Is There a Future for the “Myth of Kosovo”?*

Stanislava Judinyová

Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, Bratislava, Slovak Republic

The present paper aims at the exploration of the development of the political “myth of Kosovo” and its viability with respect to EU membership ambitions of Serbia. The battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389, presented as Serbian defeat, transformed itself into the founding political myth of modern Serbian nation in the 19th century and has continued to exist as such until nowadays. The “myth of Kosovo” could shift to the ideological-cultural basis of Serbian identity and religious-cultural practices in the case of successful EU integration efforts of Serbia. However, if Serbian-Kosovar dialogue fails or Serbia loses the perspective of EU membership or some crisis hits the European Union as such, “myth of Kosovo” could be instrumentalized by various Serbian actors in order to achieve their partial political aims.

Keywords: political myth, political mythology, Serbia, Kosovo, Battle of Kosovo Polje, “myth of Kosovo”

Introduction

September 2019 has seen stirring up of a debate concerning the fate of Kosovo-Belgrade relationships when Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić refused to meet his Kosovar counterpart, Hashim Thaci, in the framework of Priština-Belgrade dialogue facilitated by the European Union in order to normalize their mutual relations on September 7 after the unilateral declaration of Kosovo’s independence in 2008. Subsequently, Mr. Vučić set off to Northern Kosovo on September 9 in order to deliver what was supposed to be a crucial speech on the solution for Kosovo and Kosovar Serbs. There was a talk of the possibility of territorial exchange between Serbia and Kosovo going on. Although, Vučić’s speech did not finally bring any “surprises”, the issue of Kosovo got again into forefront of media attention.

One may ask what the reason is that Serbia clings so much to this relatively small territory? Seemingly incomprehensible attachment (at least to people living beyond Western Balkans region) that Serbian people cherish towards Kosovo has deep historical roots that were further instrumentalized by political actors.

Or rather, we can say that the answer lies in the domain of mythology. Human beings have always been “mythmakers”, be it in religious, cultural, or political domain. And this tendency to create myths has not disappeared or has not been reduced with the scientific and technological progress or due to the decline of religious beliefs in Western societies. It continues to be steadily present, only taking on different forms. Development of modern political nations has been accompanied by the growth in prominence of a special category of myths—political myths. When we are interrogating why political myths are so appealing to the broad public or why they will not give way to rational discourse of political events and actions, it is possibly due to their capacity to “make

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Stanislava Judinyová, PhD., Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic.

political events intelligible" to citizens as Christopher C. Flood has put it (Flood, 2002).¹

Thus seen from the above perspective, we can say that Kosovo territory is an embodiment of the main political myth of modern Serbian nation which shall be referred to as "myth of Kosovo" in the present article. Kosovo is a national symbol and a materialization of that symbol at the same time while taking many different forms in literature, journalistic production, Serbian academic research, and arts.

In the year 1389, Kosovo Polje (i.e., "Field of Blackbirds") at the territory of what is now Kosovo was the stage of a battle between the forces led by Serbian prince Lazar and the forces led by Ottoman Sultan Murad. What was the exact result of the battle is not known today for sure (Karpatský, 1990; Malcolm, 2002).² However, it was the battle in question presented as Serbian defeat that transformed itself into the founding political myth of modern Serbian nation in the 19th century.

Historical Development of the "Myth of Kosovo"

