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Ready for the Homeland: Hate Speech on Croatian Right-Wing Public Facebook Pages

Abstract

The article analyzes nationalistically motivated online hate speech on selected right-wing public Facebook pages in Croatia. The rise of historical revisionism and populism paved the way for the growing presence of hate speech, with the most salient example being the resurfacing of the World War II fascist salute *Za dom spremni* ("Ready for the Homeland") across different communicative situations. We account for the online dynamic of *Za dom spremni* as well as for the most frequent expressions of xenophobia that accompany the salute by presenting data gathered between 2012 – 2017 using Facebook Graph API. From the total of 4.5 million postings published by readers, those containing *Za dom spremni* and its variations were filtered and followed by the frequency and prevalence of the accompanying notions. By relying on cultural semiotics, we highlight the socio-communicative functions of hate speech on two levels. Firstly, the notion of the semiosphere helps us illustrate how hate speech is used to reproduce the idea of Croatianness as the dominant self-description. Secondly, we examine how the dominant self-description maintains the boundary between *us* and the *other* by merging diverse textual fragments and how their perseverance depends on the communicative situations they enter online.

Keywords: online hate speech, *Za dom spremni*, right-wing Facebook pages, semiosphere, self-description.

Introduction

Social media is rapidly becoming one of the main tools for the dissemination of vitriol and the mobilization and formation of radical right-wing organizations and hate groups (Atton, 2006; Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2014; ADL, 2015). Online hate speech has arisen as one salient consequence of these processes and the need for addressing it has been emphasized (Erjavec & Poler Kovacic, 2012; Bangstad, 2013; Gencoglu Onbaşi, 2015; Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016).

Hate speech finds itself amidst debates concerning free speech and democracy, extremism, and political correctness (Greenawalt, 1995; Hare & Weinstein, 2009; Hughes, 2009;

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Waldron, 2012), while a consensus over a univocal definition for hate speech remains unattainable due to the intertwinement of diverse cultural norms, traditions, values, and beliefs. Social media presents an additional challenge for establishing a balance between countering and regulating online hate speech and the protection of freedom of expression (Banks, 2010). Contexts in which hate speech carries a heavier symbolic burden are post-conflict societies where it played a significant role in inciting violent conflict, such as during the 1990s Yugoslav Wars and the Croatian Homeland War specifically (*Domovinski rat,* 1991-1995) (Thompson, 1999; Kurspahic, 2003; Kolsto, 2009).

The period between 2012 and 2017 in Croatia was marked by events that gave rise to the use of the fascist salute *Za dom spremni* ("Ready for the Homeland") in offline and online environments. One salient event was the return of the right-wing party the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ – *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*), which was characterized by the highly nationalist discourse of Tomislav Karamarko, the now former First Deputy Prime Minister of Croatia. The rise of Facebook pages supporting this political party and the (re)affirmation of the salute were intertwined with debates and contestations around historical events, boycotts of commemorations, and the return to the radical tendencies and values present during the Homeland War, all of which became increasingly explicit after Croatia entered the European Union in 2013 (Pavlakovic, 2018). Among one of the paradigmatic events was the controversial placement of a memorial plaque that contained the fascist salute *Za dom spremni*. It was installed by war veterans and right-wing politicians in 2016 near the World War II camp Jasenovac, that operated in the Nazi-aligned Independent State of Croatia from 1941 to 1945 (NDH – *Nezavisna Drzava Hrvatska*) (Milekic, 5th December 2016). The placement of the plaque resulted in heated discussions both offline and online as well as in attempts by extremist organizations to push forward the alleged affirmative aspects of the salute, such as presenting it as a symbol of Croatian independence. The plaque was eventually removed from Jasenovac after a range of negative reactions in Croatia as well as abroad, and installed in the nearby town of Novska in 2017. However, the underlying issues remain along with the failure of the government to clearly address them and take a stance (Milekic, 7th September 2017).

The reverberations of the 1990s Homeland War still appear in various instances of Croatian society, with social media becoming an increasingly relevant symbolic battlefield. As the debates and concerns surrounding nationalistically motivated hate speech on social media in Croatia remain, so does the need to provide insight into the prevailing notions on some of the most active public right-wing Facebook pages. Informed contributions into this aspect are scarce and we attempt to remedy this by analyzing data that we collected between 2012 and 2017 to uncover what kind of hate speech can be found on the selected public right-wing Facebook pages. The increased presence of the World War II fascist salute *Za dom spremni* is considered as a catalyst for the notions that accompany it. We rely on the terminological toolkit of cultural semiotics for the analysis of data due to its focus on meaning-making mechanisms that shape hate speech and its online dynamic. Regardless of the analysis being conducted in the Croatian context, the framework is applicable to other cultural contexts, especially those of the former Yugoslav republics due to the similarity of languages and media.

Theoretical background and research questions

One of the most employed definitions of hate speech comes from the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Recommendation No. R (97) 20[1], and it has since developed to include other forms of discrimination (Article 19, 2015; ECRI General Policy Recommendation No. 15, 2016). While establishing an unambiguous definition remains a challenge, the main functional patterns of hate speech can be identified as having the goal of dehumanizing and/or degrading a person or a group (Gagliardone, Gal, Alves & Martinez, 2015). In Countering Online Hate Speech (2015), it has been further defined as referring to "expressions that advocate incitement to harm (particularly, discrimination, hostility or violence) based upon the targets identified as belonging to a certain social or demographic group. It may include, but is not limited to, speech that advocates, threatens, or encourages violent acts" (Gagliardone et al., 2015, p. 10).

The sensitive balance between hate speech and freedom of speech is made evident by the First Convention on Cybercrime (Council of Europe, 2001). This balance becomes a considerable challenge when Facebook's corporate logic enters the equation, further influencing the communicative acts of its users and the presence and nature of subsequent measures (Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). In the platform's community standards, Facebook defines hate speech "as a direct attack on people based on their race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender, gender identity, and serious disease or disability" (Facebook, n.d., section 3, para. 2). However, the actual practice often results with Facebook being accused of a lack of transparency in its content removal policy (Gillespie, 2012; Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016), which is highly dependent on the legislation of the country at hand.

Authors dealing with online hate speech accounted for the role of extreme right political parties on Facebook as well as the implications of conflicting understanding of security (Gencoglu Onbaşi, 2015, Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). The relevance of instantaneousness has been problematized as a crucial distinguishing feature for the production of online hate speech (Brown, 2018). Moreover, bringing into question the "linkage between the 'fighting words' and the 'fighting deeds' of right-wing extremists in Norway" (Bangstad, 2014, p. 268) shed more light on the intertwinement of online and offline hate speech practices. Erjavec and Poler-Kovacic (2012) analyzed the discursive characteristics and strategies of hate speech while focusing on the motives, values, and beliefs of the producers of hate speech comments; their research successfully brought out the relevance of hate speech producers and the justificatory mechanisms those producers rely on when turning to such speech.

The scientific project *Govor mrznje u Hrvatskoj* ("Hate Speech in Croatia") (Kulenovic, 2016) included a collection of works where the authors examined the boundaries between the freedom of speech and hate speech (Kulenovic, 2016), hate speech in the Croatian and European legal frameworks (Vasiljevic, Gardasevic, 2016), the philosophical and political validity behind the legal regulations of hate speech (Cvijanovic, 2016), and hate speech in the media (Car, 2016). Concrete examples of hate speech included the legal regulation of holocaust denial (Zelic, 2016), hate speech in the Croatian Parliament (Klepac Pogrmilovic, 2016), and hate speech that targeted refugees on Facebook pages (Bukvic, 2016). Other recent studies focused on hate speech predominantly in the context of minority rights and integration, such as the publication authored by Nina Colovic and Tamara Opacic under the title *Proizvodnja Drugoga. Srbi u hrvatskim dnevnim novinama*, 2017 ("The Production of

the Other. Serbs in Croatian Daily Newspapers"). Finally, the Serb National Council recently issued the Bulletin titled *Historijski revizionizam, govor mrznje i nasilje prema Srbima u 2017* ("Historical revisionism, hate speech, and violence against Serbs in 2017").

While these works provide valuable insight into the diverse facets of online hate speech, there is a lack of contributions that focus on the prevailing notions of some of the most active public right-wing Facebook pages in the Croatian context. By analyzing the data gathered between 2012 and 2017, we attempt to remedy this by introducing the most frequent notions that accompany the World War II fascist salute *Za dom spremni* on those Facebook pages. We analyze the data by relying on the terminological toolkit of cultural semiotics, which emphasizes the meaning-making mechanisms that shape hate speech and influence its online dynamic. Cultural semiotics further helps us account for the role that hate speech carries in maintaining the dominant self-portrait of these Facebook pages, i.e. the central attitudes and values that they exhibit.

We find it necessary to emphasize that some of the introduced notions are not deemed hate speech nor expressions of xenophobia (e.g. *Jasenovac, Bleiburg*). However, that is precisely where the semiotic mechanism of self-description illustrates the process of merging diverse textual fragments that consequently reinforce the dominant image of the Facebook pages and the subsequent construction and reproduction of the *other* (i.e. Serbs) as the principal enemy of the Croatian people. In simpler terms, the mechanism of self-description shows us how stories of ourselves and cultures come to be and what are the central, dominant ones in a given period. To show the dynamics of this process online, we pose the first research question:

1. What kind of hate speech arose on the selected right-wing Facebook pages, and how frequently it occurred within the determined time frame?

The quantitative contributions provided by the analysis enabled us to specify the presence and frequency of hate speech, specifically the World War II fascist salute *Za dom spremni*, on the selected Facebook pages between 2012 and 2017. While doing so, the fascist salute helped situate the data within specific events in Croatian society that gave rise to the salute and the speech surrounding it. Furthermore, the figures and visualizations provided illustrate their modelling capacity by highlighting certain features of hate speech such as user connectivity based on the support they express toward each other by liking specific instances of hate speech. However, the quantitative insight is not sufficient to explore the dynamics of hate speech online, as it does not account for its contextual dependency nor other communicative roles, which brings us to the second research question:

2. What are the socio-communicative functions of hate speech on the selected right-wing Facebook pages?

Cultural semiotics approaches the process of identity creation as a constitutive part of communication while taking into account its dynamic and relational nature, the importance of the *other,* and the ways through which identities are negotiated and (re)articulated online (Hall, 2000; Castells, 2009; Madisson, 2016). We rely on two notions that emphasize the meaning making mechanisms shaping hate speech – the semiosphere and self-description (Lotman, 1990, 2005 [1984] – which help us illustrate the socio-communicative functions of hate speech in respect to:

1. Facebook as the mode of dissemination and the role of self-description for the selected Facebook pages as meaningful semiotic unities (reproducing the idea of *Croatianness*).

2. Showing how hate speech becomes a crucial aspect for the self-description process and the maintenance of the boundary between *us* and the *other*.

Za dom spremni – the battle continues?

The current political climate in Croatia manifests a hermetic sphere of prevalent narratives that influences the continuation of symbolic wars online. In recent years, there has been a notable rise of populist discourse (Brentin & Pavasovic Trost, 2016), historical revisionism, political parties and groups with a far-right agenda in Europe. Croatia is not an exception, and the return of HDZ was accompanied by the resurfacing of radical nationalist tendencies and a political discourse of exclusion. This caused an increased suppression of alternative interpretations of history and a reduced space for dialogue about what constitutes the Croatian national identity.[2] The proliferation of hate speech on various media platforms[3] has been one of the main symptoms of these conditions. Among some of the dominant manifestations is the use of the World War II fascist salute *Za dom spremni*, one of the symbols of the NDH, a Nazi puppet state that was established on April 10th 1941 and dissolved in 1945.[4] The salute remains a symbol of the Ustasa regime, rigorous racial laws, and concentration camps where Serbs, Jews, Roma, and antifascists were murdered.

The usage of the salute was proscribed during socialist Yugoslavia, but re-entered public discourse during the 1990s Homeland War (*Domovinski rat*) when it was used by the Croatian Defense Forces (HOS – *Hrvatske Obrambene Snage*), a paramilitary arm of the far right-wing party the Croatian Party of the Rights (*Hrvatska Stranka Prava*) (Brentin, 2016). Since the end of the Homeland War, various far-right parties and organizations have aimed to revive the World War II Ustasa legacy. In this respect the salute *Za dom spremni* carries the strongest symbolic value for the accompanying memory conflicts in the public discourse. Attempts to revitalize the salute have included an unsuccessful initiative in 2015 when the former army commander Branko Borkovic set out to make it the official salute of the Croatian Armed Forces (OSRH – *Oruzane snage Republike Hrvatske*). Another controversy came from the head of state when in 2017 the Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic claimed that the salute is historical, not fascist, and that it was corrupted during the Ustasa regime during World War II (HINA, 4th September 2017).

The rise of historical revisionism and nationalist politics paved the way for the continuous re-signification of the salute and its representation as a symbol of an alleged, omnipresent desire of the Croatian people to establish an independent state. *Za dom spremni* carries a heavy symbolic burden and invokes "past injuries and traumas that are historically sedimented in the norms, structures and conventions of language and social institutions" (Posselt, 2017, p. 17). This consequently perpetuates the production of the alleged hostile *other*, fuels antagonism, and impedes the integration of minority communities in Croatia.

European Union legal regulations that concern hate speech differ and "various regulatory responses have been developed to address hate speech and hate crime in all Member States" (Psaila, Adamis-Császár, Verbari, Leigh, & Dalla Pozza, 2015). The reason for this "derives from the fact that the terms 'hate speech' and 'hate crime' do not have universal definitions and are thus interpreted differently by the Member States" (Psaila et al., 2015). In Croatia, behavior and activities leading to the public encouragement of violence and hatred are deemed punishable under article 325 in the Croatian penal code.[5]

In January 2018, a proposal for a new law regarding the prohibition of hate speech online had been proposed (HINA, 16th January 2018). In March 2018, Croatia's Council for Dealing with Consequences of the Rule of Non-Democratic Regimes presented a proposal that would allow the use of the fascist salute *Za dom spremni* in exceptional situations, while still being considered unconstitutional (Milekic, 28th February 2018). This has furthered debates around the lack of concrete countermeasures and regulations, leaving the salute unsanctioned by Croatian law.

Methodology

This article explores asynchronous hate speech and the accompanying expressions of xenophobia on Croatian right-wing public Facebook pages based on the data extracted from 2012 until the beginning of 2017. The set of expressions that was predominantly taken into account relates to the World War II NDH and the depictions of the perceived enemy from the side of Facebook users. We relied on a twofold approach and used Facebook Graph API for extracting Facebook posts and user comments. From the total of 4.5 million postings published by readers, those containing the fascist salute *Za dom spremni* and its variations were filtered. Facebook page posts and user comments were collected using Facebook Graph API[6] (*v2.9*). All API requests were made using R language[7] and RFacebook package[8]. The acquisition method was page-based. A subset of relevant Facebook public pages was selected, and each page was processed in the following manner:

1. All page posts were collected since the date the page was created.

2. All user comments were collected for each collected post.

3. All replies[9] were collected for each collected comment.

Posts and their discussion (i.e. comments and replies) were acquired at least two weeks after the date the post was published. Collected data was then structured in a relational database and prepared for analysis. The results were first published on a blog (Rodik, 16th April 2017) and subsequently discussed by Hrvoje Simicevic in the weekly newspaper Novosti (Simicevic, 17th April 2017). Since the analysis included a smaller number of public online Facebook pages, their content cannot be viewed as representative for Facebook in Croatia. In order to collect an absolute number of occurrences of a word and/or phrase, full access to the whole Facebook base is necessary. Finally, the data we present consists of textual fragments and does not consider other multimodal features such as online images or figures.

We observed hate speech as directed toward the *other* and defined in terms of the cultural space as "ours, cultured, safe" which is opposed to "their space, hostile, dangerous" (Lotman, 1990). The semiosphere served as both a research object (semiosphere as the online sphere) and a model that enables an analysis of various cultural phenomena (Torop, 2005). By observing the online sphere as a semiosphere, we acknowledge the multiplicity of semiospheres as web pages, and the continuous production and tension between narratives and perspectives. Moreover, the World Wide Web in its entirety demonstrates the feature of a perpetually growing container of memory, serving as a platform for narrating memories, conflicts, and identities (Rutten, Fedor, & Zvereva, 2013).

The tension in the semiosphere is one of the determining mechanisms for meaning-generation (Lotman, 2005 [1984]). It takes place between the center and periphery of the semiosphere; the center presents the culture's normative, ideal self-portrait, whereas the periphery preserves elements that do not fit into the ideal self-portrait (Lotman, 2005 [1984]). In the same way as we choose which elements to include in stories about ourselves, a culture builds its image through continuous attempts of comprehending and describing itself as a whole. The stories that a culture mediates in its center are the result of self-description as the highest form of the structural organization of a culture (Lotman, 1990).[10] Some examples of a culture's self-description are dictionaries, canons, grammars, institutions, museums, laws, and websites. We can observe the logic of inclusion/exclusion when certain cultural texts become exclusive for the description of a culture (Jovic, 2017) and therefore located in its center, while others become tabooed and banished to the periphery (Blanusa, 2017). The data in this article illustrates two levels of self-description; the first one is found on the level of Facebook pages as semiotic unities and the image of Croatianess they reproduce, while the second level is found in hate speech and xenophobic expressions and their reliance on the *other* in order to maintain the dominant self-description. Therefore, hate speech invokes the *other* with the purpose of excluding them and preserving the established self-description of a given Facebook page.

Corpus

The data for the study were extracted from the following right-wing public Facebook pages: Velimir Bujanec, Direktno.hr, Dnevno.hr, Zeljko Glasnovic, HCSP (*Croatian Pure Party of Rights*), HSP-AS (*Croatian Party of Rights dr. Ante Starcevic*), Kamenjar, Most nezavisnih lista (*Bridge of Independent Lists*), Narod.hr (*The People*), Priznajem! Hrvat sam (*I admit! I am a Croat*), Projekt Velebit (*Project Velebit*), Sloboda.hr (*Freedom*), Urbana desnica (*The Urban Right*), Vecernji.hr, and Vigilare.

Velimir Bujanec, a journalist and host of the TV show Bujica (*Stream*), is a keen supporter of right-wing politicians and radical right organizations; he has additionally faced criminal charges during the past eight years. A more recent controversy, concerning the incitement to violence on his show Bujica, was subsequently evaluated by the Council for Electronic Media as "not contradicting" the Law on Electronic Media (Simicevic, 22nd December 2017). Direktno.hr, Dnevno.hr, and Sloboda.hr (*Freedom*) are online news portals characterized by radical right-wing tendencies with their target audience being predominantly conservative and nationalist readers. Zeljko Glasnovic, a former general and current member of the conservative political party Independents for Croatia, has become politically active during the Croatian 2015 parliamentary election. A radical nationalist, Glasnovic is a proponent of the fascist salute and a fierce opponent of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women. HCSP, the *Croatian Pure Party of Rights*, is a far-right political party founded in 1992 that supports the legacy of the Ustasa regime and the NDH. The party used *Za dom spremni* as an official slogan and included it on their official emblem that is still present on their website.[11] HSP-AS, the *Croatian Party of Rights dr. Ante Starcevic*, is a right-wing nationalist political party named after the Croatian politician and writer who is often referred to as the "father of the homeland" and is known for his ideas concerning Croatian independence and the evolution of Croatian nationalism. Kamenjar and Narod.hr

