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ARE IDENTITY CONFLICTS IN MULTI-ETHNIC STATES INEVITABLE? A CASE STUDY OF THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

Abstract: *In the 20th century, the Serbian people lived within the framework of Yugoslavia, through different conceptions of the organization of society and the state. That historical framework had a whole series of political and social discontinuities. The influence of ideologies on the creation and development of Serbian national identity in the 20th century is the most important issue discussed in this article. Also, the search is for an answer to the question of whether the breakup of Yugoslavia was a historical inevitability and why there was a series of violent conflicts that eventually separated once close identities.*

Keywords: Balkans, South Slavs, Serbs, Religion, Ethnic conflicts, Identity, Living space, Civil war

The study of identity

Anthony D. Smith, one of the greatest authorities in the field of identity studies, believes that national identity and the nation are complex constructs composed of a number of interconnected components: collective memory, tradition and distinctive symbolic codes. He also emphasizes that the power of national identity and the nation in the modern world is extremely great, because their functionality is shown in many situations. Members of a certain ethnic community must feel that their historical community is unique, their heritage is protected from internal “corruption” and external control, as well as that their community has a “sacred duty” to spread the values of its culture among other peoples.¹

In the process of creating nations in Europe, there are at least two different ideas of the nation: the Western European nation of citizens and the Eastern European nation of ancestors. In different terms, nation theorists contrast the na-

¹ Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, (Reno Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1991).

tion of Western Europe – civil, voluntary and contractual – with the nation of Eastern Europe – populist, organic, natural and ethnic. The Western European definition dates back to the French Revolution and defines the nation in non-ethnic terms. The nation is defined on the basis of the idea of citizenry and commitment to pluralism: the nation should not be understood in the sense of a community that is ethnically and culturally homogeneous.²

The Eastern European concept of the nation is more ethnic than political and is based on the idea of a collective entity characterized by cultural homogeneity. Political structures are considered to emerge from a pre-existing historical-biological community. The state is seen as the supreme, almost sacred, political incarnation of such a community and not necessarily a state based on law and the democratically articulated political will of equal citizens, which by definition can be negotiated and is open to rational and competent public discourse.³

Sima Ćirković writes about Serbian identity: since the disappearance of faith in the “spirit of the nation”, in origin and language as an essential and permanent characteristic of national identity, it has become more difficult to shed light on the creation and destiny of a people. When a nation is viewed as a social group, it is constantly subject to change and movement. At no time is it so complete that it can neither grow nor decline; its cohesion may increase or decrease, the essence of its individuality and difference from others may change, and some of the symbols of identity may be discarded while new ones are adopted. Changes important to the preservation and development of a group occur over centuries, so it is not only the oldest or most recent period that is significant, as is sometimes thought. The search for a core identity has revealed a series of numerous “historical threads” instead of a single factor that can be traced through many centuries. In the case of the Serbs (and other Balkan peoples) the region of their development was relatively unknown outside their group and their immediate neighbors. Ćirković also believes that this fact further obscured the process of understanding the long, complex, changing and visibly uncomplete history of the Serbs.⁴

² Dominique Schnapper, “Les sens de l’ethnico-religieux”, (1), *Archives des sciences sociales des religions*, no. 81, (1993); John Schwarzmantel, “Nation versus Class: Nationalism and Socialism in Theory and Practice”, *The Social Origin of Nationalist Movements: The Contemporary West European Experience*, (London: Sage, 1992).

³ Srdjan Vrcan, “The War in Former Yugoslavia and Religion”, *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 22, no. 4 (1994), 375.

⁴ Sima M. Ćirković, *The Serbs*, (Carlton, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), xvi.

An ethnic group is a structure that changes slowly and with its long-term and forced influence (through ethnic myths, symbols and various rituals related to myths) affects the daily life of the people who belong to it. Collective identities in general, and ethnic ones in particular, are based precisely on common interpretations of common experiences. This is how ethnic attachment arises when one group has a clear ethnic identity. If these experiences were created in the traumas caused by wars, the more there is a tendency towards the later strengthening of the collective ethnic identity.

Regional identities are also present in the Balkans, but not in a modern sense in which such identities fit into other identities and merge into one multiple identity (for example, European identity). The South Slavs, the peoples who created Yugoslavia, are peoples of space, not peoples of time. The peoples of an area build and defend their identity and their society in a certain territory that is not strictly defined, which opens up the problem of the so-called living space. Such peoples have, often subconsciously, a need for the expansion of that territory (and for population dominance expressed above all in leaving a greater number of male descendants), and for generations they live in fear that this territory is not large enough.⁵

The research of regional identities, especially in multi-ethnic environments such as Yugoslavia, shows certain regularity in that identifying with one's own community entails distancing oneself from neighboring communities (ethnic distance). This further leads to the creation of firm beliefs, ideas and attitudes of the members of one group about themselves and others. Differentiation from another group and identification with one's own group encourages internal homogenization, and creates a group ethnic identity.

This is how the construct of one territory as a “centuries-old historical entity” of only one ethnic group, special in every respect in relation to its surroundings, is created. In this concept, identity is understood as a basic human category given by birth, as an unchanging, permanent and closed concept. The feeling of community is based on the idea of common origin and historical experience of the community, on common myths, traditions and culture. This approach equates national identity with religious identity and considers it fundamental, because, along with characteristics acquired by birth and those acquired through belonging to national culture, emotions and memories of collective experience are also transmitted through it in a way that is not connected to personal choice.⁶

⁵ Jelena Čvorović, Kosta Nikolić, “Differential Reproductive Success in the Historic Populations of Sandžak”, *The Mankind Quarterly*, volume LIII, no. 2 (2012), 216–217.

⁶ Milena Pešić, Aleksandar Novaković, „Problem identiteta i multikulturalizam”, *Srpska politička misao*, 2, (2010), 147.

