

# CHAPTER 8





# A CRITICAL REVIEW OF SERBIAN MEDIA AND THEIR REDUCTIONS OF CULTURE AND (PUBLIC) CULTURAL PROGRAMS

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**Summary:** The focus of this paper is on a critical interdisciplinary reflection of the Serbian media and their role in the exploitation of culture and cultural heritage for the purposes of promotion and popularization of ruling political strategies. Namely, starting from the position that current circumstances in Serbia bear witness to the extremely invasive influence of populist policies on cultural practices, this work aims to draw attention to open abuses of culture, and due to its reduction to a mere instrument for achieving extremely questionable political goals. Furthermore, bearing in mind that the media play an important role in the mentioned processes, it is clear that they bear great responsibility for affirming the content within which the understanding, and therefore the presentation of culture, is more than problematic. In this regard, this paper tries to establish a theoretical basis for marking specific media practices that have a negative impact on culture in general, but also for finding potential mechanisms for suppressing their operation.

**Keywords:** *media, populist policies, culture.*

## 1. Introductory Remarks

Media, as a prominent electronic communication channel, wield significant influence over virtually all aspects of sociocultural life in the contemporary world. As a result, they contribute to the (re)shaping of society within the specific context of prevailing values. More precisely, the media increasingly function as instruments for the further instrumentalization of social subjects, i.e., as means for promotion and popularization (and often for openly imposing) of socially desirable models of thinking and behaving. In this way, the potential of both the

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media and media content consumers is significantly reduced, degraded, and/or even completely eliminated. All this testifies to the extremely worrying implications of those media practices, behind which are, above all, more than questionable political strategies. Bearing in mind the current circumstances in Serbia, one can unequivocally draw a conclusion about the abuse of the media by the leading populist policies, with the aim of further abuse of the citizens themselves.

McLuhan even spoke about the media as extensions of a person, but also about their forced influence on society. In this regard, he emphasized that this represents the kind of extension that causes deep and permanent changes in an individual and their environment. At the same time, the individual themselves is in a state of "Narcissus' narcosis," i.e., "unaware of the psychological or social consequences of a new technology like a fish unaware of the water in which it swims" because "just when the new environment created by the medium becomes all-pervasive and transforms our sensory balance, it becomes invisible at the same time." (Mekluan, 2018, p. 17).

Yet, the position advocated in this work is that in circumstances when the media themselves are instrumentalized by populist policies, the above-mentioned "Narcissus' narcosis" is replaced by a kind of "Narcissus' Coma" because now, instead of the unconscious, there is a total numbness that as such, allows a person to be protected from a wide range of negative consequences of the media as its extensions. However, this type of passive (self)protection cannot and must not be equated with an active (self)defense in order to survive. Specifically, McLuhan highlights that survival, tranquility, and well-being in the media era are not contingent upon the mentioned narcosis, but are primarily contingent upon an individual's capacity and willingness to comprehend the media-saturated environment at the present time. More precisely, if we "understand the revolutionary changes caused by a new medium, then we can predict and control them, but if we prolong our self-created unconscious trance, we will be its slaves" (Mekluan, 2018, p. 19).

Relating to this, it is important to refer to Lyotard, who highlights that advanced technology is slowly but surely overshadowing individuals. In other words, whether we are aware of it or not, the non-human has, to a significant extent, crept into our everyday life in the sense of replacing humans with technology, and therefore this theorist warns that living with the non-human, as we do today, is one thing, while it is something else entirely to be subject to its will. For this reason, he asks the following question: "What if all that is characteristic of humanity becomes non-human" (Lyotard, 1991, p. 2). Recognizing the alarming nature of the observed problem, Lyotard emphasizes the need to employ all available mechanisms to prevent technology from imposing its program entirely.

Considering the power and influence that technology has in modern society, the outcome is almost guaranteed. In all of this, the media (as a technology in the service of mass communication) unequivocally has an enviable share. Moreover, due to open promotions of desirable representations of reality, those same media as representatives of the “non-human” suppress diversity as one of humanity’s key characteristics. And, in Lyotard’s world, without diversity, all that is human is lost. Diversity is what life itself is made of, an element without which we lose what is most important to humans (Sim, 2001, p. 37).

Precisely for this reason, the implementation of (interdisciplinary) critical reflections on the media, i.e., the development of modern theories about the media and the affirmation of media studies is one of the leading (pre)conditions for a valid understanding of both the current socio-cultural contexts as well as the dominant phenomena within them, and for the purpose of finding solutions for their more constructive organization and therefore more productive management. In this regard, via a critique of Serbian media that participate in various exploitations of culture and cultural heritage for the purposes of promotion and popularization of ruling political strategies, this paper is an attempt to mark their negative consequences on an individual and society as a whole, but also to find mechanisms that would contribute to the suppression of said consequences. In other words, by understanding the media within Serbian society and the implications of their practices (and taking into account and analyzing specific examples) the intention is to achieve much-needed control over the media’s instrumentalization of a person.

## **2. Populist Policies and the Power(lessness) of the Media**

Both international and domestic literature are incredibly exhaustive when it comes to the misuse of the media for the purpose of promoting politically desirable representations of reality, which testifies not only to the topicality but also to the alarming nature of the observed problem. A great number of theoreticians advocate the position that the media can be not only mediators but also participants or at least active witnesses in efforts to promote a certain policy as successfully as possible, mostly with the application of populist strategies. Namely, there is countless evidence confirming that the media are conscious (co)conspirators in the creation of populist climates, meaning that they are responsible for the rise of the political phenomenon of populism (Mazzoleni, 2008). Although the socio-cul-

tural sphere of Serbia has been dominated by populist politics over the last few decades, the migrant crisis contributed to the fact that the populist model takes precedence even in Western European political practices (Nikolić, Dragičević Šešić, 2018). In other words, populism has recently started to take on the characteristics of a trend, since it is spreading from Asia, Latin America through the USA, and all the way to Europe (Peković, 2018).

When it comes to populism, it should be emphasized that, above all, it is the socio-political context that sets the framework and essentially determines its nature and scope, as well as its implications. "Like kitsch in art, populism lacks originality and is intrusive, cheap, colorful, and shiny, accessible to everyone. Populist ideology, poorly founded, but often presented in the media as a grandiose creation, is most often a soap bubble devoid of any lasting values." (Lutovac, 2018, p. 49) The essential properties of populism are, above all, the appeal to the will of the people, the use of the simple vernacular, and the antagonistic attitude towards others and those who are different, and thus considered a threat to the state and/or nation. To this, we should certainly add the "charismatic leader" who appears at the same time as a key representative of populism, as well as the media, which are used as means of mass communication for the purposes of its promotion and popularization. Furthermore, populists tend to work openly to suppress any type of pluralism, curb free and critical thinking, as well as to use the media as their own service.

Populism represents a political viewpoint according to which the people should be addressed in such a way that everyone can understand what is being said, with the intent to unambiguously influence public opinion. The media have a very important place and role in all of this since contemporary individuals are continuously exposed to their influences and construct their ideas about the world based on them. Although over time we have become participants (and to some extent (co)creators) of media reality, "like never before, the mass media reshape, structure, and often limit life itself, with the help of powerful production organizations, using the latest technology, a specific order, and their own language" (Kljažić, 2008, pp. 103-104), which has a ready-made "media menu" as its outcome, and it is up to us to "help ourselves" to it. In this way, a specific dialectical relationship of interdependence is created between individuals and the media, a relationship in which a person is simultaneously oversaturated with what is imposed on them through the media and eager for what those same media can provide them with, but do not.

However, that, which is imposed under the pretext that it represents what the public wants and that is presented in a way that is "easy to digest", i.e., comprehen-

sible to everyone, is content devoid of deeper meaning and concrete/constructive purpose. These are primarily simple, superficial, typical, worthless, and/or trivial media products through which sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, xenophobic, racist, chauvinistic, and/or other inappropriate forms of thinking and behavior are marketed, undermining individuality, uniqueness, and diversity. Furthermore, we are talking about media products through which extremely questionable value systems are promoted, marketing vulgarity, amorality, and aggression, as well as the lack of elementary culture, as desirable.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned, it is completely logical to conclude that the priority given to simplicity and superficiality on the media scene makes it impossible for true culture (and therefore its inherent diversity) to come to the fore. As a result, the media's potential to participate in the promotion of culture, and cultural diversity, as well as in the cultural unification of humanity is completely unutilized. Putting an emphasis on the promotion of "cultural" patterns that are intended for the masses, while noting that they only respond to the needs and wishes of the people, the media simultaneously participate in the degradation of those same people by promoting extremely banal, disgusting, and often humiliating content. This also confirms how (mainstream) media are actually not only permeated by the influences of populist political strategies but also powerless when it comes to opposing them.

It is also important to point out that "when populism and populist media content become a tool of political rule and a kind of political strategy, then the danger to society's interests becomes incomparably greater" (Martinoli, 2018, p. 123). In such circumstances, the survival of media that focus on reliability and objectivity is extremely uncertain, while the constitution of independent, free, and (self) critically oriented social subjects with expressed distinctiveness/individuality is the exception rather than the rule. In other words, when the media become mere instruments of populist strategies, then individuals as their consumers are also in danger. Namely, media subordinate to populism create and market content that directly threatens and diminishes the capacity of their consumers to form a truthful picture of reality and to be active participants in socio-political life.

Although the media cannot explicitly influence the opinion and actions of social subjects that make up the media audience, they have enormous capacities to (re)direct their attention and interests towards topics, events, and/or individuals that are considered desirable and therefore acceptable. At the same time, these media practices contribute to the popularization of the majority's opinion while neglecting the needs of minority and/or marginalized groups, that is, they contribute to social homogenization and self-orientation. The mentioned practices, as said previously, have a negative impact on the culture in general. Namely, media

push of cultural values and cultural identities that are (re)shaped against the interests of populist policies have both degradation and contamination of the true culture as their ultimate outcome.

