

SOME EXAMPLES FROM THE RESEARCHES OF CROATIAN CASE STUDIES IN EASTERN EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Keynote for the public symposium “The Challenges of Artistic Freedom” at the Maribor Festival, on October 23, 2018

Here we are at the end of 2018. and until yesterday we loved to believe that we are so very far away from the most notorious Index Librorum Prohibitorum (The List of the Forbidden Books) and the Holy Inquisition's oppression of the artists and art. Index Librorum Prohibitorum, firstly invented in the 9th century, was finally abolished by the Catholic Church in the second half of the 20th. The Inquisition with its burnings and executions, however, became a part of ugly history more than two centuries earlier. We also shared the very strong faith that after the fall of communism the censorship and state repression on arts belongs to the dark un-democratic and illiberal past. We used to believe that The Degenerate Art exhibition ("Entartete Kunst") organized in Munich by Adolf Ziegler was just a horrible event 81 years ago. The notorious "Action against the Un-German Spirit" by the Main Office for Press and Propaganda of the German Student Union in 1933. which produced a literary purge or "cleansing" ("Säuberung") of books by the fire, also used to be only the metaphor of something unbelievable, unimaginable and horrific, but very far away from us today.

But here we are, almost 90 years later, and behold, we are speaking today and here about the human rights, artistic freedoms and freedom of expression with most obvious reasons and very urgent needs. Let's look at only this year, 2018. in some facts. (although I will briefly present the last decade on one particular case study in Croatia). So, what are we dealing with in 2018.?

When we hear the recent information that art, media and entertainment are subject of ideological banishments and censorships, our intrinsic optimism thinks that the news are most probably coming from the so-called third world, still in process of accessing “our western high standards of democracy and liberal values”. And yes, this year, seven countries have banned one of the world's most popular video games, “The Sims”, because of LGBTQ content, so a mobile version of the game is prohibited in China, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Egypt. The explanation was, believe it or not, more or less the “un-Chinese” and “un-Islamic spirit”

of the popular game. Only a few months before, in Russia, Bolshoi theatre postponed premiere of ballet "Nureyev" by famous (and now imprisoned) author Kiril Srebrennikov for five months. The public arena was full of ultra-orthodox nationalist comments on the unacceptable gay story in the performance, which was, of course, very "un-Russian" for their tastes.

And this year also, with a new presidential decree, Turkey's authorities abolished the Turkish State Theater, which existed for more than a century, and canceled its official sponsorship. The decree confiscated all the property of state theaters and Turkey's State Opera and Ballet General Directorate. All assets of these institutions were transferred directly to the presidential office. These two theatre institutions have been very powerful tools in process of modernization and secularization of the Turkish Republic and very important places for Turkish cultural and artistic life.

And intrinsic optimists in us may say: Well, that is the "third world". It is Asia and Africa with its historic burdens and its cultural differences, after all. Unlike Europe, they never had the Renaissance, Enlightenment, bourgeois revolutions, liberal democracies, human right movements and declarations...

But, the very same year, in 2018, in the centre of Europe, the Hungarian State Opera in Budapest has cancelled a third of its performances of the stage musical "Billy Elliot" after criticism by a pro-government media of disseminating "rampant gay propaganda." According to government moral censors, watching the play could turn Hungarian boys gay.

Last examples of such ideas we can recognize in 19th-century pseudosciences and most of the earlier dogmatic superstitions.

The belief that just by watching one single theatre performance, a person can change its social behavior, psychology and even genetics can exist only in two discourses. Firstly, in the ideological construction of mythological "alternative facts", and second in psychiatric paranoid discourse. But if and when these two discourses merge, there is definitely no space for arguments, logic or even simple common sense. The construction of the delusion is deep, solid and complete. Not only the gays but also the communists, which by the way no longer exist anywhere in Europe, can jeopardize the values of Hungarian illiberal ideology. A Frida Kahlo exhibition, for example, in Hungary was criticized for "promoting communism." And that attack was executed by the same

media which accused "Billy Elliot" to "promote homosexual behavior" - the "deviation" which represents, such as the communism, obviously "Un-Hungarian spirit". That media was the news website very close to the Hungarian state chief. Hungary, very unfortunately, is not the only European state where we can observe government behavior previously exclusively reserved for the "third world" or communist regimes before the fall of Berlin wall.