Creation of Yugoslavia

Profound changes have always been a characteristic in the development of Serbian national identity, which created completely new historical circumstances. The biggest discontinuity was caused by the collapse of the medieval Serbian state and the displacement of people from the Ottoman Empire to the Habsburg Monarchy. Migrations were a feature of the time of slavery under the Ottomans, due to which a large part of the Serbian people lived outside their former home state. The Ottoman conquest changed the civilizational structure of the Serbian people. Serbs were an integral part of Europe until then, and after that they became part of a completely different world. The conquest led to the discontinuity of social, political and cultural institutions that were similar or identical to those in Western Europe.⁷

The Ottoman expansion brought about the biggest demographic changes since the settlement of the Slavs. Wars were accompanied by devastation, and the newly conquered territories were left without inhabitants. Each successive wave of migrants brought a process of population mixing, and traditional identities were never integrated due to the division between dominant powers and religions.⁸

This is the main reason why the Serbian people, neither in time nor in space, have failed to achieve a unique structure of their own cultural and national identity. In this case, there is a strong variability in the definition of national identity. The biggest historical consequences were the Islamization of the Serbs, which also brought about a change in their national identity. A special problem existed in determining the “living space” and, accordingly, the borders of the Serbian state. Thus, historical factors intertwined with ethnic factors and complicated the ideas for determining the space on which the Serbian people will form their state. This is the reason why the Serbian national question has been repeatedly raised through wars in the last two centuries, but it has never been resolved.

In the mid-19th century, Ilija Garašanin compiled the “Program of Foreign and National Policy of Serbia at the End of 1844” – *Načertanije*, in which the basic ideas about the future Serbian state in the Balkans were presented. According to Garašanin's idea, the first act of unification of the Serbian people would take place in a state which would include only Serbs from Turkey. The next stage,

⁷ Milorad Ekmečić, *Dugo kretanje između oranja i klanja. Istorija Srba u Novom veku 1492–1992*, (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike, 2007), 17.

⁸ Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Serbia. The History Behind the Name*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2002), 14

in which the unification with the Serbs from Austria would take place, would be realized in the foreseeable future. In order to achieve this, which meant the inclusion of other peoples in the state, Garašanin was ready for a major transition from the Serbian state to the Yugoslav state, as the Croats would also enter it. Thus, he presupposed a new “South Slavia” to the “Greater Serbia”, which, in addition to Serbs and Croats, would also include Bulgarians.

The basic idea of *Načertanije* (i.e. *Draft*) was the creation of a strong Serbian state. Garašanin believed in centralism just like many European statesmen of the 19th century, who equated regionalism and federalism with the anarchy of feudal rule and believed that the modern state must not allow such a “dispersal” of power. Garašanin did not show “pan-Slavic sentimentality” towards Russia, but was guided exclusively by the interests of the Serbian state. He did not show much understanding for the uniqueness and tradition of Serbs outside of Serbia and other South Slavs – Serbia was supposed to gain full independence and then expand.⁹

Historical circumstances directed the Serbian people, as well as other South Slavic peoples, to unite in a different direction. The Yugoslav state, created in 1918, is not the same as Garašanin's “South Slavia” – it was a state of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, created on an ethnic basis after the collapse of Austria-Hungary. Nevertheless, Garašanin laid the foundation for the Serbian state-building thought, which from then on constantly had before it the idea of uniting the Serbian people, and as a possibility also the other South Slavs.¹⁰

Already in the first year of the war, after the dramatic battles on Cer and Kolubara, the Serbian government formulated the idea of uniting all South Slavic peoples into one state community. On 7 December 1914, at its session in Niš, the National Assembly adopted a declaration in which it accepted Yugoslav unification as Serbia's main war goal. This document went down in history as the *Niš Declaration* and represented the first concrete step in realizing the idea of unification. The ideological narrative was dominant during the adoption of Serbian war aims. As its “main and, in these fateful days, only task”, the Serbian Assembly determined the “liberation and unification of all our unliberated brothers” and placing “all its forces at the service of the great cause of the Serbian state and the Serbo-Croatian and Slovenian tribe”.¹¹

⁹ Aleksa Đilas, *Osporavana zemlja*, (Beograd: Književne novine, 1990), 54.

¹⁰ Radoš Ljušić, *Knjiga o Načertaniju. Nacionalni i državni program Kneževine Srbije 1844*, (Beograd: Beletra, 2004), 49–52 and 99–101.

¹¹ Branko Petranović, Momčilo Zečević, *Jugoslavija 1918–1988. Tematska zbirka dokumenata*, (Beograd: Rad, 1988), 37.

As 1918 progressed, Austria-Hungary stumbled more and more, exhausted by the war efforts and burdened by economic, social and political problems. At the same time, conditions in its Yugoslav provinces were increasingly unstable, while guerrilla warfare was widespread in the occupied territories of Serbia and Montenegro. In the summer of 1918, the Allies took the initiative on the battlefield, and German troops began to retreat. The revolution was at the door of two Central European empires, and the Serbian army was preparing for an offensive. In the meantime, the population of the Yugoslav regions called on the Serbian army to protect their national territory and maintain law and order there. In parallel, there was a *de facto* unification of the states of Serbia and Montenegro with the Yugoslav countries of the former Austria-Hungary. This created the general conditions for the birth of the Yugoslav state.

Under the onslaught of events, on 25 November the People's Council from Zagreb decided to unite the “entire continuous Yugoslav territory of the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy” with Serbia and Montenegro into a single state. A special delegation was sent to Belgrade so that the new state – *the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes* – would be proclaimed on 1 December 1918. Regent Aleksandar Karađorđević stated that he would establish a government whose first and most important task would be the determination of state borders in accordance with ethnic principles. This declaration, as a constitutive act, represented the basis of the state-legal order in the newly created Kingdom.

