

The Ambiguous Nation.
Case Studies from Southeastern Europe in the 20th Century

SÜDOSTEUROPÄISCHE ARBEITEN

Für das

INSTITUT FÜR OST- UND SÜDOSTEUROPAFORSCHUNG

herausgegeben von

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und

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2013

OLDENBOURG VERLAG MÜNCHEN

The Ambiguous Nation

Case Studies from Southeastern Europe
in the 20th Century

Edited by Ulf Brunnbauer
und Hannes Grandits

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

ISBN 978-3-486-72296-3

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Satz: Composizione Katrin Rampp, Kempten

Druck und Bindung: AZ Druck und Datentechnik GmbH, Kempten

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Ambiguous Notions of “National Self” in Montenegro

One April day in 2008 my aunt, her neighbour and I were reading newspapers. My aunt has been sharing this morning coffee-and-newspapers routine with her neighbour for more than twenty years. Our conversation that morning came to focus on three reports. The first was a report about an action taken by an organization that I will refer to as “123”,¹ which provoked a twenty minute argument between my aunt and her neighbour. They exchanged shorter, but equally fierce comments about the second report, which was on the “Council for Codification of Montenegrin Language.” The third report was one that I read about an organization that I will refer to as “ABV”.² I told them that ABV was led by a friend of mine, whom they had met. I also told them that ABV provided health education and protection for certain underprivileged groups. This led both women to criticize the “non-existent” public health protection system in Montenegro. Benedict Anderson has suggested that reading newspapers can be a central aspect of the imagining of national unity.³ The three of us were at my aunt’s apartment that morning, but it was easy to imagine similar discussions going on in other apartments and houses across Montenegro. The argument between my aunt and her friend seemed both very serious and quite mundane. In this paper, I have decided to ethnographically follow the topic of this particular conversation – the three discussed organizations – in order to try to explain what was being discussed that morning. I hope that by “unravelling the lace” of our conversation in this paper, I will be able to emphasize a variety of meanings the concept of the national in Montenegro has taken.

In this paper, I will suggest that more than one national narrative shaped both intimate discussions between friends and official arguments between institutions in Montenegro. This multiplicity was readily apparent in various events and institutions. Two Orthodox churches – the Montenegrin Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church – have been organizing simultaneous, but separate, Christmas celebrations since 1991. There were two academies of arts and sciences: the Doclean Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Montenegrin Academy of Arts and Sciences. The Department for Montenegrin Language has been separated from the Department for Serbian Language since 2008, though both remain part of the state University of Montenegro. At the time of my research all of these institutions worked in a sort of

¹ The name of the organization was changed.

² The name of the organization was changed.

³ ANDERSON, Nacija: zamišljena zajednica.

national “duet.” Each of them could easily be defined as (more or less) “Serbian” or (more or less) “Montenegrin”.

The existence of more than one national narrative does not in and of itself reveal much about the issue of statehood in Montenegro. John Torpey reminds us that the nation-state is “far more than a ‘structure of ideas.’ It is also – and more importantly for our purposes – a more or less coherent network of institutions.”⁴ The link between a nation and a state is not necessarily linear or self-evident. The “untenable hyphen”⁵ joining the nation-state into a single discrete unit creates an impression of a logical, coherent and self-evident embrace. However, when the relation between a nation and a state is looked at more closely:

“The state should then be thought of in ways that are not necessarily totally dislodged from the nation but neither attached to it. Rather one should consider a variety of relations that are ambivalent, ambiguous, hostile, violent, porous (...) in which the nature of the hyphen is more a cipher than a self-evident reality.”⁶

When Montenegro gained independence from the state-union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2006, the system working in the name of the state, i.e. the network of state institutions, had already been present for some time. In other words, both republics – Serbia and Montenegro – had separate governments, state budgets, police, customs, central banks, currencies, and so on. However, the meaning of the Montenegrin nation was an oft discussed issue. While the materiality of institutions working in the name of Montenegro organized people’s everyday lives, the meaning of this “Montenegro” was ambiguous. In this paper, I will argue that ambiguity of Montenegro and Montenegrinhood simultaneously shaped, and were being shaped by, intimate inter-personal discussions as well as by disputes between officials and state institutions.

Herzfeld’s notion of *disemia* captures a tension “between official self-presentation and what goes on in the privacy of collective introspection.”⁷ This seems to be very useful for understanding the multiplicity of meaning of the national in Montenegro. There were strong tensions within two models of official national self-representation, which reflected on the tension of “the privacy of collective introspection.”⁸ The practices of Montenegro’s two Orthodox churches, its two academies of arts and sciences, its various non-governmental organizations and political parties, not to mention the two language departments at the University of Montenegro, were often defined through categories of national belonging. The *disemia* was created by national actors working “in duet,” as much as by people discussing and challenging these official national narratives in their personal interactions. Instead of having one official explanation of the hyphen between the “nation” and the “state,” there were at least two: there was not one “official” meaning of Montenegro and Montenegrinhood, which was then

⁴ TORPEY, *Coming and going*, 245.

⁵ ARETXAGA, *Maddening States*, 396.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 398.

⁷ HERZFELD, *Cultural Intimacy*, 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*

challenged and opposed from "below". Disemia structured the "official" as well as "personal" interactions.

