Milovan Subotić[*]

Institute for Strategic Research, University of Defence, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia

CONFRONTING IDENTITIES IN THE BALKANS
AS A SECURITY CHALLENGE[**]

Abstract

Identity, whether national/ethnic, religious/confessional, or cultural, is one of the key determinants by which an individual or community defines who they are, what they are part of, and/or what they believe in. However, although identity determination plays a significant role in building community and belonging, it can also become a source of instability, which is especially pronounced in multiethnic and multiconfessional societies. Tensions increase when different identities are placed in a confrontational relationship and used for political manipulation. History is replete with examples in which differences in identity have triggered wars, mass suffering, and social divisions. If identity is presented as untouchable and monolithic, or when it is perceived as exclusive and unchangeable, it manifests itself as a primary factor of constant instability. The example of the dissolutive processes in the former Yugoslavia, from the beginning of the 90s, in the name of identity differences, is the most blatant one. The consequences of this antagonism are still present today, in the third decade since the end of the complicated conflicts in this area. The survival of the rhetoric from the 90s continues to lead to radicalization, the strengthening of populism, and efforts to impose the identity policies of the countries here as a first-class political issue. Starting from the basic assumptions of identity as a confronting category, the paper analyzes the survival of conflict rhetoric in the former Yugoslavia, which is still based on "irreconcilable identity

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differences", that is, what impact does the "truth" established in this way have on the political and security stability of the region.

Keywords: Balkans, identities, conflicts, propaganda, security.

INTRODUCTION

Across all societies, people interact with each other, regardless of their level of development and organization. These interactions are primarily observed through the sphere of human movements – migration (Subotić 2022), as Anthony Giddens believes, through images transmitted through the media and the Internet (Giddens 2003, 283). Some accept this cultural complexity as an essential part of a cosmopolitan society. Others see it as a danger and threat "to cultural identities and the welfare system" (Matijašević and Todorović 2024, 50). Those who maintain fundamentalist worldviews seek refuge in established traditions and reject dialogue with those who are different (Giddens 2003, 284).

Prejudice and stereotypes are often the stepping stones in creating the negative image of Otherness. If prejudices are based on uncritical thinking, stereotypes can be defined as templates that always give the same image. Stereotypes, analyzed from a historical perspective, appear as irrefutable arguments, persistently maintained and difficult to correct (Milosavljević 2022, 21). Stereotyping functions as a mechanism in forming a discourse on Otherness, wherein it reduces a person to a simplified figure, or it reduces them to several characteristics, to a streamlined figure representing a people's essence. According to Hall, a stereotype is a one-sided description that arises when complex differences are reduced to one-dimensional representations, which are further attributed to a subject and then become evidence that defines the essence of their being (Hol 2018, 55). Gilman points out that stereotypes are also characterized by dualism, which divides people into pairs of opposite meanings (good and bad). "The deep structure of our self and the world rests on an illusory image of the world divided into two camps of us and them – good or bad" (Gilman 1985, 84).

As the most collectively exposed of all identity characteristics, national stereotypes represent exemplars of their social categorization. Since they encourage generalization, they enable the perception of an entire group (usually another nation) as individuals with dominant, less valuable traits, in the same way that they allow the perception of one's country as individuals with prevailing desirable traits (Milosavljević 2002, 22). Problematizing how public opinion is shaped, which reinforces dominant stereotypes, Milosavljević cites the media, publishing, school textbooks, and the education system as necessary. "The

characteristics that are attributed to oneself and Others (martyr, hero, separatist, libertarian, troublemaker, etc.) most often do not stem from everyday life, but rather, stereotypes about other nations are created purposefully and are conditioned by political interests, and are created by political and intellectual elites since only they have access to all the ways of influencing public opinion in terms of forming a desirable image of the Other" (22). Although Hall's essay on the discourse of the West and the rest of the world is primarily concerned with the context of the "colonization of the new world", this discourse, in its modified and adapted form, is very relevant in the modern world and continues to influence the West's image of itself and the Others, the experience of them and us, and power relations. It is essential for the languages of racial inferiority and ethnic superiority that are widely present worldwide (Hol 2018, 71). Hall also believes that each society or culture tends to impose its classifications of the social, cultural, and political worldview with varying degrees of closure. These classifications constitute the dominant cultural order, where the key issue is the structure of the ruling discourses. "Different areas of social life appear as embedded in discursive domains, hierarchically organized into ruling or preferred meanings" (19).