Serbia, the victor in the First World War, voluntarily transferred its sovereignty to the new state. It turned out to be the expected controversial decision, not only among the non-Serb peoples, but also among the Serbs themselves. The new state joined a long line of newly founded states. At the same time, the deeply changed political map of Europe no longer had room for the four great empires – Ottoman, Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian. The small Kingdom of Serbia, which for almost a whole century had the attributes of first an autonomous and then a sovereign state, also disappeared. Considering the persistence of unification as a desired goal throughout modern history, the creation of Yugoslavia could be understood as a great, and even final, achievement of Serbian national goals.¹²

In the new state, there were people who had previously been at war with each other, parts of the old Catholic Austro-Hungarian monarchy, which was a

¹² Marko Bulatović, “Struggling with Yugoslavism: Dilemmas of Interwar Serb Political Thought”, in: *Ideologies and National Identities. The Case of Twentieth-Century*, edited by John Lampe and Mark Mazower, (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2004), 256–257.

multi-national state with remnants of feudalism, were united with the Orthodox kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro, which during their short modern history were built as national and democratic states. On one side was the clerical-Jesuit spirit of the Roman Catholic population of Slovenia and Croatia, and on the other was the liberal civic ideology. However, there was almost no doubt about the correctness of the new “historical path”. Yugoslav unification was most strongly supported by Serbian intellectuals educated in Western Europe. Serbian intellectuals in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia advocated for Yugoslav and not “all-Serbian” unification, against the will of the majority of the people. All of them emphasized that Yugoslavism is the “way to humanity”, something “perfect” in relation to “tribe” or nationality – Yugoslavism was supposed to cancel all nationalism.

Was it so? The creation of a new state fulfilled an ideal that only a few years earlier seemed unattainable: that all Serbs be in one state. It seemed that the conditions had been met for the different parts of the divided Serbian people to connect and develop harmoniously. The creation of a new state established a unified framework, but it could not quickly and efficiently eradicate the consequences of a long historical discontinuity. In any case, the Serbs and their interests were not, nor could they be, the main concern of the newly created state.

The project of building a new state was based not only on ethnic similarities between Yugoslav groups, but also on the prevailing liberal concept of the nation. Yugoslavia followed the French political model of a unitary state, using simultaneously the unification of Germany (1870) and Italy (1871) as models for its own unification. However, four different elements of cultural-civilization circles were inherited from the past: Byzantine, Mediterranean, Central European and Islamic. All of them left visible traces and distinct traditions in the social life of South Slavic peoples.

According to the doctrine of national unity (“three-named nation”), Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were on their way to form a single Yugoslav nation. The existence of three “tribes” who lived in different empires and professed different religions was recognized as a passing fact. Yugoslavia was supposed to be a tool for the development of the “Yugoslav identity” and the “Yugoslav nation”. Ideas of separate political identities were to be suppressed and eliminated from political life. The constitutional structure (unitarism) was constructed to help the transition of identity from tribal separation to “Yugoslavism”.¹³

¹³ Kosta Nikolić, “The Ideocratic State and National Identity: Serbian Experience in the 20th Century”, *Istorija 20. veka*, 1, (2020), 17–18.

The decisions that led to the creation of Yugoslavia were made by narrow circles of political elites. The question of unification was never directly put before the population of the different territorial entities that made up the new state. During the political negotiations that led to its formation, no agreement was reached on the constitutional structure of the multinational state. This fundamental question remained to be resolved when the state was formed. The main point of contention was whether Yugoslavia should have a unitary or federal constitutional structure. The main centralist impulse came from Serbian politicians. They had known such a model since pre-war times, and it seemed suitable considering that the Serbs were the largest and most politically powerful component of the new state. Croatian politicians preferred a decentralized constitutional arrangement, or at least a dualistic one, modeled on the former Austria-Hungary.

The constitution was adopted on 28 June 1921, on the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, which was sacred in Serbian historical memory. The Constitution reflected the official position that Serbs, Croats and Slovenes are three tribes of one single nation, and the official language was “Serbo-Croatian-Slovenian”. But the Constitution marked the beginning of a long-term political crisis and struggle between different visions of the state that lasted throughout the interwar period.¹⁴

The creation of Yugoslavia represented a huge historical and political step forward, but it was based on a considerable degree of unrealistic idealism because from the beginning the conflict between Croats and Serbs represented the greatest threat to the unity of the state. Its causes can be traced to the development of different cultural and political identities after both Serbs and Croats took crucial steps towards the creation of modern nations in the 19th century. Constant mistrust towards Serbs among Croats, which was systematically cultivated and spread by the enemies of South Slavic unification, was one of the burdens of the past. There was a fear of Serbian supremacy, and all Serbian assurances that true equality can only be achieved in the union failed to appease the Croats: “The Serbs, for their part, did not sufficiently understand what a delicate task was before them.”¹⁵

On 3 October 1929, the country was renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The main goals of King Alexander’s reform were the establishment of a more efficient centralized political system and suppression of all nationalism. The proclai-

¹⁴ Peter Radan, “Constitutional Experimentation and the National Question in Interwar Yugoslavia”, *Istorija 20. veka*, 3, (2011), 26.

¹⁵ Alex N. Dragnich, *The first Yugoslavia. Search for a Viable Political System*, (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), 57–58.

med Yugoslavism was perceived as a synthesis of “Serbia, Croatia and Slavism”, and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia as a “completely synthetic solution” of the national and state program. The ideology of Yugoslavism was viewed as a general national ideology which, in the name of the Yugoslav future, was supposed to lead to a complete break with the past. It seemed to King Alexander that Yugoslavia had “finally won”, that “national unity” had been definitely consolidated and that tribal and provincial differences had been overcome.¹⁶ That turned out to be a big mistake.

Communist Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia's failure to resolve the national question in the interwar period is largely the result of the lack of agreement on the constitutional foundations of a multinational state at the time of its creation. This created a vacuum that could not be filled as different visions of Yugoslavia's constitutional structure vied for supremacy in a climate of increased nationalist confrontation. Turmoil was taking place in a state whose existence was increasingly threatened by the unstable European political order. Yugoslav constitutional experimentation did not solve the national question, nor did it save Yugoslavia from the maelstrom of the second World War.

In the second World War, Yugoslavia was occupied, and its individual parts were on the side of the Nazi alliance. A very complex and brutal war was fought in Yugoslavia at that time. It contained elements of liberation, anti-fascist, but also ideological, civil, inter-national and religious war, with the implementation of genocide in the Independent State of Croatia against Serbs and Jews. More than a million Yugoslavs died in that war, many more of them in mutual conflicts than in the fight against the occupiers.

