



Kosovo in the Yugoslav 1980s

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Kosovo 1989: The (Ab)use of the Kosovo Myth in Media and Popular Culture

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Abstract: The author explores the creation of public opinion in Serbia in the late 1980s and the (ab)use of the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo on 28 June 1989. As a result of Serbian president Slobodan Milošević's carefully planned propaganda, a negative image of Albanians as well as a positive perception of Serbian nationalism were enforced. The media and popular culture played a particularly important role in reviving the Kosovo Myth, together with the leading Serbian (academic) institutions and influential intellectuals. Thirty-some years after 1989, the Kosovo Myth is presented in the media in a largely unchanged manner, while for Serbia the Kosovo problem remains unsolved.

Keywords: Kosovo, 1989, Slobodan Milošević, Kosovo Myth, “Battle of Kosovo” film

The year of 1989 is known as the *annus mirabilis*, in which the fall of the Berlin Wall heralded the collapse of communism in Europe. While for some 1989 announced the beginning of a new age, for others it meant a return to the past. In the year in which the peoples of Eastern Europe looked towards their joint European future, Serbia's gaze was fixated on a point in the past and the long gone year of 1389. In Yugoslavia, the events of 1989 suggested the potential dissolution of the country, while the central topic that year was Kosovo. A short look at the chronology of events provides an insight into what happened that year in and with Kosovo, but also with Serbia and ultimately Yugoslavia.

In the summer of 1988, Serbia and Montenegro were swept along on a wave of what was referred to as a “happening of the people”, that is mass protests, by means of which the party regimes in Vojvodina, Kosovo, and Montenegro were overthrown, only to be replaced by supporters of Slobodan Milošević, who had seized power in Serbia in the autumn of 1987. Even though they had been incited by

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Milošević and the groundwork for them meticulously laid by the media, the protests of 1988 had the character of a “people’s revolt”, while the outcome of these mutinies was presented as the “people’s will”. In 1989, the “happening of the people” continued, with an “anti-bureaucratic revolution” ending in victory, as young politicians loyal to Slobodan Milošević rose to power in Montenegro in January of that year. February and March brought unrest to Kosovo, the consequences of which would be felt throughout the year. It all started with the miners’ strike in Stari Trg (Stantërg) in Trepča (Trepça), Kosovo, sparked by the expulsion of Azem Vllasi from the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia on 20 February. Vllasi had been the President of the League of Communists of Kosovo since 1986. He had remained in that position until the autumn of 1988, when he came into direct conflict with Slobodan Milošević. Milošević sought constitutional amendments which would revoke Kosovo’s high degree of autonomy, an idea that Vllasi opposed.

A day after it had started, on 21 February, the strike spread from the Trepča mines to Pristina, where around 7000 Albanian students staged a protest in support of Vllasi and Albanian leadership, and against the proposed constitutional changes. The Serbian government responded by introducing the state of emergency in Kosovo on 27 February. A day later, in Ljubljana’s Cankar Centre, Slovenians publicly voiced their support for the miners of Stari Trg, which sparked an open conflict between Slovenia and Serbia (Ramšak 2021, in this issue). Using the tried and tested method of “spontaneous gatherings”, on 28 February students gathered in Belgrade to protest against “Albanian separatism” and demand the apprehension of Azem Vllasi (“Arrest Vllasi!”) and the radicalisation of the protest (“Give Us Arms!”). Spurred by the “people’s will”, the following day Vllasi was taken into custody together with 44 other Albanian politicians. On 28 March, Belgrade adopted amendments to the Constitution of Serbia, by means of which the rights and competencies of the autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo were drastically reduced. The process of adoption of this Constitution is still remembered in “popular verses”, which during the “happening of the people” were used to voice demands for constitutional amendments: “Hey, Serbia, thrice undone, once again you’ll be as one” (*Oj Srbijo iz tri dela, ponovo ćeš biti cela*). The adoption of the constitutional amendments led to mass demonstrations, which claimed 24 victims (according to official sources), and led to the introduction of a curfew in Kosovo. The spring of 1989 brought some respite thanks to the preparations for the upcoming 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, due to be celebrated in Kosovo on 28 June 1989. In the autumn, the trial of Vllasi and the 13 people accused of “counterrevolutionary activity” started, while the relationship between Serbs and Albanians, as well as Serbs and Slovenians, concerning what had been dubbed “the Kosovo question”, grew increasingly hostile by the end of

the year (Dimić 2004; Kosovo Chronology 2018; Kovačević and Dajić 1994; Mimica and Vučetić 2008).

In Serbia in 1989, it was obvious that the Kosovo Myth had been revived and that nationalism, which had been increasingly present since the mid-1980s, had become the dominant political choice. My study shows that, while the Serbian authorities tried to shift the responsibility for the revival of the Kosovo Myth and Serbian nationalism to the “people”, it was in fact a skilfully implemented propaganda campaign with the aim of mobilising the masses for the future wars.

Creating the Atmosphere

Just as the fall of communism did not happen overnight, neither did the changes in Yugoslavia of 1989. They were meticulously prepared for. Nationalism in Yugoslavia was constantly present, to such an extent that Tito himself asked, as early as 1962, whether Yugoslavia was capable of surviving. Yet, the real rise in nationalism did not occur until after Tito’s death. The crucial role in the awakening of nationalism in Serbia was played by intellectuals gathered in and around the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA), the Association of Serbian Writers, as well as the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) (Čolović 2017; Dragović-Soso 2002; Radić 2002). At the heart of the awakening of nationalism was Kosovo, what was referred to as the “Kosovo question”. According to Jasna Dragović-Soso, in the mid-1980s, Serbian intellectual opposition affirmed Serbian national entitlement to Kosovo and called to curtail the province’s self-rule, despite Albanian demographic preponderance. This was accompanied by explosive language and a one-dimensional interpretation of history befitting the new nationalist vision, exaggerating the claims of Serbian mistreatment in Kosovo, and portraying Albanians as guilty of “genocide” of the Serbs (Dragović-Soso 2002, 115–6). In one of the foundational documents which “inaugurated” the nationalism of the Serbian elite, the 1986 SASA Memorandum (Stefanov 2021, in this issue), among the dominant topics was the persecution of the Serbian people in Kosovo, as well as “the physical, political, legal and cultural genocide against the Serbian people”. In response to this alleged “persecution”, the academics called for “a resolute defence of one’s own people and one’s own territory” (quoted in Čolović 2017, 369). The media soon pursued the same agenda, especially once the politician who was prepared to implement this policy—Slobodan Milošević—had emerged.