In personality psychology, identity is defined as the experience of the essential sameness and continuity of the "I" over a long period, regardless of its changes in different periods and circumstances. A specific identity is acquired by birth or belonging to a particular group, and it can also be defined by specific determinations, affinity, or orientation of a person. Each identity can be changeable over time, but also multiple. Each of these categories can be changed, from age to any other, and can be changed in whole or at least partially by the characteristics of the individual or social circumstances. Even the affiliation given to us at birth can be changed by our decisions throughout life (from ethnicity to, say, first and last name, etc.) - each person's overall identity changes throughout life (McAdams et al. 2021). However, things are not so unambiguous or straightforward. According to Bugarski, if the division of identity is reduced to ascribed and acquired characteristics, then from a sociological point of view, ethnicity is given only insofar as no individual can choose which ethnic community they will be born into. However, it is also changeable (like other types of identity) because it is up to us to decide whether ethnicity or ideological affiliation will be part of our identity and to what extent (Bugarski 2005, 69). As Dušan Ristić states, ideologies, in a broader sense, represent discursive resources that, about history, collective experiences, social positions, and social ties with other groups, contribute to forming collective social identities (Ristić 2018, 31).

Language is a fundamental indicator of power relations, control, and discrimination, which will be discussed in more detail in the section on some of the more recent identity conflicts in the Balkans. The relationship between language and power is primarily addressed by critical discourse analysis through the analysis of its role in the interaction of power relations and the dominance of certain members of a community over others, attempting to influence the eradication of social inequalities, differences, prejudices, and stereotypes by interpreting given linguistic phenomena. Considering how discourse expresses and reproduces basic prejudices about Others in a particular socio-political context, Van Dijk explains that a speech strategy based on ethnic prejudices and stereotypes is based on positive self-presentation and negative presentation of the Other. As he concludes, many studies of ethnic and racial inequality reveal a marked degree of similarity between stereotypes, prejudices, and other forms of verbal discrimination with discursive strategies, media, and established national boundaries (Dijk and Adrianus 2015, 11). The dehumanization of the Other, explains Zygmunt Bauman, opens the way for their exclusion from the categories of persons who legitimately have human rights. People excluded from our moral responsibility are attributed with qualities that do not deserve attention and respect, thus justifying disrespect and lack of care as "deserved punishments for the incurable vices or evil intentions of those we have deprived of respect and ignored, treated rudely, or recklessly neglected" (Bauman 2018, 79).

As Volkan (*Vamık Cemal Volkan*) points out, in the written history available to us, we constantly see interactions between pseudo-species, with one group maliciously viewing the other as less than human (Volkan 2017, 115). Social stigma and stigmatization, according to the definition of UNICEF, represent extreme disapproval or dissatisfaction with a particular person or group because of assumed or real characteristics, beliefs or behaviours that are considered to distinguish them from other members of society, whether in economic, political, cultural or social norms (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] 2019). In its most severe forms, stigma leads to the exclusion of individuals or entire groups from spheres of social functioning and creates feelings of guilt, shame, fear, inferiority, and a desire to hide.

According to Bauman, accustomed to using our characteristics as a yardstick by which to judge the humanity of other people, we "normal" people believe that a person with a stigma is not entirely human, and the immediate effect of all this is a rude refusal of social acceptance of people who are branded as animalistic, that is, their forced alienation (Bauman 2018, 42). Labelling others and those who are different as a danger to us represents a

significant step in the transition from the phase of antagonism to the phase of open conflict, in which identities are treated as destructive and devastating categories. Therefore, in the rest of the text, we will focus precisely on the destructive component, mainly ethnic identities, which are characteristic of the Western Balkan region over a more extended period.

