

KOSOVO: THE VIEW FROM SERBIA

Whilst the attitude of most Serbs and Serb politicians towards Kosovo's independence may be relatively homogenous (according to the latest polls, 94% of Serbs are against Kosovo's independence), we can identify four main trends within their reactions to Kosovo's recent secession. The popular response to Kosovo's declaration of independence has been characterised by a mixture of two dominant discourses; these may be broadly categorised as the emotional and the pragmatic. The former is vividly articulated by Vojislav Kostunica, and the latter by Boris Tadic. Although these are essentially contrasting discourses they occasionally overlap. These two dominant discourses are supplemented by the minority rational discourse of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the more moderate, slightly more pragmatically-oriented discourse of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) – although this still contains a substantial emotional component.

In the current pre-election phase and context of political competition, Kosovo is likely to become a central electoral issue. However, although most Serbs are against Kosovan independence, how significant is Kosovo as a voter issue, and on what level?

Recent polls have suggested that if the Serbian voters had a choice of voting only between the options of a 'coalition for the defence of Kosovo' or a 'coalition for a European Serbia', 44% would choose the Kosovo coalition and 39% the European Serbia coalition. The results are very closely split, and illustrate the complexity of the Kosovo debate in Serbia.

So far, Serbian reactions to Kosovo's independence have highlighted that it is not just the fate of Kosovo that is at stake, but also a sense of injustice stemming from Serbia's perceived mistreatment by the international community.

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Three boys waving flags in front of the poster of Tomislav Nikolic

How the parties attempt to restore Serbia's pride after the mistreatment it has (in the view of many Serbs at least) suffered at the hands of the international community and avoid accusations of 'selling out' to the EU, all refracted through the issue of Kosovo, is likely to influence a large proportion of voters on 11 May.

Who protested and why

The mass rally in Belgrade on 21 February protesting against Kosovo's independence, supported by the government, was relatively peaceful, until a breakaway group attacked the US embassy and several others. Most western media covering the events focused on the violent protests and their nationalist overtones. Indeed, the view within Serbia itself is that the hooligans who set the US embassy on fire were mostly youths who belonged to various active far-right groups such as Obraz. The problem is that thanks to violence and

looting on the part of the far-right groups, Serbs voicing their opposition to Kosovo independence have yet again been tainted with the image of the kind of atavistic militant nationalism associated with the Milosevic era.

Owing to the similarity of the discourses of President Tadic and Prime Minister Kostunica (as well as the SRS), the Serb response to Kosovo's declaration of independence is widely perceived to be homogenous, i.e. nationalist, refusing to give up Kosovo on the basis of widely-held notions of Serbian history and the myth of Kosovo as the cradle of Serbian identity. However, the Serb reaction is not quite so uniform as it may initially appear, nor is it based purely on irrational reactions and historical and national mythology.

First of all, many of the protestors who took to the streets were protesting for different reasons. The older generation who believe in the Kosovo-as-heart-of-Serbia ideal, were protesting on these nationalist grounds. The younger, more liberal and better-educated generations, who were not necessarily concerned with Kosovo as a Serbian issue, were protesting against what they perceived to be US imperialism or disregard for international law. A surprisingly large number of people in this group are in principle indifferent to Kosovo independence but are unhappy about the way in which independence was achieved and supported. These actors, who could have been mobilised to establish new, alternative discourses *vis-à-vis* independence, have now been alienated by the international community.

The meaning of Kosovo

Kosovo has always been an issue which has managed to unite people across disparate political convictions and agendas – for example, both the SRS and the Democratic Party (DS) are opposed to Kosovo's independence). Where does its power to mobilise people lie? Many analysts have asserted that in the 1980s and 1990s Milosevic used the Kosovo myth to 'convert' Serbs to his brand of nationalism, thus giving both Milosevic and Kosovo unilateral mobilising powers without considering what the social and cultural conditions were which made such nationalist myths so potent.

