

The Messages from Internal Emigration: the Correspondence of *Sezam* Bulletin Board System in
1990s in Yugoslavia

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Abstract

In this thesis, I am analyzing the correspondence between young people in Yugoslavia on Bulletin Board System (BBS) Sezam, founded in 1989 in Belgrade. The new communication technology enabled interesting correspondence in the outbreak of war in former Yugoslavia. What makes this communication very interesting as a source is its temporal congruence with the political crisis in the country. The beginning of intensive use of the BBS corresponds with the beginning of the media war, political polarization and exposure of the masses to the nationalistic discourse in Yugoslavia. In the former Yugoslavia, because of its specific circumstances, this medium served as an alternative discourse in society which fundamentally changed its value criteria at the time. As many discussions were dedicated to the turbulent occurrences, I consider this communication as a valuable source for examining the influence of nationalistic ideology in Serbian public sphere in the beginning of the 1990s and its critical perception in one virtual micro-social space.

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I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves.

Plato, Phaedrus

Introduction

Numerous scholars have recently tried to explain the reasons for the brutal conflicts that accompanied the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. The first attempts employed stereotypical explanations of the genuinely incompatible national characters in Yugoslavia, supported by claims that Tito and the Communists had kept nationalistic antagonisms under control by censorship and other methods of oppression. These arguments fortunately have been abandoned in recent scholarly literature.¹ The scholarly focus has shifted to the change of political structures and constitutional circumstances under which socialist ideology of brotherhood and unity gave way to the creation of ethno-national states in territories which had been ethnically heterogeneous. As Robert Hayden argues, ‘most works on former Yugoslavia have been structured by the assumption that the basic problem to be dealt with is that of guilt, of exactly who can be blamed for actions that are often described as ‘bestial’, ‘grotesque ‘or ‘inhuman’’.² The scholarly literature suffers from insufficient consideration of the process of transformation of the public sphere, which allowed, tacitly or explicitly, these inhuman, grotesque and bestial actions. In this process, the state controlled media propaganda in all parts of Yugoslavia was given a crucial role, without much elaboration on the precise connections and patterns between media propaganda and national identification.

¹ Works which frequently appear in the bibliography are those of Ramet, Sabrina P. *Balkan Babel: Politics, culture and religion in Yugoslavia*. Westview Press, 1992, Kaplan, Robert D. *Balkan ghosts: A journey through history*. Macmillan, 1993.

² Hayden, Robert M. *Blueprints for a house divided: the constitutional logic of the Yugoslav conflicts*. University of Michigan Press, 1999, p. 20

The process of disintegration could be traced from the early 1970's during the decentralization reforms, when territorial devolution of the monopoly of the League of Communists, accompanied by a deepening economic crisis, resulted in increasing autonomy of republics and opened the stage for the official republican nationalistic agendas.³

At the same time, the beginning of the 1980's in Yugoslavia was a period of citizens' habituation to the possibility of democratic choice and freedom of thought. Freedom of public discourse was gradually strengthened in the period of the late eighties. It was accompanied by several important social phenomena, which are the following: 1) the workers increasing tendency to discuss taboo subjects 2) group initiatives and movements, similar in many ways to the new social movements in the west 3) citizens' initiatives addressing a large number of petitions to high bodies of state and party and demanding the institutionalization of elements of a modern civil society in the Constitution, including the priority of human rights as opposed to the actual constitutional priority of the leading role of the communist party 4) establishment of committees whose purpose was to protest systematically against various forms of state and party repression 5) an enlarged sphere of autonomy for journalists, mainly a result of the rivalry between party oligarchies in the Yugoslav republics, 6) authors beginning to publish on politically explosive subjects 7) creation of sub and counter-cultures.⁴ Some scholars, like Darka Podmenik and Frane Adam, criticized this state of the public sphere as early as 1988, as it remained informal, legally unprotected and of no relevance for the enforcement of the political interests of society.

³ Sekelj, Laslo. *Yugoslavia: The process of disintegration*. Vol. 76. Columbia University Press, 1993.

⁴ Križan, Mojmir, On Civil Society and Socialism in Yugoslavia, *Studies in Soviet Thought*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (May 1989) p. 288

Therefore, the then newborn and weak freedom of public discourse could be abrogated at any time.⁵ Indeed, emerging civic identities and alternative initiatives lacked a political charge, due to their intellectual and cultural, rather than political self-identification. Unfortunately, these movements were not allowed to mature into real democratic expression. At the end of the 1980's the public sphere in Yugoslavia became chaotic, where patriotic, nationalistic, liberal, anti-communist, anti-bureaucrat concepts and rhetoric were mixed in one incomprehensible bewilderment. From the beginning of the 1990's, it seemed that all critical faculties of the people in Serbia was swept away.

The aim of the present paper is twofold. Firstly, this is a story of the withdrawal of civic consciousness in Yugoslavia into a semi-illegal realm. In the course of events in Yugoslavia, the immediate consequence was the disappearance of the middle social strata and in parallel, the disappearance of the urban, civic, alternative identity. Counter culture and counter knowledge, which was raised in the 1970's and 1980's and successfully resisted official monopoly in public discourse and culture, all of a sudden disappeared from the public sphere. This particular urban social stratum, with its mixture of western postmodern influence and authentic subversive response expressed in popular culture and everyday discourse, did not manage to survive. Many young people physically emigrated, and many of those who stayed in the country became, as Ivan Đurić asserted, internal emigrants.⁶ The petrified voice of those who belonged to this

⁵Darka Podmenik, Frane Adam, "Democratization of public Sphere in a Socialist State – The case of Yugoslavia.", paper presented at the course "Philosophy and Social Science", IUC, Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, March 28 – April 8, 1988.

⁶ Đurić, Ivan, and Perović, Latinka *Vlast, opozicija, alternativa*. Vol. 13. Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, , Beograd, 2009, p.76

stratum of Yugoslav society remains recorded in one specific and unexplored source, that is Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) discussions.⁷

The other aim of this paper is to contribute to the issue of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, by illuminating the process of ethnic mobilization of society. By analyzing one discourse, in addition with the insight in media content produced at the same time, I identify the mechanisms of influence and their effect. The studies of the nationalistic shift in public sphere and nationalization of the public consciousness respectively, have contented themselves with researching media content and political discourse, whereas the process of perception and procession of this content remained insufficiently researched. This is not the mere omitting, but rather the impossibility to precisely ascertain how citizens perceived all these changes. Those who wanted to include the perception in society in the former Yugoslav republics had to rely on doubtful memories of citizens after fifteen or more years after the happenings and their representations of what they thought and felt back then.⁸

In this sense, I would like to clarify my position on the Yugoslav experience, and moreover, the Serbian experience, namely – my personal preference to research Serbian public sphere which I am most familiar with does not indicate, by any means, that this is a mere analysis of a local phenomenon, nor do I argue that all conclusions stand exclusively for the Serbian public sphere. On the contrary, Yugoslavia and Serbia in this particular context are case studies, which have

⁷A bulletin board system (BBS) is a computer or an application dedicated to the sharing or exchange of messages or other files on a network. Originally an electronic version of the type of bulletin board found on the wall in many kitchens and work places, the BBS was used to post simple messages between users. The BBS became the primary kind of online community through the 1980s and early 1990s, before the World Wide Web arrived.

⁸ One of the recent attempts to illuminate the perception of Serbian citizens in the years of crisis was Zala Volcic's work where research basis is the number of interviews with the contemporaries about their personal experiences during the process of disintegration and war. See Volcic, Zala. "Serbian spaces of identity." New York: Hampton (2011).

been used to investigate important questions on the nationalism and ethnic antagonism in the public sphere in general.

I would argue that it is neither possible to speak about ethno-nationalist transformation as a uniform process, where all of a sudden all citizens of Yugoslavia became frenetic nationalists, nor was public opinion definitely and radically changed by mere absorbing of media content. If it is at all possible to speak of nationalization of the masses in general terms, I would rather argue that the process of nationalization was uneven and superficial, due to both the specificity of the public audience and the circumstances of the reconfiguration of the political elites. Both the spatial and temporal contexts contribute to the specificity of this topic as well. What makes this communication very interesting as a source is its temporal congruence with the political crisis in the country. The beginning of intensive use of the BBS corresponds with the beginning of the media war, political polarization and exposure of the masses to the nationalistic discourse in Yugoslavia. In the former Yugoslavia, because of its specific circumstances, this medium served as an alternative discourse in society which fundamentally changed its value criteria at the time.

The end of the eighties was the beginning of the digital revolution in the world. As Marie-Laure Ryan points out, this digital revolution “has let words on the loose, not just by liberating their semantic potential, as most avant-garde movements of the past hundred years have done, but in physical, quite literal sense as well. Information patterns travel incessantly inside and outside the

machine, from disk storage to active memory to output devices to other computer sites”.⁹ In the 1980’s, the huge number of BBS’es sprang up around the globe. It was asynchronous communication through computer networks, where users do not interact live, but compose and send messages which will be kept in semi-permanent storage of electronic mailboxes or bulletin boards. Bulletin Board Systems were in the first place created for the purpose of business correspondence, exchanging data and for social networking and entertainment. Due to its specific way of communication and its ability to foster a sense of community, BBS was valued from the very beginning.

By the 1990’s there were several BBSes, mainly established in the main city centers in Yugoslavia (Sezam in Belgrade, AdriaNet in Ljubljana, and MIPS and ZaMir in Zagreb). Sezam BBS was founded on November 11, 1989, as one of many one phone line/night only Bulletin Board Systems. Communities from various BBSes were able to communicate between each other as long as telephone lines in Yugoslavia functioned. With the start of open warfare in Croatia normal communications were disrupted.

