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Nationalism in the Contemporary Political Landscape in Serbia (2017-2021)

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Master in Sociology

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SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

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Abstract

The subject of this thesis is a discourse analysis of select opinion pieces by the regular contributors writing for four Serbian online media outlets (*Večernje novosti*, *Politika*, *Danas*, and *Nova*) in the period between 2017 and 2021, for the purpose of identifying the nature, prevalence, and positioning of Serbian nationalist ideology between the two major political blocs in the contemporary political landscape in Serbia. The aforementioned outlets were chosen to represent the two sides of the political divide (pro-government and pro-opposition) and two different styles of political communication (neutral and tabloid), while the chosen time period reflects the decline of Serbia from a full democracy to a hybrid regime, as assessed in the Freedom House Report (2020), limiting the scope of the analysis to a political system which conforms to the theoretical model of competitive authoritarianism, with all of its implications on the media sphere. After scanning the four outlets for texts featuring themes relevant to Serbian nationalism, a hundred and twenty five (125) were included in the analysis and categorized according to the prevalent discourse(s) featured within, as defined in the methodological section. These were then related to the theoretical models of banal and virulent nationalism, the distinction between nationalism and populism (demagoguery), as well as to the “First” and “Other” Serbia discursive frame. The results of the analysis show that Serbian nationalist discourse is featured much more prominently in the writings of pro-government media actors, but that banal nationalism is ubiquitous across the political divide.

Key words:

Serbian nationalism, discourse analysis, online news media, competitive authoritarianism

Resumo

O tema da presente tese é uma análise do discurso de artigos de opinião selecionados pelos colaboradores regulares que escrevem para quatro meios de comunicação online sérvios (*Večernje novosti*, *Politika*, *Danas* e *Nova*) no período entre 2017 e 2021, com o objetivo de identificar a natureza, prevalência e posicionamento da ideologia nacionalista sérvia entre os dois principais blocos políticos no cenário político contemporâneo da Sérvia. Os meios de comunicação acima mencionados foram escolhidos para representar os dois lados da divisão política (pró-governo e pró-oposição) e dois estilos diferentes de comunicação política (neutro e tablóide), enquanto o período de tempo escolhido reflete o declínio da Sérvia de uma democracia a um regime híbrido, conforme apurado no Freedom House Report (2020), limitando o âmbito da análise a um sistema político conformado ao modelo teórico do autoritarismo competitivo, com todas as suas implicações na esfera mediática. Depois de explorar os textos dos quatro meios, com temas relevantes para o nacionalismo sérvio, cento e vinte e cinco textos (125) foram incluídos na análise e categorizados de acordo com o(s) discurso(s) predominante(s) apresentado(s), conforme definido na seção metodológica. Estes foram então relacionados com os modelos teóricos de nacionalismo banal e virulento, a distinção entre nacionalismo e populismo (demagogia), assim como com o quadro discursivo “Primeira” e “Outra” Sérvia. Os resultados da análise mostram que o discurso nacionalista sérvio conhece maior destaque nos textos dos autores dos mídia pró-governamentais, mas que o nacionalismo banal é omnipresente em todo o espectro político.

Palavras-chave:

Nacionalismo sérvio, análise do discurso, meios de comunicação on-line, autoritarismo competitivo

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1. Introduction

Ever since the violent dissolution of SFR Yugoslavia in a series of ethnic conflicts in the 1990s, nationalism has been an endemic feature of politics in the Western Balkans. The competitive authoritarian regimes of the ex-Yugoslav republics at the time were all strongly grounded in nationalist ideology and rhetoric, no matter their formally stated ideological orientation.

Today, the role of nationalist ideology in the new hybrid regimes in the region is neither as clear nor as pronounced as before. In Serbia, the nominally pro-EU, nominally conservative Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which split off from the far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS) in 2008 over the latter's anti-EU stance, has been in power since 2012. The coming to power of the SNS marked the end of the period of democratic consolidation, which started after the coup which ousted Slobodan Milošević in 2000. The SNS has monopolized the political landscape in Serbia, and the country has moved further away from the democratic ideal, finally being demoted from a full democracy to a hybrid regime in the 2020 Freedom House Report. The regime has been criticized for cronyism, holding unfair elections, and curbing the freedom of press¹. Major opposition parties have boycotted the recent elections, and at present not a single opposition party – not even one considered coopted by the government – holds seats in the National Assembly.

The SNS has moved away from its ethno-nationalist roots and today commands a catch-all coalition, but it still uses nationalism as a “variable resource” in its messaging to the public via state-controlled media in order to maintain popular support, at the same time avoiding the kind of exclusionary nationalism which would be at odds with the official policy of accession to the EU (Bieber, 2018: 121). However, the weak and similarly ideologically heterogeneous democratic opposition is also prone to using nationalist rhetoric in order to broaden its audience. In order to help determine the role of Serbian nationalist ideology as a political force, which is obscured in the current political landscape, the focus of this research will be on how nationalist discourse is used in the polarized Serbian media sphere. This will be done through discourse analysis of opinion pieces by regular contributors for four different online media outlets – two pro-government, and two independent/pro-opposition, in texts directly related to one of the six themes defined as central in Serbian nationalist ideology in the theoretical chapter.

¹ FH Report <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2020>

In the theoretical framework (chapter 2), nationalism will first be defined as an ideology. The definition of populism shall then be considered, as well as the relationship between populism and nationalism, in order to account for the ruling party's strategy of pragmatic use of nationalist discourse. Nationalism is often recognized and discussed only when it appears in its extreme form, but for the purpose of this paper, this definition would not be useful. Instead, it seems more appropriate to expand upon the dichotomy between the notion of *banal nationalism*, proposed by Michael Billig, and the notion of "virulent" or "hot" nationalism, advanced by Florian Bieber and John Hutchinson, respectively, which enables one to analyse nationalism "when the flag isn't waving", and contrast it to the more "virulent" and exclusionary forms described by Bieber and Hutchinson. The dichotomy shall then be contextualized and applied to present-day Serbian nationalism.

Next, the notion of ideology will be related to the notion of discourse, and a brief description of the method of discourse analysis shall be provided. This will be followed by a description of common discourses present in the Serbian public sphere and the media – most notably, the discursive battleground between the "First" and "Other" Serbia. The media landscape in Serbia shall be considered.

The methodological section (chapter 3) contains the descriptions of the units of analysis (the chosen outlets, themes, and texts), the analytical model, and the sample formation. The fourth chapter constitutes a discourse analysis on select opinion pieces in four Serbian online media outlets (*Večernje novosti*, *Politiika*, *Danas*, and *Nova*) in the chosen timeframe (2017-2021), which roughly corresponds to the period of democratic decline and focuses the analysis inside the theoretical model of competitive authoritarianism. The fifth and final chapter contains comments on the overall findings of the analysis about the nature and positioning of nationalist discourse in the media sphere, along with concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Nationalism as an Ideology

Nationalism can be defined in broad terms as a belief that the nation is a central principle of political organization (Heywood, 2014: 168). Over the course of the 19th century, it became one of the most important and successful political creeds. Being a revolutionary idea, it was initially associated with liberal and progressive movements, and was commonly categorized as left-wing. As time went on, nationalism would start to get adopted by conservative and reactionary politicians as a means of social control, and primarily as a counterweight to the looming specter of revolutionary socialism. This kind of nationalism would appear in already established nation-states, where instead of being associated with political liberty, it aroused patriotic fervor by commemorating past glories and, most notably, military victories. The revolutionary political drive faded, being replaced increasingly with chauvinism and xenophobia. Nationalism was now almost synonymous to tribalism, with a distinction which should be noted between it and ethnocentrism: an ethnocentric worldview is one that is focused primarily on the in-group. It was very characteristic of medieval Europe. On the other hand, even the most extreme and exclusionary nationalist is, somewhat paradoxically, internationally oriented, because nations are constructed in contrast to ‘the other’ – with ‘the other’ here being other established nations, with which one compares on a set of predefined and accepted criteria (Anderson, 1995: 85-86). National flags are universal in the sense that every nation needs to have one. National anthems are another example: countries use different melodies and lyrics between themselves, but every country is expected to have an anthem.

A major dichotomy is between civic and ethnocultural nationalism (Heywood, 2014: 181). The former is often associated with Western European countries such as France or the United States, where the nation is considered a political entity. Civic nationalism is inclusive, universal, founded on the idea of equality between different nations, and it is based on citizenship and civic loyalty. Ethnocultural nationalism is based on the cultural/historical nation, constructed on the basis of the same language or tradition; it is exclusive, particular, based on descent and ethnic allegiance. In its extreme form, ethnocultural nationalism overlaps with racialism, which doesn’t permit any outsiders to join the ethnic group. This form of nationalism is found in Germany, as well as in Serbia and most of the neighboring Balkan and Eastern European nations.

2.1.1. The Nation and National Identity

There are many theoretical approaches to defining the nation, among them perennialist, modernist, neo-Marxist, ethnosymbolist, postmodernist, etc. The first question that one needs to answer when approaching the nation is a chicken-and-egg problem: namely, is it the nation that creates nationalism, as perennialists believe, or is it nationalism that creates nations, as modernists do? This will also pinpoint the timeframe of the nation's conception either into the industrial era, or in the distant past. Modernists place importance on the processes of modernization, as well as on political factors, when discussing the genesis of the nation (Bakić, 2006: 235-236). Popular modernist perspectives are represented by Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, whose work paved the way for postmodern thought on the nation. Anderson famously explained that nations are imagined communities, as are all communities larger than primordial villages, in which direct contact between all members is possible (Anderson, 2006: 6). In imagined communities, contact between members of the group has to be imagined, because one cannot possibly physically interact with all of them. That isn't to say that nations are fabricated, which would imply falsity, but rather that the process of imagining them constitutes their creation. Hobsbawm would expand on the idea of imagining the nation in his famous 1983 book with coauthor Terrence Ranger, titled "Inventing Traditions", wherein he would describe a specific mechanism by which nations are created and maintained: either through inventing traditions and placing them in the far past, or by recontextualizing already existing customs and institutionalizing them with a new purpose in mind (Hobsbawm, 1983: 6).

Modernist constructionism is in epistemic terms closely related to the postmodern idea of grand narratives, because it essentially claims that nations are upheld by stories. It was the idea of postmodernist authors like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe that these stories, or rather this *discourse*, should be deconstructed. Whether the nation itself can be deconstructed as discourse, or whether it is an independent part of social reality, represents an open debate which need not be addressed here. What is important is to note this relationship between the nation, ideology and discourse, because it is on the foundation of this relationship that the analysis will be performed.

One constructionist view of the nation which differs from the developmentalist accounts of Hobsbawm and Anderson, but which is contextually relevant to the subject of this paper, has been presented in Rogers Brubaker's 1995 *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the*

National Question in the New Europe. Brubaker deems that nationalism should be understood without accepting nations as substantial entities, but instead interpreting them as practical categories, institutionalized forms, or contingent events (Brubaker, 1995: 7). He makes a distinction between *nationalizing nationalisms* of newly independent states, and *transborder nationalisms* of external national homelands. The former are employed in order to distinguish the core nation in a state from citizenry as a whole and posit that nation as the rightful owner of the state, while at the same time making claims that the core nation is endangered in cultural, economic or demographic terms. This is why nationalizing nationalism argues for policies of national self-assertion, by which state power would be used to remedy the poor state of the core nation. In opposition to and often in dynamic interaction with it, homeland nationalisms call on the state to protect the interests of the nation from a certain core nation's nationalizing policies. Homeland nationalists' concern and their sense of responsibility for the well-being and the rights of their ethnonational kin extend beyond state borders and citizenship. This is a form of nationalism which has been continuously present in Serbian political discourse to this day, as recent rhetoric about the transborder "Serb world" used by high-level state officials demonstrates². The third variant of nationalism is national minority nationalism, demanding recognition from the state for the national minority's rights and cultural uniqueness.

2.1.2. Nationalism and Populism

In the beginning, nationalism was not a popular ideology, in the sense that large masses of the population were politically mobilized by the idea of the nation. Rather, it was mostly the middle classes that were enthusiastic about national unity and constitutional government (Heywood, 2014: 170). In principle, this remains true to this day. While national identity is often summoned to promote unity, this in effect can be manipulated to mask class differences inside a particular nation. Nationalists may use the term "people", but the notion of "people" that is being referred to is constructed in opposition of the in-group (my nation) to the out-group (their nation) (De Cleen, 2017: 3).

Nationalism stresses solidarity between the poor and the rich, between the propertyless and the capitalists. According to nationalist ideology, the sole principle of political exclusion and inclusion follows the boundaries of the nation – that category of people defined as members of the same culture. (Eriksen, 2010: 123)

² Al Jazeera: Critics condemn minister's call to unite 'Serb world'
[<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/19/critics-condemn-ministers-call-to-unite-serbian>]

The spatial element is thus crucial in delineating the boundaries of the “people” as defined in national terms. This is why nationalism should not be confused with populism, which constructs “the people” vertically, in opposition to a corrupt or incompetent ruling elite. This ambiguity with regards to internal social stratification will follow nationalism throughout history, which is why it has been characterized as a ‘schizophrenic’ ideology. In fact, nationalism has been successfully combined with many different ideologies, including conservatism, liberalism, traditionalist socialism, fascism, and fundamentalist religion.

