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Belgrade Pride Parade 2014: Tabloidization and Parody of the Process of EU Integration

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Abstract

Print Serbian media presented Belgrade Pride Parade 2014 in an ambivalent way - as a successful state project, on the one hand, and as a threat to the national security, on the other. Contradictory media discourse related to the promotion of human rights favored the tabloidization of almost all contents related to the Belgrade Pride Parade 2014. In this way in the focus of tabloidization was put wider cultural and social contexts including issues such as the process of EU integration, the effort of redefining national identity in the context of EU, and, finally, the very role of the LGBT community in organization of Belgrade Pride Parade. Tabloidization of the issue of EU integration was achieved mostly through indirect reporting on Belgrade Pride Parade by the combination of the articles which - in the same issue and often within the same section - reported on the Pride mutually quite contradictory for the audience, in sensationalist and confusing ways. The result of such reporting is, quite unexpectedly, the strategy of constant parody of topics which are declaratory considered to be policy priorities of Republic of Serbia while in the Serbian cultural and media practices are called into question and ridiculed. This kind of parody is based on a hidden affirmation of (in) equality and discrimination, as well as on the violation of journalistic ethics codes. The aim of the paper is to analyze - in the case of reporting on Belgrade Pride Parade 2014 - the narrative forms and the communication effects of this populist-based media parody, as well as to deconstructs its ideological reception and consequences.

Keywords: parody; discrimination; media discourse; tabloidization; Belgrade Pride 2014, EU integrations

Introduction

Organization Of 2014 Belgrade Pride Parade, The Matter Of Security And The Role Of Media Reporting On Security Matters

Belgrade Pride Parade 2014 was realized after intensive public debate about the Pride as the event of the high risk. After one month long debate about security of the Belgrade and Serbia citizens, in which right wings parties strongly opposed Pride in the name of the public peace and security, none transparent political conclusions were brought: all options (*pro et contra*) stayed open during the whole debate as well as during the very night before Pride Parade, the night between 27th and 28th of September 2014. Although expected and waited from all media official allowance for Belgrade Pride Parade 2014 was not given by government who was holding session of the Bureau for Coordination during the whole night: „Even after five hours of the start of the session Bureau for Coordination of Security has not said whether the Pride Parade approved. On the other hand Parade organizers say that the parade be held because the legal deadline for the ban on public gatherings has expired.“ (1) However, the Ministry of Police has previously reserved the right to cancel the Pride at any time if security is threatened. (2)

After the midnight Goran Miletic, activist for human rights and member of Pride organizational committee, said that the Pride board did not receive information that at the meeting of the Bureau for Coordination of Security holding Pride is prohibited. He gave the statement to all media in front of the organizational board of 2014 Belgrade Pride Parade that Pride would be held in accordance with Constitutional rights on free gathering of citizens of Republic of Serbia. (3) Even after this statement government did not confirm that the Belgrade Pride Parade 2014 could be held. But on 28th of September seven thousands policemen were on Belgrade streets protecting participants of the Parade and politicians who support Parade by their presence and speeches. The path of the Pride march start in front of government buildings in Nemanjina street in the center of Belgrade and ends in front of the building of Serbian Parliament at the Square of Nikola Pasic (Illustration nb. 1)

