Recently Serbia’s public sphere has witnessed a sequence of violent outbursts containing events dramatic enough to be featured on the newscasts of foreign European countries. One of the most recent episodes involved football fans rioting before and during a European championship qualifier between Italy and Serbia, scheduled to take place on October 12, 2010 in Genoa. Prior to the game Serbian fans attacked the Serbian team bus, besieged the team’s hotel, and threatened the life of the team’s goalkeeper, Vladimir Stojković. Immediately preceding and during the game the television beamed images of hooligans burning the Albanian flag. Eventually referees were forced to stop the match due to concerns for the players’ safety. In other instances, right-wing groups impeded and threatened marchers in Belgrade’s Gay Pride Parade in 2009 and 2010. These were not apolitical acts, or even examples of nonviolent civil protest. Violence has become a critical feature of Belgrade’s and Serbia’s everyday life, at least since the political campaigns surrounding the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo by the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government Assembly on February 17, 2008. The globe was able to witness that event through widely disseminated televised images capturing devastation in Belgrade’s streets, the burning of embassies, and of Serbs in multiple European capitals protesting Kosovo’s independence.

These events have led some commentators to argue that nationalist forces have effectively usurped the state’s power, and that they are ready and willing to use violence as a political means. Organizers of 2009’s

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1 An even more evident manifestation of the ideological concepts behind this action can be grasped from a posted youtube-clip: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQa8ORUdqF4.

2 The 2008 Annual Report of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia is entitled Human Rights, Democracy and – Violence. It starts from the observation that the period “was marked by violence at all levels – from political, through stadium violence, to school and street violence” (18). Although we can to some degree agree with the report’s diagnoses we must distance ourselves from its explanations.
Gay Pride Parade argued that the authorities’ cancellation of their event represented the state caving to pressures from a handful of right-wing extremists. Similarly, the TV station B92 produced and aired a three-part miniseries titled, *Powerless State* (*Nemoć države*, 2009), documenting state institutions’ series of failures in pursuing and prosecuting the leaders of the football hooligans and the lead activists of other extremist organizations.

Yet these events create only a partial narrative. Others tell a much more positive story focused on Serbia’s achievements over the past few years. The country’s public and private representatives routinely condemn such violent acts as shameful crimes while emphasizing the stresses and struggles Serbs have overcome. After winning the Australian Open in 2011, tennis star, Novak Djoković, used his post-match speech to emphasize that Serbs are “trying every single day to present our country in the best possible way,” while notable social scientist Ivana Spasić sees “a new realistic political culture in post-Milošević’s Serbia” (2009: 8).

We approach the paradox created by such statements and events, and interpret the spread of violence in the streets of Belgrade and other Serbian cities, with a particular sensitivity toward the visual politics of symbols. We build on the works of sociologist, Émile Durkheim (1995), and anthropologist, Mary Douglas (1996), to capture the inter-connections between the symbolic order and the stability of social and political institutions, rather than presupposing a top-down approach, i.e. that political leaderships’ communications determine ordinary citizens’ interpretations, more closely associated with proponents of Cultural Studies. With the cultural sociology of Durkheim and Douglas at the ready, we observe the interrelations between street iconography on the one hand, and state iconography on the other. More particularly, our research design is based on an analysis of street graffiti production since 2008, which we interpret in relation to so-called “official graffiti” (Hermer/Hunt 1996), defined as everyday “regulatory signs” such as highway signs, traffic signs, street names, etc. Contrary to the signs of officialdom, graffiti is interpreted in sociological literature as “radical media whose communicative thrust depends not on closely argued logic but on their aesthetically conceived and concentrated force” (Downing 2001: 52). Graffiti is described as “radical” due to its particular aesthetic but also because it is interpreted as performing a radically democratic function. It is described as “the most democratic media” (Dragićević-Šešić 2001: 84), for instance, since it represents a mode of expression of political views available for anybody regardless of their economic or political resources. One of this chapter’s main counter-arguments challenges this popular conception that attributes