

'mujahedins'

IN THE SUMMER of 1997 I did a BBC radio programme on xenophobia in the Czech Republic. One of the people I interviewed, a minister, asked me whether there were any visible differences between Serbs and Croats. "Of course," I said, trying to be humorous. "Just look at my nose. We Serbs have beaks, whereas Croats have those ugly snouts."

The minister gave me a strange look. Had my exaggeration been any subtler, I would probably have easily confirmed his assumptions. He was rather familiar with our faces (having spent several holidays in what was once called Tito's Yugoslavia), but confronted with news of war and destruction, he had begun to believe that "when differences between ethnic groups in society had become so catastrophic, these differences just *had* to be *visible*" (Mark Thompson, Balkans

(Thompson, *ibid*). On the other hand, in the Balkans, ethnicity "has been promoted as a term by nationalists who wanted their claims to souls and territory to have more gravitas, more depth, than the term 'nation' and its cognates, tainted as they still are by their status in Titoist discourse, could give it". "Ethnicity has no such taint, it has a more elemental ring," says Thompson, concluding that "since ethnicity has been exploited so much during the last 15 years in the Balkans, it has become quite as disgraceful as its grisly cousin 'race'".

'Muslim extremists'

What else but 'racism' to call what we have experienced in the Balkans, both in everyday life and through the media, ever since Slobodan

For many inhabitants of the Balkan peninsula, it has been made very difficult to like their mirror image.

Programme Director for the International Crises Group, Brussels, speaking at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, September 2000).

In his book *The Warrior's Honor*, Michael Ignatieff tries to answer a similar question by quoting a Serbian soldier fighting in Croatia: "We smoke 'Drina', they smoke 'Drava' (the two most popular brands of Serbian and Croatian cigarettes)." Being heavy smokers, and always trying to be funny, if not cynical, is not the end of similarities between the two biggest enemies in the Balkans. In fact, there are many more similarities than differences between them. For these and many other reasons, Ignatieff employs Freud's thesis of the 'narcissism of minor differences' when describing similarities between the two ethnic groups.

For many inhabitants of the Balkan peninsula, it has been made very difficult to like their mirror image. Everything and everyone – from history books, to the politicians, to the media – have been telling them that their mirror image, the others, other ethnic groups, other nations – THEY have made 'our lives miserable'. Whereas WE are 'fighting for freedom', 'defending', 'guarding' and 'protecting' our 'native soil'.

The last 15 years of the Balkan's bloody history have proved that we can talk here about racism of the worst kind, even though the word itself hasn't been used much in the region – except when tainting the 'others'. Mark Thompson explains why this is so. He talks about the term 'ethnicity' as used in two different ways: in Britain and in the Balkans. In the UK, Thompson says, the term ethnicity has been promoted "in reaction to the fascist appropriation of 'race'"

Milosevic got into power in 1987? I will use here some examples from countries at war, as well as from those that haven't (yet) experienced the war. It should be noted, as media and human rights activist Mariana Lenkova does, that with the exceptions of Greece and Turkey, "all Balkan countries are former communist dictatorships, a fact which makes people *a priori* less sensitive towards democratic values and human rights" ("Black & White vs. Diversity", *Greek Helsinki Monitor*, 1998).

The Roma (popularly known as Gypsies) are the biggest ethnic minority in Europe – and the most vulnerable. Mostly populating former communist countries, they have always been at the bottom of society. Their status has deteriorated with the arrival of 'democracy' in various countries. They are now "blamed for everything – from the worst economic and social problems to the everyday petty crimes" (Lenkova, *ibid*).

The Roma are a scapegoat nation, found a study conducted by the European Centre for War, Peace, and the News Media (ECWPNM). The ECWPNM found ample evidence, including a company ad published in March in the Romanian newspaper *Anuntul Telefonie*: "Total Protect seeks security guards ... Roma excluded." Romanian law is explicit: "Discrimination based on race, sex, language, origin, social origin, ethnic identity or nationality is **forbidden**." Both Total Protect and *Anuntul Telefonie* are yet to be punished for this violation of the law.

Generally speaking, media in the Balkans, in Lenkova's words, "recycle prejudicial concepts related to the Roma again

The last 15 years of the Balkan

'fascists'

Beaks/Snouts, Drina/Drava

The media's markers of race and ethnicity in the Balkans



Milica Pesic, fired from TV Serbia during the Balkans war for refusing to report propaganda, outlines how the region's media promote racial and ethnic strife – and argues the urgent need to 'report diversity'...

'jihad warriors'

and again". Here are some headlines from Bulgarian newspapers: "Gypsies Swallow Thousands of Turtles"; "Gypsy Boys Chopped Two Old Men with an Axe for a Lump of Cheese"; "A Gypsy Split the Skull of an Old Woman for Revenge"; "The Gypsies: Unarmed but hungry and very dangerous; Dark-skinned Bulgarians".

So much for peacetime. Wartime has been even worse. Tens of thousands of people, mostly Muslims, have been killed just for not being from 'my' ethnic group. Talking about the Balkan media in *Forging the War*, the very first book on media (mis)behaviour in the Balkans, Mark Thompson says: "Discrimination was either a policy priority, or a necessary side-effect of policy, and the media were used accordingly. Used as a state-monopoly, like the army, the police and taxation."

The case of TV Serbia has become the best known example of how to use media to make people think, believe and do what political leaders want them to. Completely in the hands

bombardment of TV Serbia) cost \$2 million a day.

However, I leave the blame with us, the Balkan people. If a marriage is not good, anyone can destroy it. And ours obviously didn't work. Yet, we did our best not to fix it.

Tens of thousands of people, mostly Muslims, have been killed just for not being from 'my' ethnic group.

Some of us journalists tried to: after being fired for refusing to take part in war propaganda in our then-Yugoslav republics, we started AIM, the Alternative Information Network. We managed to produce and publish un-biased articles on what was happening around us – so that independent newspapers, say in Serbia, could have reliable analyses of events in Croatia and vice versa.

Freedom of expression, professionalism and journalism education are our basic needs. Ignorance should not be an excuse for anything. Fair, accurate, sympathetic and in-depth reporting is vital in promoting understanding between different ethnic groups. Only thus can we begin confronting irrational prejudices and challenging extremist political agendas. Such reporting provides a

critical bulwark against the inflammation of conflict, both internally and externally.

At the European Centre for War, Peace, and the News Media we pursue similar standards. In our 'Reporting Diversity' and other training projects, we try to teach our colleagues that being different is neither a privilege, nor a threat. We live in diverse societies, and journalists must reflect that diversity. The more that people recognise themselves in the media, the easier it will be for them to see it as their media too. Thus the media will have more and more impact.

'Seeing the others as myself, and seeing myself as the others' is the working title of the next phase of our training. Vive la difference!

MILICA PESIC is director of the European Centre for War, Peace, and the News Media, based in London. The Centre's main programme is the Reporting Diversity Network, and its work focuses primarily on Central and Eastern Europe and the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union.

bloody history have proved that we can talk here about racism of the worst kind, even though the word itself hasn't been used much in the region.

of Milosevic's regime, TV Serbia had only two goals: to convince people in Serbia that all their problems were created by the other ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia; and to convince them that war was inevitable.

To achieve this TV Serbia used different methods, from omitting and obscuring the news to inventing completely new events. Disturbing images and words were used continuously. Other ethnic groups were labelled 'fascists', 'mujahedins', 'jihad warriors', 'commando-terrorist groups', 'Muslim extremists' and 'Islamic fundamentalists'. On the other side, the Serbs were 'protecting' their 'native soil' and 'Serbian brave and honest history'. "The opposite ethnic group as a whole, the opposite nation as a whole, the opposite religion as a whole were proclaimed inhuman beings," says Dr Vojin Dimitrijevic, a human rights expert from Belgrade. "And if somebody is not human, then it is easier to kill, destroy, torture, humiliate them."

That propaganda was premeditated – which constitutes it as a crime. Fomenting ethnic, religious or racial hatred was prohibited by the then-Yugoslav, as well as international, laws on human rights. But no one cared. When we, journalists fired from TV Serbia, tried to find money to start a TV station that would be strong enough to compete with TV Serbia and asked for \$6 million, we were told it was too much. NATO's six-week war in 1999 against Serbia (which included



Bosnian Serbs block the road to Koraj preventing Muslim refugees from visiting their old homes.

'commando-terrorist groups'

"Ethnicity has been exploited so much during the last 15 years in the Balkans,

it has become quite as disgraceful as its grisly cousin, 'race'" – Mark Thompson