In the Shadow of the Serbian Paramilitary Units: Narrative Patterns about the Role of Paramilitary Units in Former Yugoslav Conflict

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This article offers several basic data about Serbian paramilitary units employed in the armed conflict of the 1990’s during the decomposition of the former Yugoslavia, with the goal to depict the transformation of the representation of the paramilitary unit members and their leaders essentially through Serbian media. Once, at the beginning of the conflicts, represented as the “saviors”, “protectors” of the Serbian nation, ever present as main figures of the public life of the 90’s—they have fallen into oblivion after a decade. Their most notorious leaders are either dead or in prison. After the fall of the Milošević regime (2000) their involvement in war crimes, looting and genocide reached Serbia. From being divinized gradually they become diabolized. The contemporary events and happenings in Serbia are explained in the light of the past of these paramilitary units.

Keywords: Paramilitary; Serbia; War Crimes; Genocide; Former Yugoslavia; Veterans

Introduction

The fieldwork for this paper was done in the period 2005-2010. Statements and press releases of public personages (politicians, journalists, artists, etc.) which appeared during that period in the local media and on the web portals of independent media about several events on the political scene in Serbia were collected and analyzed in an ethnographic manner, in comparison and in the prism of the past events and media releases during the time of the Milošević era.

In a relatively short period of time—a decade and in some cases even less (the last conflict of the Yugoslav federation decomposition was in 1999)—the “guys” from various paramilitary units which were abundantly covered in the local media of the 90’s turned from “good ones” into “bad ones”. After providing several basic data about the Serbian paramilitary units, the article examines the shift of narrative patterns (public opinion, labeling, metaphors) on these units. Seen as heroes, amply exploited in the Milošević-era media during the years of the conflict of former Yugoslavia, a decade after the conflict they have fallen into oblivion: only few cases were prosecuted in the mean-time for war-crimes and they sole existence and the actual role they played in various war crimes and genocide still uncovered to the Serbian public, they became a synecdoche of the Milošević-era.

The ambition of the article is to analyze the shift in the pattern of labeling and national imagery of this group of individuals: in the first stance the story about the Serbian paramilitaries falls into a line of debate about how images from the national history, in the Serbian case, from the epic songs and stories are becoming visible and exploited during national mobilization. I argue that the actual settings of wartime which largely contributed to the exploitation of national and epic imagery also contributed to their downfall in peacetime for an obvious reason among others: the strive—victory and conquest of “Serbian territories”—was not attained. In the process of “de-armament” strictu sensu of the political currents in Serbia and de-agitation after a decade of war-cycles which goal was to “maintain the unity of the Serbian nation” the stories about these paramilitary units, former heroes of the nation became “unusable” elements in the narratives about the Serbian nation and the Serbian state.

Theoretical Background

Already at the beginning of the 90’s Ivan Colović, a Serbian ethnologist who analyzed press articles and its relation to the Serbian folklore and in this manner marvelously dissect the Serbian society at the time of fervent nationalism of the Milošević-era put in the pivotal place, among the “Serbian constellation of narratives” or narrative leitmotifs the narratives about the “Serbian warrior and hero” (Colović, 2000a). Inspired from folklore, epic poetry and national (pseudo)history, these narrative leitmotifs were abundant in political and public speeches, press articles and individual stories “about oneself and others” about “the Serbian nation and its destiny” (Colović, 2000a, 2000b; Žanić, 2007; Živković, 2011, etc.).

At the beginning of the Milošević-era, the popularization and the diffusion of ‘national heroes’ often compared or spoke of as the ‘embodiments of ancient heroes’ from epic poetry and national pseudo-history was largely exploited in the regional ethnological literature (Colović in case of Serbia, Žanić in case of Serbia etc.) and was the topic of numerous newspaper articles, tv-shows and even comics books (Colović, 2000a). Taken as
role-images for the young generations they have obtained a tremendous amount of media attention and support which proportionally declined as one armed conflict went by. During the 90’s in former Yugoslavia, and consecutively in Serbia, efforts to sustain in various manners the process of a creation of a nation-state (Banac, 2009) were tainted with fervent nationalism which remained ever since interlinked and are used still in everyday politics in present-day Serbia.

The war-time which was produced by these efforts was such a “sacred time” (Éliade, 1967) when acts of mythic heroes were revoked and were distributed to those individuals which were prepared (eagerly) to enter those “sacred time” when nation-state building was scheduled.

