

The return of hate speech into Serbian media

The new Maksimir

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To all "Dinamo" supporters, for which the war started on 13 May 1990 in Maksimir stadium, and ended when they laid their lives on the altar of their homeland Croatia! BBB, Zagreb, 13 May 1994.

(From the monument to BBB fallen in the "Homeland War")

You know, „Delijas" are Zvezda's supporters, but that group of our children demolishes everything on their way, and when they have no-one to fight with, they fight among themselves. If Arkan's group were here in Belgrade, it wouldn't be with them. Anyway, Arkan is in prison, in Croatia.

(Radmilo Bogdanović, high official in the Socialist Party of Serbia)

Fifteen years after the historic Maksimir, a sport match between one Croatian and one Serbian team, this time in volleyball, again turned into a range of fierce conflicts and a genuine little war between the fans. The return game was played in Zagreb, between the volleyball players of Zagreb and Belgrade's Partizan, within the International Cup. Skirmishes had already begun in the first match in Belgrade, where a Croatian journalist was beaten up, and the seats were thrown on visiting players. They continued in the capital of Croatia, in the train with Belgrade supporters, around the bus with players, in journalists' box. Of course, they also went on during the following days, in media. A part of Belgrade press resorted to the manners that were well known in early nineties and, over again, hate speech presented Croatian fans, and even all Croats as enemies, through a series of discriminatory texts that entirely deviated from the basic rules of

professional journalism and journalistic ethic. The whole truth was not spared, too. In the torrent of rage caused by the events, Belgrade media again missed to remind that the event in Zagreb was really an inappropriate, but undisputed reaction to the rampage that happened in the first match in Belgrade.

The Special Rapporteur of Belgrade Media Centar Press Council, Gordana Suša, who deals with frequent ethical problems in Serbian printed media, stated on this occasion that in this case, newspapers “violated a large number of basic journalistic regulations”. Suša says that “the practice of evading the rule to present other side of the story has become frequent”, while the reports were one-sided and disrespectful of the principle that any discrimination by ethnicity, language, faith, race or political preferences is unacceptable in journalism, and that journalists’ task is to oppose all those that do not recognise human rights, or who promote the discrimination of any kind.

Indeed, the examples offer convincing evidence by themselves.

The newspaper „Kurir“, in its first issue after the match, publicised a large photograph of Croatian fans holding a picture of Ante Gotovina, and a text titled “The Torture” about the troubles of Belgrade citizens in Zagreb, which severely condemned the deputy of the match – in this case, a Slovenian – for being partial and insisting the match to take place. The day after, „Kurir” was even more severe. The superscript headline relating to the match was “Ustashas still in war against the Serbs”, and the title read: “Croatian Savages!” In a lengthy text, on several occasions, journalist asks if it makes sense to play matches with Croats, are we aware how Croats pathologically hate Serbs, and has the Serb-Croat war ended at all. His tone suggests that it certainly has not.

The high-rated “Večernje Novosti” did not stay much behind. In its morning issue, it described the atmosphere of “endless hatred against everything that felt like Serbia”, self-confidently explaining that it was a well conceived scenario, a sort of a new anti-Serb conspiracy, in which the Belgrade team was certainly preordained to lose the match.

As expected, the newspaper named “Srpski Nacional” [Serb National] went the farthest. Under a huge title “Croats, Europe is Far Away” it literally writes: “The animosity, which

verges on a sick complex, will torment Croats for many more centuries in the future, but that is not our fault. However, for how much longer shall we have to tolerate the transport between hotel and sport terrain in a police vehicle? The Sava River will keep on flowing through Zagreb as it always has, but they must understand it will never be so big there, as it is near Ušće” (Ušće – place in Belgrade where the Sava joins the Danube).

The electronic media also followed the chase. For days after the match was over, television stations hosted the visits of protagonists to the events, primarily journalists and Club management. Some of them took part in quasi-analytical talk-shows, which talked about their western neighbours, their ‘culture’ and ‘hospitality’ with equal fury. However, the descriptions and accounts publicised by Belgrade media did not end with the dramatic volleyball match. Only days later, basketball players of Croatia and Serbia played a match in Belgrade - Cibona of Zagreb and Partizan of Belgrade. The match had supreme security protection, and any serious incidents were prevented. And the media had another opportunity to show their colours. Of course, newspapers were full of songs of praise to ourselves, how we taught them a lesson and how, unlike them, we were civilized people, while the Croats still had to learn some things.

This latest demonstration of the language of hate, and the flagrant disrespect of journalistic profession in Serbia remains, to a certain degree, equal to numerous examples of the kind seen in the last decade; in yet another, maybe even more important respect, there are major differences between the two.

The common stance, by which Serbs are an object of hate by Croats because they are better, stronger and smarter, and therefore the genocide-prone Croats want to square with them for decades already, largely resembles the ‘glorious’ years of preparations for war, and war-waging in the area of former Yugoslavia. Even the technique applied is quite familiar – present only your own truths, disregard the other party, and make whatever conclusions you like. In doing so, it doesn’t hurt to keep silent about an important fact or two (like, in this case, a series of minor incidents in Belgrade match), which could only infringe the presumed logic, anyway.

On the other hand, the examples of 2005 were primarily an end in themselves, unlike those that were so numerous during the rule of dictatorship and controlled media in Serbia. Starting with the dramatic football match in Zagreb Maksimir on 13 May 1990, through all those tragedies brought about by the war, through the political turmoil, to getting even with 'external and internal' enemies, Serbian media were turned into an instrument of the state, subduing their writing to strictly and precisely determined objective. There was a need to justify, persuade, mobilise and explain. Today, this objective does not exist any more. Or at least, it is not easily recognisable. The new hate speech in Serbia and its media is primarily an ugly picture of journalistic profession and galloping journalistic sensationalism, considerably contributing to daily examples of slander and defamation in media.

The recent comprehensive research conducted for local OSCE office has shown that daily newspapers printed in Belgrade, including also the serious ones, publicise numerous defaming materials on daily basis, which could prompt lawsuits with successful outcome for claimants. Bearing that fact in mind, it is by no means surprising that the number of court trials on defamation charges in Serbia remains unknown, and the assessments made by the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia indicate that, between 2001 and late 2004, there were over 350 of them. In the next months, the adoption of a new criminal law is expected in Serbia. Its draft recommends both monetary fines and prison sentences for defamation. However, the Ministry of Justice, apparently guided by the need to harmonise the new law with European standards, proposed an amendment according to which prison sentence should be revoked, and monetary fines would grow extremely high. On the other hand, journalists, media experts and a part of public support the option of the development of a professional self-regulation principle. Nevertheless, it is perfectly clear that very long time will pass before such a principle would reach its full functionality.

The writing of Serbian media about the recently played volleyball match, this time is - fortunately for the surroundings - primarily the issue for Serbian society itself. There will be no concrete, tragic consequences, apart from the new wave of inflammatory speech of one people against the other. The volleyball and media scandal are primarily the matter of journalistic profession and its irresponsibility, as well as the overall situation in the enormously large number of electronic and printed media. Fortunately, Croats have

nothing to do with the diagnosis of such a state and the possible steps that should be taken to improve it. Everyday political scandals and always fresh political and other affairs are sufficient.

All it takes is a quick look at the newspapers, almost all of them, and almost every day.

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