

---

## Symbolic Nation-building and Collective Identities in Post-Yugoslav States

---

VJERAN PAVLAKOVIĆ

University of Rijeka

The bulk of the articles presented in this special issue were presented at the international conference “Strategies of Symbolic Nation-building in South Eastern Europe”, held at the University of Rijeka 8-10 May 2014. This event concluded the three-year project led by Pål Kolstø from the University of Oslo and funded by the Norwegian Research Council, and featured over fifty participants from across Europe. One of the goals of the conference was to present the results of the project (<http://www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/research/projects/nation-w-balkan/>) and the accompanying volume of the same name published by Ashgate in 2014, which focused on nation-building in seven countries defined as the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The other goal of the conference was to encourage younger scholars to draw upon the quantitative results and explore topics beyond what the researchers on the project were able to cover in a single edited volume. The large number of responses to the conference call yielded a final program featuring such diverse subjects as sports and nationalism, social cleavages and nation-building, the role of war crimes trials in shaping national narratives, and even the relationship between food and national identity. For this issue of *Croatian Political Science Review*, I selected those papers which focused on how collective remembrance, cultural landscapes, public space, and sites of memory function in the service of symbolic nation-building not only during socialist Yugoslavia, but especially in the new post-Yugoslav states.

The modern, if not to say postmodern, conditions under which the ongoing processes of nation-building in the Yugoslav successor states are unfolding have made symbols and rituals prominent tools in the hands of the nation-builders, arguably more important now than in earlier generations. At the same time, the presence of strong *narodni*, replete with their historical and religious symbolism and rituals, means that the state leaders have at hand a reservoir of ready-to-use symbols that

may well be tempting to employ, but which do not resonate among all the citizens of the state, or at least not automatically. In *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-building in South Eastern Europe*, we singled out four parameters of identity controversies and debates: religious culture, ethnic culture, historical imagination, and geographical imagination. Mapping the variations of nation-building projects was only the first step. Our next step was to measure *the results* of these strategies: do they have the desired effect, or are they a waste of effort? Relying on the quantitative research results of the project (conducted by IPSOS Strategic Marketing in 2011) along with a variety of interdisciplinary approaches, the project contributors discovered that whereas the citizens of some states have reached a consensus about the nation-building project, other states remain fragmented and uncertain of when the process will end. In other words, how “loyal” were citizens to the new (or restored) symbolic repositories elites in each successor state drew upon for political legitimacy. Croatia and Kosovo scored the highest of the ex-Yugoslav states after waging bloody wars of independence, while the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed the lowest loyalty scores, clearly reflecting the completely fragmented political, social, and economic situation in that country.

As I argued in my chapter, the survey results for Croatia confirmed my initial hypotheses that the nation-building project was “successful” in the sense that there exists more or less a consensus over the country’s national symbols, borders, interpretation of the war of independence (*Domovinski rat*, or Homeland War), and break with the Yugoslav past (Pavlaković, 2014). On 1 July 2013, Croatia became the twenty-eighth member of the European Union, fulfilling the country’s long-term goal of Euro-Atlantic integration. Although racing to join a multinational union only two decades after fighting a war to escape multinational Yugoslavia seems paradoxical in terms of a nation-building project, for Croatia’s political elite entering the EU confirmed the country’s place in Western civilization and represented a final break with the Balkans that had characterized the traumatic twentieth century. Many political observers had expected EU membership to allow Croatia to shake off the negative legacies of the past and focus on jumpstarting the sluggish economy, reforming the bloated bureaucracy, and resolving the social crises facing the country. However, precisely the opposite took place; symbolic politics are seemingly stronger than ever. While the center-left government has been surprisingly incompetent at adequately tackling burning economic problems, the opposition has systematically waged a campaign focusing on ideological and historical issues which seem anachronistic for an EU member state. The main opposition party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), has pushed issues such as political rituals (namely polemics over commemorations in Bleiburg and Vukovar), the use of Cyrillic script, lustration, alleged war crimes from the Second World War, strict interpretations of Croatian history, and most recently a marble bust of Josip Broz

Tito into the headlines instead of offering any kind of alternative socio-economic program. The recent demonstrations by segments of the veteran population echo the HDZ's fear-mongering of resurgent communists, Yugoslavs, and Greater Serbian aggressors, even though these seem absurd threats to a fully-fledged member of NATO in the twenty-first century.

