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## THE BEAUTY OF GRAFFITI<sup>1</sup>

When I was faced, in April 2010, with Belgrade's downtown overflowing with graffiti literally calling for killing and expelling, I was upset and frightened: Not only by its existence, but also by the fact that no one reacted, no one believed that this has no place in my/our city, in my eyes, in my head. I remembered that one poet once said that he wrote about violence because he was afraid of it. I started writing, in fear of the reality of Belgrade's facades endlessly spreading the threat of death to all so-called 'others' and those that were different. But I discovered that not all to be seen on these facades was hatred and evil. There was also a series of anonymous interventions in the form of witty "restorations" of the worst hatred contents, funny correspondence, new paintings opposing the hatred, and more beautiful pictures. Thus I discovered the existence of some kind of wild – although unfinished – but certainly attractive, urban beauty. I was faced by the beauty of creation, and it was for me a moment of enlightenment, when I realised the difference between the power of creativity and violence. The capacity of creativity stood opposed to destruction and violence, actors of creation *versus* violence as demolition. I opted, naturally, for the power of creation, disagreeing with those who think all graffiti is simply an ugly and unacceptable way of dirtying the city's spaces and buildings. Graffiti messages expressing anti-Semitism, Territoriality, Right-wing sentiments, Misogyny, Homophobia, etc., belong to the domain of hate. Artistic, Loving, Acknowledging, Images/Murals belong to the domain of beauty, while Left-wing, Football-related, and Politically-oriented pieces are aesthetically neutral and might be placed within beauty or hate domains on an individual case-by-case basis.

**Key words:** graffiti, artistic graffiti, legal and illegal graffiti, how to combat hate graffiti

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In the Socialist era, graffiti was rare and nobody seriously analyzed it. It was simply not tolerated, and considered an “anti-social phenomenon”. In that ‘graffiti-free’ time, there were House Councils (*Kućni saveti*) in each residential building, and these Councils had the task of looking after buildings, and among other tasks, to reporting each message written on the facade or in the vicinity of the building, to avoid possible political consequences, and then to quickly remove them so as not to be considered an accomplice.

In the present day, long after the socialistic ‘graffiti-free’ time (G.A.,*Blic*, 2011), Belgrade and other Serbian towns are painted with all kinds of graffiti. Most of this is ugly scribbling, or simply unskilled examples of artistic expression, many with messages of open hate directed against national and sexual minorities. If, and when, asked, citizens, particularly elderly ones, are against all forms of graffiti. As one of them said “*Even if we assume that some graffiti is art, the wall does not belong to a graffiti maker. They should paint graffiti on their own walls and places designated for this purpose by city authorities. Graffiti in any other place is not permitted, and should be sanctioned and the author obliged to remove it*” (Brakočević, 2015).

Bearing in mind citizens’ animosity toward graffiti, Belgrade city administration recently announced: “Who writes graffiti will have to clean it”. The city administration has recently proposed changes to the regulations which would, in addition to fines, allow the additional punishment of forcing the perpetrator to remove theirs and others’ graffiti from streets’ facades. Communal police will continue to fine, and perhaps soon to demand personal identification from those who violate the communal order by that way. Some media reactions to this decision were published. One article in the daily *Politika* newspaper (traditional, conservative, centre-to-right-wing) titled “*Graffiti is an art, not just scribbling on the wall*” solicited artistic graffiti by providing space for graffiti makers’ opinions. Through this, some graffiti makers argued that the time has come for Serbia to adopt some good practices from Europe, to distinguish between what is art and what is vandalism. In some countries there is, for example, an office where an artist can turn to, in search for assistance, by providing a sketch and information on where he/she wants to draw. If the location is appropriate, the graffiti maker will be licensed. For

painting infrastructural facilities, such as bridges and passages, abandoned power stations, walls or columns, it is even possible to obtain a small budget for the procurement of materials.

The “easiest way” to deal with the issue of graffiti is to threaten fines and arrest. But problems about graffiti cannot be solved in such a way, which has been proven in Europe, where repression has so far failed. Zero tolerance toward graffiti makes the situation even worse. All street artists at one point retreated into hiding but continued with secret street painting. Those who served prison sentences continued to work upon release, because it is their only way to communicate with society.

### **Legal versus illegal graffiti, freedom of speech and graffiti**

Beside illegal graffiti, there are also legal graffiti pieces, and these are primarily those written or painted on ‘legal’ surfaces, walls of owners who have permitted the graffiti decoration, or had even commissioned and paid for them (Iveson, 2007: 145). Legally-permitted or legal graffiti is dedicated to the general public and can be found at approved locations, and even approved or ordered by the city authorities. Legal permission may include also individual permissions, for example, by people who donated their private properties to graffiti activity. However, we should not forget that many, even the world’s most renowned graffiti artists, paint their graffiti exclusively in secrecy and during the night, in illegal areas and on illegal surfaces, without anybody’s permission, such as British author Banksy.

Graffiti is an essential part of the urban environment. Imagining a city without graffiti would be like imagining a city without a street or a car. Graffiti is placed everywhere; on display, exposed to weather conditions and people’s emotions. And that makes it an ephemeral, although inevitable, urban environment element.

### **Photos**

Graffiti is an undoubtedly democratic phenomenon (Mitchell, 2003) because those whose artistic products cannot be exhibited in the galleries of the art establishment will, however, leave a visible, even long-lasting, mark on a city’s walls. The same goes for those whose political views cannot be expressed on an official platform at decision-making functions. They instead make their ideas visible and permanent at railway

stations, in abandoned warehouses and factories, along pedestrian passages, on fences of sports stadiums and at peripheral tram garages. Although these pieces are, in the main, simply gibberish, there are also many artistic street graffiti pieces whose aesthetic displays refresh urban drab, its monotonous uniformity and grey repetitiveness. They bring to life the endless monochromatic, aesthetically low-validated, poorly-maintained architecture, especially those neglected peripheral urban complexes of residential and industrial zones, and, as such, are generally welcomed as visually pleasing, innovative and stimulating (Mršević, 2012: 11-16).

The existence of street graffiti therefore may be understood as an indicator of democratic and pluralistic societal orientation, as an expression of free speech and artistic creativity, and also as the presence of free thought, namely pulsating alternative narratives of urban culture. Stevan Karanović, president of the first graffiti artists' club in Serbia, also once admitted that graffiti can largely be plain gibberish and blunders, but some pieces, as he claimed, are real pearls of artistic brightness and inspiration (B.R., *Novosti*, 2007). However, we should bear in mind the broad range of graffiti – from lucidity to the lowest level of triviality – and the fact that pieces are not always expressions of freedom and creativity, and can easily turn into hate and vandalism.

### Photos

It is necessary, however, to differentiate works of graffiti into those that are 'good' and those that are 'bad', recognising that not all graffiti is incoherent ranting, verbal aggression, undesirable communal mess, or, to simply put it, the ugly and unnecessary spoiling of city walls. In contrast to the opinions of those who oppose all forms of graffiti, there appears to be a contra tendency, which is to make public spaces of cities deliberately accessible to all. 'Good' graffiti is of artistic quality, interesting and fun, with (politically) 'acceptable'<sup>2</sup> messages which do not go outside the domain of socially acceptable, politically correct and polite behaviour. As such, they are welcomed in many urban areas of cities.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Acceptable' essentially means: no hate, no racism, no misogyny, no intolerance, no homophobia, no death or other threats to any person, group, etc. (Ružić, 2012)

Very close to public acceptability are graffiti pieces addressed between the limited community of graffiti makers. Among these authors, there is a sort of competition in the imagery, but also in showing courage to paint upon the most dangerous and inaccessible locations. Such places are, for example, in city centres where graffiti is least welcome and where all sorts of controls are usually strict and regularly implemented. As a rule, the competitive element of graffiti making results in graffiti located in illegal places, but also in areas very difficult to be reached, due to restrictions, physical barriers and the like. Sometimes specific graffiti makers' rivalry and boasting is reflected in repeatedly painting their own portrait in hard-to-reach places, such as is the case with the Belgrade female graffiti maker, known under her artistic pseudonym "The Queen Fairy" or acronym of her Serbian nickname (*The Kraljica Vila*), TKV. For the purpose of rivalry, sometimes it is just enough to leave one's own signature, as is the case with graffiti writers signing as Ska, Djoxs, Kang, Imso, Mng, etc. (Mršević, 2014).

## Photos

### **Graffiti makers**

It cannot, however, be denied that graffiti makers, no matter to which educational, social or ethnic/racial group they belong, usually are what is called, "highly agile, keen creator". Writers, artists, designers, creators and makers of works of graffiti (and not exclusively those of 'good' graffiti) are generally persons of artistic nature, rather than any kind of combating attacker. But it does not matter to which category they belong, graffiti makers mainly come from a heterogeneous mixture of proletarian urban poverty, racial and ethnic minorities, and/or other marginalised social groups (Jugović, 2007: 110). Their characteristic is slowed or prevented social mobility. A graffiti maker is far from the most talented or best educated member of their generation, or of society in general. Consequently, a graffiti maker not only has a reduced capacity to launch their views and ideas, but also has a reduced capacity of their own talents and articulation. Simple slogans characteristic of graffiti expression (akin to the slogans chanted at football stadiums) are probably the most sophisticated thing graffiti makers have created as their own authentic product. They are those who actually cannot devise a political speech, not to mention a political program, newspaper or scientific paper, radio or TV show, book,

exhibition or theatre play, even if there were a possibility for these products to be published.

### TKV - The Queen Fairy<sup>3</sup>

TKV - The Queen Fairy is the artistic nickname of a Belgrade female stencil artist who has created hundreds of murals and graffiti images throughout Belgrade, from small portraits to murals of over ten square meters in dimension. Her street works are upon street facades, in city parks, over garbage containers, and around prominent art galleries. She seeks to beautify the urban environment as it is a common communication area. She also intends to cover, through her artistic interventions, hate graffiti, to ‘conquer’ new grounds and new spaces with her witty urban interventions. In one period, she created self portraits altered by Photoshop-like interventions. When asked what were her drives and motivations, she responded: “I think a little bit of everything. It is difficult to say such a thing - maybe at the substantive level, there is a great need for creation, viewed through the prism of the city, and the social situation. But there certainly is an element of civil disobedience, a slightly idealised position on collective knowledge and prosperity. In fact, one should bear on mind that there are multiple layers through which my work functions” (Mršević, 2014:109).

#### Photos of TKV works

### Citizens’ initiatives in various Serbian cities

#### Belgrade graffiti<sup>4</sup>

The aim of the project titled “*Belgrade graffiti*” is to document and promote the graffiti on the streets of Serbian capital. Aleksandar Djordjević, a photographer and designer from Belgrade, started this project during the early 1990s, while living in Berlin. The project is still ongoing, presenting the explanation that the graffiti phenomenon has accompanied humankind from the earliest days of its existence. Graffiti messages always

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<sup>3</sup> The street art work of TKV is presented on her Facebook profile: <https://www.facebook.com/tkv.tkvkraljicavila>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/beogradskigrafiti/info>

exist, regardless of whether we look at the graffiti on the walls of Belgrade, or cave paintings of prehistoric hunters. Specifically, the graffiti found on cave walls in which children of the prehistoric communities drew their friends and allies, but also aliens and ghosts that haunted them. Printing and painting graffiti continues all the way to today's virtual Facebook wall. The aim of this project is to preserve and document this specific form of art. Within the project were launched a blog and the Facebook page 'Belgrade graffiti' where, in addition to graffiti from Belgrade, graffiti from various other world capitals is shown, in order to exhibit the universal language of graffiti.