Exploiting the link between festivity and war on the footsteps of Roger Caillois and George Bataille who drew striking formal correspondences between festivities and war as prominences of excess, the waste, the destruction the flagrant violations of rules, laws and taboos was already done by Mattijs van de Port (1998) who did fieldwork in the city of Novi Sad exactly in that phase of the mediatic glory of Serbian paramilitaries. And although his book mentions these armed paramilitary men who filled those times the restaurants with Gipsy music on those time in Novi Sad, he clearly compares the circumstance of the war to a ‘feast’ of exuberances of all kind in which “[…] people who in festive moods took the role of the barbarians” (van de Port, 1998: p. 17).

In such ‘sacred times’ in which no rules were to be respected anymore, the rise of often anti-social (criminal) individuals (Pavićević & Patić, 2007) willing to assume the role of the “barbarians” who accomplish the bloody job of defending the nation was logical.

Taken from another angle, Živković (Živković, 2011) examines another narrative leitmotif widespread in Serbian public and intellectual life of those years which sustained tremendously the mythical rise of the Serbian paramilitary units members: the rise and fall of the Serbian nation was interpreted by local intellectuals all the long of the 20th century as the struggle between two “spirits”, two faces of the Serbian character embodied in its populations according to its natural habitat: the highlanders and the lowlanders. The highlanders being materially-oriented, living in tribal spirit which is genuine and un-spoiled by the (à priori corruptible) civilizational influences (of Europe) and the lowlanders who are soft, intellectually (pro European) oriented, spoiled by the civilization and having a rayalšt—(servant) mentality (Živković, 2011). Of course, the members of the numerous Serbian paramilitary units fit exactly to that imaginary un-submissive mentality of the highlander haiduš (Bougarel, 1999).

While they fit perfectly to play a bloody role of the “sacred times” of wartime, why were they than discarded in peacetime?

**Times of Glory**

In an article of the first edition of his marvelous book “The politics of symbols” (1997) while analyzing the metamorphosis of football fans into warriors—volunteers of the armed conflicts which raged during the 90’s on the territories of former Yugoslavia, Ivan Čolović (Čolović, 2000a) predicted the victory of the “hooligan-tribes” and the creation of a new “vandal-warrior aristocracy”. This book, among others, was translated to several languages and was well received by the public interested in the tumultuous Balkans of the 90’s. The years that followed the publication of that book proved that Čolović was right: the “vandal—warrior aristocracy” forged in the cycles of war during the first half of the 90’s reigned the Serbian medias, the tabloids, the so called “jet-set” of the major cities.

Such a metamorphosis of football fans into paramilitary “soldiers” described by Čolović in that book is a known phenomenon analyzed for its relation with genocide (Alvarez, 2006: p. 14). The young, mainly unemployed sport zealots transformed into “fervent patriots” ready to kill for “higher purpose” are unfortunately one of the main vectors, a “perfect tool” for genocide and ethnic cleansing (as f.i. in the case of the Interhamwe in Rwanda). In Serbia’s case Arkan and his unit called the “Tigers” is the best known example. This paramilitary unit was composed from football hooligans and football fans “transformed” almost overnight into professional soldiers, and later constituted the hard-core of several other paramilitary units.

The “warrior aristocracy” was omnipresent in public life, establishing a social tendency in looks, behaving, ruling in every manner with the help of the media of Serbian society. The leaders of different Serbian paramilitary units had the status of public figures and were the center of the public curiosity. Stories, anecdotes about their “glorious” past during the wars (1991-1995) and especially their after war lifestyles were published in tabloids with a wide circulation. Biographies of the paramilitary leaders were published and sold out in bookstores. Some of the leaders were regular guests in television broadcasts with a status similar of a pop-celebrity (Čolović, 2000a; Vivod, 2009). The public was keen of all possible information about them: what car do they drove, what clothes do they wore, where they vacationed, etc. They represented an image of success, and figures looked upon by the youth. Money, political connections and the nimbus of loyalty to “serbianhood” followed them.

And then, just before of the fall of the Milošević regime (October 2000)—one main paramilitary figure, the leader of the “Tigers” Arkan was assassinated (January 2000). A couple of other known paramilitary leaders, mafia bosses, were assassinated also in a short period of time. Those who did survive were shifted from the center of the public attention: less and less information about them reached the public.

After the fall of the Milošević regime, while the new gov-
criminal past as the “sins of a youth” (Colović, 2000: p. 181). 