Populism has so far been defined in three different ways: 1) as an ideology; 2) as a political strategy; 3) as a particular political style of communication in systems whose legitimacy relies on the “will of the people” (Bakić, 2019: 67). When described as an ideology, populism is a system of thought which views society as being separated into two opposing fronts, the pure people and the corrupt elites. But much like “the nation” is a flexible notion, so are “the people” who the populist addresses. A right-wing populist could argue for a welfare state, but one limited exclusively to individuals of a particular creed or skin color (with the rhetoric naturally being adjusted in accordance with what is deemed politically correct at a particular moment), in what has been termed “welfare chauvinism”, while for a left-wing populist the basis for one being deemed part of “the people” is based on citizenship.

It might be more fruitful to think of populism as a political strategy by which a strong charismatic leader seeks or uses power on the basis of non-institutionalized support of a large number of mostly unorganized followers (Weyland, 2001: 14 in Bakić, 2019: 75). Resorting to charismatic leadership, which in turn is often cemented into an authoritarian regime, is one of the defining features of populism, and it stems from a deep-rooted distrust of political institutions and processes (Taggart, 2000: 100-101). The leader calls on the people to support him in his struggle to save the nation from privileged groups and transform corrupt institutions.

However, this way of defining populism raises another question: if populism is merely the political strategy of using demagoguery to appeal to the public, then what is its scientific merit as a term? Isn't a populist leader simply a demagogue? The way that the question of the relation between nationalism and populism shall be addressed in the research is by looking at the way that government-controlled outlets cover certain topics of importance for Serbian nationalism which are, at present, at odds with state policy followed by the ruling party (primarily as pertains to Kosovo). If these issues are underrepresented or addressed in such a way as to obviously contradict mainstream nationalist narratives, in order not to raise criticism of ruling

party policy, then it could be deduced that the goal of the texts is merely to appeal to the nationalist sentiments of the broader public and the voter base, while not proposing actual solutions which would conform to the goals implicit in the nationalist narratives themselves.

2.1.3. Banal versus Virulent or “Hot” Nationalism

The widespread view on the process of nation-formation is that it was a 19th-century teleological development which started with romanticist intellectuals and was then progressively adopted by masses of the population in the West. Rejecting this interpretation, John Hutchinson proposed an alternative model, with the dichotomy between “hot” and “banal” nationalism at its core (Hutchinson, 2006: 434). Hutchinson holds that these two types of nationalism work in parallel during the process of national identity formation.

National identity appeared as a powerful force that was able to overpower prior class, familial and religious attachments, and incorporate different sectors of the population. In Hutchinson’s view, this could not be possible if it had been merely constructed from above. It also needed to have been consumed from below, by an emergent civil society. This was a response to the crisis of identity brought about by state modernization which allowed aspiring educated groups to form a coherent worldview, which synthesized the idea of progress with a need for a shared sense of belonging. These groups wished to preserve links with an ancient past, epitomized in medieval relics and artifacts, which were symbols of an old way of life being sidelined by societal development (Hutchinson, 2006: 440). Once the new national identity and national norms were accepted, they needed to be defended.

Therein lies the explanation for what “hot” nationalism entails in Hutchinson’s view: an ideological movement which is activated in times of crisis, when there is fear that the nation is in some form of danger. The threat can come from different sources, such as war, foreign military invasion, natural disturbances, economic crises, or ideological opponents. Hot nationalism instills that the idea the nation is to be worshipped and sacrificed for as something sacred (Hutchinson, 2006: 439). In fact, the nation is perceived as a community of sacrifice, evidenced in the quasi-religious cult of the fallen soldier. Banal or informal nationalism, on the other hand, is consumed almost unconsciously by the population and guides their everyday life and conduct through its invisible appearance in popular songs, weather reports, posters, stamps, coinage, etc.

The idea of banal nationalism comes from Michael Billig’s 1995 book of the same name. The impetus behind the book is the author’s desire to explain how nationalism is not, contrary to

the commonly held conviction at the time, an exotic phenomenon characteristic of Third World countries and pre-modern societies, but rather a ubiquitous part of everyday life, even in the Western democratic world. It is so ubiquitous, in fact, that it is hidden in plain sight – it is banal.

In the book, Billig gives the argument for using discourse analysis by highlighting the role of language in the operation of ideology and the framing of ideological consciousness (Billig, 1995: 17). In the penultimate chapter, *Flagging the Homeland Daily*, he applies the model on a sample of 10 British newspapers which came out on the 28th of June 1993 (Billig, 1995: 110). The goal was to assess the prevalence of banal nationalism in reporting on various seemingly unrelated topics, such as the weather, sports events, and the war in Iraq. What the analysis showed was that banal nationalism truly did permeate all of the above; for example, a clear “us” and “them” dichotomy could be noticed in sports reporting, and one need not expend much effort to notice the aesthetic and semantic similarities between sports and war, even though Billig wouldn’t go as far as to characterize sports as sublimated violence (Billig, 1995: 124).

An example of this type of banal nationalism in the Serbian media would be the following title:

BIG SUCCESS FOR OUR COUNTRY: Serbia the first in Europe in revaccinations, third in the world (Novosti, 22.02.2021)³

which measures the success of the Serbian national Covid vaccination programme against those of other countries.

Building on Billig’s idea of banal nationalism, Florian Bieber proposes a model which differentiates between latent or endemic nationalism, a notion based on Billig’s concept, and virulent nationalism, which can be thought of as analogous to Hutchinson’s term “hot nationalism” (Bieber, 2018). Bieber states that “the virulent nationalism that rejects the status quo and seeks to reassert the will of an imagined community over a political or cultural space is different from, but draws on, endemic nationalism” (Bieber, 2018: 520). Nationalism can further be categorized along two axes in this model: one is the level of intensity, whereby it can be either *latent* or *virulent*, and the other is the level of exclusion, where distinction is made between *exclusionary* and *inclusionary* nationalism. For virulent exclusionary nationalism to

³ Novosti: “BIG SUCCESS FOR OUR COUNTRY: Serbia the first in Europe in revaccinations, third in the world” [<https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/drustvo/967508/veliki-uspeh-nase-drzave-srbija-prva-evropi-stopi-revakcinacije-treca-svetu>]

arise, it is not only necessary that there is endemic nationalism in a given population, but also that the existing social system is exposed to indigenous or exogenous shocks. In Bieber's view, this kind of nationalism is prone to taking on a violent form in times of crisis, when the "normal cognitive frame", a set of norms which prevents people from using violence against each other in normal times, is replaced by the "crisis" cognitive frame. This is the form of nationalism that is the motivating force behind ethnic war, pogroms, secessionism, state violence, and ultimately genocide.

Is the theoretical model which distinguishes between these two types of nationalism viable in the Eastern European, and, more specifically, Balkan context? How does the banal form of Serbian ethnocultural nationalism look; is it possible to identify and differentiate it in peacetime from its "hot" variety? This will be one of the questions posed in the analysis.

2.1.4. Serbian Ethnic Nationalism and its Characteristics

The Serbian national awakening started in the 19th century with the two major uprisings (1804 and 1815) against the Ottoman Empire, one of the two in which the Serbs lived after the fall of the Serbian Despotate to the Ottomans in 1459. Serbian nationalism developed out of a liberation struggle against the Austrian (later Austro-Hungarian) and Ottoman Empires, but at its core was a romanticized medieval past. With the destruction of medieval Serbian aristocracy, either physically or through conversion to Islam, the sole bearers of Serbian national memory who would remain were the Serbian church and Serbian-speaking Christian serfs. The former was allowed (and encouraged) to continue operating under the Ottoman state, where social stratification was created not on the basis of ethnicity, but on religion, which is why the religious leaders of religious minorities were allowed to have a degree of authority in their respective communities when it comes to certain matters.

This is one of the reasons for religion subsequently being a major focal point for the emergent national identities in the Balkans. The Serbian church kept the memory of Serbian statehood and nurtured the myth of the Battle of Kosovo, which marked the beginning of the end of Serbian independence, through literary works. The importance of the battle of Kosovo as the focal point of the Serbian national mythos cannot be overstated. It represents the most traumatic event in the national memory of the Serbs, and it holds the most important place in the national imagination, where the lines between the literary and the literal become blurred (Bakić-Hayden, 2006: 127). The Kosovo myth as a narrative is anti-Islamic in character, because its main villains are the Turkish Muslim invaders. Over the centuries, a demographic shift

happened through which Albanians, most of whom are Muslims, came to be the numerically dominant ethnic group in the region. In its modern iteration, the myth changes the Turks for the Muslim Albanians as the new villains. It is strongly connected to broader orientalist discourse, where Muslims are deemed spiritually foreign to European civilization (Said, 1979: 71).

Kosovo is a contested territory in the southwest of Serbia, which was put under a UN protectorate after the war between the Serbian military and Albanian separatists in 1999, and where the Albanian separatist government in Priština later unilaterally declared independence in 2008. Kosovo is a field of symbolic struggle between Albanian and Serbian nationalism, as well as of a political struggle between the Serbian state and the separatist government; both of which shall be evidenced in the analysis.

Serbian nationalism has a strong religious component, and Serbian nationalists often show deep reverence for the Serbian Orthodox Church, though there is a difference between more conservative forces, which hold the church in high regard, and radical right-wing movements and politicians, who are sometimes more critical. The deep synthesis of the national and the religious could be described with the term *religious nationalism* (Bakić-Hayden, 2006: 134). In the interwar years, Serbian religious nationalism was established in the guise of the ideology of „St Savism“, or, more precisely, “St Sava nationalism“, a reference to the 13th century Serbian prince-turned-religious figure who managed to garner autocephaly for the Serbian Archbishopric. Many „nationally minded“ public intellectuals in Serbia today adhere to or have sympathies for the clerical nationalist ideology of St Sava nationalism, along with some radical right wing political parties, such as Dveri. St Sava nationalism is at its core a reactionary fascist ideology which posits the nation as „holy“ and envisages a feudal corporate government as the desirable form of social order (Bakić, 2013: 4). Today, it is to be found amongst reactionary extremist right wing groups like Obraz.

Another important dimension to consider in Serbian nationalism is its relationship with the ideology of *Yugoslavism* and the attitude towards the former Yugoslav state. *Yugoslavism* – the idea of uniting all South Slavs into a single state – has a long history. Yugoslavism would appear in many different redactions and as part of various ideological syntheses. It would be used by both Serbian and Croatian nationalists to further their own national goals, and the tension between the two would always be a hallmark of historical Yugoslavism. In the 1990s, public debate among Serbian intellectuals on the Serbian national goals gave rise to various

forms of *Yugoslavist* or *Serbist* discourse. Before Yugoslavia had finally disintegrated in a series of civil wars which started in 1991, the idea of fulfilling the national goal of unifying all Serbs in a federal Yugoslav state was still espoused by the likes of well-known writer Dobrica Ćosić (Pavković, 1998: 515). Afterwards, however, such ideas gave way to the argument that forming Yugoslavia in 1918 was a grave “historical error” and a “costly mistake” for the Serbs, who should have instead created a greater Serbia in all the Serb-majority lands which the Serbian army conquered during WWI (Pavković, 1998: 517). Most Serbian nationalists today subscribe to this negative view of Yugoslavia, while “Yugonostalgia” is a commonly used term that encompasses various positive sentiments towards the former country shared by many non-nationalist Serbs. At its core is a memory of Yugoslavia as a decent place to live a “normal life” (Spasić, 2012: 581).

2.2. Discourse, Ideology, and the Media

2.2.1. Discourse Analysis

Discourse represents a form of social action which is expressed through speech and writing (Bakic, 2011: 109). The term itself can have different meanings, both of which refer to its different substantive elements. In a Foucaultian sense, a particular discourse constitutes a frame of interpreting reality, which is a social-cognitive structure inherited and shaped by generations in a single culture. The process of framing reality includes making a distinction between different aspects of reality, emphasizing some and ignoring others. A concrete manifestation of such a cognitive frame in language can be found in texts, where various discursive strategies are utilized. These include rhetorical tools such as metaphors, allegories, metonymy, euphemisms, hyperbole, and the use of various epithets and verbs for the purpose of realizing the discursive frame. Most notably, stereotypes are important to analyze when criticizing ideology, because they form the backbone of many discourses. Stereotypes magnify the differences between social groups and minimize internal differences inside the groups themselves. They necessarily create an “us” and a “them” (“the other”), with “us” always being in the right (Wodak, 2006: 155). But they are also put forth into the public sphere intentionally by certain centers of power in order to advance the interests of particular social groups. In other words, discourses influence social and political reality, and they constitute social practice, while at the same time being constituted by it. This is the approach of Critical Discourse Analysis, which distinguishes between four types of discursive strategies: constructive, perpetuating, transformational, and destructive (Wodak, 2006: 168). Constructive strategies

serve to establish national identity and build the in-group. Perpetuating strategies maintain, support and reproduce a national identity under threat (from a foreign power, migrations, etc.). Strategies of transformation seek to redefine well-established elements of national identity. Destructive strategies dismantle national identities or their elements.

If ideology is defined as a form of social cognition, then discourse plays a significant role in its expression and reproduction. Ideologies are axiomatic beliefs featuring fundamental norms and values which social groups call upon when defending their interests, and they represent the positive self-image of a group. This is then followed with the polarization between the ingroup (Us) and the outgroup (Them), very typical for nationalist ideology. Ideologies also control attitudes of groups on specific social issues, such as immigration, marriage, law enforcement, etc., which then form the basis of an individual's personal opinion on those issues (Van Dijk, 2008: 194). Discourse does not as a rule directly express ideologies, because it provides context models for speakers or writers to use, which can obscure underlying ideological beliefs.

