

CIVIC

## Return to ourselves

By: Daliborka Uljarević

*It is time to stop fighting the imaginary enemy, and fight the enemy in ourselves. Such victories could be a proof that we're climbing out of the periphery – not the words which, but being shouted too loudly for too long, lost their credibility and power.*

The life in the Balkans interested the French during Napoleonic conquests. At the time, as now, we were at the periphery of world events, an exotic backwater for the great power, a mixture of civilisations without a clear identity. These views transpire from the writings of **Viala de Somijer, Pjer Kokel, Pierre Marge, A. Avelo i Ž. de la Nezijer**, whose travel writings are both poetic testimonies and warnings.

Adventurer Marge travels through Montenegro writing a “simple study of tourism”, because “Montenegro is in vogue”. He comes with a description of a “tiny state which reminds of a Homeric epic”, and offers a sympathetic view of wonderful, wild landscapes, encounters surprises and struggles to keep an idealistic picture. He holds much admiration for Montenegrins, courage and dignity of poverty of life, which silently demands and visibly gets respect. He describes a functional state administration, and notes that bishop Peter II was the first to introduce a budget, king Nicolas to impose obligatory schooling and regular army service, and also that he adopted good practices in other aspects of organisation of state.

A similar picture is found in Avelo and de la Nezijer, decadent travellers, impressed by openness and hospitality of Montenegrins, beauty of the country, courage and dedication in defending their freedom. They describe Cetinje of those days as a fledgling city, and Montenegro as a fledgling state, which does not yet have administration or a taxation system. “The Minister of Finance keeps all that in a large box, and he and the Duke take from this box whenever the need arises”. But even such underdeveloped system made Montenegro a rare example of a country without debts. The judiciary was run along similar lines, under the looming person of the Duke who personally issued verdicts.

Kokel's oeuvre is more systematic and equally tainted by sympathy. “A small people on a cramped territory can also rise among the first of the nations by its virtues, gaining request of its neighbours by unyielding will and energy and winning sympathy all around for its just cause, as is especially the case with the people of Montenegro. The name is an epic of courage and pure grandeur...” There is no evidence that he had ever been to Montenegro, but in his book he stands firmly by this little Balkan land.

De Somijer was brought to Montenegro by his duty as a soldier which offered him a more analytical view of Montenegrins, their history and tradition, courage and hospitality, governance and authority, legislation and social relations, religion, customs and superstitions, as well as of their attire, nature, science, arts, etc... He focused on the details that demonstrate the will of a small nation to fight the cruelties of life and enemies. Montenegro has no cities, people are poor, houses lack furniture and are decorated by weapons as the most prized household items. The country is hospitable towards foreigners, gives an impression of order but is civically and politically underdeveloped. A living moral code and power of tradition substitute for the lack of judiciary, the role performed by the tribal leaders, under undisputed rule of the bishops. He is also shocked by the subordination of women. In this Spartan Montenegro people have never seen a watch, honour cannot be bought, moral codes come before love, plot boundaries are decorated by heads of the enemies, a word is harder than any paper or signature, there are no wealthy people, but also no beggars, brotherhood is sacred, religion and superstitions are equally observed, there are no schools but everyone is a great orator, the enemy can be respected like a friend... He doesn't hide his disappointment that France hadn't tied Montenegro more firmly to itself.



Montenegro as seen through the eyes of French travellers from more than two centuries ago resembles irresistibly Montenegro of today. They came with a background of cultural and social values of a large European power, to an unknown, small, backward Balkan state which attracted the attention of empires with its occasional courageous breakthroughs but which nevertheless remained strategically and politically unimportant. Understanding this picture is essential to understanding our contemporary cultural and social context, because the lens and the image are similar, in spite of all the differences. We have entered the processes of modernisation and democratisation with a delay, we find it hard to accept the principles and standards and fight back as if to escape domination of some enemy of the centuries past. But this is no more the question of our will or choice. And while we're still struggling with identity dilemmas, internal divisions that are so important to us and so incomprehensible to the world, we haven't noticed that the world had gone forward... While we are fighting our own mentality, our myths and oversized ambitions with little backing, from the times when we were, if only occasionally, subject of books or chapters, we are increasingly finding ourselves in the footnotes of the real events, reports and interests. Will we become incapable of facing the real problems and finding the solution, or will we still run away into identity rooms showing that we are afraid of overcoming these limitations and engaging into an identity revolution what would bloom into healthy civic patriotism? For it is the fight for civic patriotism which encounters the greatest opposition in Montenegro today, taking it further away from the ideals of open society and values of a world towards which we strive...

It has become increasingly difficult to answer the questions: what happened to the traditional values of Montenegrins, which warmed the hearths of world's travellers and inspired them to write about Montenegro with a lot of love and respect, in spite of prejudice...

Centuries that have come between us and these works have also kept some things unchanged: a periphery remains a periphery, because by the time it made its little steps the centre had already moved on, leaving it even further behind. It can easily happen that some other French tourists come up with similar observations about us, because we have not learned our lessons in the first place, we have stuck to the bad traits, working on our nepotistic, clientelistic and criminal inclinations and suppressing the good aspects of tradition, most of all the importance of a given word. And those that don't think much of their own words are scorning themselves as citizens and their democratic capacity. It is time to stop fighting the imaginary enemy, and fight the enemy in ourselves. Such victories could be a proof that we're climbing out of the periphery – not the words which, but being shouted too loudly for too long, lost their credibility and power.

*The author is executive director of the Centre for Civic Education (CCE).*