

Southeast European Politics
June 2002

Vol. III, No. 1
pp. 62-70

Nationalism and the Rhetoric of Exclusion

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Abstract

The late twentieth-century Serbian nationalist discourse is seen as a manifestation of the same rhetoric which was initially formulated in the period of national awakening associated with the two uprisings against the Turkish rule under Karadjordje Petrović (1804-13) and Miloš Obrenović (1815-17) and the institution of the autonomous Serbian principality after the Russo-Turkish War (1828). The methodological tool used in this paper to analyze the Serbian nationalist discourse in the late 20th century is a set of binary oppositions underlying the formation of Serbian national identity, which was skillfully manipulated by the former leader Slobodan Milošević.

Despite Eric Hobsbawm's optimistic predictions in 1990,¹ nationalism as a topic for scholarly debate cannot as yet be laid on the shelf and forgotten. In considering Central and South-Eastern Europe, the "loose ends" in the solutions adopted for parts of former Yugoslavia could in the future cause further destabilization in the area.

In his book *Nationalism Reframed*, Rogers Brubaker specifies three distinct varieties of the Central and East European nationalisms of the 1990s: the nationalizing nationalisms of newly independent states, the transborder nationalisms of external national homelands and the minority nationalisms within the borders of the new national states (Brubaker 1996: 4-5). Since in former Yugoslavia ethnic groups lived in each other's pockets,² most of their respective nationalisms can be seen as threefold, i.e. manifesting themselves in each of the above varieties.

Serbian nationalism notably transcends Brubaker's triadic nexus. In Serbia proper, it is manifested as a desire to own a state which will have the Serbian nation, defined in ethnocultural terms, at its core. In the period after World War II, this desire found its most explicit expression in the 1986 Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences. It is closely related to the thwarted appetites of Serbia as the "external national homeland" to Serbian minorities in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, to absorb territories beyond its borders. Brubaker's third category corresponds to the nationalism of the Serbs in Croatia, but it cannot account for the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where

the Serbian area, covering 49 percent of the territory, is now 94 percent Serbian; or for Kosovo, which is for all intents and purposes within Serbia's borders. This article focuses on the nationalizing nationalism of Serbia proper, as the *spiritus movens* and constant point of reference in this complex interplay.

The 1974 Yugoslav Constitution and 1981 Albanian revolt prompted Serbia's intellectual and political elite to begin working with all their strength on the ethnic homogenization of the Serbian national consciousness, forging it through blood ties and strengthening it through ever-closer relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church. According to one of its main ideologues, Dobrica Ćosić — a novelist and former President of the rump Yugoslavia — Serbian nationalism, by its very nature, could not allow any internal conflict:

Only big nations are capable of paying their respect to the individual. In the case of small nations it is not possible because of the national myths and taboos. Only the nation itself can be great, while the moral responsibility of individual demands sacrifices to community, nation, state. (Quoted in Popov 1993: 16)

The monolithic quality of the late-twentieth century Serbian nationalist discourse was promoted by the overtly controlled media. The new rhetoric, rich in clichés from folk history, was criticized by Belgrade dissident Bogdan Bogdanović as a “dizzying repetition of pseudo-patriotic terminology [with] a shamanistic effect” (Milošević 1995: 111-2). This phenomenon is not unique to Serbian nationalism: rather, it seems to be a *locus communis* of all discourses pertaining to nationalizing nationalisms. Dubravka Ugrešić, for example, writing in war-time Croatia (1993), experiences it as a straightjacket imposed on her own intellectual integrity and attributes it to the insecurity of newly independent states:

The business of building begins with naming. This is a house; this is the homeland; this is black; this is white. [Yet] naming is the work of God [...] it appears to be intended to convince oneself and others of the actual existence of the new reality. It is only in firm coordinates, in a clear and named world, that we shall not be lost, not threatened by the chaos of madness, ambiguity, multiple truths. Because we are at the beginning, we need one truth. (Ugrešić 1997: 160)

Another important feature that Serbian nationalist discourse shares with the discourses of other nationalizing nationalisms of Central and South-Eastern Europe is its reliance on binary oppositions in the process of exclusion and collective identity building. I would like to suggest that nationalist discourse of this kind mainly operates along two emotionally charged dichotomies:

Personal dichotomy “I” vs. “non-I”, which can be translated into “my nation” vs. the “Other” ; and Spatial dichotomy “here” vs. “not here”, which becomes the “territory of my nation-state” vs. the “*terre irredente* to which I lay claims”

I will organize my argument around these oppositions, in order to demonstrate the complex ways in which they animate the discourse and

ultimately motivate Serbian nationalist behavior. These dichotomies, which underlie the formation of national identity and the development of territorial pretensions, also determine which historical data are “remembered,” “modified” or forgotten by the nations concerned.

“I” vs. “Non-I”

This dichotomy is built around a number of ethno-cultural considerations and has to be traced back to its inception in the first half of the nineteenth century. Who are we? What distinguishes us from other nations? The most obvious areas offering possible answers to these questions are those of language, folk history and popular culture: the three “codes” which in Serbia’s case most significantly intersect in the sphere of traditional oral literature in general and of epic poetry in particular.

This most fertile resource pool for the construction of Serbian national identity was extensively explored by early nineteenth-century nationalizers such as Vuk Karadžić and Petar Petrović Njegoš. The heroic songs in *deseterac* (decasyllable), recounting an idealized version of historical events, had been at the centre of Serbian ethnic awareness in feudal times. These songs are traditionally performed by a single singer, who accompanies himself on a string instrument called *gusle*. Each line is divided into two parts by a strong *caesura* after the fourth syllable. The songs, which are firmly embedded in the epic tradition, make frequent use of set phrases and epithets, such as rosy wine, flat field, green mountain, splendid horse, handsome warrior and similar. They are charged with association and, according to Milne Holton and Vasa D. Mihailovich, “chipped into the brain of every Serb” (Holton and Mihailovich 1988: 85).

Although the songs cover a variety of moral and existential themes,³ the most prominent motif is the suffering of the Serbian people under the Ottoman yoke. The battle between the Turks and Balkan Christians at Kosovo Polje in 1389 – which Noel Malcolm calls the “totem and talisman of Serbian identity” (Malcolm 1998: 58) — is an endlessly repeated theme in Serbian heroic poetry. The mythopoeic epic interprets Prince Lazar’s defeat at Kosovo Polje as the fall of the Serbian Empire.⁴ Numerous heroes, historical or invented, but familiar to the point of internalization, fight courageously and eventually fall in the battle,⁵ victims of betrayal and brutal aggression. Another theme from epic poetry which informed Serbian nation-building in the nineteenth century — a certain single-minded fatalism — is best exemplified by young Gojko Mrnjavčević,⁶ who buries his young wife within the walls of the Skadar fortress, as a sacrifice demanded by the mountain *vila*, or nymph in Slavic mythology. In mid-nineteenth century, the three main elements of the self-styled Serbian national identity — heroism, victimization and fatalism — were immobilized in a fiercely orientalist discourse, in binary opposition with the Crescent (“infidel” Turks) in Njegoš’s epic *Gorski vijenac (The Mountain Wreath)*.

In the 19th century, the drive for unification of the South-Slavic peoples was well under way in Croatia, spurred originally by the Illyrian movement, a

cultural revival from under Habsburg yoke. The most prominent political forces in Serbia were at the beginning resistant to the idea of South Slav unification, as they did not at the time see it as a possible vehicle for national consolidation and expansion. Early in the 20th century, the narrative of Serbian victimization and adverse fate gave way to a new feeling of confidence prompted by victories of Serbia and its allies in the two Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and the ensuing territorial gains – most notably, of Kosovo and parts of Macedonia. The new self-esteem brought about a change of heart regarding the possibility of forging a South Slav union. It was given a further boost at the end of World War I:

Serbia was jubilant, at the height of glory and prestige, although it had lost one-fourth of its population and half its economic assets in the war. At long last, the chance to create, if not a Great Serbia, then at least a united South Slavic state was at hand.

