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Mitja Velikonja
University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

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SPRAYING RELIGION: (ANTI-)RELIGIOUS GRAFFITI OF THE POST-SOCIALIST TRANSITION

By Mitja Velikonja

Dr. Mitja Velikonja is a Professor for Cultural Studies and head of the Center for Cultural and Religious Studies at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. The main areas of his research include contemporary Central European and Balkan political ideologies, religious nationalism, subcultures and graffiti culture, collective memory, and post-socialist nostalgia. For his achievements, he received three national awards and one international award. He was a Fulbright visiting researcher at Rosemont College near Philadelphia (2004/2005), and a visiting researcher at The Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies (2012) and the Remarque Institute of the New York University (2018). He taught as a full-time visiting professor at Jagiellonian University in Krakow (2002 and 2003), at Columbia University in New York (2009 and 2014), at University of Rijeka (2015), at New York Institute in St. Petersburg (2015 and 2016), and at Yale University (2020). He is one of the Advisory Editors of *OPREE*

> *Images of Buddhas side by side with Christian crosses of different shapes; stars of David next to stars and crescents; fervent pro- and anti-religious calls, even insults; ethnic symbols merged with religious ones etc., etc.*

A confused class about religion? A chaotic online chat under some religious post? A bulletin board of an ecumenical discussion group? No, this is a brief look into my folder, entitled with bolded letters "On Religion" with hundreds of photos of graffiti and street art on religious topics. This particular, well-classified collection is part of my much broader and continuous research on contemporary political graffiti and street art in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, from Baltics to the Balkans, from Prague to Moscow, all of this, of course, in global perspective. It took me over 20 years of systematic fieldwork—taking photos of graffiti and street art in four continents (there are about 25,000 of them in my archive, almost all of them original), attending and participating in different graffiti events, meeting and

interviewing graffiti writers and activists, and continuously following this vibrant urban creativity on websites and social media—to be able to publish a monograph a few months ago.[1]

I define graffiti and street art as specific, two- or three-dimensional, illegal, visual expression conveying a message in connection with the public space in which it is created. Graffiti, stencils, stickers, paste-ups, murals, different inscriptions, scribbles, arborglyphs, illegal public installations, latrinalia, etc., cover a wide range of different topics: from love messages to soccer-fan battle cries, innocent jokes to unimaginable curses, and from xenophobic threats to calls for a better, more tolerant, just, and solidarity world. As such, they are complementary, and at the same time, critical to more conventional media, like press, electronic, and digital media. They cover topics that are, in the views of graffiti authors, missing or under-represented.

Graffiti are constructing and at the same time reflecting cultural and political reality around them; they are a kind of litmus paper of social situation in their environment. They are a kind of "document of their time," a precious evidence of what is going on in a society, right or wrong, in the eyes (and sprays!) of graffiti writers and activists. As a cultural studies scholar, interested in cultural and ideological changes in the post-socialist transition, I understand them in their cultural and aesthetic integrity and in their ideological and political context. Generally speaking, aesthetic (or subcultural) graffiti put emphasis on aesthetic expressivity and artistic craftmanship, while the political graffiti express political opinions or agendas. The former poeticize streets, and the latter politicize them. In both cases, graffiti writers take liberties for their aesthetic creativity or for their political purposes that no one allows or grants them.

Lots of graffiti and street art deal with, or refer to, religious topics from different perspectives, having different orientations, different ambitions, and addressing different publics. They reveal attitudes toward the religion and religious institutions–and against them in this part of the world. However, I did not come across any study or scientific article that would deal with them in any part of the world–obviously they are taken seriously neither by graffitologists nor by sociologist of religion. So I decided to approach graffiti and street art in my standard way: by researching them in the broader context of comprehensive and critical studies of religious dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe.[2] In footnotes at the end or in the

[1] Mitja Velikonja, *Post-Socialist Political Graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020).

