Hermeneutics of Critical Cyber Security Studies?

Rethinking contemporary theoretical debates and the case of Serbia

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Introduction

Looking at South-East Europe, and the case of Serbia, offers key insights into reassessing current theoretical debates on cyber (in)security, online disinformation and fake news, and the role of key powers such as China, Russia, and the US in this context. Considering the ongoing debate between actor-centered theories of e.g. Thierry Balzacq and Myriam Dunn Cavelty, on the one hand, and political ontology by e.g. Tobias Liebetrau and Kristoffer Kjærgaard Christensen on the other, the issue of adaptivity of theoretical frameworks in specific cases arises. In this paper I argue that the specific interrelationship between complexity and interconnectivity of both domestic and foreign factors renders the case of Serbia particularly well suited to investigate our conceptual and empirical understanding of International Relations.

While Quentin Stevens' assembly theory, recurring to Gilles Deleuze, offers a broader perspective on the subject, I argue that a phenomenological and hermeneutic angle can significantly add to theoretical debates. By discussing key aspects of such a hermeneutics of international cyber politics based on Hans-Georg Gadamer, as well as Li Shaojun, and Mark M. Ayyash and linking it to the case of cyber propaganda and online disinformation in the Serbian context, my paper aims to make a novel contribution to the developing field of Critical Cyber Security Studies.

Disinformation and propaganda are as old as modern civilization, as such, they are nothing new. Still, the circumstances in which they occur have changed and were transformed by the sheer speed and interconnectivity offered by the technological possibility of the internet. This is not just an opening formulation, it is also recurs in one of the basic assumptions that Actor-Network Theory (ANT) harbors: not only are humans and their different forms of organization part of the social fabric that constitutes the living world, but technology and its devices are also an actor (Kneer 2009, p. 19).

On the other hand, this approach is to some extent challenged by Political Ontology. It argues that ANT is too focused on the actors and their relations towards each other in a network and neglects the actual circumstances under which political decisions are made (Liebetrau and Christensen 2022, pp. 31–

32). I argue that one possibility to close this gap and form a synthesis might be a hermeneutic approach, guided by phenomenological analysis.

Language constitutes and forms our perception of the world and might be regarded as another actor in the network, but it is too ubiquitous to be called a mere technology. Furthermore, language is also part of all political decision-making and as such part of political ontology, but its vocabulary cannot be altered indefinitely . Much of it is already pre-formed and defined. It might be right to say that language is the absolute foundation of both theories, and is also what interlinks them.

Hermeneutics relocated in modern times

According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the "founding fathers" of modern hermeneutics, language is not a mere tool that we use to achieve certain things through communication. It is one of the most powerful entities that shape our way of perceiving, thinking, acting, and our consciousness (Gadamer 1977, p. 3). It brings order into our world and makes us capable of relating to each other.

He defines tradition as one of the main driving forces that constitute our self-perception. He does not understand this term in the classic sense, but he defines it as a way of interpreting, expressions, semiotic structures, and thoughts transported and altered, over time (Gadamer 1977, pp.9).

> "It should be evident already from the essential linguisticality of the world, which has as its own way of fulfillment a constantly self-renewing contemporaneousness." (Gadamer 1977, pp. 19)

The ancient Greeks had a very powerful illustration for this: the Cult is what happens every day in the temple, its actions, and its rituals, but it is the Myth that reigns over it and which controls it, guides it invisibly for all of the time. The Cult is the visible, tangible action but the Myth is the spoken word, the sense, and the framework of ideas that forms it. There is no Cult without a Myth, but the latter does not require the former as a precondition.

What comes into sight, even if it is transcendental, has already formed our perception, not because of its mere physical existence, but because of the things we already know from tradition and prejudices. Gadamer also uses prejudice in a completely different meaning. What we already know, what kind of pre-formed information we have, and which kind of perspective we have, have already preliminarily formed vast parts of our opinion. The result is an objectivation[1] (Gander, in Hennigfeld 2005, pp. 31–48) that has its roots in the allegedly proven applicability and plausibility for each of us, with all its possible fallacies.