## Photos

### **Zrenjanin<sup>5</sup> citizen initiatives to preserve murals**

Murals are a specific form of graffiti, a kind of developed, 'matured' graffiti. Paintings on Zrenjanin's facades and walls that were once recognisable urban decorative elements, even a pride of Zrenjanin, are presently becoming increasingly suppressed and made almost invisible by billboards. However, in the city people still wish to, yet again, renew their murals. The Citizens' Initiative of Zrenjanin aims to prevent deterioration of the painted city murals which were once recognised and praised throughout the entirety of Former Yugoslavia. The primary focus is the dynamic picture of "Four Horses" running across a wall from left to right, an image derived from and inspired by a popular folk song.

Three decades ago, the painter Milutin Mičić initiated the idea of painting murals upon the city's walls. He was the primary author of three large murals within the city (Đukić, 2014). The first of these lies upon a building beside to the main road leading into the centre of the city, with ancient cultures being represented as connected to the Banat culture and environment. The mural has been whitewashed over since. The second was located upon the main facade of the economic school and consisted of motifs symbolising the chronology of civilisation, with symbols denoting epochs through which civilisation had passed. The inexorable passage of time is symbolised by a sundial which physics professor Krste Naumovski placed upon Mičić's mural. The Latin message "*Noras non numero nisi serenas*" ("*I count only sunny hours*") is still visible at the site of the mural.

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<sup>5</sup> Zrenjanin is the main city of the Central Banat District in Vojvodina Province. It lies on the banks of the river Begej.

The third mural is the most famous and it is located along the same highway, and there was painted the four horses mentioned above. The horses were positioned as if they had emerged from the song *Četir Konja Debela (Four Fat Horses)*, harnessed to a carriage crossing the narrow iron bridge over the river Begej. The mural is the most popular amongst the residents of Zrenjanin, and it was famous throughout Former Yugoslavia, and the author Milutin Mičić received plaudits from across the nation. Although he received no money for his work, he was happy mostly because he, although a young and unknown artist, had the opportunity to make this impressive mural located upon a busy city road, with dimensions of almost 800 square metres, and the length of each horse being almost four metres. One can judge the importance of this mural by comprehending the fact that people from Zrenjanin demanded it be the first mural restored and protected from decay.

#### Photos of 4 fat horses

Unfortunately, in the current situation the artistic murals are no longer considered an important element of the urban environment. Moreover, murals are forgotten and no longer recognised as creative ways of decorating (but also preserving) facades. This leads to a loss of opportunity for encouraging creative thought and action. Human freedom, the spread of spirituality and creative organisation of space are all benefits of such urban decoration. In spite of this fact, instead of creating new artistic murals, the new and easier practice of installing the easily changeable visual contents of advertising billboards takes place almost everywhere. New initiatives to paint new murals no longer occur. Therefore, at least the old ones should be preserved in all their beauty.

#### **Leskovac<sup>6</sup>**

Through the initiative of citizens dissatisfied with how the public space of their city looks, a project was launched, humorously titled “*What should be done in Leskovac (that does not cost anything?)*”<sup>7</sup>. A Facebook group was launched too, gaining several hundred members. They presented various creative proposals for improving the ambience of Leskovac. In order to change the drab urban spaces, besides pleasant graffiti

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<sup>6</sup> Panel on hate graffiti was held in Leskovac on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2014. Leskovac is a city in Southern Serbian, once the Serbian textile industry centre, with the moniker “Serbian Manchester”.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/184588391614241/permalink/708197825919959/>



interventions, actions of painting benches in public parks and public stairways, all in vivid colours, have been planned. The most interesting plan was to employ traditional folk motifs used in woven carpets and to paint the facades of family houses with local ethno motifs, but also imported motifs, inspired, for example, by the Ndebele people of South Africa.

#### Photos of street interventions in Leskovac

#### **Kosjerić<sup>8</sup>**

In the city of Kosjerić a biennial art colony is regularly organised, when the city hosts dozens of domestic and foreign artists. After the colony, their paintings and other artistic products are donated to the city. Some of these artworks have remained upon the inner and exterior walls of the municipal building at the very centre of the city. Besides the municipality building, the murals are located at the walls of the City Library and House of Culture. Interestingly, Kosjerić, thanks to that practice of organising art colonies, is the only place in Serbia where there is graffiti which publicly celebrates positive local figures, so-called “Bulgakov” graffiti, as titled by Bushnell, who wrote about Moscow’s graffiti (Bushnell, 1990). Namely, upon the external walls of the City Library there are portraits of locally-famous chess players of Kosjerić, including Milovan Jovčić, and also world-famous conductor, Herbert von Karajan.

#### Photo of famous conductor on the outside wall of the City Library

#### **Vranje<sup>9</sup>**

Vranje predominantly is covered with football fans’ graffiti, but also some large works contain explicitly homophobic messages, one of them located near the main city bus station. Otherwise, in the well-known and popular resort of “Čoška”, near Vranje, there are cheerful, comic-caricatured graffiti decorations. They are well-accepted by visitors, and these graffiti works are considered almost a part of the natural environment and have not been exposed to any intentional damage. Such graffiti facilities can serve as an example of successful cooperation between city authorities and graffiti artists. In this way, good, artistic graffiti decorations are obtained to improve the public environment.