[2] See: Timothy A, Byrnes and Peter J. Katzenstein, Peter J., eds.: *Religion in an Expanding Europe*. (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Irena Borowik and Sabrina P. Ramet, eds., *Religion, Politics, and Values in Poland - Continuity and Change Since*

middle of each group of religious graffiti analyzed below, I compare them with similar examples from the other parts of the contemporary world.[3]

Religious symbols

Graffiti, Belgrade, Serbia, 2015. Text in Cyrillic "Pravoslavlje" (Orthodoxy)

I found lots and lots of different religious symbols, traditional and new ones in graffiti and street-art form, displaying religious devotion like *Jesus is super!*[4] on façades in Poland during the 2000s, *Jesus Christ* (Otočac, Croatia, 2013),[5] *Glory to Jesus* (Ljubljana, 2019),[6] or

1989. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), Miklós Tomka and Irena Borowik, eds.: *Religion and Social Change in Post-Communist Europe*. (Kraków: Nomos, 2001), Miklós Tomka, *Church, State and Society in Eastern Europe*. (Washington, D. C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2005), Paul Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans.* (New York: Continuum, 1994); Aleš Črnič, "New Religions in 'New Europe'" in *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (2007): 517-551.4); and Marian Smrke, *Religija in politika – Spremembe v deželah prehoda*. (Ljubljana: Znanstveno in publicistično središče, 1996).

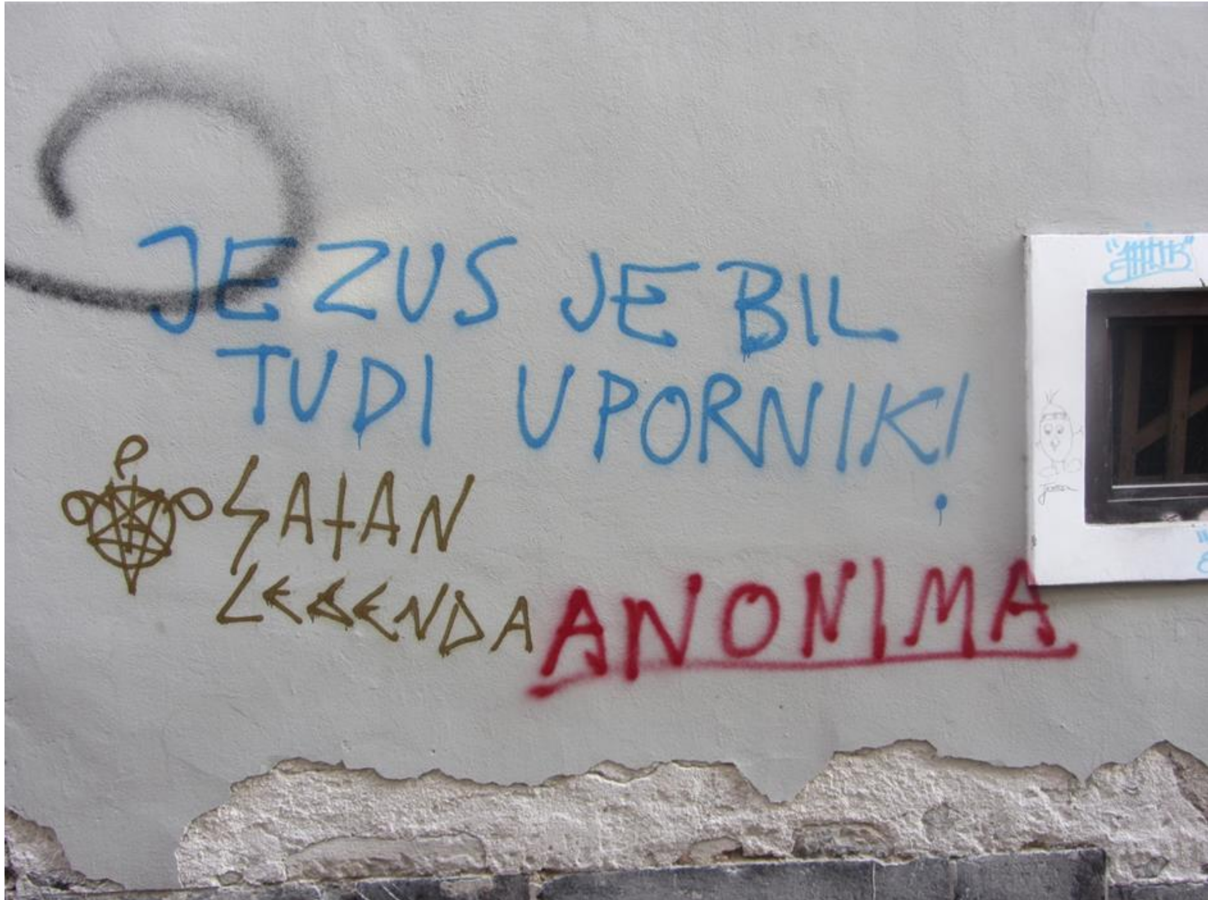
[3] Text of graffiti in English and original languages, as well as ideological phrases, are written in *italics*.

