

THE SERBIAN QUESTION AND THE YUGOSLAV CRISIS

Abstract: *The paper deals with the transformations of the Serbian national identity during the last period of the existence of the Yugoslav state. Special focus is on the changes in the attitude of the intellectual elite, political nomenclature and public opinion towards the Yugoslav community and the position of the Serbian people. Foreshadowed by constitutional amendments, and completed by the adoption and implementation of the 1974 Constitution, the country's decentralization limited Belgrade's effective control to the area of central Serbia. The experience of being reduced to a "Pashaluk of Belgrade" shook Serbian ontological security in Yugoslavia. The Serbian question was unsuccessfully opened by the Blue Book in 1977. The revolt in Kosovo in 1981 and demographic decline of the Serbian presence in this province contributed to the feeling of insecurity growing into a state of ethnic panic, which affected both political and cultural actors, as well as the public. The crisis of the Yugoslav state, its dysfunctionality in the economic sphere, reduced importance in international relations and the inability to solve accumulated social problems influenced the development of the Serbian question into a true national mobilization at the end of the 1980s. It culminated in the consolidation of the regime of Slobodan Milošević, who put the solving of the Serbian question in the foreground, at any cost.*

Keywords: Serbian question, Yugoslav crisis, Mihailo Đurić, Draža Marković, 1974 Constitution, Kosovo, national mobilization, Dobrica Ćosić, SANU Memorandum, Ivan Stambolić, Slobodan Milošević

Introduction

Contemporary Serbian views of Yugoslavia are contradictory, and these contradictions have a profound prehistory.¹ Serbs spent almost the entire twentieth century in Yugoslavia. The experience of living in a multi-ethnic, multi-confessio-

¹ These contradictions are discussed by Dejan Jović, *Srbija i Jugoslavija: Od najveće pobjede do najvećeg gubitka* <https://velikeprice.com/politika/srbi-i-jugoslavija-dejan-jovic-feljton/>, accessed 2 July 2024.

nal and multicultural community influenced the Serbian collective identity, which was significantly transformed in Yugoslavia. The creation of the South Slavic state after the First World War formally ended the existence of the Kingdom of Serbia, which merged into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. This change was experienced by the majority of the Serbian elite as a well-deserved reward for the war effort and enormous human and material losses.² More than just a territorial expansion, it represented the basis for the unification of the majority of Serbs and their related peoples into an even wider community, similar to the role that Piedmont and Prussia had played in the creation of Italy and Germany.

Such an understanding legitimized the interwar dominance of the Serbian dynasty, political, military and economic elites, but also survived it. Although quite a few Serbs were among the defeated royalists in World War II, and some actively collaborated with the Axis, many were prominently represented in partisan units.³ Socialist Yugoslavia thus also enjoyed considerable legitimacy among Serbs, especially during its first two decades, characterized by centralized governance over a formally federalized state. Many Serbs identified themselves with it so fiercely that they were ready to identify as Yugoslavs during the further course of the building of socialism.⁴ However, in the second half of the 1960s, the League

² The relationship of the intellectual elite towards Yugoslavia was investigated by Branka Prpa, *Srpski intelektualci i Jugoslavija, 1918–1929* (Beograd: Klio 2018); Cf. Љубомир Петровић, *Југословенска држава и друштво у периоду 1920–1941* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју, 2000). It is far less clear what the so-called ordinary people thought about Yugoslavia: Dubravka Stojanović, *Privatno jugoslovenstvo i srpsko javno mišljenje 1890–1914* https://yuhistorija.com/serbian/jug_ideja_txt01c1.html, accessed 2 July 2024. In this volume, Danilo Šarenac writes about the views of an influential social group, the Serbian officer corps. Данило Шаренац, *Ратни циљеви Србије виђени кроз службену и приватну војну преписку 1914–1918*.

³ This particularly applied to the so-called Prečani, i.e. Serbs from the former territories of the Habsburg Monarchy. Ivo Goldstein, Slavko Goldstein, *Srbi i Hrvati u narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi u Hrvatskoj*; in: *Dijalog povjesničara-istoricara 7*, edited by. H. S. Fleck i I. Graovac, (Zagreb: Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, 2003), 247–268; Xavier Bougarel, *Kod Titovih partizana. Komunisti i seljaci u Bosanskoj krajini 1941–1945*. (Sarajevo: Udruženje za modernu historiju, 2023); Немања Девић, *За Партију и Тита: Партизански покрет у Србији 1941–1944*, (Београд: Службени гласник 2023).

⁴ The Communist Party had a far more complex view of the relationship between the national question and the construction of socialism. Cp. Predrag J. Marković, „Odnos Partije i Tita prema jugoslovenskom i nacionalnom identitetu“, in: *Identitet: Srbi i/ili Jugosloveni*, edited by Svetlana Ljuboja, Predrag Marković, Laslo Sekelj, Mirjana Vasović (Beograd: Institut za evropske studije, 2001), 13–62. More in: Hilde Katrine Haug, *Creating a Socialist Yugoslavia. Tito, Communist Leadership and the National Question* (London: I.B. Tauris 2012). Certainly, this does not mean that many were not carried away by the idea problematized by Коста Николић, *Мут о партизанском југословенству* (Београд: Завод за уџбенике, 2015). It was particularly

of Communists of Yugoslavia took a completely opposite direction, and the increasingly complex mechanisms of division of power in socialist Yugoslavia affected this self-perception of Serbs and has prompted reexamination of their view of their own position in the common state.⁵

As issues of identity cannot be measured on an exact scale, it is difficult to capture the nuances of this phenomenon with precision, especially within a collective. At the same time, in the conditions of limited freedom of expression that characterized the Yugoslav public sphere, people often spoke in codes and hints. And yet it is obvious that even in the 1960s, this dissatisfaction was accumulated, to be manifested in the 1970s, and escalated and finally exploded during the 1980s.⁶ Moving from the margins to the very center of the national discourse, moving from the cultural sphere to the political sphere, descending from the elite to the masses and vice versa, this issue had a decisive impact on the transformation of the Serbian identity. The manner in which it was posed, neglected and resolved deepened the Yugoslav crisis, and ultimately contributed significantly to the bloody collapse of that country.

Intertwining various sources – census results, public debates, political discourse, memoirs and archival documents, this article follows some of the main stages of that process, the outlines of which are obvious but important details still elude us, probably because we are still living its consequences today.

Incubation: (Con)federalization and the erosion of Serbian ontological security in Yugoslavia

According to the 1971 census, 8,143,246 people declared themselves Serbs in Yugoslavia. Of that number, just over 6 million lived in Socialist Republic (SR) of Serbia, along with 1,393,148 in Bosnia and Herzegovina and 626,789 in

expressed in the public debate between Dobrica Ćosić and Dušan Pirjevac. Cf. Agustín Cosovschí, „Between the Nation and Socialism in Yugoslavia. The Debate between Dobrica Ćosić and Dušan Pirjevac in the 1960s“, *Slovanský přehled*, 101, (2015), 41–65.

⁵ Tomaž Ivešič, „The Yugoslav National Idea Under Socialism: What Happens When a Soft Nation-Building Project Is Abandoned?“, *Nationalities Papers*, 49(1), (2021), 142–161. The previous efforts towards the creation of a Yugoslav identity is written about in this collection by Ивана Добривојевић Томић, *From integral Yugoslavism to brotherhood and unity. Attempts to build the Yugoslav identity of the youth*. About abandoning this policy in this collection is written by Kosta Nikolić, *Are identity conflicts in multi-ethnic states inevitable? A case study of the former Yugoslavia*.

⁶ More on identity changes during this decade in Audrey Helfant Budding, “Yugoslavs into Serbs: Serbian National Identity, 1961–1971.”, *Nationalities Papers*, 25(3), (1997), 407–426.

Croatia, 46,465 in Macedonia, 39,512 in Montenegro and 20,512 in Slovenia.⁷ Although the number of those in Yugoslavia who declared themselves Serbs decreased in percentages from 42.1% (1961) to 39.7% (1971), there were no serious signs of dissatisfaction with Yugoslavia among them. The prevailing belief was that the Serbian national question was resolved in it. Moreover, only the Serbian leadership did not object to the introduction of the census choice *Yugoslav* in the 1971 census.⁸ There was no fear of “melting” Serbs into Yugoslavs, and such a tendency was even reflected in public opinion polls, conducted at that very time by the Institute for social sciences. Thus, for example, 42% of the surveyed Belgrade youth opted for the Yugoslav national identity in 1971, while the following year even more than half of the youth believed that the Yugoslav nation should be gradually created.⁹ However, this enthusiasm showed that the young people did not understand that the League of Communists of Yugoslavia not only abandoned this concept of ethnic Yugoslavism, but perceived it as a serious problem, as a potential basis for Ranković-type unitarism, if not the dreaded specter of Greater Serbian hegemony under the guise of integral Yugoslavism.¹⁰

Therefore, the Yugoslav orientation among the Serbs was put to a difficult test by the transformation of that community, which took place in the early 1970s in turbulent circumstances, marked by an outburst of nationalism in Croatia, during the “Croatian Spring”, a mass movement on the wings of which the leadership

⁷ Bearing in mind the complexity of national identities in Yugoslavia, this issue should be taken with a grain of salt, since there were certainly people who declared themselves Serbs, but felt themselves Yugoslavs (or vice versa), or those who felt both Montenegrins and Serbs, and so on. However, it is an official statistical data, which still serves as an important indicator. All data on the number and distribution of the population, as well as its religious and ethnic affiliation, taken from the website of the Statistical Office of Serbia, <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/oblasti/popis/prethodni-popisi/>, visited on 2 July 2024. Tabular views of the statistics mentioned in this paper are available in the electronic version of this paper on the website.

⁸ Слободан Селинић. „Национално питање у попису становништва Југославије 1971“, *Токови историје* 24, 1, (2016), 63–96.

⁹ Dragomir Pantić, Mijat Damjanović, *Omladina Beograda o međunacionalnim odnosima* (Београд: Институт друштвених наука, Центар за истраживање јавног мњења, 1971), 16, 48; Велимир Томановић, „Мишљење Београђана о томе како би требало да се развијају међунационални односи у нас“, приредио Фирдус Џинић, *Јавно мњење Београда: Извештаји и студије* 73 (Београд: Институт друштвених наука. Центар за истраживање јавног мњења, 1973), 1, 7. These results are consistent with the absence of nationalist overtones during the 1968 student demonstrations in Belgrade.

