THE TIPOLOGY OF THE ETHNIC CONFLICTS:
THE CASE OF THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA AND SERBIA

a) The conflicts in The Former Yugoslavia

The main conflict deriving from the breakup of former Yugoslavia can actually be regarded as a conflict of identities, based on the feeling of being endangered. This, however, does not prevent it from being perceived as an objective and real, if not rational, conflict. The exclusive nature of the conflict of identities (Self-assertion through Self-differentiation in relation to Others) substantially limits the development of conflicts based on interests and consequently the chances for a compromise.

The long-drawn-out global and structural social crisis in Yugoslavia turned into a profound political crisis, violent ethnic conflicts and bloodshed. Indeed, the recent history of Yugoslavia and Serbia provides a challenging and enlightening example for a frees understanding of conflict. The 1987-2000. Period has been one of the most turbulent in Yugoslav and Serbian political history, including such momentous events as the end of communism; the reintroduction of the multiparty system, the breakup of the SFR of Yugoslavia (“former Yugoslavia”); the civil war or wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo; the creation of new national states in the territory of former Yugoslavia establishment of a new state of Serbia and Montenegro, the FR of Yugoslavia (FR); UN sanctions and international isolation of the FRY and NATO strikes on Serbia and Montenegro; constant internal ideological conflicts, political instability and conflicts between the majority and the minority; frequent elections and governmental instability, radical changes in cultural, moral and social values and much else.

Conflicts in former Yugoslavia, a could be divided into four different types according to their degree of intensity and the parties involved:

1) Conflicts between nation-states: Conflicts of the first type include those between federal units/republics which, due to their attributes and status as nation-states, necessarily took on the properties of ethnic conflicts. In that context, the most prominent subclasses are:

(a) Direct political conflicts between Serbia and Slovenia and Serbia and Croatia, which also include latent conflict between Serbia and Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro;

(b) Open conflicts between the residual power of the federal state and federal units (in particular Slovenia, Serbia and Croatia) over the redistribution of the economic and financial burden of economic reform and the prerogatives of state authority (especially the armed forces and foreign policy) which the federal units wanted to obtain and considered necessary for the full realization
of their respective independent nation-states. This conflict was articulated in different ways depending on a number of characteristics (including, *inter alia*, regional-ethnic features);

(2) **Conflicts within the nation – state**: The second group comprises conflicts within federal units which emerged in response to the growing centralization trends within nation states. These were, in fact, conflicts among the republican authorities that tried to strengthen the processes of state centralization and ethnic homogenization, directly encouraging similar tendencies among minorities as reflected in:

(a) Demands for ethnic separation (e.g. activities of the Albanian movement, especially in Kosovo, demands for autonomy and ethnic mobilization by Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina; the ethnic mobilization of Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina; the Muslim ethno-nationalist movement in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sanjak, Serbia and Montenegro; calls for ethnic mobilization and for a separate organization for Hungarians in Vojvodina etc.);

(b) efforts to renew the political autonomy of certain regions (in Kosovo and Vojvodina), or to establish it for the first time (in Istria, within Croatia and in Slovenia).

In order to analyze these conflicts the following hypothesis could be tested: the reorganization of the public sphere and changes in governmental forms (from centralized federation to loose confederation), as well as the principles and mechanisms for the resolution of the national question, including the so-called elimination of nationalism as an instrument for the management of conflicts of interest, proved useless to the extent that they could not ensure modern development, the establishment of democracy and the preservation of the state. These conflicts shall be analyzed in greater detail in relation to the overall political conflicts among federal units.

(3) **Conflicts between ethnic communities**: As in other multiethnic communities, the main characteristic of these types of conflict is the fear of the hegemony of the most numerous and/or influential ethnic community. These conflicts often lead to divisions into irreconcilably opposing blocks. This section of the paper will pay particular attention to conflicts between Serbs and Croats and later to conflicts between Serbs and Albanians and Serbs and Muslims.

Here, the hypothesis is that we are dealing with a crisis in national identity and that any attempts to resolve it on the basis of ethno-nationalism, failed. The effects this approach to the question of national identity has had on one specific community, the Serbs, will be discussed subsequently.