"Myth of Kosovo" took its shape as the main Serbian political myth during the 19th century thanks to Serbian nationalist intelligentsia aiming at creation of modern Serbian nation and due to Serbian ruling dynasties of Karadjordjević and Obrenović. Those actors deliberately used existing ecclesiastical myth of Serbian Orthodox Church as well as folk epic rich in songs about the Battle of Kosovo (Karpatský, 1990).³ It was especially one of the gems of Montenegrin poetry (but extensively quoted also by Serbs during different public occasions until this day)—epic poem "*Gorski vijenac*" ("Mountain Wreath") by Montenegrin poet and prince Petar Petrović Njegoš II. from 1847 that helped to spread the "myth of Kosovo" in this period (Njegoš, 1847). The Serbian ruling dynasties used this myth as a sort of justification of their legitimacy implying that the defeat at Kosovo Polje in 1389 and the subsequent instauration of Ottoman supremacy had caused the interruption of continuity in Serbian sovereignty which was gradually renewed during their reign. The use of "myth of Kosovo" gained a new momentum in connection with the capture of Kosovo territory by Serbian forces in October 1912 during the First Balkan War (October 1912-May 1913)⁴ and its subsequent occupation until the Second World War. The myth was used, towards own public as well as towards the external actors, to justify the possession of Kosovo territory by Serbian state and its policy of colonisation by Serbian farmers with the aim to reinforce Serbian population there after the First World War.

After the Second World War, in Titoist Yugoslavia, "myth of Kosovo" was suppressed as "nationalist" and allegedly promoting unacceptable "Greater Serbia" ideology. New political myths of Partisan guerrilla fight of all Yugoslav nations against Nazi invaders under the motto "Brotherhood-unity" were created; however, they

¹ Christopher C. Flood considers political mythmaking as "...normal way of making political events intelligible...".

² Different sources state contradictory information. For instance, French author Philippe de Mézières (c. 1327-May 29, 1405) speaks about the victory of Serbs (Malcolm, 2002, s. 75). Later sources like the biography of Prince Lazar's son and heir "*Žitije despota Štefana Lazarevića*" ("*Life of Despot Štefan Lazarević*") claim that the Battle of Kosovo was won by Ottomans (Mihajlčič, 1984, In *Co se stalo na Kosovu rovném*, 1990, s. 19). According to current historiography the battle finished most probably as a draw (Malcolm, 2002, s. 76).

³ Majority of Serbian population throughout the 19th century was illiterate, however, maintained and spread orally vast amount of epic folk poetry, mostly in the form of ten-syllable line verse called "*deseterac*". Vuk Karadžić, codificator of modern Serbian language and collector of Serbian folk literature, even claimed that the reason why Serbian nation did have just few preserved folk songs from the period before the Battle of Kosovo was that Serbs were so affected by the defeat at Kosovo that they "forgot almost everything that had happened until that time and only since that event they started again to tell stories and sing" (Karadžić, 1824, In *Co se stalo na Kosovu rovném*, 1990, p. 132).

⁴ First Balkan War was fought between Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Greece that were all opposed to the Ottoman Empire and its result meant the loss of the majority of its European possessions for Ottoman Empire to the benefit of the above-mentioned countries.

were recycling traditional elements of “myth of Kosovo” in the process of symbolical bricolage.⁵ So for instance, the Battle of Yugoslav Partisans against Nazis at the River of Sutjeska in the South-East Bosnia in 1943 that despite tragical loss of lives of almost two thirds of Partisan fighters, meant a breakthrough for Partisans in the sense of their acceptance as relevant fighting party, was reinterpreted during Titoist Yugoslavia as a sort of “new Kosovo”. However, this time “Kosovo” that was not limited to Serbians but included members of all ethnic groups and nationalities that were present in Partisan guerillas.⁶

It was only the Serbian Orthodox Church that was keeping the Kosovo tradition alive during this period through religious ceremonies during this period just like in the period following Kosovo Battle (this is why we consider the Church to be a societal actor in Serbian that is the most efficient in preserving and disseminating “myth of Kosovo”). After the death of Josip Broz Tito in 1980 when the disintegration of Yugoslavia started and particular nationalism of Yugoslav nations and nationalities began to flourish, Serbian Orthodox Church started to publicly draw attention to the difficult position of Serbian minority in Kosovo through the writing of its representatives or through their press outlet “*Pravoslavje*”. Soon, Serbian intelligentsia joined the Church in accusing Kosovar Albanian majority of discrimination of Kosovo Serbian population. Traditional “myth of Kosovo” was interlinked with four main issues that were a source of Serbian agitation (highly fueled by Serbian daily press at that time) with regard to the position of its population in Kosovo: discrimination of Serbs in Kosovo (for instance in professional sphere), Serbian emigration from Kosovo territory supposedly caused by the pressure from Kosovo Albanian population, high natality rate of Kosovo Albanians that was allegedly deliberate with the aim of changing demographic composition of Kosovo population and a phenomenon that we can designate as “rape of Serbity”. All those topics served as a vehicle for victimization of Serbian population in Kosovo which enables to see “US”, i.e., Serbs as innocent victims while “They”, i.e., Kosovo Albanians as cruel perpetrators of various crimes against “US”.

This was especially highlighted in the “myth” that was told about the extensive rape cases perpetrated by Kosovo Albanians not only on Serbian women in Kosovo but also on children, nuns and even men. Instrumentalization of discourse about rapes in Kosovo was sparked by the case of Kosovo Serb Djordje Martinović that is not conclusively deciphered until today. Mr. Martinović accused “masked Albanians” from raping him with a bottle on May 1, 1981, while Kosovo police authorities (with the predominance of Kosovo Albanians in their ranks at that time already) claimed that he had inflicted his injuries himself. Journalist from Belgrade magazine “NIN”, S. Spasojević, was so succesful in spreading the word among Serbian public that not only he later published a whole book about the case called “*Slučaj Martinović*” (“The Case Martinović”) with 50 000 copies printed during its first edition but also contributed to putting this case on the agenda of Yugoslav Federal Assembly twice (Malcolm, 2002). Rape cases with its sexual dimension that features prominently in the affective part of human psyche offer an excellent possibility for developing victimization discourse. The effort to present perpetrators as “dehumanized” creatures (Edelman, 1977) (who could be able to commit such a horrid act as a rape, certainly not a “human” being). Moreover, to claim that a man was raped is another element that aggravates the effects of such a discourse on the mind of people living in a society that has been traditionally very patriarchal. The impact of this event on Serbian psyche can be seen also from the fact that Mr. Martinović case was also reflected in artistic production: Serbian painter Miodrag Mica Popović depicted

⁵ We are using the term bricolage in the sense coined by French structuralist, Claude-Lévy Strausse. Original meaning of this word in French language is a sort of do-it-yourself activities.

⁶ Emmert, T. In Dorich, W. a kol. The Kosovo Legacy. Retrieved from http://www.kosovo.net/history/dorich_kosovo/kosovo11.htm.

this event in the painting called “Crucifixion of Djordje Martinović” from 1985⁷. The painting features Mr. Martinović in the role of Christ that is being elevated on the cross by men in traditional Albanian white caps. Unlike the “masked Albanian” rapists from official Martinović case, the men on Popović’s paintings have visible faces and its caps clearly demonstrate their ethnic origin. The artist shows thus who are the perpetrators.

The efforts of Serbian intellectual community in 1980s with regard to the protection of Serbian interests in Kosovo culminated in the document “*Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts*” from 1986. This document was prepared by 16 members of Serbian Academy of Science and Arts as a non-public non-paper destined to Yugoslav federal bodies, that leaked into the press in September 1986. Its aim was to present proposals how to respond to social, economic and ethnic crisis that was engulfing Yugoslavia after Tito’s death. However, a special attention was paid to “the difficult position of Serbian nation” in the then Yugoslav state. The authors of the Memorandum openly claim that “physical, political, legal and cultural genocide against Serbian population of Kosovo and Metohija” is going on there.⁸

The year 1987 brought an ascent of the first communist politician that dared to use “myth of Kosovo” for political purposes—Slobodan Milošević. He especially made use of the 600th anniversary celebrations of Kosovo Battle anniversary in 1989 when he delivered his famous speech in front of approximately one million people at Kosovo Polje that can be considered as proclamation of his nationalist “political programme”. The “myth of Kosovo” featured prominently in this speech. Milošević’s speech has two dimensions: dimensions of the past and the dimension of the future linked together by the present. The result of Kosovo Battle has been the disunity and discord of the Serbian nation (literally “*nesloga*”). On the other hand, Serbian nation possesses also positive features: grandeur and a tendency to “liberate” itself as well as the others. In the “present” period, i.e., during Milošević’s rule, Serbia has gained again its “state, national and spiritual unity”. As for the ambition for the future, Milošević’s draws the vision of what is interesting “multinational” Yugoslavia marching at the forefront of countries that are going to build a new “civilization” in the growingly interconnected world.⁹