The ascent of Milošević and consolidation of his power were significantly aided by the demonstrations and rallies, the spontaneous organisation of which was nothing but an illusion. These “happenings of the people”, which started in the summer of 1988, were used extensively by the Serbian media, which

emphatically presented the images of the “endangered” Serbs (first in Kosovo, and then in Croatia) in contrast with the images of their “enemies” (Albanians, and then Slovenians and Croats). To understand the (ab)use of the people and the “people’s will” in justifying political manoeuvres, it should be borne in mind that Milošević had started manipulating the people even before he ascended to power, which in fact helped him seize power in Serbia in the autumn of 1987. The first extreme example of this manipulation occurred in Kosovo Polje (Fushë Kosovë) on 24 April 1987, when Milošević, as the President of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia, went to mediate in a conflict between Albanians, on the one hand, and Serbs and Montenegrins, on the other. The events of Milošević’s visit to Kosovo were subsequently reduced to a single sentence, with which he addressed the Serbs and Montenegrins on the occasion: “No one may beat you up!”, which resulted in him assuming the status of the “protector” of Kosovar Serbs and Montenegrins (Sundhaussen 2008, 440–1).

In everything that happened when Milošević rose to power in 1987, and during his consolidation of power in 1988 and 1989, a major role was played by his invocation of the “people” and “people’s will”. As Dragović-Soso noted, the dramatic events of the summer and autumn of 1988, known as the “anti-bureaucratic revolution” and the “happening of the people” were a sign that the new Serbian leader was responsive to the demands of “the people”. At the time, there was nowhere in Serbia where there was not a “rally of truth”, at which “the people” voiced their support for Milošević and demanded more energetic support for the Serbs in Kosovo. The largest “Brotherhood and Unity” rally in Belgrade, held on 19 November 1988, attracted over one million people, according to the Milošević-controlled media (Dragović-Soso 2002, 211–3). Even though the media at the time presented all this as the “people’s will”, an analysis of the media and cultural scene in Serbia shows that this was actually a masterfully conceived propaganda campaign.

A major role in the mobilisation of the people was played by the Kosovo Myth, strongly emphasised throughout this period, with its main motif of Serbs as the chosen people who sacrificed themselves for the Kingdom of Heaven (Čolović 2014, 2017). Quoting only the most striking examples is sufficient to convey the immensity of the role that Kosovo and the Kosovo Myth was attributed in the promotion of the nationalist and anti-Albanian policy. Preparing the public for the future deconstruction of the country, the media, film, music, theatre, literature and the arts were all mobilised.

When it comes to the media, this propaganda was particularly prominent in the daily *Politika*, which is not only the longest standing newspaper, but also has a readership that is believed to be the most reliable, and as such exerts a huge influence (Čolović 1999; Marović 2002; Mimica and Vučetić 2008; Nenadović 2002;

Popović, Janča, and Petovar 1990). This newspaper reported on the “happening of the people” since the summer of 1988, and published numerous articles promulgating the notion that “the people had spoken”. As the culmination of this politically conceived campaign, in July 1988, *Politika* started publishing a column called “Echoes and Reactions”, in which citizens provided allegedly “spontaneous”, but actually, as it turns out, very much orchestrated, explanations of the events in Serbia presented as an expression of “the people’s will”, and celebrated the historic moment in which, finally, “the people had spoken”. This very column illustrates the way in which public opinion in Serbia, as well as in other parts of Yugoslavia populated by Serbs, was systematically prepared for the future wars, to the point of remaining a symbol of the political manipulation of the media to this day (Mimica and Vučetić 2008; Popović, Janča, and Petovar 1990). Ultimately, this column produced the “Serbian people” as an incontestable political instance, while simultaneously institutionalising populism as the new legitimising foundation of Milošević’s rule. This column demonised individuals, as well as entire nations. First in line were the Albanians as “separatists”, but also Slovenes and Croats were soon characterised as an “anti-Serbian coalition”. Journalist Aleksandar Nenadović (2002) defined *Politika*’s entire campaign as “a programmed dramatisation”, contributing to the illusion that the people were those dictating events and governing the situation.

Throughout the entire period of this column’s publication, from July 1988 to March 1991, Kosovo was its leading subject. In truth, anti-Albanian sentiment was evident even earlier, immediately after the Eighth Session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. From that point onwards, the media referred to the Albanian population less and less frequently as Albanians, and increasingly as “Šiptars” (Shqiptars), “the Šiptar people”, “Arnauts” or “Arbanasi”, which are all historically derogatory names, and they were qualified as “animalistic”, “bestial”, or “monstrous”. In articles on Kosovo, there was an increased use of phrases such as “guarding the home fire”, “centurial hearth”, and “the cradle of Serbianhood”. The people that “had spoken” sought justice in Kosovo, but increasingly also justice within Yugoslavia as a whole. “Spontaneously gathered”, the people attended “the truth rallies” carrying banners of Milošević, shouting slogans such as “Serbia would like to know who’ll replace our Marshall Tito” (*Srbija se sada pita ko će nama da nasledi Tita*), or “Slobodan, you just urge [us], like a bullet we will surge” (*Slobodane samo reci, letećemo kao meci*). Decisions by the Serbian political elite, such as the adoption of constitutional amendments, were also presented as the people’s will (“Oh, Serbia, may you be peaceful, the Constitution will be writ by the people”; “The people will author the new Constitution!”) (Mimica and Vučetić 2008, 21–4; Nenadović 2002, 161).

While the terrain for Milošević's ascent to power was prepared by the intellectual elite, led by the SASA and aided by the SOC, the further strengthening of Milošević's policy was primarily fuelled by the media, but also by culture and art, as political goals needed to be interpreted to make them accessible to a wide range of citizens. Both in culture and in art, the central topic in 1989 was the Battle of Kosovo, which took place in the Kosovo Field (Kosovo polje/Fushë Kosovë) on St. Vitus Day (28 June) 1389, also known in Serbian as *Vidovdan*. The battle was fought between a Serbian army led by Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović, and an Ottoman Turkish army, led by Sultan Murad and his sons Bayezid and Yakub. The question of who the victor was in this battle remains a topic of scientific debate to this day, yet it is certain that both leaders—Lazar and Murad—died. The Turkish Sultan was killed by a Serbian feudal Lord, later identified as Miloš Obilić. Besides the heroic Obilić, who became one of the central figures of the Kosovo Myth, another important mythic figure was Vuk Branković who, according to the legend—history does not concur—betrayed Prince Lazar. Even though the Kosovo Myth started to be used to reignite Serbian national consciousness in the mid-1980s, it had served as a tool of political manipulation already before (Šuica 2010). Indeed, Serbia's entire history is rooted in the Battle of Kosovo. In 1989, when the 600th anniversary was celebrated, the Battle occupied a central place not only in historical memory, but also in the campaign of the new Serbian political elite (Zirojević 2002, 234–5). On the eve of the anniversary, there was not a single sphere of culture that did not resound with the Kosovo Myth. The Belgrade National Theatre produced the play *Knez Lazar* (Prince Lazar), the opera *Kosovska vrlet* (The Kosovo Crag) and the ballet *Kosovka devojka* (The Kosovo Maiden), while the Yugoslav Drama Theatre gave performances of *Kosovski boj* (The Battle of Kosovo) by Ljubomir Simović. Immediately before the celebrations themselves, the dramatic musical piece *Pasija Svetog kneza Lazara* (Passion of Saint Prince Lazar) by composer Rajko Maksimović and the musical stage piece *Kosovski boj* (The Battle of Kosovo) by composer Zoran Hristić were performed. Even the most important Yugoslav theatre festival (*Sterijino pozorje*) was inspired by the Battle of Kosovo that year (Zirojević 2002, 261–2; Janković 1989, 10; *Kosovski boj*, *Politika*, 31 Mar 1989). Bearing in mind that this was the most significant theatrical event in Yugoslavia, it is clear that the topic of Kosovo was not only exploited to the maximum in Serbia, but also imposed onto the rest of the country.

Particularly important was the introduction of Kosovo-related motifs in popular culture, since popular music and film aimed at a much wider audience. Kosovo was first introduced in pop music through a song titled *Kosovska* (Kosovar song) (1983) by the most famous Yugoslav rock band *Bijelo dugme* (Bijelo dugme, *Kosovska*, 1983). At the time, it was new for the public to have a Yugoslav band

singing a song in the Albanian language. The song was written in the context of rising tension between the Serbs and Albanians in the wake of the Kosovo demonstrations of 1981, where the Albanians had sought a higher degree of autonomy within the Yugoslav federation (Limani Myrtai 2021, in this issue). On the surface, *Kosovska* was a love song in which a boy asks a girl out, with no openly political connotations, yet it contained references to the red peony (*Paeonia peregrina*). The symbolism of this flower is quite important, because it is believed that the peony had been white until the Battle of Kosovo on 28 June 1389, but after the battle, red peonies bloomed, soaked in the blood of the Serbian heroes. This flower is thus also known as the Kosovar peony (*kosovski božur*) (Božur u tradiciji Srba, *Bašta Balkana*, 4 March 2016). Reference to the peony in a song in Albanian was definitely something new, and this song was thus perceived by some as being subversive. According to a subsequent testimony, the *Bijelo dugme* singer Željko Bebek left the band because of the song: “What kind of message was I relaying in Yugoslavia at the time, with all its peoples and nationalities? Me, who wanted to introduce the spirit of modern culture, all of a sudden entering the arena of daily politics. This was in a way the seed of our discord and we disbanded after that in 1984” (Bebek: Napustio sam “Bijelo dugme” zbog pjesme “Kosovska”, *Radio Ljubuški* 2017). In this atmosphere, at the end of 1984, *Bijelo dugme* published a new record with an LP cover representing a slightly redesigned version of the painting *Kosovka devojka* (Kosovo maiden) by the famous Serbian painter Uroš Predić. While the cover was dedicated to the Kosovo Myth, the first song on the record was the national anthem *Hej Sloveni* (Hey, Slavs) played and sung in a combination of rock and folk. This mixture of nationalism and Yugoslavism, as well as folk and rock, could be interpreted as a provocation, but also as a reflection of the deep crisis of the state, especially regarding the situation in Kosovo. This was, however, just an introduction to the Kosovar music of the 1980s.

Four years after *Kosovska*, another Kosovo-themed pop song was released—*1389/Neće Fata sina Bajazita* (1389/Fata doesn’t fancy Prince Bayezid) by the Belgrade band *Alisa*, from their album *Da li si čula pesmu umornih slavuja* (Have you heard the weary nightingales’ song) (1987) produced by the “Record-Producing Company of Belgrade Radio and Television” (*Produkcija gramofonskih ploča Radio televizije Beograd*, PGP RTB), a major state-owned record label and chain of record stores in Yugoslavia, and the biggest music production branch of Radio Television Belgrade (RTB). After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, it changed its name to PGP RTS (Record Production Company of the Radio Television of Serbia). This song made direct reference to the Battle of Kosovo and was a combination of pop and folk. The song included the refrain: “Fata doesn’t fancy Prince Bayezid. / She craves Obilić, her hero in need. / Fata doesn’t fancy the looting emperor. / She wants Miloš, it’s her proud temper” (*Alisa, 1389/Neće Fata sina Bajazita*, 1987).

Serbian pride was especially stirred by these lines in which Fata (short for Arabian Fatima) chooses the Serbian hero Miloš Obilić over the Sultan's son Bayezid. Thus Fata changed the course of history in a direction that was more favourable for Serbs. Namely, after the Battle of Kosovo, Olivera, daughter of Serbian Prince Lazar, was given to Sultan Bayezid I to become his wife and live in his harem from 1390 to 1402. By means of this song, the Serbian hero Miloš Obilić, who is “cunning”, “flawless”, “never loses a fight” and “sends Murad and 12,000 Turks to heaven”, has taken revenge for Olivera, thus turning the 1389 defeat into a victory.

It was folk music that promoted the Kosovo Myth most, however. In 1989, folk singer Nikola Urošević Gedža recorded his song *Šest vekova prođe od Kosovskog boja* (Six centuries have passed since the Battle of Kosovo) (Gedža, *Šest vekova prođe od Kosovska boja*, 1989). The singer Mirjana Petričević gained prominence by choosing to adopt the stage name *Mira Kosovka* during this time (Najtužnija priča domaće estrade, *Telegraf*, 14 Aug 2017). However, the greatest popularity was achieved by the modern folk song *Vidovdan* (St. Vitus Day) (Lazarević, *Vidovdan*, 1989), interpreted by folk singer Gordana Lazarević and composed by Milutin Popović-Zahar, who is one of the most important composers of Yugoslav pop and folk music. His most famous songs have acquired hymn-like prominence, for example *Od Vardara pa do Triglava* (From Vardar to Triglav), *Hej Jugosloveni* (Hey, Yugoslavs), and *Živela Jugoslavija* (Long live Yugoslavia). *Vidovdan* was made in 1989, and it has remained the most popular patriotic song about Kosovo to this day, commonly referred to as “the second Serbian anthem”. The lyrics to this song—“Always return to you wherever I may go / No one can tear you from my soul, oh, Kosovo”—are always evoked when Serbian national sentiment needs to be stirred, especially when it comes to Kosovo itself. Even though it resembles traditional folk songs, the song was actually written for the celebration of the 600th anniversary of the battle, something which its author revealed only much later. Thirty years after the anniversary, the tabloid *Alo* (2019) published a “sensational” headline: “Show business’ greatest secret revealed. Everybody knows the song *Vidovdan*, but you’ll be shocked when you hear who commissioned it from Zahar” (Otkrivena najveća tajna estrade, *Alo*, 28 June 2019). The “sensational” piece of information revealed then by Zahar was that “the song was created after I received a call from the Director of PGP RTS, and he told me that he had been asked by the secretary to Patriarch Pavle to commission 10 songs about Kosovo, for the celebration of the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo”. This was the album *Za Vidovdan 1989* (St. Vitus Day 1989), with famous folk singers singing songs that Zahar had composed especially for the occasion: *Vidovdan*, *Kasno Marko na Kosovo stiže* (Marko arrives late in Kosovo), *Bog se dragi na Srbe razljuti* (Dear God got angry with Serbs), *Oj Kruševcu Lazarevo carstvo* (Oh Kruševac, Lazar’s kingdom), and *Kosovski božuri* (Kosovo’s peonies),

among others. Elsewhere, Zahar (2019) stressed that he had composed *Vidovdan* upon the request of the Church, and that it was his “present to the Church”. The way he described the song’s creation is striking:

Inspiration seized me in an instant, and this is no wonder, given that I grew up on religious hymns [...]. For half a day, I had a terrible fever, I was out of my wits. I sat on the floor, angrily, and all of a sudden [...] I saw the face of Patriarch Pavle. It was as if he was sending me a message, by some divine intervention [...]. Within five minutes, I had both the melody and all the stanzas. (Otkrivena najveća tajna estrade, *Alo*, 28 June 2019)

Judging by the alleged commissioner of the song (Patriarch Pavle’s secretary), this was another project initiated by the Serbian Orthodox Church, which had managed the campaigns for the revival of the Kosovo Myth since the mid-1980s. The PGP RTB was their contractor on this occasion rather than the PGP RTS, as Zahar mistakenly claims. The latter was not founded until 1993. This was the same company that had produced the aforementioned song *1389* by *Alisa*, and Radio Television Belgrade was also the producer of the greatest “blockbuster” related to Kosovo, the film *The Battle of Kosovo* (see below).

All these details provide ample evidence of how the creation of the song *Vidovdan* was post-mythologised. There is still a certain grey area, however—Zahar repeatedly referred to Patriarch Pavle, perceived by many citizens of Serbia as a saint. However, at the time of celebrating the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, Pavle had not yet become the head of the SOC, as this position was still occupied by Patriarch German, who led the SOC between 1958 and 1990, while Pavle inherited the position in December 1990 and held it to his death in 2009. It is possible that by emphasising the role of Patriarch Pavle in the song’s creation, giving it an aura of divinity (“it was as if he sent me a message via some divine power”), Zahar wished to attach even more importance to his song, but also to highlight the already prominent role of the SOC in its creation. Irrespective of these efforts to mythologise the creation of *Vidovdan* retrospectively, the song has maintained a cult status to this day.

What *Vidovdan* was for music, *The Battle of Kosovo* (*Boj na Kosovu*) was for cinema. This film, based on the drama of the same name by dramatist and academician Ljubomir Simović, was directed by Zdravko Šotra and produced by RTB. In this case, once again, the Serbian public broadcasting company (RTB), together with *Politika*, played the main role in the media promotion of Kosovo-related subjects, but also in Milošević’s propaganda. Expectations of *The Battle of Kosovo* were huge—VHS cassettes of the film were to be sold, especially to Serbs abroad, but the film was also designed as a kind of history lesson. Director Zdravko Šotra stated that he wanted his film to highlight the importance of the Serbs as a bulwark to protect Europe against the Ottoman Turks, but also to correct the

historical injustice suffered by the Serbian people. Šotra claimed that Serbs had been forced to suppress everything “that comprises our essence, starting from the Middle Ages, all the way to the First World War”, and that they even “banished St. Sava from their schools”. Now the time had finally come to correct such injustice. He admitted that this might seem to some like “an onslaught of national sentiment”, yet he immediately followed this with a justification—“after such a long silence concerning all these events, this is quite logical” (To se jednom, *Politika ekspres*, 22 June 1989).

The film had two premieres—its gala premiere was on 21 June 1989 in the great hall of Belgrade’s Sava Centar, while its TV premiere was on St. Vitus’ eve (27 June) in the primetime slot. The gala premiere was, according to the newspaper *Večernje novosti*, attended by “high government officials and Church dignitaries”. In its review, the paper highlighted the role of Serbia in protecting Europe, stating, for example, that the Battle of Kosovo was “lost for the Serbian state, but won for Europe, saved from the first and strongest wave of the Turkish invasion by the bodies of Serbian heroes in Kosovo”. The didactic character of the film was also enhanced, since the film “offers a chance to the youngest generations to look up to the noble examples of heroism and patriotism of the characters from their ancient history. Kids should no longer play being Rambo and characters like this, but rather Miloš Obilić and others who lost their lives in the Kosovo Field” (Po meri, *Večernje novosti*, 22 June 1989). Role models like this suggested the need for self-sacrifice among the younger generations, as those losing their lives were quoted as positive examples, unlike Rambo, the American movie hero who always emerged victorious. Thus the importance of choosing the Kingdom of Heaven over the earthly existence was once again emphasised.

Another motif frequently revived through the Kosovo Myth was the betrayal by Vuk Branković, a Serbian medieval Lord who ruled in one part of Serbia, under Prince Lazar, and who was married to Prince Lazar’s daughter. According to the Kosovo Myth, Branković betrayed Prince Lazar in order to rule over the whole of Serbia. However, historiography has confirmed that this is no more than a legend (Šuica 2017, 2019; Mihaljčić 1989). The film’s emphasis on Vuk Branković’s betrayal was justified by the screenwriter Simović in the following way: “Had I removed this condemnation of Vuk Branković, there would have been no drama left, and the story would have therefore appeared too simplified” (Bajazit doleteo, *Večernje novosti*, 22 June 1989). The price of this historical depiction was promptly paid by the actor playing Branković, Vojislav Brajović, with him being the only one to leave the premiere without a standing ovation. As one newspaper concluded, the reason he was not applauded was not because of his weak acting skills, but rather because “he was given the unpopular role of Vuk Branković” (To se mora, *Večernje Novosti*, 22 June 1989). The film, in contrast to the story of the

traitor Branković, highlights the importance of a new leader, or shepherd, as evidenced by Miloš Obilić's lines:

Today a shepherd will be found in Kosovo, before whom those will retreat that have not retreated from anyone else before. Even Murat and his son, that degenerate of a dog. And the sun will, even if it takes a hundred of years, chase away the ravens and the rats, and it will warm up and shine on Serbia. (Šotra, *The Battle of Kosovo*, 1989)

Such a depiction was particularly important for the consolidation of Slobodan Milošević's rule, as it was this very anniversary celebration of the Battle of Kosovo that was to turn him into the "uncontested" leader of Serbs.

Although much was invested in this film, the first impressions were unfavourable, even in the Milošević-controlled media. Even on the day of the celebration itself, a negative review was printed in a newspaper which usually glorified everything to do with the Battle of Kosovo anniversary. The author of the review could not keep silent about what seemed to be the general consensus—that Simović's play was directed in a manner which was more theatrical than cinematic. It was said that the director lacked courage as he offered "a piece of cinematic theatre" and "unsuccessfully mixed historical episodes with scenes of medieval everyday life" (Koreni mitske svesti, *Politika ekspres*, 28 June 1989). Among the subsequent appraisals of *The Battle of Kosovo*, perhaps the most interesting is the critique of the film's producer, which appeared on the official RTS website:

Confined by the deadline and the wishes for the glorious past to become yet another of Milošević's weapons [...], Šotra himself would be more than ready to forget about this film altogether. Despite the immense efforts by the entire crew, it was obvious that the film was made for a purpose, as it included numerous technical flaws and the typical pathos in actors' delivery, which made the Serbian past so very distant while striving to make it relevant. (Seobe, RTS, 29 July 2017)

Some of the flaws of *The Battle of Kosovo* have since become commonly used to ridicule the film, including the scene of Miloš Obilić riding a horse with a tractor visible in the background, or a scene where, in the midst of the battle, a red Coca-Cola truck can be seen in the distance. An identical "Turk" is killed as many as 17 times during the film, while some of the extras lay dead in their tracksuits, jeans and sneakers, and one of the film's heroes wore a wrist watch (Srpske filmske greške, *Kurir*, 12 Jan 2014). Be that as it may, on the eve of the main Serbian mnemonic event of 1989, the film significantly contributed to reviving the atmosphere of the Kosovo Myth. Despite the negative reviews and a huge number of technical flaws, it continued to play its propagandist role, which I elaborate on in the following pages.

Gazimestan as the Climax

All the media preparations and cultural events were but an overture for the main occasion. The celebration of the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, held in Gazimestan on 28 June 1989, was the climax of the entire campaign which had started with the “happening of the people”. Gazimestan is the renowned memorial site commemorating the Battle of Kosovo. The site is situated near the Kosovo Field, where the battle took place in 1389. Each year, on St. Vitus’ Day (28 June), this is the location where the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo is commemorated, while the celebration of the six centuries that have passed since the battle continued in Serbia throughout that year. Media preparations started in April 1989. In its Labour Day edition, *Politika ekspres* printed a detailed announcement of the June festivities reporting, already at this point, that two and a half million people would gather at demonstrations to be held between 25 and 28 June in Belgrade, Kruševac, Gazimestan, and Gračanica. The announcement emphasised that the 600th anniversary would be commemorated “with dignity, and without any politicisation of the occasion”, even though politicisation was already evident in every newspaper article (Janković 1989, 10). The first in the series of events was scheduled for 25 June. On that day, the plan was for the 4000 ton dome of the St. Sava Temple in Belgrade to be mounted “before at least half a million people”, while the liturgy was to be served by Patriarch German. For the following day, it was announced that an event would be held in Kruševac with the purpose of symbolically evoking the memories of the Serbian army’s departure for Kosovo. Thereafter, on 27 June, the relics of Prince Lazar to Gračanica would arrive, and a midnight liturgy would be served, again by Patriarch German, for half a million people. The climax of the celebration was envisaged on St. Vitus’ Day at Gazimestan, where 10,000 buses and at least seven special trains, from 120 Yugoslav cities and towns, were planned to arrive (Do Kosova preko šest vekova, *Politika ekspres*, 30 Apr–2 May 1989).

The finale itself once again included the involvement of the main actors in the Kosovo Myth revival—the SASA, the SOC, and the intellectual elite. Since the SOC was seen as the “guardian of Serbian identity”, it comes as no surprise that it had been the first institution to mobilise in the “defence” of Kosovo in the 1980s (Dragović-Soso 2002, 125–6). According to Šuica (2010, 165–6), the SOC already initiated the arrangements for celebrating the 600th anniversary in 1987, and for both the SOC and the SASA, the anniversary at Gazimestan was to be the highlight of the whole “awakening decade”. Between 22 and 24 June, the SASA organised a scientific conference on “The Battle of Kosovo. History and Tradition”. Two days prior to the big celebration, a gala ceremony “The Passion of Saint Prince Lazar”

was held, including a choir, symphony orchestra, and actors, and attended by the highest state officials, the patriarch, the representatives of the army, the religious communities, and the diplomatic corps. As reported by the press, this passion of Lazar was intended to represent the passion of the entire Serbian people and its sacrifice for the protection of Europe in the Middle Ages, but also the protection of “European democracy and freedom, not only in peace, but also in numerous uprisings and mutinies, as well as in both world wars” (Srbi branili svoju slobodu, *Politika*, 27 June 1989). The stage spectacle “The Battle of Kosovo”, with its 400 participants, premiered on 13 June in Belgrade and free tickets for this performance were given to “working people and citizens” (Boj na Kosovu, *Politika*, 9 June 1989; Ivana Žigon, *Politika*, 9 June 1989). A similar atmosphere surrounded the musical and stage piece “The Battle”, performed in the Ethnographic Museum (Ko je tražio program za Kosova, *Politika*, 30 June 1989). Another contribution to the celebration came from the avantgarde Bitef Theatre, which organised a concert “On the Eve of St. Vitus”, where visitors were offered bread, salt, and red wine (I “Žutim” na Kosovo, *Večernje novosti*, 28 June 1989; Solunci, *Politika ekspres*, 28 June 1989; Uči Vidovdana, *Večernje novosti*, 28 Jun 1989). In addition to the aforementioned conference, the SASA members contributed to commemorating this important anniversary in different ways. The culture supplement of *Politika* regularly included Kosovo-related poems, such as a poem by Matija Bečković (1989, 9) entitled *Kosovska zbilja* (The reality of Kosovo), or works by painters, such as Mladen Srbinović, who created a “Kosovo cycle” mosaic for the municipal hall in Kruševac (Živković 1989, 13). On 28 June 1989, radio and television programmes were dedicated exclusively to commemorating the Battle of Kosovo anniversary (Radio i TV program, *Politika*, 28 June 1989, 35). Throughout the year, “megalomaniac print runs” of academic works and historical sources on Kosovo topics were published (Šuica 2010, 166–8).

The day before the great anniversary, according to journalist Aleksandar Nenadović (2002, 171–2), *Politika* published headlines bigger than those printed by the most famous international newspapers to announce the beginning of World War II. The entire edition was dedicated to Kosovo and the celebration, with rather ridiculous and sensationalist headlines such as “Kosovo is a dream dreamt by generations”, “For six centuries Kosovo waited for her sons to return and say: she is ours and shall always be ours”, “Millions of people dreamt of such a celebration” (Nenadović 2002, 171–2). Immediately before the celebration, the decision was made for two streets in Pristina to be named after Serbian heroes of the Battle of Kosovo (Prince Lazar and Miloš Obilić), in addition to one in Kosovo Polje (Kosovar Heroes’ Street) and Gračanica (Kosovo Maiden’s Street) (U Prištini, *Politika*, 23 June 1989).

