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Taking a stand in times of violent societal changes: Belgrade and Zagreb feminists' positionings on the (post-)Yugoslav wars and each other (1991-2000)

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Summary

This socio-historical doctorate research explores the positionings – discourses and activities – of the Belgrade and Zagreb feminists vis-à-vis the (post-)Yugoslav wars and one another in the period between 1991 and 2000. Primarily applying a Bourdieuan framework and based on a comprehensive review of the relevant scholarship, extensive semi-structured qualitative interviews, and a thorough examination of various types of organisational documents and printed media articles, this analysis attends to a number of biases, lacunae and incorrect or insufficiently precise (recurring) information in the literature. In this way, this thesis not only enriches the existing historiographic and sociological knowledge on the war-related feminist activism in Belgrade and Zagreb in the 1990s, but it also raises several pressing epistemological questions about this knowledge. In short, I challenge the common suggestion that the outbreak of the war violence in 1991 led to exactly the same reorganisation of the feminist field both in Belgrade and in Zagreb: The feminists in each city, who had up until then worked together without tensions, divided into antinationalists and nationalists and began clashing with each other because of the different war-related positionings.

The first significant finding of this research is that the names ‘antinationalist’ (or, the less often used, ‘non-nationalist’) and ‘nationalist’ (or, the less often used, ‘patriotic’) should not be seen as completely value-free, objective descriptions of dissimilar ideological positionings, as the scholarship implies by not attending to the origin, meaning, and consequences of these terms. The designations in question were, instead, an essential part of the diverse local and international efforts to stop the (sexual) war violence, and of the struggle for legitimacy among the feminists in each city – endeavours in which many Western (feminist) academics, activists, and funders were involved, too.

Furthermore, a power disparity existed between the two sets of designations. ‘Antinationalist’ and ‘non-nationalist’ were the self-designations of some feminists, whereas ‘nationalist’ and ‘patriotic’ were the names which these feminists gave to the feminists from the same city whose war-related positionings departed from theirs. In addition, the classification employed by the Belgrade and Zagreb feminists who were seen as nationalists is by far less prevalent in the scholarship than the above classification which the other feminists used. Thus in this thesis I speak of self-declared antinationalist and so-called nationalist clusters, feminists and positionings.

Another important finding of this research is that Belgrade and Zagreb should not be considered as interchangeable locations with regard to the intra-feminist dynamics and the war-related feminist positionings in the 1990s. The split in Zagreb

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happened earlier (late 1991–early 1992) and was much more articulated and public. Throughout the 1990s it remained essentially intact, even though it started to become gradually less visible after late 1993. Such a clearly delineated split has never taken place in Belgrade. From early 1993 onward the existence of dissimilar war-related positionings among the Belgrade feminists began to crystallise, but quite unlike in Zagreb, these differences were hardly ever publicly articulated and some feminists with divergent positionings continued to work together in the same feminist groups. A slightly more noticeable and deeper division took place in Belgrade in 1998 and 1999, when an additional differentiation occurred in the self-declared antinationalist feminist cluster.

On the eve of the outbreak of the war violence the Belgrade and Zagreb feminists alike employed a purely gender-based positioning on domestic, sexual, and war violence, which regarded men as the perpetrators and women as the victims. However, faced with the (sexual) war violence in Croatia (1991–1995) and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995), the Zagreb so-called nationalist feminists abandoned this orthodox positioning and created a new, heretical positioning which was ethnicity-based. In this new positioning Serbs were the perpetrators, while Bosniaks and Croats were the victims. Thus, it was impossible for Serbs to be victims of (sexual) war violence committed by Bosniaks and/or Croats. The Zagreb self-declared antinationalist feminists used categories which were more open. They maintained their pre-war gender-based positioning, but made it less strict by partially adding ethnicity to it. While underlining the fact that all warring sides committed (sexual) war violence, these feminists recognised Serbia's greater responsibility for it and the dominance of the Serb (sexual) war crimes. This modification occurred, though, only after the appearance of more reliable reports on these crimes.

A few years later, in the spring of 1999, the Zagreb so-called nationalist feminists approved of the NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. They saw it as the appropriate way to end Serbia's continuous policy of ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs, which was, at that time, aimed at the Kosovar Albanians and earlier at Bosniaks and Croats. The feminists from the other Zagreb cluster disapproved both of the bombing as a method and of the Serb ethnic cleansing of the Kosovar Albanians, but did not make a link between the latter and the previous wars.

All Belgrade feminists initially maintained the gender-based positioning on violence and spoke of a shared responsibility and victimisation of all warring sides. Nevertheless, as a result of the emergence of more trustworthy information on the perpetrators and victims of the (sexual) war violence, as well as of the interactions with Zagreb feminists at gatherings in third countries, the future Belgrade self-declared

antinationalist feminists changed their positioning radically. They began to accentuate Serbia's greatest responsibility for and participation in the (sexual) war violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, as well as to condemn Serbia's politics of ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs. The gender-based positioning was not abandoned, but it was subordinated to the new and heretical ethnicity-based one. The other Belgrade feminists, the future so-called nationalist ones, continued to employ the orthodox gender-based positioning on (sexual) war violence and to talk of a shared responsibility and victimisation of all warring sides, but started to pay more attention to the Serb victimisation. Soon afterwards, though, the ethnicity-based positioning of the Belgrade self-declared antinationalist feminists became the orthodox positioning in the Belgrade feminist field, whereas the gender-based positioning ended up as heretical.