Nevertheless, the open talk about their misdeeds and criminal activities of looting, genocide, war crimes and rape were printed in the headlines of newspapers or reported by television channels only after the fall of the Milošević. Although there was almost no open public debate in any form about their role in war crimes, genocide committed or the support of these troops by the Serbian (during Milošević) government, and since the fall of the regime small efforts have been made to reveal the past of these units, the chat rooms, blogs on internet were (and remain) the battle field of the supporters, the fans of these “heroes of the nation” and the ones who are convinced that the troops were the main vector, the tool of the ethnic cleansing, the genocide in the former territories of the late Yugoslavia. For the first group these veterans remain popular, untouchable and their reputation uncontested: the mission of these units was the protection of “serbianhood” and for the sake of this mission the members of these units were and remain untouchables.

For the second group they are the source of all evil behind what happened during the armed conflicts of the decomposition of the country. After the fall of the Milosevic-regime negative events which shocked the Serbian public are explained, interpreted—especially by the independent media—in the perspective of this very dubious past, as an unwanted “heritage” left by these units. The origins of the contemporary events are investigated through the looking glass of the ideology of the past which instigated the formation of such units, the motivation of the paramilitaries to act as they did, and consecutively the admiration of the Serbian public mirrored in mediatic cover they enjoyed. After a decade of the overthrow of the Milosevic regime, these units and their former members are the embodiment of the link between the past and the present.

I argue that at present we are witnessing a third phase of the public image of these veterans: the current, especially the negative events are interpreted à posteriori in the light of not so “glorious” past, which is more and more reviled publically. The myth of these “warriors”, “heroes and protectors of the nation” and their leaders linger on in the present, suffering a radical alteration: from being the protectors and mythical heroes they become the quintessence of violent behavior and intolerance, the residuum of the nationalist regime. What was at the time of Milošević reign a “virtue”, a socially accepted and well seen behavior is at present finger-pointed, analyzed as a social pathology.

The explanation offered through the independent media claims that the roots of newest events are in the military virtue popularized in the past, the ethno myths, the thinking and behaving patterns inherited from this former regime, perpetrated by the paramilitary units and maintained by their contemporary followers (journalist, writers, sportsmen, etc.), with whom the past Tadić-government was unable (or unwilling) to dissociate
itself and the present Nikolić-government is closely linked. A link between the present and the past which is actively created in this manner in the Serbian media, reveals the belief that the wrongdoings made in past still reverberate in the present, following the Serbian nation as an obsessive compulsive behavior which prevent the modernization, the “Europeanization”.

As the events, such as war crimes and genocide, are discovered and revealed every day, the conviction that present society can’t, but yet again, must face the past is growing. In this line of thinking the paramilitary units represent the quintessence of the shady past that the divided public of present has to discover and to face.

In order to scrutinize this argument it would be preferable to mention some facts about the Serbian paramilitary troops engaged during the wars in former Yugoslavia:

There were a surprisingly huge number or paramilitary formations during the wars in former Yugoslavia (1991-1999) from which several—the most notorious ones were the subject of many studies or mentioned as the main vectors of committed war crimes and genocide (Alvarez, 2007; Duffy & Lindstrom 2006; Judah, 1997, etc.). The shocking amount of unities, particularly employed by the Serbian forces pointed toward as if every region had its own paramilitary unit which was employed parallel to the official army in certain period of time.

The United Nations Security Council reported in 1994, that in the conflicts on the territories of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the Republic of Croatia, and to a lesser extent, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 82 “paramilitary organizations” were employed.

Under the definition of the UN Security Council the: Paramilitary organizations exist in several forms. Some are highly-organized groups and operate in several theatres in conjunction with regular military formations. Others are loosely organized and act alone in a single village or on an ad hoc basis. Some of the groups preceded the conflict, others followed it. Still others were formed as the need arose during the conflict. These groups have been organized by the governments or military forces of the warring factions, by political parties, as well as by local police, political, military or community leaders. The members of these paramilitary organizations have been drawn from all walks of life. Territorial Defence forces, local militia and police, local civilians, expatriates, and foreign nationals. According to some reports, the paramilitary organizations also include criminals released from prison solely for the purpose of forming these units.

The paramilitary forces operating in the territory of the former Yugoslavia were classified into four categories: Special Forces, “Militias”, “Paramilitary units”, and “police augmented by armed civilians”.

Fabian Virchow (Virchow, 2007), although he refers to the U.S. militia movements, gives a simple two-word-definition of the term militia which covers well the semantic field of the majority of the paramilitary units employed during the conflict in former Yugoslavia and which are particularly interesting for me: armed “citizenry”.

