
CHALLENGES OF NATIONALISM ON THE EDUCATION SYSTEM AND POLITICAL CULTURE OF POST-WAR SERBIA

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In the aftermath of the political and military conflicts of the 1990s Serbia not only suffers from economical and political decline, but also from the effects of social and civil despair and the lack of reasonable elites to give the post-war society new structures and identity.¹ The problem becomes obvious in the issue of rising nationalism in Serbia, despite of the ambitions of reformers like Zoran Djindjic or Boris Tadic to modernize Serbia in order to achieve western European democratic values and standards.

Nationalism as a consequence of a “lost” war

The disintegration of the state and society in the 1990s and the fall of communism—resulting from the end of the cold war and its effect on world politics—led to conflicts and war in all the countries of former Yugoslavia. Especially for the population of Serbia,—which more than any other republic inherited the years of “Yugoslavianism” along with a very mixed population and ethnical and political diversity—the war became a “national tragedy” and led to new victim myths in Serbia after the fall of Milosevic regime.² In spite of this, all efforts to create a new “national state” failed in the Milosevic era, and led them into cruel civil wars which created a human and economic disaster for

¹ The brain drain is a widespread phenomenon among the Balkan countries, with Albania, Serbia and Kosovo suffering the most from brain-drain processes. See Academic Reconstruction in South Eastern Europe—Interim Review 2000 to 2003, Bonn.

² The roots of the Serbian “victim myth” are present throughout Serbia’s history during the 20th century. Florian Bieber explains the problems of nationalism in Serbia with several competing “national ideas leading to a chaos of ideas and political interests in the end of the Tito era, making democratisation very difficult even with the fall of the Milosevic regime.” See Bieber “Nationalismus in Serbien vom Tode Titos bis zum Ende der Ära Milošević”, Wien.

the population of Serbia and Kosovo.³ With the fall of the Milosevic regime in October 2000, many problems remained, which have not necessarily been solved with an exchange of state elites such as the one that took place in October 2000, but which have deep structural causes in informal institutions of power and structural inequality among people.

Pluralism and diversity in Serbia

Despite the war and its “ethnic cleansing” Serbia even today is a multiethnic country with huge regional disparities. The transition and democratisation process aims at stability and efficiency of the newly established democratic institutions. But Serbia has many problems, not only in maintaining these democratic institutions—as the failed election campaigns and the murder of Zoran Djindjic in March 2003 showed⁴—but also in facing the difficulties of an unbalanced centralism that leaves the regional and minority political leaders unsatisfied and without power.

Serbia is a multiethnic state, with most of the ethnic minorities living in the north (Vojvodina) and in the south of the state territory.⁵ In Serbian Vojvodina for example, the minorities, especially Hungarians, make up around 20-30% of the population. Kosovo, which is formally still part of Serbia, is also a multiethnic region whose future status is still unknown.

The minorities in Serbia were used as a tool by political leaders at the time of the civil wars in the 1990s for their own private economic interests and/or for

³ Kosovo is today under the protection of the United Nations, but still under sovereignty of Serbia. The final status of Kosovo is due to be discussed in the United Nations in autumn 2005. Lately the Serbian government has offered regional autonomy to the Kosovo Albanian people, with Serbia still controlling foreign policy and taxation of Kosovo. Compare news bulletin on: http://www.lycos.de/startseite/news/welt/show_story.html,,db_id=19115/serbien-will-kosovo-entmilitarisieren-und-souveraenitaet-behalten.html

⁴ The elections for a Serbian president failed twice in 2004, because less than half of Serbia's population participated in the elections. The result of the third –valid– election was a very narrow win for the democrat Boris Tadic in 2004, competing with Ultra-Nationalist candidate Seselj.

⁵ Included here is also the Roma population, often referred to as “gypsies” but more important in terms of number is the Hungarian ethnic minority in Vojvodina and the ethnic Albanians in the south. See Djorde Tomic's “Vojvodina- the political aspect, regional organisations and initiatives in Vojvodina”.

staying in power.⁶ As a matter of fact this situation became especially evident during the Serbian wars in Yugoslavia, but it continues to exist even today. We can still observe cross-border nationalism with reference to “minority rights”. Examples are Kosovo’s Serbian minority as an example of Serbian Ultra-Nationalism in the Kosovo region, but also Hungarian politics for the Hungarian people in Vojvodina, granting them the extraterritorial right of being a “citizen” of Hungary.

