

# “Battle for Sarajevo” as “Metropolis”: Closure of the First Queer Sarajevo Festival according to Liberal Press<sup>1</sup>

*Sanja Kajinic, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary<sup>2</sup>*

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to look at the web of discourses created around the violent closure of the first Queer Sarajevo festival in 2009 in order to examine how the participants of the debate and the event negotiated not only the status of non-normative sexual identities in Bosnia and Herzegovina but the image of Sarajevo as the city, on the one hand, and on the meaning of “tradition,” on the other. The debates on what is the “true” Bosnian “tradition” and on its “belonging to Europe” are fiercely waged in both liberal and conservative camps. This paper will look particularly at liberal discourses around the QS festival to ask about the discursive implications of such media visibility for a small queer festival and for the Bosnian LGBT community. It will claim that, despite “good intentions,” the liberal discourses’ treatment of the QS festival as a litmus test for “Sarajevo as tolerant metropolis” has the effect of inadvertently rendering invisible the queer persons and queer art the festival was supposed to be about. The analysis will also focus on how women disappeared from the media accounts of the QS festival, while at the same time the festival itself was gendered as female.

The Queer Sarajevo festival might easily be the most passionately discussed and the shortest-lived festival in Bosnian history. The media attention started a month before the opening date in September 2008, with an article in the *Dnevni avaz* denouncing the festival, and spread into all forms of media and private conversations for months afterward, although the festival only lasted one night.

What follows is the analysis of the web of discourses created around the first Queer Sarajevo festival. It examines how the participants of the debate and the event negotiated not only the status of non-normative sexual identities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the image of Sarajevo and the meaning of “tradition” as well. The focus is particularly on the liberal discourse around the QS festival, and the implications of such media visibility for a small

queer festival and for the Bosnian LGBT community. I claim that, despite “good intentions,” the liberal media’s treatment of the QS festival as a litmus test for “Sarajevo as tolerant metropolis” had the opposite effect of inadvertently rendering queer persons and queer art invisible.<sup>3</sup>

The first Queer Sarajevo festival was supposed to take place September 24-28, 2008. However, after the opening of the exhibition and the festival at the *Academy of Fine Arts*, the festival participants were attacked by organized groups of football fans and religiously motivated protestors (so-called “vehabije” – “Wahhabis”). The opening gathered a crowd of 300 people: liberal intellectuals and activists mixed with the festival participants. The *Academy* was surrounded by the opponents, who were composed of, what was later termed, the “football-Wahhabi fascistic alliance” (Hemon 2008a). The police let the “alliance” advance up to the steps of the *Academy* and did not prevent the subsequent attacks around the city. The evening ended with eight festival participants needing hospital treatment. In a high-risk situation, and due to inadequate support from the police, the QS festival was cancelled the following day.

The build up to these events can be followed through heated discussions in the Bosnian media and on Internet forums, where the reasons for opposing or supporting the festival developed into a wide range of discourses. A part of Bosnia’s “Muslim community” linked to the conservative Wahhabis felt mobilized by the date of the festival during the month of the Muslim religious holiday of Ramadan, which was perceived as disrespectful. The organizers claimed that any date would be a wrong one for “queers” in Bosnia. They were doubly unfortunate in the timing of the festival since it opened a week before the local elections and was used by politicians of almost all parties in their campaigns. From a first glance at Bosnian media, it is clear that “queerness” in Bosnia does not generate opposition only from (a part of) the Muslim religious community. Bosnia is still a multi-ethnic and multi-religious, though politically and administratively divided, country.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the festival organizers were justified in pointing out that almost any other date would be problematic for some group in Bosnia, religious or political, since the public visibility of non-normative sexualities seems to elicit similar responses from all sides. However, in this particular case, the violence at the QS festival and the controversy that preceded it were articulated with arguments and imagery that particularly engaged the Muslim community in Bosnia,<sup>5</sup> and this is reflected in media representations.

The Queer Sarajevo festival has functioned as a juncture around which a considerable amount of political controversy was played out. The outstanding popularity of the QS

festival as the media “hot potato” on the Bosnian political scene (Izetbegovic 2008) can be easily observed through the quantity of articles Bosnian press devoted to it.<sup>6</sup> *Dani* is at the forefront with 60 articles (including feature articles, reactions from the readers, and a threatening letter to the journalists). The opposite pole, represented by the conservative *Dnevni Avaz* and *Saff* (newspaper of the Wahhabis), published 24 and 3 articles respectively, but had a considerable impact – by publishing the very first article on the QS festival they started the media hype and later influenced the forum discussions (and, arguably, actual events). The media’s middle ground is covered by other Bosnian newspapers that treated the QS festival as an important topic, in a manner similar to that of *Dani: Oslobođenje* published 33 articles (one was “The battle for Sarajevo is lost”); *Nezavisne novine* - 25; *Start* - 19 (among them: “Welcome to Teheran” and “Sarajevo is the heart of Wahhabism”), while *Slobodna Bosna* published 9 (the front page on the day after the attacks read: “Taliban Kristallnacht in the center of Sarajevo”).

The arguments circulated by all those newspapers (except, arguably, *Dnevni Avaz* and *Saff*) can be analyzed along the lines of the “battle for Sarajevo” discourse – the debate about the political and geo-historical position of Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina in relation to its assumed role as a bridge or a crossroad<sup>7</sup> in the context of the enlargement of the EU and Bosnian post-war, post-Dayton reality - seen in the light of the closure of the QS festival. I chose to focus on the articles published in *Dani*, convinced that they give a good overview of the construction of the liberal discourse in the Bosnian context, as well as a glimpse into the opposing direction through their representation of the conservative Islamist position.

