

DENY THY NEIGHBOR: IDENTITY PANICS AND THE DENIAL OF NEIGHBOR'S IDENTITY IN THE SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

Abstract: *This paper is an attempt to explain the specific phenomenon of denial of identity, most often of one's neighbors. Identity denial most often occurs in moments of identity panic, when a community feels threatened. The main topics of the observed strategies of identity denial is that some of our neighbors are "fictional" and "non-existent peoples". They have been created by great enemy forces using apostates from "Us" and converts from "our" faith. Identity deniers claim that these "fake" nations have been suffering from a collective guilty conscience for generations, which is why they hate us. The paper presents examples of identity denials in the Balkans, but the Russian-Ukrainian and Turkish-Kurdish cases are also addressed.*

Key words: Identity denial, identity panic, national guilt syndrome, apostates, converts, Balkans, Ukraine

This paper is an attempt to establish the bases for researching a specific identity strategy. It is the denial of other people's, usually neighbors' identities. This approach to identity has not been sufficiently researched. There are numerous works dealing with the nationalist perception of the "Other". They are often seen as intruders on "our" land, as an eternal threat, as invaders or barbarians. Identity deniers say something completely different. According to them, some of those "Others", the worst ones, are "Our people" who have betrayed their true identity. More precisely, the elites are traitors, most often an instrument of foreign powers, and the common people have forgotten their true nature. That is why these identities are false, constructed, or simply unnatural.

This entire identity denial activity most often takes place in the field of pseudo-science, called "parahistoriography" by Andrej Mitrović, and "pseudoscience" by Radivoj Radić.¹ For this reason, the primary focus will not be on

¹ Andrej Mitrović, *Raspravljajnja sa Klio*, (Sarajevo:Svjetlost, 1991); Мирослав Јовановић, Радивој Радић, *Криза историје*, (Београд:УДИ, 2009).

official academic disciplines, but journalism, as well as what shapes historical awareness the most today, the internet. However, there are also some of the most prominent representatives of the academic community who have gone over to the side of identity deniers. Where appropriate, examples from literature will be used, which is a powerful weapon/tool in the creation of national identities, as well as in identity conflicts. The anti-vaccine hysteria during the Covid epidemic, the proliferation of various conspiracy theories show that it was a big mistake to underestimate such ideas as frivolous and marginal. After all, the denial of the neighbor's identity is one of Putin's arguments for the attack on Ukraine. The Turkish state denies the existence of the Kurds to the extent that the mention of the Kurdish name and language is prohibited by law. They are referred to as "mountain Turks".² In both cases, identity denial is one of the reasons, or justifications, for the terrible wars. The one in Turkey is one of the longest civil wars. The Russian-Ukrainian war is the bloodiest war in Europe after World War II.

The paper will focus on Southeast Europe, although the case of Russian non-recognition of Ukrainian identity will also be addressed. Apart from examples of the negation of the identity of other peoples, the basic research question will be under what circumstances do such identity strategies appear and what is their goal? The question will be raised as to what is the difference between societies in which identity deniers exist and the others, where there is no such kind of intellectual activity.

Commonplaces of identity denial

There are commonplaces among all identity deniers. The first commonplace is the worldview they share with all other nationalists. It is the idea of the age and "eternity" of national identities. Antony Smith called it a "primordialist" understanding of identity.³ Primordialists believe that identities are immutable and that peoples are the same as they were in the distant past. Hence the obsession of identity deniers with the antiquity of their own nation and the insufficient antiquity of that other nation, or of all other neighboring nations, which are therefore not "real" nation(s). Identity deniers often belong to the group of autochthonists, authors who claim that their peoples have been there since antiquity, or

² „Denial of Kurds by Turkey“, *Wikipedia* (en), приступљено 02.08.2024.

³ Antoni D. Smit, *Nacionalni identiteti*, (Beograd: XX vek, 1998). In the original: Anthony D. Smith, *National identity*, (London: Penguin books Ltd, 1991).

even the Paleolithic.⁴ Only the ancient peoples are “real”. Those who have developed their identity in recent times are “artificial” and “constructed”. That is why the Ukrainians (Little Russians) are not a true people, because they originate from Kiev Russia, and later they lived in the Russian state for a thousand years, just like the Great Russians. In the Balkans, this applies especially to Bosniaks, Macedonians and Montenegrins. As they shaped their identities later, their identities are not “natural”. On the other hand, nationalists from peoples whose identity is exposed to denial search for their roots in the distant past. Thus, Macedonians see themselves as direct descendants of Alexander the Great, which some authors call “antiquization”, which will be discussed later.

This understanding of identity implies that “artificial” peoples are passive objects of history, manipulated by foreign factors. This is how the second common position of identity deniers has appeared. It stems from the explanation of the reasons for the emergence of “false” identities. These false identities were created by great powers in order to weaken, diminish, or even destroy “Us”. With certain local features, this position appears in the case of Russian denial of Ukrainian identity and in cases of Balkan denial of neighboring identities. In Ukraine, first Germany, with the treacherous cooperation of the Bolsheviks, and then the USA, took advantage of the backwardness and primitivism of the “fake” people and convinced the Ukrainians that they were not Russians. In the case of the Balkans, there is the Vatican, the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires and the Republic of Venice, and in the 20th century, the Comintern. Croatian deniers of Serbian identity and Bulgarian deniers of Macedonian identity included the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Serbian state and Serbian intellectuals in those foreign powers. Later, the Bulgarians added the Yugoslav communists led by Tito, as manipulators of the insufficiently aware Macedonian Bulgarians. Conversely, the Serbs added the Bulgarians to the list of enemy powers, but, above all, they also accused Tito and the communists of stealing and perverting parts of the Serbian national “being” in many directions. In the south of the Serbian ethnic area, they created an “invented” nation of Macedonians. In the west – Muslims/Bosniaks. In the southwest – Montenegrins.

The problem with the evil great powers that consciously manipulate the identities of our neighbors in order to weaken “Us” is that people in those great

⁴ „Autohtonous theory about origin of the Bulgarians“, *Wikipedia* (енглеска) „Тракология“, *Уикипедия*, (бугарска), приступљено 06.08.2024; Радивој Радић, *Срби пре Адама и после њега* (Београд: Стубови културе, 2005); Ivan Jurić, *Podrijetlo Hrvata – genetički dokazi autohtonosti* (Zagreb: Nova stvarnost i Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2011).

powers often do not differentiate between the peoples in question. The manager of the German national team, Joachim Löw, in an interview with journalists at the 2010 FIFA World Cup, confused Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia. Certainly, football coaches are not necessarily experts in geopolitics. But even when they are well informed, the leading people of Germany for example, rarely show that they know about hidden plans, such as the one about the creation of a Ukrainian nation. Helmut Schmidt, the former German chancellor, said after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014: "Ukraine is independent, but not a nation state. It is disputed among historians whether there is a Ukrainian nation at all."⁵ It is an opinion that any Russian nationalist would support. Those who believe in the conspiracy of the great powers would say at this point that he is concealing the true intentions of the German political elites, or that he does not know about the centuries-old plans of the deep German state.

The third position is common in all cases of identity denial, but in some cases, such as the Serbian denial of Croatian identity, it is absent. That is paternalism. According to Russian nationalists, Ukrainians are the "younger brother", underdeveloped. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, Russian travelers through Ukraine tended to idealize this country, seeing it as "Russian Italy", inhabited by sincere, honest and pious peasants, albeit a bit plain and simple.⁶

The fourth commonplace is the idea that our apostates are immoral people. Apart from the simple ones, who are victims of the manipulation of great powers, there are also those who betray their "true identity" for profit, whether they are careerists, or eager for material goods. There is a Serbian proverb "They sold their faith for dinner", which describes religious conversion as an act of greed.⁷

The fifth commonplace of identity deniers is the fact that there are often grounds for their opinion. Doubts about identity are not always one-sided. The Ukrainians themselves have long been hesitant about what they are. One of the greatest Russian (Ukrainian?) writers, Nikolai Gogol, is the best example of this. Gogol's hesitation between being Ukrainian or Russian ended with his final commitment to the Russian nation. This can also be traced in his literary work. The collection of stories

⁵ „Löw verwechselt Serbien, Bosnien und Kroatien,“ *Die Welt*, 18.06.2010; Andreas Kapeler, *Rusi i Ukrajinci:nejednaka braća*, (Beograd: XX vek, 2023). In the original: Andreas Kappeler, *Ungleiche Brüder.Russen und Ukrainer von Miiletalter bis zur Gegenwart* (München: C.H.Beck, 2017), 105–106.

