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Confronting recent history: Serbia's 'fateful eight' and a decade of Kosovo's independence in the Serbian media (2008–2018)

Introduction

Taking a look into Serbia's recent history reveals Serbia's own recent "fateful eight" – the declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008, when the last part broke off from the carcass of former Yugoslavia. Though other significant eights have figured in Serbian (and Yugoslav) history – such as the 1918 creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, or the 1968 student protests – Kosovo's declaration of independence, as a recent "addition" to the list, has figured profusely and significantly in Serbia's recent history, especially within the media.

Serbian media – traditional and electronic – have figured as a key centre of disseminating Kosovo-based Serbian nationalism since 2008 and the declaration of independence. While there is a significant body of research on the Serbia-Kosovo issue, the role of the media in publicising nationalist discourse centred around Kosovo still has not seen its day in scholarship. In this article, I shall tackle Kosovo-based Serbian nationalism in recent

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history (a decade into the past) from the point of the media (both traditional and electronic), applying the methodological tenets of media content analysis (Macnamara, 2005; Riff, Lacy, & Fico, 2014).

The context: Serbia's Kosovo problem

Much has been written on Serbia's "Kosovo issue", both from the perspective of Kosovo as Serbia's main national myth (Bieber, 2002; T. Emmert, 1999; T. A. Emmert, 1990; Kostovicova, 2005; Kuhle & Lausten, 2006; Mihaljčić, 1989; Spasić, 2015; Trgovčević, 1999), as well as from the political and legal perspective after the declaration of independence (Kostovicova, 2013; Lončar, 2016; Štěpánek, 2011). Scholars have already confronted the widely held Kosovo myth, according to which Serbian forces stood up to the significantly larger and more powerful Ottoman Empire in 1389, and lost, including the death of their prince, after which they fell under the "Turkish yoke" for five centuries. Nowadays, the "sorrowful but proud feeling of tragedy, death, and loss engendered by remembrance of the Kosovo catastrophe 600 years ago is generally held to be the foundation of Serbian identity, part of the very essence of being a Serb" (Spasić, 2015, p. 81). Spasić's claim, though, needs to be modified, as the Kosovo myth is not "generally" held as a keystone of Serbian identity, but held as such primarily by Serbian nationalists; in particular, nationalist and populist political figures. To them, "national myths are a potent form of discourse defining a nation's place within the cosmic order of the world" (Edwards, 2015, p. 187). Due to the passage of time and the general lack of information from the period (Čolović, 2017), it was easier for it to become mythologised.

Myth per se is a standard instance encountered in politics (Adak, 2003; Dorsey, 1995; Edwards, 2000; Gustainis, 1989; Ritter, 1975), as it is a "common form of discourse" (Edwards, 2015, p. 188). Myths tend to help provide a means to extract sense out of the world around us and the position of the society in a larger environment (Nimmo & Combs, 1980); most importantly – especially in the case of the Kosovo myth – they "perform an identity function" (Edwards, 2015, p. 189), in this case, the function of Serbian national identity. Political myths in particular can be defined as "historical narratives that serve to articulate the history, the values, and the destiny of a nation" (Kluver, 1997, p. 53). In the case of the Kosovo myth, it "has operated within a number of vastly different ideological-political programmes in modern Serbian and Yugoslav history" (Spasić, 2015, p. 82), and it still does, being promoted by nationally

minded political players (such as any nationally-minded politician, from the former president Slobodan Milošević, through the former Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica, to the former and current members of the Serbian Radical Party) and in particular – by the media.

Since the onset of Romanticism – in this case particularly the works of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić and Petar II Petrović Njegoš¹ – the Kosovo myth has been gaining in salience within the population, and Kosovo gradually became a sort of a “cradle” of Serbia, one of the holiest of places within it (Euka, 2013, p. 28). As Jacques Ellul and Elaine Halperin wrote, the most decisive part of the myth is the most potent, containing the communal belief and in-group values (Ellul & Halperin, 1958, p. 28). Consequently, ever since then, the general, collective recollection of the Kosovo Battle maintained within it an idea of foreign domination, enabling even modern Serb nationalists to regain a sort of connection with ancient history (Morden, 2016, p. 450), so that “in the middle and late 1990s, Slobodan Milošević and other Serb nationalists made great use of the Battle of Kosovo myth to justify sustaining Serb control over Kosovo, against the wishes of the majority Kosovar public” (Morden, 2016, p. 450).

In recent history, Kosovo itself (not only its perception by the population of Serbia) has been the hub of a series of conflicts, from the issues in 1989 during the visit of Slobodan Milošević, to the 1999–2000 Serb-Albanian war that instigated a NATO intervention. The 1999 NATO bombing further stressed the idea that Serbs are not allowed to keep Kosovo within their borders, and was largely seen as a support for Kosovo's independence by the international community. After 2008, however, Serbs became the “minority of the Kosovo region, in conflict with majority ethnic Albanians, [and] would claim the territory and statehood based on historic rights as evident from memories, religious rituals, narratives and monuments about Serb ancient kingdom in the disputed area” (Perica, 2017, p. 26). This was consequently heavily exploited by the Serbian media in a victimisation discourse about their “suffering Serbian brethren”, commonly used as a populist engagement trope in election battles ever since 2004, possibly culminating for the first time at the rally in Belgrade in 2008, held by Vojislav Koštunica. It would be useful to notice that even before the declaration of independence Kosovo had been used by Serb politicians to engage – via promoting the narrative of “protecting Kosovo Serbs” and fighting for

¹ An early onset of such nationalism was identified by Holm Sundhaussen (Sundhaussen, 2008, pp. 105, 116) in the work *Srbi svi i svuda* by Vuk Stefanović-Karadžić (Karadžić & Ivanić, 2014), as well as the famous *Gorski vjenac* by Njegoš (Petrović Njegoš, 1847).

Serbian "identity" – in numerous criminal affairs and money laundering under the cover of an interest in Kosovo, as expounded in detail by the *Insajder* (Insider) team of investigative journalists (Insajder, 2007). After the declaration of independence, nationalist Kosovo-based discourses have been increasingly pushed and promoted by the media.

In 2008, Kosovo declared independence, immediately to be rejected by the Serbian government and the majority of the media, which commonly dubbed it as a "unilateral declaration of independence". A strong, media-based proliferation of nationalist discourse, based on the Kosovo trope, thus increased since 2008 and has not come to a halt a full decade after the declaration of independence.

Theory and methodology

With the media in the centre of attention, I approach the subject from the point of view of media content analysis. Introduced almost a century ago in Harold Lasswell's research on propaganda (Lasswell, 1927), media content analysis is now seen as "a research technique that is based on measuring the amount of something in a representative sampling of some mass-mediated popular form of art" (Berger, 1998, p. 25), combining both a qualitative and quantitative perspective (Macnamara, 2005). According to Jim Macnamara, media content analysis sampling comprises three phases, namely: the selection of the media form, the selection of period and the sampling of the relevant content (Macnamara, 2005). I have thus selected a combined media form (traditional and online media), the 2008–2018 period, and what Macnamara calls a stratified composite sample, "constructed by randomly selecting units for analysis (articles or ads) from certain days or weeks over a period" (Macnamara, 2005, p. 13). Within the samples – analysed in the Case studies section below – I thus concentrate on the common tropes and rhetorical instances that are used in the discourse about Kosovo's independence in the Serbian nationalist media.

Another relevant issue that needs to be tackled in this case is the concept of populism, having in mind the strong populist note purported by the media which support Kosovo-based Serbian nationalism. I take that "populism has a cosmology, or a general belief about how the political universe operates. Populism sees politics as a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of a knowing, diabolical evil – hence, it is Manichaeic or dualistic" (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017). These "diabolical forces", as we shall see, will be discursively presented within the Serbian media as ones trying to "take Kosovo away" from

Serbs. Media themselves are intrinsic to populism, as research has shown that “looking at the most well-known cases of populist phenomena in Europe, we can see that leaders and movements often seem to rely on some sort of ‘media complicity’” (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 50), that is, “in many instances, the European media appear to have contributed to a legitimization of the issues, key-words and communication styles typical of populist leaders” (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 50), as the populism stemming from the media may easily go hand in hand with political movements that support the same or similar ideas (Krämer, 2014, p. 42). Looking at the media, we can see the “populist strategy that consciously appeals to widespread anxieties, prejudices, and resentments, and exploits them for political gain” (Betz, 2009, p. 194). Some scholars have noticed populist instances in Serbia’s relation towards Kosovo going as far back as the late 1980s (Grdešić, 2017), while others have observed that political players who support Kosovo-based Serbian nationalism display populist tendencies (Semenov, 2017). Many have noticed populist tendencies in Serbia in general (Brown, 2017; Krasteva, 2017).

Presentations of Kosovo in the Serbian media in the wake of its independence in 2008 can be described from a topical, punctuation-related and lexical point of view, or, to be more precise, from the point of view of framing, having in mind that the media “set the frame in which citizens discuss public events” (Tuchman, 1978, p. ix). The case examples speak to how the media set the “schemata of interpretation”, that is, “frames” that enable the audience to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” informational instances (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). From the point of view of framing analysis, we can easily identify what Zhongdang Pan and Gerald Kosicki called thematic structures (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 60), listed below. Additionally, certain rhetorical structures (Braungart, Braungart, & Gamson, 1987) are found to be iterative, such as the catchphrases “the so-called state of Kosovo”, which are all together connected to particular lexical choices (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 62).

Case studies

The cases analysed here were selected from a slew of traditional and online media (newspapers/dailies, weeklies, monthlies and online portals), wherever the trope of independent Kosovo was found. Although more examples come from nationalist or nationalist-leaning media (*Srbija danas*, *Pravda*, *Pečat*, *NSPM*, *IN4S*, *Geopolitika*, *Ujedinjenje*), or impactful Russian propaganda portals (*Sputnik Srbija*), old, traditional papers have also been promulgating

a similar discourse (*Večernje novosti, Telegraf*), as has the online portal of the RTV (Radio Television Vojvodina). It needs to be noted that a standard problem with Serbian media is that their circulation and finances are unknown due to the shady nature of the media business in the country (Parčetić Mitić, 2014)

Since the declaration of independence in 2008, the textual production of the Serbian media has quite often used the collocation “the so-called state of Kosovo” (Ser-Cro. *takozvana država Kosovo*),² as in the article “The case ‘The so-called state of Kosovo’: A secret narco-project of 3 billion dollars!” (Obradović, 2016), in which the author, writing for *Srbija danas* (Serbia Today), tries to convince the audience that the state of Kosovo was formed in order to create extensive drug-trafficking networks. Another article by *Sputnik Srbija* (Sputnik Serbia) proclaimed that “the so-called state of Kosovo will not remain independent” (Ristić, 2017), claiming additionally that Albanians were “arming themselves” in Kosovo in order to territorially expand and create a “Great Albania”, while the conservative *Pravda* (Justice) calls it the “fake state of Kosovo” (“Evo dokaza koliko je država priznalo nezavisnost Kosova”, 2014). The right-wing portal *Ujedinjenje* (Unification) calls it “the so-called Kosovo” together with “the so-called state of Kosovo” (“Prof. dr Zoran Čvorović”, 2017). Similarly, Kosovo officials are also referred to within quotation marks, for example the “Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo” (“Enver Hodžaj”, 2017). This is in agreement with the study of Rachael Tatman et al., in which they have come to the conclusion that non-lexical textual patterns allow the possibility of divulging the author’s political affiliation, punctuation being one of the revealing instances (Tatman, Stewart, Paullada, & Spiro, 2017), in this case, the excessive use of parentheses, coupled with a repetitive lexical choice. This lexical selection commonly surfaces in the form of the “fake” or “so-called” state of Kosovo, confirming R. Sherlock Campbell and James W. Pennebaker’s research on pronouns as most important signifiers within qualitative content analysis (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003). A similar view can be found in Pan and Kosicki’s work on framing, wherein the “role of lexical choices” is seen as relevant for framing, as “choosing a particular designator (...) is a clear and sometimes powerful cue signifying an underlying frame” (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 63). In other words, “Kosovo” as a designation is almost never used as a state name, but as a “fake” name instead.

Going into discourse about Kosovo’s independence, however, an ineluctable instance is the “Kosovo is Serbia” slogan (Ser-Cro. *Kosovo je Srbija*), which entered public and media

2 Note that the language spoken in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and Bosnia is still considered by linguistics to be one language, even though it has suffered a political split.

discourse in 2004, during a protest organised by the then government of Serbia (FoNet, 2004), though expanded in salience since 2008, as well as a similar slogan, "Kosovo is the heart of Serbia" (Ser-Cro. *Kosovo je srce Srbije*). *Pečat* (The Stamp) used an array of adjectives to describe the independent state of Kosovo, such as the online tag "fake state of Kosovo", as well as the tags "criminal state of Kosovo" and "Kosovo is Serbia". Their end-page columnist, Dragomir Antić, wrote an article bluntly entitled "Kosovo and Metohija are Serbia" (Ser-Cro. *Kosovo i Metohija su Srbija*) (Antić, 2017). Coming from such a worldview, even gatherings dedicated to poetry had to stress the centrality of the topic of Kosovo, carried over by the *Večernje novosti* (The Evening News) daily: "The main song always has to be the song of Kosovo and Metohija, and if this were not true, we would live and exist far away from ourselves" (J. S., 2018).

Reporting on a protest against Kosovo's independence, the nationalist portal IN4S described it as follows: "The act of the declaration of independence amounted to a rough blow against the sovereignty and integrity of the Republic of Serbia and against international relations in the whole region. Valuing historical flows and not accepting the severe injustice and violence, a group of young people has organised a protest on that account" (IN4S, 2016). The group additionally called Kosovo's independence "a blow against the ethnic and spiritual core of Serbs". The lexical choices serve to stress the importance of the Kosovo issue: it was a "rough blow" against both the "sovereignty and integrity" of Serbia, whilst campaigning for the return of Kosovo within Serbia's borders is framed positively by drawing upon "historical flows" and "not accepting severe injustice and violence" that is represented by Kosovo's independence.

In 2016, the daily *Telegraf* (Telegraph) chose to remind its audience of the notorious warmonger of the wars of the nineties, Željko Ražnatović Arkan. Arkan played a crucial role in forming and organising Serbian paramilitary formations that took part both in the wars of the Yugoslav secession and in the acts of humiliation, torture and illegal arrests of Serb refugees from Croatia, sending them forcefully back to the front to fight for the "Serbian cause" (Mahkovic, 2016; Radović, 2006; Samardžić, 2006). In *Telegraf's* article, Arkan was framed in a positive light, owing to his campaigning based on Kosovo nationalism: "Little is it remembered that one of his 'titles' was the 'independent candidate of the citizens' group from Kosovo", with his origins from Priština stressed as well, emphasising that "since Ražnatović had always shown special sympathy for the 'holy Serbian land', the south Serbian region was the framework of his political campaign. (...) Arkan used to emphasise that Kosovo is the heart of Serbia, and that it shall remain Serbian" ("*Kosovo je srce Srbije*", 2016).

The stress on Kosovo being a province in the “south of Serbia” serves to stress that Kosovo is a part of Serbia. The rhetorical positioning of Kosovo as a “region/province” in South Serbia is common in the discourse; the 2015 Strategic Culture Foundation article named the independence “a secession by the Albanians, that is, the annexation of the South Serbian province” (Jevtović, 2015). This “south Serbian” trope draws on the nineteenth century and the fledgling Serbian nationalism’s vision of Kosovo and Macedonia as “Old Serbia” or “South Serbia” (Reljić, 2017) that became part of Serbia after the successful expansion of Serbia to the south during the First Balkan War in 1912.

Another common trope is seen in the excessive use of the phrase “the (forceful) taking of Kosovo” (*otimanje Kosova*), seen in a number of articles. In 2009 the Radio Television Vojvodina (watched in the northern part of Serbia, and not of particular nationalist provenance) quoted the Serb nationalist poet Matija Bećković, who said that “the taking of Kosovo is the same as the harvesting of organs”, dubbing it in the metadiscourse as the “word of the poet” (“Reč pesnika: Otimanje Kosova i otimanje organa je isto”, 2009) to emphasise the validity of the source. The nationalist portal *Koreni* (Roots), in turn, dubbed it the “taking of Kosovo for resources and due to geopolitics”, as they explained that “NATO and the USA saw Kosovo as their ‘spoils of war’, as one of the reasons for the foreign support for Kosovo’s independence was to punish Serbia by forming a pro-Islamic ‘phantom’ state of Kosovo” (Kresović, 2016). *Srbija danas* wrote as recently as February 2018 how Britain was “ignoring the VIOLENT taking of Kosovo, NATO aggression, but think that Crimea was TAKEN?” (“SKANDALOZNE laži Britanaca”, 2018). The *Telegraf*, additionally, has an online tag/category named “the hijacking of Kosovo”. As seen in the titles above, the use of capital letters in the original is but one of the ways in which further emphasis is put on the topic.

The weekly *Pečat* has been prolific in publishing on Kosovo and its independence. In 2018, it brought the whole declaration signed by a large group of nationalist activists, entitled “A plea for the defence of Kosovo and Metohija”. Written in hectic, unclear language, the Plea specifies as follows:

Without Kosovo and Metohija or any part of its territory, Serbia would not only be mutilated, but also permanently defeated, as a country that sold its valuable destiny and destroyed its own identity. It is known that what is taken by force can be returned, but what is given away remains lost. By agreeing with the abduction and voluntary renunciation of oneself and their basic country, with the greatest number of their Church/folk and national medieval Holy Monuments – their Rulers, Patriarchal

and all-national Foundations – as well as a part of their own people, unstoppable decay and disappearance of Serbia would begin, until its final removal from history. (Uredništvo, 2018)

The emphasis on the religious is common in Serbian nationalism and has been studied in scholarship on the region, as religion, since the 1990s, has made an extremely successful comeback and permeates all aspects of the society, politics included (Aleksov, 2018; Drezgić, 2010; Malešević, 2005; Perica, 2002; Powers, 1996). Considering that Kosovo boasts a significant number of Christian Orthodox churches and monasteries – according to some, over a thousand (Vlašковиć, 2016) – and that the Kosovo myth itself stems from a mystical, religious *Weltanschauung*, this coupling of Kosovo's independence with religion was to be expected. Concentrating more on the paragraph quoted above, we can see lexical choices laden with connotation ("mutilated", "defeated", "valuable destiny", "destroyed", "by force", "unstoppable decay", "disappearance"), useful for emphasising the gravity and relevance of the topic and stressing the negative impact that the nation itself is suffering. The very title, containing the word "defence", connotatively implies that, since defence is needed, there is an "attack" going on. A similar, religion-based article published by the pro-Russian monthly, *Geopolitika* (Geopolitics), claims that the "destiny of Orthodox monasteries and temples in Kosovo" was "dramatic", within the body of the text entirely concentrating on religious shrines ("Za kim zvona ne zvone", 2010), having in mind that the multitude of Orthodox shrines in Kosovo is often stressed as a factor of relevance.

Conclusion

On the basis of the textual production presented above, the presentations of Kosovo could be classified as follows:

- lexical: iteration of such collocations as "the fake state of Kosovo", "the so-called state of Kosovo", "the criminal state of Kosovo"; strong connotative adverbs and nouns relating to the independence; the "(forceful) taking" of Kosovo, the "hijacking of Kosovo";
- topical/thematic: focus on the independence; focus on the idea that Kosovo is a province in Southern Serbia, and not a standalone state; focus on the religious;
- punctuational: the excessive use of quotation marks to stress the alleged artificiality of Independent Kosovo; the use of quotation marks for Kosovo state officials.

The rhetorical instances listed above are continuous and repetitive within the media discourse about Kosovo's independence, and they have not changed since the declaration itself in 2008. This is largely due to the lack of political will to confront the fact of Kosovo's independence. Considering that a potential official recognition of Kosovo as a sovereign state would be tantamount to political suicide, political players – especially of nationalist provenance – have been consistently pushing the Kosovo-based nationalist, populist discourse. In view of a strong influence of the government over the media (Freedom House, 2016), it is hardly surprising that Kosovo has continuously held a strong presence within the media. Any media that would claim otherwise and/or promote a discourse different to the dominant one would probably suffer from a decrease in readership. The one daily that does not press a strong nationalist rhetoric, the daily *Danas* (Today), consistently has the lowest readership.

The whole issue connects to the increasingly popular topics of populism and nativism. Although due to the lack of space in a standardised research article I am unable to go deeper into the questions of populism and nativism (see: Bugaric, 2008; Espejo, 2017; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017; Herkman, 2016; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), it is fairly clear that both are present in the Serbian media discourse on Kosovo. The Kosovo topic is useful as a decoy from real and practical problems that would otherwise take precedence, were it not for the ubiquitous nature of the Kosovo issue that is continuously being forced onto the public by the media.

Kosovo has so far figured in scholarly research as a topic discussed either in relation to the nationalist myth, or from a legal/political perspective. Studies considering the media perspective proved impossible to find. I hope that this article can serve as a nudge to explore the Kosovo issue from various perspectives and disciplines.

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Confronting recent history: Serbia's 'fateful eight' and a decade of Kosovo's independence in the Serbian Media (2008–2018)

Serbia's latest "fateful eight" – from the 1918 creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, to the student protests of 1968 – is by far the declaration of independence of its former southernmost province, Kosovo, in 2008. Having in mind that the Kosovo myth – much debated in scholarly circles – is a key instance in understanding Serbia's nationalism ever since its inception in the nineteenth century, a strong discourse negating Kosovo's independence has been promulgated by the media. Through the lens of media content analysis, the author tackles the Kosovo-related rhetoric within the media in Serbia's recent history, from the declaration of Kosovo's independence, to 2018.

Keywords:

Serbia; Kosovo; independence; media; content analysis

Stawiając czoła najnowszej historii: serbska „przełomowa ósemka” i dekada niepodległości Kosowa w serbskich mediach (2008–2018)

Najnowszą z serbskich „przełomowych ósemek” – po utworzeniu Królestwa Serbów, Chorwatów i Słoweńców w roku 1918 i protestach studenckich w roku 1968 – jest bez wątpienia ogłoszenie niepodległości przez byłą południową prowincję Serbii, Kosowo, w 2008 roku. Ponieważ mit kosowski – wciąż będący przedmiotem dyskusji w kręgach akademickich – pozostaje kluczowy dla zrozumienia serbskiego nacjonalizmu już od chwili jego narodzin w dziewiętnastym wieku, media forsowały dyskurs wyraźnie przeciwny niepodległości Kosowa. Korzystając z metod analizy treści autor przygląda się w tekście retoryce serbskich mediów dotyczącej Kosowa, od chwili ogłoszenia przez nie niepodległości w 2008 roku do roku 2018.

Słowa kluczowe:

Serbia; Kosowo; niepodległość; media; analiza treści

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