In order to explain what my aunt and her friend discussed that morning while reading newspapers, I followed newspaper reports and internet discussions. I also worked in ABV for a month and interviewed some of the organization's former and current employees, as well as former employees of the NGO 123. In addition, I spoke with students and lecturers at the university departments for Montenegrin and Serbian language. The state "Council for Codification of Montenegrin Language" and non-governmental organizations are two very different kinds of institutions. Nevertheless, both had their place in the production of ambiguity. I will try to show that their work was shaped by, and simultaneously has shaped, cultural intimacy of "official" as much as "personal" interactions.

"Official" and "personal" or "public" and "private" recursions

I have not used the words "public" and "private" in this paper so far. However, the differentiation between "official" and "personal" conceptually might seem too close to the distinction between "public" and "private". For this reason, I believe I need to briefly explain how I understand the distinction between "public" and "private" in this paper.

Susan Gal argues that, instead of trying to define the historically dependent "content" of the "public" and the "private," the analytical focus should be directed towards their relationship. "Public and private do not simply describe the social world in any direct way," she writes, "they are rather tools for arguments about and in that world."⁹ Together with Gail Kligman, Gal also emphasizes the fact that talk about the "public" or the "private" as a field with an exact and single meaning prevents people from understanding that these two notions do not mark clearly separated and distinct spheres, but a relation that recursively appears across various domains.¹⁰

In a discursive model of the public sphere, developed by Jürgen Habermas, the public was defined procedurally: as a single stage of discussions, arguments, debates, negotiations, and criticisms. It was conceived as a space where political participation is enacted through talk about issues of mutual interest.¹¹ Habermas differentiates the public sphere from both the state apparatus and market networks.

Serious critiques of Habermas's notion of the public sphere have been made on the basis of its exclusivity. It failed to take into account a number of "contra-" or "alternative" publics, which appeared at the same time, and which were no less politically relevant.¹² Nancy Fraser writes that the very definition of "issues of mutual interests," as well as the ways of accessing this "public sphere" were based on a specific idea of "a man" defined in terms of gender, race

⁹ GAL, *A Semiotics of the Public*, 79.

¹⁰ GAL / KLIGMAN, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*.

¹¹ HABERMAS, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

¹² WARNER, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 49–90.

and class. Furthermore, an idea that women were excluded from the “public” is based on a particular concept of the public:

“Thus, the view that women were excluded from the public sphere turns out to be ideological; it rests on a class- and gender-biased notion of publicity, one which accepts at face value the bourgeois public’s claim to be the public.”¹³

Various feminist theoreticians have pointed out the existence of alternative and competing publics that flourished during the nineteenth century in spaces previously marked as “private” in the western European states. These included numerous voluntary, civil, professional, and cultural women associations. Instead of assuming that there are certain spaces which are “public” and “political,” Seyea Benhabib argues that the “public” needs to be understood procedurally, as any kind of a discussion about issues which affect discussants:

“The public sphere comes into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general social and political norms of action engage in a practical discourse, evaluating their validity. In effect, there may be as many publics as there are controversial general debates about the validity of norms.”¹⁴

Thus, from this perspective, discussions within the walls of one’s home can be public and political as much as parliamentary discussions are. The morning conversation between my aunt, her friend, and me was as public and political as were the discussions of members of state bodies and institutions, since they were led by those “affected by general social and political norms of action,”¹⁵ who then engaged in a practical discourse, evaluating the validity of these norms.

I have decided to use the notions “official” and the “personal” instead of “public” and “private” in this paper for two reasons. Firstly because Herzfeld’s concepts of disemia and cultural intimacy capture the tension between an official, bureaucratic, institutional order, and personal, intimate interactions (rather than between “public” and “private”). Secondly, because contemporary developments of the notion of the public do not have to conceptually distinguish between “interpersonal” and “institutional,” or “official”. National ambivalences in Montenegro have shaped, and were shaped by, various practices, some of which were official, and others very personal. Disemia was created by official actors working in nationally defined “duets” – churches, academies of arts and sciences, political parties, institutes for history and language. Disemia was also created by the “privacy of collective introspection,” practiced in personal interactions, and intimate discussions. This means that the “official” and “personal” practices produced ambiguity and uncertainty of the national in pretty much the same way. Nation, in other words, was an issue discussed in a similar way on levels as diverse as the state institutions, NGOs, and the morning conversations in one’s own home. National narratives of state institutions would be expected to act in concert, offering a singular view of a “national self”. However, this was not the case.

¹³ FRASER, *Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution of actually existing democracy*, 61.

¹⁴ BENHABIB, *Situating the Self*, 105.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

In the following pages I will present discussions and ambiguities that proliferated through the work of the "Council for Codification of Montenegrin Language," a body for linguistic standardization that was founded by the state. After that, I will focus on the work of two NGOs in order to show how their work could be read through the "prism" of national belonging. Finally, I will suggest that the work of these three organizations reveals how cultural intimacy, understood as an articulation of uncertainties and the tensions of national and state belonging, shaped both "interpersonal" and "official" discussions.

Council for Codification of Montenegrin Language

Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian was the name of the language used in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia spoke Serbo-Croatian, while inhabitants of Macedonia and Slovenia also spoke Macedonian and Slovenian, respectively. During the 1992–1995 Balkan War, the name Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian disappeared in several former Yugoslav Republics. The Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian languages were taking its place.¹⁶

From 1992 until 2007, the official name of the main language spoken in Montenegro was Serbian. During the 1990s various voices supported calling this language the "Montenegrin language" in Montenegro.¹⁷ The "Institute for Montenegrin Language and Linguistics 'Vojislav P. Nikčević'" was established as an NGO in 2003. Its mission was to study and codify the Montenegrin language.

A specific problem was the name of the language as a school subject. Some elementary and high school teachers declared to their pupils and colleagues that they taught Montenegrin language. This caused occasional disputes between parents, teachers, heads of schools and the Ministry of Education. In March 2004, the Ministry of Education changed the name of the school subject from "Serbian Language and Literature" to "Mother-tongue and Literature." This solution was neither satisfactory for speakers of the Montenegrin language nor for speakers of the Serbian language. Far from solving the problem, it instead provoked many ironic comments from students and parents about the "father-tongue" and the relationship between the "mother-tongue" and the "father-tongue".

Montenegrin language became the constitutionally approved name of the state language in 2007. In addition, according to Montenegro's 2007-Constitution, Serbian, Bosnian, Albanian and Croatian (in this order) were declared further languages in official use.

However, linguistic standardization and the codification of the language has been provoking fierce disputes. The "Council for Codification of Montenegrin Language" was formed at

¹⁶ The dynamics and politics of language separation were different in different republics. Although they are very interesting topics, the rapid changes to the Croatian language and discussions about the Bosnian and Serbian languages are far beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁷ For example, a famous linguist, Vojislav Nikčević, published the first volume of a book called "Montenegrin language: its genesis, typology, development, structural forms and functions" in 1993.

the beginning of the year 2008. It had thirteen members whose task was to codify the Montenegrin language, i.e. to create the orthography and spelling rules, grammar and vocabulary of the Montenegrin language. Prior to the 2007 Constitution of Montenegro, even naming the language Montenegrin was a matter of great dispute. The Council was formed as a result of the actions of a group of linguists, writers and politicians who wanted the language to be named Montenegrin.

Members of the Council were in disagreement from the beginning. Even though all of them agreed that the language must be named Montenegrin, they disagreed about how the language should sound. Broadly speaking, one group promoted an archaization of the language. They called for the (re-)introduction of three letters, linguistic forms and vocabulary that belonged to literature written in Montenegro during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The other group promoted codification of the contemporary spoken language. They sought (re-) introduction of one specific letter without any further changes or additions. The dispute was further complicated by the fact that many members of the Council were not linguists and that some of them spoke *ekavica* rather than *ijekavica*.¹⁸

For example, Tatjana Bečanović, a professor of literature at the University of Montenegro and a member of the Council, spoke *ekavica*. Graduate students and some lecturers told me that she was one of the most prominent supporters of the introduction of Montenegrinology (*montenegristika*) as a separate discipline and the creation of a Department for Montenegrin Language. She was also one of the members of the Council who opposed the language's archaization. During summer 2008, newspapers regularly reported on heated discussions between the Council's members. In those discussions, Bečanović and others opposing archaization were sometimes described as traitors. The Doclean Academy of Arts and Sciences publicly supported Bečanović.

In January 2009 the work of the Council was stopped. The Ministry for Education formed an "Expert Group" whose task was to decide about the Montenegrin language's orthography and spelling rules. The rules, ratified in summer 2009, incorporated some solutions posed by both groups within the Council. Nevertheless, the discussion of these rules continued in daily newspapers. Those opposing the archaization questioned the composition of the Expert Group, since some of its members were not linguists and none of them lived in Montenegro. Opponents of archaization also questioned the Expert Group's linguistic decisions. Some members of the Expert Group made surprisingly gendered comments about the language and the difference between *ijekavica* and *ekavica*. They also questioned the competence of people opposing the archaization.

In the meantime, the Faculty of Philosophy opened a Department for Montenegrin Language and South Slavic Literatures, even though a Department for Serbian Language and South Slavic Literatures already existed. The curricula used in both Departments are almost the same,

¹⁸ Speakers of *ekavica* and *ijekavica* have no problem whatsoever understanding each other. *Ekavica* is the variant of the language spoken in most parts of Serbia, while *ijekavica* is spoken in most parts of Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia. In addition to these, there is also *ikavica*, which is spoken in some parts of Croatia.

but the issue of which jobs each department’s graduates ought to be eligible for remains a subject of serious debate. Whether graduates of the Department for Serbian Language may teach the Montenegrin language in public schools and vice versa has not been resolved. Whether elementary and high schools should offer courses in Serbian language in addition to courses in Montenegrin language was also not determined. The grammar of the Montenegrin language, an essential tool for the work of the Department for Montenegrin Language, had not been created at the time of the Department’s establishment.

Here, the “clash” was not unilinear. Members of the Doclean Academy of Arts and Sciences (who were “radical Montenegrins” in the words of one of my interlocutors) did not support the archaization and did not use the language of loyalty/betrayal of national goals. Those who spoke *ekavica* did not necessarily wish to name the language Serbian.

Speakers of the Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian languages understand each other perfectly well, even though there are some small differences between them, and despite the fact that the Croatian language has been transformed considerably. These are simultaneously four languages, and one language, depending on who describes the situation where and in what context. People living in Montenegro knew that. State university departments for Serbian and for Montenegrin language had almost the same curricula. Some people claimed to speak Montenegrin, while others claimed to speak Serbian even though they used the same linguistic forms and vocabulary. Some people claimed that they speak the *ekavica* version of the Montenegrin language. Others claimed that they speak the *ijekavica* version of the Serbian language. The work of official state bodies – the Council and the Expert Group – produced these contradictions. It was neither the first nor the only state initiative that re-created ambiguity over such “key” national issues.

