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HUNDRED YEARS SINCE YUGOSLAVIA'S BIRTH: LESSON ON NATIONALISM, BALKANIZATION AND RELIGION IN EUROPE'S PERIPHERY¹

By Vjekoslav Perica

Vjekoslav Perica is a Croatian-American historian based in Baltimore, Maryland. Since 2006 Perica has held Professorship in History at the University of Rijeka, Croatia. He is the author of scholarly books and articles, including *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; a revised 2-volume edition in Serbian, Belgrade, Biblioteka XX vek, 2006) and *Heavenly Yugoslavia. Interactions between Political Culture and Political Mythologies*, coauthored with Mitja Velikonja (Belgrade: xx vek). Translations of *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* are upcoming this year in South Korea and Poland. His article-chapter “Jerusalem Balkanized: The Kosovo Controversy and Balkan-Mideast Parallels, 1985-2018,” will be published in Nadim Rouhana and Nadera Shaloub-Kavorkian, eds., *When Politics are Sacralized: International Comparative Perspectives on Religious Claims and Nationalism*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

¹ This lengthy foreword serves as a chapter that completes the concluding picture from the original version of *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Thus the Korean translation of *Balkan Idols* is not just going to be a linguistic interpretation but supplement to an ongoing research on the new public, globalizing religions and the de-secularized nationalisms in our time. Although *Balkan Idols* has been hitherto translated in several languages, what further makes the Korean edition special is the global comparative perspective under which the story from the distant Balkans will be read and reconsidered. While it seems too bold to compare historical experiences of the peoples in the Balkan and Korean peninsulas, there is at least the widely known common experience of imperialism, tragic fratricidal wars, partitions and invented enmities among kin peoples living side by side for centuries. Regarding the role of religion in recent history, during my Balkan research trips, I have met devout Korean Catholics visiting what is now globally popular pilgrimage destination of Medjugorje in Herzegovina. While their religious experience does not require profound knowledge and critical thinking about the interaction of religion and nationalism in the Balkans, Korean researchers will benefit from the critical approach to these topics. It is fortunate that Balkan religions have sparked the interest of Korean academics. I am therefore deeply grateful to Dr. Chung Keunjae from Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul, Korea, for the translation of *Balkan Idols* to the Korean language. Thanks to Dr. Chung's translation of *Balkan Idols*, I am now hoping that both regions' knowledge and culture will benefit from this book as a contribution to these recent Balkan-Korea global encounters and exchanges of knowledge. I am also grateful to Dr. Snježana Zorić at Hankuk University's Global Campus for facilitating the communication between Croatia and Korea and making this text better with comments as suggestions for which I also would like to thank Dr. Mila Dragojević of Sewanee University, USA.

In 2018, historians were marking the one hundredth anniversary of the foundation of a nation-state in southeastern Europe remembered as Yugoslavia—the country of Southern Slavs. The multi-ethnic nation used to connect several European ethnic groups of the shared Slavonic ancestry yet were divided by three major religions and mutually exclusive ethnic nationalist ideologies. The Yugoslav national project lasted seven decades under various regime types in a sensitive balance often disturbed by wars. In the 20th century alone, the territory of the former Yugoslavia saw six major wars, three cycles of ethnic cleansing and genocide, and about fifteen various states and regimes, half of which have by now collapsed and disappeared from the map. In a wider historical perspective, this Europe’s periphery has left the lesson which world history curricula ought not to overlook: how the Southern Slavs united, rose out of obscurity and then ruined themselves. In addition to that lesson, another may be developing as the world order seems to be changing. The world today is not the same as that which was formed at the end of the Cold War. Since the state arrangements in the ex-Yugoslav space have always changed and restructured in response to major changes in international order, it is likely that the Balkans will go to war again, possibly, again, in the broader context of major regional or even world wars.

As a result of the Balkan wars of the 1990s, a larger unified Yugoslav nation-state has been destroyed and replaced by seven smaller states. Each now claims a distinct nationhood and separate language, homogenizes the population ethnically and religiously within state borders, establishes a state religion, perpetuates mutually contesting interpretations of the common history, and invents numerous border crossings within the relatively small, interdependent, and naturally shared space. The dissolution cost 150,000 human lives, not counting twice as many people who have been crippled and traumatized for life. An additional several million have been forced out of their homes in the warring factions’ effort to break up multiethnic communities

aiming to create homogenous ethno-sectarian states. Headquartered at The Hague in the Netherlands, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) held 10,800 trial days, heard 4,650 witnesses, consulted 2.5 million pages of transcripts and passed 161 indictments—most of which resulted in long prison sentences for war crimes, crimes of genocide and ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

The causes of genocide and ethnic cleansing in the 20th century Balkans are not wild outbursts of ethnic or religious hatred as Western mass media used to speculate. Rather, genocide and ethnic cleansing are unavoidable maladies of ethnoreligious types of nationalism. Balkan genocides and ethnic cleansing campaigns in the 20th century were pre-planned methods for the restructuring diverse societies, which formed over many centuries into historically unprecedented ethnically and religiously homogenous states. The reason Yugoslavia was destroyed is not because it was communist and authoritarian in order to make it democratic. It was destroyed because it was a multiethnic nation-state in order to balkanize it into ethnically homogenous states most of which never sincerely wanted democracy. The Balkan ethnoreligious nationalist revolutions of the 1990s have destroyed a unique civilization. They aimed to annihilate the pluralistic social fabric consisting of culturally pluralistic communities, multiethnic cities, and millions of ethnically and religiously mixed marriages. They also targeted monuments, memorials, libraries, archeology, architecture, literature, history, and the memory of the common state and similarities among its former peoples. Portrayed by the new nationalist myths as the restoration of ethnic kingdoms originating in the Middle Ages, and therefore seen as “natural” versus the allegedly “artificial” Yugoslavia, the new states were historically unprecedented artificial constructs and hybrids of recent history. The novelty of the alleged “old nations” is evident from their new national ideologies that have mainly been constructed by the

historical revisionism of the Second World War, the Cold War, and the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

In the Balkans, legacies of imperial conquest left a heterogeneous population in a land where Eastern and Western Christianity overlap boundaries with each other and Islam. Over centuries there have emerged culturally diverse societies with the four common-language speaking Slavic ethnic nations; their close ethnic relatives are Slovenes, and several dozen ethnic minorities of which Albanians were the largest. In such a setting, no culturally homogenous ethnoreligious nation-state would be possible without tribal wars, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. Therefore, in the 19th century, positive ideologies of peaceful interethnic integration and cooperation as the path to development, national emancipation, and successful nation-building emerged. For nearly two hundred years these ideologies had been more influential than separatist ethnic nationalism, which came to the forefront only in extraordinary circumstances—such as the Nazi-fascist occupation in the Second World War when the invaders pitted the local groups against each other, and following the end of the Cold War and collapse of communism. In the end, the turmoil of post-communism and the genocidal wars of the 1990s enabled ethno-sectarian nationalisms to defeat the idea of multiethnic integration, which is unlikely to ever re-emerge in the form of a unified statehood.

Consequently, ethnic cleansing has been partly accomplished and war crimes paid off as a long-term investment. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, a homogenous Serb sub-state (called *Republika Srpska*) has been created through ethnic cleansing and genocide. The Dayton Peace Accords of 1995 legitimized it, which has largely satisfied the Serb nationalists' war aims. Bosnian Muslims, once representing an indigenous European Islam bridging the East and West, began importing foreign brands of radical Islam from Iran and Saudi Arabia. In Croatia, after the 1991-

1995 war, Croat nationalism emerged triumphant defeating a Serb separatist movement and forcing most of Croatia's native Serbs out. Meanwhile, the new Croat nationalism has grown to rival Serbian nationalism, and the two continued to hold the whole region hostage to their mutual hostility. While their states force Serbs and Croats to differ from each other as much as possible, the common language under different labels continues to work well for all, as well as the two nation-states' key similarities. These similarities include a church-state symbiosis and the type of nationalist mythology that commemorates lost battles. Finally, in the Western Balkans' southeastern pocket, the Kosovo province, Serbs have made several attempts to ethnically cleanse the majority Albanians since the early 20th century. In the end, Kosovo Albanians have succeeded to expel almost all Serbs from the land which once was the Serbian medieval empire. Like most other post-Yugoslav states, the new state of Kosovo is largely a failure. The neighboring miniature Balkan states of Montenegro and Macedonia are in no better shape (the latter living 30 years without an official internationally recognized name and under threat of partition into a Slavic and Albanian state).

In short, the Yugoslav fairy-tale from the golden age of the interethnic brotherhood and unity, socialist workers' self-management, charismatic Titoism and non-alignment turned into a nightmare. Following Snow White's death, the seven dwarfs lived unhappily ever after. Unable to keep their house neat and mine diamonds, they even forgot to sing cheerful songs. They just hated, envied, and feuded with each other. The very same nationalist ideology emphasizing the cult of the nation-state, which gave birth to post-Yugoslav ethno-clerical regimes, crippled them from the beginning. The seven smaller mutually feuding states, successors of Yugoslavia, have been unable to maintain Yugoslavia's independent status and carry on its reputation and influence in international affairs earned during the Cold War. The post-Yugoslav dwarfs have

become client states and semi-colonial domains of the great powers—Russia, Turkey, and Germany—reviving imperial appetites in the Balkan region. The new Balkan states’ political sovereignty was reduced to spheres of folklore and international sport. Economic sovereignty was never established, meaning natural and economic resources have been quickly sold to foreign banks and largely foreign private capital. Serbia and Croatia, the two principal Balkan nationalist bullies, have national institutes for history and linguistics, national pilgrimage centers, national cathedrals and national churches paid by the state but not a single large national commercial bank. Furthermore, the cult of the state as the most sacred goal for which nationalist movements mobilized people to war, became a costly burden on new societies and economies threatening to bankrupt them. Taxpayers’ money fed the new corrupt elites and parasitic classes. These include ethno-clerical nationalist parties allied with clerical elites, oversized military forces and hundreds of thousands war veterans living on lavish pensions, and war veterans organized in political lobbies to back right-wing nationalist politics and to plot authoritarian *coup d’ etats*.

While economies struggled and political corruption spread; history, myth, religion, and linguistics became priority topics in public discourse. Exhausting and absurd historical controversies, denial of war crimes and genocide, glorifying criminals as heroes, obsessions with “the negative other,” and the resentment caused by the unfair distribution of the socialist-era wealth and property have engendered moral relativism, disillusionment, and cynicism. To make the nationalist establishment even angrier, the former Yugoslavia seems to have continued life. The nostalgic cultures of memory thrive in subcultural and virtual spheres, and in a post-Yugoslav diaspora, honoring Yugoslavia’s founding anti-fascist years in the Second World War, and the golden age of socialist modernization and international non-alignment from the 1960s to

1980s. In addition, the common language of Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, and Bosnians (without an official name it's called "ours" by all) and the Yugo-nostalgic culture and memory continue to defy the invented segregation. Three decades later, the destroyed country seems revived as culture and memory connect people within the common space simply called "the region."

The post-Yugoslav nationalism is strikingly religious. As ethnic leaders show off the official religiosity, new churches and mosques have mushroomed across the region. According to the new national identities, all Serbs are presumed to be Christians of the Greek Orthodox tradition, members of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and unwavering believers in its mythical interpretations of history. The neighboring Croats are practicing Roman Catholics and must adhere to the Church's interpretations of history, most importantly of the World War II, the communist era, and of the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Likewise, Islam for Bosnian Muslims is both religion and nationality. Most importantly, the Bošniaks have to believe that the Ottoman rule in the Balkans was a blessing of a superior civilization rather than a brutal imperial conquest. Clerical elites are handsomely paid by the state. Religious instruction in public schools becomes de facto mandatory. Religious authorities take special spiritual and ideological care of the members of police and military forces—preparing them for holy wars and cleansing of alien faiths and cultures. School classes in earlier best-integrated ethnically mixed communities of Bosnia-Herzegovina have been segregated along ethnoreligious lines. Religious institutions influence educational and cultural policies and state-run media. Nationalist mythmaking is a substitute for objective historiography. The ethnoreligious hatred which poisoned multiethnic Yugoslavia has never subsided. The clerical elites who used to incite hate before and during the war never confessed to the crimes committed by members of their own group, and have not initiated interfaith and interethnic reconciliation, even of a purely ritual character.

Despite the post-Yugoslav regimes' apotheosis of the new nations as triumphant and successful, an exodus of biblical proportions followed the wars of the 1990s. Instead of cheering the theatrical show of new nationhood without substance, millions of people chose to resettle in the West. From a population of more than 23 million, according to the last all-Yugoslav census of 1991, the number of permanent residents in the ex-YU space today is probably less than 20 million. This exodus coupled with devastating demographic trends promises to resolve the Balkan conflict by natural causes. By the end of this century, the Serbs and the Croats—the two largest ethnic nations and the principal founders and destroyers of the common state, will face a near-extinction. Even if their ethnoreligious nationalists ever admitted to their responsibility for this outcome, the process will remain irreversible.

Similar to Europe after the First World War, the European Union fears *balkanization*, i.e., the violent fragmentation of larger states into smaller mutually hostile and barely viable units. Historically, the most successful European nationalisms have been those that integrated and united smaller states, autonomous regions, and diverse regional cultures and peoples to successfully create larger nation-states. Thus for example, if Germany had not united several hundred small German states into the large German nation after the Peace of Westphalia, Europe would have looked like Central America, the Middle East, or the Balkans today. England, the Netherlands, France, and Italy—among others—have also become worldly and historically important nation-states thanks to the merging and integrating of autonomous regions, and the diverse regional cultures and peoples into large nation-states. Nationalism as an ideology of modernity, and progress presupposes integration and unification of smaller states into larger states. The larger and stronger states will then pursue further expansion, economic growth, and international competition. In addition, the western European nation-formation involved a leading

role of the most developed regions. In the Netherlands—Protestant Holland and the northern provinces in Germany’s case—it was again the Protestant north, in Britain it was industrialized England, and in Italy it was the northern regions, etc. Regarding the role of religion in this original Western European nation formation, the large successful nations have emphasized secularism, religious tolerance, and the principle of church and state separation. Some of them—notably France, Germany, and Italy—even came into conflict with major religions and clerical ambitions asserting supremacy of the state.

The nation-formation in the Balkans featured the opposite of the Western European precedent. Integrations and modernizing drives struggled and failed. The most backward regions played the leading roles, religion fused with ethnicity de-secularized national ideologies, and the nation-states became sacralized as mythical irrational fantasies with no rational developmental and modernization agendas. Accordingly, if the Western European nation-building experience is called nationalism, and if the Yugoslav project tried to follow this model, then the anti-Yugoslav ethnic separatism would not qualify as nationalism. Balkanization, and the specific Balkan type of nationalism, are actually some kind of antinationalism. Tribalism or ethnic particularism, sectarianism, provincialism, and the established concept of *balkanization*, all seem more appropriate terms than nationalism. *Balkanization is the opposite of nationalism*; it denotes disintegration and destruction driven by wild passions without a vision, and it results in barely viable states and problematic constructs of nationhood.

Among these balkanizing nationalisms, the Serb-Orthodox, which is particularly ethnocentric and sectarian, has been the strongest and most influential in the Balkans. As such it has influenced and created in its own image the neighboring Croat-Catholic and Bosnian-Muslim ethnoreligious ‘nationalisms,’ not to mention Montenegrin, Macedonian, and Kosovar.

Ironically, the more they struggled to differ from each other, the more they looked the same, emulating the most hated and envied Serbs.

As a result, when the recent balkanizing tendencies spread westward, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, warned in a 2014 interview that Western countries struggling with ethnic separatism such as Spain and the United Kingdom, must do all they can to avert “the tragedy of balkanization.” The struggling states of the postwar Balkans proved the pontiff right. A Bosnian columnist has recently passed the following message to separatists in Spain: “Look at us, Catalonia! Are you sure that you want to be like us!?”

Seeking a wider socio-historic context in which the new Balkan ethnoreligious nationalism could possibly fit—while rejecting the ancient (religious and ethnic) hatreds thesis—could be the phenomenon described as the “de-secularization of the world” since the late 20th century. The process is broad and complex, yet, for example, countries which after the Second World War experimented with ambitious social modernization emphasizing socialism, secularism, and integration across ethnic and religious barriers, (e.g. Tito’s Yugoslavia, Israel prior to 1967, Nehru’s India, Indonesia, Egypt, etc.), have experienced the religious nationalistic and anti-secularist backlash from the 1970s to the present. In the case of the former Yugoslavia, the resurgent religions since the 1970s had concealed the real agenda of the interethnic and sectarian feud behind the Cold War battle cry against “godless communism.” In reality, the vengeful Yugoslav post-communist religions did not hate systemic Marxism as much as they hated the Titoist national ideology of Brotherhood and Unity, advancing interethnic harmony, ecumenical dialogue, and interfaith cooperation. Apparently, the ethno-clerical nationalists’ hatred of the idea of a peaceful multicultural and interfaith integration seems stronger than both the mutual animosity and fear of atheism.

In conclusion, there has been the noticeable influence of organized religion on recent nationalism beyond mere identity politics. Distrusted by early western nationalism, religion has proved a recyclable material. In our time, despite all the technological and scientific progress and numerous other secularizing factors, worldwide there are a number of states, nations, and regimes that can be described as theocratic, clericalist, religious-nationalistic, or strongly influenced by religion. In the case of former Yugoslavia and its successor states, religions have begun their resistance to modernity as guardians of ethnic identities and resisters to secularization. They ended up as instigators and legitimizers of massive crimes, co-creators of problematic forms of nationhood, and virtual co-rulers of failed or struggling states. Even some religious scholars have to admit that the quality of spiritual and moral life of religious believers under communism might have been better if religion had been less opulent, public, and political, and if people overall had thought less dogmatically.