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M. Dodik, A. Vučić and SPC patriarch Porfirije

Photo: Tanjug

SERBIA: BUILDING THE STATE AND STATE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Identity politics already became relevant in the former Yugoslavia in the 1980s, in the new historical circumstances created by the country's deep political crisis that ultimately led to its brutal breakup. The homogenization of the Serbian people already began at that time, primarily due to the Kosovo problem and alleged endangerment of the Serbian people in Yugoslavia. As stated by Ivan Čolović, it was demanded that the Serbs return to their authentic identity, become nationally aware and be "what they are", so that

they can gather as a homogeneous and strong national community, freed from the illusory communist ideology of Yugoslav brotherhood and unity, and capable of creating a new Serbia, stronger and bigger than the existing one, at the time of the breakup of Yugoslavia.¹

The breakup of Yugoslavia was accompanied by the rise of nationalism and the affirmation of

¹ Ivan Čolović, *Rastanak s identitetom*, Biblioteka XX vek, Belgrade 2014.

ethno-national identities. As the new states were created, there was a tendency to define citizenship and belonging in ethno-national terms, often tied to religion. Identity politics played a significant role in shaping the political landscape of the region. Thus, it is deeply associated with the issues of ethnicity, religion and historical narratives.

An ethno-religious matrix was created and religious symbols and practices were often used for the affirmation and differentiation of ethno-national identities. This resulted in a greater complexity of inter-religious relations, higher tensions and even conflicts. Religion was instrumentalized to strengthen divisions.

This led to the renewal or intensification of religious life and overemphasized affiliation, especially the religious one. The return to religion meant, among other things, the collapse of the socialist values and barbarization of the society through the wars, crimes and ethnic cleansing. All this had a lasting impact on ethno-religious identities.

The new identities were established on the basis of an anti-communist, anti-Yugoslav and fascist mantra, which also led to the promotion of extremist ideologies existing before and during the Second World War. In the case of Serbia, it is, first of all, about the return of Chetnikism as the dominant ideology, which now shapes the value system and culture of remembrance, as well as the revision of history. Public opinion is shaped by the thesis about the endangerment of Serbs and their deprivation in both Yugoslavias, as well as the promotion of Russia as a sincere protector of the Serbian people.

The Orthodox Church (SPC) acts on the social and political scene as an extremely active factor and the generator of Serbia's national development. These tendencies (ethno-clericalist and ethno-totalitarian) are civilizationally

downgrading the Serbian society and leading to its anomie. This means a return to the tribal determination of the nation, which is contrary to the liberal democratic values – an open society, the rule of law, pluralism and respect for human rights and freedom. Such a view of the nation, society and community generates tension, the denial of the “other” and even conflicts.

Such a self-definition of the nation, coupled with continuous homogenization, is a prerequisite for keeping the Serbian question open. The leading Serbian elite believes that it will be closed only by “Serbian liberation and national unification” and not by inclusion in Euro-Atlantic integration or some surrogate creation, such as the so-called “region”.

After the wars, when the “Serbian territories” were delineated (primarily Northern Kosovo, the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro), the identity was systematically built as part of cultural politics and revisionism, which should historically prove how much the Serbian people were victims in both Yugoslavias and, at the same time, amnesty them from the responsibility for all crimes, especially those committed during the 1990s.

This is why all efforts to reform and Europeanize Serbia have been unsuccessful. Because democracy can be introduced more or less quickly, while the culture of liberalism needs generations for its development, because it will not emerge spontaneously by itself. In Serbia, as in most post-socialist countries, roads, stadiums, airports and highways have been modernized, but not their societies. This would require the enlightenment of the population and identity formation based on completely different premises. Primarily on the civic values that have no primacy and are not central to the Serbian political elite. After 1989, democracy was introduced at the level of procedures and not, as Vaclav Havel put it, “at the level of souls and hearts.”

