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FOLKLORE STRATEGIES OF FACING DISTORTED NORMALITY IN PRECARIOUS TIMES: A CASE STUDY OF FOLKLORE IN BELGRADE DURING THE YUGOSLAV WARS 1991–1999*

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It is in the human nature not to believe in unpleasant things, even when they are inevitable. That is why, no matter how much we prepare ourselves, unpleasant events and misfortune always surprise us. That was the case yesterday, that is the case today.
(Dragomir Antonijević, The bombing goes on...*)*

Abstract

The last decade of the 20th century was marked by a political crisis that led to the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in a series of armed conflicts and interrelated wars. In Serbia and Montenegro – parts of the same state until 2006 – this period of recent history was additionally marked by economic and cultural sanctions imposed by the international community. The sanctions caused hyperinflation, economic dysfunction and adoption of a wartime embargo economy and culture, in which various forms of folklore responses to the external events and phenomena appeared. They had different communication functions: informative, expressing emotions, psychological tensions, or political and social critique, giving comments on the surrounding reality or transmitting knowledge. In some

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cases, this folklore had an important role in shaping survival strategies. The paper addresses the interrelation between the macro and micro social environment and the use of specific folklore forms which were dominant in that period of time in Belgrade, as well as the importance of both social and cultural capital for the creation, transmission and pragmatic dimension of this kind of folklore. It focuses on those forms which turned out to be important elements of the survival strategies developed during the '90s.

Keywords: folklore of crisis, Serbia during the '90s, wartime Belgrade, folklore communication, urban folklore, survival strategies

The last decade of the 20th century was one of the gloomiest historical periods in some of the ex-Yugoslav countries due to the series of political crises, armed conflicts, insurgences and interrelated wars which led to the breakdown of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In Serbia and Montenegro (parts of the same state until 2006), this period was additionally marked by economic and cultural sanctions imposed by the international community that caused economic dysfunction, hyperinflation and shortage of almost all kinds of products. This resulted in the creation of a distorted social ambient of isolation, extreme precariousness, crisis, existential insecurity, rise of criminality, smuggling practices, grey economy and an intense flow of refugees, all giving rise to a specific wartime culture in Serbia[1] in which various forms of folklore responses to the external events and phenomena appeared. They had different communicational functions: informative, expressing emotions, psychological tensions, or political and social critique, giving comments on the surrounding reality, transmitting experience, knowledge or ideas on how to make ends meet, etc. Some of them had an important role in building, shaping and enhancing survival strategies and this paper primarily focuses on that aspect of the folklore in Belgrade during the '90s.

The theoretical framework applied in the analysis relies on the interactionist theory of culture, according to which cultural phenomena arise as products of communicative interaction between different social groups coexisting in a wider community (see Fine 1979: 733–734; Fine & Fang 2019: 2). As a result of this kind of interaction the members of the group develop some form of culture, which Fine calls *idioculture* (Fine 1979: 734; Fine & Fang 2019) and uses it as a synonym of the term *folklore* (Fine 1982: 47). He defines it as "a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction" (Fine 1979: 734) and which forms the link between the actions of a group of individuals and the structures of the system (Fine & Fang 2019: 2). Seen through the lenses of sociology – such as

[1] For more information about the Serbian society during the '90s, the dissolution of socialism and the various aspects of the destruction of the structure of the Serbian society see Antonić, 2002; Bolčić and Milić, 2002; Lazić, 1994a; 1994b; 2000; Tomanović, 2006.

those of Gary Alan Fine – the folklore "is the outcome of social forces" and there are five elements central for its development: "that it be known, usable, functional, appropriate in terms of the group's status hierarchy, and triggered by an experienced event" (Fine 1982: 49). The analysis relies on the comparative method, in which the tension between the micro and macro social phenomena from the wider cultural surrounding are compared to the idioculture generated as the outcome of the interaction between them. The analyzed data are taken from different sources: UNHCR reports, scholarly literature, internet, documentary films, media, photographs, interviews and personal memories. The interviews were taken from 2017 to 2024. Those before 2023 were recorded as parts of conversations focused on other subjects, in which the personal memories of the '90s popped up spontaneously as side topics in the talks with my conversation partners. Some of those personal memories have been used in this study as illustrations of the phenomena which will be discussed. During 2023 and 2024 a series of interviews were taken with the purpose of collecting data for this study, which is developed within the project *Living in the age of permanent crisis* led by Ana Luleva and Jadranka Đorđević Crnobrnja. Fifteen persons who lived in Belgrade during the '90s were interviewed, six male and nine female, borne from 1935 to 1972. The conversations were led in the form of semi-structured interviews with a focus put on the personal memories of survival strategies and practices used during that period of time, on everyday life, family living, social and cultural life, as well as the forms and examples of folklore expression and communication, if remembered.

