate nor it can be introduced into a structure of a human being in any way other than ideologically.⁴ It is defined as a political ideology or a movement that considers nation, i.e. ethnic community, to be a foundation of a human society and thus advocates creating states on a national principle exclusively. In the 19th century it imposed itself as a dominant ideology in the world and often played an important role in significant events in accordance with other ideologies, such

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4 Dušan Kecmanović, *Psihopolitika mržnje (Psycho-politics of Hatred)*, Prosveta, Beograd, 1999.

as the outbreak of World War One and World War Two, i.e. a series of ethnic conflicts of which many last until the present day. In the 19th and 20th centuries it also served as a foundation for racism and fascism, and in the late 20th century it began to be expressed as religious fundamentalism and imperialism.

These definitions are, as in the case of nationalism, formed in relations to 'others', which makes them susceptible to a logic of 'differentiation and belligerence' which in nationalism perceives 'other' as hostile and/or of lesser value.

Thence the extreme level of intolerance in Serbia, the brunt of whose force was most often felt – and still feel 'others' – women, the Roma, national minorities, persons whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual and everyone who in one way or another does not conform to the desirable social norm.

The beginning of the wars and the afore mentioned processes prompted the initial feminist reactions and women's anti-war initiatives in which women from the gay/lesbian movement, which was being formed at the time in Serbia, took part. These initiatives were mostly realised in the form of antiwar protests that at the time put their participants at great risk (bearing in mind that the war was a taboo), but also peace gatherings outside the borders of the former SFRY, where women from the former Yugoslav republics gathered together expressing solidarity and refusing to conform to social dictates that were striving to make enemies out of them.

Economic instability and insecurity provided a fertile soil for manipulation of national feelings and its own instrumentalisation with the goal of gaining power and maintaining positions of power.

Control of thinking and 'manufactured consent' were, among other things, established through the control of the media and an absence of 'real' and diverse information. The fact remains that at school we were not taught to think in a critical way and ask questions, and it is logical that at wartime patriotism is encouraged along with love for fatherland and an appeal to defend it. A large part of the society automatically accepted a system of values promoted by the structures in power, not knowing of alternatives and different opinions and ideas that didn't get any space in media. Those who didn't conform were at risk.

In creating the Serbian national identity that exists today, a key role was played by the myths linked to historical events, such as The Battle of Kosovo⁵. Key elements of ideology apparatus of the Serbian state/Republic in the 1990s were constituted by the trinity of: the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts (SANU) – the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) – the Writers' Association, as well as numerous politicians, media, schools, sports fans, intellectuals and public people who promoted the idea of 'Great Serbia'. These same institutions support the current government in a very similar ideology nowadays, due to which they are a subject of criticism of all anti-nationalist organisations, groups and associations. However, such criticisms, reactions and protests rarely gain the desired media space, and nor the answers to their questions. A part of them nevertheless reaches a certain number of people through several alternative Internet websites in existence in Serbia, where everyone has the right to post news (providing they don't instigate hatred and discrimination). This aspect of information dissemination becomes an increasingly used mean of attaining space in media.

Stereotypes

“Nationalism cannot even be defined outside of the relationship with ‘others’ because it defines the community itself exclusively through opposing its own interests to someone else’s, and defines nation as an organic unity with inner traits and character, as opposed to the other, also organic unities with their respective traits and character.”

O. Milosavljević

National identity can be based on different foundations: a soil where we were born and/or where our ancestors were buried: ‘where Serbian graves are, Serbian land is’, then on culture, language, social values, blood relations, the idea of: all people in a country are a single organism and so forth. It is usually

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5 The Battle of Kosovo was fought on St Vitus' Day (June 15, now celebrated on 28) in 1389, between the coalition of Serb lords and the Ottoman Empire. The Battle of Kosovo is regarded until today as a milestone in the Serbian national identity and has been evoked several times during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Source: Wikipedia. (editor's note)

constructed in relation to some other and entails a series of enemy identities that imperil 'national interests'. Propaganda uses the old and creates new stereotypes about 'them' and 'us'. In creating these stereotypes, the greatest part had immediate political interests. During the 1990s, most of the new-old values and 'Serbian collective identification' were formed as a contrast to 'enemies' – 'two faced and bloodthirsty' Croats, 'stupid' Bosnians, 'filthy and uneducated' 'Shiptars'⁶, 'Gypsies', Romanians, Bulgarians. It can often be read that Serbian nationalism in the 1980s and 1990s was 'defensive', formed as a response to the 'offensive' and 'aggressive' nationalism of Croats, Bosnian Muslims, Albanians etc. According to the beliefs of 'Serbian nationalists', 'national interests' are jeopardised by: feminists, lesbians, gay men etc. All of them are 'an import from the West' or 'are originally from other, enemy nations, e.g. Croatia'. This could also be heard at the first Gay Pride in Belgrade in 2001, when certain groups called participants 'ustasha'. Carriers of enemy identities alter the language, alter traditional values and expand borders that are, as well as the state borders, established through pain and bloodshed. Tradition is cited as an argumentation that requires no further explanation: 'That's how it always was and therefore it is good'. It is believed that in Serbia had never existed Serbian women wishing emancipation and people that are attracted to others of the same sex, then violence against them is legitimised in order to make them return to the 'right path'. It is not natural for 'our nation' to be like that because it was not like that once upon a time (never). It is also believed that the true and only borders are the ones from the time when Serbia had the largest territories, at the time of Dušan's Empire in the Middle Ages.

For years now, in Serbia, nationalist pro-fascist organisations, but also numerous political parties, manipulate this social system of values and collect political points through populism, glorifying the mythic past and through further elaboration on conspiracy theories and for centuries long injustice directed against the 'Serbhood'. How strong position nationalism holds in

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6 'Shiptars' – offensive title for Kosovo Albanians, often used in the regions of the former Yugoslavia. (editor's note)

Serbian politics is confirmed by the fact that not one post-Milošević government has distanced itself from the nationalist politics. Constantly indulging the national oriented electorate, insisting on preserving ‘traditional’ Serbian (patriarchal) values and Cyrillic script, introducing catechism to schools and generally increasing involvement of the Church in politics (clericalisation), that during the government of ‘Christ-loving legalist’ Koštunica assumed all characteristics of clero-fascism – point towards a worrying increase of backward tendencies in Serbia. In this atmosphere, the patriotic ‘St.Sava-nationalist’ organisations such as Otačastveni pokret Obraz (Fatherland Movement Dignity) that don’t believe in ‘pluralism of interests among the Serbian people, but instead in its unity, in a unified system of values and in one shared destiny for all Serbs’ – win over ever more supporters. In such an atmosphere, it is quite logical that ‘defiant’ inditees of The Hague and fugitives are considered ‘Serbian heroes’ and fighters for ‘Serbian national interests’, threatened by ‘Judeo-Masonic anti-Christians’. Of course, there is a certain number of those who point out that ‘Serbian heroes’ keep the political/cultural progress of the entire country at a stall with their lack of readiness to take responsibility for their actions (crimes).

Serbian nationalists, who base their nationalism on patriarchy, fundamentalism and the exclusion of diversity, rightly believe that feminists and activists of LGBTTIQ⁷ movement wish to change that tradition. A system of values that entails heterosexuality as a norm, marriage as the only and basic community for realising needs, in which man is superior to woman and children, sexuality with the sole and exclusive purpose of procreation, is not in compliance with an existence that entails freedom and choice. What feminists, and particularly lesbians and gay men ‘threaten’ to bring about is a disruption of family as a procreative community from which the state draws economic and labour force. Nationalists believe and spread the story of a Jewish/Masonic/ gay conspiracy that in a premeditated way, and using various means, ‘strikes’ at

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7 LGBTTIQ – Acronym for ‘Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersexual and queer’ persons.

our nation in the sphere in which it is most vulnerable, the sphere of morality and privacy. As well as all 'other nations' marked as 'enemies', the grouping of 'feminists-lesbians-faggots' has a strategic plan to destroy 'Serb' nation. Among others: the former keep multiplying in order to surpass the number of 'Serbs' (similar theories can be found in university textbooks on Sociology of family, for example), and the latter stop procreating in order to help the ones on the outside from the inside. Whilst on one hand sanctioning abortion for reasons of the alleged white plague is promoted, there is not a sufficient number of kindergartens to accept all children applying for them this year. It seems that not many see a problem in the fact that huge means are invested in lighting-speed construction of ever greater numbers of Orthodox churches, while the investments and means for construction of schools and kindergartens are permanently lacking.

Street and public places

A certain number of groups and associations in Serbia through their policies and actions try to point out the mutual connection of all sources of discrimination and oppression where, along with nationalism, a significant role is played by patriarchy, militarism, clericalism, racism. A part of the action is related to anti-nationalism because it represents a right to not identify with any one national identity, but also the right to identify ourselves in any way we want to as long as we don't jeopardise the others. In the society we live in, it seems it is necessary to have an identity. From birth we encounter a network of identities of which some occupy a high and respectable place on a social ladder as opposed to the others. The greatest privileges are held by white, rich heterosexual men. Also, depending on the geographic location in which our ancestors were born, we too, usually, inherit the same nationality, which brings along privileges, compared to the members of ethnic minorities.

Of course, anti-nationalism from nationalist perspective is always perceived as anti-Serb. If anti-nationalism insists on promotion of diversity, it is perceived as a promotion of the corrupted West that threatens to destroy 'our' traditional patriarchal values.

Anti-nationalist political actions speak of the right to choice and (non)identity which does not seek to be defined in relation to the 'other' that is of lesser value in the hierarchy where 'ours' comes first.

A large number of anti-nationalist and antiwar actions took place in the streets. The street, as a place for the promotion of values we advocate, still proves to be a brilliant field for surveying the public opinion.

Here we would like to mention some of the actions and how the Serbian public reacted to them.

Every year, to mark the anniversary of the massacre in Srebrenica, Women in Black, with the support of anti-war activists, organise a peaceful protest in the Square of the Republic, in Belgrade. This 'standing' in silence and in mourning reminds the public of the crime that took place 'on our behalf'. Every year various incidents take place during the protest, varying from verbal insults to young nationalist throwing teargas at this peaceful gathering. They, as a mirror of the society, send a message that crime is not only recognised, but also perceived as necessary for freeing Serbian national identity from the restrictions of a Bosniak one, in this particular case. We are traitors who 'had not been killed enough'. Similar verbal assaults take place every time when the attention of the public is drawn to the fact that it hadn't dealt with nationalism and a clero-fascist system of values. Along with being qualified as 'traitors' and 'foreign mercenaries', the assaults include a range of insults and discrediting on the bases of sexuality and gender. We are 'whores', 'lesbians', 'fat', 'ugly', 'not fucked enough' and the 'shame of the Serbian nation'. What makes us the greatest enemies of the nation is the fact that we are rebelling women who instead of 'baking cakes', 'giving birth to sons', 'being obedient to their husband, fathers, god', come out to the sphere of public-political life and promote a different system of values.

Association Queer Belgrade organises cultural-political festivals, performances, actions, during which safe spaces are created for all 'others' and serve as an example of the strength of self organising and resistance to discrimination and exclusivity, where it works on changes and attaining rights and liberties. These actions include placing large banners with political

messages on overpasses across motorways in Belgrade, in order to be seen by a great number of people. These banners are most often removed as soon as a couple of hours later. Along with this, in cooperation with Stani Pani Collective, a series of actions for graffiti writing were organised, in which political messages were written, mostly against fascism, nationalism and current political trends. These graffiti, among them the latest ones that criticise the stunning release of a Serbian Orthodox Church priest accused by five underage boys of sexual abuse, are most often sprayed over after a few days, and then the ‘signatures’ of Serbia or firesteels⁸ remain in their place. This example demonstrates that, notwithstanding the horror of the greatest part of the public, some individuals would rather believe the institution of church than children, and perceive the attack on the church as an attack on the nation. This case also reveals how untouchable this institution is, whose priests, often under suspicious circumstances and through procrastination in court processes, are released of charges and at the same time occupy an increasing number of positions in the institutions (schools, Broadcasting Agency, Negotiating Team for Kosovo...) where they (in a secular state) do not belong.

Next to antinationalist graffiti, or the name of the group who wrote them, words such as: ‘Shiptars’, ‘faggots’ and the like are often added, which undoubtedly has the goal of discrediting them on the bases of the logic of perceiving ‘others’ and those who are different as enemies and of lesser value. Towns in Serbia are inundated with graffiti reflecting this system of values: ‘Šešelji, a defiant Serbian hero’, ‘Serbia belongs to Serbs’, ‘War is better than independent Kosovo’, ‘Every Serb is Radovan’⁹, symbols of swastika and firesteel.

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- 8 Many believe that the phrase ‘Samo sloga Srbina spašava’ (Only unity can save a Serb) is found on the Serbian cross and national coat of arms in the shape of four firesteels that are reminiscent of four Cyrillic letters S, which is not in accordance with the truth. The four shapes similar to Cyrillic letters S are inherited from Byzantine heraldry and most likely represent the four letters V (Greek letter vita) from the phrase: VASILEVS VASILEVN VASILEUVN VASILEUOUSI (Emperor of emperors reigns over emperors).
- 9 Radovan Karadžić is a former leader of Serbs from Bosnia and Herzegovina, politician, psychiatrist and fugitive indicted for war crimes and genocide by the ICTY in The Hague. Karadžić is still considered a war hero by many nationalistic orientated Serbs. (editor’s note)

Joint actions of various peace, LGBTTIQ and feminist groups, that once a year or more often if required paint over such graffiti, are very important because they show that there are some radically different opinions in Serbia.

However, it also happens that activists – radical in areas such as labour rights, direct actions and the like, succumb to the patterns of nationalist and patriarchal elitism and machismo. Such politics are manifested in glorifying their own success, work and actions and denying, belittling, degrading and aggressively attacking every initiative coming from elsewhere. Most such groups have never publicly distanced themselves from nationalism. Cooperation with them, which is important because of a very small number of activists and huge social problems, is made very difficult due to aggressive communication, where one of the most successful ways of situation changing is – insisting on principles of nonviolent communication.

Such groups, that often call themselves anarchist, concentrate their actions on ‘starting a revolution’ whereby they, more often than not, exclude the possibility of supporting antinationalist manifestations and actions, always finding ways to discredit organisers and deny their participation. Their ‘revolution’ mostly addresses labour rights, but neglects the fact that it is among this very working class, and quite often among them themselves, where nationalism, misogyny and homophobia are the most widespread.

Necessity

Considering the role it played in outbreaks of some of the bloodiest events in history, nationalism is linked to ethnic intolerance, ethnic cleansing, chauvinism and militarism. On the other hand, for ideological reasons, it is given a positive tone when it is manifested in the form of liberation movements against large imperialist powers or when it encourages the progress of culture and technology through peaceful competition of national states.¹⁰

Due to everything listed above, we believe it is necessary that all political forces engaged in social changes that include human rights and liberties, and

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10 www.en.wikipedia.org

not only the most imperilled minority groups, should clearly and resolutely take a stand and struggle against nationalism. The listed actions, as well as a wide range of others, and starting a dialogue on the socially devastating consequences of nationalism have to take place on both the personal and political levels. Only through a tenacious and committed political struggle can the level of nationalism be decreased, so that in the near future it can become a negligible part of political culture of the country. Only then will the position of marginalised social groups begin to reach equality. The struggle continues...