In Croatia, there is a long and scandalous list of banishments and prohibitions I would leave for the end of this speech. In Poland, as we will probably discuss here today, the theatre is one of the most common targets of the new democracy rooted in the nationalism and religious zealotism. Even one of the most atheist European countries, Czech Republic, tried to forbid theatre performance this year on the ground of religious arguments. I will present that case later as well.

Also in 2018, Serbian Ministry of Culture made the decision to remove the sculpture of Belgrade's art group "Dimenzijsa" (Dimension) from the Serbian cultural centre in Paris, after anonymous protests of Serbian immigrants in France followed surprisingly quickly by the campaign of Serbian conservative media. The protesters stressed that such sculpture (gay sexual intercourse between Walt Disney's characters Mickey the Mouse and Donald Duck) is extremely offensive, especially standing so near to the poster of Serbian Orthodox Church's most famous icon, also exhibited at the window of the Cultural Center. The sculpture with such "un-Serbian" spirit was removed from the exhibition in Paris.

What is most disturbing is not that such archaic and barbaric practices are resurrecting in Europe nowadays, but the fact that they are established by the very tops of the social hierarchies. Such attacks, unfortunately, are not at all ridiculous extravagant actions of some marginal groups of fundamentalists or puritan zealots or lunatic preachers. On the contrary, they arrive directly from the top of the states, or the Churches, or both. Just one day before the opening of The Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich, in 1937, Adolf Hitler himself delivered a speech in which he clearly declared "merciless war" on cultural disintegration of German spirit, and "degenerate art" was extensively and broadly defined as something which in any case may "insult German feeling".

The criticism of "Billy Elliot" the musical and Frida Kahlo exhibition in Hungary in 2018. operated by very similar arguments, and it was orchestrated from the "Magyar Idok", a news website that openly supports Prime Minister Viktor Orban and which has direct links with his office. Turkish

decision of overnight execution of State drama theatre and State Opera and Ballet was also “justified” by ideological explanations about Turkish tradition, imperial history, deviant western influences etc. (you recognize the pattern of “un-Turkish spirit”) from the journalists directly connected with the office of very president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and whole act was performed by his presidential executive decree. Removal of the Serbian sculpture in Paris was ordered by the Serbian Ministry of Culture. Attacks on theater director Oliver Frlić’s theater in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Poland and Czech Republic came from the prominent politicians and very high positioned priests of Catholic church, such as bishops, archbishops or, in case of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Czech Republic even the Cardinals, the princess of the Church in the first row behind the Pope, far away from marginal, far away from accidental, far away from isolated incidents and uncontrolled violent groups of hooligans like the Islamic terrorists which, for example, attacked the office of “Charlie Hebdo” in Paris.

Of course, there are also the good, bright and encouraging examples. 81 years after the Degenerate Art exhibition (“Entartete Kunst”), there is a completely different story in Munich. For example, the theatre performance “What they want to hear” in Münchener Kammerspiele confront and very strongly oppose anti-immigrant sentiments and confront right-wing tendencies in society, just as hundreds of thousands of artists, activists and citizens in Munich, Berlin or Chemnitz. Not to mention that German official state politics is very resolutely and clearly engaged to preserve liberal European values. It seems that 81 years later the task of creating Degenerate Art (“Entartete Kunst”) lists is mostly concentrated in so-called New Europe, or to be precise, post-totalitarian Eastern European countries.

Here I will present very briefly - because there is unfortunately so many examples - such Eastern European cultural wars against “un-Croatian spirit”, “un-Polish spirit”, etc.

No matter whether “the enemy”, “the deviation” or “degenerate art” comes from the sexual, ethnic, religious, national or some other minorities, the aggression toward the Otherness is the common denominator of all these attacks. As Reinhard Kühnl in his book “Liberalism and fascism”ⁱ clearly explained, the pattern of the scapegoat is one of the main tools in the foundation and formation of the fascist government. And that creation and foundation of new fascism in Europe is the very reason we should openly discuss such things as we are doing here and now.

Just the case of the Croatian director Oliver Frlić in the last 10 years can illustrate the whole story of such a deeply disturbing situation in Eastern Europe. Almost the same pattern of public reactions, conservative media attacks, right-wing politicians' condemnations and organized protests of the religious fundamentalists can be followed and recognized from 2008 to 2018 in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Poland and Czech Republic, with absence of organized political and religious direct attacks and just slightly more civilized and sophisticated media harassment in Austria. But the case of Oliver Frlić is for sure complete separate case study, already largely analyzed and needs the whole special essay. So much about Oliver Frlić, whom British "The Guardian", for example, just a few months ago listed as one of the five most important theatre directors in Europe.