The view on the role of national minorities in peace building and creating political stability is therefore quite ambiguous, often making them a target for national and antidemocratic propaganda from irredentist parties or political leaders.

Taking into consideration that the European Union is trying to integrate the Western Balkans as a whole, especially Croatia and Serbia, the question arises as to whether the multiethnic and multinational regions can be utilized to build “bridges” in civil society through cross-border co-operation as part of a two-track integration strategy of the European Union. The minorities in Serbia, in Vojvodina and Kosovo search for possible solutions for a better regional political integration, and aim at not depending on a Serbian central statehood and tax system alone. In a way, the multiethnic regions represent a “Balkan political avant-garde,” uniting local, regional and national identity. So the national minorities can on the one hand be regarded as an obstacle to democratic evolution, making the stabilisation of state institutions and representation in the political process more complicated. But on the other hand they put democratic identity issues into political processes and put forward issues of multiple identity and democratic peace.

Education and political culture

As reflected upon at the outset, post-war Serbia is still very busy with its own national identity and questions of guilt for wartime cruelties. Paradoxically, the fall of the Milosevic regime has not had the effect of a general democratisation process of society and a change of political culture. There was even a backlash in nationalism after the fall of the Milosevic regime in 2000 that became obvious with an ultranationalist candidate for presidency almost coming into power in

⁶ Croatia’s F. Tudjman was regarded as a charismatic leader whose power was based mainly on ultranationalist mobilization.

the 2004 presidential elections and the ultranationalist party being the strongest faction in the Serbian parliament. These results are proof of a lack of democratic culture in Serbia with informal institutions and unequal structures of power present everywhere.

National myths are widespread, praising Serbian uniqueness and lowering the status of other ethnic groups. Only in the spring of 2005, when a video of the Srebrenica massacre was shown to the Serbian public, did doubt set in for the first time among a huge number of people as regards their “heroic fight” for Serbia in civil war.⁷ This may be the beginning of a new democratic conscience in Serbia, strengthening human and minority rights and making them a common issue among many people who even today are nostalgic about the Milosevic era.

Conclusion: Education as a key to a democratic culture in Serbia?

A very important and yet often neglected issue is the use of national myths in history books. It is very difficult and takes a long time to deconstruct them and make space for new ideas. Recently a history book for the common history of South-Eastern Europe and the Balkans was published in Greece as an avant-garde project in the region.⁸ “The aim of history books should be to inform about historic events without being biased in description,” says Nenad Sebek from the Centre for Democracy in Thessaloniki. “But here in South Eastern Europe we have achieved this way of teaching yet. We have done research in the eleven countries in South Eastern Europe, and came to the conclusion that history is taught in a very simple way: We are the good guys, the others are not good. We have always been the victims, and have never been the aggressor.”⁹ A commission of historians then decided to prepare a book in the last five years

⁷ See interview with Sonja Besirke (Helsinki Committee for human rights) who in spite of this assumes a growing isolation of Serbians in Europe because of little progress in dealing with their own past and being much too uncritical about their own history, especially in regard to Kosovo issues. (21.9.2005, Fokus Ost-Südost, <http://dw-world.de/ostfokus>)

⁸ See interview with Nenad Sebek (Centre for democracy Thessaloniki) (19.9. 2005, Fokus Ost-Südost, <http://dw-world.de/ostfokus>)

⁹ Translation by Eva Dangendorf, see Original text on the www. Geschichtsbuch als Beitrag zur Versöhnung in Südosteuropa, 22.09.2005 <http://dw-world.de/ostfokus>.

in the English language, which now has to be translated into the ten languages used in the Balkan states.¹⁰ But even with the translation in progress, the more difficult problem is to introduce the four-volume history book into the various education systems of the Balkan states and to the teachers and historians who will try to stick to their old way of history teaching and history textbook writing.. Because of this, they will probably go on reproducing the national myths and master narratives of the 19th and 20th centuries which can be made responsible for the “ideological warfare” that caused civil wars and national mobilisation in Serbia and the other republics of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

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¹⁰ The five year project was financed by the German and the US ministries of foreign affairs as well as by the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe