

## **Heroes of yesterday, war criminals of today: the Serbian paramilitary units fifteen years after the armed conflict of former Yugoslavia\***

Keywords: paramilitary, Serbia, war crimes, media, former Yugoslavia, veterans

Abstract:

The aim of the paper is to describe the transformation, primarily through the medias, the image of the Serbian paramilitary unit members employed during the armed conflict of the 90es in the period of the decomposition of the former Yugoslavia. At the beginning, represented as ‘heroes’, ‘saviors’, ‘protectors’ of the ‘serbianhood’ (*srpstvo*), ever present main figures of the public life – their public image has gone through a couple of change. Once they were the role models for the young generation, only after the fall of the regime (2000) their involvement in war crimes, mass rape, looting and genocide attained Serbia. Several landmark trials offered a glimpse into their role during the series of the conflicts. Once warlords, with a status of pop icons, the embodiment of mythical warriors and epic bandits, they are no more the living archetypes of collective remembrance, although their responsibility remain unquestionable for a part of the contemporary society.

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Are the former “dogs of the state” a residuum of times that the contemporary society is trying to forget? The recent events, such as street violence, severe cases of xenophobia and other forms of institutionalized brutality are explained through the looking glass of the past which incarnation are the paramilitary units, their leaders and their ideology.

Open debates, serious research are rare. For a part of the media, political parties in opposition they are the source of all (past & present) evil.

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The leaders of different Serbian paramilitary units had the status of public figures and were in the center of the Serbian public curiosity at the beginning of the ninties. 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 2000. Vivod 2009). The public was keen of all possible information about them: what car do they drive, what clothes do they buy, where they go to vacation, etc. They represented an image of success, and figures looked upon by the youth<sup>1</sup>. Money, political connections and the nimbus of loyalty to ‘serbianhood’<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup>. Those who

survived 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 government was working on reforms, there was another topic which hit the main news of the Serbian medias and which was related to the Serbian units employed in one of the series of armed conflict in territories of former Yugoslavia. One of the so called ‘special units’ the Red Berets (*Jedinica za specijalne operacije* -JSO) had begun a strike which had all the appearance of a military coup<sup>4</sup>. JSO was another paramilitary unit<sup>5</sup> which was almost unknown to the public during the 90’s, organized by the Serbian Service of State Security. This military coup was later linked with an event which transformed the majority of the Serbian public opinion about the paramilitary units: the assassination of Prime Minister Đinđić in March 2003. Following this event, the Serbian state declared war against the organized crime groups and it was a moment when the criminal past of the paramilitary troops and their leaders came in the center of public concern. As it turned out, an organized crime group was closely linked with leading men of the Red Beret unit and it was them who were accused and later sentenced (2005) for the assassination of the PM Đinđić.

The years which followed after this assassination, Serbian medias reported several accusations, trials for committing war crimes of several paramilitary leaders and unit members (the Scorpios, the White Eagles, the Yellow Wasps, etc.). Video tapes, testimonies of survivors and victims resurfaced in the media –especially in independent media. The time of glorification of these units and their leaders seemed to belong to the past – at least publically.

Analyzing the past two decades, two main phases emerge of the public –image and representation of the members and the leaders of the Serbian paramilitary units. In the first phase these ‘volunteers’ were depicted as the heroes and the protectors of the Serbian nation in danger in its ancestral territories. Compared to the epic champions from traditional epic songs<sup>6</sup>, history myths

and legends they were represented as almost saints battling for the greater cause: for the nation, for the ones who were incapable to fight for themselves - women, children, elderly - and the protectors of Christianity (Čolović 2000. Vivod 2010).

Although the glamorous lifestyle they lead during the series of incessant conflicts spread the rumors in Serbia – in their ‘Matrix’ – about looting and other criminal activities they lead in the war ravaged territories, the ‘fighters’, combatants of the paramilitary units were represented in the Serbian media as mainly ‘volunteers’ who went to the war-ravaged former territories of Yugoslavia to protect the Serbian ‘fellow countrymen’ for no pecuniary reason at all. The fact that some convicted criminals were ‘drafted’ in such units, and that several paramilitary leaders were mafia bosses also added even more truth to the rumors which reached Serbia. Speaking about the prior criminal ‘carrier’ of the leaders and unit members Čolović (2000) stated that the criminal past of these leaders made them ‘more convenient’ for the task of protecting the nation, indicating a ‘parabola of the sinful son’ (“*parabola o bludnom sinu*”) and referring to this prior criminal past as the ‘sins of a youth’ (Čolović 2000:181)<sup>7</sup>.