As I believe that our duty is, as the Japanese proverb say first to "clean the snow from our own roof before we complain at the snow from the neighbor's" or, as it is usual to say in this parts of world to "clean in front of our own doors first" - for the conclusion of the keynote, let me present you just with a few most recent examples of the attacks on freedom of artistic expression and culture in the youngest member of EU, Republic of Croatia.

Here is, just briefly, the list of the most recent attacks on the freedom of artistic expression and artistic rights, human rights and culture in contemporary Croatia, beside the mentioned banishment and prohibition of Oliver Frlić in general, of course:

2013

The poster for the performance "Fine mrtve djevojke" (Fine dead girls) in Drama Theatre Gavella in Zagreb was banned on the ground of insult of Christian feelings. Theatre management gave in after orchestrated media campaign and direct suggestion from the Mayor's office.

2014

Croatian associations of the war veterans expressed their displeasure by the movie "Broj 55" (Number 55) which won the biggest Croatian film festival Award as an absolute winner with several most important film awards. Croatian national TV even organized the roundtable (not audience focus group, but professional roundtable) to hear veteran's observations, which were, as expected, purely ideological. Among the others, the veteran "critics" blamed the movie that in a

story about the Homeland war the screenplay never use words such as “homeland, faith, family” nor “showed the Catholic rosary around the Croatian soldier’s necks”. Obviously, quite “un-Croatian” spirit for the aesthetic of “Blut und Boden Ideologie” (“Blood and Soil”).

2015

Dubrovnik summer festival cancelled the performance “Elementarne čestice” (The Elementary Particles) by Michael Houellebecq on the ground of the “high-security risk” whatever that was supposed to mean. The police never explained the procedure of the security assessment except for very broad implications that anything disturbing for Islamic fundamentalists feelings so near the border of Bosnia and Herzegovina can be a potential invitation for the Islamic terrorists. But it was very indicative that such assessment from the police came after the high ranked politician critique that the performance is “morally provocative”. Let’s say that, according to his judgement, that was rather “un-Croatian” by its spirit.

In Zadar police suggested removal of some artworks of the Russian artist duo “Blue Noses”, again on the ground of the high-security risk, with the explanation that the artifacts with Islamic motives could be offensive to the Muslim believers and therefore (the conclusion is obvious) probably provoke a terrorist attack on the gallery.

In Dubrovnik “high-security risk” Croatian police did not resolve the issue by raising the level of the security and by intensive anti-terrorist activities, but by banishment and censorship of art, adjusting the theatre festival and gallery programs according to the potential terrorist's feelings, tastes and needs.

In 2015, an advertising agency in Zagreb informed festival “Perforacije” (Perforations) that it will refuse to advertise the performance “Nečastive” (Denuded) because of its title which is associated with Lucifer, Devil and Satanism. The agency also refused to pay back already paid advertising fee, so the festival had to fight for it in court.

In 2015, the hysterical campaign of Catholic activists in Zagreb asked for the banishment of the poster for the performance of Toller’s “Hinkemann” because of the open presentation of male nudity. Zagreb Youth Theatre did not accept such demand, as they did not in 2016 when some “concerned citizens” also found the poster for the performance “Pad” (The Fall) “highly unpatriotic”.

2016

Extreme right-wing veterans associations attacked Croatian Audio Visual centre and its manager Hrvoje Hribar for “ideological propaganda against Croatia”. Although this orchestrated attack of right-wing politicians, conservative public organizations, Catholic church and veterans mixed almost everything in their furious and very aggressive attack, it was clear that their agenda is purely ideological and propagandist. Basically, in short, they demanded Croatian movies and TV productions to be exclusively patriotic, meaning to distribute only Croatian nationalist and Catholic propaganda.

2017

The international event “The Night of theatre” was forced to change its date because the war veterans’ associations found it offensive that such “entertainment and festive” event collides with the date of the fall of the city of Vukovar during the war. The organizers had to find the new date, even though ten other countries participating in the same event kept the previously agreed and traditional date.