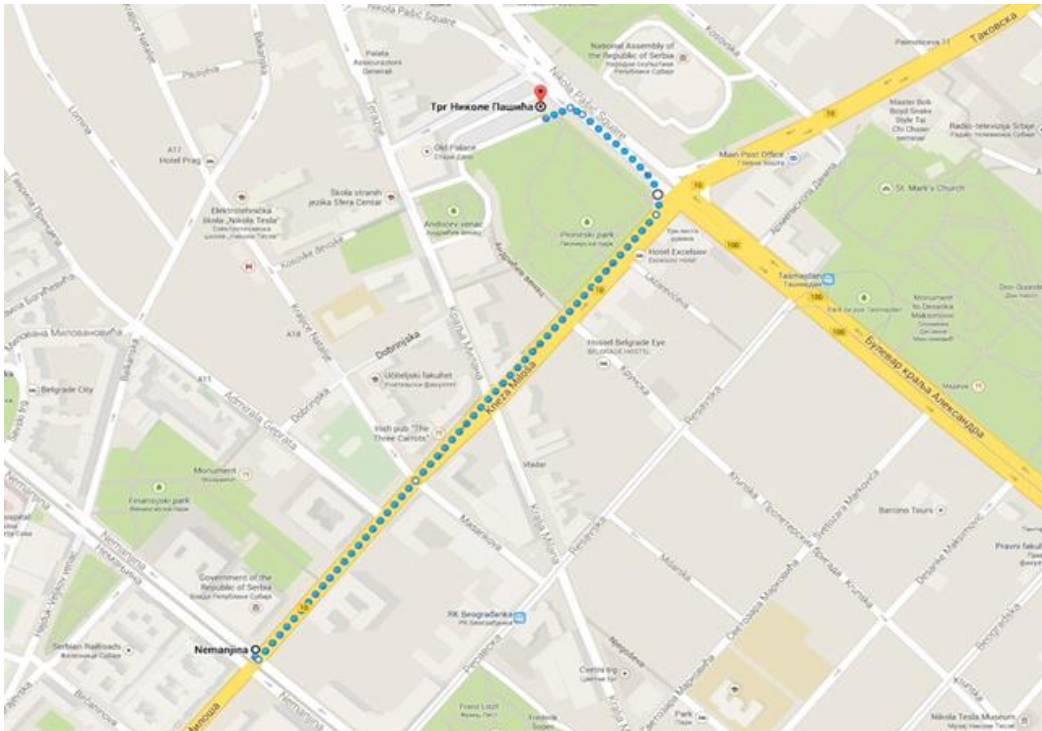


Illustration nb. 1.

The march lasted almost one hour, and at the end, in front of the Serbian Parliament members of organizational board, LGBTQ activists from Serbia and ex-Yugoslav region, as well as Serbian and foreign politicians delivered speeches in which Pride Parade and EU support to this event was celebrated. Michael Davenport, the EU ambassador to Serbia, addressed the Pride saying it is "very good that this parade took place. It sends a strong message to everyone, especially the LGBT community, but also a message to those who use hate speech that such a behavior in Serbia is not acceptable." (4) Mayor of Belgrade, Sinisa Mali told reporters in front of the government that he came to show his support to Pride and that it is a very important to show that: "Belgrade is an open city, which means it is open to all and that everyone here is equal." (5) Great kiss between Boban Stojanovic and his partner, Adam Puskar, finalized the celebration. (6) Premier Aleksandar Vučić speech in which he pointed out that he would not join the 2014 Belgrade Pride Parade participants himself - instead he planned to visit households in the flooded areas and then went on a family Sunday lunch – seemed forgotten. (7) But the metaphor of family Sunday lunch used in Aleksandar Vucic speech symbolizes persistent resistance to Pride Parade as something deeply opposed to traditional Serbian values. As symbol of heterosexual family and coherent national attitude this metaphor reveals hidden discursive strategies of political rhetoric on GMG social inclusion in Serbian public discourse.

What was claimed in Serbian media to be the utmost political will of the new, pro EU oriented Vucic government (8) was, however, annihilated by the social and cultural practices presented by the very same media. Thus official statements on Belgrade Pride Parade 2014 given both by politicians and LGBTQ activists are shaped by the same ambivalent discursive strategies; they praised the role and importance of the state instead of carnival joy of differences and power of love characteristic for the Pride as cultural, social and political event. The policy of media reporting on GMG is marked by the very same ambiguity which could be detected in speeches of official representatives of Serbian political institutions: on power is the secret rule which asks hidden stigmatization of GMG *versus* declarative advocacy for GMG rights as transparent political will of Serbian government and people.

In the paper is analyzed the case of media reporting which is considered as representative example of reporting on gender minority groups (GMG) rights in Serbian print media during Belgrade Pride Parade 2014. Case is taken from daily tabloid Kurir and can be seen as paradigmatic discursive practice of tabloidization of media reporting on GMG in Serbian media *in general*, characterized by ambiguity and strong tension between support and conviction of GMG community. The case also raises question about the real role of LGBT activist elite in organization of Belgrade Pride 2014 as a state project intended to be implemented at all costs. The paper aims to explore what is the real role of LGBTQ elite in tabloidization of the media reporting on Belgrade Pride Parade 2014 and how does the EU integrations narrative function in the context of media discourse tabloidization.

Intertextuality and Montage as Strategies of Media Reporting: Daily Tabloid Kurir, 23rd September 2014

On 23rd September 2014 two articles considering GMG and LGBTQ population were published in daily tabloid "Kurir". (9) Articles were published five days before Belgrade Pride Parade was held, in the midst of public debate about the Pride as the event of high risk. The two texts were published on the same page, side by side. The first one is interview with Boban Stojanovic, one of the organizers of Belgrade Pride, in which he describes his impressions after his meeting with Ministry of Police, Nebojsa Stefanović. In this interview Stojanović emphasis his belief in the importance of the state support to organization of upcoming Belgrade Pride.(10) The second article describes the protest against "gay tourism" which is planned to be improved by opening touristic resort on Goli otok (in literaaly translation: Naked Island) in Croatia – the infamous jail built in Titos regime. (11) It was a place where many people were tortured and murdered during and after 1948., the historical moment of breaking up of SFRJ and USSR. The text also quotes the President of the Association of Detainees who survived the jail torture. He states that, unfortunately, the Association cannot do anything on this issue although there were mostly Serbs at Goli otok. He also notes that Goli otok is now a part of Croatian territory and therefore Serbia has no jurisdiction to seek memorial park on the island instead of the tourist resort. While

in the first text struggle for GMG rights is given in the light of the optimistic visions of successful cooperation between the LGBTQ community and Serbian state in the second text stigmatization of GMG groups occurs through the activation of various stereotypes about LGBTQ community as dangerous entity that jeopardizes that same state.

It is obvious that there is hidden intertextual connection between the two texts. Existing social and political tensions are activated by this editing montage: nationalist tensions between Serbian and Croatian nation / state; class prejudices about gay people as a very rich; resistance to EU, which in this case is represented by its new member, the Republic of Croatia, which contempt both history of a communist-guerrilla struggle and history of, now non-existent, SFRJ. But, this kind of the connection should influent reader in quite opposite way from the connection which is usually implied by the usage of the term intertextuality in the postmodern theory of the discourse in which this term marks „that demands of the reader not only the recognition of textualized traces of the literary and historical past but also the awareness of what has been done-through irony-to those traces. The reader is forced to acknowledge not only the inevitable textuality of our knowledge of the past, but also both the value and the limitation of that inescapably discursive form of knowledge, situated as it is "between presence and absence". (12) In tabloid media intertextual connection should stay hidden, and should „work“ or connect two texts on subconscious level: from reader is not asked or demanded to become more critic but to become more biased, more committed to its own prejudices. The strategy of tabloid intertextuality is to stay unconscious, and to influent reader in discursive form which is not form of knowledge but of misinterpretation.

The official rhetoric of advocating for the rights of GMG is completely canceled by the second text published in Kurir in which GMG community is put in a problematic historical and social context, and accused for immorality, historical irresponsibility and lack of class empathy. The issue of gay tourism on Goli otok actually activates both class and ethnic stereotyping about GMG as social threat. GMG community is represented as community devoid of any respect for the traditions and historical scruples, being shaped by influence of the foreign and hostile political (Croatian/Western) forces. Gay population stands out in the text as one that spends an extremely high amount of money on travel and entertainment per year all around the world which is in social contrast with economic crisis which heavily strikes Serbia under Vucic governance.

The logic of tabloid editing policy is based in binary opposed codes - reader should choose one option; reader is booster who should confirm his/her loyalty. In this way, many target groups of readers are caught in the process of potential identifications that are actually located on the line long advertised strategy against Pride in Serbian public sphere which claimed that gender minority groups usurp the rights of the majority and thus implemented violence over public space. The comparison between

these two minority groups, one that presented as repeatedly sacrificed (firstly in 1948, than followed by the breakup of Yugoslavia and globalization) and the other presented through Stojanovic activist negotiating optimism put the reader of „Kurir“ in the situation of political choice. The members of the first group do not speak to journalist but to own representatives and representatives of related groups in the name of abolishing historical injustice and return to the position they unjustly seized. “Minority” that speaks in this text represents public opinion that gladly represent Serbia as a country deprived of its historical autonomy, so the voice of this minority is actually a majority voice of the Serbian society, who requires return to seemingly deprived decision-making position, the position on which no minorities should threaten the majority. Empathy and identification with gender minority groups cannot take place since these groups are seemingly about to realize their rights while the Serbian people as the only minority group in Serbia is always again deprived from its own rights – the fact that 2014 Belgrade Pride Parade is going to be held is, for reader of „Kurir“, just one reason more which leads to such political conclusion.

