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The Heavy Burden of History: Political Uses of the Past in the Yugoslav Successor States

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Summary

Political interpretations of the past serve different purposes: they are the source of collective identities that distinguish “us” and “them”, they mobilize support for political leaders as well as negative emotions against political adversaries. In the post-Yugoslav states political uses of history by political elites played an important role in their nationalist policies which ultimately produced violent conflicts and war. This outcome has been rather exceptional in comparison to the dynamics of nationalism in other two dissolving post-communist federations. The author examines several explanations of this exceptionalism and argues that the strength of nationalism and intensity of nationalist conflicts among the ex-Yugoslav nations can be explained by the unfavourable historical conditions of nation- and state-building and by different elite strategies. A comparison of nationalist discourses and political strategies of Serb, Croatian and Slovene political elites reveals significant differences which led to different outcomes.

Key words: nationalism, political elites, historical identity, Yugoslav successor states, state-building



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1. Nationalism and history in Eastern Europe

In the region that historically belonged to Yugoslavia and that today entails six Yugoslav successor states, with a seventh one (Kosovo) probably emerging from the remainders of the Yugoslav federation, historical memo-

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ries and politically interpreted images of the past used to play an extremely important role, and they still do today. The recent Yugoslav wars – the first large scale armed conflict in Europe since 1945 – seemed very much determined by this historical consciousness and political ideologies which are inspired by it. Today again competing interpretations of the past forwarded by national political and intellectual elites decisively determine, on the one hand, the ways in which responsibility for the wars and the crimes committed in the wars is understood in the region and, on the other hand, the claims by which different national groups justify their state- and institution-building goals. If we look for evidence which supports this thesis, we will find many examples from recent past as well as from present-day politics. One of the best known instances of the political use of the past for mobilizing political support and strengthening national identification is the famous speech of the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević at Gazimestan (Kosovo) in 1989. On the occasion of the celebration of the 600th anniversary of the Kosovo battle against Ottoman Turks, on June 28, 1989, Milošević gave a political speech in which he, among others, stated:

“Today, six centuries later, we are once again in battles, and facing battles. They are not armed battles, although the possibility of those cannot be excluded. But, regardless of what they are like, battles cannot be won without determination, courage, self-sacrifice, without those good traits that were present on the Kosovo field a long time ago.”¹

Milošević’s rhetoric served two purposes at the same time: it was a mobilizing message to his supporters, an appeal to all ethnic Serbs to follow Serbian leadership and rely on the long and virtuous tradition of solidarity and sacrifice, symbolized by the Kosovo battle (but also avoid disunity which Milošević portrayed as the main reason for the Serb defeat in 1389); on the other hand, it was a clear warning and a threat to all political adversaries of Milošević, but also to all non-Serbs, that a war “...cannot be excluded” if they do not comply with Milošević’s demands.

There are numerous illustrations of such an instrumental political use of the past from other parts of former Yugoslavia – although perhaps not as rhetorically impressive as Milošević’s speech – which served similar purposes.

The first Croatian President, Franjo Tuđman, himself a historian, won the first free elections in Croatia on a programme which exploited common places of a nationalist interpretation of Croatian history. He described Croats as “one of the oldest European nations” and declared the establishment of an

¹ Cited in Vujačić 2004: 31.

independent Croatian state as the necessary outcome of a “millennial struggle” of the Croatian people. At the same time, the ideology of Yugoslavism, originally a Croatian creation, was condemned as a fatal political error of the founding fathers of the Croatian national movement. The reference to history was so important for Tuđman that he personally wrote the historical parts in the Preamble of the Croatian Constitution, with a long account of events which led to the establishment of the Republic of Croatia.²