¹⁰ This issue was effectively closed at the Ninth Congress of the SKL in 1969. More in Tomaž Ivešić, *The Rise and Fall of Communist Yugoslavism: Soft Nation-Building in Yugoslavia* (London: Routledge 2023).

of the League of Communists of Croatia demanded more sovereignty for this republic.¹¹ Although Tito crushed this movement in 1971, he felt its strength, giving the green light for decentralization subsequently. It was hard not to get an impression that some of the key demands of the punished “Springers” were actually granted through the opening of the process of constitutional changes that aimed at increasing many of the republic's powers in relation to the federation.¹²

This, in turn, caused a reaction in Belgrade, clearly expressed already after the publication of the draft of 23 constitutional amendments in early 1971. The main changes were related to strengthening the position of the republics in relation to the Yugoslav federation, as well as the provinces in relation to the Socialist Republic of Serbia.¹³ Although the Serbian members of the Constitutional Commission did not protest or offer alternative solutions, resistance to this concept of decentralization was unusually strongly expressed during the public discussion on the draft amendment organized within the Section of the Association of University Lecturers at the Belgrade Faculty of Law on 18-22 March 1971. Some of the protests there struck at the very heart of the amendment. Budimir Košutić believed that “this essentially changes the position of certain Yugoslav nations. Since the republics are not nationally homogenous, the position of the other peoples living in them is fundamentally changing.” Radoslav Stojanović warned: “With this kind of solution to our constitutional and political system will we create a national question in Yugoslavia in its full extent (...) If we reduce Serbia again to the Pashaluk of Belgrade, Serbian nationalism will be created by the very objective force of the laws that operate at this moment in social development.”¹⁴

The biggest scandal was caused by Mihailo Đurić's speech, entitled “Invented Intrigues”: “We should be clear about the fact that Yugoslavia is already almost just a geographical concept, since on its soil or, more precisely, on its ruins, under the guise of consistently developing equality between the peoples who live in it, several independent, even opposing national states are being established.”

¹¹ Đuro Kesar Bilbija, Nenad Stefanović, *Geneza Maspoka u Hrvatskoj* (Beograd: Književne novine 1990); Tvrtko Jakovina (prir.), *Hrvatsko proljeće, 40 godina poslije*, (Zagreb: Centar za demokraciju i pravo Miko Tripalo 2012).

¹² Jill Irvine, „Hrvatsko proljeće i raspad Jugoslavije“, *Političke analize* 7(2), (2011); T. Jakovina, *op. cit.*, xxi-xxii.

¹³ *Службени лист Социјалистичке Федеративне Републике Југославије*, година XXVII, број 29, Београд, 8 јул 1971.

¹⁴ *Анали Правног факултета у Београду*, (мај-јун 1971), 224, 266, <https://anali.rs/xml/197-1971c/1971-3-s/Anali-1971-3-zabranjeni-broj.pdf> accessed on 2.7.2024.

In such circumstances, he emphasized that “we must be aware of our historical responsibility before the nation to which we belong, then we must know that for the Serbian people at this time the question of its identity and integrity is of the greatest importance, therefore the question of its political, state-legal unification.” He expressed the opinion that “the Serbian people are already in an unequal position compared to other peoples in Yugoslavia, so the proposed constitutional change is, ultimately, directed against their deepest life interests. The ultimate consequence of that change would be its complete disintegration (...) There is no republic in Yugoslavia, except perhaps Slovenia, for which the existing borders are adequate, and especially for Serbia. Do I even need to remind you that around 40% of Serbs live outside Serbia, or almost as many as Croats in SR Croatia, namely as many Slovenes, Macedonians and Muslims together? At a moment when, by force of circumstances, it has been brought to the point where it needs to re-establish its national state, can the Serbian people be indifferent to its many parts outside the current borders of the SR Serbia?”¹⁵

Although more loyal faculty, such as Dragoslav Janković, tried to counter this “ghostly and monstrous, as is every nationalist appearance, whether it originates from Croats, Serbs or anyone else”, characterizing it as a “severe nationalist falsification of history”, the genie was let out of the bottle.¹⁶ With his speech, Đurić actually opened the “Serbian question” in a way that did not suit the Serbian leadership, led by Marko Nikezić and Latinka Perović. At the time when the national awakening was heating up in Croatia, it tried to shake off any pretense of “Greater Serbian hegemony”. This was followed by a ban on the distribution of *Anali*, the magazine of the Faculty of Law, which had published presentations from the counseling sessions, and then Đurić was sentenced to two years of rigorous imprisonment for “inciting and calling for the breaking of the brotherhood and unity of the people of Yugoslavia” by “maliciously and untruthfully portraying socio-political situations”.¹⁷ Letters of support from domestic and foreign intellectuals did not help either. Moreover, a number of his colleagues from the Faculty of Law (Andrija Gams, Kosta Čavoški, Vojislav Koštunica...) were removed from teaching because of that support.

Thus, a potential debate on the impact of constitutional changes on the status of the Serbian people in Yugoslavia ended ingloriously. The opportunity to

¹⁵ Михаило Ђурић, „Смишљене смутње“, *Анали правног факултета*, (Мај-Јун 1971), 230–233.

¹⁶ Драгослав Јанковић, „Историјско разматрање поводом амандмана“, *Ibid*, 259.

¹⁷ The sentence was subsequently changed to nine months, which Đurić served in Zabela. Јовица Труља, „Досије о Михаилу Ђурићу“, *Hereticus*, 2, (2003), 189–255.

timely exchange opinions and examine various aspects of inter-republic and inter-ethnic relations was missed, and opposition dissidents closed ranks in the position of criticizing constitutional solutions.¹⁸

Frustration: The question of the constitution of the SR Serbia and deterioration of relations with its autonomous provinces

Immediately after the adoption of the amendments, the writing of the entire new constitution began, and at the same time the harmonization of the Constitution of the SR Serbia with it. Since Nikezić's reform group was wiped out from the political scene in the fall of 1972, this procedure was managed by a new, but actually old leadership, in which Dragoslav Draža Marković played a key role.¹⁹ He was also the main Serbian representative among the constitution-writers, tasked with its harmonization during 1973: "At those sessions, many solutions were improved, many positions were specified and harmonized. With that, a big job, and for me a big part of the obligations, was completed. Life will be easier and better in the coming period."²⁰ A few days after the promulgation of the Constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ), on 21 February 1974, the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Serbia was also adopted: "Thus, finally, many years of work came to an end. Successfully? Who knows? Time will tell."²¹

The time spoke, and only within a few months: "However, things are developing unfavorably. Serbia is quite isolated. From Bosnia, Slovenia, and even Montenegro, there are reservations toward us in many circles. Croats are simmering in their own sauce. (...) There will continue to be problems with Vojvodina;

¹⁸ Dobrica Cosic, „Trials, verdicts and naïve questions“, July 17, 1972., objavljeno u „Yugoslavia: Truth in art“. *Index on Censorship*, 13(4), (1984), 61–70. The gradual grouping of criminal dissident intellectuals along the lines of Serbian nationalism was described in detail by Jasna Dragovic Soso, *'Saviours of the Nation': Serbia's Intellectual Opposition and the Revival of Nationalism*, (London : C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2002).

¹⁹ Slavoljub Đukić, *Slom srpskih liberala: tehnologija političkih obračuna Josipa Broza* (Beograd: Filip Višnjić 1990). Firsthand account of this purge in Latinka Perović, *Zatvaranje kruga. Ishod rascepa 1971–1972*. (Sarajevo: University Press – izdanja Magistrat, 2018).

²⁰ Dragoslav Draža Marković, *Život i politika 1967–1978* (Beograd: Rad 1987), II, 8.

²¹ D. Marković, *op. cit.*, II, 14. About the constitutional consensus in Serbia in detail: Dejan Jović, „Zašto je Srbija prighvatila Ustav 1974“ in: Dejan Jović, *Jugoslavija: država koja je odumrla. Uspón, kriza i pad Kardeljeve Jugoslavije 1974–1990* (Zagreb/Beograd: Prometej/Samizdat B92), 175–206. More about the constitutional solutions in the forthcoming book *Симболично и стварно у уставу СФРЈ*, especially in the contributions of Aleksandar Miletic and Petar Žarković.

Kosovo is a reserve for any anti-Serbian activity. (...) Certainly, we should see what needs to be corrected in our country; remove everything that breeds mistrust. (...) However, that is one thing, and it is another to come to terms with attempts at discrimination and the constant carrying of the 'guilt of the Great Serbian fathers.'²² Soon, a stumbling block appeared with Kosovo as well, in the form of allocations to encourage the development of underdeveloped parts of the country. Throughout Yugoslavia, this topic was an inexhaustible source of disagreements. The north of the SFRJ (mostly Slovenia and Croatia) grumbled about having to allocate for the southern and central parts of the country, while those areas felt that they were being exploited, because economic differences were increasing unstoppably, instead of decreasing under socialism.²³

Serbia had the same problem within its own borders, since Vojvodina and Belgrade belonged to the more developed parts of the SFRJ, central Serbia was around the average, and Kosovo belonged to the least developed part of the country, so the total GDP figure was slightly above 90. Thus, soon there were "serious disagreements about the policy of further assistance for the faster development of Kosovo from the funds of the SR Serbia." Vojvodinians came forward with a thesis about the relative lagging of Vojvodina's inability to further participate in the realization of those additional efforts."²⁴ As the Serbian leadership found itself between the federal hammer and the provincial anvil, Marković tried to cushion the pressure by circulating material on the dysfunctional state of Serbia that he had been collecting for two years in order to show "to what extent the issue of constituting the SR Serbia as a state union, as a unique socio-political union, as a Republic, has come to a constitutional-legal and factually realistic impasse."²⁵

This is how the text of the working group of Serbian Presidency under the title *SR Serbia and its Constituent Autonomous Provinces – Constitutional Position and Practice* was finalized. It moved within the framework of "constitutional norms that contain initial positions on the categories of republic and province and norms that determine their specific rights and duties", pointing out the existence of "different, even opposite understandings and tendencies and practices of

²² D. Marković, *op. cit.*, II, 41.

²³ Thus, the GDP in the republics (if 100 is taken as the Yugoslav average) was very unequal. In Slovenia in 1962 it was 189, and in Kosovo 34. Ten years later, it was 194 for Slovenia and 32 for Kosovo. D. Jović. *op. cit.*, 211. More in: Ljubomir Madžar, "Ko koga eksploatiše. in: *Srpska strana rata. Trauma i katarza u istorijskom pamćenju*, edited by Nebojša Popov. (Beograd : B92, 1996), 171–200.