After Milošević stripped Kosovo of its considerable autonomy enjoyed under the Yugoslav Constitution from 1974 in 1989, his regime pursued policy that resembled the one from interwar years of the 20th century in Kosovo. However, NATO military intervention in 1999 meant the beginning of the end for Milošević’s regime as well as the end of Serbian administration over Kosovo territory that became *de facto* international protectorate under the United Nations Mission (UNMIK) supervision.

Since Milošević was ousted from the Serbian political life in 2000 we can observe several tendencies in Serbian politics towards Kosovo and “myth of Kosovo”. “Myth of Kosovo” is widely used by Serbian political elites and Orthodox Church at the home political front, i.e., towards Serbian population in Serbia (the adoption of Serbian Constitution of 2006 by referendum which states that Kosovo is an integral part of Serbia is an example of the success of this approach) and Kosovo (sending of the train with the inscriptions “*Kosovo je Srbija*” (“Kosovo is Serbia”) and depictions of various Serbian historical and cultural sights across Kosovo border at the beginning of 2017). On the other hand, Serbian foreign policy is very pragmatic, aimed at the EU

⁷ See the reproduction of the painting for instance on the following site: Miodrag Mica Popovic slike. Retrieved from <https://ar.pinterest.com/pin/561753753500186797/>.

⁸ Memorandum Srpske Akademije Nauka i Umetnosti (nacr.) Jesen 1986. 1986. Retrieved from http://pescanik.net/wpcontent/PDF/memorandum_sanu.pdf.

⁹ See Milošević’s speech on the following link: Gazimestan 1989 600 Kosovo Polje. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1CruF80Xx8>. Interestingly, although he is mentioning growing interconnectedness of the modern world, he does not use the term globalization.

integration efforts of Serbia and dialogue with Kosovar Albanians (also after the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008). "Myth of Kosovo" in current Serbian foreign policy is practically absent as a source of motivation for foreign policy action.

Future of the "Myth of Kosovo"

"A myth is in a sense invulnerable" stated Ernst Cassirer in his seminal work on political mythology "The Myth of the State" from 1946 (Cassirer, 1946). While, this is certainly true, every myth can also be subject to adaptation and modification reflecting and reacting to the current political development. With regard to Serbian aspirations to become a Member State of the European Union, "myth of Kosovo" will probably undergo adjustments as well.

In the above-mentioned context, it is interesting to mention the document "*Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*" dated from February 6, 2018 which sets as a condition of the successful conclusion of the accession process of Serbia to the EU "...irreversible implementation of the comprehensive, legally-binding agreement with Kosovo reflecting the consolidation of the full normalisation of relations will need to have been reached".¹⁰ This practically means that Serbia has to de facto recognize Kosovo's independence if the country really means its EU membership ambitions seriously.

So, what does this mean for the future of the "myth of Kosovo"? Any Serbian government that would concede to the recognition of Kosovo independence would go against the very ideological basis of modern Serbian political nation. Moreover, the Serbian Constitution from 2006 states that Kosovo constitutes an integral part of the Serbian territory. How to reconcile the EU integration efforts with declarations aimed at domestic public that Serbia will never recognize Kosovo?

Certainly, the European Union represents an attractive opportunity to become a part of a large grouping of democratic and economically developed European countries solving their potential disputes by peaceful political means. This statement can be considered as a sort of "mythological" narrative too. However, as we can see in the case of countries that are already part of the EU, this "myth of European integration" has not superseded their respective national "political myths". We can even observe the reinforcement of nationalistic or populist anti-European rhetorics in certain EU countries nowadays.