Kosovo does carry weight as a cultural myth, and it is indeed seen as an historically integral part of Serbia and, by extension, of Serbian identity. However, the idea of Kosovo being the ancient 'heartland of Serbian civilisation' would have perhaps remained at the innocuous level of a folk narrative, had the last two decades not been interpreted by Serbs as a string of events aimed at the ongoing dissolution first of Yugo-

slavia and then of Serbia, culminating ultimately in the loss of Kosovo itself. Since cultural myths constantly evolve, Kosovo has been invested with a new, contemporary meaning as well. That meaning has ceased to be only about Kosovo itself and its significance for Serbia but now extends to the issue of the Serbians' perceived mistreatment by the 'international powers'. Thus, much like Mladic, Kosovo is a symbol and a repository for collective negative feelings rooted in a sense of injustice that has accumulated over the last two decades. Both have been reduced to symbols – many Serbs do not care about Mladic himself, but rather about what the hunt for Mladic symbolises (the prevalent view is that the ICTY exists solely as a tribunal targeting the Serbs; that a disproportionately large number of Serbs have been indicted etc). Similarly, whilst Kosovo has been mythologised as 'the heart of Serbia', most people do not think of it in that way but rather dwell on the 'unfair' way in which Kosovo was 'stolen' by the international community on behalf of the Albanians (as the current popular interpretation of events sees it). Thus, from being the focus of a cultural myth of Serbian origins, Kosovo has developed into the vehicle of a cultural myth of injustice and mistreatment suffered by Serbians.

Rather than reflecting an irrational tendency to interpret world events in terms of conspiracy theories, this current meaning attached to Kosovo reflects the contemporary Serbian cultural and political context. As such, it points (as all conspiratorial belief does) to a disenfranchised and marginalised society imbued with feelings of powerlessness.

What ordinary citizens tend to believe is incredibly powerful on a local level because it is rooted in beliefs and attitudes that are deeply embedded in Serbian culture and indeed in the Serbian national psyche. Thus, Serbia now faces a situation where most people are aware of the impossibility of retaining Kosovo as a part of Serbia (having resigned themselves to its independence), but at the same time, protest against the idea on ideological and cultural grounds. Most people in Serbia have in fact long been resigned to the inevitability of Kosovo independence, understanding the need of a people to claim their own territory and national identity. However, the problem is that this is happening in their own 'space', and so the Serbs have reacted much in the same way as any other ethnic group would have done in such circumstances: by protesting. The problem arises when analysts place this protest in the stereotyped framework of Balkan nationalism; i.e. if Serbs are protesting against Kosovo independence, it must be to do with their nationalist obsession of clinging to the past and reviving old glories. Whilst there are certainly nationalist elements at work, framing the Serb response only within the nationalist context ob-

scures other more subtle aspects of what is going on.

Deeply embedded popular beliefs implicitly set the limits of the ‘thinkable’ and the ‘sayable’, which is why certain discourses are more resonant with dominant cultural beliefs in Serbia (e.g. the viewpoints of Kostunica), while others are positioned as ‘traitor’ narratives being seen to lie outside the boundaries of what is culturally acceptable (e.g. parties supporting Kosovo independence). Popular belief of this nature shapes politics rather than the other way around; Kostunica and Tadic often draw on such beliefs in order to preserve power and popularity.

For instance, even though the Serbian public displays a great capacity for rational approaches and reactions to Kosovo independence, when a marginal political party or NGO attempts to introduce a view that runs contrary to ‘the accepted wisdom’ (in this case, pro-Kosovo independence) it is immediately vilified as a ‘traitor’ and as propagating a ‘foreign mercenary’ version of events. These are the same labels which have been systematically applied to ICTY supporters and prosecutors, witnesses and NGOs dealing with issues of facing the past.

This illustrates that such opposing beliefs are relegated to ‘outsider’ status because they are seen as anti-Serb, as falling outside of what is regarded as the limit of the culturally acceptable. Even though many people would privately admit that pro-Kosovo independence advocates are ‘right’, it is considered taboo to announce so openly, because popular attitudes and beliefs, both culturally and politically, dictate otherwise.

