

THE STORY ABOUT OLD HAG EUROPE AND HEALTHY MAIDEN SERBIA

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In the process of a creation of an image of the Other, a self-image is created, establishing a relation between the 'Observed' - 'the Other' and the 'Observer'. A political myth, in its every-day form, as a political story about the 'rotten West', the 'decadent, old Europe' which is facing a chaste, uncorrupted Serbia, is propagated in public, as well as in private sphere and making a 'obsessive-compulsive nightmare' of the Serbian community.

Keywords: Serbia, Milošević, political myth, nationalism, stereotype.

V procesu ustvarjanja podobe Drugega nastane tudi samopodoba, ki postavlja razmerje med »opazovanim« - »drugim« in »opazovalcem«. V svoji vsakdanji obliki je politični mit oz. politična zgodba o »gnilem zahodu«, o »dekadentni stari Evropi« ki se spoprijema z nedolžno, nepokvarjeno Srbijo, propagiran v javnem in zasebnem območju in ustvarja 'obsesivno-kompulzivno nočno moro' srbske skupnosti.

Ključne besede: Srbija, Milošević, politični mit, nacionalizem, stereotip.

When people have no other tyrant, their own public opinion becomes one.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873)

It has been almost twenty years since the Yugoslav passport, in the form it had during the Titoist period, ceased to exist. It was a priceless passport: for their first trip abroad, children were taught to keep it close to them,¹ so it would not be stolen. A thief could easily travel to almost every country on the planet, especially from eastern Europe to the western bloc. The former Yugoslavia was seen as being right between the capitalist western bloc and the communist eastern bloc, and its citizens felt that they had the best of both sides: living under communism and traveling freely between the two sides of Europe.

The "inheritor" of Yugoslavia,² Serbia, does not possess such a "golden" passport. In fact, after 1992 traveling to the West became difficult. First the new Yugoslavia (following the disintegration of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia comprised of Serbia and Montenegro),

¹ Interviews during fieldwork in Serbia between 2000 and 2004.

² Serbia considers itself the sole successor to Yugoslavia. On 5 June 2006 Serbia was declared the successor of Yugoslavia and its state union by the National Assembly of Serbia. The EU foreign ministers decided on 13 June 2006 that Serbia is the successor to the state union of Serbia and Montenegro, but this succession is still an open question for the international community. For more details, see *Ethnicity and Power in the Contemporary World* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1996)

and then Serbia (after that disintegration), is still seeking to be included on the “white list” for the Schengen countries’ visa regime.³ Since the East and West have become united (many of the eastern countries east of Serbia, such as Romania and Bulgaria, have entered the EU), access to almost every neighboring country requires a visa (a huge dossier of papers to prepare and hours, days, and weeks of standing in line in front of embassies – a daunting task). The result is no more travel for many of those that can remember the 1970s and the 1980s. For many others that were born during the 1980s and later, the idea of travel, of “voyage” represents a trip to the next village or town – or, in the best case, Belgrade.

Without the opportunity to move, view, check out in person, and see with one’s own eyes other countries, other people, and other cities, people can only imagine and interpret what life is like out there, in the world, in the West, from newspapers, television, and the narratives of “lucky” individuals or *gastarbajters* ‘migrant workers’.⁴

In the process of creating an image, a self-image is created as well, defining the relations between the observed Other (in this case, Europe) and the observer. This article discusses one particular image perpetuated in the form of political myth and political stories about the West and the relations between Serbia and Europe.

This is the story about Europe the Old Hag and the Serbia the Nubile Maiden.

In the 1990s, economic sanctions were imposed on Serbia, with an obligatory visa regime for visiting EU countries, to try to control the warmongering policies of the Serbian Socialist Party, with Slobodan Milošević as its leader. The Socialist Party controlled the means of public information, and Serbia was presented to the local population as unjustifiably punished for every war (in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia), accused of initiating every conflict, and its population victimized as a scapegoat. This kind of brainwashing through the media influenced individual points of view as well.

Since then, political power has changed,⁵ but this point of view has remained the same. Former Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica (now leader of the Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS) who “inherited” the leadership of Serbia after the fall of Milošević, and the political elite of Serbia are still presenting⁶ the image of an unjustifiably punished

³ Serbia will be included at the end of year 2009.