In my fieldwork I was interested in the members of Serbian paramilitary units which can be put in the last category as “armed citizens”, more correctly, armed s.c. “common individuals” or “actors” of normal situation in a normal situation such as the war, the ones “from segments of a society that are extremely vulnerable to indoctrination into ideologies and practices of violence” (Alvarez, 2006: p. 26).

Fifty five paramilitary groups were operational in support of the Government of Serbia, 13 of Croatia, and 14 were Bosnian Muslim paramilitary units. The Serbian groups were known under various names: several had very “picturesque” names—possibly describing their battle-ideals—such as: the Tigers, the Scorpions, the Panthers, the Wolves, etc.—the names of “animal predators” (Colović, 2000a). Others groups used the names of their leader (i.e. Jovičević—the Jovič-group, Dragina Grupa—the group of Drago) or employed a name a geographical topos indicating their origins (i.e. Bilogoroski Odred—The division from Bilogorje, Kninđže—“Ninja’s from Knin”), or names inspired from history (Armanda, Četnici, Dušan sihni, Garda) (Colović, 2000a. UN report 28. 12.1994). These scenic names reflect a hidden message, an ideology which inspired these units: for instance the ones inspired from toponyms claimed spatial attachment, or those using a “historical” name aimed to maintain a temporal continuity.

The criteria which lead the UN officials to organize the paramilitaries was the actual support which the units got from their “Matrix” (Yugoslavia for the Serb forces, Croatia for the Croats, Bosnia for the Bosnians). The support was in money (in form of salaries), armament and other equipment, such as the vehicles, uniforms, fuel, back up, training bases, and volunteers (Alvarez, 2006; Andrews, 2004; Glaudic, 2009: p. 97). The members of these units were recruited in two manners: informally—through publicity (via the media, newspaper ads (Colović, 2000a), personal contact, friendship, family ties (see testimonies of Scorpions) or formally—i.e. through party membership or organized sport supporters clubs, or drafted

According to some information published in the media (source B92) Nikolić himself was at time a member of a paramilitary unit (White Eagles under the sponsorship of the Serbian Radical party which leader faces trial at the ICTY in The Hague).


idem.

idem.

3Interestingly in the interview of Der Spiegel with Siniša Vučinić the leader of the Serbian Hawks (Srpski Sokoli) paramilitary unit he states that his units is entirely financed from abroad, from the Serbian emigrants (Spiegel 41/1992: 201b) although he adds later that his unit maintain contacts with the regular army (JNA) which “leaves [them] a lot of heavy armament” ...

4Several Serbian political parties had “their own” paramilitary units which were organized, entrained and financed through them. For instance the Serbian Guard (Srpska Garda) was a unit organized by the Serbian Renewal Movement (Srpski Pokret Obnove—SPO) with Vuk Drašković as a political leader (Source: transcript statement: Witness VS-2000 page N14105 (re-sumes) (open session). Cross examination by Mr Seselj; IT-03-67: Seselj[DOC] Public Transcript of Hearing 05 February 2009 (English, 99 Pages) Document Type: Transcript. Date: 05/02/2009. By: Trial Chamber III); Siniša Vučinić the president of the Royalist Movement (Rojalistički pokret) was also the leader of the paramilitary units the Serbian Eagles (Srpski Orlovi) (see Spiegel 41/1992); the Serbian Radical Party (Srpska Radikalna Stranka—SRS) with Vojislav Šešelj (at present on trial for alleged war crimes and possible crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) organized the White Eagles (Beši Orlovi) although Vojislav Šešelj denied his association with this formation: “In previous wars (Bosnia, Croatia) there was a small paramilitary organisation called White Eagles, but the Serb Radical Party had absolutely nothing to do with them.” Testimony of Vojislav Šešelj). Transcript of 23 August 2005, p. 43081, lines 16-18. Nevertheless see: the testimony of the witness VS 1055, a protected witness in the trial of Vojislav Šešelj and see the interview with Siniša Vučinić (a self proclaimed “duke” of the Chetnik Movement), Der Spiegel. 41/1992 201b. author Renate Flottau, among many other documents, and testimonies stating the contradictory.
under command— in case of several professional soldiers who were charged to lead, entraîn the groups or simply to “lift up the professional level” of a unity (see testimony of protected wit- ness K-2 at the Trial of Slobodan Milošević at ICTY).

The groups were constituted from men of different ages, social classes and professional backgrounds. There were originat- ed from: the territories under the conflict (as they like to emphasize “they defended their village, their properties and families”) such as Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, from Serbia (Spiegel 41/1992, testimonies of former Scorpio unit mem- bers)—a country which officially was never at war, a state- ment which was propagated through the machinery of the Milošević regime (Biserko, 1999; Hartmann, 2002) and expatriates—first or second generation of Serbian citizens from abroad16.