2018

War veterans and notorious ultra-right TV program asked for the banishment of the concert of the rock band “Hladno pivo” (“The cold beer”) at the celebration of the Homeland Thanksgiving Day in Split, because of their left and liberal songs. The only thing more disgusting than the demand that Homeland Thanksgiving by default must be right wing oriented was humiliating apologize to the veterans by the Mayor of Split who practically said that his deepest regret was that unfortunately there was no legal ground for such banishment.

In 2018, what they failed to do in Split, the veterans made in the city of Karlovac. On their demand, the city cancelled concert of the famous Serbian singer (born in Croatia) Momčilo Bajagić Bajaga, on the ground of false accusations that he was singing as an entertainer for the Serbian paramilitary troops during the war in Croatia.

In 2018, after the pressure and protests of association of war veteran widows, Croatian movie “Ministarstvo ljubavi” (The Ministry of Love) was not excluded from the program of Croatian national Television, as they asked, but it was moved from prime time to the late-night term. A few days later the same protesters asked for the exclusion of the movie “Ustav Republike Hrvatske”

(Constitution of the Republic Croatia) and National TV management did the very same thing, transferring of the movie in the midnight spot. The reason for the protests was, as one can already suppose, lack of patriotism or, let's say, "Un-Croatian" spirit of the movies, which by the way were, satirical movies and comedies.

For such very intensive and aggressive activities especially focused on banishment and censorship in culture, different Croatian associations of war veterans (and there are exactly 1384 of them representing more than half million persons, even just few of them - not more than five - are active in this censorship activities) already gained the name "zabranitelji" in media and in public, which is the word game between the word "branitelj" (defender), as they are officially called, and "zabranitelj" (prohibiter) as the liberal media started to call them.

In 2018, after the spectacular success of the Croatian soccer team which won the silver medal in Russia, and eruption of primitive nationalism at their festive welcome in Zagreb, three Croatian famous actresses, Nataša Janjić, Jelena Veljača and Lana Barić, commented such chauvinism as completely inappropriate and unnecessary. All of them immediately became targets of massive nationalist hysteria, experiencing open threats, public humiliations and bulling.

Two years ago, famous Croatian actress Nina Violić was the victim of the same hysterical attacks and threats after her opinion (again on her private Facebook profile) about the appointment of the extremely right-wing revisionist and openly Nazi sympathizer to the position of Minister of culture in new Croatian Government.

Croatian Association of Drama Artists never spoke a single word in defense of this actresses, with the excuse that they deeply respect the diversity of their membership and their rights to very different and often opposite viewpoints and beliefs. It is very significant that the Croatian Association of Drama Artists expressed a lot of understanding for the extreme right and even fascist members right of expression but did not express the same understanding for the liberal ones. After that, a significant number of actors, directors and dramaturges left the Association.

In 2018, the already notorious associations of war veterans banned the folk music festival of traditional village singing, the special kind of very old traditional music protected by UNESCO as an immaterial cultural heritage. The argument was that the tradition is ethnically Serbian, and as such, has no place in Croatian city. The Mayor of that city expressed his deepest disagreement

with such demands and with the festival organizers decision to postpone the event. Few days after his resistance to the nationalist's demands, his house was broken in. Nothing was stolen, but the whole house was in a disturbing mess.

In 2018 the General Manager of Student Center University of Zagreb illegally fired his assistant for culture, Mrs. Nataša Rajković, almost with no explanation. The manager, as a right-wing and conservative person, did not even try to conceal his divergence to her open, liberal and multicultural program. As Mrs. Rajković made several very important international events and festivals, and opened Student Center to the youth, experimental, avant-garde and innovative practices, more than 1.200 prominent artists, cultural workers and public persons signed letter of support to her. Even Ministry of Culture expressed deep concern about such act, Ministry of Science and Education, as direct superior to Student Center did not say a word about the case.

In 2018, a member of Croatian Parliament, a politician from the extreme conservative catholic right-wing marginal party, manipulating with much fake news, attacked festival "Fališ" (I miss you) in the city of Šibenik for promoting both communism and Serbian nationalism using the Croatian public funding for performing such "un-Croatian" festival.

2018 is coming to an end, but there is still time. To be continued...

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ⁱ Formen bürgerlicher Herrschaft. Liberalismus – Faschismus. Kühnl, Reinhard. Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1972