⁶ A. Kapeler, *op. cit.*, 102.

⁷ Marija Mandić, "The Serbian Proverb Poturica gori od Turčina (A Turk-Convert Is Worse Than a Turk): Stigmatizer and Figure of Speech x. František Šistek, (ed.), *Imagining Bosnian Moslems in Central Europe. Representations, Transfers& Exchanges* (New York-Oxford, Bedrg-hann, 2021).

Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka was the first bestseller that contained Ukrainian words, culture and customs. At the end of his identity wavering, Gogol wrote *Taras Bulba*, the book that was most important for the Russification of the portrait of the Cossacks.⁸ Cossacks are mentioned in the Ukrainian national anthem, as a kind of forerunner of Ukrainian statehood. Gogol was the first, but not the last, writer who, despite his Ukrainian origin, became a giant of Russian literature. No one denies that Russian literature cannot be imagined without Mikhail Bulgakov and Isaac Babel.

For centuries, Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks/Muslims have been undecided about whether they are one or more peoples. At the time of the creation of Yugoslavia, Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were considered to be the three “tribes” of the three-named nation. At the end of the 20th century, the vast majority of members of these nations believed in the existence of their own separate ethnic group.

That is why this paper does not deal with the exceptionally interesting case of Montenegrins. The selection of examples of identity denial in this work was based on the self-identification of denied peoples in the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. Only those peoples who believe they exist in the vast majority, judging by the census results, were taken into account. That is why Ukrainians are also mentioned, who, regardless of the language they use, mostly declare themselves as Ukrainians. The same applies to Serbs in Croatia and BiH, as well as to all Croats, Macedonians and Muslims/Bosniaks. Bosniaks/Muslims believe they are a separate people, although they are not quite sure what their language is called. Despite all the nuances that distinguish them, the aforementioned peoples mostly have no dilemma about their identity. Denial of their identity mostly comes from their neighbors.

In the case of Montenegro, the “majority” population of that country is divided over its identity.⁹ “Majority” is put in quotation marks because the censuses do not provide a clear answer as to which ethnic group constitutes the “majority”. In those censuses, there is a small difference between those who think they are Montenegrins and those who are convinced that they are some kind of Serbs. This distinguishes it from all other examples. In all other cases, identity denial is

⁸ Edyta M. Bojanowska, *Nikolai Gogol: Between Ukrainian and Russian Nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁹ Kenneth Morrison, *Nationalism, Identity and Statehood in Post-Yugoslav Montenegro* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2018); Siniša Malešević and Gordana Uzelac, “A nation-state without the nation? The trajectories of nation-state formation in Montenegro.” *Nations and Nationalism*, 13(4), (2007), 695–716; Vladimir Vučković, Miloš Petrović, “Colliding Western Balkan Neighbors: Serbia and Montenegro in Post-Yugoslav Context-Identity and Interest Representation”, *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, 9(2), (2022), 54–80.

unilateral. Someone else, mostly the neighbor(s) denies the identity of a people who believe in their existence. Therefore, this paper will address identity denials that have no basis in reality. Why, then, do a large number of people in the public, in academic disciplines, in literature persist in this futile effort to disprove someone's existence? That is the theme of this entire text.

“Ukrainians, nevertheless, do not exist”

The best-known example of the denial of the neighbor's identity is Putin's position towards Ukraine and Ukrainians. In several of his speeches, he has stated that Ukrainians are not a real people, and that the Ukrainian language is a dialect of Russian. He only expresses the belief, widespread among Russian politicians and intellectuals, that the Great Russians, Belarusians and Little Russians (Ukrainians) are part of a single Russian people. Belarusians and Little Russians are younger brothers. Ukrainians have been corrupted by foreign influences. The Russians created states in their surroundings through centuries of struggle, while the modern borders of the former Soviet republics were created by the communists in order to alienate those countries from Russia. There are suggestions that Ukraine is an artificial creation that should be grateful to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, because without the Soviet legacy its inhabitants would still be Russians. According to that history, the communists wanted to reduce and damage Russia, so they dismembered the area that historically belonged to the Russians. Ukrainian nationalists are Nazis.¹⁰ Interestingly, the Belarusian identity has not attracted much attention, nor is the existence of the Belarusian nation considered a cuckoo in the nest planted in the Russian world.

It is now time to look at individual examples of identity denial. We will start from south to north.

¹⁰ The best example of Putin's speech is the one he gave on 24. 02. 2022, Vladimir Putin's Speech on Ukraine and US Foreign Policy and NATO - 24 February 2022, ENG Subtitles (youtube.com); Vukan Marković, „Naličje rusko-ukrajinskog sukoba: Politika identiteta i rat istorijama“, <https://oko.rts.rs>, 06. 03. 2022; Taras Kuzio, “Russian Stereotypes and Myths of Ukraine and Ukrainians and Why Novorossiia Failed”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 52, no. 4 (2019), 297–309; Taras Kuzio, “Imperial nationalism as the driver behind Russia's invasion of Ukraine“, *Nations and Nationalism*, 29, (2023), 30–38; Roman Szporluk, “Ukraine: From an Imperial Periphery to a Sovereign State”, *Daedalus*, 126, 3, (1997) 96; Anna Fournier, “Mapping Identities: Russian Resistance to Linguistic Ukrainisation in Central and Eastern Ukraine”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 54, no. 3 (2002), 415–43; Paul Goble, “Russian National Identity and the Ukrainian Crisis”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, (2016), 37–43.

Are there Macedonians?

Is it possible to classify identity denial strategies according to irrationality? They are all quite irrational. However, Greek and Bulgarian denials of Macedonian identity seem to be somewhat more irrational than others. Unlike the former Yugoslavia, the Macedonians did not go to war with the Bulgarians and Greeks, nor did they ever have territorial claims against these neighbors. Both Greeks and Bulgarians feel threatened, not for their territories, but for their histories and cultures. The Greeks are bothered by the Macedonian appropriation of the symbols of ancient Macedonia. Some authors called it “antiquization”. It is the idea of a direct connection between modern Macedonia and the ancient state of the same name. It has not only filled books and media, but also dominated the public space. The center of Skopje is dotted with monuments and buildings that should bear witness to the ancient origins of today's Macedonians. In the case of Bulgaria, the separate Macedonian identity also threatens the integrity not of Bulgarian territory, but of Bulgarian history, because it “takes away” from it entire periods and many personalities, such as Tsar Samuel, Clement of Ohrid and Gotse Delchev.¹¹ For this reason, the Greeks exerted such pressure that the Macedonians first had to change the flag, and finally the name of their country.

Before the Prespa Agreement (2018), Greek nationalists denied the identity of Macedonians on three grounds. The first is that the Macedonian nation does not exist because no Macedonian state existed. The language spoken by the “people of Skopje” cannot be Macedonian because the ancient Macedonians spoke Greek. It is just a corrupted dialect of Bulgarian. Thirdly, there is no Macedonian minority in Greece, only “Slavophone Hellenes” or “Bilingual Greeks”. For Greek nationalists, the use of the term “Macedonia” is plagiarism. It constitutes stealing of the Greek name and cultural heritage.¹²

After the 2018 Prespa Agreement, the Macedonians agreed to call their country “Northern Macedonia”, and the Greeks acknowledged the existence of the Macedonian language.

¹¹ Anastas Vangeli, “Nation building ancient Macedonian style: the origins and the effects of so-called antiquization of Macedonia”, *Nationality Papers*, vol. 39, (2011), 13–32; Anton Kojouharov, “Bulgarian “Macedonian” Nationalism: A Conceptual Overview”, *The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution*, 6, 1 (Fall 2004), 282–295.