IDENTITY AS A DESTRUCTIVE CATEGORY

Certain aspects of identity can create intense and destructive conflicts. If an identity is highly reinforced or very important to someone, such as ethnicity (nationality) or religious/confessional identification, then threats to that identity are difficult to ignore. Also, specific cultural patterns with an overemphasized uniqueness in the group can create conflict. These patterns include a pronounced tendency to distrust other groups or to belittle them and even deny the cultural identity of the other group. If a particular group believes it is a victim of another group, it develops a feeling of permanent threat. In fear of retaliation or attacks of another kind, moves are triggered that are intended to prevent these attacks, but often in a way that threatens the other party. As an epilogue to this double threat, according to the principle of "all against all", a long-term destructive struggle most often develops. Identity is most often based on experiential interactions. Suppose a group is accustomed to coercive interactions. In that case, their identity will tend to treat harsh members of the group with respect while at the same time perceiving enemies as extremely violent and cruel. Finally, identities are typically asymmetrical. Powerful groups will seek to define other groups. The Nazis forcibly imposed their perception of who and what Jews were, as a grotesque example of this tendency (Malek 2013).

Social identity theory considers how group membership is incorporated into our self-concept and influences our views of other members and non-members of our groups and members of rival groups (Hogg 2011). Social identity is a concept that refers to the social use of cultural markers to assert, achieve, or attribute group membership (Ohlagaray 2020). This definition of social identity leads us into the field of politics because it refers to different dimensions of what is called political identity. Sometimes, these identity disagreements escalate into mutually destructive conflicts, using a formula according to which belonging to a group identity (identity groups) becomes the ultimate value. For some, these identity groups can be nationalism and ethnicity; for others, race, religion, or sexual orientation (2020). Identity antagonism can also be based on the fan subculture or fanatical loyalty to a sports club (Đorić 2024, 167).

Most deeply rooted and persistent conflicts are characterized by antagonism between identity groups. Therefore, more and more research is turning to this fact, and terminology such as ethnocentrism, prejudice, stereotypes, xenophobia, and the like speaks of the existence of a broad descriptive apparatus of the role that social identity plays in conflict. The identity factor is so influential that, once invoked, it excludes or nullifies any other analysis and even the need for a rational attitude towards these phenomena. In other words, deeply rooted social identities can be the product of conflict, just as deeply rooted conflicts are the product of confronted social identities (Ohlagaray 2020). As David Pilgrim points out, identity politics is like a "priest's egg"[1] – partly good, partly bad. However, besides taking up a lot of our time, the bad parts have also proven to be a divisive factor in "progressive" debates over the past few years. Namely, they have occasionally led to political paralysis and factionalism among those who, at least on paper, were on the same side. Political parties have split, and even new ones have been created due to resentment and dogmatism (Pilgrim 2024, 8).

In line with Pilgrim's view, applied to identities more broadly, one can conclude that there are two directions between identity and conflict: identity does not lead to conflict, but some identity is a necessary prerequisite for philanthropy, solidarity, and altruism. What drives identity toward conflict is a characteristic of a particular kind of identity – *the narcissistic identity*, one of the most important transmitters of conflict. This identity is most often based on some foundational myth that describes the noble or divine origins of the group in praise of past achievements or ancient injustices that have hindered the development and well-being of the group. Narcissistic identity creates conflicts in at least three ways (Ohlagaray 2020): a) Founding myths are monolithic – they cannot be changed, nor can any (even reasoned) disagreement with them be expressed. They are about "saving the inalienable and absolute truth shared by the group", which is typical of so-called groupthink; b) The narcissistic group contrasts a positive image of itself with a negative vision of another (opposed) group. For "us" to improve, "they" must be worse; c) Narcissistic identities raise the value of their group by underestimating others, denying their ethical relevance, and even the very basis for the existence of the other group.