Looking into the nongovernmental sector

That the first organization dedicated to the Montenegrin language, the “Institute for Montenegrin Language and Linguistics ‘Vojislav P. Nikčević,’” was registered as an NGO was not an isolated case. NGOs in Montenegro have been used in specific ways and their specific goals were often firmly intertwined with issues of national and state belonging. Stubbs notes that the introduction of the civil sector in the post-Yugoslav states from the beginning of the 1990s brought certain ironies and problems, such as the reduction of civil society to the non-governmental organisations. He writes that concepts moving to new spaces, such as “civil society”, are “almost always, more or less explicitly, about claims-making, opportunities, strategic choices and goals, interests, and resource maximisation.”¹⁹ In other words, particular ways in which travelling concepts become appropriated almost always involve creation of unexpected links, making of strategies, and struggles of various sorts.

¹⁹ STUBBS, *Civil Society or Ubleha?*, 219.

Non-governmental organizations are in post-Yugoslav states considered to be one of the key agents of “civil society”. Coyle reminds us that during the 1980s there was a shift in the way that the funding of international development agencies was organized. Funding moved from the direct aid to governments to the growing non-governmental sector.

“NGOs have come to be regarded as a cheaper, less bureaucratic and more controllable form of intervention. They are often also favoured as a focus for local, ‘grassroots’ social activism and public participation. They are seen as providing the ‘bottom-up development’ that donor agencies now consider necessary for the construction of civil society and democratisation.”²⁰

The notion of civil society needs to be placed in the context where it is practiced in order to understand its complexities.²¹ The NGO sector has been used in various ways in the post-Yugoslav region, including Montenegro, throughout its existence. Small NGOs in Montenegro were often founded as family-run micro-enterprises. Those small NGOs offered an institutional framework in which individuals could act outside of state institutions and through which they were able to secure an extra monthly payment. Many worked to earn small amounts of money through projects dedicated to “preserving cultural heritage,” “environmental protection” or various types of “cultural work” in art, publishing and so on. Furthermore, those institutions that were supposed to be the “key” Montenegrin national institutions were registered as non-governmental organizations. In addition to the “Institute for Montenegrin Language,” the Doclean Academy of Arts and Sciences was also a member of the NGO sector. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church has been registered with the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Montenegro since 1997, and the Doclean Academy is listed in the register of NGOs of the Ministry of Justice of Montenegro. Even though these statuses were widely known, they did not seem to place the legitimacy of these institutions in any kind of a danger. When we discussed this issue, the twenty-five year old teacher Ivona made a comment that simultaneously expressed irony and an understanding for this practice:

“Well, that’s possible only here. However, they had to be registered somehow, and this was the easiest way, they used what was the best for them in order to start to work, to do something.”

Members of the Doclean Academy were well established and usually well known personalities. This created a situation in which the Doclean Academy was simultaneously a non-governmental organization and one of the key “national institutions”.

I will not further emphasize the work of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church or the Doclean Academy of Arts and Sciences in this paper. Instead, I will outline the work of two large NGOs, that I refer to in this paper with the pseudonyms ABV and 123. These organizations have dedicated their activities to the issue of state policy towards youth and health and the topic of corruption, respectively. Both ABV and 123 have been highly visible organizations and powerful actors in Montenegro for many years.

²⁰ COYLE, *Fragmented feminisms*, 57.

²¹ DUNN / HANN, *Civil Society*; ISHKANIAN, *Is the Personal Political?*

The multiple activities of "ABV"

At the end of 2007 I walked toward ABV's offices to meet Milica, the director of the organization. We were to discuss the possibility that I might work there for a short period of time. ABV's offices were located at the very centre of Podgorica, the capital of Montenegro. On my way there, I passed dozens of boutiques with expensive brand-name clothes. Even though it was midday, I also passed more than ten overcrowded cafes before I reached ABV's offices. The offices were located on the second floor of a shopping mall. Milica and I quickly agreed that I would work with ABV for one month. My task was to search for papers by social scientists about the "ethnic tolerance among youth" in three countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia. I was to prepare these papers for publication in a single volume.

In 2007, ABV consisted of approximately ten employees, all of whom were between twenty and thirty years of age. Several dozen volunteers, who were mainly high school pupils, also worked with ABV. Milica, a young and very capable woman, had been the director of the organization since 2000. Her present husband was one of the organization's founders. While he led ABV from 1996 to 2000, the organization published a student magazine with the same name.²² ABV was one of the first NGOs in Montenegro, and probably the only one that has not fully changed its initial goals. The Open Society Institute (OSI) was the greatest financier of the NGO sector in Montenegro during the early and mid-1990s. ABV's first large project – the ABV Magazine²³ – was supported by OSI. The official story of the organization's beginnings was presented on ABV's website as follows:

"During the initial years, a group of students, with the support of the Open Society Institute, began working on the Youth Magazine (...). The objective was to create an outlet for youth issues, ideas and interests. We recall that back then there were few magazines and that the media was not open to youth expressing their views, especially those related to certain fields; in brief, the media was closed to opinions that differed from the established and generally accepted ones. It was virtually impossible to expose the existing problems, let alone to criticize the trends and events in progress at the time. (...) The magazine gave that exact opportunity to the youth in Montenegro."²⁴

The first issue of the magazine was "apolitical."²⁵ However, the second issue presented the work of *OTPOR*²⁶ and reflections of various authors about Serbia, Montenegro and their relationship. In the second issue, one of the many leaders of the student protest movement in Belgrade wrote:

²² The three issues of the magazine that were published in 2001 were "oriented towards culture," mostly because its editors could no longer reach a consensus about political questions, according to Milica.

²³ The name of the magazine has been changed.

²⁴ Since the magazine has the same name as the organization which is in this paper called ABV, I did not include a reference to it.

²⁵ One author whose work was published in the magazine claimed: "In those circumstances, no one wanted new, youth, and apolitical magazines."

²⁶ *OTPOR* (engl. Resistance) was a famous Serbian (umbrella) organization that fought against the politics of Slobodan Milošević. For further discussion of its work, see NAUMOVIĆ, 'OTPOR!'.

“Radicalized and frustrated, Serbia does not offer the perfect frame for the creation (or, discovery) of the “wind of change.” Since it is so heavily conservative, it actually offers the opposite. In fact, it is the ideal soil for this culture of Lord and Lording. In the light of (in the dark of) repression and depression, it is no wonder the work of the *OTPOR* movement is too close to conspiracy, or even to guerrilla work, at this moment.”

Montenegro was described somewhat differently in the same issue:

“Montenegro does not need military protection and it does not need any imperial guard of its state and national being, its territory and its market, its ethos, culture and tradition. The position of the free, open, neutral countries, whose harbours are used as trade marines rather than as marine bases suit it much better.”

In addition to the magazine, ABV organized concerts, parties, performances, radio-shows, an “anti-war campaign against the politics of Slobodan Milošević,” as well as a campaign entitled, “Go out and Vote” and so on. At the end of the 1990s, it started a project called “Culturally connecting the north and the south.” The project consisted of a set of art events aimed at the creation of a common “cultural space” in Montenegro. This project did not last long.²⁷ A couple of months later, the orientation of ABV was changed and the organization got new leaders. ABV has been continually working on three to five programs during the last ten years. These include health, conflict resolution, peer education, culture and art.

The program I was involved in was called “Conflict Resolution.” It started in 1998. Firstly, it was framed as “the critique of the politics of Slobodan Milošević.” Since the 1999 conference “Through Dialog to Solution of Conflict between Montenegro and Serbia” the program has established a clear boundary between Montenegro and Serbia. This boundary was conceptualized as a line separating two independent entities and it has remained part of ABV’s work ever since. The activities of the organization presented Montenegro as an autonomous cultural space, distinct from Serbia. In other words, the way projects were structured suggested that Montenegro was an unambiguous notion in the work of this organization. Projects that were explicitly about Serbian-Montenegrin relations were in fact about relations between the state of Serbia and the state of Montenegro. They were not about the relation of “Serbhood” and “Montenegrinhood” in Montenegro. ABV’s work presented a clear picture of what and where Montenegro was, both as a state and as a feeling of national belonging.

²⁷ The Ministry of Culture started the project, “Montenegro – a Single Cultural Address,” in 2008/2009. The goal of this project was very similar to the goal of ABV’s project. A representative of the Ministry of Culture explained: “This project implements the concept of the territory that is culturally organized, and the key role for the design of such a concept belongs to the cultural centres and local politics of culture. In long term perspective, the problem of the current inequality of culture in Montenegro could be resolved through projects such as the ‘Program for the Development of Culture’ in municipalities in the north of Montenegro.” At <<http://www.pobjeda.co.me/citanje.php?datum=2009-01-31&id=157620>> last access: 20 September 2012.

One of ABV’s largest and, in my opinion, most impressive programmes was called “Health”. Through this programme, which has existed since 2000, ABV realized more than twenty projects in support of different groups with special needs. The programme has been financially supported by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria since 2007. In order to receive funding from the Global Fund, there had to be a partnership between the state, international developmental bodies and the NGO sector. This meant that the project’s grant application was written by a “National Country Coordinating Mechanism,” which included three NGOs. ABV was the only organization whose responsibilities went further than prevention activities. ABV’s employees in this program – usually students of medicine or social work – worked with prisoners, sex workers and intravenous drug users. Milica told me that “ABV is probably the first nongovernmental organization in the Balkans that ‘went’ into the prisons.” It educated prisoners about health and drugs. Sexual health issues were a special focus. Employees referred to all of their activities simply as “fieldwork”. Miloš and Ana often spent more than eight hours per day “in the field”. Their job was to gain the trust of the people that they were supposed to work with (prostitution and drug consumption are legally punishable activities in Montenegro). They did this by pledging to fully respect their privacy and anonymity, offering them informal education about sexually transmitted diseases, and continually supplying them with new syringes, needles and condoms. At least once a week they had to go into “the field” in the middle of the night because of a phone call from one of the people with whom they worked. Without Miloš and Ana and ABV’s other “field teams,” these people simply would not have received health education and protection designed to meet their needs.

Milica told me that ABV was planning to open “health-stands” in strategically chosen places, in order to make the protection of vulnerable groups’ health more stable and permanent. Since health care in Montenegro is mainly funded and organized by the state, ABV has become a “helping hand” for the state in this field. The NGO offers services that people expect the state system of health and social care to provide. As Milica told me:

“From that moment on, from 2004, until today we have somehow become oriented as a service within the state, the only one that works with groups like prisoners, sex workers, and for some time we were the only one, and it’s great that we are not the only one anymore, working with Roma people and with the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] population.”