Macrosocial context

Living in Serbia in the '90s was marked by political, economic and social crisis which had devastating consequences on the society – sociologist see it as a time of the "system breakdown" (Lazić 1994a), "destruction of society" (Lazić 1994b; Bolčić and Milić 2002), "destruction of the social sector of work" (Bolčić 2002) and "maelstrom of social disintegration" (Milić 1995). The growth of nationalism and separatist tendencies in the republics of the Social Federal Republic of Yugoslavia drew the country into a brutal civil war. Officially, Serbia did not participate in it until the NATO bombings in 1999, but did support in different ways the Serbs from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. For that reason, the international community imposed economic and cultural sanctions onto the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – compound of today's Serbia (Kosovo and Metohija included) and Montenegro. The sanctions lasted from May 1992 to October 2000. They were the result of the UN Resolution 757 and consisted of a complete international economic embargo, a ban on trade and payments with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a complete ban on aircraft flying to and from the country, a ban on servicing aircraft registered in Yugoslavia, a reduction in the diplomatic presence in Belgrade, a ban on the participation of sport teams and individual athletes representing Yugoslavia

in any competition, the suspension of all scientific, technical, educational and cultural cooperation and an extremely restrictive policy regarding permissions to enter Western countries. These measures transformed the country into a closed system, a kind of economic and cultural ghetto within Europe – Slobodan Antonić named it the "imprisoned country" (Antonić 2002).

The sanctions caused economic dysfunction and rapid erosion of the industry, shortage of almost all kinds of products and hyperinflation from 1992 to 1994 that reached its peak in January 1994 with 116.546 trillion percent, or 20% per hour (PI UNHCR 1996: 16). Every five hours the prices would double. At that time, the National Bank released a banknote of 500 billion dinars – which was approximately the price of 200g of mustard. The banking system fell apart and the savings of the citizens disappeared. The unemployment considerably increased (Milošević 2002, Bolčić 2002b) and the intensity of the "brain drain" was extremely high – during the '90s around 400.000 highly educated young people emigrated from Serbia to the countries of the West (Bolčić 2002c; Milić 2006: 60).

Besides international pressure, the stability of the country was challenged by the separatist insurgences in the region of Kosovo and Metohija and a continuous flow of refugees coming from other parts of former Yugoslavia, which transformed the (remaining) Federal Republic of Yugoslavia into a country with the highest number of refugees and temporarily displaced persons in Europe since 1945. They were coming from all ex-Yugoslav regions: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo and Metohija. According to the data presented in the UNHCR report from 1996, by 1995 the number of refugees reached approximately 646.000 (PI UNHCR 1996: 16, 19), although the number was higher: the participation in the Census was not obligatory and the people who left Kosovo and Metohija before the bombing were not included, since they did not have the status of refugees, but of temporarily or permanently displaced persons. The number increased considerably during the bombings in 1999, when more than 200.000 persons fled from Kosovo and Metohija to central Serbia (see UNHCR in the Republic of Serbia).

The UNHCR report from 1996 claims that more than 60,4% of the refugees expressed the willingness to integrate and stay within Serbia or Montenegro, no more than 10% preferred to be repatriated or relocated, while 30% were hesitant or seeking a way to emigrate outside of the ex-Yugoslav region (PI UNHCR 1996: 26). This attitude towards repatriation was the result of a massive war destruction in the course of which many of them had lost their homes, experienced ethnic cleansing and faced the unwillingness of the governing structures in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to make repatriation possible (PI UNHCR 1996: 4, 17). According to the refugee census from April to June 1996, 617.700 refugees were registered in Serbia. Almost 92% of those included in the UNHCR report found their refuge where their relatives and friends resided (PI UNHCR 1996: 17). The rest of them had to rely on the premises and help of the state, which was under considerable economic pressure due to the sanctions. Around 170.900 of the refugees stayed in Belgrade (PI UNHCR 1996: 29), which in 1991 had the population of approximately 1.600.000

(SORS 1991: 1). Bearing in mind the massive emigration of highly educated young population from the city, we come to the conclusion that at that time the refugees made more than 10% of the Belgrade population. The majority of them were deeply traumatized by the war experience, vulnerable and in an extremly precarious situation since many had to flee in a hurry, with a minimum of their possessions.[2]