(*The People*) are both independent Croatian portals exhibiting radical right-wing tendencies and publishing fabricated news pieces. Most nezavisnih lista (*Bridge of Independent Lists*) is a center-right political party founded in 2012 and marked by a short-term and fairly unstable government formed with the Patriotic Coalition after the 2015 parliamentary elections.
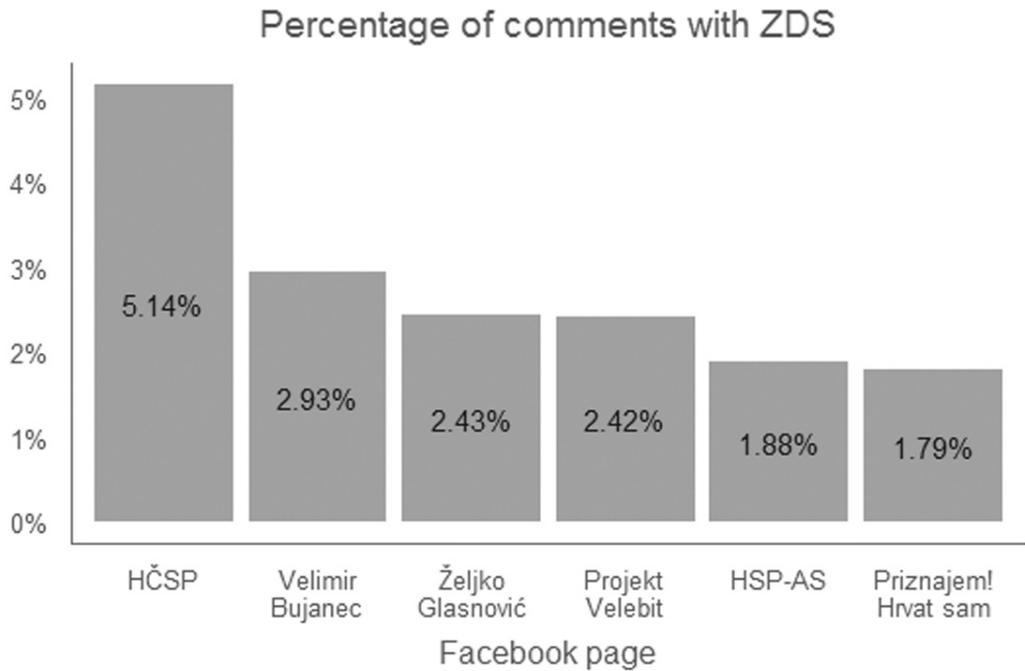
Priznajem! Hrvat sam (*I admit! I am a Croat*) is a community of Croatian patriots highly engaged in the preservation of a positive representation of the Homeland War. They were also among the instigators of the movement against the Cyrillic script in the town of Vukovar. Projekt Velebit (*Project Velebit*) is a radical right-wing association that promotes the unification of Croatian nationalists and patriots and opposes any kind of relations with Serbia or other neighboring countries with the aim of furthering cultural aspects they see as dominant Croatian values. Urbana desnica (*The Urban Right*) is an association of citizens established in 2012. Their main goals include the promotion of patriotic values and the implementation of lustration in Croatia. Vecernji.hr, an online version of the daily newspaper Vecernji list, is a conservative, right-wing news portal. Lastly, Vigilare, an association branding itself as preserving traditional and conservative values, is among the most aggressive groups in its efforts to ban abortion and it fiercely opposes same-sex marriage and the already mentioned ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

These pages are publicly accessible, known to the Croatian public, and predominantly include content of rightist character that often manifests radical tendencies.[12] The initial set containing 10 pages was manually checked and included into the analysis depending on whether they contained an observable level of antagonistic content. This was followed by the inspection of pages that were presumed to relate to the first set.

Type and frequency of hate speech

Right-wing public Facebook pages with the highest share of messages that contained the Croatian fascist salute *Za dom spremni* were HCSP (*Croatian Pure Party of Rights*) with 5.14% and Velimir Bujanec with 2.93% containing the salute. The Facebook page Zeljko Glasnovic contained 2.43% instances, whereas contained Projekt Velebit 2.42%. Figure 1 shows the listed percentages:

Figure 1. Six Facebook pages with the highest ratio of variants of the fascist salute.

Percentage of comments with ZDS

Facebook page	Percentage
HČSP	5.14%
Velimir Bujanec	2.93%
Željko Glasnović	2.43%
Projekt Velebit	2.42%
HSP-AS	1.88%
Priznajem! Hrvat sam	1.79%

Overall there were 24,814 Facebook users who liked a comment that contained the fascist salute *Za dom spremni.* In total these users gave 77,990 *likes* for the salute. The *like* feature allows users to broadcast various messages and receive social support from other users (Carr, Wohn, & Hayes, 2016), as presented in figure 2:

Figure 2. Relationships between Facebook users where a relation is defined in terms of a like between two users. The thicker connection shows that the User A liked the message of the User B containing the fascist salute Za dom spremni.
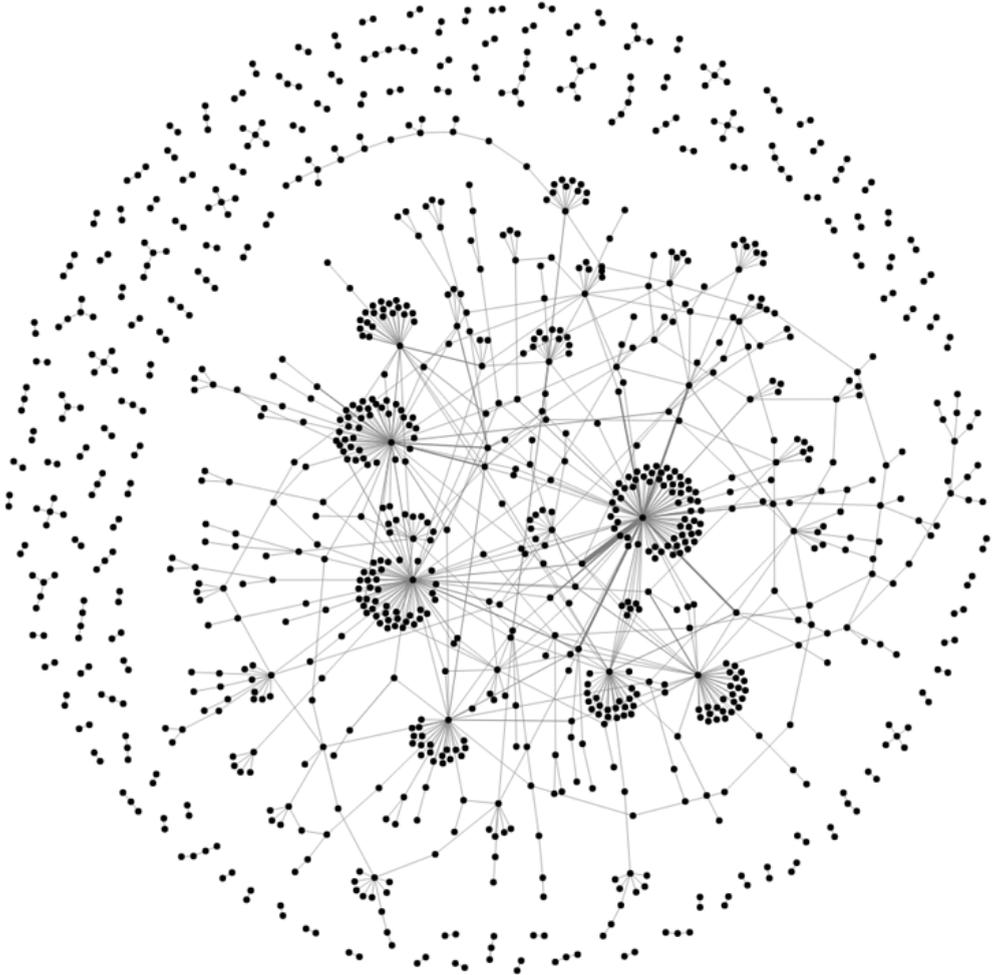
The Facebook page Priznajem! Hrvat sam (*I admit! I am a Croat*) contained 285 comments where the commentators claim that Serbs should be hanged on willow trees. These comments were manually inspected after the initial filtering with the goal of discarding all messages that judged that kind of hate speech or maintained a neutral stance. The presence of comments expressing concern over the potential lack of willow trees and the need for alternatives such as beams and birches was introduced. A comment from July 2014 states:

> "serbs on WILLOW TREES-children on BEAMS... this is the OLDCROATIAN TESTAMENT.f*** their 6 month old. In the eye."[13]

Jugocetnici (*Yugochetnik*s) were mentioned 502 times, and Srbokomunisti (*Serbocommunists*) 526. The most common variant was Srbocetnik (*Serbochetnik*) with 1,798 occurrences.

Jugounitaristi (*Yugounitarians*) were mentioned 49 times, whereas *komunjara* (commie) had 28,850 occurrences. It is important to point out the tendency of producing the other under the notion of the *Yugoslav* and *communists.* It illustrates the development of self-descriptions based on the opposition Yugoslav – non-Yugoslav, which maintains the hermetic organization of the Facebook page and shows the inclination of (re)producing the 'enemy' precisely for the purpose of excluding them. During the 1990s war the nuances of language use[14] in political discourse served to inscribe negative associations with the Yugoslav past in the national consciousness; "the 'aggressors' were referred to as 'Yugocommunists' or 'Serbocetniks', whereas Croatian soldiers were 'knights' (*vitezi*) and martyrs" (Pavlakovic, 2014, p. 32). The continuous resignification of Yugoslavia as 'the enemy' points toward the all-pervading propensity of (re)producing the enemy as a constitutive part of reshaping national identity (Jovic 2017, p. 28).[15]

Skojevci[16] appeared 1,087 times, *Petokolonasi*[17] 1,554, and *Orjunasi* had 2,982 occurrences. The high spike in usage of the terms *Orjuna* and *Orjunasi* was provoked by a Facebook post published by the Croatian president, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, during the European Football Championship 2016. During the match between Croatia and the Czech Republic, a group of hooligans from the side of the Croatian fans threw torches on the field, which resulted in a temporary break in the game. Although the president subsequently stated that she used the term *orjunasi* because she received numerous emails prior to the match warning her that *orjunasi* would cause interruptions (HINA, 3rd July 2016), this does not account to why she decided to extend the usage of that particular term on her Facebook account in order to describe the group of fans responsible for the interruption. The Orjuna – the Organization of Yugoslav Nationalists – was active from 1921 until 1929 and employed violent means in order to promote a unified Yugoslav nation. The memory of Orjuna remains marginally present in Croatian political discourse, which points to its relevance for the construction of the Croatian national identity and enemy signification (Duraskovic, 2011).

Figure 3 shows the messages that contained a variant of *Orjuna* from the outlined period.

Figure 3. Number of messages that contained a variant of Orjuna shown monthly.
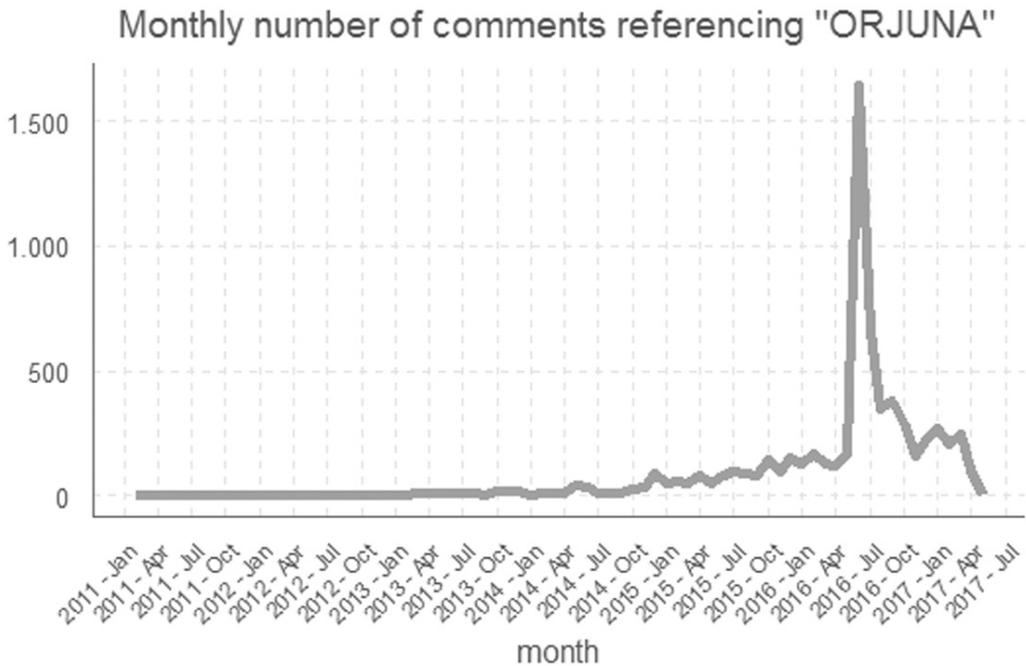
Jasenovac included 9,055 occurrences and *Bleiburg* 4 765. Jasenovac was a concentration camp active from 1941 to 1945 in the Nazi puppet state of NDH. The debates and conflicting narratives concerning its nature and position within the Croatian historical statehood narrative (Bellamy, 2003) have been on the increase since the return of the right-wing party HDZ and characterized by a prevalent rise of historical revisionism that extended into various instances of Croatian society. One salient example of the aforementioned circumstances is The Jasenovac Triple Camp Research Society (*Drustvo za istrazivanje trostrukog logora Jasenovac*) founded in 2014 and consisting of deniers of the Ustasa genocide in the NDH. Another example is the 'triple' Jasenovac commemoration that has been held for the past three years. Namely, the representatives of the Jewish, Serb, and anti-fascist organizations have boycotted the official commemoration to the victims of the Ustasa concentration camp due to the failure of the Croatian government to intervene in the increased usage of the Ustasa insignia, primarily the fascist salute *Za dom spremni.* Therefore, three separate commemorations are organized, which reflects a worrisome degree of historical revisionism and division.

Bleiburg, a frequently employed term on the presented Facebook pages, refers to another controversial point in contemporary Croatia. Bleiburg is a town in Austria where fleeing troops and members of the Nazi-aligned Independent State of Croatia surrendered and were handed to the Yugoslav Partisans in May 1945. The ideological divisions drawing upon the symbolic legacies of the Partisans or Ustase are nowadays present in multiple social arenas as the appropriation of the commemoration by nationalists perpetuates its controversial manifestation (Pavlakovic, Brentin, & Paukovic, 2018).[18]

Mode of dissemination

Facebook functions as a semiosphere in itself and also as a part of a larger semiosphere, i.e. the World Wide Web. Facebook is composed of various forms of media as cultural content and expression where pages, communities, comments, and posts can be observed as individual semiotic unities establishing mutual contact (Madisson & Ventsel, 2018). The capability of describing itself is seen as the highest form of a semiotic system's structural organization (Lotman, 1990) and it is manifested in the formation of culture-specific regulations, laws, myths, customs, institutions, etc. Although the sphere constituted with radical right interactions is a narrow sub-sphere of Facebook, we can observe this dynamic online as well since Facebook functions as a whole and contains various pages, groups, and communities that are individual parts and parts of that whole simultaneously. This means we can speak about the process of self-description that creates the ideal self-portrait of the selected Facebook pages as semiotic unities. Some instances of self-description include notions of patriotic values, conservativism, culture of life[19], lustration, marriage, Croatianhood, and national identity.

However, the lack of instances of self-description, as is the case on the Facebook pages Narod.hr (*The People*) and Priznajem! Hrvat sam (*I admit! I am a Croat*) notion towards the importance of meaningful absence. Namely, the term "minus-device" as "the meaningful absence of structural elements that influences the perception of the text" (Semenenko, 2012, p. 85). Grounded in formalism and re-defined by Lotman, meaningful absence points to elements that do not exist in the text but still compose an intrinsic part of the text while being located somewhere "in-between" passages/sections of the text (Semenenko, 2012, p. 85). In the online sphere the "in-between" can be found in the multiplicity of other structural elements constituting a Facebook page such as topics, posts, likes, and shares.

As opposed to the lack of instances of self-description we may also encounter cases when it is explicit. An example of this is the Facebook page Projekt Velebit and its official website *Project Velebit – An Association for the Protection of National Interest.*[20] Under the section *The Scheme of the Program Principles*, the third point forms its dominant description by stating:

> **PROJECT VELEBIT**, by cherishing the traditional Croatian national values, has a specific goal of realizing a wide support of nationally conscious Croatians and Croatian citizens who reject any form of state and law regional association, regardless of whether it is Yugoslavism or some other formal or informal unification with Serbia, or with some of the historical pretenders to Croatian territory from the Austrian, Hungarian, Italian or similar, closer or distant, European neighborhood. **PROJECT VELEBIT** stands against any form of servility and state minimalism as a worldview.[21]

The observable hermetic organization is a distinguishing attribute of the selected Facebook pages as semiotic unities. They are oriented toward the preservation of the existing order and the maintenance of rigid boundaries, which means that the *self* and the *other* are used as ontological categories. This defies the dialogic principle of communication and consequently hinders the production of new messages (Lotman, 1990) and with it the appearance of alternative perspectives. In order to sustain the existing order of the semiotic unity, the boundary serves as a filter that controls the intrusion of outside information and divides the *self* from the *other* (Lotman, 2005).

Elements that do not fit in the established self-description of a Facebook page are suppressed and/or eliminated from the center (Lotman, Uspensky, & Mihaychuk, 1978).[22] In radical right online communities, "information is frequently created according to an antithetical

model that separates the world into two camps in a binary opposition: moral and immoral, beneficial and harmful, friends and enemies" (Madisson & Ventsel, 2016, p. 333). Therefore, semiotic unities that are organized in such a way often avoid external impact and do not perceive difference as something potentially fruitful, but rather dangerous (Lotman, Uspensky, & Mihaychuk, 1978). In order to sustain the hermetic organization of a given Facebook page, perspectives and insights that are perceived as threatening to it are subject to evaluation and/or automatic exclusion. The process of elimination can be automatic or manual, depending on the internal hierarchy of the Facebook page as a semiotic unity. Administrators and moderators of these pages often fulfill the function of the boundary by limiting certain content in advance; this is usually found on the level of self-description, or more explicitly and in the case of Facebook groups, by making the group closed or secret. Another way includes filtering the content manually by evaluating the content before publication or removing it after it has been published. The mode of dissemination inevitably influences the features and dynamics of the socio-communicative functions of hate speech. Facebook and its dynamic and interactive nature, the capacity to contest and (re)produce meanings instantaneously (Brown, 2018) opens up a new dimension for the exploration of new forms of old conflicts on the example of hate speech practices.

Socio-communicative functions of hate speech

Building a sense of community, instantaneous communication, and interaction with like-minded individuals that would not necessarily be able to connect otherwise (Brown, 2018) has become a distinguishing feature of social networks. In the case of data presented in this article, we observed hate speech that targeted members of the Serb minority and serves to share and reaffirm the existing values and attitudes among like-minded people, consequently excluding anything that fails to fall into that category. Furthermore, the degree of anonymity present among most Facebook users makes it easier to imprint meanings they are more inclined to since they operate with a mere impression of others.

Diverse textual fragments such as the fascist salute *Za dom spremni* followed by Jugocetnici, *Srbocetnici, Srbokomunisti, Jasenovac,* and *Bleiburg* function as manifestations of the perceived threat of the *other*, i.e. Serbs, for the establishment and maintenance of the unity among the Croatian people. Here we can observe the tendency to develop self-descriptions based on binary oppositions. Since these textual fragments are imbued with conflicting ideas, memories, and representations, the process of self-description fulfills two goals: the first goal is to aid the unification of those fragments in order to maintain the hermetic organization of the Facebook page as a semiotic unit, while the second goal prioritizes contact with those whose ideal self-portrait corresponds with theirs. The unification of heterogeneous textual fragments serves to frame them as a cultural text for the in-group; since it reveals "a capacity to condense information, it *acquires memory*" (Lotman, 2014 [1988], p. 55). Under these conditions the text conveys information, but also transforms messages and develops new ones, due to which its socio-communicative functions become more complex (Lotman, 2014 [1988], p. 55).