After the series of armed conflicts (1991-1999) the former members of paramilitary units were dispersed. Some returned to the territories in which they fought (or rather stayed on the conflicted territories—being originally from there). A great part went to stay in Serbia. There were several reasons for such a migration: one of it was to reunite with their family members who came as refugees during the conflicts, some of them be- cause they had investments on the Serbian territory (f.i. they purchased a property in a form of house, firm, etc.). Many of them actually were originally from Serbia (Spiegel 41/1992). A reason for this relocation was also a fear of retribution: they felt unsecure, that they will be recognized and indicted as war criminals (Vivod, 2009).

In the countries of the former federation—at the time the “enemy”—the names of these units match with “genocide”, “war crimes”. After the conflict, several former Serbian para- militaries were indicted and sentenced as war criminals in local special tribunals (in case of Serbia and BiH, in case of Croatia the local, the županjiški (district) tribunals were reinforced to be able to handle the cases of war crimes), other were accused and condemned in Hague by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

Having the benefit of access to the “great Pantheon” of the local Medias during the 90’s, they were presented in Serbia as the stars, war heroes, the guardians, the defenders of the Ser- bian people and its territories (Colović, 2000; Jansen, 2000). The leading personalities of these troops were present as public figures in the political and in cultural life during the 90’s as f.i. the notorious Ražnatović aka Arkan, Dragan Vasiljević aka Captain Dragan, and others (idem).

For instance, taking the example of the broadcaster Pink, with headquarters in Belgrade which broadcasts nationwide, who had a couple of TV shows in which Arkan (the leader of the Tigers) and his folk singer wife Ceca were regular guest (f.i. in the shows of Milovan Ilić-Minimax)17. Captain Dragan (Dragan Vasiljković)18 the leader of the Kninjaz—Ninja’s from Knin (Kninđe) was impersonated as main figures in a serial of comic books bearing his name (Colović, 2000a). A silver coin was minted with his image. With one side stating that “Terro- rism stops here” and the other side bearing the inscription of “Captain Dragan Fund” (Fond Kapetana Dragan) created in order to help wounded patriots and families of those who died at the front. Djordje Božović aka Giška, the leader of the Ser- bian Guard (Srpska Garda), a paramilitary unit initiated by the Serbian Renewal Party (Srpski Pokret Obnove), was a topic of numerous publications—books, articles and documentaries, as one paramilitary leaders too19—as criminal who was con- verted into a national hero defending the “Serbian cause”.

Most of these formations were dissolved after the conflicts, and the great part of the Serbian paramilitary leaders died after the conflicts—and not from natural causes—only a few re- mained more or less “active” during the peacetime, particularly after the fall of the Milošević’s regime in 2000. Two examples are the Red Berets (Crvene Beretke) or JSO (Jedinica za Speci- jalne Operacije) the Special Operations Units. The leader of this unity Milorad Ulemek-Luković aka Legija, along with a couple of his subordinates, were sentenced to 40 years prison for the murder of the Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003 (supra).

Although there were rumors in Serbia—the Matrix of these units—about the lootings, murders and rape committed by these units during the 90’s, the criminal past of the paramilitary units reached the public in Serbia through the Serbian media only after the fall of the regime (2000). The most shocking evidence of the activities of these units came to the Serbian public via local media when a video tape of the Trnovo/Srebrenica mas- sacre (1995) was broadcasted in 2007 first on B92 Television (the documentary “The Scorpions, a home movie”20). A couple of unit members of the Scorpios murdered, in cold blood, six civilians from whom three were just teenagers. The premedita- tion of this act is clearly evident when one of the unit members asks seemingly the youngest of them if he ever made love (us- ing a vulgar term). When receiving a negative answer the shooter concluded with “And you won’t either”. The “Scorpion” members shot these six individuals with bound hands while making jokes, insisting that the cameraman shoot the whole scene of the execution, delaying the last execution to make sure that the camera’s battery isn’t empty.

The phase of the glorified image perpetuated in the Serbian Medias during the 90’s was over. A special tribunal in Belgrade was made in order to put on trial the individuals who committed war crimes. The IC Tribunal for the FY in Hague has indicted and condemned some members of a couple of Serbian paramilitary units (f.i. White Eagles—massacre of Ovčara-Vukovar/Croatia). Some other former paramilitaries were convicted later in Serbia (the Scorpios, the Red Berets—for the massacre in Trnovo, Srebrenica/Bosnia, and the massacre in Podujevo/Kosovo, the Red Berets for the murder of P.M. Đin- đić).