It is often ignored that the polarised political debate (e.g. democratic versus nationalist, pro-European versus isolationist), simplified according to camps and sides, is not often reflected in the same way on the ground. Therefore, understanding how key cultural myths such as Kosovo are interpreted and help shape opinions, frameworks, discursive strategies and responses, can help us understand not only the scope of the Kosovo debate in Serbia, but also the best ways of harnessing the rationalist discourses which also exist alongside the emotional, nationalist ones.

Political responses to Kosovo independence

Kostunica and the emotional response

As outlined above, the two dominant types of response to Kosovo independence have been clearly represented by Tadic and Kostunica. Their position has always been that both see Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia and regard its independence as illegal: but they have dif-

fered in terms of their ideas about how the situation should be resolved. They also differed in the speeches and reactions that they gave immediately after Kosovo’s declaration of independence. Kostunica exemplified the emotive, reactionary response, posturing on the high moral ground, whilst the more pragmatic Tadic drew on the legality debates.

Kostunica, as the barometer of Serbian popular opinion, embodies and plays upon prevalent attitudes and beliefs in Serbia. His responses to such issues as the ICTY and Kosovo resonate with what most ordinary Serbs think and feel, even if they do not necessarily support him or agree with him on other issues. He does not change or directly influence public opinion but merely draws upon the beliefs which are already widely held among the Serbian population. His views, which include elements of conspiracy theory, are based on the popular beliefs which Serbs hold about themselves: their belief in Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia; their innocence in the entire matter; their perceived mistreatment by the West, and in general, their lack of responsibility regarding the loss of the province. Such views are not only a part of the national mythology but are also expected responses of any community or group – no nation, given the choice, will portray itself as a culprit, or willingly give up a part of its territory.

Kostunica did not offer solutions or attempt to calm the tempers of many Serbs. Rather, his response was rooted in the traditional, self-righteous ‘victim syndrome’ which drew heavily on what can broadly be labelled conspiracy theory in order to blame the international community for Kosovo’s independence. This angle was emphasised in the causal linkages that he drew between the 1999 NATO airstrikes and Kosovo independence. Immediately after the declaration of independence Kostunica stated:

The unilateral proclamation of a phoney state under the patronage of the US and EU represents the final act of a policy of force that started with aggression and the insane bombardment of Serbia and then continued with the arrival of NATO troops in Kosovo-Metohija. Never before has the truth been clearer as to why Serbia was savagely destroyed by NATO bombs as it is clear today on February 17. The real foundations of the phoney state are the bombs that NATO used to destroy Serbia. This is why the real truth needs to be told, that it is the military interests of NATO that are behind this phoney state. (Kostunica’s address to the citizens of Serbia after Kosovo declaration of independence, 17 February 2008.)

The short extract is illustrative of most of Kostunica’s statements made after the declaration of independence. Two trends are evident: Kostunica’s insistence on

and repetition of 'real' and 'truth' and the strategy of blame/self-victimhood. The exaggerated emphasis on 'real truths' is a direct continuation of his rhetoric of 1999 and 2000, where he constantly claimed that there existed another, 'real reason' for NATO airstrikes. Such discourses, which hint at the possibility of 'something else' going on behind the scenes and ulterior motives, and which establish causality between elements that are not necessarily linked (e.g. Kosovo and US military 'interests'), is a classic example of conspiracy theory discourse. In this case, it serves to highlight US involvement in suspect independence movements; suggesting even more suspect military aims – with NATO airstrikes being cited as 'evidence'. Kostunica's conspiratorial discourse attributes the blame for independence to the US and EU (an independence which serves their interests), whilst entirely ignoring the actual problems Kosovo has faced and which led up to its independence. In the extract quoted above, no mention is made of the Albanian population who initially called for independence; of course, no mention is made either of the unrest in Kosovo which led to the NATO airstrikes; and there is an endeavour to portray Serbia's role in the whole affair as entirely passive.