The primary unit of discourse analysis is text, taken in a broad sense to mean any written or uttered use of language. A "text" can thus include shopping lists and newspaper articles, but also interview transcripts, TV programmes and web-pages (Fairclough, 2004: 3). When analyzing any given discourse, context must always be kept in mind. The four levels of context between which the discourse-historical approach distinguishes are the immediate language; the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses; the extra-linguistic social/sociological variables and institutional frames of a specific „context of situation“; and the broader socio-political and historical contexts, which the discursive practices are embedded in and related to (Wodak, 2006: 158).

In order to identify discourses within a text, it is necessary to assess which particular part of the world the discourse represents, as well as which perspective it represents the world from (Fairclough, 2004: 129). The former constitutes the main "themes" in the discourse, while the latter identifies the point of view from which they are represented.

2.2.2. The "First" and "Other" Serbia Discourses in the Serbian Public Sphere

Since 2000, the public debate on the major issues concerning the nation, tradition and modernity, the role of nationalism in the Yugoslav wars of the 90s, etc., has spawned two opposing ideological groups in Serbia, both with radically different positions: the so called "First Serbia", and the "Other Serbia". Though the primary division is between self-identifying members of either "bloc" amongst politicians and public intellectuals, the dichotomy between

the two is sometimes taken as permeating Serbian society beyond mere intellectual debate, as an essential and deep division between two value systems existing side-by-side: the nationalist, traditionalist, illiberal, Euroskeptic, and Russophile “First Serbia”, and its polar opposite, the progressive, liberal, secular, pro-EU “Other Serbia”, which emerged from the anti-war movement during the 90s (Omaljev, 2016: 20).

Various public intellectuals and political actors have been recognized as the representatives of “First Serbia”. Intellectually, the group has been best represented by members of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences such as writers Matija Bećković and Dobrica Ćosić. The First Serbia believes that Serbia should be a militarily neutral country, with preference for a strategic and cultural alliance with Russia. The political standard-bearer for the group since the 1990s has been the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and its leader Vojislav Šešelj. From 2011, the nationalist, homophobic, Euroskeptic, anti-globalist NGO called *Dveri* has actively engaged in Serbian parliamentary politics. More recently, this conservative citizens association has evolved into a radical right-wing party, characterized by its Islamophobic and homophobic stance.

The “Other Serbia” is comprised of liberal intellectuals and pro-Western NGOs, such as the Women in Black, the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, and others. This group is focused, among other things, on opening a public debate on human rights, war crimes perpetrated in the name of the Serbian nation during the 90s, the Srebrenica genocide, the Kosovo question, the siege of Sarajevo, and activism in support of Gay Pride. The narrative of Serbian victimhood is deconstructed and replaced with the notion that Serbs were the main perpetrators of the conflict in former Yugoslavia (Omaljev, 2016: 22). Two distinct factions can be identified within Other Serbia: the “soft” and the “hard” liberals. The ‘soft’ liberals were represented politically by the Democratic Party (DS) and its leader and two-term president of Serbia Boris Tadić. Tadić pursued a “both Kosovo and Europe“ foreign policy, using a „moderate nationalist“ rhetoric with regards to Kosovo. When soft liberals discuss Kosovo, they often refer to it as having been “lost“. On the other hand, the „hard liberals“, led by DS detractor and founder of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Čedomir Jovanović, openly support Kosovo’s independence, unconditionally support Serbia’s accession to the EU and the adoption of “European values”, and argue strongly for prosecuting Serbian figureheads for war crimes and full cooperation with the Hague. Other Serbia considers present-day Serbia “undeveloped”, as compared to the ideal of a “civilized”, “rational”, “peaceful”, etc. Europe (Omaljev, 2016: 35).

The First-Other Serbia divide is an important dimension to consider in the media sphere as well. Papers, TV stations, as well as online media, were for a long time profiled in the public eye according to whether they belong to one ‘bloc’ or the other. But from 2012 and onward, the political and the ideological seemingly started diverging. LDP leader Čedomir Jovanović, a “hard liberal”, refused to support “soft liberal” Tadić in his presidential election race against then SNS leader Tomislav Nikolić in 2012, who was now also running on a pro-EU platform, but with much of the ideological content inherited from the Serbian Radical Party unchanged. Afterwards, Jovanović did not cooperate with any of the other opposition parties in their boycotting of the parliament because of ruling party filibustering after 2018, choosing not to challenge what many sectors of the public have termed an increasingly autocratic rule of new SNS leader Aleksandar Vučić and a revival of the “nationalist-authoritarian” Milošević regime. For this reason, LDP was now considered “coopted” opposition by the anti-Vučić “hardliners”, most of whom were themselves part of “Other Serbia”. Ideological differences are obscured and confused in the new political landscape, creating a need for an approach which isolates nationalism as an ideology and as discourse in order to properly position it in Serbian politics and the Serbian media.

2.2.3. Post-2012 Authoritarianism and the Media Sphere in Serbia

Levitsky and Way define the notion of the playing field in politics by first explaining what it is that makes one uneven. Unlike traditionally authoritarian methods of electoral fraud or political repression, an uneven playing field presumes unequal access to political resources – state institutions, financial resources, and access to the media – between the incumbents and the opposition (Levitsky & Way, 2010: 57). An unequal playing field constitutes more than mere incumbent advantage: it can threaten to undermine democracy itself. The three necessary conditions for a playing field to be uneven are: 1) that state institutions are widely abused for partisan ends; 2) that the incumbent party is systematically favored at the expense of the opposition; and 3) that the opposition’s ability to organize and compete in elections is seriously handicapped (Levitsky & Way, 2010: 58). Whether this will actually happen depends on the level of abuse of state resources in a given country.

As of 2021, Serbia is classified as “partly free” by the Freedom House Index, with a score of 22/40 in political rights, 42/60 in civil liberties, and an overall score of 66⁴. This is a considerable deterioration when compared to 2017, when the total score was 76, with the

⁴ Freedom house report (2021): <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2021>

country being in the “free” category⁵. The score declined in 2018 to 73, and from 2019 onwards Serbia has been categorized as “partly free”. In order to stay more firmly inside the theoretical frame provided by the theory of competitive authoritarianism, the primary focus in the analysis and the majority of the sample texts shall be taken from the time period between 2019 and 2021, when the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) managed to secure absolute control of the parliament with all major opposition parties boycotting the parliamentary elections.

The SNS is a party with a giant membership base: more than 600.000 people are officially members of the party, making up over 8% of the entire population (Bieber, 2018: 52). As it controls access to state resources, it is able to provide employment (usually low wage) to its members in exchange for loyalty. It is a party which completely dominates Serbian politics, and, by extension, economy and society, which are highly interconnected with politics in any authoritarian regime. While nationalism has been proven in prior sociological research to be a value constant in broader Serbian society (Lazić, 2016: 166), a significant shift occurred between the socialist period and the present day among the Serbian political elite. The anti-modern values of traditionalism, authoritarianism and nationalism saw a significant increase in the post-socialist period. In particular, the post-2012 elite, centered around SNS and SPS, has shown greater support for all three values than members of other parties (Lazić, 2016: 174). This would seem to indicate that even with the official pro-EU position of the ruling coalition which forced them to be more careful with openly stating their Euroskeptic and xenophobic opinions, its members still form the nationalist political backbone of Serbian society, but now with foreign policy much more aligned with their “soft liberal” predecessors. Virulent nationalists turned banal. Unlike other hybrid regimes in the region, the SNS uses nationalist rhetoric pragmatically, as a tool to reinforce regime control, but it does not have a central function (Bieber, 2018: 122).

Thus, while nationalism has been a less central feature of more recent competitive authoritarian regimes than their precursors in the 1990s, nationalism is part of the legitimizing strategies, moderated or rather modified in the context of the centrality of external legitimacy. This results in EU accession-compatible nationalism that tests the boundaries of historical revisionism, as in Serbia (...) Throughout, latent nationalism remains potent, as the fundamental narratives of the wars in the 1990s have not been substantially reshaped or, in some cases, returned to the dominant lines of argument that emphasize one’s own innocence (and usually victimhood) and shift blame to others (...)

⁵ Freedom House report (2017): <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2017>

Thus, while nationalism might not be a constitutive force of most regimes, it continues to be an important resource. This does not mean that nationalism automatically generates support, but rather that it triggers different, context-specific dynamics that reinforce polarization, marginalize particular political actors, or divide opponents. (Bieber, 2018: 124)

Due to the weak economy and problems with liquidity, the state is able to influence and control the media market through direct ownership or different models of state financing. The media landscape can thus best be described using the term clientelism, defined as a model of state organization in which access to social resources is controlled by the patrons and provided to the clients in return for various kinds of support (Milinkov et al, 2020: 5). The media are integrated into the clientelist system and serve as methods of communication between the elites, as well as partners in influencing political or legislative decisions. The loyalty of media to particular elites is questionable and varies, often with the change of ownership⁶.

3. The Method

3.1. The Online News Media in Serbia

The Serbian media landscape is heavily polarized between pro-government and anti-government outlets. Pro-government media serve as voices for the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. These outlets do not even make an attempt to disguise their political allegiance. Each of the three media service providers with national frequency licences listed by the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (*Pink*, *O2*, and *Hepi*)⁷ openly show pro-government bias in their reporting, greatly skewing the information available to the public about political parties, especially during election time, and especially considering that the *Radio Television of Serbia* (*RTS*) is likewise considered editorially compromised.

In terms of online media outlets, the public perception is that *Vreme*, *Danas*, *NI*, *Nova*, *Insajder*, *NIN*, among others, are editorially independent. This means that it is not uncommon to see these outlets host opposition leaders or people critical of the government. *NI* is a television station which has a popular website and YouTube channel, and *Insajder* is an online

⁶ The daily paper *Kurir* last changed owners in 2019, at the same time entering a strategic partnership with Portal Mondo, which is founded and owned by the state company Telekom Srbija.

[<https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Igor-Zezelj-zvanicno-novi-vlasnik-Kurira-347>]

⁷ REM website: http://www.rem.rs/en/media-service-providers-register?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q%5Btip_id_in%5D%5B%5D=4&q%5Btip_id_in%5D%5B%5D=5&q%5Btip_id_in%5D%5B%5D=6&q%5Bpretraga%5D=&q%5Bzona%5D=Podru%C4%8Dje+cele+Republike+&q%5Bdozvola_prestala_da_vazi_eq%5D=#gsc.tab=0

investigative journalism show. *Kurir* and *Novosti* are pro-government, with *Kurir* likely having changed editorial policy after the change of owner⁸.

An online survey conducted in March 2019 ranked online media by popularity, with the following ranking:

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. <i>Blic</i> | 6. <i>Novosti</i> |
| 2. <i>Kurir</i> | 7. <i>Informer</i> |
| 3. <i>B92</i> | 8. <i>Danas</i> |
| 4. <i>Telegraf</i> | 9. <i>Mondo</i> |
| 5. <i>NI</i> | 10. <i>RTS</i> ⁹ |

3.2. The Units of Analysis – Outlets and Op-Eds

The subject of the following analysis will be to identify and place nationalist discourse in select texts – mostly opinion pieces, along with a few news articles for reference – from four select online media outlets: two government-aligned, and two independent, which concern the previously defined themes, in the time frame of 2017-2021. The focus was narrowed on signed opinion pieces in an attempt to study the various discourses in their most (verbally) elaborate form. The goal will be to determine the prevalence, nature and positioning of nationalist discourse in the Serbian political landscape. In order to encompass both major styles of political communication in Serbian media, one of the two outlets for either “side“ of the political divide were chosen to be more tabloid in character, and the other one more “serious“ in its content. The tabloid style of communication is naturally more closely associated with the ruling party, as it is the case with most populist parties, but there is also a distinction in style on the opposition side.

Even aspects of the 'style' of a text may be ideologically significant. When for instance public bodies such as government ministries produce public information on their schemes and activities, they select a style of writing (or indeed televising) partly on the basis of the image they thereby construct for themselves. This can be regarded as a special sort of ideological process of subject constitution. (Fairclough, 1995: 75)

Popularity was taken into consideration (two of the chosen outlets are on the survey list), along with the fact that all four appear in print form as well (one of them, *Nova*, as of recently),

⁸ *Danas*: “The new owner of *Kurir*, Igor Žeželj“ [<https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/novi-vlasnik-kurira-igor-zezelj/>]

⁹ “The most read media on the internet in Serbia – ranking“ [<https://z1info.rs/najcitaniji-mediji-na-internetu-u-srbiji-rang-lista/>]

meaning that some or many of the chosen articles could also appear in print, and are so able to reach an “offline“ audience as well.