Starting from an ontological understanding of the human essence, psychiatrist Jovan Rašković, in his study "Narcissism", establishes a relationship in which there is a deep

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[1] Curate's egg is a metaphor that originated from an anecdote described in a late 19th-century comic strip, according to which a curate at a bishop's breakfast, not wanting to offend his host, who served him a rotten egg, assured him that some parts of the egg were good after all (Hanks 1986, 381).

connection between narcissism and aggression to show that narcissistic aggression is the most widespread form of aggression. The human aggressive potential and its specificities lead him to believe that human aggression, as the oldest irrational biological creation, is linked to passion, which this author sees as "the youngest child of instincts" and irrational energy. He believes that passion has no better partner than aggression, but also that aggression has no better instigator than passion (Božović 2018, 116). Among the many different forms of aggression, this author believes that narcissistic aggression is "the most widespread form of aggression" (Rašković 1988, 62).

The recent history of the Balkan turmoil has shown that the "Narcissus-leader" was established on nationalist narcissism as a collectivist foundation. It is difficult to say who encouraged whom more to realize the destructive political idea. Perhaps the worst thing is that the narcissists in the position of leader have combined their fanaticism with collective narcissism and nationalist fanaticism. An atmosphere of nationalist narcissism has been created, in which "my people" is crowned with superlatives, never controversial or problematic. In numerous cases of ethno-nationalist conflicts, the most profound hatred is between the peoples who, according to the most noticeable features, show the least differences. This is one of the great contradictions of civilization and one of the most significant sources of dissatisfaction, and Sigmund Freud named this phenomenon "narcissism of small differences". In his words: "It is precisely the minor differences in otherwise similar people that form the basis for their mutual hostile feelings" (Freud 1991, 255).

Narcissistic leaders are often characterized by what Orwell calls the national personality (Orwell 2018). The characteristic elements of what he defines as the nationalistic personality are: a) Rallying around a sense of defeat; b) Finding a common enemy, often responsible for this emotional defeat, who is to blame for all the ills of our society; c) The rise of a national hero, often represented by an ideal citizen and a sense of superiority over others, whom we should all aspire to and admire.

The nationalist personality, according to Orwell, sees history, especially modern history, as an endless rise and fall of great powers, and every event that occurs seems to him to be confirmation that his side is on the rise. Some hated rivals are on the decline and weakening. However, it is essential not to confuse nationalism with the mere idealization of success. The nationalists do not act on the principle of simply siding with the strongest side. On the contrary, having chosen his side, he convinces himself that it is the strongest and can stick to his conviction even when the facts are completely against him. Nationalism is a

hunger for power reinforced by self-deception (Orwell 2018). In the context of the sources of collective identity, nationalism is considered the most persistent spiritual offshoot of the French Revolution (Keitner 2020). It seems as if the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia, based on "irreconcilable identity differences between regional actors" (Subotić 2024a, 62), refuted the position of Eric Hobsbawm, who believed that the theme of his book was, historically speaking, in complete retreat (Hobsbawm 1990). The idea of the nation, especially in the countries of Southeastern Europe, has filled the vacant place that ideology once occupied in those areas.

SOME OF THE RECENT BALKAN IDENTITY FRICTIONS

The numerous examples that testify to the antagonism in the name of opposing identities on the territory of the countries of the former Yugoslavia, especially the innumerable and repeatedly discussed examples from the 1990s, ground us in the knowledge that the existence of different identities (religion-nation-ethnicity) in the Balkans is marked by difficulties, suffering and suffering. Or rather, by manipulations of identity properties (Subotić 2024b). According to this "reality", it turns out that the local identities were created to suffer. If we do not go into the distant past but take the 1980s as a reference period (when they began to be frequently discussed), the laments over their fate and the increasingly frequent calls to stand in their protection do not cease. This is one of the constants of contemporary politics in the Balkans. It would seem that the political leaderships of the Balkan states, as well as the official and self-proclaimed representatives of their cultural elites, see their most important task in "mourning" the supposedly severely damaged identities and in panicking calls to protect them from further suffering. Examples from the last few years testify that more than 25 years after the previous military conflicts in this area, identity antagonism continues. Recognizing the fact that the role of identity in the wars of the 1990s has been extensively studied academically, in the following text, we will focus on some of the more recent examples of regional antagonism in the name of identity.

