



Slavenka Drakulic

We took its light for granted

In memoriam: Feral Tribune (1993–2008)

A former contributor to the Croatian weekly *Feral Tribune* writes that the paper was left to die by those who should have taken better care of it: its readers and all who cared for its lone, free, critical voice.

It is hard to write an obituary when a friend dies, much harder when this friend is a thing, not a person. A newspaper, that is. Its name was *Feral Tribune* and it was an independent political weekly published in Split. In its final form it was not very old: 15 — not even of age — yet its importance was immeasurable. In Croatia, the small country where it lived its short but memorable life, there was nothing even close to its quality. There never existed such a weekly where standards were high and journalists brave and uncorrupted. They were an exception to the rule: a kind of guerrilla in the time of transition. In addition, *Feral* cultivated a characteristically sharp, often dark humour. It quickly became an institution, a light at the end of the tunnel — *Feral* means a kind of lamp — that functioned as a thorn in the flesh of successive governments: socialist in the period before 1993 when it was part of a national daily, nationalist under President Franjo Tudjman and post-Tudjman coalitions.

Feral started in 1984 as a satirical supplement to the daily *Slobodna Dalmacija* in the last years of the socialist government and immediately became the object of criticism from the top. It left *Slobodna Dalmacija* in 1993 when the paper was sold to a member of the ruling HDZ and became an independent weekly. The *ancien régime* was experienced enough not to punish its editors too severely or to close it down, which would not have been difficult. They let it live as a proof of the liberal and democratic credentials of the government, an example of the "socialism with a human face" it claimed to represent. In fact, all this proved was that in the absence of any active civil society to take up the issues raised, the socialist government felt it was untouchable, above such criticism.

With the collapse of communism and the proclamation of an independent, democratic Croatia in 1991, civil society was given its chance. But the autocratic first president of the newly independent state, Franjo Tudjman, was neither a democrat nor a tactician. He would frequently fly into a rage at articles published in *Feral* and was personally offended by its criticism, its investigative reporting on corruption scandals and its exposure of war crimes. A word of truth at a time when extreme nationalism reigned supreme, *Feral* was a red rag to Tudjman and his cronies. Its editors and journalists were "enemies", "traitors", "children of Yugoslav army officers",

"Yugo-nostalgics", or "full of hate" for everything Croatian. Tudjman resolved to financially destroy this vipers' nest by bringing *Feral* to court for slander, where, the president presumed, the newspaper would quickly be found guilty — no matter that ordinary people might wait years for their cases to come to court. It was something of a miracle when, in 1996, a judge in the case of "Franjo Tudjman vs *Feral Tribune*" found editor-in-chief Viktor Ivancic not guilty for writing that Franjo Tudjman was a fascist. Ivancic had, in fact, quoted from an interview with Tudjman in which he had said how much he enjoyed comparing himself to Generalissimo Franco.

Then *Feral* was banned, withdrawn from kiosks, publicly burned at the stake; its editors were sued, slandered, arrested, physically attacked and sent death threats. In yet another attempt to see the magazine off, only one year after it had started as an independent weekly, it was forced to pay the punitive pornography tax.

Tudjman's death in 1999 ushered in a more liberal atmosphere. *Feral* continued to publish important stories on issues no other newspaper would touch. In 2000, it revealed an extraordinary series of taped conversations between Tudjman, his military commanders and ministers that demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt that the Croatian army was engaged in Bosnia in 1994. The tapes also proved that Operation Storm was not only a legitimate military manoeuvre to take back the occupied territory of Krajina, but also a successful ethnic cleansing. The authorities denied the authenticity of the documents.

After Tudjman's Croatian Democratic Union regained power in 2004, the long war of attrition between the powers that be and the journalists of *Feral* was conducted by more subtle means. Yet *Feral* was doomed. Why? The reason is twofold: economic strangulation and the failure of its readership.

It took some time before a functionary in the CDU-led coalition government caught on to the most efficient — and discreet — way to finish off the beast. Even if it sells 20 000 copies weekly and gets more international awards for excellence than the rest of the country's press put together, no newspaper can survive without advertising. But *Feral* got none! State-owned companies knew better than to publish there and private companies, which needed to remain on good terms with the political top brass, received not-so-subtle signals to avoid advertising in the paper. *Feral* did what it could to survive: cut its staff, reduced production expenses to little more than the cost of a samizdat sheet, took out bank loans. It was not enough and in 2004, *Feral* opened negotiations with Europapress Holding in the naive hope that it could exist within the kingdom of its tabloids. The media mogul personally expressed interest in the project and negotiations were opened — and closed without explanation. In the environment of the so-called "free market", the entirety of which is divided between two companies (EPH and Austrian Styria), newspapers have become "envelopes for advertising". The exhausted *Feral* announced its own death in its last issue and passed away quietly on 18 June 2008. One fears independent political journalism in Croatia died with it.

The other reason *Feral* died is civil society generally and we its readers. It has to do with our lack of concern for the public interest — and there was clearly not enough interest among the public for it to survive. Under the terms of wild capitalism and the savage dictatorship of the "free market" economy, the idea that we needed *Feral* because it defended public interest and not the private interest of individual politicians was just not strong enough. We are

responsible because *Feral* died of negligence. We did not see that it was our duty to keep it alive, not necessarily with money but with pressure — demands that it be saved, debates about its future, concern for its survival. We are responsible for *Feral's* death because we took it for granted. There it was on the kiosk, and we knew that every Friday there would be something to read, something to keep us sane in the madness surrounding us: that it would cast light on our ghastly reality. Only now, when its light no longer shines, shall we, perhaps, be able to see the depth of the darkness in which we live in Croatia. Who is going to write about Branimir Glavas, an alleged war criminal on trial for war crimes with a seat in parliament?¹ Or analyse the phenomenon of Thompson, the pop-singer who greets his public with the equivalent of "Heil Hitler"? Or expose the corruption scandals shaking the judicial system?

The death of *Feral Tribune* is a sad loss for its friends and readers, but all Croats are the poorer: while it lived, it made us appear more tolerant and civilized — people with a sense of humour, rather than the indifferent, selfish and cowardly lot we appear with *Feral* gone for good.

This article was originally published on the Swedish website [DN.se](http://www.dn.se) on 11 July 2008.

¹ The trial of Glavas, accused of the murder of Croatian Serb civilians the town of Osijek in 1991, has been delayed repeatedly since December 2006. See: "Politics, crime and the media in Serbia and Croatia 1989–2009. Timelines" in Eurozine <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-03-20-timelines-en.html>

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