[4] *Jesus jest super!*

[5] *Isus Krist.*

[6] *Slava Jezusu.*

simply *Orthodox Christianity* (Belgrade, 2015).[7] A wall in the port of Rijeka, Croatia, was decorated with a sophisticated mural of Pope John Paul II with his motto *Don't be afraid* (2015).[8] An informal group of Russian graffiti writers create murals depicting Russian Orthodox icons in different cities.[9] A stencil with the image of Jesus called *Wanted* could be seen in Prague (2015). Emancipatory potentials of Christianity are revealed in Ljubljana's graffiti *Jesus was a rebel too!* (2014).[10] Images of crosses in different sizes are sprayed, drawn,



Graffiti, Ljubljana, 2014. Text in Slovenian, "Jesus was also a rebel."

[7] *Православље.*
[8] *Ne bojte se – Karlo Josef Wojtyla – Papa Ivan Pavao II – 1920+2005.*
[9]See for example https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tg77A0UfA4 or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4_ov7kRYkk, accessed April 4, 2020.
[10] *Jezus je bil tudi upornik!*

written, glued, etc., on walls in Central and Eastern European countries of traditional Roman Catholic (Latin) or Eastern Orthodox religious-cultural patterns, as well as the crescent and star in green in Bosniak parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro.[11]

The so-called *Celtic cross*—the cross on a circle—which is one of the historic versions of the Christian cross, became the new trademark of white supremacists and neo-Nazis in Europe, and (un)knowingly adopted also by soccer fans. Another example of "invented tradition" in graffiti and street art is *spinning wheel*[12] (a double swastika), an alleged symbol of Old Slavonic, pre-Christian religion and *purity of the Slavic race*. I noticed this so-called *Slavic Sun* on the walls in Poland, Serbia, and Slovenia from the late 1990s on.[13] On the other side, there are quite a few satanic symbols and names (pentagrams, inverted Latin crosses, *Belial*, *Satan*, *Lucifer,* etc.), often connected with radical music genres and subcultures, or as a denominator of the political opponents. For example, Croatian autochthonists issued stickers with a crossed-out EU abbreviation and their motto *NO to EU!*[14] accompanied by the Satanist pentagram and the symbol of freemasons (2016).

Religious Confrontations

The highly problematic Huntingtonian *clash of civilizations* ideological doctrine of the post-cold war world is unfortunately intensively present also in graffiti and street art. All over the central Balkans, symbols of "neighboring" religions are regularly destroyed or desecrated. Graffiti in Plodiv, Bulgaria, combines an inverted Catholic cross and swastika (2019). Croatian religious extremists cross out Serbian Orthodox crosses and add Roman Catholic/Latin ones (and often swastikas and/or some soccer fan slogans). The popular Serbian Orthodox symbol (four *S'*s in Cyrillic script *C*) is often turned into an Islamic symbol by adding four small stars next to four »Cs« or drawn in green—in both cases symbolically implying that the Muslim side "won." In Slovenia, all of them are simply crossed out, and *Slovenia* or the abbreviation *Slo* is added (throughout the 2010s); some other graffiti shows how the Serbian Orthodox symbol is