Even in the second World War, the basic strategy of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was the fight against “Greater Serbian hegemony”, which was a permanent accusation against the Serbian people. In the name of the reconstruction of Yugoslavia, a specific strategy of silence about the Serbian victims was used, and the policy of “brotherhood and unity” drastically changed the position of Serbia. National policy was formally established by the first Constitution of the new Yugoslavia adopted on 31 January 1946. It was created under the direct influence of the Soviet constitution of 1936, also known as the Stalinist Constitution. The complete break with the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was achieved by the

¹⁶ Ljubodrag Dimić, *Istorija srpske državnosti. Srbija u Jugoslaviji*, (Novi Sad: Platoneum, 2002), 141–142.

proclamation of a federal system and six new republics. The doctrine of the “three-named people” was abandoned and the status of a nation was given to Macedonians and Montenegrins. Despite the nominal federalism, a centralist state system was introduced, and ideological, political and other forms of pluralism were prohibited.¹⁷

The Serbs were the most dissatisfied with the federal reorganization of the state because they were the dominant force in the partisan army that led to these changes. Historical experience has confirmed that Serbia was an obvious loser in communist Yugoslavia. The formation of Serbia as a future federal unit testified to the complete inability and unwillingness of Serbian communists to protect the basic national interests of their people.

The new national policy hit the Serbs in Croatia the most. In the Croatian constitution, it is emphasized that the Republic of Croatia was constituted by Croats and Serbs, that Serbs are equal to Croats, but their right to self-determination, which is exclusively related to Croats, is not mentioned. In addition, the expression “Serbs” and not “Serbian people” suggested their belonging to the Croatian political nation. The “National Liberation Struggle” remained dominant in the collective memory of Serbs in Croatia. They ignored all other forms of identity: its religious aspect was minimized; initiatives related to the Serbian alphabet and language remained on the sidelines, and political demands did not exist.¹⁸

A more dominant view in Serbia was that the new federation harmed the Serbs in several ways, most notably through the declaration of Montenegrins as a new nation. During the second World War, a brutal identity war broke out in Montenegro. The extreme violence that marked this conflict was a way of creating a new Montenegrin identity, that is, of eliminating the Serbian identity from Montenegro. Although at first glance they strongly promoted the policy of brotherhood and unity, the communists simply tried to erase the Serbian national consciousness among the Montenegrins, as well as everything that was common in their history. The new political reality caused a change in the identity of the Orthodox population of Montenegro. In the early 20th century, according to the 1909 census, there were 95% Serbs in Montenegro. After the second World War, according to the 1948 census, there were only 6,707 (1.78%) Serbs and 342,009 (90.67%) Montenegrins in Montenegro.¹⁹

¹⁷ Kosta Nikolić, Ivana Dobrivojević, “Creating a Communist Yugoslavia in the Second World War”, *Balkanica*, XLVIII, (2017), 257.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 261.

¹⁹ Kosta Nikolić, *Jedna izgubljena istorija – Srbija u 20. veku*, (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2016), 317.

The doctrine of a new national entity in Montenegro was promoted without general social and national consensus. This essentially opened the way to a long-term split in society with unfathomable consequences. Serbs were *de facto* outlawed, deprived of the right to their own national name, and without their consent included in the newly formed Montenegrin nation.

The ideology of Yugoslav communists

When the Yugoslav communists came to power, they claimed to have introduced a “perfect” socialist system and “justly solved” the national question. The five constituent nations were given their own republic and constitutionally guaranteed the right to self-determination, including secession. The solution rested on the principle of national equality without a group that could dominate Yugoslavia. The constitutional and institutional aspects of this concept were based on the slogan “brotherhood and unity”, with the aspiration to build a socialist society under the leadership of a single communist party. This ideology was later supplemented by an attempt to impose a new concept of “socialist Yugoslavism” on society.

The period in which the so-called Partisan Yugoslavism dominated lasted until 1952. It seemed that the pre-war communist dogma that Yugoslavia was an “artificial” and “unpopular” creation had been abandoned. This short period after the end of the war was very important, because it seemed that ethnic tensions had been eliminated and that there was a general common will to forget the past and overcome national differences and conflicts. Contrary to popular belief, Partisan Yugoslavism was a thin veil designed to cover the nationalism of the Yugoslav Communists (with the exception of the Serbian), as well as to provide a framework for the dictatorial rule of Tito and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia.

According to the ideology of the Yugoslav Marxist elite, the essence of Yugoslavia's existence was the protection of the “small” Yugoslav peoples, not the creation of a Yugoslav nation. The purpose of the communist revolution was to solve the national question. Consequently, Yugoslav identity was no longer based on ethnic similarity between the Yugoslav peoples. Neither ethnic similarity nor the existence of the state could serve as pillars of identity in Marxist frameworks. According to that doctrine, the construction of the Yugoslav identity was nothing more than a cover for the assimilation of “small” nations and their cultures. Ideas about a wider South Slavic identity as a solution for overcoming the nationalisms

that came from Serbia were perceived as particularly problematic. They were seen as political illusions or “evil intentions”.²⁰

Yugoslavism was therefore discouraged even when it took root as a real identity. Its advocates are labeled as reactionaries, i.e. enemies of socialism. Citizens who declared themselves as Yugoslavs in the population censuses were listed under the heading “nationally undetermined”. Not a single “Yugoslav” became a member of the highest party or state structures, so Yugoslavia failed to transform from a multinational community into a multiethnic community. Multiethnic societies differ from multinational ones in that the former states are uni-national in the political and civil sense, regardless of ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural differences. These are civic communities based on constitutionality and democratic order. A typical example of this is the USA and Switzerland. Multinational states, such as Yugoslavia, are based on the territorial-political principle in order for all nations to “protect” their free development. Everything in them is subordinated to the interests of their own people and they are heavily burdened by the constant solution of the national question.²¹

This difference was fateful for the survival of Yugoslavia. Events unfolded as a logical outcome of such a misguided policy. Since the adoption of the 1974 Constitution, Yugoslavia was no longer a union of South Slavs, but only an ideological project, without an ethnic or civic basis of unity, leaving weak foundations for the identity of its citizens. The very idea of a Yugoslav state union was rejected. Yugoslavia became only a geographical concept, and six independents, even opposing nation-states arose on its soil.

The 1974 Constitution showed that Yugoslavia remained a party state, as the Bolshevik legacy was still dominant. The political power of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia was not diminished, and the general social stagnation was an obvious proof that de-Stalinization was not carried out to the end. All processes of reforming society and the political system were interrupted at the beginning, and the party committees were still the centers of inviolable political power.