Nevertheless, the open talk about their misdeeds and criminal activities as looting, genocide, war crimes and rape came on in the headline of newspapers or were reported in 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 and genocide committed and the support of these troops by the Serbian (during Milošević) government, and since the fall of the regime small efforts<sup>8</sup> 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 there are the source of all evil what happened during the armed conflicts of the decomposition of the country. Recently, 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 motifs 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 medias 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 present government is unable (or unwilling) to dissociate itself. 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.

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The members of these units were recruited in two manners: informally - through publicity (via the medias, news paper ads (Kronja 2004. Čolović 2000), personal contact, friendship, family ties (see testimonies of Scorpions) or formally – f.i. through party membership<sup>9</sup>, organized sport supporters clubs, or drafted under command– in case of several professional soldiers who were charged to lead, entrain the groups or simply to 'lift up the professional level' of a unity (see testimony of protected witness K-2 at the Trial of Slobodan Milosevic at ICTY).

The groups were constituted from men of different ages, social classes and professional backgrounds. There were originated 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 members) – a country which 'officially' was never at war, a statement which was propagated through the machinery of the Milošević regime (Biserko 1999. Hartmann 2002) and expatriates - first or second generation of Serbian citizens from abroad<sup>10</sup>.

After the series of armed conflicts (1991-1999) the former members of paramilitary units were dispersed. Some returned on the territories in which they fought (or rather stayed on the conflicted territories– being originated from there). A great part although went to stay in Serbia. There were

several raisons of such a migration: one of it was to reunite with their family members who came as refugees during the conflicts, some of them because 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 originated from Serbia (Spiegel 41/1992). A raison of this relocation was also a fear of retribution: they felt unsecured, 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 paramilitaries were indicted and sentenced as war criminals in local special tribunals (in case of Serbia and BiH, in case of Croatia the local, the *županijski* (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 to an access of 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 Serbian people and its territories (Čolović 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, 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)<sup>11</sup>. Captain Dragan (Dragan Vasiljković)<sup>12</sup> the leader of the Kninjas – Ninja’s from Knin (*Knindže*) was impersonated as main figures in a serial of comic strips bearing his name (Čolović 2000). A silver coin was minted with his image. With one side stating that “Terrorism stops here” and the other side bearing the inscription of “Captain Dragan Fund” (*Fond Kapetana Dragana*) created in order to help wounded patriots and families of those who died at the front. Djordje Božović aka Giška,

the leader of the Serbian 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 other paramilitary leaders too<sup>13</sup> – as criminal who was converted 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 few remained more or less ‘active’ during the peacetime, particularly after the fall of the Milošević’s regime in 2000. One example are the Red Berets (*Crvene Beretke*) or JSO (*Jedinica za Specijalne Operacije*) the Special Operations Unit. The leader of this unit Milorad Ulemek-Luković aka Legija 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 medias only after the fall of regime (2000). The most shocking evidence of the activities of these units came to the Serbian public through local media when a video tape of the Trnovo/Srebrenica massacre (1995) was broadcasted in 2007 first on B92 Television (the documentary ‘The Scorpions, a home movie’<sup>14</sup>). A couple of unit members of the Scorpions murdered in cold blood six civilians from whom three were just teenagers. The premeditation of this act is clearly evident when one of the unit member asks seemingly the youngest of them if he ever made love (using a vulgar term). When receiving a negative answer the shooter concluded with “And you won’t either”. The ‘Scorpio’ 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 Scorpions, 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. Đinđić).

The denunciations, the testimonies and the videotapes of cold blooded murders revealed in the Serbian press and the television, 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'<sup>15</sup> [*Obraz*], the 'National Alignment' [*Nacionalni Stroj*], the 'Serbian Gates' [*Dveri Sprske*], etc) the paramilitary leaders and the units are the undisputable heroes serving the Serbian national interests<sup>16</sup>.

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 territories<sup>17</sup>, which are continuing to shrink endlessly<sup>18</sup>, the individual and social impoverishment, and the landmark trial of the former Scorpio members (2005-2007)<sup>19</sup> 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 were feared and respected in Serbia, and when the medias 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)<sup>20</sup>.