The four chosen outlets are: 1) *Politika* (government-aligned in news reporting); 2) *Večernje novosti* (government-owned, tabloid format); 3) *Danas* (United Media Group-owned); and 4) *Nova* (UMG-owned, opposition-aligned, more tabloid in style). *Politika* is an old and widely respected daily newspaper, which hosts different writers and views on its pages, but perhaps most prominently features conservative nationalist viewpoints, on the political line of the SANU and the Democratic Party of Serbia. Its main shareholder is Miroslav Bogićević, the president of East Media Group, an obscure firm which was undergoing termination in 2018. Bogićević had supported the opposition before, but after his arrest and after the anti-trust lawsuits against his firm started, he switched sides and started criticizing the opposition in government-friendly media¹⁰. *Večernje novosti* started in 1953 as a tabloid daily. In 1986, it was one of the outlets to print parts of the SANU Memorandum. Its profile was thus distinctly nationalist, and once Slobodan Milošević consolidated his power in Serbia, the daily became a government mouthpiece. The tabloid is still a government mouthpiece today. During the DS government (pre-2012), East Media Group president Bogićević was offered to buy the fledgling company undergoing privatization, just like he did with *Politika*, but he never seems to have managed. *Večernje novosti* announced bankruptcy in 2017, after which it was taken over by its greatest creditor – the “Borba” Printing Press, a state-owned company¹¹. *Danas*, a liberal and staunchly anti-government paper, was taken over by the United Media Group, the self-styled “leading media company in South East Europe”, in March of 2021¹². UMG has its headquarters in Luxembourg, which is very often repeated in public by the President of Serbia, who uses this fact to discredit all outlets owned by the group and brand them foreign mercenaries or agents of George Soros – even though, as members of the RRW party “Dosta je bilo (Enough is enough!)” rightfully point out, he seems keen to meet Soros’ son Alexander¹³ (thereby reminding one once again of the definition of populism as demagoguery). UMG also controls *NI*, a regional TV station and internet portal with politics strongly aligned with the

¹⁰ MOM Serbia: East Media Group [<https://serbia.mom-rsf.org/rs/vlasnik/companies/detail/company/company/show/east-media-group/>]

¹¹ MOM Serbia: Večernje novosti [<https://serbia.mom-rsf.org/rs/mediji/detail/outlet/vecernje-novosti/>]

¹² *Danas*: “United Media took over the paper *Danas*“ [<https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/united-media-preuzela-list-danas/>]

¹³ DJB: “Why did Vučić and a part of the opposition agree to let Soros organize their meeting?“ [<https://dostajebilo.rs/blog/2019/08/05/zasto-su-vucic-i-deo-opozicije-pristali-da-im-soros-organizuje-sastanak/>]

EU, as well as the TV station, internet portal, and as of recently daily paper *Nova*. *Nova's* contributors (and readership/viewership) are perhaps more decidedly anti-Vučić than *Danas*, but they are also ideologically more heterodox. As such, *Nova* could possibly have broader appeal, catering to an ideologically diverse and more “soft liberal“ opposition audience. More apparent banal nationalist discourse is therefore more often found on *Nova* than on the other opposition medium, both in agency reporting and in the opinion pieces of certain contributors.

In an effort to further determine the outreach of the analyzed texts, and thus the discourse and ideology they propagate, their popularity on social media, in the terms of Facebook likes and retweets on the respective outlets' official pages, shall be indicated in some cases. *Politika* does not have social media profiles, while the other three outlets do. *Večernje novosti* has 98.3k Twitter followers and 397k Facebook likes; *Danas* has 170.3k Twitter followers and 125k; and the official pages of *Nova.rs* on Twitter and Facebook have 40.1k followers and 86k Facebook likes, respectively. Some of the comments left on the articles by readers will also be included, for the sake of broadening the analysis to include the message receivers and their reactions to what is written. After all, “claims to discover ideological processes solely through text analysis run into the problem now familiar in media sociology that text 'consumers' (readers, viewers) appear sometimes to be quite immune to the effects of such ideologies (Morley 1983)” (Fairclough, 1995: 72).

3.3. Research Goals & the Analytical Model

The main questions posed in this paper are as follows: 1. Is the division in the polarized Serbian media sphere more ideological or partisan in nature?; 2. Can a distinction be made between banal and virulent nationalist media discourses in the context of Serbian nationalism?; 3. How strong is the correlation between the ideological and the partisan (e.g. Do popular anti-government outlets feature exclusively anti-nationalist views, and vice-versa)?; 4. What kinds of Serbian nationalist discourse (virulent or banal, as defined previously) are prevalent in the opinion pieces hosted by the outlets, and to what extent is each of them represented on both sides of the political divide, respectively? The primary goal will thus be to determine how nationalism operates in the contemporary Serbian political landscape, how the opposing political blocs are positioned with regards to Serbian nationalism in the polarized online media sphere, taken as an ideological battlefield where the political mobilization of nationalist ideology can be assessed by analyzing the discourse prevalent in opinion pieces by the regular contributors of the four outlets. Another goal will be to demonstrate how the unique political

situation in Serbia, defined by an authoritarian ruling party following a pro-EU foreign policy while espousing national conservatism, shapes the messaging in government-controlled media. Finally, it will be considered how prevalent nationalist attitudes are overall in the analyzed texts, as well as how they relate to the established ideological division between the “First” and “Other Serbia”.

The primary hypothesis is that nationalist discourse is prevalent across the current political chasm, with the most dominant form in pro-opposition media being banal nationalism, as defined in the local context, while the pro-government media will also feature a more “virulent” form of nationalist discourse alongside “banal” examples. Moreover, with the ruling party’s official pro-Western position, exclusionary virulent ethnic nationalism would be too taboo to openly espouse in state-aligned media, so even if present in the public and among the political elite, it would be politically incorrect to defend – except in the case of chosen nationalist emissaries inside the ruling coalition.

The secondary hypothesis, which follows from the first, is that the “hot” nationalist discourse in pro-government media is intertwined with populist rhetoric (demagoguery), which can be shown in the way that the contributors for a pro-government tabloid like *Večernje novosti* stray from established nationalist positions on topics such as Kosovo in order to conform to the ruling party policy on this issue. The validity of the First-Other Serbia framework in the chosen time period will be assessed. Hopefully, by the end of the analysis, the place and function of Serbian nationalism in contemporary Serbian political discourse will be made clearer.

3.4. The Sample

In total, a hundred and twenty five (125) texts found on the four online outlets in the chosen time period (2017-2021) were included in the analysis. They were chosen because they deal with one of the six themes relevant to Serbian nationalist discourse, and then categorized according to the general ideological positioning of the author towards the subject. The six themes chosen are: 1) Yugoslavia; 2) Kosovo; 3) Islam; 4) Europe/EU; 5) the nation; 6) the Serbian Orthodox Church. Texts about the nation and nationalism in particular were omitted from the discourse analysis, because they are thematically represented in the other texts, but they were categorized and taken into account in the final sample.

On the *Večernje novosti* website, the following sections were screened for texts: “Feljton” (Feuilleton), which features articles categorized by topic and author; “kolumne” (columns); “politika” (politics), and “članci” (articles). On the *Politika* website, the “članci” section was

screened. For *Danas*, texts were found in the “kolumna“ and „dijalog“ (dialogue) sections, and in the case of *Nova*, all of the texts were taken from the “kolumne“ section.

4. Nationalism in Serbian Online Media (Analysis)

4.1. *Večernje novosti & Politika*

The two government-aligned outlets are, for the most part, dominated by nationalist discourse. This is indicated by the prevalence of the “Yugoslavia as a historical error“ narrative, the widespread perpetuation of the Kosovo myth in the analyzed texts, support for Serbian foreign policy in the region with respect to Serbian national interests, Euroskepticism, and an appreciative stance towards the SOC as the staple of national identity. There are notable differences between the two outlets, however. While orientalist discourse as part of anti-Albanian rhetoric was found in a number of texts from *Politika*, more overt Islamophobia directed against the Bosniaks was only evidenced in *Večernje novosti*. Examples of extreme nationalism, such as inciting hatred or calling for violence against national minorities, were not found in either outlet during screening.

The first example from *Večernje novosti* reflects a critical conservative view of socialist Yugoslavia, grounded in the Kosovo myth.

- 1) He [*the Serbian peasant*], as previously stated, ever since the Kosovo myth and [*Prince*] Lazar’s curse, has been obsessed with condemning treachery.
- 2) The struggle against traitors is deeply embedded into the Serbian being. (...)
- 3) Against that [*evil*], as already emphasized, is the vow given to the King and the Fatherland.
- 4) Breaking that vow equals treachery in evil.
- 5) We have to remind ourselves once more that our man [*Serb*], about whose moral strength songs were sung, traded in his vow to his King and Fatherland with the song: “Comrade Tito, we vow to you, that we will not stray from your path”!
- 6) The path was set after that.
- 7) We descended into yoke, and with it into a gutter.

(*Greatest of enemies to our own selves*, Dr Dragoslav Slović, 30. 03. 2019. at 18:55)

The foundation for Serbian national identity is to be found in the “peasant spirit” of the Serbs, and in the vow given to their king, which dates back to the Battle of Kosovo. The perpetuating

discursive strategy seeks to reaffirm and defend this national identity from the communist Other. The greatest evil for the Serbian peasant is treachery, which implies that his greatest virtue is loyalty (1, 2). In fact, it is his vow, given to his king, that is a symbol of this loyalty, and breaking the vow is equal to treachery (3). This is why the communists were able to “confuse him” and convince him that his king is the real traitor, placing him in a conundrum about whether to honor his king or abandon him for treachery (4, 5). The Serbian national character was thus tempted by the historical moment and forced to make an impossible choice, the negative consequences of which are felt to this day (5, 6). The Serbs were victims of circumstance. There is a complete self-identification on part of the author with the Serbian nation, as defined by him, shown in the use of the deixis “we” (6, 7).

The 90s brought about a radical discursive shift, whereby socialism in general had become an outcast term in Serbia. The distancing from the socialist past which started with Milošević’s adoption of “Serbism” and culminated after the coup d’etat in which he was ousted on 5 October 2000. Efforts were made to rehabilitate conservative elements of the Serbian past such as the leader of the WWII monarchist Chetnik movement Dragoljub Mihajlović, fostering a memory culture where socialism was erased from public view (Kuljić, 2017: 133). Anti-socialist sentiments are combined with a critique of what was perceived as repressive secularism and a lack of freedom to openly practice religion. They are also often paired with national frustration and an impression that the Serbs were discriminated compared to other ethnicities, mainly Croats and Slovenes, coupled with an aversion to the idea of a Yugoslavia in light of the war crimes committed against Serbs in the recent war, as well as the massacres of the Second World War.

It is not immediately clear whether the author completely rejects “Yugoslavism” for “Serbism”, or if he just rejects socialism and the kind of Yugoslavia that was created in 1945. A clue can be found in another of his texts, where he praises nationalism and the “respect for one’s own ethnicity”, stressing the Christian component of “good” (non-chauvinistic) Serbian nationalism which was formalized by priest Nikolaj Velimirović, the founder of the clerical nationalist ideology of St. Saviism¹⁴. Velimirović has become such a widely regarded figure in Serbia that he is often quoted in schools, off-curriculum, by teachers sometimes ignorant of his ideology.

¹⁴ Novosti: “A flag of a different color“
[https://www.novosti.rs/dodatni_sadržaj/clanci.119.html:279980-Barjak-druge-boje]

In fact, his brand of nationalist ideology is rendered invisible by its ubiquity in culture – it is *banal*.

It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the strife with socialist Yugoslavia shown by the *Večernje novosti* contributors stems from the state's secularism and perceived persecution of religion, and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), as the staple of national identity, in particular.

Politika is dominated by a similar viewpoint, stressing the lack of religious freedoms in socialist Yugoslavia. There is also a pronounced nationalist interpretation of the Partisan movement in Serbia, seeking to “de-nationalize” and Otherize Serbian communism. The difference in style between *Politika* and *Večernje novosti* is not evident in the op-eds and articles on Yugoslavia, showing the “banality” of nationalist interpretations of Yugoslavia.

- 1) It [the Kingdom of Yugoslavia] was a “prison of peoples”, ruled by “the ‘Greater Serbia’ clique”.
- 2) There is an opinion that the most responsible for the malicious interpretation of Serbian history are the Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war, left-wing intellectuals who chose to stay in the Soviet state after the revolution, and were given high positions in Lenin's Comintern.
- 3) After the war, they were joined by communists from the former Austro-Hungarian regions and Bulgaria, such as Dimitrov (who was the Secretary General of the Comintern for a long time), Broz [*Tito*], Kardelj and others.
- 5) All of them contributed to the negative interpretation of Serbian history, all wrapped up in Marxist-Leninist phrases.

(Ilija Lukačević, *Communists and the malicious interpretation of Serbian history*, Thursday, Apr 4 2019 at 15:50)

The communists wished to destroy the essence of the Serbian national character, and as part of that goal they started revising Serbian history and removing its romantic and mythological content. The perpetuating discursive strategy again seeks to defend the nation from communist fabrications. Primarily, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia wasn't a Serb nationalist project. The discursive strategy of irony is applied through the use of quotation marks (1). Quotation marks serve to accurately relate another's words, but they may also function as borders between the

discourse being established and other, conflicting discourses. By putting “Greater Serbia” in quotation marks, the author distances himself from a particular type of discourse, critical of Serbian nationalism. It is either the case that for him “Greater Serbia” was never an actual national project of pre-WWII Yugoslavia, or he is contesting the term itself. While the author doesn’t go into further detail on “Old Yugoslavia”, the omission seems to indicate that it, in his view, it was not as detrimental to the Serbian national interests as socialist Yugoslavia. Anti-communism is more prominent here than the reflection on the importance of Yugoslavia itself for the Serbian nation. The discourse can thus be described as “socialist Yugoslavia as a historical error”.

The enemies here are “wise and enlightened Serbs”, in a clear anti-elitist message characteristic of populist rhetoric (here not defined as demagoguery, but as an ideology) (2).