⁴ I use the expressions of my interlocutors.

⁵ That is, the “revolution” of October 2000.

⁶ For instance, a segment of a speech by Tomislav Nikolić, a nationalist and at that time the number two man in the Serbian Radical Party (*Radikalna stranka*), from 21 February 2008. During the event organized in Belgrade after the proclamation of Kosovo’s independence on 17 February 2008, he said: “Think, Europe! You have time; go back to your friendship with Serbia and towards the Serbian people! Don’t forget that the Serbs know how to pardon when they have someone to pardon and, when not, then there is no pardon to be given. Please, let us show them, who are an old European nation, let us show when we gather up, and when we are showing our rage and anger, we are doing it as Serbs. Don’t let them touch us! Show them that we are fighting for Kosovo and Metohija as Serbs. They don’t need that.” / Razmišljaj Evropo, imaš vremena, vrati se svom prijateljstvu prema Srbiji, i prema srpskom narodu! Ne zaboravi, Srbi znaju da praštaju kad imaju kome, a kad nemaju kome, onda ni praštanja nema. Molim vas, pokažimo mi njima ko je stari evropski narod, pokažimo da kad

nation through the media. The reproduction and repetition of such and similar statements, without consideration for their credibility, are perpetuating an obsessive nightmare for this community (Bogomilova 1999).

The myth about the “unjust and unprovoked” punishment of Serbia and Yugoslavia by the international community was constructed and propagated by the media in the hands of the ruling Socialist Party of Serbia, and was accepted as the point of view of individual destiny (Lazar 1996: 168), expressed at the everyday level under the form of a “political story.”⁷

Serbian political mythology offers two complementary images of “rotten Europe.” The expression “the rotten West” is an idiom frequently used when referring to Western Europe. “Overwhelmingly, Serbs hold a distinct and essentialist image of the West, one that stresses the importance of capital and individuality, domination, emptiness, pomposity, and western-centrism” (Volčić 2005: 163).

In one image, Western Europe crumbles because it renounced God to glorify unworthy man and the fragile creations of his governance. In the other image, which is far more common, Europe is falling apart because it betrayed authentic man and the only natural form of government – the one personified in an ethnic nation (Čolović 2000b: 61).

The biologically and morally decadent creature of the rotten West, or “Europe the Old Hag,” is in opposition to the image of Nubile Serbia viewing this freak with disgust and shame (Čolović 2000b: 52). Western Europe is described as a place without a real, living faith, in which both dominant religions, Catholicism and Protestantism, have succumbed to temptation and exchanged Christianity for humanism (Čolović 2000b: 59).

The Serbian Orthodox clergy support this thesis. Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović says in an interview:

Europe is not against us because we are not and we do not wish to be Europe, but because we are, not by our merit, but by God's gift, the bearers and the guardians of the original Jerusalem-Mediterranean Europeanism, which does not accept losing the balance of human existence that is at the center

se okupimo i kad izražavamo svoju srdžbu i svoj gnev mi to činimo kao Srbi. Nemoj da nas diraju, da im pokažemo kako se za Kosovo i Metohiju borimo kao Srbi. Ne treba im to.

Very interesting is the grammatically incorrect use of the verb *nemoj* ‘don’t’, which is explicitly second person singular.

⁷ During my fieldwork I often meet individuals (e.g., cab drivers, barbers, etc.; cf. the filmed interview with N. Z. at <http://www.rap.prd.fr/ressources/vod.php?videotheque=mnhn/smm>) that express such opinions about the “destiny of the Serbian people and its relation with Europe,” interpreting it as their own, personal path. The nature of such discourse is very much nationalist. They are spreading their way of thinking like missionaries spreading the “truth” and their own interpretation of it. Their words are unquestionable, so it is their authority and they do not need arguments for their claims. If a justification is asked for, they land on their feet, inventing and improvising the argumentation taking this process to perfection. The convention of a genre demands that the storyteller be all-knowing, and in the story about the nation and politics, they claim the right of knowing the truth in this area without proofs and arguments, based only on the authority of the storyteller (Čolović 2000: 12).

of the crossing of the horizontal and vertical of the Holy Cross. (Čolović 2000b: 53)⁸

Instead of a continuity of being, Europe has accepted profane temporality, history understood as progress, history without a “vertical,” without a soul (Čolović 2000b: 53–54). The Serbs, who also paradoxically appear at the same time to be non-Europeans because they are out of the reach of profane European history, are the only true Europeans because in them the deep history of the European spirit is still alive; because Europe has no deeper roots than those through Greece and Byzantium (Čolović 2000b: 54). They are the keepers of Christianity and its values, of the main European characteristics.⁹

In this bipolarity runs this thought: “Europe is ungrateful to those that today, as in the past centuries, seemingly defended her spirit and its borders” (Čolović 2000b: 57; Volčić 2005: 155). The Europeans are forgetting that for their survival and peaceful development they are in debt to Serbia, which defended it from the Turkish onslaught at Kosovo in 1389. Slobodan Milošević, at the beginning of his career, reminded them of this in his speech at the celebration of the six hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo (Hartmann 1999: 61; Čolović 2000b: 57).

According to this myth, the war in Bosnia was a continuation of the war against Islam, which started with the battle of Kosovo. Serbia sacrificed itself for the survival of European Christianity, and is misunderstood and condemned by Europe. This is the Serbian version of the “cult of the nation and the heroic death at its altar” (Čolović 2000b: 60), a role of defender of the borders of “ungrateful” Europe, which was unwillingly taken up by the Serbian nation, but at the same time eagerly as well.

Incidentally, this segment of that political myth is the continuation of the myth about the military frontier (Germ. *Militärgrenze*), a defensive anti-Ottoman system established by the Habsburg monarchy in the sixteenth century (Lory 2003: 36–37). According to this myth, since the Turkish invasion of Europe, Serbia has stood alone defending the borders of Christianity and Europe. Nevertheless she is misunderstood by the one she is protecting because Europe is ungrateful. In spite all the efforts of Serbia and its people, Europe is working against her, taking the wrong sides and even adding to the misfortune of the Serbian state and its people.

This line of thinking was put into practice as well: Radovan Karadžić, the politician and ex-leader of the Bosnian Serbs, now on trial by the International Criminal Tribunal in the Hague for the Former Yugoslavia, once stated “The West will be grateful to us one day because we were elected to defend Christian values and Christian culture.”¹⁰

⁸ Interview with Amfilohije Radović, Vaskrsenje ne biva bez smrti. *Pobjeda*, 19 October 1991).

⁹ For the concept of Christianity as one of the basic values of Europe, see Hansen 2004.

¹⁰ “Serbian Orthodox Crusade against Islam” by Feyyaz Yusuf at http://www.naqshbandi.net/haqqan/i/Islam/Shariah/muamalaat/jihad/Orthodox_crusade.html, <http://www.islambosna.ba/forum/historija-genocida/tako-je-govorilo-radovan-karadzic-odabrani-citati/>

Although small (in territory) and weak in comparison to western political forces, Serbia stands alone:

A second important motif in Serbian national self-images is the idea that the Serbian nation, and its individual materializations in particular people, represent the eternal David, fighting a long historical series of different Goliaths. The Serbs, it is then argued, never shy away from struggling with stronger opponents in order to defend righteousness and dignity. (Jansen 2000: 13)

Old Europe is not only ungrateful and decadent, it is also culturally inferior to Europe: “the most common images of Serbia and the West encountered among the interviewees was one envisaging the west not as culturally superior, but culturally inferior” (Volčić 2005: 165). “On a more general level, throughout my fieldwork experience, every Serbian child knew that the Serbs ate with knives and forks before the United States even existed. These arguments of historical legitimacy built on specifically Serbian nationalist aspects of historical mythology” (Jansen 2000: 20).

The origins of such an image of Europe and the world lie in:

an imaginary cartography, which projects onto the real landscape its own shadowy ideological antagonisms, in the same way that the conversion symptoms of the hysterical subject in Freud project onto the physical body the map of another, imaginary anatomy. Much of this projection is racist. (Žižek 1999, cited in Volčić 2005: 162)

In this imaginary cartography where the notion of “us” and “them” are very much defined, Europe is accused (along with the US) as being one of the factors for the collapse of Yugoslavia, and also for the present economic and political situation in Serbia.