The aim of hermeneutics, as a classic Continental-European school of thought, is not to provide an answer to how a certain phenomenon functions but to answer why a certain phenomenon exists the way it is – in short: it is all about understanding.

Hermeneutics is in some ways an archeology of language. It takes a look into the historicity of expressions, semiotics[2], semantics and words, and takes advantage of prejudices as a sort of "quality control". Through awareness of our limited, and maybe false pre-formed knowledge, of the plurality of perspectives beyond our own, we can move on to new knowledge – which is a new understanding.

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[1] Mere matter, existing in a physical sense is numb, it is our objectification that gets the things to speak by giving objects a second layer that consists of meaning, cf. Gander (2005, pp. 31–48).

[2] Semiotics has a wider meaning in hermeneutics: concepts and ideas can also be symbols as well, when if they are of a certain complexity. Karl-Otto Apel goes even further and includes numbers as well as their construction as human artifacts.

Hermeneutics and International Relations

A hermeneutical discussion would not be thorough if it would not set some basic definitions. I would like to take the simplest one, from the Encyclopedia Britannica:

> "International relations, the study of the relations of states with each other and with international organizations and certain subnational entities (e.g., bureaucracies, political parties, and interest groups). It is related to a number of other academic disciplines, including political science, geography, history, economics, law, sociology, psychology, and philosophy."[3]

As we see, it is an interdisciplinary approach, profiting from the fields of political science and philosophy, which hermeneutics is a part of.

In his paper "International Relations Research and Hermeneutic Methods" Li Shaojun explains the development and meaning of hermeneutics for modern research on International Relations. He identifies the interpretation of messages as central to the discipline, a method that stems from the scholars who sought to understand ancient texts like the Bible, the messages of the Greek gods, or in his example ancient documents of the Ming dynasty (Shaojun 2006, pp. 7–13). Some of these are hard to understand, some even incomprehensible to us, but they were comprehensible at another time and to other people.

"First understand the text as well as the author, then even better than the author understands the text well", is one of Shaojun's key insights, with recourse to the German philosopher F.D.E. Schleiermacher (Shaojun 2006, p.8). He argues that only by understanding the time and the circumstances in which the author as a subject worked and lived, can we deliver a profound interpretation of a certain text, a real understanding. Historicity does not only mean the circumstances in which the text evolved but also that its linguistic features are also engulfed by them and thus matter to the analysis (Shaojun 2006, p. 7–10).

Shaojun recurs to Gadamer in explaining the concepts of interpretation and understanding and outlines that he concurs with him that these two central methods are not a simple reiteration but are creative, research and investigation guided creative thought products in all sense (Shaojun 2006, p. 7–10).

From an epistemic point of view, the author identifies two different dimensions when it comes to texts: the aim of reconstructing the author's intention and message as accurately as possible or to allow their own expertise and knowledge to interact in an inseparable relation with the text – to transcend the written to a new insight.

Getting to the matter of humans, which is a social and political, phenomenon, Shaojun recurs to Wilhelm Dilthey and explains that the investigation of objects and events in nature has to be fundamentally different from that of social ones (Shaojun 2006, p. 10). While nature has no consciousness of itself, its matters can be understood mechanically. The social world is formed by consciousness, by-products of the mind, and cannot be understood solely mechanically, it has to be understood through analysis of what it constitutes: language, and this is where hermeneutics enters the sphere of the political. The author describes the way that International Relations evolve based on two dimensions: the act and the actors.

> "In contemporary times, the social facts formed by various international interactions [and actors, LMS] will be in the forms of different existing texts." (Shaojun 2006, p. 7–12)

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[3] Encyclopedia Britannica. International relations, by Charles A. McClelland, accessed: https://www.britannica.com/topic/international-relations as seen 07-02-2022

Categorizing various types of text is a straightforward task, as the author explains. However, it becomes significantly more challenging, and perhaps even impossible, for a single researcher to cover the entire spectrum of textual content in their research. Shaojun argues that the best way to get a broad picture is to collect material from every position within the complex of International Relations, but as few as possible and as distinguishable one from the other as possible (Shaojun 2006, p. 7–12).

He explains that if the reality of International Relations is not objective, because it is written by authors (actors) in all of their subjectivity, the researcher must interpret their texts (acts) to understand and analyze their perspective – not to align them with some concept of objectivity that stems from natural sciences (Shaojun 2006, p. 7–12). This, according to Shaojun, does not mean that deliberately spreading lies should be treated as equal to the truth, but the researcher should understand why this happened and what the actor's intention is (Shaojun 2006, p. 7–12). Further, the incorporation of other sources to dismantle the arguments as being lies is a feature that has become easier in our times through easily accessible platforms for international communication. Still, so Shaojun, the absolute truth is not something that can be constructed by hermeneutics since the number of texts inaccessible, because of state secrets e.g., is too vast (Shaojun 2006, p. 7–12). Still, there is an abundance of documents that are close to such secret texts and which can be accessed – and which give us the chance to extract at least a part of the truth.

To bring Shaojun's contemplations to a practicable synthesis, I would like to draw a conclusion. International Relations in a hermeneutic view is the interacting intentions of actors (authors) who all have their own perspectives and inner thought processes, which determine their actions in the network of International Politics.

In his book *A Hermeneutics of Violence: A Four-Dimensional Conception* Mark Ayyash discusses the semiotics of violence and its implications for language. He indicates that even though violence in international conflicts is, of course, a physical event, it still forms people's subjectivity, transforms language into violence, and establishes, as he calls it enemy siblings that rely on each other – even though the two fight each other (Ayyash 2019, p. 126; p. 207).

A form of negative identification happens, in which language is incorporated that defines the self as a form of absence of everything the counterpart represents (Ayyash 2019, p. 39). Violence and conflict are elevated above the common forms of constitutive exclusion towards being a part of the identity of a certain nation (Ayyash 2019, p.69; p.127), something that is enforced even on the individual level. Thus, representing forms of violence, like language, become identical to the physical notion of violence, a mimesis is established (Ayyash 2019, p. 94), although its edges never can be fully grasped, because of the infinity of its applications.

This brings me to major methodological considerations for the application of hermeneutics in International Relations.

Operationalizing Hermes in the 21st century

To transcend hermeneutics in International Relations from a theory to a method, one should have in mind what Hans-Georg Gadamer, and as well Karl-Otto Apel understood to be texts. Unfortunately, there is a lot of misunderstanding when it comes to this category. It is a widespread opinion that in this school of philosophy, only written documents are analyzed and interpreted: this is not correct.

In hermeneutics, everything that is a form of language is understood to be a *text*, Gadamer even went as far as saying that everything that speaks to us is in fact text, and as such can be regarded as language. For reasons of thoroughness, it should be mentioned that a similar concept is also discussed

in ethnology. Dvora Yanow claims that the entire discipline should be considered as *phenomenological and hermeneutic*, and that everything humans produce is some sort of language, even the common-sensual, the unspoken and the artificial objects (Yanow 2009, pp. 33-37).

In the eye of the debate between ANT and Political Ontology, this opens an opportunity to create a synthesis between these two disciplines and widen the possibilities for research in International Relations.

Actor-Network Theory claims that not only humans are agents in the sphere of the political, but that it also has to include technology and its various applications. Thus, it is part of the social world, and has a role in the cause and action of the entire network in which International Relations come into reality. Even though ANT can be characterized as post-structuralist because, despite its research goal to identify networks, it claims that reality is nothing simply given but reproduced constantly by reciprocity of all participants (Moebius in Kneer 2013, p. 421). When we consider a basic framework of ANT that also has a notion of the insights from Science and Technology Studies (STS), we may come closer to grasping what role technology plays in International Relations and politics. Modern technology is like a prism in which ideas, text, and thus politics can be projected, transcended, and bring actors into relation who without it might not have had any connection. Thus it is a device, not a determinator, for there are always multiple possible courses of action (Pinch and Wiebe 1984, pp. 399–441).