1. "Communication between addressant and addressee. A text fulfills the function of a message from the bearer of information to the audience" (Lotman, 2014 [1988]: 55). The informative function of the text gains prevalence due to the hermetic organization of the select-

ed Facebook pages and the agenda of preserving the established boundaries of the semiotic unity in question. Shared between the users on these pages, the fascist salute *Za dom spremni* serves to connect users to those sharing a compatible worldview, while either manually or automatically excluding messages that do not fit into this model, which consequently produces messages that are equally encoded and reinforce the prevailing worldview (i.e. *Jugocetnici, Srbocetnici*). As pointed out in the article "Viral Communication and the Formation of Counterpublics", the process of sharing viral texts "which depict some groups, persons and so on in a negative light, this logic of exclusion simultaneously functions as a mechanism of identity-creation in the viral community" (Ventsel, 2017, p. 372). The inherent viral[23] feature of the Internet enables the reinforcement of those functions by *liking* and/or *sharing* the messages, which make them available to a much wider audience.

2. "Communication between the audience and the cultural tradition. A text fulfills the function of a collective cultural memory. In this capacity it discloses a capacity for continual replenishment and for retrieving some aspects of the information stored in it and temporarily or totally forgetting others" (Lotman, 2014 [1988], p. 55). Viral texts and messages "can act as memory triggers that bring the texts lost in cultural periphery back into circulation" (Ventsel, 2017, p. 372). In this respect the fascist salute *Za dom spremni* functions as a trigger for particular cultural texts related to the World War II NDH to resurface when they come into contact with specific messages. In the case of the current analysis, this is observed in the use and resignification of the fascist salute and the messages arising from it that serve to strengthen group ties and exclude the *other*. At the same time the messages are re-signified to fit the established center of the semiotic unit/Facebook page by being framed around the dominant/central ideas of national identity and the notion of Croatianness, the ideal self-portrait of the given Facebook pages.

3. "Communication of the reader with himself. […] During this type of communication […], a text plays the role of mediator, helping to reorganize the personality of the reader and change its structural self-orientation and the extent of its links with meta-cultural constructions" (Lotman, 2014 [1988], p. 55). The importance of the 'I-I' relation in communication and the process of auto-communication comes to light. According to Lotman, in the 'I-s/he' system the addresser remains the same while transferring a message to another person (Lotman, 1990). However, in the 'I-I' system the addresser influences and restructures his/her essence as well, if we consider individuals as mini-cultures shaped by distinctive cultural codes in continuous reproduction and negotiation. The functions and potential of the 'I-I' relation do not only become discernible during practices such as prayer or when talking to oneself, but they become apparent in instances of perceiving the seemingly same things in completely different ways, as is the case when we re-read our favorite book periodically or watch a movie numerous times. Cultural codes constituting people are correspondingly dynamic and ensure the necessary element of difference in order to produce new meanings and interpretations. In the case of the data presented on the selected Facebook pages, the circulating messages serve to either reaffirm, oppose, or modify the user's internal values and beliefs, depending on the current hierarchy of their cultural codes. The fascist salute and the accompanying textual fragments can serve as catalysts for self-reflection of a user; the process of liking and/or transforming them inevitably positions the user for or against particular values (Ventsel, 2017). Moreover, giving and receiving social support by using the *like* feature

(Carr, Wohn, & Hayes, 2016) reinforces further communication between users and strengthens their online community and the organization of the Facebook pages in question.

4. "Communication of the reader with the text. Manifesting intellectual properties, a highly organized text ceases to be merely a mediator in the act of communication. […] For both the author (addressant) and the reader (addressee), it may work as an independent intellectual structure, playing an active and independent role in dialogue" (Lotman, 2014 [1988], pp. 55-56). As emphasized throughout this article, the fascist salute *Za dom spremni* and the textual fragments that accompany it, merge by means of self-description and consequently (re)produce a hermetic sphere of communication. However, due to interactivity being one of the main features of hyper textuality (Ventsel, 2017, p. 374), the multiplicity of modes by which a user can respond to content inevitably rises. Therefore, in addition to being continuously shared and/or modified, the text develops its own dynamic within the online sphere while making the dynamics of power relations more explicit. As pointed out by Ventsel (2017), the feature of interactivity raises the potential to emancipate from power relations and allows the users to modify and transform the content to their liking. This transformation can fulfill a function of a political statement, e.g. it can be directed toward the status of the fascist salute in public discourse or the position of the Serb minority in Croatia. Interactivity further enables the formation of viral communities that are formed based on shared values, while the new transformations of texts can be used to contest the authority of a hegemonic discourse (Ventsel, 2017), or to support and reaffirm it.

5. "Communication between a text and the cultural context. In this case the text is not an agent of a communicative act, but a full-fledged participant in it, as a source or a receiver of information" (Lotman, 2014 [1988], p. 56). The relation of a text to the cultural context is either metaphorical or metonymical. In the first sense "the text is perceived as a substitute for the overall context to which it is, in a certain respect, equivalent", whereas in the second "a text represents the context as a part of the whole" (Lotman, 2014 [1988], p. 56). Online the text passes rapidly from one context to another and thus "it may enter into different relations with its different structural levels" (Lotman, 2014 [1988], p. 56). Depending on the online context in which it finds itself, the text either reaffirms and strengthens its position, as is the case with the Facebook pages presented in this paper, or it is suppressed and/or excluded from it in cases where it does not fit the self-description of a Facebook page. This process is characterized by the central values of a particular semiotic unit and the subsequent processes of inclusion/exclusion. Namely, in the instances where *Za dom spremni* and its accompanying textual fragments do not fit the center of a semiotic unit/Facebook page, they will usually be eliminated from it either automatically or manually by page moderators, and consequently maintain the organization and dominant self-description of a given Facebook page. Viral texts can also be ripped out of their former contexts, whereas the reason "for their instant spreading lies in the meaningful effect of using them in a new communication situation" (Ventsel, 2017, p. 377). The functions of this can take various roles, from re-directing the public's attention from/to other current issues, to re-introducing a particular one, and re-hierarchizing existing cultural codes.

Conclusion

In this article we analyzed nationalistically motivated hate speech on selected Croatian right-wing public Facebook pages. Considering the World War II fascist salute *Za dom spremni* as a catalyst, we focused on two research topics: the type and frequency of hate speech on those pages, and the socio-communicative functions of hate speech. The type and frequency of terms uncover the prevalence of *Za dom spremni* and the following dominant notions: *Jugocetnici, Srbokomunisti, komunjara, Orjunasi, Jasenovac,* and *Bleiburg.* The central self-description of the Facebook page as a semiotic unit is built on the opposition with the notion of the *Yugoslav,* evidencing the rise of anti-communist politics of memory in Croatia (Lynch, 2017). As every description of the *other* is also a description of *us,* the prevalence of the *Yugoslav* fulfills the socio-communicative function of reproducing the idea of Croatianness as the dominant self-description. Furthermore, the process of self-description maintains a hermetic organization of the Facebook pages as semiotic unities by reinforcing the production of equally encoded messages; those that do not fit the ideal self-portrait of a given Facebook page are usually excluded from it, which consequently impedes dialogue and significantly reduces the possibility of the creation of alternative perspectives.

The advantage of self-description is that it shows us how diverse textual fragments such as *Jugocetnici, Jasenovac,* and *Bleiburg* can merge into a dominant cultural text for Facebook users and exhibit antagonistic and exclusionary tendencies as opposed to when observed separately. This emphasizes the fact that hate speech is not always explicit, which does not mean it is not potentially dangerous (Benesch, 2013). The communicative situation of the dominant cultural text online and its viral feature determine its longevity and future dynamics. The socio-communicative functions it fulfills in those circumstances include online identity creation through the exclusion of the *other,* resignification of specific messages (*Za dom spremni*) to strengthen group ties, reaffirming existing values and beliefs, contestation or support of authorities, and making a particular issue salient in public discourse.

This framework can provide a base for the further exploration of meaning-making mechanisms and discursive strategies that influence and shape hate speech and its online dynamic. The potential role of hate speech in political elections as well as in the processes of nation-building is of particular interest, especially in post-conflict societies such as Croatia where the proliferation of hate speech reinforces symbolic divisions in the society. Finally, future research could include a comparative analysis of hate speech in Croatia used by right-wing and left-wing groups, as it can produce a valuable insight into the ways how they model reality. This in turn would help develop a more comprehensive view of hate speech practices, its functions and features, and the narratives that fuel and surround it.

Notes

[1] See https://rm.coe.int/1680505d5b.

[2] For a recent, detailed insight into the importance of the *Homeland War* myth and its role in the construction of the national identity of contemporary Croatian society, see Dejan Jovic *Rat i mit. Politika identiteta u suvremenoj Hrvatskoj,* 2017.

[3] For an overview of particular cases of hate speech in the former Yugoslav region, see Asja Roksa Zubcevic, Stanislav Bender, and Jadranka Vojvodic *Media regulatory Authorities and Hate Speech,* 2017, and Elliot et al. "Hate Speech: Key concept paper", in *Media, Conflict and Democratisation* (MeCoDEM), 2016.

[4] See Sabrina P. Ramet "The NDH – An Introduction.", 2006, and Vjeran Pavlakovic "Opet *Za dom spremni.* Desetotravanjske komemoracije u Hrvatskoj nakon 1990. godine", 2008.

[5] The penal code: https://zakonipropisi.com/hr/zakon/kazneni-zakon/325-clanak-javno-poticanje-na-nasilj e-i-mrznju.

[6] https://developers.facebook.com/docs/graph-api/.

[7] https://www.r-project.org/about.html.

[8] https://github.com/pablobarbera/Rfacebook.

[9] Replies were introduced to Facebook in 2013 as a comment threading option.

[10] Yuri Lotman relied on cybernetics during the further development and application of the notion of self-description. Namely, that dialogue between semiotics and cybernetics rested upon the aim of creating a meta-language that would describe the dynamics of both natural and cultural systems, as well as their intertwinement. See Mari-Liis Madisson "Self-description", 2016, and Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak: A History of Soviet Cybernetics*, 2002.

[11] See http://hcsp.hr/znakovlje/.

[12] As in the case of hate speech, it is difficult to establish a clear definition of the radical right or the extreme right, although certain patterns and features are possible to outline. According to Cas Mudde, certain organizations, parties, and/or movements can be characterized as more extreme than others, and the recurring features include the presence of nationalism, xenophobia, racism, anti-democratic sentiment, and support for a strong state (Mudde, 1995: 206; Mudde, 2000: 11).

[13] "srbe na VRBEEE–cede na GREDE..to je STAROHRVATSKI ZAVIJET.jebem im dete od 6 mj. U oko." – my translation from Croatian – K.D.

[14] In her book *Jezik i nacionalizam* published in 2010, the author Snjezana Kordic raised a lot of debate regarding the position of the Croatian language and the question concerning its status as a unique language or a dialect of the Serbo-Croatian. She adamantly argues that Croatian has undergone a purification process in the 1990s as a result of the nationalistic politics of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ – *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*).

[15] Jovic brings forth the Declaration of the *Homeland War* as the paradigmatic example of this process. According to him, those who do not share the myth of the *Homeland War* are proclaimed Serbs, i.e. the *other*, which leads us to the creation of imaginary Serbs. Accordingly, the production of the enemy would continue regardless of whether Serbs are present in Croatia, most probably in the forms of Croatians that are perceived and represented as not authentic enough, "not good enough Croatians" (Jovic 2017:27-28).

[16] The League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia.

[17] Usually used to describe a group of people who coordinate and engage secretly in conducting any kind of subversive activities against the state or a regime; the members are labelled as traitors.

[18] See http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/croats-convicted-for-ustasa-salutes-on-bleiburg-07-05-2 018/1431/4.

[19] As manifested in opposing abortion, contraception, artificial insemination, euthanasia, and based on the belief in the sanctity of life.

[20] Projekt Velebit – Udruga za zastitu nacionalnog interesa. My translation from Croatian – K.D. Available at: http://projektvelebit.com/.

[21] **PROJEKT VELEBIT**, njegujuci tradicionalne hrvatske nacionalne vrijednosti, za poseban cilj ima ostvariti siroku podrsku nacionalno osvijestenih Hrvata i hrvatskih gradana koji odbacuju svaki oblik drzavnopravnoga regionalnoga udruzivanja, bez obzira je li rijec o jugoslavenstvu ili nekom drugom obliku formalnoga ili neformalnoga ujedinjavanja sa Srbijom, ili s nekima od povijesnih pretendenata na hrvatski teritorij iz austrijskoga, madarskoga, talijanskoga ili inoga, blizega ili daljega, europskog susjedstva. **PROJEKT VELEBIT** stoji nasuprot svakog oblika sluganstva i drzavnoga minimalizma kao svjetonazora – My translation from Croatian – K.D. http://projektvelebit.com/programska-nacela/.

[22] According to Lotman, Uspensky, and Mihaychuk (1978) in their approach to culture as the long-term memory of a community, how it is filled can be distinguished in three ways: a quantitative increase in the amount of knowledge, a hierarchic appraisal of what has been recorded in the memory, and lastly, forgetting. The process of selection of texts according to the semiotic norms of the center is as equally relevant as the process of remembering; on a wider scale we can observe the dynamic of inclusion-exclusion of ele-

ments on any level of the semiosphere/culture. For instance, the elimination of languages/scripts, historical narratives, renaming streets and public squares, etc.

[23] Accordingly, a viral text is understood here as "a heterogeneous set of texts that share the common characteristic that they spread over a short span of time, from person to person, reaching a wide audience" (Ventsel, 2017: 369).

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