²⁴ D. Marković, *op. cit.*, II, 250.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 307.

implementing the Constitution.” Particularly emphasized was the “duality of the being of a socialist autonomous province”, as a subject of Yugoslav federalism and an integral part of Serbia simultaneously. Denying “any side of this complex being of the province is against the spirit and letter of the Constitution of the SFRJ”, emphasized the Blue Book, named after the color of its cover.²⁶

Initial reception was promising: “SR Serbia and its position are in the center of everyone’s attention. It is apparent that it could no longer go on like this. The conditions are ripe for understanding that equality for all in the SFRJ cannot be achieved in conditions of inequality for Serbs. Therefore, everything related to the position of the autonomous provinces in SR Serbia and the SFRJ began to be more realistically discussed and evaluated. E. Kardelj and S. Dolanc agreed with the prepared materials. (...) I am exceptionally pleased about that.”²⁷ However, it turned out that the road to a solution was neither quick nor direct. It turned out that Kardelj “fully realizes the absurdity of the situation we got into (...) but believes that the main battle must be fought by us. He believes that the other republics will remain disinterested and passive, that Comrade Tito himself will have a similar attitude, at least at this stage. (...) We have agreed, somehow, on further (...) work on the material, and we have foreseen the discussions that we will hold with the most responsible comrades from the autonomous provinces.”²⁸

However, the outcome was the complete opposite of Marković’s ideas. Marković came under attack from the very beginning, mostly from Serbian cadres in the federation and the provinces. “Why did Draža need to set this up now,” asked Miloš Minić, Federal Secretary for Foreign Affairs.²⁹ Gane Radosavljević from Vojvodina and Dušan Ristić from Kosovo took a similar stance. “I am not worried about that. The question had to be opened. The fact that it fell into my hands – I don’t care, all the better. I am a ‘unitarian’ and a ‘Greater Serbian centralist’ after all. However, my conscience is completely clear. (...) Precisely, this inadequate position of the autonomous provinces and SR Serbia in particular represented, in recent times, if not the only, then the main source fueling the Serbian nationalism.”³⁰

²⁶ *Социјалистичка република Србија и аутономне покрајине у њеном саставу: Уставни положај и пракса* (Београд: Радна групе Председништва Социјалистичке Републике Србије, 1977). More in Слободан Бјелица, „Плава књига и њена рецепција 1977. године”, *Токови историје*, 2, (2016), 41–42.

²⁷ D. Marković, *op. cit.*, II, 328.

²⁸ D. Marković, *op. cit.*, II, 333.

²⁹ *Ibid*, II, 318.

³⁰ *Ibid*, II, 334.

In the first half of 1977, it became clear that the group gathered around Marković (Petar and Ivan Stambolić, Dušan Čkrebić, Tihomir Vlaškalić) did not have enough strength to impose the conclusions of the Blue Book on the provincial leaders, and that they were even facing resistance from among the “Serbs” – Živan Vasiljević, Moma Dugalić, Mirko Popović). Those problems became more acute at the meeting of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia, where Mahmud Bakali, who demanded the disqualification of the working group's materials, was joined by Miloš Minić, Živan Berisavljević and Stevan Doronjski, and especially Kolj Široka.³¹ Faced with such a strong opposition, Marković concluded: “It is better to postpone some solutions than to agree to fundamentally unacceptable compromises.”³² Thus, the Blue Book was practically buried as an initiative, since with such disunited leadership, it was illusory to expect the support of Tito or Kardelj to change the relationship between the republic and the provinces, especially since the former was at an advanced age and completely focused on foreign policy, and the latter was seriously ill. Consequently, while the other republics achieved the elements of statehood, Serbia was paralyzed: “The Serbian political elite felt cheated and unequal compared to others. (...) a sense of loss, inequality and injustice has been created in Serbia.”³³

The Blue Book thus remained in limited circulation among the party leadership, which once again missed the chance to address the “Serbian question” in a clear way, recognizable to the public. Instead of discussion, mantras were spoken, not only in political but also in scholarly circles.³⁴ So, eyes wide shut, the leadership was rushing into the next decade, which began with Tito's illness and death in May 1980. Despite the glamorous funeral, the oaths to “continue on Tito's path” and the morbid catchphrase “After Tito, Tito” notwithstanding, it was clear that the country was moving in an uncertain direction. That was no secret for the informed public, which the political elite called the “street”. That street was buzzing louder and louder that Serbia had been deceived and reduced to the

³¹ Ibid, II, 367.

³² Ibid, II, 369.

³³ D. Jović, *op. cit.*, 258–259. More about the role of constitutional reforms in the development of the Yugoslav crisis: Vojin Dimitrijević, “The 1974 Constitution as a Factor in the Collapse of Decaying Totalitarianism”, in: *The Road to War in Serbia*, edited by Nebojsa Popov (Budapest: Central University Press, 2000). 399–424.

³⁴ A good example of that sterility was the gathering initiated at the end of April 1978 by the section for inter-ethnic relations of the Central Committee of the Serbian Communist Party: Dušan Janjić, Mirko Mirković (eds.), *Postanak i razvoj srpske nacije. Neki metodološko-teorijski problemi u izučavanju nastanka i razvitak srpske nacije* (Beograd: Narodna knjiga/Marksistički centar CK SK Srbije, 1979).

Pashaluk of Belgrade, and the relations between Serbia and its provinces had deteriorated to such an extent that Serbia itself was given an informal, but very telling acronym – UŽAS (an acronym from “Narrow Serbia”, meaning horror).

Escalation: The Kosovo uprising and the emergence of ethnic panic

Two coinciding events from 1981 had a great influence on the further shaping of the discourse on the Serbian national question and its relationship to the Yugoslav community – the new census results and the riots in Kosovo. The apparently trivial display of dissatisfaction with the position of students at the University of Pristina on 11 March 1981 spread throughout the entire province by the end of the month, escaping any control.³⁵ During the clashes with the police, which continued at the beginning of April and even hindered the arrival of famed Tito's relay to Kosovo, cheers for Enver Hoxha were heard, as well as slogans such as “Trepča is working – Belgrade is being built” and “Kosovo is a republic”. The momentum of the protests forced the Pristina leadership to qualify them as “a counter-revolutionary act inspired by Albanian nationalism and irredentism” on March 29”.³⁶ 258 people, of which 119 policemen, were injured in the riots that took on the character of a rebellion. The first victims fell too, so the Presidency of the SFRJ convened an emergency meeting in early April in the capacity of the Supreme Command, whose unanimous conclusion was that Kosovo events constituted a counter-revolution aimed at inciting ethnic nationalism with the aim of breaking up Yugoslavia and annexing Kosovo to Albania. In order to crush this attempt, the head of the federal police, Franjo Herljević, proposed that the state of emergency, which had been introduced earlier in Priština, Vučitrn and Uroševac, be extended to the territory of the entire province.³⁷

The qualification of these events as a counter-revolution entailed serious consequences. While the army and the police broke up the demonstrations with repressive measures, along with human casualties and extensive arrests, there were also fractures within the League of Communists of Kosovo. The counter-revolution in Kosovo was condemned during April and May by leaders from al-

³⁵ On the course of the demonstrations, see Петар Ристановић, *Демонстрације Албанаца на Косову I-III*, <https://stellapolarebooks.com/2021/05/07/petar-ristanovic/>, accessed on 3.7.2024. More in Петар Ристановић, *Косовско питање, 1974–1989* (Нови Сад/Београд: Прометеј/Информатика, 2019).

³⁶ Sinan Hasani, *Kosovo – istine i zablude*, (Zagreb: Centar za informacije i publicitet 1986), 30.

³⁷ Архив Југославије (АЈ), фонд 68, Седница Председништва СФРЈ, 5. април 1981. године, Политичко-безбедносна ситуација у САП Косово, 32.

most all levels of government (Fadilj Hodža, Stane Dolanc, Lazar Mojsov, Ali Šukrija), leading to an avalanche of accusations. Predictably, Albanian leaders from Kosovo found themselves under the greatest pressure, being blamed for their lack of vigilance, so 1,500 members were excluded from the League of Communists of Kosovo in the process of mass differentiation.³⁸

In a way, the protests came as an unexpected spur to the Serbian leadership, which until then had been at an impasse regarding the issue of changing relations with its provinces. The request of protesters for the republic status of Kosovo, was interpreted as the first step towards its separation from Yugoslavia. In order to completely delegitimize these irredentist tendencies, the riots, the causes of which were obviously complex, were interpreted not only to the protesters' intention to annex Kosovo to Albania, but to their desire to remove Serbs, Montenegrins and other non-Albanian population from this territory.³⁹ Although there was not much evidence for this, in an electrified situation, fueled by the open hostility of Enver Hoxha's Albania, as simple as unfounded conclusion imposed itself: "All discovered hostile organizations and groups are characterized by persistence in achieving their strategic goal – the creation of an ethnically pure 'Kosovo-Republic' and annexation to Albania".⁴⁰

The full force of this accusation was felt at the 22nd session of the Central Committee of the SKJ held on 17 November 1981, convened to define a political platform for the development of SAP Kosovo.⁴¹ A good part of the lively discussion was related to breaking the specter of "ethnically pure Kosovo", which had already been accepted as a well-known fact by then. Dobroslav Ćulafić, the future Federal Secretary for Internal affairs, already in his introductory speech warned that "the counter-revolution ... is at work and is achieving one of its envisaged goals – an ethnically pure Kosovo".⁴² Miloš Minić, the Federal Secretary for Fore-

³⁸ S. Hasani, *op. cit.*, 24.

³⁹ АЈ, фонд 68, Седница Председништва СФРЈ, Политичко-безбедносна ситуација у САП Косово, 56. Although security data is unavailable, its logic can be reconstructed from publications by authors close to the secret service. Cf. Nikola Milovanović, *Kroz tajni arhiv Udbe* (Београд: Sloboda, 1986), II, 240–273.

⁴⁰ Коста Михаиловић (ed.), *Косово и Метохија: прошлост, садашњост, будућност: зборник радова са међународног научног скупа одржаног у Београду, 16–18. марта 2006. год.* (Београд: САНУ, 2007), 353–356.

⁴¹ Петар Ристановић, "Платформа за Косово – Одговор Централног комитета Савеза комуниста Југославије на демонстрације Албанаца и покушај побуне 1981. године", *Баштина*, 45, (2018), 367–382.

