



Alma Jeftić

## **Mnemonic Battles in the Balkans**

*Narrative for Europe and for the Rest of the World*

"Europe still does not know what it knows and does not know what it wants. Europe today is refined headless: on the one hand as smart as mask against toxic gases, *on* the other dead as an old-fashioned lumbard and challenging at the same time as a metropolitan showcase, full of diversity and precious nonsense." (*Miroslav Krleža*)

This will be one of those columns that cannot be written without a description of authoress recent experience. Therefore let excuse all those who believe that there is no place for personal stories in this column, but first let them read to the end, so maybe they can feel and detect the connection ...

It was one of those days when after the exam in Belgrade, I was walking down the Knez Mihajlo street trying to do something while waiting for bus for Sarajevo. And so, always in the same way, I found myself in one of the bookstores where I was trying to find something that at least resembled serious scientific literature in psychology (since I was surrounded by "see", or better to say "ocean" made of

“popular” psychology books). While my gaze was moving over the shelves from which one could only see smiling faces of "shades of gray", I heard the question, asked by one lady: "*Do you have a monograph of the old Yugoslavia?*"

Perhaps because of the emphasis on that "old" or simply because of the way the question was asked I was forced to interrupt the already unsuccessful search for literature and I began to seamlessly follow the further flow of conversation. Employee (younger woman) asked (with a confused expression on her face) gentleman in relatively mature age (to be politically correct): "Do we have a monograph of the old Yugoslavia?" The answer consisted of one non-verbal act of shrugging shoulders and facial expressions that reminded of a combination of disgust, mockery and sadness.

Why this introduction? Probably because it is just one of many examples of how memories affect people. In fact, memories exist at the individual level firstly, but what is necessary to mention is that it is completely impossible to separate it from the social milieu in which it is developed, created and transmitted through the generations.

According to Zerubavel, mnemonic battles are both over what events should be remembered and what events should be forgotten, but also about how these events should be remembered in order to interpret the past in a “correct” way. Thus determines which books should be printed, which monographs should be placed on the shelves in bookstores, which monuments should be raised and what kind of memorials should be organized.

It may not have been a big problem to date if such a huge number of different narratives that circulate Balkans do not have been existing for a while. These narratives are presented in the historical monographs and textbooks which nobody

reads or which are read only by those who must read and interpret them in a way they were told to do so. In order to satisfy their desire for cognitive closure, people tend to mentally transform the flow of more or less unstructured events in relatively coherent narratives (Zerubavel, 2003). In this way, a complete personal experience becomes subordinate to a collective narrative that at the moment prevails in a particular group in a particular area.

All this would not be so significant that for many years have not led to bloody battles just because of these narratives created in order to (what a paradox) achieve cognitive closure and coherence within the group. Mnemonic battles that are currently destroying the Balkans are a clear example of how memories can become destructive. And, what is particularly significant to note, in the same way that memories arise - at the individual level - they become destructive: first destroying the individual, then the group that she/he belongs to, and then the wider environment.

If the curious reader expects advice or instant recipe how to organize memories in the Balkans, let's not expect too much. Memories occur in the same way in which they develop. From us, of us, to others, to those who are different, to the similar, precious and not so precious ... Although large-scale event, our battle begins in us and from us. Therefore next column will be dedicated to us, but to all those who are trying to figure out the cause, course and objective of mnemonic battles in the Balkans. And this text will end up personally, as it had begun – by one verse of the authoress. Maybe one day it will find a place in the Monograph of Memories that will not only serve as a souvenir for the confused "sellers" of popular literature:

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*“... You, Stranger, who over these fields walk  
Do not throw tarnished silvers in the ash  
Ponder over that dark stone  
Since memories here beyond the first Rib exist.”*

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