[11] I took photos of very similar ones also in USA: Don't be caught without Jesus (New York, 2004), Jesus loves you (New York, 2020) or Boycott Hell!–Repent (road to Philadelphia, 2018), not to mention different graffiti versions of God, Jesus, Trinity and other Christian icons.
[12] In many Slavic languages, *kolovrat*.
[13] For the comprehensive study of "neopaganism" in the broader region, see Aitamurto and Simpson 2013.
[14] *NE u EU!*

the same as the Muslim one, implying that they are both alien to *Roman Catholic Slovenians* (Ljubljana, 2009).[15]

Critics of Religion or Religious Institutions

Stencil, Sibiu, Romania, 2017.

[15] On the other hand, an example from Graz, Austria, shows that and how love transcends religious differences: there's a large heart between simple inscriptions of Hajnalka with a cross and Mehmet with a crescent and star (2015).

Many graffiti and stencils criticize religion as such, or religious institutions as a social phenomenon, especially those that enjoy hegemonic positions in their societies. A stencil in Sibiu, Romania, depicts a high Romanian Orthodox dignitary who demands *Obey* (2017), while the one in Bucharest (*Jesus dies–Buddha smiles*) "corrects" the word *Jesus* into *Jeu*, adding two dollar signs (2017).[16] A scary creature holding a cross high up on the arm can be seen in graffiti in Stara Zagora, Bulgaria (2019). Graffiti in Sarajevo announce that *Hodjas and priests are the biggest thieves* (2014).[17] A stylized motif on a sticker in Rijeka shows how a young woman and a priest are fighting over a big key, which is a metaphor for the heated and protracted discussions about the reproductive, and in general, women's rights in Croatia (2015). Quite a few stencils that are critical to the Church appeared in Slovenia. The one in Ljubljana problematizes the Church's greed: Above the crucified Jesus, instead of the *INRI*, stand dollar and euro signs (2014). A stencil with a hook and cross on one side implies that a person can get hooked or addicted to religion, and on the other hand, is an Ancient Greek symbol of Cronus and an alchemistic symbol for lead (Maribor, Ljubljana, 2014). Another one in Nova Gorica, Slovenia, shows a stylized image of a man running from a church and explaining *Jesus did not go to church* (2012),[18] while the one in Ljubljana proclaims *Death to religion that spreads hatred* (2012).[19] Close to it I found graffiti depicting different types of crosses, from Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian crosses to (double) swastikas (2015).

Sticker, Rijeka, Croatia, 2015.

[16] I found similar ridicule also in USA: in a stencil in New York, motto *Jesus saves* with Jesus' happy face is turned into *Jesus shaves*, and the name of a famous blade-and-razor company (2018).
[17] *Hodže i popovi najveći lopovi*. Hodja is a Muslim clerical position.
[18] *Jezus ni hodil v cerkev.*
[19] *Smrt veri ki širi sovraštvo.*

To understand (anti)religious graffiti and street art, their location and the time of their creation are very important: they "hit" where and when it hurts the most. In times of political campaigns where dominant churches are involved, their buildings are regularly targeted with anti-religious graffiti. During the campaign, before the fertility treatment referendum in Slovenia in 2001, one of the churches in the city center was "bombed" with graffiti *Better test tube than having Cukjati for father* (2001).[20] Graffiti *Tito* and *CPY* (*Communist Party of Yugoslavia*) could be found on the entrance of the building of the Split Roman Catholic archbishopric in 2005.[21] Graffiti on diagonal lines crossing, taking to one of the churches in Zagreb, asks *I'm not completely sure whether there is a God or Mephisto* (2020).[22] Anti-church graffiti like *Church lies* can be noticed on churches and religious objects in different post-socialist countries.[23]