⁴² 22 Седница ЦКСКЈ, *Политичка платформа за акцију СКЈ у развоју социјалистичког самоуправљања, братства и јединства и заједништва на Косову*, (Београд: Комунист 1981).

ign Affairs, presented the foreign policy angle of this problem, attacking the statement of Enver Hoxha, attributing a large part of the responsibility for the events in Kosovo to Albania, and outlining the two-stage plan of the protesters from inspiring the “Kosovo-Republic” to its separation and annexation to Albania.⁴³ The third stage, which referred to the expulsion of the non-Albanian population, was hinted at by Milojko Drulović, who was stressing the racist character of the Kosovo counter-revolution, and Bogoljub Nedeljković, who concluded that “the aspirations of the enemy for an ethnically pure Kosovo and those who stand it are resembling the Nazis who advocated theories of superior and inferior races”.⁴⁴ Dr Koča Jončić, an expert on inter-ethnic relations in Yugoslavia, went the furthest. He insisted that “it should be said more openly and clearly that this *excessively* high birth rate is precisely to the detriment of the Albanian people themselves... that this spontaneous, uncontrolled birth rate is encouraged and used as a tool and argument for their hostile activity, in conjunction, by all nationalist elements within the Albanian people in Kosovo”. He thought that “inciting the forced emigration of Serbs and Montenegrins is complementary to it, because mutually and together they tend to direct these two actions towards the same goal: an ‘ethnically pure Kosovo’ and other areas of Yugoslavia...”.⁴⁵ He supported his presentation with a series of statistics, using the results of the census that had just arrived. Although he did not clarify how exactly the Albanian extremists had come together to conquer Kosovo by increasing birth rate, and certainly did not show how this plan had been implemented, he once again underlined the request to strengthen the Platform by specifying that the manipulation of high birth rate also represents the policy of “ethnically pure Kosovo”.

Although Jončić’s proposal did not find its place in the Platform, its text confirmed the counter-revolutionary character of the protests, and the label of irredentists became a permanent stone around the neck of the Albanian communists. The middle generation was purged from the scene, starting with Mahmut Bakali. Wartime cadres like Fadil Hoxha, Xhavid Nimani and Veli Deva had lost their influence, and were suppressed by more loyal personnel like Sinan Hasani, while space was opened for younger ones, such as Rrahman Morina, followed by Azem Vllasi. However, the statements of this new group about the decisive fight against irredentism did not necessarily instill confidence in Belgrade, especially as the figures mentioned by Koča Jončić resonated with the public. The results of

⁴³ Ibid, 112.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 173.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 204–206.

the 1981 census showed that the downward trend of the Serbian population in Yugoslavia had continued, this time both in absolute terms (from 7,806,152 in 1961 and 8,143,246 in 1971 to 8,140,452) and in relative numbers (from 42.1% of the population of Yugoslavia in 1961, over 39, 7% in 1971 to 36.3% in 1981). It had already become clear that the Serbs were not the majority, but only the largest minority.⁴⁶ The low natural birth rate excluded the possibility of an imminent change in this trend. In Serbia itself, the population stagnated, from 6,016,811 (1971) to 6,182,155 (1981).

That stagnation was ethnically and territorially uneven. Whereas in Vojvodina the share of Serbs decreased slightly (from 55.8% to 54.2%), in Kosovo, which had in the meantime become a neuralgic point of Yugoslav international politics, their absolute number decreased from 228,264 to 209,497. Since in the same period the number of Albanians increased from 916,169 to 1,226,736, they represented an unquestionable majority in the province with 77.5 percent, as opposed to 13.2% of Serbs, 3.7% of Muslims and 1.7% of Montenegrins.⁴⁷ It was hard not to get an impression that the control package over Kosovo had been demographically lost for the Serbs. Interpreted in this key, the 1981 census results contributed to the growth of Serbian ontological security, which was still shaken by the constitutional changes, into a direction of a true ethnic panic, especially as it turned out that the decrease in the number of Serbs was not only a consequence of the lower birth rate, but also of emigration from the province.⁴⁸

Why were Serbs leaving Kosovo? The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts became interested in this phenomenon, forming at the suggestion of academics Miloš Macura, Antonije Isaković and Radomir Lukić an interdepartmental commission with the aim of researching the migration of the Serbian and Montenegrin population from Kosovo. Summarizing the results of an extensive survey by Ruža Petrović and Marina Blagojević, which indicated that in addition to disturbed inter-ethnic relations, the economic moment was also an important factor in emigration, it was nevertheless stated that “the ethnic homogenization of

⁴⁶ Републички завод за статистику, <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/oblasti/popis/prethodni-popisi/>, accessed on 2.7.2024. Among Croats, there was a similar downward trend from 23.1% in 1961, over 22.1% in 1971 to 19.7% in 1981.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ More about the dynamics of emigration in: Marina Blagojević, “Iseljavanje sa Kosova”, in N. Popov, *op. cit.*, II, 265–300. On the concept of ontological security in international relations, see Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma”, *European Journal of International Relations*, 12(3), (2006), 341–370. It is elaborated on the example of contemporary Serbia Filip Ejdus, *Crisis and ontological insecurity – Serbia’s anxiety over Kosovo’s secession* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

Kosovo and Metohija (...) is in full swing, achieving one of the basic goals of the Albanian chauvinists and secessionists.”⁴⁹

The character of emigration became the central topic not only in scientific, but also in political circles. It was used to reopen the issue of relations between this republic and its provinces: “The unresolved issue of the constitutional structuring of Serbia today is the only real social root of the existence of Serbian nationalism, which we have not yet managed to stamp out,” claimed Draža Marković: “It is not a natural thing that the national composition of those leaving Kosovo is such that the majority of them are Serbs and Montenegrins”.⁵⁰ The opinion that the ethnic homogenization of Kosovo continued with the methods of displacing the Serbs was shared by the Central Committee of the League of Communist of Serbia. Its senior members such as Nikola Ljubičić and Petar Stambolić agreed on this, so did their younger successors. Ivan Stambolić, Petar’s cousin, who presented these views to the Yugoslav Party Presidency in July 1985, stating that “there is particular dissatisfaction with the state of emigration”, and that “even among the cadres there is the most widespread awareness that an ethnically pure Kosovo, as the basic strategic goal of the irredentist, exists and will materialize in a foreseeable, measurable, very short time.”⁵¹

Unlike before, this time the discussions did not remain behind closed doors, but made their way into party speeches and the media. *Borba* warned: “Out of about 700 ethnically pure or almost pure Albanian villages in Kosovo, in many of them there was not a single Albanian family only a decade ago.”⁵² However, it is difficult to assess to what extent the Serbian party elite formed a public discourse in this regard, and to what extent it followed the escalations of collective frustration. There were indeed reasons for dissatisfaction, not all of them necessarily political. As Yugoslavia faltered more and more visibly after Tito’s death, shorta-

⁴⁹ Ружа Петровић, Марина Благојевић, *Сеобе Срба и Црногораца са Косова и Метохије. Резултати анкете спроведене 1985–1986*, (Београд: САНУ, 1989), 1.

⁵⁰ D. Jović, 290. On the continuous efforts of various factions of the LCS aimed at changing the constitutional position of Serbia, see *ibid*, 256–290.

⁵¹ „Dramu Kosova neće razrešiti samo reči i papiri“, in: Ivan Stambolić, *Rasprave o SR Srbiji, 1979–1986*. (Zagreb: Globus, 1987), 110; AJ, 507 (ЦК СКЈ), 131 седница Председништва ЦКСКЈ, одржана 23.јула 1985; Slobodan Selinić, „Ivan Stambolić u arhivskim dokumentima u prvoj polovini osamdesetih godina 20. veka“, in: *Arhivska građa u teoriji i praksi*, 5, edited by Slobodanka Cvetković, (Novi Sad: Arhivističko društvo Srbije, Arhiv Vojvodine, 2022), 278–298. Insights into the complex relationships within Serbian post-war political groups are given by Душан Чкребић, *Поглед искоса: људи, судбине, коментари* (Београд: Службени гласник, 2009) and *Употреба Србије: оптужбе и признанја Драже Марковића* (Београд: Beseda 1990).

⁵² *Борба*, 21. јун 1986.

ges and austerity measures became everyday reality, and unemployment was especially pronounced in Serbia. “At the end of June 1983, there were 439,146 unemployed people in Serbia, “, of which 270,278 were in the central part of the republic, 86,233 in Vojvodina, 86,233 in Kosovo. A third of the unemployed Yugoslavs were in central Serbia.”⁵³

In the conditions of an insufficiently open society, conclusions on the mood of the people can only be inferred indirectly. It manifested itself in unusual ways, for instance through a spontaneous gathering of tens of thousands of people during the funeral of Aleksandar Ranković in August 1983. They did not simply come to bury him, but to express their dissatisfaction with the state of the country. However, Ranković was not remembered as an economic prodigy, but as a unitarist with a heavy hand, in whose time the Serbs in Yugoslavia had their say. As such, he was sent to “the other world” by the crowd that gathered to mourn that time, but it also showed that that time could be returned.⁵⁴ The frustration among the Serbs that began with the feeling of inequality with other republics and confinement within the borders of the “Belgrade Pashaluk” escalated with the burning feeling of humiliation due to the inability to help their Kosovar compatriots in need.

Mobilization: Working toward the national gathering of Serbs

It was not only Serbian party cadres who noticed these escalations. Dissident-minded intellectuals, and even entire institutions under their influence, were actively involved in channeling dissatisfaction in the direction of national mobilization. This “awakening of Serbia” developed on the subject of Kosovo. In that field, the Serbian government was more willing to tolerate nationalist outbursts in order to increase pressure on the provincial and federal leadership. Utterances that only a few years ago would have had serious consequences were now tolerated. In this sense, the discourse about the threat toward the Serbian people, penetrated the public sphere from various sources. Since the Serbian Orthodox Church was at its forefront, this concern was expressed in archaic, yet effective formulations. Already in the spring of 1982, its newspaper *Pravoslavlje* published the *Plea for the protection of Serbian people and its sanctuaries*: “The Serbian people have no more precious word than the word Kosovo (...) Kosovo is our memory, our home, the focus of our

⁵³ Слободан Селинић, „Србија и политички односи у Југославији у време сахране Александра Ранковића 1983: Тачке сукоба“, *Историја 20. века*, 2, (2021), 416.