The specific relationship between ABV and the state is evident not only in its role as a “service within the state,” but also in ABV’s involvement in a variety of state bodies and councils. It is a member of the Republic HIV/AIDS Commission, it was involved in writing state policies for youth, in the creation of the state’s strategy for human resources, in the formation of self-regulating strategies for the nongovernmental sector, in the creation of the “National Strategic Response to Drugs,” and so on. When I asked Milica to describe the relationship between the state of Montenegro and ABV, she said:

“It is basically an addition to the state’s work. To correct, or to create a missing service when the state is not working. Like, for example, that service for certain vulnerable groups. The state could not have created it on its own, because it would have if it could, or perhaps people did not perceive this issue as important. Or, in my opinion, they themselves were not a large system, they did not have the capacity to react to all sorts of things, and especially to social problems, and hence those problems were addressed from the NGO sector.”

Milica told me there were two paths that ABV might take in the following five to ten years. On the one hand, it could “continue to professionalize itself and to become even closer to government institutions such as the health care ministry, the institute for public health, and so on.” As a result, it might even cease to be an NGO. The other possibility was to “strengthen its youth work through the centre for volunteers.” The direction that the organization would take was dependent on many things. ABV was not yet ready to move one way or the other at the time of my research. It was a social service as much as a youth organization and it used to be a politically active organization. Milica thought that ABV’s work could be understood as a helpful critique of the state. She described its work as a critique “that is healthy” and that is an addition/support/help to the existing system.

ABV supported the state politically until the relations between political parties changed, that is, until the members of the ruling party clearly showed that the independence of Montenegro was part of their political programme. Afterwards, ABV briefly attempted to support the “cultural unification” of the state: to promote the creation of a common “cultural space” in Montenegro. Finally, the NGO became a pseudo-state service dedicated to health education and protection of certain vulnerable groups. It was also a youth organization. In all of these activities, Montenegro was a term with unambiguous meaning. ABV’s work did not reflect the uncertainties and ambiguities of the multiple meanings of “Montenegro”. Instead, ABV’s work presented a well articulated effort to transform Montenegro into a term with one meaning.

The anti-corruption NGO “123”

At the end of December 2008 daily newspapers reported that Zorica Popović had graduated with honours from the Faculty of Economics of the University of Montenegro. The newspapers quoted parts of her graduation thesis:

“The links forged between business, politics and criminals helped to form the oligarchic structures in Montenegro. These structures enabled creation of monopolies and cartels, and the same individuals owning and holding multiple memberships in directors’ boards have entrapped the state.

Certain decisions of the government’s representatives were designed to meet the interests of the people in the highest political positions and of the ‘captors’ (individuals or companies who entrapped the state). Their interests could have been opposed to the state interests. At the same time, foreign companies aggravate the entrapment of the state and invest in the creation of legal barriers that guarantee them special treatment.

The lack of transparency of the privatization process, the structure of the new owners, and the lack of responsibility toward the public have created the conditions which empower informal

centres of power. These informal centres of power keep their monopolies, prevent the construction of a concurrent framework of power, and avert the implementation of reforms. Benefits of a slow recovery of the economy are not distributed equally, so the level of poverty is the same, while the structure of direct foreign investment is not contributing to sustainable economic development.”

I think this quote partly illuminates why the graduation of one person was the focus of media attention. Popović levelled serious and nuanced accusations against the government not only in her graduation thesis, but also through a decade of work at the NGO 123.

The descriptions that I will offer here are based on public reports and news about the work of 123 and on interviews with former employees and external associates of the organization. According to the information I got from an interview with one former employee, 123 was formed in 2000. At the beginning, it was oriented toward the development of the non-governmental sector. It soon re-oriented itself to focus on locating and reporting corruption at various levels of the state. Some of 123's programs were called “Corruption and the Conflict of Interests,” “Freedom of Access to Information,” “Parliament” and “Public Procurements.” At the time of my research, 123 had approximately thirty employees, most of whom were between twenty and thirty years old.

It is almost impossible to count all the reports and lawsuits 123 filed against politicians, local police officials, mayors, directors of city councils, inspectors for urban construction and so on. One of 123's most famous actions was part of its program for fighting corruption. Members of 123 filed a criminal charge against the former president of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, Svetozar Marović, his brother Dragan Marović, and the Russian investor Viacheslav Leybman. 123 claimed these three men were involved in the construction of a large tourist complex without a construction permit. They also claimed that the men used space that was marked in the city's urban plan as a “green area” without permission. 123 members followed the events concerning this affair for almost a year. They continually informed the public about new developments and they filed numerous lawsuits and complaints. The state organization, “Department for Fighting Organized Crime and Corruption,” was established at the end of 2008 and this issue came under its jurisdiction. In the meantime, Svetozar Marović backed off from the construction of the tourist complex, and the city's urban plan was changed. As this paper was being written, 123 complained that the prosecutor had not yet announced whether an official indictment had been filed, despite the “more than forty written proofs” that 123 had given to the prosecutor along with the criminal charge.