Another and more recent example from Croatia demonstrates the continuity of strategies based on political uses of historical memories and their relevance for contemporary Croatian politics. Different policies of remembering the past can be pursued by various political players, not only by regimes. They can become the source of political conflict and can serve to underpin the legitimacy of one’s own political position, while de-legitimizing the position of the political opponents. Every year in spring two exercises in symbolic politics, based on interpretations of historical events from World War II, are staged in Croatia and receive great public attention. On April 22 the Croatian political elites – together with parts of civil society – commemorate the escape of a last surviving group of prisoners from Jasenovac, the biggest concentration camp of the fascist Independent State of Croatia, and honour the victims of the camp. Three weeks later, on May 15, an alternative commemoration is organized in Bleiburg/Austria, where Yugoslav partisan army captured the fleeing Croatian fascists and their homeland army, together with numerous civilians, and massacred a yet unknown number of them³. This later event is organized by different right wing associa-

² The Preamble of the Croatian Constitution begins with the following statement: “Expressing the *millennial identity* of the Croatia nation and the *continuity of its statehood*, confirmed by the course of *its entire historical experience* within different forms of states and by the preservation and growth of the state-formative idea, founded on the *historical right of the Croatian nation to full sovereignty*, manifested in: – the formation of Croatian principalities in the seventh century; – the independent mediaeval state of Croatia founded in the ninth century; – the Kingdom of Croats established in the tenth century; [... a list of 12 more items follows, N.Z.], *the Croatian nation* by its freely expressed will at the first democratic elections (1990) *reaffirmed its millennial statehood*. (...) Considering the presented *historical facts* and (...) the inalienable and indivisible, non-transferable and non-exhaustible *right of the Croatian nation to self-determination and state sovereignty*, (...) the Republic of Croatia is established as *the national state of the Croatian nation* and the state of the members of autochthonous national minorities” [emphasis N.Z.].

³ In both cases there are bitter controversies about the number of victims. While it seems that the scholars increasingly agree on an estimate of 80-100 thousand killed in the Jasenovac concentration camp, there is no scholarly consensus on the number of killed in Bleiburg: most realistic are estimates that 30-50 thousand were killed on the spot (Žerjavić 1992)., but the total number of Croatian victims of Partisan retaliation at the end of the war is estimated to be higher, by some calculations it might have been as high as 200 or more thousand killed. As for the participants in the memorial events, it is characteristic that no representatives of the Catholic Church participate in the commemoration in Jasenovac.

tions and parties, but regularly enjoys the support of the Catholic Church in Croatia through a designated bishop who participates in the ceremony, and the commemoration takes place under the auspices of the Croatian parliament, with one of the vice-presidents of the parliament addressing the participants in Bleiburg.

A final example may be taken from the most topical case: the struggle between Serbs and Albanians over the question, whose claims to Kosovo are more justified. It is interesting that both Serbs and Kosovo Albanians, apart from demographic (ethnic composition), democratic (demand to freely decide the status of Kosovo by its citizens on a referendum) and legal arguments (whether or not the Autonomous Province Kosovo in the former Yugoslav federation was already a quasi-state), also employ a range of historical arguments, which range from medieval times, or even antiquity, to the recent history of the Balkan wars and the two World Wars.

Is this practice of using historical arguments for political purposes an exception typical for the Yugoslav successor states? Of course it is not. We know that every nationalist discourse includes historical narratives and modes of incorporating memories of the past into the self-image of a nation that it produces. But it seems that the obsession with the past is typical for East European nationalisms: the national discourse is predominantly focused on uncovering and commemorating past injustice that one's own nation experienced in the past and that was caused by regimes or members of other nations (Schöpflin 2003). To illustrate this we may recall two recent events which happened in Eastern Europe.

The Polish vetting law has recently produced a deep political cleavage in the society and divided parties and societal groups on the question, how to practice lustration of those responsible for injustice and repression under communism. The communist system and its repression are regarded as a criminal endeavour and – since it was installed from outside – it is also treated as an essentially antinational regime. Therefore the law seeks to restore justice by labelling and excluding from public life those responsible for the systemic repression: members of communist secret services and their collaborators.⁴

The other example is the Estonian controversy over the Soviet soldier monument.⁵ In this case it is even more evident what determines the contradictory positions vis-à-vis the communist system in Estonia: while the titular nation (Estonians) sees the incorporation of Estonia into Soviet Union at the end of WW 2 as occupation, and thus cannot have a positive attitude towards

⁴ Cf. for instance Ramonet 2007.