⁵⁴ Video recording of funeral of Alensandar Ranković at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6eu1HkDyLDI>, accessed on 2.7.2024.

being.” The plea also warned that, unless something was done, this process would end in “peaceful, genocidal extermination.”⁵⁵

The plea remained unsigned, in all probability as a kind of examination of the reactions of the authorities. However, there was no need for that. The Serbian Orthodox Church became a serious interlocutor in renegotiation of ethnic relations in Serbia.⁵⁶ It occupied an increasingly significant place in the Serbian public, not only in public performances, but also in the capital's landscape, with the continuation of the restoration of the Temple of St. Sava. This strengthened the positions of those church dignitaries who were at the forefront of national mobilization, such as the influential theologian Atanasije Jevtić, who was the author of this plea. He continued to develop the thesis about the continuity of the martyrdom of the Serbian people throughout Yugoslavia, especially emphasizing the Ustasha crimes against the Serbs committed during World War II in his travel writings entitled *From Kosovo to Jadovno*.⁵⁷

Reviving the memory of the genocide against the Serbs during World War II, pierced yet another neuralgic point in the Serbian collective memory, on the wave of widely circulated novel *Knife* written in 1982 by Vuk Drašković's and Jovan Radulović's play *Golubnjača*, which was played in 1982 and 1983 and then removed from the repertoire, only contributing to its popularity and creating the impression of a cover-up.⁵⁸ A similar counter-effect was caused by other attempts to suppress these tendencies, especially when they came from outside the Serbian environment, such as the *White Book* prepared by the Center for Information and Propaganda of the CK SKJ of Croatia at the order of Stipe Šušteršič.⁵⁹ It included quotes from the works of about 120 public workers whose content had been marked as politically unacceptable, about ninety of which were from Serbia. However, things had already gone so far that the intellectuals who were on that “black list” rejoiced, and those who were omitted by Šušteršič envied them.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ „Апел за заштиту српског живља и његових светиња на Косову“, *Православље*, 364, 15. мај 1982, 1-4.

⁵⁶ Бојан Ђокић, „Српска Православна Црква о међуетничким односима у Социјалистичкој Аутономној Покрајини Косово у периоду 1981–1985.“ *Теолошки погледи* 50, 1, (2017), 115–148; Radmila Radic, “The Church and the 'Serbian Question'”, in: *The Road to War in Serbia-Trauma and Catharsis*, edited by Nebojša Popov, (Budapest: CEU Press, 2000), 247–274.

⁵⁷ „Од Косова до Јадовна, путни записи јеромонаха Атанасија Јевтића“, *Православље* број 400, 15. XI 1983; 404, 15. I 1984, и 405, 1. II 1984.

⁵⁸ Јован Радуловић, *Случај Голубњаца – за и против*, (Београд: Филип Вишњић 2008); С. Селинић, *Србија 1980–1986*. 442–450.

⁵⁹ *Bela knjiga-1984: obračun sa "kulturnom kontrarevolucijom..." u SFRJ*, edited by Kosta Nikolić, Srđan Cvetković, Đoko Tripković (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2010).

⁶⁰ D. Jović, *op. cit.*, 351–362.

It also turned out that Yugoslav nationalisms were feeding off each other. Thus, for example, the effort of Franjo Tuđman, a retired JNA general and a Croatian dissident, to reduce the number of victims of the Ustasha concentration camp Jasenovac earned him a three-year prison sentence in Croatia, but at the same time aroused the fear in the Serbian intellectual elite of the underestimation of this crime, which was expressed in the tendency to exaggerate the number of its victims that continued up to this day.⁶¹ The facts, which were really not adequately addressed in the socialist Yugoslavia, were no longer of importance. The new arrest of Tuđman, or the news about the extradition of Andrija Artuković, the Minister of Internal Affairs of the NDH, who was detained in the USA in 1984 with the intention of being extradited to Yugoslavia, did not help either. Although by the late 1980s professional preconditions were created to speak about the victims of the World War II in the language of the profession, preference was given to the language of incendiary poetics, embodied in Matija Bećković's metaphor that "Jasenovac is the largest Serbian underground city."⁶²

True competition in the heretical approach to national topics actually began in the literary elite, resulting in increasingly self-centered cultural production.⁶³ The theme of the sacrifice of the Serbian people in the First World War, opened up in the novels of Dobrica Ćosić *The Time of Death* (1972-1979), was also placed on theatre stage (*The Battle of Kolubara*, directed by Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz, 1983). This topos of collective martyrdom was fully expressed in Danko Popović's novel *The Book of Milutin* (1985), in which both first and second Yugoslavia, were seen as a tragic Serbian mistake and naivety rewarded by the ingratitude of the liberated "brethren".⁶⁴ In fact, even the process of national mobilization did not manage to overcome the difference between "Serbians" and "Serbs on the other side of the Sava and Danube", or to conceal the complex, polycentric character of the Serbian national identity.

⁶¹ Srđan Bogosavljević, „Nerasvetljeni genocid.“ in: *Srpska strana rata : trauma i katarza u isto-rijskom pamćenju*, edited by Nebojša Popov (Beograd: B92, 1996), 159–171.

⁶² The committee of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts for the collection of material on the genocide of the Serbian people and other peoples of Yugoslavia in the 20th century, which was initiated by Vladimir Dedijer, was soon instrumentalized along a similar line by Slobodan Kljakić, *Kratka istorija Odbora SANU za sakupljanje građe o genocidu nad srpskim narodom i drugim narodima Jugoslavije u XX veku*. *Catena mundi II*, edited by Predrag R. Dragić Kijuk, (Beograd-Kraljevo: Ibarske novosti, Matica Srba i iseljenika Srbije 1992), 498–515.

⁶³ Mirko Đorđević, „Književnost populističkog talasa. O populističkom talasu osamdesetih godina u Srbiji“, *Republika*, VII, 1995, 22–33.

⁶⁴ Данко Поповић, *Књига о Милутину* (Београд: Књижевне новине 1985).

Hence, points of consensus, and above all on the issue of Kosovo were in the forefront. Their words of fear and anger, which only ten years ago would have caused disbelief, were falling on fertile soil.⁶⁵ *NIN* predicted that “in just five years, there will be no more Serbs and Montenegrins; this means that in such a short time the capital city of Priština would become the largest ethnically pure center in Yugoslavia”.⁶⁶ As the space for a rational consideration of the Kosovo problem was narrowing, works of art that pointed to the unsustainability of the current state of affairs dominated the public sphere. It became the subject of songs of musicians as diverse as *Zabranjeno pušenje* (*The Cheyennes leave*: 1984: “A desolate wasteland too small for two. The Shoshones close ranks, the hooves of their enraged horses resound ominously”, 1984), *Kerber* (*Migrations*, 1986: “People turn off their stoves, leave forever. The greatest misery is to leave home, from pillar to post before the evil fate”) and Đorđe Balašević (*Don't break my locust trees*, 1986: “Slowly neighbors! You can't just come in and wreck another's. Oh, do I have to repeat? Get away from them, otherwise I will have to break you!”).⁶⁷ In the field of visual culture, Mića Popović's painting was emblematic. Entitled *May 1st, 1985*, it was inspired by the serious injuries suffered on that day by farmer Đorđe Martinović in Gornji Livoč near Gnjilane.⁶⁸ The very fact that the painter did not even have to give a title other than the date indicates that his audience was clear about what he wanted to say – that this case depicted the fate of the Serbs in Kosovo, that the Serbs were being impaled again, that something had to be done to reverse this trend.

All these claims from the fields of politics, science, activism, culture and art were intertwined in an incendiary atmosphere. They became dogmas that re-defined Serbian identity and laid the foundations for national mobilization on a very simple basis – Serbs in Yugoslavia were individually and collectively threa-

⁶⁵ The use of the subject of Kosovo in the Serbian public was analyzed by Ivan M. Baščarević in his doctorate, *Однос српске интелигенције осамдесетих година двадесетог века према косовском миту као топосу националних интереса*, (Филозофски факултет Универзитета у Београду, 2016). Реторика српске штампе током осамдесетих тема је доктората Бојана Ђокића, *Српска јавност о међунационалним односима у САП Косово 1981-1989.*, (Филозофски факултет Универзитета у Новом Саду, 2019).

⁶⁶ *НИН*, 2. фебруар 1986.

⁶⁷ Further development of this theme in popular culture is followed by Radina Vučetić, “Kosovo 1989: The (Ab)use of the Kosovo Myth in Media and Popular Culture”, *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, 69, (2021), 223–243.

⁶⁸ The case was never properly investigated, although several parallel investigations were conducted. It is difficult to find a more balanced factual description of the Martinović case than the contribution of Petar Ristanović, *Преломна тачка косовске кризе – случај Мартиновић*. <https://izgubljeniraj.com/2020/04/>, accessed on 2.7.2024.

tened and something needed to be done urgently to change this situation. Thus, in the mid-1980s, the Serbian question, timidly raised a decade earlier by the Blue Book, then pushed under the carpet, was now heard loudly. “Now they are riding the Kosovo horse”, Radomir Konstantinović and Pavle Ugrinov commented on this cultural change: “Kosovo's irredentism was just what they needed; the forced emigration of Serbs, tragic in itself, is an excuse for taking over all the media and public discourse, for the supposed defense of national goals”.⁶⁹

Activation: Raising the Serbian question on the Yugoslav level

That riding went from a trot to a gallop, especially because the Kosovo Serbs were more than mere pawns of the Serbian nomenclature or dissident opposition. The autonomous appearances of their leaders, Miloš Šolević and Petar Baletić, expressed itself through the petition of 2016 Kosovo activists from October 1985: “The Serbian people in Kosovo is exposed to genocide (...) This is the last chance to save the lives of our families in Kosovo in a legal way. Endangering the people of Kosovo means endangering Serbs in general”.⁷⁰

With their declaration packed, Dobrica Ćosić, Mihailo Marković and Ljubomir Tadić headed to Ljubljana on November 15, to exchange opinions about the situation in the country with Slovenian dissidents in the Ljubljana tavern *Mrak*.⁷¹ Although they later claimed that they were surprised to learn that the Slovenian oppositionists did not see their future in Yugoslavia, they shared the realization that the common state was finished. Ćosić pointed out that the Serbs had no reason to create either the first or the second Yugoslavia, that they gambled away alternatives to their own detriment. “At the end of the 19th century, we were the most advanced country in the Balkans in every way, politically, spiritually and institutionally. We enter Yugoslavia, our own tomb that we created ourselves. And the second time, we were creating a Yugoslavia that is killing us. (...) Only then does that lazy, primitive, unhappy consciousness realize that we are nationally endangered.”⁷² He

⁶⁹ Pavle Ugrinov, *Egzistencija* (Beograd: Prosveta 1996), 238–239.

⁷⁰ Петиција „2016”, in: Милорад Додеровић, *Како се догодио Шолевић* (Ниш: Градина 1990), 67. On local activism at Kosovo see Nebojša Vladislavljević, “Nationalism, Social Movement Theory and the Grassroot Movement of Kosovo Serbs, 1985–1990”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 54, no. 5 (July 2022), 771–790.

⁷¹ The entire conversation was recorded by the Slovenian secret service, and the transcript is available in the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia (ARS), CK ZKS, zbirka 1589/IV, tehnična enota 2637/37, Informacija o sestanku predstavnikovih meščanske desnice, ki iščejuj elemente za skupno sodelovanje.

