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The Serbian Transition: An Explosive Cocktail of Politics and Culture[1]

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Abstract

The central question this article will attempt to answer is why a transition from authoritarian rule in Serbia in the early 1990s proved to be much more difficult than in most other former Communist Central and Eastern European countries. The essential component of the answer will deal with the role of nationalist political culture as a surrogate for democratization in a state in which, between 1945 and 1987/88, both nationalism and liberal democracy were deprived of their political and social legitimacy. The Serbian authorities averted an imminent collapse of Communism in the late eighties by adopting nationalism, instead of democratic reforms, as the legitimating principle of their rule. To give a satisfactory explanation for the fact that Serbia and a number of other republics in the erstwhile Yugoslav federation turned to nationalism and war, instead of following a path to democracy, it is essential to understand the interaction between politics and culture, that is the relation between the power maximizing strategies of political elites and the role of the culture of nationalism. I will therefore treat both political actors and culture as the relevant independent variables that can explain the outcome of my interest.

1   Introduction to the theoretical context of the case of Serbia

Current discussions concerning the causes of nationalism and war in former Yugoslavia, both in scientific and journalistic texts, frequently ask the question whether nationalism and war were a result of a manipulation of popular masses by authoritarian political elites or a result of 'ancient hatreds' among ethnic communities in the Balkans. This question, however, is based on a false dichotomy. There is no reason to exclude the possibility that *both* political elites *and* cultural factors (rather than the more narrowly defined 'ancient ethnic hatreds') played an essential role in the rise of militant and xenophobic nationalism in Serbia and a number of other former Yugoslav republics. On the contrary, this article will assert that an *interaction* of politics and culture was necessary for the outcome I am attempting to explain.

It is almost impossible to overestimate the role of the authoritarian neo-Communist regime in Serbia in the instigation of nationalism and war. Although somewhat similar roles were played by other authoritarian regimes in the republics of former Yugoslavia (the Croatian regime in particular), I will concentrate primarily on the Serbian authorities. It is important, however, to emphasize that, without the presence of a specific cultural base in the Serbian nation, its history and tradition, no political elite would have been capable of politicizing the national(ist) identity in the direction the Serbian authorities did. Thus, fertile soil for a particular type of nationalism existed before the political elite intervened. However, such nationalism and war would not have been possible without the very specific kind of involvement of a cynical and authoritarian Communist regime that exerted near total control over the state. Metaphorically speaking, the Yugoslav cocktail was indeed potentially explosive. And yet, the explosion would not have occurred, if ruling political elites had not deliberately set fire to it.[2]

I will operationalize the idea of an interaction of politics and culture by employing the concept of the politicization of cultural (or ideological) frameworks by political elites. A framework will be defined as an interpretative system. In Serbia, I will distinguish two such interpretative systems: the Communist-xenophobic and the liberal-nationalist. These two frameworks interpret political reality along two axes, one axis defining the political debate on the basis of the dichotomy 'Communism vs. democracy', the other on the basis of the dichotomy 'Serbs vs. Others'. Proponents of the Communist-xenophobic framework tend to employ the latter axis; proponents of the liberal-nationalist framework are more inclined to seek interpretations along the former axis.

In the case of a successful politicization, a cultural framework will become hegemonic, i.e., it will provide a uniform interpretation of reality: it will begin to 'reign as common sense' (see section 3 for an elaboration of the concept of hegemony). Since I found two salient cultural frameworks on the Serbian political and social scene of the 1990s, i.e., the Communist-xenophobic and the liberal-nationalist, the question arises: *How did the Communist-xenophobic framework become hegemonic in Serbia?* This is in fact a reformulation of the main question of this article, i.e., the question why Serbia failed to experience a democratic transition.

In the reamaining part of this section, existing approaches to democratic transition will be classified. In section 2, the dynamics of the Serbian political scene will be described in terms of my theoretical concept, and alternative explanations for a failure of democratic transition in Serbia will be discussed and criticized. Since the concept of hegemony plays a salient role in my argument, it will be discussed in the Serbian context in section 3. The last section will give an account of the historical-cultural background that was responsible for the achievement of hegemony by the Communist-xenophobic

framework, and therefore, for the failure by Serbia to achieve a transition to democracy. This section is essential to understand why Serbian national identity and political culture provided such a good instrument for the Milosevic regime in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Generally, the role of nationalism in transitions from authoritarian rule is not emphasized in existing literature.[3] This is probably because most existing literature on democratic transitions deals with Latin America and Southern Europe, i.e., with countries in which nationalism did not play a significant role in political processes. It seems, however, that nationalism figures quite prominently when explaining transitions and failed transitions of a number of Central and Eastern European countries. Below is a classification of existing literature on democratic transitions.