The main celebration at Gazimestan was publicised nationwide. Newspapers created the impression that everyone was heading for Gazimestan. The “spontaneously gathered citizens” had, in fact, been thoroughly organised, usually by the League of Communists of Serbia and the SOC. Newspapers reported on peasants preparing to head for Gazimestan on horses or in carriages (Kasom do Kosova, *Večernje novosti*, 28 May 1989). Bus and train transport was also organised. From Niš alone, transport was arranged for some 20 thousand people (Veliko interesovanje za odlazak, *Politika*, 23 June 1989). Many travel agencies also organised trips to Gazimestan, while one of the best known Yugoslav travel agencies, *Yugoturs*, advertised visits to Gazimestan “tailored for everyone’s budget”—ranging from day trips to seven-day packages with luxurious accommodation at the mountain of Kopaonik. Besides *Yugoturs*, other leading Serbian travel agencies such as *Putnik*, *Srbijaturist*, *Centroturist*, and *Ineks* published advertisements in newspapers too. According to estimates, more than 500 buses belonging to various travel agencies departed from Belgrade alone (Zov pradedovskih ognjišta, *Politika ekspres*, 28 June 1989). Belgrade’s *Yellow Taxi* drove the citizens unable to find other transport, while *Beotaxi* organised free transport for 50 World War II veterans. The newspapers specifically mentioned the attendance of the Serbian princess Elizabeth Karađorđević, the “Serbian sisters” travelling from Chicago, Serbian workers from West Germany, a woman from Bosnia whose family had been slaughtered in 1941 by the Ustasha, factory workers, as well as 200 employees of the Institute of Nuclear Sciences “Vinča” on the southern outskirts of Belgrade. In so doing, the propaganda skilfully gave the impression that Gazimestan was attended by everyone—from workers to princesses.

To prove that this was a universal people’s event, and that it was not anti-Albanian, a *Politika ekspres* reporter also located “an honest Albanian”—Musli Berisha from the village of Mazgit, who, according to the newspaper, did not hide his enthusiasm for the massive turnout at the event, estimating that there were more than two million people at Gazimestan. In this highly propagandistic article, Berisha expressed regret that no one was staying at his house as a guest, while showing that he was even more aggrieved by the fact that it would not be possible for him to make it to the grand stand to see Milošević up close, because “Milošević’s politics is just and it is only opposed by enemies of Yugoslavia” (Hoću da vidim, *Politika ekspres*, 29 June 1989). Propagandist articles, as well as photos from the press and video footage, all indicated that everything was organised in advance. For example, the attendees carried numerous banners, flags, and pictures, which bore no trace of the amateurism characteristic of the banners generally carried on such occasions (Medenica 2014, 9).

The event at Gazimestan required thorough technical planning, from organising access roads, parking, mobile toilets, field hospitals, the press centre, and water tank trucks, all of which was reported on in detail by the press (U Prištini, *Politika*, 28 June 1989). Once all these preparations had been completed, it was at last ready for the undisputed leader to be enthroned. Slobodan Milošević arrived at Gazimestan “out of the skies”, like a messiah, as his helicopter landed in the midst of masses of people. Seated in the first row were the Serbian leadership, the president of the presidency of the SFRY, Janez Drnovšek, prime minister Ante Marković, Patriarch German and representatives of the religious communities, representatives of the Yugoslav republics, the diplomatic corps, and the top ranking officers of the Yugoslav People’s Army (Trideset godina, *Slobodna Evropa*, 28 June 1989). Estimates of the number attending at Gazimestan ranged from 600,000, according to Reuters, to two million people, according to *Politika*, who reported both estimates (Obnovljena sloga, *Politika*, 29 June 1989). Ten years after the event, Warren Zimmerman (1999), the American ambassador to Yugoslavia at the time, who had refused to attend, wrote that Milošević

drew a crowd of a million people, probably twenty-five times the number of soldiers in the tiny feudal armies of 1389, to the Field of the Blackbirds, the site of the battle. [...]. The large number of visitors contrasted markedly with the much smaller number of Serbs (about 200,000) who actually lived in Kosovo.

Milošević’s speech at Gazimestan had a major influence on the subsequent events in Yugoslavia (the text is online, cf. Slobodan Milošević’s St. Vitus Day Speech, 28 June 1989). As Šuica noted, through Milošević’s words, medieval history became a kind of tool for tackling contemporary events, but also for solving political problems (Šuica 2010, 169–70). The first important message conveyed by the speech was one that had also been highlighted on many occasions preceding the celebration—that Serbia, in 1389, had protected Europe: “Six centuries ago, Serbia heroically defended itself in the Kosovo Field, but it also defended Europe. At that time, Serbia was the bastion that defended European culture, religion, and European society in general.” Another crucial message, however, was entirely new, and sounded ominous. The president of Serbia announced the possibility of armed conflict: “Six centuries later, we are now once again being engaged in battles, and are facing battles. They are not armed battles, although such things cannot yet be ruled out” (Slobodan Milošević’s St. Vitus Day Speech, 28 June 1989). This was interpreted by many as the start of an attempt to redraw the borders of Yugoslavia—in other words, a declaration of war. Drawing a parallel between the fate of the Serbian people shaped by the Kosovo Myth and the situation in Kosovo in the late 1980s, Milošević condemned discord and betrayal, and portrayed himself as the figure of national unifier and protector of a strong Serbia. This

performance turned Milošević into the irrefutable Serbian national leader, which marked the end of the idea of Yugoslavhood. It is therefore no wonder that this speech was used by The Hague prosecutors as proof of Milošević's militant intentions (Trideset godina, *Slobodna Evropa*, 28 Jun 1989). The television broadcast of Milošević's speech itself was indicative of the rekindled Serbian nationalism, and foreshadowed the future wars. In the footage, it is evident that apart from the sparse Yugoslav flags, the gathering was dominated by Serbian flags, while people shouted "Kosovo is Serbia". The TV broadcast of Milošević's speech was concluded with the attendees breaking into song: "Who's that saying, who's that lying that Serbia is small?/Not so small, not so small, thrice she went to war". The broadcast was interrupted at the exact moment when the song would have continued with the line "Again she'll rise, again she'll rise, lest she be tyrannised" (600. godina od Kosovske bitke, *Dokumentarne Emisije Balkan*, 2 Nov 2014), a line that, since the late 1980s, had commonly been sung as "Again she'll rise, again she'll rise, if dear God so allows".

The international media were virtually unanimous in their assessment of Milošević's speech. *Associated Press* called it "a defiant demonstration of Serbian nationalism". *The Independent* reported on the rally as the culmination of Serbian national awakening, while the *Sunday Times* described the celebration as "a day of demagoguery". A commentator on Swedish television issued a warning: "Unless Milošević succeeds in controlling the Serbian nationalism that he himself stirred up, the Yugoslav federation shall dissolve." Foreign commentators also noticed that speaking in Kosovo and about Kosovo, Milošević failed to mention Albanians, who were the majority population there (cf. Marinković 1989). Unsurprisingly, the reactions of the Albanians to this event were entirely negative. The Albanian political leader and writer Ibrahim Rugova noted: "It is my impression that there are forces in Yugoslavia who almost hope for terrorist actions to occur in Kosovo. I can but warn the Serbs that every time that a small nation, and the Serbian nation is indeed small, tried to impose their supremacy in the Balkans, it ended in its own tragedy" (Trideset godina, *Slobodna Evropa*, 23 June 1989). Rugova's words would indeed turn out to be prophetic.

No "the End"

Two years after the celebration of the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, the aggressive action taken by the Yugoslav People's Army in Slovenia on 27 June 1991 heralded the beginning of the end of Yugoslavia. Ten years after Milošević's speech at Gazimestan, after the NATO bombing from March to June 1999, the Serbian army withdrew from Kosovo. Twelve years later, on 28 June 2001, Milošević was aboard a

helicopter again, this time heading for The Hague. On St. Vitus Day, based on a Serbian government decree, he was extradited to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The Serbian prime minister at the time, Zoran Đinđić, used the opportunity and the symbolism of Milošević's extradition on St. Vitus Day, to suggest that Serbia should free itself from Milošević and from the Kosovo Myth, as a symbol of the policy which had led to the destruction of the country, and to renounce the Kingdom of Heaven in favour of the ideals of the earthly Serbia (Čolović 2017, 436–7).

Paradoxically, a few days after Milošević's extradition to The Hague, on 9 July 2001, Vidovdan was reinstated as a national holiday and thus, in postcommunist Serbia, gained its place among the most important dates in national history (Čolović 2014, 47). Two years later, Zoran Đinđić was assassinated. The question now remains as to what has become of Serbia and the Kosovo Myth today. According to Ivan Čolović, the Myth is in crisis, as, for Serbian nationalists, rather than occasions to demonstrate that “Kosovo is the heart of Serbia”, St. Vitus celebrations at Gazimestan have become bitter confrontations with the reality that Kosovo is no longer Serbian (Čolović 2017, 440–1). This was evidenced in 2019, when the commemoration was attended by 800–1000 people, with a noticeable absence of political representatives of Serbia (Celi govor Slobodana Miloševića na Gazimestanu 1989, 28 June 2019). The commemoration was attended, however, by those who had actually reignited the fire of the Kosovo Myth in the mid-1980s—representatives of the SOC (Gazimestan trideset godina kasnije, *Politika*, 28 June 2019). According to journalist Tomislav Marinković,

the intellectual and clerical elites still play their fiddles to the same old songs of the Kosovo Myth and Kosovo Testament, of Kosovo as the dearest Serbian word and of the Serbian Jerusalem, hoping for yet another Battle of Kosovo into which they could push today's youth and let them die for the sacred Serbian land.

He comments that this was tragic Serbian impotence when it came to breaking the vicious circle of nationalist illusions (Vidovdan mrmota, *Aljazeera Balkans*, 28 June 2019).

After the end of the Milošević regime in 2000, the authorities did not work to change the historical interpretations the regime had propagated, and the “News from the Past” project shows that in 2010, when the survey that the project is based on was conducted, the Battle of Kosovo was still considered the most significant event in Serbian history, and the Turks were still perceived as arch-enemies. This was especially the case among the youngest generations (Stojanović 2010, 27–9). Since then, it is safe to assert that the situation has not changed much.

The best answer to the question of Serbia's position concerning Kosovo and the Kosovo Myth today is perhaps provided by the film *The Battle of Kosovo*.

Regardless of its poor quality, since 1989, I recall well how this film has nevertheless been shown every time it was believed that it could be of help promoting an event's crucial importance for the Serbs. It was broadcast at the very beginning of the 1999 NATO bombing (24 March 1999) and a few more times during the same year. It was also broadcast the night before the vote for the constitutional preamble in 2006, under which the Province of Kosovo and Metohija was defined as an integral part of the Republic of Serbia. The most recent example of the use of *The Battle of Kosovo* in combating enemies—be those Ottoman Turks, Albanians, NATO, or even viruses—was the broadcasting of the film on the night when Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić announced the state of emergency in Serbia over the coronavirus pandemic, and it was also rerun during the state of emergency itself. The state of emergency was introduced on 15 March 2020, after having been declared by Vučić on 14 March. That same night, *TV Pink* broadcast *The Battle of Kosovo*. All this shows that the Kosovo Myth, just like a deadly virus, is always present and may be “reactivated” for political purposes at any time. In cinematic language, one could say that the (ab)use of the Kosovo Myth in Serbia has never concluded with “The End”, but rather always with “To Be Continued”. This constant possibility of the Myth being “reactivated”, as demonstrated in the attempt to fight against Covid-19 by means of *The Battle of Kosovo*—which is really the peak of absurdity, since choosing the Kingdom of Heaven in a battle against a pandemic does not seem to be the smartest option—brings to mind the end of Albert Camus' *The Plague*. Its final paragraph forewarns that

the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city. (Camus 1991 (1947))

Much like the Kosovo Myth.

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