The veterans of former paramilitary units live mainly 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 business (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<sup>21</sup>. In fact, the salary was so high that it was an additional motivation to join a ‘unit of volunteers’ (at the time used as an allegory of a militia) and ‘serve the nation’. Several militia-leaders in fact, become very rich through the looting of the population from the territories in war<sup>22</sup> (Andreas 2004). They developed a ‘business’ of smuggling of goods across several states (f.i. Ražnatović aka Arkan/Tigers, Slobodan Medić aka Boca/Scorpions<sup>23</sup>). The series of armed conflict were a ‘marvelous’ economic opportunity structure for clandestine commerce and made possible for the enemy sides to establish cross-border smuggling channels (Andreas 2004). The Serbian press speculates about the total estimation of property of the leader of the Red Berets (JSO) Luković aka Legija, which would be between fifty and one million euro<sup>24</sup>.

Recently a new law into force in Serbia (March 2009) which will provide under estimations an extra income for the Government for 100 million Euro: every property which is gained though

crime and other criminal activities will be confiscated. The list of 300 Serbian citizens contains also the names of several paramilitary unit leaders as well<sup>25</sup>.

The state medias, and those who are close to right wing political parties provide a minimum of information about the trials of former paramilitary unit members and their crimes. When it comes to their role that they actually had in the armed conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo and their financing a certain ‘taboo’ is lifted especially in the independent media (f.i. B92, *Vreme*, etc.). The NGO’s are those who are organizing a public debate and speaking, and openly spread information about the crimes of the Serbian paramilitary units (f.i. Humanitarian Law Center from Belgrade, Women in Black, etc.). Very often it is the private media close to a right wing political party or the former ruling party of Milošević (f.i. the TV broadcasters *Most*, or *Palma*) who are tacitly maintaining the status they had during the 90’s of these units by omitting to report about the trials. It is their past which is still under the discussion, their present, as for instance where are the remaining members now, how the invalids live, what happened to those who are accused of war crimes, etc. is not a topic of reports.

The medias cover meagerly the news about the so called ‘the veterans of the Kosovo war’ who engage a strike (in summer, autumn 2009, winter 2010), blocking the main roads and railway in the region of their origins - mainly in central Serbia, rarely at the capital city of Belgrade - reclaiming their unpaid wages which the Serbian government owes them. The medias report about 2000 law suits are ongoing against the government for the unpaid wages in amount between 600 to 1400 Euro. Interestingly the category of ‘war veterans’ remains vague, it is uncertain if this term covers the individuals who were drafted in the regular army or its is mixture between the so called ‘volunteers’ and the ones who were conscripts in the regular army<sup>26</sup>. The statements made in the press by the newly registered political party of veterans points toward the second possibility<sup>27</sup>.

The actual Serbian public have a lot of difficulties to face from the past, the ‘deadly 90’s’<sup>28</sup>, 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 ethnomylths perpetrated in public speeches, through the medias during the past twenty years.

Incidents as for instance the demonstrations turned into hooligan disorder and looting (f.i. the demonstration in February 2008 when the independence of Kosovo was declared), an excessive and violent behavior toward the foreigners<sup>29</sup>, 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 pretext 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.

Recent events, which shocked the Serbian public such as the scandal of the Crna Reka drug rehabilitation center<sup>30</sup>, 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 present Prime Minister Tadić while visiting the maneuvers of the Serbian regular army (October 2009) motivated a journalist<sup>31</sup> to ask a rhetorical question 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 demilitarized 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 centre-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.”*<sup>32</sup>

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 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 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<sup>33</sup> when engaged NATO 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 'weak 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<sup>34</sup>, 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<sup>35</sup>.

The fact that is has been discovered in the mean time 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 *à 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 criminal past of its members, which used the conflict as a continuation of their criminal carrier. The promiscuity maintained by the Milošević regime with the secret services which already used criminals during the titoist regime to ‘do the dirty work’ (as for instance to eliminate political dissidence at broad<sup>36</sup>) is offering an additional explanation why these troops committed so many war crimes and massacres in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. A support to this reasoning is an additional argument of the politicians in opposition, the independent press, the journalists and writers, that the regime financed most of these units and then denied to be involved in any armed conflicts which followed the decomposition of the former Yugoslavia.

As the information about the genocide(s) or 'war crimes' is becoming wide spread, finger pointing is evolving toward two main causes: the blame is put on the Milošević regime and his partisans and secondly, toward the personality of the men who were recruited in a paramilitary unit. There are mainly imagined, pictured as asocial individuals, criminals, unemployed young males – the ‘residuum of the society’ (*društveni talog* –as one of my interlocutors expressed). As Teofil Pančić notices in his article *Kočija i bundeva* (The Carriage and the pumpkin)<sup>37</sup> : “What the ‘left’ side of Croatia, or the ‘antdeclarationists’ in Serbia, the inheritors of three-headed war ethnobarbarism of Bosnia and Herzegovina are insisting on, is not anymore (proofed to be impossible and unsustainable) negation of the crime, but its *pathologisation and depolitisation*. What does it means concretely? That means that every individual ‘we’ without reluctance will condemn crimes-committed-in-our-names, but that those crimes have to remain somehow isolated from every congruous and understandable social-political-historical conditionality, perfectly decontextualized and washed from political meaning, hastily extracted from the frame in which they are naturally belonging. So ‘the crimes over the civilian populations’, or prisoners, or any other individual,

became a kind of pathological undertaking of renegade individuals and small group *who are not OK*, and whit whom 'we' and Our Justified Historical Aspirations have nothing to do; in contrary, they are pollute and compromising Our Otherwise Righteous Objective.<sup>38</sup>

The responsibility is therefore equally distributed between the former regime and the 'bad nature' of the men who made these units. In the press articles making the link between the past and present through the speech of Milošević at Gazimestan-Kosovo (in 1989) and the violent behavior of hooligans in Belgrade and the raping military units during the armed conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia are embodying such an opinion in the press in opposition<sup>39</sup>.

The civil, demilitarized society of the sober, present-day Serbia is defended by and personified in journalists, thinkers, layers, writers, the representatives of the 'intelligentsia' as they portray themselves. This part of the society is in binary opposition with the class of semi-illiterate, unemployed men of inferior social ranks, as they usually are imagined, who choose to embrace the military virtues in order to become warriors. They are the embodiment of the past, and the past values and are in other pole in time, in social class and even in terms of the future when it comes to economical projects of a whole nation. Two sides of this interior dynamics are imagined and represented in opposition such in urban/rural, pro European/ pro Russian paradigms— since Russia is very much present as an imaginary bloc standing in opposition of the European Community. These two oppositions are the interior forces of the contemporary society which seemingly keep the whole country as its hostage.

Of course there is a possible deeper, seemingly irrelevant cause which makes this gap between theses strata of the Serbian society even more profound. It is motivated by the mytheme expressing a unity and according which the metonymic representatives of the collective (Jansen 2000), in this case of the whole serbianhood. In this case the metonymic part is the paramilitary units. They are the 'brothers of the same blood' of the entire contemporary Serbian nation, and

they gave a 'bad name' to the whole nation with their actions in the past<sup>40</sup>. Very 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<sup>41</sup> 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 publically about what happened during the 90's. The elements of two main trials which shackled the public (the members of the Scorpios, 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 inappropriate sentence of the Serbian Supreme Court (*Vrhovni Sud*) in case of the Scorpios<sup>42</sup> which leaves a bitter taste for the victims and those who are willing to face this past. As if there is a general desire to leave this past behind without any further analysis.

There is a spectacular ‘curve’ which the Serbian public showed toward the paramilitary units, its leaders and members. Their mediatic popularity started sky rocketing at the beginning of the 90's and assured them a status of pop stars, an untouchable and guaranteed position in their communities. Lifted up in the pantheon of serbianhood by the medias – since only the medias can assure such a spotlight and instant glory, they were once in the center of public attention, making seemingly everlasting their invented merits. As the embodiment of the past regime and its ideology, their destiny of ‘fallen Gods’ remains uncertain. At present they are a suitable topic for those who are seeking the traces of the past regime in contemporary Serbian society. The questions remains, will they face an unpunished oblivion and will the Serbian society consecutively risk their resurgence and maybe even a restoration somewhere in the future and will more light be shed on the true nature of those numerous paramilitary units, the identity of those men who belonged to them and the true role they played in the decomposition of the former Yugoslavia, remains very current and pertinent and it is to be answered in the near future not by the whole Serbian society.

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<sup>1</sup> Commenting about the popularity of the paramilitary leaders during the 90es, an interlocutor of mine (at the time he was in his mid 20es) stated referring to the popularity of Arkan and his folk singer wife: “Fxx the country where the ideals of the youth are a murderer and a prostitute.” [“*Jxx zemlju u kojoj su idoli omladine ubica i k...a*”]. (the swear-words are marked with ‘x’)

<sup>2</sup> ‘serbianhood’ or *srpstvo* in Serbian language is a concept based on ethnic unity and ethnical belonging and orthodox Christianity; perceived as a unity, having the same characteristics as an individual: f.i. behave, have rights, and even bleed as an individual (f.i. see Dučić, Jovan. (1871-1943) poet, writer and diplomat.in *Verujem u boga i u srpstvo* (I believe in god and in serbianhood), Centralni Odbor Srpske Narodne Odbrane u Americi, Cikago 1942, page 18, 22, 23

<sup>33</sup> f.i. in March 2000 Branislav Lainović – a mafia boss from Novi Sad- who was also the right hand of Djordje Božović Giška the leader of the paramilitary unit ‘Serbian Guard’ –*Srpska Garda*) and several other individuals linked with organized crime as f.i. in February 2000 Mirko Tomić aka Bosanac and twelve days later Radosav Trlajić aka Bata Traja; Interestingly Yugoslavia’s (at that time the name of the country is Federal Republic of

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Yugoslavia constituted from the federation of Serbia and Montenegro) defense minister Pavle Bulatović was assassinated also during this troubled month of February 2000....

<sup>4</sup> See final word of Attorney Srdja Popović in the case Serbian state vs. Milorada Ulemek et al., Belgrade District Court, 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Although the JSO apparently was an armed unit which had all the appearances (affiliation, armament, command chain, etc.) of special army or police force, the author of this article opted to add them to group of ‘common armed individual’ (see *infra*) for two main reasons: the core of this unit were from the Arkan’s Tigers and Captain Dragan’s Kninjas; secondly this unit continued to recruit (after 1996) in the same manner as the several paramilitary units at the beginning of the 90es: using f.i. small adds...

<sup>6</sup> Serbian epic poetry is a form of popular poetry dealing with historical events and personages originating from Serbia, Bosnia, Herzegovina and Montenegro, mainly composed in by unknown authors between the 14th and 19th centuries.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the ‘sins of a youth’ can be ‘washed’ by the activity in a paramilitary unit: At the celebration of the 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary (in August 1999) of the founding of the paramilitary unit Serbian Guard (*Srpska Garda*) Jovan Otašević gave an interview to the Serbian daily *Glas Javnosti* (The Voice of the Public) stating that bishop Atanasije of the Serbian Orthodox Church declared that Djordje Božović aka Giška (the leader of this unit who was shot and killed in Croatia in 1991) washed his earlier sins with his subsequent activities (the ones committed in Croatia?) off. “*Giška je grešio kao mladić. Ali, znate, postoje stvari koje biste uradili kao devetnaestogodišnjak, ali ne i kao zreo čovek od trideset pet. Ali, kako kaže Vladika Atanasije, ako je i učinio nešto loše u životu, on se kasnije potpuno oprao.*” <http://arhiva.glas-javnosti.rs/arhiva/1999/08/02/srpski/R99080102.shtm>

<sup>8</sup> the Humanitarian Law Center from Belgrade (*Fond za Humanitarno Pravo Beograd*) is one of the few who organized open debates confronting victims and perpetrators

<sup>9</sup> Several 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 N°14105 (resumes) (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 (*Royalistički 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 (*Beli 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

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self proclaimed 'duke' of the Chetnik Movement), *Der Spiegel*. 41/1992 201b. author Renate Flottau, among many other documents, and testimonies stating the contradictory.

<sup>10</sup> Results of fieldwork

<sup>11</sup> There is an urban legend which says that during one TV show on 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.

<sup>12</sup> He is accused by the Republic of Croatia of being responsible for soldiers under his command allegedly torturing, beating and killing captured members of Croatian Army and Police in 1991 in Knin. On 12 April 2007, authorities 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

<sup>13</sup> f.i. Marko Lopusina's *Commandant Arkan*; Vojislav Milić's *My son Đorđe Božović Giška* and many others

<sup>14</sup> Documentary first shown in 2007. Realised with the financial support of National Trust for democracy (NED), U.S.A. and the Sweden Helsinki Comitee for Human Rights (SHC), Sweden. The documentary contains archive materials from the of the humanitairian Right (Fonda za humanitarno pravo), the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the materail filmed by the Scorpions themselves.