Deterministic schools emphasize the role of structural preconditions in transitions to democracy. They include a number of concepts. In *socio-economic accounts*, democracy is correlated with economic modernity. The main idea of such theories is that socio-economic modernization is followed by a corresponding ('democracy-friendly') value change. The assumption is that there is a positive correlation between capitalist development and democratization (Lipset 1959). In the *historical school of comparative sociology*, Barrington Moore's path-dependent account of democratization figures prominently. According to Moore, the state of democracy in a society is determined by the path that this society followed to reach its current status. Thus, the history of a particular country determines the type and level of its democracy. The path to democracy is a long struggle, during which, among other things, arbitrary rulers have to be checked. According to Moore, the beheading of Kings is 'not the least important feature' of the checking of rulers. This implies that the long struggle is frequently a violent one, which may result in a non-gradual, revolutionary 'jump' to a more democratic society (Moore 1966). In traditional *political culture schools*, democracy is correlated with a specific civic culture. Unlike the previous two approaches, which follow the tradition of analysing socio-economic factors, the traditional political culture school is more oriented to socio-cultural factors. Almond and Verba (1963), for instance, assess the correlation between values and democracy. Later other scholars, such as Ingelhart (1988) and Putnam (1995), used approaches similar to the political culture perspective. Ingelhart found a high correlation between cultural variables, such as the degree of personal life-satisfaction, political satisfaction, interpersonal trust, and the support for the existing social order (together termed as 'civic culture') on the one hand, and the stability of democracy on the other hand. Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* is a remarkable attempt to assess the positive correlation between civic traditions and democracy.

Voluntaristic accounts of democratization emphasize the role of the elites that are engaged in bargaining processes during periods of transition. A seminal work is O'Donnell and Schmitter's *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (1986). In the authors' view, there does not seem to be any logical sequence in the processes of democratization, although some regional and temporal patterns can be discerned. They reject deterministic notions of democratization in periods of transition. Democratic transitions are characterized by a high degree of indeterminacy, by participants' actions on the basis of insufficient information, by confusion about motives and interests, plasticity and even indefiniteness of political identities (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 5). Using a Machiavellian terminology, the two authors stress the role of *fortuna* (unanticipated events) and *virtu* (talents of actors). Socio-economic concerns do not have a prominent place.

Haggard and Kaufman's *Political Economy of Democratic Transitions* (1995) is an interesting, more recent attempt to reconcile deterministic and voluntaristic notions of democratization. The authors depart from a purely choice-based approach by placing significant emphasis on the economic and institutional aspects of democratic transitions. On the other hand, decisions of policy-makers also have an important impact on political outcomes. Thus, institutions, economic conditions *and* politics shape the prospects of democracy.

The above mentioned approaches view democratization as a process that correlates with economic modernity (socio-economic accounts), a specific civic culture (political culture schools), or as a process that is determined by the historical paths a society follows (the historical school of comparative sociology), elite bargaining (voluntaristic accounts) or a combination of structural pre-conditions, institutions *and* decisions of political actors (attempts aimed at reconciling deterministic and voluntaristic schools). Apart from these approaches, some recent attempts are aimed at emphasizing the role of sequencing in democratization, the roles of localities, protests, women, the international context, etc. As already stated, in most of these accounts nationalism is practically disregarded as a variable that may explain democratic transitions or their failure. In many Central and Eastern European cases, however, the role of nationalism in democratic transitions should not be downplayed. In the Serbian case, the role of nationalism (and a particular political culture determined by specific forms of nationalist awareness) is central.

For a satisfactory account of Serbia's failure to follow most other former Communist states in their transitions to democracy, political culture has to figure prominently. However, the relationship between democratization and political culture will prove to be multifarious, and more complicated and ambiguous than is assumed by a number of existing approaches to this relationship, which stress a positive correlation between democratization and

a specific form of civic culture (Almond & Verba 1963, Putnam 1993, Ingelhart 1988). Although the Serbian case certainly does not repudiate this correlation, it proves that political culture can also play other roles in political and social processes.

2   The politicization of cultural frameworks and alternative explanations

To answer the central question of this article, it is necessary to concentrate on the period just before the Central and Eastern European transitions, the 1980s. In the early and mid eighties, three ideological frameworks striving for societal hegemony in Serbia are to be distinguished: the embattled Communist, the liberal democratic, and the nationalist frameworks. Until 1987, the Communist regime had been challenged by an informal liberal-nationalist alliance. In September 1987, when the Serbian League of Communists adopted nationalism as a power-supporting ideology, the liberal-nationalist coalition began to fall apart. This was most visible during mass rallies that were organized in 1988 and 1989 by the 'new' Communist-nationalist authorities in Serbia. At these rallies, a synthesis – which until then had been unthinkable – of the symbols of state socialism and Serbian nationalism was developing, whereas liberal democrats became increasingly marginalized.