In 1991, Sezam became one of the biggest BBSes in Europe according to all adequate criteria - the number of dial-in lines, the number of users, and the contents.¹⁰ Contrary to many BBS systems dedicated to file download, Sezam focused on conferences. During the media blockade imposed by Milosevic's regime, Sezam was one of very few free media in Serbia. The

⁹ Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Cyberspace textuality: computer technology and literary theory*. Indiana University Press, 1998., p. 1

¹⁰ “Sezam” <http://www.dejanristanovic.com/sezame.htm>, accessed May 2nd, 2014

community of Sezam users was not a numerous one. They were marginal in number, and moreover, they spontaneously and voluntarily retreated from society. Despite some other BBS communities mainly oriented towards anti-war and human rights activities and connecting anti-war activists throughout Yugoslavia, Sezam community demonstrated one particular characteristic, that is lack of any organizing initiative outside the virtual space. This retreat in the physical sense does not mean, however, that they were uninformed or disinterested in the situation around them. I find their communication important because it reflected condition of the society, at the same time as their withdrawal from this very society and their perceptions and reactions to the situation. Moreover, this communication was a relic of the social consciousness and ethical faculty which seemed to have disappeared.

From the overall observation of this correspondence, I decided to follow two main aspects which I found the most interesting and indicative. The first is the manner of discussions, namely, the developing discourse and the attitude of participants in accordance to public discourse in their environment. The second is the very process of their retreat from reality and the building of their own virtual space for gaining information, opinion and testing their social and personal, moral development.

By following these two tendencies of the BBS discussants, I will cut through several major issues discussed in it. Among numerous and proliferate discussions, grouped by forums according to topic, I choose to focus on the issues of history, ethnicity and war.

Theoretical considerations

The writing about discourse is a slippery slope. This fluid and elusive, yet overused concept do not stand alone but it is associated with other concepts as well as different theoretical traditions. Application of this concept in my work is twofold – as ideology as well as one specific discursive field, or counter-discourse. It was certainly an advantage to have extensive amount of literature in media theory, public sphere, propaganda and persuasion. However, relatively insignificant attention was given to the alternative discursive spheres in the numerous volumes dedicated to the problem of human communication.

In my attempt to analyze in parallel nationalistic ideology in Serbian public sphere in the beginning of the 1990s and its critical perception in one virtual micro social space, I used the terms discourse and counter or alternative discourse. It was impossible to pass over the work of Michel Foucault and his broad account of the relationship between discourse and knowledge. He treated the notion of discourse sometimes as the general domain of statements, and sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, making the very notion fluctuating, subjected to many interpretations.¹¹ His work provides the broad framework for identifying, positioning and juxtaposing both the main discourse in one society, and the counter discourse as individualized group of statements. Drawn to the idea to examine one relatively hidden and marginal discourse,

¹¹ Foucault, Michel. *The archaeology of knowledge*. Random House LLC, 2012, p. 80

I find support in the Foucault` principle of reversal as methodological requirement in analyzing discourse. This principle means shifting perspective in examining discourse, or, negative action of a cutting – up and the rarefaction of discourse. Instead of traditional search for source of discourse –author, the discipline, the will to truth – Foucault`s recommendation, which I found useful, is to consider every possible access to alternative discourse which lies underneath. ¹²

When public sphere in one society constructed itself according to the mainstream social current, it always has in itself on embryo of a counter discourse. These counter discourses often offer an alternative definition of appropriate citizen behavior that dispute dominant discourses that characterize them as ill mannered or ill-informed, failed citizens.¹³ Alternative discourses, however, expressed as they were through ephemeral enactments, seldom took the form of enduring records available directly to historical researches. The records of self-representations by subordinate peoples was mostly compiled by and filtered through bystanders. The research of discourse was mainly focused on dominant discourse, discounting the importance of alternative and oppositional discourses. Alternative and oppositional discourses through history rarely were able to reach the attention of the wider public or to influence main course in the society. Marginalized as they were, these discourses the most often remain unrecorded and on the margin of interest. They find the mode of expression in the new unknown medium which created users and their discourse equally as the users themselves created mode of communication. The

¹² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Discourse*, in *Untying the text. A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. by Robert Young (Boston, London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 51-78

¹³ Butsch, Richard. "The citizen audience." *Crowds, publics, and individuals*. New York (2008), p. 3

medium and the users of medium influenced each other; therefore, it is impossible to analyze communication without insight into specificity of medium itself.

As early as beginning of the 1980's theoreticians of mass media claimed with certainty that revolutionary turn in mainstream media is not very possible scenario. They mainly agree on the premise that traditional media of mass communication have more or less interpretative framework, within people and events are fitted. Simple, one-directional communication of traditional media with the audience makes them more or less closed toward possibility of interpretative varieties of thought and different attitudes toward actualities. Thus Jean Baudrillard argues that critical turn in established mass media is not possible, due to its technological configurations and managerial nomenclatures, which are already positioned in established system of relationship between government, ideology and profit.¹⁴ This thesis introduces the question of determination of the opinions and the ideas by the very mode of the communication and medium itself. To the certain extent, the medium indeed determines discourse, according to the McLuhan's famous paradigm - Medium is the message.¹⁵ What distinct users of computer as medium was specific, omnidirectional way of communication and the possibility to disclose and display knowledge, information and opinions to each other.

The mode of communication in BBS conferences offers alternative to the existing language of traditional media. The very nature of communication requires argumentative conversation in civilized manner, where decency in communication was required from all users. It is not possible to interrupt the interlocutor, or to express any aggressive distraction as it possible in verbal communications, and these characteristics gave the medium particularly democratic properties.

¹⁴ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation*. University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 40.

¹⁵ McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. MIT press, 1994

BBS is usually open for all opinions however they might be different or unusual. Offensive content is usually deleted by moderators of the conferences, and continuous harassment on the site eventually lead to permanent ban.

In the beginning of era of computer networking, there were strong conviction of enormous potential of a new information society and expanded human communication. George Lakoff expressed enthusiasm towards the possibility for a completely new form of communication: “Computer networks have never before played an important role in a matter of vital public importance. The time has come. The media have failed to question what should be questioned. It is up to us to do so. There are a lot of us connected by these networks, and together we have enormous influence.[...] We have a chance to participate in the greatest experiment ever conducted in vital, widespread, instantaneous democratic communication.”¹⁶

It these first enthusiastic years of using computer mediated communication, these media were seen as a real avant-garde. It seemed that this form of communication would bring a revolutionary new way of communication with revolutionary new communication techniques. Lev Manovich argued that the new media are not revolutionary in the sense of seeing and representing the world in the new ways, but rather with accessing and using in new ways previously accumulated media. In this respect new media is post-media or meta-media, as it uses

¹⁶ Lakoff, George. "Metaphor and War he Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf." (1991), accessed April 14th, 2014, doi:<http://nic.funet.fi>

old media as its primary material.¹⁷ The BBS community in Serbia was basically the space where the media content was ventilated and deconstructed by its members.

Political attentiveness and political interest of the users was a consequences of both their specific characteristics as a group (young, urban, educated) as well as sociopolitical climate in the country. Despite its democratic mode of communication, we could see from these discussions that they mainly perpetuate and reinforce existing disagreements among groups of discussants. The social acting in the circumstances of a new mode of communication was an aspect which requires special attention. In addition, peculiar circumstances in society when this communication was conducted emphasized even more the reconceptualization of reality. It is necessary to help us understand the ways in which social worlds involving new communication technologies are created and endowed with meaning by actors, as well as the subtle, long-term effects of such technologies.

In analyzing the peculiar relationship of the discussants and to what extent their engagement in discourse was real, and to what extent was a game, being aware that virtual community is still community, with its specific rules, and that its virtual character does not diminish the need of its members to position themselves in this community. Here is perfectly applicable Goffman's theory of keys and keying.¹⁸ The specific dynamic of communication on BBS was characterized by constant shifting from the level of intense personal involvement in communication and community to a level of a game with appointed roles. In a way, this is an expression of their ambivalent relationship toward social environment in general, that is space outside Sezam. They

¹⁷ Lev Manovich, *Avant garde as software*, in Manovič, Lev, Sretenović Dejan, Tomić Đorđe, and Tupanjac, Vladimir. *Metamediji: izbor tekstova*. Centar za savremenu umetnost, 2001, p. 28

¹⁸ Goffman, Erving. *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press, 1974, p.40

were at the same time interested but detached. It was a consequence of both social reality as well as of the specificity of the new communication.

As McLuhan points out, all media had physic and social consequences that shifted previous boundaries and patterns of communication culture. According to his theory that every media which encounters with a new one transmit its characteristics to the new one, in a continuous process of extension of man. Therefore, computer mediated communication extended previous characteristics of a print as a medium. One of the most significant gifts of typography was detachment and noninvolment – the power to act without reacting. In BBS communication, as well as all other computer supported communication, detachment and acting without reacting are emphasized even more. The peculiar relationship with reality of my group of discussants demonstrates precisely the theory of a power of the postmodern, electric age “to separate thought and feeling, to be able to act without reacting, that split literate man out of the tribal world of close family bonds in private and social life.”¹⁹

The story about Sezam BBS discussants in the period of political crisis in Yugoslavia is precisely the process about their more or less successful, separation of thought and feeling.

And finally, for the concept and perception of new collective identities, the ideas of the We and the Other, which I find crucial in defining division in the consciousness which go beyond ethic

¹⁹McLuhan, Marshall, Ibid, p. 173

division, immensely helpful was Zygmund Bauman`s comprehensive study of the postmodern perspective on ethics.²⁰

²⁰ Bauman, Zygmunt. *Postmodern ethics*. Vol. 195. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993

Historical revisionism and the break of the communism

“The only thing I remembered from the history classes was the boring professor’s story about her listening to the sounds of the Russian cannons from the distance, on October 19, 1944. What history teaching are we talking about here?”²¹

This is the reminiscence of the history lessons in the high school from one of the participants of the discussions at Bulletin Board System (BBS) named *Sezam*, created in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. History, however, became all of a sudden very popular at the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties in Serbia. The newspapers, radio and television programs were overloaded with historical topics. The whole process of Yugoslav state and society entering into a disastrous change of its structure began with a revisiting of its history.

In this chapter, I will focus on the concept of historical revisionism as an integral part of the process of discourse transformation from 1989 until 1992. I will try to provide an analysis of a process of creating new historical paradigms, in the circumstances of vacuum during and after the collapse of communism in Yugoslavia and the decline of its structure as a state. I will also try to bring to light how these concepts were perceived by one part of the citizens, according to their correspondence in *Sezam* BBS.

As it was previously asserted, majority of the *Sezam* BBS users were to the high extent distanced from the official public and media discourse from the very beginning. They were very well informed, yet very distrustful towards all of them, apart from several independent media like *B92* radio station or newspaper *Vreme*. It is interesting to analyze the growth of distrust, from the

²¹Dgavrilovic pseud, 24.01.1993, *Sezam* BBS, Forum Civilisation, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

very beginning of launching this communication system to next several years. Gradually, the distance became larger and larger, creating a real abyss between the real environment and its discourse.

The role of the intellectuals

The process of historical revisionism started with the academic discourse of a group of Serbian intellectuals who established a kind of “new orthodoxy” in national history of Serbs. This group included the most famous writers, professors and other distinguished persons from intellectual and cultural realm in Serbia. The role of Serbian intellectuals in the revival of Serbian nationalism and eventual disintegration of Yugoslavia has been a subject of several scholarly analyses, among which Audrey Budding, Nick Miller, Jasna Dragovic-Soso and Aleksandar Pavkovic contributed significantly to the debate on this subject. Their attempts to explain the seemingly unexpected dominance of one group of intellectuals in Serbian cultural and political scene in the 1980s reveals a thoroughly prepared agenda for the reconfiguration of political forces in Yugoslavia in the decades before the 1980s. A considerable oppositional intellectual body was formed thanks to the specificity of Yugoslav political system, namely national

communism, and its semi membranous censorship. Their activities as political underground²², started to raise to the surface of the political scene during the eighties.

In the 1980s there was no contested terrain in the Serbian academic and cultural realm, especially when it comes to humanities. With their reputation and authoritative, unquestioned attitude, they gradually became more and more present in the public sphere.

Serbian dissident intellectuals had important, yet until today insufficiently lighted role in these events. Since the end of 1960`s, dissident intellectuals did not suffer from serious repercussions in spite of their positions. Although some of them were attacked in the media and some of them were sacked from their jobs, none of them spent time in prison and only a few of them were brought to trial. As Pavković argues, in a way they were the ‘Establishment’ dissidents, sometimes even untouchable by the regime.²³ There were other groups of dissident intellectuals which emerged in the 1960s which formulated their agendas on a different basis, that is the Praxis group and the liberals within CPY. They never, however, became a strong alternative to patriotic dissident intellectual group, either because their discourse was too theoretical and they drew less on history, and more on political and social theory, or because they expressed certain reluctance to go beyond theoretical criticism and to establish themselves on the political ground. The patriotic group of dissidents in Serbia, emerged from the group from Simina 9 and later found its organizational base in the Association of Serbian writers and the Serbian Academy of

²²Question whether the dissident movement in Yugoslavia was really dissident has no consensus among historians and political theoreticians. On this issue, it is worth considering Mihajlo Mihajlov, *Ponovljene misli*, (Thoughts repeated) Sluzbeni Glasnik, Belgrade, 2008, p 47-53.

²³Pavković, Aleksandar. "Intellectual Dissidence and the Serb National Question." *Pavkovic et al.(eds)* (1995)., p. 123

Arts and Sciences, proved to be the most resistant and resilient.²⁴ Their status testified to their significant political skills and ability to balance between nationalistic rhetoric and the interest of the regime. The reason lies partly in their attractive discourse based on historical patriotic narrative, in mystification of their activities and partly in the unwillingness of the Serbian Communist Party leaders to be seen as anti-intellectual.²⁵

Both Miller and Dragović Soso argue that the nucleus of the latter nationalistic turn in the Serbian political and public sphere could be found precisely in the continuous acting of the Yugoslav dissidents of Serbian provenance.²⁶ The credence they enjoyed was precisely due to their reputation as critics of the Yugoslav communist regime and its rigid bureaucracy, hypocrisy and violation of human rights and free speech. Dragović Soso tried to essentialize the program of Serbian intellectuals in the very title of her book – *The saviors of the nation*.²⁷ Although it is a very precise description of intellectual`s agenda, it is worth mentioning that they, in the first place, acclaimed themselves as saviors, or rescuers from the communism. That was the deceitful illusion offered to the public by Serbian intellectual elite, as a prelude to the outburst of the open nationalism.

A number of distinguished dissident intellectuals became omnipresent in the media from the middle of the eighties, emphasizing the necessity for revising certain periods in history. Their

²⁴ Miller, Nick. *The Nonconformists: culture, politics, and nationalism in a Serbian intellectual circle, 1944-1991*, Central European University Press, 2007; Pavković, Ibid, p. 123

²⁵ Pavković, Ibid, p.123

²⁶ Miller, Ibid; Dragović-Soso, Jasna. *Saviours of the nation: Serbia's intellectual opposition and the revival of nationalism*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2002.

²⁷ Dragović Soso, Ibid

elaborations on Serbian history were generally perceived with great respect, and their authoritative appearance and status acknowledged their discourse as a new orthodoxy in historical science. The media set intellectuals themselves as arbiters of truth, and at the beginning they were perceived in that way. We can see from the very first discussions how young people identified dissidence and anti-communist attitude with democratic values and political integrity. Some of the discussants automatically expected opposing the dissident intellectuals to the regime which inherited former League of the Communists, and they were very surprised when they find out that majority of them was very supportive to the Milosevic regime.

This aura of dissent, rebellious intellectuals around former dissidents who were supposed to bring the light of truth and democratic change, started however to fade away soon. According to discussions, they lost their reputation of rebellious intellectuals as soon as they slide into the banal ideology of nationalism. Their more or less openly support to Slobodan Milosević's regime also contributed to their moral descent. It is clear from the following discussions that many of the discussants soon started to suspiciously and critically perceive slogans about Serbdom. One of the discussants on Sezam expressed his disappointment this way:

“I am really sorry for the fact that communist buirocrat Bogdan Bogdanović seems more capable to understand the times and happenings, while Brana Crnčević, with his careless nationalism,

annulled his honorable reputation he has built for the decades. [...] I am afraid of the future where Brana Crnčević will be considered as national hero, instead as primitive nationalist.”²⁸

Other one was astounded with the performance of the two former dissidents, poet Rajko Petrov Nogo and philosopher and academician Ljubomir Tadić during their interview on Belgrade independent NTV Studio B:

“I was horrified listening the former [Rajko Petrov Nogo – S.T] while he was spreading around his fascistic ideas in a poetical manner. The later [Ljubomir Tadić] made me sick long ago with his thesis about abstract pacifism....During the period of anti-war protest every now and then he was an invitee at Radio Television of Serbia, where he expressed his opinion about “just” struggle of those who defends their homes. Guess both of them just act according to the directions of their party.”²⁹

Even more anger and disappointment was expressed in the next post:

“...And now in Serbia an obscure group of Elders tries to light a fire in the brains of young people, to send them to death afterwards. Instead of working on the improving of education for these young people, they offer them Kalashnikovs. Rather than writing books, they create phantasmagoric political programs that reflect their immaturity, and ethical depravity. Would it be ever possible to expect anything else from these people? These people were politicians and remain politicians until today. In addition, they decided to become a writer, artists, and get in this shameful institution of Serbia, the so-called Academy. Is it supposed to expect something better

²⁸Balinda, pseud, 17/09/1992, Civilization, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

²⁹Bbaja pseud, 22/02/1993, Forum, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

from Ćosić or Isaković? (We indeed expect more from Bećković, and therefore his decline is even greater ...) [...] Just look at their resumes - Dobrica Ćosić - Agricultural School student, communist party commissar, a writer with the official function as a party censor. The other members of the Academy are not much better, i.e. Kosta Mihajlović, who is the most famous by introducing and defending the compulsory sale and farmers' co-operative working. And so on and on ... all of them communists, autodidacts, incompletely and poorly educated people.”³⁰

Historical images

In this very period of time, in all levels of the public sphere the feeling could be encountered of the atmosphere of change. The inkling of the incoming change could be felt in a whole society. It was not an irrational feeling, but rather the vague notion that the regime was emptied of its content and since the death of Josip Broz Tito the structure and the system was artificially sustained. The whole of Eastern Europe inevitably moved in the direction of change, and the change firstly and foremostly meant the emancipation of the communist regime. Many people in Yugoslavia, and especially younger population were impatient to follow other Eastern European countries in the process of liberation from communist regime. This eagerness for liberation from communist regime is significantly noticeable in discussions I analyzed. One participant expresses his discontent after the discussion about state flag and anthem in the Yugoslav Assembly, saying that “five pointed star remains in the flag of Yugoslavia- the last one in the whole Europe.”³¹ This quite concise, yet accurate expression of a feeling of saturation of the ideas and ideology,

³⁰ Lola pseud, August 8th, 1991, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

³¹ Squsovac pseud, September 9th, 1991, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

long ago emptied of their content, describes the atmosphere among younger urban population in general. The whole official rhetoric about every aspect of life and society was so devitalized and petrified that hardly anyone could be unaware of it.

Nobody, however, was prepared enough for the excitements which were followed. In his major work, *Simulacra and simulation*, Jean Baudrillard recognizes the role of a history as a new myth in a postmodern society. Analyzing the phenomenon of invading historical themes in contemporary cinema, he argues that “the historical stake chased from our lives by this sort of immense neutralization, which is dubbed peaceful coexistence on a global level, and pacified monotony on the quotidian level – this history exorcised by a slowly or brutally congealing society celebrates its resurrection in force on the screen, according to the same process that used to make lost myths live again. History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth.”³²

In the context of Yugoslav society, images of history had particular importance in the period before the disintegration. This importance of the historical images lies much less in the historical facts than in the manner in which it has subsequently been interpreted. Peaceful coexistence and pacified monotony proved to be just a thin and fragile surface which was easily broken with the new images of history. Although there were concrete issues which required urgent solving, such as unemployment and troubled economy, the major concern for political authorities in the period from 1984 was redressing historical injustices. Trading “pacified monotony” with dynamism of nationalistic turmoil was immediately embraced by a number of citizens, who participated the mass rallies, so-called “meetings of Truth” and strongly supported Milosević in his rise to power.

³² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p.43

At the November 1988 huge meeting was held in Belgrade and attended by more than one million people. Either as active participants or passive observers, citizen's first impulse was to protest against poor life and work conditions. Soon, however, these demands were neglected and replaced with the idea that Serbdom should be restored, preserved and protected.

Historical images offered through the public discourse were therefore twofold. The turn to Serbian romanticized past, related to the events from middle ages or early modern period was one level of the discourse. The other one was revealing the true facts about Yugoslav communist regime, which was indeed, to the certain extent, repressive and far from democratic. These two layers of discourse were interwoven, and I would argue that they needed each other in order to support the illusion. In order to protect something as abstract as identity of nation, it firstly should be presented as something precious and mystical. Here the representations of Serbian medieval and early modern past come to play, colored with symbols and myths. In order to protect the nation of others, it is necessary to represent it as a victim, and even more, as victim which was not recognized and respected enough. Here, however, process of collapsing communist regime established the ground for imputing nationalistic attributes to the subject.

Mystifications of Serbian national past begin with the myth of the battle of Kosovo. The celebration of 600 anniversary of the battle in 1989, contained all the attributes of contemporary nationalist ideology, namely eliminating the historical separation between past and present, by emphasizing elements of myth of the battle of Kosovo, national self-sacrificing, figure of a traitor

and heavenly kingdom. ³³The event which supposed to be romanticized reference to the Serbian medieval past, proved to be convenient occasion for political speeches:

“On the 600th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo, we have to announce that Kosovo is Serbian and that this fact depends on neither Albanian birth rate nor Serbian mortality. There is so much blood and so many sacred relics in Kosovo that Kosovo will remain Serbian land, even if not a single Serb remains there.”³⁴

As Ulrich Bielefeld argues, imagined nation as political concept has to be created in such way that it could be practically experienced. Fusion of nation and the state, as genuinely modern concept, has to have certain elements in order to be successfully performed. These elements are discovery of national roots, category of national pathos, and somewhat vague idea that substantial national topos could be presented only as an ultimate secret. ³⁵The constant referring to historical events that had mythical and sacred resonance, offered an experience of vivacity, spirituality and aroused the collective emotions to the public sphere, in accordance with Baudrillard’s premise of history as a tool of breaking pacified monotony in postmodern society.

Political mythology, particularly of the nationalistic and similar myths of the modern age, is not at all exclusively characteristic for Balkan, at times of crisis and war on the territory of former Yugoslavia. One could find similar messages in the political language of other European countries as well. However, particular employment of national myths in the context of criticizing insufficient political liberty of the then regime became increasingly exploited in Serbian media, both printed and electronic.

³³Florian Bieber (2002), Nationalist Mobilisation and stories of Serb suffering: The Kosovo Myth from 600th anniversary to present, *Rethinking history: The Journal of Theory and practice*, 6:1, p. 95-110.

³⁴Speech of Matija Bećković, cited in Bieber, *Ibid*, p.95

³⁵Ulrich Bielefeld, *Aliens – friends or enemies*, (from Serbian translation), Biblioteka XX vek, Beograd 1998, p. 257.

Once Serbian intellectuals, writers and poets sketched the mythologized image of Serbian national past, media took over the role in exploitation these images for political purposes, in compliance of necessities of a new political reality. Ivan Čolović, in his collection of essays about political symbolism of Serbia, described how he become aware of overusing the notion of spirituality in the political and media discourse. As he points out, “one does not need a long memory or great lucidity to observe that spiritual has come to mean ideological as a sign of the times and a vague but respectable symbol of authority.”³⁶ Finally, the rhetoric originated from the same matrix, since the institutional, bureaucratic apparatus did not change.

While romanticized references to the Serbian medieval past with high dose of mystification seemed nevertheless benign at the beginning, revising recent past from the beginning of WWII proved to be particularly controversial because it practically turned out into demonstration of alleged historical injustices. The main argument was that there were a lot forbidden of purposely neglected episodes from history of WWII in Yugoslavia, which were simply swept under the carpet, for the sake of “brotherhood and unity”.

The historians, with the strong support of journalists, started to pull out the unknown episodes from the WWII. As tensions in the country rose, the references to history became closer to the recent past and bloodier. Interesting example is magazine *Pogledi*. It started as a socialist-realistic magazine of the Kragujevac University students; at the end of the eighties, the editorial board turned it into a tool for the rehabilitation of the Serbian Chetniks as a second Serbian anti-fascist army. As anti-communist magazine, it became very popular among Serbian audience, and

³⁶Čolović, Ivan. The politics of symbol in Serbia: essays in political anthropology. C. HURST & CO. PUBLISHERS, 2002., p.125

many of the participants in Sezam referred to its articles. Soon, however, in the period of "national awakening" the magazine started to publish the essays of the "hard-line" rightist intellectuals, as well as dubious articles about allegedly hidden historical facts about Serbia victims of communist terror. For example, there were numerous articles about Serbian civilians, victims of the communist terror, which happened immediately after the World War Two. It was indicated, however, that commander of the unit which committed this crime was Bosnian Muslim.³⁷

The *Politika Daily*, newspaper of record, as well as *Vecernje Novosti* and *Politika Ekspres* published the numerous articles with the reminiscences on the crimes committed by Ustase³⁸ during the fascistic regime in the Independent State of Croatia. Milorad Pavić, distinguished Serbian writer, draws the connection between the happenings in Croatia in 1991 and those in 1941 in this way:

“The only difference now in 1991 is that neither the Serbs nor the Jews would not allowed to be taken into the slaughterhouse. [...] But the Serbs do not have international religious protection like Catholics in Croatia and Slovenia. Men without international religious protection now in Europe is like hunting animal.”³⁹

In *Politika* was published various interpretations of history by many other intellectuals. Dinko Davidov, art historian, explains the consequences of political conspiracy against Serbs

³⁷ “Crimes against Serbs in Foca”, *Pogledi*, no. 68, October 15th,. 1990, p.11

³⁸The Ustaše also known as "Ustashe", "Ustahas", and "Ustashi", were members of the Ustaša – Croatian Revolutionary Movement (Croatian: Ustaša – Hrvatskirevolucionarnipokret), a Croatian fascist and terrorist organization active, in its original form, between 1929 until 1945. Its members murdered hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, and Roma during World War II in Yugoslavia.

³⁹“Evropi bi stetonovizidkaoberlinski”, *Politika*, September 14th, 1991, p. 8

after the WWII, especially in Croatia, inclined to suppress the genocide crime from the historical memory. According to Davidov, this was the real reason why Serbian Orthodox churches in Croatia, damaged during WWII, were never renewed.⁴⁰

From the examples both from the newspapers and correspondence among discussants at Sezam, it is possible to identify what was offered to the public, but also how it was perceived in the one audience group presented in the sources from Sezam discussions. Inevitably, as mainly critically oriented, educated young people, they liked the idea of unrevealing dark episodes hidden from the official science. Moreover, they were fed up of historical and other textbooks full of a dry, ideologically colored history, offering a mixture of romanticized stories of partisan battles and socialist-Marxist demagoguery. Although they showed certain respect and confidence in the rhetoric of intellectuals, as they perceived them either as members of academic community or, in case of former dissidents, as warriors for truth and democracy, this confidence did not last long. The lining of the intellectuals with the new establishment and populist, banal rhetoric soon caused aversion among them.

Pretty much resilient to the national pathos and vague ideas of importance of nationalistic identification, the discussants showed significant distrust to the official rhetoric. Their illusions were broken at the very moment when they realized that nation does not mean stable and firm national state. Instead of it, what was offered to them was myth, nation as pathetic secret as

⁴⁰“Srpske krajine”, *Politika*, September 29th, 1991, p. 22

Bielefeld described it, namely fraud. They noticed shortly the fatal connection between national myth, public exaltation and power, and refused to take part in this enterprise.

Although the critical perception of the ideas offered was prevailing, there were a number of patriotic, or nationalistic inclined discussants who built the opposite side in the discussions. They had an immensely important role in discussions, as a counterbalance which keeps the dynamic of the communication. This group of discussants is also very important in identifying the mechanism of influence of the mainstream discourse in the public sphere, therefore more attention will be pay to them in the next chapter.

Who are We and who is the Enemy?

The main concept of the communication on Sezam, as it was in all asynchronous communication through computer networks, implied diversity of the opinions and democratic form of communication as its main principle. As a new form of discourse born out of computer technology, it encouraged brainstorming and throwing of ideas for the sake of testing the reactions of the audience. There were discussions on various topics, and discussants were often incongruous about different issues. Discussions on political situation were divided in several forums.⁴¹ These forums were created to be realms for polemical and democratic discourse, but they soon became fields where the most passionate debates were held.

The community in Sezam BBS provided the opportunity for people in Serbia to communicate with people from Croatia and Slovenia by the spring 1992, when telephone lines between former republics were definitely disrupted. Many of the participants appreciated this opportunity as a way of informal first hand informing about the situation in these republics. As one of discussants puts it:

“In every war, the first victim is the truth. I believe we all agree on this. I propose therefore that this forum, or one topic within the forum, use exclusively for the exchanging the facts by those who are situated on the spot. It is not necessary for one to agree with their opinion, but these people are our only chance to find out what is really going on. There are no benefit to drive them

⁴¹*Yugoslavia, Serbia, Where are we, Tradition and Civilization* are the names of the forums containing mainly discussions on political and social issues on Sezam

away from Sezam with insults and threats. In the following days, accurate information will be a real rarity. People at Sezam have the privilege to have these information. Lets use this opportunity!⁴²

Others, however, found a possibility as opportunity to take up arms. Participants in Sezam discussions were by no means the conformists, as one might expect, although they came from relatively similar intellectual and cultural milieu. In these political forums participants were sharply divided between those who were liberal, critically oriented and open minded, and to those who were nationalistic oriented and conservative. The latter, although underrepresented, challenges the thesis that urban environment and education necessarily forms ‘civic’ identities – but, this is another topic.

Thus, analytic framework of these communications and discourses must be able to capture both the critically oriented majority of the discussants and those who pretended to be advocates for Serbian national interests. The crucial differentiation between them was in their different attitude towards information. Whereas the majority of people were able to detach themselves from the dominant media discourse, others obviously took it for granted. First who firmly articulated their stance were those who bought the patriotic rhetoric. These people were not dominant in the BBS community, nevertheless, their voice was very loud.

⁴²Gbiocic pseud, July 4th,1991, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

It is important to stress at this point that discussion groups are a stage of performance, where success is measured by the number of the responses to the posting. These discussions, as every human communication, had elements of play, which appeared at some points of the discussion, seemingly out of the blue. Erving Goffman's in his explanation of interaction play can provide a helpful means to analyze the content cues of communication play. Goffman believed that "play" was a situation grounded on a transformation of a serious situation. Thus "play" fighting takes place with wooden swords and with mimicked moves. The transformation from serious to "play" situation is rule governed and takes place as long as the participants observe the rules. Within the rules of the play situation, cues are provided that establish and maintain the transformation to play. Goffman regarded these cues as "keyings," (similar to the music metaphor) that signalled a special form of interaction based on a serious type.⁴³

In the same manner, our discussants played the verbal fight, representing the opposite sides and opposite discourses. When one of the most energetic patriotic discussants withdrew from Sezam for a while, the others found that they missed him. When he appeared soon after, one of the participants told him that he is glad to see his messages again, despite all their disagreements. "Sezam would not be such an interesting place if you was away for too long" - it has been said to him.⁴⁴

Although underrepresented in these discussions, these patriots were capable of provoking the arguments and electrifying the discussions. Apart from their importance for keeping discussion vivid, they are significant as a fossilized relict of a nationalistic discourse created at real time. For the purposes of examining mechanism of creating national topoi in Serbian public sphere,

⁴³Goffman, Erving, Ibid, p.48

⁴⁴Balinda pseud, April 1st 1992, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

these patriotic discourses are of the great importance. Therefore, they will be in the primary focus in this chapter. By analyzing their discourse, and more importantly, their relationship to others, I will attempt to deconstruct the mechanism of media influence in creating nationalistic imaginary, and more importantly, its ephemeral and arbitrary nature. Firstly, it is necessary to briefly elaborate the political context.

Fast moves and instant nationalism

Polls taken in 1990 showed that only a small percentage of population expected the break-up of Yugoslavia.⁴⁵ On ethno-national relations in workplaces, 36 per cent characterized them as good, 28 per cent as satisfactory, and only 6 per cent as bad or very bad.⁴⁶ For the majority of Yugoslavs on the eve of the Yugoslav wars, according to these polls, nationalist contention in the public arena did not translate into hostile interpersonal ethnic relations.

In the meantime, since his emergence as leader of the Serbian League of Communists in 1987, Slobodan Milosevic's political acting was characterized at the series of quick moves, aiming to keep him on power. In the period of one year, he was able to purge all competitors from Communist party, and to catapult himself to the position of the first man in the Party. At the same time he managed to appoint new, loyal people in all important positions in institutions, and he

⁴⁵Oberschall, Anthony. "The manipulation of ethnicity: from ethnic cooperation to violence and war in Yugoslavia." *Ethnic and racial studies* 23, no. 6 (2000): 982-1001, p.13

⁴⁶Oberschall, Anthony, *Ibid*, p. 13

personally was particularly concerned with media management.⁴⁷ The next huge challenge was abolishing the monolith one party system in Yugoslavia in 1990. As already entrenched as a leader of the League of the Communists, he simply took over the infrastructure of the former Communist Party of Yugoslavia and created a new one, the Socialist Party of Serbia. In parallel, he was constantly investing in populist demagogy, as the safest way to quickly gain public support.

In the elections of 1990, citizens of various republics had no chance to vote for maintaining the federation, despite the fact that most wanted it to continue. There was a proliferation of political parties, many of them without clear political and economic program. The voters lacked information; political parties and leaders had limited time and resources to organize the campaign. According to Woodward, in these campaign, “nationalism has a particular advantage. The message is simple, relies on familiar, takes little resources, does not have to develop a new political language and explain the complexities of democratic institutions and market economy.⁴⁸ Even so, the most nationalistic parties did not win large majorities of the vote. Milosevic and the Socialist party of Serbia won 47 per cent of eligible voters. Once elected, he continued to rapidly act to consolidate their power. It was possible by the peculiar mixture of the unclear concepts in his political agenda – populism and disguised nationalism on the pretext of protection of Serbs, but also the protection of Yugoslavia. His rushing trajectory from communist to alleged democrat and socialist remains unclear to the end of his rule. This was not accidental – obscurity is the prerequisite of every manipulation. The necessity for rapid acting determined to

⁴⁷Boljević Ivan, Odavić Đorđe, *Reci i nedela: Pozivanje ili podsticanje na ratne zločine u Srbiji*, Centar za tranzicione procese, Belgrade, 2011, p.34

⁴⁸Woodward, Susan L. *Balkan tragedy: Chaos and dissolution after the Cold War*. Brookings Institution Press, 1995, p.145

the great extent both the mechanism of the influence the audiences and the reshaping of the cognitive frame of the citizens.

The result of this instant political acting and ideological apparatus, strongly supported by the media, was instant nationalism. Filled with the new staff, loyal to the new political leadership, the media did their best to quickly reshape public opinion. The whole process went through three steps, which gradually influenced public opinion in Serbia. These steps were conducted in order to assure citizens that 1) the time has come for Serbia to regain their national identity (the instant history) 2) that Serbs in Serbia proper and Serbs in other republic are one entity (the instant WE concept) and 3) that Serbs outside the Serbia proper are endangered (the instant Enemy).

The main condition that made this process possible and effective was the closed, divided and exclusive discursive space that existed during the late 1980s and early 1990s, in which the inflow and exchange of information between republic was greatly reduced (by controlling access to broadcast and publishing from other territories) and within them was censored. This tightly controlled and restricted media space within a single republic indicates that the main target of the media war was not the audience on the other side of the republic's border, but the audience within its own, closed space. Ivan Čolović was first to point that the media war was primarily a mode of auto - communication with its most fundamental role to foster the cohesive and mobilizing power of an ethnically defined group.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Čolović, Ivan. *Bordel ratnika: folklor, politikai rat*. Vol. 78. Čigoja štampa, 2000, p.157

The process of mobilization

Historical narratives in media was a cohesive force in terms that it compressed one part of public consciousness into imagined community of Serbian people with those outside the Serbia proper. Especially dangerous refrain which followed these historical narratives was subtext about endangered Serbs outside Serbia. Therefore, parallel with the process of building *The We group*, was the creation of an equally fictitious group of *The Others* or *The Enemy*. Constructions of a new national identity, based on historical narratives, tradition and political myths, were neither solid nor permanent, as it might seem at the first sight.

The construction of temporary groups in a society as a phenomenon of the postmodern era is elaborated by Zygmunt Bauman, and Michael Maffesoli.⁵⁰ Both of them employ the term of the neo-tribes in the context of postmodern nationalism. These neo-tribes or psychological crowds are local quasi structures able to quickly assemble and dissemble. Bauman asserts that, unlike the case of classic crowds, the physical co-presence in a confined space is not required by the neo tribes. It was rather psychological gathering, when the number of separate individuals may at certain moments, under the influence of certain violent emotions, like a great national event, assume the characteristic of a psychological crowd. This is precisely the case of the formation of the We concept on the cognitive frame in the public sphere in Serbia. The tribe is quite convenient term because of the leveling down of units, erasure of differences, and militant assertion of collective identity are their mode of existence. Moreover, with “the efficient

⁵⁰Maffesoli, Michel. "Affectual Postmodernism and the Megapolis." *Threshold IV* 1 (1988). p. 42; Zygmunt Bauman , *Ibid*, p. 141

network of communication, and illusion of immediacy arising from the mostly visual form which information assumes, it is all too easy for even small-scale, local and one-off events to become national, or even world-wide – in their notoriety, if not impact. The media transmitted patterns for copy-cat imitation which had the power to sustain 'crowds' of the enormous sizes, by the expedient of simultaneous reply of action in places located at vast distances from each other. ⁵¹

The instant and superficial process of re-establishing Serbian national identity, constructed for the purposes of the fast transformation of political circumstances of that period, had in itself the above mentioned patterns of discourse, and these patterns are simply copied by the media transmission to the audience. Therefore, people who were prone to uncritically absorb media content, were not capable for anything but to replicate these patterns of discourse. If we analyze wordy statements of patriotic inclined discussants, we could find the very same patterns of discourse as there were in the media.

One discussant, in attempt to explain why he constantly write the word Croats in the lowercase in his posts, write this rationale:

“I just want you to understand and keep in mind that, according to the official list before the start of World War II on today's Croatian territories the proportion between Serbs and Croats was 50%: 50% Today this ratio is 80%: 20 %, precisely because of the misdeeds of your predecessors. I seek no revenge, just want you to realize that the previous generation of your

⁵¹ Zygmunt Bauman, Ibid, p. 142

people committed genocide and that your generation should not try to do it again. Decision to write the name of your people in the lowercase is just my modest attempt to remind you to this fact. Until today nobody from the former communist government nor the new one did not ask forgiveness from the Serbs. Even the former Croatian police officer Stevo Krajacic in Jasenovac, said "We killed too little of you." Similar statements came from the representatives of your current government, and you personally refuse any responsibility for the genocide of my people. All this looks like a prelude for a new genocide for me."⁵²

The patriotic inclined discussants in Sezam literally repeat the phrases from media, and their rhetoric is actually rhetoric from artificially created collective consciousness. The memory of their own recent experiences was overshadowed by the memories of their ancestors. I was not able to find any personal experience or insight in their messages, except several references to the experiences of their grandfathers and grandmothers from the WWII. It seems that the media content was quite enough substitution for the real experience, causing enormous aggressiveness in communication. According to their rhetoric, propaganda apparatus fully achieved their goal in frightening the audience. In all these references to Jasenovac concentration camp, and to opening the mass grave from the WWII in Pribilovci, one could read the message - We, the Serbs, are in danger.