### **The “Real Problems” and Anxieties over “Normality”**

How does one begin to interpret the cynicism of one among many self-critical statements by the *Dani* journalists: “Now that we have destroyed another cultural festival, we can sleep peacefully” (Stojic 2008b)? I argue that the Queer Sarajevo festival has functioned as a point of convergence in the public sphere for articulating fears and anxieties, as well as strengthening the utopian image crucial to contemporary Bosnian society, while diverting attention from its so-called “real problems” (40% unemployment, 25% of population living below poverty line, political inefficiency).<sup>8</sup> Media representations of the QS festival clarify how the specter of “queerness” in Bosnia makes visible the anxieties over the vulnerability of traditions while at the same time “queerness” ends up being loaded with the utopian expectations as the ultimate *other* in an allegedly historically tolerant context.

The *Dani* articles reflect an awareness of the risk of an oversimplified image of a conservative, “barbaric” Bosnia constructed (especially) through Western accounts of the attacks on the QS festival. The tone of self-conscious anxiety in the articles of *Dani*’s journalists is bound to the ways in which the Orientalist/Occidental representations of the Western press seem to position the Bosnian state as non-modern and non-European. Such “outside” judgments are related to how local progressive media, activists, and intellectuals negotiate the meanings of citizenship and identity in the context of their state and the city: each side is a self-critical outcry against a “destroyed” festival.

One of the defence mechanisms of *Dani* journalists consists of being even more sophisticated in the criticism of the local political context than any “outsider” could be. The intolerance toward queers is linked to the political and social problems of Bosnian society: what else can be expected in a society where “the only successful branch of industry” is that of patriotism, which works ever better “the bigger the social misery?” (Stojic 2008b). One of the examples of this Bosnian brand of “patriotism” is the manner in which, in Sarajevo, “the media and political elites used the religious groups to beat patriotically on the fragile backs of the city’s queer population, not caring at all that they are storming against their co-inhabitants of Sarajevo, fellow-citizens, children, writers and journalists” (Stojic 2008b).

According to the views expressed in *Dani*, Bosnia’s *real* problems are found in the so-called “normality” of Bosnian society, perceived as intertwined with hypocrisy and corruption. In contrast, the QS festival is seen as opening up a space of “personal freedom, shared by heterosexual and homosexual people, who have, for a long time now, felt sick of Bosnian normality” (Hemon 2008b). This “normality” nurtures the development of “general, tri-national fascism” in Bosnia. “Bosnian normality” is based on a clear hierarchy of belonging, which makes it possible to list the categories of citizens who will *come after* the “homosexuals:”

Next will be the turn of the journalists who write against it, and their names are known; then of women whose skirts are too short, who use too much make-up and do not cover their faces; then of punks and dandies and potheads and other junkies and exhibitionists; then of nonbelievers and heathens, and Roma and Jews, those of mixed origins, the diaspora and tourists, the members of other parties and fans of other football clubs; then the Muslims who like to drink and the owners of the cafes and clubs; then ordinary passers-by who accidentally cause offense (Hemon 2008a).

The anxieties over “normality” that feed the development of such hierarchies of citizenship are presented in *Dani* as being fed by the statements of various religious leaders. So, the mufti of Mostar “absolutely condemn[ed]” the Queer Sarajevo festival and its propagation of “degenerate ideas and that garbage imported from the West” that puts in danger the values of “free society (...) the healthy ideas and healthy life” of Bosnian normality (Dani 2008b). According to the ironic reading of *Dani*, the only “normality” and “unity” present in Bosnia are built around the intolerance toward queerness: “for the first time in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, people’s tribunes are united, showing that homophobia is the only platform around which national leaders of different origins have established a strong consensus” (Dani 2008b).

### **Inventing the Tradition of Heterosexuality**

What is meant by “tradition” in the discursive “battle for Sarajevo?” For the liberals, the “tradition” of Sarajevo lies in its proud history of “tolerance of differences,” while the defeat in this “battle” consists in becoming conscious that in the case of the QS festival, the “traditionally tolerant spirit of Sarajevo is leaning toward racism” (Stojic 2008a). The opponents of a queer festival in Bosnia, during Ramadan or at all, draw upon an understanding of “tradition” that sees the religious practices and citizenship as profoundly endangered by the visibility of “queerness.”

The tension in these two approaches to “tradition” is located in their attitude toward “modernity.” Both explicitly link the discourse of human rights and “queerness” to “Europeanness” and modernity, but with very different results. While liberals had hoped that the QS festival would have proven the tolerance and secularism of Bosnia, bringing the country symbolically closer to the EU, the majority of Bosnians feel anxious about both events. Furthermore, the events around the QS festival have made visible the practical negotiation of “tradition” in the Bosnian context by the Wahhabis, themselves a relatively new, post-war phenomenon. Namely, the project of Wahhabis to introduce authentic Islam to Bosnia dates back to the recent war and is connected to the presence of foreign Islamic fighters in Bosnia and humanitarian aid from Islamic countries to Bosnian Muslims. A community that was created out of these connections remained with an uneasy task in post-war Bosnia to “invent” the tradition they aspired to.

The paradox of this situation is that the “traditional” Muslims of Bosnia are usually (self)represented as “modern” and oriented more toward the cultural and customary aspects

of their religion. The Wahhabis represent the *new* Bosnian Muslims, and often they find themselves the topic of controversy. For example, they have been scrutinized by the media over their possible connections with terrorism. Although it is usual for this “imported Islam” to be labeled as “Wahhabi Islam” and presented in opposition to a “supposedly heterodox and tolerant ‘local Islam,’ a better term for it would be ‘neo-Salafism’” (Bougarel 2005:18)<sup>9</sup>. “Neo-Salafism” refers to the new “jihadist” and militant movements that advocate the return to the tradition not to innovate but to “impose its formal and rigorous imitation” (2005:10). Although many Islamic religious institutions are funded by Muslim countries, the neo-Salafists do not control them. On the contrary, they are regarded with suspicion by the majority of the Bosnian Muslim population since “the religious practices they promote are regarded as retrograde and contrary to local tradition” (2005:19). The Islamic community (Islamska zajednica - IZ) of Bosnia has had a conflicted relationship with the neo-Salafists: from banning their organizations and reserving the label “Islamist” only for IZ official use, to developing a co-existence with the neo-Salafists who themselves had been forced to change somewhat their demands and image after the events of September 11, 2001 (2005:21). However, seen from the liberal shore, the distinctions between differently positioned factions of the religious Bosniac community become irrelevant. In this view, they are discredited by their common usage of the concept of “tradition” to deny the right of existence to “homosexuals” in Bosnia, and consequently, by their complicity in the attacks on the festival. According to *Dani*, the muftis’ calls for violence and the silence of the Bosnian Reis functioned as “approval from the top,” without which there would not have been such mobilization among some believers (Dani 2008b).

According to the liberal interpretations in *Dani*, the tacit or explicit approval of intolerance and violence from the “top” of the religious and political hierarchy has enabled its marginalized “bottom” to mobilize and execute the attacks. In this view, the new “traditionalists” – the “Wahabbis” – do not represent the extremist views foreign to “tolerant” Bosnian society. On the contrary, the Wahabbis, together with the football hooligans, have only accomplished the dirty work, cheered on by the mainstream praises of “Bosnian normality.” According to *Dani*, the spectacular closure of the QS festival thus continues the politics of “giving blood and games to the crowds, so that the unholy political-mafia-religious trinity can continue getting rich” (Dani 2008a).

The discourse that establishes the “tradition” of conservative Bosnia as the *authentic* Bosnia is countered by parallel liberal discourse of the “tradition” of secular, multi-cultural Bosnia. With this *Dani* published *Organization Q*’s reaction to the accusations of

disrespecting Ramadan by organizing the QS festival at the same time. The organizers explained that they had chosen the date of the festival a year in advance but also noted that Bosnia is “a secular country where different events and activities do not have to be harmonized with different religious calendars” (Organization Q 2008). This would, however, be proven wrong by the events that occurred at the opening of the festival. Furthermore, it seems that this will constitute a historical precedent since the popular *Sarajevo Film Festival* has, after the closure of the QS festival, announced that it would change the already planned date of its opening due to convergence with a religious holiday.

To better understand the context in which a world-renowned film festival (*Sarajevo Film Festival*) suddenly feels obliged to consult a religious calendar, it helps to look at the articulations of the *tradition of heterosexuality* view. An example, printed by *Dani*, can be found in the threatening letter directed at the journalists of *Dani* (and the journalists of several other Bosnian newspapers). The letter, signed as the “Wreath of the Sarajevo veterans,” adopts a menacing tone toward journalists who have “gone too far” by supporting the QS festival. It establishes an interesting connection between the discourses of Bosnia as a victimized country and the Western threat of queerness.

According to the letter’s authors, the sin of *Dani*’s journalists is that they “support the biggest evil of the modern age;” they consider such “immorality (...) the test of tolerance in our exhausted state;” they “spread and protect this ‘Western poison’ by describing it as multicultural expansion;” and above all, they think that “the only way for Bosnia and Herzegovina to enter the European Union is ‘from behind’” (War veterans of Sarajevo 2008). It is possible to link the threats of the “war veterans” with the motivation of the attacks by Wahhabis and the football hooligans on the evening of the QS festival opening. However, the mode in which the letter represents, for example, the concepts of freedom, tolerance, a healthy society and loyalty to the nation, warrant further attention. In order to begin engaging both with the “war veterans” rhetoric and with its opposite – that of the journalists of *Dani*, it is useful to turn to consider the workings of Occidentalism and its links to the creation of “tradition.”

For most theorists, Occidentalism is not the opposite of Orientalism but the “condition of its possibility, its dark side,” and as such, it represents a “constitutive relationship between Western representations of cultural difference and worldwide Western dominance” (Coronil 1996:56-57). The links of Occidentalism to global imperialism can be exposed by showing how the self-representations of the First World are partly constructed by presenting the *other* of the “international community as disordered, chaotic, tribal, primitive, pre-capitalist,

violent, exclusionary and child-like” (Orford 2003:43). This type of Occidentalism builds a favorable image of the (First World) self on the basis of the constitutive contrast to the *backward* other. It is this type of Occidentalism that the *Dani* journalists seek to counter through discursive strategies that permit some room to maneuver or resist.

Another possibility is to link the discourses around “tradition” in Bosnian context with the working of “colonialist representations” that idealize the West as the space of change and progress as opposed to Third world countries as the space “without history,” ruled by the “unitary complex called ‘their Traditions/Religions/Cultures’” (Narayan 1997:43-49). It is noteworthy that many (Third world) religious fundamentalist representations “mirror” those problematic representations in defining their societies as based on “unchanging traditions” (1997:52). The recycling of the colonial discourses is now put to a different use by the religious fundamentalists who employ them to “construct and justify nationalist visions that seek to confine women to ‘traditional roles’ in the name of religious values and cultural preservation” (p. 52). Similar discourses that invent the “unchanging traditions” are used to police traditional sexual and gender behavior in Bosnia. They could be analyzed by following the “politics of tradition formation” that emerges through the historical contextualization of the construction of “traditional practices” (1997:59). Narayan recommends that a feminist analysis of “all supposedly longstanding” traditions should “check (their) actual vintage” and inquire how “the regional traditions of particular groups acquire the status of ‘national traditions’” (Narayan 1997:75).

In checking the “vintage” of the conservative religious “tradition” in Bosnia, it is important to notice that, although the “authoritarian re-Islamisation policies” of the SDA party and the Islamic community of Bosnia have been dominant in the education and in the military, all attempts to impose them in the private sphere, such as the fatwa on the drinking of alcohol and the campaign against Santa Claus and against mixed marriages, have been “strongly resisted by the Bosnian population” (Bougarel 2005:15).

The specificity of the Bosnian situation is the rather “low level” of religiosity of the Muslim population as the whole, which is at odds with the politicization of the elite so that “a deeply secularised Muslim population has brought a tiny minority of pan-Islamist activists to power” (2005:16). Such a political situation might explain the openness of the Bosnian media space to earnest debates on the real “vintage” and “nature” of Bosnian “tradition” in light of cultural phenomena such as the QS festival.