⁷² ARS, CK ZKS, zbirka 1589/IV, tehnična enota 2637/37, Informacija ..., 15.

concluded: “Thus, we feel deceived, we sacrificed ourselves for that Yugoslavia, we are degraded in every respect, we are deeply dissatisfied.” He concluded: “We have no reason to defend Yugoslavia (...) This Yugoslavia is not our fatherland, it is not our homeland. No way. How to get out of it?”⁷³

This issue of exit was thematized by Tadić, who blamed Edvard Kardelj and “his boss” for the current situation, and especially the 1974 Constitution, which had imposed on Serbia “the tutelage of its own provinces, leaving many Serbs outside its borders.” Like Ćosić, who read the entire petition of the Kosovo Serbs to the gathered, Tadić also underlined the Albanian issue: “I absolutely give that nation the right to emancipate itself. But the way it is done (...) Impaling people with the approval of the authorities is the return of the Turkish regime. (...) They impaled a man, that's barbarism (...) That society has fallen into a horrific regression.”⁷⁴ Tadić also had a number of complaints about Serbian officials in Vojvodina: “they are the worst opponents of Serbian nationality. They are ready to give public evidence to anyone, why? Because there are enormous privileges behind it.”⁷⁵ At the same time, he noted that the Serbs in Croatia “after all the Ustasha crimes” had “absolutely no rights, no representatives, and any attempt to secure anything nationally is welcomed as Great Serbian, while in Bosnia “regressive Islam is favored. The Koran commands them how to behave in life. Give them national legitimacy, which they perceive exclusively as an anti-Serb thing.”⁷⁶

Interestingly, their Slovenian interlocutors managed not only to present their positions, which varied from confederation to independent Slovenia and its Europeanization, but also showed understanding for the Serbian problem. In particular, Taras Kermenauer pointed out “the knot of the nation. Slovenians in Yugoslavia have one advantage (...) We are not to blame for this, but we have a somewhat homogenous nation. We can always say, the republic, the nation, everything is fine. You are torn apart (...) You have the right to that country of yours. However, how to create that state now, because the Serbs are in Croatia, Bosnia, etc. (...) Therefore, I think that the objective interest of the Serbs is to fight for Yugoslavia (...) because outside of Yugoslavia, the Serbs are losing a third or more of their population”.⁷⁷

⁷³ Ibid., 17–18.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 24, 266.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 91–93; Marko Zajc, “Slovenian Intellectuals and Yugoslavism in the 1980s. Propositions, Theses, Questions”, *Südosteuropäische Hefte*, 4 (1), (2015), 46–65.

Ćosić spoke in a similar direction, stressing the importance of “the fight for the cultural unity of the Serbs in the entire area where they live and the right to develop into one creative entity.”⁷⁸ He expressed hope that “if we, our group and some broader forces of people, could get together, that’s where the visionary project comes in and cooperation is in it. Whether it is a federation or a confederation, to hell with that, if you’ll allow me.” But for France Bučar, that was the key thing. He did not dispute “your interest to fight as Serbs for Serbia. We are very much in favor of confederacy, which does not suit you.”⁷⁹ In a perplexing atmosphere, various modalities were mentioned, from centralization and a military coup to plebiscites, redrawing of borders and relocation of the population, but there was no conclusion. In the general cacophony Taras Kermenauer’s far-reaching warning was lost: “Today we are in a mutual blockade, in disintegration. (...) Then when the system falls apart, we know what, chaos ensues. Chaos is Lebanonization, it is disintegration and killing.”⁸⁰

However, it was clear that this chaos would affect different parts of Yugoslavia unequally. While the Slovenians might be able to afford separation along the existing borders of republics, for the Serbian side it would mean at the very least the creation of a significant diaspora in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, plus the loss of connection with Montenegro, and thus access to the sea. In a worse scenario, provincial borders could even permanently separate Vojvodina and Kosovo from Serbia proper and thus reduce it to the borders of 1912.

This possibility was literally driving insane an influential part of the Serbian intellectual elite.⁸¹ In their view, it would render meaningless the huge sacrifices that the Serbs had made in the creation of the first and second Yugoslavia, and thereby turn their victories into defeats, which was an old obsession of Ćosić’s. The unspoken consensus in the circles of nationalist intellectuals was that this kind of development must be prevented, at all costs. Mihajlo Marković told an unnamed police informant in November 1985 that “the current crisis can only be overcome with a coup d’état”.⁸² Antonije Isaković even anticipated the war, predicting such an outcome of the Yugoslav crisis to a stunned Latinka Perović

⁷⁸ ARS, CK ZKS, zbirka 1589/IV, tehnična enota 2637/37, Informacija ..., 80.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 71.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 44.

⁸¹ Jasna. Dragović-Soso, “Rethinking Yugoslavia: Serbian Intellectuals and the ‘National Question’ in *Historical Perspective*.” *Contemporary European History*, 13, 2, (2004), 170–84.

⁸² ARS, CK ZKS, zbirka 1589/IV, tehnična enota 2637/37, Neka saznanja i ocene u vezi sastanka pripadnika građanske desnice iz Beograda i Ljubljane, 6.

in the mid-1980s, but also comforting her: “There will be no war in Serbia, but about 86,000 people will die!”⁸³

The state of ethnic panic among the national workers quickly turned into action. Under the influence of Dobrica Ćosić, a petition of 211 Belgrade intellectuals was drawn up in early 1986 in support of the Kosovo Serb petition: “More than 700 settlements have been ethnically ‘cleansed’, emigration continues unabated, Kosovo and Metohija become ‘ethnically clean’.”⁸⁴ In April of the same year, the Association of Writers of Serbia started with protest evenings, marked by harsh words, such as Vuk Drašković’s speech: “The wail of the martyrs from Kosovo reaches us... in the desolate hope that something will happen (...) His forehead touched the very bottom of human humiliation and could go no lower than that”.⁸⁵ The anarchic rhythm of liberalization reinforced these sentiments, opening ever new spaces for their expression. All previous taboos were called into question, including not only the foundations of the “Kardelj’s” Constitution, but also Tito’s political legacy. The culprits for the existing situation, growingly deemed unbearable, were being more and more openly sought.

Implosion: The Memorandum Crisis

The SR Serbia leadership thus found itself in a very delicate situation, and even at risk of being on the list of culprits. To a large degree, it shared the dissatisfaction of the dissidents, but was not in a position to adapt to the form in which it was expressed. Nonetheless, the possibility of further confederalization of Yugoslavia became unacceptable to the majority of Serbian political factors, as it would lead to further destabilization of the SR Serbia. The organized effort aimed at its recentralization was led by Ivan Stambolić, who was by mid-1985 successful in reopening its constitutionalization along the lines of the Blue Book, not least due to the long shadow cast by the Martinović affair. At the end of October that year, the Presidency of the Central Committee of the SKJ adopted the opinion of the commission headed by Milan Kučan, Somewhat influenced by the just released petition of the Kosovo Serbs, it assessed the situation in Kosovo as tense, and

⁸³ Darko Hudelist, *Memorandum SANU, 30 godina poslije* <https://www.darkohudelist.eu/det.php?id=81>.

⁸⁴ The petition reproduced in: „Захтев за правним поретком на Косову”, *Hereticus* 3–4, 2007, 225–229.

⁸⁵ Vuk Drašković, *Odgovori* (Beograd: Piščevo izdanje, 1987), 160

recognized the need to resolve the status of Serbia, challenged by the inconsistent application of the 1974 Constitution.⁸⁶

Along with this “long march through the institutions”, Stambolić began to actively work on calming the Kosovo problem. He went to Kosovo Polje on April 7 to prevent a protest march by Serbian activists to Belgrade, to whom he told: “This is the right place to solve your problems, and any other place is wrong.” He urged them not to leave their homes, but also not to allow others to manipulate them. His message was well received, but the march was not cancelled, and a day later the activists met with the President of the SFRJ Presidency, Lazar Mojsov, in Belgrade. After their departure, Stambolić informed the Presidency that “the situation is much worse than we here think and know.” He assessed that there was a danger of mass protests, that opposition leaders in Belgrade were connected with Kosovo activists, “and the chances of them becoming leaders of the masses were increasing.”⁸⁷

These fears were not unfounded. Public opinion polls showed that the questioning of Yugoslavia was not only an obsession of the cultural elite. At the national level, it became clear that for 11% of respondents aged 18 to 25, Yugoslavism no longer meant anything, while this figure was 10% for those aged 26 to 35, which was a dramatic drop compared to their parents' generation (1% in those between 56 and 65 years old). Pupils and students (14%) were giving the tone, indicating hence the questionable future of the country.⁸⁸ At the same time, the ethnic distance grew, especially among the youth, but also in the entire population, particularly in comparison with the period of the mid-1960s.⁸⁹

Probably aware that he was losing control, Stambolić tried to build a bridge with his opposition through the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, which offered professional help in solving the accumulated problems. “We have agreed with the idea of the leadership of the Academy, a year before the Memorandum was to appear, that it would organize several teams composed of different experts who would deal with current social problems and make proposals for their solutions”, he recalled later.⁹⁰ Thus, in May 1986, the regular Assembly of SANU ma-

⁸⁶ On Stambolić's action in detail in C. Селинић, *Србија 1980–1986*, 354–382. Also in D. Jović, *Jugoslavija...* 350–358.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 359–361.

⁸⁸ Milan Miljević, Nikola Poplašen, „Politička kultura i međunacionalni odnosi”, in: *Jugoslavija na kriznoj prekretnici*, edited by Ljiljana Bačević et al., (Beograd, IDN: Centar za politikološka istraživanja i javno mnjenje, 1991), 163.

⁸⁹ Dragomir Pantić, „Nacionalna distanca građana Jugoslavije”, in: Lj. Bačević, *op. cit.*, 173.