(Prpić-Jovanović 1995: 43)

And indeed, Serbia kept the upper hand in the first 20th-century Yugoslav state, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918-41), which meant that narratives of victimization were quickly appropriated by other ethnic groups in the Kingdom, notably the Croats. Serbian nationalist rhetoric resurfaced in World War II, particularly in narratives surrounding Draža Mihajlović's royalist Chetnik movement. In Tito's Yugoslavia it became prominent again after the 1974 Constitution, which granted the two Serbian "autonomous provinces" – Kosovo and Vojvodina – a *de facto* republican status.

In the late twentieth century, a self-conscious heroism, victimization and fatalism were pushed forward daily in Milošević's controlled media. Orientalism was resurrected in modern-day Serbian nationalist rhetoric in relation to both the Bosnian Muslims and Kosovo Albanians. President of the Republika Srpska, Biljana Plavšić, accused Bosnia's Muslims of pursuing a form of "sexual terror" against the Serbs that was "genocidal in character." She also referred to the Islamic practice of polygamy and to the "right to the first night" she said was enjoyed by Muslim notables with Christian women under the Ottoman Turks (Cohen 1998). Albanians are often portrayed as fecund,⁷ inferior and incurably irredentist. They are viewed as having been privileged in the Ottoman Empire and as having taken over properties left behind when Serbs fled northward in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The twentieth-century Serbian national identity also relies on a more recent binary opposition, in which the enemy is seen as "fascist" or almost "genetically programmed for genocide." Milošević's propaganda machine incessantly used images from the real Croatian genocide against the Serbs during World War II to portray every contemporary Croat as a latter-day fascist ready to follow in the footsteps of his or her predecessors (see, for example, Krestić 1997). Neo-fascism was also often attributed to the Bosnian Muslims and Albanians. Many Bosnian Muslims initially embraced the Ustaša rhetoric, which had declared that Muslims were Croats' brothers and that Croatia was a nation

with two recognized religions, Catholicism and Islam. As for the Albanians, already in 1986, Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences spoke of their “neo-fascist aggression in Kosovo” and their attack on the “cradle of the Serbs’ historical existence.” (Mihajlović and Krestić 1995: 127, 129)

“Here” vs. “Not Here”

This dichotomy refers to the territory of the Serbian state within its official borders at any given moment in the history of Serbia as a nation-state, i.e. since 1829, in relation to the greater territory to which the nation lays claim. The idea of a “Greater Serbia” — the battles to achieve it, frustration and blaming the Other (under the sign of the Crescent, Swastika or, most recently, NATO military insignia) and eventual resignation — goes hand in hand with the idea of heroism, victimization and fatalism of the nation. It is built on the myth of a “glorious medieval empire” overpowered and extinguished in Turkish invasions. The idea of a recreation and further expansion of this empire — a kind of Serbian Megale idea⁸ — reemerges periodically in Serbian history. Peter Sugar attributes this peculiar expansionism of Serbian nationalism to the fact that for Serbia, the state and the national awakening happened simultaneously (Sugar 1995: 357).

In order to understand the territorial claims underlying Serbian nationalist rhetoric, it is necessary to take a step back in history to the medieval period, considered by nationalists as Serbia’s “Golden Age”. From 1169 onwards, Raška (as Serbia was then called) underwent a considerable expansion into neighboring lands in present-day Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and central Serbia. Raška also expanded southward under King Milutin (reigned 1282-321), conquering territory from Byzantium. The dominion of Milutin’s son Stefan Dušan (1331-55) extended from the Danube to central Greece. Dušan’s empire disintegrated after his death; prince Lazar and his allies were defeated at the Battle of Kosovo Polje (1389); and the Turkish conquest of the Serb territory was accomplished in 1459. In the centuries that followed, the Serbs were vassals in the Ottoman feudal system. The so-called *Vojna Krajina* (Military Frontier) was formed during the reign of Ferdinand I (1526-1564) to protect Austria from Ottoman invasions. It was under the direct jurisdiction of the War Council in Graz as a separate administrative area. It consisted of two sections: Croatian, with the centre in Karlovac, and Slavonian, with the seat of command in Varaždin. The population in this area consisted mainly of the Orthodox from the Dinaric Alps regions.

The scope of Serbia’s future *terre irredente* was extended further by the two great migrations ahead of the invading Turks, led by the patriarchs Arsenije III Črnjević (1690) and Arsenije IV Šakabenta (1737) to territories in present-day Vojvodina (Srem, Banat, Bačka), northwestern Bosnia and parts of Croatia (Slavonia, Baranja, Banija, Kordun, Lika and continental northern Dalmatia). The significance of these migrations for the Serbian nationalist discourse is twofold: firstly, it is claimed that Albanians came to Kosovo only after the migrations, to fill the vacuum left by the exodus (see, for example, Roth 1996);

secondly, the migration legends boosted the national awareness of the Serbs in the areas where they were a minority.

The first systematic treatment of the Great Serbian program was devised by Ilija Garašanin, Minister of Internal Affairs in the government of Aleksandar Karađorđević, the son of the rebel Karađorđe in 1844. In a secret Memorandum (*Načertanije*, trans. *Draft*) he sent to the prince, Garašanin recalled the mythical Golden Age of medieval Serbia and speculated on the possibility of recreating it. He then listed potential territories to be included in a Greater Serbia: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and northern Albania. He was also interested in Serbs living in Banat, Bačka, Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia, but refrained from advocating unification with these areas because they belonged to Austria, which was in his opinion too strong to be challenged. The “unity of the Serbian people and Serbian lands” was also supported by the Serbian Orthodox church.

The Greater Serbian idea later developed in two different directions: the first was envisaging a powerful state in which all Serbs would be included; the second streak, aspiring to a united state of several South-Slavic nations,⁹ with Serbia at its core, was to be put into practice in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, called Yugoslavia from 1929 onwards. The proclaimed Yugoslavism in this state was experienced by the non-Serbs as aggressive Serbian hegemony and enforced Serbianization. World War II saw the disintegration of interwar Yugoslavia into a number of separate entities, some of which – notably, Kosovo within the Italian-run Albania and the Independent State of Croatia, incorporating Bosnia and Herzegovina – either sided with or were under direct control of the Axis powers. Thus, the “Other” associated with these two entities – the Kosovo Albanian and the Croat – became fixed as ‘fascist’ in the black-and-white nationalist discourse. As mentioned before, omnipresent and uncritical labeling of these two ethnic groups as “fascist” became part and parcel of Serbian nationalism of the external homeland in the 1990s.

As early as 1942, Tito condemned the “numerically insignificant minority of Greater Serbian hegemonists” (Sugar 1995: 311) who had promoted national oppression in pre-World War II Yugoslavia. The new federal republic proclaimed in 1943 consisted of five republics as national homelands (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro) and one as a tri-national unit (Bosnia and Herzegovina). The subsequent Constitution also established two autonomous provinces with large non-Serb populations within Serbia (Kosovo — which was initially called an “autonomous region”, only to be promoted into a province in 1963 — and Vojvodina). Both measures were designed to curb Serbia’s hegemonism. The 1974 Constitution went even further: the two provinces were now directly represented at both Serbian and Federal levels and gained the power to veto decision-making on issues requiring consensus. For the Serbian nationalizing nationalism *couchante*, this was a serious blow, perceived as a loss of control over the entire territory of its national state. Also, after the Croatian nationalist movement in 1971 and the mass demonstrations in April 1981 by

Albanians in Kosovo demanding full republican status for the province, the Serbs, the largest nation in Yugoslavia, felt extremely vulnerable, as the balance of power was not any more in their favor. This insecurity was expressed in the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts of 1986, which became the manifesto of the latest Serbian nationalist revival imbued with the rhetoric of victimization.

The Memorandum was later denounced by the Serbian communists, but the new party president, Slobodan Milošević, had already learned his lesson. Faced with angered Kosovar Serb demonstrators at Kosovo Polje in April 1987, he gave them his famous promise: “No one will ever beat you again!” In 1988 and 89, Milošević abolished the autonomy of the two provinces and replaced the political leadership in Montenegro by his own supporters. Subsequently, he extended his promise of protection to the Serbian diaspora in other republics of former Yugoslavia. He thus set the Serbian nationalist rhetoric in full swing by skillfully tapping into its constructed grid of dichotomies, with fatal consequences for South-Slav federalism. Throughout the 1990s, this rhetoric was the mobilizing call for Serbian fighters in the long and bloody series of wars leading progressively to the fragmentation of former Yugoslavia. Since July 2001, Milošević’s statements at the United Nations war crimes tribunal in the Hague have been a veritable repository of nationalist rhetoric, postulating his own and his people’s heroism¹⁰ and victimization.¹¹

Vojislav Koštunica’s electoral victory in October 2000 did not put an end to Serbian nationalism, but rather changed its public face by extricating it from the communist framework within which it had been operating under Milošević and allying it more openly with its traditional *alter ego*, the Serbian Orthodox Church (Biserko 2000). The intimate, but delicate relationship between present-day Serbia and its Bosnian off-shoot Republika Srpska, as well as the apartheid dividing the UN-run Kosovo, still offer fertile ground for nationalist rhetoric. It is therefore too early to say whether the latest development – the overwhelming vote by the Yugoslav Parliament (31 May 2002) in favor of a proposal to put an end to the Yugoslav federation and create a new looser union between Serbia and Montenegro – may signify a move away from expansionist rhetoric.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to explain how rhetoric of othering, sometimes based on elements of history but, more commonly, invoking mythical narratives from a pool of popular culture to construct a collective identity, functions to mobilize dangerous passions in the service of a “national cause” for present-day purposes. Mythical narratives provide a self-styled mirror for the narcissistic national “self” – simultaneously a hero and a victim, and therefore “justified” in pursuing national aspirations, regardless of the cost. Serbian nationalist rhetoric thus fits the pattern commonly employed by nationalist discourses in other geographical and historical contexts. “Remember the Alamo!” is a war call which needs to be problematized by questions such as “What exactly is there to remember?” and, more importantly, “Why are we asked to do so?”

Notes

¹ “After all, the very fact that historians are at least beginning to make some progress in the study and analysis of nations and nationalism suggests that, as so often, the phenomenon is past its peak. The owl of Minerva which brings wisdom, said Hegel, flies out at dusk. It is a good sign that it is now circling round nations and nationalism.” (Hobsbawm 1990: 183)

² To quote Ivo Banac’s metaphor of the Russian *matryoshka* dolls, in Yugoslavia, there was always a “successively smaller toy-baby in the litter.” (Banac 1991: 148)

³ For an informed analysis of the moral aspects of the Serbian epic, see (Brkić 1961).

⁴ In fact, the Serbian empire had collapsed after the death of Tsar Dušan in 1355. After the battle of Kosovo, the Serbian Orthodox church promoted a religious-patriotic cult of Prince Lazar - a tradition which was revived in 1989, when his supposed remains were ritually carried through the “Serbian territories” of former Yugoslavia.

⁵ Jug Bogdan and the nine Jugovićes, Vukašin, Uglješa and Gojko Mrnjavčević, Stepan Musić and finally Lazar Hrebljanović himself.

⁶ Gojko is, notably, a poetic invention, while Vukašin and Uglješa Mrnjavčević are historical figures.

⁷ Serbia’s Minister for Family Affairs, Rada Trajković, a former doctor in Priština, called Albanian women “child-bearing machines” who she claimed did not always know the names of all their children (Kaufman 1999).

⁸ Greek, the ‘Great Idea’. The term refers to aspirations by Greek nationalists to create a Greek state with boundaries encompassing all the lands that had been under Byzantine rule or under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The idea was the driving force of Greek nationalism, particularly in the 18th and the 19th centuries (see Jelavich 1997: 262).

⁹ Yugoslavism can be traced back to the Illyrian movement in 19th-century Croatia. As noted earlier in this paper, the idea of South Slav unification was not immediately embraced by the Serbian political circles.

¹⁰ For example, his notorious statement that he “should be given credit for peace in Bosnia, not for war” (11 December 2001). All transcripts of Milošević’s trial can be found at <http://www.un.org/icty/latest/index.htm>.

¹¹ “They [the Prosecutors] want to proclaim us the culprits, who were the victims of their aggression, and me, with the help of this Tribunal, to bring me before Nuremberg to reverse the roles. That crime, which was the crime of the killing of Yugoslavia, and crucifying me here, they are doing that with the help of their – today’s allies and one-time enemies. All the facts bear this out and all the moves actually implemented bear that out” (14 February 2002).

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