Finally, the author absolves the Serbian nation of “responsibility” for the victory of communism, thereby framing it as its *victim* (3). National victimhood is an essential aspect of Serbian nationalist discourse. Here, the communists who wished to undermine Serbian history were outsiders, not Serbs: Bulgarians, Croats (Tito), Slovenes (Kardelj), etc. Not coincidentally, the first two groups are deemed Serbia’s traditional enemies. The Serbian nation is thus left blameless and ideologically pure.

This particular text by Lukačević in *Politika* was published in the “opinions” section, where below every article there is a disclaimer written by the staff notifying the reader that the authors’ views are not necessarily their own. There is a comment section below the text, and while there is disagreement, most of the 36 comments praise the piece. The most “upvoted” comment states:

- 1) Belgrade today is the biggest Serbian delusion. Naturally, I am referring to political Belgrade. Belgrade has not been a Serbian city for a hundred years.
- 2) Belgrade still dreams Yugoslav dreams, and the Serbian elite globalist ones, although both have a provincial spirit. (...)

“Belgrade” here is merely metonymy for the “estranged Serbian elite” (1), which is leading the people astray with its globalist and Yugoslavist ideas (2). Such a Belgrade is not the representative of what Serbia and the Serbian nation truly are. The most popular comment resonates with the core populist message of the piece. On the other hand, one of the commenters criticizes the focus on religion as the staple of national identity, offering a counter-example

where Balkanization wasn't stopped even between fellow Orthodox peoples, when Macedonia left Yugoslavia and Montenegro left the state union with Serbia in 2006.

Not many texts directly related to Kosovo were found in the survey of the “feuilleton” section on the *Večernje novosti* website, which is interesting, having in mind this outlet's conservative ideological profile and the abundance of texts on the SOC. A possible reason for this is that because of the Serbian government's “both Kosovo and EU” policy, which forces it to engage in diplomacy with the separatist government in Priština, content which would rile up nationalist sentiments with regards to Kosovo is considered too dangerous. Even the official government stance on Kosovo is elusive: President Vučić made several calls in the past years for an “internal [national] dialogue” about Kosovo, which would presumably entail intellectuals and experts from relevant fields discussing and debating the issue openly in the public sphere, on national television, in public spaces, etc. Even though an official platform was adopted and initiative taken for starting the dialogue by forming a working group, and though some thirty round table meetings were held with various figures from the academia and other walks of life, many feel that the process was neither transparent nor an actual dialogue, with the President listening to parties but not speaking his own mind¹⁵. It is a widely held belief in opposition circles that Vučić was allowed to come to power by the EU in order to finally “surrender Kosovo”, which the public would more readily accept from him than from an “Other Serb” like former president Tadić – if he managed to sugarcoat the surrender in his usual nationalist rhetoric. This could be the reason for the mixed messaging in pro-government media, as well as by government officials or ruling party members¹⁶.

The following text is an example of the discourse on Kosovo encountered on the *Večernje novosti* website: banal nationalist and decidedly pro-government. No hateful rhetoric is used against ethnic Albanians or even the Albanian state, which is seen as a partner in this instance. The primary function of the text is to support the Serbian government in its Kosovo policy and

¹⁵ EWB: “Was the internal dialogue about Kosovo unsuccessful?”

[<https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/da-li-je-unutrasnji-dijalog-o-kosovu-bio-neuspesan/>]

¹⁶ The governor of the National Bank of Serbia, Jorgovanka Tabaković, stated in 2017 that Serbia is paying off all the debt from the 90s on, including Kosovo bonds, because the territory of Kosovo is constitutionally defined as a part of Serbia. In a meeting with an IMF official, she stated that “Serbia is paying for that debt, because it considers Kosovo part of its territory”. The governor's wording might be intentionally ambiguous: instead of sending a clear message as an official that Kosovo is part of Serbia, she merely related the official stance of the Serbian government, as if not to invite journalists to press the issue further. [<https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/384333/Ekonomija/Tabakovic-Placamo-dugove-Kosmeta-jer-je-deo-Srbije>]

criticize the separatist government in Priština, not to demonize Albanians (therefore, virulent nationalism is absent).

1) The faster flow of people and goods, trucks passing without delay, an open labor market ... Huge savings in both time and money. This is all laid out in the "Open Balkans" initiative, the successor of the previous "mini-Schengen".

2) Serbia, Northern Macedonia and Albania have decided not to sit idly by in the EU waiting room, and have taken concrete steps towards mutual economic connection, for the benefit of both citizens and the economy.

3) As expected, Priština reacted most violently to the messages from the gathering in Skopje, warning of the danger of "Vučić's project of creating a new Yugoslavia" and "Greater Serbia ideas", throwing trees and stones at Rama for participating in it all.

(Dragutin Stevanović, *Enchanted Pristina: Why Kurti and his followers are bothered by the "Open Balkans" initiative*, 02. 08. 2021. at 10:38)

This article begins by setting a discursive boundary between those who “follow the rules” and those who “cause problems” to everyone else. In this case, the rule is: the idea of the “Open Balkans” initiative is a good one, and rational political actors should support it (1). The “us” and the “them” here aren’t ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanians, but the Serbian government and the separatist Albanian government in Priština, respectively. The rational political actors are the governments of Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania, who are working on realizing the Open Balkans initiative for the benefit of their citizens – a noble, non-violent goal (2). However, the separatist government in Priština is disrupting the process and reacting to it with violence, even against the prime minister of Albania, who is here presented as an ally in the initiative and a *victim* of the Kosovar government’s inflammatory rhetoric (3).

An example of a text on Kosovo could be found in a 2019 article from *Večernje novosti* categorized as a “report” and titled “Tirana and Moscow rile up Šiptars”¹⁷. “Šiptar” is a derogatory term for Albanians in the Serbo-Croat language, derived from the Albanian endonym “Shqiptar”. The use of the term in public discourse is almost always intentional and almost always derogatory. It is characteristic of a more “virulent”, but not uncommon nationalist viewpoint, whereby ethnic Albanians as a group are the enemy.

¹⁷ Novosti: “Tirana and Moscow rile up Šiptars”
[https://www.novosti.rs/dodatni_sadržaj/clanci.119.html:819231-tirana-moskva-uzbunjuju-siptare]

The following text found on *Politika's* website is an example of the orientalist “clash of civilizations” discourse on Islam, in the context of the conflict between the Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo.

- 1) Emphasizing that Serbia is fighting against ISIS in KIM could change the attitudes of the United States and the EU. Because how to explain to their public that they support the realization of Islamic terrorist ideology on European soil [Title]
- 2) After the visit of President Aleksandar Vučić to Rome, it was pointed out that the Vatican sees the issue "... of Kosovo within the frame of confrontation between the Islamic and Christian worlds".
- 3) Sparrows also know that almost everyone in Serbia rejects this image and believes that Albanian secessionism is extremely anti-religious.

(Miroljub Jevtić, *For the Pope, Kosovo and Metohija is a religious problem, while for Serbia it is atheistic*, Sunday, Sep 22 2019 at 18:00)

This text from the political scientist Miroljub Jevtić in the “personal opinion” section sends a strong religious nationalist message. The frame of interpreting reality here is strongly based on an idea of the world best described by Samuel Huntington as “the clash of civilizations”. Islam and Christianity are eternal rivals, and it is through the lens of Christianity’s struggle against Islam that foreign policy should be conducted (1). The clash of the two civilizations is articulated in the struggle of the Christian West against Islamic terrorism. Serbian officials and diplomats should stress the fact that the battle for Kosovo is a religious battle between Orthodox (and European) Serbs and Muslim (and oriental) Albanians when they talk to their colleagues abroad (2). It is primarily a battle against the Islamic terrorism of the deeply religious Albanian Kosovo (3).

In *Politika*, the overall discourse on Kosovo is banal nationalist. The primary goal is to keep Kosovo inside Serbia’s borders. But there are also examples of more extreme nationalist views, which postulate Albanians as the Serbs’ mortal enemy, where the only logical solution which arises from the premises is war and, possibly, ethnic cleansing.

The following op-ed from a *Večernje novosti* contributor combines Euroskepticism with a view of Serbian history which posits Slavic Muslims as traitors to their Christian forefathers. It is an example of more overt nationalism with xenophobic undertones, which is common in the texts found on the website.

1) In the national sense, it was that Serbia, which he calls "Ottoman", that put its head on a stump and carried its cross fighting against the Ottoman Empire from the Holy Emperor Lazar in Kosovo through Deacon Avakum in front of the Kalemegdan, to the heroes of the Balkan wars, but also those of the 1990s.

2) This has been proven to us these days, when the greatest enemy (we can freely say that) of the Serbian people in BiH, Bakir Alija Izetbegović, takes as his godfather a man who imagined that he was the new Turkish sultan who would renew the Ottoman Empire, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

3) Unlike the Serbs from "Serbia proper", but also unlike his former neighbors from Tuzla (who also left this city in face of the penetration of neo-Ottoman culture), who never accepted Ottoman culture, his ancestors did, so it is more fitting to call them "Ottoman Serbs".

4) So, if they exist, and Sejdinović claims so, it is clear who the "Ottoman Serbs" are, it is certainly not those who preserved the tradition of their ancestors, but those who accepted the values and cultural pattern of the Ottomans, i.e. their conquerors, and took it as the cornerstone on which they further built their new identity.

5) According to logic, since the dominant occupation ideology today is the one that advocates so-called European values and cultures, the new "Ottoman Serbs" are not those "narrow-minded ones" who stick to their own, but these modern ones to whom Sejdinović himself belongs and who swear by some new values and patterns.

6) Let us revisit, ultimately, the "Ottoman Serbs" and who they really are.

7) Are they the Serbs from narrower and wider Serbia who want the new Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral to be enthroned in Cetinje, or those who oppose this and at the same time welcome the "friend of the Montenegrin people", the imaginary Sultan Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, with billboards?

(Filip Rodić, *It won't be: Ottoman Serbs*, 29. 08. 2021. at 07:26)

The author is responding to a journalist from Bosnia living and working in Serbia, Nedim Sejdinović, who used the term "Ottoman Serbia" in one of his texts, published by Danas, to refer to Central Serbia, in order to differentiate "Serbia proper" from the northern province of Vojvodina¹⁸. He is criticizing the use of the term "Ottoman Serbs", because in his view Serbian

¹⁸ Based on the fact that what is now Central Serbia was ruled by the Ottoman Empire, as opposed to Vojvodina, which was Austrian territory.

national identity is defined by the struggle against the Ottomans, conforming to the “clash of civilizations” orientalist discourse (1). The (civilizational) struggle is carried over into modern times, evidenced by the fraternizing between the head of the largest Bosniak political party in Bosnia (SDA), who is the greatest enemy of the Serbs, and the Turkish president (2). “Ottoman Serbs” is also dismissed as a valid term because the author believes it would imply the existence of cultural bonds between the Serbs and the Turks, which to him is a false assertion. Instead, it is the Bosniaks who are the real “Ottoman Serbs”, who traded in their religion for social privilege and built a new identity for themselves (3, 4). The term is thus appropriated from Sejdinović in a derogatory form, to be used for any Serb who deviates from Serbian national identity, as defined by religion and traditionalism, such as those who adopt new (European) fads and values (5). Finally, it is implied that the “Ottoman Serbs” are those Serb outcasts (Muslims) who do not agree with the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral, who belongs to the SOC, being enthroned in the city of Cetinje (6, 7). In Serbian nationalist discourse, South Slavic Muslims are always regarded as the Serbs who abandoned the religion of their forefathers. Whether or not the Muslims who wish to identify as Serbs are accepted into the Serbian nation depends on how much importance is placed on Orthodox Christianity by individuals, but the ideal will always be an Orthodox Serb.

It is important to mention that the article by Sejdinović that the author is responding to only makes mention of “Ottoman Serbia” once, in the subtitle¹⁹. Its focus was on criticizing the government, as well as other politicians and figures, for placing so much importance on the matter of whether Serbs from Vojvodina will be able to declare their nationality as “Vojvodinian”. Sejdinović criticized what he termed the “nationalist authoritarian” regimes of Vučić and Orban and the effects of their policies on “Vojvodinian identity” of the Serbs living in the province. It proposes that Vojvodina is the “European” side of Serbia, with potential to be its guide it into a modern Europe, as well as to lead a political struggle against Vučić. This could mean that nationalist rhetoric against Sejdinović here is merely opportunistically employed in order to delegitimize his critique of the ruling party. As Bieber states: “This does not mean that nationalism automatically generates support, but rather that it triggers different, context-specific dynamics that reinforce polarization, marginalize particular political actors, or divide opponents” (Bieber, 2018: 124).

¹⁹ Danas: “Being a Vojvodinian” [<https://www.danas.rs/kolumna/nedim-sejdinovic/bitivojvodjanin/>]

If the two columnists from these two ideologically different outlets are their representatives, then their texts serve to reinforce the “First” and “Other” Serbia discursive division, and align it with the political division between the government and the opposition. The traditionalist and nationalist First Serbia belongs with the current government, while the modernist and liberal Other Serbia belongs with the opposition.

The following text is indicative of the Euroskeptic nationalist stance of the *Večernje novosti* contributors.

1) ADOPTING the law on same-sex unions would be, in the words of its proponents, "a step towards the modernization of our society", but the question is whether what is "modern" is always good.

2) The undisguised and over the course of the war many times repeated goal of the Axis powers, emphasized many times in propaganda endeavors, was to build a "new" and "modern" Europe.

3) Proponents of this idea claim that the adoption of the law on same-sex unions would modernize and classify Serbia as a progressive state, but as we can see from the example of March 27, like many others, not every modernization is good, and the refusal to join the ranks a state that is "modern" and "progressive" at the time does not automatically mean that something very good seems to be done.

(Filip Rodić, *A step away from Sodom* March 28, 2021 at 07:26)

In *Večernje novosti*, the EU (and NATO) is seen as “the Fourth Reich” and compared to Nazi Germany. In this discursive frame, traditionalist Serbia is once again on the side of “good”, as it was previously during WWII, no matter how difficult a choice it was then and still is now. Modernity is dismissed as an argument for the validity of a proposition, here in reference to same-sex unions (1). The new Axis powers are the EU, the values it promotes, and its visions for a “new” Europe (2). Here, modernity is directly associated with Nazism. Just like the Serbs resisted the signing of the Tripartite Agreement with Nazi Germany, so should they resist the dictates of the new “Reich”, which wishes to impose same-sex unions (described as sodomy in the title) on the Serbian society (3). This radical Euroskeptic (nationalist) view is in stark

contrast to official government policy and the ruling party manifesto²⁰, but it is tolerated, possibly because among the SNS voters there are still many Euroskeptics²¹.

Much of the geopolitical discourse on Europe in *Politika* was represented in the analyses of the recently passed politician (SNS), political and military commentator and diplomat Miroslav Lazanski. Lazanski espoused and elaborated on the official government policy of military neutrality, which seeks to find balance between the East and the West in foreign policy, but stresses historical and cultural ties with Russia²², while trying not to antagonize either side.

Even though Lazanski never had a high position inside the SNS, his writing is still a testament to the latent Euro- and NATO-skepticism in the party.

1) NATO in Slovenia determines when a general should be replaced, NATO in BiH determines when a general should be promoted, NATO in Macedonia determines what Macedonians are called, NATO in Croatia does not have to order anything, Croats accept everything, NATO organizes peasant coups in Montenegro, while NATO in Serbia determined when to send the general to The Hague.

2) Today, 40 years later, I watch with sadness as Macedonians take down signs with the names of highways and airports, the names they gave.

3) For the sake of joining NATO and the EU, it agrees to give up its name and identity.

4) I am ashamed on behalf of all those soldiers from all over around the former Yuga who, serving the JNA in Bitola, were ready to die for Macedonia and its name.

(Miroslav Lazanski, *We wanted it ourselves*, 25.02.2018 at 9:05)

In the above text, Lazanski laments the degree of NATO's influence on those former Yugoslav states which became its members, even criticizing Serbia for extraditing Mladić and Karadžić because of Western pressure. He makes specific mention of Macedonia and defends the right of Macedonians to assert their national identity and policy against the pressures made by

²⁰ The Loop: "Identity versus global politics: Euroscepticism in Croatia and Serbia"

[<https://theloop.ecpr.eu/identity-versus-global-politics-euroscepticism-in-croatia-and-serbia/>

²¹ [<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/2486147/faktor-plus-vice-od-polovine-gradjana-podrzava-sns-raste-evroskepticizam.html>]

²² "The St Savist connection between Serbia and Russia" (*Politika*, 24.02.2018) – On the occasion of the 180th anniversary of Serbian-Russian diplomatic relations, Ivica Dačić, leader of SNS's coalition partner SPS, remarked that anybody who says that Serbia should lead an anti-Russian policy under the influence of the West is harming Serbia. Vučić stated that the Temple of St. Sava is probably the best place for reminding oneself of the sanctity of some links, especially those between the two churches, the two peoples, the two countries – Russia and Serbia.

[<https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/398973/Svetosavska-veza-Srbije-i-Rusije>]

NATO and the EU (and Greece in particular) (1, 2, 3). This view is quite uncommon in Serbian nationalist circles, where the Macedonian nation is considered an artificial communist creation, and modern-day North Macedonia is decried for recognizing Kosovo. Lazanski also criticizes the concessions that the Macedonian government made in order to join NATO, indicating his positive sentiments towards the country and using a term of endearment for SFR Yugoslavia (“Yuga”) (4).

This “Yugonostalgic” discourse was picked up on by one of the commenters, who received 23 upvotes, writing:

Branko Srb Kozaković

Always that Yugonostalgic and Brozian-Yugoslavistic sentiment. JNA [Yugoslav National Army], the oaths, Cyrillic-Latin (...) He is sad because “this country had to change its name”... Let go, man... As far as I’m concerned, Yugoslavia shouldn’t even have been created – in it, Serbianhood was dissolved under the USSR-Yugocommunist red ideology, from the Dresden Congress to the Deal of Novi Sad (...) And, as far as FYR Macedonia is concerned – I neither grieve it, nor do I think that it should be tolerated that it adorned itself with the foreign. They certainly have nothing of their own, not much.

Here, the positive sentiment towards one of the former Yugoslav republics is seen as part of “Yugonostalgia”, which is of itself problematic, because Yugoslav communism marked the dissolution of Serbianhood. This is an example of a significant part of the readership of *Politika*, which is highly conservative, anti-communist, and nationalist.

While the traditionally conservative *Politika* does also provide the anti-nationalist perspective of its columnist Boško Jakšić, its readership for the most part reacted negatively to the message. Most of the 39 comments beneath one of his articles criticizing the influence of the SOC in secular politics (Boško Jakšić, *His Holiness Bishop Dodik and the cult of Serbian martyrdom*, Wednesday, 09/09/2020 at 18:00) are highly dismissive of the author’s perspective. One of the more popular comments under the article reads:

Lepa Ribich

Mr. Jakšić, you didn't surprise me. You are a bigger American than the Clintons and an ANTI-SERB. (78 upvotes)

Jakšić’s critical perspective on Serbian nationalism earns him the “anti-Serb” moniker.

4.2. *Danas* & *Nova*

In the chosen opposition media, there is a notable difference between the two outlets, which seem to conform, respectively, to what Omaljev (2016) described as the “hard liberal” and the “soft liberal” ideological positions with regards to nationalism. The “hard liberal” outlet, *Danas*, features a very strong anti-nationalist message, which can be evidenced in all the analyzed themes. Notably, the discourse on Yugoslavia is highly positive; nationalist policies, national myths, and the SOC are extensively criticized and scrutinized; the EU is for the most part taken as a positive model, and the accession of Serbia to the EU is widely supported; Kosovo is viewed as a place of Serbian state repression and discussed in terms of national reconciliation with the Albanians in the common European (EU) future of the two nations. On the other hand, some of *Nova*'s regular contributors espouse banal nationalist viewpoints, especially with regards to Kosovo, the most powerful national myth. More apparent banal nationalist discourse is therefore more often found on *Nova* than on the other opposition medium, both in agency reporting and in the opinion pieces of certain contributors. As a more tabloid-style outlet, it will also be interesting to look at an example of a news article from *Nova*, which relates a gossip story from an obvious nationalist perspective.

In *Danas*, all of the analyzed texts, except for one that was found in the “personal opinions” section, demonstrate a favorable view of socialist Yugoslavia.

- 1) (...) That is why SFR Yugoslavia was the most successful modernization project in this poor area, which we now call the region.
- 2) Simply put, our peoples and nationalities, through socialist Yugoslavia, had finally stepped into modernity.
- 3) And to the extent that we are still modern today – that is, literate, educated, healthy, insured, urban, enlightened and pop-cultural – Yugoslavia is alive.

(Alekselj Kišjuhas, *Yugoslavia is alive!*, 07/04/2021 07:57)

The world of discourse is set in the conflict between modernity and tradition, where modernity is preferable. Socialist Yugoslavia is seen as a success of modernity, and it is contrasted with the term with which the Western Balkans is nowadays often referred to in the EU bureaucratic discourse: “the region”, which is constructed as poor and backward compared to the positive European Other (1). “Our peoples and nationalities” was a phrase often used by the communists in SFRY (2). It is often connected with the “brotherhood and unity” slogan, which emphasized

the solidarity between the nations of Yugoslavia and is often quoted by those critical of Serbian or other post-Yugoslav nationalisms. The author evokes the phrase and associates it with modernity. Yugoslavia itself is the embodiment of modernity (3).

Even if one would expect anti-communist (but not nationalist) criticism by some of the liberal writers of *Danas*, such texts were not found during the screening. This hints to the possibility of the “First” and “Other” Serbia divide still being a very powerful discursive frame in public debate, meaning that ideological differences are less important than being on the “right side” of this divide. Yugoslavia is an important symbol and a litmus test in this context. The conflict between tradition and modernity is also one of the primary dimensions of the ideological battle between “First” and “Other” Serbia. It could also mean that the two broadly defined ideological positions are still linked strongly to certain political parties, with “First Serbia” positions being associated with the government.

Screening *Nova*'s “columns” section for articles on Yugoslavia did not produce many results. An article was found comparing the “Serbian dream” to the “Yugoslav dream”, with the author concluding that the latter was clear and attainable, while the former is elusive²³. It represents the discourse on “Yugoslavia as a place for leading a normal life”. The other text criticizes the Yugoslav socialist economic and political system from a (neo-)liberal perspective, but makes no mention of the nation²⁴. The article's author is highly critical of the “normal life” narrative and seeks to deconstruct it.

All the articles on the topic of Kosovo encountered on the *Danas* website are deeply critical of official government policy and supportive of national reconciliation between the Serbs and the Albanians. The authors stress the responsibility of the Serbian nation to recognize and make amends for the decades-long mistreatment of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo.

- 1) There were all sorts of cases of "demarcation", "population exchange" and "humane relocations" along ethnic and religious lines in European and world history.
- 2) And they never, never really did well. Indeed, what is "demarcation" if not ethnic "purification"? (...)
- 3) Hitler's idea that the Third Reich could comfortably swallow both Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia, just so that Germany's borders would coincide with the ethnic distribution

²³ *Sara Radojković writes: What does the Serbian dream look like? (Nov 05 2020 at 9:04, Nova)*

²⁴ *Slavisa Tasic writes: Two types of countries (29 Aug. 2020 at 15:25, Nova)*

of the Germans, is unthinkable today. Except in the skulls of those who still wetly dream of a "all Serbs in one state" corrupt, anachronistic and genocidal policy. (...)

3) And now, nationalist-oriented cynics will readily say that Serbia's borders have already been called into question by international squinting at Kosovo's secession.

4) However, what we then fail to grasp is both the cause and the context of this pretend "unjust" exception, which actually confirms the rule.

5) And the cause and context are in the crimes organized by Serbian paramilitaries and police in Kosovo in the late 1990s, but also the practice of oppression, discrimination and torture of Kosovo Albanians for decades and centuries.

(Aleksej Kišjuhas, *The Kosovo napkin*, 09/09/2018 08:48)

Drawing new borders with Kosovo along ethnic lines is a publicly stated possibility repeated often by President Vučić²⁵. The author of this article is staunchly opposed to the idea (1, 2), comparing it to nazism and labeling the nationalist project of uniting all Serbs under one state genocidal (3). As an explanation for Kosovo's illegal secession in terms of international law, Serbian state repression against Kosovo Albanians is cited (4, 5). Moreover, the repression is given as justification for Kosovo's secession. The often heard statement that the secession was an unjust historical precedent is dismissed through the use of linguistic devices: quotation marks around the word "unjust" and the preceding epithet "pretend".

Kosovo is not a common topic among in the op-ed section of *Nova*, though the website is regularly updated with news from Kosovo. But what little was found paints a picture different from the other pro-opposition outlet. Where *Danas* criticizes the government and the ruling party for their failure to secure equal rights for Albanians, on *Nova* it is possible to find a critique of the government about its Kosovo policy from a "soft liberal" perspective, which calls for maintaining Kosovo as a part of Serbia and stresses its cultural importance for the Serbs, while at the same time not featuring hateful rhetoric against Albanians. This perspective could be thought of as the banal variety of Serbian nationalism.

1) Kosovo was considered the most expensive Serbian word, but these days it has been reduced to discount goods offered during the famous Black Friday, that is, it has become cheaper than expected.

²⁵ Danas: "Vučić: 'I support redrawing borders with Kosovo, that is the absolute healthiest solution for Serbia'" [<https://www.danas.rs/politika/vucic-ja-sam-za-razgranicenje-na-kosovu-to-je-apsolutno-najzdravije-za-srbiju/>]

2) If we know that the award is worth about a million dollars (by the way, eight years ago the Nobel Foundation reduced the amount of cash prizes by 20 percent), then it turns out that *Kosovo and Metohija* is worth about as much as one "Maybach", a luxury "Mercedes" limousine, but without additional equipment. (...)

3) Is he aware (and I am asking nonsense) how much he insulted and hurt the feelings of millions of Serbs with his trivial statement who do not think about Kosovo, even in their most nightmarish dream or despair, the way that Aleksandar Vučić or Čedomir Jovanović do?

4) And he arbitrarily looked at the Nobel letter on the wall, polished that piece of metal and spent a million dollars, or, as a sign of good will and good neighborly relations with Thaçi, Haradinaj and Hoti, he would give it to independent Kosovo, so that tomorrow they could raise minarets on the Patriarchate of Peć or the Dečani monastery, which they are already appropriating.

5) (...) In Kosovo, a medal can be "earned" in only one way - by defending it.