(4) **Ethnic conflict in personal relations**: These are the conflicts that develop within personal relations, in everyday life. They are characterized by the domination of a collective – and thereby also national and ethnic – consciousness and identity.

The implicit hypothesis is that the domination of a collective national/ethnic consciousness and ideology as well as the overall politization of the ethnic factor (the “ethnification” of politics and social life) reflects on numerous aspects of individual life and personal relations,
including the most intimate ones. These issues will be analyzed below, in dealing with the question of ethnicity and national identity as mechanisms for ethnic mobilization.1

b) Serbian case

Two mutually related but not identical problems should be distinguished. One is the question of Serbia as a state. It is constitutionally defined as a civil state but is being developed as a national state of the Serbs.

Speaking of the Serbian nation, it is the new identity which is undergoing a crisis, i.e. the attempt to build a national identity based on ethno-nationalist standards. The decisive factor which allowed traditionalism to determine the spirit of the times in present-day Serbia and within the Serbian nation, was a combination of spontaneous popular traditionalism, oppositional “traditionalism of resistance” in which tradition serves as a symbol of political attitude, and “official traditionalism” as a reinforcement of “official nationalism”. 2 Thus, the cultural sphere developed a kind of national mythomanic kitsch reflecting megalomania and xenophobia in equal measure. 3

The crisis of national identity was also manifested as permanent division and confrontation – numerous inter-ethnic conflicts in Serbia and the FR of Yugoslavia. This paper will specifically address conflicting political-psychological stereotypes and political doctrines and institutions.

B 1) in the conflict of psychological stereotypes new stereotypes have been created and old ones strengthened.

The widespread prejudices and stereotypes prevalent in Serbia and among the Serbs reflect a deepening of the real economic, political, inter-ethnic and even exceptionally violent conflicts of psychological stereotypes, within Serbia and the Serbian nation but also in relations with others, especially competing nations and states, as well as the European and world organizations (the UN in particular). One could even say that views about Serbia and the Serbs were formed under the growing influence of stereotypes both in Serbia itself and among the Serbs, and in the world in general. The long list of misconceptions that others have of Serbia and the Serbs is in itself evidence of the propaganda-ideological needs of the regime to bring about national homogenization by “encircling Serbs and Serbia with enemies”. At the same time, the response to these stereotypes confirms the existence of strong nationalist stereotypes in the prevailing Serbian understanding of Others and the Serbian nation.

This situation has been created by persistent media and other promotion of the old Manichean dichotomy of the confronted “We” (Us), determined in value terms as the “good ones”, and “Others” who are “evil”.

Serbian nationalist populist ideology uses variations of numerous national-populist stereotypes, the most important of which are the following:

- “We are hated by the whole world”! This stereotype was created in an attempt to use emotional elements to make isolation from the world seem acceptable to the Serbs and other inhabitants of Serbia. This stereotype is also bolstered by the fact that indeed a part of world public opinion has vilified Serbs and Serbia. ⁴

Incorporated in these stereotypes is the so-called theory of conspiracy. This conspiracy against the “heavenly people” is substantiated by the allegedly centuries long efforts of numerous parties against the Serbs. Of late these include the Comintern, the Vatican, Germany, the CIA, etc. The concept of a general conspiracy against Serbia has been firmly implanted. “This theory of conspiracy” was deliberately encouraged by the authorities and the ruling party and primarily through the media and nationalist intelligentsia, with a view to adding to enhancing the ties and dependence of the masses on the nation, state and above all the Leader, to blaming the deficiencies of the regime on someone else and channeling the dissatisfaction of the citizens towards those who point out the flaws in the regime and were, most often, labeled “traitors to the nation”. ⁵ This theory served the purpose of retaining power, but also evolved into an independent national fixation;

- The insecurity felt by many people because of the crisis and the war, gave rise to concern and anxiety which grew into fear and from there into aggressiveness and various forms of hatred. This hatred was turned against Others – neighboring peoples, minorities and “national traitors”. All of this is expressed by the stereotype, “Others are impossible to live with”, the development of which was encouraged by the regime and the media it controls to facilitate a “divorce” from the Others. Thus, Serbia nationalism, just like other nationalisms on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, confirmed itself as being separatist. But, in contrast to others – primarily due to frustrations generated during life in a multi-ethnic Yugoslav state – it was concealed behind false Yugoslav rhetoric. This misled quite a few as to the true objectives of Serbian national policy and secured the support of those who would otherwise have been disinclined to embrace separatism. ⁶ Essentially, it was nationalism and needs which had not been properly articulated and therefore turned into aggression. However, since nations are forced to live together, and politics must express that requirement, it will certainly be one of the first stereotypes to be abandoned.

B 2) The sphere of conflicts of ideological doctrines reveals a fierce ideological struggle to win members of the Serbian nation for individual ideological concepts. I.e. national programmers.

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⁴This stereotype is in contradiction with another one, which is also quite widespread in Serbian public opinion, namely that Serbia and the Serbs are in “important”, “historic nation, which has always been “one the right side” and had allies (e.g. French, English, Americans and Russians). However, the recent nationalist interpretation seemingly removes this contradiction. Namely, the “Serbs emerged victorious from wars with all empires in alliance with others. It seems that this is where an important reason for the present vilification of Serbia should be sought. It is planned revenge on the part of the mighty towards a small country exercised at a moment they found favourable” (Prvoslav Ralic, “Srbija je hegemonistička i ekspasionistička zemlja”, Recnik zabluda, A. Dictionary of Misconceptions, Ministarstvo za informacije Srbije, Beograd, 1994, p. 80).
⁶ That delusion was exceptionally effective in the first stage of Milosevic’s rule and in winning for him the support of the Army.
Throughout the development of Serbian civil society various views on society and the nation, its social and national achievements have been expressed in Serbia. However, there is a permanent line of thought – the Serbian nation emerged from the struggle for liberation with distinct elements of social revolution and sees in the continuation of the revolution its national transformation. Reforms and gradual changes are of secondary interest.

Ever since the time the Serbian nation had through national revolution raised the question of completing its liberation and state unification, two mutually conflicting national programmes have had the greatest influence. They could, in most general terms, be defined as programmes, which treat the national issue as problems of the state and of democracy respectively. These two programmes are characterized by the syntagma: “Two Serbias”.

The modern syntagma of “Two Serbias” has acquired predominantly political prefixes. The central point of difference between the ‘two Serbias” is the struggle for power. However, there is a still deeper dichotomy than one of political prefixes. This is the transition from a patriarchal into a modern society, which is always painful and controversial, time-consuming and unpredictable.

While the first option builds national identity on a single cultural pattern which defines ethnic entities without erasing their specificity, the other pattern bases identity on the national state as the foundation of national sovereignty with internal homogenization (within the nation) and opposition to the exterior (Other ethnic groups and nations) including a characteristic revival of the mythical heritage. This other option of regarding the question as one of state territory became topmost, demanding expansion of the mother-state to the envisaged ethnic borders. Thus, it is not a question of what kind of a state it would be, but rather how large it would grow. This option predominant in the history of the Serbian nation prevailed once again. The majority of the intellectual and political elite of Serbia favored it. One of the best-known supporters of this option is Dobrica Cosic, called by many people “the spiritual father of the Serbian nation”.

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7 This came, among other things, from the fact that in the 19th and 20 the centuries the Serbian nation existed in several states, some of which were initially vassal and thereafter-sovereign national states, while others were foreign (the Hapsburg and Osmanli states). At the same time, national consciousness and feelings were expressed in various strata of the underdeveloped or semi-developed civil society as well as in patriarchal communities (Andrej Mitrovic, “Nekoliko teza o uslovima I mogucnostima prucavanja I razvitka srpske nacije”, in: Nastavak I razvitak srpske nacije. Marksisticki centar CKSK Srbije, Beogra, 1978, pp. 14,15.

8 Dr Miroslav R. Djordjevic, Srpska nacija u gradjanskom drustvu, Marksisticka misao, Beogra, 2/80, p. 169.

9 The syntagma of two Serbias was first used by the leader of Serbian social democracy Dimitrije Tucovic on the occasion of demonstrations by 12 thousand Belgrade workers, in December 1910. He was, at that time, referring to bourgeois and proletarian Serbia.


12 Cosic changed his explication of the role of the nation as the key political actor from “integral Yugoslavism” to pan-Serbian unification (Branišlav Milosevic, “Mene i ciljev Dobrice Cosica”, Pogledi, Split, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1989). Seeking to define the “substance of the Serbian question” in Yugoslavia in 1968. Cosic linked the renewal of the “Old historical objective and national ideal – unification of the Serbian nation into a single state” to “bureaucratic and petty-bourgeois elements”. He particularly criticized so-called “Serbianism” which he saw as an “essentially primitive and anachronism political mentality”, i.e. a vision of Serbia stretching from Uzice to Zemun” which in addition to other consequences, inaugurated an infamous personel policy “according to native affinities and criteria” (Dobrica Cosic, Stvarno I moguce, Otokar Kersovani, Ljubljana – Zagreb, 1988, pp. 31, 34, 35.
The nationalist intelligentsia, from the already mentioned Memorandum of the Serbian Academy, to the Congress of Serbian Intellectuals, generally accepted ideas similar to Cosic’s. These ideas were in April 1991. Incorporated by the Initiating Committee for the establishment of the Serbian National Council, into the draft Declaration on Serbian National Unity which had one basic demand: “a single state for all Serbs”.

This idea of a “Greater Serbia” spread myth-like throughout Serbia and the Serbian nation in the period 1992-94, particularly in the form of a belief that the unification of all Serbs in a single state was only a matter of days.13 The programme of unification of the Serbian nation need not have Greater Serbian, nationalistic overtones if it results from the cohesive needs accompanying the creation and development of any nation, including the Serbian.14 Even the idea of Serbia as the “mother country” – a home base for all Serbs – does not, in itself, lack legitimacy. But there is no doubt that Serbia, led by an elite obsessed by the idea of the union of Serbian lands, cannot provide that base. Actually, in its efforts to achieve union, the present Serbia has weakened and isolated itself so much that it seems unable to resolve even its own problems. In effect, it is clear that the basis of the concept of a Greater Serbia (“Greater” state or nation) is that of a totalitarian state. Reasons against the idea of a “Greater Serbia” include the following: the Serbian people do not have the demographic potential to “cover” the area of the new Serbian state as envisaged; the Serbs would be a minority and the state would find itself exposed to permanent ethnic and religious tensions.15 Implementation of this programmes has adverse effects in two basic field of action: first, it advocates statehood within a national framework at a time and under circumstances when this framework has already become limited, leading to localism and parochialism; and secondly, since basically nationalism is not in interest of groups which can carry out modernization, it obstructs social structuring and interest stratification on new bases, which is the only way to overcome the collectivist pattern of socialist society. Actually, in multi-ethnic societies (such as Serbia – FRU) “patriotic” mobilization precludes strengthening the formal equality of citizens.16

(1) Already at the time of the elections in 1991. (Political parties and blocs, institutions of power, etc.) became increasingly sharp, primarily over control of centers of political, financial and military-police power, as well as the political rights of individuals and groups.17 Underlying this is an even more serious

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13 In that respect Milosevic and the SPS enjoyed the support of the opposition until 1993. However, during 1993 a part of the “moderate” nationalist opposition started to gradually distance itself from this idea. In 1994 open conflict in Serbia broke out between the SPS and radical Serbian nationalism embodied in the former SPS ally, the Serbian Radical Party of Vojislav Seselj. By opposing the radicals, the regime sought to detach itself from the war-mongering programme it had initiated itself and used to reinforce its rule in Serbia, and to transfer to Seselj and his followers the burden of the responsibility for the war and war crimes. This turning away from the war-mongering policy meant separating from those political factors among the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia who were not able to follow in their steps or believed that the policy of war should be continued so as to establish a union of Serbian states. The first conflict of this kind with the SDS of Srpska Krajina and Milan Babic ended in the victory of Milosevic and imposition of “people loyal to Belgrade”, Martic and Mikelic as presidents of Krajina and its government respectively. After that, during the Second Congress of Serbian Intellectuals official policy and the media were noticeably restrained. In the summer of 1994. a new conflict broke out with the SDS of Republika Srpska concerning (non) acceptance of peace solutions proposed by the so-called Contract Group.
17 A particularly grave problem in this respect is the unresolved question of the army, which retains autonomous status, both in relation to the public and parliament; is primarily a political factor outside the legal system, i.e. a
problem. Serbia and the FRY are, in fact, states with a “divided personality”: on the one hand, the old institutions – presently under the influence of the voluntarism and subjectivism of the leader and the nationally defined Serbian interest – are crumbling, while on the other there is the newly emerging state – the FR of Yugoslavia which is incapable of defining itself. Actually, the FRY is an incompletely formed social and state community. This state is, just like many other countries in Eastern Europe, presently undergoing the process of its political constitution and search for legitimacy. Along with that, the FRY, is, today, caught in between the incomplete disintegration of (the former) Yugoslavia and emerging of new states.

(2) Conflict at the internal territorial-political level, combined with the ethnic element, has also become evident. Kosovo and the Albanian population are almost completely outside the control and influence of Serbia. There are difficulties in containing the situation in Sandzak, and the authorities are having problems maintaining control problem of maintain control in certain parts of Vojvodina. The question of the status of these parts as well as the actual authorities, economic powers and meeting of social and individual needs at the local level is increasingly intense. Within that framework, the question of minorities and the conflict between the majority (represented by the state authority and minorities come to the fore. These conflicts are, most often, focused on the status and protection of minority rights.

The national minority problem is tied up with interethnic relations within Serbia itself but also with relations with other countries. Indeed, the fate of the minorities is linked to certain wider and even regional solutions (starting from the solution for relations between the newly created states on the territories of (the former Yugoslavia to Central-European and Balkan integration). In view of the gravity of the problem and the fact that, in the territory of Serbia, virtually anyone can, at a particular territorial level, find himself in the position of a minority, the resolution of this problem will have a direct impact on Serbia’s emergence from the shadows of the past into a stage of democratisation and modernization, although the moves made by the minorities are also important. However, a particular problem is found in the fact that most political parties do not pay due attention to the problems of living with “others”.

factor with its own parallel legal system. The army is, therefore, one of the main motors of hyperinflation and unpredictability in political developments. The army also is a direct channel for Serbian participation in the war.

18 Just like many other terms, this one also has different meanings and synonyms. There are some who call this state the “Rump Yugoslavia”, while others refer to it only by the names of its members, i.e. “Serbia and Montenegro”. In both cases it is implied that this creation emerged out of the disintegration of the former state and is not recognized by international law. Furthermore, this term is, whenever possible used to suggest something derived from nationalism, aggression, war, wartime devastation and atrocities and therefore unacceptable. However, for the purpose of this paper, this and other terms will be used as defined in the existing constitutional acts.

19 The position towards the former Yugoslavia is contradictory: on the one hand, the political authorities of Serbia, seeking to secure for themselves and the FRY the “automatic international recognition”, although it would not acknowledge that Serbia has left the framework of Yugoslavia, still invokes continuity with the state in the FRY Constitution and at the same time notes the voluntary association of Serbia and Montenegro (Dr Dragoljub Petrovic, “Drzavno-pravni polozaj Srbije krajem XX veka”, in: Srbija u modernizacijskim procesima XX veka, Institut za noviju istoriju, Beograd, 1994, p. 186


The Serbian–Albanian conflict has numerous characteristics of an interethnic confrontation and is a serious challenge to the integrity of Serbia. Its actors and their behaviour have been “ethnified”. As it essentially revolves around the status of Albanians and control over the territory of Kosovo, this conflict could be called a “realistic social conflict”. It is a conflict between the majority (which has opted for isolation) and the minority (which has chosen separatism), wherein both sides aim at the attainment of pan-ideas (Greater Serbia and Greater Albania).  

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