¹² Loring M. Danforth, “Claims to Macedonian Identity: The Macedonian Question and the Breakup of Yugoslavia”, *Anthropology Today*, vol. 9, no. 4 (Aug., 1993), 3–10.

From the beginning of their modern history, Bulgarians have considered Macedonia a part of their country and considered themselves the “big brother” of the Macedonians. The short-lived idea of recognizing the Macedonian identity existed from 1945 to 1948. At the time of conceiving the Balkan Federation with Yugoslavia, the Bulgarian communists allowed the arrival of Macedonian-speaking teachers in Pirin Macedonia. They also opened a theater in Macedonian in Blagoevgrad, the center of that area. This policy is reminiscent of the *Korenizatsiia* in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, as well as the policy of the Yugoslav communists towards small nations throughout their rule. It completely disappeared after Yugoslavia's conflict with the Eastern bloc, as did the idea of a Balkan federation. The Bulgarian public has never forgiven its communists such recognition of an artificial nation, even on its own territory. The Bulgarian nationalists, like the Greek ones, also believed that the Macedonian nationality was the result of manipulation by Tito's regime. But they believed that it was possible to return the Macedonians to their true “origin”.

The fall of communism and the breakup of Yugoslavia renewed the denial of Macedonian identity. At the very beginning of Macedonian independence, in 1992, Bulgarian President Zhelev explicitly stated that Bulgaria recognized the Macedonian state, but not the nation. By an agreement from 1999, the Bulgarians agreed to recognize the Macedonian language, under the unusual condition that Macedonia would not interfere in Bulgarian internal politics. For the next 25 years, identity panic attacks broke out periodically in Bulgaria because of the Macedonians. While the Macedonian nationalists tried to separate the Macedonian identity from their neighbors as much as possible, the Bulgarians could not bear the “stealing” of their historical symbols. The signing of the Treaty of Friendship in 2017 did not stop the denial of the Macedonian identity permanently. The treaty mentions “common history”, but the Macedonians undertook to review the content of the history textbooks, which claimed that the Bulgarians, as an ally of the Nazis, had been the occupiers of Macedonia in World War II. Top Bulgarian statesmen often claimed that their support for Macedonia's entry into the EU would depend on resolving differences in Macedonian understanding of history in Bulgaria's favor. Such understanding threatens Bulgaria's national interest, the prime minister said in 2019.¹³

¹³ Milena Mahon, “The Macedonian question in Bulgaria”, *Nations and Nationalism* 4, 3, (1998), 389–407; Symeon A. Giannakos, “Bulgaria's Macedonnnian dilemma”, *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, volume 3, number 2, (2001), 153–170; A. Kojouharov, *op. cit.*; “Macedonia, Bulgaria Sign Friendship Pact To End Years Of Feuding”, *Radio Free Europe*, August 01.

Serbs, all and everywhere

One of the sources of identity confusion in the area of BHS language speakers is the 19th century linguistic belief that, as Humboldt succinctly expressed it: “The language is the true homeland.” When Vuk Karadžić published a study entitled “Serbs, all and everywhere”, as part of the book *Kovčežić za istoriju, jezik i običaje Srba sva tri zakona / Treasure Box for the History, Language and Customs of Serbians of All Three Faiths/* (1849), he only reiterated the ruling opinion of leading Slavists such as Jozef Dobrovski, Pavle Šafarik and Jernej Kopitar. Šafarik wrote: “Serbs live in Serbia, Bosnia, Slavonia, Herzegovina, Montenegro and Dalmatia. And they can also belong to the Western Church”. They speak the same language, which is divided into “several insignificant variants.” Until the 1860s, Croatian and Slovenian intellectuals hesitated whether Slovenes should also accept the Serbo-Croatian language.¹⁴

Belief in national unity, above all of Serbs and Croats, was commonplace among the greatest Croatian intellectuals and most important politicians before the First World War, not only Tino Ujević, Matoš or politician Ante Trumbić. Even Stjepan Radić, a fighter against Belgrade centralism, who would end his political mobilization of Croats in the common state, accepted a common South Slavic identity at the time of the creation of the Kingdom of SHS. Ivan Meštrović, a Croatian sculptor, created an artistic representation of the Vidovdan cult, and in a book published in 1915, he says: “The Serbian or Yugoslav people are embodied in the Kosovo epic”. Another Croatian intellectual who believes in the complete unity of the Yugoslav peoples is Vladimir Dvorniković. In his sizeable book *Karakterologija Jugoslovena /Characterology of the Yugoslavs/*, in the spirit of the 1930s, he gives an unusual systematization of Yugoslavs based on physical anthropology, namely the shape of the body, head, nose. It goes without saying that the anthropological types of Yugoslavs transcend ethnic boundaries.¹⁵

2017; “Bones Of Contention With Bulgaria Threaten North Macedonia's EU Hopes”, *Radio Free Europe*, October, 02.2019.

¹⁴ Endru B. Vahtel, *Stvaranje nacije, razaranje nacije (Wachtel, A.B, Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation)*, (Beograd: Stubovi kulture, 2001), 35–39; Милорад Екмечић, *Стварање Југославије. Прву том* (Београд: Просвета, 1989), 440–441; Petar Korunić, *Juoslovenska ideologija u hrvatskoj i slovenskoj politici* (Zagreb: Globus, 1986), 259–267.

¹⁵ Dejan Djokić, *Yugoslavism.Histories of a Failed Idea 1918-1992*, (London: Hurst&Company, 2003), 144, 222–251. Meštrović's text was published in: Niko Županić, *O Slovincima*, (New York: Milan Marjanović, 1915), 111; Владимир Дворниковић, *Карактерологија Југословена* (Београд: Космос, 1939, Просвета, 1990).

During the period of the first Yugoslavia, Serbian intellectuals, and perhaps the common people as well, mostly equated Serbianness with Yugoslavism. Perhaps the most prolific identity denier, Slobodan Jarčević, accuses Vasa Čubriović and Vladimir Ćorović of making concessions to the Croats, because they wanted to win them over for Yugoslavia. Jarčević admits to Ćorović that he “hints a little more mildly and quietly that Croats are a historical people.” Vaso Čubriović is known as one of the few academic scientists who was involved in the planning of ethnic cleansing. We will see later in this paper Ćorović's doubts about the authenticity of Croatian culture. According to Jarčević, due to the desire to integrate the Croats into a common state, Čubriović and Ćorović donated Serbian lands to Croatia and renounced the Catholic and Muslim Serbs.¹⁶

Denial of Croats occurs in times of conflict and crises. Jovan Dučić, a great and popular Serbian poet, is the first artist of his stature who wrote verses of hatred towards Croats, “Son of a thousand-year culture”. He calls the Croats a “stunted race,” without any heroic history, who brutally struck their brothers and “drank the blood of our children from the cradle.” This poem was written in 1942 in the midst of the bloodiest Ustasha terror.

The so-called Croats

In communist Yugoslavia, any national discussion in the spirit of the idea of “brotherhood and unity” was silenced. With the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the questioning of its essence began again. Many books appeared that questioned the relationship between Serbs and Croats. Here we will discuss only three authors. The first is Vojislav Šešelj, one of the greatest figures of Serbian politics from the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. He is not an academic, but the impact of his ideas is enormous. Here we will talk about his book, which most resembles academic work out of his 160 or so books, *Ideologija srpskog nacionalizma. Naučno i publicističko delo prof. Dr Laze M. Kostića* / *The Ideology of Serbian Nationalism : the scientific and publishing work of Prof. Lazo M. Kostić*/. According to Šešelj, Croatian history has been filled with barbarism and savagery for centuries. The Croatian mentality is criminal, robbery and murder are primeval traits of the Croatian national character. Their ethnic being is characterized by animal instincts, they are perfidious. Šešelj does not say that they are all Serbs, but that they were created by assimilating foreign elements. The first are the

¹⁶ Слoбoдaн Јaрчeвић, *Грeси истoричaрa* (Бeoгpaд: Мирoслaв, 2019), 90–99; Влaдимир Пeтoвић, *Etничкo чишћeњe: Geneza koncepta*, (Beograd: Arhipelag-Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2019).

