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**“FLOATING SIGNIFIERS” – NEGOTIATIONS OF THE MEANING OF THE
NATIONAL IN MONTENEGRO**

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Introduction

Montenegro left the Union of Serbia and Montenegro and gained independence on 21 May 2006. The national feeling, in my opinion, still remained under intense discussion in Montenegro and on the most varied of levels. Numerous answers appear to the question of whether Montenegrins are Serbs or not, whether they are Croats or not, whether they are a separate nation or a separate people, where they came from, and where it is that they should go to.

In this paper I will present the results of the research conducted between April-July 2007, about the internet forum, Café del Montenegro. I would like to present the different ways the users determined the meanings of the national terms, and show how the virtual space of the forum was used for the questioning and reproduction of national allegiances.

The internet forum is, I believe, a particularly interesting place for the analysis of national feelings for multiple reasons. I have lived in Montenegro for more than half of my life, which means that the political and national issues dominant in the public life of Montenegro have shaped my own life in many different ways. In an attempt to understand that interconnectivity - the inter-game in which the political and the national shape and at the same time are being shaped by the individual - I decided to research the internet forum, as it represents a place where personal stories become visible and public. Around twenty percent (130,000) of the people living in Montenegro use the internet¹, and 7,579 people are registered visitors of the website that I researched. It seems to me that the place that so many people find worth visiting is also worth researching.

¹ Data obtained from the UNDP report, which part can be found on the address: http://www2.undp.org.yu/montenegro/files/press_releases/Media%20Advisory%20-%20Dan%20borbe%20protiv%20siromastva%2016%20oktobar%2006.pdf

Theoretical-methodological framework

In an attempt to understand the ways in which the nation is imagined, attention can be directed to various levels and domains of reality. What I found interesting was the question of how big, institutionally created national structures are being incorporated into individual lives; that is, how do individuals feel, understand and redefine national attachments. In this part I will first present the culture of intimacy as the basic concept that I will use for understanding the national feeling. Herzfeld's concept is useful when one considers that the author managed to reshape the contemporary theses of gender and cultural studies in such a way that they can be used to study the national feeling. Furthermore, I will sketch several points in which the internet can be problematized, such as with issues about the existence of virtual communities, problematics of the opposition "Real: Fake" in studying the internet, as well as the relationship between the virtual and non-virtual sociality.

Cultural Intimacy- Cultural Engagement

Michael Herzfeld determined the concept of cultural intimacy in such a manner that it can connect small, individual acts with big national and state narratives; emotional experiences; „view from the top“ and „view from the bottom“; the relationship between „us“ and „strangers“ (foreigners).

Herzfeld emphasizes the *cultural engagement* – “experiencing” of the state and the feeling of national identification. He says that anthropologists “still start from the official ideology as the correct explanation for the essence of a national state” (Herzfeld: 2004, 18). However, the official ideology hides numerous levels of creative disagreement - small, individual experiences, repetitions of which produce a state and those who belong to it all over again. The subjects of the state are the citizens, or more precisely, the people who look for security in the concept of “their state”. These concepts are created and reproduced through small acts of talking about the state (positive or negative), through acceptance/distortion of state symbols, and through perpetuating and “experiencing” the state. Herzfeld says that: “Just by talking about “it” in such a way, even the citizens who claim to oppose it call to the state: they blame “it” for their failures and misery or for the betrayal of national interests that the state tends to present and protect. However, by these little acts of essentializing, they all contribute to the state becoming a permanent and inseparable part of their lives” (Herzfeld: 2004, 18). In other words, the very act of communicating about the state produces a state as a naturalized, real, and unquestionable en-

tity. Such small, anecdotal practices of producing the state are taking place on all levels. According to Herzfeld, it is acting that matters – cultural engagement “common to the large number of participants.” Political figures, women doctors, state officials, police officers, bureaucrats, cattle thieves, artists, workers, and pilots – all produce the state as natural and omnipresent, by talking about it and experiencing it.

In an attempt to answer the question of how is it possible that such different „levels“, or different groups of interest that are in asymmetrical relations of power, are equally important for producing a state, Herzfeld offers the concept of cultural intimacy :

„The approach described here can be characterized as researching the relation between a view from the bottom and a view from the top. But I am more keen on perceiving the „top“ and the „bottom“ only as two kinds of the many refractions of cultural engagement which is common to a bigger number of participants... What is the common basis that finally annuls the possibility of clearly defined, unchangeable levels of power? I claim that the most important role in that is the role of cultural intimacy...” (Herzfeld: 2004, 19-20).