Foremostly, the notion that technology is not a given archetype in ANT but a part of the social world has a juncture where hermeneutics in IR is able to link in. From this point of view, it is possible to say that technology is just another form of text. Yet this would be a little bit too simple, an explanation is needed. Technology is not a given thing of nature, but an artificial construction made by people, and as such it serves a certain purpose in the social sphere. As we have seen before, a fulfilling mindful purpose is typical only for the social sphere humans have and which is constituted by language. Such technology is just another form of human textuality and contextuality.

Political Ontology, on the other hand, has a more liberal approach to International Relations and regards ANT's strategy as too rigorous.

> "Yet, one result of thinking in ontologically political terms is that 'every time we make reality claims in social science, we are helping to make some social reality or other more or less real'." (Liebetrau and Christensen 2021, pp. 7)

It seeks to achieve an understanding through the constant analysis of the socio-physical processualism of international politics. Political Ontology seeks, as one can find already in the second word, for the self-being of International Politics, and one can find even a hyletic moment in its theoretic considerations. Hylē (old gr. ὕλη) is what in classic philosophy, as well as later in the phenomenology of e.g., Edmund Husserl, means the matter, the basis of a phenomenon that cannot be further reduced (Husserl 1982, pp. 7). Thus, Political Ontology seeks the self-being of International Politics that is hidden behind the fabric of all the networks, the un-reducible essence of the social world in this special sphere.

I argue that here we also find an access point for hermeneutics. All of our social self-being, no matter in which aspect, is formed, constituted, and reproduced in language, in text, and in context. Starting from this point, relating ANT and Political Ontology through hermeneutics, that is the analysis and interpretation of authors, texts, and all their different histories, perspectives, and intentions, we can answer the question of the self-being essence as well as the interaction of actors and networks of both concepts.

Still, further considerations are required to successfully apply hermeneutics in that way. Very often, its methodological side is a little bit too broad to be practicable. This is the reason why I assume that a basic framework to bring these assumptions into a consolidated method can be drawn from phenomenology. Shaojun argued that the selected texts should be the outmost representative and

distinguishable, but I argue that this approach is too simple. Taking into consideration the phenomenological categories of *morphology and taxonomy, chorology, and chronology* can serve as a breakthrough to identify and sort all kinds of relevant text sources and material for the analysis.

Morphology can be understood in this context to identify all relevant actors, agents, and the circumstances in which they interact, while *taxonomy* seeks to find and interpret core terms and concepts of the phenomenon. *Chorology* means in the original to have knowledge of the place in which the phenomenon takes place, but I would argue that we can assume that cyberspace, a technology, can be seen as some sort of textual place that counts in this category. *Chronology* is simply the time frame which each researcher has to define for the investigation, that is: from which span of time will be texts analyzed and why is this done in this certain particular way.

On this basis, the texts themselves can be investigated by a more thorough hermeneutic analysis that looks for interpretation, the history, and intention of the author(s), their interaction with other texts, an understanding of the semiotics, semantics, and linguistic meanings of words and grammar.

Online Disinformation in the case of Serbia – an application of modern hermeneutics in Political Science and International Relations

I would like to give a short example of a possible application that stems from my focus of research. In doing so, I try to "build the case" and develop step-by-step my interpretations from the general to the specific, through a phenomenological funnel. This brief application is by no means holistic, it is only superficial, for a thorough analysis would exceed the limits of this paper. The final step, the one to take the matter of online disinformation in Serbia into the international context thus will only be touched on. I argue that there should not be any division into "domestic relations" and "international relations". In our world, in which the dialectic of inner and outer events is so deeply interwoven, often indistinguishable and complex, in which local events depend as well to international factors and vice versa, a distinction between inner politics and International Relations seems anachronistic.