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<sup>8</sup> Kosjerić is a small town in Western Serbia. A panel on hate graffiti was held in Kosjerić on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Vranje is the main city of the Southern Serbia Region. A panel on hate graffiti was held in Vranje on 8<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

The graffiti artists are supported in their artistic expression, and there is no need to illegally paint ugly graffiti all around the city.

#### Photos of the resort area decoration

##### **Novi Pazar<sup>10</sup>**

In Novi Pazar there are not large amounts of graffiti, and, where present, they primarily consist of the aforementioned combination of football fans' and nationalistic graffiti. But ecologically-themed graffiti is also evident: the slogan "*Dirty and clean is not the same*" appears on the bridges over the city's river. Through this, the city's environmental movement has warned of the possible danger of not cleaning sewage and river beds, which was proven to be a very important issue during the spring of 2014 when a series of catastrophic floods devastated Serbia.

##### **Prijepolje<sup>11</sup>**

Around the schools of Prijepolje there is graffiti bearing educational topics. This graffiti has emerged through organised learning activities under the slogan "*I have rights*". As a multiethnic environment, Prijepolje is very sensitive to all forms of hate speech, including nationalistic graffiti that occasionally occurs, but is quickly removed. One of the most interesting ways in which graffiti has been used as an expression of civic protest took place in Prijepolje: The environmental movement of the town, concerned about the possibility of a hydroelectric power station construction on the river Lim ("Brodarevo" 1 and 2), organised the fierce civic protests in various forms, from public rallies, to signing petitions. But as the hydropower project was planned to be financed by foreign sources, the project was considered as profitable and neither local nor central government would tolerate civic resistance to the implementation of this project. The protesters were arrested and there were allegations of cases of abuse, too. Criminal charges for spreading racial and national hatred and intolerance were pressed against all protesting people, although the members of the environmental movement were members of several nations and as such, very much paid attention to fostering good neighbourly relations. During the protest

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<sup>10</sup> Novi Pazar is the main city centre of Sandžak region, mostly inhabited by Serbia's Muslim minority. A panel on hate graffiti was held in Novi Pazar on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Prijepolje is located in Western Serbia, near the Montenegrin border. A panel on hate graffiti was held in Prijepolje on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2014.

and after, the protesters were refused access to the media, and could not address their messages to the public. Therefore, the protesters decided to use graffiti, mostly with the messages, “*Stop the hydroelectric power plant*”, “*We do not want the hydroelectric plant*”, “*Citizens have a say*”, and similar slogans, which were painted throughout the city and on the road from Prijepolje to the nearest Montenegrin town, Bijelo Polje. Although still visibly shaken by everything they experienced due to their protest, the protesters were successful in halting the implementation of the hydropower construction, due to their perseverance. This was a successful outcome of a protest which employed graffiti as a tactic.

Photo of a school graffiti, I have rights

### **Sremska Mitrovica**

The centre of Sremska Mitrovica<sup>12</sup> is decorated with religious murals and antique motifs, but also scenes of the nearby Zasavica National Park. The author of these murals is a painter and professor of classical painting from the town, Dragan Martinović. More than twenty large murals that adorn facades in the centre of Sremska Mitrovica have been financed independently, with only one funded by the city, and even this small-scale cooperation was discontinued in 2004. Martinović was assisted in the creation of the murals by his students, who were encouraged by the usual graffiti-making motive; the opportunity to see their work in public and for it to be seen by hundreds of people every day, thus enriching and beautifying urban spaces usually filled with grey and faceless facades.

Photos of Martinovic street art works

### **Hate versus beauty**

But when speaking about beautiful, good or artistic graffiti, we should not forget that much graffiti undoubtedly constitutes a visible form of human destructiveness, incorporating elements of threats of violence and vandalism (Komlenović, 2010: 468). Graffiti can also be physically detrimental to public buildings, privately-owned property, cemeteries, churches, and historic and cultural resources. Pieces may cause damage or

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<sup>12</sup> In western Vojvodina, famous as the location of the archeological site of the Roman city of Sirmium.

destruction, and create costs for their removal or overpainting. Their occurrence and frequency in areas in and around school yards points to the possible development and escalation of what is defined as anti-school violence (Filipović, 2011: 339), directed against peers, but also against teachers, schools' facilities, and their assets. It can also be an indicator and warning of territoriality, which is also often the case with football fans' graffiti, and can also act as a call for meeting to fight with an opposing group, or anyone else seen as a rival.

#### Photos of football fans graffiti marking territory

If, for a moment, one can ignore graffiti as a part of urban culture and a way of expressing youthhood rebellion, or as a communal problem, and analyse and interpret the messages of graffiti and motives of these messages, in most cases in Serbia they are motivated by hatred of other people, mostly due to their national, racial, sexual or religious belonging (S.J., *Danas*, 2011). The irony of the whole situation becomes apparent when one understands that the main social groups targeted by hate graffiti (e.g., Roma, LGBT population, ethnic minorities, etc.) are members of a very similar if not identical demographic social mix of poverty, marginalisation and discrimination to the graffiti makers! Therefore, the question still remains unanswered as to why this antagonism and publicly manifested hatred is expressed, instead of social solidarity (Badiou, 2008: 70). The hate expressed by such graffiti is of such intensity that there can only be a small space between this and publicly-manifested physical violence. This open and possibly violent confrontation discourages the concept of social solidarity and justice within various disadvantaged groups. One possible answer offered by Professor Svenka Savić (2007) resulting from her several researches and studies, undoubtedly leads to the conclusion that such graffiti does not arise individually and spontaneously: “[...] *graffiti is the means of powerful people who have engaged youngsters (or even whole groups of them) to write hate messages.*”

The reasons for the current absence of sanctions for this specific form of juvenile hate speech are to be found in weak institutions and a general inefficiency of law enforcement. The fact that there is an absence of any counter-measures creates an urban environment of hatred which is unable to deal with the otherness of the so-called “Others” in a civilised manner (Gruhonjić, 2007).