During the NATO bombing and the intensified war in Kosovo the Belgrade so-called nationalist feminists condemned the Serb victimisation by NATO, but they remained silent about the Serb ethnic cleansing of the Kosovar Albanians. This positioning on victims and perpetrators was shared by some Belgrade self-declared antinationalist feminists. The other feminists from the latter cluster openly criticised this instance of ethnic cleansing but held opposing views on whether the bombing was the right means to bring an end to Serbia's long-standing politics of violence against non-Serbs.

Each of these different positionings served, on the one hand, to communicate a specific definition of the war situation – including the designation of perpetrators and victims – and to indicate the needed mechanisms for cessation of the (sexual) war violence. On the other hand, these positionings were closely intertwined with the struggle for legitimacy between the two clusters in each city, ie the efforts to establish oneself and the like-minded feminists as those who appropriately perceived the war situation and suggested the most viable strategies for restoring peace. This aspect of the dynamics among the Belgrade and Zagreb feminists has remained thus far fully omitted from the scholarship.

That the strife for legitimacy was especially observable in the interactions with Western audiences and was much more pronounced among the Zagreb feminists should be seen, foremost, in light of the differences in their symbolic feminist capital. The Zagreb self-declared antinationalist feminists were typically those who enjoyed a larger legitimacy (symbolic feminist capital) in the West and had, consequently, better access to Western funds, training, networks, and media, which further increased their symbolic feminist capital. In addition, they came more often from more privileged backgrounds in socialist Yugoslavia, and their gender-based positioning on

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perpetrators and victims was the orthodox one in the Zagreb feminist field. Therefore, the Zagreb heretical challengers, the so-called nationalist feminists, had to put a great deal of effort into their attempts to delegitimise the feminists from the other cluster and to become recognised as the legitimate Zagreb feminists.

The situation in Belgrade was, once more, somewhat different. Whereas the encounters with Western audiences often caused a comparable struggle for legitimacy among the Belgrade feminists, this struggle was less common and less intense than that in Zagreb. Unlike in Zagreb, there were no large pre-war differences in cultural, economic, social, and symbolic feminist capital among the Belgrade feminists. Furthermore, the ultimate Belgrade heretical challengers, the so-called nationalist feminists, were numerically inferior and did not engage that much in challenging the legitimacy of the Belgrade self-declared antinationalist cluster, but focused on their other (often academic) interests. Finally, contrary to their Zagreb counterparts' implicit denial of any Croat responsibility, the Belgrade so-called nationalist feminists acknowledged the Serb partial responsibility for the (sexual) war violence. Since the latter was not the case regarding the NATO bombing and the war in Kosovo, the struggle for legitimacy increased somewhat around that time, but did not reach the same intensity as earlier in Zagreb.

At the time of interviewing in 2009 (or, in few cases, 2010) it turned out that the divisions between the feminists and the struggle for legitimacy were still very emotionally and politically charged topics for the respondents and were, therefore, hardly ever addressed. The only respondents who were partially able to observe critically both their positionings from the 1990s and the dynamics of the time between the two clusters were the Zagreb self-declared antinationalist feminists. The narratives of the majority of the Zagreb so-called nationalist respondents were quite at odds. The war-related positionings that these feminists articulated and the vocabulary that they used to delegitimise the Zagreb self-declared antinationalist feminists were virtually the same as those from the 1990s. This difference between the clusters was due to the fact that the positioning on perpetrators and victims, which was used in the Croatian official politics in 2009 (2010), stood closer to that of the Zagreb self-declared antinationalist feminists, as well as to the fact that these activists have remained the established Zagreb feminists – both in the West and in the Zagreb feminist field. The 1990s were, thus, a much less distant past for the Zagreb so-called nationalist respondents.

A more intense presence of the 1990s was visible also in the narratives of the Belgrade feminists regardless of cluster, but for different reasons: the greater temporal proximity of the war violence which took place in Serbia, the ongoing strife between

Belgrade and Prishtina regarding Kosovo's independence, the awareness of Serbia's at least partial responsibility for the wars, and the political murder of the Serbian prime minister in 2003. Different from their Zagreb counterparts, the Belgrade self-declared antinationalist feminists, despite remaining the legitimate Belgrade feminists with regard to war-related topics in the Belgrade feminist field and in the West alike, could not afford to openly question their positionings from the 1990s. This absence of a critical perspective was strengthened by Serbia's official positioning on victims and perpetrators in 2009 (2010), which spoke of a shared responsibility and victimisation of all warring sides, but underlined the Serb victimisation – a positioning which overlapped with that of the other Belgrade feminist cluster. At the same time, given this overlap, as well as the legitimacy which the Belgrade so-called nationalist feminists enjoyed regarding non-war-related issues, they were less inclined than their Zagreb counterparts to delegitimise the self-declared antinationalist feminists. When they, nonetheless, did so – in order to increase the legitimacy of their own war-related positionings – their speech was less fervent and accusatory than that of the corresponding Zagreb feminists. This had also to do with the fact that the struggle for legitimacy between the Belgrade clusters in the 1990s was less pronounced and severe than that in Zagreb.