The impact on the everyday life

Due to the inflation Yugoslavia became a country of "billionaires" unable to satisfy the basic necessities regarding food, energy and almost any kind of goods. This resulted in a creation of an distorted cultural ambient of isolation, extreme precariousness, anxiety, social crisis, existential insecurity, rise of criminality, smuggling practices, grey economy and a black market as practically the only way of trading during the time of the economic embargo, since the shops were empty. One interview partner described the situation evoking a memory of the empty supermarket in which she used to go before the embargo started:

> There was one big PKB supermarket in my neighbourhood and I remember that one day I got in to buy something. I was shocked because it was completely empty… There were long, long empty shelves… I strolled along to see if I could find any item and there they were – two bottles of starch… that was all… (D. T. 1972, female)

Since many people had lost their jobs or – even without losing them – stopped receiving salaries, the number of those who had to switch to grey and black economy practices was very high: gasoline, cigarettes, food, clothes, shoes, medicines, cosmetics… they were all smuggled from Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria and sold at flea markets or individual selling points scattered everywhere, along the streets, in the parks, marketplaces, wherever there were people passing by.

The German mark became the unofficial means of payment. For an average monthly salary one could buy 3 to 5 German marks. |As soon as one would leave the workplace (the salaries were received in cash), the money was exchanged. The transactions were done by *dealers* – persons engaged in illegal foreign currency exchanges. That kind of illegal operation was taking place everywhere, in the streets, marketplaces, gates, front entrances or street passages (Ljuboja 1995: 161–162):

> The flourishing of the street *dealer* transactions is the result of the combined action of several additional factors: state and monetary policy, semi-legalization through the involvement of banks in these businesses, hyperinfla-

[2] Gordana Vukanović's research on ex-Yugoslav refugees in Great Britain, Serbia and Montenegro offers a detailed insight into the problems this population was facing and into their life stories. For more information, see Vuksanović, G. (2001).

> tion without a precedent in the modern world, and poverty that has affected broad segments of society. (…) In the *dealing* network there were stores, craft shops, private boutiques, coffee shops, even some public institutions involved (Ljuboja 1995: 162).
>
> The change in the street exchange rate is the result of the operation of an established system, the basic components of which are the amount of money available and the speed of news spreading, which is almost inexplicably transmitted from one end of the city to the other (Ljuboja 1995: 163),

Speaking about the psychological impact that the hyperinflation, the isolation and the sensation of living in a chaotic society with an inverted way of functioning had on people, Gordana Ljuboja noticed that this combination of factors erased one of the most important requisites of discerning, classifying, and valuating the element of reality, which is the dimension of time (Ljuboja 1995: 165):

> The only thing we depose of is one endless present in which dominates the hyperproduction of experience, a powerful avalanche of events that do not find reflection in human consciousness and mind. An important factor and causative agent of that state of mind is the inflation, which, when it gets out of control, starts gaining space and modifying all spheres of life, without exception. At the beginning it happens imperceptibly, almost as a game; with time it becomes more perceivable and at the end it reaches the very basic human mental functions as it is the perception of time. The time that is not measured by days, hours and minutes, but by the changes in the value of the German mark does not pass towards the future. In spite of the nervous and rhythmic dynamics, it is immobile and stays in the present. The well-known saying that the time is money should be understood as mathematical equation in which both sides can switch places since it does not change the equation: the money is time. The common measure of all things is simultaneously the measure and the unit of time measurement. And as long as the time ticks, standstill as gangrene or a time bomb, my *dealer* acquaintance will keep on standing in the street offering and exchanging foreign currencies and pronouncing from time to time a lucid cry: "What am I? A man without a job and profession. A bloody street person!"

The extremely high Gini coefficient of socio-economic inequality reached 37, 8 (Bolčić 2002a: 40) and there was a huge economic difference between the minority who profited financially from the war and sanctions and the majority of population who found themselves in extreme precariousness since the middle class was dragged into poverty (Milić 2006: 61). The vision about the future inside the country was pessimistic and gloomy. The highly educated young people were looking for ways to get visas to Western countries and emigrate, which was complicated and hard to achieve.

The criminal groups were the only segment of society which largely benefited from the situation, since they seemed to be best prepared and skilled for functioning in the illegal profit zone.

> They were those who had money, fancy cloths, expensive cars, sexy looking girls, money to pay abundant restaurant bills, make big parties with live music … they were the masters of the money and didn't have to hide it… (A. T. 1968, male).

