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## **Between Trauma and Transformation: Serbia's Evolving Attachment to Kosovo**

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**Abstract:** Serbia's policy regarding Kosovo is constrained and bounded by decades of propaganda, which have stoked constructed memories of the past so that Serbs think of the Battle of Kosovo of 1389 as a hugely important historical event and experience collective political trauma when they reflect on the loss of Kosovo. Thus, although more than 90% of the population of Kosovo is Albanian and want to maintain the independence of their republic, against a mere 2.3% that are Serbs (according to the 2024 census in Kosovo), the Serbian political establishment has continued to insist that Serbia has an “eternal” right to rule Kosovo. The Kosovo myth, in which the 1389 Battle of Kosovo is just one component, albeit the central symbolic one in inter-generationally transmitted trauma, is both limiting and, for the regime, empowering, insofar as it promotes a degree of political homogenization, thereby constraining the political opposition. However, while some commentators write as if Serbs thought alike when it comes to Kosovo, survey data show a different picture, confirming that some Serbs are against this dominant narrative, and may even agree with articulate liberal advocates of recognition of Kosovo's independence and promote a reassessment of the dominant narrative. The latter's alternative narrative opens the possibility for Serbia to chart a different political course in the future.

**Keywords:** Serbia, Kosovo myth, trauma, nationalism, collective memory

### **Introduction**

In August–September 1989, the first author of this article spent five weeks conducting research interviews in Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, and Skopje. One of her interviews was conducted at the Association of Serbian Writers with four prominent members, among them Matija Bećković, at that time President of the Association. In the course of a roughly two-hour interview, Bećković offered the striking formula that there

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were so many Serbian bones buried in Kosovo, that the territory would forever remain part of Serbia even if the time would come when not a single Serb lived there.<sup>1</sup> Bećković's statement made it clear that he, like many other Serbs, was already worrying that the independence of Kosovo from Serbia was a potential future. There is a huge and growing literature focusing on Kosovo. Among the classics, which is to say those books which have sparked the most discussion and are the most often cited, there are those that focus on the sufferings of Serbs of Kosovo, such as the volumes by Dimitrije Bogdanović (1986) and Ruža Petrović and Marina Blagojević (1992); those that focus primarily on the sufferings of Albanians of Kosovo, such as the volumes by Noel Malcolm (1998) and Miranda Vickers (1998); and those with specific alternative foci, such as those by Tim Judah (2022), and Miloš Mišović (1987). In addition, there are other volumes which also offer unique perspectives, specifically those written or edited by Konrad Clewing and Jens Reuter (2000), Alex N. Dragnich and Slavko Todorovich (1984), Filip Ejodus (2020), and Sabrina Ramet, Albert Simkus, and Ola Listhaug (2015).

With so much scholarship and wisdom about the subject of this article, including other works not acknowledged here, we hope nonetheless to offer something new, specifically: first, whereas it is common for writers to refer to the dominant narrative among Serbs often without acknowledging other voices, we will take note of the contending, liberal narrative, identify its chief advocates, and examine the relevance of this opposition narrative to the politics of Serbia in the context of Kosovo; second, we will provide survey data from 2021–2023 to measure the proportion of Serbians (citizens of Serbia, among whom 88% are ethnic Serbs) under the influence of or, alternatively, rejecting the dominant (nationalist) narrative. These two points are important insofar as they suggest that the regime is not a prisoner of its narrative. Third, we will bring Serbian history textbooks briefly into the discussion of the dominant narrative; fourth, we will discuss the side effects of narratives, especially as regards Serbia; and fifth, we will show how the Kosovo myth that was evoked in the nineteenth century entailed an oath to regain and preserve Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo and how President Vučić's limited flexibility in 2013 and more recently remains within the boundaries set by public understanding of the oath. And finally, our central argument in what follows is threefold: It is misleading to generalize about what Serbs think, since they do not all think alike and the understandings that most Serbs have of Kosovo's past and present are fashioned in the first place by history textbooks and the media, both of which the regime controls. This opens the possibility that the regime could dictate new content to textbooks and media alike, transforming Serbian public opinion over time.

By *trauma* we mean, as per the American Psychological Association, “an emotional response to a terrible event,” which may have long-term effects. By *nationalism* we mean the affective attachment to a self-defined national community and the prioritization of the interests of the collective nation over the interests of both other nations and the collective's individual members. By *collective memory*, as per the American Psychological

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1 Bećković's statement was included in an article of his, published in *Kosovo 1389–1989*, special edition of the *Serbian Literary Quarterly*, nos. 1–3 (Belgrade, 1989).

Association we mean “shared recollection: mental representations of past events that are common to members of a social group.” And by *myth*, following Gerry Philipsen (1987, 251) we mean “a great symbolic narrative which holds together the imagination of people and provides bases of harmonious thought and action.”