It should be emphasized that populist policies are also responsible for the creation of legal solutions that have contributed to the general media decline, which is reflected in the absence of quality media strategies, the impoverishment of media programs, and the lack of professional media personnel, thus, making the media profession meaningless. By focusing on the market and the audience as the two leading mechanisms for regulating media content, populist policies have succeeded in reducing the media to means for providing (increasingly questionable) information and trivial entertainment, which results in the suppression and positive discrimination of culture.

In this regard, it should be underlined that positive discrimination of cultural program content is a well-known legal solution, but also that the market orientation of populist policies has led to the fact that these programs are almost nonexistent on national television (Peković, 2018). And if cultural programs do not exist on national channels, then it should not be surprising that they do not exist on commercial television channels either. None of the above is contrary to the law because the law does not prescribe the necessary quotas, thus confirming once again that laws are created and adopted in accordance with the interests of the currently ruling populist policies.

When it comes to the media in Serbia, the general impression is that the majority of it is at the service of the ruling populist policies. Specifically, there is almost no traditional media that has not subordinated its program to the ruling regime's policy, which is the result of decades of both political and economic crisis. Inšajder, Cenzolovka, and Istinomer are rare examples of new media practices that resist populism. They represent alternative media projects that distribute their content through online channels and platforms. However, while attaining international recognition, these outlets face condemnation and overt efforts within the politically polarized domestic audience to discredit them. Despite the professionalism, objectivity, and constructive criticism of society, the messages conveyed through the mentioned alternative media outlets do not yield the same impact as that characteristic of state-controlled media such as RTS, Pink, Happy TV, and similar channels.

In addition to the obvious existing difference between traditional and new media today, there is also a significant difference in the degree of media influence on people from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The impression that inevitably emerges is that modern individuals rely on the media to such an extent that they have established a kind of dependent rela-



tionship towards the media and that they thereby (un)consciously contributed to the reduction of their own potential. What especially stands out among the (side) phenomena of media practices, are changes in the ways of human socialization, (co)existence, as well as in the patterns of human (self)definition. By conducting a selection of events and personalities to report on, and determining the character of their content, the media bring a different view of reality that cannot be seen in any other way than as a new reality. If those same media are additionally burdened by the influence of populist politics, the presented picture of reality becomes problematic in numerous ways.

By canceling the clear boundary between reality and its apparent "truth", the mainstream media managed to impose itself as the prevailing, and often the only view of the world. According to Vuksanović, this does not mean that "the initially understood reality (...) was immediately suppressed and abolished by this other, media reality"; but it is grounds for the claim that with the "emergence and frequent 'creative' use, primarily, of mass media communication, nowadays, the experience of reality has changed to a great extent" (2007, pp. 9-10). At the same time, changes in the perception of reality inevitably brought about changes in the understanding of culture. Above all, it can be said that media-mediated culture is nothing more than a pseudo-culture characterized by transience, changeability, and superficiality. For this reason, questions related to the place and role of true culture for modern humans do not lose their topicality, but, on the contrary, are of particular importance for critical perception of the media-infused and essentially subordinate human reality.

### **3. Media and (Non-) Culture**

When it comes to culture, the question of its survival is being raised more and more often nowadays, due to the fact that it is not only marginalized and degraded but also due to increasingly obvious threats of it being abolished completely. Furthermore, the culture is increasingly threatened by the various modern tendencies trying to provide space within the culture itself for the things that do not belong within the culture, i.e., for the non-cultural. "Paradoxically, more often than not, cultures of our species rest on the fact that in proportion to their development, we have to go through increasingly longer, more inconvenient, thorny, and winding roads in order to achieve our goals." (Zimel, 2008, p. 11) In other words, despite the enviable level of development and representation, culture today is faced with a series of (un)favorable circumstances that question it, as a result of

attempts to redefine the framework of what the “cultural” is, as well as to affirm new forms and the contents they encompass, which are then attempted to be subsumed under those same frameworks.

Thus, at play, parallel with the culture, which, in a nutshell, we can define as the process of humanization of an individual and their world, there are various pseudo-cultures whose representations of reality are more than questionable. „Mentioned pseudo-cultures can, among other things, be viewed as individual aspects of mass culture whose role in constituting the general image of reality is not at all negligible.” (Ratković, 2020, p. 93) By creating and promoting extremely strong models of identification, mass culture simultaneously affirms specific patterns of thinking and behavior which, as such, have a largely negative reflection on the society that created it and the social subjects included in it. It should be added that the mentioned culture “participates in establishing highly questionable value systems, which is reflected in the disappearance of old ones and the formation of new ‘cultural elites’, ‘cultural authorities’, ‘cultural paradigms’, etc.” (Ratković, 2020, p. 93).

Since it is not guided by the demands of the market and does not cater to the (lack of) taste of the masses, true culture does not manipulate and does not settle for anything less than what it is competent for, and as such it seems to be less and less needed by instrumentalized social subjects. Given that culture is an extremely complex phenomenon, it is, therefore, understandable why there is a diverse multitude of its definitions in theory. The term culture usually refers to a complex set of institutions, values, ideas, and practices that make up the life of a certain group of people and are transmitted and received through learning. “Combining nature and spirit, necessity and freedom, anthropology and aesthetics, the concept of culture has oscillated throughout history between these poles, which has marked it with an internal duality and constant attempts to overcome it.” (Source 1) Enlighteners tried to bridge the perceived gap by treating culture, i.e., civilization as a process of liberation from inherited tendencies in the areas of morality, science, economy, politics, and technology. Instead of coming to terms with it, a person is obligated to change their innate nature if they want to be a responsible citizen of the world, and therefore culture was understood as a deliberate self-shaping of humans, for the purposes of the successful functioning of the state administration system, which sought to suppress the repressive mechanisms of the previous stratification of social order.

The idea of cultural shaping of self very quickly encountered strong resistance after it was noticed that instead of describing an individual’s natural aspiration, it is basically an idea that is essentially determined by and subject to the demands of the European bourgeois class. Since it presupposes certain socio-economic

conditions, it cannot apply equally to all citizens of the world. After noticing this, Herder, as an illustration, emphasized the necessity to recognize the rights of distinctiveness to non-European cultures. In a typically romantic spirit, he pointed out: "What one nation considers absolutely necessary for the circulation of its ideas, never even occurred to another, while the third would declare it harmful." (Source 1)

However, although he defended the idea that different civilizations can be reduced to one common civilization only with the help of violence, Herder still tried to unify these same differences between civilizations, claiming that in the process of progress of human history, "one sprouts from the other creating only a necessary means to an end", and as "the man was the goal of natural evolution, the European man is the goal of the cultural one" (Source 1). If culture is understood as a manifestation of the universal spirit, a certain representative is appointed for this same universality (for example, Europe according to Herder or Germany according to Schlegel), which by setting the "standard of excellence" gets the role of "cultural guardian" (Source 1).

It was the experience of the Second World War that brought to light the racist background of Herder's conception, exposing its scientific groundlessness and political catastrophe. In the tradition of the conception of culture as a collective way of life, which was developed by social anthropology in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the unexpected emergence of special identification features of each cultural creation stimulated the emergence of cultural studies during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From their perspective, culture loses its humanistic precondition by including alternative views of activities, relationships, and processes. "Manifesting itself as part of the victory campaign of pluralistic fracturing, for example, camera culture, gun culture, service culture, museum culture, deaf culture, football culture, culture today is once again becoming inseparable from politics." (Source 2)

Without pretensions to offer a comprehensive definition of culture, Hall states that it is eternal and that one cannot step out of it because it is inconceivable what a human being would look like outside the framework of culture (Hol, 2017). According to Sloterdijk, culture is "the ability to establish oases, i.e., to establish places where people consciously work on building what suits each other" (1991, p. 103). In the humanist tradition, the phrase "imperfect garden" first used by Montaigne becomes a general metaphor for human cultural existence. In regards to that, Todorov sees the imperfect garden as a place where we learn to make the ephemeral eternal, and where coincidental turns into life's necessity (2003). Williams tries to be as precise as possible in defining culture, and states the following:

There are three general categories in the definition of culture. First, the "ideal", according to which culture is a state or process of human improvement in terms of certain absolute or universal values. (...) The second, "documentary", according to which culture is a set of works of mind and imagination in which, in an exhaustive way, human thought and experience are variously recorded. (...) And finally the third, "social" definition of culture, according to which culture is a description of a certain way of life that expresses some meanings and values, not only in art and education, but also in institutions and everyday behavior. (Vilijams, 2008, p. 125)

Based on the aforementioned, it is clear how complex of a phenomenon culture really is, but also, to what extent it can be misunderstood and misrepresented by both the professionals and the general public, as a result of which it becomes the subject of various abuses with extremely alarming consequences. The media, due to the absence of competence and capacity to resist such practices, (in)directly participates in the additional suppression of culture and its inherent pluralism, thereby suppressing free and critical thought. Since the media are generally only slightly interested in culture, it is quite understandable why the cultural identity of modern humans as an increasingly intemperate consumer of media content is under great question.

On the other hand, those media practices that focus on culture and cultural programs, but market them in an inadequate and even inappropriate way represent an additional problem. This creates an extremely unfavorable socio-cultural climate with a wide range of negative implications for humans. And one of the most alarming ones is beyond any doubt the suppression of true diversity, which was already discussed at the beginning of this paper. In regards to this, Lipovetsky also wonders: "Isn't it right that the problem of true identity (...) can appear when social otherness massively gives way to sameness, and the difference to homogeneity?" (Lipovecki, 2011, p. 80)

No matter the extent to which each society tends to impose its own classification of the world, thereby creating a dominant socio-cultural order, it is never absolutely unanimous and irrefutable. Despite this, populist policies strive to go one step further, that is, to establish the maximum degree of social confinement, i.e., socio-cultural uniformity. In this regard, Hall states the following: "While in theory, democratic pluralism allows for the entry of new groups and associations into the political arena, in reality, and in practice, it works by systematically ignoring and depriving individual emerging groups of rights and interests that are outside the consensus, keeping the existing structure of political interests intact." (Hol, 2017, p. 28)

In all of this, the media have a huge share since the media space is used for the purposes of promoting and popularizing what populist political groups consider desirable and acceptable, while everything that differs from it is presented as deviant (sick, corrupted by others, misleading, subject to social disorganization) by the very same media. At the same time, their degradation is carried out through mockery, exclusion, stigmatization, etc. In such circumstances, culture itself is often the subject of both political and media abuse.