Through the indirect definition of provinces, Serbia was promoted to a federation with elements of a confederation. The Republic, as a sovereign state, was limited only to the so-called narrower area. Double federalization (double division of sovereignty) immediately led to the blockage of the political system.

²⁰ K. Nikolić, “The Ideocratic State and National Identity”, 21–22.

²¹ Vesna Pešić, “Rat za nacionalne države“, u: *Srpska strana rata. Trauma i katarza u istorijskom pamćenju*, I, (Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2002), 32–33.

With the constitution of the power system (legislative, executive and judicial), the provinces have fully shaped their sovereignty. Serbian identity was most drastically threatened in Kosovo and Metohija. After 1974, when Serbia practically lost all authority over its southern province, the Serbian people had no choice but to either leave Kosovo or accept a subordinate position.

Discouraging both the ethnic and civic basis for Yugoslav unity, the ruling elite promoted nationalism in its constituent nations. Paradoxically, the regime promoted nationalism as the main alternative to its own order. Republican nationalisms grew stronger as the only serious and strongest alternative to socialism, which made the decisive step towards the subsequent disintegration of the state. This meant that Yugoslavia was “desirable” only as a socialist state, and that other forms of Yugoslavism were neither possible nor desirable. When socialism became impossible, Yugoslavia also became impossible for many.²²

The case of Serbia

With the 1974 Constitution, Serbia became federalized at a time when all other republics had rounded up their sovereignty. The Serbian people were convinced that the position of Serbia in the Yugoslav federation was unjust and that it could not be corrected within the existing ideological and political system. The outraged Serbian public, in whose consciousness the 1974 Constitution became a symbol of national humiliation, began to demand changes. The inability to publicly articulate dissatisfaction created conditions for alternative action by individuals and groups, primarily intellectuals. History opened wide the door to the Serbian national movement, whose birth can theoretically be determined as a result of “wounded pride and feelings of humiliation among the most socially conscious members, which ultimately produces anger and self-affirmation.”²³

The rebellion was initially directed against the communist regime, but over time it turned into “defense of the nation”. In such circumstances, any politician who would promise to change the “humiliating position of Serbia” would become a hero of the nation. By a paradox of history, this role was played by a politician of the communist regime – Slobodan Milošević. He launched a conservative revolution, rejected economic and political reforms and launched a struggle for the unification of the Serbian people into one state. The domi-

²² Dejan Jović, *Uvod u Jugoslaviju*, (Novi Sad: Akademska knjiga, 2024), 357–358.

²³ Isaija Berlin, „Nacionalizam. U prošlosti zanemaren, danas moderan“, u *Protiv struje. Eseji iz istorije ideja*, (Pančevo: Kulturni centar, 1994), 350–371.

nant idea of the era was that Serbs were the biggest losers and victims of the communist regime.²⁴

At the end of the 20th century, Serbian national identity was built on archetypal myths, and the future was projected as a return to the past, as a kind of “rebirth” of the nation. The Serbian critical intelligentsia, which once fought for the protection of human and civil rights, played a decisive role in this. Democracy was presupposed to the idea of the nation, no alternative to Milošević’s policy was created, and his regime successfully overcame the crisis of legitimacy.²⁵

The Serbian intelligentsia that supported Milošević was anti-Western. It understood any opening towards other civilizations as abandoning the foundations of Serbian autochthonous culture, as a danger to national identity. Implicit and explicit ethnocentrism dominated the public space into which the cult of “holy death” was reintroduced, suggesting that the loss of life in battle was simply an obligation to “illustrious ancestors” who had sacrificed their lives for freedom. Thus, at the end of the 20th century, the Serbian people built their identity around the mythical cult of death, bringing it into constant connection with existing political relations.

Are identity conflicts inevitable?

In all societies where there are significant ethnic divisions, conflicts of ethnic interests occur. The greater the ethnic divide, the more political and other conflicts of interest tend to be channeled along ethnic lines. Among the South Slavs, a national-spatial identity is also noticeable, which has always been identified with one territory as exclusively one’s own living space. Identifying with one’s own community entails distancing oneself from neighboring communities (ethnic distance). This further led to the creation of firm beliefs, notions and attitudes of the members of one group about themselves and others. By differentiating from another group and identifying with one’s own group, internal homogenization was encouraged and group ethnic identity was created.

This is how a construct was created about one territory as a “centuries-old historical entity” of only one ethnic group, special in every respect in relation to its surroundings. The sense of community is based on the idea of common origin and the historical experience of the community (common myths, tradi-

²⁴ K. Nikolić, “The Ideocratic State and National Identity”, 23.

²⁵ Jasna Dragović Soso, *Spasioci nacije. Intelektualna opozicija Srbije i oživljavanje nacionalizma*, (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2004), 19.

ons and culture). This approach equates national identity with religious identity and considers it fundamental.

At the moment when war broke out in Yugoslavia, academic and public debates began about the long-term and short-term causes of wars and about who was responsible. Numerous and contradictory interpretations of the causes of the breakup of Yugoslavia still exist. Whether it died out, whether it simply ceased to exist or was violently broken are questions to which different authors give different answers. Everyone was looking for an answer to one question – why did Yugoslavia disappear from history?

Dominant theories in historical research suggest that Yugoslavia was an unsustainable state union due to strongly conflicting national ideologies that marked its history. The most important questions for us are: was it an inevitable historical process or did the nationalists, in the “fall of communism”, activate the crisis framework of ethnicity and follow the processes that were hidden in the “dark depths” of the past?

Yugoslavia was a conglomeration of nations, languages, cultures and religions. During its existence it was both a monarchy and a republic; it changed all the social systems of the 20th century – parliamentary democracy, constitutional monarchy, personal rule of the ruler, pseudo-parliamentarism (in the interwar period), Stalinist socialism, liberal socialism (with a market like no other in Eastern Europe), and federation and confederation in the post-war period.

At the time of its disintegration, Yugoslavia had a population of over 23 million.²⁶ It was a multinational state with six nations; although treated as a “nationality”, the Albanians outnumbered the three South Slavic nations. It was composed of six republics, constitutionally defined as states, and Serbia had two autonomous provinces, constitutionally defined as federal units same as the republics. In modern Europe, there was no such small geographical space where there were such great differences as was the case with Yugoslavia. It was a unique but harrowing picture of national complexity in the face of disintegration, war and mass displacement of people.

²⁶ The population census was conducted in March 1991 in disturbed political conditions (Albanians in Kosovo and Metohija and in Macedonia boycotted the census), so its results are not the most accurate. It is assumed that the ethnic composition was as follows: Montenegrins (600,000 – 2.6%), Croats (4,650,000 - 19.6%), Macedonians (1,420,000 – 6%), Muslims (2,200,000 – 8.9%), Slovenes (1,820,000 – 7.8%), Serbs (8,460,000 – 36.3%) and Yugoslavs (over 700,000 or about 3%). It was estimated that there were about 2,178,000 Albanians. Yugoslavia was also a multi-religious country: Serbs, Montenegrins and Macedonians are Orthodox (45.4%); Croats, Slovenes and numerous national minorities were Catholics (30.8%), and there were 17% Muslims.

Huge differences have accumulated in the very dense territorial area of Yugoslavia. The differences in the degree of modernization and economic development between individual Yugoslav provinces (for example, Slovenia and Kosovo) were greater than the differences between the most developed and the most backward European countries.

Ethnic conflicts are very cruel because their outcome can be survival or genocide. They can be written about from the point of view of evolutionary theory, that is, that there is a “Darwinian struggle” for resources, which is the heart of political conflicts everywhere in the world. Primordialist theories focus on ethnicity and a sense of “collective self-consciousness” as primordial patterns that allegedly have a specific potential to create ethnic violence. The main argument in these theories is determinism, which indicates that violence between different ethnic groups is inevitable.²⁷

There are interpretations that ethnic conflicts will arise “by the mere existence of ethnic diversity”, regardless of state policies. In multiethnic societies, conflicts due to different political and economic interests inevitably become ethnic conflicts. These conflicts are universal, they break out regardless of the social, economic and cultural level and degree of democratization of a society. Since we live in a world where there is a scarcity of natural resources and at the same time we want descendants, we are “biologically programmed” to improve our own survival (survival of our own genes) more than the survival and sustenance of others, so in this sense we can talk about ethnic nepotism. This is why ethnic conflicts appear at all levels of democracy, because all human populations share the same behavioral predisposition for ethnic nepotism.²⁸

Theorists and researchers recognize multiple views of ethnicity and ethnic violence – primordialist, instrumentalist and constructionist views. Primordialists believe that, despite the seemingly good relations of the Yugoslav peoples, in their subconscious they lived enmity, even hatred, as it has always been in the Balkans. Driven by the fierce competition for political power during the breakup of Yugoslavia and driven by uncertainty over state borders and minority status, these enmities and hatreds, fueled by fear and revenge, turned neighbor against neighbor in an upward spiral of aggression and reprisal. However, although the primordialist account sounds plausible, “the truth is that politicians activated and manipulated latent nationalism and ethnic fears.”²⁹

²⁷ K. Nikolić, *Srbija u 20. veku*, 351–354.

²⁸ Tatu Vanhanen, *Ethnic Conflict Explained by Ethnic Nepotism*, (Stamford: Connecticut, 1999), 143–145.

²⁹ Anthony Oberschall, “The Manipulation of Ethnicity: from Ethnic Cooperation to Violence and War in Yugoslavia”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 23, no. 6 (2000), 982.

Theories about the inevitability of conflicts between different ethnic groups fit in with the tendency of Western analysts to interpret the Balkans as a region of centuries-old traditional, and therefore inevitable, ethnic conflicts. These views force the conclusion that the Balkans are on the margins of civilization, a place of “ancient hatreds”, that they are simply condemned to a chronic state of ethnic conflicts and wars, so a large part of Western analysts adopted the view that the breakup of Yugoslavia was just another Balkan crisis about which not much can be done. The arguments for this interpretation were that communism kept the population in “deep hibernation” for almost half a century, that it stifled ethnic identities and political freedoms. When the repression disappeared, the ghosts of the past came to life and the hatred that poisoned the Yugoslav peoples was at work. Such interpretations suggest that ethnic conflicts are rooted in “old enmities” and the memory of “past crimes,” which made new violence inevitable. When asked why Yugoslavia fell apart, the simplest possible answer was offered – because its peoples have always hated each other.³⁰

This view of the people of the Balkans as “wild Balkan tribes” who are only capable of war in order to realize their right to statehood is very dangerous, because it justified the inactivity of some segments of European politics and the war activities of certain political elites in the region, thus making violence and disrespect for human rights “natural”.³¹

Unlike the theories of “inevitability”, history teaches us that there is a responsibility of the political elites for the disintegration of Yugoslavia because the state is the main actor in creating, emphasizing or reducing the conflict of ethnic identities. States are arenas where rivalry, conflict, and the resources of ethnic mobilization and countermobilization are displayed.³² In the Yugoslav federation, built after the second World War, ethnic conflicts were suppressed through a one-party dictatorship, but the federal state structure simultaneously created conditions for the separation of close ones and the creation of new ethnic identities, which opened up space for conflicts, because the issue of political power was defined according to ethnic borders.

The collapse of the order of real socialism brought liberalism and democracy to Eastern Europe. Robert Hayden, however, believes that what succeeded

³⁰ Dejan Jović, “Razlozi za raspad socijalističke Jugoslavije: kritička analiza postojećih interpretacija”, *Reč*, 62/8, (June 2001), 103.

³¹ Nataša Beširević, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Former Yugoslavia as a Consequence of Nation–State Building”, *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, number 61, (April 2010), 43.

³² Williams, M. Robin Jr., „The Sociology of Ethnic Conflicts: Comparative International Perspectives”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 20, no. 1, (1994), 49.

state socialism was not the idea of democracy as a community of equal citizens, but the idea of creating a nation-state for a local, ethnically defined majority.³³ In Yugoslavia, that process was brought to its ultimate consequences because its most important politicians projected the future as a return to the past, a kind of “rebirth” of their nations. Such a concept simply could not be realized without war, which was understood as an “organic transformation” that divides time into “small” and “large” epochs of a nation.

In Yugoslavia, liberalism and democracy became a means of mobilization for war because the old idea of “community” won over the idea of “society”, the idea of “collectivity”, and especially “nation”, over the idea of a free individual. Instead of freedom and pluralism, a new “single-mindedness” was promoted in the name of a new “national unity”. Political pluralization was considered “dubious” and was quickly essentially abandoned. There was never a serious, rational and calm dialogue about important issues, “about the key taboos and myths” of the previous period: on the contrary, the political elites preferred to organize a war that suited them, in order to “explain” to their population that life with others was no longer possible, than accept new ideas and new solutions.³⁴

Whether the history of Yugoslavia would unfold in one of the following directions depended on the determination of the ruling political elites: democratic integration of the country, peaceful separation of the republics, or civil war. Like other countries of real socialism, Yugoslavia faced the necessity of fundamental changes in the field of politics and unlike them, it was forced to respond at the same time to a special type of challenge that called into question its survival as a political community.³⁵

The crisis of the order of self-governing socialism (political monopoly of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, stifling of freedom and initiative of individuals in all spheres of social life, inferiority of the “contract economy” in relation to the market, illegitimacy of the regime) did not inevitably lead to civil war. Two communist federations, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, serve as a good example of this. The peaceful transformation of those two multi-ethnic federations confirmed the thesis that there was also the possibility of a different political outcome in Yugoslavia, i.e. the civil war was not the result of an

³³ Robert Hejden, *Skice za podeljenu kuću. Ustavna logika jugoslovenskih sukoba*, (Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2003), 31.

³⁴ Dejan Jović, “1989: godina koja nam se nije dogodila”, *Politička misao*. <http://politickamisa.com>

³⁵ Kosta Nikolić, *Jugoslavija, poslednji dani 1989–1992*. Knjiga prva: *Svi Srbi u jednoj državi*, (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2018), 508.

a priori “judgment of history”, but a series of decisions and actions of political elites in the state itself.³⁶

The key actors (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia) were not ready to find a mutually acceptable solution through mutual concessions. A series of negotiations during 1991 deepened the disagreements of national leaders regarding the fundamental issues of the state crisis: 1. whether peoples or republics are the bearers of sovereignty and decision-making on the right to self-determination (until secession); 2. whether the internal borders are administrative, and therefore changeable, or are they state, therefore unchangeable; 3. secession (dissociation) is a sovereign right or is it possible only with the consent of all members of the federation. The most important actors decided to use violence to achieve their goals.

Yugoslav politicians resorted to nationalist rhetoric and finding an external enemy in order to create national cohesion, conceal internal problems and strengthen their own position of power. The epilogue of “challenge and response” was a series of civil wars. They were brutal because they were also the initiators of “nation building”. Those wars, as well as the processes of national homogenization and ethnic cleansing that would follow them, were motivated by the need to create simple and unambiguous identities in a population that was extremely mixed and diverse in origin. Another motive was to erase the elements of “mixture, pollution and indeterminacy” that threatened emerging states. This further means that the brutal violence that marked the breakup of Yugoslavia did not stem from “opposite and incompatible” identities, but was an attempt to produce them.³⁷

Understanding the conflict in Yugoslavia exclusively in an ethnic sense, political elites contributed to the triumph of nationalist forces and encouraged the use of ethnic principles in organizing political and social life. Ritual symbols of society were in the foreground: populist rhetoric emphasized the inherited characteristics and differences that exist between close ethnic identities, so an ideological reinterpretation of the past was used. Thus, the differences manifested themselves in a drastic way and produced catastrophic consequences for all ethnic communities.³⁸

The ideology of “brotherhood and unity” was the foundation of the ruling ideology imposed by the state as the highest patriotic value, but it was not based on rational foundations and carried within itself the legacy of the pre-war natio-

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ger Dežings, *Religija i identitet na Kosovu*, (Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2005), 53.

³⁸ Milan Tripković, “Antropološka dimenzija etničkih sukoba”, *Sociologija*, vol. XLII, 3 (2008), 311.

nal policy of the CPY, which was based on renouncing the fundamental principles of left-wing internationalism. In that period, the communists cooperated with nationalist and pro-fascist forces in order to carry out a revolution the meaning of which was in the national question.

When they won power, the communists sought to prevent the recurrence of ethnic conflicts, but they only played the role of hibernators of those conflicts and, due to the nature of the government they established, essentially prepared their renewal. National conflicts in Yugoslavia had an uninterrupted flow, because national political oligarchies under the guise of “ideological purity” imposed a nationalist alternative in order to realize the idea of the sovereignty of their nation (republic) as a historical inevitability. Slovenian and Croatian communists have always criticized the tendencies of integral Yugoslavism and the affirmation of the Yugoslav nation as “bureaucratic-centralist” tendencies that are connected with the “remnants of large-state hegemony”, that is, with the “remnants of Great Serbian nationalism”. For them, ethnic kinship was not the basis for the convergence of the peoples of Yugoslavia.

Over time, the old divisions were opened, which decisively influenced the disintegration of the country in a series of ethnic conflicts, which began exactly half a century after the beginning of WWII, when the communists launched their revolution.

Yugoslavia never developed as a modern state and remained a divided society – with many different national and cultural identities, different interests and value orientations; a society with deep national, religious, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and social divisions, a society that simply could not function according to the liberal model of democracy. When the communist elites weakened the state sufficiently, nationalism positioned itself as an alternative to socialism using the mythology of the rebirth of the nation. That model, as the oldest model of the story of the origin of the people, was based on the authority of “blood and soil”.

The inhabitants of Yugoslavia had two frameworks in ethnic relations: “Cooperation in a period of peace and a dormant crisis framework anchored in family history and collective memory of wars, ethnic crimes and brutality. Threats and lies that were unbelievable and dismissed in a normal framework could resonate when the crisis framework was turned on: they became convincing, they were believed and they caused fear”.³⁹

In the “waning days of communism” nationalists, in popular culture, in social movements and in election campaigns, activated the crisis framework abo-

³⁹ A. Oberschall, “The Manipulation of Ethnicity”, 998.

ut ethnic vulnerability. That led to the victory of the nationalists. Once in office, they also suppressed the moderates in their ethnic group: “They waged war according to a crisis scenario. Without the tacit, overt, or confused support of the majority, nationalist leaders could not have escalated ethnic rivalry and conflict into massive collective violence.”⁴⁰

In that process, religious intolerance played an important role. In post-communist countries, religion has created favorable grounds for religious nationalism. Groups that are exposed to constant conflicts with other groups seek the full engagement of their members and fully embrace their personalities, allowing only limited deviation from group unity. They strive to suppress internal conflicts because they can be fatal for the group's survival. “Romantic nationalism”, as a product of liberal-democratic Western societies, could not serve to identify the nations in the Balkans, because religion was recognized as the most important symbol of national identification in relation to the other/others.

Thus, nationalism defeated communism and destroyed Yugoslavia, which, as Dejan Jović concludes, had no enemies outside its borders – its enemies were within the borders of the state.⁴¹ In a mutual struggle, the war-mongers sought to win allies among the nationalist opposition in their republic. Through intense propaganda, feelings of hostility towards other nations were created, and they grew into hostility over time. The conflict of republic elites over the future of Yugoslavia was transformed into a national conflict centered on issues of identity and survival of national groups. Conflicts were encouraged along ethnic lines, and thus the disintegration of Yugoslavia was carried out through a series of civil wars.

The outcome of the Serbian 20th century

The Serbian twentieth century began with the First Balkan War in 1912, and ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This “short century” was also the period in which Yugoslavia was created and disintegrated. The forces released by the outbreak of the world conflict led to the birth of Yugoslavia in 1918. Similarly, the forces released at the end of the Cold War contributed significantly to the wars that destroyed Yugoslavia. The historical forces that dominated the 20th century – wars and aggressive nationalisms – also dominated the history of Serbia.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 999.

⁴¹ D. Jović, „Razlozi za raspad socijalističke Jugoslavije”, 131.

Serbian history in this period was followed by two phenomena: an unfinished state and a state of ideology (ideocratic state). All the states in the creation of which the Serbian people participated were unfinished – they represented, so to speak, an open option that resisted a final definition. In the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which existed for just over two decades, two constitutions were adopted – in 1921 and 1931. In communist Yugoslavia, as many as four constitutions were adopted, which were followed by republic constitutions. First, the FНРY Constitution from 1946 was adopted; then the Constitutional Law from 1953 (which contained elements of the constitution); followed by the Constitution of the SFRY from 1963 and, finally, the Constitution from 1974 (it integrated three amendment packages from 1967, 1968 and 1971). Serbia, although still part of Yugoslavia, independently adopted a new republic constitution in 1990. In the period after the breakup of Yugoslavia, three more constitutions were adopted: one during the creation of the Serbian-Montenegrin federation (1992), the second during the revision of that state (2003) and the third when that state ceased to legally exist and Serbia became independent (2006).

Such changes had a profound impact on the development of society. With undeveloped democratic structures, Serbia remained an underdeveloped society. Oscillating between dictatorship and democracy, Serbian society has passed through several authoritarian regimes, often with devastating consequences. Occasional attempts to start the society and move it from the European periphery through shortcuts and detours have led to unsuccessful outcomes.

The unfinished statehood of Serbia is most typical for the period after the second World War, and this phenomenon continues even in the modern era. It was a period of long latent statelessness, i.e. a state in which it was not possible to precisely identify the state, and often not even its borders. All forms of statehood were based on strong ideologies that were mostly outside of historical reality.

During the 20th century, Serbia participated in two Balkan wars, two world wars and the wars of Yugoslav succession. The First World War created a new epoch in Serbian history in which the creation of the Yugoslav state was seen as the most important goal. This idea was renewed during the second World War, which led to a new social, political and economic order in communist Yugoslavia, which was still a state that gathered the majority of the Serbian people. The breakup of Yugoslavia marked a national regression, which returned Serbia to the period before the Balkan wars.

The demographic suppression of Serbs is the main characteristic of the 20th century. It is a long-term phenomenon, which began under the pressure of the sta-

tes that conquered Serbian territories in the Middle Ages, and this process accelerated tremendously exactly during the time of the existence of the Yugoslav state. The Serbian question has never been a marginal issue in European history. It affected the borders of the Serbian state, caused great reactions from regional powers for centuries and became one of a series of open European issues. As a result of intensive hundred-year diplomatic and military efforts, in the 20th century Serbia gained the borders it had in the Middle Ages and the majority of Serbs found themselves in one state. But it had its price – a huge depopulation. In a period of only 195 years, from 1804 to 1999, the Serbian people fought 13 major wars, on average every 15 years. Only during the 87 years of the 20th century, from 1912 to 1999, the Serbs fought six times, losing twice and creating a state three times.

The balance of the 20th century can be expressed in another way. In the first decades of the last century, the Serbian people made up the majority of the population in Macedonia, Kosovo and Metohija and in Sandžak, where 50.4% were Serbs. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, they made up 43% of the population and had a majority in 28 out of 53 areas. They made up 21% of the population of Croatia and Slavonia, i.e. 17% on the territory of Dalmatia, and in 20 municipalities of those three provinces they had a numerical majority.

The wars were accompanied by a clear trend of the reduction of the once most numerous ethnic groups in this area, the Serbs, at the expense of the Croatian population in Croatia, the Muslim/Bosniak population in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in Serbia itself, in Kosovo and Metohija. With the breakup of Yugoslavia, the idea of a multiethnic state was defeated, and the concept of ethnically “pure” national states won. Forced resettlement of the population along ethnic lines was an inevitable consequence that, paradoxically, was legalized by international institutions at the end of the war in 1995.

Wars, political and economic migrations, declining living standards, together with declining birth rates, have shaped heavy population losses of millions of real and demographic victims. The demographically destroyed Serbian countryside, refugees and persons displaced in wars, political and economic emigration are the frames of centuries of wrong policies of the Serbian political elites. They did not pay attention to the “human cost” of their ambitions, nor did they take adequate measures to recover the biological resources of the Serbian people. When it comes to the resilience, strength and ability of the Serbian people to successfully organize, protect and defend their national identity and living space, historical experience does not inspire optimism. On the contrary.