(Ranko Pivljanin, *Will Kosovo go for the Nobel Prize?*, 11. dec. 2020 at 08:49)

The author opens by criticizing the government for cheapening the word Kosovo, in reference to the phrase popularized by writer and SANU member Matija Bećković ("Kosovo is the most expensive Serbian word") (1). He then goes on to compare the value of the Nobel Prize, which president Vučić mentioned he would get if he recognized Kosovo, with the price of luxury cars (2). Continuing, he draws a boundary between "millions of Serbs" who have "feelings" for Kosovo, and politicians such as president Vučić or Čedomir Jovanović, who openly supports Kosovo's independence, and who is not able to understand and empathize with those millions (3). The critique here is aimed at the same time at the president of Serbia and the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, who is seen as part of the "Other Serbia", as a hard liberal, and who is also perceived as being cooperative with the SNS government, especially with regards to Kosovo policy. Jovanović openly supports the independence of Kosovo, while the ruling party is inadvertently enabling that outcome with its policy. Finally, Vučić's foreign policy is criticized for being too "neighborly" with the Albanian leaders of Kosovo, who will ultimately convert Serbian Orthodox monasteries into mosques, showing concern for the Albanization and, by extension, the Islamization of Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo (4). The author states that medals can be earned only by defending Kosovo, where the type of defense – diplomatic or military – is not specified (5). But this perspective is radically different from the dominant discourse in *Danas*, where there are no calls for maintaining Kosovo as part of Serbia.

There are 40 comments under the article, most of which consist of a short praise of the author and his perspective, showing that the readership of Nova positively reacted to the message. The article was also shared on Nova's Twitter page, which has 40.000 followers. It received 9 likes and three comments, one of which praises and reverberates the author's perspective.

Since *Nova* is an outlet characterized by a more tabloid news style, it might also be relevant to consider how it treats a piece of "national gossip", related to an Albanian pop-singer. Dua Lipa, an Albanian singer from Kosovo, cited ajvar, a traditional dish from the south of Serbia, as being an Albanian national dish. This is how Pero Jovović interpreted the story for Nova.rs:

- 1) While trying hot sauces on the show, she at one point mentioned traditional Albanian dishes which, she said, were a real treat.
- 2) At that moment, she started talking about ajvar, explaining to the host what ajvar is and stating that she likes to eat it with everything.
- 3) Ironically, the show showed photos of ajvar packed in jars with the words "Leskovac ajvar".
- 4) In the same show, she also mentioned cabbage pie, stating that it is another specialty from Albania that people should try.

(Pero Jovović, *Dua Lipa eats ajvar from Leskovac, says it's an Albanian dish*, 24. 07. 2020)

The story was reported across many tabloid-style, pro-government media outlets. *Nova* is the only exception, being a pro-opposition outlet that covered it. The singer's statement is played for laughs, pointing at the "irony" of a product with a Serbian label being presented as Albanian (1, 2, 3). Another "appropriated" dish is cited (4). Apart from sports, there is probably no better field to study banal nationalism than national cuisine, especially in the extremely diverse context of the Balkan Peninsula, where tracing most dishes back to a single ethnicity or nation in history is often impossible. The message here can be decoded in two ways: 1) a Kosovo Albanian is appropriating a traditional Serbian dish, or 2) a Kosovo Albanian is unwittingly enjoying a traditional Serbian dish, while claiming it is Albanian. Both remind 'us' that the separatist Kosovo Albanians not only 'stole' the most holy Serbian land, but are even attempting to 'steal' a part of Serbia's intangible cultural heritage.

This article poses an interesting challenge to the "First" vs. "Other" Serbia frame of interpreting public discourse and political culture, where an author who could be described as a "hard liberal" according to his positions finds it difficult not to criticize the "modernist" or "democratic" opposition for their timid reactions to the crisis. At the same time, the Serbian government nominally supports the SOC, but is also said to be politically allied to the fellow

authoritarian regime in Montenegro. Both governments in fact have the backing of the EU. There is thus an apparent disconnect between the political and the ideological, and nationalism no longer appears to be tied to the “First Serbia”, nor does “First Serbia” itself seem like a tangible concept in the political sense.

The contributors at *Nova.rs* are highly critical of the connections between church and state.

- 1) A sympathizer or candidate of the list, Aleksandar Vučić - for our children, became the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which strengthened the unity of the church and the state.
- 2) The leader gave a blessing, the bishops said "let your will be done" and so the 46th patriarch was elected.
- 3) And dear God had no objections to the record, as if he also liked a firm hand.

(Milenko Vasović, *The Holy Spirit "recognized" Porfirije*, 18 Feb 2021 18: 43)

The newly appointed Patriarch of the SOC is criticized for being a political ally of the SNS (1). It is implied that he was chosen as the candidate with Vučić’s approval (2), and the process is then criticized as a mockery of religion itself (3), with the same sentiment being expressed in the satirical title (*The Holy Spirit "recognized" Porfirije*).

Danas is very pro-EU oriented. Pro-EU discourse is usually “developmentalist“, in the sense that Europe is imagined as a goal towards which Serbian society should strive and an example which should be followed. This is why “progressive“, “democratic“ and “modern“ Europe, sometimes also referred to with the metonymy “the normal world“, as compared with the “backward“, “autocratic“, “patriarchal“ Serbia.

The other opposition medium is similarly positively inclined towards the EU. The following is taken from an article hosted on *Nova*.

In normal countries, the media (especially the opposition) would deal with the figures from the inaugural "report" and prominent strategic goals, but how to believe the first among equals in a government that someone else (sorry, the First Man) not only put together but immediately time-limited it to a very short lifespan.

(Ivan Mrđen, *In normal countries...* 31. Oct 2020 at 07:46)

This text is an example of the developmentalism common in the “Other Serbia“ discourse, in which the EU countries and the West in general are referred to as “normal countries“. Even if

not explicitly stated, it is almost always the implication that the phrase refers to the developed West, as opposed to the backward East. Here, the author criticizes the media and the opposition for not scrutinizing the official government statistics on the status of the Serbian economy, which the author explains are false and misleading.

5. Conclusion – Nationalism in Serbian Public Discourse

5.1. The Analysis Results

The screening lead to the development of a categorization system for the analyzed texts, where discourse was determined based on 1) the theme and 2) the attitude of the writer towards the subject. Ultimately, it was arrived at 20 different narratives, and many of the texts combined more than one. Below is a table with the chosen labels of these narratives and the number of analyzed texts in which they appeared.

| Theme | Discourse (with the number of instances overall) | | | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Yugoslavia | Yugoslavia as a Historical Mistake 17 | Yugoslavia as a Place for Leading a Normal Life 4 | | | |
| Kosovo | Kosovo is Lost (soft liberal position) 1 | Kosovo and Serbian Repression/War Crimes (hard liberal position) 11 | Kosovo as “the Most Expensive Word” 9 | Kosovo as a Lawful Part of Serbia 12 | |
| Islam | Islam as the Civilizational Enemy 5 | Orientalism 11 | Tolerance 3 | | |
| Europe | Euroskepticism/Russophilia 13 | “Developmentalist” discourse, Europe as a model 11 | | | |
| The Nation | The Nation as Glorious, Ancient 15 | The Nation as the Just Side in Conflict 46 | Victimhood 11 | Militarism 0 | The Nation as Backward 26 |
| The Serbian Orthodox Church | SOC as the Staple of National Identity 21 | St Savist Nationalism 2 | SOC as Reactionary 14 | | |

Table 1: Themes and Discourses in *Večernje novosti*, *Politika*, *Danas*, and *Nova*

The most dominant discourses overall are the broadly defined “the nation as the just side in conflict”, almost all of which was found in government media (45/46 texts), and its near-polar

opposite, “the nation as backward”, encountered almost exclusively in opposition media (23/26 texts). This goes to show that there is still an ideological divide in the political landscape which corresponds to the established “First” and “Other” Serbia division, where the former is espoused by the government, and the latter by the opposition. There is, however, a disconnect, notably between the opposition media and the opposition parties, where the level of distrust in the opposition on part of the writers for opposition-profiled outlets is significant. The contributors in opposition media are almost never supportive of the government, which is why even for the “hard liberals” among them it is rare to see support for the “hard liberal” opposition (LDP, LSV), which is at present not critical of the regime.

Discourses which would strongly indicate virulent nationalism, namely “Islam as the civilizational enemy”, “militarism”, and “St Savist nationalism”, were found in a very small number of texts, even though one of the outlets (*Večernje novosti*) is a true tabloid, where the probability of this happening would be greater. And while most of the nationalist discourse encountered would more adequately be labeled “banal” than “virulent” in the Serbian context, one has to remember that the context is that of a society which was part of deadly nationalist conflicts relatively recently. What is “banal” in Serbian nationalism and ubiquitous in the Serbian media sphere would be considered “virulent” in e.g. the United Kingdom. This is why Hutchinson’s remark that hot nationalism is an ideological movement activated in times of crisis is so important. Serbia is a society which has constantly been in various different crises for the past 30 years, from inflation and economic recession, to war, the assassination of a democratic prime minister in 2003, the global economic crisis of 2008, etc. The political crises in Montenegro and in Bosnia, where the local Serb population feels threatened by the state, carry a risk of igniting the flame of conflict. Recent developments, such as the “Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom, and the National Flag”, instituted a year ago and celebrated on the 15th of September by the governments of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska (a Bosnian entity with a Serbian ethnic majority), may be a signal that ethnic tensions between the Serbs and other neighboring nations might increase in the following period²⁶. The nationalizing state is going through a new process of national reinvention through the invention of new traditions²⁷. For the first time after many years, it was decided that the new school year should start by playing

²⁶ RFE: “Five things you should know about the Day of Serbian Unity“

[<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/pet-%C5%A1ta-o-danu-srpskog-jedinstva-slobode-i-nacionalne-zastave/31461811.html>]

²⁷ A monument to medieval Serbian ruler and founder of the Nemanjić dynasty Stefan Nemanja was erected in Belgrade this year as a symbol of national pride.

the Serbian national anthem in schools, which caused controversy in Bosniak majority regions. Where the nation is defined by ethnicity, which is in turn defined by religion, and not citizenship, such a move by the government can contribute to the rise of nationalist hatred.

Twitter was found not to be a significant factor in the spread of the analyzed texts, as most of those that were posted to Twitter had less than a dozen retweets or comments – which could be due to the low popularity of Twitter as a news medium in Serbia²⁸ – while the Facebook pages of the three outlets active on social media had more responses in terms of likes and shares (mostly around a hundred). It is also possible that opinion pieces are not the type of texts which commonly start discussions on social media.

5.2. Concluding Remarks

Nationalist discourse is indeed prevalent across the political divide in Serbia. However, when it comes to the online news media, there is still significant relation between political affiliation and the prevalence and type of nationalist discourse employed. Nationalist ideology is still most prominent in the outlets connected to the ruling party. Using discourse analysis to try and identify elements of ideological speech or writing appears useful in the climate of competitive authoritarianism, as the ideological and the political move further and further away from each other. In fact, the discrepancy between the prevalence of the topic of Kosovo, with its important role in Serbian nationalism, and the overall prevalence of nationalist ideology in pro-government media, shows that there might be a considerable amount of self-censorship and disciplining involved, as dictated by the ruling party, whose leader himself offers mixed messages with regards to Kosovo, and whose official strategy on this issue is quite elusive²⁹. Banal nationalist discourse crosses partisan lines, but with an important note on the difference between the two pro-opposition outlets: *Danas* is very strictly liberal and anti-nationalist, while *Nova* is ideologically more diverse, and seems to speak to a broader opposition audience. Populist discourse was also found to be widespread in pro-government media, in both the analyzed texts and the reactions of the audience on social media or the outlets themselves.

²⁸ According to WVS data for Serbia between 2017 and 2020, 42.1% of the respondents said that they used social media as a source of information daily, while 38.2% said they never do. However, it would appear that opinion pieces do not appear as frequently or are as popular on these websites (<https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSOnline.jsp>).

²⁹ There have been speculations that Vučić was allowed to come to power by the West in order to see the negotiations with Kosovo to the end.

Therefore, the primary hypothesis was partially confirmed. There is still a strong division between the discursive worlds of “First“ and “Other“ Serbia, and so *Danas*, as a hard liberal outlet, features virtually no nationalist discourse, banal or otherwise. The secondary hypothesis was confirmed. While banal nationalism is ubiquitous, hints of the more “virulent“ kind of nationalism are found exclusively in pro-government media. In order to understand this fact, it is necessary to remember that the far-right elements in Serbian politics have been absorbed into the current ruling party (SNS), which itself evolved from a radical right-wing party (SRS). Every now and again it is revealed through statements by party figureheads or the discourse evidenced in pro-government media that the new political elite never renounced their old politics, instead only slightly euphemizing their rhetoric in order to remain politically correct in light of their party leadership’s new official pro-EU policy. At this point in time, SNS’s rule could hardly be described as “authoritarian nationalism“, as Eric Gordy described that of Milošević, but the regime does appear to be the floodgate which is keeping more radical forms of nationalism at bay. Should that floodgate be compromised, for any reason, whether because of external factors or as a consequence of a shift in official policy, nationalism might very quickly turn into its violent form.

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Appendix A: Islamophobia in Serbian Politics

Three separate discourses influence perceptions of Islam and Muslims in Serbia: 1) Anti-migrant rhetoric, which is often a local reflection of the global (Western) anti-migrant trends; 2) Orientalism, where Muslims are the eternal “other” in the ‘clash of civilizations’ narrative frame; 3) the discourse of religious tolerance. Anti-migrant rhetoric is characteristic for radical and extreme right wing parties and movements, and its presence in the analyzed articles would indicate a more virulent form of nationalism. Official government rhetoric on immigrants from the Middle East is espoused by president Vučić, who recently gave assurances that Serbia will not be a “parking spot” for anybody coming from abroad, but stressed that the migrant crisis will not be a problem for Serbia and called for showing humanity³⁰. He wondered about why there is so much xenophobia and hatred towards those who come from somewhere else. This rhetoric could be interpreted as part of a well thought out political strategy inherited from Slobodan Milošević, who used Vojislav Šešelj and his Radicals as a signal to European leaders that if he is ousted, somebody worse than him will take his place. This allowed him to present himself as the rational party. Aleksandar Vučić does the very same thing – often with the very same person, his political father, who was his “favorite” opposition leader before all opposition parties remained seatless in the National Assembly after the most recent elections. But new actors have emerged as well, such as “Levijatan“, a movement supposedly concerned with animal welfare, but in actual fact a disguised far-right group mostly active in harassing Roma communities (which was the conclusion of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, but which they deny³¹) on the basis of alleged animal abuse, as well as organizing anti-migrant demonstrations. The Media Diversity Institute concluded that “Since the beginning of the migrant crisis, the online space and media landscape in Serbia has been intoxicated with xenophobia and bigotry towards refugees and migrants which led to fear and the rise of the far-right’s anti-migrant actions“³². Anti-migrant rhetoric has been on the rise in 2020. The radical right wing movement Dveri launched an anti-immigration campaign and warned that Serbia was to become the biggest migrant center in the region.

³⁰ Danas: “Vučić: I have nothing against refugees, but Serbia will not be a parking spot for anyone coming from abroad” [<https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/vucic-nemam-nista-protiv-izbeglica-ali-srbija-nece-bit-parking-ni-za-koga-ko-ce-dolaziti-sa-strane/>]

³¹ Danas: “Levijatan rejects claims about the discrimination of the Roma“ [<https://www.danas.rs/dijalog/reakcije/levijatan-demantuje-navode-o-diskriminaciji-roma/>]

³² Media Diversity: “‘Not welcome!’: migrants and refugees labeled as undesirable in Serbia“ [<https://www.media-diversity.org/not-welcome-migrants-and-refugees-labeled-as-undesirable-in-serbia/>]

However, anti-migrant rhetoric is sometimes also encountered among the center-left opposition as well.

Trifunović: I am sorry, Hungarians, it was a slip

(Danas, 14.04.2019)³³

After having made a comment against the „settlement of Syrians and Hungarians“ in Serbia while speaking to a crowd of supporters, politician Sergej Trifunović, then president of the liberal Movement of Free Citizens, issued an apology in the media. Interestingly enough, only the Hungarians were targeted with the apology, while no mention of Syrians was made. By not apologizing to the Syrians, a clear signal was given to the public about their desirability as guests in the country, as opposed to that of Hungarians.

It could be argued that this liberal politician tried using right-wing populist rhetoric to boost his ratings, because he was blaming the government for the alleged rise in illegal settlement to the detriment of working class Serbs (which would imply nationalist populism anyway). Whatever the case may be, it is a testament to the broad appeal of anti-migrant rhetoric across the political spectrum.

Appendix B: The Serbian Orthodox Church as Part of National Identity: the Case of the Political Crisis in Montenegro

Eastern Orthodox churches are unique in being tied to the state in a relationship which was referred to as “the symphony” in Justinian’s Eastern Roman Empire. In sociological literature, the relationship here exemplified was termed *caesaropapism* by Weber (Kuljić, 2009: 137). Caesaropapism, as opposed to theocracy (or hierocracy in Weber’s terms), is the exercise of supreme authority over matters of both church and state by a secular figure. It was characteristic of Eastern Christianity and Islam, and could be found in the Eastern Roman, Russian and Ottoman Empires. For example, the first Orthodox Patriarch of Serbia in the 14th century was a steward of Emperor Dušan – a bearer of secular authority turned religious figurehead. This relationship between church and state was unchanged in the modern era, so when the Orthodox peoples of the Balkans started forming nation-states on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, their churches became national churches. An independent Orthodox nation without an independent national church is a rarity in modern times. Until very recently, the only exception was

³³ <https://www.danas.rs/politika/trifunovic-izvinjavam-se-madjari-to-je-bio-lapsus/>

Montenegro³⁴, whose church was still under the undisputed control of the Serbian Archbishop for the region. But along with the nation-building project which seeks to find an identity for Montenegrins which is separate from and opposed to Serbs and Serbia, efforts are being made to secure autocephaly (independence) for the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. Whether other Orthodox religious authorities (the Serbian Orthodox Church or the Ecumenical Patriarchate) recognize this autocephaly or brand it schismatic matters little in the caesaropapistic model of authority, because it is the state that ultimately makes decisions in religious matters. This is why the nationalist discourse on Montenegro in the Serbian public sphere focuses on the clerical dispute between the Serbian Archbishopric and the schismatic Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which was exacerbated in 2019 with the announcement of a law on religious freedoms in Montenegro which critics claimed would effectively nationalize much of the property of the SOC in the country.

For two years from 2019, the Serbian community in Montenegro had been protesting the introduction of the Law on Religious Freedoms, which they feared would bring about the nationalization of many objects belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro. Serbian political leaders reacted in various ways. Even though the stances on Montenegro in Serbia are split along ideological lines, with nationalists supporting Montenegrin Serbs gathered around the SOC, who led the protest, and liberals defending the pro-Western (albeit highly autocratic) government of Milo Đukanović, politicians across the ideological spectrum mostly supported the protests out of fear that they would alienate their supporters by taking a controversial stance on a national issue. As the political crisis was unfolding and became the main topic of the day, many public figures voiced their opinions, including the contributors to the four outlets which are being analyzed here. Many of the articles concerning the Serbian Orthodox Church found in this period were thus directly related to the crisis.

President Vučić reaffirmed that Serbia would stand behind the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro and support the Montenegrin Serbs when they are endangered. This could entail support against the “nationalizing“ efforts of the Montenegrin state and the attempts of the (now former) Montenegrin government to help establish a new Montenegrin national identity,

³⁴ Montenegro is also a historical exception to the rule of caesaropapism in Orthodox countries, having been a theocracy with a religious ruler (the Njegoš Dynasty) acting as a secular authority for much of its modern history. It was also the only independent South Slavic country in the Balkans for a long period during the Ottoman rule in the region.

separate from the Serbs. While these attempts date back to at least before the Second World War, they have been greatly accelerated after the 90s.

Jeremic (NS): The adoption of the Montenegrin Law on Religious Freedoms means taking away the Serbian Orthodox Church from the Serbian people, the surrender of Ostrog [monastery] and other holy sites to the hands of the mafia.

Jeremic pointed out that the Montenegrin Orthodox Church “does not exist” and that it is a “creation of the Montenegrin Secret Service”

<https://www.danas.rs/politika/jeremic-vucic-sramotno-cuti-o-crnoj-gori-kao-sto-je-milosevic-cutao-o-krajini/>

People’s Party (NS) leader Vuk Jeremić focuses on the situation with the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, at the same time criticizing the Montenegrin government as corrupt. He denies the existence of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, whose universal recognition by other religious authorities would serve to cement Montenegrin national identity. Jeremić instead defends that the only legitimate Orthodox church in Montenegro is the SOC. Liberal critics see the presence of the SOC in Montenegro as destructive, and view the organization itself as an agency of the Serbian government seeking to destabilize the pro-Western and progressive Montenegro (often at the behest of Russia).

Djilas (PFJ): I supported him when he said that they shouldn’t bring Serbian flags to the protest walks, because it was a protest for the defense of all holy sites, a protest which showed the powerful strength of the people who no longer wish to endure lawlessness, injustice and corruption, and not a protest for the status of the Serbian people in Montenegro.

<https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a653225-djilas-ponovo-su-dosla-vremena-kada-okupirana-srbija-gleda-u-slobodnu-crnu-goru/>

The president of the center-left Party of Freedom and Justice Dragan Đilas is also careful not to antagonize Serb nationalist forces in Montenegro or potential voters in Serbia. He expressed his support for the protest, but reframed it as a civic protest against a corrupt government, not as a protest for the status of the Serbs. By offering his support in this different framing, he will hopefully be able to appease both the nationalist and the liberal opposition voters.

What follows is an example of agency reporting from *Večernje novosti*, with the name of the author only given as initials. The news is that the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral of the Serbian Orthodox Church held an evening service in the Montenegrin capital.

- 1) PODGORICA IS RED, BLUE, WHITE: Large tricolor in front of the temple during metropolitan Joanikije's reception

(*Večernje novosti*, 02.06.2021)³⁵

The exclamation that the city of Podgorica is “red, white, and blue” in the title refers to the colors of the Serbian national flag, used by the Serbs of Montenegro (1). The discursive universe shrinks to encompass only the national colors of Serbia, while at the same time these colors are extended upon the whole city, implying that the boundaries of the Serbian nation and the city of Podgorica are or should be one and the same. The colors of the national flag determine the boundaries of the in-group (the Serbs) – as opposed to the separatists (the Montenegrins), who are the outsiders. The metropolitan is at the center of the in-group as a member of the Serbian Orthodox Church – as opposed to the separatist Montenegrin Orthodox Church. The occasion is a religious celebration with the participation of the Montenegrin prime minister.

Večernje novosti features a feuilleton dedicated to the national identity of the Montenegrins. The topic is introduced as follows:

- 1) Montenegro was not named after Montenegrins, like Serbia was after Serbs, or Russia after Russians, it was the other way around – Montenegrins were named after their homeland
- 2) The doctrine of ethnic nationality of Montenegrins will be born in clero-nationalist incubators.
- 3) Unlike other peoples, Serbs who renounced their national name were becoming its greatest haters and enemies
- 4) The destroyers of the Serbian ethnic space proclaimed the Montenegrin nation by confusing the meaning of the terms citizenship and nationality³⁶

Before opening any of the texts, the reader is greeted with this heading. After pointing out that the Montenegrins were named after Montenegro, and not vice-versa, implying that their claims to a new nation based on a separate ethnic identity from Serbs are unsustainable (1), the text goes on to criticize the idea of a Montenegrin ethnicity in somewhat vague terms (2), after which Montenegrins are characterized as traitors of the nation, and (4) as (unwitting) destroyers

³⁵ <https://www.novosti.rs/crna-gora/vesti/1003210/podgorica-crveno-plavo-bela-velika-trobojka-ispred-hrama-tokom-doceka-mitropolita-joanikija-video>

³⁶ <https://www.novosti.rs/feljton/1015/zagonetka-crnogorskog-identiteta>

of the Serbian ethnic space. This kind of nationalist discourse is more “virulent” than it is banal, because it conveys a sense of urgency in righting the wrongs caused by the detractors of the Serbian nation.

Danas’ contributors are highly critical of the SOC, especially with regards to its political activity, seeing it as an extension of the subjugating attempts by the government in Belgrade aimed against other nations in the region.

- 1) At the same time, the Serbian Orthodox Church or the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral is a political actor in Montenegro.
- 2) And "a state within a state which it does not recognize" (Miloš Perović) - but does form its government.
- 3) There is no theology, scholasticism or mysticism, but only pure political ideology (with lucrative protection of real estate and construction land).
- 4) The famous protest walks were political rallies according to the Udba [Yugoslav secret police] recipe of yogurt or boulder revolution of the time.
- 5) And on whose rope we were already hanging, shattering that common South Slavic state.
- 6) It is a para-church and pretend-religious ideology that is, above all, anti-modern, anti-Western and anti-European.
- 7) It is only unusual that even many anti-war and anti-nationalist-oriented intellectuals in (Other) Serbia do not notice this obvious fact.
- 8) While it is not particularly unusual that the current Serbian opposition does not understand this scam; it is only an opposition to Aleksandar Vučić, but not to Vučić's policy.

(Aleksej Kišjuhas, *Whose is Montenegro*, 09/12/2021 07:45)

The author, yet again operating in the discursive world of modernity vs. tradition, the West vs. the East, Europe vs. Russia, rationality vs. religion, etc., recognizes the SOC as a political actor (1), and makes a remark on the strength of its influence, whereby it is able to influence the formation of the government, in a country which it does not recognize (2). Furthermore, the SOC is viewed purely as a political actor, and so the format of “respectful disagreement”, which is often used by those critics of SOC who still believe in its sanctity, is here changed for a more overtly critical tone (3). The political protests in Montenegro are said to have been organized

by the secret police, referenced in comparisons to the Yugoslav secret police agency UDBA (4), which is seen as the cause for Yugoslavia's dissolution (5). Here, Yugoslavia represents the modernist and Western values of a part of the Montenegrin society, while the Serbian church represents undesirable traditionalist and pro-Russian positions (6). Liberal and leftist public intellectuals are criticized for conceding to nationalist positions in the case of the political crisis in Montenegro (7), while the opposition is criticized for not daring to detract from Vučić's nationalist policies (8).

Appendix C: List of Analyzed Texts

1. "REŽIM U PODGORICI TRAŽI: SPC da se posle OSAM VEKOVA registruje, jehovini svedoci ne moraju" [The regime in Podgorica demands: the SOC needs to register after eight centuries, Jehova's Witnesses do not need to], V.K., novosti.rs, 23.07.2020.
2. "Država kontroliše verski život" [The state controls religious life], Dr Jovan Janjić, novosti.rs, 21.02.2020.
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