The feeling that the Western world greatly influenced the collapse of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s is well represented in the lines of thought of historians, philosophers, and public opinion¹¹ in Serbia. This interpretation has an element that involves a conspiracy theory, explaining¹² that the Western world and the United States deliberately sowed hatred, discord, and division among the ethnic groups of the former federation to destroy a large competitive industry, particularly arms manufacturing.¹³ Some contemporary historians (e.g., Milorad Ekmečić, Vasilije Krestić, and Srđa Trifković) indirectly blame the Western world and its view of the Balkans for the collapse of Yugoslavia.

¹¹ <http://www.sanjalica.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=1110&start=45&sid=6c53fd049b5916d13e5ff94cceda9245>.

¹² During my fieldwork (carried out from 1997 to 2000), several of my interlocutors supported the conspiracy theory of how Europe and the western world conspired to deliberately destroy Yugoslavia.

¹³ One of my interlocutors explained that the Yugoslav arms industry was the fourth largest in the world in the 1980s, a serious competitor to the United States and certain western European countries, which triggered the western countries to sow discord among the Yugoslav republics. In fact, by 1990 the Yugoslav industry was providing about 80% of its own basic military equipment and some advanced systems; see <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-14948.html>.

“The break-up of Yugoslavia as a state (1992) is a result of the old conviction that since the ancient times of the Hellenic world until today a permanent border has been dividing the east from the west” (Ekmečić 1998: 49). The differences between these “civilization types” also resulted in economic differences. The fall of purchasing power and the standard of living, which was a direct result of the political uncertainty at the beginning of the 1990s, highlights the small difference that existed between the quality of life of an average Serbian citizen and a Western European citizen. The feeling of inferiority of Serbia in comparison to Western Europe, especially when it comes to economics, became a leitmotif of political speeches, individuals’ way of thinking, and messages from the media.

Ever since 1819, the year in which Joseph de Maistre published his “picture” of two unequal civilizations, and until the present day, when civil war has been raging across the territory of ex-Yugoslavia, the special interpretations and claims that since the age of the ancient Hellenes there has been an inferior eastern Europe are all governed by a search for the political borderline that divides the two worlds (in terms of civilizations) into unequal sides. (Ekmečić 1998: 49)

The collapse of the communist federal system of ex-Yugoslavia and its economic structure is interpreted as a period of change towards a “better” world in Serbia. These are the critical moments when Serbia tried to approach Europe in some way and make actual steps by trying to establish a similar political system, or cultural values, and a way of life like that in Western Europe:

As it was throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Serbian nation is repeatedly at a turning-point, when old motives turn into the grounds for the journey into the future. All its efforts in the past to identify its way with that of Europe have hit against the wall of prejudice that the Serbs do not belong to that better world. (Ekmečić 1998: 72)

The critical period, this “turning-point” of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, was an ideal period for the creation and perpetuation of political myths. The analysis of political myths directs us toward Émile Durkheim’s concept of anomy or, even further, to the old and widespread difference in French sociology between “critical” and “organic” periods. In critical periods, political myths spread the quickest and the clearest, are pushed on with greatest power, and show how attractive they can be (Girardet 1986: 178; Čolović 2000b: 20).

Political myths have their roots in a “political imaginarium,” as Čolović (2000b: 20) calls it, inspired by Serbian folklore. In the case of Serbia, folklore and politics have been connected (Čolović 2000b: 23, 2008; Hudson 2003: 157–158, 167–168) since the time of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić,¹⁴ who represented folklore as a turning point of national life.

The way of speaking in political speeches maintained the elements of epic discourse: the grammatical forms, the tone of voice, and the expressions, metaphors, and images

¹⁴ A nineteenth-century Serbian linguist and major reformer of the Serbian language, author of the first Serbian dictionary (1st ed. 1818, 2nd ed. 1852).

used (Čolović 2000a, b; Jansen 2000; Volčić 2005). The conscious employment of these elements has as its consequence the undisputable authenticity of the person and the statements that he or she makes.