When I was faced (in April 2010) with Belgrade's downtown overflowing with graffiti literally calling for killing and expelling, I was upset and frightened: Not only by its existence, but also by the fact that no one reacted, no one believed that this has no place in my/our city, in my eyes, in my head. I remembered that one poet once said that he wrote about violence because he was afraid of it. I started writing, in fear of the reality of Belgrade's facades endlessly spreading the threat of death to all so-called 'others' and those that were different (Rill, 2012). But I discovered that not all to be seen on these facades was hatred and evil. There was also a series of anonymous interventions in the form of witty "restorations" of the worst hatred contents, funny correspondence, new paintings opposing the hatred, and more beautiful pictures.

#### Photo of intervention on Coca Cola

Thus I discovered the existence of some kind of wild – although unfinished – but certainly attractive, urban beauty (Hajms, 1980). I was faced by the beauty of creation, and it was for me a moment of enlightenment, when I realised the difference between the power of creativity and violence. The capacity of creativity stood opposed to destruction and violence, actors of creation *versus* violence as demolition. I opted, naturally, for the power of creation, disagreeing with those who think all graffiti is simply an ugly and unacceptable way of dirtying the city's spaces and buildings.

#### **The Broken Window Theory**

The broken windows theory is a criminological theory that emerged in the early 1980s in the works of Wilson and Keeling (Wilson & Keeling, 1982). They indicated connections between urban disorder and vandalism and other forms of antisocial and criminal behaviour. According to this theory, the existence of urban disorder (symbolised by broken windows) represents a signal, and also an indication of increased potential for criminal acts of a violent character.

Places where broken windows are not regularly repaired, where garbage is irregularly taken away, and where nobody prevents and removes graffiti, seem to be places where nobody cares about environmental problems. This is a factor which gives a "green light" to vandalism and violent crime. A society which is negligent of the broken window, or any analogous "broken window", like communal disorder, indicates a lack of

general self-concern of the community for its own wellbeing. This is a signal of the vulnerability of such communities, due to the absence of defence mechanisms. No matter how many times the fixing of 'broken windows' is necessary, or how much it costs in economic terms, these efforts should be regular and constant everywhere, and each community must invest part of its resources in countering 'broken windows' of all forms (Simović, 2011).

Broken windows lead to future problems in the form of street gangs gathering, the assembly of drunks and drug addicts, flourishing prostitution, street peddling, gang conflicts, mass fights, robberies, etc. All of the effects mentioned in turn feed residents a greater sense of lack of control over the environment in which they live. They fear that the entire district will become even further deteriorated and degraded. The root of broken windows theory is that small, but neglected, offences and violations of the law open the way to more serious and greater crime because the level of crime tends to rise as it was tolerated in its initial forms.

It is believed that the sense of fear is one of the key moments of broken windows theory, because unsolved communal problems or 'broken windows' (street trash, ugly and hate graffiti, broken playground equipment, destroyed street lighting, etc.) create in people a sense of helplessness, separation, loneliness, fear and mistrust, and foment a lack of solidarity. People avoid each other as a response to the feelings of distrust and fear. Possibilities for cooperation and joint control over public space become further and further reduced, while the frequency of acts of violent crime proportionally increases (Sulima, 2005). In contrast, the reduction of crime and violence begins with maintaining social control and public order. The existence of neighbourly relations or its absence is the very crux of distinction between environments with lower rates of violence and criminality and environments with higher rates. It is possible to see the difference at first glance, by noting the absence or presence of graffiti.

Street obituaries are considered as the evidence of existing the "broken windows" in certain area. In current times, this kind of graffiti art is the Belgrade typical way of celebrating murdered "tough guys" who probably fell as victims of street conflicts among the street gangs.

**Photos of Street obituaries**

## **On feminist refusal of hate and civic activities against hate graffiti**

### **Belgrade**

Hate speech is a verbal expression which motivates and leads to the next step, consisting of discrimination and hate crimes. Therefore, it is nothing more than an initiating phase, followed by the discrimination and hate crimes as implemented in practice, after previously verbally expressed hatred (Mršević, 2012).

Feminist refusal of hate speech in all its forms and aspects is a part of regular feminist agenda. To be a feminist means also to actively oppose this specific contamination of public space. Feminists do not agree with hatred, discrimination, incitement to violence, glorification of violence, intolerance, rejection, or exclusion of the “Other”. Action is necessary because when hatred and violence are tolerated and face no reaction they become dangerously comfortable pathological forms of ‘normal’ life, and too easy and too fast a path to the brutalisation of society (Metz, 2012). Silence that is continuously and permanently present in our lives additionally leads to what is called the ‘normalisation of evil’ (Koković, 2010: 40). Feminist opposition to hatred is also an opposition to patriarchy in its transition from traditional paternal dominance to modern, fraternal, male dominance (Kunac & Sarnavka, 2006: 13). Hate graffiti – as well as much hate speech – is a result of the metaphorical brotherhood striving to forever preserve their male privilege. This dominance includes a ‘right’ to violence, a ‘right’ to reject all those considered ‘other’ and ‘different’, and male dominance over women and all those who are weaker, less manly or unmanly.

