Politics and Counter-Politics of Identity and Space: Several Cases from Belgrade’s Streets in the 2000s

With the onset of political overturn in Serbia in 2000, the process of the ideological reconfiguration of public places was simultaneously being put in motion. One of the most prominent means of this endeavor was naming and renaming of urban space, primarily of streets and squares, but also treatment of existing memorial sites and monuments and commissioning and erection of new ones. These undertakings were especially prominent in Serbia’s capital Belgrade. Such processes were opposed several times by certain political parties and groups which organized street-actions of counter-naming of Belgrade’s thoroughfares and campaigns against newly designated public monuments, and power-play and identity politics of such proceedings will be commented on here. This paper will discuss practices of several artistic and political groups which carried out unofficial street-renaming actions and performances, or discussed and opposed proposed new memorials. By (re)naming certain urban spaces, hegemonic political coalitions are trying to construct significant symbolic places, while oppositional counter-actions are seeking to overtake those same places and reinterpret them. This paper will attempt to sum up and inquire into the ideological politics of official memory discourses and artistic and political counter-politics and actions of opposition or alternative commemoration.

Introduction

The late 1980s and 1990s saw the absence of Serbia from main-stream historical and political developments which took place in other former communist

Key words:
identity, culture of memory, street names, memorials, Belgrade

1 This paper is part of research pursued under the project Cultural Heritage and Identity (No. 177026) financed by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia.
countries and most post-Yugoslav states: wars which Serbia was actively engaged in postponed transition and inclusion into the newly defined European political and economic frame. The downfall of the authoritarian regime in 2000 facilitated re-entrance of the country to the global “historical course”, but such delayed transition showed inevitable specificities, even more striking than those naturally occurring in other post-socialist countries. Newly established prevailing public narratives about nation, its past and future (subjected to constant modifications) didn’t conclusively break away from the nationalist rhetorics and politics of the 1990s (the way most transition countries broke away from the immediate socialist past with the onset of reforms), but instead directed its attention to the pre-Milošević socialist period. The responsibility of vast parts of the new hegemonic coalition for 1990s downfall and failed war efforts led to direction of the public focus on socialist era and its overall condemnation, so as to swiftly bypass the questions of responsibility for war and war crimes. A seemingly substantial make-over of the national imagery, self-representation and public discourses, wrapped in pro-European packaging (but still bearing a strong nationalist sentiment), was largely endorsed by the profound reconfiguration of public memory of the 20th century. As in most other post-communist states, remembrance of World War II and socialism experienced most extensive alterations – on the other hand, strategy of public amnesia (coupled with overall amnesty) was dominant when dealing with recent Yugoslav wars. Eviction of Yugoslav experience (especially its components of multi-ethnicity, socialism and antifascism) from modern national mythology became one of the key traits of identity politics.

The 2000s witnessed the further acceleration of the previously begun trend of reconfiguration of public remembrance of World War II and its aftermath and formation of the memory of socialism in former Yugoslavia. With right-wing political elites and conservative academia exercising prevailing power in Serbia at the time, a comprehensive process of revision of WW 2 history and creation of memory of Yugoslav experience and communism took place, encompassing media narratives, educational curricula, official policies etc. This process also included the management of memory in public space, primarily monuments, memorials and museums created till 1990s, and urban commemorative toponymy which either erased and destroyed the proscribed monuments and changed the street, square or institution names, or marginalized and neglected others (with attempts of reification of the new prevailing memory culture). This steady and all-encompassing wave of memory rewriting in public space, although more or less silent and lacking revolutionary epochalism, met some opposition which mostly emerged from academic and artistic circles, and sometimes political groups. Of course, competitive narratives and commemorative culture endure, but they lack discoursive power and influence being far from centers of political power and usually evicted from the history and educational curricula. However, with historiographic academia being split when it comes to the evaluation of the 20th century past, the media being more open to both domestic and global narratives that can contradict official versions of memory and nation, dominant circles find themselves in position of being able to hold partial monopoly only of the educational system and political discourse. Under circumstances of competing concepts of identity and subsequent memorial culture in a rela-
tively open and democratic society amid globalization in Europe, one of the strategies of ideological control becomes the political conceptualization of space.

American anthropologist Katherine Verdery argues that political and social power is being exercised through control of both history and landscape (as quoted in Light et al. 2002, 136), with the goal, among other things, to contribute to the establishment of a desirable political and/or national consciousness among the population. Ideologically encoded space, with its communicational power and discursive potential, becomes an active participant in construction and perception of social reality, therefore transforming history into an element of a “natural order of things”, hiding at the same time, its induced and artificial character (Azaryahu 1997, 481). Because of its physical character, space (both natural and built) is colloquially seen as less temporary and culturally affected than other traits of culture (although it ultimately never is), connoting at the same time solidity, authenticity and sense of longevity. As Yi Fu Tuan (1977) and Marc Auget (Ože 2005) state, politics of space (and place) tend to transform as much space into place (a space that occurs on level of identity), while public politics of space tend to create ideologically firmly controlled public spaces, or anthropological places (in contrast to non-places, spaces not connected to collective identities and shared values), by means of creation, denomination, physical design, organized social behavior etc. Urban anthropology and cultural geography argue that nation-states and grand historical narratives, although not really experientially available to citizens, become culturally intimate through their reconceptualization into various places. In the contemporary era, it could be argued that nation-states have more solid control over construction of space than other public domains and discourses which are more prone to external influences in the era of globalization and transculturalism, although it must be noted that what used to be Henri Lefebvre's concept of nation-state's undisputed monopoly and reign in the field of public memorialization is no more as monolithic as it used to be. That being the case in Serbia too, politics of space and spatial design in 2000s show text-book cases of ideological management of place(s). Such politics of space/place, combined with continuously defining culture of remembrance, endorse gradual formation of cultural management of place(s) and socio-cultural engineering of national identity in transitional Serbia, which is especially noticeable in respect to reconfiguration of Serbia’s historical heritage of the 20th century. Such ideological interventions in anthropological places, architecture and city text usually imply a two-way complementary process, as defined by Izraeli geographer Maoz Azaryahu: first of de-commemoration (removal of cultural/political value or symbol from a place), followed by commemoration, i.e. new inscription of value into recently de-commemorated space/place (Azaryahu 1986, 581).

Regarding the memorial culture of the late 20th century in Serbia, politics of space in recent years have shown an overwhelmingly de-commemorative trend: marginalization or destruction (organized or spontaneous) of WW II and communist memorial sites, massive renaming of urban toponymy related to the epoch or non-Serb persons/notions, marginalization or abolition of evocative rituals performed in public spaces, etc. These politics of memory in Serbia sometimes legitimize them-
selves with growing transnational memorial culture, while at the same time they extensively alter and mystify them in the local context, and for local (political) use.\(^2\) Wrapped within the web of multifold national and global politics of memory and space/place, Serbian elites are trying to generally ignore the most recent past (wars in former Yugoslavia), focusing on narratives and images of previous historical eras, thus pursuing a discursive politics which could be designated as “simulation of continuity” (Malešević 2008, 17). This kind of scenario doesn’t exhibit anything innovative – it has already been seen in late 1980s and early 1990s, for example with loud and mass removals of communist statues etc. across Eastern and Central Europe. What differs in the Serbian case is that, unlike most other countries where decommemoration represented an openly demonstrated and symbolic “ritual of revolution”, in Serbia such acts are usually being carried out, although systematically, in almost complete silence. The evident absence of political declaration with strong proclamatory value which usually makes a part of the process of reconfiguration of time and space that follows the change in political order, might indicate insecurity of identity politics being carried out, probably due to consciousness of lack of general, or majority support for some of the commemorative symbolism being installed. As in most other countries, ruling political and social elites usually implement their ideological agenda into urban spatial design, but they also meet opposition arising from different social strata. The following pages will show-case and comment on several instances of identity and memory counter-politics dealing with urban symbolic reconfiguration in 2000s in Belgrade, which mostly stemmed from political and art groups with differing agendas and varying outcomes of their activities.

**Countering the Dominant Politics of Identity and Memory**

The silent consensus of majority elites in Serbia concerning remembrance of late 20\(^{th}\) century history could be show-cased through one of two most ambitious memorialization projects of the 2000s in Belgrade which are still in the planning phase (the other being the intended monument to “modern Serbia” that was supposed to be erected in Belgrade’s Slavija square commemorating the bicentennial of the First Serbian Uprising of 1804 which is considered as the grounding event for the reestablishment of the Serbian statehood in the 19\(^{th}\) century – this project never went any further than the commissioning phase). In 2006, the Serbian ministry of culture and Belgrade’s city council announced the official open call for submission of proposals for erection of, what they referred to as “Memorial to civilian victims and defenders of the Fatherland from 1990–1999” on Savski square in Belgrade. The case of this memorial is paradigmatic of the concepts and uses of the prevailing remembrance discourse on Yugoslav wars, and it represents one of the rare cases of postponing a state sponsored memorialization plan in part because of the outcry of certain segments of artistic community and intellectual and general public. The aim

\(^2\) A very blunt example of local (mis)uses of international memory cultures could be seen in the case of the Staro Sajmište WW 2 site in Belgrade during Milošević era – this is discussed in detail in Byford (2009).
to indirectly commemorate both victims and perpetrators of the war with the same public monument, testifies to the prevailing ambitions in society to suppress and naively hide the horrors of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s with the concept whose working title could be described as “everybody is a victim of war,” and which sends out blurry and confusing messages to the public. Even the fact that the form of the counter-monument, to use James Yong’s term (Young 1992, 271), was implicitly suggested by the authorities to potential authors of the memorial (implied by the fact that overall infrastructural and urban reconstruction of the square was also a part of the competition), shows the ambition to commemorate something or someone while knowing at the same time that the entire concept is not fully legitimate and overt. Unlike regular ambitions of state authorities, it could be deemed that this memorialization project was planned as to avoid monumentalization and clear and explicit didactics towards the public.

This initiative met little or no opposition until an art group called Grupa Spomenik (Monument Group in English) started a public campaign against it. Members of the group argued that what they called a “commissioned pseudo-ecumenical monument” would become a pastoral screen of remembrance which blocks memory of the real nature of death committed in the name of the sacred ethnic cause. The sole fact that authorities are placing both victims and warlords in the same category shows a completely pointless effort of the state to effectively hide the truth and politics that were pursued for some twenty years in former Yugoslavia. As members of the Spomenik group deemed, by commissioning a memorial dedicated to recent Yugoslav wars, Serbian state actually wants to set those same issues aside – instead of discussing the war, the state is trying to camouflage it through limited and vague memorialization. In an interview for Vreme weekly (no. 866, 2007), historian Olga Manojlović Pintar stated that the question of victims of

---

3 The initial idea for erection of this monument was declared a few years before the announcement of the 2006 open call for project proposals by the Belgrade City council, with the initial aim to commemorate innocent victims of wars fought in former Yugoslavia. However, as Branimir Stojanović points out, shortly afterwards, originally relatively undefined ‘victims of war’, ‘all victims’, were additionally ‘redefined’ once the soldiers killed in action “marched in” – the final competition title read “The Competition Inviting Designs for a Monument to the Soldiers Killed in Action and Victims of Wars Waged in the Former Yugoslavia from 1990 to 1999.” The actual victims of the war were in this instance “sacrificed” to the concept of overall oblivion and politics of non-accountability of 2000s elites for wars of 1990s (which is further elaborated in Branimir Stojanović’s text from 2003 “Sacrificing the Victims”, which was kindly forwarded to me by another member of the Serbian Spomenik group Nebojsa Milikić).