And then, there are other external actors that "pay court" to Serbian political establishment and without the conditions that come with the accession process to the EU: Russia and China. And those actors support Serbian stance not to recognize Kosovo. While China uses mainly its large investment projects to promote its interest with Serbian (but also other Western Balkans countries), Russia, thanks to its Orthodox culture¹¹, has at its

¹⁰ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, p. 8. Retrieved from https://eurlex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:d284b8de-0c15-11e8-966a-01aa75ed71a1.0010.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

¹¹ Serbian Orthodox Church is a very influential organisation despite the fact that most of the Serbs are not very practicing Christians. Allegiance to the Serbian Orthodox Church is more of a way to declare himself or herself as a Serb which is partly a result of the *millet* system that existed on the Balkans during Ottoman times—people were defined primarily by their religious beliefs e.g., Muslims, Jews, Orthodox Christians-Serbs, etc. The religion also contains very strong cult of national patron saints—ancient Serbian kings for example that is widely exploited when the need to make an appeal on nationalistic sentiments presents itself.

disposal also instruments and narratives that can be very appealing to big part of Serbian population. For instance, Russian media outlets like Sputnik or Russia Today, that have been very active on Serbian media scene recently, promote the idea to construct a monument in honour of the victims of NATO bombardment during Kosovo crisis in 1999.¹²

However, the situation, in which Serbian political establishment is reassuring domestic and Kosovar Serb public that it will never renounce Kosovo and cooperating closely with Russia and China while simultaneously proclaiming its EU membership ambitions, cannot last forever. For now, it may seem propitious for Serbian political elites to maintain this approach of concentrating on four issues in their foreign policy: Kosovo, EU integration, relations with Russia, relations with China, but sooner or later the decision what to prioritise and what to “sacrifice” will have to be taken. And this decision will have impact on the future shape of “myth of Kosovo” as well.

We believe that the accession to the EU with its conditionality and the attractive image of prosperous and peaceful Union could mitigate to certain extent the most radical nationalistic interpretations of the “myth of Kosovo” as well as the misuse of such interpretations on the political scene. However, the question remains how to practically do this without pushing Serbia to overtly recognize Kosovo’s independence. There are some possibilities available.

First of all, the communication from the Commission quoted above is politically very important document but not binding legally, so there is a way how to practically close blind eye on it. The other possibility if there is a pressure to stick to it, is for Serbia, to recognize the membership of Kosovo in selected international organisations but not in the United Nations organisations and not to exchange diplomatic representatives. This could mean some concession in the direction of normalisation of Serbia-Kosovo relations but it could also be interpreted as sticking to the policy of non-recognition of Kosovo, just making some concessions, on the Serbian domestic scene. Serbia has also the possibility to claim that in the case of its and Kosovo succesful integration process to the EU, both territories will be *de facto* “re-united” in the Union where freedom of movement exists.¹³

There is also a possibility coming up on regular basis from certain representatives of the Serbian political scene to exchange territories with Kosovo. However, we consider this to be quite unrealistic option, not only due to the reluctance of international community and Kosovo but also due to the fact that it would be difficult to interpret this potential solution in the perspective of the political “myth of Kosovo”—why to bargain territories if the whole of Kosovo territory is a material manifestation of the “myth of Kosovo”.

Conclusion

The “myth of Kosovo” has a potential to shift to the ideological-cultural basis of Serbian identity and religious-cultural practices in the case of successful EU integration efforts of Serbia. However, if Serbian-Kosovar dialogue fails or Serbia loses the perspective of EU membership or some crisis hits the European Union as such, “myth of Kosovo” could be instrumentalized by various Serbian actors in order to achieve their partial political aims.

¹² Eksklusivno Vučić: Srbija će podići spomenik žrtvama NATO agresije. Retrieved from <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/201704091110641439-nato-agresija-srbija-bombardovanje-spomenik-1234-aBcd-1-3/>

¹³ This narrative can be heard on occasions in the case of Czech and Slovak Republic after the disbandment of former Czechoslovakia in 1993 and subsequent accession of both countries into the EU in 2004.

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