Ethnicization and Politicization of Religion

One of the consequences of the post-socialist transition in Eastern Europe, especially in the Balkans, was the reconstruction of "religious integrism," merging ethnic (and often political) and religious identities.[24] Ethnicization and politicization of religion lead to tensions within (against secular parts of society) and outside of society (against neighboring countries/nations/religions).[25] All this was and is reflected also on the walls where we find the whole spectrum of different clero-nationalist symbols. On the Croat side, I found hundreds of graffiti with *ustasha U*-signs with the Roman Catholic cross in it, sometimes accompanied with calls to kill (*Slay* in Split, 2004),[26] and with the standard phrase *God and Croats*, or iconography of clero-fascist organizations like *HOS,* pro-ustasha *Croatian Armed Forces*.[27] On the Serbian side, I took photos of graffiti featuring the aforementioned popular symbols of Serbian Orthodox integrist ideology (so-called *Svetosavlje*), the three-finger salute,[28] the

[20] Franc Cukjati, an ex-Jesuit, is one of the leading right-wing politicians in Slovenia, whose opinions are very close to the ones of Roman Catholic Church. Original goes *Raje epruveta kot Cukjati za očeta.*
[21] *Tito, KPJ.*
[22] *Nisam baš na čisto dal tu je Bog je il Mefisto.*
[23] Again, this is not very different from the examples I took photo elsewhere. Stencil in Graz with crucified Jesus says *Stop lying* (2013).
[24] Perica (2002: 214-223) calls it "ethnoclericalism."
[25] For the harmful process from militant to militaristic religion (justifying war and religious/ethnic cleansing with religion by religious/ethnic extremists), see Mojzes 1994, Cvitković 2004 and Velikonja 2003.
[26] *Kolji.*
[27] *Bog i Hrvati* and *Hrvatske oružane snage.*
[28] A new Serbian Orthodox salute, ethnicized symbol of the Holy Trinity.

slogans *God protects Serbs* and *With faith in God*, etc., together with iconography of the radical groups *Obraz* and *National Alignment*, and the soccer fan groups *Christian Orthodox Army* and *Orthodox Boys*.[29] A mural in Novi Sad shows Russian and Serbian flags, the Orthodox cross between them, and the affirmation *Two nations–One faith* (2016).[30] An inscription on the wall in Kranj says *Holy Macedonia* and is joined with the drawing of *Macedonian sun*, their newly invented national symbol (2011).[31] Bosniak religious integrists spray or draw graffiti with acronyms of their leading political party,[32] or the Bosnian medieval coat-of-arms and a green crescent and stars, etc.

Simultaneous references to God, Christianity, and radical political groups are often present in soccer fan stickers, stencils, and graffiti. The FC Cibalia Vinkovci (Croatia) fans sticker says *Let it be heard, let it be known, That there are only God and Croatia above Cibalija!*[33] together with an image of a soldier wearing a Nazi helmet (2015). FC Hajduk's fans, *Torcida*, put the Catholic cross in ustasha's letter U in the name of their club (from 1990s). One of Korona Kielce's (Poland) fans displays images of the Ku Klux Klan members and burning crosses, with the English inscriptions *We stand for God, race & country* (2011). The *Vojvodi* (*Dukes*) soccer fans of FC Teteks, Tetovo (North Macedonia), choose to be represented by the hand firmly holding the Orthodox cross (2011). Christian imagery is present also in graffiti supporting national soccer teams. I have never read that any respectable religious institution would condemn or distance itself from such appropriations of their name and imagery.

Graffiti, Tetovo, North Macedonia 2011, supporting the local soccer club.