After new parties had begun to emerge in Serbia (in late 1989 and early 1990 in particular), some of the more moderate nationalists defected from the alliance with the Communists and restored their alliance with the liberal democrats. Most of the relevant Serbian opposition parties are an offspring of this liberal-nationalist alliance, while the dominant Serbian party (the Serbian League of Communists, renamed the Socialist Party of Serbia in 1990) represents an alliance between Communists and xenophobic nationalists. Serbian society and politics of the nineties cannot be comprehended without a profound insight into the struggle for hegemony between the liberal-nationalist and Communist-xenophobic framework.

The use of xenophobic nationalism by the ruling party as a means of preserving power was positively correlated with the opposition's emphasis on democratic principles (at the expense of nationalist ones) as a means of challenging the regime. The regime's preferred ideological axis to mobilize popular support gradually became the 'Serb vs. Other – axis'. For the opposition, it became the 'Communism vs. democracy – axis'. The former was based on inter-ethnic, the latter on intra-ethnic cleavages. Hence, our central question may also be raised as follows: what facilitated a successful mobilization of popular support (by political elites) on the basis of inter-ethnic diversities in Serbia, rather than on the basis of intra-ethnic diversities?

There is an interesting overlap between the struggle for hegemony between the Communist-xenophobic and liberal-nationalist framework on the one hand and the struggle for hegemony between the framing of the political debate on the basis of the inter-ethnic axis and intra-ethnic axis on the other. The proponents of inter-ethnic framing in Serbia are obviously pro-Serbian (not pro-Other), whereas the proponents of intra-ethnic framing are pro-liberal (not pro-Communist). Thus, those who insist on the argument of 'national interest' as the sole dimension of the interpretation of reality are, in the Serbian context, xenophobic (usually proto-Communist) nationalists, while those who insist on the prominence of the ideological 'communism vs. democracy' axis are generally democrats (though possibly liberal nationalists).

To research confrontations between the concept of framing the political debate on the inter-ethnic axis of 'national interest' (Serbs vs. Others) and the concept of framing on the intra-ethnic ideological dichotomy 'Communists vs. democrats', mass rallies held between 1988 and 1997 were investigated. These rallies were attended by millions of people (of a population of around ten million) and provide, therefore, an excellent framework and a quite reliable source of data for an assessment of the mood and behaviour of politically interested masses. They exhibit a socio-political conflict between the Communist-xenophobic and liberal-nationalist framework, and prove that the former was based on an insistence on inter-ethnic cleavages, whereas the latter was oriented towards the framing of political questions in the context of intra-ethnic ideological divisions.[4]

An analysis of the behaviour of political elites (the Serbian authorities in particular) proves that the culture, ideology and political messages of the rallies were used by these elites as an instrument to maximize their power. It is clear that the authorities preferred a xenophobic-nationalist political culture as a basis for mobilizing popular support. However, there is sufficient reason to believe that if the authorities had decided to mobilize support on the basis of liberal principles, Serbia would by now have completed the transition to democracy. On the other hand, the authorities' attempt to use nationalism as a power maximizing strategy would have failed, if a particular nationalist political culture had not been present in Serbia. In other words, relevant mass rallies that were held in Serbia between 1988 and 1997, as well as the political events that preceded and followed them, furnish strong support for the thesis that both culture and politics are essential for an answer to the main question of this article.

The relevance of the 'politics-culture cocktail' does not mean that, in general, other variables are considered to be irrelevant for democratic transitions. It will be asserted, however, that for an explanation of the failed democratic transition in Serbia, cultural factors and politics are the essential independent variables. Other variables, that are frequently employed to

account for democratic transitions or authoritarian consolidations, are less significant in the Serbian context. The role of four such variables (institutions, adjustments to economic crises, the international community, and war) will be discussed in the following section.

The relevance of institutions was significantly diminished when Milosevic established his full authority over the state, transforming them into nothing more than a legal umbrella for his despotic rule. As time passed, extra-institutional rule became increasingly apparent, while the roles of parliament (both the republican and federal) and the ministries became symbolic. All major decisions were taken by Milosevic, no matter which office he was holding, and, in less important matters, by a few of his aides and informal advisers.[5] Thus, the importance of institutions in the period in which a democratic transition should have been expected in Serbia (i.e., from 1989) should be regarded in light of the fact that all power was concentrated in the hands of one person. In similar cases (Romania, the German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria, Albania), dictatorial rule proved insufficient to keep the regimes in office. Hence, an explanation for the failure of democratic transition in Serbia has to be sought elsewhere.[6]

The failure of the Serbian regime to adjust to economic crises (the most spectacular one of which, in 1993, was accompanied by arguably the highest hyperinflation in world history), would lead us, following Haggard and Kaufman, to predict authoritarian breakdown. Since such a breakdown did not occur, it appears that economic variables (as employed in the mentioned democratic transitions literature) are not central to an explanation of the failure of democratic transition in Serbia.