The almost complete criminalization of the society quickly brought the criminal groups into the limelight. They imposed themselves as a model of those who "knew how". The subculture of the "new rich" popped out from their more or less closed circles and threatened to become dominant. One of the markers of that culture was the turbo-folk[3] music. Its stars and their hits were promoted by the mainstream media as part of the "bread and circuses" agenda launched in order to control the social dissatisfaction. Another facilitating factor was that it appealed to (para)military groups and bearers of the war culture, since they shared the same traits of folkloric vitality and masculinity.

Silvano Bolčić describes the Serbian society of the '90s as a "deconstructed society" – a society which ceased to exist, with "emptiness of basic social institutions" (factories which do not produce, shops which do not sell, banks without money etc.) and the transfer of their functions to the elements of "para-reality" (dealers as para-financial mediators, black-market selling stands as para-shops…). He describes it as a society in which people generally neglected and broke the law and social rules, the society of persons who had lost their social position and any meaningful social role and who lived in a culture of "bare survival" with "careless and destructive individualism" (Bolčić 1994: 139–145). Bolčić also noticed that this sociocultural environment created an ambient of lost confidence in both people and institutions, in which the members of (the previously existing) society "massively turn 'their back' to each other, interrupting human communication (…) [since]

[3] Generally, 1994 is accepted as a year in which the turbo-folk genre was created with the release of Ivan Gavrilić's hit "200 na sat" ("200 per hour"), in which the neo-folk style of singing is combined with the sound of accordion mixed with the samples of the techno dance hit "No limit" by the band *Two Unlimited* (see Đurković 2013: 244; Kulenović and Banić Grubišić 2019: 51). Although for almost twenty years the turbo-folk music was perceived by the scholars as a music style opposed to the western music, in the last ten years this position was questioned and even seen as an obstacle to understanding the processes of changes in the Balkan popular music styles. Miša Đurković called attention to the fact that this opposition is an artificial construct created as a "reflection of ideological discourses" and that we cannot talk about coherent, isolated and opposed music styles at all, since they were all shaped as intensively interrelated, hybrid and complex music phenomena (Đurković 2013: 233); he even questions the adequacy of the generally accepted term *turbo-folk* because "it does not relate to any specific music form" and proposes the term *neo-folk* as its substitute (Đurković 2013: 235–236).

when the 'basic confidence' in almost any 'other' except in your 'closest ones' is destroyed" (Bolčić 1994: 141).

Many examples of "destructive individualism" can be found in the anecdotes and memories of my conversation partners, as well as clear indicators of lost confidence in institutions and non-reliance on them, the lack of predictability of the outcomes of the everyday social interactions and the stories with only several stable characters who can be marked as "trustworthy persons" (mother, father, or some other family member, a friend). However, in all the testimonies there is a dominant memory of living and developing survival strategies within small communities of people without whom those strategies would not be successful.

Survival strategies

The feeling of insecurity and mistrust in people and institutions created a need to retreat into the microsocial circles of family, close friends and trusted contacts. That strategy provided a stronger sense of security, solidarity and support. The hardships of everyday life, especially those related to battling inflation and being informed about how, where and what to do in order to achieve the basic prerequisites of survival were too challenging for individuals who did not have that kind of social capital and were unable to accept the changes happening at a galloping pace:

> I remember that at some point people in my neighborhood started committing suicides... every 7–10 days somebody would jump from a window or from the top of the building… almost always elderly people who lived alone. I guess they just could not adapt… did not know how to live in those circumstances and were too proud to ask constantly for other people's help (T. A. 1968, male).

One of the major survival strategies consisted of finding some additional source of income – the data from 1994 show that one half of the population had one additional job (a person would go to after the regular working day) in the public, private or informal sector. It could be a formal or informal extra job, work within the informal and grey economy, agriculture (if the family had members living in a village, or had some piece of land) or some kind of home production for personal use (Milić 2006: 64–75), trade or exchange.

> My husband inherited some land in Srem[4], which helped us a lot. For three or four years we grew watermelons there, which provided us an important extra income, but then we realized it was too complicated for us since we lived in Belgrade and the gasoline was an issue at that time, so we decided to rent the land to a local farmer and it turned to be a better solution, since

[4] A region in the northwest of Belgrade.

> the farmers would pay us in what they produced… we always had enough flour and beans. (K. O. 1943, female)
>
> I had three different jobs. At home, I started making costume jewlery which I was selling while I was working for an art dealer – selling paintings and graphics in the shopping zone of Merkator. That was during the day. At night, I was selling journals and daily press at the floating clubs and restaurants by the river. At some point my mother started making stuffed toys and I was selling that also, together with the paintings and my handmade jewelry. (A. T. 1968, male)

The greater the number of family members were able to earn some extra money, the lesser financial pressure the family experienced. Numerous and multigenerational households had the benefit of having access to a more extensive social network of acquaintances, which was of utmost importance for the exchange of information and goods – until the very end of the '90s there was no Internet connections and mobile phones.