⁵ Cf. BBC news, 27. 4. 2007.

the symbols commemorating this event, the Russian minority understands the very same event as the main fundament of the legitimacy of communism in Soviet Union: its victory over Nazism. The positions seem irreconcilable because they reflect two different and mutually exclusive processes of nation-building.

But although the later case very much resembles controversies over political interpretation of historical memories in the dissolving Yugoslavia and the states that emerged out of it, we can immediately recognize the most striking difference: apart from minor clashes with the police (in the early 1990s and again in 2007), Estonian-Russian disputes did not produce violent conflicts, while the Yugoslav nationalisms resulted in several wars and large scale ethnic cleansing.

Why has the dynamics of nationalist controversies in Yugoslavia been so extremist and violent? Why it was not possible, unlike in the Czechoslovak and Soviet case, to peacefully dissolve the common state and channel all the controversies and contested issues into non-violent procedures and institutions?

2. Explaining the politics of memory in Yugoslav successor states: nation-building and state-building in the late 20th century

I will briefly discuss some theoretical answers given as explanations of Yugoslav exceptionalism and will then present in greater detail an explanation that combines several elements in order to portray a rather complex picture. It is my firm understanding that simple explanations of the Yugoslav exceptionalism – as elegant and attractive they may appear to social scientists – are wrong.

The first approach rests on a “civilizational” or cultural argument and points at ethno-cultural or even anthropological factors in order to explain the traits of Balkan nationalisms. According to this argument, there is a long history of violent conflicts between the ethnic groups who live on the same or neighbouring territories that belonged to the Yugoslav state.⁶ This tradition of conflict and violence has produced a specific “cultural syndrome” which turned the conflicts that could otherwise be peacefully resolved into war and excessive violence against the members of the adversary ethnic group.

⁶ See for example some of the arguments in Cohen 1993 and Kaplan 1993. Critical evaluation of the argument is given in Sekulić et al. 2004.

Another approach proposes the argument about the preponderance of nationalism.⁷ Unfinished nation-building processes were only temporarily postponed during the socialist regime; the legitimacy crisis of socialism resulted in the demise of socialist ideology and the rise of the old currents of nationalist ideology. It also became clear during the 1960s that a supranational or combined Yugoslav identity could not substitute the national identities of the constituent nations; even the peoples with an unfinished nation-building process (Bosnian Moslems, Macedonians, Montenegrines) experienced a rise of national awareness since the 1970s.

Similar to the previous approach, although with a slightly different emphasis, is the argument about the political elites as nationalist “political entrepreneurs”⁸. Political elites act as political entrepreneurs; they adopt ideologies and design political programmes according to the circumstances. Thus under conditions of a legitimacy crisis of the socialist ideology, the incumbent elites may adopt an alternative and more promising ideology, by which it can mobilize the necessary support. This is what happened with Slobodan Milošević in the League of Communists of Serbia in the late 1980s. Alternatively, if the ruling elite is dogmatic or unable to initiate the ideological change for any other reason, thus being unable to grasp a more effective ideological framework and offer a new political programme, counter-elites will emerge as “political entrepreneurs” that exploit the most effective ideological instruments for mass mobilization. This is what e.g. happened in Croatia as a result of the threat by the Serb nationalism of Milošević and his mobilization of the Serb minority in Croatia.

