

## Nationalism, Myth, and the State in Russia and Serbia: Russian and East European Government Politics and Policy

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The disintegration of communist federations at the end of the Cold War represented the most momentous reconfiguration of the boundaries of Eastern Europe since 1945. Not only did dominant ideologies and power centres that had defined Europe's political, social and economic life implode rather suddenly, but states that had been in existence for most of the 20th century rather unexpectedly disappeared from the map within the span of a few years. In this redrawing of Europe's eastern borders, the Czecho-Slovak 'velvet divorce' and the largely peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union stood in stark contrast to Yugoslavia's violent disintegration, which cost over 130,000 lives and the brutal displacement of at least two million people throughout the region and beyond (*Glas inicijative REKOM*, January 2013). The contrast between the dissolutions of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union is particularly striking when taking into account the similar position of the two dominant nations, the Serbs and the Russians, a significant proportion of whom were left outside the borders of the new Serbian and Russian states. Whereas in the Serbian case, the '*pre?ani* Serbs' outside Serbia contested the new state borders and – aided and abetted by Slobodan Miloševi?'s regime in the Republic of Serbia – launched an armed insurgency, in the Russian case, the approximately 25 million Russians left outside the Russian republic put up no resistance and even embraced their new state entities. While some violence accompanied the disintegration in 1991 of the Soviet Union in the peripheral regions, it was remarkably absent in those areas with the largest ethnic Russian populations (notably Ukraine and

Kazakhstan). These different trajectories of the two multinational socialist federations and their 'dominant nations' provide the puzzle that Veljko Vujačić's illuminating study of Russian and Serbian nationalism seeks to explain.

Of course, Vujačić is not the first to examine these dissolutions and their different outcomes. Together, the Soviet and Yugoslav disintegrations have given rise to a veritable cottage industry of writings – ranging from journalists' accounts and scholarly analyses to policy assessments and memoirs. Most of these books focus on the period immediately preceding dissolution and provide elite-driven explanations, focusing on the personalities and actions of leaders (Slobodan Milošević in the Yugoslav case, and Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin in the Soviet one) as fundamental both for state dissolution itself and the nature of this process. Others highlight structural factors, such as the location and compactness of minority populations and the emergence of security dilemmas in the two scenarios; and still others note the evolution of socialist federalism and the important role of institutions, notably the communist parties and the armies, in determining the respective trajectories of the two states. Vujačić surveys some of these explanations, pointing out their limitations and calling for a multi-causal approach. Above all, he highlights the importance of historically forged national ideology as a 'necessary antecedent condition' (p. 5) in explaining the divergent nature and outcomes of the process of state dissolution in the two cases.

When historical legacies and national ideologies are invoked in the literature, this is often done in a deterministic way – from the by now thoroughly debunked 'ancient hatreds' thesis in the Yugoslav case to the more scholarly yet sometimes equally blinkered vision of immutable national ideologies, portrayed either as a constant striving for hegemony or a continuous desire to oppress and annihilate the national/ethnic 'others'. While adopting a *longue durée* framework, Vujačić consciously avoids these pitfalls, focusing instead on the ways in which the Russians' and Serbs' ethnic foundational myths (*mythomoteurs*) were transformed and reinforced by historical and political experiences in the modern period, and how they in turn informed collective political and social approaches to the state. Applying Max Weber's conception of the nation as a 'cultural community of shared memories and common political destiny' (p. 71), Vujačić differentiates between civic, ethnic and 'state' conceptions of nationhood – all of which co-habited the cultural and political space of the 19th and 20th Centuries and gave rise to alternative political agendas and discourses. The book's central argument is that the radically different historical legacies of state- and nation-building by Russian and Serbian elites – along with the specific historical experiences that cemented the Russians' and Serbs' national myths and narratives – produced different forms of nationalist mobilization and different trajectories of state dissolution in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Vujačić's argument focuses on the predominant vision of the state itself among Russians and Serbs, forged as it was in the two cases by completely opposed experiences of empire and state-building. In the Russian case, the birth of an ethnic *mythomoteur* in the early 17th century – embodied by the notion of 'Holy Russia' (*Sviataia Rus*) as a community of the Orthodox peasantry – created a sense of collective belonging that was distinct from the Russian empire (*Rossiiskaia imperiia*). Vujačić argues that this contrast between the imperial state (*Rossiiia*) and the Russian peasantry (*Rus*) represented 'a fundamental rift between the state and the people that would haunt imperial Russia throughout its existence, inhibiting the kind of positive identification between national *Kultur* and the state that stood at foundation of the modern concept of the nation' (pp. 101–2). Subsequent historical developments, such as the codification of serfdom and Peter the Great's 'coercive modernization' policies, cemented the perception that the imperial state was alien to the people and contributed to the emergence in the 19th century of a liberal romantic nationalism and a revolutionary movement that were both opposed to the official Russian state. Vujačić argues that this gulf between state and society continued into the 20th century despite the politically diverse national programmes that sought to overcome it, finding further confirmation during the Soviet period, which saw 'the total subordination of popular (peasant) Russia to the all-powerful Soviet state' (p. 170).

Soviet nationality policy territorialised and institutionalised ethnicity in the 1920s and 1930s, creating a federal structure and allocating bureaucratic positions according to nationality, and it also codified ethnic belonging through the introduction of internal passports. In this system, Russian nationhood was treated as a residual category – with the Russian Republic devoid of the cultural and institutional trappings of statehood

enjoyed by other republics – while at the same time Russians were, as Vuja?i? states, ‘in a recognizable sense, *the dominant nation* in the Soviet Union’ and ‘the main ethnic glue of the new Soviet state even if only as carriers of the universal communist message’ (p. 173). This dominance came at the price of repressing any manifestation of Russian national identity and replacing it with an ideologically conditioned Soviet ‘state nationalism’ as its only legitimate expression – a policy that was most explicitly and coercively pursued under Stalin but was largely maintained by his successors. As Vuja?i? puts it: ‘In short, the continued dominance of Russians in the USSR was purchased at the price of dissolving the Russian nation in the Soviet state’ (p. 197).

The implications of this historical legacy for the dissolution of the Soviet state in the 1990s were twofold. First of all, Russians had a historically rooted vision of the state as an alien, autocratic and coercive entity that had remained separate from the Russian people. The defenders of the Soviet Union following the failed coup of 1991 were viewed in this light, lacking broader legitimacy and failing to attract a critical mass of the population that would be vested in preserving the Soviet Union, particularly at the cost of further coercion. Secondly, the historical repression of an ethnic Russian national identity meant that when the Soviet Union imploded, there was no alternative programme for a pan-Russian ethnic unification that could have undermined the existing republican borders of the now de-legitimized federation. In fact, as Vuja?i? shows, the historical experience of common victimization by the Stalinist state in the 1930s – regardless of national belonging – meant that ethnic Russians in neighbouring republics could accept or even support independence movements to break away from the coercive central state (p. 41).

The Serbian case had some initial commonalities with the Russian. Here too, the emergence of an ethnic *mythomoteur* centred around the differentiation between the Orthodox peasantry and the dynastic Ottoman and Habsburg empires, both of which rejected popular sovereignty and offered few opportunities for individual betterment. In the Serbian case, however, the Orthodox Church was not linked to the ruling imperial centres, but held instead important religious, legal and administrative power over its flock, thanks to the Ottoman *millet* system which allowed a degree of autonomy for non-Muslims in the empire. Even in the Habsburg empire, Orthodox Christian settlers of the military frontier bordering on the Ottoman lands enjoyed freedom of worship and self-rule within their own village communities and extended family structures (*zadruga*). It was thus logical for them to eventually develop a national identity based on ethnic and religious particularism, in which the Orthodox Church played a key role. The Church was also instrumental in the development of the Kosovo myth, the Serbs’ foundational national myth, telling of heroism and sacrifice and the loss of the medieval Serbian state as the start of the ‘long Turkish night’ of alien rule. The subsequent adaptation of this story into a full-fledged nationalist narrative over the course of the 19th century, when the Serbian peasantry revolted against the Ottoman Empire, eventually creating a state of its own, further reinforced this idea of the national state as the Serbs’ ultimate protector and unifier. In contrast to the Russian case, Serb political and cultural elites maintained a strong attachment to ‘the idea of the *state* as the embodiment of national purpose’ (p. 40) and as something that was worth fighting and dying for. The formative experience of the First World War with its extraordinary human losses—when Serbs as ‘a nation of less than 5 million lost more than 1,200,000 people (or 27 per cent of its population), of which about two thirds were civilians’ (p. 153) – reinforced the narratives of heroism and sacrifice against the odds, which was at the heart of the Kosovo myth, and fostered a sense of allegiance to the state that had been successfully defended at such tremendous cost.

As Vuja?i? shows, the Serbs’ experience of multi-national Yugoslavia – first as an inter-war kingdom and then as a socialist federation – also differed quite significantly from the Russian relationship with the Soviet state. A Serbian national programme developed in 1844 by Serbia’s main statesman of the time, Ilija Garašanin – the *Na?ertanije* – envisaged the unification of what he considered to be ‘Serbian lands’ (Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) into a larger Serbian state with an outlet to the Adriatic Sea (p. 198). Although Vuja?i? convincingly contests portrayals of this programme as a ‘protoimperial’ plan for Serb hegemony in the Yugoslav state of the future, he notes nevertheless that it is ‘easy to see how Garašanin’s “larger Serbia” could become a step toward “Great Serbia” and how the latter, in turn could dominate the future South Slav state’ (pp. 199–200). He thus argues that the idea of unifying all Serbs in one

state was not incompatible with the cause of unifying the South Slavs, and that ‘one could believe in the cause of Yugoslav unity and remain a Serbian nationalist’ (p. 201). Allegiance to the new Yugoslav state was a natural extension from loyalty to the Kingdom of Serbia, as the goal of national unity was now accomplished and the Serbs became the new state’s most numerous and influential ‘dominant nation’. When this first Yugoslav state became increasingly contested by Croatian national elites – eventually leading in 1939 to the brokering of a Croat-Serb ‘Agreement’ (*Sporazum*), which created a Croatian federal unit within Yugoslavia – the original programme of Serbian unification into a national state could provide an alternative platform. This was evidenced by the arguments of an influential group of Serbian intellectuals who, for the first time since the creation of Yugoslavia, called for the creation of a separate Serbian territorial unit, albeit in this case within the broader Yugoslav state (p. 213).

In contrast to the Soviet-Russian case, the socialist Yugoslav federation created in 1945 did not treat the Serbs as its ‘ethnic glue’. Indeed, the communist leadership went to considerable lengths to ensure that Serbs would not dominate the second Yugoslavia. Within the federal structure, Serbia was the only Yugoslav republic that contained two autonomous entities, Kosovo and Vojvodina, while Serbs in the republics of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were not given any territorial autonomy, despite there being similar ethnic and historical grounds for potentially doing so (p. 237). The effects of this policy were twofold. On the one hand, it meant that when Yugoslavia was increasingly transformed into a socialist confederation from the late 1960s onward, ‘the communists’ early postwar decisions about the borders between federal units became the main source of Serbian national grievances’ (p. 235). On the other hand, this treatment of Serbia as just another republic, with its own cultural and political institutions, enabled it to become the focal point of the Serbian nationalist revival in the 1980s – first manifested as a programme for the recentralisation of Yugoslavia and, when this met with staunch resistance in Croatia and Slovenia, with a programme for a unification of all Serbs in a single national state (the ‘Greater Serbia’ idea). The historical legacy of Serbia’s independent statehood and the identification of the nation with the state as its natural protector and unifier meant that, when Yugoslavia sank into its deep and multi-faceted crisis in its last decade, a ‘fallback option’ existed and could be deployed to mobilise Serbs. This was very different from the Russian experience, where no such programme of Russian national unification outside the Soviet Union had been developed (p. 41).

The contrast between the Russians’ and the Serbs’ national myths and narratives and their different respective trajectories at the time of state dissolution also resided in their different collective memories of the key formative event of the Second World War. Vujačić highlights the experience of the war as fundamental to cementing the Serbs’ national narrative of unity and statehood as the ultimate source of protection and survival. Rather than focusing on the narratives about the war articulated by Belgrade intellectuals and Serbia’s leader Slobodan Milošević, as others have done, Vujačić highlights the importance of the wartime experience for the ‘diaspora’ Serbs. Their shared collective memory of victimisation in the wartime Independent State of Croatia, where they constituted about one-half of all victims (p. 234), left a legacy that could be easily mobilised against the independence of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1991. This experience also explains the ‘diaspora’ Serbs’ relative overrepresentation in the Partisan movement (in autumn 1943 they still made up three-fifths of the Partisan movement, p. 230) and their special role in Yugoslavia’s reunification under the communists – which was reflected in their disproportionate membership of state institutions and leading roles in the Yugoslav People’s Army (p. 237). All this gave them a particular stake in the continuity of socialist Yugoslavia as a single state and later turned them into a critical constituency for elite-led ‘statist-nationalist mobilisation’ as Yugoslavia fell apart in the early 1990s (p. 41).

Vujačić argues that the Russian experience of the war was fundamentally different. For Russians, the first two years of the war produced an ethos of ‘a civic appeal to solidarity in the service of the Motherland’ which replaced Stalin as ‘the main locus of loyalty’ and which represented a time of ‘relative freedom’ and ‘“spontaneous de-Stalinization”’ (pp. 191–2). However, as victory became more palpable after 1943, these limited freedoms were gradually withdrawn and the cult of Stalin as ‘the infallible wartime leader’ was revived (p. 193). The victory, secured at the cost of incredible human losses, was officially portrayed as the

victory of Stalin and the Soviet state, in which ordinary people were, to quote Stalin, mere “cogs” in our great state mechanism’ (p. 194). In this respect, Vujačić tells us, the Russian experience of the war was no different from that of other Soviet nations. In contrast to the Serbs of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, ‘the shared Russian-Ukrainian memory of common victimization by the Stalinist state in the 1930s and Nazi invader in the 1940s increased the likelihood that Russians in Ukraine would accept and even support Ukraine’s independence from the “imperial center”’ (p. 41). It also reinforced the notion that – whereas for Serbs the state was a source of salvation and protection – for Russians it was equated with victimisation and oppression. Abandoning the Soviet Union was a form of liberation.

Vujačić’s argument is nuanced, compelling and well-supported throughout. It provides a masterful overview of the historical legacies that gave rise to such different trajectories of the Russians and the Serbs in the 1990s. However, as Vujačić himself notes in his postscript, the dawn of a Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014 does raise questions about the durability of these particular legacies and the presence of alternative national myths and narratives that could be deployed in very different ways. Vujačić presents a spirited defence of his analysis and convincingly argues that 2014 was not merely a delayed Russian reaction to the end of the Soviet Union but the outcome of a new set of circumstances and of a particular evolution of the Ukrainian and Russian states and societies since independence. However, does this not undermine to some degree his argument about historical legacies and ‘antecedent conditions’? More specifically, are some of the key legacies invoked by Vujačić in the Russian case – namely the legacy of ‘anti-statism’ combined with a commonality of experience of Russians and Ukrainians during the Second World War – still relevant in the current conflict? Or have these now been superseded by other legacies and national myths focused on differences and past conflict? Many commentators of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict have highlighted the widely divergent uses of the wartime past in contemporary Ukrainian and Russian national narratives and the revival of a type of nostalgia for the Soviet state – something that Vujačić himself notes (pp. 302–3). Historical legacies are important because they predetermine certain outcomes – or at least make them more likely. But if multiple legacies and conditions co-exist and can become dominant at any given time, giving rise to completely opposite outcomes, then what does this tell us about the overall explanatory power of an argument centred around historical legacies? This evolution in Russian-Ukrainian relations points rather to the transience of historical legacies and the malleability of national narratives.

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