⁹⁰ Ivan Stambolić, *Put u bespuće* (Beograd: Radio B92, 1995), 118–119.

de a decision on the formation of a commission to draft such a document. That commission included the President of the Academy, Dušan Kanazir, together with his deputy, Antonije Isaković, who became the head of the Working Group for drafting the text itself. Academicians Mihailo Marković, Nikola Pantić, Miroslav Pantić, Ljubiša Rakić, Radovan Samardžić, Vasilije Krestić and Kosta Mihailović were also in it.⁹¹

Their draft, informally called the SANU Memorandum, saw the light of day under still unclear circumstances. Extensive excerpts from this manuscript were published in *Večernje novosti* on 24 and 25 September 1986 under the unequivocal title: “An Offer of Hopelessness.”⁹² Namely, a good part of the “Memorandum” was devoted to the growing dysfunctionality of Yugoslavia, which was blamed on the 1974 Constitution. The unequal position of Serbia, its economic backwardness and political tension was blamed on to the autonomy of the provinces. Perhaps Stambolić would also stand behind such an argument. However, that was only the basis for further statements: “Physical, political, legal, cultural genocide against the Serbian population of Kosovo and Metohija is the heaviest defeat in the liberation struggles led by Serbia from Orašac in 1804 to the uprising in 1941. The responsibility for that defeat falls, first of all, on the still alive Comintern heritage in the national policy of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and the adherence of Serbian communists to that policy,” the draft emphasized, attacking the very center of power.⁹³

In dramatic vocabulary, alarming forecasts were made: “In less than ten years, if things do not change significantly, there will be no more Serbs in Kosovo, and an “ethnically pure” Kosovo, that unambiguously expressed goal of the Great

⁹¹ Apart from them, the wider group also included Pavle Ivić, Miloš Matsura, Predrag Palavestra, Dejan Medaković, Miomir Vukobratović, Ivan Maksimović, Stojan Čelić and Nikola Čobeljić. Dobrica Ćosić, Ljubomir Tadić and Jovan Đorđević, Vasilije Krestić and Kosta Mihailović were in some type of consultative body that was supposed to help the creation of the document. However, it was Krestić and Mihailović were apparently the sole authors of the draft. Василије Крестић, *Запамћења* (Нови Сад: Матица српска, 2016). 140. More in Vasilije Krestić, Kosta Mihailović, *“Memorandum SANU” Odgovori na kritike* (Beograd: SANU 1995); Audrey Helfant Budding, “Systemic Crisis and National Mobilization: The Case of the ‘Memorandum of the Serbian Academy’”, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 22, (1998), 49–69.

⁹² This article was written by Aleksandar Đukanović, the son-in-law of the academician Jovan Đorđević, which caused a lot of speculation about how the manuscript reached him. Александар Ђукановић, „Ovo je moja istina o Memorandumu SANU“, *Новосту*, 12. децембар 2016, accessed on 22.9.2024.

⁹³ On the use of the term genocide in the memorandum in Xavier Bougarel, “From Penal Code to Memorandum: The Uses of the Term Genocide in Communist Yugoslavia”, *Serbian Studies: Journal of the North American Society for Serbian Studies*, vol. 33 no. 1, (2022), 95–109.

Albanian racists, grounded already in the programs and actions of the Prizren League in 1878-81, will be fully achieved.”⁹⁴ The position of the Serbian party did not differ much. However, here too, the authors went one step further. Adopting as an unquestionable, position that the genocide against the Kosovo Serbs had already progressed, the academics pointed to similar tendencies in other parts of Yugoslavia: “Kosovo is not the only area where the Serbian people are under the pressure of discrimination. The absolute, and not only relative, decline in the number of Serbs in Croatia is sufficient evidence for this claim. According to the 1948 census, there were 543,795 Serbs in Croatia, or 14.48%. According to the 1981 census, their number decreased to 531,502, which was 11.5% of the total number of inhabitants in Croatia.”⁹⁵ The fear was expressed that in Croatia “Serbs, as an immigrant, minority and socially inferior group, are very susceptible to assimilation. After all, the Serbian people in Croatia are exposed to a refined and effective assimilation policy.”⁹⁶

All in all, the Memorandum repeated, magnified and deepened the basic theses of Mihailo Đurić from 1971. The Serbian people are portrayed as being in danger in Yugoslavia, maliciously neglected by their South Slavic compatriots, where the same right “does not apply to Serbia due to its special legal and political position, which reflects the desire to keep the Serbian people under constant control.” The authors pointed out: “In less than fifty years, in two successive generations, twice exposed to physical destruction, forced assimilation, Christianization, cultural genocide, ideological indoctrination, devaluing and renunciation of their own tradition under an imposed guilt complex, intellectually and politically disarmed, the Serbian people were exposed to difficult trials (...) If it counts on its future in the family of cultured and civilized peoples of the world, the Serbian people must be given the opportunity to find themselves again and become a historical subject (...) to come up with a modern social and national program that will inspire current and future generations.” Formally insisting on the reform of the 1974 Constitution in the direction of strengthening the Yugoslav federation and its reorganization on democratic principles, the Memorandum left room for alternatives: “Advocating AVNOJ determinations, Serbia must also count on the fact that it does not depend only on it, that the others may have some other alternatives. That

⁹⁴ *Memorandum SANU draft*, Innovation Center Archives, Institute for Contemporary History, 57.

⁹⁵ *Мемораднум САНУ у рукопису*, 58.

⁹⁶ *Мемораднум САНУ у рукопису*, 70–71.

is why it is tasked with clearly looking at its economic and national interests in order not to be surprised by events.”⁹⁷

This unauthorized draft of about ten thousand words, which was published only in fragments in *Večernje novosti*, caused turbulent reactions in Yugoslavia. That affair simultaneously marked the end of overlapping interests between the party leadership and non-party players, and convinced Serbian leaders, especially Ivan Stambolić and Dragiša Pavlović, that tolerating “street” nationalism pays too high a political price and opens new fronts. Stambolić did not intend to give the national workers from the Academy *carte blanche* to put together a comprehensive national project. Aware of the fear this initiative caused in other republics, the Serbian leadership spared no words in condemning the Memorandum and putting pressure on SANU to renounce the text and distance itself from its authors.⁹⁸ Stambolić condemned it as “In memoriam to Yugoslavia” and a “chauvinistic initiative” calculated to “incite conflict and poison relations.” He emphasized that Serbian communists “will never accept the destruction of Yugoslavia.”⁹⁹

However, if Stambolić disavowed the Academy and distanced himself from the views of the “street”, it in turn completely turned against him. The people who stood behind the Memorandum, primarily its drafters Kosta Mihajlović and Vasilije Krestić, then also Mihailo Marković and Ljubomir Tadić, and above all Dobrica Ćosić, who was marked as its inspirer, were elevated and later accused of creating a Greater Serbian project with this endeavor. However, it is closer to the truth that they simply struck a chord to play a tune which was in the making for fifteen years. They knew it well, because they worked tirelessly on its affirmation during that period, and they also judged well that the time for action was ripe. Namely, although their text was never formally published, hectographed versions and photocopies were circulated in Belgrade, and were transmitted through taverns, sometimes by the same officials who had condemned it in party forums.¹⁰⁰ Its content was not discussed, but instead it acquired the mythical character of a prophecy that would be self-fulfilling in the fol-

⁹⁷ *Memorandum...*73. The basic tenets of this text are analyzed by D. Jović, *op. cit.*, 360–364.

⁹⁸ On the crisis of relations between the Serbian leadership and the Academy in this period from the point of view of academics: Дејан Медаковић, *Ефемерис*, (Београд: БИГЗ 1994), т. V, 150–169; Dobrica Ćosić, *Stvarno i moguće* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1988), 155–161; Василије Крестић, *op. cit.*, 140–142.

⁹⁹ Stambolić quoted in D. Jović, *op. cit.*, 367.

¹⁰⁰ Darko Hudelist, Memorandum SANU, 30 godina poslije, <https://www.darkohudelist.eu/det.php?id=81>, accessed on 22.9.2024.

lowing years.¹⁰¹ The volcano started spewing, it remained to be seen how the lava will be channeled.

Culmination: Putting Serbian question in the hands of Slobodan Milošević

Ivan Stambolić underestimated the forces he was dealing with, just as he misjudged the mood in the League of Communists of Serbia, and the situation in his immediate environment. His associate and protégé, Slobodan Milošević, saw the storm on the horizon better than he did. He was known as a tougher representative of the younger generation of the party. Already as the head of the Belgrade communists, he said at the session of the Central Committee of the SKJ that “we must get rid of the complex of unitarism” and that “we have no reason to bow before anyone”.¹⁰² It is not clear when exactly he saw the opportunity to marginalize his mentor in the wake of the growing crisis, but the fact is that he skillfully positioned himself in the memorandum affair, not criticizing the Academy publicly and thus implicitly recommending himself for the role of protector of Serbian national interests.¹⁰³

Much has been written about Milošević's coming to power, so here focus will be only on the aspects relevant for the transformation of the Serbian national identity. It is not news that Milošević prevailed by integrating elements of the nationalist rhetoric of the dissidents into his vocabulary. In Kosovo Polje at the end of April 1987, he not only said that “no one should beat this people”, but spent the whole night listening to angry people.¹⁰⁴ In his final speech, he told them in archaic language, free of bureaucratic phrases, to stay in Kosovo: “You should stay there for the sake of your ancestors and your descendants. Your ancestors would be ashamed and your descendants disappointed.” Of course, Milošević's loyalist, the director of Belgrade television, Dušan Mitević, did everything to ensure that this message reached as many people as possible, but it was not just propaganda that did its job, it was also the right moment. His

¹⁰¹ The concept of self-fulfilling prophecy was developed by Robert Merton, „The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy“, *The Antioch Review*, 8, (1948), 193–210.

¹⁰² According to С. Селинић, *Србија 1980–1986*, 344.

¹⁰³ However, at the same time, he managed to restore the shaken sense of trust in the party nomenclature and assert himself as a defender of the idea of socialism. Christian Costamagna, “Milošević posing as Saviour of the Communist Regime: A Reassessment”, in: *Debating the End of Yugoslavia*, edited Florian Bieber, Armina Galijaš and Rory Archer (London: Ashgate, 2014), 180.

¹⁰⁴ More in: Kosta Nikolić, „Niko ne sme da vas bije“. *Slobodan Milošević u Kosovu Polju 24–25. april 1987*, (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2006).

words were a comfort for many. For the first time after Tito, songs were written about a living politician: “But a handsome young speaker arrives / The setting sun sets his spiky hair ablaze / I will talk to my people on the clearing, he says / In the school yard, in the field”.¹⁰⁵

Milošević’s intra-party victory at the Eighth Session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia is also researched well.¹⁰⁶ Here, it is enough to touch on one aspect indicative of the situation in Serbia in the fall of 1987. The pretext for convening the session has almost been forgotten. Namely, during the confrontation between Milošević’s and Stambolić’s factions, a gunfight broke out in the barracks in Paraćin, in which on September 3, a soldier of Albanian nationality, Aziz Kelmendi, fired into the dormitory in disorder, killing four recruits and injuring five others. The then editor-in-chief of *Politika* Živorad Minović writes about the way the Belgrade press covered this tragedy: “When I think about all of this today, it is possible that we were wrong (...) I recall what the front page of *Politika* looked like on 4 September 1987. The first two columns: ‘Four soldiers killed’, the second three: ‘Kelmendi fired into Yugoslavia’.”¹⁰⁷ One tragedy, the background of which was not adequately investigated, since Kelmendi died during the pursuit, was elevated to the rank of the last straw. The funeral of one of the killed soldiers, Srđan Simić from Belgrade, was turned into a nationalist event, despite his father’s pleas not to do so.¹⁰⁸

Ivan Stambolić writes about it: “After the murder of soldiers in the barracks in Paraćin, there was a qualitative change in the public opinion of Serbia. (...) There was a nationalist surge in *Politika* after Paraćin. As if on command. They are starting to burn Serbia. They put the Serbs on their feet. If Milošević had planned for years what should be done to get a chance, he could not have come up with a more favorable event.”¹⁰⁹ In agreement with Stambolić, the leaders of the Belgrade communists, Dragiša Pavlović and Radmilo Kljajić, invited the editors of the main media for a briefing. Pavlović drew their attention: “The situation in Kosovo, which is not improving at the desired and promised speed, is creating a dangerous atmosphere (...) What needs to happen for us to understand that the trigger on the weapon is also being pulled by tactless words on the public sta-

¹⁰⁵ Radoslav Zlatanović, „Himna na ledini“, *Književne novine*, 1987, br. 731, 1. 5. 1987.