Parody of EU Integrations Narrative

The shocking montage characteristic for tabloid editing policy is applied both on visual and on verbal level of the media content. It is the most obvious on the „Kurir“ cover on which both above mentioned texts are merged in one gathered image printed in the lower left corner of the cover. (Illustration nb. 2) The image is supposed to be ironic and sarcastic toward the “enemies” – Croat state and gay population of the Serbia are merged in collage which represents hybrid strategies of tabloid reporting aiming to confuse the audience playing with the subconscious fantasies, desires and prejudices of the readers.



(Illustration nb. 2: Croats find a solution for gays (the first line on the image) forcing gays to Goli Otok (the second line) Serbian gays: the parade will be (the third line) Minister guarantees it to us (the fourth line))

The vivid images are juxtaposed in quite unusual and shocking way, in a good all manner of avant-garde montage: carnival photos of drag queens are mixed with black

and white photographs of run-down building on Goli otok while Boban Stojanovic photo (left corner of the image) is opposed to the photo of the Ministry of Police of Republic of Serbia, Nebojsa Stefanovic (right corner of the image) in a mimicry of fragile political balance.

EU is represented through comparison and competition with Croatia, the youngest member of EU which is in post Yugoslav space geographically the closest one to Serbia and which enters EU with the burden of unclear relationship with Serbs related to the Second World War and concentration camps such as Jasenovac. The avant-garde strategy of shock and montage – same as the discursive strategy of intertextuality – should influence readers of tabloid print unconsciously, making parody of EU integrations narrative which dominates official political discourse of Serbian government. Through its embodiment as Croatia island of gay joy, island at which heroic past and epic tradition are annihilated, EU narrative is connected with recent communist i.e. Second World War past and represented as something false, hypocritical, nontransparent, autocratic, with the regime which does not deserve neither respect nor obedience. EU integration narrative is represented as narrative imposed from outside and it is nothing else except false fair-tale to mocking with, regime whose rules will be tricked by the same playful and resistant epic spirit of Serbian people which has been denied and defeated at Goli otok.

The photos of drag queens and transvestites have powerful meaning in this ideological battle. Represented as morally problematic, LGBTQ community is identified as usurper who will luckily, in the name of justified historical revenge, find its territory on the enemy Croatian land – hidden humor which shapes „Kurir“ cover has its roots in the parody of the political Otherness, either Croat or EU entity, who - in traditional, hyper masculinized Serbian patriarchal public space - represents unworthy opponent which will be punished by metamorphosis in the drag queen. Continuous exchange between the role of political enemy (Croat) with the role of gender otherness (gay/drag queen) is a kind of mockery in which both denial of the EU values and the rejection of the process of EU integrations as process of needed social and political change occurred. As all others discursive strategies parody used in tabloidization process loses its critical potential – parody is used as vulgar way of humiliation of the unwanted ideological Other.

Conclusions and Questions

What was response of LGBTQ elite to the text in tabloid „Kurir“ in which was manifested discrimination and homophobia together with the open hate speech and violation of the basic regulations of reporting on gender minority groups? Did Boban Stojanović react to this kind of tabloid editing, asking the withdrawal of his interview from „Kurir“ and apology from „Kurir“ editorial staff to LGBTQ community in Serbia? Nothing similar happened. Melodramatic aspects of betrayed hope could be detected in such media situation – hope supported by the very interview which Boban

Stojanovic gave for „Kurir“, assuring audience that Serbia is getting closer to the abolition of media stigmatization of GMG.

But the real relationship between official media rhetoric of advocating for GMG rights, on the one hand, and, on the other, simultaneous media stigmatization of GMG in Serbian media implied LGBTQ elite as hidden partner in the media strategy of stigmatization of GMG. These elite takes part, on its own, in the deliberate parody of EU narratives and tabloidization of media reporting on GMG. Therefore the following questions should be explored in further research of media discourse on GMG in Serbia: a) in which way LGBTQ elite is self-represented in the context of media reporting on Belgrade Pride Parade 2014 and b) in which way the media image of gender minority groups (which that elite try to advocate for) is really established?

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