4 Although what is considered as counter-monuments is often appraised as bald, edging and sunk into entire urban surroundings, their abstract form and lack of direct deductive content make them too vague in terms of symbolic directness and straight-forwardness if not accompanied by lateral corresponding memorial discourses through official, educational or media narratives, which is the case in aforementioned situation.

5 As stated in an interview given to Radio Free Europe by group’s members Milica Tomić i Branimir Stojanović (“Vlast meša žrtve i zločince” – interview retrieved from the radio’s web page www.danas.org in March 2010). More on the activities of the group can be found on the web page http://grupaspomenik.wordpress.com.
war is a key question of each society, and erecting a monument commemorating them is therefore one of the ways to open the social dialogue regarding wars, victims and perpetrators. Contrary to this, the proposed concept and frame of the physical design of the site aim at actually subtly closing the questions of Yugoslav wars which basically aren’t thoroughly discussed in contemporary Serbia. Actions of the Spomenik group therefore revealed the intentional paradox of the planned memorial: aim of the memorial was to facilitate oblivion rather than particular memory, since the nation-state still hasn’t formulated its own definite narrative on this segment of the past, and deems necessary to close in on the subject by basically erecting a false memorial which would hopefully bury the discussions on the matter. Artists’ public speaking out against the authorities’ plans emphasized the fallacy of the memorial which would deliberately deliver no memory, i.e. oblivion, coupled with absence of any clarification of the nature of Yugoslav wars.\(^6\) Paradigmatic for this memorialization endeavor could be the statement of the authors of the winning project (a group of students of architecture), at a public discussion panel, that they actually didn’t know much about what was happening in war-torn 1990s.\(^7\) It should be also noted that the members of the Spomenik group were not only artists, but also art historians, historians, social scientists and others: what was sensed and conceptualized as an issue mostly by the artists, was further elaborated also by intellectuals on several levels through various media, lectures, public discussions etc. The plans for this memorial have not been officially dropped yet, but its realization was indefinitely postponed largely due to this campaign. The entire Spomenik group public campaign was one of few cases where organized opposition to dominant memory (or oblivion) politics regarding the formation of public memory in urban space had some effect and substantial public impact. Some other campaigns, pursued by different social actors, proved not to achieve even the limited impact this campaign had. We will now shortly make an overview of a few of those campaigns which primarily dealt with the renaming of streets, a process which could be defined as one of the quickest and most efficient methods of collective memory inscription onto urban topography.

Soon after the tragic death of Serbian Prime minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003, a significant number of city councils proceeded with initiatives to name central thoroughfares with the prime minister’s name. Cases of swift urban commemoration of recently deceased dignitaries are not an uncommon occurrence globally,\(^6\) That this might probably be the case, also testifies a situation as recent as 2011, when the City council’s committee for monuments and street names refused to endorse erection of the monument dedicated to the victims of the Srebrenica massacre of 1995, which was proposed by several organizations and individuals. Being specific and straightforward is not considered appropriate when dealing with Yugoslav wars and Serbia’s involvement in them. As several Belgrade media reported, Committee’s explanation why such a monument is not suited for Belgrade was that the tragic event “took place farther from the (our) area”, and that the massacre deserves commemoration, but in situ, not in Belgrade.\(^7\) The panel discussion in question was organized by the Spomenik group and took place on October 5th 2007 at the Centar za kulturnu dekontaminaciju in Belgrade – panel’s title was Savski trg i slučaj beogradskog ‘Spomen-obeležja žrtavma ratova i branioćima Otađbine od 1990 do 1999.’
and such actions in this case didn’t represent anything particularly novel. Usually, central streets were renamed after Zoran Đinđić, and usually it meant taking away the street name from someone, or something else, which usually turned out to be commemorative names related to World War II (e.g. in the town of Svilajnac in 2004, where a street named Alley of Fallen Heroes became Alley of Dr. Zoran Đinđić). However, Belgrade was not one of those cities since several ideas which were deemed appropriate (renaming a part of the central Belgrade square – Trg Republike, construction of a modern arts gallery in central Belgrade named after late prime minister, and so on) never actually caught the paste in terms of realization. That changed only in 2006 when civic petition (mostly organized by the Democratic party) asked for renaming of the AVNOJ boulevard (commemorating the supreme Yugoslav anti-fascist council during Second World War) in Novi Beograd (large Belgrade quarter mostly built during socialism, and nowadays turning into a major financial and political hub) with Đinđić’s name. As it is in many other cities in similar circumstances, what was represented as a popular initiative was actually a pursuit of a political party agenda, which went on to be officially adopted in March of 2007 when City council’s commission for naming of streets and squares approved the proposal. This street renaming eventually met substantial opposition, but not so much, if any at all, because of de-commemoration of an anti-fascist symbol (only several public protests followed this direction), but because of the commemoration of the late prime minister. As with the proposal process, it was presented as if it was a popular demand, but was actually organized and promoted by the right-wing Radical party. The counter-actions took to the streets (more specific, to the street which was to be renamed), turning into political performance(s) with a street-table twist: protesters took to the designated Đinđić boulevard with printed leafs imitating street name table pattern that said “Boulevard of Ratko Mladić” (referring to the Bosnian Serb general accused of serious war crimes during 1990s), waving with them and placing them onto buildings in the boulevard. The argument was that, unlike Đinđić, Ratko Mladić is a real popular hero whose name is worthy to be publicly commemorated. Although this counter-action never achieved its goal

---

8 Which will prove to be the case for example in 2009 with the death of the patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, when literal competition took place which town would be among the first to name a street or an institution after patriarch Pavle. Historically, when a dignitary is assassinated, which was the case with premier Đinđić, the need of political structures to publicly commemorate him or her as fast as possible is even greater – for example, in 1914 Sarajevo city council named the then central city street after archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sofia who were shot dead only several months before, being among the first cities of the Austrian-Hungarian empire to do so, much because of the fact that the royal couple was killed in Sarajevo (Bejić 1973, 245). In more detail about similar cases in the United States see Alderman (2000).

9 Only to get its old name back by the end of the same year once the post-Milosevic Socialist party regained the ruling power in this town. A few years later, with the new political coalition gaining momentum after local elections, the street was again named after Zoran Djindjic. Similar situations also occurred in several other Serbian towns.

10 Azaryahu states that, however it might seem that street renaming proposals are mass endorsed by the public (or the other way round, that they’re disliked by people), ultimately the process of selection and renaming is determined and dependant on political will (Azaryahu 1997, 481).
(to this day this Belgrade thoroughfare is named after Zoran Djindjić), it emerged as one of the prime political hot topics of the year, successfully turning the spotlight to the organizers of these activities. The entire case of the AVNOJ/Djindjić/Mladić boulevard could be discussed to further depth, especially given that it clearly revealed the essentially political nature of the street (re)naming process in general, but we would like to point out to another performative counter-action connected with this case, this time responding to the mentioned right-wing counter-action.

With rightist activists loudly promoting a fugitive warlord, much to public dismay, a “counter-counter-action” was organized, using methods and paradigms utilized in the Mladić boulevard counter-action. A few days after the improvised street tables with Ratko Mladić’s name found their place on the scrutinized boulevard’s buildings, certain city streets were covered with another kind of street table patterned leafs, this time promoting different kinds of popular heroes. In this instance, several streets and squares in Belgrade were named as: Eric Cartman street, Papa Smurf street, Teletubbies street, Rocky Balboa street, Homer Simpson street, etc. The entire parodied commemoration referred to fictional characters and popular culture heroes. This street action was organized by an artist group called the BIRO movement, under the motto “Place your own hero” (in Serbian “Zalepi svog heroja”), and was to start with a performance of renaming the Magistratski square (where the seat of the Radical party, proponents of the Mladić action, was) into Power Rangers square (because of threats by some activists, the actual performance was cancelled, and street name signs were spread out during the night one day before the planned date). Members of this group stated that their “campaign comes as much needed at a time when members of certain extremist organizations, because of their own lack of education and valid information, and because of their distorted system of moral values, try to present murderers as being heroes.”

Street actions that countered the previous street actions cleverly utilized the same means of performance and practice implemented by their opponents, as to highlight the arbitrary nature of political proclamation of social virtues. However, it did not address the original issue of the matter, the act of de-commemoration. While the Biro movement street names performance precisely tackled the problem of commemoration, that is the identity and memory politics which, in this instance, tried to legitimize recently defined nationalist discourse through symbolic urban design albeit unofficial or potential, it did not address the issue of de-commemoration, i.e. politics of suppression of certain historical or ideological values through its eviction from symbolic urban space (in this particular case, the removal of AVNOJ with all its connotations from urban toponymy).

---


12 It could be argued that in recent years in Belgrade, the scope and nature of de-commemoration in symbolic urban space poses a greater issue than the novel commemoration and newly introduced street names etc, given that eradication of certain segments of toponymic heritage is more systematic and focused than the inscription of the new memory culture whose elements are still undergoing significant negotiations and dilemmas in the dominant discourse (Radović 2008, 69–70).
public actions and street performances, was partially approached in a similar “street renaming” display two years later.

In 2009, ahead of November 9th (International day against fascism and anti-Semitism), a political gathering under the name “Antifascists in Action” (Serbian: Antifašisti i antifašistkinje u akciji) organized another street renaming action. They symbolically changed the names of central Belgrade streets by placing, similar to above mentioned performances, print street name tables commemorating what they designated as the most vulnerable strata of Serbian society. Thus, Nikola Pašić square was symbolically renamed Square of the General Strike, Terazije street – Boulevard of Antifascism, Kolarčeva street – Street of the Refugees, The Republic square – Women’s Liberation square, Vasina street – Queer street, and Studentski square – Square of the Roma people (as with the previously mentioned performance, the action didn’t go uninterrupted since several hostile citizens tried to prevent the placing of improvised street tables at one of the squares). On November 9th, the planned march went through ideologically redefined route in central Belgrade, and it ended by the neglected memorial to victims of fascist and quisling terror in Terazije street which was specially illuminated as to remind the citizens of its existence and symbolically make it more visible in the street’s texture.13 As with previously presented street renaming actions, the actual ‘new’ street names and their improvised tables didn’t last very long (the longest life span among these performative designations were those commemorating Ratko Mladić, possibly not because of the lesser extent of their removal or tearing, but more likely because they’ve been reinstalled more often). Similar could be said of the action’s impact: it wasn’t covered by media the way other mentioned actions were, and subsequently its echo was somewhat more short-lived. This might not be explained by the organizers’ relatively small numbers or their absence from social and political mainstream (which was mostly the case also with the Biro movement who gained more media attention), but perhaps more with the contexts of each performance – while the Biro’s performance added to the already hot political battle fought by topographic means, the antifascist actions related themselves to the date commemorating what is in Serbia mostly forgotten values of antifascism, antiracism and so on.14

Discussion

Opposing dominant discourses of identity and memory in terms of urban symbolical construction is possible, and has been happening throughout modern so-