Context: Chorology

In Serbia, online disinformation has a fixed place in the country's current political sphere. The country has been ruled since 2012 by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), whose former prime minister, Aleksandar Vučić, now serves as president of the republic for the second time since 2017.

Global think tanks such as Freedom House, categorize Serbia as only "partially free" (Freedom House 2022), which is a deterioration from 2010 when it was still labeled as "free". Most of the media outlets, just like print media, television, and radio can be defined as being mostly pro-government and in line with the ruling parties SNS and SPS (Socialist Party of Serbia). The opposition is fragmented and can only win seats in the parliament by forming voting coalitions, while the level of clientelism by the governing parties is extending evermore (Danas 2019)

Context: Chronology and Taxonomy

When we have a look at the history of the main political actor, the SNS, it becomes obvious why the country is shifting year by year closer to an electoral authoritarian system. Its origins can be found in the SRS[5], the Serbian Radical Party, a self-declared ultranationalist party, led by convicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj. President Vučić, as well as Tomislav Nikolić, his predecessor, and almost the entire entourage of the party, were members of the SRS before the split in 2008. In that year, the fraction around

Nikolić disagreed with Šešelj on the subject of the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union. As the chairman of the party, which is strictly anti-EU, he requested all members to vote against this agreement from his cell in The Hague – which prompted Nikolić to leave the party with other like-minded members and to form a new fraction, and later a new party, the SNS. Its first opportunity to form a government came in 2012 and it remains the ruling party until today.

Still, this move did not make Nikolić and Vučić convinced and genuine pro-Europeans, it was far more a pragmatic choice. In order to better understand this, one has to go back even further into the past, the beginning of the 1990s, the time when the SRS was founded. Vojislav Šešelj was a member of an anti-communist dissident group, the Serbian Popular Renewal[4] (SNO), along with other important figures, like Vuk Drašković. Even though this group had assembled like-minded people, Šešelj was dissatisfied to share power with the others and decided to form his own bloc, in which he was supported clandestinely by a branch of the State Security, the MUP[5] (Paralaks 2008). A certain role was created for his newly emerged SRS: to be the assembly of nationalists who are not critical of the regime of Slobodan Milošević, but who either support his irredentist agenda or criticizes it only for not being radical enough.

Even though the SRS's first program was critical to the maximum of communism and socialism, it followed the argumentation of many parts of the Milošević line: centralization of the state, revoking privileges for minorities, irredentism. Just the economic aspects were characterized by a renewal of national-liberal ideas that had their origins in the party program of the People's Radical Party, a historical party in Serbia and first Yugoslavia. This was an attempt to create some sort of continuity by the SRS, which failed for many reasons, one of them being that they were republican and not monarchist as the original had been. In any case, the ultranationalism of SRS, as well as the self-declared pro-EU nationalism of the SNS can be identified as being inauthentic because their historic roots are either completely fictional or their claims are untruthful and purely declarative – in terms of the inconsistency of the party program, political actions, and decisions.

The SRS even formed a coalition with the Socialist Party of Serbia in 1997, and held the infamous Ministry for Public Information, headed by Aleksandar Vučić, where it had proven itself to be a loyal ally to the regime and restricted the freedom of the press even more. Until the democratic change in the year 2000, when the regime was toppled, the SRS remained in the government.

Being "his favorite opposition" (Skrozza in Vreme 2005), as Milošević had labeled the SRS even before the coalition, the party was also entangled in the shady twilight zone of former Yugoslavia, where state security services, organized crime, and politics were mixed and formed some sort of deep state (Danas 2019). When the first democratically elected government under Zoran Đinđić took power, the ancien regime was not defeated and planned its come back. Some figures in the new government were also on the hit list of organized crime because they established contacts and got their support for the revolution of October 5th, 2000.

Former leading political figures from both SPS and SRS, and many persons close to or even in the Serbian mafia decided first to topple Đinđić by changing public opinion. Numerous newspapers were founded, yellow press that published libelous articles on a daily basis, all directed at the new government, but especially at the new prime minister. Some of these outlets even survive until today, like *Kurir*, and are still in the hands of the successor of the SRS, the SNS. It is only one examples that the state media is under the control of the new ruling party.

Until today, *Kurir* has headlines that are symbolic for the entire mindset representing this part of the political sphere in Serbia: *5. Oktobar je bila velika izdaja!* (5th of October was great treason! Kurir 2021),

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[4] Serbian: Српска народна обнова, Srpska narodna obnova
[5] Ministry of Inner Affairs, Serbian: Министарство унутрашњих послова, Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova. Back then also state security for inner affairs, incorporated with intelligence, paramilitaric units, etc.

as in an online issue that was published on August 7th, 2021. The tone that is behind that slogan can be found in many media outlets controlled by the government and even in public speeches. As a message, it is clear: the democratic change of the year 2000 should be reversed.

Context: Morphology of the phenomenon

Unlike Slobodan Milošević and his party SPS, which is ironically the junior partner right now in the government coalition, the SNS understood very well the importance of mass media in politics. In the 1990s, former Yugoslavia had an abundance of newspapers and TV stations that were critical of the government, and which were not censored until 1997, when the SRS formed a coalition with Milošević. Today in 2022, almost all newspapers and TV channels are controlled by the government, or in the hands of people who are members of the SNS. Free TV stations like N1 or Nova S had their frequencies restricted, journalists are threatened and assaulted, and an unprecedented campaign against everything that is related to the opposition takes place constantly.

Media coverage by outlets close to the government is filled with words that can of course be translated directly but have a deeper symbolic meaning in Serbia. The political language is dividing the society in the country, and has its sources, with some alterations, in the terminology of communist propaganda that was established after the Second World War. People are either categorized as being faithful, patriotic, or devoted in their Serbianess (Српство, Srpstvo) or they are traitors, evil wrongdoers, and foreign agents.[6] Nothing can exist in between these categories, and every argument by the other side can be easily discarded without consideration because it represents "pure evil". Unfortunately, this mindset is not something that can solely be found in the government party, but in almost all political actors. It is a result of decades of authoritarian rule in the country where no democratic debate culture was ever really established and developed.

Yet, another sphere of text and contextuality was still not under the influence of the Serbian government, this is of the SNS, when it came to power in 2012: the internet. Until today, cyberspace counts as the medium of choice in Serbia, at least among young people, when it comes to the free expression of opinions. Even Freedom House (Freedom House 2022) and the Belgrade Center for Media and Media Research claim (Milivojević et al. 2020) that this is still a space of freedom in the country. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the strategy has not changed since, because from 2017 onward there was a drastic increase in attempts to disrupt the public online discourse by the government.

Employees in the public sector, from simple clerks to teachers and middle-ranking civil servants, are required to register in a database called "Castle" (also called "Тврђава/Tvrđava" in Serbian, which also means fortress, castle). The subdivision of the registered contacts is very complex and staggered according to function, region, and according to which social networks the respective persons use. These must be deposited with a link to also ensure that the given "work" is also carried out (Nova Srpska Politička Misao 2015).

If an online article is published now with a political reference by a newspaper , or if a piece of news was tweeted from the SNS, then the person network is activated by the administrators, who sit deep in the party. In the run-up, instructions are already given as to how the messages to be posted should be phrased and in what period of time they must be submitted (Nova Srpska Politička Misao 2015).

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[6] Some examples: Страни плаћеници, ("Strani plaćenici", foreign mercenaries), пета колона ("peta kolona", fifth column), издајници (izdajnici "traitors"), Другосрбијанци (Drugosrbijanci, "Second Serbianers", pejorative reference to a group around the philosopher Ivan Čolović, magazine Borba and others, who were labeled as being defeatist in the early 1990s), on the other hand you have as well Сељаци ("Seljaci", peasants), Багра ("Bagra", scum), Ништарија ("Ništarija", evil people, people without any value).