IDENTITY POLITICS AFTER THE WARS OF THE NINETIES

In his book "The Geopolitics of Emotion", Dominique Moisi, a French political scientist and author, concludes that, after the 20th century was the "century of ideology" and "American century", the 21st century will be the "Asian century" and the "century of identity". He also points out that, in a transition from ideology to identity, in both the West and the East, emotions become more important than ever in shaping the worldview.² Bearing in mind the disorderly state of the world, dominance of geostrategic criteria and changes in the world paradigm, this thesis is continuously gaining importance.

The building or upgrading (depending on the circumstances) of state and national identity is not only linked to the territory, but also to the content, which also implies certain values that should ensure the citizens' stability and economic and social development.

However, Serbia opted for building a new identity of the state and society which it perceives, as pointed out by German historian Holm Sundhaussen, as something "given in advance and obvious, biologically and genetically immutable, and cannot be chosen." By nature, such a state and society tend towards intolerance, aggressiveness and conflicts.

As pointed out by Vladimir Kolarić, an art and culture theorist, the Serbian cultural, civilizational, national and religious identity is based on the established understanding of the country's position as being "between East and West"... In the surrounding of a permanent identity threat, Serbia defines its religious identity by means of the national one and its national identity by means of the religious one. In the face of an "Islamic threat it ties its Christian

Orthodox identity to Europe, while in the face of the "threat" of the West, it ties it to the Orthodox cultural and civilizational circle led by Russia.³ Kolarić further points out that "19th century Serbia had its head turned to the West and its heart to Russia. At the sensory-instinctive level there is still a strong influence of the Turkish Orient."⁴

After the wars of the nineties, Serbia embarked on the process of creating a new identity, based on the new premises and traumas caused by those wars, primarily due to its defeats in the wars against Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Serbia did not accept the new reality in the region and tries to revise its defeats under the "Serbian World" project. Just this new identity is problematic for several reasons. The legacy of Yugoslavia is negated and its history is "nationalized", which is also done by the other newly created states. Such a revision is based on myths and mostly on radical right-wing ideologies. Strong anti-communism negates all past experience, diminishes the value system and mocks all achievements of that period, while at the same time serving to legitimize the new political elites.

The post-war building of Serbian identity additionally reaffirms the "magnificent past", that is, the Middle Ages (Dušan's empire), endangerment of the Serbian people throughout the 20th century, Orthodoxy, denial of responsibility for the wars of the nineties, anti-Westernism, anti-communism and anti-Yugoslavism. The additional element is Russophilism aiming to affirm the historical role of Russia as the protector of the Serbian people.

All this was accompanied by the change of the state symbols (coat-of-arms, flag, anthem), removal of a five-pointed star from the City

2 Dominik Moisi, *Geopolitika emocija*, Clio, Belgrade 2012.

3 <https://standard.rs/2019/10/23/izmedju-istoka-i-zapada-iskustvo-srbije/>

4 Ibid.

Assembly of Belgrade and replaced by an eagle with spread wings. This was symbolically done by Zoran Djindjić as the Mayor in 1997. Street names are changed in all Serbian cities. They mostly refer to the persons and events from the First World War and Serbian medieval state. Thus, the Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and Flag, marking the breakthrough of the Salonika front (on 15 September) has recently been introduced. The Armistice Day marking the end of the First World War (11 November) has also been introduced. The new symbols refer to the entire Serbian people and the need for its unity and unification at some time in the future. Thus, Serbia presents itself as an unfinished state by its own choice because it still does not recognize the internationally recognized borders in the region.

REVISIONISM AND THE CREATION OF A NARRATIVE ABOUT "SERBIA'S INNOCENCE"

The revisionist narratives in Serbia try to diminish its role in the wars of the 1990s and its responsibility for them as well as to challenge the categorization of certain events, primarily the war crimes and responsibility of Serbian political and military leaders for them. The revision aims to lay the foundation for a new identity.

The defeats suffered by the Serbian people, as expressed by the main national ideologist Dobrica Ćosić, "are not final, bearing in mind some historical victories such as the Republic of Srpska". That is why Euro-Atlantic integration is viewed as "the closing of the chapter concerning the national question" and putting an end to the revision of borders.

A series of books has been published with the aim to deny Serbian hegemonism and the Greater Serbia project. However, most of them

reveal the misunderstanding of the creators of the processes leading to the breakup of Yugoslavia and therefore justify that project.

In the process of building a new national and state identity, Serbia relativizes its responsibility for the brutal breakup of Yugoslavia as well as its frustration with the defeats and insists on a fairly "distributed burden of guilt". The theory about Serbia's "clean hands" is also dangerous, because it feeds and encourages the ambitions based on the expectations that the international context will change and be beneficial for Serbia.

The theory about the "surrounding" of Serbia suggests the existence of constant threats from external enemies. The wars of the nineties also relied on this theory and were presented as "preventive self-defence". It is implied that everyone is against the Serbian people, even against the state that provokes wars.

The disastrous consequences of the war policy have not become the topic of internal dialogue, although they are still at the very centre of all problems plaguing Serbia today. The idea about "war culprits" is still being elaborated. This idea stands in the way of an open discussion about the causes of the war and Serbia's politics before and during the war.

Serbia has not distanced itself from the war policy of Dobrica Ćosić. Slobodan Milošević and other architects of that disastrous project. For many of them, Milošević is increasingly becoming a symbol of resistance to the imperial repression of nations and states. With the argument that his plan "has not been so bad and unrealistic – on the contrary", he is only blamed for the way of its implementation, while his resistance to NATO is considered his greatest triumph.

POST-TRUTH

The efforts of a part of the society to look objectively at the 1990s and Serbia's role and responsibility for war crimes are met with great resistance from virtually all elites that are focused on the so-called post-truth with which they fill textbooks, the public and media sphere, and politics of remembrance.

Despite the abundance of the facts from the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), hereinafter referred to as the Hague Tribunal, and the International Court of Justice (ICJ), as well as numerous testimonies, documents... Serbia denies that it has been involved in the war and thus responsible for the war crimes.

Most verdicts given by the Hague Tribunal refer to Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially the genocide in Srebrenica, and clearly document the responsibility of the Serbian side. The legacy of the ICTY in Serbia has been marginalized and systematically denied. At the same time, the convicted war criminals are glorified after serving their sentences. They are given a lot of public and media attention as well as the opportunity to give their interpretation of the wars on the territory of Yugoslavia almost every day. This has been adopted as the official narrative on the basis of which the new generations are educated. Murals, series, books, studies, films and TV shows affirm, on a daily basis, the interpretation that the western republics (Slovenia and Croatia), supported by the West, are the culprits for the wars. In the current international context, everything is confined to the thesis that the West prevents the "unification of the Serbian lands" because "Serbs are little Russians".

The genocide in Srebrenica, when more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys were executed in 1995, is a special story over which Serbian revisionists argue. The Serbian narrative about

Srebrenica focuses on the denial of genocide insisting that it was a military conflict within a civil war. Although it is acknowledged that massacres and crimes did take place, it is claimed that they were not part of a systematic plan to exterminate Bosniaks, but rather a consequence of the conflict. This narrative is in conflict with the final judgments of international courts. Israeli historian Gideon Greif, who headed the International Commission of Inquiry on the Sufferings of All Peoples in the Srebrenica Region Between 1992 and 1995 (formed by the Government of the B&H entity Republic of Srpska), claims that no more than 3,500 Bosniaks and 2,000 Serbs were killed in Srebrenica. According to the report, there was no genocide.⁵ This report has been criticized by the international professional public.⁶ However, the opinion of the Serbian public that genocide had not taken place in Srebrenica has been further strengthened.

KOSOVO – A FROZEN CONFLICT

The question of Kosovo is still a frozen conflict despite the attempts of the EU and the US to put an end to it within the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. While a large number of countries (about 100) and international organizations recognize Kosovo as an independent state, Serbia does not. The revisionist narratives in Serbia challenge the legitimacy of Kosovo's independence, referring to international law and the inviolability of borders. Radicalization with respect to this issue was intensified after Russia's deep infiltration into the Western Balkans, primarily into Serbia and the Republic of Srpska as early as 2013-2014. That is when the emphatic reminder of NATO intervention (almost every day) and

5 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2022/1/19/greif-priznaje-u-srebrenici-ubijeno-oko-8-000-ljudi>.

6 Germany has withdrawn its decision to honour Israeli historian Gideon Greif with the one of the country's highest decoration.

Security Council (SC) Resolution 1244 began. This is mostly initiated by Moscow through its media (Sputnik and Russia Today; Sputnik's radio programme is broadcast on Radio Belgrade at 5.30 p.m. every day, while on Studio B radio it constitutes almost half of the programme) which are widely quoted in Serbian media, especially those under state control. A large part of the academic community and the SPC believes that Serbia is faced with a big challenge in connection with Kosovo's independence and advocates the keeping of the problem in a state of frozen conflict.⁷ At the same time, they believe that the "Serbian plan" must not be abandoned and that the demonization of "our previous national programmes – from the Načertanije to the SANU Memorandum – must be prevented".⁸ In essence, this means, as pointed out by historian Aleksandar Raković, that "the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro should unite into a single Serbian state".⁹

THE DENIAL OF MONTENEGRIN IDENTITY

Montenegro is of particular importance when it comes to Serbia's geopolitical ambitions and, in that sense, it is treated as an "internal issue". Serbia's strategic interest is access to the Adriatic Sea and the word "Montenegrin" is treated as a geographical term. Serbian strategists believe that independence has been encouraged by "an impulse coming from outside".

The Serbian presence in Montenegro is aggressive, which clearly points to the importance that Serbia attaches to it. As religion is an important identity factor, especially in Orthodox

countries, the autocephalous Montenegrin Orthodox Church (CPC) is perceived as an attack on the "cultural and religious hearth of Montenegrism which lies in Serbdom". The Montenegrin Orthodox Church is treated as a political or nongovernmental organization, while the introduction of the Montenegrin language into official use is treated as an additional blow to Serbdom. The autocephaly of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church will represent the completion of the Montenegrin statehood process and, in this sense, the church issue is the only one left open among the identity issues.

In the elections held in 2020, the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian bloc came out as a winner with the wholehearted help of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Belgrade, primarily due to the Law on Religious Freedoms and Religious Communities.

However, it turned out that the timing for the adoption of this law was not well chosen. Thus, during the next three years, the new Montenegrin Government, formed by the SPC, succeeded in signing the Fundamental Agreement between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the State of Montenegro recognizing, among other things, the SPC ownership of almost all sacral monuments. The Fundamental Agreement also enabled the SPC to have a greater influence on social life and opened the door to the educational system.

During the last three years, a special attack on the identity of Montenegro was launched. In this sense, Belgrade managed to destabilize and polarize the Montenegrin society through media, cultural and educational policies.

A very intensive campaign, which is carried by the Belgrade media and all political actors, especially the SPC, as well as the calls on Montenegrins to declare themselves as Serbs in the upcoming census, is underway.

7 Slobodan Erić, "Nema predaje Kosova ni sankcija Rusiji", *Pečat*, 11 October 2023.

8 Ibid.

9 Aleksandar Raković's interview, "Nesalomivi Srbi", *Pečat*, 11 October 2023.

During his recent visit to Montenegro, Patriarch Porfirije¹⁰ told its citizens that he felt the need to support them to resolutely express “their identity as the believers of the Serbian Orthodox Church, speakers of the Serbian language and glorious members of the Serbian people”.¹¹

AMBIVALENCE TOWARDS EUROPE AND WEST

After 5 October 2000, Serbia failed to consolidate itself as a modern and democratic state. Nationalism is still its dominant ideology, while the liberal values are perceived as a threat to Serbian identity and culture.

Since 2000, Serbia’s pro-European orientation has never been formally questioned and during the first years of its transition the majority of citizens supported this orientation. In recent years, however, support in favour of EU accession among Serbian citizens has been dwindling.

With the coming to power of the Serbian Progressive Party, which has close historical ties with Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church, Serbia’s turn to Russia was simultaneously accompanied by its moving away from European integration.

In the meantime, the international circumstances changed and the West lost its potential to exert influence not only on the Serbian elite, but also on the elites in the region. In its latest confrontation with the United States, Russia

skillfully manipulates their foreign policy failures and promotes the interpretation that the West is mostly to blame for the breakup of Yugoslavia. With such an interpretation of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the ensuing wars, Serbia is granted an amnesty for its responsibility and is presented as the sole victim of all wars fought in the 19th and 20th centuries.

One of the theses used against the West is that it wishes the final spiritual and moral destruction of the Serbs as a nation. This is supported by the West’s insistence on Serbia’s distancing from Milošević’s politics and assuming the responsibility for the wars of the nineties. All this is interpreted as “imposing the identity of criminals which will, once accepted by us, contaminate all historical, cultural and traditional models of the Serbian people”.¹²

NATO intervention is most often used as an argument against the West, but it is also mentioned that “Serbia resisted the world’s largest army for 77 days” and that, as Nebojša Katić points out, ‘Serbia did not only defend its right to exist as an independent state. It did not only defend its honour and dignity, but also defended the honour, dignity and memory of millions of its ancestors who did not think that sacrifice is absurd and did not hold on to real-politik calculations’.¹³

THE SPC AND VALUE SHAPING

The theological shaping of the public sphere in Serbia began after 2000, when Orthodoxy with political pretensions began to shape the public, that is social sphere. The secular values of civic society – democracy, civil society, pluralistic

10 Since his election as the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church in February 2021, Porfirije has visited Montenegro at least five times. On the occasion of his visit at the end of August 2022, the municipal services in Herceg Novi were engaged in putting up Serbian tricolours and banners about Serbian Boka.

11 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/podogorica-patrijarh-spc-porfirije/32636176.html>

12 <https://standard.rs/2023/04/06/cija-je-srbija/>

13 <https://standard.rs/2019/04/02/prosveteceni-srbi-i-smisao-istorije/>

discourse, secular and religious tolerance and individual human rights – were rejected.

During the 1990s, the SPC was dominated by the Saint Sava ideology. The syntagm of that ideology is – one nation with one religion in one state. The majority of right-wing groups and intellectuals advocate the “Saint Sava identity of the Serbian people”, as the support on which “all victories and hopes for the Serbia’s recovery are based”. They strongly oppose the reforms under the pretext that they destroy the Serbian identity.

An important role in the creation of a new identity is also played by Russia whose presence on the cultural and political scene fuels the Serbian frustration and the thesis that Yugoslavia was a Serbian delusion. The same goes for the thesis about artificially created nations such as, for example, Macedonians, Bosniaks and Montenegrins. At the same time, the influential pro-Russian conservative bloc strengthens the Russian component in the Serbian identity or, in other words, contributes to the “Russification of the Serbian nation” with the thesis about the superiority of the Orthodox civilization, Byzantine heritage, Slavism and mutual historical assistance.

ANTI-YUGOSLAVISM

In Serbia, the breakup of Yugoslavia is perceived, as emphasized by Vladislav Obrenović, a political scientist and contributor to the magazine *Identitet*, as a painful fact that has broken the Serbian illusions about Yugoslavia and joint life of South Slavs. Because after one hundred years the results of great victories have melted away. The big illusion paid dearly by the Serbian people has disappeared.¹⁴

14 <https://standard.rs/2018/12/20/zasto-srbija-nema-adekvatnu-kulturu-secanja/>

Disappointment, which is primarily due to the loss of the territories and dominance, is also reflected in the cultural policy that plays a crucial role in profiling a new identity by praising the “glorious past” (series and films). At the same time, historians diligently fabricate books and publications that amnesty Serbia from any responsibility and are confined to the thesis that the West has demonized Serbs because they are “little Russians”.

Yugoslavia, that is, anti-Yugoslavism became the focal point in profiling a new identity. Anti-fascism, as one of the basic values of Yugoslav socialism, also came under attack as the Chetnik movement rose to the level of the second anti-fascist movement from the right in Serbia. The wars of the nineties were based on the Chetnik ideology and the programme of “homogeneous Serbia”.

Boris Tadić (Democratic Party) and Ivo Dačić (Socialist Party of Serbia) signed the declaration on a political reconciliation between Chetniks and Partisans (2008). According to Tadić, the signing of this declaration was a step towards national reconciliation as well as a message for the international community that Serbia left behind the time of conflicts and confrontations, and entered a new political era. However, the Chetnik movement turned into the dominant antifascist movement, which is supported by various productions – series, films, books and the like. The last in the series are the film “The Heroes of Halyard”, a celebration of the alleged anti-fascist feats of Chetniks during the Second World War, as well as the opening of a private museum dedicated to Draža Mihailović and the erection of his monument.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Identity politics in the Balkans after the breakup of Yugoslavia is deeply rooted in ethnic and nationalist divisions, historical legacy and complex relations between different groups. Despite the efforts to solve these problems and promote reconciliation, the influence of identity politics continues to be a significant factor in the regional politics and societies.

Identity politics hinders the mobilization of communities, has a harmful effect on pluralism and uses diversity for the politics of hatred and polarization. These trends have always been present in the region, but the obsession is new. In this overemphasized understanding of self-worth, the recent past is systematically relativized as is the normalization of nationalist ideologies and war criminals as national heroes.

The new identities also fuel regional tensions; the neighbours and minorities are usually seen as “others”, or even as the “factors of disorder”, while all potential fundamentals for a better mutual understanding and cooperation in the region are undermined. Many minorities face challenges to their identities and rights despite the existing normative framework, imposed primarily by the EU and the Council of Europe.

The international community has played a significant role in shaping the post-conflict ethno-religious landscape. The peace agreements (such as the Dayton Accords in particular) and international interventions had implications for ethno-religious relations and identities.

Serbian ethno-clericalism continues to mobilize Serbs (as it did in the early 1990s), primarily on the basis of the thesis about threats as well as Serbia’s need to revise its defeats. Such revisionism has significant consequences for the regional relations, understanding of history and efforts to achieve reconciliation and stability. The paranoia of Serbian nationalism boils down to the thesis about a conspiracy against the Serbian people, which is promoted by politicians, the SPC and the academic community on a daily basis.

The triumph of disorientation, imposition of silence on the “key topics”, hiding or falsification of facts and prevention of alternative information disorient the population and, in the context of a long-term crisis, encourage an increasing number of citizens to migrate (about 40,000 every year), mostly to the West.

All Western Balkan countries seek membership in the European Union (EU) and NATO. This is why the EU and its members should be more involved in the integration process and promotion of a credible narrative, especially the one about the wars of the nineties. Serbia and its state institutions must commit themselves to promoting the policy of remembrance, based on the facts and judgments of the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

The members of modern societies have multidimensional identities, formed through social interaction. In that sense, identity politics should become part of the integration process that will resolve ethnic tensions, which are produced by narrowly defined ethno-identities, over a long term. It will also be necessary to define a broader national identity that has an integrative potential, while at the same time taking into account both diversity and liberal democratic values.