As noted earlier, conspiratorial discourses illustrate more than just belief – rather, they suggest quite a lot about the cultural context which produces them. In this case, Kostunica is merely exploiting the sense of disenfranchisement and powerlessness many Serbs have felt since the 1990s, feeling that most political events have been beyond their control (feelings confirmed twice over when the debate over the questionable legality of NATO airstrikes and Kosovo independence did not prevent either from taking place). Kostunica's rhetoric is all the more powerful – and gains added public legitimacy – because it is based on accepted popular belief and resonates across all the major political parties (including the SRS) and such established and respected institutions as the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Other than demonstrating that the cultural myth of Kosovo has now evolved into a conspiratorial myth of Serb mistreatment, victimhood and blamelessness, Kostunica's position on Kosovo contains nothing in terms of offering a diplomatic solution to the Kosovo issue. However, his conspiracy theory-fuelled discourse is very popular among large sections of society because most people are primarily concerned with identifying (outside) culprits for what is widely perceived as a cultural and historical injustice. Kostunica also draws on Serbian popular belief so successfully that he makes conspiracy theories sound like reasonable interpretations of the Kosovo crisis (much as he did during the NATO airstrikes).

Although this kind of rhetoric plays on patriotic emo-

tions and widely-held beliefs with regard to Kosovo, and although there is a tendency towards victimhood among large sections of the population, it would be a mistake to see this as the only tendency. The Kosovo declaration of independence did not come as a surprise to many Serbs, who had anticipated this act for at least two decades; most having understood that Kosovo was 'lost' with Milosevic, and learning to see it as a part of foreign territory ever since UNMIK took over its administration. Many have also come to terms with the fact that an Albanian majority exists in Kosovo and with its wish for independence. Many ordinary Serbs and commentators have already pointed out that Kostunica's rhetoric about Kosovo is frighteningly similar to Milosevic's stance on the same issue in the 1980s and 1990s. Many Serbs, even though they essentially agree with the viewpoint put forward by Kostunica, do not wish to see a return to the political and cultural atmosphere of the Milosevic era. Having seen the kind of politics that this emotive rhetoric brings with it, people are now much more cautious and are already being critical, which is why Kostunica is not likely to sweep the population along with him into a militant response to Kosovo independence.

In terms of the upcoming elections, this may lead to surprising results. Kostunica and DSS (The Democratic Party of Serbia) supporters may still feel strongly attached to Kosovo but nevertheless many want to 'move on' from the Milosevic-style politics that have held Serbia back for so long. In a way, notwithstanding the unresolved issue of ICTY cooperation on Mladic, Kosovo is the final painful issue that Serbs have had to deal with, and the last remnant of the Milosevic past. Thus although many still feel that 'Kosovo is Serbia' and will not negotiate on the issue, and whilst Kosovo still does matter as a voter issue, it is no longer enough for politicians to indulge in belligerent rhetoric. The public is quite clear that they want either a move away from the politics of the past, or a resolution of the Kosovo issue, two options offered by the DS and the SRS.

Tadic and the pragmatic response

Boris Tadic and the DS are against independence too, and their initial response was just as emotional as that of Kostunica, but they have approached the issue and reacted in a rather more restrained, diplomatic way, opting for the path of pragmatism. Tadic's responses from the start were focused on the (contested) legality of Kosovo's declaration of independence and appeals were made on the basis of Serbia's sovereignty. In a letter to Ban Ki-Moon, Tadic stated: 'it is evident that the secessionist move by the Assembly of Kosovo is an attempt to bypass the Security Council and unilaterally

impose a solution.’ He then appealed to the Council to ‘unambiguously reconfirm that the fundamental principles of the Charter of the United Nations and international law have universal validity’, asking member states of the UN to ‘fully respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia, in accordance with their obligations under international law, the UN charter and UN Security Resolution 1244’.