Avars, who left the most traces in Zagorje and Pannonia. He quotes Dvorniković, how the Avars were a narrow-minded and sadistically cruel people. They mixed with Germans, Hungarians, Czechs and Poles. The “Croats” of Dalmatia and Slavonia are predominantly Catholicized Serbs.¹⁷ Here we come to a paradox. Most of the crimes against the Serbs were not committed by the Zagorje descendants of the cruel Avars, but, according to his and the general opinion of Serbian nationalists, by the former Serbs, the Croats of western Herzegovina.

Another author who needs to be analyzed is Nikola Žutić. He differs from other deniers of Croatian identity in that he is a trained historian, who has earned the highest scientific degrees, and who extensively quotes historical studies and archives. Admittedly, selectively and often out of context. Nikola Žutić began his scientific activity with a very Yugoslav study of the sports organization *Sokoli*, probably the most massive organization of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, whose ideological goal was to foster Yugoslav unity.¹⁸

In the following decades, Žutić, like many others, blamed Croatian betrayal for the breakup of Yugoslavia. Which is to be expected, because before that they had betrayed their true, Serbian origin. A synthesis of his views was published in the book *Srbi rimokatolici takozvani Hrvati: „Srbi svi i svuda“: Hrvatske zemlje bez Hrvata / Roman Catholic Serbs, The So-Called Croats: “Serbs all and everywhere”: Croatian Countries without Croats /*. The book deals mostly with the mission of the Roman Catholic Church after 1881, but the first third is devoted to prehistory. The converted Croatian nation appropriated almost all the traits from others. A smaller part of the language from the Slovenes, a bigger part from the Serbs. They appropriated the culture and traditions of Bunjevci, Šokci and Krashovani. They took the state ideology from the Hungarians. The Croatian Illyrians tricked the naive Vuk Karadžić into accepting the Vienna Literary Agreement, in order to appropriate as many people as possible under a false Illyrian name. The Illyrians are the direct predecessors of the extreme Croatian ideology – the Rightist Movement (*pravaštvo*). For some reason, the people who best created the myth about the Croats were not Croats, like the great novelist August Šenoa, the son of a Czech father and a Hungarian mother. The creator of Croatian nationalism, Ante Starčević, who was the biggest denier of Serbs in history, is himself a Serb by origin, his uncle's name was Miloš.¹⁹

¹⁷ Војислав Шешељ, *Идеологија српског национализма. Научно и публицистичко дело проф. Др Лазе М. Костића* (Београд: Српска радикална странка, 2016), 490, 511, 566–593.

¹⁸ Никола Жутић, *Соколи. Идеологија у физичкој култури Краљевине Југославије 1929–1941.* (Београд: Ангротраде, 1991)

¹⁹ Никола Жутић, *Срби римокатолици такозвани Хрвати: „Срби сви и свуда“: Хрватске земље без Хрвата* (Земун: Српска радикална странка, 2006), 5, 51–52, 66–69.

The third author who should be mentioned is Slobodan Jarčević. He does not have the political weight of Šešelj, or the academic profile of Žutić, but he is characterized by an unlimited denialist imagination. In a long series of his books, Jarčević spreads denial from the usual Roman Catholics, Muslims and Montenegrins to other surrounding peoples, including the Romanians. The Romanian nation was created from the Serbs, because the native people of Romania are Dacians, Slavs, that is, Serbs.²⁰

The main culprit behind the creation of the “artificial nation” of Croats: the Catholic Church

Identity deniers believe in the eternity and immutability of their people. They also believe in the perpetuity and immutability of the policies of the great powers that are out to get “us”. According to identity deniers, two mysterious organizations created false nations. The first is the Vatican, the second is the Comintern. Although the Serbian public is full of stories about how these archenemies of Serbia were obsessed with the destruction of the Serbs and/or Yugoslavia, one can count on the fingers of one hand serious books on the subject. The only Serbian researcher who has seriously studied the Vatican archives, for the earlier periods, when, according to the generally accepted narrative, the Vatican started working on the destruction of the Serbs, was Marko Jačov. A scientific synthesis was written about the Comintern, by Branislav Gligorijević.²¹ The Comintern was against Yugoslavia for seven years, from 1928 to 1935. In contrast, the Vatican has tried to harm the Serbs for centuries. One of the most important ideas of Serbian deniers of Croatian identity is that the popes have worked for centuries to convert Serbs first into Catholics and then into Croats. Also that the Western powers were implementing the policies of the Vatican. And that Croatian nationalists are just mere tools of the Roman Catholic Church.

The opinion about the Vatican as the ringleader of all Western powers in the centuries-old attempt to weaken the Serbs by creating Croats was transmitted like a broken telephone game. It permeated the entire Serbian society, from the media to the highest academic circles. This was succinctly expressed by member of the Academy of Sciences and Arts Slavko Gavrilović: “The conversion and denationalization

²⁰ Слободан Јарчевић, *Бивши Срби: римокатолици, муслимани Црногорци, Румуни* (Београд: Мирослав, 2009), 71–92.

²¹ Марко Јачов, *Списи тајног ватиканског архива XVI-XVIII века* (Нови Сад-Београд: Архив Војводине-Српска академија наука и уметности, Одељење историјских наука, 2022); Branislav Gligorijević, *Kominternu, jugoslovensko i srpsko pitanje* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1992).

of the Serbs in the Catholic states, the Republic of Venice, the Hungarian and Habsburg Monarchies, lay at the basis of their policy towards those “schismatic” people. The religious and state authorities did everything to convert the Orthodox Serbs into “the Roman Catholic faith, the only one leading to salvation”.²² It is not that many researchers have checked the views of the Vatican's hatred towards Serbs, and the docile stance of the great powers towards the Roman Catholic Church.

Some of the most serious authors, such as Vladimir Ćorović and Ivo Andrić, believe that the Catholic Church has alienated the Croats from the “original” national tradition, which is actually shared with the Serbs, or is purely Serbian. Ćorović says that what little tradition there is among Croats came to them from the Serbs (epic poems about Kosovo, Prince Marko, Vuk Grgurević Branković). In his doctoral dissertation, Ivo Andrić writes that the Franciscans destroyed folk customs in their religious overzealousness.²³

Identity deniers believe in the exceptionality of the Serbian people. They, and everyone else who believes in the eternal hatred of the Vatican towards the Serbs, ignore the fact that the destruction of the Serbs was not such an important task for the Roman popes. In the eyes of these deniers, the fight against Serbs and Orthodoxy is the life mission of many popes. Thus, Branko Ilinčić, author of the book *Rasrbljavanje /Deserbianization/*, the reviewer and proofreader of which is Slobodan Jarčević, has concluded that the Catholic saint Pius V was the originator of the idea of biological extermination of the Orthodox Slavic people. “His words, no doubt, encouraged Croatian soldiers in World War II to heartlessly kill hundreds of thousands of Orthodox Serbs”. Pius V had been elected Grand Inquisitor for life before becoming Pope. During his short pontificate (1566-1572) he did a lot. He organized the liturgy and, for the first time, standardized the liturgical books Breviary and Missal. The mass introduced by him was officiated until 1970. He led the fight against Protestantism in which he excommunicated Queen Elizabeth I without much effect. His most significant historical contribution is that he orchestrated the Battle of Lepanto (1571), which ended the Ottoman naval threat to Western Europe forever.²⁴ It is unlikely that Pius

²² Славко Гавриловић, „Проблем унијаћења и кроатизације Срба“, у: Зоран Каличанин, *Република Српска Крајина* (Топуско-Книн-Београд: Српско културно друштво Сава Мркаљ, Српско културно друштво Зора, Радничка штампа, 1996), 111–126.

²³ Владимир Ђоровић, *Покрети и дела*, (Београд: Геца Кон, 1920), 44-45; Иво Андрић, *Развој духовног живота у Босни под утицајем турске владавине* (Београд: Просвета, 1994), 59–64; Comparative analysis in: Ђуро Бодржић, *Српски идентитет* (Београд: СКЗ, 2018), 301.

