

TOLERANCE AND PREJUDICE IN BELGRADE: YOUNG PEOPLE'S CONSTRUCTIONS OF SELVES AND OTHERS

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The cultural and public spheres of Serbia today reveal little to suggest the country's recent experience of civil war or conflict.ⁱ Indeed, one of the most striking observations from fieldwork - carried out between October 2005 and May 2006 in Belgrade - was the existence of a general 'information blackout' about the civil wars of the 1990s. There are only a small number of books on the topic, copies of which are not widely available. There is an absence also of films, plays, lectures and public dialogue that would raise awareness of the eventsⁱⁱ while high school history books avoid discussion of the civil wars almost entirely. Moreover, my ethnographic research suggests that the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo tend not to be discussed in families and, when reference is made to them, the subject is changed quickly or dismissed. In contrast, the NATO bombing campaign in 1999 is discussed and widely referred to as 'the war'.

This information blackout is particularly important to bear in mind when considering young people's identity formation, not least because the Yugoslav conflicts themselves were intrinsically connected to ideas of belonging and identity (Kaldor 1999). Even the oldest of the respondents engaged in this study was too young to remember the conflicts of the 1990s for themselves. Moreover, with a few exceptions, respondents knew nobody directly affected or involved in the warsⁱⁱⁱ and they received little direct information about them. Despite this, the research revealed that young people had concrete ideas about the 'national characteristics' of those involved in the conflicts drawn from 'second hand' and 'retold' understandings of, and information about, these conflicts. Such 'second hand' stories are crucial to how respondents viewed 'others' - Bosnian Muslims, Croats and Albanians - involved in the conflicts and young people's reliance on them is indicative of the fact that they are at the receiving end of information systems (education, media, parents) and enjoy very little opportunity to produce their own discourses about war.

Academic discussion of these issues is limited also. Whilst some research has been

carried out with Serbia's younger generations^{iv}, it rarely considers young people's interpretations of recent cultural trauma (Alexander et al 2004) and/or constructions of selves and others^v. Academic publications on young people in post-Communist Eastern Europe more generally,^{vi} on the other hand, do not capture the unique situation in which young people in Serbia (and the rest of former Yugoslavia) find themselves; not only are they living through the profound social and economic changes initiated by post-communist economic transformation but also those brought about by civil war. This post-war context also means that the identities of ethnic 'others' remain highly politicised and memories of ethnic conflict are still vivid. This article addresses this academic gap, drawing on material from interviews with ten respondents alongside extensive ethnographic observation conducted in Belgrade (2005-06).

Methods

Discourses on identities often involve complex, and frequently self-contradictory, responses; identities are almost always created in relation to 'others' and in this process it is often the case that national, religious and ethnic groups are conflated. For this reason, where identities are concerned, it is better to think about the 'politics of representation' rather than seek 'representational adequacy' (Barker and Galasinski 2001: 19). The methods selected for this study - in-depth interviews and observation - are a particularly productive tool for this purpose as well as for uncovering the textual construction and articulation of specific opinions.

The ten respondents referred to in this article are part of a larger study for which forty respondents from three different generations were interviewed in order to understand how ideas about identity, nationalism and 'others' vary between generations. The families were selected because they were 'ordinary' Belgrade families, by which is meant, they were not involved in politics, were not public figures, or public intellectuals, and the young respondents' parents and grandparents occupied 'ordinary'

jobs (in administration, accounting, teaching and similar) with no political influence. In this respect, they, and their families, do not stand out from the majority of Belgrade's population; their selection was in no way designed to capture conscious nationalists or xenophobes. Rather the aim was to identify where feelings of prejudice, intolerance and nationalism emerged (if they did at all) in 'ordinary' young people's discourses, and in what circumstances and contexts 'others' were discursively invoked.

Therefore, what is being examined are the constructs of others in language (see Barker and Galasinski 2001). The aim is not to uncover general or representative attitudes of the younger populations, but rather to expose a range of discourses and opinions concerning others. The research allows for an in-depth examination of a small number of cases, and provides a 'snapshot' of a particular cross-section of society and their opinions. It helps to uncover the *compositeness* of the narratives (see Smith 2004) and demonstrates that not all constructs of others are 'black and white' or nationalist and non-nationalist, but that they encompass various, often opposing, notions of others. Analysis of these narratives, moreover, helps illuminate the processes and cultural influences which lead to the formation of specific constructs, opinions and actions. Importantly, even though claims of 'representativeness' cannot be made, such research helps create 'from below' understandings of post-conflict societies, and their youth.

Such research is highly dependent upon the context within which it is situated, and it is important not to stretch its validity. That is to say, young people's constructs of others in societies after conflict cannot and should not be extrapolated to such issues as support for nationalist parties in Serbia or young people's views on Kosovo, democracy or Serbia's political future. Links between such political issues (so often the subject of social research on Serbia) and young people's images of and attitudes to others can be no more than tenuous given that the illumination of such links was not originally factored in to the research. The research was designed not to shed light on the political future of Serbia as a whole but to explore the workings of systems of cultural production by investigating a social group – young people – who are located at the very end of such systems and whose position is one of relative powerlessness (in terms of parental or

financial restraint) to generate their own meanings and experiences (for instance through travelling). The significance of their narratives is that they reveal, first of all, what kind of stories, information and ideas have filtered down from the older generations in a war torn society and, secondly, which of these are accepted and which are rejected. This facilitates an understanding of where leverage and potential for change and reconciliation reside.

Whilst from such research we are not able to recreate 'representative' attitudes and constructs, we can, nevertheless, gauge the limits of the acceptable (see Bourdieu 1977). We can see, for example, that the responses of young people largely corresponded with those of their parents, grandparents and society more widely (on a cultural and political level, for instance). The apparent lack of deviation of their views helps further understand the dominant ideas that circulate in society and are (re)produced by the youngest generations.

In the selection of respondents, I used a snowballing technique whereby the families I already knew in Belgrade introduced me to their friends and family, and I approached those whom I thought were suitable for interviews. The only 'criteria' for the selection was that the respondents were neither politically involved nor a public figure and that they ethnically (self) identified as Serbs. I selected ten respondents from each generational group: from a generation of those aged 60 and above; a generation aged between 40 and 60; a generation of respondents in their thirties and the youngest generation of those who were 18 to thirty. The idea was that each generation had experienced a different period of former Yugoslav history, and thus their constructs of identity and 'others' were likely to be different (see Meinhof and Galasinski 2000).

Stereotypes, Images and Processes

In the course of interview, respondents were asked what they thought of each significant ethnic minority in Serbia proper^{vii}, i.e. the Roma, Albanians and Muslims. The general trend in responses was one of tolerance. The interviews, for instance, revealed no evidence of 'intolerant' or 'hate speech' as defined by Bugarski (2002:93) as a 'vicious form of public defamation [...] with the aim of satanising an ethnic, racial, confessional, social or political group'. This certainly did not occur in the

interviews. However, this basic tolerance was nonetheless underscored by a range of prejudices and misconceptions regarding others. When talking about ethnic minorities and their characteristics, the respondents, all ethnic Serbs, saw all of the groups, including their own, as monolithic. Moreover, when talking about 'others', all of the respondents had immediate answers that conveyed very concrete and definite opinions. In contrast, when asked to talk about the Serbs as a nation, all the respondents were hesitant or vague in the way they talked about themselves as a national group. This indicates that they do not think of themselves as ethnically positioned; rather they take themselves to be the 'norm' against which other minorities are judged. Given that the respondents belong to the dominant ethnic category in Serbia, and are not directly threatened by other groups, this is, perhaps, not surprising. However, their ability to talk with confidence about other minorities was indeed unexpected given that it was not grounded in experience; none of the respondents had a close non-Serb friend.

Roma

By far the most (negative) opinion and 'knowledge' was generated in relation to the Roma minority. This, I would argue, is because they are the most visible minority group in Belgrade. This visibility stems from their socio-economic status, their use of the Roma language and a popular belief that they are physically distinguishable from the Serbs. Most respondents used the derogatory label 'Cigani' ('Gypsies') to refer to the Roma, and their positioning vis-à-vis this group was clearly illustrated by the response of one interviewee when I asked what she thought of ethnic minorities; before I had time to elaborate *which* minorities, she replied, 'You mean Gypsies?' (Milena, 18^{viii}). To the respondents the term 'ethnic minorities' was synonymous with the Roma, whilst other groups (Albanians, Muslims and Croats) were viewed, rather, as political enemies and provocateurs.

Prevalent opinion and discourse regarding the Roma concentrated mostly on their lifestyle, perceived unwillingness to work and physical appearance. Along with negative stereotypes of un-cleanliness, there was also a perception that they were visually distinguishable from Serbs. The following interview extracts illustrate some of these ideas.

Extract 1

My friend and I were... waiting to cross at the lights, and they asked me for money and wanted to spit on me if I didn't give them money. Well I'm not going to give it to them, if they ask for it, because they can work.... And so I have that kind of negative stance [towards them] because most of the Roma don't go to school – they live where they can They live off other people's backs, they beg and that's it. And it annoys me that they really smell.

Ana, 18.

Extract 2

... they are a people who are damned, they are a people who have simply drawn the kind of genes that make them beg, never do anything, behave in the way that they behave and basically [they] have the kind of genes that make them literally barbarians.

Milena, 18.

Extract 3

Well, I don't really mind the Roma, but I don't like the fact that they don't want to work or do anything. They don't want to be educated. ... At primary school, there were a couple of Roma, but they all reach third grade and leave. Where's the desire to be a part of something?

Milan, 22.

Extract 4

I don't understand what they actually are. I mean.... they... I don't understand them, I don't know... you say there are Orthodox Roma. The ones that I see on the street are always called Sheherezada or something and they don't

communicate in Serbian. ...And I concluded, I mean, when I was little I had no idea what the Gypsies were, only that they were darker people and I had no idea what they were, what religion or faith, and no one talked about it. I made the conclusion myself, based on their names, that they are Muslim.

Kristina, 22.

Extract 5

A: What's characteristic about the Roma – at least what everyone says – is that they steal and always beg...

Q: And do you believe everything that is said about them?

A: Well I think even those who are not like that, become like that.

Danijela, 23.

With the exception of Extract 4, it is clear that Roma are identified primarily by their socio-economic status ['begging'] rather than any perceived character flaws or physical differences. This suggests a general shift from seeing the Roma as a group which can be identified through biological factors only and an awareness of the actual problems that the Roma face as a group. This awareness, however, ends with the claim that 'they don't want to work' and before any recognition of the fact that most Roma are unable to get work, or are able to work only in certain low-paid jobs.

The negative images and stereotypes the respondents had of the Roma were not often perceived as a barrier to being friends with someone from this group. One respondent, Milan, related a story of the last time he remembered Roma children in his class in primary school, and recalled being really good friends with them even though 'they were dirty, and people didn't really want to spend much time around them because they were unruly'. Indeed, paradoxically, there is more prejudice but less intolerance towards the Roma than towards other ethnic groups (especially Albanians and Muslims); the Roma are treated more as a social nuisance than a threat. This is probably explained by the fact that the Roma

were not involved in the Yugoslav conflicts (although large numbers were made refugees) and thus there is no political or historical tension between them and the Serbs. In contrast, the Muslim, Albanian and Croat minorities have become politicised and seen in symbolic relation to the wars; this is especially true of the young, who have no direct experience of this historical period of time but are subject to recycled and largely negative stories.

All respondents were conscious of the fact that the Roma's problems are rooted in their current circumstances and that their 'unruliness', and general standard of living, are not genetically determined, even though they believe that these conditions are socio-biological rather than socio-economic. The kind of belief and approach to the Roma, illustrated in the extracts above, is interesting not least because of the way in which it differs from the expression of negative opinions regarding Albanians and Muslims. In the case of Muslims and Albanians no explanation for negative opinions was articulated beyond reference to stereotyping based on conflicts and historical issues which none of the respondents really understood.

Albanians

Expressions of greatest intolerance were leveled at the Albanians as an ethnic group, although there were also some positive associations made by the young people interviewed. Most opinions were based on, or influenced by, the conflicts in Kosovo and concerns about the potential loss of the province.

Much like other ethnic groups, the Albanians were seen as a monolithic entity and only in isolated instances did the respondents differentiate between Albanians in Kosovo and those in Albania. The responses on the whole were varied:

Extract 6

My friend, this Milena – well her Dad is from Kosovo and she told me what it was like for him over there...they say he couldn't stay there because he had to run away. Basically, from everything I've heard I've got a really negative stance towards those *shiptars*,^{ix} because

we've fought for Kosovo throughout our entire history.

The same respondent continued:

Extract 7

When I hear 'Albanian' I think of Kosovo and I immediately switch off and don't like them....Kosovo is ours... I think that Serbs have to go back there because Kosovo is theirs, Serbian – I mean, the Serbs have to go back to Kosovo and we have to chase those *shiptars* out of there.

Ivana, 18.

What is interesting in Ivana's response is that her stance towards Albanians is wholly negative yet her friend - Milena - whom she mentions as having been affected directly by the Kosovo conflicts, noted in her interview that she wouldn't have a problem with having an Albanian friend or boyfriend. Milena went on to elaborate that she believed that those young Serbians who are unacquainted with Albanians have the worst opinion of them while those, like her, who have experienced conflicts are more likely to be aware that an entire nation cannot be the perpetrator of violence and war.

Above all, the opinions of young people regarding the Albanian nation illustrate the impact of politics and political events, especially conflicts, on the attitudes of the young towards other ethnic groups. However, when asked whether they thought that the Serbs and Albanians could ever live together - that is, whether their problems stem from political reasons or from some more fundamental barrier to the two nations living side by side - all of the respondents admitted that the problems were of a political nature, and that, as far as they could judge from the stories they heard from their parents and friends, the people themselves liked living together in an ethnically mixed Kosovo.

This kind of contention – on the one hand, understanding that politics and not ethnic differences were behind the unrest in Kosovo, while, on the other, still cultivating strong negative prejudices – is symptomatic of the current situation in Serbia with regard to Albanians and Kosovo. The information blackout, the lack of opportunity for communicative exchange with members of other

ethnic groups and the influence of news and media propaganda leads to uninformed opinions being created and propagated uncritically.

Some respondents did comment to the effect that they did not know any Albanians and were therefore unable to comment on the Albanian nation, which demonstrates that some young people do refrain from making negative assumptions about ethnic others they have never encountered. Furthermore, one of those respondents recognised the heterogeneity of the Albanian nation itself, realising that the Albanians in Kosovo and those in Albania should not be seen as one homogenous mass.

Extract 8

I have never talked to an Albanian in my whole life. I don't know, I really don't have any kind of opinion. It's questionable how much those Albanians from the south of Albania know what their northern friends are doing....

Milan, 22.

Extract 9

I've never been friends with them....so I can't really say anything about them.

Danijela, 23.

What makes some respondents able to comment with authority on minorities like the Albanians, whilst others refrain from making any comment? All the respondents were from very similar backgrounds and the variance in age between them was not great. A more extensive study than this one would be needed to determine this, but it is clear that some respondents often made comments that they perceived to be acceptable at a general societal level (see section on External Influences). Comments on Albanians were peculiarly coloured by the issue of Kosovo, whose potential independence (as well as the 1999 conflict) still carried strong significance for many Serbs, and was the only of the former Yugoslav wars openly debated in many homes. Thus the Kosovo issue was invariably addressed along the lines of: Kosovo is Serbia; the

Albanians have a wrongful claim on Serb territory, and the 1999 NATO airstrikes were illegal.

In this way, Kosovo, which has always had a symbolic and mythical significance in Serbian society (Anzulovic 1999; Mertus 1999; Popovic 1998), becomes the site and repository of identities, both collective and private. It should be noted here also that all respondents mentioned learning about Kosovo in school; they confirmed the significance of Kosovo for Serbia and that their parents and grandparents also believed in Kosovo's status as an integral part of Serbia. Moreover, Kosovo is one sphere of political life in which interviewees showed interest and, unlike the previous wars, the Kosovo conflict was in *their* living memory. This means that, at a physical and symbolic level, the recent conflicts and the possible future loss of Kosovo, threaten the idea of a collective Serbian identity and thus those respondents who feel this threat as Serbs develop more hostile constructs of Albanians that immediately link the idea of 'Albanians' with the idea of 'Kosovo'.

Muslims

The constructs of, and opinions about, this group are marked by ambiguity and confusion. Views are also very wide-ranging, extending from benign responses such as 'Muslims in Serbia are a very pleasant people' (Danijela, 23) to more negative opinions. In the former Yugoslavia, the populations of Muslim faith were given the right to declare themselves to be *ethnically* Muslim. After the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the name Bosniak (Bošnjak) came into use, to denote Bosnian citizens of Muslim faith. Muslims in the Sandžak region of Serbia also use the title Bošnjak to refer to themselves.^x However, I asked the respondents specifically what they thought of *Muslims* since I wanted to understand what they thought of 'Muslims' as a larger group and whether the respondents would distinguish between Muslims in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania.

Misconceptions about Islam and Muslims voiced in interviews included a belief that Muslims can be distinguished from Serbs physically and, sometimes, Muslims were confused with Albanians. The extract below illustrates some negative perceptions and prejudices held about Islam and Muslims, and also how the tropes of 'Muslim' and 'Albanian'

become conflated in some respondents' constructions:

Extract 10

Q. Do you think that Serbs and Albanians can coexist?

A. No. Come on, no, no, no....

Q. But how –

A: Because they hate us, they...in fact their religion is like that, they don't respect any other religion. Islam is like that...

Kristina, 22.

Such attitudes demonstrate a trend also clearly identifiable in Serb society as a whole; not only are *others* intolerant, goes this line, but they hate the Serbs and actively engage in acts of intolerance, whilst the Serbs are wholly passive in inter-ethnic problems (see Obradović 2007).

Another misconception was that being Muslim is a visually recognisable trait (although it should be noted that this was an isolated comment).

Extract 11

A: You can tell that she's Muslim, in some people you can just tell they are Muslim.

Q: How?

A: ...some of them have this kind of ...they are somehow so arrogant....I have this aunt who's Muslim, she's not a blood relative, but she's dangerous, she looks cunning, like she's evil, she somehow looks at you out of the corner of her eye...

Milena, 18.

Such extracts, which distinctly define the Muslims as 'others' based on their physiology, contrasted sharply with comments by other respondents who saw Muslims in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as 'us', as in Extract 12 (below). There was also a difference in opinion

when it came to defining Muslims. Whilst a number of respondents uncritically accepted them as a national group, others had different ideas. The same respondent saw a very distinct difference between what he called 'our Muslims' and Muslims elsewhere:

Extract 12

I don't even consider them a nation.
They are people who believe in
Allah, but actually, they are Croats or
Serbs, or Bosniaks... Personally, I
don't consider those from Bosnia to
be Muslims. In fact they are Serbs
who have changed their
faith... Muslims are Turks, those
Iraqis – they are the real Muslims.
But these, ours here, they are
Muslims who eat pork...

Milan, 22.

Very rarely was the discourse produced on Muslims as a group connected to Islam as a religion or its religious practices and beliefs, thus making this group, which is defined through religion, at the same time separate from it. As Stef Jansen argues, '...the label "Muslim" fails to convey the ambiguity of the reference to Islam, which was at once an indispensable and a negligible element' (Jansen 2003: 217).

Thus Muslims, as a group, are seen more or less as 'us'; they are seen as closer to Serbs than either Roma or Albanians. This is evidenced in Milan's claim (Extract 12) that Muslims are in fact Serbs who converted to Islam. This is a commonly held view in Serbia and many of the adults I interviewed saw them as 'Serbs of a Muslim faith' as one of my older respondents explained. This may help explain such widely varying opinions; respondents like Milan subscribe to the view that they are 'Serbs of a Muslim faith' whilst others, like Kristina, do not. This is perhaps best understood with reference to the respondents' linked understandings of civil wars^{xi}, where, if the Bosnian war was understood from a primarily ethnocentric perspective (where Serbs are the sole victims and Muslims the sole perpetrators) then the respondents often also took on a defensive stance and projected all the negative characteristics onto the 'offending' Bosnian

Muslim group identified as the single cause of ethnic tension. These ideas still prevail in Serbia and it is unsurprising that some of the young people in this research had adopted negative opinions of (Bosnian) Muslims, as they are likely to have been influenced by parental attitudes whilst being unlikely to have ever met anyone from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The complexity of young Serbians' attitudes towards Muslims was revealed most clearly during a trip to Republika Srpska, the Serb entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. There, young Serbs, without exception, viewed the Muslim population as aggressors, as a threat, and as entirely different to Serbs; in effect much the same way as Serb youth in Serbia views the Albanian population. This can be accounted for by the fact that, in this part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the link between negative stereotypes and conflict is absolutely clear while, in Serbia itself, the lack of open conflict between Serbs and Muslims on Serbian territory, tempered negative opinions and feelings amongst Serb youth and bolstered the view of some respondents that Muslims were not a 'threatening' group. In my experience, the respondents with this view are often those who have travelled to Bosnia and Herzegovina, had relatives there or who, or whose parents, have Bosnian or Muslim friends. These respondents often had an awareness of Bosnian Muslims as an ethnic group, based on personal experience rather than recycled narratives of the conflict.^{xii}

Serbs

Once respondents had adjusted to the idea of thinking about themselves as an ethnic group at all, their projection of their own nation tended to contrast directly their images of national 'others'. Serbs were perceived in positive terms. Where negative characteristics were identified, the main one was a lack of unity as a people, a view shared across all three generations of respondents. Moreover, the descriptions of Serbs were distanced from conflicts and violence, unlike the descriptions of Albanians, for instance.

The clearest sense of how Serbian identity is constructed by Serbs themselves, however, emerged when it transpired that almost all respondents saw themselves, and Serbs in general, as victims of media and other institutional misrepresentation and victims of

others' intolerance (see Obradović 2007). As a national group, they felt wronged and considered that institutions like The Hague and the (undifferentiated) West were working against the Serbs.

Extract 13

...on TV, it's always Serbs killed this many Croats.... Like now in Kosovo. It's always Serbs that are to blame. According to the TV, the Serbs have killed the entire world. And I find that really strange.

Ivana, 18.

Not only does the perceived victimisation^{xiii} of Serbs replicate discourses produced by the older generations, and the general consensus in Serbia, but it also leads to growing resentment against ethnic others. This is especially the case in situations where Serbs are perceived as the 'real' and unproblematic victims, for instance, in Kosovo.

Western and non-Serbian media and scholarly work show that Serbs as an ethnic group are stereotyped much in the same way that Serbs stereotype other groups. My interviews with young Serbs demonstrate that they suffer from, and are frustrated by, these stereotypes of themselves, and this drives some to react against them. This is especially important where young people are concerned because the negative stereotyping of Serbs is a product largely of recent conflicts, in which the decision-makers were the older generations. Young people, therefore, are additionally frustrated by being subjected to negative representations of themselves because of the actions of others.

The awareness of negative representations is reflected, perhaps, in a hesitancy and indecisiveness among respondents when asked what the Serbs are like as a nation.

Extract 14

Well I have to think about that – how do you mean what are we like?.... We're always ready to have fun...Regardless of everything that we've been through...Most of the

Serbs...we go through everything with a smile.

Ivana, 18.

Extract 15

I don't know, wait, I never thought about what makes me a Serb. Well, I am a Serb because I was born in Serbia, because I love this country, because I will never be ashamed that I am a Serb.

Milan, 22.

Extract 16

I think that our whole nation has been taught that way, it doesn't wish anything bad on anyone, never causes harm to others and everyone returns our kindness with evil. I don't know why.

Kristina, 22.

This ambiguity and hesitancy demonstrates, primarily, the respondents' status as the dominant ethnic group, and as such, one which has not had to think about its own defining characteristics. Instead, they see themselves as the 'norm' against which all other groups are judged, and against whose values other groups' values, traditions and customs are compared. Serbs thus embody everything that is positive whilst ethnic others embody negative characteristics. Consequently it is 'they' who are believed to be the ones that cause problems, not 'us'.

Discursive Strategies

In interviews, the respondents often employed repetitive discursive strategies when talking about themselves and others. It is important to analyse the strategies used in conversation because it is often the syntax, a clause or a qualifying comment, which functions to 'hide' prejudice (see for instance Van Dijk 1987) or to deflect negative characteristics away from the Serbs as an ethnic group. For instance, one of the predominant strategies used attempted to justify

negative opinions of other ethnic groups through the use of blame-shifting rhetoric. In this way, ethnic groups were made responsible for the prejudice against them through the implication that 'they hate us' or 'they do things that make me not like them'. Below are some extracts that illustrate this.

Extract 17

Q: And [between] Serbs and Catholics, are there any tensions there?

A: Well...yes, but it all comes from their side. They hate us, but I don't know why. They think we're abhorrent, they don't want to have anything to do with us and I don't understand that...I have nothing against anyone if they don't wish me any harm...I can't feel comfortable in the company of some Croat if I know that he hates me, that he'd like to root me out....

Q: But surely not all of them hate us? There are some –

A: Well, I've never heard of any Croat who likes me, to be honest.

Kristina, 22.

Extract 18

When I see on TV what those [Albanians] are doing in Kosovo, of course I hate them and I don't want to come into contact with them.

Ana, 18.

Treating others as the intolerant group, acts as an excuse for negative opinions whilst also shifting the blame for prejudice and ethnic tension onto others. This kind of rhetoric runs parallel to, and has echoes of, the general war discourse in Serbia, which seeks excuses for killings and fighting during the civil war by relativising the violence committed by Serbs and other ethnic groups. In these types of discourses, Serb violence is rationalised with suggestions that it is 'others' that started the war, or attacked the Serbs. Serb wartime violence is only ever

understood in this context, and war crimes are rarely spoken about or labeled as such (Obradović 2007). This 'conspiracy of silence' (Beč 2005) not only impedes any critical discussion of war crimes, but also of national others. Likewise, instead of facing up to their own negative stereotypes, which they consciously elaborated, young people in this study were intent on silencing these negative actions through the same relativising logic which circulates in Serbia's public discourses today.

Furthermore, the respondents in the above extracts were unable to see 'why they don't like us', because they see themselves only through positive, non-war related frameworks. Since they also admit to not knowing much about the war, it is hardly surprising that they do not understand why other nationalities could possibly harbour any negative constructs or resentment against them *even though* they were fully aware of the negative images of the Serbs present in all but Serb media. Continuing the trend of blame-shifting, most of the respondents knew someone whom they would accuse of intolerant behaviour or would label a nationalist 'in the negative sense' (Milan, 22). In other words, the respondents believe themselves to be tolerant, whilst the prejudiced, intolerant or nationalist was always 'someone else' - a friend, classmate or a parent. From this it is apparent that respondents are perfectly capable of recognising what they see as negative and intolerant behaviour in other people. However, because they recognise prejudice only as something extreme, as very visible acts of discrimination, they fail to classify their own constructs of others as prejudiced behaviour.

Extract 19

My brother [has] two Gypsies.... in his class, and what they're doing to them, it's such awful mistreatment... I try to play on his conscience about what they are doing to them... They're malicious to them and I ask him why they do it and he says 'because they smell.'

Milena, 18.

Extract 20

I have this friend – suddenly she became a patriot...just because she was in that kind of environment and when you're in that kind of situation they impose opinions on you...Now, suddenly, she's a Serb – a real patriot – she hates all other people, hates blacks, hates the Chinese...

Ivana, 18.

Extract 21

I have one friend, who is, in my opinion, a huge nationalist but in the wrong sense...when we go on holiday to another country he goes with Karadžić and Mladić^{xiv} t-shirts...I say, what if there is someone from Croatia on holiday [with us], he says, he can get lost...And when you ask him why, what's wrong with him, he says I don't know.

Milan, 22.

Whilst instances of behaviour elaborated in Extracts 19, 20 and 21 were identified and problematised as intolerant, at the same time, respondents appeared unaware of the many ways in which prejudice and intolerance can manifest themselves and continued to express their own prejudices, often subconsciously, through comments such as 'I don't mind them *but....*'.

External influences: Media, Parents and Peers

Several 'external influences' have a direct impact on respondents' constructions of others. Of particular significance are the media, parents and peers. In reflecting on this influence respondents were highly critical of parental and peer influence whilst, with the exception of the questioning of negative media representations of the Serbs as illustrated in Extract 13 above, media influence was normalised and naturalised.

With regard to parental influence, respondents showed elements of criticism and resistance; they believed, for example, that their

parents' opinions were 'imposed' on them. Whilst this element of resistance and criticism to parents' and friends' opinions was visible, so was the realisation that their parents' opinions still limited their actions.

Extract 22

My friend asked me, 'Would you go out with a Croat?' I said 'Why not?' But she said her parents would disown her. Just as hers would disown her because of a Croat, so mine would over a Muslim...It really isn't up to us, it's up to our parents, they impose their will on us, and it's because of them that we are not allowed to be friends [with ethnic others].

Milena, 18.

Similarly, the significance of peer influence is seen in the extract below. It seemed that, with the younger respondents, those around 18 years of age, peer influence was significant insofar as it caused them to make changes to their behaviour with regard to ethnic others. Milena related a story of her friend Sanja, a Serb who had a Roma boyfriend but had to pretend to another friend that she didn't know he was a Rom:

Extract 23

She said she didn't know - but you can tell the guy is a Gypsy. It was because of that friend. She didn't want to admit to her that she knew [he was Roma].

Milena, 18.

Media influence was not questioned and problematised to the same (if any) extent. Moreover, the media seemed to directly affect not only opinions but also the actions of young people towards others. When asked how she would react if she found out that one of her close friends was Muslim, one of the respondents noted that the situation would feel 'unpleasant' and, when asked to elaborate why, went on to say that:

Extract 24

It is probably because of everything that we see on TV and what our parents impose on us, probably because of that.

Ana, 18.

She continued:

Extract 25

When I see on TV, what [Albanians] are doing in Kosovo of course I hate them and I don't want to be in contact with them.

Ana, 18.

Interestingly, it transpired through the interviews that the older generations were also passive consumers and perpetrators of media representations, and often repeated the same stories of ethnic others as the media did, but their children did not seem to pick up on this.

This passivity towards media coverage can perhaps be best explained through considering the content of the Serbian media. Today, print and TV media in Serbia are not concerned with giving platforms to nationalist speakers, nor openly discriminating against any one ethnicity. However, at the same time there is a lack of criticism and reflexivity in the media regarding politics and current affairs. With the exception of the B92 TV station and the odd weekly such as *Vreme*, the media avoids any critical stance. This was clearly seen in the case of fugitive war criminals, for example, where the media have been happy to report on the hunt for Ratko Mladić 'as it happens' but, on the whole, avoid commenting on his previous behaviour.

Similarly, when the media report on the Kosovo situation, only reports of Albanian attacks on the Serbs make it into the public arena whilst Serbian attacks on Albanians are silenced. Therefore, a discourse is created – without any kind of discriminatory language being used – in which the Kosovo Albanians can only ever be the perpetrators and Serbs the victims. This is not to say that all generations of viewers are merely passively consuming these stereotypes –

rather, this version of events fits with their own knowledge of 'how things are' and their own local 'truths' (Mertus 1999: 7). In such local truths, especially where the Kosovo situation is concerned, the Serbs overwhelmingly understand themselves to be the victims (Anzulovic 1999:12-12; Mertus 1999). Thus, rather than provoking reactions for their negative portrayals of the Kosovo conflict, the media are much more likely to be supported for providing a historically and culturally 'accurate' way of understanding the situation.

Concluding remarks

Perhaps the most significant aspect of life in post-Yugoslavia and 'post-conflict' Belgrade is that young people are now, in most circumstances, cut off from their peers in the remainder of the former Yugoslavia and the rest of Europe. A significant number of those interviewed had never been to Bosnia and those who had visited Croatia had done so with parents before 1991. Cultural exchange is also limited. Therefore, not only do the respondents not know anyone of another ethnic background but most do not even have the opportunity to meet others through travel. Countries of the former Yugoslavia are now more inaccessible to Serbian youth than other Balkan countries as there is a belief amongst some respondents that Serbs are not welcome in these areas. One respondent had been told by Serb friends residing in Croatia:

Extract 26

They told me that if I want to go to...
Croatia...I won't come back alive
...My Dad told us that if they hear
you speaking Serbian they
immediately turn their backs on you.
If they see you are a Serb they
immediately distance themselves
from you.

Ivana, 18.

The kind of distance and prejudice about ethnic others outlined in this article is hardly surprising, considering that all of the respondents had grown up against the backdrop of past conflict but in a present characterised by information blackout and misrepresentation. However, despite the

prejudices, there is a strong desire amongst most of the respondents to visit other countries and take part in exchanges with ex-Yugoslav countries. Moreover, many realise that the negative views they have of ethnic others, and that others have of them, derive from politics, conflict and the general political mismanagement of the older generations. On a similar note, Aleks related a story of travelling to Sarajevo and feeling as though he had to speak in a Bosnian accent whilst walking around the city because:

Extract 27

I had to...you just don't know if someone on the street, if a Serb has killed someone from his family or not....

Aleks, 23.

Interview material collected indicates the willingness of young people to meet and interact with ethnic others, which also derives from the understanding that there are no essential or racial differences between them and their ethnic others. In this, young people demonstrate an ability to think beyond inherited patterns of prejudice – even if they sometimes (re)produce them. Their ability to understand that most inter-ethnic problems are caused by politics is combined with an inability to break away from perpetuating the stereotypes and prejudices with which they are surrounded because they have no other points of reference. Generally, whilst there is resentment over Kosovo, there is optimism in the discourses of my respondents, and willingness to move on and forget the recent conflicts; in this they differ from the discourses of the older generations in which these conflicts still feature heavily.

What underpins the respondents' narratives of selves and others is confusion; nowhere is this clearer than in the contradictions and conflicting opinions they voice and the experiences they recount. This confusion, it has been argued here, is a result of a number of factors affecting this generation of young Serbs. Of particular significance is the combination of, on the one hand, being exposed to a plethora of popular narratives in the context of media misinformation and information blackout regarding the wars and, on the other, the absence

of young people's own experience with national and ethnic others, itself a consequence of the conflicts of the 1990s.

Notes

¹ Of course Serbia is not strictly speaking a 'post-conflict' country. No military conflict actually took place on Serbian territory with the exception of that connected to the Kosovo conflict (even this was not in Serbia proper) and the NATO air strikes in 1999. However, it remains a country profoundly affected by conflict through refugee flows, the exacerbation of economic decline and the general misrule of Slobodan Milošević. Moreover, whilst Serbia was not involved in the Bosnian war *officially*, a (disputed) number of men volunteered for paramilitary service and a further group was mobilised for the 1991 Croatian war. The situation faced by the younger generations of Serbia is described by Žarko Trebješanin (2006: 46) thus:

The situation is especially difficult for the young, those born in the 1980s and growing up in the 1990s...at a time of poverty, crisis, wars, hyperinflation, sanctions. Today, they live in a state that is undefined, defeated, weak, poor and without hope that they will soon be able to have a stable job, decent salary, flat and the most basic living conditions.

² NGOs such as the Centar za Nenasilje (Centre for Non-violent Action), Women in Black, Centre for Cultural Decontamination, Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Humanitarian Law Centre, Helsinki Centre for Human Rights and others have run campaigns and actions to raise awareness and encourage dialogue. Likewise, actors such as the independent daily *Danas*, television network B92 and its publishing division, and the Documentation Centre for Wars 1991-1999 have striven hard to talk openly about the conflicts. However, their activities have failed to break through what Janja Beč (2005) calls 'the conspiracy of silence' surrounding present-day Belgrade.

³ That is to say, most of the respondents in the study had neither friends nor relatives who had fought in, or been forced to flee from, any of the wars. One respondent had a friend whose family had been affected directly by the Kosovo conflict

but this incident had occurred when the respondent was 11 years old and they were unable to recall the event.

⁴ See for example: Markovic & Mitrovic 2004; Mikić & Čičkarić, 2004; Volčić 2005; and Todorović & Bakir 2005.

⁵ See for example: Yerkes 2004; Volčić 2005; and Malesevic 2004.

⁶ For instance: Riordan et al 1995; Pilkington 1994; and Pilkington et al. 2002.

⁷ By this is meant 'Central Serbia', including Belgrade but not the two autonomous provinces within Serbia – Vojvodina and Kosovo – and the question was phrased in this way because of the very different ethnic composition of these two provinces. Below is a shortened version of the Population by Ethnic or National Group, Census 2002 report summary, taken from *Communication* No 295, Issue LII, December 2003 'Statistics of Population: Final Results of the Census 2002' issue published by Republic Statistical Office, Republic of Serbia.

	Republic of Serbia					
	Total		Central Serbia		AP Vojvodina	
	All	%	All	%	All	%
Total	7,498,001	100	5,446,009	100%	2,031,992	100
Serbs	6,212,838	82.86	4,891,031	89.48	1,321,807	65.05
Montenegrins	69,049	0.92	33,536	0.61	35,513	1.75
Yugoslavs	80,721	1.08	30,840	0.56	49,881	2.45
Albanians	61,647	0.82	59,952	1.1	1,695	0.08
Bosniaks	136,087	1.82	135,670	2.48	417	0.02
Muslims	19,503	0.26	15,869	0.29	3,634	0.18
Romanies	108,193	1.44	79,136	1.45	29,057	1.43
Croats	70,602	0.94	14,056	0.26	56,544	2.78
All others	739,361	9.86	185,919	3.77	533,444	26.26

⁸ All respondents' names are pseudonyms, with their ages given after the name. Prior to the interview, all respondents were explicitly told that they will remain anonymous. Although anonymity is widely practiced in social science and ethnography as 'good practice' in order to avoid recognition and visibility of respondents, most of the respondents in this study also expressed relief in remaining anonymous due to

the sensitive nature of the questions. Many admitted they would also feel 'embarrassed' if their friends came across responses attributed to them.

⁹ Shiptars is a title which derives from the Albanian word 'Shqip' – meaning 'Albanian' – but in Serbia it is often used in a derogatory manner to refer to Kosovo Albanians.

¹⁰ See the Bosniak National Council (Bošnjacko Nacionalno Vijeće, Državna Zajednica Srbija i Crna Gora) website, <http://www.bnv.org.yu/>.

¹¹ This issue is not explored in this paper but see Obradović (2006).

¹² It must be noted that the youth in question had travelled to Bosnia proper, rather than the Serb entity of Bosnia, Republika Srpska. The entity has a majority Serb population, whilst Bosnia proper ('the Federation') has a majority Muslim population, and both are due to forced displacement during and after the Bosnian war. The youth who had traveled to Bosnia proper were thus not subject to discourses of intolerance of Bosnian Serbs in the Republika Srpska part of Bosnia.

¹³ See, for example: Jansen 2000; Kuljić 2006; and Obradović 2006.

¹⁴ The respondent is referring to Radovan Karadžić, former president of the predominantly Serbian Republika Srpska part of Bosnia and Ratko Mladić, a general in his army during the 1992-1995 Bosnian war. Both men have been indicted for war crimes by the Hague Tribunal. Mladić remains fugitive, while Karadžić was arrested in Belgrade in July 2008. They are often appropriated as symbols of Serbian nationalism and 'heroism' by some movements and factions.

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