During her ethnographic research among *dealers* Gordana Ljuboja noticed that they came from various social backgrounds:

> He was electrician and plumber by profession, but he left his job three years ago to engage fully in foreign currency exchange (…) before, he did it as an extra income while working at his regular job, but the salary became so low that it did not make sense to put effort and time at doing his job anymore. He realized that "it is better to be on the street than to go to work" (Ljuboja 1995: 162).
>
> People of different characters and moral standards go to the streets to do this job. Their motives and reasons to take this decision also differ. Students and secondary school pupils do the *dealing* in order to get money for their studies, or for pocket money for going out and getting cigarettes. The same job can be done by people whose stakes and goals are much bigger and who do not have existential problems or hardships in their lives. There are people who work for themselves and those who work for someone else. Today, without any problem, anybody can become a *dealer*. A sufficient condition is that one has an initial sum of 50 German marks that he can put into circulation and invest with an almost certain profit of ten percent. (Ljuboja 1995: 163)

Ljuboja also noticed that the complexity and risks associated with the *dealers'* transactions required team work, mutual protection and professional solidarity among the *dealers* (Ljuboja 1995: 163–165). This rule can be applied to all other widely practiced grey economy activities, since they all involved risks related to functioning in the illegal zone. Operating in small groups of trusted people was an essential prerequisite of success.

The barter increasingly became a new type of commerce. People exchanged one type of goods/services for another: a table for potatoes, a TV set for a freezer, the repair of a washing machine for fixing clothes.

> Our boiler and washing machine were pretty old and they would break down from time to time. As it was almost impossible to fix them because there were no original or at least usable spare parts on the grey market, my mom, who was a very good seamstress, would sew or repair the cloths in exchange for fixing the broken appliance and make it run at least for some extra months. (D. T. 1972, female)

The strategy of retreating into smaller groups of friends and acquaintances did not relate only to the struggle for economic survival, but also to the cultural needs of specific segments of urban population which differed from each other on the basis of a series of cultural markers. Roughly speaking, the identities of those groups were shaped around three categories of binary oppositions: 1) the prewar city inhabitants and the newcomers; 2) the new-rich and the others; 3) the bearers of prewar urban cultural models and those of rural background.

The relation based on the opposition *prewar inhabitants* vs. *newcomers* was created by the perception of the prewar inhabitants of Belgrade that the city was suddenly 'invaded' by people speaking other ex-Yugoslav dialects and coming from the war zones. The refugees made the largest part of newcomers, but there were also those coming from and going back to the war lines – of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – and who were the bearers of the authentic war culture, described by Graham Seal on the example of the folklore of WWI soldiers:

> Central to this culture was the sense of shared suffering and interest in survival that held men together and sustained them through the darkest experiences of the war. As a culture it was profoundly masculine, single-minded in the imperative to survive, violent, vulgar, and savagely satirical. But it could also be sentimental, nostalgic, and even 'soft' or emotional. It ran on rumor, folk belief, crude self-entertainments, and food and drink, when they were available. Its modes and sentiments were blackly and bleakly humorous, chattily complaining, and communal (Seal 2013: 178).

In Belgrade of the '90s one could easily recognize them since they were dressed up in uniforms or in military pants or jackets.

Although the *newcomers* were of heterogeneous sociocultural backgrounds, the majority of them came from rural areas and were not accustomed to the life in a big city and to its social and cultural rules. The refugees mainly relied on the communities of their refugee countrymen and on relatives and friends from Belgrade, if they had any. They were a vulnerable population who found themselves in a new and unknown surrounding struggling to survive without basic premises. Many of them were still mourning their lost ones or were torn by worries about those members of the family who disappeared or stayed behind in their places of origin.

The new-rich were war profiteers, black economy prominent figures and associated persons from the world of show business. They were the masters of the mainstream media narratives and those who imposed new cultural models belonging to

the subculture of the criminal groups – their language, behavior, haircuts, dressing codes (expensive sportswear, Diesel jeans, large golden chains, track jackets and sweatshirts tucked into the pants, pants tucked into socks), and turbo-folk music. On the symbolic level, this group also included all those young people who accepted the markers of this subculture – which shared many elements with the British *chav* related to other music styles such as hip-hop and *dance*.