²⁴ Branko Ilinčić, *Rasrbljavanje u svetlu božjih načela*, (Beograd: Miroslav, 2019), 143; *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America, 2003), vol. XI, 373–375.

V would have been involved in the creation of Croats amidst so many continental struggles that he was leading.

Another important topos of identity deniers is the narrative that the Western powers are mere enforcers of the Vatican's will. The Republic of Venice was the first western power that dealt with the South Slavs from Petrovac to Istria, and in the first centuries of modern history, it was the closest West in general for the South Slavs. Only later would Pest and Vienna become closer than Venice. "La Serenissima" was by no means a henchman of the Vatican, on the contrary. Pope Paul V excommunicated the Republic of San Marco in 1606, due to a dispute over the church's right to purchase land and Venice's insistence that the two priests be tried by a secular court.²⁵

Larry Wolff wrote the book *Venice and the Slavs*, which explores how the Venetians saw their neighbors on the east coast of the Adriatic. In Wolff's opinion, the Venetians did not see a big difference between Serbs and Croats, because both were called Morlachs. The Croatian entry about Archbishop Vicko Zmajević on Wikipedia would not agree with Wolff. More will be said about Zmajević in the next chapter, but for now it should be said that the Croatian Wikipedia states that Zmajević accused the Venetians of settling too many Orthodox Christians in Dalmatia.²⁶ According to Croatian Wikipedia, the Republic of Venice is carrying out its conspiracy, but against the Croats.

It is certain that the local Catholic priests were dedicated to the mission of converting the schismatic Orthodox people to Catholicism. Archbishop Vicko Zmajević, the brother of Matija Zmajević, one of the founders of the Russian fleet, was one of the most important such local proselytizing enthusiasts. Zmajević is not a priest indifferent to local culture. In Zadar, he founded a seminary for Glagolitic priests. On Croatian Wikipedia, it is said that his seminary was intended to educate the Illyrian (i.e. Croatian) clergy. It seems that he was among the first to try to reduce the Serbs to Orthodox people. Marko Jačov notes: "This, it seems, is the first explicit attempt by a Roman Catholic church dignitary to identify Orthodoxy with

²⁵ William J. Bouwsma, *Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty. Renaissance Values in the Age of the Counter Reformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Predrag, J. Marković, "The Image of Italy in Serbian Popular Culture and Media", D. Dahlmann, M. Kosanović, M. Ristović, R. Gašić (eds.), *Clio im südosteuropäischen Diskurs-Festschrift für Andrej Mitrović zum 70. Geburtstag* (Bonn: Zikic Stiftung, 2007), 305–322.

²⁶ Јован Радонић, „Римска курија и јужнословенске земље од XVI до XIX века (Београд, САН, 1950), 174, 176, 203; Larry Wolf, *Venice and the Slavs: The Discovery of Dalmatia in the Age of Enlightenment* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001); „Vicko Zmajević“ *Wikipedia* (HR), accessed 22.06.2024.

Serbia, and deprive Catholic Serbs of their national name. Since he wanted to separate the Catholicized Serbs from his own, and could not join them to another nation, Zmajević tried to define them nationally with Catholicism. This is the only way to explain his 'Catholic nation', which he mentions several times in his writings." Although the fact that he did not use a Croatian name, which Jačov also says, as well as the fact that he uses the word "Illyrian" for the language, calls into question his Croatianness. Not all authors think that the Roman Catholic Church is unconditionally loyal to the Croats. One of Ćorović's views calls into question the pro-Croat orientation of the Catholic Church. He claims that the Catholic clergy "did not have any traditions that would tie them to the Croatian state, nor was their fate tied to that state, its disappearance or restoration." Many foreigners in the ranks of the Catholic clergy, according to Ćorović, even despised local customs.²⁷ Unlike them, Zmajević was a local patriot, which does not mean that he was a Croatian nationalist. We know that he was dedicated to the spread of Catholicism among Albanians. It is not likely that he wanted to Croatize them too. In today's language, it could be said that he had a regional rather than a narrowly national perspective.

Last but not least in the story of the Vatican's responsibility for the alienation of Serbs and Croats, is the attitude of Croatian nationalists towards the Roman Catholic Church. Ante Starčević, the father of Croatian nationalism, was an ardent opponent of the Catholic Church, which he believed was working in the interests of Austrians and Hungarians. The priests described him as a "rebel, heathen, antichrist". Nikola Žutić, who is by no means an admirer of Stjepan Radić, describes how this first true leader of the Croatian masses was in fierce conflict with the church. At the assembly of the Croatian Republican Peasant Party in the fall of 1924, Radić delivered a speech "Pagan politics of 14 Croatian Catholic bishops." He called them infidels and immoral persons. A little earlier, in February of that year, he attacked the Pope himself, because of the Pope's support for the Italian occupation of Rijeka. He stated: "That is why, from now on, neither a priest nor a layman may appear in the Croatian nation to convince us Croats that the Pope of Rome is our political friend and that we Croats must lead a Catholic policy." Radić was by no means a consistent man, so around at the same time, in the Jesuit association in Vienna, he said praises to Catholic Austria.²⁸

²⁷ Марко Јачов, *Венеција и Срби у Далмацији у 18. веку* (Шибеник: Епархија далматинска СПЦ, 1987), 55–56; „Вицко Змајевић,“ *Wikipedia (sr)* accessed 13.07.2024; В. Ћоровић, *op. cit.*

²⁸ „Ante Starčević-Otac domovine koji je prezirao kler“, *Povijest*, приступљено 27.07.2024; Никола Жутић, *Римокатоличка црква и хрватство* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју, 1997), 259–263.

While the Croats were created by a conspiracy of the great Western powers and the Vatican, the Bosniaks/Muslims were created more out of a character flaw. They gave in under the pressure of the Ottoman state, often for nefarious reasons.

Ein Renegat

The idea that Islamized Christians are apostates, who should perhaps be returned to the “faith of the ancestors” is common to various Christian nations in the Balkans, primarily Serbs and Bulgarians. In the first dictionary of the modern Serbian language from 1818, written by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, the word *poturica* (a convert to Islam) is translated into German as 'unechter Türke' (false Turk) and into Latin as 'pseudo-Turk'. In the same dictionary, *poturčenjak* is translated as 'Ein Renegat', and in Latin as 'apostate'. Both words mean “apostate”. A few decades later, Njegoš's *The Mountain Wreath*, would be published, probably the greatest book in the Serbian language. In the spirit of political correctness, there are debates as to what extent the messages of this epic, in which the “extermination of converts to Islam” is an important theme, can be misused and misunderstood.²⁹

At some points in the 20th century, the narrative of returning apostates to the faith of their ancestors was taken seriously. In Montenegro, on 16 March 1913, 12,300 Muslims from Gusinje and Plav were baptized. The number was confirmed by priest Dorđe Šekularac, who performed that service. It is interesting how the local military authorities explained this act: “they said that the old faith was invalid and that we should all go to church. We replied that we absolutely did not accept that”, a qadi from Gusnje Šaban Musić testified. Montenegrin mufti Murteza Karađuzović filed a protest in an audience with King Nikola. The king ordered the Minister of Defense, Mašan Božović, to solve the problem. By May 1913, all Muslims returned to their faith.³⁰

In Bulgaria, the collapsing communist regime in the 1980s decided to “Bulgarianize” both the Pomaks and the Turks. At the end of the century, Todor Zhivkov behaved much worse than King Nikola. The campaign of forced conversion to Christianity was euphemistically called the “Process of Revival”. The most striking form of that Bulgarianization was the forced change of names from Muslim to Bulgarian. Hundreds of thousands fled to Turkey.³¹

²⁹ M. Mandić, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Šerbo Rastoder, „Pismo gusinjskog kadije, Šabana (Musića) –Murtezi Karađuzoviću, muftiji crnogorskih muslimana o masovnom pokrštanju 1913.godine“, *www.academia.edu*, accessed 13.07.2024.