## **The Political Instrumentalization of the Kosovo Myth: Shaping Collective Memory and National Identity**

Since public opinion matters to policymakers, the latter pay attention to how to channel, mold, and even orchestrate what the public thinks, in order to gain support for specific policies. Thus, political elites interpret both history and current events for their respective publics and may also manipulate their publics for certain purposes. In this regard, they function, to use Pavlaković's term, as *memory entrepreneurs* (Pavlaković 2019, 122). Pavlaković inherited the term *memory entrepreneurs* from Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1902), via an article by Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins (1998, 106). In addition to history textbooks and news media, public opinion is influenced by various agents, including films, literature, speeches of politicians, clergy, and other prominent persons, and, inevitably, also by rumors, among other sources. In the case of Serbia, elites have highlighted the 1389 Battle of Kosovo since at least the nineteenth century (specifically since the 1860s, according to Miodrag Popović (2007); since 1878, according to Ejodus (2020, 165), with the Yugoslav government and the Serbian Orthodox Church collaborating in 1939 to stage a huge commemoration of the 550th anniversary of that battle (Falina 2023, 29, 128). Indeed, according to Milica Bakić-Hayden, thanks to the cult of Prince Lazar (who lost his life in the battle) and active propagation by the Church, among other actors, of a tragic-heroic myth about the battle, “In popular perception Kosovo...became the paradigm for collective self-understanding...[and] became intimately tied to the life of an entire people” (2004, 34). Thus, the trauma experienced by the Christian army led by Prince Lazar was reimagined and transferred, with a delay of half a millennium, to the entire Serbian nation. And “collective political trauma”, as Yaacov Vertzberger has noted, has “consequences for values, beliefs, and attitudes held by the mass public toward issues that it associates with the traumatic event” (1997, 864). During the Yugoslav communist rule, from 1945 until the emergence of Milošević in 1987, the Kosovo myth lost some of its prominence in public. Daniel Šuber describes this period, especially under Josip Broz Tito's leadership, as one of “forced amnesia” regarding Kosovo (Šuber 2006, 4). The myth persisted through the Orthodox Church though.

But Slobodan Milošević (1941–2006; ruled 1989–2001) revived the focus on Kosovo, cultivating the myth of the Battle of Kosovo which had been fought on 28 June 1389 according to the Gregorian calendar (15 June 1389 on the Julian calendar in use in Serbia at the time of the battle). According to legend, on the eve of the battle, an angel visited Lazar and offered him a choice between victory and the expansion of his (earthly) principality on the one hand, and defeat and the achievement of a heavenly kingdom on the other hand. Prince Lazar is said to have chosen the heavenly kingdom. But what exactly did that

mean? One interpretation, promoted by Greenawalt (2001) is that rule by the Ottomans secured the Serbian Orthodox Church, with Serbs enjoying religious freedom and feudal duties lower than their counterparts in Christian-ruled Europe. An alternative interpretation, harnessed by irredentists, is that the choice of the heavenly kingdom amounted to an entitlement to restore Serbian rule over all lands lost in medieval times. Further, there are inevitably Serbs who treat this tale of Lazar's choice as nothing more than a fable intended to pump up Serbs' sense of glory. And finally, there is Dejan Djokić's representation of Lazar's choice as amounting to a "spiritual victory," (2009, 164), with Lazar's sacrifice and his army's loss symbolizing Serbia's transcendence. At the same time, it was also seen as a national catastrophe, contradicting the idea that Lazar willingly accepted defeat.

Clearly, some Serbs, both among the general population and among the elites, view the battle as Serbs' great historical trauma and, as Vamik Volkan has noted, once a large group feels that it has experienced a traumatic event (though this consensus might come long after the event in question took place), it can "choose' to mythologize and psychologize the mental repercussions of [the] event" (as quoted in Baliqi 2018, 474). But collective memories of a (perceived) traumatic event do not assemble themselves. Rather, they are constructed on the foundation of the "interests of the most influential and dominant political forces," and contribute to shaping the understanding of present challenges (Baliqi 2018, 473). This applies, of course, only to politically aware Serbs in Kosovo and, as ever, one needs to keep the distinction in mind between Kosovo Serbs, Serbs of Serbia (themselves divided), and non-Serb citizens of Serbia.

### **From Modus Vivendi to Confrontation**

Trauma has been linked to depression, anxiety, aggression, and a desire for vengeance (Kaminer and Eagle 2010, 127; Bast and DeSimone 2019, 20; Guerra et al. 2003, 1562; Lupu and Peisakhin 2017, 837). It is *not* associated with flexibility or a willingness to negotiate concerning what is ultimately at stake. Trauma, as a "psychological disorder" (Mohamed 2015, 1173), as Ana Ljubojević and her colleagues have argued, may reshape memories and understandings of the past (2017, 201). Moreover, as Jeffrey Alexander has explained, "events that are deeply traumatizing may not actually have occurred" or at least not in the way they are recalled. But whether remembered more or less accurately or not, when collective trauma sets in, it "leaves indelible marks upon [people's] group consciousness, marking their memories forever" (Alexander 2004, 8, 1).

As close observers of the region are aware, there were always problems between Kosovo's Serb and Albanian populations, and the province-wide riots in spring 1981 (see: Ramet 2006, Chapter 10) should have served as a wake-up call that there needed to be radical change in Kosovo but, until Slobodan Milošević arrived on the political scene in 1987, politicians struggled to find formulae that would not drive either community over the brink.

The signal that the era of searching for a middle ground was coming to an end was given in April 1987, when Milošević, a banker-turned politician and at the time President of the League of Communists of Serbia, told Serbs in Kosovo, after police used truncheons to beat some of them, “No one will ever beat you again!”

In his speech at Gazimestan on 28 June 1989, on the occasion of the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the famed Battle of Kosovo, Milošević stated that the presence of non-Serbs in Serbia was not a disadvantage but an advantage, called for full equality for all nations living in Yugoslavia, and concluded his speech with an emphasis on “peace and brotherhood,” though he did not use the old socialist slogan of “brotherhood and unity” (Milošević 1989). Indeed, Florian Bieber has argued that the 28 June 1989 commemoration of the battle “purported to be a Yugoslav celebration. But in reality, it was essentially directed *against* the very ‘brotherhood and unity’ that it claimed to be preserving” (Bieber 2002, 101, emphasis added). In the same speech, he drew parallels between historical struggles and contemporary political challenges, effectively mobilizing public opinion to support assertive policies in Kosovo. By referring to “treachery”, to Serbs being “[o]ppressed by pain”, and to the Serbs’ alleged “slavery” under the Turks, he allowed his listeners to rekindle old trauma, if anything deepening it and now casting the Albanians of Kosovo as Serbs’ rivals for land. Curiously, Milošević “assert[ed] that historians might challenge the story of the battle without invalidating its nationalist truth” (Ancombe 2006, 792). In an oft-quoted passage, he warned: “Six centuries later [i.e., after the 1389 battle], we are being again engaged in battles and facing battles. They are not armed battles, although such things cannot be excluded yet” (Milošević 1989). Whether this was a warning or a threat or perhaps a Freudian slip is open to debate; what is important in this passage is that the Serbian leader could already imagine the possibility of armed conflict. Indeed, in September and October 1990, at Milošević’s direction, the Yugoslav People’s Army undertook to train and arm Serb civilians in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, organizing them into militias (Divjak 2001, 154). Milošević also arranged for the importation of Soviet arms to Serbia – this was illegal because he was not the head of Yugoslavia.

The Serbian government made no objection to the declaration of independence by Montenegro on 3 June 2006 but strenuously objected to Kosovo’s declaration of independence 20 months later. Two explanations for the difference from Serbia’s reaction to Kosovo’s declaration of independence come immediately to mind. The first is that Serbia and Montenegro had been nominally equals in the now-defunct Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; the second is that, unlike the case of Kosovo, Montenegro never occupied a central place in Serbian national myths or historical trauma, and its departure did not provoke deep emotional distress. There were no famous songs, poems, or fears about Montenegro’s secession, nor any historical trauma associated with its loss, making its independence a far less sensitive issue for Serbia. As for Resolution 1244, which had guaranteed the territorial integrity of the FRY, Belgrade now made the case that 1244 guaranteed the territorial integrity of Serbia. Seeking to underscore the territorial integrity of Serbia and anchor it in law, Vojislav Koštunica, at the time Prime Minister of Serbia, pushed forward a new constitution for Serbia, adopted on 30 September 2006.

This new constitution, approved in a public referendum conducted in Serbia but not in Kosovo, pointedly affirmed that “Kosovo and Metohija” – the official Serbian term for the region which Albanians call simply Kosovo – was an integral and inalienable part of Serbia. The Venice Commission, an advisory body of the Council of Europe, reviewed the new constitution and criticized it, and concluded that while Resolution 1244 called for “substantial autonomy” for Kosovo, the new constitution placed nearly all decision-making power in Belgrade, undermining Kosovo’s autonomy (European Commission for Democracy through Law – Venice Commission 2007). The text of the 2006 constitution, however, may suggest a different conclusion since it states explicitly that “The Assembly of an autonomous province [...] shall be the supreme body of the autonomous province and a local self-government unit” (Article 180) and that the autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo (called Kosovo and Metohija in the text of the constitution) regulate, among other things, education, culture, and public information within their respective borders and establish their own symbols (Article 183) (Republic of Serbia 2006). By late 2007, the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy had become convinced that there was no alternative to independence for Kosovo and advised Kosovo’s political leaders to proceed with a declaration of independence.

## **Independence**

On 17 February 2008, Kosovo, which had been part of Serbia/Yugoslavia from 1912 to 1941 and again from 1945 to 1999 (after which it came under a UN mandate), declared its independence after coordinating and preparing this move in advance with the United States, Great Britain, and France. Boduszynski and Pavlaković quite accurately refer to “Kosovo’s internationally-guided declaration of independence” (2019, 816). As of March 2025, Kosovo was recognized by 84 out of the 193 United Nations member states (Kosovo Online 2025). The new state is currently a member of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Council of Europe Development Bank, the Venice Commission, the World Customs Organization, and other international and regional organizations and has applied for membership in the Council of Europe, the European Union, and NATO’s Partnership for Peace. According to the 2024 Kosovo census, 91.8% of the inhabitants of Kosovo are Albanians; Serbs are the second largest group accounting for 2.3% of the population, and Bosniaks place third, with just 1.7% of the population (kos\_data 2024). And yet the Government of Serbia, still operating under a constitution adopted in 2006, continues to insist that Kosovo is rightfully part of Serbia, with the phrase “Kosovo is Serbia” frequently used, meaning that Serbs do not recognize Kosovo as having any separate existence from Serbia. This slogan is obviously intended to be understood normatively, rather than empirically. In early 2024, a two-thirds majority of the members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recommended that the Council accept Kosovo’s application for membership. In response, Serbia’s foreign minister at the time, Ivica Dačić, called the vote “a day of shame in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe” (as quoted in Helsinki Committee 2024, 6). His reaction reflected the deep trauma that many Serbs associate with

Kosovo, including memories of the 1389 battle, which continues to leave a vivid and painful psychological scar for at least some Serbs (Porter and Peace 2007, 440).

Belgrade decided to challenge Kosovo's declaration of independence by asking the U.N. General Assembly to refer the matter to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Some Western states pressured Serbia not to pursue this question via the General Assembly. The Serbian government held firm, however, at least in part to demonstrate to angry Serbian citizens that it was doing its best to try to abort Kosovo's newly declared statehood. On 8 October 2008, the General Assembly voted on Serbia's request to refer the question of the legality of Kosovo's declaration to the ICJ; of those states whose representatives were present for the vote, 77 voted to ask the ICJ to render an opinion, six were opposed, and 74 abstained (Milošević 2010, 4; Ker-Lindsay 2015, 9, 11, 17). With that, the question of Kosovo's statehood was referred to the ICJ. The court took 21 months to deliberate, finally ruling on 22 July 2010 that Kosovo's declaration of independence was not contrary to international law. This ruling strengthened Kosovo's position internationally, as it gave more legitimacy to its independence, encouraging more countries to recognize it. However, to clarify, the decision did not say whether Kosovo was legally a state or whether other countries should recognize it. Instead, it confirmed only that proclaiming independence did not violate international law.

### **“Serbia Is Not a Handful of Oats”<sup>2</sup>**

Between 2008 and 2019, Kosovo and Serbia engaged in multiple rounds of negotiations to resolve their disputes, primarily facilitated by the EU. The main goal was to normalize relations, address practical issues, and pave the way for their potential EU membership. Then, in March 2019, the parliament of Kosovo adopted a platform for negotiations with Belgrade, projecting mutual recognition between the two states, within their existing borders. Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić reacted angrily to the announcement of this platform, asserting that Serbia was not a “handful of oats” for the European Union and the government of Kosovo to divide, a phrase drawn from the 1989 film *Boj na Kosovu*, directed by Zdravko Šotra, which also played a role in the (re)construction of the myth. The Serbian Orthodox patriarch declared, and not just on one occasion, that “without Kosovo, Serbia is like a body without a head or a heart,” while then-Foreign Minister of Serbia, Vuk Jeremić, told an American audience in March 2011, “Kosovo is our Valley Forge and Yorktown, our Alamo and Gettysburg, our Pearl Harbour and Iwo Jima all rolled into one” (both extracts as quoted in Ejodus 2020, 117, 135). Jeremić may have exaggerated the importance of most of these references for the average high-school educated American and perhaps forgot that Gettysburg is, at most, a trauma for some latter-day Southern Confederates, but his point was, nonetheless, clear, viz., that the loss of Kosovo was a supreme tragedy for Serbia and revived the feeling of chosen trauma. The Serbian side continued to throw down a virtual gauntlet, repeating over and over that Serbia would

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<sup>2</sup> Vučić, as quoted in Ejodus 2020, 147.

not give up Kosovo. But, in fact, Serbia is not in a position to give up territory it has not held since 1999. Then-Prime Minister Ivica Dačić, who was an aide to Slobodan Milošević when Serbia went to war with NATO, departed from this litany in March 2013 when he unexpectedly told Serbs that they “had been lied to for ten years that Kosovo was [still] Serbia” (as quoted in Ejodus 2020, 138). But the outcry was so fierce that Dačić had to beat a retreat within a matter of hours, once more declaring that Serbia would never accept the independence of Kosovo.

### “When Pigs Fly”<sup>3</sup>

At this writing, Kosovo has not yet been admitted to the United Nations, due to vetoes registered by Russia and China on Serbia’s behalf. On 19 April 2013, with EU mediation, Serbia and Kosovo signed the Agreement on the Principles of Normalization, which contains 15 points. All but one of these have been either fully or partially implemented (Deda 2015, 174). The sole provision which has not been implemented at all thus far is the agreement that the 50,000 Serbs living in northern Kosovo would be allowed to establish an autonomous Association of Serb Municipalities (Gashi and Novaković 2020; United Nations 2023). In discussions at the UN Security Council ten years later – on 27 April 2023 – Foreign Minister Dačić of Serbia stressed the importance that his country attached to the formation of the Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo, which he said should include “municipal self-government”. Dačić also told the contentious session that “For Serbia, Kosovo is *sui generis*. As Jerusalem is *sui generis* for the Jews. As Mecca is *sui generis* for Muslims. As the Vatican is *sui generis* for Catholics” (as quoted in United Nations 2023). What is striking here is that Dačić was comparing Serbia not to other countries but rather to three of the world’s six great religions. With this, Dačić claimed Kosovo as a sacred place for Serbs and, more, that Serbia enjoyed a quasi-religious claim to Kosovo – a “heavenly kingdom”, as widespread misunderstanding of Prince Lazar’s role holds. In September 2018, then-Foreign Minister Dačić was asked when Kosovo might expect Serbia to withdraw its objection to Kosovo’s admission to that body. Dačić’s retort, “when pigs fly,” dashed all hope of this for the foreseeable future.

### The Divided Serbian Public, 2021–2023

In April 2021, an opinion poll was conducted among 1,129 Serbian citizens. Among its findings was that only 17.9% of respondents said that they were “very interested” in current political developments in their country, with an additional 36.4% claiming to be “somewhat interested”, adding up to just over half of the respondents reporting some measure of interest in what was going on in Serbian political affairs (Bjeloš 2022, 5). Much of the poll was devoted to Kosovo, producing some interesting results. Asked if they were worried about Kosovo (Kosovo i Metohija in the poll), just under two-thirds of respondents acknowledged some level of concern (about half of these were “very worried” and

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<sup>3</sup> Dačić, as quoted in Ejodus 2020, 145.

the rest “somewhat worried”) (Bjeloš 2022, 8). Thus, more than a third of respondents were *not* worried. In fact, 16.3% of respondents said that they were “indifferent” when it came to Kosovo (Bjeloš 2022, 11).

Asked if Kosovo was the heart of Serbia, 40.7% strongly agreed, with 29% somewhat agreeing – again adding up to two-thirds of respondents (Bjeloš 2022, 15). In a closely related question, those being polled were asked whether they agreed with the statement, “There is no Serbia without Kosovo; Kosovo is the foundation of the Serbian state and Serbian identity,” 29.3% strongly agreed, with 29.5% somewhat in agreement – in combination accounting for just under 60% of respondents (Bjeloš 2022, 15). Respondents were also asked whether recognition of Kosovo’s independence would amount to national betrayal, to which 49.9% strongly agreed, with a further 23.2% reporting that they were somewhat in agreement (Bjeloš 2022, 15). This large majority reporting opposition to recognition may well figure in President Vučić’s calculations, although public opinion is to a considerable extent shaped by the regime-controlled media and, in any event, the poll gave no indication as to how strongly respondents actually felt about their responses. Finally, respondents were asked if they thought that Kosovo was lost; 36.3% said yes, 54.8% said no, and 8% said that they did not know (Bjeloš 2022, 16). The overall picture that emerges from these data is that, while very roughly two-thirds of Serbians are not prepared to reconcile themselves, at the present time, to Kosovo’s independence, roughly one-third are of the opposite orientation. A subsequent survey, conducted among 1,200 Serbian citizens in May 2023, found that about three-fourths of Serbian citizens (thus, 66% of Serbs) would like to see a lasting peace with Kosovo’s Albanians, while 70% would not accept recognition of Kosovo even as the price of admission to the European Union (IEP 2023). Yet, what these data did not adequately capture was how intense Serb (or perhaps Serbian) feelings on these matters were (and are). It was possible, for example (likely, in our view), that local Serbs might feel more agitated when the nearby bakery ran out of bread, when normal coffee was not available in the shops (as was the case in 1979–80), or even when Belgrade’s football team did not perform well. Politics is a high priority for some people, of course, but it is not everyone’s highest priority, as the survey data bear out and that goes especially for people who do not follow the news.

### **The Liberal Alternative**

The survey data presented above already document the heterogeneity of views about Kosovo among Serbs, and the chief alternative to the regime-sponsored nationalist narrative is a liberal one. The best-known advocates of the liberal alternative in Serbia are: Čedomir Jovanović, who served as Deputy Prime Minister between March 2003 and March 2004; Sonja Biserko, founder and president of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia; and Dušan Janjić, president of the Executive Board of the Forum for Ethnic Relations. All three of them believe that the best path forward for both Serbia and Kosovo would entail Serbian recognition of Kosovo’s independence, abandonment of any aspiration to arrange for a land swap with Kosovo or alteration in the Serb – Kosovar

border, and an end to Belgrade's efforts to destabilize Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina (see Mlloja 2024). Among the bones of contention between Belgrade and Prishtina is the stillborn Association of Serb Municipalities. While Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti worried that allowing the Association to operate would fuel an escalating spiral to disintegration – a fear shared by Jovanović (Fazliu 2017) – Biserko offers that “Belgrade is not genuinely interested in the creation of the [Association] of Serbian municipalities. Instead, its constant insistence [on this issue] serves to portray the Kosovo Government as rigid and Stalinist... Kosovo is used to unify the Serbian people” (Mlloja 2024). Indeed, wielding the “Kosovo myth” promotes political homogenization not only in Serbia, according to Biserko, but also in Kosovo (Bergamaschi 2020).

The Kosovo myth imposes an implicit oath on Serbs to fight for Kosovo literally *forever* – as then-Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica made clear in a public speech in February 2008 (Haug 2011, 329). This is, of course, nothing less than an oath to refuse to accept change, to refuse to accept reality. But the myth and the implicit oath impose “a dense normative social environment,” as Jelena Subotić calls it (2016, 611). The Kosovo myth is, in fact, a *narrative*, narrow in focus but broad in implications. But when *trauma* is the central focus of a nation's dominant narrative, the result can be problems with processing new information (Mohamed 2015, 1170), an increase in proclivity to violence and depression (Guerra et al. 2003, 1562), and an intensification of identification with the group (in this case, the Serbian nation), along with an increase in hostility to the “out group” (here, the Albanians of Kosovo) (Lupu and Peisakhin 2017, 836). In response to this syndrome, Jovanović declared, in 2023, “We are functioning in an insane dimension; we have learned nothing from 1999” (Jovanović 2023). Those who characterize dialogue with Kosovo as treason, Jovanović told Tanjug in 2020, would condemn Serbia to catastrophe (Jovanović 2020).

The route forward, Janjić has advised, is for Belgrade to revive dialogue with Prishtina and cooperate with KFOR (European Western Balkans 2022). President Vučić's request to NATO in December 2022 for permission to send Serbian troops into Kosovo had no prospect of being granted and was, in due course, declined; this well publicized request was surely aimed at Vučić's domestic audience, to show that he was doing everything possible to protect those Serbs living in Kosovo. A call for the full reintegration of Kosovo into Serbia, a demand registered by a group of intellectuals and opposition figures in 2002 (Dragaš 2022) for example, was similarly extremely unlikely to produce any positive effect, whether for Serbia or for Kosovo. The ideal scenario rather, according to Jovanović, would be for Kosovo's Serbs to become “fully integrated into Kosovo's social and political life” (Fazliu 2017), and, as he told K2.0, “to change the goals in Serbian society” (Fazliu 2017) and begin the work of gradually building normal relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

Among other leading figures with liberal views one may count the late respected historian and former politician, Latinka Perović (Koha 2022), who claimed that Serbs derived their political goals from myths and publicly talked about the injustices against the Albanians (Koha 2022); anthropologist and writer Ivan Čolović who claimed the Kosovo Myth effectively became state religion in the 1990s and fuel for the cycles of violence seen in the

Balkans (Knezević 2017); sociologist and former politician Vesna Pešić who holds that Kosovo is a finished story that Serbs are just wasting time on (Telegrafi 2022); and the late Borka Pavičević, founder of Centre for Cultural Decontamination, who worked hard for the normalization of relations between Serbs and Albanians (Global Voices 2019).

Among Serbia's political elites, there are likewise different views and different interests at play, although the center of gravity is clearly around Vučić and his coterie. A central feature here is that, much as in the case of a number of U.S. Senators and Congressmen, Vučić and his closest collaborators give priority, according to Vladimir Trapara, to preserving their political positions and their power (Trapara n.d., p. 3 of 6). An article published by the online news site *European Western Balkans* in 2024 criticized President Vučić for a speech in which, according to the writer, he argued that Kosovo's Serbs could be safe only in an environment in which they were dominant. In the same speech, Vučić compared Kosovo's Albanian leaders with Adolf Hitler – the most extreme comparison most of us can imagine. But this extreme comparison would seem to be intended, according to *European Western Balkans*, to stoke “continued instability in the north of Kosovo” and “to rally nationalist sentiment and distract [people] from Serbia's pressing domestic challenges” (Ilazi 2024), thereby nullifying any political opposition demands that Serbs' real-life issues be addressed.

Vučić's anti-Kosovo rhetoric has consolidated anti-Kosovo attitudes among Serbian citizens. For example, in an opinion poll conducted by the Institute for European Affairs in 2020, 77% of Serbian citizens are opposed to recognizing Kosovo's independence in exchange for faster accession into the EU (Institute for European Affairs 2020), while a survey conducted by CRTA two years later found that almost two-thirds of Serbian citizens rejected any notion of recognition of Kosovo's independence (CRTA 2022). Nonetheless, in spite of Vučić's occasionally strong rhetoric, a poll reported by Euractiv in 2017 found “that an overwhelming majority of Serbians wouldn't support armed conflict in order to reclaim the province” (Euractiv 2017).

### **Side-Effects of Trauma and Myth-Making**

It is useful to distinguish between the side-effects of trauma and the side-effects of myth-making about trauma. There would be, of course, the direct consequences of trauma, such as depression and a proclivity to violent behavior, as already mentioned. But myth-making about trauma can sustain the feeling of trauma, inducing a feeling of injustice. Among the side-effects is that the traumatized person or persons may feel somehow unique, not only in terms of the degree of suffering (recall here Vuk Drašković's reference to Serbs as the lost eleventh tribe of Israel) but also in a grander historical sense (and here, one may recall Ivan Čolović's reference to the imagined “Serbian planet”).

A second side-effect is that dwelling on past collective suffering may lead sufferers to demonize perpetrators (or alleged perpetrators) and to assert the moral purity of one's

own group – in this case, the Serbian nation. A third, in the case of the Kosovo myth, is that *some* Serbs present the loss of Kosovo as historically unique, as if no other nation has experienced anything even remotely comparable. Yet Germany lost the historic city of Königsberg, which had been founded by Teutonic Knights in 1255, serving as the capital of East Prussia from 1773 until 1945; moreover, Königsberg was the city in which the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant lived. Again, the First Bulgarian Empire (893–927 CE) covered much of the Balkan peninsula, incorporating not only the land that comprises today's Bulgaria but also the lands that today comprise Romania, Albania, and the Aegean coast of Greece. And yet again, Spain, which from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, ruled much of the Western hemisphere, from California and Texas to Argentina and Paraguay, lost almost all of its lands in the West by 1825 (Cuba was lost in 1898). What is unique in the case of Serbia, thus, is not the loss of historic land but rather that the loss was mythologized, in an altered way, by the Church, poets and bards, and politicians, so that the loss of Kosovo seems fresh in a way that, for example, the loss of much of the medieval Bulgarian empire does not seem fresh to Bulgarians generally.

### Defusing the Crisis

From the end of the Second World War until February 2008, Kosovo was attached to Serbia, first as a “region”, later as a “province”, although beginning in summer 1999 it functioned as an UN-NATO protectorate while recognizing Serbia's nominal sovereignty. As of the 2024 census, the population of Kosovo was registered at approximately 1.6 million inhabitants (kos\_data 2024) mostly Albanians. There have been proposals for partition or territorial exchange between Serbia and Kosovo. In any such exchange, Serbia would hope to regain parts of northern Kosovo with Serb-majority districts, including mineral-rich areas, rather than other parts of Kosovo with historic Serbian Orthodox churches and other religious sites.

The April 2013 Brussels Agreement remains, at this writing, the most ambitious effort, since February 2008, to defuse the persistent crisis in Kosovo and reduce tensions. But Serbs who invest a lot of emotion in Prince Lazar's supposedly heavenly kingdom or even indulge in fantasies about how the boundaries of the medieval empire of Tsar Dušan the Mighty (reigned as King 1331–1346 and as Emperor 1346–1355) might be approximated are deluding themselves and stoking embers that should be allowed to die out. Aleksandar Vučić, President of Serbia since 31 May 2017, speaking on Radio-Television Serbia on the anniversary on 28 June 2017 of the mythical Battle of Kosovo at which Lazar lost his life, struck an ambiguous chord when he told Serbs, “even Prince Lazar would want us to fight for [an] earthly Serbia and not a heavenly one” (as quoted in Vulović 2023, 525).

The fact that Vučić at one point hinted at the partition of Kosovo in exchange for Serbian recognition of the statehood of central and southern Kosovo, in spite of that suggestion being clearly at variance with the Serbian constitution, shows just how secure Vučić has been in his power. His authority has not been significantly challenged by legal constraints,

political opposition, or public backlash. It also reflects the fact that Serbia is not a liberal democracy but rather a competitive authoritarian regime, with the ruling party using its monopoly of the media to spread doubts about the honesty or reliability of opposition politicians and, according to Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, a competitive authoritarian regime may be expected sometimes to violate its own existing laws and rules “to such an extent...that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy” (2002, 52).

Vučić has been not only, for all practical purposes, secure in power but also highly pragmatic. In this spirit and implying a readiness to abandon any notion of retrieving control over Kosovo, he told an audience in Kosovska Mitrovica on 9 September 2018: “myths, dreams, and premonitions are not my job, nor is my job [to pursue] a lunatic vision of Kosovo without Albanians, or even worse – without Serbs. Reality is my job” (as quoted in Vulović 2023, 529). Moreover, he reflected in a later speech on 28 May 2019, “We are a nation that does not like reality...We have never had love [of] and faith in reality” (as quoted in Semenov 2002, 264–265). One of Vučić’s nominal foreign policy goals is to secure Serbia’s accession to the EU but, up to now, he has given priority to maintaining close relations with the Putin regime in Russia. Accordingly, accepting reality and working with what is possible, in Vučić’s mind, entails meeting the EU’s expectation by reaching an agreement with Kosovo. Vučić told his listeners in 2019 that gaining admission to the EU would allow the living standard in Serbia to rise by 72%. He argued that the alternative to joining the EU would be a continued decline in Serbia’s population and, by implication, its living standard. The price of EU membership, Vučić said, was compromise and “[i]f the Serbs [accept] a compromise, then they are no longer myth-believers and truth-haters, but they become a people who value peace and truth above everything” (as quoted in Semenov 2002, 269). Vučić’s declared realism has been hard for some Serbs to swallow and, in July 2020, there were violent protests in front of the Serbian parliament, at which protesters shouted “Arrest Vučić!” and “Traitor!” (as quoted in Vulović 2023, 539). Whether Vučić actually wants something that might be recognized as a “compromise” outside his inner circle (or even within it) is open to question, insofar as he has repeatedly declared that “there will be ‘neither factual nor de jure’ recognition of neighboring Kosovo under his leadership” (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2023a, 2).

A critical argument which Vučić has presented is to counter the typical Serb nationalist claim that Kosovo has “always” been Serbian. On the contrary, as already noted, for roughly half a millennium, ending in 1912, Kosovo was part of the Ottoman Empire, ruled from Istanbul. As for partition, this is a rather unlikely solution since the Republic of Kosovo would be the loser in such a scenario as well as in any project of territorial exchange. The most likely path to EU membership for Serbia would entail an agreement between Belgrade and Prishtina, in which each side would gain something tangible. What Kosovo would want would be for Serbia to stop blocking its accession to the United Nations, thus respecting one of the provisions of the Brussels Agreement, a normalization of relations, ideally including mutual recognition (Obradović-Wochnik and Wochnik 2012, 1164), and the abandonment of any claim on Serbia’s part to any portion of Kosovo’s territory. For

its part, Serbia under Vučić would expect that the government of Kosovo would respect the Brussels Agreement by allowing the long-delayed formation of an Association of Serb Municipalities in northern Kosovo, undertake measures to promote a de-escalation of tensions, and keep the border crossings open to traffic with Serbia. Obviously, the Serbian government would expect that authorization to establish the Association of Serb Municipalities would *precede* the holding of fresh municipal elections in northern Kosovo. But, more importantly, Serbia would expect to be rewarded by the EU for reaching an accommodation with Kosovo by being granted accelerated entry into its ranks.

Serbs, like people everywhere on the planet, form their views primarily based on what they encounter in broadcast and print media, especially the television news, social media, and conversations with friends, although the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church hierarchy on the thinking of some Serbs should not be ignored. President Vučić and his associates control the press, television news, and history textbooks used in the republic, which mention only the crimes committed against Serbs by Kosovo Albanians while omitting those committed by Serbs against Albanians, promoting a Serbian self-image centered on “purity and moral integrity” (Stojanović 2004, 333). As a result, these media and books convey the interpretation of political reality favored by the Vučić regime. As a result, as shown in the data presented earlier in this article, roughly two-thirds of Serbs accept the nationalist narrative. Vučić then tells the EU and NATO that he must respect Serbian public opinion, even though he is largely (though not wholly, of course) responsible for its present shape. If Vučić were to shift the reportage and interpretation of Kosovo, most (never all) Serbs could be expected to shift and adjust their thinking over time. As Jelena Subotić has noted, “political actors strategically manipulate shared cognitive (narrative) frames for their own political ends” (Subotić 2016, 611). But any significant revision to the dominant narrative would carry political risk for the elite, especially in this case Vučić. As for opinions within the political establishment, Sonja Biserko has reported the existence of rival “factions” within the Belgrade regime, with some actors more inclined to favor a pro-Russian orientation (thereby, also hostile to recognition of Kosovo) and others being more pro-European (and potentially more flexible regarding Kosovo) (B29 2012). The division within the regime provides Vučić with the opportunity to push his own agenda vis-à-vis Kosovo, appealing to whichever faction will give him more support. The limiting factor is that Vučić wants to maintain good relations with both Putin’s Russia and the EU and is not willing, at this writing, to put all his eggs in one basket. Meanwhile, side effects of the regime’s instrumentalization of the Kosovo myth and its manufactured but real trauma include manifestations of brooding, anger, despair, and fantasies of reconquest, especially at annual commemorations of 1389 on June 28.

Since at least 2022, there have been repeated reports in the Serbian press alleging that Orthodox churches in Kosovo were being attacked, set ablaze, or reduced to ruins. In July 2023, President Vučić expressed his concern that the authorities in Kosovo were perpetrating the “silent ethnic cleansing” of the Serb population and affirmed that the situation in Kosovo was getting “out of control” (both as quoted in ABC News 2023). The EU set up

a framework for dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina more than a decade ago but, at this writing, the two sides remain deadlocked.

After the EU presented a 10-point plan to the two sides in February 2023, Serbian President Vučić and Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti indicated that they saw merit in the plan, although each of them expressed reservations about it. The two men met, face-to-face, for talks in September 2023, but these talks led nowhere and after the EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell blamed Kosovo for the failure, Kosovo's prime minister accused the EU of favoritism toward Serbia. The EU subsequently rebuked both sides for failure to honor their obligations under past agreements (Brzozowski 2023). Thereafter, EU Special Envoy Miroslav Lajčák visited Kosovo in early November 2023 to discuss the draft statute for an Association of Serb Majority Municipalities, even as Serbs underlined the importance they attached to the Association (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2023b; Blic 2023).

### *Generational Trauma and Political Attitudes in Serbia and Kosovo*

Serbs are a traumatized nation, even if not every Serb shares in the collective trauma, and Serbian policy vis-à-vis Kosovo is affected by the constant repetition of allusions to the importance of Kosovo. There are several points that should be registered when it comes to trauma. First, people do not need to be victims in order to be traumatized, although victimization may be associated with the most severe traumatization. On the contrary, both children and adults may become traumatized by witnessing an atrocity, even by being told about it by a family member or close friend, by viewing news reports about it on television, or – and this is where the 1389 battle comes into play – by repeated exposure to myths and narratives presenting the nation as victim, whether these are factually grounded or not. Among recent examples, there was a report in *Večernje novosti* on 14 June 2024, accusing the government of Albin Kurti of ejecting Serbs from their houses and repeating the accusation that the Prishtina government was carrying out a campaign of ethnic cleansing (Večernje novosti 2024). Indeed, constant revisiting of a past defeat or suffering keeps the constructed memory of it alive and keeps some people in a state of agitation. Moreover, as research has documented, the perpetrators of atrocities can *also* suffer prolonged trauma after they have stopped inflicting pain on others (Guerra et al. 2003, 1562; Mohamed 2015, 125).

Second, trauma fuels hatred and resentment of the group the victims hold responsible for the undeserved pain and suffering they endured (Lupu and Peisakhin 2017, 836). Third, as Noam Lupu and Leonid Peisakhin found in face-to-face interviews in 2014/15 with 300 Crimean Tatar victims of deportation in 1944, 600 children of these deportees, and 1,004 grandchildren of the deportees, trauma passes from one generation to the next, with even the third generation being animated by resentment and often by a desire for revenge (Lupu and Peisakhin 2017, 837, 840–841, 843; Walter 2004, 373). In the case of Kosovo, both Serbs (in Kosovo and also in the Republic of Serbia) and Kosovar Albanians have

clearly been traumatized. Albanians remember suffering and injustice in the years 1919–1941, 1945–1968, and 1989–1998, while Serbs remember suffering and injustice from the years 1941–1945, 1968–1989, the 1999 bombing by NATO, and the loss of sovereignty over Kosovo 2008–present, accompanied by Albanian ethnic cleansing of Serbs and Roma (details in Ramet 2006, 538, 542; and Amnesty International 1999) and, at least in some cases, resent the UNMIK mandate in Kosovo during the years 1999–2008. In short, there are Albanians who feel that they have been wronged by Serbs and Serbs who feel that they have been wronged by Albanians. Given clinical research showing that trauma can continue across generations, the memories or even just narratives of the interwar period and the Second World War can continue to stoke trauma, just as the endlessly revisited myths about the Battle of Kosovo do. “Violence,” as Lupu and Peisakhin note, “leaves lasting legacies that shape political attitudes and behaviors across generations” (2017, 848).

Is there an escape from the cycle of trauma? The short answer is *yes*. The first thing to note here is that, although trauma leaves psychological scars and although memories of trauma fade much more slowly than positive emotional memories (Porter and Peace 2007, 440), memories of trauma do ultimately fade, unless they are constantly stoked. For example, one would be unlikely to find anyone in Hungary still brooding about the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century, let alone fantasizing about taking revenge on contemporary Mongolia (although there are Hungarians who still resent the punitive territorial terms of the 1920 Treaty of Trianon). Second, as Guerra, Huesmann, and Spindler argue, reducing the level of violence within the community (the nation) can help to reduce traumatization over the long term (Guerra et al. 2003, 1574). Third, if each side, both at the elite level and at the level of local citizens, can acknowledge the pain and suffering of the other side, this can – and has been shown to – reduce animosity and even build relations of interethnic trust (see Bryn 2015). And fourth, if the presentation of Kosovo, as dictated by the regime, were to change, most Serbs would, over time, revise their thinking and become open to new understandings.

## Conclusion

Serbia’s foreign policy, especially its stance on Kosovo, demonstrates the enduring influence of historical trauma, myth creation and nationalist narratives on contemporary political decisions. Deeply influenced by the legacy of the 1389 Kosovo Battle and the myth of Kosovo, the Serbian political structure has maintained its claims over the region despite changing geopolitical realities. The portrayal of Kosovo as the “heart of Serbia” and the presentation of its loss as an existential crisis affected the emotional perception of the population and narrowed the political room for maneuver. This narrative, continuously reinforced by the state-controlled media, education system and political discourse, has created a strong collective memory and increased resistance to pragmatic policy changes.

While some other nations also mythologize their own defeats, the depth, continuity and impact of Serbian myth-making is particularly prominent. Although many national myths

fade into oblivion over time, the Kosovo myth has been constantly reshaped and actively used for political and ideological purposes. Furthermore, the Kosovo myth has played a role in modern conflicts, such as the wars of the 1990s, whereas some older myths have become merely symbolic. Its influence on present-day Serbian-Kosovo relations remains significant. Trauma is not the only factor shaping Serbian policy on Kosovo for sure; however, it serves as a powerful mobilization tool for the political elite. Evidence from Serbian political discourse, school curricula, and national commemorations like the annual Vi-dovdan celebrations illustrates how trauma is actively reinforced.

Myths and collective memories are not fixed; they evolve over time as they are reinterpreted and reimagined to suit contemporary political and social contexts. The fact that the myth has been reimagined and transferred over half a millennium shows that it is malleable and subject to change. Further, history textbooks and media, as tools of the regime, are simply the latest mechanisms through which this reimagining occurs. A regime can affect how people relate to the myth by highlighting some of its elements – such as heroism, sacrifice, or victimhood – while downplaying others. Controlled narratives have the power to gradually transform even deeply ingrained myths, although this usually takes generations of consistent work rather than sudden changes. The regime may not be “changing” the myth entirely but rather reinterpreting it to fit contemporary political needs.

Eventually, while a large part of the Serbian population adheres to the nationalist narrative, a tangible minority holds more liberal views advocating the recognition of Kosovo's independence and a reassessment of the existing narrative. This group could grow if political elites change their rhetoric. Mutual acknowledgement of past suffering by both Serbs and Albanians could build interethnic trust and reduce hostility. Furthermore, changing the way Kosovo is presented in Serbian media and educational materials could open public opinion to new understandings and possibilities for reconciliation.

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