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Arkan: A villain glamorised by the media

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What role do the media play in creating or perpetuation modern myths? Focusing on the recent life and death of a notorious Serbian gangster, Dina Iordanova suggests that 'glamour' is more newsworthy than any 'victim'. In other words, it doesn't matter what you do as long as you do it with style.



The news of Arkan's death struck, by coincidence, precisely at the time I was editing part of my forthcoming book that mentioned him. It was on Saturday 15 January 2000, and I had just

written a footnote: ‘When members of my family learned that I intended to discuss Arkan critically, they tried to talk me out of writing about him fearing that I might be targeted for revenge. While I do not think that my comments on Arkan could be considered slanderous, I feel compelled to quote at least one (of many) known incidents where Arkan indeed held those who wrote about him responsible for what they wrote. “After the Belgrade newspaper *Borba* ran a report on the paramilitary leader Zeljko Raznatovic, known as Arkan, and his volunteers (who were to play a ghastly role in the first onslaught on northern Bosnia in March and April 1992), Arkan arrived at the editor’s office with two armed and uniformed bodyguards. They demanded that either *Borba* print an interview with Arkan, or they would “liquidate” Gradisa Katic, author of the offending report’ (In Mark Thompson, *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina*. London: Article 19, 1994, p.34).’

All of a sudden, Arkan was no longer alive and the fear was over. His end was just as flamboyant as his life. He had always enjoyed larger-than-life coverage, so no wonder that the news of his death made the headlines. Now I only needed to change what I had written about him to the past tense.

Arkan was the best-known Serbian villain, but not necessarily because he was the worst. Certainly, because he was one of the best looking and because of his unmatched charismatic audacity. In his media-conscious flamboyance he was superior to any other Serb public figure. While his political beliefs and behaviour were comparable to those of the radical nationalist Vojislav Seselj, there cannot be any comparison between the international media presence of the two. The nondescript, dull appearance of Seselj reduced Western media attention to him to a minimum, while Arkan’s showy nature powerfully attracted them during the past decade. It was the disproportionate media attention given to Arkan that established

him as a larger than life celebrity. In his case, a specific phenomenon came into being – the glamorised villain – and Arkan readily played along.

It was not so much because of his crimes but because of this audacious aura that he was so extensively covered. But why were the media so preoccupied with him? I think mainly because he fitted so well the pre-conceived image of what a Balkan thug should be like.

Arkan was an alias for Montenegrin Zeljko Raznatovic, a Belgrade-based businessman, one-time parliamentarian, founder and President of the Party of Serbian Unity. He was a man well connected both to Serbia's secret services and the Mafia, and leader of the paramilitary unit of the Tigers, which in 1992 had terrorised, looted, and 'cleansed' a number of towns in eastern Bosnia. In contrast to the regular state army, Arkan's Tigers had an iron discipline. Their drills were so rigorous that videos of their training sessions have been offered for sale in the martial arts category.

Arkan's official business was in sweets – pastries and ice cream, and he was said to have regularly profited from trafficking fuel against the embargo. Later on, he also bought a football team – Obilic, named after the Serbian folk hero who sacrificed himself during the Battle of Kosovo.

It was not for these activities, however, but for his exposure-conscious lifestyle and reckless attitude that he was regularly the centre of media attention. His hacienda-style home in Belgrade was one of the landmarks of nouveau rich residential architecture. Well aware of the admiration of his devoted following, in 1994 he pleased his fans by publishing a calendar featuring a different photo of him for every month. His 1995 wedding to turbo-folk singer Ceca was played out as a popular media event.¹



In a 1995 documentary exploring the criminal sub- culture of Belgrade, *See You in the Obituary* (Vidimo se u citulji, Yugoslavia, Aleksandar Knezevic and Vojslav Tufegdzic, 1995), Arkan was depicted as an inspirational role model for the younger gangsters of Novi Beograd who are the subject of the film. He appears as an embodiment of their ideas of style with his army of bodyguards and his exclusive use of top-line four-wheel-drive vehicles. In the film, Arkan is shown campaigning for the Parliament in Kosovo, and then, at his lavishly furnished headquarters, kissing the Serbian flag. Wearing a Tom Wolfe-style immaculate white suit, in a close-up he tells the camera that all he has to say is ‘I do not give a damn’—a line which he delivers in English.

The link between the criminal underworld and the nationalist paramilitaries is simple and straightforward and in Arkan’s case easy to grasp. Criminals like him have waived many of the stipulations of standard moral behaviour, but as far as patriotic feelings are concerned,

they are often seen as brave guys in possession of an inborn nobility who are ready to display superior care for the national wellbeing. They have dared to take the unconventional path of a life in danger, and they are equally daring in taking up patriotic commitment. In peaceful times they practise racketeering and trafficking and are regularly involved in coercion and violent showdowns. As soon as they hear the call of the motherland, however, they are ready to divert their energy and apply their gangland skills against the alleged enemy. The way they deal with disobedient debtors is now applied to members of an ungrateful ethnic minority, which has shown the same tendency to disobey. What in the context of everyday organised crime is a simple violent boldness becomes heroism once transposed to the context of patriotic warfare.

Telenovela background

As a media phenomenon, Arkan began domestically. A Yugoslav media scholar, Milan Milosevic, described him as a darling of Serbian media from the early 1990s, a romanticised ‘TV favourite’ who ‘was referred to as a “rest- less youth”, with some of the aura of a Rambo.’ Many legendary stories of Arkan’s glorious past were in circulation – like his daring escape from a Swedish courtroom in the 1980s where he was supposed to be tried either for drug trafficking or for a bank robbery, and from where he was abducted by his buddies who held the judges, clerks, and court security at gun point. Consistent with the telenovela style characteristic of Arkan-related developments, late in 1997 documents concerning his criminal past in Sweden mysteriously disappeared from the car of a Swedish diplomat working for the war crimes tribunal, who was *en route* from Stockholm to The Hague.

Wanted by Interpol, at home Arkan was more than just confident about his personal safety. His name would appear in the West almost every time paramilitary atrocities were

mentioned, but he was safe in that respect as well – he was not on the list of those indicted by the Hague tribunal. Until 1999, when it was announced that such an indictment had come into effect, not least because of international media pressure on the tribunal.

In the summer of 1997, CNN aired a half-hour special, *Arkan: Alleged Serbian War Lord*, with Christianne Amanpour, featuring appearances by Richard Holbrooke and Cherif Bassiouni discussing Arkan's war-crimes and raising the question why he has not been indicted. His infamous statement 'I do not give a damn!' was played again and again. The narrative made use of existing footage, such as scenes of terror in Vukovar and Zvornik, to assemble a consistent indictment of the warlord. Survivors from Osijek, Zvornik, and Bijelina were shown talking about atrocities committed by Arkan's Tigers. They were juxtaposed with footage of Arkan who says to the camera in English: 'We came to help these people', a statement further intercut with images of slaughtered civilians and Arkan, saying: 'Muslims are like wild dogs.' Amanpour talks of Arkan's links to the Yugoslav state security and authorities, shows his pre-election posters and footage of his campaigning for a parliamentary seat in Kosovo in 1993, and mentions that he was planning to run for presidency in the year 2000.

Arkan reacted publicly to this particular documentary by promising to file a libel suit. He claimed that as long as no formal indictment was laid against him, CNN was committing libel.

I cannot say what a legal argument about libel would look like in this case. I can attest, however, that Western and domestic media alike played an important role in blowing up the importance of Arkan by providing extensive coverage of all aspects of his shady activities in politics, business, and crime. So, it is difficult to say now if it was the crimes that warranted such media attention, or if it was the extensive media coverage that kept scrutiny of his

crimes going. Media coverage of him was always of a thug. The coverage itself, however, happened not because he was a thug – many others were – but because he was a charismatic and colourful one. And he was willing to play along and deliver what the media expected of him.

A thug with an aura

I first saw Arkan on Canadian TV in April 1993, interviewed at a training camp near Vukovar by TV Ontario's Steve Paikin. It was an accidental TV encounter for me. I was just flicking through the channels. What I saw was a military man with a beret, with wrinkles around smiling eyes, and I could not help stopping for a moment to see who he was. I heard Arkan speak in fairly good albeit accented English, and say things like: 'We are fighting this war with our hearts [. . .] I hate to fight but I have to fight. I have to protect my people [. . .] I have two judges – God and the Serbian people.' He emanated strength and reliability; he was a macho guy but friendly and relaxed. He insisted on being seen as a caring father who wanted to secure the peaceful sleep of his children. It was easy to take his statements at face value as the interviewer seemed to – Arkan's charisma was undeniable, he was a thug with an aura.

The best-known photograph of him is the one taken by American Ron Haviv where Arkan appears in his para-military uniform, standing in front of a tank and holding a baby tiger. He is surrounded by his boys, the Tigers, all wearing black balaclavas and holding top-of-the-line automatic rifles. There is a macho thuggish glamour in this photograph, and a John Wayne/Silvester Stallone audacity about Arkan's look.

Another photograph of Arkan, from the time of his publicity stunt-wedding to folk-singer Ceca, was widely reprinted around the world. Arkan is sitting on a chair and holding his bride on his lap, her slender long legs on display, both looking straight at the camera. And both

emanating an almost belligerent readiness to do anything for the camera. This audacious, unblinking facing down of the media seemed to fascinate and attract journalists; they readily provided the attention that Arkan demanded.

For that 1995 stunt, dubbed by the local media ‘the wedding of the century’, Arkan and Ceca had relied not so much on image consultants but rather on their own intuitive knowledge of popular taste – flamboyant is beautiful. They had managed to command media attention by exhibiting their audacity not just locally but globally.

Western media took the hook and readily publicised the event: a lavish ‘feast in times of plague’-style wedding of a charismatic warlord and a turbo-folk queen. The over-whelming feeling of dependency and political insecurity in Belgrade had little in common with the assertive message seen in the wedding, an over-the-top demonstration of confident self-determination.

The spectacle of the wedding was videotaped, cut down to two hours by a local production company, and then released for sale at the store operated by Red Star football club in Belgrade. The proceedings from the sale were donated to the Third Child foundation, which makes grants in support of ethnic Serbian mothers.

For the 140-minute duration of the tape the groom changed costume three times, the bride four. It was a variety show with something for everyone. For the peasants the couple posed as villagers, honouring tradition and even coming up with folklore elements invented especially for the wedding. For the fans of Orthodoxy there was an elaborate church ritual. For the monarchists they performed as a royal couple. For the secular urbanites they engaged in an elegant civil ceremony. For global audiences they staged an American-style gala dinner at the

same Intercontinental hotel where Arkan was to meet his death five years later. And for popular taste there was turbo-folk and belly dancing.

Media manipulation

At the time of Belgrade's bombing of Kosovo, Arkan was one of the first people that Western journalists rushed to seek out, particularly because they had hurriedly declared that he had gone to Kosovo to 'cleanse' and now needed to verify their story. True to his love of the media, Arkan did not let them search for long but readily popped up in person at the Hyatt hotel where most of the journalists were stationed. Once again networks from around the world gave him a round of attention and reported his presence in Belgrade. That a resident of Belgrade was, in fact, in Belgrade, seemed to be a valid international news item as long as Arkan was concerned.

This Belgrade appearance, alongside his glamorous wife, all in white fur for the occasion, gave him top coverage, particularly in the British tabloid press. Although the essence of the coverage was supposed to be Arkan's attempt to deny Western media reports that he was actually busy 'cleansing' Albanians in Kosovo – a piece of news which barely made much sense in the context of the overall hostile coverage of the Serbs — the tabloids simply made good use of the images that the event supplied. Some ran a cover photograph of the couple, with the headline *The Beauty and the Beast*.