[29] *Бог чува Србе*, *С вером у Бога*, *Национални строј* and *Православна армија*.
[30] *Два народа - Једна вера*. For Sells (1996: 51), "Christoslavism" is an integrist ideology based on "the premise that Slavs are by essence Chistian and that conversion to another religion is betrayal of the people or race."
[31] *Sveta Makedonija.*
[32] SDA, *Stranka demokratske akcije, Party of Democratic Action*.
[33] *Nek' se čuje, nek' se zna, da je iznad Cibalije samo Bog i Hrvatska!*

However, I have seen plenty of street reactions against all of this. Many urban artifacts of this kind are very soon crossed out, or painted over, or bleached, or peeled off, or confronted with the opposite religious/national symbols or confronted with radical secular critics. Graffiti *Death to clero-fascism* with the anarchist sign and a crossed out swastika in Maribor (2014) is one, and it is joined with a few others condemning the collaboration of parts of the Slovenian Roman Catholic clergy with the Nazis during WW II (Maribor, 2014).[34] The one in Bihać in north-western Bosnia-Herzegovina explains that *Religion + nation = double penetration* (2017).[35]

Hatred Toward Religious Minorities

Walls present another media of spreading religious distance, and even hatred, toward religious minorities. In the post-socialist graffitiscape, two religious "others" are particularly targeted: Jews and Muslims.[36] The sad tradition of Central and Eastern European antisemitism continues to this day also in the form of antisemitic graffiti. Very often they are associated with the name or image of the Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros as a new personification of a "harmful Jew." Soccer fans, *Wisła Sharks,* of the Krakowian FC Wisła proudly display their antisemitism in graffiti with a crossed out Star of David and an acronym *A J*, *Anti Jews* (2014).[37] Graffiti of the Star of David is decisively crossed over in Belgrade (2015), while in Izlake, Slovenia, it is equalized with a swastika (2013). The one on the gates of a synagogue in Odessa says *Jews out--Ukraine for Ukrainians* (2017).[38] The Red Army monument in Plodiv, Bulgaria, was covered with the graffiti *Communism = Jewishness, 88,*[39] *6.000.000 lies,* and a swastika (2017).[40]

Especially, but not exclusively in the Balkans, anti-Muslim graffiti, stickers and stencils accompanied Islamophobia in three waves: during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995), as an echo of the American *War on Terror* (after the 9/11 attacks), and during and after the so-called "refugee crisis" in the fall of 2015. Graffiti like *Stop Islamization*, or stencils

[34] *Smrt klerofašizmu.*
[35] *Religija + nacija = dupla penetracija.*
[36] And, interestingly, not members of new religious movements and *foreign sects*, which are otherwise regularly attacked by religious autochtonists as *alien to our culture.* I never noticed a single anti-NRM graffiti.
[37] *Anty Jude.*
[38] *Геть жидів, Україна для Українців.*
[39] *88* is an international neo-Nazi code for *Heil Hitler!* while *18* for *Adolf Hitler.*
[40] *Комунизъм = Евреиство* and *6.000.000 лъжи.*

showing a person throwing the Muslim crescent and star into the garbage, could be observed all along the so-called "Balkan route," from Turkey to Central Europe. In Ljubljana, anti-Muslim graffiti were joined with the image of *our* Roman Catholic cross, Celtic cross and a call *We want weapons* (2015 and 2016).[41] The graffiti (interestingly, in Serbo-Croatian language) *Kill all Muslims*[42] appeared in Jesenice, Slovenia, in 2015, while *Do not spread Islam in Czech Republic! Otherwise we'll kill you* in Brno appeared in 2019.[43] Islam was often joined with other "harmful" ideologies in Central European nations. The Autonomous Nationalists of Slovenia, for example, sprayed together the crossed out (red) star the crossed out $, also the crossed out swastika, and the crossed out (red) star; their graffiti says *Here's no place for totalitarianisms!* with all of them crossed out. With other Islamophobic extremists, they posted a number of stickers with similar contents throughout the 2010s: *Preserve your heritage, say no to multiculture, Stop Islam, Slovenia to Slovenians, Europe to Europeans!* and *Eurorabia? No, thanks! Let's stop the Islamization of Europe and the spread of Islamic extremism, Europe to Europeans!*[44] Graffiti explain that Europe was, is, and will remain a *Christian continent*, period.

Such intolerance brings counter strikes: Islamophobic graffiti with a crossed out Muslim symbol bearing the original inscription *Stop Islam* has been replaced by *Stop idiots*, *Stop Islamization* and has become *Stop idiotization* with a small intervention, and *Stop Islam* has turned into *Enter Islam*[45] (all in Ljubljana, 2012-2016). Graffiti in this same city ironically ask *So you are for burek, but not for the mosque!?* (2010).[46] Similar ecumenical[47] or religiously tolerant[48] responses can also be noticed elsewhere.

[41] *Hočemo orožje.*
[42] *Ubi sve Muslije.*
[43] *Ne širte islam v ČR! Jinak vas zabijeme.*
[44] An all-European sticker of the new youth alt-right organization Generation Identity shows European medieval knight chasing Muslim couple with Kalashnikovs in their hands explaining *Islamists not welcome – Stay back or we'll kick you back* (from 2015). And the newest graffiti in Paris explains *Zero Muslims = Zero cases of coronavirus* (*O Musulman = 0 cas de coronavirus*, March 2020).
[45] *Stop islamu – VStop Islamu.*
[46] *Burek bi đamije pa ne bi!? Burek* is a typical Balkan street-food (and from the Yugoslav decades very popular in Slovenia as well) and– for Slovenian nationalists–symbol of the Balkans. Author of graffiti condemned hypocrisy of Slovenian anti-Balkanian and anti-Muslim nationalists who love *burek* but reject the Balkans/Muslims.
[47] A stencil in Paris aptly combines Muslim crescent (*C*), letters *O* and *E*, star of David (*X*), letters *I* and *S* and Christian cross (*T*), forming the word *COEXIST* (2015).
[48] Immediate bottom-up resistance toward the so-called *Muslim Ban* (Executive Order 13769), imposed by the then new Trump administration in late January 2017, was strong also in graffiti subculture with variety of visual interventions, expressing solidarity with Muslims and firmly rejecting Islamophobia (with messages like *Muslims are not terrorists, NY loves Muslims, Everyone is welcome here* with an image of a Muslim woman etc. etc.).

Conclusion

I see my study of (anti-)religious graffiti as a complementary contribution to the already impressive corpus of profound, critical studies of religious changes in the post-socialist transition—which cannot be properly understood if we don't take into account also their "sprayed" narratives of (anti-)religious graffiti, stickers, stencils, posters, and murals. Many of them are written in English, so they are not directed only to "domestic public," but also to foreigners. They are, in its innovative, concise, often also offensive manner, a valuable source of sharp *pro et contra* opinions, but also hard data to know more about this topic. The contents and tones of many of them are often congruent with the ones generated by religious radicals within churches, conservative political parties, and state administrations on one side with the critics of religion/churches on the other. So, these graffiti confirm that "typical social and polarization and confrontation" (Smrke 1996: 99) in Central and Eastern European countries, historically shaped by Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox religious-cultural patterns, continues to these days.

The number and variety of (anti-)religious graffiti is dramatically increasing: almost none of them were around 30 years ago, while today they are present everywhere in the Central and East European urbanscape. Graffiti point out all controversies, antagonisms, and (un)resolved dilemmas and many similarities, but also significant differences of religious and social dynamics in this part of the world. They point out trends of (de)secularization, levels of (dis)satisfaction with the new role of religious institutions, reaches and limits of revitalization of religion and politicization of churches, challenges of religious pluralism and temptations of religious monopolism, parallel processes of "belonging, but not believing" and "believing, but not belonging," individualization and (new) collectivization of religion, (dis)continuities of religious tradition in respective countries, etc. Not a single of these phenomena was left unreflected on the walls. So, to get a better insight in what is going on within the walls of churches, state institutions dealing with religious topics, and within homes of (un)believers, we have to check also these same walls on the outside.

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