13 Data on the mentioned performances were gathered by observation of these actions.

14 What could be designated as performative street renaming in 2000s in Belgrade was first carried out in 2006 by the Illegal Confectioners artist group (Serbian: Ilegalni poslastičari). By placing a street table on a building’s curve, they renamed an urban crossroad “Salvador Dali corner”. Unlike previously mentioned street actions, this one wasn’t directly political, and could hopefully be discussed in another instance.
ties where authoritarian grip wasn’t prevalent. The forms and results of such opposition varied, and in democratic circumstances it sometimes had the potential to channel public dissatisfaction with swift, radical or unwanted alterations in urban memorial and toponymic heritage, with different outcomes (e.g. see De Soto 1996). Similar could be argued regarding Serbia’s capital in 2000s, and even 1990s: during the Milošević period, actions of the City council (when ruling power in the city was held by parties the opposition) which included the renaming of city streets were not only aimed at urban identity reconfiguration and memory rewriting, but were also means of political struggle and manifestation against the state authorities which sometimes turned into fierce political fighting on the official level with national authorities declining to legislatively confirm street name changes (Radović 2008, 61). What was at that time a collision between official political structures, turned into less intensive political battles in party politics like in the case of the AVNOJ boulevard - friction was transferred from the administrative to the political level. While political infighting between different parties regarding public monuments and street names was heavily covered in the public, and sometimes produced certain results, actions pursued by civil organizations, different social groupings, artists, non-party political platforms and so forth, did not result in media attention of such a scale, nor did they usually reach any significant outcome. Issues of identity and collective memory, even at this level, have become strictly political domains, more specifically domains of party politics (like many other segments of public social life in Serbia nowadays). While such a situation does not testify to any considerable lack of political freedoms, it does point out to monopolizing of wider spheres of social life by politics in its strictest sense of meaning. When a non-political action, such as the one organized by the Biro movement, did take considerable media spotlight, it was in a matter of highly politicized question of competition of contemporary political symbols (personalized in the names of Đindjić and Mladić) by means of street naming. Also, only a well prepared and simultaneous long-term campaign of the Spomenik group succeeded to partially enter the public mainstream regarding the scrutinized question, and raise some public awareness on the issue with varying results. Other campaigns and performances, which weren’t connected with specific political party actions, didn’t effectively break this solid political and media barrier and present their cases to the wider public. It could be argued that the issues of urban memorial design and street renaming are significantly ‘abducted’ by party politics.

While the political arena has a firm grip on issues of identity building through public memorialization, and is selectively letting non-political actors take part in the dialogue and decision making on those issues, still it has not yet clearly

---

15 It has been recorded that even in Eastern Bloc countries, the process of (re)named streets and conceptualization of public monuments wasn’t completely a one-sided process solely originating from the ruling political class, and that it sometimes resulted from dialogue between the authorities and citizens who at times even displayed notable opposition to official commemoration – what was sometimes considered as heavily “politicized landscapes” turned out to be no more political than in countries of Western democracies (Lebow 1999).
defined the vision of the identity and consistent memory politics regarding modern history. Unlike some other post-socialist nations, where ruling elites are pursuing more or less clear directions regarding public memorialization which encompass both clear memory and identity politics, and social agents which implement those politics such as specific (and privileged) groups of artists, architects, academia members etc. (Khazanov 1998), this wouldn’t be completely true in Serbia in recent years. In the last decade, neither were figures in charge of the memorialization effort prominent or constant, nor was the effort consistent or publicly decisive. As historian Dubravka Stojanović states, the current political order formed after 2000 in Serbia is still in pursuit of its identity and ideological legitimacy, and in a situation of constant reshuffling of political alignments between political parties which try to find an appropriate ideological combination that would ensure their stay in power. In that pursuit of adequate ideological components, authorities are also searching for historical periods which could be represented as the new “golden eras” upon which a desirable image of alleged consistent rooting of the new political elites to “tradition” could be constructed. Such a quest for “better past” usually commences with eviction of those segments of history which do not suit the new authorities, which confuse the image of “historic flawlessness” of the nation, or those which could remind the citizens of some “happier times” (Stojanović 2009, 266). As Stojanović argues, however inconsistent might the new elites ideological profile be, what is transparent is their anticommunism and effort to depict the era of socialist Yugoslavia as negative as possible, at the same time minimizing or ignoring collaboration during World War 2 and Serb involvement in Yugoslav wars in 1990s – thus, novel political reinterpretation of these historical periods is crucial for obtaining the desired public identity to ruling political elites (Stojanović 2009, 273). Therefore, the dominant political circles more or less clearly recognize what they want to erase from public memory, i.e. de-commemoration from public space, but are also quite uncertain what to precisely deliver as a new memory narrative, that is, what to commemorate through monuments and street names. The quest for the winning ideological combination and appropriate official version of modern national history (and subsequent recycled public memory) is obviously still in the phase of intensive creation.

References:


