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NATIONALIST AND RACIST TENDENCIES ACROSS EASTERN EUROPE EXPOSED IN RECENT DOCUMENTARIES

Dina IORDANOVA @ Astra Film Festival, Sibiu, 2018



Nationalism is rising across (eastern) Europe

Widely shared perceptions of the region formerly referred to as 'Eastern Europe' (and nowadays consisting of variously positioned entities, variably known as the Visegrad Group, Central East Europe, the Western Balkans, and so on) would probably have it that it is only the Serbs that are

known for their nationalist tendencies. After all, weren't they the ones responsible for most of the ethnic cleansing across the lands of former Yugoslavia? Or so the popular narrative would have it. Such an opinion could easily be formed based on the fact that mainstream media reporting on developments in these parts of Europe over the past twenty-five years has been nothing short of sporadic and superficial.

Those who are observing the region more closely will react, perhaps, by saying that countries like Croatia, Hungary, and Poland have a particularly problematic record on matters of nationalism and race these days. But all other countries in the region can easily be added to the list. Even if not stigmatized as the Serbs, it only takes a little digging elsewhere to uncover ugly episodes that reveal deeply problematic hateful practices, in most cases directed toward their own minority populations (of which the Roma are the largest), or against the global flow of refugees that pass through or seek to settle in these territories.

Traditionally 'white' countries that have seen only moderate growth of multicultural diversity in the past two decades, these lands are producing a fair share of the xenophobic and racist discourse that is found across Europe nowadays. It is a situation exacerbated by elected governments that display fascist tendencies at worst or populist tendencies at best. The position of the dominant religious organizations, be in the Catholic or Orthodox Church, adds fuel to the fire.

It is no wonder, therefore, that it is left to intrepid East European documentary filmmakers to make the effort of uncovering societal ills where mainstream media fear to tread. Once again, documentary is working toward correcting the record by revealing the ugly logic of racism and xenophobia.

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I recently served on the jury at the [ASTRA International Film Festival](#) in Sibiu, Transylvania (Romania). Even if not explicitly acknowledged in its title, this is a renowned documentary gathering that has been around for a quarter of a century already. It awards a number of prestigious prizes and is highly esteemed by documentarians around the world, as testified by my fellow-jurors, who included important festival personalities such as Ally Derks (founder and long-standing director of IDFA), Haruka Hama (artistic director of the Yamagata International Documentary Festival), Simon Kilmurry (executive director of the L.A.-based International Documentary Association), and Romanian directors Cristi Puiu and Alexandru Solomon.

Out of ten titles, the East European section at Astra included two important films that spoke to the growth of racism in the region – both produced in the Czech Republic. The first one was [THE WHITE WORLD ACCORDING TO DALIBOREK](#) (2017) by respected Czech documentarian Vit Klusak (best known for CZECH DREAM, 2004). The film follows around a protagonist who is representative of today's mainstream working classes, a 'white trash'-type of character who is not hesitant to display his neo-Nazi inclinations in any form he manages to. Some extreme statements – mostly against the Roma and refugees, but also others — are made directly to camera. Words that would not only qualify as 'hate speech' but should be leading to direct prosecution — of which there is no evidence — are on the record here. A truly disturbing trip to Auschwitz sees the protagonist and his associates rehearse asking the well-known questions that probe the level of Cyclon-B residue in the gas chambers' walls...To some this may appear as a set up. Not to me – during a visit to Auschwitz near Krakow in the Fall of 2016, I personally had the chance to observe a group of Belgian neo-Nazis who were also on a visit there, looking pretty much the same as Daliborek, asking the same questions...



Vit Klusak's THE WIDE WORLD ACCORDING TO DALIBOREK

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Then, there was [WHEN THE WAR COMES](#) (2018) by Jan Gebert, a film which is set in Slovakia and to which we gave the prize for best film at ASTRA. It follows around an upwardly mobile young protagonist — a self-styled leader of a paramilitary army. He may be not particularly educated but who certainly knows how to make a good impression at the local administrative offices, with his neatly cut hair and pressed shirts. His way is smoothed by the admiring local clerks who promptly accept all documentation he has prepared, to legalize the paramilitary army that he leads into training in the nearby woods on weekends. Just as the world is marking the 80th anniversary of Kristalnacht and repeats 'never again', these young people are engaged in militarized drills that look so reminiscent of what is supposed to never be repeated...Who would the war be against, when it comes? This remains not clearly identified,

but we somehow roughly know – it will be against the Roma, against the refugees, against the ‘foreign’, against all those who are not ‘us.’



Jan Gebert's WHEN THE WAR COMES: Getting ready for combat against Roma, refugees and various ‘others’

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It has been nearly a year now since the ‘release’ of [Adela Peeva](#)'s documentary LOVG LIVE BULGARIA (2017), yet another installment in the work of this courageous director, this time focused on exposing extreme nationalist tendencies among Bulgaria's youth. Mainly shot in and around the city of Stara Zagora and featuring young people, ranging from ages between 14 and 20, it reveals a degree of hateful radicalism and extreme nationalism that is difficult to imagine exists.

The list of festival participations for this alarming film is alarmingly short. I had the chance to see it, out of competition, at the Astra festival (where the director, pictured, engaged in a Q and A), but I realize that very few people will be able to see it beyond the festival.

The film is co-produced by Bulgarian National Television, yet it has not been broadcast. Who knows if it will be broadcast at all...I understand that it is a bunch of history teachers from across the country, ashamed by what is shown in the film and ashamed by the fact that nationalism seems to be flourishing in school settings, that have taken it upon themselves to showcase the film wherever possible in special screenings. And the director is traveling this clandestine circuit in an effort to ensure the film is seen.



Adela Peeva's LONG LIVE BULGARIA: Stara Zagora's teenagers revel in extreme nationalism that is difficult to imagine exists

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Another film tackling issues of problematic nationalism in Bulgaria, [Tonislav Hristov's THE GOOD POSTMAN](#) (2016), a Finnish co-production by the director of much better known films such as THE RULES OF CHACHELOR LIFE and LOVE AND ENGINEERING, has not yet been shown on Bulgarian National Television as well. THE GOOD POSTMAN is a subtle film that follows around a village postman who wants to allow refugees to settle in the empty houses of his depopulated village in the Rhodopi mountain, near the Turkish border, and who suffers a defeat to the local nationalists who want to keep the land pure and clear from foreigners. Under the pretext this is a film financed by Finland (as have all other films by the documentarian, who works closely with influential documentary promoter Iikka Vehkalati), the film does not have any real presence in Bulgaria's public discourse where it has mainly been shown sporadically. Unlike LONG LIVE BULGARIA, however, it has been made available on DVD.



It seems important to keep homeless refugees out of their depopulated village in Tonislav Hristov's THE GOOD POSTMAN.

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But what good it is to bury one's head in the sand...?

And what would be so shameful for Bulgarian mass media to acknowledge the racism in society?

Other countries in Eastern Europe and the Balkans show the same racist tendencies as well. In many of them these films do not get widely seen either. Yet, these are matters to be spoken about, not for silence. And whilst I engaged with giving examples of documentary films from the Czech Republic and Bulgaria in this instance, I can confirm that similar films are made also in Romania, Hungary, Poland, Croatia...The list would be too long to complete here. Perhaps some specialized festival could take it upon itself to showcase this body of work in its entirety, in view to highlight the extent to which activist documentary filmmakers in Eastern Europe are concerned over nationalism, racism and xenophobia?