Tadic’s arguments can be seen as a step away from the reactionary politics of Kostunica, whose discourse marks a return to the kind of rhetoric peddled by Serbian politicians in the 1990s. The problem is that, given the political climate and national sense of grievance, no Serbian politician has been able to afford to break completely with this kind of discourse. Tadic’s arguments and statements find a wide consensus among the Serbian public, but compared to Kostunica’s highly-charged emotional appeals, they appear banal. In a moment of cultural crisis, Serbs are much more moved by emotional rhetoric than by dry speeches based on legal arguments, and many saw Tadic’s failure to attend the 21 February protest as a failure of leadership. Thus, Tadic is caught between appeals to popular public opinion based on the politics of Serbian cultural myths, and attempts at being a genuine statesman. Exactly the same tension is present in the coalition itself.

On the other hand, in the context of the elections, the strength of Tadic and the DS is that they are attempting to solve the Kosovo issue using any legal and diplomatic means at their disposal. Whilst Kostunica’s emotional rhetoric may have held strong appeal in the immediate aftermath of independence, by election time it is likely to have worn thin, especially as in comparison to the Tadic and DS standpoint, it offers nothing but a further stalling of any real resolutions. The Serbian public is under no illusion that, even with Kostunica and the DSS in power, there exists a possibility of revoking Kosovo independence. The public, while reluctant to admit the loss of Kosovo and its cultural legacy, is slowly shifting its concerns from the ideology of Kosovo to the more pertinent problems of Kosovo Serbs, potential IDPs, and their own future in Europe should Kostunica remain in power.

Whilst Tadic and the DS offer some solutions to these problems with their pro-European politics, their diplomatic and excessively abstract solutions to the Kosovo issue are eclipsed by the more radical and emotive appeal of the SRS.

The SRS and the alternative view

The SRS curiously straddle a middle ground between Kostunica and Tadic when it comes to Kosovo. Their starting point is, of course, that Kosovo is a part of Serbia but they have recently toned down their insistence on this fact. In a March 2008 press conference, Aleksandar Vucic concentrated on the inability of the current government to bring about change and have any impact on the Kosovo situation (according to the SRS, due to high levels of corruption). In a second press conference condemning the actions of UNMIK in Mitrovica, the core of Vucic’s complaint was the plight of Kosovo Serbs. Thus, from reactionary rhetoric, the SRS have moved on to identifying on-the-ground problems. The SRS hold an additional appeal, as they often exploit ideas of Serbia’s mistreatment by the West and similar conspiracies, in the same vein as Kostunica. They thus hold the emotional appeal of Kostunica, whilst focusing on more pertinent ‘real’ problems (such as the economy and people’s standards of living) much more than Tadic, whose discourse on resolutions and sovereignty appears abstract in comparison.

In the elections, the SRS are likely to garner votes from the disillusioned Tadic/DS supporters (they have given him a chance but the promised changes have not come about) and the tired Kostunica/DSS supporters for whom Kosovo is still an emotional issue but who see Kostunica’s rhetoric as somewhat lacklustre in comparison to the SRS, who have succeeded in projecting a much more dynamic image.

The policies of the SRS however, would severely slow down EU accession, as their stance regarding the EU is ‘EU membership but only with Kosovo’. The SRS may compromise EU accession but only at the expense of issues with which the Serbian public is more immediately concerned (economic problems for instance). In addition, like many previous promises made by the DS, EU membership is already seen as a failed project, or as a prospect which is so remote that it holds no immediate significance.

Additionally, in a cultural and political context, the SRS’ ‘EU accession but on our terms’ standpoint is seen as a welcome alternative to Tadic’s attempts to curry favour with the international actors held responsible for Kosovo independence. As one of the main problems attached to the broad issue of Kosovo is in fact Serbia’s perceived mistreatment, the Radicals seem to be offering the only option for the reaffirmation of Serbia’s national pride (augmented by promises of non-cooperation with the ICTY). In the context of the elections, the Radicals, in short, seem to be offering the

best of both options: an insistence on national values and Kosovo, but with a dynamism and different focus (i.e. on economics and 'the people') which help obscure the fact that this too is a return to the politics of the 1990s.