These narrative forms are used by public personas (the clergy, politicians, artists, journalists, etc.) in open, public discourse, but also by common people expressing their individual points of view, in which they represent themselves as a part of a bigger entity. The embodiments of contemporary Serbian political myths in daily life are political stories (Čolović 2000b: 11). The political myth gains its legitimacy as the “voice of the people” (Čolović 2000b: 16) in the form of a political story developed by an individual. It is born in “the living cult of the story developed around epic storytelling” (Čolović 2000b: 12). Political stories are derived from political myths and they are told in a story-like form by individuals in a shortened version, sometimes adding or taking away certain parts.

The myth in its form as a political story uses the same rhetoric used by many other participants in public communication that want to demonstrate their messages as the *vox nationis* (Čolović 2000b: 195).

The various political stories are a reservoir of fabulae nested in certain literary and folkloric forms of storytelling (Čolović 2000b: 16). When the speaker chooses to use a storytelling, narrative form of expression, this kind of political story is sure proof that the speaker is treating a very important national question and wants to emphasize that importance through the form of storytelling (Čolović 2000b: 12).

Political stories are inspired by Serbian ethnic and nationalist myths (Čolović 2000b: 13) and they are a form of thoughtful collective behavior and thinking. They are founded on the “phantasm about political power, based on the ‘natural and divine’ right of an ethnic community to consider itself the only measure of all things” (Čolović 2000b: 18). The storyteller has a credible and unquestionable source of knowledge: he or she does not need arguments, and the oral form he or she chooses to use is undeniable:

Often, in the collectivizing discourse of nationalisms, those who consider themselves members of a certain nation (and, more problematically, those who are considered so by others, but not by themselves) are to a certain extent seen as metonymical representatives of the collective. (Herzfeld 1985; Biro 1994)

This intimate link between the characterization of the nation and the individual becomes particularly clear in people’s often indiscriminate use of “I,” “we,” “a Serb,” “the Serbs, and “our people.” In nationalist discourses this intersection of the collective and individual level is often deployed as a semi-strategic narrative mechanism, whereby, at different times, responsibility, guilt and merit are differentially distributed between the two levels (see Holy 1996: 61–66, 72–91; Jansen 1998). (Jansen 2000: 9)

In an imaginary, symbolical dimension of political power, one can observe the current Serbian political and ethnic myths as a means of displaying an ethnically centered *political*

imaginarium of Serbia, of the Serbian nation, demonstrated in political rituals such as inaugurations, funerals, political meetings, and gatherings, or in the form of musical and artistic symbols: coats of arms, flags, emblems, and hymns (Žanić 1998; Čolović 2000b: 105).

The values underlined by the cult accorded to this political *imaginarium* are blind fidelity to the leader and humbleness before the state, which includes willingness to die for it and nurturing of military virtues. These values are in opposition to urban, cosmopolitan, and democratic Western European political culture. Following these values is not a divine mission and not something that would be strange to secular enlightened European nations, but a feeling of a God-given obligation of the Serbs to deliver a warning to Europe and to the Western world that they are mortally sick (Čolović 2000b, 2008), to give them an example of sacrifice and virtues, and to show them the path of healing.

The representation of Western Europe as a “cold place”¹⁵ with people without any human feelings, who “vegetate” in their lives – living just to earn and spend money, “without really living” pushes individuals to create an opinion that this “place” is better avoided, and even visiting it is not recommended. That Serbia is the best possible world worth living in is recurrent in the opinion of the younger population – those that were born during the 1980s.¹⁶ Interestingly, according to recent statistics,¹⁷ 75 % of the population under the age of twenty-five has never been abroad.

The unique source of information about other possible lifestyles continue to be the individual discourse of returning (but never or rarely resettling) homesick *gastarbajters* from abroad, lamenting how life “out there” is so different, cold, and uneasy, and how life in Serbia is so much better, so much freer.

However, then again, times change. Recently in my fieldwork I have noticed that the image of Europe and the West is being treated with less rage, and the *imaginarium* is slightly changing. The anger against “ungrateful Europe” felt by the common individual¹⁸ has metamorphosed and the relation towards Europe is acquiring more humor, although it is a bitter humor. One of my interlocutors, who knew that I was from France, recently asked me “And how is the rotten West? Is it still rotting?”¹⁹ In response to my silent smile, which probably meant that his allusion was well understood, he responded with a smile of his own and a sarcastic sigh: “I wish I could rot too – for a while.” The population seems to have had enough of “moral and cultural superiority” and the “post-communist transition period,” which has lasted for twenty years now. Many of my interlocutors expressed the opinion that it would be nice, even for a while, to live in the morally inferior capitalist system, and to rot along with the rest of Europe.

¹⁵ Interview with the programmer R. K. from Novi Sad, age 33, an ethnic Hungarian (fall of 2008)

¹⁶ Based on interviews during my fieldwork in Serbia from 2002 to 2007.

¹⁷ Compiled by the chair of the Sociology Department at the Faculty of Arts in Novi Sad, Serbia, 2005/2006.

¹⁸ See the filmed interview with N. Z. at <http://www.rap.prd.fr/ressources/vod.php?videotheque=mnhn/smm>.

¹⁹ “Kako je na trulom zapadu? Je l’ se truli?”

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<http://youtube.com/watch?v=liuPkIxGrRg>
http://youtube.com/watch?v=iPee3_YMFDA&feature=related

ZGODBA O ZLOBNI STARKI EVROPI IN ZDRAVEM DEKLETU SRBIJI

Članek, ki temelji na terenskem delu v Srbiji v letih 2000–2007, obravnava politični mit v njegovi vsakdanji obliki, kot politično zgodbo o »gnilem Zahodu«, »dekadentni, stari Evropi« v nasprotju z nedolžno, nepokvarjeno Srbijo. Ta politični mit, populariziran tako v javnosti kakor v zasebnosti (v političnih govorih, množičnih občilih, drobnih pogovorih, npr. med potniki in taksisti, idr.) kaže na »obsesivno-kompulzivno moro« srbske skupnosti.

Mit ima več segmentov: prvi je »nepravično in neizzvano« kaznovanje Srbije in Jugoslavije s strani mednarodne skupnosti – ustvarili in razširili so ga mediji v rokah Socialistične stranke Srbije, ki je vladala v 90. letih; bil je sprejet kot stališče individualne usode. Posamezniki – zunaj javnega diskurza – ki izražajo takšno mnenje v obliki politične zgodbe o »usodi srbskega ljudstva in njegovega odnosa do Evrope«, ga razumejo kot svojo lastno, osebno pot in usodo. Pogosto je tudi pojasnilo za osebne neuspehe in nesrečo.

Srbska politična mitologija ponuja komplementarni podobi »gnile Evrope« – tj. izraz, ki se pogosto rabi v zvezi z Zahodno Evropo in Evropsko unijo. Prva je podoba Zahodne Evrope, ki se razkraja, ker se je odpovedala Bogu, ki slavi ubogega človeka in krhka bitja, ki jim vlada. Po drugi podobi, ki je precej splošnejša, Evropa razpada, ker je izdala avtentičnega Človeka in edino naravno obliko vladavine, učlovečeno v etnični naciji. Ta biološka in moralno sprijena pošast je nasprotje podobi zdrave Srbije, ki gleda nanjo z gnusom in sramom. Opisana je kot kraj brez resnične, žive vere, v kateri sta se obe vladajoči veri, katolištvo in protestanstvo, predali skušnjavi in zamenjali krščanstvo za humanizem. Srbi in, navidez paradokсно, Neevropejci – ker so zunaj profane evropske zgodovine – so edini pravi Evropejci, ker je v njih še živa globoka zgodovina evropskega duha; Evropa namreč nima globljih korenin od grških in bizantinskih. So varuhi krščanstva in njegovih vrednost, glavnih evropskih značilnosti.

Mit seže celo dlje: sodobni srbski zgodovinarji, misleci posredno krivijo geografski, politični položaj bivše Jugoslavije – v »sredi«, med »Zahodom« in »Vzhodom« – zaradi razpada, in napovedujejo strašljivo prihodnost Evrope: spremenila se bo v kulturno, politično puščavo.

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