³¹ Frederick De Jong, “The Muslim Minorities in The Balkans on the Eve of the Collapse of communism”, *Islamic Studies* 36, no. 2/3 (1997), 413–427; Darina Vasileva, “Bulgarian Turkish Emi-

“Slavic-Serbian Breed”

The most ambitious denier of Serbian identity among Croats was the “father of the Homeland”, Ante Starčević. According to Starčević, the word Serb came from the word *servus* (slave). Starčević writes in ekavian dialect: “It is known to the learned people that the name Serb or Serv in ancient times, or the name Slav, was the common word for a slave in the Middle Ages.” Serbs are “an impure Slavic-Serbian breed.” Slavic-Serbs are amoral and anational people, they can also be found among Croats, French and Russians. Everything that was good about Serbs is Croatian. There are the Nemanjićs: “With Stefan Dušan, the last branch of the illustrious Croatian dynasty of the Nemanjićs was extinguished.” Arsenije Černojević: “Arsenije Cernović came from a well-known Croatian family.” In the Battle of Kosovo, “Miloš Oblič turned out to be a Croat.” Serbs do not really exist as a separate people, because in the past they had “no national, no collective name”. In Southeast Europe, there are only “Croats and Bulgarians”. Serbia has never existed, because it is always “the most insignificant province of the Croats”. In some of the texts, he writes in ijekavian dialect: “Through eight centuries, there is no trace of Serbian nationality, there is no Serbian literature or Serbian national history.” In a hundred years, the same language will be spoken in Belgrade as in Bucharest, “if the Serbs do not stand up for Croatian language, and refresh themselves from it.”³²

“Croatian and Bosnian Serbs are not Serbs”

Croatian deniers of Serbian identity did not, after Ante Starčević, deny the existence of all Serbs. Those east of the Drina exist, but those in the West are the product of conspiracy and manipulation by Serbian intellectuals and the Serbian church. The view that Croatian Serbs are not Serbs appears not only in obscure media, but also in the most influential source of historical awareness today, Wikipedia. That thesis appears in the entry on the “Vlachs” in the Croatian edition of this internet encyclopedia. Croatian Wikipedia draws most of its data from reputable scientific publications, such as *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, namely the article

gration and Return”, *The International Migration Review*, 26, no. 2 (1992), 342–352; Francesco Trupia, “What would have been my name? The Post-Memory of the “Generation After” in the Revival Process in Bulgaria”, *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, 9, 1, (2022), 47–64.

³² Ante Starčević, *Pasmina slavoserbska u Hervatskoj* (Zagreb: Tisak Lava Hartmana i družbe, 1876), V, 29, 68; Mile Starčević, *Dr. Ante Starčević i Srbi* (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1936), 96–107.

by Mirko Valentić. The idea is simple. The Orthodox inhabitants of Croatia are not Serbs, but the Serbian Church has imposed that identity on them in recent times. Leading Serbian intellectuals have helped the Church in this endeavor. For example, Aleksa Ivić, wherever he saw “Vlachs” in the sources, he renamed them into Serbs. Others continued in the same manner, from Pavle Ivić to Drago Roksandić. Even the great Croatian historian Ferdo Šišić succumbed to that Serbian propaganda, and he too recognized the Serbianness of the Vlachs. According to Valentić, the Serbianization of the Vlachs had taken place very late, it was completed by the Serbian Orthodox Church by the end of the 19th century. A special role in this was played by the bishop of Gornji Karlovac, Lukijan Mušicki (1777-1837).³³

Valentić modernized older authors, the most striking of whom was Ćiro Truhelka. He was an ardent admirer of the NDH and the manager of the National Museum in Sarajevo. Truhelka believed that the source of the antagonism between Serbs and Croats “is that the Serbs are an ethnically foreign element, who due to their geopolitical position belong to different cultural areas, and have never had a common history, religion or cultural life, and this struggle that is being waged before our eyes is the struggle of Vlach immigrants against the autochthonous population of Bosnia, which has always been only Croatian.” In tune with the racist theories of his time, Truhelka considers Serbs to be racially inferior and inhuman. While Muslims and Croats have blue eyes and fair hair, Serbs are dark-skinned and dark-haired, have pigeon chest and elongated skulls. Their culture is imbued with stagnation and death, and their history is filled with inhumanity, which is a consequence of the “disgusting stench of Byzantium.” Truhelka had a great influence on Ustasha intellectuals, who cited him as an important source. In recent times, Rusmir Mahmutćehajić is a great admirer of this scientist.³⁴

Why do our “prodigious sons” hate us?

Identity deniers believe in something that can be called the national guilt syndrome. This syndrome can be one of the explanations for the intellectual effort they invest in denying other people's identities. It is also their answer to one of the main questions in the thoughts about ethnic conflicts. That question is: is there an “ancient hatred”? If so, what causes it?

³³ „Tko je bio prvi, Hrvati ili Vlasi“? *Povijest*, 28.07.2024; Mirko Valentić, „O etničkom korijenu hrvatskih i bosanskih Srba“, *Časopis za suvremenu povijest*, 24, 2, (1992), 1-21.

³⁴ Ćiro Truhelka, *Uspomene jednog pionira* (Zenica: Vrijeme, 2012), 117; Idem, *Hrvatska Bosna. Mi i „oni tamo“* (Sarajevo: Vogler, 1907), 24–5; Zoran Milutinović, *Bitka za prošlost* (Beograd: Geopoetika, 2018), 207–208.

Identity deniers have a ready answer to this question. Deep down, our apostates feel the pain of the betrayal of the “faith of their ancestors”. By killing Serbs, for example, they kill their inner Serb, who torments them and reminds them of the sin of their ancestors. It seems that there is some cultural intimacy in the selection of targets for identity denial. Apart from cultural closeness, conflict is necessary for this denial. For decades, deniers have found the national guilt syndrome almost exclusively in Croats and Muslims/Bosniaks. They were particularly concerned with the Serbian origin of the Herzegovinian Croats, disproportionately represented among the Ustasha. True, Herzegovinian Croats often have the same surnames as Herzegovinian Serbs. There have also been common, general Christian and new, Yugoslav names, but identity differences are more clearly visible in personal names than in surnames. For example, Kovačević can be a Serb, Croat, Muslim/Bosniak or Montenegrin. Some names like Petar, Nikola and Luka are shared by all the Christian nations of the former Yugoslavia. The Neo-Yugoslavian name Goran can be given to a member of any South Slavic nation, including Muslims/Bosniaks. But Stevan and Nemanja cannot be Croats, nor can they be Muslims/Bosniacs. Just like neither Serbs nor Montenegrins nor Muslims can be Domagoj or Hrvoje.³⁵

During the conflict in Kosovo, Kosovo Albanians were added to the Serbian apostates. They, especially those from Drenica, the fiercest Albanian nationalists, are the ones who kill the Serb deep inside themselves. “Famous Belgrade ethnologist and historian” Božidar Kljajević has discovered that the great-grandfather of Hashim Thaçi, commander of the paramilitary KLA, president and prime minister of Kosovo, was Orthodox priest Radoslav Danilović. He converted to Islam in 1898. A document about this is allegedly located in the library of the Hilandar monastery. Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović said the same. Imaginative journalists have “found out” that Thaçi does not come to work on Mitrovčan – the Saint Day of the Danilovićs, and that he said to his associates that they were incompetent, but were lucky to be led by him, of Serbian blood. After all, 40 to 60 percent of Albanians in Kosovo are of Serbian origin, according to Kaljević and Dr. Kaplan Burović.³⁶

³⁵ Predrag Marković, “Nomen Est Omen- Given Names Witnessing the National Identity Change in Belgrade in the 20th Century”, Slobodan Naumović, Miroslav Jovanović (eds), *Childhood in South East Europe: Historical Perspectives on Growing Up in the 19th and 20th Century* (Belgrade-Graz: 2001), 235–247.

³⁶ „Našim Tači je Srbin!“ *Pink.rs/informer/Srbija danas*; „Писани манастирски докази: Тачијев прадеда је био Србин“, *ИИ4С*. accessed 06.08.2024.