In the face of such populist SRS discourses, Kostunica appears *passé* and Tadic simply too bland. In addition, it is hardly surprising that the real rational views on Kosovo, such as those held by the LDP, have very little support. The LDP supports independence, and thus contradicts all dominant cultural and national beliefs. They have always been an 'outsider' party because of this and the culturally unpopular views they hold cannot, in the current cultural context, gain widespread support.

Challenges for the EU

One of the results of the widespread bitterness over the Kosovo issue is the increasingly negative attitude towards the EU, which is seen as a part of the 'international community' which facilitated Kosovo independence. Recent polls suggest that 51% of the population has a negative opinion of the EU (and 79% have a negative opinion of the US). In the current political climate, in which the idea of accession to EU membership is being manipulated by certain political parties and indeed being used as a 'political football' in some quarters, the EU's room for manoeuvre is very limited..

Serbs now also believe that issues of legality do not seem to hold much weight with the international community, thus 'proving' that the international community is not favourable towards Serbia. This is a vicious cycle. In the climate of crisis in which it is all too easy to manipulate popular belief, it becomes even easier to add 'evidence' to existing conspiracy theories. If the Serbs believed that the international community has been against them ever since the 1990s (citing as evidence the outcome of the wars, the ICTY trials, the NATO airstrikes), they are even more inclined to think so now – making the rhetoric of Kostunica and the Radicals, rather than Tadic's rhetoric, even more resonant and appealing. The Serbs perceive their protest as rational and as having a solid basis; to have it disregarded proves bias towards Albanians and (since many Serbs express surprise as to why the US would support 'another Albanian state' in the Balkans) further fuels the belief that 'there is something else' going on in the background. Such acts are misinterpreted by popular opinion; anger over Kosovo is misdirected; facts are distorted, and thanks to a general sense of powerlessness to change the situation, belief in ulterior motives as the most plausible explanation for US/EU actions flourishes.

Such an attitude, legitimised by not only Kostunica but by the SRS and even the Serbian Orthodox Church, may, in the short term, lead to a further lack of cooperation with the ICTY. Even though the issues of the ICTY and Kosovo are by no means connected, they are regarded as being a part of the same problem (i.e. the unfair treatment of Serbia). In addition, many are likely to feel an increased hostility or resistance to Europe, especially since Tadic used this as his election platform. Responses from Belgrade have suggested that the DS election platform and suggestions of visa liberalisation have been used to 'sugar-coat' Kosovo's independence which was perceived as 'engineered' by the international community with the full cooperation of the DS.

On the other hand, understanding the wide-ranging nature of the rationalist response to the Kosovo issue, and the resignation many have felt over the loss of Kosovo, can help us understand the potential spaces for change. Emotional reactions are likely to be short-lived. Such reactions are relatively normal in the context of severe cultural trauma, and in any case, are not sustainable in terms of the energy required to keep them going. Most Serbs are not likely to ever agree with Kosovo independence but most are likely – once the crisis has died down – to accept its status and shift the focus of their attention to the welfare of the remaining Kosovo Serbs and preservation of cultural monuments.

Understanding the full complexity of attitudes towards the European Union and the international community depends on understanding the intricate interplay between conspiratorial ideas of Europe as the enemy and the desire and aspiration towards European standards. These are two diametrically opposed notions of Europe which must find a way of being reconciled if the Serbs are ever to see eye-to-eye with the EU over the Kosovo issue.

It is important to recognise the different discourses and responses which exist within Serbia, because to conflate them as a homogenous 'nationalist' Serb response would be to oversimplify the scale of the Kosovo problem. Similarly, ignoring the more pragmatic elements which exist would be to ignore the scope for potential change. Needless to say, the current turbulent reactions, expressed in both violent and peaceful protests, are 'knee-jerk' reactions to what is effectively a deep cultural and political crisis. As such, they are likely to be short-lived. Rather than focusing on what such nationalist and violent responses may mean, a more constructive approach would be to monitor alternative (non-nationalist) discourses, map the areas which have potential for change and give them legitimacy.