¹⁰⁶ Kosta Nikolić, „Kako je Slobodan Milošević izabran za vođu srpskih komunista“, *Istorija 20. veka*, 1, (2006), 9–26.

¹⁰⁷ Živorad Minović, *Ulični biograf. Knjigom na knjige Slavoljuba Đukića*, (Beograd: Altera, 2010), 104–107.

¹⁰⁸ D. Jović, *op.cit.*, 264.

¹⁰⁹ *Žrtve. Ivan Stambolić Slavku Ćuruviji*, (Beograd: Udruženje nauka i društvo Srbije, 2006), 30.

ge?”¹¹⁰ Precisely because of this criticism, in which Milošević recognized himself, Pavlović was relieved of his function at the Eighth Session, which practically sent Ivan Stambolić into political retirement. Milošević not only consolidated power, but also gained the halo of defender of Serbian interests.¹¹¹

Although on the Yugoslav stage this event was more or less interpreted as a Serbian intra-party confrontation, its tectonic character was unmistakably seen in Serbia itself. In a specific atmosphere, it was discussed, no less, not only what role should be played by the provinces in the Republic of Serbia, or SR Serbia in SFR Yugoslavia, but also what it meant to be a Serb. History became the key driver of that process. Suppressing the “shock workers” and even the “heroes of the revolution”, old figures entered the new Serbian Pantheon, at first the medieval figures of Saint Sava and his father Nemanja, then rulers like Emperor Dušan and Prince Lazar, and even kings Petar and Aleksandar and Nikola Pašić appeared on the margins. Re-traditionalization, interpreted as “the return of Serbia to itself” was also reflected in other aspects. Songs that had long been banned or suppressed flooded the market (*No one has what a Serb has, Who says that, who lies that Serbia is small, Serbian trumpets are heard from Kosovo ...*). New ones were also sung, actually augmenting the newly created political program: “Hey, Serbia from three parts, you will be whole again”.¹¹²

Political events reflected these trends, through rallies in support of Milošević's policy, which crushed his opponents in Vojvodina in the summer of 1988 in the famous “yogurt revolution”.¹¹³ With this, he won the sympathy of the most vocal part of the nationally oriented Serbian dissident circles. “We knew that he was organizing protest rallies across Serbia, that he was overthrowing party leaders in Vojvodina and Kosovo so that Serbia would become whole again from three parts (...) We knew all this, and we supported everything thunderously. We prepared and groomed the horse to win”, recalled Vuk Drašković.¹¹⁴

Thus, Milošević received plebiscite support for the policy of centralizing Serbia, almost by all means. After the fall of the Vojvodina government in the fall

¹¹⁰ Dragiša Pavlović, *Olako obećana brzina* (Zagreb: Globus, 1988), 97–98.

¹¹¹ Dejan Jović, “Osma sjednica: uzroci, značaj, interpretacije.” in: *Slobodan Milošević: put ka vlasti*, priredili Momčilo Pavlović, Dejan Jović, Vladimir Petrović, (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2008), 33–70.

¹¹² R. Vučetić, *op. cit.*

¹¹³ Nebojša Vladislavljević, *Serbia's antibureaucratic revolution: Milošević, the fall of communism and nationalist mobilization* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 109–144.

¹¹⁴ Вук Драшковић, *Ожиљци живота* (Београд: Лагуна, 2022), 125; Matija Bečković, Veselin Đuretić, Tanasije Mladenović, Antonije Isaković, Mića Popović stood out in this circle ...

of 1988, he hinted at the next direction in November at a large rally of Brotherhood and Unity in Ušće: “We will win, therefore, regardless of the fact that even today our enemies outside the country are uniting with those in the country. We tell them that we are not timid at all, that we enter every battle with the intention of winning it. (...) and that the Turkish and German invaders know that this nation is winning the battle for freedom. We entered both world wars naked and barefoot with the belief that we were fighting for justice, and we won both wars.”¹¹⁵ At the end of February 1989, a general strike in Kosovo was violently quelled by the Albanians, who tried to prevent the crushing of autonomy.¹¹⁶ At the same time, at another large rally, he promised the enraged crowd that demanded the arrest of Vllasi: “Soon, all the names will be published, and I want to tell you that those who used people to manipulate in order to achieve political goals against Yugoslavia will be punished and arrested!”¹¹⁷

What ensued was an acceleration of events that were difficult to follow, let alone to look at critically. The support that the Slovenian leadership gave to the Albanian strikers was met with enormous indignation in Serbia, which the Serbian government would channel by the end of the year through the introduction of an embargo on trade with Slovenia. It seemed as if Milošević’s power was simply growing by both reflecting and directing the will of the masses, defying the trend of overthrowing the socialist order that shook Eastern Europe in 1989. Presenting populism as democracy, he consolidated himself in power while deepening old enmities and gaining new ones. As David Owen put it, “Milošević rode the tiger of nationalism.”¹¹⁸

On this wave, amendments to the Constitution of the SR Serbia were quickly adopted and, as it were, by acclamation on 28 March 1989, which completely destroyed the restrictions set by the 1974 Constitution. Although the process

¹¹⁵ Ušće rally, 19.11.1988, <https://youtu.be/RvXgqKWwUzk>, accessed on 3.7.2024.

¹¹⁶ Milošević succeeded in putting pressure on the Presidency of the SFRY to impose a state of emergency in Kosovo. This control was established by brutal measures, military intervention and police administration over rebellious Albanians, which was simply ignored or justified by a discourse that took on racist overtones. Video of demonstrations: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xR865iyzcS8>, visited on 3.7.2024, More in Стефан Стојановић, *Председништво СФРЈ и дешавање на Косову и Метохију 1989*. (Филозофски факултет Универзитета у Београду 2020).

¹¹⁷ Rally in Belgrade, 28.2.1989, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FkYdCib-us>, visited on 3 July 2024.

¹¹⁸ International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Trial of Slobodan Milosevic, testimony of David Owen, https://www.icty.org/x/file/About/OTP/Milosevic%20Feature/High%20level%20witnesses/milosevic_owen_fulltestimony_bcs.pdf, 426, accessed on 3.7.2024.

was formally managed by Borisav Jović, who became the newly appointed Serbian member of the Presidency of the SFRJ, Milošević's name was on everyone's lips. Thus, as Milovan Vitezović poetically expressed it, in a short time "people happened" in Serbia, and at the same time a leader happened to that nation, sung in a decasyllable by an unnamed national poet: "Our nation is asking / Who will replace Tito / so that the people would no longer ask / Slobodan is a proud name!" As one advertisement for cologne from that time said: "The leader has arrived."¹¹⁹

The commemorations of the sixth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo were an expression of this euphoria. The entire first half of the year was spent in the spirit of preparations, publications, commemorations and visual presentations, including the film *The Battle of Kosovo* directed by Zdravko Šotra and written by Ljubomir Simović. The central, culminating event was organized on St. Vitus Day, 28 June 1989, in Gazimestan, where hundreds of thousands of people, federal and republic leaders, First World War veterans, religious leaders, cultural workers and military leadership gathered. Even the dead were there. The relics of the medieval Serbian prince Lazar, the hero of this battle and that film, traveled through Serbia and Yugoslavia for a whole year organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church, and on that day, they were exhibited in the Gračanica church. However, Lazar was not in the foreground. The event culminated with Milošević's arrival. He descended spectacularly from the helicopter and said from the ceremonial stage: "It is not difficult for us today to answer the old question: how will we come before Miloš. Through the game of history and life, it seems as if Serbia regained its state and its dignity precisely in 1989 in order to celebrate a historical event from the distant past that had great historical and symbolic significance for its future (...) Six centuries later, today, again we are in battles and facing battles. They are not armed, although they have not yet been ruled out as such".¹²⁰

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At a time when communism was losing ground not only in Yugoslavia, but in the whole world, Milošević managed to get unparalleled support for his policy of confronting complex problems with brisk solutions. He outgrew the very party that had brought him to power and imposed himself as an indisputable interpreter of the national interest. The secret of this success was related to the

¹¹⁹ The Leader Has Arrived, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQup5BynB3E>, visited on 3.7.2024.

¹²⁰ Gazimestan 28 June 1989, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjJ4R6YQTcY>, visited on 3 July 2024.

evolution of the Serbian question, which is the main topic of this paper. In just two decades, the road was crossed from shaken trust in Yugoslavia, through ethnic panic and promotion of “Serbian awakening” to the unleashing of rabid nationalism and its etatization by a skilled, unscrupulous leader. His picture adorned not only the walls of official institutions, but also private homes, just as the book of his speeches, *The Year of Unraveling*, became a bestseller.

The plot, however, was yet to come. The consequences of Slobodan Milošević’s enthronement were multifaceted and far-reaching. The destabilization of Yugoslavia seemed like an acceptable price for rounding off Serbian statehood and reestablishing control over Kosovo, redefined as the Serbian national cradle, the most expensive Serbian word and a holy land worth every sacrifice. Accepting armed conflict as a possible option completed the transformation of the Serbian national question. It was thoroughly redefined since 1971, when formulas for coexistence with compatriots were sought. Two decades later, it became a matter of life and death. Opponents were seen as traitors and enemies, which were both perceived and made at an alarming rate. By then, the economic, social, international and security situation in Yugoslavia had eroded to such a level that it was difficult to say whether the crisis of the Yugoslav community caused the opening of the Serbian question, or the way in which it was resolved brought the country closer to the atrocious breakup. In all likelihood, both was the case.

