

**THOUSAND ISSUES OF FERAL TRIBUN:
HARD COPING WITH NEW TIMES**

Goran Vežić

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Feral Tribune, Croatian political and satirical weekly from Split published its 1,000th issue on 19 November. Instead of celebration and public awards it has deserved, few days ahead of the jubilee, its journalist Vladimir Matijanić was sentenced by the Court of Split to three months in prison – one year on probation – on defamation charges against former Croat football player and member of state representation, Igor Štimac. In early nineties, Štimac was involved in planting explosive under a shop and café-bar in Split owned by a Serb. All that Matijanić did was to use police records of that time, specifying the event. So, why was he punished at all?

“I mentioned him in two texts which quoted his statements found in police investigation records, without much comment. After that, he filed a lawsuit against me for defamation and offence. The case came to the hands of a judge with whom I had had a polemic long time before this dispute. Before entering the judicial system, that judge was an activist of Croat Democratic Union in Bol, where Štimac happened to have his discotheque, so I immediately knew I would be convicted. The situation was paradoxical: I kept persuading my lawyer that I would be convicted, while she kept persuading me that no grounds for that existed”, says Matijanić.

Thus, in this November case, as well as before, Feral stayed consistent. Feral and its journalists are among the most frequently convicted media workers, who have paid hundreds of thousands of Euros to various claimants, usually close to authorities during the mandate of president Franjo Tuđman in Croatia, but also the most internationally awarded Croat newspaper and, even more than that, institution in general. Indeed, Croatian awards surpassed Feral because it relentlessly kept discovering all Croatian follies and wrongdoings, not only at Tuđman's times of the nineties but also later, when Croatia was democratised, probably owing primarily to

the media lead by Feral, which, ridiculing and exposing the core of the rule of Franjo Tuđman, remain the most meritorious for the assessment that Tuđman was a dictator never feared by anyone. Addition to this assessment reads: Feral was there to prove that there should be no fear. However, when the changes of the 2000s arrived, Feral refused to run across to the victors, although – as Feral folks would put it – it seemed as though Feral idea prevailed over the nationalist one. Feral has stayed, as they say, aside, refusing to fit into any pack.

Consistent through all times

The founders of Feral and its editor-in-chief Viktor Ivančić and Predrag Lucić underwent a good training of the eighties, while communist regime was toppling – and Feral was one of the messengers of media freedoms – up until the nineties when it turned into the target of most attacks against newspapers in Croatia, but also the credential of the struggle against totalitarian regimes, not only in Croatia but also in the surrounding countries that once formed the SFR of Yugoslavia, all the way to the 2000s, when Feral survived in Croat market as the hindmost, smallest newspaper publisher.

“That time was kind of good, these late eighties. That period was quite interesting, with a number of pressures that were entirely different from these we are experiencing today; nevertheless, we were managing to penetrate certain free areas, sometimes even rather aggressively for that ambience”, says Viktor Ivančić about the eighties, when Feral was published as a piece added to “Nedjeljna Dalmacija”, the Split weekly it survived. With the arrival of the democracy of the nineties, and in the desire to flatter new authorities, “Nedjeljna Dalmacija” drove Feral off its pages. It was adopted by daily Slobodna Dalmacija, where it stayed up until 1993 when the independent editorial policy of that newspaper also ceased. When Tuđman’s Croat Democratic Union took power over “Slobodna Dalmacija”, Feral became independent weekly of not only satirical, but also of political kind.

“Nineties were the time when public mongering started. The state propaganda of that time prompted people against state enemies, and you could experience odd things in the street. Before, you had yourself opposed to institutions, which is always a cold relation, regardless of repression levels. We were our own masters. We never visited anywhere, we had our own newspaper and the absolute space of freedom we had conquered for ourselves and refused to ever compromise it”, says Ivančić.

Predrag Lucić says that the pressures of the eighties were essentially different from those of the nineties. “I would not dare point out what time was better, and what time was worse. Generally speaking, those times were bad. During communism, certain rules of the game were imposed, with no pardon. On the other hand, if you ended in court, you had no option of any public protection. Newspapers were sometimes banned, which was not the case later”.