Contemporary culture is also referred to as media culture since “we live in a time in which no fact becomes a fact if it is not somehow produced or at least transferred by the media” (Dragičević Šešić, 2008, p. 29). Media culture signifies “a commercial form of culture that is created for profit and distributed in the form of goods” (Kelner, 2004, p. 27), that is, for idle entertainment or, for a fragment better, infotainment. For modern individuals, media culture represents the central segment of their lives, and it largely reflects on their constitution, that is, on the formation of identity, as well as on the development of ideas about the world and desirable values, norms, and principles. When it comes to our unique socio-cultural context, which is largely subordinated to populist political preferences, it is important to keep in mind that within it, a media culture prevails in which show business, various quizzes, and reality shows form a dominant part of the overall picture of reality.

At the same time, “the art of reading and critically understanding reality is slowly sinking under the pressure of improvised spectacles, eros, intertwined news and entertainment, breaking down the once stable fences of space and time” (Jevtović, 2008, p. 111). Triviality, pulp, half-truths (and often untruths), and cheap populism, are just some of the properties of extremely “dumbing-down” media content that directly correspond with the ruling policies. The true *homo informaticus* is replaced by *homo adorans*, who finds joy in and derives pleasure from the “benefits” of media content that promotes highly questionable patterns of thought and behavior. In this regard, the position that modern human is simply bombarded with information by the media, and as a result of this not only their mental but also their emotional structure changes, must be taken with a grain of salt.

Namely, in the era of the media, people are not exposed to information so much as to contents that are only presented as informative, but which, in their essence, are not. In this sense, modern human is rather semi-informed, misinformed, and even uninformed, due to excessive exposure to entertainment content whose quality and value are extremely questionable. In addition, excessive exposure inevitably leads to the development of addiction to the mentioned content, which makes a person as *homo adorans* incapable of constructive and critical action within a wider social context.

The postmodern age, which is in reality obsessed with information and expression, is at the same time an age in which relevant information is almost marginalized, and the more expression there is, the less meaningful and constructive there is to say. Regarding this topic, Lipovetsky says that “the more subjectivity is encouraged, the performance is increasingly more anonymous and emptier”, and that is, nothing else than “narcissism, expression in the style of anything-goes, the primacy of the act of communication over the nature of what is communicated, indifference toward the contents, ludic abolition of meaning, communication without a goal and an audience since the sender has become their own main recipient” (Lipovecki, 2011, pp. 18-19).

The mentioned narcissism occurs in an atmosphere of superficial apathy despite the catastrophic reality that is presented through the media. “Without tearing ourselves apart, we get used to the worst that we consume through the media; we fit right into a crisis which, as it seems, does not override the desire for well-being and leisure at all.” (Lipovecki, 2011, p. 69) The narcissism Lipovetsky talks about enables the full bloom of the Ego, whereby the more one’s own self is the object of attention and the more one invests in it, the vainer and more superficial it becomes. The multitude of “information” inevitably leads to the fact that the “I” becomes an “empty mirror” (Lipovecki, 2011, p. 74), deprived of its own identity and therefore its own peculiarity.

The aforementioned decomposition of the “own self” is largely influenced by the media and their inherent media culture, which is primarily focused on entertainment. Although entertainment is not only a legitimate but also a desirable segment of the media since it represents a natural and more than justifiable human need, that same entertainment becomes questionable when it is deprived of any criteria, or creativity, and when it is solely in the service of profit. “Entertainment is what increases circulation and ratings in today’s media, brings popularity and money. It is at times easygoing and uncreative, but populist and therefore widely consumed.” (Veljanovski, 2008, p. 134).

Furthermore, such entertainment does not require large investments, and with advertisements, it brings much more than what is invested in it. As a result, instead of worrying about everyday existential problems, it is subtly suggested to modern humans as consumers of media content to worry about the survival of the participants of what used to be *Big Brother*, *The Farm*, *Couples*, and nowadays is *The Cooperative*. At the same time, it is important to note that the participants of the latter *reality* format are, first of all, people with extremely questionable levels of education and occupation, who are prone to excessive behavior, serving young people with criminals, ex-convicts, various drug and alcohol addicts, people with questionable morals, limited cognitive abilities and/or seriously impaired mental health, etc. as their role models.

## The Cooperative



Source: <https://www.telegraf.rs>

Bearing in mind the motto of the famous British BBC dating back to the 1930s, which reads “We don’t produce the kind of program people like and want, but the kind of program they should like and want!” (Ilić, 2008, p. 157), the inevitable conclusion is that at the beginning of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, media contents which are produced serve as a way to “fall in love with” not only moral but also every other form of destruction. In such an extremely problematic media context, there is almost no place for true culture. On the other hand, non-culture almost dominates. Good taste and style were replaced by “fun” thus the aesthetic age, culture, and originality gave way to uniformity and transience.