It was around this time that the announcement of his indictment by the Hague tribunal was finally made public. Always ready to talk to the media, Arkan was interviewed for the special issue of BBC 1's flagship political programme *Panorama* in March 1999. Soon afterwards the buzz around Arkan faded. As Maggie O'Kane described it in *The Observer* (January 16, 2000): 'Later, as the nights of the Kosovo war dragged on and the press was confined to Belgrade and the Intercontinental, journalists stopped paying him any attention and he would

have a slightly offended look on his handsome face when people stopped looking on from their late dinner to draw breath at his presence. Arkan was getting fat and becoming old hat.’

While earlier she had thought of Arkan as ‘a brilliant and charming TV performer, who left interviewers struggling with his articulate defence of himself as a “nationalist and servant of the motherland”,’ now he no longer seemed to matter. O’Kane and others could not help noticing that in 1999 it was actually him seeking out the journalists, particularly the ones who were new in town, and that it was somehow too easy to get an interview with him. He was desperate to impress, but it no longer seemed to work. One wonders why – because people no longer feared him, or because he was getting fat. I am inclined to think that the early signs of obesity had a lot to do with the changing media attitudes.

In such a context, it seems he met a timely death. That news, besides making the front page, occupied whole pages of coverage in the leading newspapers of the world and it was still not too late for him to be remembered as ‘the most able self-publicist in Serbia’ (Misha Glenny, obituary in *The Guardian*, January 19, 2000). More details of his life were covered and made publicly known than any of the details concerning the personal lives of the other war criminals responsible for the violence in the Yugoslav break-up. There was still interest in him and the media did not miss the chance to run a last round of pictures.

Media which rely on visuals, such as newspapers and TV networks, want them to impress, to be memorable. So they tend to run pictures of distinctive looking people more often than of people with a nondescript appearance. This is the case with criminals of all kinds – barely a media report on Charlie Manson or Jeffrey Dahmer remains without their photo alongside. This is also happening with the villains of the Yugoslav succession wars – pictures and footage of the good-looking perpetrators are more likely to make the media than pictures and footage of those whose faces do not intrigue. And this is clearly so in Arkan’s case. When in

1998 an indicted Bosnian Serb leader, General Radislav Krstic, known as ‘the butcher of Srebrenica’, was arrested and deported to the Hague, Western news media repeatedly showed a proud-warrior-style photograph of him – a handsome white-haired man with piercing blue eyes, in a black beret and uniform. The footage of Krstic’s subsequent court appearance flashed only briefly in the media – maybe because here he appeared uninteresting, a balding and bland-looking man, stripped of glorious military paraphernalia and wearing a plain suit.

In 1999 when another indicted Serbian General was arrested in Vienna, very few papers and networks ran pictures of him – he was short, plump, and lacking distinctive looks. Seemingly, the boring looks of one of the main thugs, General Mladic, granted him only peremptory appearances in the media. His face is well known around the world only because it has been shown so many times over a long period since 1992. The first man to go on trial at the Hague, Dusko Tadic, the guard from Omarska, also often featured in the media. Albeit short, he was in possession of a ‘handsome’ face (*The New Yorker*), and his photo appeared in the press quite often. Footage of Zeljko Meakic, the young and good-looking commander of Omarska, somewhat reminiscent of Arkan in his appearance, featured repeatedly in the documentary *Calling the Ghosts* (USA/Croatia, Mandy Jacobson and Karmen Jelincic, 1996).

Arkan’s story is the ultimate proof that much more individualised attention was paid to the villains than to the victims in the Balkan conflict. It also gives a strong indication that a good looking criminal, who fits the idea of what a Balkan thug should be like, may stand a better chance of a career in public relations than politicians or victims’ advocates. For only a few ‘dark Balkan subjects’ have managed to remain in the media spotlight for so long. ■

Note

1 Turbo-folk is a contemporary Yugoslav musical genre, characterized by a fusion of folk melodies, rock rhythms, and oriental influences (chalga). Its performers all share nationalist orientation, flamboyant looks, and provocative dance kitsch manners. It has received tremendous commercial promotion and it is particularly popular with the lesser educated masses. It is considered to be one of the main non-traditional vehicles of nationalist propaganda in Serbia.

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