

“Hell Is Other People”: Kinships among the Yugoslav Nations

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During a meeting in Naples, while World War II was still going on, Winston Churchill allegedly asked Tito, the communist leader and later lifelong Yugoslav president, how he imagined that he would keep together the various peoples which constituted Yugoslavia, especially if one considers their large historical, cultural, and linguistical differences. “If someone attacks us” Tito replied “we will act as one people“. – “And what will happen if no one attacks you“? asked Churchill.

The Montenegrin independence referendum in May 2006 has closed a troublesome circle, which the current Croatian president Stjepan Mesi? believed he had already closed in 1991. Back then, after the secession of Croatia and Slovenia from Yugoslavia and while he was the last chairman of the common Yugoslav state, he stated – not without pride – from the lectern, that he had performed his task: Yugoslavia would not exist anymore. Whether meant as a joke or more cynically, this statement was not completely in line with reality since Yugoslavia continued to exist, albeit somehow damaged and in regard to the number of its federal units considerably downsized. Not until 15 years later, when the citizens of Montenegro voted against the preservation of the rest of Yugoslavia (consisting by then of Serbia and Montenegro only) and for an independent Montenegro, did Mesi?’ s statement receive its full confirmation.

Simultaneous with the now definitively final moment of Yugoslavia, the journal “Balkan Diskurs” provided an insight into the Balkan countries, both from an internal and an external perspective. By reading the articles about the situation in the Balkan states one can observe that both Balkan insiders and outsiders have similar observations. In their articles they attack and defended the Balkan states, they praise and scold them, they truly love and strongly hate them; some observers are in search for understanding, while others declare patience for these states to be a waste of time. These states are, according to the authors, in search of themselves, for the right distance and/or closeness to the European Union, for their own identity. On the other side Europe, namely the EU, keeps on calling this region uniformly “Balkan,” “Western Balkan” or “Southeast Europe,” against great

odds and despite the desperate wish of each of the new states to be acknowledged in its uniqueness. Why the EU is doing so is not clear, possibly because it is simply easier or because it reflects its understanding of this region.

So, when drawing up a balance for the Balkans as a region, and especially for the former Yugoslav republics, we get to read pretty down-to-earth conclusions. The (identity/political/economic) crisis that used to be some kind of normality during the whole period of their modern history seems to be a basic element of the newly established (democratic) states as well. This, of course, raises the compulsory question whether the establishment of national states really is an inexorable, inevitable, and above all necessary process in one's state development, or whether the concept of an unavoidable creation of single national states was rather just used as an good argument by nationalistic elites in the former Yugoslavia in order to maintain their power. But in this paper I will not deal with that intricate question. Instead I want to take the Yugoslav example in order to show that hell seems to be always the other: the other state, the other nation, the neighbor. However, what I unfortunately will not do is to provide an answer to the – probably more psychological – question why people, when confronted with problems, usually start to point the finger at others first.

I. Yugoslavia as hell

Today the elites of the former Yugoslav peoples and nations consider Yugoslavia as a deviation from their own nation, something that was reluctantly imposed on them. Yugoslavia was a jailhouse. Present Slovene and Croat elites, at least their mainstream, have always known that their Habsburg heritage and even maybe their religion would make them forever incompatible with those South Slav nations which were under Ottoman rule, but due to naivety they did, however, join the common state in 1918 after World War I. Present Montenegrin elites believe that their elites in 1918 were just fooled by false promises from the Serbian side, and Montenegro, in fact, did join the common state due to pure altruism, while consciously accepting the obvious disadvantage of a common state. Bosnian elites think that Yugoslavia was a mistake, because all the other nations were just too dominant. Finally, even present Serbian elites consider Yugoslavia in retrospective as the wrong way for the Serbian nation. Instead of being altruistic and working on an integration of all other nations, Serbia should have rather followed its own interests. For its attempt to sacrifice its own established national state for a supranational Yugoslavia, Serbia got an overflow of ungratefulness and animosity. The greater part of today's Serbian political elite is convinced of this.

So, it seems that today all national elites of the former Yugoslav nations agree on one thing: if each of the national elites in 1918 had taken the better way, which means a separate way, leaving the idea of Yugoslavia to poets and romantics, everyone would have been better off and today the Balkans would be a safer place to live in. This thesis of course cannot be verified, since no one knows what would have been if Yugoslavia had not existed. Hence it is a moot point to ask whether the decision was wrong or not. But what we could ask is whether the decision of the national elites in 1918 was indeed forced (by others), and whether that decision was made unwillingly. And this is the point were the

argument gets illogical, since history shows that there was no sign of force used in 1918. On contrary, all the nations could have decided differently as well, but did not, for diverse reasons. The fact, however, that the argument of forced unity is still being upheld can be related to the wish of today's elites to rewrite/reinterpret history. In this respect today's elites see their elites in 1918 as either fooled (Croatia, Montenegro, Slovenia) or just too trustful and naïve (Serbia), when they stood up for the common state.

Such an interpretation of history shows, first and foremost, that the national narcissism of present elites goes so far that they do not retrospectively consider their support for Yugoslavia as an immaturity, incapability, stupidity, weakness, or megalomania of their former national elites. But quite the opposite, they see their elites as victims who had to accept an imposed common state, being at the others nations' mercy. The fault and responsibility is therefore always seen in the other, and not in oneself. In the course of such considerations a historical denial is taking place and a couple of formerly very popular ideas (such as the idea of a common state or socialism/communism) are being dismissed and attributed to others. A very simple example is the change of many street names, which were named after known partisans or partisan movements who fought against the fascists and who were Yugoslav orientated. Also exemplary is a map of Croatia published by the Croatian Tourist office in 2006. Beneath the map there are the names and short biographies of the most famous Croatian citizens, among others of Josip Broz Tito. His biography is summarized as: "Politician and statesman, leader of the anti-fascist movement in Yugoslavia during World War II." This might be compared to a similar map of France when mentioned Charles de Gaulle as, basically, some politician or statesman, who was the leader of the resistance movement in France during World War II, not mentioning that after the end of the war he was prime minister and president of France for 10 years, and that, hence, he can be considered as the most relevant person for the foundation of the Fifth Republic, which in fact is the main reason for his current place in history.

Now, it is of course legitimate to consider Yugoslavia as a prison and hence to deny its existence as something that was willingly decided upon. The problem is that nations blame the other and not themselves for being a prisoner in their own created prison. And they do it by using, *inter alia*, the argument of the broken identity. Broken by others, notably.

II. Myth of a Broken Identity

It is not just that Yugoslavia is seen both as a deviation and a prison for each nation, but it is also held responsible for the suppression of each national identity, which had developed up until 1918 when the unity was created. In this respect Radenovi? argues that "by annexation [of Montenegro in 1918] a great part of the century-long existing Montenegrin identity perished in the the newly formed Southslav empire. After World War II Tito rewarded the communists from Montenegro for the merits of the Montenegrin partisans during the war, by offering their state a status of a federal unit within the communist Yugoslavia. The communists expressed their gratitude by renaming their capital in 1946 Titograd. "[2]

This quote is paradigmatic, on one side, for the self-perception of a helpless victim as mentioned above (“annexation”, “Southslav empire”, “communists from Montenegro”), and at the same time it stands for the rejection of responsibility of its own elites for (what are today believed to be wrong) decisions or simply weakness when opting for Yugoslavia as a common state. On the other side, it stands for a prevalent understanding of the term *identity*, as if identity is a clear and unchangeable category which is exclusively top-down defined. In accordance with this the present elites believe that until 1918 and the creation of Yugoslavia there had been century-long established strong national identities, which in their development were choked or at least slowed down by the imposed Yugoslav identity.

Identities however seem to be rather very complex constructions, which develop steadily and over a long period of time, without ever achieving a final end point. Their long and gradual development indicates at the same time that they can be changed only within an equally long and hard process. The fact that national identities in Yugoslavia were replaced by a new, younger Yugoslav identity suggests rather that the national identities that existed prior to 1918 had been much weaker than the present elites would like to admit in retrospect. The replacement can also allude to the fact that the Yugoslav identity, especially after 1945, was imposed top-down by the communist establishment. But, even if we accept that it was a top-down approach, and hence not a very kind one, we cannot but pose the question of the role of Serb, Croat, Montenegrin, Bosnian, Slovene, or Macedonian elites between 1945 and 1990 in the diffusion of the Yugoslav identity (and hence the suppression of each national identity). So, who were those men and women/politicians, who were acting for the Yugoslav identity, and against their own national identity? Obviously they were Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, Bosnians, and Macedonians. To call them today simply communists from Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, etc., instead of *Serbian*, *Croatian*, etc., communists is just another denial of reality.

So, if today someone wants to tie up an identity that was believed to have existed and then been choked almost 90 years ago, then he/she somehow overlooks the fact that national identities did continue to exist and develop even between 1945 and 1990. And, although that development was not as the present national elites would have liked it, it seems very simplistic to explain the wrong decisions of one’s own nation and elites during 1918 and 1990 as the result of annexation (Croatia, Montenegro), or of altruism or naivety (Serbia). After all, Serbian altruism was not all that altruistic or charitable, since Yugoslavia was a state that gathered all major Serbian settlements. And, on the other side, territorial annexation was not something that was foreign to the Montenegrins and Croat elites (especially in regard to Bosnia and Herzegovina), something which became obvious during the 1990s.[3] This of course should not be understood as a justification or relativization, but quite the contrary. It should show that negative aspects or deviations of one’s own nation, identity, or history should not be simply explained by the negative influence of others, but instead by one’s own reasons, motivations and interests.

Finally, it might be very popular and to a certain extent even legitimate for individuals to construct their identity on the basis of the selection of mostly positive characteristics. The aim of science, however, should be to indicate the delusiveness of always explaining the negative developments of individual or national identities as the bad influence or the

impositions of others, eluding one's own responsibility. Self-reflection is hence more than just an academic duty or necessity, because when constructing an identity that does not consider or admit its own failures, the best chance is given that – when we come to the next historical crossroad – we will take the wrong path again.

Notes:

[1] *Balkan Diskurs: Balkan und Europa: Kommentare und Analysen von Innen und Außen*. 5, Vol.1, 2006.

[2] Radunovi?, Filip. "Montenegro und die Ironie des Mythos". *Balkan Diskurs*. 5, Vol.1, pp. 82-85.

[3] In this regard today's popular statement that Montenegro was the first victim of the great Serbian aggression could be accepted as equally as true as the statement that Austria was the first victim of the German Nazi regime, since the Montenegrin party that has governed until present was the same one which optionally and willingly supported the regime and politics of Slobodan Miloševi? .

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