One of the discussants from Serbia asked other from Croatia :“I want to ask you – did you watch the broadcast of the exhumation of the bones form the mass grave in Pribilovci? You did not, of course, because it was not broadcast on HTV (Croatian National Television – S.T). You should see this huge pile of bones of all sizes, dug from the only one grave. And there are many

⁵² Bradenkovic pseud, 13/09/1990, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

more graves waiting for the opening. There was also one documentary footage of Jasenovac and Stara Gradiska concentration camps [...] . If you had watched this, you would have understood how Serbs “enjoy” in Croatia and why they are so afraid.”⁵³

This uncritically absorbed media content caused psychological involvement in the constructed WE group, and therefore caused aggressiveness in communication toward those who thought differently, and especially towards the members of other nationalities present in BBS – Croats and Slovenes. In discussions with patriot members, they were assigned the role of the enemy. In reality, they had nothing to do with the picture of the Croats and Slovenes in Serbian media, but from one group of patriotic oriented discussants from Serbia were treated as if they were disguised Croatian nationalist or Slovenian provocateurs. Moreover, their way of speaking and thinking knows no relativity or skepticism. The roles are assigned, everything is clear, predefined and easily explainable. One of the Croat people, a member of the Sezam BBS community, after fair amount of arguments with patriots from Serbia, expressed his feelings this way:

” If you must know, I feel like a catalyst, which only favours one's thinking, but do not do anything useful, except for the acceleration of one's thought processes. I feel as though I could not affect your thinking in any way, I just satisfy your need for "the other side". Also, just as now, by chance, I do it myself, could be anyone else. In short, I feel stupid, because I realize I am not important. Here is important just my determination as Croat, and not myself. [...] I am not a typical Croat, although I am Croat in the fullest sense.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Bandit pseud, February 20th, 1991, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

⁵⁴ Dkropek pseud, August 21st, 1991, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

The fabricated enemy was not a person, but the other nation. This perception has manifestation in these discussions, where patriotic oriented discussants perceive people from Croatia and Slovenia as the Other side, as quoted discussant asserted. Deprived from their personal characteristic, opinions and attitudes, they became The Other, or The Enemy. Here Colovic's argument about auto-communication as a consequence of closing political and media realm is not fully tenable. I would agree that this discourse is an auto-communicative in the sense that the patriotic media discourse perpetuated in the public sphere. Closing the physical space and preventing the communication between the republics was necessary but not sufficient cause for raising nationalism. If we consider BBS community as a fully open discursive micro-space, we could conclude that already framed nationalistic consciousness could not be re-framed by discussion with other side, quite the opposite. The other is assigned to the role of the listener to phrases prepared in advance. In that sense, BBS community, despite its possibility for open discussion with the other side, had no capacity to change anyone's convictions. What is important to stress that majority of open minded, liberal people on Sezam defended their position even more firmly in the presence of a very few nationalist discussants. In that sense, they were the catalysts for all others.

The constant referring to the events from WWII indicates that media content caused intensive feeling of anxiety and fear. These feelings lay at the very root of these formed nationalistic consciousness, and they were intensive enough to erase the boundaries between past and present.

. The fear caused projection of other people as the enemy, so the whole articulation of the We

concept was actually articulation of the fear. This was the short-term consequence of the public discourse, in the very first period of preparation of the public sphere for the approaching war. This is in accordance with theories of Bauman and Maffesoli on relations within neo-tribal groups, which are largely non-rational, affectively charged, tactile and rooted in the moment. Following the patriotic discourse on Sezam, we could capture decreasing patriotic emotions all along to the unconcern of those who were subjects of passionate debates – Serbs from outside Serbia.

However, fast mobilized nationalistic consciousness was just as easily dissolved. As Bauman asserted: “But the fact that the patterns are media transmitted and have no other means of transmission or sources of credibility, determines also the brevity of their existence. [...] Each single neo tribe is doomed to an episodic and inconsequential existence”⁵⁵

The falling apart

The feeling of unity with the Serbs outside Serbia proper dissolved once when people in Serbia dealt with the huge wave of the refugees from the former Yugoslav republics, at first from Croatia, and later on from Bosnia. It corresponded with huge economic turmoil, hyperinflation and general impoverishment that accompanied the disintegration of Yugoslavia. During 1992 and 1993, in Serbia came 40.000 refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. When UN sanctions were imposed at the end of May 1992, Milosevic said simply “This is the price we

⁵⁵ Bauman Zygmund, *Ibid*, p. 142

must pay for supporting the Serbs outside Serbia.⁵⁶ These Serbs outside the Serbia proper, by that moment united only in their collective consciousness with all Serbs from the Balkan Peninsula, find themselves in the situation to share not just imagined space, but physical space in Serbia proper. They differed in dialect, customs, as well as in their relationship toward state and property. Citizens of Belgrade in particular had a reserved attitude toward refugees. Numerous reasons and justifications were asserted for this reluctance, among which prevailed argument about the poor economic situation in the country, unable to host too many refugees. Refugees occupied our flats, refugees took our jobs – these statements were very common in conversations these days and in the Sezam as well. It is especially striking this terminological shift in Sezam communication, where all of a sudden, they were no longer Serbs, just refugees – strangers who occupied the living space in Serbia. It is difficult to find compassion towards refugees from Croatia and Bosnia among the very same people who were passionately discussed about the endangered Serbs in Croatia just a year before. Economic conditions was not the sufficient reason for this change. The main reason for it lies in the fact that instantaneously fabricated patriotic feelings were not meant to last too long. Anderson's imagined community, different from an actual community because it is not based on everyday face-to-face interaction between its members, here has its full demonstration. It is difficult to find compassion towards refugees from Croatia and Bosnia among the very same people who passionately discussed about the borders of the Great Serbia. Therefore the imagined, instant WE group dissolved very soon, as a superficial result of a superficial attempt to build instant, short-term national identity. It was

⁵⁶ Judah, Tim. *The Serbs: history, myth, and the destruction of Yugoslavia*. Yale University Press, 2000, p. 261

precisely in accordance with Bauman's premise that "once the play has ended, what formed a whole becomes diluted until another mode emerges."⁵⁷

Here is one of the typical observation on refugees in Serbia, by one of those radical discussants:

"It is really strange that refugees often got several flats in one building to live in. I completely understand that these people need help, however, this is really too much. Some refugees live much better than people from Serbia. And do you know how easily they get the jobs? One friend of mine was sacked from the job where he was temporarily employed, and some refugee got his place in the firm. And by the way, this guy has a brand new Mercedes. [...] And here is another absurd – refugee who distributes mobilization calls?!? Man in early thirties, looks healthy and strong. He distributes the calls to people in Serbia, who are supposed to defend his house and property somewhere outside [of Serbia – S.T], while he is here. ⁵⁸

⁵⁷Bauman, Ibid, p. 143

⁵⁸Hercog, pseud, January 16th, 1992, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

The War

“As for my students, for me they are one of the greatest enigmas. Where are the roots of their indifference? Except for the militant, neo-fascist core, whose ideologists are situated in my very school, the students were not in favor of war. But the fact is they never really gave a mass opposition to the war. Even their brief rebellion in 1992 was more of a social character; they were more interested in prices of Coca-Cola than the terrible fact that a war was raging. It is up to the social psychologist to explain this phenomenon. For me, they were simply the sons of their fathers, sinking into conformity, unaccustomed to thinking with their own heads but still cunning enough to think know how to look out for themselves. Perhaps this judgment is without nuances, but exceptions were too few not to make me believe that perhaps I was right.”⁵⁹

This is an excerpt from the interview of Mirjana Miočinović, professor at the University of Belgrade, theater expert and one of the most active anti-war activists from the beginning of war in Yugoslavia, published in *Glas*, a bulletin issued by the *Center for Anti War Action* from Belgrade. She explicitly expressed her disappointment of her students and the lack of open resistance from their side. How this resistance was supposed to be expressed, unfortunately remains unclear from this excerpt and her whole interview.

There were, however, different opinions on this issue. Stojan Cerović, journalist in the magazine *Vreme*, considered this attitude as citizens' disobedience which deserves memorial:

⁵⁹Mirjana Miočinović, Milica Lučić Čavić, *The other Serbia*, *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (May, 1996), p 28.

“All I want to say is that Belgrade lacks a monument that would celebrate and keep memory of the drama and misery of these years in a proper manner.[...]And I will not agree with anyone who thinks that there is nothing to commemorate and that is the best to forget everything. Therefore, my suggestion is to build the memorial to the Unknown Deserter. Even at the beginning of the Yugoslav wars, while Yugoslav People’s Army tried to mobilize reservists from Serbia and Montenegro, when various national military and private guards were created, I thought that the best and the most honest attitude is to avoid uniform, weapons or just to desert. Thousands of people from Belgrade and Serbia found a way to escape the war, and I am sure this is the only thing we will be proud of in the future. Prior to that, every human virtue was forced to withdraw. Decency and honesty were demobilized; wit, truth and humanity deserted.”⁶⁰

Passivity in articulating protest and passivity toward the war itself was indeed the dominant stance of the younger population in Serbia, and remained dominant until the end of the war. Was their passivity just a consequence of their conformity, as Ms. Miočinović argues, or was it a praiseworthy expression of passive resistance? Discussions on BBS are helpful in elucidating this phenomenon.