Speaking about the 2000s, Lucić says: “People expected that the lead-heavy times, at least so far as media are concerned, were the thing of the past. After Tuđman’s death and the retreat of the first HDZ from power, pressures were no longer so rigid. During those ten years, it seems that the new-state hysteria, when some people seriously accepted the belief that the world started with them, and tried to force all others into the same conviction, had had it enough of its own way. The zero years were not much happier than the nineties or the eighties. There existed certain quite perfidious mechanisms of restricting liberties and media corrupting, ranging from advertisements to powerful media, which were not always necessarily expressed through politics, but never moved far from it either. That was the space in which Feral stayed on its own”.

Return to “reserve positions”

Feral is a weekly almost without advertisers, it lives on the sale of its copies, which is lower than it was in the golden nineties. From colour pages and the format of newsmagazine, it has retreated to reserve positions, to newsprint paper and black-and-white technique, which was the form they started with in the nineties. How on earth are they managing at all?

“It is very hard. At the moment, Feral is the only small newspaper publisher in Croatia, the only company publicising only a newspaper and books. This is the only newspaper surviving without ads, living only on the sale of its copies; therefore, we are living more modestly than most other newspapers, but that is the price of our autonomy. Our position makes it unprofitable to enter into compromises and adulate the advertisers”, says Viktor Ivančić, also adding that Feral is the last serious newspaper in Croatia. “It seems to me that today, a certain difference between Feral and other newspapers remains even stronger than before, because the journalism in general is gradually turning into leisurely reading aimed at serving big companies and

their advertisement campaigns. Now, we have stayed as a persistent, small team sticking to old-fashioned, serious journalism. I can see that the differences are even deeper than before. That position has no particular perspective, but we like it that way”.

Although you can laugh to tears reading Feral's satirical part, this is still a newspaper that even now, almost a decade after the war and half a decade since Croat lead-heavy times have ended, makes you depressed both by its appearance and by the themes covered. Editor-in-Chief Heni Erceg agrees with this assessment: “In our opinion, it is journalism and journalists that have to be the mirror of truth in a society. I am also sorry that the situation in Croatia was so horrible, it was more than depressive. Today, it is still depressive enough. Being journalists, whose task is to depict the real state in the society, it is only natural that Feral's texts are depressive. I am deeply sorry about that. I hoped to have a situation that would encourage us to make a happier and a more boring newspaper, and that we all together would enjoy good times, so good and so boring that Feral would no longer be able to expose any depressing things. This is the reason why the satirical part exists, to cheer the people up a little”.

The meaning of Feral goes well beyond the information offered by the free press, and beyond laughter offered by supreme satire. During the war, many people of former Yugoslavia, scattered throughout the world, claimed that they could thank Feral the fact that they'd stayed normal. “Traveling all over the world, I met many people who said that Feral was their only homeland”, says Predrag Lucić. “Not that Feral is a substitute for Yugoslavia, because it is not that. There is no the sign of equality. Feral treated Yugoslavia in the same way it later treated Croatia – and in the same way as it is going to treat any new future state, even if its name is European Union. Nation-building strategies are not our job, nor a matter for people to identify with. Feral seemed to have defended against violence that new regimes introduced into their lives, when they tried to persuade them that their lives before the nineties never even existed, or they were utterly incorrect, and that now they had to be very ashamed because they lived and because they were not born on the day when the new state and new regime were born. These people, dispersed all over the world, also have a sentimental background of their own. If Feral is a part of it, that makes me very happy and very proud. This background includes some pick-up records, some books, films, travels, some life. Feral, which is often nostalgia-labelled, is not a nostalgic, mercantile newspaper. Feral has continued to pursue the same direction it had in the

eighties. Feral never had its eyes closed for that reality, nor for the reality of yesterday or before yesterday”.

Certain crisis affecting Feral in recent years has weakened it financially, but it nevertheless does not intend to sell itself out, says Lucić. “In this place we are sitting right now, rain water leaked last night. But that is still better than having someone shitting on your head”, he adds ironically.

Feral is also weakened in personnel matters: it has provided a number of Croatian newsrooms with excellent journalists, while former Feral workers, in addition to excellent texts, also write award-winning novels. Which one among the authors do they miss the most? “Franjo Tuđman. He was one of the most productive contributors of Feral”, agreed Lucić and Ivančić.

Goran Vezic is journalist of STINA news agency and Media Online correspondent from Split, Croatia. Translated by: O. H. © Media Online 2004. All rights reserved.