Feminist action against hate graffiti is based on the understanding that such graffiti is part of the unacceptable contamination of public space by hatred, which requires direct feminist action. The first level of this action is to identify such graffiti as an expression of hate. Furthermore, the next necessary steps are understanding, awareness of their content and political significance, their capacity to encourage and mobilise like-minded people and their contribution to the rise of hate and intolerance.

Therefore it is necessary to formally address public authorities and request their removal. If there is no response and no removal of the hate graffiti, it is necessary to organise public protests, accompanied by a public call for hate graffiti removal, followed, if necessary, by removal using own funds (presented through a media campaign). All these phases took place in March 2011 in what is now known as a successful feminist action of clearing Belgrade of hate graffiti. In this action, the 'Labris' organisation for lesbian human rights sent a letter of protest to the Mayor of Belgrade and municipal communal inspection, expressing indignation that even six months after the Pride Parade, numerous instances of homophobic hate graffiti were to be found everywhere throughout the city (Labris, 2011). The letter was followed by an approach from the representatives of the organised feminist groups to the Belgrade city authorities, which led to a rapid agreement regarding the removal of graffiti mostly aimed toward the LGBT population and Roma people. Just one day later, through the rapid action of the city communal services, all hate graffiti was overpainted (N.N., *Blic*, 2011). There was also a promise given that hate graffiti will be continuously removed if and when new examples appear. Due to this action, there was hope that the same model could be repeated in other communities where there is an intention to remove hate graffiti.

Photos of tries to create beauty instead of hate

### **Novi Sad**

In early 2011, the facade of the Novi Sad Youth Centre was practically covered by homophobic hate graffiti. After more than a month of sending repeated petitions and various other applications to municipal inspection and other services in Novi Sad, there was no institutional response (BETA, 2012). Therefore, Novi Sad feminists organised a public action in April 2011, with the intention of removing hate graffiti (FONET, 2011). City authorities remained silent and undertook no action during all the activities. Therefore, the Provincial Institute for Gender Equality, on two occasions (in May and September 2011), organised a campaign of hate graffiti overpainting, trying by these actions, accompanied by a media campaign, to convince the city authorities to remove hate graffiti. However, the city administration has not changed its opinion that all graffiti should be removed by the tenants and owners of apartments in buildings where facades



are covered by graffiti, and not by the city communal services. In this way, hate graffiti has been treated as a private problem, like the replacement of light bulbs in the hallway, or the maintenance of locks at the entrances to buildings. Therefore, the Institute for Gender Equality and the Provincial Ombudsman launched a campaign to map hate graffiti in Novi Sad, with intention of presenting evidence of how widespread hate graffiti was, its places, contents, main target groups, etc. The mapping of hate graffiti convinced the competent authorities and police to confront this serious problem in a decisive manner, in accordance with the Constitution, the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination and ratified international human rights treaties (S.J., *Danas*, 2011).

The consequences of activist interventions in collaboration with city authorities against hate graffiti, as well as the first court sanctions (albeit only probationary) imposed, became very considerable to the authors of hate graffiti. Firstly, in Belgrade the apparent disappearance of signed graffiti became noticeable. Before the court proceedings, various football fan groups, such as *Grobari* (*Gravediggers*, supporters of Partizan football club), *Naši* (*Ours*), *Obraz* (*Honour*), etc., who, as the most prominent homophobic graffiti signatories had previously even boasted with their hate graffiti painted all over the city, stated that they no longer wished to be identified with such graffiti and thus exposed to possible sanctions. Also, there have been changes to the content of graffiti, and now ambiguous messages prevail, where there is no longer an explicitly expressed call to violence, murder, etc. Currently, homophobic content is dressed in attire of ‘permissible’ expression of political opinion, such as disagreement and non-acceptance: *Stop Gay Parade*, *For the Life of Serbia*, and similar slogans. It is clear that behind the new graffiti, while dressed differently, there is the same homophobic intent and hatred, including threats to the security of the LGBT population. But it is difficult to prove in a court of law that such graffiti is not something within the permissible domain of free speech. It was also noted, as consequence of hate graffiti removal in Belgrade, that homophobic graffiti was in fact rare in the spring of 2012. Although the walls of the city were covered by graffiti almost to the last inch (as a result of the so-called “fear of empty space” – *horror vacui*) (Biringer, 2005) by all sorts of ‘doodle art’ products, everything is present except for explicit homophobic graffiti. That certainly is an initial success visible through the withdrawal of the tacit permission of

Serbian cities to further tolerate hate in public spaces, against Roma citizens, ethnic minorities, and the LGBT community.

But appeals to the authorities to trace the organisers and perpetrators of such hate campaigns and threats of violence and calls for lynching of an entire section of the population that raise tensions in society failed. A true institutional response did not happen, i.e. by the way of sanctioning those who have in recent years literally flooded the cities with hate graffiti (Hadžagić-Duraković, 2012). Political condemnation of this phenomenon, coming from various level of state administration, is still completely absent. In the meantime, some overlooked, never-removed hate graffiti and stickers can still be seen on the streets and squares of Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš<sup>13</sup>, as well as public areas of other cities. They will probably remain until civic, antidiscrimination groups again launch the next campaign against them. The absence of an institutional response is not surprising, because it is still incredibly difficult to expect anything more than the removal of the most visible hate graffiti by the city's communal services and the neutralisation of hate graffiti by overpainting it. It seems that condemnation of violence and open threats of violence is still impossible. Willingness to justify hate graffiti messages, with the familiar argument that “*graffiti makers are only youngsters, football fans and, in fact, our children*” may just prolong tolerance to hate speech, and contribute to eliminating an adequate social environment for delivering sanctions and the consequent elimination of hate graffiti, and all other forms of hate speech (Gligorijević, 2012).

### **Institutionally-organised initiatives against hate graffiti**

#### **Let's paint over the hate graffiti<sup>14</sup>**

*“Let's paint over hate graffiti, and graffiti which calls for discrimination, glorifies war criminals and comprises messages of Nationalistic roar [...] which ‘decorate’ Novi Sad”,* is the counter-hate graffiti initiative of inhabitants of Novi Sad (A.I., *Danas*, 2012). The initiative's rhetoric slogan in form of a question is: “Who else, if not us?” This is the introductory sentence clarifying the intentions of the initiative “Paint over hate graffiti”.

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<sup>13</sup> Niš is the second largest city in Serbia, after the capital Belgrade.

<sup>14</sup> *Prekrečimo grafite mržnje (Paint over hate graffiti)* is a Facebook profile created on 19<sup>th</sup> July 2013.

It paraphrases the fact that Novi Sad has long been the most notorious place for graffiti of various extreme nationalist (often neo-Nazi) organisations and political parties. It is noted that such graffiti is intended to promote values that dominated the political scene in Serbia in the late 1980s and entire 1990s<sup>15</sup>, and from which society still has difficulties recovering. It warns that hate graffiti, calling for discrimination, celebrating war criminals, and what the authors of the website called “nationalist roaring”, etc. are visible almost on every city wall. It is clear that such graffiti, besides promoting hatred, at the same time causes fear and instils a sense of hopelessness in the sections of the population that do not share the opinions expressed in such graffiti. It also warns that hate graffiti should not simply be overlooked, ignored or considered unimportant through the incorrect assumption that nobody notices it.

#### Photo of hate graffiti removal

In much the same way as advertising billboards and posters, graffiti has a long-lasting effect, influencing the awareness and attitude of people. It is necessary to raise the awareness of residents of Novi Sad and to encourage them to overpaint hate graffiti. Therefore, the site suggests that people submit photographs of such graffiti, along with information on its location. It also suggests that people paint over graffiti and submit evidence of this activity for publication. That is seen as a way for communities to motivate themselves and others who follow this site to eliminate hate graffiti. The initiative’s creators are aware that it is not easy to overpaint such graffiti, primarily due to safety reasons, but also due to financial constraints. For this reason, they suggested just to spray-paint over graffiti, which is a quick and inexpensive way to neutralise its message. However, the goal is not to carry out work during night-time, because the initiative *Paint over hate graffiti* wishes to be recognised as absolutely legitimate. The leaders therefore emphasise the importance of the act of overpainting during the day, visible to all, because the act of painting represents public resistance to the propagation of negative values. People always watch, even if not openly, but watch and remember. Finally, people from the initiative *Paint over hate graffiti* wish to stress that they have nothing against beautiful, creative, nice or witty graffiti. This holds an importance as a contrast to the ugly and hateful graffiti. For this reason, the organisers have promised to share all

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<sup>15</sup> The 1990s were a period of violent, bloody disintegration of the Former Yugoslavia.

submitted photos of such artistic graffiti, downloaded from various sites around the world. Could you please say in 1-2 phrases what happened with this initiative, had it have any consequence?

### **About the project “The implementation of anti-discrimination policies in the Republic of Serbia”**

“The implementation of anti-discrimination policies in the Republic of Serbia” is an IPA 2011 project funded by the European Union, aimed at increasing the capacity of the Republic of Serbia to secure, protect and promote human and minority rights, as based on the principles of equality and non-discrimination<sup>16</sup>.

The project consists of three components: 1. Support to the Office of Human and Minority Rights of the Government of the Republic of Serbia; 2. Support to the Commissioner for Protection of Equality; 3. A campaign addressed to the widest Serbian public. In addition, the activities are aimed at improving the capacity of relevant ministries and government institutions, the judiciary, the police, the media, local government and civil society organisations for the effective implementation of anti-discrimination laws, policies and measures. For each of these target groups, activities were organised such as trainings, preventive and promotional measures and development of information. Also, the project helped to develop mechanisms of connection and cooperation between the project’s two major institutional beneficiaries and civil society organisations in regard to the implementation of anti-discrimination provisions and policies. Activities included a comprehensive assessment of legislative and policy solutions in combating discrimination.

“The implementation of anti-discrimination policies in the Republic of Serbia” comprises several elements, which are worth mentioning in regard to the issue of graffiti: Panels against hate graffiti and hate speech, a Protocol on the Elimination of hate graffiti and combating all forms of hate speech, provision of a legal basis and rationale of the Protocol on the Elimination of hate graffiti and combating all forms of hate speech.

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<sup>16</sup> The project was implemented by the EPTISA Consortium, together with the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, DRC and GDSI in the period November 2012 to November 2014.

In spite of the fact that hate speech, in either oral or written forms, or in the form of electronic communication or slogans, is prohibited by the Constitution, the Criminal Code, the Law Against Discrimination and other relevant laws, Serbia still lacks a timely and strong response of state authorities, especially at the level of local government, which would prevent and eliminate hate speech.

One of the preventive measures that the project team conducted at the level of local governments in eleven areas was aimed precisely at increasing the awareness of public officials at the local level of how to prevent hate speech hate graffiti and hate crime. The aim was to raise awareness of local officials, police officers, judges, prosecutors, local media and non-governmental organisations which should actively work on mutual prevention of hate speech and hate crime (as recently introduced into the Criminal Code). Also, the project activities are directed towards ways in which to improve institutions' own capacities to recognise, act preventively and eliminate hate speech in order to prevent direct discrimination and hate crimes.