These worrying trends do, however, indicate that this research into the symbolic strategies of nation-building remains absolutely relevant and that the post-Yugoslav societies will continue to feel the effects of the 1990s conflicts for decades, regardless of EU promises of a prosperous, harmonious, and stable future. Political elites (often supported by media corporations, religious community leaders, and intellectuals) throughout the region have clearly seen that framing contemporary problems as a continuity of historical victimization, ideological division, and the need for strengthening the "imagined community" ensures their grip on power and patronage systems. Moreover, the violence in eastern Ukraine also reveals many similarities with the war in Croatia in 1991, when intervention by the Yugoslav People's Army was justified because of fears of alleged fascists from the Second World War. Thus this collection of articles offers an interdisciplinary look into the symbols, spaces, cultural artefacts, and monumental structures that serve as physical expressions of nation-building, whether pan-Yugoslav or post-Yugoslav ethno-national states.

Mark Wolfgram's article opens the special issue with his thought-provoking comparative model on collective memory studies, drawing mostly upon his work on German cultural history but expanding it to include case studies from Spain, Japan, Turkey, and the former Yugoslavia. Seeking to explain the process of collective memory formation, Wolfgram explores the various domestic cultural matrixes and external forces which influence how individuals construct various meanings from certain cultural objects that are a representation of the past. Most of his empirical data comes from analyzing television, film, radio, and theater productions in West Germany and how they dealt with difficult issues such as the Holocaust and German guilt. Just as television documentaries and films allowed societies in Western Europe to begin an open dialogue about controversies from the past – such as the Vichy Regime's participation in the Holocaust in France, German society's culpability in the murder of Jews, or Francisco Franco's dictatorship after the Spanish Civil War – provocative theater productions like Oliver Frlijić's *Aleksandra Zec* or the film *Crnci* deal with issues which politicians prefer to shy away from in Croatia. Even though Wolfgram's model is comparative, he reminds us that "memory needs to be studied in its social context", and that factors such as generational transmission of memories, family histories, and personal experiences shape collective remembrance regardless of top-down state initiatives in imposing hegemonic narratives of the past.

An example of this top-down, institutional construction of identity and narrative is discussed in Marco Abram's contribution about public space in Belgrade from 1944 to 1961. All of the values, ideologies, and images of the new communist regime were active in the reconstruction and expansion of Belgrade, which was to be a showcase and the capital of Yugoslav brotherhood and unity. All of the symbolic strategies of nation-building observed after the 1990s – the changing of street names, construction of memorials, establishment of cultural institutions, and staging public celebrations – was present in socialist Belgrade, but with an emphasis on pan-Yugoslav multiculturalism. In addition to promoting the ideology of brotherhood and unity, the city was intended to demonstrate the success of Yugoslavia's modernization, which is dealt with in greater detail in Brigitte Le Normand's impressive study of urban planning in Belgrade (2014). Even though Abram ends his study in the 1960s, it is already possible to see a tension between the Yugoslav and Serbian identity of Belgrade, since ultimately the city served as both a federal and republican capital. Although we can argue that a singular cultural landscape was never fully constructed anywhere in the former Yugoslavia, the drivers of the nation-building projects in the 1990s understood that even this semi-formed Yugoslav collective identity needed to be erased in order to inscribe ethno-nationalist meanings into the urban palimpsests of the new independent states.

Stevo Đurašković's deconstruction of the political writings of Croatia's first president, Franjo Tuđman, reveals a blueprint for a nation-building project that was ultimately realized in the 1990s. Unlike the many studies of Tuđman that include a discussion of his political career, Đurašković focuses exclusively on the historical, philosophical, and ideological elements of his writings prior to 1991. Tuđman's ruminations on the nature of the Partisan struggle during the Second World War, the number of victims at the notorious Jasenovac concentration camp, and the "natural" borders of Croatia were developed in his books long before multiparty elections were on the horizon, but these are issues which continue to stir polemics in Croatian society. With hindsight after the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, we can now see that Tuđman's speculations about rejecting universal ideologies such as liberalism, strengthening national identity, and contemplating population exchanges as a way to ensure stable nation-states were not merely theoretical but part of a political plan. As the former president of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, Stephen E. Hanson, noted in his plenary address last year, "we can predict the behavior of people who are themselves dogmatically confident that they know what the future will hold... committed ideologues, it turns out, typically do just what they say they are going to do, for good or ill".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *ASEEES NewsNet*, January 2015, 55 (1): 4.