At the other extreme there were the bearers of the subcultures which existed in the prewar urban culture of Belgrade and whose markers of subcultural identity were closely linked to the music they listened to (rock, pop, punk, funk, ska, heavy metal, jazz, new wave, etc.). Music taste was always an important element of subcultural differentiation among youth in the prewar Belgrade (Prica 1991). The cultural division between these two groups of Belgrade young population seemed irreconcilable. They did not like mixing with each other and called the others with pejorative names: *padavičari* ('the epileptics' – disrespectful name for the bearers of pop-rock culture, who were perceived as "deep thinkers", always worried and depressive) and *dizelaši* ('the diesels' – reference to the *dizelaši* favorite jeans brand). The differentiation between these groups (which were not homogenous either) had many layers, but at its roots it was primarily based on the dichotomy between those who embraced the cultural contents of the new criminalized reality and participated in it willingly and those who were resilient (often disgusted with it) and who preferred to stand back adopting the strategy of living in small subcultural bubbles:

> I realized at some point that the only safe place to go out at that time… the place where there were always normal people… were jazz clubs. For some reason *they* [*dizelaši* culture] could not stand jazz… I observed them several times when they would get in and choose a table… very soon they would become nervous, start feeling unpleasant… you could see it clearly from their facial expressions… they would quickly drink up what they had ordered – if they stayed long enough to order something at all – and they would leave. As I observed this several times, I realized those were the places for going out and at the same time feeling that it will be a sure escape from their presence (D. M. 1969, male).

During the '90s, the members of the so called *padavičari* groups started feeling marginalized and culturally isolated due to the dominancy of *dizelaši* and rural culture carriers and lived within small groups of friends and acquaintances with whom they shared the same music taste and understanding of what they considered esthetically and morally acceptable.[5]

[5] A good testimony of the situation in which rock musicians found themselves during the '90s is the documentary *Geto – tajni* život *grada* (Geto – the secret life of the city), released in 1995 in B92 production and directed by Ivan Markov and Mladen Matičević. The narrator is Goran Čavajda – Čavke (1962–1997), the drum player of the two well-known ex-Yugoslav bands, *Električni orgazam* and *Babe*. He describes Belgrade during 1991–1995 as an unrecognizable city for him (who was from Belgrade) and the feeling of depression, bitterness, disappointment and cultural isolation.

The differentiation between the mentioned groups has been roughly presented here, since the identification of one individual with a group was not always unilineal – there were refugees from big cities with urban lifestyle, or persons from Belgrade who were linked to paramilitary and war profiteer groups and used war culture iconography, etc. Besides, the number and the variety of groups were certainly much bigger. Those mentioned appeared recurrently in the talks with my conversation partners and can illustrate the ambient in the city during the '90s, as well as the potentially existing tensions and reduced communication between them. It should be noticed that the functioning within small groups was not only done due to the destroyed social institutions, but also due to cultural differences. Although the groups were small, their interconnection was essential for the fast and broad flow of information – it was a time when there was no Internet and until the end of the '90s hardly anybody had a mobile phone. As the groups were interconnected, they actually operated on the principle of the system of connected vessels. They were an important element of the survival strategy through which negative sensations like the feeling of insecurity, mistrust, loneliness, incapability to learn fast enough about the quickly changing reality etc. were amortized. At the same time those small idiocultural groups were the social framework within which useful information, knowledge and experience were generated and exchanged in the form of specific embargo-war folklore.

The embargo-war folklore

Within the small but interconnected idiocultural groups emerged specific embargo-war folklore as a flow of responses of the group to the everyday events, surrounding phenomena, news and challenges. The exceptions are the students' protests of 1992 and 1996/1997 and the NATO bombings in 1999, during which the folklore circulated within large population united in a common political effort.

The folklore of the '90s in Belgrade had different communicational functions: informative, expressing emotions, political and social critique. It served as a channel of controlled liberation from psychological tensions by giving humorous comments on the surrounding reality. At the same time, it transmitted knowledge and ideas on how to make ends meet, etc. Within the embargo-war culture the dominant folkloric forms were jokes, urban legends, anecdotes, the "embargo cousin" recipes that circulated by word of mouth, new epic chronicles in verse thematising the war, protest slogans, street art, graffiti, etc.

Jokes

Jokes were a dominant folklore genre and an important channel for liberating accumulated tension through laughter. The war, the life on the frontline, the hyperinflation, politicians, smuggling, the prototypes of the opposed (sub)culture and all kind of phenomena which sprung from the distorted social and economic order were present in jokes, establishing, at least for a moment, the sense of superiority

and control over the chaotic and threatening reality. Coming from the pool of the war folklore, jokes were often full of black humour, but generally, many were thematising the war:

> The Americans brought Tuđman, Izetbegović and Milošević to Dayton, put them into a hall with 10.000 parrots and said that among the parrots there was only one male – the one who discovers which one it is will get Bosnia. Franjo [Tuđman] started observing carefully, but got tired – nothing. Alija [Izetbegović] was checking and checking, but – zero. Then Sloba [Slobodan Milošević] came and said to the parrots:
> – "Comrades[6] parrots, I am Slobodan Milošević!
> – Get off my dick!

Anything else could also be a topic of a joke. Plenty of them were about *dizelaši*, women sponsored by them, Chuck Norris, *padavičari*, human relations or national characteristics, like this one about the national obsession with basketball:

[Michael] Jordan's running through Rakovica [Belgrade suburb] and asks an old woman:

> – Old woman, is that a [tram number] three?
> – No, Jordan, you've stepped the line.
> [Џордан трчи кроз Раковицу, сретне бабу и пита је:
> – Баба,, је л› оно била „тројка"?
> – Није, Џордане, нагазио си линију.]

Urban legends

The situation in which everybody was aware that the projection of reality coming through the mainstream media differed from reality and that there were many hidden events and processes going on favoured the circulation of rumours and urban legends. During the '90s many of them thematized war events and prominent figures of the criminal underground, as those about the life and death of Đorđe Božović Giška (1955–1991), a prominent and controversial figure of Belgrade's prewar underground (cf. Trubarac Matić 2018: 171). One of the urban legends was telling about the origin of the *dizelaši* practise/style to tuck their jackets into the pants and then pants into the socks. According to it, Knele (1971–1992), a legendary Belgrade gangster, popularized it by using it as a tactic to ensure that his gun would always slide into his socks while running away from the police.

Anecdotes

Ephemeral anecdotes were an important genre for transmitting knowledge and experience. The "know-how" information was often told in the form of anecdotes,

[6] 'Comrades' is the way communists address each other. It is an allusion to the communist ideology to which Slobodan Milošević stayed faithful until the very end.

which would be retold to other people and spread by word of mouth. After several retellings the anecdote would be dissolved and only the instruction would remain:

> I needed to go to the hairdresser. I had the money to do it before going to work, but I didn't have enough time to do it. If I went after my work, the price would be much higher, so I went to the hairdresser before my work, paid and agreed that I would come in the late afternoon. The hairdresser said it was ok with her (N. N. 1964, female).

Through strange, absurd, funny situations described in anecdotes people were learning how to exchange money as fast as possible when receiving salary, how to smuggle goods, how to behave and what to say at a Western country embassy, etc.

"Embargo cousin" recipes

There existed a specific genre of embargo-cousin recipes which emerged from the need to overcome the shortages or the high prices of ingredients. The recipes were transmitted by word of mouth from one woman to another, normally within the neighbourhood, friends and relatives. They had many variants since they would constantly be changed or adapted depending on one's creativity and the available ingredients at home. Among the most famous recipes of that time were the "embargo cake" (without eggs, milk or butter), the "embargo meat balls" made out of old bread and just 100 – 200g of meat for a family of four persons, the "embargo mayonnaise" made without eggs, "embargo chestnut cake" (without chestnuts, potatoes were used instead), or a famous recipe on how to make 10 litres of orange juice and orange jam with only 4 oranges.

This culinary folklore developed as a response to extreme precariousness within a frame of oral communication and as a part of survival strategies.

Epic chronicles

The epic chronicles in decasyllable verses sung to the *gusle*[7] were a part of a much broader phenomenon of war folklore, which embraced a lot of different genres: jokes, anecdotes, songs, etc. They were brought to Belgrade by people who had come from the war zone regions. In the '90s, the central area of the city (Terazije, Knez Mihailova street) was full of their poorly improvised sales stands with the illegal or improvised-studio production copies of CDs and audio cassette recordings of *guslars*. Some of these songs thematized the events from the frontline, some celebrated the dominant personalities of the wartime, such as the general Ratko Mladić or Radovan Karadžić – the former President of the Republic of Srpska.[8]

[7] *Gusle* (pluralia tantum) are traditional one stringed music instruments to which epic poems are sung.

[8] This branch of epic chronicle was discussed in terms of the (ab)use of *gusle* singing for political purposes. For more details about the polemics regarding *gusle* which became dynamic during the '90s and the first decade of the 21st century, see Trubarac Matić 2018; Trubarac Matić 2019.

The form of the epic chronicals of the '90s, the ideas expressed, their ideological, functional and other characteristics were very heterogeneous: elegiac odes about the fellow soldiers killed in battles, family members lost in the war or children killed in ethnic cleansing or during the NATO bombings; chronicles of particular battles, events, heroic deeds, etc. For many people coming from the war zones listening and performing gusle songs was an important way of participating in the shared truth common to the members of the group, which was not only an element of a shared identity with homogenizing power, but an important channel for coping with grief and loss. Articulating pain through a specific, structurally defined poetic form – proximate to everyday life yet sufficiently displaced from it – enabled a controlled encounter with pain and its channeling into a symbolically coherent frame of meaning (Trubarac Matić 2018: 170). This element of cultural capital rooted in centuries old oral tradition of singing to the gusle can also be seen as an idiocultural practice needed in the times of extreme precariousness, vulnerability and limited self-defense (cf. Butler 2004: 29) in order to frame human loses as real in order to be socially recognized (cf. Butler 2004: 32).

Protest slogans, street art and graffiti

Graffiti and street art were an important medium of freedom of expression and speech. Street art was a form through which an anonymous artist could express ideas and emotions, exposing them in public spaces and calling the spectator to pay attention. In an everyday atmosphere of violence induced by the war, it was a channel for expressing non-verbal and sometimes subtle messages.

As a genre, graffiti are a cheap way in which a person who is in a weak social position can say something in a public place and convey his/her message effectively. They gained specific importance in Belgrade during the '90s as a "symbolic form of resistance" (Antonijević 2002: 280). All kinds of messages were there to express political and social critique, give funny or bitter comments, launch the voice of protest, as it was mainly the case during the NATO bombing in 1999 and during all the massive political protests in 1992, 1996 and 1997.[9] Normally subversive of the mainstream narrative, graffiti and protest slogans also open the possibility for a kind of "wall discussions" – passersby can leave their own comments with a spray or a marker. By the end of the first year of the Students' protest of 1996/1997, a group of anonymous Belgrade University students published a book *Buka u modi* (Noise in Fashion) – a title borrowed from a famous hit of a Belgrade cult band *Disciplina ki*čme (Backbone Discipline) which had become one of the unofficial anthems of the protests. This publication has a representative number of protest slogans and graffiti, such as:

[9] For more information on students' protests in Belgrade during the '90s, see: Babović et al. 1997; Čupić 1998; Delić and Nikolić 1997; Gorunović and Erdei 1997; Milić and Čičkarić 1998; Petrović Trifunović 2017.

Marsovci, dajte nam naftu! (Martians, give us oil!) – graffiti

Isključite TV – uključite mozak! (Turn off your TV – turn on your brain!) – graffiti

Ovoj mladosti je potrebna zemlja! (This youth needs a country!) – graffiti

Cogito ergo ambulo – protest slogan, Students' protest 1996/1997

AMERICAN PEOPLE HAVE: Bill Clinton, Steve WONDER, Johnnie CASH and Bob HOPE!

SERBIAN PEOPLE HAVE: Slobodan Milošević, no WONDER, no CASH and no HOPE! – protest slogan, during students' protest 1996/1997

Kolumbo, jebem te radoznala! (Columbus, fucking curious you were!) – protest slogan against the NATO bombigs led by the USA.

Nato – nacistička američka teroristička organizacija (NATO – Nazi American Terrorist Organization) – protest slogan against the NATO bombigs

Sorry, we didn't know it was invisible! – protest slogan, during the NATO bombigs (a reference to the shootdown of the Americam 'invisible' airplain F-117A)

Conclusion

During the 1990's Serbia and its capital Belgrade experienced a profound crisis marked by war, economic sanctions, hyperinflation, and the collapse of social institutions. In this context, a specific wartime embargo culture and its folklore emerged as an idiocultural response to the new circumstances of life. This folklore appeared within small, but interconnected idiocultural groups and represented an important segment of a culture of survival in the times of extreme precariousness. Created in a zone of interrelation and exchange of social and cultural capital of individuals / groups it was an important tool for generating and spreading the know-how information, enhancing solidarity, enabling psychological relief and symbolic re-establishing of a system of values. At the same time, it was a powerful channel for expressing protest, social critique, ethic and aesthetic disapproval, and served as a tool of identity consolidation. It also called for action and activism being a platform for public discussions in a struggle over different ideological standpoints. Gaining and shaping knowledge and strategies of survival was one of the important functions of the folklore during the '90s. It empowered the members of the group to face the challenges in a collapsing society during wartime Yugoslavia.

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