<sup>15</sup> Cheek is the symbol of honor in the Serbian language f.i. 'having no cheek' means that the person has no honor

<sup>16</sup> F.i. see interview with Boško Obradović the editor in chief of *Dveri Srpske* (review of the same name movement) Svetlana Lukić and Svetlana Vuković the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 2005  
<http://www.pescanik.net/content/view/1630/61/>

<sup>17</sup> "The 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: 460)

<sup>18</sup> the declaration of the independence of Kosovo was seen as another loss of territory

<sup>19</sup> In 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/Srebrenica in Bosnia they were trialed 2005-2007

<sup>20</sup> Recently the 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 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2010.

<sup>21</sup> see testimony of a former Scorpio member in the documentary '*Scorpions, a home movie*'

<sup>22</sup> see statement of General Manojlo Milovanović head of the Republika Srpska Army-VRS in documentary of Filip Švarm *Jedinica* (The Unit) 2006.

<sup>23</sup> see testimonies of General Manojlo Milovanović head of the Republika Srpska Army-VRS in documentary of Filip Švarm *Jedinica* (The Unit) 2006 and the the interview Der Speigel with Sinisa Vucinic.

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.novosti.rs/code/navigate.php?Id=9&status=jedna&vest=147453&title\\_add=Legija-%20nelegalno%20%3Cbr%2F%3Esupruga-](http://www.novosti.rs/code/navigate.php?Id=9&status=jedna&vest=147453&title_add=Legija-%20nelegalno%20%3Cbr%2F%3Esupruga-)

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%20po%C5%A1teno&kword\_add=legija%2C%20oduzimanje%20imovine;

[http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2009&mm=04&dd=23&nav\\_category=120&nav\\_id=356980](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2009&mm=04&dd=23&nav_category=120&nav_id=356980)

<http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/article/1744465.html>

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2009&mm=03&dd=01&nav\\_id=347582](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2009&mm=03&dd=01&nav_id=347582)

<http://www.naslovi.net/2009-09-03/b92/imovina-osumnjicnih-na-proveri/1306927>

<sup>26</sup> One of my interviewed person picturesquely explained this situation that “the state won’t feed its dogs who were sent to kill for it”

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.rtv.rs/sr\\_lat/politika/partija-veterana-protiv-martona--lsv-se-zali-mup-u\\_141175.html](http://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/partija-veterana-protiv-martona--lsv-se-zali-mup-u_141175.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 lawyers “Vukovar 1991” and supported their idea of raising a monument in two villages where they were held as war prisoners in detainee camps.

<sup>28</sup> For 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’: “Then, the nineties have come, sorrowful and grievous... Phobic... Ordinary bums broke into text- and reading-books... It is too late to panic... We gave a chance for the madness to become official... And now we are like simply surprised... »

<sup>29</sup> The Serbian 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.

<sup>30</sup> The Crna Reka scandal came to light after a video was released showing center staff beating one of the center’s wards. The magazine *Vreme* (May 2009) has reported that at a clerical-run rehabilitation centre treating addicts in Crna Reka, patients have been brutally beaten by ‘caregivers’ and therapists and that this practice is a part or a ‘regular therapy’. A video posted on their website shows a patient being beaten with shovels and punched on the face. The centre’s representatives told his family that the contract (signed mainly by the patients parents) permitted them to use any form of treatment, including light and “ more severe” beatings. Initially, the centre was blessed by the local Serbian Orthodox Bishop, Artemije. Interestingly when this scandal exploded through the Serbian medias in public, the extreme right wing organization *Obraz* organized a support rally for the priest who runs the center.

In a interview (June 2009) I had with a journalist who interviewed a couple of former patients of this rehabilitation center in Crna Reka stated that he have been told that the employed guardians of this rehabilitation center (described as a dog guarded prison camp) are former members of paramilitary units as for instance Arkan’s ‘Tigers’.

<sup>31</sup> Ljubomir Živkov *Govor Tekstila* 10.10.2009. <http://www.pescanik.net/content/view/3790/1073/>

<sup>32</sup> „Zašto se u Srbiji žmuri na pretnje i pozive na linč desničarskih organizacija, pokušao je da odgovori predsednik Lige socijaldemokrata Vojvodine Nenad Čanak.

“Policija u Srbiji, oduvek, ne samo u Srbiji, uvek ima te neformalne grupe koje služe kao država s lažnom

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ličnom kartom. Pa koliko smo imali 90-tih godina paravojnih, pod navodnicima, jedinica koje su Harale po Bosni i Hrvatskoj, po Kosovu, pa i ovde, pa ste ovde imali prebijanja ljudi koji su lepili plakate od nekih neimenovanih lica. Posle se ustanovi da svi oni imaju službene legitimacije i da su bili u članstvu Službe državne bezbednosti Srbije.““ source:

[http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2009&mm=09&dd=16&nav\\_category=12&nav\\_id=381665](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2009&mm=09&dd=16&nav_category=12&nav_id=381665)  
translation by the author of this article

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly the word ‘war’ is used by many of the informants only when referring to the period of March to June 1999 while the NATO bombing campaign lasted.

<sup>34</sup> A specific terms is used: *nejač* in Serbian, meaning children, women and elderly

<sup>35</sup> The notion of Christian value of paramilitary soldiers is/was taken very seriously: in the documentary ‘*Škorpioni- Spomenar*’ (The Scorpions – a home movie) a scene is filmed by a Scorpio-member where an orthodox priest is giving a blessing to the member of this unit.

During the armed conflicts in Bosnia Serbia was imagined as a bearer of authentic Christian values, and as a last bastion against Islam (Vivod, 2010)

<sup>36</sup> Former police inspector Mladen Lojović gave an interview to *Naša Borba*, from Belgrade April the 20<sup>th</sup> 1997, speaking about Đorđe Božpvić aka Giška, a convicted criminal and the leader of the Serbian Volunteer Guard, a paramilitary unit organized by the Serbian Renewal Party (*Srpski Pokret Obnove*): “Giška was one of the people who in the '80s had contacts with the State Security forces and carried out their dirty work abroad. He didn't know, nor did others that they would become disposable” <http://www.ex-yupress.com/nasaborba/nasaborba13.html>

Božidar Spasović gave an interview in the documentary ‘See you in the obituary’ (1995) directed by Janko Baljak based on the book *The Crime That Changed Serbia* by Aleksandar Knežević and Vojislav Tufegdžić. He stated in the film that he was the chief during nine years of a special unit in charge for abroad ‘actions’ of the Yugoslav State Security and he personally ‘helped’ 120 individuals, ‘criminals’ to go abroad and secured them with falsified passports and documents.

<sup>37</sup> in weekly *Vreme* n°1007. 22th of April 2010. <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=927184>

<sup>38</sup> Cursive and capitals in original text

<sup>39</sup> Milošević's made a reference to the possibility of "armed battles", in the future of Serbia's national development; For example: Nikola Samardžić, *Bez nasolva i bez muzike* (Without title and without music) 23.09.2009. <http://www.pescanik.net/content/view/3706/78/>; Ivan Torov, 01.10.2009. *Sistemska Nasilja* (Systematic Violence) <http://www.pescanik.net/content/view/3746/80/>, etc.

<sup>40</sup> Milošević's made a reference to the possibility of "armed battles", in the future of Serbia's national development. Nikola Samardžić *Bez nasolva i bez muzike* (Without title and without music) <http://www.pescanik.net/content/view/3706/78/>, Biljana Srbljanović, *Kad porastem ubiću kengura* (When I grow up I will kill a kangaroo) 02.10.2009. <http://www.pescanik.net/content/view/3749/129/> etc.

<sup>41</sup> Blog of Todor Kuljić on the site of *Politika*, a Serbian daily newspaper

[http://www.politika.rs/index.php?lid=sr&show=rubrike&part=list\\_reviews&int\\_itemID=64896](http://www.politika.rs/index.php?lid=sr&show=rubrike&part=list_reviews&int_itemID=64896)

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the site of CCE- Center for contemporary education (*Centar za savremenu edukaciju*):  
<http://radnaetika.org/content/view/178/lang,srl/>, *Vreme*, a weekly newsmagazine:  
<http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=872124>).

<sup>42</sup> The Belgrade war crimes court sentenced four members of Scorpios unit (April 2007) to a combined 58 years in prison for killing six men (three of them minors) in Trnovo/Srebrenica. This sentence was reduced later (2008) by the Supreme Court of Serbia: one Scorpio member was liberated and sent to a new trial; the sentence of the main accused was reduced from 20 to 15 years of prison.