Another very strong argument in favour of the position that economic and institutional variables are not the most prominent ones in a successful explanation of authoritarian consolidation in Serbia, is the fact that the first years of Milosevic's rule (1987-1990) were marked by institutional pluralism (some of the institutions of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia were still intact) and relative economic prosperity (in the period of the pro-Western Markovic government in the late 1980s and early 1990s). After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, a major change occurred both at the institutional level and in the economic sphere: institutional pluralism turned into monism and relative economic prosperity turned into an economic catastrophe. Neither the situation in the first years of Milosevic's rule, nor the substantially changed situation in the 1990s resulted in authoritarian breakdown. A drastic change in the proposed independent (institutional and economic) variables did not result in a change in the dependent variable (democratic transition). Thus, also from this perspective, economic and institutional variables cannot be used to explain the failure of democratic transition in Serbia.

The role of the international community in the events after the collapse of

Yugoslavia has also been analysed.[7] The end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union had far-reaching consequences for Yugoslavia. Its role as one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) came to an end (after the collapse of the Soviet bloc the basic principle behind the NAM became increasingly absurd), whereas separatism became to be regarded as a realistic option in Yugoslavia after a peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union. The fact that the European Union yielded to German pressure on the issue of the recognition of an independent Slovenia and Croatia, contributed, according to some analysts, to an escalation of the conflict in Yugoslavia. However, no matter how important the role of the international community was in the Balkan conflicts, its salience in an explanation of the failure of democratic transition in Serbia is dubious. Its moves were generally merely reactive. Only after major excesses of the Serbian regime (e.g., widely publicized war crimes, mass expulsions, electoral theft) did the West act in the region. It may have helped the regime in some periods (in particular in its post-Dayton view of Milosevic as a necessary evil, i.e., a 'factor of stability' in the region with whom the West ought to negotiate and cooperate), but the causes of the regime's relative stability should not be sought in a factor that became (moderately) important only *after* the regime survived the 1989-1990 Central and Eastern European revolutions without any outside help.

It is also possible to attempt to explain the failure of democratic transition in Serbia by the wars that were shaking the region in the 1990s. Again, however, the first years of Milosevic's rule were not marked by wars. Furthermore, Milosevic remained in office in times of peace and in times of war. Hence, variables must be found that remained unchanged during the entire period of the Milosevic dictatorship. Two such variables are politics (power was in the same hands during all the relevant years) and culture. War ought to be regarded as a product of the interaction between these two independent variables, and not as an independent variable itself. Politics and culture, on the other hand, are the variables that remained constant.

3   The application of the concept of hegemony

Having critically looked at alternative explanations in the preceding chapter, I will now devote the necessary attention to the concept of hegemony that is essential for my argument. This concept is strongly related to the one developed by David Laitin in *Hegemony and Culture* (1986). Following Laitin, this article accepts the notion of "culture's two faces" (Laitin 1986: 11-12). Culture's first face is emphasized by social system theorists who assert that "cultural identities are primordial and self-reinforcing and that they provide ideological guidelines for collective action" (Laitin 1986:12). Culture's second

face is stressed by rational choice theorists who hold that "individuals are utility maximisers and will therefore manipulate their cultural identities in order to enhance their power and wealth" (Laitin 1986: 12). Laitin's concept of hegemony (borrowed from Antonio Gramsci) attempts to reconcile these two faces: [8]

> [hegemony is] the political forging – whether through coercion or elite bargaining – and institutionalization of a pattern of group activity in a state and the concurrent idealization of that schema into a dominant symbolic framework that reigns as common sense (Laitin 1986: 19).

> One way to lower the costs of control is to view the society from the lens of a single socio-cultural divide … Cultural hegemony has been established when members of all social strata interpret politics and choose strategies of participation in terms of the divide favored by the elite group. (This does not preclude the existence of a latent set of membership categories that cross-cut the chosen dimensions of conflict: all citizens have 'contradictory consciousnesses')… Political conflict can be intense; it will, however, be fought along a single dimension, one that had originally been favored by the hegemonic bloc (Laitin 1986: 107).

The main ideas of the concept that is advanced in this article correspond to Laitin's theorizing. In the case of Serbia after 1989, there were *two* dimensions (or axes) along which political conflicts were being fought. One dimension emphasized the importance of the 'national interest' and justified political actions usually by exploiting the logic of the *raison d'etat*. The other dimension framed the political debate along the dichotomy 'Communism vs. democracy'. The existence of more than one dimension along which political issues were being framed, indicates that there was no cultural hegemony in Serbia after 1989. Serbian society remained polarized between the notion of framing central political issues along the intra-ethnic dimension (Communism vs. democracy) and the notion of framing them along the inter-ethnic dimension (Serbs vs. Others, i.e., the logic of the 'national interest').

In other words, after the collapse of Communist rule, Serbian society became divided on the basis of a national and ideological cleavage (respectively, the inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic axis). The first cleavage insisted on divisions between Serbs and the surrounding ethnicities (ethnic Albanians, Croats and Bosnian Muslims in particular), the second on divisions within Serbia between the Communist regime and the liberal opposition. The Communist authorities were aware of the fact that their support within the framework of the intra-ethnic divide was weak and opted, therefore, for a definition of political issues on the basis of the nationalist inter-ethnic cleavage. The opposition, though frequently nationalistic as well, attempted to frame the political debate along the ideological intra-ethnic axis. Thus, after 1989 (the

end of Communist-xenophobic hegemony) it was two axes (dimensions), instead of a single one, along which political conflicts were fought.[9] As it was pointed out earlier, it was not only the two poles of an axis that were struggling for hegemony, but the axes themselves were fighting for a hegemonic position in the political debate. Hence, there was also a struggle between different concepts as to how the debate ought to be framed. At different points in time one or the other concept was dominant.

Laitin made a remarkable attempt to bridge the gap between two approaches that appear difficult to reconcile (political culture and rational choice). A major problem with all attempts to reconcile semiotic (e.g., Geertzian) approaches to political culture and rational choice theories, will remain the level of analysis: while students of political culture (in its semiotic variant) raise questions on a group level, rational choice theorists are concerned with individual action. The investigation of mass rallies seems therefore an adequate instrument for dealing with the level of analysis problem. Individuals address the masses and there cultural interaction between them. In recent years, the media in Serbia has been mostly controlled by a few individuals who have a direct political interest in using the masses. Since the roles of only a few political actors were decisive for recent political developments in Serbia (and Yugoslavia in general), and since their roles can hardly be seen outside the context of the politicization of masses, interactions between these actors (individuals) and the masses (groups), both through speeches and through state- or opposition-controlled media, bridge the gap between the individual-level and group-level of analysis.

The concept of hegemony employed in this article refers to a uniform interpretation of reality. This notion does not depart substantially from the previously cited definition and does not suggest that a hegemonic interpretation of reality is an interpretation that is not even latently challenged. On the contrary, hegemony generally contains a potential for counter-hegemony.[10] Counter-hegemony becomes manifest when a hegemonic framework is challenged by another organized interpretative system. Latent counter-hegemony may well be present during the rule of a hegemonic framework. Only when it becomes an organized interpretative scheme, however, will it be a counter-hegemonic alternative to the existing order of norms.

It is obvious that any judgment concerning the existence or non-existence of hegemony in a society is a qualitative judgment. Hegemony is a relative concept. There is no generally applicable demarcation line between the presence and absence of a hegemonic interpretative scheme in a society.[11] This feature may seriously imperil any judgment about the existence of a uniform interpretative scheme of reality (i.e., hegemony) in a particular society, when the dominant order of norms is not openly challenged by an alternative framework. In the case of Serbia, however, the existing order of norms was very visibly challenged after 1989 (in the streets, in some media and through the

formation of non-Communist political parties). This is a quite fortunate for my argument, since it enables me to apply the notions of hegemony and counter-hegemony in a consistent manner. The first months of 1990 marked the beginning of the formation of non-Communist political parties, the first significant anti-Communist street protests and the beginning of a campaign in official media against alternative interpretations of political reality (i.e., against an emerging counter-hegemonic framework). In fact, the beginning of 1990 marked a real counter-hegemonic explosion. At that point, the hegemony of the Communist-nationalist (xenophobic) framework came to an end.[12]

4　What went wrong in Serbia?

What remains unexplained is why Serbian political culture from the late 1980s and early 1990s was such good material for the power maximizing strategies of the Milosevic regime. In other words, what were the relevant specificities of Serbian national identity and political culture? An answer to this question will complete my explanation of the failure of democratic transition in Serbia.

If the Serbian Communists had decided to follow their ideological kin in other Central and Eastern European countries, in other words, if they had decided to reform their party in the direction of liberal democracy and not to mobilize support on the basis of extreme nationalism and xenophobia, it is possible (even likely, although this claim cannot be tested empirically) that Serbia would have followed the path of Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. In terms of political and economic freedom, as well as the population's prosperity and the country's openness to the West, former Yugoslavia was (until the late eighties) significantly ahead of these other three countries. However, the Serbian authorities (i.e., the anti-reformist wing in the Serbian Party loyal to Slobodan Milosevic) decided to mobilize their support on the basis of an anti-democratic nationalist framework, with the aim to preserve their power and as much as possible of Communist ideology. This was the uniqueness of Serbian Communists. In contrast to other Central and Eastern European Communist parties, most of which were challenged by the opposition's nationalism (and anti-Communism, of course), the Serbian Party used nationalism to challenge the opposition. In most countries of state-socialism, nationalism was one of the means of challenging Communist rule.[13] In Serbia, it was the most essential means of preserving Communist rule. This unique political behaviour of the Serbian Communist elite, partly explains why a transition to democracy failed to materialize in Serbia in the early nineties.

Why was the Communist elite able to mobilize some popular support in Serbia, and not elsewhere? Were Serbian Communists simply more skilful or luckier? Was it perhaps because the Serbian Communists made a serious

attempt to preserve their power by using nationalism, whereas other Central and Eastern European Communists made no serious attempt to use nationalism for this purpose? Or was the Serbian opposition weaker than the opposition in other countries of state-socialism? Although all these factors may have played a role, they are generally merely consequences of other circumstances. The central explanation is to be found in the history of the Serbian nation and its nationalism, as well as in a specific 'identity crisis', which the Serbian nation was suffering.[14] Serbian history suggests why nationalism was such a convenient socio-cultural framework for the mobilization of popular support by political elites, especially by those elites who exert control over the state. This mobilization was facilitated by the identity crisis, which itself is a consequence of a number of historical circumstances. Thus, an explanation for the Communists' success in preserving power is not to be sought in the alleged popularity of communism among the Serbs, but in the specificity of the central instrument of the Communists to prolong their rule, i.e., in the specificity of Serbian nationalism, as well as the crisis of identity that this nationalism faced in the twentieth century.

An essential peculiarity of the Serbian nation is that it was formed long before the 16th century, as a consequence of a number of historical incidents. After the conquest of the developed Serbian Medieval state by the Turks (1459), an interesting overlap between social status and religion began to take shape. The Orthodox Christians (Serbs) became the lower social strata and the Muslims (Turks) the higher strata. Serbian identity was defined by both social and confessional status (which overlapped), as well as by the memory of the Golden Age when the Serbian Medieval states had been prosperous and powerful. The Christian Orthodox Church played an absolutely central role in the formation of the Serbian nation. It had confession-based definition of the identity of those of the lower strata who spoke the Serbian language (i.e., Serbs): 'Serbianhood' was defined by belonging to the Orthodox Church. On this basis, a very early form of nationalism was developed, based on the idea that the community of Serbian Orthodox Christians in the Turkish Empire would one day resurge the Serbian medieval state. Gradually, this idea evolved into the assumption that the new Serbian state should encompass all Serbian-speaking Orthodox Christians in the Balkans. The fact that they were frequently scattered in ethnically heterogeneous territories, brought this community in conflict with other South Slav *ethnie* (often speaking the same language), who attempted to define their own territories. All in all, nationalism is not only a state-creating concept for many Serbs, but an ideology of ethnic, social, confessional and political liberation. For centuries, nationalism (in one form or another) was a struggle for both collective and individual rights. The cultural relatedness of many South Slav peoples (similar or identical languages, similar customs, sometimes even identical confessions) was an

important condition for the development of identity crises. National elites were in a good position to claim that a number of nations were part of broader national communities, while ethnic communities, which were considered part of broader nations, were sometimes induced to develop their separate identities. Although some national identities were quite stable and capable of 'swallowing' other national identities (the Serbian and Croatian identities, for example, were potentially capable of annihilating smaller ethnic identities through assimilation), they were often also in a position to protect their own identity against still broader identities, such as Yugoslavism. In the Serbian case, it was precisely Yugoslavism that contributed decisively to a crisis of national identity.

This identity crisis made the reestablishment of Serbian national identity a matter of prime importance in the late eighties and nineties. In addition to that, the ideology of Serbian nationalism, imbued with old state-creating concepts based on an ethno-religious definition of nationhood (as explained above), gained influence in Serbian society in the late eighties. Both developments made a manipulation of nationalism by the ruling elite a highly profitable political enterprise.

The Serbian authorities addressed the lack of legitimacy of the Communist regime in Serbia, and former Yugoslavia in general, by means other than democratization. Unlike most other Communist regimes, which were forced to accept a liberalization of society and democratic reforms as a response to a severe crisis of legitimacy, the Serbian regime, though almost equally illegitimate, had a different opportunity to address problems of legitimacy. Manipulating Serbian nationalism during a national identity crisis was an ideal way to found the regime's legitimacy on the basis of the *raison d'etat* or 'national interest' (as opposed to the interest of surrounding nations). Thus, the regime's lack of legitimacy was not solved by democratization or by the development of a more efficient economy, but by representing the Communist regime as the defender of the 'national interest'. External legitimacy became a surrogate for internal legitimacy. The defense of the nation against the Others became an alternative for reforms. Nationalism became the surrogate of democracy. Cooperation and compromise, both with other nations and among political subjects within Serbia, were replaced by a general political and cultural '(hetero-)phobia'.

Hence, transaction costs of Communist rule and its inefficient economy were indeed lowered through a legitimization of this rule. This legitimization, however, was not based on liberal concepts, but on the *raison d'etat*. On top of that, the Serbian Communist regime defined the 'national interest' in opposition to the interest of surrounding nations, and in the nineties even in opposition to the entire international community. The nationalist-Communist alliance from the late eighties was transformed in the early nineties into an

extremely xenophobic, but still proto-Communist movement. The campaign of the regime in this phase was based on the creation of enemies and the development of all kinds of conspiracy theories. The Serbian authorities instigated xenophobia in relation to non-Serbian nations, and political hatreds within Serbia in relation to ideological opponents. The official media had the task to infect as many people as possible with the carriers of this generalized heterophobic syndrome.

All this was made possible by the identity crisis, which made a clear definition of Serbian national identity impossible. Many Serbs, even nationalists, identified with both Serbianhood and Yugoslavism. Thus, on the one hand Serbs and Croats began confronting each other with hostility, but on the other hand they were both identified (by the Serbs in particular) as Yugoslavs. In other words, the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' were blurred in the Serbs' perception of their national identity. This made it possible for political elites to manipulate national identities very much to their liking. If Serbian nationalism was in one context the preferred ideological framework for nationalist mobilization, in another context Yugoslavism could serve a similar purpose.

Yugoslavism was employed in Serbia both as a genuine concept and as a euphemism for the ideology of Greater Serbia. In the pre-World War II Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the ruling Serbian political elite considered Yugoslavia as a surrogate for a Greater Serbia. After the Communist takeover in 1945, however, the ideology of Yugoslavism as a genuine concept also found some support in Serbia. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Serbian nationalism and Yugoslavism (as a genuine concept and as an instrument for the creation of a Greater Serbia) were both supported by different ideological, political and social groups. The Serbian regime therefore had the opportunity to mobilize support among some traditional Serbian nationalists (separatists, as well as open supporters of the establishment of a Greater Serbia), and among Yugoslavists (those Serbian nationalists who considered Yugoslavia an instrument for achieving the objective of a Greater Serbia, as well as pro-Yugoslavia Communists who considered Serbian nationalism as a necessary evil for preserving Yugoslavia and the Communist system). In fact, the Milosevic regime found itself in an unusually enviable position, being able to seek support both among those who considered the regime as a necessary evil for reaching the goals of Serbian nationalism, and among those who considered the regime's (true or pretended) nationalism as a necessary means to preserve Yugoslavia and socialism. Therefore, traditional Serbian nationalists (in the late 1980s in particular), pro-Yugoslavia Communists, as well as genuine Milosevic supporters all became potential targets of the regime's power maximizing policies. In other words, the Serbian regime was able to take advantage of a broad, insufficiently defined and flexible cultural-ideological and political basis for its manipulative strategies. The explanation for its success in avoiding a

democratic transition is to be found in that basis. Without it, the regime's options would have been limited and would not have differed much from those available to their Communist colleagues in most other Central and Eastern Europe countries.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of *Acta Politica* for their valuable comments.

2. A significant number of Serbian scholars hold the view, directly or indirectly, that generally political (sometimes also intellectual) elites are strongly responsible for the emergence of militant nationalism and the outbreak of war. Markovic rejects the notion that it was interethnic hatred that caused the war and the disintegration of the state. Commenting on existing Yugoslav surveys on 'social and ethnic distancing', she concludes that "judging by the empirical evidence collected by standardized instruments on representative samples, one could not anticipate – based on social distancing between different nations of the former Yugoslavia – either the forthcoming tragic disintegration of the state, or interethnic conflicts" (Markovic 1996: 168). Matic holds that "many historic events during the eighties were 'assisted' by state services" (Matic 1996: 236). Janjic asserts that "dissatisfaction was, thus, deliberately transformed into a large-scale, aggressive nationalist movement" (Janjic 1997: 25), whereas "the energy of nationalism was used pragmatically in the struggle for the rise to and preservation of power" (Janjic 1996: 195). Vukomanovic emphasizes also the role of intellectuals in the ignition of nationalist passions and war (Vukomanovic 1996: 126-127).

For a cogent statement that plays down the importance of elites in the emergence of nationalism and war, see Bacevic (1996: 176-177):

> I believe that situational factors and the role of political and economic elites are, nevertheless, overestimated. I believe, namely, that the elites have opened Pandora's box of unconscious, irrational and, over decades of repression, controlled and 'hostile emotions' which survived 'enveloped in the web of collective memories'. Not only have traditional enemies from the past unmistakably found each other, but with an unbelievable ease and speed, recognizable nationalistic symbols and iconographies were renewed and adopted (flags, coats of arms, names, songs, uniforms, rituals) including even techniques and instruments of crimes .

3. There are a number of exceptions to this general downplaying of the role of nationalism in democratic transitions. These exceptions are mostly to be found in literature on democratic transitions and consolidations in Central and Eastern Europe, where nationalism did play a salient role in political processes. For instance, Linz and Stepan's (1996) give a cogent and informed account on the role of nationalism in the democratization of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Valery Tishkov (1997) gives an account, which can also be regarded as exceptions to the general trend.

4. For an analysis of these rallies and their importance, see Rakic (1998).

5. The negotiations in Dayton and the actions of the international community during the 1998-1999 crisis in Kosovo are a striking illustration. In Dayton, Milosevic negotiated on behalf of the Bosnian Serbs, even though he was neither their leader nor the president or prime minister of (rump) Yugoslavia. He was only the President of Serbia, i.e., of one of the two republics that remained in Yugoslavia.

During the 1998-1999 crisis in Kosovo, Milosevic was the President of Yugoslavia. The office of Yugoslav president does not give its holder the right to conduct the state's foreign policy. That right is in the hands of the Yugoslav prime minister. Still, the international community dealt only with Milosevic in its attempts to prevent an escalation of the conflict and, once the NATO air raids had started, in its attempts to secure peace. It was obvious who was *de-facto* in charge in rump Yugoslavia.

6. It is theoretically possible to seek an explanation for the failure of democratic transition in Serbia in the assumption that institutional variables acted in conjunction with other variables. For instance, one may hypothesize that the Milosevic dictatorship was not supported from outside (like the Honecker or Zhivkov dictatorships) and that the 'Gorbachov factor' did not have an impact on Serbia. However, even if this is true, such a hypothesis still has to indicate the mechanisms by which the Serbian dictatorship was supported (and explain why the Romanian and Albanian dictatorships, though without Soviet support for years, collapsed as well). An account of these mechanisms brings us again to non-institutional variables.

7. Woodward (1995) gives a useful account of the role of the Cold War in the preservation of Tito's Yugoslavia, as well as of the role of the international community in the collapse of Yugoslavia.

8. Laitin's most essential departure from Gramsci can be found in his divorce of the idea of 'false consciousness' from the concept of hegemony (Laitin 1986: 106-108).

9. For an explanation of the fact that I locate the end of Communist-xenophobic hegemony at that particular time, see the last paragraph of this section, including the relevant footnote.

10. For a concise review of the features of hegemony, consult Kubik (1994: 11-12). Kubik's definition of hegemony emphasizes the *voluntary* acceptance of the rulers' definitions of reality by the ruled (Kubik 1994: 11). Both Gramsci and Kubik make a distinction between political dominance (in Kubik's terminology sometimes described as 'power differential') and cultural hegemony (in Kubik's terminology closely related to the concept of legitimacy) and tend to relate it to the coercive component in dominance and the voluntary component in hegemony (Gramsci 1992: 55 n.5; Kubik 1994: 11). My distinction between dominance and hegemony, though compatible with Gramsci and Kubik, stresses also the aspect of *relative* advantage in dominance and the aspect of (at least manifest) *absolute* advantage in hegemony. Thus, a dominant paradigm may be openly challenged, while a hegemonic order is unquestioned (at least manifestly).

11. Verdery rightly emphasizes that hegemony is 'provisional' and 'a matter of degree' (Verdery 1991: 10).

12. I am even inclined to point to a specific date that marked the end of the hegemonic order that was created by Milosevic in 1987/88: 6 January 1990, the day

when the Serbian National Renewal (*Srpska Narodna Obnova*) was founded. The SNR was the first Serbian radically anti-Communist political party, the creation of which received significant publicity in official media. It was an extremist, national-chauvinist party with massive support among the least educated social strata. It organized the first large anti-Communist demonstrations in Belgrade and was ferociously attacked by the authorities and their media (and subsequently prohibited). The alternative interpretative (counter-hegemonic) framework that was launched as an organized system with the creation of the SNR, obtained with the passing of time much more sophisticated and less extremist forms. It may be argued, however, that the roots of counter-hegemony were in the establishment of the SNR .

13. Our emphasis on nationalism in challenging Communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe, does not suggest that all oppositional groups in those countries were nationalistic. I owe to Jan Kubik an insight into some Central European non-nationalist dissident groups, such as Charter 77 (Czechoslovakia) and KOR (Poland).

14. The term 'identity crisis' is employed in the Serbian context in Janjic (1992:323, 1996: 197-206 and 1997: 29-44).

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