The "trolls against their own will" must always have the "Castle" program active on their computer, laptop, or smartphone during their working hours. If they receive instructions, they must comment on the particular article on a web page or a particular tweet based on the prefabricated information template. If the order is completed, feedback must be provided, and in case of non-compliance, after receiving a reminder, there is also the threat of losing their job, which, as has already been mentioned, was mostly awarded via the party book.

If, for example, the aim is to defame a political opponent, the personal Instagram or Twitter accounts of the opponents are often attacked as well. This was the case, for example, when Sergej Trifunović, an artist and opposition politician from the Free Citizens Movement, visited Abbot Sava Janjić of the Serbian Orthodox monastery Visoki Dečani in Kosovo, who is himself very critical of the government in Belgrade (Čovs 2022).

No sooner had Mr. Trifunović posted a picture with the abbot than troll messages started appearing under his tweet, almost all of them with the same content and written by accounts that sprang from the "Castle" network. In them, both were subjected to the worst insults, allusions to a sexual relationship between the two were made, and one message even went so far as to suggest that Mr. Janjić please hang himself after this meeting. There is no need to talk about the usual topoi of calling dissenters "traitors to the country" and "foreign agents", but you should notice the sexual connotation in this slander. In Serbia, where homosexuality is only tolerated in the large urban centers like Belgrade and Novi Sad, to call someone "gay" is still some kind of swear word, a marking, and labeling of someone to be allegedly somehow immoral, distorted, and even sick.

The opposite case, i.e. the artificial adulation, does not look much different, but it takes on greater proportions. When the president opened a new section of highway, for example, as he did on December 18th, 2019, the respective tweet is covered with comments that ascribe almost superhuman abilities to the president. The "tune" is always the same: Vučić is a visionary who is ingeniously leading Serbia into a golden future, while the country is getting better and better and his time in power will later be measured by the actual immeasurable good he has done for his people. In addition to these comments, which are striking for their wooden wording and repetitive pattern alone, the retweets also stand out. If you take a look at a few accounts that share the president's tweet on their profile, you quickly notice that these people almost exclusively share government content.

However, after those responsible at SNS noticed that the public's attention was focused on the topic of opinion manipulation following various leaks and media coverage in the country's last free newspapers and TV stations, activities were drastically curtailed and various tweets were even deleted.

This does not mean that there is not still busy "spamming". Apparently, it was very important to the Serbian government that after a meeting of President Aleksandar Vučić with Vladimir Putin no visible critical comments appear under a tweet of the Russian Foreign Ministry. Thus, once again, songs of praise were tirelessly sung, this time about the good Russian-Serbian relations, following the old tried and tested pattern.

Interpretation – getting to the core of the phenomenon

The purpose of this approach is not, as Jovica Pavlović of the Institute for European Studies points out, to convince the population of a very specific political view (Pavlović 2019, pp. 52–75). This would also be nearly impossible and would not justify the costs. Rather, is a matter of fostering apathy among those parts of the Serbian people who would otherwise be critical of the government. Their voices are to be silenced. To this end, exuberant approval of the government is simulated, and in this way, spaces for critical socio-political discourse are disintegrated (Petrović 2018).

Troll messages and social bots are not capable of undermining and eliminating a protest movement, or critical Facebook groups, so in this case, another approach is resorted to, countering through duplicate structures.

For example, in 2017, the Facebook group "Against the dictatorship", which was actually directed against the ruling party SNS and its practices, was cleverly copied, only with completely different content. All of a sudden, facts were described in a twisted way that they were more of a burden to the opposition, but without praising the government. This was done intelligently by including metadata on the social platform, with duplicates of the banners and an exact copy of the user behavior of the original group (Petrović 2018). In the end, it was no longer obvious to many people which of the two was now the "real" one. Confused, some citizens turned away from both groups, an effect that was intentional, as it took away the momentum of spontaneous networking, which is a pillar of all protest movements today (Petrović 2018).