Assertiveness and enterprising are certainly not an attributes of one BBS community. Communication in Sezam was an underground communication, which never intended to be anything else than just a virtual space for mere exchange of information and observations. This community was bonded in cyberspace, and their physical detachment remained constant and influenced their passivity. Therefore, they never considered undertaking any activity outside the cyberspace. For example, they never really seriously considered organizing or participating in

⁶⁰Stojan Cerović, “Spomenik neznanom Dezerteru” *Vreme*, April 3, 1995, p. 8

anti-war meetings, or any other form of protest whatsoever. One discussant gave a simple explanation at one point: “Anti war protest – how convenient way for military officers to collect us altogether and send us to the front.”⁶¹ This imminent danger, however, was not the only reason for their inactivity.

On the other hand, the informality of communication in Sezam provided some specific advantages and the most important was a confidence in the information as well as in this media itself. As I asserted in previous chapter, from the very beginning a strong disbelief to official media prevailed among majority of discussants. Often could be find statements like – but of course that its a big fat lie, what else could you expect from *Radio Television of Serbia*? Or Is it possible that you still believe in articles form *Politika*? In Sezam, however, the omnidirectional way of communication and sharing the information provide the ground for uncensored and safe communication and critical reception of information. The discussants were aware of the possible unreliability of information, yet had complete confidence in the reliability of communication itself. In other words, information could be accurate or inaccurate, verified fact or rumor, but at least not an intentional lie. BBS discussions provided the possibility for independent way of informing, as well as discussing and collective processing the information. It is particularly evidential in discussions on war and mobilization.

⁶¹ BBS discussion

The Conscription

In June 1991 the process of the unofficial, yet massive and organized conscription of Serbian citizens in Yugoslav People's Army began. The Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) had a unique operational military doctrine for a conventional military force. It was a conscript military system, with large reserve contingents trained and equipped to carry out territorial defense and support YPA regulars in resisting external attack. This means that in the case of external attack on Yugoslavia, the entire Yugoslav population was to be engaged in armed resistance, armaments production, and civil defense. In the case of civil war, however, this concept of YPA as all-Yugoslav institution proved to be untenable. As the outbreak of fighting in Slovenia and Croatia in June 1991 demonstrated, in a national mobilization the active reserves and territorial defense forces split along ethnic lines, making mobilization the spark for civil war. On June 25, 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence; two days later the YPA attempted a limited intervention to retake customs stations and the airport in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, but proved ineffective in the face of Slovene militia using partisan warfare. The mobilization and deployment of forces against Slovenia causes a huge crisis within Yugoslav People's Army, because the majority of Croatian and Slovene officers, soldiers and reservists refused to serve. In Croatian and Slovenian press, YPA was presented as an occupation force. The representatives of YPA tried to defend it in the press, stating that it was preserving the territorial and constitutional integrity of the SFRY and had been forced to act because of "hatred, terror, and extremely inhumane actions" directed against it by the Slovenian Government and forces.⁶² What was

⁶² Predrag Pejčić, "Jugoslovenska narodna armija nije okupatorska" [The Yugoslav People's Army is not an occupation army], *Front*, No. 14 (12 July 1991), p. 2

really surprising for YPA High Command was the fact that a significant number of Serbian reservists also refused to respond to call to mobilization. The Presidency of Yugoslavia, which was actually reduced to representatives of Serbia, her provinces Kosovo and Vojvodina and Montenegro, never officially proclaimed the state of war in the Republic of Serbia and its provinces and never announced total citizens' mobilization. Moreover, the war objectives of Yugoslav People's Army were never determined and publicly announced. This led to utter confusion among people, especially young men who were obliged to respond to the military call and who were the most concerned about this issue.

Conscientious objection as an institutionally recognized human right to refuse to collaborate with military organizations on the ground of freedom of thought, conscience or religion was defined several years later, in 1998.⁶³ Nevertheless, starting hesitation of the young population to take part in the civil war in Yugoslavia finally grew into massive public dispute about conscription. In autumn 1991, the responses to the mobilization were 50% in Serbian province and only 15% in Belgrade. Passive resistance was strong from the very beginning, despite the war mongering campaign in all the Yugoslav media.⁶⁴ The methods of conscription were as dubious as was the policy of conscription itself. People were selectively picked, sometimes taken during the night, without explanation and any information where they were taken and for how long.

⁶³"Conscientious objection to military service, Commission on Human Rights resolution 1998/77, CHR 54th 4/22/1998E/CN.4/RES/1998/77". United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. 1998. Retrieved 2008-04-24.

⁶⁴Ofelija Bačković, Milos Vasić, Aleksandar Vasović, "Ko to rado ide u vojnike: Mobilizacijska kriza", *Republika*, br. 198, p. 5

This situation influenced considerably the course of the discussions at Sezam conferences, and the conscription became one of the most discussed issues. The seriousness of the situation in society made this communication far more important and far beyond plain entertainment, than it supposed to be at the first place. All of a sudden, participants became aware of the advantages of this alternative way of communication and informing.

When our discussants encountered a real danger of forced mobilization and being sent to the front from the country which officially “was not in war”⁶⁵, Sezam became a place for sharing information and safe communication as well as a vent of frustration. Here is important to stress one practical purpose of Sezam. Users shared advices how to avoid mobilization officers who collected people from the homes and from the streets. With regards to mobilization, Sezam BBS was one of the places where young people could search for advice in the situation when military officers knocked on their doors. There were a lot of time spent in discussions what one should do in order to avoid mobilization, and what would be the legal consequences of such decision. In a way, conscription issue bonded the BBS community more than any other.

“If you don’t want to be pick up, do not open the door, do not pick up receiver, and do not receive mails and telegrams. And be careful if the old mate from the army from whom you did not hear long ago all of a sudden call you, or if unknown girl gives you a call...”⁶⁶

⁶⁵I am referring here to Slobodan Milosevic’s often repeated statement that Serbia is not in war. *Politika* published this statement in article “Ceo svet je video ko nije za prekid vatre” on September 20th, 1991, p. 1.

⁶⁶ Bandit, pseud, November 11th, 1991, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

Those who were mobilized and during this experience were lucky enough to stay unharmed and come back, shared their experience and the real information from the places in Croatia, which differed significantly from the information from the state media. Discussions on war experience were the most serious discussions, sometimes having a form of a real moral treatises.

On morale and moral

A survey of the Sezam discussions points at several very strong motives to refuse to participate in war. Prevailing attitude on this issue was distinctively critical, with a very few participants with a positive opinion. Some of them declared themselves as pacifists, while others claimed that the main problem for them was irresoluteness when it comes to war objectives. The protection of Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav People's Army and their symbol – a five pointed star – were for many of them totally deterrent, if not meaningless, war objectives.

On the other hand, despite the fact that military and state institutions failed to articulate clear aims and positions, and despite the unclear, manipulative and ambivalent rhetoric in media about the war, the decision to avoid military obligation and participation in war caused certain anxiety among young men. Finally, Serbian society has a lot of traditional elements even today, and military obedience was a duty traditionally assigned to men. Soon, however, as some of the participants were mobilized, and got the first-hand experience about situation in the fronts in Croatia, the dilemmas became less and less present among the people. The experiences which

shared by those who were mobilized after their return from front, helped in solving moral dilemmas of those who were still uncertain about their choice not to respond to the mobilization. It was not because of the dreadful war stories (which, by the way, were not at all predominating in this discourse, as one might expect), but because their experience assures others of a total moral decline among the military leadership. What astounded these people the most was the incapability and dishonesty of the officers in the Yugoslav army. The discussions on morale in the army resonated with the discussions on the moral in public sphere and society in general.

“As I promised, the following story is my personal experience which hopefully would be interesting and useful for many of you. Military unit to which I belong was mobilized in municipality Vracar [municipality in Belgrade]. At first we arrived to Backa Palanka where we get the uniforms, guns and ammunition. [...] We realized then and there that something is seriously wrong with the army. We did not have enough ammunition, nor armors, nor battle vehicles. We had no medical corps, neither the equipment for the night battles, nor for the communication. Not to mention reconnaissance forces or intelligence service. Moreover, we did not have any identification documents – military IDs were taken from us, and we did not get any dog tag or something. Our anxiety turned out into a rage when one YPA lieutenant addressed to us. It turned out that he was not able to answer to any our question. He did not know to show us the direction to Vukovar or Ilok, although he was a person who supposed to be our head. Instead, he tried to give us a political speech of the worst manner. We were not sure whether he was complete fool, or just drunk. Anyway, we whistled to him and that way prevent him to speak further.”⁶⁷

⁶⁷Mkiric pseud, September 22nd, 1991, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

If the young men was afraid or ashamed to openly express their anti-war attitude, women were those who did not hesitate to raise their voice. The first active protest, which took place during summer 1991 in Belgrade, was organized mostly by mothers of conscripted young men. Women in general were the majority of organizers and participants of the peace movement in Belgrade. They took the role of active advocates for the peace alternative, precisely articulating the attitudes of those who were labeled as deserters: "We refuse that our sons become the victims of senseless militarists. The goals we should sacrifice our sons for are not clear. Our sons have been deceived: they have to participate in a war for which they are not the least bit responsible, in a war that has not even been declared. That they should give their lives for imperialist purposes is the project of politicians. It is a disgrace to win a fratricidal war."⁶⁸

The first large protest against the war was held by several hundred parents, mostly mothers of conscripted men, in the Serbian National Assembly in Belgrade on 2 July 1991. In their statement they said, "The protests of mothers is a feminine spontaneous reaction to the disgrace of the civil war" (Mother's Movement, July 1991). Repeatedly, throughout the summer, in letters to officials and public statements, the mothers called for an end to the war and a return of their sons.⁶⁹ This movement was starting point for the foundation of liberal civil society groups in Serbia.

Mobilization crisis as specific articulation of civic protest in Serbian society indeed deserves more attention and more research than it has been given in this paper. Rather than trying to give

⁶⁸Hughes, Donna M., Lepa Mladjenović, and Zorica Mršević. "Feminist resistance in Serbia." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 2, no. 4 (1995): 509-532, p. 5011

⁶⁹Hughes, Donna M., Lepa Mladjenović, and Zorica Mršević, *ibid*, p.512

moral judgment of the attitude of citizens of Serbia toward war and mobilization, I would argue that his mobilization crisis proves the insuperable gap between the state institutions and its citizens. According to the correspondence from Sezam, there was discordance with the political elites and the people, as they were parallel universes. An attempt of political elites in Serbia to sustain ambiguous position toward war in other republics, with its seemingly neutral position and obscure moves, publicly unexplained, caused enormous discontent among all people. The unofficial conscription, without proclaimed war and war objectives, but with orchestrated war mongering propaganda, showed the full extent of moral decline of the political and military elites. The negative response of the citizens to the conscription, deserting and ignoring military calls, were not very surprising.

In the famous military treatise, *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu indicates the principle of morale law among five universal principles in military competence. “The Morale Law causes the people to be in complete accord to their ruler, so that they will follow him regardless of their lives, undismayed by any danger”.⁷⁰ The meaning of the morale is here twofold – it means a principle of harmony between people and the government, as well as morale as a tribute of the ruler, in a very abstract sense. In the circumstances of public distrust in the state concept, ideological apparatus and the elite, it is not very surprising that war was regarded as meaningless and dishonest.

⁷⁰Tzu, Sun. *The art of war*. Orange Publishing, 2013, p. 4

On individual rights and pacifism

The BBS discussions are excellent source for tracing the evolution of nationalistic sentiments. In the previous chapter, we see how it looks like at the period of extreme nationalistic turmoil, in the period of preparation for war and building nationalistic legitimacy. The indoctrination was in its full potential, and media propaganda on its peak, so we could find transmitted patterns of discourse among the group of nationalistic inclined discussants. This group however disintegrated and leaves the place for the new, more sophisticated group of nonconformists.

It does not mean that BBS community achieved peaceful consensus; the discussions continued and remained passionate as they were at the first place. I would like to distinguish here one specific group of discussions. These were discussion about general, normative meanings of war, which contained critics of pacifism from one side and critics of an idea about the necessity of war as such, on the other side. More precisely, these were the discussions about moral obligation of the individual to participate in war. Several discussants argued that the state has a right to expect of citizens to participate in war, because their duty as citizens is to defend the state in danger. The majority of them, however, strongly disagreed with them.

If there is a reason for this duty to be abolished, as one discussant pointed out “it could not be a matter of personal decision, but only a matter of general principle”⁷¹ Right to decide whether to participate in war or not, therefore remains exclusive right of a state to make this decision in the name of its citizens. Continuously, the discussant used term state, instead of institution, of politicians. The majority of other discussants found this claims ironical, and this and similar claims faced the sharp criticisms and arguments in the Sezam. While one group spoke about war

⁷¹ Crveni pseud, October 23rd 1995, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

which happened during this time, with its concrete victims, failures, and lack of aim and meaning, other spoke about rights, duties, war and state in general terms. In a manner of scholarly, disguised nationalism, one of the participants claimed that “pacifism is untenable ethical position. I would not go into details of analysis of pacifism (but to those interested in the subject, I could guide them to literature). I would just assert that pacifism as an universal claim for non-violation 1) pave the way for the tyranny of the strongest 2) endanger the personal dignity 3) shows pride because it does not recognize the other side, i.e. the opponent.”⁷²

This and similar posts caused an enormous arguments on *Sezam*, proving that majority of other discussants were equally capable to defend their moral choice of pacifism or civil disobedience from the ideas of moral obligation for the state as organism which is beyond right or wrong. Nationalistic discourse gradually became disguised in seemingly patriotic and ethical truisms about fateful historical moment for the state and nation which is inevitable as earthquake or flood. In this rhetoric, the notion of responsibility of the state was replaced with the idea of the destiny. It was sophisticated nationalism which tried to portray the fate of Serbia as something which was not develop in it, but from external circumstances. Hereby, regime was released from all accountability for the damage. The conclusion arising from this argument is that duty of the individual is to accept their state and its condition as historical inevitability. This is often supported with additional argument about hostility of all other nations and countries toward Serbia and Serbs. Therefore, there is no physical escape from this situation, there is no alternative country. Only one possibility left, to change the perspective and accept that

⁷²Crveni, pseud, October 23rd 1995, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

everything what happens is a destiny, a pathos, which state and its citizens had to live out. As this discussant pointed out a little bit further:

It seems to me that these times are not the worst nor the most unusual ones, from all known historical periods. Just imagine yourself in the period of inquisition and you will feel better. The real question here is whether anomalies in the functioning of the state and unusuality and “less quality” of the historical periods in which we live are reasons good enough for denying legal and moral obligations.”⁷³

The above elaboration on pacifism caused a lot of opposed responses, and here is one, in my opinion one of the most concise and illustrative at the same time:

“Here, of course, is not an issue of a pacifism as an universal principle, but rather of the pacifism in our concrete situation. And situation is that even the general response to the military calls hardly would result with the ideal resolution (or I should call it *final solution*, right?) Because this war was not conducted only with the military methods, by no means. My opinion is that pacifism is completely justified when the wars are lost in advance, because it saves the lives which otherwise will be sacrificed for nothing. I could not argue with you about the justification of a state as institution or shortcomings of pacifism in general terms, but don't you think it sounds pretty cynical in this state and this war, which promises no good?”⁷⁴

From these discussions I would draw the conclusion that passive resistance was not the free choice young people in Serbia in the beginning of the 1990s, neither was the mere conformity. It

⁷³Crveni, pseud, October 23rd, 1995, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

⁷⁴Supers, pseud, October 24th, 1995, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs.

was rather their moral decision. They were indeed passive in the sense that they never considered open, active resistance to the regime which pressed them into the slaughterhouse (to use Kurt Vonnegut's metaphor). Instead, they decided to retreat completely, and reason for that is the sense of powerlessness which could be read from their correspondence. It seems that many of them shared the feeling that things happen regardless of what they do or not.

As one of the participants in the discussions puts it "This [Serbia] state, where I am living now, does not offer me any protection, any perspective, nothing except the mere struggle for life. In this state might makes right, and always will be like that. I have seen so many awful things here that will be enough for my all further reincarnations. This state offered me nothing but the possibility to die in the trench. [...] Everything I acquired, I had to scramble for." ⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Saxon pseud, October 12, 1995, Sezam BBS, accessed on telnet.sezampro.rs

The Conclusion

De-ideologized consciousness of younger population in relatively liberalized atmosphere in the 1980s in Yugoslavia, together with the alternative cultural movements was a forerunner of a civic identity. Even since 1980`s these civic identities were identified much more with cultural movements, rather than political and social. Their contemptuous and elitist attitude toward the institutions and participants of the official political scene resulted in lack of political charge. The development of this immature civic identity was stopped in the beginning of nationalistic turmoil and preparation for war in Yugoslavia. Period of late eighties and beginning of the 1990`s was characterized by disappearance of civic identity from the public sphere. Along with the political tensions, the discourse itself has become a scene and an object of struggles in Yugoslav society. Manipulation of opinion would increasingly replace the institutional or legal enforcement, where ideological hegemony of Communist party has been replaced with those of nationalistic parties in each of the republics respectively. This manipulation was conducted with its most potent weapon – monopoly control over the formation and expression of a public discourse.

In an attempt to bring an updated perspective in the ways notions of nationalism, liberalism and media intersect, the insight in one underrepresented form of communication is quite compelling. However, specific source used in this thesis has both the advantages as well as the shortcomings. The communication in Sezam BBS and reflection of its users on the overall political and social sphere brings a new insight into a complex problem of the nationalization of the masses and its examination contributes in understanding the political and moral decline of society in general.

The advantage of BBS correspondence is in its authenticity, since it petrified the process of perception, as well as building an opinion of one group of people. Moreover, this communication seems better adapted to the spontaneous movements of thought because it enables ideas to grow, allows jumps and digressions, and provides advanced way of communication. Finally, it allowed specific communication in a debating manner between people who otherwise hardly communicate between each other.

This is at the same time oasis which provide free speech, the space for deconstructing the official "truth" and finally, the articulated content of the otherwise passive resistance of these people. Polarized as it were, these discussions provided a spectrum of different opinions where all the questions, dilemmas and fallacies within this community could be identified and observed. It provides the possibility of tracing the trajectory of change of beliefs, attitudes, and disillusionment among those people.

This source however brought certain methodological concerns. It is impossible to find out how many people exactly used this communication in the beginning of the 1990`s, but we could claim with certainty that their number was not exceeded several thousand users. The limited scope of the group of people who participate in these discussions was the first concern in terms of its real influence.

This is in relation with their closeness and withdrawal out of the public sphere, although I would argue that mere form of communication was neither the only nor the most important reason for

their absence in the public sphere. Their withdrawal could be easily equated with their insignificance as a social or political factor in the given period. Albeit invisible, this discourse remains seemingly self-perpetuating and without influence towards the mainstream public sphere. It was encapsulated the counter discourse in one closed, virtual space, which brought a permanent doubt about the importance of this discourse in the political reality in Yugoslavia.

The perception of the political reality among the discussants, either it was deconstruction of the mainstream discourse or maintaining and supporting it, speaks about this very community but also about outside reality. The lineage of grandiose failures in recent Yugoslav history was amplified in this discourse like under the magnifying glass.

The closure and refusal to go out of internal emigration was a continuation of the process of closing civic identities in the private sphere from the early 1980`s. The oppressive regime made many people even more embedded in the attitude that every attempt to change something actively was doomed to fail. The withdrawal in the invisible sphere where they built their own habitus, with the internal representations of external structures means specific activity without interacting with the other, public sphere. Immediate and concrete consequence of this deconstructing the reality without active involvement was the massive emigration of the young people abroad in this very period. This is probably the only concrete, physical expression of their disillusionment, which again confirms that their passivity was not the free choice, but rather the constraint. They have no illusion about vain effort in the losing battle.

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