Recognition, prevention and elimination of hate speech and its expression through "hate graffiti" was noted as one of the main areas that required action at the local level. It is clear that hate graffiti may be found practically everywhere, and it comprises a very similar meaningful repertoire in both in larger and smaller towns and cities. Hate graffiti is not something exclusive to large Serbian cities, as is usual and typical for large urban areas. The main social groups that are the targets of this speech in Serbia have also been the ones that are most often exposed to discrimination such as Roma, LGBT people, ethnic minorities and human rights defenders.

It was also noted that local authorities either ignore the hate graffiti problem or perceive it as an irrelevant activity of minors, or sometimes as a communal problem, rather than an act of hatred and incitement to violence. The authors of the discriminatory content are rarely revealed, and sanctions practically do not exist whatsoever for hate speech content in public spaces. In some cities and municipalities, the removal of hate graffiti has been sporadically initiated by local civil society organisations, schools and individuals. But when hate posts remain for longer periods of time, their messages stay visible for the long term, and are accessible to all passing citizens. Such graffiti, if

undeleted and tacitly tolerated, through this becomes a ‘legitimate’ message, acquiring ‘rights of citizenship’, and as such becomes acceptable.

Because of this, the emphasis of the project’s activities was placed on preventive and proactive joint actions undertaken by all relevant actors at the local level; representatives of municipal governments, police, prosecutors’ offices, civil society organisations and the media, to identify and mitigate further forms of hate speech in all forms, including hate graffiti, which potentially leads to social conflicts, providing support to continued discrimination against vulnerable groups, and, moreover, contributing to, or following, the outbreak of violence.

Panels began in December 2013, when the project team organised the first panel on how to prevent and condemn hate speech in the form of hate graffiti. The round tables were held in eleven municipalities (Žitiste, Odžaci, Bor, Jagodina, Loznica, Kosjerić, Vranje, Leskovac, Novi Pazar, Ivanjica and Prijepolje). These events were attended by a large number of participants, particularly those from the local authorities, who should recognise, prevent and eliminate hate speech in public spaces and organise coordinated counter activities, due to their authority and position in local communities. These actors were holders of public authority at the local level, in cities or municipalities, police officers, representatives of centres for social work, education and health services, local non-governmental organisations and the media.

#### **Photo of the project publication: Hate crime, hate speech and hate graffiti**

The project team also organised a collection of photographic examples of hate graffiti situated in local communities. Based on the Memorandum of Understanding, signed in October 2013 with the municipalities of Bor, Smederevo, Jagodina, Kosjerić, Leskovac, Loznica, Novi Pazar, Odžaci, Prijepolje, Vranje and Žitište, a model protocol on cooperation between the Office of Human and Minority Rights and the Local Self-Government was developed with intention of confirming and enhancing cooperation directed toward the full elimination of hate speech (including hate graffiti).

#### **Conclusion**

The Mayor of Novi Sad has recently formed (in December 2014) an ‘Anti-Graffiti Unit’ that would be tasked with the removal of graffiti from all facades in Novi Sad. The

priority will be to remove graffiti that carries messages of hate. The Mayor's decision marks the introduction of the city-wide system of combating intolerance and discrimination, as well counteracting disruption of the townscape. Activities of a handful of anonymous vandals, who either individually or at someone else's expense, under the cover of darkness, painted hate graffiti, will no longer be tolerated. The Anti-Graffiti Unit received a period of six months to remove all messages of intolerance that spoil the reputation of Novi Sad as an open minded and tolerant city. Additionally, in order to make the battle against hate graffiti successful, a special telephone line was opened, so that citizens will be able to report observed hate graffiti, and the Anti-Graffiti Unit will remove this graffiti within 48 hours of receiving a call.

Statements like 'graffiti is 'ugly', a 'blight on the urban landscape', 'it makes places dirty', and 'it is a 'broken window' element' are typical opinions used to justify the ongoing war on graffiti. Many cities have now engaged private armies of graffiti removers in order to impose their authority on the urban landscape. A number have dabbled with public advertising campaigns intended to mobilise citizen-soldiers in the war on graffiti. It is interesting, and somewhat ironic, that many of these anti graffiti campaigns actually use graffiti aesthetics in order to convince citizens as to how bad certain instances of graffiti are. Opposers of the Mayor's decision argue that the removal of graffiti does not produce any aesthetic integrity or purity of its own, being mostly just a visible indicator of the desperation of authorities to assert their authority. They raised a question: Do we really need all these activities and many kilometres of barbed wire to be installed in cities to protect spaces from incursions by graffiti writers and others?

Graffiti is an ancient companion of mankind, presenting, on the walls of human settlements, declarations of love, political rhetoric, and simple thoughts and popular messages, social and political ideas. The eruption of Vesuvius, for example, preserved graffiti in Pompeii, which includes ancient curses, magic phrases and spells, declarations of love, political slogans, but also famous literary quotes, providing us with an insight into the rhythms of street life of that vanished world.

It is clear that not all pieces of graffiti are undesirable holders of messages of hate and destruction, not all of them are just urban garbage. Graffiti helps us to better understand the contemporary political and cultural environment, but also to express our

human need to develop possible political and cultural alternatives. It is necessary only to condemn and suppress the hatred and danger arising from it, but not the artistic attempts to create beauty. Beauty of – and by – graffiti should be discovered, understood and accepted, even if it is unsuccessful or incomplete.

It seems that the time has come to attempt to understand that the best way to curb ugly and hateful graffiti is to give to graffiti makers what they want: a possibility to obtain permission to paint a city's facades with their street art works.

So the real question given rise to by this paper is related to what we really want, not just what we are against. There is no doubt that we are against hatred and discrimination and their precursors in the form of various forms of hate speech, including hate graffiti. But we are in favour of graffiti that carries messages of love, protection of the environment, or the simple, small, but necessary aesthetic moments of beauty that break the drab of a city.



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