In this regard, populist policies would rather support manifestations of a national character such as *Slaninijada*, *Kobasicijada*, *Štrudlijada*, *Belmužijada*, *Gulašijada*, *Jagnjijada*, *Pečenjijada* (Source 2), etc., that is the kind of “cultural” programs that are aimed at the people and which either directly or indirectly affirms the

“folk” i.e., the national spirit. “Public projects in culture are expected to create an atmosphere of happiness and joy, to brand the city, to canonize tradition and spectacularly portray national greatness: what we are the first, the biggest, the most beautiful in.” (Nikolić, Dragičević Šešić, 2018, p. 23)

### Slaninijada



Source: <https://013info.rs>

Festivals like Exit and Guča have long distanced themselves from their original reasons for existence. More precisely, nowadays the promotion of trumpet art in Guča is less important than food spectacles and tents with singers and “exotic” dancers, while art projects and fairs of non-governmental organizations have long been excluded from Exit’s programs. In the mentioned cases, culture and musical art as essential segments are thus reduced to mere means of entertainment and carefreeness.



## Guča



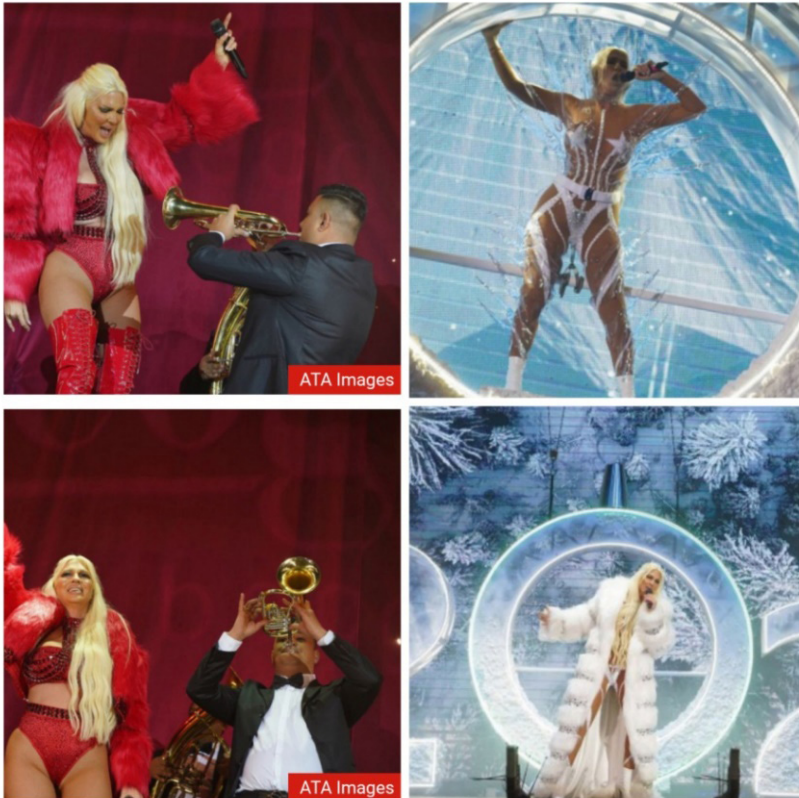
Sources: <https://www.novosti.rs>, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.rs>, <https://www.kul-tim.net>, <https://www.informer.rs>

The concerts of the Philharmonic at Ušće and the Opera of the National Theater on the Belgrade Waterfront's promenade are both equally valued as the common good<sup>2</sup> because they are cultural events that generate enthusiasm among the people. No matter how much of a seemingly better option this is than, for example, the New Year Eve's concert of the "diva" Jelena Karleuša in Belgrade, it continues to be an issue of programs that do not primarily promote true culture, but, in which culture is reduced to a mere tool for the implementation of populist strategies. Reducing culture and art to mere entertainment, that is, instrumentalizing cultural and artistic programs and putting them in the function of providing

- 2 It is important to note that the concepts of public good and public interest have been replaced by the concept of "common good", and that even public interest is often called common interest. Populist politicians hold the view that the common interest can solely be something that is considered, by a widespread consensus, the greater national good.

entertainment for entertainment's sake is one of the leading and at the same time the most successful, ways to distract the masses from pressing political and socio-cultural problematic phenomena.

### The New Year Eve's concert of the "diva" Jelena Karleuša



Source: <https://www.hellomagazin.rs>

It should also be noted that culture is also used as a means to achieve political goals as part of the policy of building or replacing monuments. The goal is to influence people's emotions, that is, to provide content that almost everyone can enjoy, or content that is there to oppose fear and humiliation, by establishing victimization as a national feature. The plain and obvious truth is that these are in fact populist abuses of culture, in order to manipulate the citizens themselves as successfully as possible. The opening of the monument enables, first of all, the gathering of the people, and then the creation of a mass that supports the go-

vernment. In this way, populist policies prevent the emergence of a different, i.e., critical opinion, while the “charismatic” leader repeatedly (self)presents himself as an expert on politics and economics as well as on culture, art, and aesthetics.