Getting the international context

The techniques to execute such operations are not genuinely Serbian. Digitalization and technology transfer in the country are mainly coming from the People's Republic of China, one of Belgrade's most important partners in trade and development, as well as in governmental issues (Juraković 2021). Despite the fact that the ruling SNS considers itself to be a conservative party, it has a deep-rooted cooperation with the Communist Party of China when it comes to governance and public policy.

One of the other "foreign players" is the Russian Federation in Serbia, which has not so much economic influence, but recurs on a historic "brotherhood" with the country and is able to transport anti-western propaganda through the yellow press sector, which is in the hand of the ruling SNS. To explain this all would exceed the capabilities of this paper, still, it was worth mentioning it, to shed more light on the contextuality of the political language and disinformation in Serbia.

Online disinformation in the case of Serbia would be unthinkable if there is no technology transfer from the PR China, I argue. A good hint for this is the close cooperation and knowledge exchange between the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Beta/Fonet 2019). The regime in Beijing makes vast use of techniques that aim at shaping public opinion and has a tremendous apparatus for propaganda, with enormous knowhow and expertise in this field.

Of course, it would be an argument *cum hoc ergo propter hoc* if I say that there is an immediate link between the partnership of the SNS and CCP, and the increase in online disinformation of the forementioned Serbian party. Still, the coincidence is intriguing, and in my opinion there is a correlation between the cooperation, for it is at least documented since 2018 (Mondo 2022), and the increasing efforts in the field of online disinformation in Serbia by the ruling party.

Still, I would like to elaborate this complex topic in another paper, because it would lead too far in this one.

Conclusions

As we can see, online disinformation and attempts to interfere in text and contextuality, or to say it with Michel Foucault to control the discourse, not only in offline but also in online communication are characteristic of Serbia. Still, we can deduce that the actors and the network in which they operate show a large interdependence and orchestration, there are only a few possibilities for individuals or groups to set up a contesting network in order to change the system. From the stance of Political Ontology, with the hermeneutic considerations in mind, we can draw this conclusion: its base, the hyle remains the

same and is built on old structures that were established in the 1990s when the "rules of the game" were set by the main actors back then. Behind the fabric of modern technology and accelerated repro-duction of reality by mass media, the very core of the situation in Serbia did not change and was only contested for a short time, during the early 2000s.

The constitutive exclusion, as Ayyash argued it, of Serbian society and politics is based on a constant inner conflict between alleged patriots and traitors, between heroes and foes. Despite the fact that the country is in constant crisis economically, and suffers from a captive state, the "system" works, because it is reproducing itself every day without any break in sight.

From an Actor-Network Theory point of view, with our hermeneutic considerations in mind, we can claim that the most powerful actor, the Serbian government, interacts with others in terms of a defini-tional language, which judges who is rightful and who is not. As violence has a textual level, one could say that the language in Serbia serves as some sort of weapon against imagined inner, and outer, ene-mies.

Yet the picture would be incomplete, if were not to include the foreign actors, which not only con-tribute to the matter of online disinformation in Serbia, but are a key moment in this phenomenon. Thus, looking at the local events in the country are also relevant per se to International Relations. They are interwoven, show a high grade of reciprocity, and are not thinkable one without the other. The man-ner in which this interaction is occurring revolves not only around some form of assistance provided by language and text but rather places language and text at the very heart of the phenomenon. Context is analyzed and interpreted by the researcher, assembling all of the pieces, drawing conclusions, explain-ing, and getting "a picture". Of course this is also prone to fallacies, yet the processuality and perpetuality are an attribute and a characteristic of hermeneutics. It is always somehow *on the way.*

I would like to conclude that language, the text, and its hermeneutic analysis, guided by phenome-nological methodology, is, as we see, able to create a synthesis between ANT and Political Ontology. Thus, it should be seen as an opportunity with potential to contribute to the progress of research on International Relations.

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