The identity deniers were quite incidentally interested in Sándor Pétefi, the greatest Hungarian poet and great Hungarian nationalist.³⁷ If they had been more interested in the world outside the former Yugoslavia, they could have easily said that Petefi became a great Hungarian to cover up the fact that he was born as Aleksandar Petrović.

The idea that apostates from our nation are morally problematic people is quite old and rooted. In his *Dictionary*, Vuk Karadžić cites the proverb: “A Turk-Convert Is Worse Than a Turk”.³⁸ The proverb “They sold their faith for dinner” has already been mentioned, as an accusation of the immorality of the converts.

The guilty conscience syndrome introduces an element of psychological problems into the identity strategy. The fact that prominent individuals and even entire nations have fallen away from “Us” is a product not only of moral weakness, but also of a sick mind. In the eyes of some Bosniak intellectuals, such an apostate was Ivo Andrić: “He is an apostate, a convert, a man of extremely dubious morals... He can be linked to Hitler, Milan Nedić and Draža Mihailović. He must certainly be linked to the communist dictatorship, which he served, and which promoted him.... By emphasizing that there are Serbs, Croats and Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Andrić violated the unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in which only Bosnians should live, and they are, in fact, only Muslims”, writes Zoran Milutinović.

Muhsin Rizvić summarized accusations against Andrić for mental illness in his book *Bosanski muslimani u Andrućevom svijetu / Bosnian Muslims in Andrić's World* !: “Because one's own hatred seeks, and demands, feelings and expressions of hatred in others, even on the opposite side, it is projected pathologically with its own relief (...)”. Rizvić finds hatred towards Muslims in Andrić in every text, even in the sentence that he “became spiritually enlightened” in Poland. Rizvić believes that Andrić said that because of the Polish tradition of fighting Islam. And all this stems from Andrić's pathological personality. Rizvić claims that Andrić identified with almost all the villains from his works, especially sex criminals and erotomaniacs. According to him, Andrić suffered from various complexes, especially Oedipus, and suppressed urges. He never mentioned his father, he hid his origin.³⁹

On the Serbian side, Andrić's work was also interpreted as the intention to problematize Islamic identity. One of the leading interpreters of Ivo Andrić's

³⁷ Слободан Јарчевић, *Бивши Срби Мађари* (Београд: Мирослав, 2016).

³⁸ M. Mandić, *op. cit.*

³⁹ Z. Milutinović, *Bitka za prošlost*, 55–70.

work, Petar Džadžić, found evidence of conversion pain in the novels *Na Drini ćuprija /The Bridge on the Drina/* and *Omer paša Latas /Omer pasha Latas/*. That pain is a warning and a prediction, it is passed on to posterity.⁴⁰ In one of the most politically influential novels published at the beginning of the Yugoslav crisis (1982), the novel *Nož /Knife/* by Vuk Drašković, the main character who grew up as a Muslim, Alija Osmanović, but who is actually a Serb, Ilija Jugović, reacts like this when he discovers his Serbian origin: "I am a Serb! That thought makes him want to fly, it seems to him that he has wings, that he has been reborn."⁴¹

The example of the fiercest Croatian nationalist, Ante Starčević, who himself was a great denier of the existence of Serbs, was mentioned earlier in the article. Identity deniers imply that he was repressing the Serb in him, because he is, in fact, a first-generation convert.⁴² He was mentioned only as the most prominent example. There are countless texts in the Serbian public about the Serbian origin of the main Ustasha criminals, since they were mostly from Lika and western Herzegovina. According to the deniers of Croatian identity, all Catholics in Lika and western Herzegovina are covert Serbs.

One of the most prominent Serbian anthropologists, Bojan Jovanović, gave a scientific explanation to the psychological problem of converts:

"The change of religion also meant a change of cultural and spiritual identity, ethnic alienation and a change of national affiliation. Due to the need to prove their uniqueness, confirm their identity, converts are the main actors of religious and national intolerance, the drivers of conflict and war with their former compatriots, religious and ethnic brothers. By overemphasizing belonging to a new religion, i.e. a new religious community, the believer is deeply psychologically motivated to prove himself religiously with his conduct and at the same time to distance himself from his previous faith."⁴³

The narrative of national guilty conscience leads into a logical trap. If we consistently follow that discourse, we will come to the conclusion that our apostates are the worst in the world. Because it seems that the Germans do not feel guilt for abandoning their ancestral faith. This happened around the same time as the Islamization and Catholicization of the Serbs. Nor are the Sikhs worried about being such a young religion. Identity deniers would perhaps have a ready answer to that question and say that the difference is that our apostates converted to the religion

⁴⁰ Петар Џадић, *Храстова греда у каменој капији* (Београд: Народна књига, 1983), 58, 62–63.

⁴¹ Вук Драшковић, *Нож* (Београд: Српска реч, 1998), 301.

⁴² Н. Жутић, *Срби римокатолици такозвани Хрвати*, 69.

⁴³ Бојан Јовановић, *Дух паганског наслеђа у српској традиционалној култури* (Нови Сад: Светови, 2000), 63.

of the occupiers. Fortunately for the Sikhs and the Germans, we have seen that identity deniers generally have little interest in the world outside their immediate environment. It would be interesting to know how these deniers would explain one of the most massive and rapid religious conversions in modern history. It is the conversion of Koreans to Christianity in the second half of the 20th century.⁴⁴

It is interesting that identity deniers show little interest in examples of converts who have adapted loyalty to the new faith and devotion to the people of their origin. Such was Mehmed Pasha Sokolović, one of the greatest Ottoman statesmen.⁴⁵ His devotion to his origins also led to the construction of a bridge over the Drina, which became the subject of the world's most famous Serbian novel *Na Drini ćuprija /The Bridge on the Drina/*. Identity deniers are only interested in those examples that are evidence of hatred, or in this case, the guilty conscience of the brothers who have betrayed us.

Identity panic

Identity denial almost always occurs in moments of identity panic. It occurs in times of crisis or insecurity. It is no coincidence that it appeared among Serbs and Russians after the collapse of complex states, when it was necessary to reconstruct anew the Russian, i.e. Serbian identity on the ruins of the deconstructed Soviet and Yugoslav identity.

Going back in history and longing for better times seems to be the commonplace of all societies unsure of their present and future. Bulgarians are hesitant about what their golden age is. No one expressed it better than the world's most successful Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov. In his most awarded novel *Time Shelter*, he describes how Bulgarians, dissatisfied with the present and without faith in the future, go to a referendum where the question is what era Bulgaria should return to. Some are in favor of the revival in the 19th century (Вългарско възраждане). Others are for the era of socialism⁴⁶.

At first glance, this explanation does not apply to the Greeks and Bulgarians and their denial of Macedonian identity. In Bulgaria's case, it may be a populist strategy, where nationalist rhetoric is used to divert attention from the almost constant political crisis in the country. The Greek case is not entirely clear.

⁴⁴ Dae Young Ryu, "Religious Change in Korea", Wilfred, Felix (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 279–296.

⁴⁵ Радован Самарџић, *Мехмед Соколовић* (Београд: СКЗ, 1971).

⁴⁶ Georgi Gospodinov, *Vremensko sklonište* (Београд: Геопоетика, 2023).

It has to do with the Croatian approach to the denial of the Serbs. The Greeks have almost completely “solved” the issue of the Macedonian minority after the civil war, but Greek nationalists continue to deny its existence.⁴⁷ Croatia has almost wiped out the Serbian minority from its country in the mid-1990s, and Croatian extremists continue to erase any signs of Serbian presence. Is it about the need to ensure the results of ethnic engineering and prevent the vampirization of those unsuitable minorities? Identity denial is sometimes the result of the fear that these (non)existent neighbors will take not only our territories, but also our national symbols, traditions and history. When it comes to Turkey's denial of Kurdish identity, there is indeed a decades-long war not only over identity symbols such as national insignia and language, but also over territories. Greeks and Bulgarians deny the Macedonian identity because of the “stealing” of history. For the Greeks, the golden age of their history is antiquity, in which the Macedonians try to “steal” space for themselves. Russian nationalists find it unbearable that the cradle of their people, Kiev Russia, is inhabited by foreigners.