In 2007, 123 initiated a major public protest against the Power Company of Montenegro. 123 had demanded transparency in the privatization of the Aluminium Plant Podgorica (APP) since 2006. In 2007 the Power Company increased electricity rates for the “common citizens” by seventy-one per cent, while one of the largest industries in Montenegro – Aluminium Plant Podgorica – continued to pay its bills at a special, significantly lower rate.²⁸ After the seventy-

²⁸ The Power Company was transformed from a “public company” into a joint stock company in 1999. The state owns seventy percent of the Power Company, while ten percent is owned by individuals and twenty percent is owned by the funds.

one per cent rate increase, 123 organized a set of actions including a petition drive that was aimed at putting the issue of the unequal treatment of citizens and the Aluminium Plant Podgorica on the agenda of the Parliament. More than fifty NGOs from across Montenegro supported this initiative. The petition was signed by approximately 30,000 people. This action received the strongest public support of any such campaign in Montenegro. Public signings of the petition were frequently followed by various types of performances organized by 123's members. One of the organizers described such a performance to me:

"Afterwards, we took out a static bicycle and connected it to a battery; it was supposed to be something like a modern kind of power plant. So (...) since we cannot pay the electricity anymore, we'll have to produce it ourselves (...) We have tried to sarcastically illustrate to the people (...) to provoke passers-by to smile, to think 'Oh, there is this issue, too.' To make them recognize a bit of themselves in it."

He also said the action lasted for several months, and:

"(...) everyone, regardless of financial status, national belonging of any kind, were united (...) There you could directly see what people felt about a certain issue (...) There were people who were cursing, who were shouting, 'Yes! That's it!', then there were people who wanted to help us. We have had volunteers from all cities in Montenegro (...) At that time 123 was 123 at its best, for me, because it was with the people. Because it was not some kind of an abstract organization, which perhaps it needs to be."

All the former 123 employees that I have spoken with had the impression that they were "doing something important and good." The fact that a job at 123 "was never only a job" probably contributed to their dedication to the organization. Marko, one of the former employees, said:

"We did not work like others: you write the request for information and then fax it. We took requests where they needed to be in person. One copy for them, the other kept for us, for our archive."

Marko explained that he started to work in 123 in order to be involved in the creation of a better state:

"I usually explain that through the comparison between, for example, us and the Americans. When an American drives and when he is stopped by a police officer, he probably does not feel a pressure, because the police officer is a representative of the state and is there to help him, blablabla. Me, on the other hand, if I see a police officer 200 metres away from me, I immediately (...) sense tension. You'll see once you drive, it's like (...) you see him in that bullet-proof vest, and right away you think – is my belt on? It is (...) I know I did everything properly, but it's something (...) I feel something is wrong. The state is not a friend to us, probably, but some kind of a Big Brother. That is it. Well, 123 opted for developing the state in that direction, to have us all feeling pleasant in it, to see it as an organization, that is, a mechanism working for the benefit of all of us. Not for the benefit of a handful of individuals."

Even though 123 was one of the strongest and most serious critics of state institutions and political leaders, I was not able to notice a difference in its work related to the referendum on Montenegrin independence. In other words, I do not think it was possible to "classify" the work of 123 in the terms of "before" and "after" 2006, when Montenegro became an independent state. On the contrary, 123 has been working with the same fierceness since 2003/2004 on a variety of issues – corruption, conflicts of interest, legality of urban construction, the free legal protection of citizens, etc. This organization treated Montenegro as an independent state for several years before it actually became an independent state. In Marko's words, this relationship with Montenegro was possible because of "a wave of changes that were introduced in 1997 and [the fact that] Montenegro had all the institutions and functions of an autonomous state since then."

Since June 2007 public opinion polls have continually shown that out of all public personalities, Montenegrin citizens had the highest trust in Zorica Popović, the leader of 123. 123 is "Zorica's baby," in the words of a woman whose only contact with 123 is daily press. However, Popović does not only embody 123 for the wider public, she does so for 123's employees, as well. All of the former employees that I talked to had the impression that "she cared the most." After she was selected as the person in whom citizens had the highest trust, Popović organized a press conference and said:

"I would ask the gentleman [who conducted the poll] to avoid placing people of civil society in the context of politicians' competition (...) [because] 123 is not doing politics and has no intention whatsoever to start doing it."

Despite its explicit distancing of itself from partisan politics, and although the issue of nationality was not part of 123's work, Popović and 123 have been nationally and politically determined in the eyes of many of the people with whom I spoke. More than once, I heard that Popović should run for president and "finally save us all from misery." I have also frequently heard people saying they wanted to physically "settle things" with her. Misogyny was very explicit in these comments. I have heard that Popović was, "Milo's man: she creates a small disturbance he needs. Do you really think she would still be alive if she did not have someone watching her back?" 123's members described their work as a critique of the state, a critique aimed at improving the functioning of the state. In other words, they saw their work as supportive of the state. However, their support was not directed towards "the existing structures," but towards the Montenegro that they wanted to live in. Since the same political party has been ruling Montenegro for almost twenty years,²⁹ being against "the existing structures" was a deeply politicized act, not just in an abstract sense, but also in terms of daily party politics as well. Political parties, like most other public actors, were implicitly or explicitly nationally defined as "pro-Montenegrin" or "pro-Serbian". Acting against "the existing structures," therefore, could easily have been read through the prism of national belonging.

²⁹ Although the ruling party's official goals and rhetoric underwent several major changes, the fact that "the same people are in power for almost twenty years," has hampered almost every opportunity to debate whether the new goals and rhetoric imply a new party.

Certain people (“Montenegrins”) perceived the work of 123 as a direct attack on Montenegro, an attack aimed at destroying the state and nation that had been so difficult to obtain. Some other people (“Serbs”) supported 123 because they perceived it as a “pro-Serbian organization” that fought against “Montenegrin” political parties. Some others (both “Montenegrins” and “Serbs”) fully supported 123 because they perceived it as a brave public actor that was involved in the creation of a better Montenegrin state. 123 attempted to distance itself from political and national issues. However, since it has worked on issues imbued with political and national meanings, it was possible to understand 123 in many ways. It was a simultaneously “pro-Montenegrin” and “pro-Serbian” organization, depending on one’s point of view, i.e. on the way that one understood Montenegrinhood and Serbhood.

Similarly, ABV came to be considered a “nationally neutral,” “pro-Montenegrin” organization. As an NGO whose initial activities were directly related to daily party politics, and which later transformed itself into a “helping hand” of the state, it was also possible to “read” ABV as nationally and politically defined.

Competing notions of “national self”

I think that both 123 and ABV simultaneously criticize, support and enable Montenegro. The issue of which national narrative is implied by the name “Montenegro” entails subtle, but deeply politically charged, differences.

The existence of at least two “official” explanations of “Montenegro” could be looked at through the concept of disemia. Herzfeld writes: “the disemia concept might work best for countries with an ambiguous relationship to ideal images of a powerful culture.”³⁰ Disemia articulates “the formal or coded tension between official self-presentation and what goes on in the privacy of collective introspection.”³¹ However, disemia does not represent binarism only in terms of official versus individual, or more powerful versus less powerful pairs: “Anyone can claim elite or humble status, but these attributions are always contested in the play of social interaction.”³² In other words, according to Herzfeld, disemia is not only a relation between two modes of unequal power, it can also be a relation between two modes competing for power. “Serbian” and “Montenegrin” versions of the meaning of Montenegro could be understood as two modes competing for power.

Let us go back to the morning that I described at the very beginning of the paper. What did my aunt, her neighbour and I discuss that morning while we read our newspapers? One woman passionately argued for 123, claiming that all politicians are corrupt criminals. She said that the increase in corruption since the 2006 referendum shows that Montenegro would be much better off with Serbia. The second woman agreed with the notion that all politicians are criminals, but she strongly opposed the idea that Montenegro should have anything to do with Ser-

³⁰ HERZFELD, *Cultural Intimacy*, 16.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

³² *Ibid.*, 15.

bia, except for polite, neighbourly relations. She claimed that "we" should get a state before we start improving it. She thought that 123's fierce attacks on the weak and fragile state were not of any help. According to her, 123's main goal was the personal promotion of Zorica Popović and the promotion of the idea that everything related to Montenegro was wrong.

One of these women spoke Montenegrin, the other Serbian. The information about the work of the "Council for the Standardization" led one to make ironic remarks about the need for a Montenegrin language. It caused the other woman to talk about a century-long subservient relation of Montenegrinhood to Serbhood.

When I explained the kind of work that ABV did, both agreed that the health care system in Montenegro was bad and that their generation had left only problems to young people.

Even though corruption, health care, or youth work might not have a direct relationship to national belonging, the work of the two NGOs was often understood through the "prism" of the national. I think that both organizations started with a similar idea of what the state should look like, but their approaches were different. ABV has openly supported the existing system, serving as a "helping hand" to the state for more than ten years. 123 was "outside," criticizing, warning, suing and demanding changes to state institutions. In spite of these differences, the work of both organizations was involved in the reproduction of the meaning of "Montenegro" and of national and state belonging. At least, that was the effect of their work when my aunt and her neighbour discussed Montenegrinhood, Serbhood, Montenegro and Serbia, while they were reading their newspapers.

It seems to me that these NGOs were interpreted as being related to Montenegrinhood and to national and state belonging because both "official" and "personal" interactions in Montenegro were shaped by cultural intimacy. Herzfeld develops the notion of cultural intimacy in order to be able to disperse "top" and "bottom" into a multiplicity of perspectives among numerous social actors responsible for the reproduction of belonging to a nation. Hence, the binarism implied by *disemia* becomes lost in the "recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality".³³

Herzfeld explains that "embarrassment, rueful self-recognition: these are the key markers of what the cultural intimacy is all about."³⁴ The relations discussed in this paper suggest that competition for power between two explanations of "national self" was involved in the production of embarrassments and tensions of cultural intimacy. This competition made the official "national self" ambiguous. If "they" – that is, the politicians, academics, priests, professors and statespersons – could not agree about the meaning of the basic terms, what else could "we" expect? The official "national self" was challenged. Not only was the nation-state reproduced in the everyday, it also seemed that everyday tensions and ambiguities were reproduced by the official institutions. Instead of coherent, clear-cut, unambiguous "national self," these official actors produced tensions and ambiguities.

³³ Ibid., 3.

³⁴ Ibid., 6.

Key national institutions (such as academies of arts and sciences, university departments and churches) as well as many other actors not necessarily directly related to national belonging, became defined through the prism of the national. They were (more or less) “Montenegrin” or (more or less) “Serbian”. The united result of their actions was a variety of ideas about the meanings of Montenegro, Montenegrinhood and Serbhood. Citizens, or “ordinary people,” lived in this cluster of meanings that were not clearly separable.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss how, in spite of these ambivalences, the state was formed. Nevertheless, it seems important to emphasize that Montenegro became an independent state in the midst of great ambiguity about the meaning of the “nation”. The existence of a material system – police, army, economy, bureaucracy and so on – working in the name of the state was perhaps more relevant for the shape of the lives of people in Montenegro than the existence of a distinct meaning for this system. Despite the obvious vagueness of the “key national terms” and the multiple presentations of “self,” the state was created and reproduced as the only possible framework of existence for its citizens/subjects.

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