In our recent past, we have also witnessed the practice of demolishing monuments as representatives of a time whose significance for our history is sought to be diminished or even completely disputed, and which sends a clear message that the current status of monuments depends solely on current socio-political circumstances. In other words, when the values embodied by certain monuments become ideologically worn out or when there is a need to replace them with some other values, it is not at all unusual for those same monuments to be replaced by others, removed, and/or deliberately destroyed. By erecting new monuments, a culture that focuses on events, characters, and symbols that seek to legitimize desirable political and social values is affirmed. One of the examples is the monument to Stefan Nemanja on the Savski Square in Belgrade erected in 2021, at the initiative of Aleksandar Vučić, not as president, but as a citizen of the Republic of Serbia. This monument is, among other things, a symbol of the brutal populist intervention in the sphere of culture and politics, and the authoritarian way of decision-making and attitudes both towards the culture of remembrance and culture in general.

According to the UNESCO definition, cultural heritage represents the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible properties of a certain group or society, inherited from previous generations, that are maintained in the present and preserved for the benefit of future generations (Source 3). In other words, within the framework of cultural heritage, UNESCO labels items/objects and social practices significant for the study of human history, which enables a more concrete insight into the ideas of the past, which can be subjected to the evaluation process based on that. In this regard, UNESCO only sees physical destruction as a danger in the processes of their protection, but not possible (mis)use in the field of interpretation as a leading instrument for presentation in the promotion of heritage. Even though the attitude towards cultural heritage must be based on an objective perception and verified facts, populist policies often manipulate it in order to carry out further manipulations of citizens as successfully as possible. Heritage itself does not speak, but it is spoken about and thus the way it is interpreted greatly influences the processes of its understanding and contextualization within the concrete social systems that directly inherit it. In this regard, Ognjenović points out:

As we spontaneously choose to select from history what we consider important at a given moment in social reality, we are often unaware that the ruling political elite is by a rule of thumb doing it instead of us, using a selected part of the cultural heritage as a kind of visual identification

of their political goals, and most often as “argument” of the continuity of unquestionable values from the past, whose ideas constitute the basis on which the future is created. (2018, p. 321)

Based on what has been said, it is clear that under the conditions of social crisis, cultural heritage in the hands of populists becomes a powerful instrument for further instrumentalization of the public, because recalling the “glorious past” in the not-so-glorious present promises improvement in the near future. Handling both idealized values from the past and selected examples of cultural heritage, and their interpretation in accordance with daily political needs is proving to be a dangerous tool for gathering political support. When it comes to current populist political strategies that operate within our own specific social context, what characterizes them, above all, is the abuse of cultural heritage in such a way that it is presented as a testimony of a glorious, incomparably better and more productive past in which everyone lived well because had brave and honorable rulers who fought for their people. According to the current *Cultural Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the 2017-2027 Period*, which contains numerous populist and demagogic platitudes, Slavic, Byzantine, Old Balkan, and heroic elements are cited as key, where the following is mentioned as a particularly relevant dimension of Serbian culture:

the idea that culture must not belong only to elites, that the culture that does not permeate society is doomed to die out, that living culture is not made up of institutions where the capital's elite entertain themselves, but institutions that encourage and recognize the artistic endeavors of people from all segments of society and which strive to make that culture the everyday life of the community (Source 4).

In all of this, the media have their place and role, to maintain populist policies in power with their unprofessional and unethical interpretations of events, notable people, and information from the past. The mentioned Strategy under the heading *Encouraging Projects Related to the Interpretation of Heritage in the Media, Especially Electronic and on the Internet*, hints at special support for film and television production of such content that focuses on the promotion of Serbia's cultural heritage. Thus, through the media, we are nowadays witnessing open abuses of cultural heritage for the purpose of shaping both the ruler's and the subject's identity. In this regard, the “Nemanjić Dynasty: The Birth Of The Kingdom” series produced by RTS represents one of the (relatively) recent examples of political and media instrumentalization of cultural heritage, with the intention of affirming populistically desirable “traditional values”. The ratings of the series are used to confirm its quality based on the quantity, and thus further catering to the masses, by sending a clear message that the people know best what is good.

The goal of this series is neither to educate nor to entertain the audience based on a valid interpretation of history and cultural heritage. Similarly, it does not look to introduce the public to a dynasty of rulers, based on an interpretation that is founded on proven, i.e., relevant cultural and historical facts. On the contrary, the primary purpose of the aforementioned series is to use populist means to create a straw man, i.e., a kind of banalization of cultural heritage, in order to implement further instrumentalization of the largest possible part of the public through the instrumentalization of culture itself. In this way, the reshaping of the socio-cultural identities of individuals, of which the aforementioned public is made up, is (in) directly influenced, with the intention of putting them at the service of the most productive implementation of populist strategies.

Given that cultural heritage cannot be viewed as a passive witness of a certain epoch, it is clear that it cannot be handled according to populist needs, that is, according to the preferences of the political power players and/or depending on the daily political circumstances. Therefore, it is understandable that there is a need to conceive and consistently implement a cultural strategy that will include all those elements that are equally important for the recognition, evaluation, and protection of cultural heritage as well as for the creation of new cultural programs that will not conflict with each other. Hence, it is expected from those involved in the sphere of culture to be involved actively and in an organized fashion in the processes of devising strategies and defining legal guidelines, with the aim of keeping all those processes harmful to culture under control, if not completely preventing them.

## **4. Concluding Reflections**

The media, as an inseparable part of society, are nothing more than a reflection within that same society of the prevailing value system, and therefore it should not be surprising that the media in Serbia are increasingly becoming “megaphones” at the disposal of the figures in power from the sphere of politics, business, and/or entertainment. At the same time, “populist content and populist presentation strategies for the media become a tool, a strategy for achieving a financial profit or political and social influence that will, in turn, be traded for money or privileges” (Martinoli, 2018, p. 123). In this regard, it should be emphasized that when populism and the media subordinated to populist strategies become instruments in the service of achieving political power, then the danger to the interests of society as a whole becomes incomparably greater. Namely, the

populism present in the media (in)directly threatens and reduces the capacity of the public to create an objective and critical picture of reality, as well as to be an active participant in the (re)shaping of political, social, and cultural life. In this way, everything that comes precisely from the media becomes part of our perception of reality, and as such is not questioned by the instrumentalized consumers of media content. Furthermore, based on the specific examples presented in the text, it is evident that the diversity and plurality of cultural expressions are extremely undesirable for populist political strategies, hence they are sidelined from the cultural mainstream scene, and thus, their media invisibility is understandable but still unacceptable.

Therefore, despite the fact that they can present reality and help us understand it, the media increasingly have a share in its deliberate reshaping against predominantly populist pretensions. Namely, the media are particularly important for any head structure, including the populist one, because they can contribute to the spread and affirmation of its leading ideas to a large extent and in a relatively short time. Since the media are the ones that produce the most diverse content through which certain influences are realized, it can be concluded quite reasonably that the aforementioned influence is the fundamental product of media activity. With that in mind, it is clear why populist policies are particularly keen to reduce the media to their own service. In this regard, despite the efforts to ensure true media neutrality and independence through the law, it has not been achieved anywhere, including within our society. Namely, the current legal solutions, created precisely under the strong influence of populist policies, are responsible for personnel and program degradation, followed by a drastic turn towards idle entertainment, as well as the complete disregard for content that promotes all (and not just selected) aspects of reality. Furthermore, the media are preoccupied with the need to make as much profit as possible and to survive on the market, which makes it understandable why they are extremely uninterested in non-commercial content, which certainly includes true culture.

The media is thus most often a communication channel that propels populist ideas, but also a tool that produces and spreads populism. The symbiosis of populist policies and the media proves to be particularly productive considering that it is based on the realization of the idea of giving the people exactly what they are looking for, which is primarily entertainment and pastime, i.e., easy content in every sense. Therefore, for the media, which have been reduced to mere instruments of populist policies, giving up space for genuine cultural programs would be nothing more than a complete failure. Namely, hyper-emotionalization, sensationalization, and tabloidization of media content are what the instrumentalized media believe the people need and that is what they strive to provide. At the same

time, the populism that dominates the mainstream media is primarily based on popularizing the opinions and “needs” of the majority, while minority groups and their inherent preferences and aspirations are generally ignored. In this regard, it is also unavoidable to discuss a culture that is either instrumentalized for the purposes of populist pandering to the (lack of) taste of the masses or, alternatively, it might be completely discredited if it contradicts what populist strategies seek to affirm. True culture is generally left aside because as such it is not considered profitable or marketable. The wide range of its benefits for individuals and society as a whole is actually something extremely undesirable for populist strategies and the media subordinate to them because, with the affirmation of true culture, the kind of socio-cultural identities that are destructive for populism are simultaneously affirmed.

For this reason, it is precisely professionals and cultural workers who should act as mediators between politics and the media, and have culture and its well-being as their priority. They are the ones who must stand up for culture and come to its defense, although it often seems like an impossible mission in the conditions of increased populism initiated by both the political-economic crisis and the crisis of socio-cultural identities. The mentioned figures in culture should be actively involved in the creation of not only cultural but also media strategies, as well as in other processes of designing programs that focus on the decontamination of the media and the affirmation of culture and cultural diversity through them. Namely, in the conditions of increasingly accelerated media development, one of the leading challenges is adequate education and the encouragement of an objective and critical attitude toward media practices. From there arises the need to implement media education, as well as to shape media culture. In this regard, life with the media (un)covers a whole series of different possibilities, thus imposing an active, creative, and productive approach to that same life as a challenge. This, among other things, implies the provision of space for culture as a particularly important factor in the constitution of modern social subjects.

Without adequate media education, it is difficult to expect that the necessary turnaround will be carried out within the media in the form of a revaluation of the existing media system, for the purpose of finding mechanisms for its reconstruction. Therefore, media education is of incredible importance and should serve as a basis for learning about reality itself, that is, not only for theoretical but also for practical action within the current media paradigm that aspires to technologically shape and/or transform the world of culture. At the same time, media education should be accompanied by other educational processes related to the promotion of universal cultural values, as well as truly democratic processes that affirm culture as an end in itself, and not as a means to achieve questionable political goals.

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