There is no identity panic in ethnic communities that feel safe. While the Irish, the Scots, and the Welsh talked widely about their identities, the English did not dwell much on their separate national identity, preoccupied with running the United Kingdom and the British Empire. For the English, it has been said, to talk about national identity is rather like talking about sex and religion: “something one does not do in polite society”. With the devolution of the United Kingdom, things have changed, but not as dramatically as in the former Yugoslavia. The place where feelings of identity can be monitored in every country are the stadiums. English fans began to use the red and white flag of St. George en masse only in the 1990s, especially since the 1996 European Championship. Previously, they had mostly waved the British Union Jack flag. Nevertheless, empirical research shows that even at the time of the 2006 World Cup, English fans were more concerned about their club than the national team. In that year, the majority of Scots and Welsh people respected their flags more than the flag of the United Kingdom. Less than half of the respondents in those parts respected the flag of the common state. In contrast, 62 percent of English people respected the Union Jack, and 47 percent the flag of St. George. Despite devolution, most young English people are still indifferent to national identity.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Anastasia Karakasidou, “Politicizing Culture: Negating Ethnic Identity in Greek Macedonia”, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, volume 11, number 1, (May 1993), 1–28.

⁴⁸ Krishan Kumar, “English and British National Identity”, *History Compass* 4/3 (2006), 428–447; David McCrone, “A Nation That Dare not Speak Its Name? The English Question”, *Ethnicities*, 6/1, (2006), 96; Mike Cronin, “Flags and nationalism in modern Britain: The case of the English

Perhaps the best example of a non-event is the German attitude towards the separation of the Austrians. Austrians have created two meta-narratives to explain their special identity since 1955. One is that Austrians were never Germans, which is based on the juxtaposition of Prussian and Habsburg historical traditions. The second is the myth of the first victim of Nazism. Most Austrians believe that story, despite the fact that their compatriots were proportionally much more numerous in the ranks of the Nazis than the Germans themselves.⁴⁹ On the other hand, there are no articles about any German dissatisfaction with that Austrian apostasy. Even the extreme right-wingers don't seem to mention the subject. Just as the English during the era of the Empire and the United Kingdom were indifferent to their national identity, so perhaps the Germans, preoccupied with the building and managing the European Union, did not consider that the defense of the narrower German identity was something important and fateful.

The author was unable to find any work on the denial of neighbors' identities among Scandinavians. If we were to apply the criteria of the Balkan identity deniers, we might wonder whose language is the "real" one, whether some Scandinavian people has betrayed the nation of their ancestors. Scandinavians, however, do not ask these questions. Probably because they are satisfied with their countries and societies.

The Serbs devoted most of the 20th century to the construction and preservation of Yugoslavia. Their attitude may resemble that of the English towards the United Kingdom. Just as the English considered themselves primarily British, so the majority of Serbs believed that they were Yugoslavs. Unfortunately, the Serbian academic community has not produced research on the evolution of the concept of Yugoslavia among Serbs. According to some researchers, one of the main doubts about Serbian Yugoslavism is the question of whether Yugoslavia is the same as the great or expanded Serbia. The two only syntheses published in the 21st century about Yugoslavism are from the pen of Slovenian scientists.⁵⁰

football supporter", *Soccer & Society*, 1, 1 (1999), 1–11; Steve Fenton, "Indifference towards national identity: what young adults think about being English and British", *Nations and Nationalism*, 13, 2, (2007), 321–339.

⁴⁹ Tschiggerl, "Significant otherness – nation building and identity in postwar Austria", *Nations and Nationalism*, 27, (2021), 782–796.

⁵⁰ Dennison Rusinow, "The Yugoslav idea before Yugoslavia", in: Dejan Djokić, *Yugoslavia*, 11–26; Božidar Jezernik, *Yugoslavia without Yugoslavs. The History of a National Idea* (New York-Oxford: Berghann Books, 2023); Tomaž Ivešič, *The Rise and Fall of Communist Yugoslavism* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2024).

It is no coincidence that the tide of articles about non-existent neighbors, their upstart and invented identity, arose during the terminal crisis of Yugoslavia in the 1980s. The opinion that Yugoslavia was the most expensive mistake in Serbian history has strengthened among the Serbian public. There are countless books that talk about it. The historical narrative has been completely reversed. Up until then, the one prevailing one was that the Serbs were a nation of winners, who, with huge sacrifices, has won two world wars and created and restored the great state of Yugoslavia. Since the 1980s, the first Yugoslavia has been increasingly seen as a dearly paid cuckoo in the nest, and the second as a conscious anti-Serb project of the communists. The distancing from Yugoslavia began in journalism and literature. Perhaps the most influential book that symbolizes that change is *Knjiga o Milutinu / The Book of Milutin*, by Danko Popović. In that novel, the paradigmatic Serbian peasant Milutin Ostojić, in the prison where he was imprisoned as a kulak after World War II, describes his life, and especially the warfare in the First World War. The book mostly talks about the senseless suffering of the Serbs in the First World War and about the false Yugoslav brothers-traitors. *The Book of Milutin* sold half a million copies. Interestingly, the first editions were in Latin, which can be an indication of to what extent the Serbs accepted the general Yugoslav identity. In the 1980s, the Serbian academic community still defended the idea of Yugoslavia.⁵¹

After the breakup of the country, the voices of the intellectual public who claimed that Yugoslavia was a dead end in Serbian history multiplied even more. The concept of “Greater Serbia”, marginalized after the creation of Yugoslavia in 1918, was revived. In order to justify the request for borders along the Karlobag-Ogulin Karlovac-Virovitica line, for which Vojislav Šešelj advocated throughout his political career, it was necessary to prove that the inhabitants of that territory were Serbs, aware or unaware of their true identity.

It is possible to conclude that the denial of neighbors' identities requires crises, not only in relations between peoples, but also insecurity in one's own identity. In the case of Bulgaria and Greece, there is no conflict with Macedonia, but there may be insecurity, not because of the territorial integrity of their country, but because of the alleged Macedonian “stealing” of part of the national history and culture of these countries.

⁵¹ Danko Popović, *Knjiga o Milutinu* (Beograd: Književne novine, 1985). Review of historiographic polemics about Yugoslavia in: Коста Николић, *Прошлост без историје* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју, 2003), 99–123.

In other examples mentioned in this article, the connection between conflict and denial strategies is clear. This is best seen in examples where there is a belief that a nation is our strayed brother, but if there is no conflict, it is not given much attention. For example, a large part of the Russian public and the academic community equally consider that Belarusians are an artificial people, as well as the Little Russians (Ukrainians). However, that conviction does not have the emotional strength or political consequences that a belief in the Ukrainian “betrayal” of the older brother has.

It is similar to the denial of identity among the South Slavic peoples. The idea that Slovenians are “mountain Croats”, which was advocated by the father of Croatian nationalism, Ante Starčević, is mentioned today only in a joking context. Serbs often hold the view that Macedonians are not a true people. There is a joke that they are Serbs with a speech impediment. However, the existence of a separate Macedonian nation does not attract particular anger, even among extremists. Šešelj, who included Macedonia in his fantasy of Greater Serbia, devoted 28 pages to the Serbian identity of Macedonians out of 1058 pages of his book *Ideologija srpskog nacionalizma /The Ideology of Serbian Nationalism/*.⁵²

The final conclusion could be that the denial of neighbors’ identities is the product of a multifold crisis of confidence. Identity deniers are distrustful of several things. They don't trust their neighbors, because they are often ours, apostates who have betrayed their brothers. They do not trust the great powers, because they have created these apostates. They don't even believe in their own countries, because they are weak and because they have led the wrong policy. Finally, they don't really believe in the attractiveness of their nation either, as they are convinced that so many people throughout history have run away from their “true” national identity.

⁵² „Ante Starčević“, *Hrvatski biografski leksikon* (vebsajt), accessed 28.06.2024; В. Шешель. chapters „Српска Македонија“ and „Македонско питање“ in: *Идеологија српског национализма*, 157–172, 725–736.