Finally, there is the argument about “subversive institutions” of the socialist regimes in general, and of the socialist federations (Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia) in particular (Bunce 1999). Socialist institutions generated their own demise and collapse because they became increasingly dysfunctional with increasing complexity and modernization of society. The institutions of socialist federations were initially designed to control and channel ethnic politics of the constituent nations by the central communist elite. Under changed conditions, however, they became tools in the hands of the ethnic political elites. A special version of this argument has been forwarded for the Yugoslav case (and enjoyed much support in Serbia)⁹: the blame for the emergence of disintegrative nationalisms was put on the Yugoslav 1974 Constitution, which established quasi-confederative in-

⁷ Cf. as a general outline of this argument (for the whole Eastern Europe) Roeder 1999.

⁸ As a general theoretical proposition cf. Offe 1994; the argument is, at least partly, applied on the Serbian case in Gagnon 1995 and Pavlović 2001; Malešević 2002 applies the thesis on the Serbian and Croatian cases.

⁹ Cf. for example the arguments in Veljačić 1996b.

stitutions with inbuilt excessive veto-powers, inevitable decision deadlocks and fostered further centrifugal and secessionist tendencies.

Apart from the first approach, which I consider entirely wrong as an explanation for either the character of nationalism or the causes of violent conflict, the other three approaches certainly bring forward some good arguments. I agree that the character of nationalist ideologies and actions in the former Yugoslavia is to some degree determined by each of these factors: specific nationalist traditions which survived socialism, unfinished processes of nation-building in some of the South Slav nations, strategies of political elites who mobilized nationalism (in order to preserve or to gain power), failure of the institutions of the Yugoslav socialist federation, which probably didn't cause the emergence of nationalism, but contributed to the state collapse through their ineffectiveness and inability to channel and resolve conflicts. However, a more adequate explanation requires more complexity, that is, we need to combine several factors. Again, the point is not to advocate eclecticism, but to recognize a specific sequence of events and to understand the interconnection of different factors. In what follows I offer an outline of the argument about the causes of the emergence of Yugoslav extremist and history-obsessed nationalisms which led to the war.

My first thesis is that the nation-building and state-building processes among the South Slav nations that formed Yugoslavia were predominant vis-à-vis other fundamental processes that shaped these societies during the last century and half (modernization, industrialization, economic growth, social reform, democratization) in a way that is hardly present in any other part of Europe.¹⁰ In fact, in both Yugoslav states authoritarian or communist modernization was only an instrument used by the elites of individual nations in Yugoslavia to accomplish national integration and establish own nation-states.

There are several reasons why the problems of nation-building and state-building were so particularly difficult and why their solution was not successfully achieved in the 20th century (and indeed, the processes have still not been completed, as the unresolved status of Kosovo and the unstable political situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina show):

1. *Unfavourable geopolitical conditions*: The region was historically a zone of contact between two empires (Habsburg and Ottoman), complicated by a strong involvement of the Venetian Republic and historical memories or institutional remnants of independent medieval Croatian and Serbian political entities. The dissolution of the empires resulted in territorial claims of the neighbouring nations (Italians, Hungarians, Austrian

¹⁰ Perhaps the Irish case with the still unresolved question of Northern Ireland is to a certain extent similar to the Yugoslav experience.

Germans), which threatened to cut off significant parts of territory inhabited by South Slavs.

2. *Extreme differences in the level of economic development*: By the end of the Yugoslav state in the late 1980s ratio between Slovenia and Kosovo in terms of economic output per capita was still 6:1 despite decades of development in the common state and considerable transfers of resources to underdeveloped regions.
3. *Great cultural heterogeneity* on a relatively small territory, mainly in terms of coexistence of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity and Islam, and the necessity to combine three distinct historical legal traditions, the Habsburg, the Ottoman and the Venetian (with traces of even older custom law and kinship institutions in the mountainous and border areas).
4. *Dual process of nation-building* (de facto until 1980s, or at least until 1970s): Yugoslavism and Yugoslav identity developed simultaneously to the particular national identities of the Yugoslav constitutive nations. This dualism was probably stronger than in the other two East European states which also pursued a similar goal of developing a synthetic common national identity, while at the same time promoting particularistic identities of the constituent nations, Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia.
5. An additional problem with the common Yugoslav identity was that it was essentially based on a *romantic nationalist idea of South Slav linguistic and cultural proximity and solidarity* against its bigger neighbouring non-Slav nations, who were perceived as threat to own aspirations for statehood and cultural distinctiveness. This was the reason why ideology of Yugoslavism could hardly appeal to the non-Slav minorities, and with the growing number of Albanians, who demanded equal treatment as the constituent South Slav nation, the integrative formula became increasingly dysfunctional. Another consequence of the primacy of cultural and ideological elements in the construction of Yugoslav identity was the neglect and weakness of political institutions.
6. *Nation-building and state-building processes of different South Slav nations evolved at different pace*: while nation-building of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was more or less completed at the beginning of the 20th century, Macedonians started to build a new identity that is clearly distinct from Bulgarian only after the World War 2, Bosnian Moslems began to establish their national consciousness that was not reduced merely to religious identity in the 1970s and Montenegro remained deeply divided over the issue of their national identity.
7. In the long run (and unlike Czechoslovakia and Soviet Union) *there was no hegemonic nation that could successfully keep its dominant position*: While there is no doubt that Serbs had the aspiration to play the role of

the hegemonic nation, in both Yugoslav states they were unable to maintain this claim successfully. Unlike Soviet Union, which was a transformed Russian Empire, Yugoslavia was not a small Serbian empire but a genuine new political project, based on contradictory goals of its stakeholders. This perhaps could have been an advantage that would strengthen the cohesion among the South Slavs, but it was ultimately not accepted by the Serbs.

My second thesis is that in analyzing the dynamics of social and political processes – and here the focus is on the nation-building and state-building of the constitutive peoples of former Yugoslavia – we can observe the following sequence of steps that determines the relationship between structure and agency: historically given conditions (some of which I described above) are perceived by the social and political actors as “problems” and “challenges” against which they conceive their strategies and programmes and carry out their actions. In order to stabilize action the actors establish arrangements and institutions that eventually become effective. Both implemented strategies and established arrangements/institutions produce consequences, which accumulate to become new conditions that the next generation of social and political actors has to deal with. It is important to stress that “action” is not only practical but also discursive: ideologies as general orientations of action and programmatic discourses of the political elites constitute different discursive arenas. On the one hand there is a political discourse in which all political processes are embedded. It is predominantly (although not exclusively) determined by political elites and it is transmitted mainly through nation-wide media. The societal discourse, on the other hand, is constituted by the communicative processes in the civil society, which go on both on national and the local levels. Both discourses are very important for the dynamics of nationalism and the processes of national integration that are in the focus of my analysis. They also can explain how such phenomena as “politics of memory” and political uses of history emerge and become prominent in political life. Here I will give a brief outline of a possible way to apply these analytical tools on the dynamics of the three nationalisms that played a crucial role in the process of dissolution of Yugoslavia: Serb, Croat and Slovenian. I will try to show how political elites of these three nations defined the problems they were faced with, what strategies of action they chose and what consequences they produced.

The actions and discourses of the Serbian political elites since mid 1980s were characterized by the following features (cf. Vujačić 1996a, 2004, Pavlović 2001):

1. Serbia was identified with Yugoslavia or at least seen as its backbone. Milošević exploited this dualism ever since he seized power and continued to do so even in the late 1990s. It has been rightly pointed out (Vuja-

čić 2004) that he never changed his rhetoric to simple extremist talk about Greater Serbia (although of course he did use nationalist arguments). It also gave the ruling communists the opportunity to take over the control over federal army. If Yugoslavia was jeopardized by secessionist republics (Slovenia and Croatia), there was a wide consensus among political elites (in power and in opposition) that the Serb minority living in other Yugoslav republics (mainly Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina) had the right to stay in the common state with Serbia and take away parts of the territory of the secessionist republics.

2. The Serb minority in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia was mobilized for the concept of a recentralized (and Serb dominated) Yugoslavia and/or Greater Serbia. The main discursive instrument of mobilization was the equalization of the new independent Croatian state with the Croatian fascist state during the World War 2 – hence the importance of the political uses of historical memories pertaining to WW 2.
3. The unequal status of Serbia in Yugoslavia was argued by the fact that it was the only republic to have Autonomous Provinces, which have after 1967 become de facto independent from the Serbian government. It is well known how Milošević crushed opposition in the provinces and subordinated them to Serbian centre. While this didn't provoke much resistance in Vojvodina with its Serb ethnic majority, it led to the deepening of conflict in Kosovo. At no point before the NATO intervention against Serbia in 1999 were Serbian political elites ready to negotiate about substantial autonomy for the Kosovo Albanians. They are ready to negotiate now, but it is too late, because Albanians don't want anything less than independence.
4. Serbian political elites were convinced that it is in Serb interest to use violence against political enemies in Yugoslavia: Albanians, Slovenes, Croats and Bosnians. However, there was not much willingness to take the responsibility for the consequences of the use of violence.
5. The main conflict between Milošević and the Serbian opposition was about democracy, while there were no significant differences on the question of national policy of establishing Greater Serbia. Despite the unfulfilled demands for democracy, this circumstance has given Milošević the legitimacy basis to stay in power until 2000. The opposition was able to defeat Milošević in elections and remove him from power only after his nationalist programme failed.
6. While Serbia has lost all the wars that it has waged (in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo), and has already paid a high price in economic decline, NATO bombing and influx of Serbian refugees, it seems that neither political elites nor the society are yet prepared to face the respon-

sibility for the disastrous consequences of the Serbian politics. A critical distance from the past nationalist ideology, which would change both political and societal discourses, is still not visible.

In Croatia the main features of elite strategies and discourse were quite different from those in Serbia:

1. In the 1980s Croatian politics was blocked by the balance of power between reformers and hardliners, the latter were also strengthened by the veto-power of the Serb ethnic minority representatives in the League of Communists of Croatia. Political change became possible because of an external pressure: the threat by the Milošević regime and the Serb national movement on the one hand, and the demonstration effect of the crumbling communist regimes on the other. The first elections (unlike Serbia, but similarly as in all Central European countries) resulted in the change of government: the ruling communists were replaced by a nationalist party that pursued the programme of Croatian national independence with determination.
2. The initial structure of political consensus between the political elites in government and opposition was the exact opposite from that in Serbia: while there was basic agreement on the desirability of liberal democracy, there was no agreement about the state-building goal (reformed communists at first didn't support full Croatian independence). With the intensification of conflict into a full-scale war the consensus among Croatian political elites was reached also on the question of state independence. However, at the same time the representatives of the Serb minority in Croatia were (self-)excluded from this agreement. During this period the manipulative political uses of history were widely endorsed by both conflicting sides, the nationalist Croatian regime and the leaders of the insurgent Serb minority in Croatia.
3. The Croatian nationalist government in the 1990s is responsible for two main political mistakes in the context of war and deterioration of inter-ethnic (Croat-Serb) relations. Firstly, it encouraged and sometimes even actively supported hostilities toward the Serb minority in Croatia, which resulted in a rapid change of attitudes towards the Serbs.¹¹ As a consequence, many Serb citizens outside the areas affected by war also left Croatia. Secondly, the government pursued a strategy of dividing Bosnia-Herzegovina and was seeking an agreement between Croats and Serbs on

¹¹ Cf. Šiber 1997 on the increasing ethnic distance vis-a-vis Serbs at the beginning of 1990s. However, an analysis of the change of media reporting in early 1990s has shown that war itself had much more impact on the attitudes towards the Serbs than the political propaganda (cf. Zakošek 2000).

this issue. Only after a heavy international pressure it was forced to abandon this policy.

4. In the domestic politics the nationalist government blocked democratic consolidation and produced a deficient economic system, which was perceived by the losers of transition as very unjust. Because of these mistakes nationalists were voted out of government in January 2000.
5. Since 2000 Croatian politics experienced gradual moderation and democratic consolidation. However, one of the main problems today is that the societal discourse didn't follow the democratic turn of the political discourse and remained strongly polarized.

The Slovenian experience with state-building and democratization again was substantially different from Serb and Croatian experiences. The Slovenian politics, and in particular the political and societal discourses since 1985 display features which explain why state-building was successful and quick consolidation of democracy was possible:

1. An early political consensus emerged on the goals of national independence and liberal democracy in the 1980s between the reformist communist and the opposition. This is also the reason why during the formative years of Slovenian state-building and democratization no divisive "politics of historical memory" was pursued by major political actors (although these topics were addressed by intellectual elites).
2. Despite the ten days war in 1991, Slovenia didn't have any lasting consequences of this conflict. Slovenia was able to achieve its national independence at a quite low price. However, the main losers of this transition were immigrants from other Yugoslav republics in Slovenia who were not given Slovenian citizenship.
3. In the 1990s the crucial role in the Slovenian politics was played by the Liberal party, which was able to successively (or simultaneously) form governments with parties left and right of centre and thus promote consensual democratic politics and a moderate form of political competition.
4. Since Slovenia joined the EU a change was visible in the Slovenian politics from a consensus model to a more confrontational and polarized one. This shows that political and societal discourses remain open to change by initiatives of the "political entrepreneurs". In this context it is not surprising that instrumental uses of certain historical topics by political elites (WW2 communist crimes, responsibility for the repression during communism, lustration) re-emerge.

3. Final remarks: from analysis of the past to lessons for the future

The political and social actors in former Yugoslavia – elites as well as social movements, associations and other members of civil society – were confronted with difficult challenges during the 20th century concerning the major processes of social and political change, among which nation- and state-building was given the highest priority. Under these conditions they produced a great variety of strategies, some of which proved successful, and some self-defeating and self-destructive. Probably the most self-defeating was the strategy of Serb political elites. An extremely important question in normative terms is how this experience can be transformed into a historical consciousness that will not become instrumental for some future extremist policies.

Of course, in dealing with the burden of recent history one could look at the examples of Germany and Japan. However, these two states, with their unique situation after World War 2 – characterized by total military defeat, unilateral ascription of guilt and responsibility for the war crimes (which was ultimately accepted by the political and societal elites) and an externally imposed re-education policies – cannot serve as a model for other post-conflict regimes like Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia or Kosovo. It is rather necessary for the post-conflict societies themselves – although assisted by international actors (such as ICTY) – to develop policies of dealing with the past, both of correcting injustice and developing an understanding of recent history that is not irreconcilable with the views and interests of minorities and neighbouring nations.

A starting set of recommendations of how to proceed could encompass at least the following elements:

1. It is necessary to resolve the remaining state-building and institutional issues on the basis of universal principles that will equally be applied to all cases and involved parties: this is important for all cases, from the question of the status of Kosovo, functioning of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian state and ethnic power-sharing mechanisms for the Albanian minority in Macedonia to the issues of the return of Serb refugees to Croatia and protection of minority rights in Serbia and Slovenia.
2. It will serve justice to establish specialized institutions to deal with the questions of individual responsibility for war crimes, for example through special and competent courts (assisted by other parts of the judiciary) in the countries where these crimes were committed.
3. The important task for political elites is to reform their political discourse: it is crucial for politicians to become able to acknowledge and

morally label the self-defeating strategies of the past (“*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*” by elites).

4. Final (but not the least important) point is to support the self-investigative and critical societal discourses through research, education and public debates: it is necessary to open up space for societal actors who would be able to cope with the nationalist legacies and their instrumental and manipulative “politics of memory”.

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