The denunciations, the testimonies and the videotapes of cold blooded murders revealed in the Serbian press and the televi- sion.

18Results of fieldwork.
17There is an urban legend which says that during one TV show in the Pink television hosted by Minimax which was imagined as “interactive” (viewers were allowed to call and ask question to the guest in the show), one women called to ask Ceca from where she has the seemingly expensive necklace. The women recognized a custom-made necklace from a relative of hers, which was brutally murdered in the territories under the conflict.
19He is accused by the Republic of Croatia of being responsible for soldiers under his command allegedly torturing, beating and killing captured mem- bers of Croatian Army and Police in 1991 in Knin. On 12 April 2007, au- thorities in Sydney granted Croatia’s extradition request. On 3 February 2009 Vasiljković appeal against extradition to Croatia was rejected by the Federal Court of Australia.
sion, and the fact that in the case of the “Scorpions” the material was actually filmed by the unit members, added to the notoriety of these units in Serbia. Nevertheless the spotless “glory” of the war heroes is still undisputable for at least a part of the population. Their popularity is detectable by the number of fans of “groups” or web communities on Facebook, or Youtube postings dedicated to these units. For this part of the population made by “enthusiastic” individuals and the extreme right wing organizations very active in public life of the contemporary Serbia (such as the “Cheek”21 [Obraza], the “National Alignment” [Nacionalni Sjave], the “Serbian Gates” [Dveri Srpske], etc) the paramilitary leaders and the units are the undisputable heroes serving the Serbian national interests.22

Dogs of the State

Since the revelations about their past and actual role during the conflicts, the former paramilitaries are going under a less glamorous chapter of their existence. The frustration about the lost wars, the “lost years” (Vivod, 2009) during which they were battling for the Serbian territories23 which are continuing to shrink endlessly24, the individual and social impoverishment, and the landmark trial of the former Scorpions members (2005-2007)25 changed the perception of how the former paramilitaries are seen, and how they perceive themselves.

During interviews with the veterans of a militia the main theme is regret and nostalgia toward “the good old times”—when these soldiers where feared and respected in Serbia, and when the media glorified them as the “epical heroes” and “the protectors of the nation” (Vivod, 2009). The frustration for being once venerated as the savior of the nation and being considered and rejected nowadays as war-criminal and war-profiteer is often combined with rage pointed toward those whom believed to be responsible for this transformation. They feel that the Serbian state has abandoned them (Vivod, 2009)26.

The veterans of former paramilitary units live better, even now, than the average of Serbian population, although without any (official) financial support from the Serbian state thanks to the financial advantage which they gained during the 90’s by starting some private businesses (opening a shop, developing an export-import activity, etc.).

The wages, paid through unofficial channels during the war-time although officially it was denied that these unit members received any financial compensation (see for more in Spiegel 41/1992), were at that time considerable.27 In fact, the salary

21Cheek is the symbol of honor in the Serbian language f.i. “having no cheek” means that the person has no honor.

22F.i. see interview with Boško Obradović the editor in chief of Dveri Srpske (review of the same name movement) Svetlana Lukić and Svetlana Vučković the 24th of March 2005. http://www.pescanik.net/content/view/1630/61/

23The perception by Serb nationalists of their national space tends to have no relation to the actual extent of Serb-held territory: many still believe that territories such as Dalmatia or Macedonia, whose populations are mostly non-Serb and which were not occupied in the recent war, are nevertheless “Serb lands.” (Hoare, 2006: p. 460).

24The declaration of the independence of Kosovo was seen as another loss of territory.

25In the case of the Scorpions the trial for the massacre of Podujevo in Kosovo started in 2002 and ended in 2004; for the massacre in Trnovo/Srebnica in Bosnia they were trialed 2005-2007.

26The Movement of Serbian Veterans registered as a political party as an effort to accomplish more rights for a part of a society which claims to be forgotten. A general assembly was to be held the 28th of February 2010.

27See testimony of a former Scorpion member in the documentary “Scorpions, a home movie”.

28See statement of General Manojlo Milošanović head of the Republika Srpska Army-VRS in documentary of Filip Švarm Jedinica (The Unit) 2006.

29See testimonies of General Manojlo Milošanović head of the Republika Srpska Army-VRS in documentary of Filip Švarm Jedinica (The Unit) 2006 and the interview Der Spiegel with Sinisa Vicinić.

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uncertain if this term covers the individuals who were drafted in the regular army or it is mixture between the so called “volunteers” and the ones who were conscripts in the regular army. The statements made in the press by the newly registered political party of veterans points toward the second possibility.

The actual Serbian public have a lot of difficulties to face from the past, the deadly 90’s, especially when it comes to the war crimes committed by the paramilitary troops in the name of the Serbian people and the Serbian nation. While grasping, trying to understand the degree of the involvement of these units in series of armed conflicts, the contemporary events are discussed, interpreted in the light of past ideologies which lead to the creation of these paramilitary units, the manner how they acted and in the shadow of the acts they committed in the name of the nation.

Using the independent media and the internet, journalists, writers and thinkers are seeking the roots of unsocial, negative behavior in the military in the military virtues nurtured by the Serbian society during its history, heroic myths, national political ethnomythologies perpetrated in public speeches, through the medias during the past twenty years.

Incidents as for instance the demonstrations turned into hooligan disorder and looting (i.e. the demonstration in February 2008 when the independence of Kosovo was declared), an excessive and violent behavior toward the foreigners, the general xenophobia, acts often committed in the name of “patriotism” are serving as a à posteriori explanation of the events from the past decade. Links are made between the past ideals of a Great Serbia, especially the military ideals which nurtured the men which were between their twenties and forties at the time, and who were ready “to serve the nation” during the 90’s, and even to die for it, who used this pretexts to commit terrible crimes, and between today’s youth which aspires to the same military virtues, but this time “at home”, on their “native soil” where the aggressive conduct, the murdering and looting continues. It is seen as the same conflict, at present, interpreted as a social problem only relocated in time and space by a new generation of perpetrators. Violent behavior carried out in the name of “greater good”, in the name of “family values” and “patriotism” by individuals, football fans or extreme right wing organizations is directly linked with those “values”—now declared as non-values—from the past, embodied perfectly in paramilitary units and its members.

Other events, which shocked the Serbian public such as the scandal of the Crna Reka drug rehabilitation center, the murder of a young French football supporter in Belgrade by a mob (October 2009) or the cancelation of the Belgrade Gay Pride parade only 24 hours before the event because government officials couldn’t ensure public order and the peace and security of the participants (September 2009) are just couple of examples which were decoded by the independent media by taking into account the events of the 90’s.

Even the “outfit” of the former Prime Minister Tadić while visiting the maneuvers of the Serbian regular army (October 2009) motivated a journalist to ask a rhetorical question in the title of his article if “President Tadić is a paramilitary soldier?” (Živkov, 2009) indicating that his taste of clothing may be the sign that his imperatives are far from the values of a militarized civil society which he has been chosen to represent.

The political parties in opposition are using the same arguments to criticize the government. The leader of the League of Vojvodina Social Democrats (Liga socijaldemokrata Vojvodine, LSV) a center-left regionalist social democratic political party in Serbia, Nenad Čanak responded on the question why the Serbian authorities remain inactive on the incidents of the extreme right-wing movement:

The police in Serbia, and not only in Serbia, possess always these informal groups which are serving the state with a false identity card. How much paramilitary, under quotations marks, units had we during the 90’s which ravaged across Bosnia and Croatia, and then at Kosovo, and even here, so you had as a result a beating up of people who attached posters by unnamed individuals. Afterwards it is determined that all of them have official legitimization and that they were members of the Service of the Serbian State Security.

These events are presented as a prolongation of the war crimes committed in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, committed by the same authors—perpetrators or their spiritual “inheritors” for whom they served as an inspiration. The fact that the present government didn’t separate itself from the crimes committed

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52One of my interviewed person picturesquely explained this situation that “the state won’t feed its dogs who were sent to kill for it”.

53http://www.rtvsr.rs/sr_lat/politika/partija-veterana-protiv-martonova-1sv-se-za-unistvu-3391151.html. The president of the In August 2009 the president of the assembly of the city of Zrenjanin was accused by the Party of Veterans for “extremism and disrespect of the Serbian veterans and of the Serbian state” for receiving in his office the representatives of the Croat Society of Belgrade during the period of September-October 2009; the media reported 3 - 4 assaults on foreigners in the capital city of Belgrade during the period of September-October 2009; the media reported that there were no other reasons for these assaults except the fact that these individuals were foreign citizens.

54For instance the song of a prominent Serbian singer-songwriter Đorđe Balašević, popular in countries of the former Yugoslav federation called “Nineties” expresses the public sentiments toward the “deadly nineties”.

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...ed in support of the former regime is an additional proof, an argument for its opponents that the present political elite and its institutions are in fact quiet supporters of the same great-Serbian warmongering ideology which caused almost a decade of suffering of all kind.

We are witnessing the third "stage" of the public image of paramilitary unit members who made a great step, better said "fall" from being divinized and represented as the ideals, role models of the Serbian society to become a symbol of all evil of the past. No more heroes, doubted and feared, ignored by the present government, they occupy a marginalized social role. Their characteristic which were their advantage in the past (criminal past, violent, asocial behavior, etc.) appears to be the main ground of today's criticism and transfers the public to toward a reinterpretation of the past events. Spatial and temporal continuity is constructed with the events and the actors of the past, as if the civil wars are still raging, putting at present the conflicts on the soil of Serbia, which was spared from war on its territory until 1999 when NATO engaged airstrikes against the country.

The warriors, protectors of the weak made from “noble” volunteers, from the group of the so-called "simple people" were the incarnation of archetypes (in Jungian sense) battling for a just cause. The story archetypes in a form of epical heroes, which stepped out from the cycles of epical poetry for the defense of Christianity, the “week ones and the unprotected ones” turned into collective shadows (Sandić & Sandić, 2006). The fact that several of them had a criminal past, made the “sacrifice”, to embrace the role of volunteers and “go off” to protect the weak ones, even more “noble” and attractive. As if this earlier “sin” was a necessary element toward the “correction” which came through joining such a unit, in order for one to become “righteous” in a Christian sense of the term.

The fact that has been discovered in the meantime that they abused their power, situation and status of the “protector and heroes” for looting, rape and crimes makes them at present even more hateful. An a posteriori explanation, that these units were made of football hooligans, criminals and that they were organized, supported and financed by the Milošević regime is an appealing explanation, simple by its mechanism. The criminal activity of these units is considered under the previous paramilitary units. They are the “brothers of the same blood” of the present government, they occupy a marginalized social role. The “sacred times” of war which served for the “correction” which was put in place by others is considered under the previous paramilitary units which had the criminal past, violent, asocial behavior, etc. and that they were used criminals during the Titoist regime to “do the dirty work” (criminal past, violent, asocial behavior, etc.) appears to be the main ground of today's criticism and transfers the public to toward a reinterpretation of the past events. Spatial and temporal continuity is constructed with the events and the actors of the past, as if the civil wars are still raging, putting at present the conflicts on the soil of Serbia, which was spared from war on its territory until 1999 when NATO engaged airstrikes against the country.

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often the substantive “we” (mi) is used abundantly in the articles is expressing the idea of this unity. For the contemporary deadlock in society “they” are the true culprits, for they have committed those acts, those atrocities which discredited the Serbian nation. Furthermore there is a darker shadow which remains almost unmentioned but nevertheless is present in the idea of the failings of nation’s “heroes” which brought dishonor to the nation: they didn’t actually do the job… the territories were lost. The hopes of a “Great Serbia” melted to nothingness.

Allegations are in “vogue” by a part of the media and political parties in oppositions. Unfortunately there is great lack of desire (or courage?) in Serbia to face the past openly and public about what happened during the 90’s. The elements of two main trials which shackled the public (the members of the Scorpions, and the members of the Red Berets for the murder of PM Đinđić) were presented in the press, mainly in the independent press (f.i. Vreme, B92, etc.). However the details about these units, the number of men who were employed in them, the benefits they enjoyed and especially their crimes remain obscure to a great part of the public. Efforts are made by a couple of NGOs (f.i. Women in Black, the Humanitarian Law Center, the Helsinki Committee of Human Rights in Serbia, etc.) which are publishing books, articles, financing the making of documentaries. Unfortunately their work touches only a handful of individuals.

As the current situation of the former paramilitary units members is an uncovered topic by the media, also the many other Serbian paramilitary units remain unmentioned in public. What happened to these other paramilitary units and their members after the everlasting series of armed conflicts of the 90’s seems to be irrelevant. No serious research (scientific or other—especially initiated by the Serbian government) is made about the exact role that these units played. Their activities remain in obscurity leaving a lot of space for guessing and presumptions. The author of this article is regretting the lack of serious studies and the lack of will to organize more open and public debates which could determine their actual role and activities during the armed conflicts following the decomposition of former Yugoslavia. What is even more regrettable is the public debates which could determine their actual role and serious studies and the lack of will to organize more open and public about the exact role that these units played. Their activities remain very current and pertinent and it is to be answered in the near future not by the whole Serbian society.

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