So once the nation-building project is achieved, what to do with the common cultural heritage of the former state? This is the question posed in Marija Jauković's article, which moves beyond the historical and political science disciplines and engages with contemporary theories of cultural heritage preservation. She explores how the network of monuments and memorial complexes dedicated to the Partisan victory in the Second World War were imbued with shared meanings of the common struggle against fascist occupiers and domestic collaborators, and thus represent the cultural heritage of a state which no longer exists. Although in many cases the authorities in the emerging nation-states have sought to inscribe new meanings into these monumental examples of socialist modernist architecture, there have been numerous examples of memorials begin deliberately destroyed, defaced, or left to fall into disrepair, especially in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>2</sup> Jauković offers a discussion of new trends in cultural heritage management and preservation that take advantage of virtual networks and transnational cooperation, in particular considering a growing international interest in socialist Yugoslavia's monument heritage.

The contributions by Anida Sokol and Nicolas Moll provide complementary analyses that on the one hand reveal how dramatically divided the symbolic landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina has become twenty years after the Dayton Accords ended the war, and on the other hand indicate that perhaps there are common historical symbols which can restore a sense of unity to the citizens of the country. The results of the Strategies of Symbolic Nation-building project explicitly demonstrated how Bosnia and Herzegovina is fragmented by ethno-national and confessional differences, which was further reflected by the lowest loyalty scores of all the countries under investigation (Dević, 2014). The numerous examples of war memorials, egregious use of religious symbols, and legal frameworks regulating the representation of the recent past provided by Sokol indicate that the elites in both the Muslim-Croat Federation and Republika Srpska are actively perpetuating these divisions through symbolic nation-building strategies. In contrast to Croatia, where a general consensus around the Homeland War has resulted in a uniform memoryscape of the 1990s conflict, in Bosnia and Herzegovina various interpretations of the war struggle for predominance in every town square, roadside marker, and memorial cemetery. Moll, while also recognizing the seemingly insurmountable challenges in finding any kind of common ground, suggests the 1984 Winter Olympics as a possible *lieu de mémoire* that could generate positive memories of what Bosnia and Herzegovina once was.

In the final contribution, Denis Ermolin provides an ethnographic essay of a foreigner's experiences in the radically transformed cultural landscape of Koso-

<sup>2</sup> As James Young argues, new regimes almost always attempt to inscribe new meanings into the memorial leftovers of previous political systems (1993).

vo's capital, Pristina. Historical figures share prominent boulevards with kitschy monuments to foreign leaders such as US President Bill Clinton. Ermolin notes the contradiction in Kosovo's proclaimed multiculturalism with the reality in the urban spaces and memorial complexes, which in fact celebrate only the cultural heritage of the Albanian population. Kosovo's remaining Serbs are relegated to tightly guarded enclaves or the area of land north of the Ibar River, where exclusively Serbian cultural and political symbols can be seen. Although aware of the vast gulf between the various ethnic groups in Kosovo following the atrocities committed during the 1990s, Ermolin nonetheless hopes that the future holds more mutual understanding which would then be reflected in the cultural landscape.

## REFERENCES

- Dević, Ana. 2014. Jaws of the Nation and Weak Embraces of the State: The Lines of Division, Indifference and Loyalty in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in: Pål Kolstø (ed.), *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-building in South Eastern Europe*. Ashgate. Farnham: 51–86.
- Le Normand, Brigitte. 2014. *Designing Tito's Capital: Urban Planning, Modernism, and Socialism in Belgrade*. University of Pittsburgh Press. Pittsburgh.
- Pavlaković, Vjeran. 2014. Fulfilling the Thousand-Year Old Dream: Strategies of Symbolic Nation-building in Croatia, in: Pål Kolstø (ed.), *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-building in South Eastern Europe*. Ashgate. Farnham: 19–50.
- Young, James E. 1993. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. Yale University Press. New Haven.

*Mailing Address:* **Vjeran Pavlaković**, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Cultural Studies, Sveučilišna avenija 4, 51 000 Rijeka, Croatia.

*E-mail:* vjeran.pavlakovic@ffri.hr