## **What Kind of City is Sarajevo? From Mahala to Metropolis**

The heart of the liberal media discussion on the QS festival seems to be about the city of Sarajevo much more than the festival itself. The dilemma faced by the participants of this debate consists of presenting Sarajevo either as *mahala* (a Turkish/Bosnian term for “neighborhood,” in this case indicating provincialism) or as *metropolis*. Symbolic conceptualizations of Sarajevo as either *mahala* or *metropolis* reflect two extreme poles discernable in *Dani* articles. The “Sarajevo as mahala” approach places the city in the “East,” associating it with backwardness and the need to catch-up. The “Sarajevo as metropolis” view tends to romanticize the city as multi-cultural urban space in the *heart* of Europe.

The liberal media discourse posited the QS festival as a “test” of the true nature of the Bosnian capital, and, since Sarajevo failed – there is proof of its cultural backwardness (somewhat eased by the hopeful evocations of the city’s history of tolerance). This testing reveals the extent to which both terms, as used in liberal discourse, are value-laden: mahala as undesirable provinciality; metropolis as a utopian project and a proof of modernity.

The liberal discourses of the intellectuals of East and Central Europe seem to be characterized by a paradoxical stance of imagining “Europe,” specifically Western Europe, as the place of “goodness” – a “topos of west European moral superiority” and “an object to be emulated” (Böröcz 2006:112). In this attitude there is a double move for opposing racism (nationalism, homophobia) by calling upon Western Europe, while actively forgetting the participation of this very location in the construction of these discriminatory discourses. Through usage of the formula “Europe equals goodness” the liberal intellectuals also construct their own position as “simultaneously ‘white,’ European, marginal, left-liberal, and post-state-socialist” (2006:112). In the Bosnian context, possible additional markers of this discourse could also be: secular, anti-fascist, and anti-nationalist.

Such strategies of intellectual distancing from the local context could be traced to the historical attitude of the Muslim intellectual elite from the Balkans, who, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tried to break their ties with the Ottoman Empire and create a “local Islam” that would be “compatible with Western modernity” (Bougarel 2005:11). It is significant that during the period of communism, the Cold War, and the nationalist struggles, the political and cultural elites continued “implicitly to value Western modernity” (2005:11).

In *Dani* articles, both metaphors for Sarajevo were evoked. There seems to be no consensus: most representations attempt to place the city on a spectrum between two poles of

provincialism and global modernity. Some authors see the im/possibility of both: “Sarajevo is not (and has never been) *the* utopian City where everything is great and wonderful” nor is it the “paradigm of the closed, backward, boring *kasaba*”<sup>10</sup> (Bazdulj 2008b).

After the closure of the QS festival, *Dani* articles communicated mostly the disappointment through the “Sarajevo as a failed metropolis” commentary. However, they maintain the desirability of tolerance as a utopian project, although they cannot find concrete examples in the current Bosnian context. This failed tolerance in Bosnia contrasts uneasily with the imagined tolerance of the European Union. This tension could be analyzed in regards to the centrality of Europe as the “sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories” that positions the Third (and I would add, the Second world) on the margins, characterized by “a lack, an absence, an incompleteness (...) ‘inadequacy’” (Chakrabarty 1992:1-5).

The strategy of “provincializing Europe” proposed by Chakrabarty would counter this production of “Europe” as a “hyperreal ‘Europe’ (...) constructed by the tales that both imperialism and nationalism have told the colonized” (1992:18). This project would also reveal the role that “third-world nationalisms, as modernizing ideologies par excellence,” have had in this process of “equating a certain version of Europe with ‘modernity’” (1992:21). “Provincializing Europe” in the Bosnian context would start with destabilizing the much discussed binary between local provincialism and “European” modernity. Next, the debate could move on from being anchored in the impasse of deciding the “nature” of Sarajevo to engaging with queerness in Bosnia and with cultural implications of the QS festival.

### **The Queer Sarajevo Festival according to *Dani***

*Dani* is a weekly magazine that presents a liberal standpoint in the Bosnian media context. It was founded in 1992 and has the circulation of 25,000 copies per week.<sup>11</sup> It covers politics in Bosnia, devoting much critical attention to the activities of the religious leaders. It also has the reputation of being “one of the few independent journals in the country [that is] strongly critical of the government” (Divertito and Leone 2004:232). According to the journal itself, they have for a long time been “the magazine with the biggest circulation and the most read magazine in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the most esteemed and the most cited newspaper abroad” (Pecanin 2008a). The magazine is forced to be printed in Croatia since the “owner of *Avaz*, a journal supportive of the government, controls the printing (of journals in Bosnia) and has imposed unrealistically high prices”

(Divertito and Leone 2004:232). I have chosen to focus on the articles from *Dani* for several reasons: first, it is the journal with the highest number of articles covering the QS festival (60 articles), and second, it can be taken as representative of the liberal views on this subject. Since it also published the opinions and reaction letters of the opponents of the festival, it offers a glimpse of the opposite side and the way that liberal media discourses dealt with it.

The discussions about the closure of the QS festival in *Dani* follow several routes. The journalists were very critical of the political situation in Bosnia and invoke human rights standards for measuring it. Thus, “even clumsy, fake, loose democracies like this one still have, at least rhetorically” to give support and protection to its citizens, including sexual minorities (Hemon 2008b). Furthermore, *Dani* published the interview with one of the only public figures who supported the festival - Damir Arnaut, councilor to the president. Arnaut compares the homophobia of public discourse generated around the festival with Islamophobia “to which we are so sensitive here,” in that both constitute separate subgroups of xenophobia as “fear of the other and different,” and he links the current homophobia to the electoral campaign (Becirbasic 2008b).

*Dani* also published an interview with Danis Tanovic, the Oscar-winning director of *No Man's Land*, who founded *Naša stranka (Our party)* six months before the local elections on October 5, 2008, as a multi-ethnic alternative to the perceived corruption and nationalism of the existing parties. He was also one of the few politicians to criticize the attacks on the QS festival. He presupposed the complicity of the ruling party in the closing of the festival but expressed his surprise at the lack of reaction from the “civic parties” (Pecanin 2008c). The critical tone of *Dani* can be read in a whole series of articles that exhibit what can be termed “overdoing” self-criticism to counter the Orientalist gaze. The attacks on the festival participants have been termed the “lynching of the visitors of the Queer Festivals, orchestrated by the politicians-fascists and the media close to them” (Bacanovic 2008). One columnist proposed *Primitivija* as the new name for Bosnia, earned by the alleged hypocritical and discriminatory way the country confronts difference: not through learning from it but by using violence and exclusion (Cenic 2008).

The closure of the QS festival was presented as a blow to the image of Sarajevo as “the city that even now boasts about its openness and multi-ethnicity” (2008). However, it is also a challenge: “Why doesn't Sarajevo prove that it's really trying to be an open city and the capital of everybody in the Bosnian state?” (2008). The question of ‘whose capital is Sarajevo’ was notoriously posed by the Serbian Prime-minister Dodik, according to whom Sarajevo is the capital of the Bosniacs. The *Dani* columnist situated the QS festival as the

test that would prove or disprove the status of Sarajevo as exclusively the city of Bosniacs, the “Islamic city,” and contrasts it to “Paris, London and Berlin, or any other European city” that would never suppress a festival organized by “those who ask for the understanding of difference” (Cenic 2008).

Occasionally there was an article in *Dani* that critiqued the liberal discourse. An especially critical article called to order “those who want to present themselves as advanced, inclusive, progressive and/or liberal” for their arrogant reading of Bosnian political reality and the role of the “gay movement” in it (Lovrenovic 2008). This, however, did not start a debate in the liberal press about the assumptions that inform the liberal discourse in relation to the geo-historical position of Bosnia or to the LGBT movement. The debate remained directed toward the “outside” opponents.

*Dani* also published numerous articles that presented the views of the festival’s organizers and the supportive reactions of the citizens. One article described the hopes of the festival’s organizers, who had put it together against many odds but now “wonder if they had too ambitiously believed that Sarajevo is the kind of city that would like to present itself as: multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-tolerant” (Becirbasic 2008c).

*Dani* becomes the forum for voicing opposing opinions through the practice of publishing reaction letters that represent conservative homophobic views. An imam from Sarajevo wrote a reaction letter to *Dani* with a confusing title: “Queer fusion-ing,” but soon it became clear that this “fusion” was a term expressing his horror of non-normative sexuality. He would like to know whether:

all those whole-hearted, loud supporters of the Queer festival would continue to be so impassioned in their support if they would see their own children in the parade of homosexual pairs, in the odious “fusion” of same-sex creatures marching down the streets of the public space and (mis)using the public institutions and threatening our (still) pure space and consciousness (Velic 2008).

Would they support an “equally unnatural festival,” for example, a festival of pedophiles, he wonders? His argument is a curious mix of under- and overvaluing the existence of queer people in Bosnian society. He calls the queers of Sarajevo “ten young men” and proposes the journalists of *Dani* to ask a “much more logical question” of why should those “ten young men upset the city of half a million people?” (Velic 2008).

This imam's conclusion is that the lobbying of *Dani* for tolerance (or for the "flood of attacks on values and sanctities") is hypocritical since it is on "glass legs," i.e. exhibiting a kind of false consciousness. If answering honestly, he states, the journalists would have to admit that they believe in religious and family values. If honest, they would have to confront "some questions and answers that would clarify things: would you, personally, be in the parade or any other manifestation of these queers?! Would you be in the 'fusion?'" (2008).

One reaction letter reminds the imam that the "Bosnian Muslims" are victimized not by the queer people but by the corrupted politicians and complicit religious leaders who spread the "fear and hatred of the other" (Jusic 2008). The imam is warned against fusing religion and politics that are not appropriate to a "modern democratic" state (2008). Another *Dani* reader reacting to the imam's letter is quick to note: "I am not a homosexual so I will not participate," but suggests that the imam and the opponents of the festival should – to heal from ignorance (Bujic 2008).

Although *Dani* does publish the reactions and interviews presenting opinions opposed to those of their journalists and their readers, this plurality becomes a strategy for confirming the shared ground of the *Dani* readership. For example, *Dani* published a transcription of a television interview with Bakir Izetbegovic, one of the most powerful politicians in Bosnia, president of the SDA party and leader of the Bosnian delegation at the Council of Europe. Izetbegovic explains how he as "a really big believer cannot look differently at that (...their sexual disorientation...) than God does (...) That thing should not be popularised, shown as harmless. That thing spreads, if you let it. It should be done within four walls" (Izetbegovic 2008).

The journalist went on to mention that the Council of Europe in the approved *Resolution on Bosnia and Herzegovina* has reprimanded Bosnia for the attacks on the participants of QS festival. Thus he sets up the opposition between the paternalistically tolerant EU and the compromised local politicians and authority figures. The examples of the local homophobic opinion-makers are two extreme nationalist Serbian politicians who expressed admiration for the Wahhabis execution of the "Sarajevo night of terror," and of the Bosnian Croat archbishop, Vinko Puljic. Puljic stated that it was "unnecessary to give too much attention to such a festival. That should have been resolved by the security forces instead of burdening the whole public by such reality (i.e. homosexuality)" (Pecanin 2008b). The *Dani* editor proposed that the next time the archbishop is trying to alert the public "from Vatican to Washington" that a Catholic has been attacked in Sarajevo, he should be reminded of his own words: the incident should be taken care of by the security forces and he should

not bother the rest of the society with it. Especially since, writes this columnist, “really what is the difference between an aggressive ‘Wahhabi’ who hates ‘faggots’ and an aggressive ‘Wahhabi’ who hates Catholics?” (2008b).

In an issue immediately after the violent festival closure, *Dani* reported the statements of “politicians, imams, doctors and some media who had attacked the QS festival during the month before its opening, and thus “given the green light” to the actual attackers – “members of the Salafi order and local hooligans” (Dani 2008b). The title of the article clearly expresses the journal’s attitude: “You are guilty as well!” In a similar vein, the “Judgement day” section of *Dani* reported problematic statements from the current public discourse and other media. One of these “gems” set up a metaphor of “Europeanness” as gayness in the Bosnian context: the festival was, again, turned into a “gay parade, in the centre of Sarajevo” and called a “cultural happening, a visa to EU” (Borojevic 2008).

Almost the only article that discusses the QS festival as also an art event reported an ironic statement by one festival organiser that “the programme of the festival will include the court cases,” and talks about the meeting of the journalists at a secret location with three artists who were supposed to perform or present their work at the festival (Ivo Dimcev, John Greyson, and Viva la Diva) (Durkalic 2008). This article presented the QS festival as a “baptism in fire” that provided the LGBT community with realistic information on its status (which is usually the function of Prides in this region), in opposition to the myth of a tolerant Sarajevo (2008).

The critical tone of the *Dani* articles draws attention also to the problematic cultural politics exposed by the treatment of the festival. The QS festival “crystallized the horror of local conservatism,” exposing the homophobia of cultural institutions when one cultural venue after another cancelled or refused to rent the space to the festival, due to, among other things, “being closed to the public or overbooked or reconstructing the ventilation and air-conditioning system” (Becirbasic 2008a). The *Academy of Fine Arts* was the only cultural space that consented to host the QS exhibition and thus “justified what it is – the space for promoting arts and culture, the role *par excellence* of which is to fight the ideology of negating the other and the practices of exclusion. In this way, Sarajevo showed what, unfortunately, it really is: the city of *kafana* culture of living (...) Somebody said metropolis?” (2008a).

## **The Gender of the Queer Sarajevo Festival Participants: Ten Homosexual Men Disturbing the City**

When looking at media representations (both liberal and conservative) of the QS festival, it is a challenge to understand the gender (and number) of queer persons in Bosnia. Why is “queerness” discussed only as “homosexuality?” Why are only men “queer?” How does a queer culture and arts festival consistently turn into a “gay parade?” Why are there only “ten young men” or at best, in liberal press, also “four young women,” there to participate?

It might be useful to look at representational practices that produced the particular over-visibility of the QS festival while simultaneously negating the existence of its audience. Sarkar analyzed how the invisibility of the Muslim women and their absence from the discourse is related to the construction of the category of the ideal “Indian woman” as upper/middle class Hindu, and the creation of the category “Muslim” in terms of maleness, backwardness and violence in nineteenth century Bengal (Sarkar 2008). Besides tracing the discursive practices that engaged in the construction of this in/visibility, she also attempted to “systematically relate the ‘exclusions/- exploitation’ experienced by one group (of women) to the selective ‘inclusions/privileges’ of another” (2008:56).

When analyzing the media representations of the QS festival, it is impossible to overlook the bias around the gender of queers in Bosnia. One article after another (both in *Dani*, and in other newspapers) talks about “homosexuals,” “faggots” and “gays.” According to one imam from Sarajevo, the whole QS festival is about “ten young men” upsetting the whole city (Velic 2008). Through such representation, the “queers” in Bosnia are gendered as male, while lesbians (as well as bisexuals and transgender persons) become invisible. Such erasure manages to accomplish an impressive feat: it manages to disregard the fact that the festival was organized by women, and that women were among the artists and the participants at the opening of the QS festival. Four women who organized the QS festival have been constantly threatened (through e-mails, text messages, even video clips). However, their visibility as lesbians or queer women becomes completely subsumed to the only role given to them by the press – that of the “organizers.” A sympathetic journalist calls them “four girls from Organization Q” who started planning the festival with minimal support and budget (Becirbasic 2008c). One other article from *Dani* empathizes with the pressure they have been under and the threats they have received: “they have been through hell” and “the witch hunt started in Sarajevo” against them. It also talks about the clip on the

YouTube that was “an open death threat” to the president of Organization Q, which showed a knife cutting off the head of the figure from the official poster of the festival (Durkalic 2008). Another journalist mentions the same hate message clip that showed how “the gentle and fragile (...) president of Organization Q is decapitated with a knife” (Stojic 2008b).

Here it is important to notice how this representation of feminine “fragility” enables the liberal journalist’s empathy, but at the same time, functions to hide its “queerness.” How is it possible that a woman received death threats in contemporary Bosnia because of her sexual orientation? Why is female queerness so dangerous? If she was not represented as “gentle and fragile,” but in a manner more threatening to the prevalent gender mores, would she be equally deserving of liberal sympathy? These are some of the questions not covered by the liberal media representations.

Another gender aspect related to the QS festival concerns the construction of a particular type of Bosnian (Muslim) masculinity. This new Bosnian masculinity concerns mostly the “Wahhabis,” but also the football hooligans who are curiously absent from media representations, though active in the events themselves. This new image of a Bosnian Muslim man, which emerged through the events and debates around the QS festival, is itself ambiguous and unstable. He is virile in being ready to take action against the threat to the values of “normality,” but weak in being exposed as prone to paranoia and easily manipulated. He is the hybrid of a religious extremist and a hooligan, defending the “tradition” through untraditional means: computer hacking and attacking exhibition-goers. On another level, it is also necessary to look at how gender as a symbolic marker (Scott 1986) functioned in relation to the QS festival. It is impossible to overlook the wave of anxieties that a festival “exhibition” of “queer” and LGBT identities generated in Bosnia – in terms of its implications for the gender hierarchies around which much of Bosnian citizenship, ethnic and national belonging, is structured. One *Dani* article portrays the whole festival as a sensitive, victimized body, over whose “young, fragile back” the battle of two styles of democracy is fought: the battle between “fascistoid ethno-democracy” and the utopian democratic project based on individual rights (Hemon 2008b). This image of QS festival is not only particularly portrayed as vulnerable but is also connected to youth, so that marginalization associated with youth and feminine vulnerability becomes one of the reasons for supporting “these girls and boys who are heroically organizing [the festival]” (Hemon 2008b).

Opposed to the fragile alternative body are the virile, also youthful, fascist bodies of the attackers. The same columnist goes as far as to call them “the new generation of killers”

and situates their genealogy in the recent Bosnian history: “Having inherited the traumas of their parents and their parents’ generation, they grew up in the senselessness of Daytonian Bosnia and Herzegovina, practicing violence at the tribunals of football stadiums, under the light of torches, on the streets and on the trams, ready to knife or shoot anybody who frowns at them” (Hemon 2008a).

The author posits this paranoid violent body as a threat to the rest of society by directly addressing “you reader” – you who hope to avoid danger in public spaces by engaging in obviously heterosexual behavior or in good citizenship: “And you reader, if you think that they will spare you because you are deep in heterosexual embrace on Wilson street or because you are staying out of all trouble since you have two small children, you are very wrong” (Hemon 2008a).

## **Conclusions**

The analysis of (liberal) discourse in *Dani* has brought out loaded terms of the debate around the Queer Sarajevo festival in Bosnian media. The *true* version of Bosnian “tradition” and its “belonging to Europe” continues to be fiercely contested in both liberal and conservative camps. This analysis was undertaken with an aim to look at the local negotiations of “nonimperial geohistorical categories” (Coronil 1996) and practices—or lack thereof—of “provincializing Europe” (Chakrabarty 2000). It pointed out the ambiguous relation of *Dani* journalists toward the project of renegotiating geopolitical categories of Bosnia’s place in Europe.

Although *Dani* provided a much-needed forum for voicing opinions supportive of the festival and expressions of difference in Bosnia, its strategies of discussing queerness in Bosnia have had questionable effects. Instead of “provincializing” Europe by questioning it as a source of “moral goodness,” these representations reinforce the “provincialization” of Bosnia as the space of problematic European periphery. While the Occidental interpretation positioned Bosnia at the margins of Europe (this time for its homophobia), liberal journalists and intellectuals tried to find a way out. A prevalent strategy consisted of positioning oneself on the side of “European values” of tolerance and respect for human rights, and away from the homophobic violence of “Bosnian normality.”

The debates in *Dani* offer a severe criticism of the conservative version of “Bosnian normality,” presenting it as a xenophobic and fascist discourse that hides the “real problems” of Bosnian society, which concern economic and political hardship and cultural censorship.

One interesting rhetorical move is comparing homophobia to Islamophobia and setting up a parallel between discrimination based on sexual orientation and discrimination based on ethnic belonging.

Another strategy much used by *Dani* journalists is their overuse of self-criticism in order to counter (the anxiety of) Orientalism. A related strategy is presenting the opponents of the QS festival (and of *Dani*) as ignorant and hypocritical (by publishing their own words, but putting them in a “foreign” context), while on the other hand functioning as a space for liberal public opinion to showcase its tolerance. *Dani* provides space for opposing opinions but frames it in a way that discredits them and reaffirms the boundaries of liberal readership. The *Dani* articles here provide an insight into the “battle for Sarajevo” – a discursive struggle on the meaning of “tradition” in Sarajevo and Bosnia fought between the “tradition” of tolerant multi-culturalism and the “tradition” of conservative, heterosexist ethno-nationalism. This battle sets the stage for the dilemma typical of liberal media representations: the debate on the “true nature” of Sarajevo. The binary opposition between provincialism (“Sarajevo as mahala”) and European modernity (“Sarajevo as metropolis”) constructed through liberal discourse might be destabilized through the project of “provincializing Europe.”

Finally, it is important to notice how women disappeared from the media accounts of the QS festival, while at the same time the festival itself was portrayed as female. The “queers” of Bosnia were consistently represented as male and “homosexual.” Thus the potential of the term “queer” to upset the identity categories did not play out in the media “battle” around QS festival. The festival itself became imagined as “fragile” and in need of protection from the hostile masculinity of the attackers.

Paradoxically, almost any discussion of the art aspect of the festival was lost in the process. The content of the exhibition that was opened on the first night, the presence of several queer artists in Sarajevo despite the closure of the festival, the motivations of *Organization Q* for organizing a queer art festival instead of a “gay parade” – this all got sidelined in the media’s representations. The disturbing balance of the QS festival’s media hype is that the over-visibility of the festival as a media topic contributed to rendering queer persons and queer art in Bosnia invisible.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Zachary Kelly for his editorial assistance with this article.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sanja Kajinic is a PhD student in the Gender Studies department at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. She wrote her MA at CEU Gender Studies on the experiences and effects of the violent attacks on the first Belgrade Pride in 2001 and the first Zagreb Pride in 2002. In 2007 she was a Marie Curie fellow at the Women's Studies Centre, University of Lodz, Poland. Her research interests revolve around feminist visual art criticism and social movements theory.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, individual articles within this debate gave voice and visibility to queer persons in Bosnia, but my concern is with the general tendency of the liberal discourse. The conservative discourse accomplishes the same feat of objectifying (and much more) through different strategies.

<sup>4</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina, after the Dayton Agreement, is divided into two entities: Republika Srpska and Bosniac-Croat Federation, and 1 district (Brcko district). It is under international supervision through the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the presence of EUFOR troops. The religions in Bosnia are: Muslims 40%, Orthodox Christians 31%, Roman Catholics 15 %, others 14 %. See: <http://www.nationmaster.com/country/bk-bosnia-and-herzegovina>.

<sup>5</sup> Bosnia is a home to 2,020,000 Bosniacs (Bosnian Muslims) who make up 46% of population, and are the majority (75%) in Bosniac-Croat federation (Bougarel 2005:7).

