

# The Dirty Tyranny of Mr Clean: *as Croats celebrate the purity of their air, Dubravka Ugresic is afraid of suffocating*

Dubravka Ugresic

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TWO years ago, when the Croatian nation was euphorically declaring its independence, there were unusual tin cans on sale in kiosks in Zagreb. They were like Coca-Cola cans, with the red and white Croatian coat of arms and the message: 'Clean Croatian Air'. This message coincided with the (then) most popular television advertising slogan for cough-sweets: 'Breathe more easily'. Thus, one message reinforced the other: 'Breathe more easily with clean Croatian air']

Today you can't find these politico-ecological tins; there's a different souvenir on sale now: a chocolate box designed like a Croatian passport, with the same coat of arms. From 'clean Croatian air' (or the proclamation of independence), the kitsch industry has moved on to the 'sweet Croatian passport', that is, to a sovereign, internationally recognised state.

But what happened to the air? That innocuous message on the empty can has come to life like a spirit released from a bottle, It has attached itself to the Croatian language like a burr, entered the media, politics, thought, everyday speech, everyday life. Today, there is hardly a newspaper article or television broadcast without the word clean, which, of course, implies its opposite - dirty. And, with the newly established system of values based on the opposition, clean/dirty, life suddenly seems simple.

As well as external enemies - finally named (another phrase from the new times: 'We have finally named the enemy') - who are the cause of this dirty war, the spirit from the bottle is relentlessly cleaning everything in Croatia.

So numerous self-styled blood group police are diligently verifying the blood of Croatian citizens in a search for the 'unclean'. Croatian citizens have begun frantically digging through their own and other people's biographies in case they find an undesirable blot. Hence the recent pronouncement by a well-known public figure - 'Everyone knows there hasn't been any Byzantine blood in my family for 300 years' - becomes normal behaviour. It was begun by the Croatian President, when he announced that he was glad he had a pure Croatian wife (that is, not a Serb), and immediately afterwards a member of the Assembly announced that he, too, was glad his wife was a Croat, and not, therefore, either a Serb or black.

In the new system, 'Byzantine blood' is the most dangerous polluter. 'Byzantine' is another, more refined, word for Serb, Orthodox; and in the same linguistic and ideological system, the adjective means sly, dirty, deceitful; in other words, different from us. Or as the author of a newspaper article recently defined it: 'Ordinary Croatian people are not the same as ordinary Serbian people who are aggressive and collectively frustrated by the Serbo-Byzantine philosophy of life - kill, seize, steal, dominate.'

The magic spray-formula, clean Croatian air, cleanses Croatian territory not only of 'Byzantines' but of all internal enemies who are insufficiently good Croats: 'saboteurs', 'traitors', 'villains', 'anti-Tudjman commandos' and 'Commies'. In this spirit, politicians, including the President himself, have promised to 'clean' all influential posts of Communists.

Mr Clean Croatian Air is continuing to clean Croatian territory also of 'inanimate' enemies, of symbols of the former non-national, Communist regime, as was wonderfully explained by the writer of a newspaper report justifying the mass destruction of monuments to the victims of fascism.

The spirit from the can has inspired self-appointed cleaners as well, the 'bombers', who have taken upon themselves the difficult patriotic task of 'cleansing' Croatian towns of houses whose owners are Serbs - with dynamite. In their zeal the cleaners sometimes use dirty methods. One of these is the collective smearing of the house with collective shit, to ensure

that the undesirable owner abandons the house forever. This original method of cleaning was adopted by the inhabitants of a small island town on the Adriatic. The house in question belonged to a former Yugoslav minister. The local police did nothing to suggest that such methods were unacceptable.

The spirit from the can has crept into the Ministry of Culture where the officials, with the new minister at their head, have proved themselves diligent cleaners. They have cleansed the school curricula of everything 'undesirable', and, for the sake of 'clean Croatian air', the minister has publicly recommended that teachers of the Croatian language in schools should be pure Croats. Mr Clean Croatian Air has entered the libraries like a cool draught, and the diligent patriot cleaners are quietly putting books by Serbian writers into the cellars, cleaning the shelves of enemy Cyrillic, and anti-fascist books by Croatian writers.

Mr Clean Croatian Air has cleaned up all the old names of streets, schools, institutions, squares because the old ones sullied our Croatian surroundings. That little zealot's spirit has entered businesses, workplaces and, for two years now, has been cleaning away all unlike-minded politicians.

The ever more terrible spray-formula is still energetically cleaning everything in front of it. The Croatian newspapers are full of threatening texts, and one of the most frequent threats is, again, connected with - the air. 'If he wants to go on breathing Croatian air, and behaving the way he does . . .' the attackers write angrily. And they are profoundly right. Because breathing Croatian air is the only thing left to the Croatian citizen. Soon he or she will not have enough money to buy Croatian bread. So the air of Zagreb becomes cleaner and thinner every day. One breathes as in the Andes, almost with gills. On the other hand, the doctors assure us that such air favours the creation of red blood cells. And red, as we know, is the colour of patriotism.

*The author is a Croatian writer living in Zagreb. Her latest book is 'Fording the Stream of Consciousness' (Virago).*