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The Home is Where...: The Chronotopes of the Origin Myth in Pseudohistorical Narratives of the Serbian Far-Right

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Happy nations have no history.

- Albert Camus, 'A Happy Death'

Abstract

Contemporary right-wing actors in Serbia are exploiting social media logic in order to disseminate a particular pseudohistorical, populist “us” against “them” reconfiguration of the nation’s past. Its mythmaking foundations – e.g., the contentious question of ‘who was here first’ – are traceable and reminiscent of the dominant separatist narratives emerging from ethnic tensions in ex-Yugoslavia, which manifested in one of the most frightening conflicts on European soil after World War II. The online content of these pseudohistorians has gained hundreds of thousands of views on different platforms, especially YouTube, with channels like Srbija Global, HelmCast, and BALKAN INFO rapidly earning a dedicated fanbase. Despite the extensive literature on the discursive strategies of the far-right in the construction of collective memory and national identity in post-socialist countries, little has been done in applying the narrative approach to the analysis of populists’ storytelling practices in regard to the present sociopolitical moment. The aim of this article is to uncover the nationalist underpinnings behind the symbolic geo-political spaces and proposed alternative historical timelines of the Balkans. I rely on Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope, which posits the influence of time-space conjuncture on identity, to follow the plurality of cultural and mythical narrative threads woven into the national fabric. Drawing inspiration from a rich storytelling heritage, the historical revisionism of the Serbian far-right borrows elements from the classical Ulyssean motif of “a home long lost” and the biblical tragic character arc of “a banished Jewish tribe”. This intruder syndrome is formed in an anxiety-filled vacuum between the crisis-driven present and the glorified past. This is why I also utilise Bakhtin’s concept of dialogue and Boym’s understanding of nostalgia as historical emotion to reveal the ideological connectedness between the opposing historical topographies. The findings indicate that the discursive practice of “homeland making” serves as a compensation for the dissolution of a supposedly ethnically homogenous and culturally related entities – Republic of Srpska, Montenegro and Kosovo, territories perceived as national and spiritual cradles of Serbia. Moreover, the sentiment of the greater European irrelevance emphasizes the need for enhancing the national self-perception, and the reimagined, ancient past provides the hearth around which political emotions are ignited.

Keywords: chronotope, pseudohistory, national identity, Serbia, origin myth, narrative

1. Introduction

The mythical evocation of the distanced past is one of the essential attributes of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes (Sviličić & Maldini, 2014; Stanley, 2019). Leading up to World War II, 'Ahnenerbe', a German scientific institution, was given the task of finding prehistorical evidence about the supposed Germanic supremacy which could be used to support the 'Übermensch' narrative (Pringle, 2006). Approximately fifty years later, nationalist discourses that appeared during the Yugoslav wars relied heavily on loose interpretations of historical events for the purposes of the turbulent present. These storytelling practices were important to the creation of new national identities – as Eco (1995, p. 7) emphasizes – “the only ones who can provide an identity to the nation are its enemies”. The populist nature of these narratives pitted “us” against “them” – a selfless, morally pure collective that fell prey to greedy and powerful evil forces who robbed the innocent people of its dignified and rightful place in history (Manojlović-Nikolić & Mihajlović, 2016).

However vague the concept of populism may be, with author Ernesto Laclau (2005) even considering this ambiguity its intrinsic quality, the essence of this political ontology is the construction of a dominant, hegemonic social bloc. Be that as it may, the instability of such structures enables dynamic, fluid and vapory political shifts, resulting in the simplification of the democratic processes and electoral mechanisms. Many populist right-wing leaders and parties that have gained worldwide traction over the last decades employed a similar 'exclusionist, ethno-nationalist notion of citizenship' (Muis & Immerzeel 2017, p. 910). These narratives, as was the case with Brexit and Donald Trump's electoral campaign, were intensely promoted via social media platforms. Numerous authors have highlighted the potential of the architecture of the Internet for extremist and far-right actors (Gerstenfeld, Grant & Chiang, 2003; Haanshuus & Ihlebæk, 2021; Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017; Schafer, 2002; Wahlström & Törnberg, 2019). As a communicative tool, the global network offers an alternative pathway for marginalized and radical groups in their attempt to reach what Wahlström and Törnberg (2019, p. 7) call 'digital counterpublics'. Additionally, the hierarchy of newsworthiness on social media platforms, which favours intense emotions, reactions and conflicts, is perfectly compatible with the 'shameless normalization of impoliteness' of populist leaders (Wodak, Culpeper & Semino, 2020).

With the process of nation-building still being at large in Serbia, a former Yugoslav republic, radical and xenophobic actors are aggressively exploiting online channels to

disseminate their nationalist agenda. This became ever so prominent when Kosovo, an autonomous region in the south, declared its independence. Once again, Serbian national structure fell into a deep political and economic crisis and was in need of a 'ethnogenesis myth' in an attempt to shape a new cultural identity (Milosavljević & Palavestra, 2017, p. 840).

In this paper, I turn my attention towards a specific pseudohistorical narrative of the 'ancient Serbian folk', an ethnos which supposedly predates all other national entities on the Balkans. This proposed, but ultimately inverted and false chronology is heavily promoted on social media platforms and alternative online channels, with several videos on YouTube going beyond half a million views.

In an attempt to examine this narrative, I have limited my analysis to three popular channels on this media platform that predominantly cover topics relating to pseudohistory and nationalist politics – namely, BALKAN INFO, HelmCast, and Srbija Global. These independent productions are primarily supported by their viewers and benefactors. The show on BALKAN INFO, for example, was one of the first that pioneered the three-hour long format of online interviews in Serbia, and the choice of guests quickly earned them a dedicated fanbase, with their videos regularly gaining one hundred thousand views. On the other hand, HelmCast and Srbija Global are niche projects, with the latter exclusively focusing on historical content. Nonetheless, several of their videos have proven to be highly successful. These alternative channels all explore the mythical nature of an ancient Serbian utopia, arguing the nationalist case for Serbian ancestral status in the Balkans.

Drawing upon Svetlana Boym's (2001) seminal work on nostalgia, one of the key elements of contemporary ideologies is their orientation towards rebuilding the old, ideal homeland. Additionally, with both time and space being so closely intertwined in the process of remembering and reimagining the past, I principally rely on the Bakhtinian concept of 'chronotope' (time-space). Also, expanding on Blommaert's (2017, p. 4) position on chronotopes, I argue that the inextricable link between space and time informs one's identity and 'creates a sense of cohort belonging with others'. Therefore, the pseudohistorical territorialization and colonization of the past in the mythical narrative of the 'ancient Serbian folk' plays a vital part in the national self-perception.

2. Romanticized Utopia: Political Myths and National(ist) Past

Historians Milosavljević and Palavestra (2016, p. 126) underline the importance of ideological return to homogenous, collective past in order to mobilize the masses. This particular tendency was heavily utilized during the 1990s, when a violent conflict broke out in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The evocation of the past served as ‘moral and historical justification for achieving political goals’ (Manojlović-Nikolić & Mihajlović, 2016, p. 1062). This period laid the foundations for the renewal of separate national identities of the Serbs, Croats, Slovenes and other ethnic groups that lived in Yugoslavia. As Mols and Jetten (2014, pp. 75-76) note, ‘history makes social identity possible’ and, to understand it, one needs to recognize where ‘that group is coming from and where it plans to go’.

In 1989, Slobodan Milošević, then president of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, symbolically flew six-hundred years back and in front of around a million people at Gazimestan in Kosovo honoured the fallen Serbian ancestors, heroes who against all odds confronted the Ottoman army to defend their homeland. However, this event was not a mere celebration of the past, but also a roadmap to the destined future – the realization of the nationalist and territorial ideal of “the greater Serbia”, a political utopia of an ethnically homogenous world. The Kosovo myth is at the core of this ideology, “an essential ingredient of nation-building” (Djokic, 2009, p. 218). The symbolic capital of this region increased just ten years later, when a conflict broke out between Serbs and Albanians, who had gradually become a majority in Kosovo, which was administratively still under Serbian sovereign rule. Consequentially, the allied forces of NATO bombed Serbian targets, which impacted the decline of Milošević who was arrested in 2001 on St. Vitus Day, the date of the Kosovo battle. This temporarily ended the Serbian elite’s nationalist claims, but also left the politically dominant identity structure shattered.

As one of the successor states to Yugoslavia, the turbulent past left Serbia ‘internationally insignificant, impoverished, depopulated, struggling, with corrupt ineffective government’ (Perica, 2017, p. 67). Moreover, the territory of the state kept shrinking, as both Montenegro and Kosovo declared their independence in 2006 and 2008 respectively. This fragmentation further deepened the identity gap that was still in the process of being built. Additionally, as Manojlović-Nikolić & Mihajlović (2016, pp. 1059-1060) show, the subsequent ‘deterritorialization effect’ of globalization caused a sense of insecurity and anxiety about oneself, national identity and the system of traditional values and beliefs.

These authors (Manojlović-Nikolić & Mihajlović, 2016, p. 1063) argue that the prevailing socio-economic situation led to a form of escapism into the imagined past, a mechanism which served as a 'survival strategy'. Outside of that protective shell, everyone and everything was a threat to self-preservation, a mental and cognitive state which was, and still is, actively exploited by the populist figures and extremist organizations.

3. A Nostalgic Turn: Time-Space-Identity

Memory, or as Petó (2016, p. 2) puts it - "counter-history", works as a safe, mental space. Ephemeral, impalpable and fluid, it is prone to revisionist attempts. Its historical facticity becomes irrelevant, as it starts being primarily viewed as a moral and normative category. Glorified, past memories are therapeutic, they numb the present sufferings and shape nation's moral compass.

As an act of remembering or creatively reflecting upon one's past experiences, nostalgia enacts a cognitive process of 'longing for home that no longer exists or has never existed' (Boym, 200, in Čaušević, 2019, p. 14). In order to explain this interdependent relationship of space and different temporal trajectories in shaping a unique material unity, Bakhtin (1975) introduced the concept of 'chronotope'. Within the context of this analysis, the different 'time-space' entities are in a juxtaposition with each other. It is in that interaction, a sort of Bakhtinian 'dialogue', in which the past, the present and the future are communicating simultaneously, where meaning and identity are created.

Negating the linear notion of historical time, nation-building myths and populist narratives resurrect convenient symbols and events of a bygone era, when and where the homeland, the hearth shone brighter. Public squares, monuments, and museums, as in the case of the Trianon Museum in Hungary, are erected and act more as a ritual, socio-political object, than a factual, historical reminder. Pseudohistorical narratives have chronotopic attributes which 'reach back into an imagined past, to propose glorious futures whilst simultaneously setting boundaries about who belongs in the national space' (English, Mahendran & Nieland, 2021, p. 2). The aforementioned cultural site in Hungary is particularly interesting within the context of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's illiberal rule and his toying with the idea of a pre-war 'outer, greater Hungary'. Regardless, the notions of 'greater Hungary' and 'greater Serbia' are populist, nationalist propositions which are fundamentally based on homes which are no more, where current administrative borders are lines that separate ethnic groups that are perceived as being close as kin, a family member.

Studies on social self-perceptions have suggested that people are inclined to see their in-groups as temporally stable and continuous collectives (Bowe et al, 2007; Obradović & Howarth, 2017; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). National identity is among those core social and group elements we use to ascribe meaning to ourselves as a part of a community. However, nationalist movements tend to gather around a primordialist understanding of the concept. According to this stance, national identity is static, rooted in us from the day we were born, creating an abstract link with our mutual descendants and colored with irrational and unutterable feelings (Milošević Đorđević, 2007, p. 386).

However, members of the in-group must always be alert and wary of intruders who may disrupt the link, break the chain. This threat in the Balkans intensified after 2014, once refugees and migrants increasingly started traversing through the Near East and Eastern and Central Europe. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, again, paved the way and acted as a role model for conservative, populist and radical actors in the Western Balkans. His position was firm and fierce, putting fences and barbed wires on the border with Serbia, even deploying military units to stop the refugees from crossing into Hungary. He perceived the EU policies on immigration as detrimental to the Hungarian national identity and sovereignty, and he assumed the narrative and the role of a 'defender', a protector of, not only his people, but the entire Judeo-Christian world (Lamour, 2021).

This was his *topoi*, the geo-cognitive space and homeland. Simultaneously, it was accompanied by *chronos* - 16th and 17th century Ottoman invasion of Europe. The failure to repeat this past achievement would result in a tragedy similar to the one post-Great War - the Trianon and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian empire. History served as a form of a narrative, 'a syntagmatic dispersion of events across a temporal series presented as a prose discourse' (White, 2001, p. 233, in Lawson 2011, p. 387). It conveyed a plot which is a 'cultural and historical construction rather than a reality uncovered' (Lawson, 2011, p. 392).

In troubled times, communities often adopt the practice of what Bakhtin (1975) calls 'historical inversion' - all that is ideal, essential, desirable is transferred into the past, where it becomes more palpable, more real. The origin myth and the myth of the golden age are, according to him, a perfect manifestation of those cognitive efforts. A prototypical individual inhabiting these fictitious plots is strong, uncompromising, opposed to the morally corrupt ruler, and a representative of the 'ordinary folk'; he/she earned his/her rights and land based on their merit, not by exploiting others (Bakhtin,

1975). The further away this idealized and reimagined utopia is, the more distinct it is from the cruel and gruesome present moment.

This confronts the 'modern understanding of time' represented through history and progress (Boym 2001, p. 18). Within the realm of restorative nostalgia, historical complexities are replaced with a simplified, transcendental plot and a primordial configuration of 'good versus evil' (Boym, 2001). Moreover, Đerić (2004) reflects upon the omnipresence of a mythical and premodern frame of interpretation in Serbia. She specified the importance of the 'liminal time', one which does not recognize the temporal boundaries in a linear sense. Rather, it emphasizes certain historical events, which are appropriated for the present moment. In assimilating the past, the present and the future into one, it supplies the meaning and develops a shared sense of collective continuity.

4. Data and Method

For the purposes of this analysis, three prominent right-leaning Serbian YouTube channels were selected – namely, BALKAN INFO, HelmCast, and Srbija Global. The choice of these three YouTube accounts was based on their popularity and recognition among the online viewers in Serbia. Since most of the videos are conceptualized as podcasts in visual form, with interviews lasting for approximately two hours each, selection criteria were necessary to narrow the sample.

The body of the analysis consisted of ten videos – four were chosen from Srbija Global, while the remainder was split between BALKAN INFO and HelmCast. This decision stemmed from the fact that, out of the three, only Srbija Global, content-wise, covers purely historical topics. On the contrary, BALKAN INFO and HelmCast dedicate only a fraction of their content to historical topics.

In order to avoid arbitrariness and maintain impartiality, the choice was guided by a set of procedural criteria. In the case of BALKAN INFO and HelmCast, with the diversity of topics at hand, I turned to the use of key words *Srbija*, *istorija*, *preci* and *poreklo* (eng. *Serbia*, *history*, *ancestors* and *origin*) during the search. Then, the videos were chosen based on the number of views, as this was thought to be the most representative indicator of dominant narratives' presence. Three of the most popular ones were selected from each channel. For example, the interview on BALKAN INFO titled 'INTERVJU: Goran Šarić - U školama učimo laži, moramo čuvati naš identitet i istoriju! (26.12.2018)' [*INTERVIEW: Goran Saric - Schools teach us lies, we have to preserve our identity and history! (26.12.2018)*] has, at the moment of writing, 579,529

views; on the other hand, the video 'Genetika i poreklo Srba! – Jovan D. Marjanović (Autohtonisti)' [*Genetics and Serbian origin! – Jovan D. Marjanovic (Autochthons)*] on HelmCast has 61,198 views. Since this is a niche topic, identical guests appear both on BALKAN INFO and HelmCast, and some of them are even regulars. For example, the Croat theologian Goran Šarić appeared once on HelmCast and four times on BALKAN INFO in the past three years. Moreover, episodes with him as a guest are some of the most popular on the channel on the given topic. Therefore, the decision was made not to have same guests appear twice, as it would significantly impoverish the analysed narrative palette.

As for Srbija Global, the selection procedure had to be conceptualized differently. Again, the same key words were employed and the most popular content was chosen. However, several of channel's most viewed videos are from 2017, back when the authors were just starting on YouTube. For instance, one of their first shows is also the most popular one - 'POREKLO SRBA - Šta zaista kažu genetika i arheologija' [*Serbian origin – What do genetics and archaeology really tell*] with 779,801 views. In order to avoid having multiple videos from this narrow period, and with the intention to broaden the scope of the research and track potential modifications of their pseudohistorical narrative, the decision was made to include the most popular videos from each year, from 2017 until 2020.

Finally, a sample of ten videos, and more than ten hours of footage, was assembled. For the purposes of a more simplified and accessible presentation, the videos mentioned in the paper are referenced in the following manner - (*Name of the YouTube Channel, Number in the Referencing List*).

In approaching the analysis of the raw material, I opted for a mixed-method approach, combining elements of narrative inquiry and critical discourse analysis. The former is manifested through the use of a simplified version of Greimas' Actantial Model (Greimas, 1966, in Wang & Roberts, 2005). Beneficial for the analysis was the proposition of studying power relations between actors in a narrative's syntagmatic structure. Since this interpretative study is concerned with the nationalist populist myth of the ancestral home, the plot conveyed through these videos is viewed through the lens of a narrative as 'based on the selective appropriation of characters and events that are ordered and related to one another temporally' (Ewick & Silbey, 1995, p. 200 cited in Taş, 2020, p. 3). In our case, the subject, the tragic hero of the story is the Serbian ancestral folk; the object, on the other hand, would be the homeland, the place of origin. Another element important for the analysis of data is the opponent in

Greimas' model, because the intruders, who take different shapes and forms, are those who disrupt the stability and peace, and are the engines for the plot. The interrelation between these three categories is observed in syntagmatic fashion – the overarching narrative was divided into smaller, but meaningful units within the storyline.

Complementing the research, critical discourse analysis was utilized primarily for discovering and interpreting the practices of “Othering” in the mythmaking, and how those are reflected within the present socio-political and national context in the Balkans. Defenders and assailants, settlers and intruders, advanced civilisations and barbarians, are all categories constructed and assigned to entities who threaten or impact the decay of the present moment. Populists weave the narrative process of ‘making sense of’ the crisis-driven and turbulent reality by attributing its negative consequences to the “Other” – an outside intruder or an inside traitor. As Taş (2020, p. 4) argues in his work on chronopolitics of national populism in Turkey, ‘contemporary national populisms utilize a shared schematic narrative template that accounts for national subjectivity through a peculiar set of timing and sequencing of events complemented by affective registers’. Therefore, narratives serve as meaning-making units, a way of recollecting past experiences, creating a stable and logical order out of them (Moen, 2006).

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 How ‘We’ Came Here: The Birth of the Serbian Civilization in the Danube Region

The tale of the ‘origin myth’, in the timeline proposed in these YouTube videos, begins around 5.000 years BC, when ‘proto-Slavs’ (BALKAN INFO, 1) inhabited the Danube region in the present-day Serbia. To paraphrase the guest on the BALKAN INFO show, Serbian history goes into the deepest depths of the past, and its traces are lost in eternity (BALKAN INFO, 3).

Mirroring Bakhtin’s insights into the act of historical inversion, the further away the past is from the present moment, the more idealized it becomes. In that sense, the Serbian ancestors in the Danube region created a ‘splendid, extraordinary’ civilization, built terrific megalithic towns, which represented ‘the pinnacle of architecture in Europe’ at the time (Srbija Global, 1). Not only did the structural and cultural efforts of the ‘proto-Slavs’ outmatch that of the rest of Europe, Vinča, the settlement on the shores of the Danube, is the place where the European civilization was born (BALKAN INFO, 3). It was the centre of the Neolithic world, while the neighbouring areas, such

as Romania and Asia Minor, were its peripheral territories (Srbija Global, 2). What is more, Serbian ancestors are described as the forebearers of the Indo-European language family (HelmCast, 3).

This 'El Dorado' of the Danube Valley was on par with the moral magnitude and nobility of the people who inhabited it. As such, they were worthy of 'heaven on Earth'. Again, the sentiment replicates Bakhtin's observations – the folk lived in peace, they were self-sufficient and were eager to welcome strangers; there was no need for fences, and morality and freedom were the highest of principles. This utopia prevailed for more than two thousand years, until the nomadic tribes from the East, the ancestors of the Westerners, invaded Europe.

At this point, it is important to address the main character in the particular mythmaking and nation-building proposal. Interestingly, the hero of the narrative is not an individual, even though per author Sabrina Ramet (2011) there exist numerous suitable candidates in Serbian historiography – religious figure Saint Sava who established the Serbian Orthodox Church, Stefan Nemanja as the first Serbian ruler, Tsar Dušan as the founder of a short-lived Serbian empire during the Middle Ages, or Lord Lazar Hrebeljanović, who fought the Ottomans at the Kosovo battle. Contrary to these archetypal national exemplars, accepted within the political mainstream, at work in this alternative instance is the collectivization of a hero – from a celebrated individual to the victimized and threatened homogenous Serbian entity. This is not to say that these narrative decisions are exclusionary in the totality of any particular national mythology, but it is certainly indicative of the far-right's view of its preferred ideological structure.

The Albanians, the Catholic Church and the Westerners are those who notoriously pose as a dangerous 'Other' to Serbian nationalists and extremists. In this narrative sequence of the myth, a typical populist 'us' versus 'them' strategy is employed, and one is created in the image of the "Other". Hence, the Westerners came violently storming into Europe, removing anyone who stood in their path, with one historian describing their invasion as a 'genocidal act' and 'extermination' (BALKAN INFO, 1). Additionally, they brought with them the practice of slavery in order to extract valuable ores and minerals. However, this led to the rebellion of the indigenous people, who had to defend their sacred households and culture – an important motif throughout the narrative (BALKAN INFO, 1). Nevertheless, many of the 'proto-Slavs' were banished from their ancestral hearths and had to flee into exile, which signals the beginning of what Sabrina Ramet (2011) would categorize "the myth of martyrdom".

5.2 Where 'We' Are Going: The Serbian Odyssey

The following sequence of the origin myth is very reminiscent of the Jewish exile and the Babylonian captivity depicted in the Bible. After the collapse of the Danube civilization, the 'proto-Slavs' were left homeless, forced to abandon their hearths and roam throughout the known world. In the words of the guest on BALKAN INFO (1), destiny labelled the Serbian folk as 'the eternal wanderers'. During their travels, they moved eastwards and inhabited regions from Greece to Asia Minor, all the way to India.

Similar to the heroic journey of Kurmanzhan and her sons, as described by Andrew Wachtel (2016, p. 10) in his exploration of the Kyrgyz national mythology, who roamed from the Alai Mountains to China and Afghanistan, so too did the Serbian ancient folk travel tirelessly in their search for a new and welcoming home.

However, on their voyage the Serbs are portrayed as a culturally developed collective, who politically operated with a level of autonomy everywhere they went and settled. They brought Serbian culture, tradition and language. A couple of historians who appear in these videos go so far as to say that the mythical Aryans are actually 'proto-Slavs', who conquered the Hindu tribes and established the caste system, positioning themselves in the upper classes of that ancient society (BALKAN INFO, 1; BALKAN INFO, 3). This motif is frighteningly reminiscent of Nazi pseudohistorical propaganda.

This narrative thread adds another layer to the story of the Slavic migration in the 6th and 7th century, because it provides a 'rational' explanation for its occurrence. These pseudohistorians argue that, if there ever was such an event as the Slavic resettling, it was only the return to the place of origin, 'a coming back' (BALKAN INFO, 1).

Therefore, the Serbian ancestors, in their endless wanderings, moved through India, the Caucasus, Ukraine, around the Black Sea, and returned home - a prototypical Ulyssean plot.

With Serbian descendants populating much of the territory from the Balkans, across Asia Minor, to India, their tribal culture had a huge influence on the rise of Ancient Greece. In an interview on BALKAN INFO (3), Jovan Deretić, with a background in engineering, says the Greeks were 'our diligent students'. To add to his point, he goes on to state that even the ancient Greek writers admitted that they were not indigenous, but rather lived in a 'sea of barbarians', from whom they adopted much of the language (BALKAN INFO, 3). The host of the Srbija Global show further suggests that Greek and Latin are just 'crippled versions of the Serbian language' (Srbija Global, 2). Nonetheless, the 'official history', he and his peers claim, continues to

present the Serbian people as ‘savages’ or ‘intruders’ even though they were ‘the founders of culture’, a line of thinking which again echoes the Nazi worldview.

What is interesting here is how the term ‘barbarians’ is interpreted and its pejorative sentiment is modified. In all but one video, the label ‘barbarians’ is understood in a negative context; however, the author of the Srbija Global (2) channel tries to impose a more positive connotation. He claims that the word originally comes from the ancient Sanskrit language, where it was used to describe the people who had ‘just enough’, who were not the richest, nor the poorest, but a group of individuals who were satisfied with bare essentials, with what they could hold in their hands (Srbija Global, 2). In populist terms, the ‘barbarians’ are the ‘common people’. Additionally, he goes on to say that, even if Serbs were ‘barbarians’, they lived in harmony, nurturing tribal and family relationships, and that there were no visible social differences among the members of the collective.

The reimagination of the ‘barbarians’ here serves, again, as a necessary dialectical tool in order to distance these heavily burdened, self-sufficient Serbs from the ‘greedy Greeks’. A widespread, yet unrewarding sentiment exists in contemporary Serbia, as people believe that Westerners in the developed world look down upon ‘us’ and think of Serbia in terms of a ‘country lagging behind’. Jovan Deretić cites Hegel, who allegedly said that the Slavs are ahistorical folk, and Engels, who supposedly only thought of the Germanized Slavs as civilized. Therefore, the romanticized depiction of the primitive, the ordinary, is integral as it confronts the image of the evil, elite ‘Other’, pompous and arrogant Westerners. Mirroring the collapse of the Danube civilization, the primordial version of capitalism, the Hellenization process, swallowed the ancient hearths and homes of the pure and simple Serbian folk.

5.3 How ‘We’ Never Really Left: The Illyrians and the Slavic Migrations

The piece of puzzle that solves the mystery of the Serbian historical continuity on the Balkans are the Illyrians, a diverse social entity which inhabited the region in ancient times. The struggle for the Illyrian heritage is particularly prominent and present whenever there are national tensions. Within the context of this analysis, the most notable identity dispute is between the Serbs and the Albanians, especially with Kosovo’s declaration of independence in mind. Among the Serbian and Albanian nationalists, this region constitutes the sacred or the rightful land, and is a legitimate part of the bigger, territorial project.

This struggle for territorial and ideational heritage is inseparable from the ethno-national experience of collective identity. Building on Richard Jenkins' interpretation, author Gordana Đerić (2002, p. 250) argues that ethnicity is not inherently owned or possessed by people, but rather a repertoire of everyday practices which "constitute the feeling of continuity and understanding" with the perceived in-group. Consequentially, these constructs receive an aura of populism once they are instrumentalized and used as justifications for political decisions made in the name of "the people" - that is, the dominant social bloc labelled as "us". The ethno-national "us" is, in this case, shaped by external, socially conditioned repertoires, such as ancestors, which enables the interplay between myth and history in the narrative formation of a nation's continuous identity.

For example, the speaker in one of these videos asks the audience whether they think the situation in Kosovo would be different if Serbs were not portrayed as 'newcomers' (HelmCast, 1). Moreover, scholar Jovan Deretić in his interview on BALKAN INFO declares himself an 'Illyrian' and the whole of the Balkan peninsula - 'Illyricum' (BALKAN INFO, 3). Thus, he adamantly states that not one of his ancestors came from a foreign land, but were here from the start. After all, as the host on Srbija Global (1) theatrically ponders, the Illyrians were renowned for their democratic tradition, family values, and putting their freedom above the law, being willing to defend it until death and with great sacrifices. Finishing the monologue, he asks the viewers if this description reminds them of anyone, alluding to the Serbian people.

If the opposing view were to be adopted, it would suggest that the Serbs drove away the Illyrians, the present-day Albanians. This, again, underlines the influence of liminal perception of time within the Serbian nationalist discourse, since the past is almost identical to the crisis-driven present, the one in which the Albanians are 'taking over Kosovo'. Therefore, the defensive response from the far right is that history is being fabricated in order to enable this 'kidnapping of Serbian lands' (BALKAN INFO, 3).

Naturally, if the Serbian folk were not the 'intruders', then the Albanians must have been the ones who, to quote, 'intruded' (Srbija Global, 1). Among other things, the Albanian nation is assumed to be a social construct, an experiment conducted by the Vatican and the Austro-Hungarian empire in order to break Serbian unity and the rise in power of the Serbian state (BALKAN INFO, 1). Moreover, the Albanian population in Kosovo is assumed to be a negligible minority, an 'anti-Serbian and anti-Orthodox project', which prevents the Serbian people from 'returning' to this land (BALKAN INFO, 1).

Nonetheless, the 'return' that did happen was the Slavic migration to the Balkans, but only insofar as the Serbs joined their kin and tribe who were already here (HelmCast, 1). However, reaching the full circle in the narrative is, paradoxically, where the opposing, negative identity of the 'intruders' is at its strongest. Even the designation 'Slavs' is frowned upon, as it is understood to mean 'slaves' (Srbija Global, 1); in other videos, they are characterized as 'cowards following the tails of the Avars' horses' (BALKAN INFO, 1) and living 'in a swamp with frogs' (HelmCast, 3). Due to their primitive origin and lacking a moral compass, the Slavs are not shy of invading foreign lands, burning down houses, stealing and pillaging. They are represented as savages, a nomadic tribe, technologically inferior to the 'prosperous Illyrians' (Srbija Global, 1).

What these pseudo-historians deem even more humiliating is the fact that this narrative suggests that Slavs were gifted the land by the Byzantine emperor. In other words, this is interpreted as if the Serbian folk is insignificant, weak and not capable of establishing their own state, which in turn makes them 'undeserving' (Srbija Global, 1). One historian uses the metaphor 'Byzantine's reflection' in a pejorative manner to describe how Serbia, taking on the form of a virus, grew only at the cost of the other – in this case, the Illyrians and the Byzantine empire (BALKAN INFO, 2).

5.4 The History Within Us: Culture and Genes

There is another, peculiar time-space-identity triad at work in the narrative of the origin myth, and it is buried in the cultural and biological underpinnings of human society. Namely, it is an abstract compensation for the physical loss of territory, 'the homeland of the Serbian people'. The equation is simple – even if 'our' lands can be taken from us, who 'we' are and what is rightfully 'ours' is deep within 'us', and 'we' will carry the memory of it through generations until eternity. In other words, home is where the heart is, or, at least, wherever there are 'Serbian genes'. This is a clear example of the primordial concept of national identity vividly present among the Serbian right-wing groups. The most glaring instance of this is uttered on the show HelmCast (2) when the guest, remembering an alleged historical anecdote, explains how one woman, in trying to prevent the Ottomans from burning down houses, begged them to stop 'if they have anything Serbian in them' – in this case, a synonym for 'human(e)'.

The primary cultural manifestation of this sentiment is the symbol of the hearth, which is a microcosmical metaphor for the homeland. It is a popular image, and can be found even on the Serbian national flag. The hearth is the gravitational center of one's home, family, identity, because only those that he/she deems close and is intimate with are

allowed to be around the fire. Thus, when pseudo-historians discuss the exile of the 'proto-Slavs' from the Danube region, they describe how the indigenous people were driven away from their 'ancestral hearths' (BALKAN INFO, 1).

The second manifestation of the national identity, which goes above and beyond the conventional time-space dichotomy analyzed here, is the biological transfer of the 'Serbian gene'. This practice is, in the words of Milosavljević and Palavestra (2017, p. 843), a tendency common with the Serbian right, where one's national identity is understood as a biological feature, and the 'nation' is seen through 'racial lens'. However, these authors emphasize that the disappearance of one's ethnic identity does not mean that the population's biological traits will vanish, which is exactly what happened after the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

In spite of that, the genetic purity and continuity are constantly highlighted as credible evidence to support the theory of Serbian antiquity. The pseudo-historians claim that the genetic ties are hard to break and cannot be easily manipulated (Srbija Global, 2). What is more, since the Serbian biological structure is 'unique' and 'special', it can be traced with great accuracy throughout history (Srbija Global, 2). On the other hand, the genetic material of the English or the Germans is not 'distinct' (HelmCast, 2), and they are genetically 'the most aggressive' groups (HelmCast, 3), while the Greeks and the Albanians are a 'genetic mix' of different populations (HelmCast, 3).

One of the analyzed videos (Srbija Global, 4), imagined as a response to the findings of the 'Serbian DNA project', focuses its attention solely on this topic because conclusions the discussed research proposes are in discord to the pseudohistorical line of thinking. Most notably, the discussed study states that the genetic material of the Serbian population is rather a combination of the Slavic, Germanic, and even Nordic genetic traces. The host of the show interprets the evidence as 'humiliating' to the Serbian population, who are represented as a 'bastard child of a raped woman' (Srbija Global, 4). Additionally, he goes on to lament how, if that were the case, then the Serbian people are 'no one, nothing, a mix of everything and anything, who came from somewhere else, took someone's land', and whoever later came into the Balkans ended up 'genetically repairing' the Serbian inhabitants, as if they were not good enough (Srbija Global, 4).

6. Conclusion

People without their mythology are like a mob, declared historian Goran Šarić on the show BALKAN INFO (1), and the mythical truth – tradition, beliefs and values, are

essential for society. Therefore, the myths function as a mechanism for creating one's identity, and within their time-space conjuncture, the 'folklore individual' seeks the realization of oneself as an omnipresent and continuous entity (Bakhtin 1989, p. 267). In that sense, national heritage is seen as 'a cultural, economic, and political resource' in constructing a desirable version of the past (Ashworth et al, 2007, pp. 1-4, in Vuković, 2018, p. 702). With the never-ending process of nation-building in Serbia, the what we remember and, more importantly, how we do it is vital to 'setting in motion, uniting and directing the energy of the people' to participate in this cognitive undertaking (Milosavljević & Palavestra, 2016, p. 126).

As shown, the chronotopic nature, the temporal and spatial aspects of these appropriated historical narratives act as foundational cogs in the development and stabilization of one's national identity. When the present is perceived as endangered and insecurity prevails, some social groups retreat to the idealized and reimagined past as a 'survival strategy' (Manojlović-Nikolić & Mihajlović, 2016, p. 1063). Thus, these individuals become easily susceptible to populist and nationalist worldviews, which are even more visible now with the intrusive, everyday presence of traditional and new media. The common denominator in these narratives is the eternal struggle of 'us', the pure, homogenous people, and 'them', who stand for the corrupt elite, hungry for power and dominion over the 'ordinary folk' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018).

In Serbia, fertile ground exists for populist ideas along the lines of national tensions between the countries of the Western Balkans. The geography and the history, the territory and continuity, enter the social realm as symbolic means which are used to justify political goals and pretensions. With one's national identity at stake, what is considered 'the homeland' and who has the historical right to claim it is of particular importance. Serbian nationalists and pseudo-historians weave the narrative thread around the ancient Serbian presence on the Balkans in order to shape this region as their 'home'. In doing so, any action they take against the intruders to defend it, violent or not, is excused. On the other hand, if the Serbian folk were 'the historical outsiders', then that would deal a disastrous blow to the pretensions extremists and nationalists have for the territory of Kosovo, particularly within the contemporary political situation. Therefore, the stories of the conflict will be shaped by 'different experiences of processes, developments, and activities in relation to their respective spatio-temporal contexts' (Lawson, 2011, p. 407).

The perceived insignificance of Serbia on the European stage after the collapse of Yugoslavia is vividly manifested through these pseudohistorical narratives. The

symbolic geography at play here serves as a reactionary response to Serbia, and Balkan countries in general, being perceived as the European 'Other', its dark side (Đerić, 2004, p. 128). In order to retain a sense of self-respect and dignity, these nationalist scholars and figures portray Serbia at the center of the world, and locate its important place and role in the prehistoric era and antiquity. Therefore, the mythmaking process is rather straightforward – it borrows everything it needs from the past experiences for the purposes of the present.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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