<sup>6</sup> I collected the articles about QSF from 7 Bosnian newspapers (Dani, Dnevni Avaz, Saff, Oslobodjenje, Nezavisne novine, Start, Slobodna Bosna) covering the period of almost 5 months, from the first article in August 22nd 2008, a month before the beginning of the QSF, until January 15th 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Symbolic representations of Bosnia as a multicultural bridge or crossroads between East and West abound both historically and in current discourses (Helms 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina is in the 14<sup>th</sup> place among the countries of the world with the highest unemployment rate (40%, the same as Swaziland, Afghanistan and Kenya). See: [http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/lab\\_une\\_rat-labor-unemployment-rate](http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/lab_une_rat-labor-unemployment-rate). It ranked 84th among the countries with highest rate of population living below the poverty line, see: [http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/eco\\_pop\\_bel\\_pov\\_lin-economy-population-below-poverty-line](http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/eco_pop_bel_pov_lin-economy-population-below-poverty-line). It is found closer to the bottom of the list of world countries according to the level of corruption (94<sup>th</sup> of 160 countries, starting from less to more corrupted), see: [http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/gov\\_cor-government-corruption](http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/gov_cor-government-corruption).

<sup>9</sup> "Wahhabism" refers to a neo-fundamentalist 18<sup>th</sup> century movement opposed to religious innovation that became the religious doctrine of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. "Salafism" was a 19<sup>th</sup> century school of thought advocating the return to the religion of "pious ancestors" to make possible new forms of interpretation (Bougarel 2005:10).

<sup>10</sup> *Kasaba* is a Turkish/Bosnian word for a small village, here equivalent of *mahala*.

<sup>11</sup> Since each copy of the magazine is read by an average of 4.6 persons, the magazine claims that its readership reaches 100,000 people. See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BH\\_Dani](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BH_Dani).

## References Cited

- Bacanovic, Vuk. 2008. "Graffiti Antifascism (Zidni Antifasizam)." *Dani*, October 10.
- Bazdulj, Muharem. 2008. "Praise to Indifference: About Tolerance (Pohvala Ravnodusnosti: O Toleranciji)." *Dani*, September 19.
- Becirbasic, Belma. 2008a. "Cultural Misery of Sarajevo: Nobody Wants Queer Festival (Kulturna Bijeda Sarajeva: Niko ne zeli Queer Festival)." *Dani*, October 17.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008b. "Politicians' Homophobic Statements are Anti-Constitutional (Homofobicnim izjavama politicari krse Ustav)." *Dani*, September 19.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008c. "Proud to be a Faggot (Peder sam i nije me sram)." *Dani*, August 29.
- Böröcz, József. 2006. "Goodness is Elsewhere: The Rule of European Difference." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48:110-138.
- Borojevic, Dubravko. 2008. "Gay Parade for Ramadan (Kada nam za Ramazan gay parade osmisle)." *Dani*, October 24.
- Bougarel, Xavier. 2005. "The Role of Balkan Muslims in Building a European Islam." *EPC Issue Paper*, 1-31.
- Bujic, Branko. 2008. "We Need Queer Festival (Queer festival nam je potreban)." *Dani*, September 24.
- Cenic, S. 2008. "United in Stupidity (Ujedinjeni u gluposti)." *Dani*, May 9.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 1992. "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?." *Representations* 1-26.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton University Press.
- Coronil, Fernando. 1996. "Beyond Occidentalism: Toward Nonimperial Geohistorical Categories." *Cultural Anthropology* 11:51-87.
- Dani. 2008a. "Bosnian Islamic Community (Islamska zajednica BiH)." *Dani*, March 10.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008b. "You are Guilty as well (I vi ste krivi)." *Dani*, March 10.
- Divertito, Stefania, and Luca Leone. 2004. *Il fantasma in Europa: la Bosnia del dopo Dayton tra decadenza e ipotesi di sviluppo*. Il Segno Gabrielli Editori.
- Durkalic, Masa. 2008. "Seriat Police in Action (Serijatska policija u akciji)." *Dani*, March 10.
- Hemon, Aleksandar. 2008a. "Death to Fascism (Smrt fasizmu)." *Dani*, March 10.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008b. "First Queer Sarajevo Festival (1. Queer Sarajevo Festival)." *Dani*, May 9.

- Izetbegovic, Bakir. 2008. "That should be done within Four Walls (To treba iza cetiri zida)." *Dani*, March 10.
- Jusic, S. 2008. "The Color of Backwater is not Green but Red (Zabokrecina nije crvene nego zelene boje)." *Dani*, September 24.
- Lovrenovic, Maja. 2008. "Political Reality of Gay Movement (Politicka realnost gay pokreta)." *Dani*, October 17.
- Narayan, Uma. 1997. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism*. Routledge.
- Orford, Anne. 2003. *Reading Humanitarian Intervention: Human Rights and the Use of Force in International Law*. Cambridge University Press.
- Organisation Q. 2008. "Reaction: The Queer Festival is Held in a Secular Country (Demanti: Queer se odrzava u sekularnoj drzavi)." *Dani*, May 9.
- Pecanin, Senad. 2008a. "Changes: Vildana Selimbegovic New Editor of *Oslobodjenje* (Promjene: Vildana Selimbegovic, nova urednica *Oslobodjenja*)." *Dani*, October 10.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008b. "Everybody should get Beaten Up (Sve treba mlatiti)." *Dani*, March 10.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008c. "'Our Party' is the Only Guarantee for Change (Jedino je Nasa stranka garant promjena)." *Dani*, March 10.
- Sarkar, Mahua. 2008. *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal*. Duke University Press.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. 1986. *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis*. American Historical Association.
- Stojic, Mile. 2008a. "Septembar (September)." *Dani*, May 9.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008b. "Word in Focus: Patriotism (Rijec u fokusu: patriotizam)." *Dani*, March 10.
- Velic, Muhamed. 2008. "Queer Fusion-ing (Queer Fuzioniranje)." *Dani*, September 19.
- War veterans of Sarajevo. 2008. "Rage of War Veterans of Sarajevo: The Threat to the Journalists of *Dani* (Gnjev ratnih veterana Sarajeva: Prijetnja redakciji *Dana*)." *Dani*, September 24.