Cultural intimacy conveys those aspects of identity which are accepted as unpleasant in front of the “Others”, while among “Us” they create a feeling of belonging to the community. Practices and traditions practices which might be viewed as archaic, traditional, conservative, pre-modern, etc. to the “Others”, on the other hand, create feelings of intimacy, familiarity, and closeness when they are performed among “Us”. Herzfeld thinks that such special kinds of feelings of cultural intimacy enable people positioned on different social levels to produce the state absolutely equally, with the same emotional investment. Cultural intimacy, according to Herzfeld, is necessary – it can be understood as help in unknown, potentially dangerous and uncertain contexts; it can serve for more precise articulation and grasping of an unpleasant situation.

Reality of the Virtual

Are virtual communities really communities? David Alan Coon inquired whether the sociological concept of community can be applied to „chat rooms“, and reached a conclusion that the categories which characterize the social definition of a community can be found in a virtual context as well; that is, that chat rooms „can be perceived as virtual communities“ (Alan Coon: 1996) ². Stolterman, Ågren and Croon say that „A virtual

² “Findings indicated that the majority of the social relationships which exist in #friends met the characteristics needed for communal social relations. It was found that the majority of the social

community is first of all a social entity. It is a number of people who relate to one another by the use of a specific technology. In a traditional society we often see communities as something evoked by geographic closeness (village, neighborhood, town, etc.) or organizational belonging (schools, churches, sports, hobbies, etc.) “ (Stolterman, Ågren, Croon: 1999).

However, in virtual communities something is obviously different – the material aspect of the internet shapes the communication differently to non-virtual spaces. The language, pace of discussion, geography, and non-verbal signifiers are conditioned by the material character of virtual space. Still, emotional and intellectual investments, importance and meanings are not necessarily smaller, bigger, or different in comparison to non-virtual life.

Marilyn Strathern reminds that social connections in non-virtual space (in “real” space) are analogue to virtual sociality in one additional way – they are both imagined, produced, and created (Strathern: 2000). This doesn’t suggest the fake, but rather the social character of social connections. “Imagined connectivity” doesn’t imply existence of some different, more real, more authentic connection. These words emphasize that it is necessary to investigate the ways of producing the feeling of togetherness, allegiance and connections. In other words, virtual space is as real as non-virtual: communication is realized through it, knowledge is created and transferred, and emotions (often very strong³), individual and collective actions are being produced⁴.

networks formed in #friends were large in geographic scope. There was found to be a fair amount of community sentiment in #friends, and a high degree of attachment among those with close friendship ties in #friends. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the #friends chatroom on IRC has many of the characteristics of a community and can be considered a Avirtual community“. Alan Coon: 1996

³ Ruth Oldenziel quotes an example: „In the 1980s, Julie, an old and barely mobile woman, projected her personality over the electronic network with great success, avoiding showing her appearance. Very soon she acquired the trust of many women, who joined the Network finding her advice useful, encouraging and inspirational. It was only later on that it was discovered that Julie was actually a middle-aged male psychiatrist. Many of the women felt betrayed, even raped in a psychological sense.” Oldenziel: 1996, 67

⁴ Maybe the best example is the famous “Louise Woodward Case”. Woodward was a nanny accused in the US for the murder of the boy she took care of. Huge number of websites, on-line petitions, and generally the whole internet support network Woodward that was created during the lawsuit proceeding resulted in an unexpected outcome in off-line life. “The judge prepared to consider whether to accept the jury's original verdict or to overturn the verdict and impose his own ruling (...) The judge announced that it was his intention to release his ruling on the Internet, rather than using the traditional method of handing out paper copies from the courthouse (...) The judge, Hiller Zobel, overturned the original murder verdict and substituted one of involuntary manslaughter. He passed a sentence of 279 days in state prison: the length of time which Louise had already served», in: Hine 1998.

What should be questioned is not whether, but in what way, different social attachments are being created in virtual space, and in what kind of relationship they are with their non-virtual equivalents.

In various places one can still read and hear theses about the internet as the place of absolute freedom, an abandonment of existent social categories, a place of pretence, lies and delusions⁵. A man can present himself as a woman on internet, a woman herself as a boy, a young girl as a Doctor of Science. National, religious, professional, and all other types of identity that the users claim to be their own, can easily turn out to be nothing but a made-up story. However, the problem in such an approach is that it is based on the opposition of “Real: Fake”. The idea that a person *is* something in real life, and *is pretending* in virtual space, makes many important questions invisible and impossible. In a classical ethnographic work the informers can lie as well, and the anthropologists might not ever have to find out about it. However, lying is a social act as well. It seems to me that it is much more productive to observe “pretence” not as concealing, distortion, denying the truth that ought to be revealed, but as a strategy, an act that is always socially determined.

Ruth Oldenziel says that “Possibilities that are opened by new informational technologies for new ways of thinking and existing look endlessly exciting (...),” however, “the current theory suggests to perceive technology as a configuration of knowledge, things, organizations and people” (Oldenziel: 1196, 68). In other words, technology doesn't exist outside of the social context in which it is being used, and here I reach an important moment for the analysis that is to follow.

The internet presents a special kind of context (space, surroundings), but it shouldn't be observed as a place where chaos, disorder, or absolute freedom reign. Cultural symbols, formulas, topics and narratives that exist in non-virtual space shape the ways in which people use the internet. What and in what way will be written on forums, blogs or personal pages of users, how they will talk about themselves, how they will lie, which websites will they visit and recommend – these are not questions that can always be answered. Still, they can point at the fact that internet should be observed as a place which is being shaped by social practices from the non-virtual context, and which redefines non-virtual sociality in return.

⁵ <http://mstation.org/internetpublishing.html> and <http://magazin.krstarica.com/l/kompjuteri/sloboda-da-sloboda-ne/>, and similar.

Problem Determination

I started the research wishing to see what the users describe as Montenegrinhood and Serbhood; that is, how they talk about national feelings. I wanted to collect intimate, personal statements regarding the nation from the forum, but soon it became clear that the communication on forums is formalized and that it has its rules. The way discussions are formulated on the forum is different in comparison to discussions among friends in non-virtual space – language, style and topics are not the same, nor are these things as intimate as those in the inn or between the walls of one's own home. Still, I think it is possible to talk about intimacy, but of another kind.

With this research I tried to answer the following questions:

- 1) What is said and how is it said about the nation on the forum?
- 2) Can one say that the users have used the forum for national acting, for producing the national, and in what way?

In other words, I want to show what narrations about national feeling exist on the forum. At the same time, I want to try to show what is “done” through them, how telling national stories on the forum turns into acting – producing, questioning and creating the national feeling.

Material Description

Café del Montenegro (CdM) is the most visited forum in Montenegro. There are 7,579 registered members, with 1,649 taking active part in discussions⁶. CdM is structured as most of the other forums – there are general topics, sub-forums⁷, under which specific topics are being brought up and discussed. On every sub-forum there is a moderator – a person in charge of keeping order and ensuring that rules are respected.

Forum users congratulate each other on birthdays, arrange to go out together, know the new members very well, and also what kind of attitudes the other users have; a few times

⁶ Data taken from the website itself. Link: <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/index.php>

⁷ Sub-forums are: CdM INFO; #montecafe; Love; Women Corner; Teenland; Travels; Birthdays, Weddings, the rest... J; MN Diaspora; English Only; Internet; Mobile Telephony and Telecommunications; Programming, IT General; Game Server MN; Hardware; Selling/Adds; Computer Viruses; Titograd; Herceg Novi; Kotor; Bar; Budva; Cetinje; Niksic; Pljevlja - Zabljak - Berane - BPolje; Ecology; Sport General; Automobiles; MMA a.k.a. Mixed Martial Arts; Film; Sex and Erotica; Music; Literature and Theatre; Painting, Design; Gastronomy; Religion and Philosophy; History; Science General; House Pets; Jokes; Miscellaneous; Politics General; Future of Montenegro; CdM Archive; SP 2006 Germany; Olympic Games; EURO 2004- Portugal.

they have organized elections for the “favorite forum guy/girl” with an award in money, etc. Forum CdM obviously is not a place for discussing national identity exclusively, and of course it is not the only topic that the users discuss. However, nationality easily becomes a topic of any discussion – on all sub-forums discussions can be found that “slipped into” a discussion about Montenegrins, Serbs, church, language, and so on⁸. The topic *Chauvinism on Forums*⁹, opened under sub-forum CdM INFO (where the functioning of the forum community is discussed), shows that the users feel the “omnipresence” of the national:

“I hope there is no need to list definitions and forum rules here, but for how much longer will the forum discussions be vulgarized by posts like this one: *Those Serbs who live in Montenegro, are for a big part Serbianized Montenegrins. Shame on them... But I am not surprised they would sell their own mom to get something good...* After such posts the whole discussion goes to hell, normal people leave, and those people end up dominating the forum. It’s sad to look at it...”

As well as:

“Regarding the national feelings in Montenegro- it’s such a confusing story that here on the forums (**where more advanced parts of the society come to discuss**) it is a part of daily routine to poison with hatred.”

During a discussion about the authenticity of the national feeling, one of the users ended up getting banned from the forum. I think his response clearly shows that the forum is not unimportant in everyday life of individuals. On the contrary:

“Well, to cut the long story short, long live all of you, rock this forum with whatever you like, but do it without me. It isn’t like I don’t care after seven or eight years, but I really can’t allow being thrown out like a drunk from a bar... I’ll keep in touch with dear, nice friends from here, and all the rest of you be healthy and good...”

For the most part I observed discussions on sub-forums of History, the Future of Montenegro, Literature and Theatre, and Politics General, trying to understand the way in which the nation is talked about on the forum. National attachment is most often, in my opinion, the most passionately discussed topic. A paradigmatic example is the topic of

⁸ For example, on the sub-forum *Love Dating a person of a different nationality... A problem or a good thing?*; on Mobile Telephony and Telecommunications *The kid won 25000 because he told on...*; on the sub-forum Literature *Those we dislike*; on the sub-forum Jokes *Old but current- WHO IS A LOSER-SERBIA OR MONTENEGRO*; and so forth.

⁹ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=27137>

*Montenegri*ns – *Their Own People or Serbs*¹⁰ on which eighteen users wrote what amounted to 149 pages (word document, standard format) – that is, a short book – in eight days.

There is an overwhelming potential to literally turn any topic into a discussion concerning the issues of what Montenegrinhood and Serbhood is, what is normal to feel and think, and who is a traitor, etc. I observed numerous different ways in which users explained and presented different national and historical categories. In the next part I will present the different opinions expressed about Montenegrinhood, Serbhood, and various other issues concerning the national. It should be mentioned that almost all the explanations quoted are represented equally frequently.

Montenegri

ns are a distinct people and a distinct nation, with a history that is easily distinguished from the history of other peoples. Criteria for determining the national identity are located in the past:

„I am a Montenegrin, because of the Saint Vladimir Dukljanski, Kings Bodin and Mihailo, because of the Balšić family, because of Stefanica Crnojević, Ivan Crnojević and his son Đurđa, because of Saint Petar Cetinjski, Njegoš, Marko Miljanov, because of Nikola, because of Saint Vasilije Ostroški, because of Krsto Popović, because of my language, customs and history, and because of my mother and my dad - because they told me I am a Montenegrin!“¹¹

The national identity of Montenegrins is based on moral imperative, and is not directly determined by other types of divisions. By this logic, a follower of any religion (who lives in Montenegro) is a Montenegrin if his behavior is regulated by the moral imperative contained in the phrase “Humanity and Bravery”.

„The real Montenegrins are those who took the side of humanism and bravery. In modern history those are the people who took the side of humanity in the early 1990s. It is true that Cetinje was their center, but they weren’t from Cetinje only. There were Montenegrins of all religions, and the nicest thing of all things is that nobody cared (about the other person’s religion).“¹²

Montenegro is a point of meeting and a symbiosis of most various cultural identities – a unique kind of a hybrid:

¹⁰ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=22714&highlight=svoj+narod+srbi>

¹¹ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=22714&page=8>

¹² <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=22714&page=10>

„A people that speaks the same language and have the same religion, that moved and migrated across these regions a lot in the past 600-700 years – from Kosovo and Macedonia to Montenegro, from Sandžak to Vojvodina, from East Serbia to Bosnia, from Herzegovina to Krajina, and, further on, from Montenegro to West Serbia, Krajina, and even further, to Austria, Russia... up until the nineteenth century; and that is the beauty of these people, it has nothing to do with genetics and miracles.”¹³

Montenegro is a geographical, not a national area, so one can't talk about Montenegrins as a group which once had a national identity:

„Montenegrins (not the geographical ones) have been invented about 1948. Thus, you, as a new nation, start from scratch. You don't have the right to use others' fame.“¹⁴

Montenegrins originate from a mixture of Slavs and Illyrians-Vlachs. Here the nation/people is perceived as a partially blood-based community, or at least a community that has shared national genes. Biology is what differentiates Montenegrins from Serbs, Croats, and all others:

“Montenegrins have more of the Vlach gene than the Slavic one.”¹⁵; “In Montenegro the Vlach gene is represented as equally as the Slavic gene. That is why we are not typical Slavs with blue eyes. We are a mixture of Vlachs and Slavs, and if we accept that all South Slavs are Serbs (and some Serbian historians are trying to tell us that we are), then it would be logical that we are not the purest but the “dirtiest” Serbs. But, of course, Slavs who inhabited Duklja are not Serbs, Serbs and Croats came to the Balkans 500 years after Slavic tribes who inhabited the area of contemporary Montenegro. That is the whole story and the science about the “purest Serbs”, as they like to name Montenegrins.”¹⁶

Montenegrins are Dukljans – descendants of people who lived in this area a thousand years ago in the state Duklja. Everybody who lives in Montenegro now can relate to Duklja in some way (genetically, spiritually, culturally...), that is, those who can't do not qualify as real Montenegrins:

“I can differ from someone from the North but it is a spiritual connection that matters, to put it that way. We follow the continuity from Duklja, not from some gusle poem.”¹⁷

¹³ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=22714&page=2>

¹⁴ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=11343>

¹⁵ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=22714&page=2>

¹⁶ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?p=662951&highlight=ilira%22#post662951>

¹⁷ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=26367&page=2>

A Montenegrin is a person who feels like a Montenegrin, or, more radically, a person who chooses to feel like one. According to this idea, feelings of a person, that is, her/his personal choice of national identity are the most important. Biology, genetics and history don't play any kind of role:

“Here you go again with my family... I explained that before. Migrations, passions, always on the border, and always rocks, cliffs... You want a whole genealogy of the past 600 years? I can do that too, but not on this topic, J Cipur, I wish that you could understand what I think: Did your people sing songs to Saint Sava 50, 100, 150, 200, 300 years ago, or did my people do the same... in the end it doesn't even matter! I don't know, the feeling that both of us carry in our hearts is what is really important, no documents, no history can change that, in me or you, nothing can endanger that feeling in me or you...”¹⁸;

As well as:

“I am a Montenegrin from Cetinje and that is how I would feel even if my family had arrived on a camel from the Middle East.”¹⁹

Following the logic of feelings, an attempt can be noted to explain the Montenegrinhood without calling to Duklja or Serbia, as an individual political and emotional self-sufficient category.

“I am a Montenegrin, with no additions. But my ancient origins don't go back to Duklja, neither do I think I am of Serbian origin. I am unimportant as an individual. What is important is that many Montenegrins don't originate from Duklja, and what bothers me, and many others, is this generalized equalization of Montenegrins and Dukljans.”²⁰

When explaining what Serbhood is for them, the users often used similar arguments.

- Serbian national identity is not natural; it has no historical or biological continuity. It was created in the nineteenth century, as a political project:

“Serbs are a religious group that self-proclaimed itself for a nation in the twentieth century only, although the Serbian elite consisted of Serbs west of Tara back in the mid nineteenth century. That is how many people in the Balkans were named Serbs, after some medieval people *Srbliji*, with whom eighty to ninety percent of contemporary Serbs have no connection whatsoever. On the contrary. The ancestors of most contemporary Serbs were at war with the people of Srbliji.”²¹

¹⁸ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=22714&page=9>

¹⁹ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=23810>

²⁰ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=26367>

²¹ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=22714&page=2>

As a constitutive part of the previous idea, one could also perceive the idea of Serbhood as a religious determinant. During the Middle ages it was a synonym for Orthodoxy:

“Before they were Montenegrins, they were Zečans, Dukljans, descendants of incoming Slavs and the inhabitants who were there: Illyrians, romanized Illyrians... What is unclear? What Serbs - what nonsense? Nemanja imposed the Orthodox religion upon Zeta, and it was so closely connected to the Serbian state that they started calling it the Serbian religion. That is how contemporary Serbs found themselves in Montenegro- they are a product of misinterpreted Orthodoxy and small-town complexes.”²²

Serbhood is a „lifestyle“, an individual cultural and moral category which is characterized by:

„Religion, tradition, song, honor, bravery... A whirlwind of freedom that landed from those hills. Pride, and, of course, spite. Humor as well, of course. And never, in any case, hatred.“²³

An attempt to use the borders to determine what real Serbhood is:

„For Serbs from Serbia it is understood that they are Serbs, in comparison to Serbs from other countries (Macedonians, Montenegrins, Bosnians etc. whose nationality is unknown since they change it more often than their socks).“²⁴

Serbhood is a determinant for people who live in Serbia. It was introduced in Montenegro in the nineteenth century, but since it was imported (like communism) it is not natural and will retreat:

“I do not dispute that Montenegrins had their supranational feelings imposed by Njegoš and Nikola, but that was the same as when we were Yugoslavs twenty years ago.”²⁵

²² <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=14534&page=2>

²³ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=22714>

²⁴ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=22714&page=2>

²⁵ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=22802>

Analysis

In the first part I will try to show what reasoning is followed by the national narrations from the forum, and then I will suggest how the writing on the forum can be understood as a special kind of cultural engagement.

Authenticities

It seems to me that almost all explanations of the national in Montenegro presented here are structured in the same way – through the idea of authenticity. The main discussion is about which national feeling has the bigger “right to existence”, which one is real and which one is fake, constructed, and unnatural. Quoted explanations about nation in Montenegro have their representatives on the forum, and, as mutually contradictory as they might be, their basic reasoning is the same.

The users often apply a very anthropological idea of nation as a constructed community, starting from different presuppositions. Constructedness is opposed to authenticity – constructed national feelings are fake, untrue, and thus should be abandoned. Authentic (real, true) national attachments should be embraced and defended. To learn an authentic national feeling, and then to teach the other users the truer version of history, nation and state in Montenegro, is an explicit goal of many of the forum’s visitors.

It would seem that this, almost a levi-straussian, opposition between natural and constructed national feeling is not a basis of one idea only – Montenegro as a “cultural hybrid”. Hybrids, mixtures, *beauty in variety*, cannot be explained through authenticity. They don’t have their oppositions, their national Other in relation to which they could be true and normal. It seems that the users who stand for this idea have found an elegant way to solve the ambiguity and uncertainty of national feelings.

Questioning the Feelings

What can be learned about national feeling from computer mediated discussions? It seems that discussions on the CdM forum can provide an insight into parts of much broader social processes in Montenegro.

The CdM forum is a public space, which is being arranged, written out, and fashioned primarily from a private sphere. The users visit in their own free time to transpose their personal thoughts to a public space. In this way the CdM forum becomes a place that overcomes the opposition of “Private: Public” – 1,500 people on a daily basis and several thousand people more at times discuss their national feeling, movies, politics, sports,

and literature. Their discussions become a part of everyday life in Montenegro – available to anybody who has access to the internet.

Although I realized during my research that in the off-line life I know many people who participate in the CdM forum²⁶, I don't know who all the participants from the discussions are, or what kinds of identities they take on, internalize, or name as their own. A group discussing the national feeling could be comprised of a Member of Parliament from Montenegro, a young girl studying music, a female Muslim doctor, a Swedish emigrant, an Albanian sportsman, a fifty year old gay sailor, a rocker atheist, a high school history teacher, a lesbian mother of two boys, etc.

Who are the users, where are they, what do they do – these are not questions that influence the agency of the forum. With the phrase “agency of the forum” I do not mean to suggest that the CdM forum should be perceived as a collective entity that has its own will, as a supra-organic community that overcomes the people who make up the forum. CdM is a result of the acting of individuals who together write out thousands of pages. Those pages, which contain discussions about national belongings, become a cultural text in the full sense of that word. They are a part of the public sphere – they are somewhere between the domain of “bar stories”²⁷ and “media”.

Their acting can be understood as a form of cultural engagement, which Herzfeld talks about. Regardless of social positions and the power relations between them, on the forum they all produce national attachments together, by writing and talking about them. By questioning their feelings, debating their own versions of history, and discussing whose national feeling is more authentic, they create a part of the public life of Montenegro.

The most clear example is the intentional, clearly articulated goal of the users of the sub-forum History who perceive their acting as a „correction“ of national historical narratives available in other sources (schools, magazines, popular history books...): *Who knows how many people still don't know that this sub-forum is the best place for Montenegrin history on internet*²⁸. In other words, the users decided to take advantage of the free, virtual space on the forum to write an addition to, or maybe even rewrite Montenegrin histories. The urge to write out, to fill in, to recreate, to correct the history of Montenegro and the history of

²⁶ Many display pictures of themselves or leave links to their personal websites, such as www.myspace.com or www.blogovanje.com.

²⁷ The very name of the forum is a reference to a „bar context“.

²⁸ <http://forum.cafemontenegro.com/showthread.php?t=7118>

national feeling in Montenegro speaks vividly about an important issue which is not connected to the virtual space only.

Internet, the CdM forum in particular, is conceptualized as a library in which true historical data about the past can be found, and through which it is possible to compensate on what is missing in non-virtual space – a clear narration about nationality and history in Montenegro. A lack of a unique national narrative (or, more likely, the conflict of histories, politics and national feelings which resulted in multiple and conflicted meanings) is not hard to be recognized in the writings on the forum. The variety of meanings of national terms implies that the nationality in Montenegro is still a point of great disputes and debates. I think that the activity of the CdM forum users clearly shows that the uncertainties are still there, a year after the proclaimed independence of Montenegro. It is still not clear who Montenegrins, Serbs, Dukljans, and Croats are, where they come from and where they are heading. The result of the users' activity is not one coherent story, but several divided histories and national categories.

The national structures most of the discussions on the forum; however, as I tried to show, the result of the united acting is far away from a unique narrative. National signifiers have covered a lot of the signifieds, in other words – the terms “Montenegrin”, “Serbian”, and “Dukljanian” potentially have an endless number of meanings. The result of writing out together on the forum is a many-year persistent negotiation of the sense of national categories in Montenegro.

Conclusion

Yael Navaro Yashin writes: “People from all sections of society were constantly involved in criticizing various manifestations of the state in the most sophisticated manner. In other words, I argue that the so-called public in Turkey has already critiqued and deconstructed the state. And yet, simultaneous practices of reproduction, regeneration, and reification keep re-dressing “the state” in a variety of garbs. If the political survives critique and deconstruction, if the state endures, as it has, then the anthropologist must venture other arenas and analytical frameworks for the study of the political. For the very people who critique the state also reproduce it through their “fantasies” for the state” (Navaro-Yashin: 2002, 4).

By passionate writing out, arguing, and negotiating the meaning of the state and the nation, many different and divided kinds of knowledge have been created – several histories have been offered, different geographies, and different ethics and politics. On one side,

this directly undermines, endangers, and questions the power of the state national narrative, its ability to represent itself as the most desirable, standard, and natural view on the world – the forum is a part of public life of Montenegro and its visitors can encounter various explanations about the national on a daily basis. However, talking about nation, state, and authentic attachments simultaneously produces nation-state as realistically existent. As I tried to explain, the main problem is which feeling of (national) attachment has more right to authenticity – which one is more natural, real, deeper rooted. Still, the idea of nation-state is the only thinkable/imaginable framework of existence. It seems to me that the result of using the virtual space of the forum is questioning, which re-produces the idea of the state at the same time.

In my opinion, virtual and non-virtual sociality could be understood here as a system of mirrors²⁹ – they exist in parallel, they reflect mutually, but they change each other a bit. The ambiguities and uncertainties of national attachments from the non-virtual context have a strong influence on what will be talked about on the forum that I researched and how it will be talked about. At the same time, negotiations in the virtual space create a particular form of functioning in the public life of Montenegro; they question the meanings of the national and reconstitute the importance of the idea of nation-state for existence.

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²⁹ «The Mirror System» consists of two mirrors across each other; they reflect in each other, while the reflection is multiplied and slightly changed on every next level.

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