While the "new reality" (Đorić 2021) due to the coronavirus epidemic lasted, the "guardians" of local identities did not leave their "guard posts". They continued to observe and record everything that allegedly threatened these identities and to warn the public in their countries about it. However, since life in these countries gradually began to return to normal, news about these identities suffering has suddenly multiplied. One gets the impression that they fear that, due to the preoccupation of the authorities and the people with the epidemic,

the level of public hatred towards the nation's enemies has decreased. Therefore, they are trying to fix this by "pumping" an increased dose of this, as they undoubtedly think, vital national feeling into the public (Čolović 2020). Information about new conflicts between Balkan identities has continued to reach the media. We learned that merciless confrontations are underway between Serbian and Albanian, Albanian and Macedonian, Macedonian and Bulgarian, Bosnian and Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian, Bulgarian and Serbian, Serbian and Montenegrin, and Croatian and Serbian (predominantly ethnic/national) identities – *Bellum omnium contra omnes* – war of all against all.

One of the more paradigmatic clashes in Balkan identity conflicts occurred when a TV film entitled "The Great Serbian Historical Deception – How the Serbs Stole Albanian History" was shown in Albania. It claims, among other things, that since the time of Stefan Nemanja, the Albanian people have been victims of identity denial and theft, that the Serbs have taken away their churches[2] (including Gračanica, the Church of St. Petka in Prizren, and the Peć Patriarchate),[3] and that the people and clergy have either been baptized or driven away. The text published by *Koha Ditore* states the thesis that Serbs occupied Kosovo, that the cradle of Serbian churches and monasteries during the Nemanjić rule "was not located within Kosovo",[4] and that "the territory of present-day Kosovo was not the epicentre of Serbian church-building activities during the Nemanjić era" (Kosovo online 2020). The Serbian Ministry of Culture responded to all these "new narratives" from Albania by announcing that the film was a dangerous forgery. Still, that responsibility for it did not lie solely with the Albanian side but also with its Balkan allies, and that it was the fruit of "orchestrated activities from chauvinistic circles in some neighboring states in the region

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[2] The cultural identity of the Serbian people in Kosovo and Metohija is affirmed by the existence of over 1.500 documented cultural monuments (monasteries and churches), which attest to the centuries-old presence of the Serbian nation, as well as the Christian religion within the framework of almost every denomination that emerged in these regions as a result of the intertwining influences of Eastern and Western Christian cultures. Building one's own identity through the destruction of all symbols of the other in the community is merely a sign of weakness and an underdeveloped sense of identity, as evidenced by the destruction of 156 monasteries and churches across Kosovo and Metohija, with the most significant losses suffered by the historically important city of Prizren, once the capital of the Serbian Empire – 13 (Medojević and Milosavljević 2022, 244–250). This factual situation, on the other hand, is today superficially portrayed through political maneuvers as a centuries-long struggle of the Albanian population to preserve their own identity and integrity.

[3] Seizing or destroying sacred sites as places of communal gathering for a nation was actually a *modus operandi* of Albanian extremists in achieving their ultimate goal, which is the displacement of non-Albanian, i.e., Serbian, populations. They then attempt to portray this as evidence of the centuries-old existence of the Albanian nation in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija (Avramović et al. 2010, 20–21).

[4] One of the many attempts to rewrite history in order to build a national identity by denying the existence and activities of the Nemanjić dynasty in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija can be refuted by relevant historical sources, primarily Byzantine, which unambiguously testify that these regions were governed by Grand Prince Stefan Nemanja from the late 12th century, that is, after the death of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1118–1180) (Avramović et al. 2010, 16).

aimed at nullifying, erasing from history and seizing Serbian cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible" (Politika 2020). The Ministry has discerned the ultimate goal of the enemies of Serbian national identity, which is nothing less than the destruction of the Serbian people. "Such attempts", the statement reads, "have all the hallmarks of cultural genocide, and as history teaches us, it is often a prelude to physical genocide" (Politika 2020).

Around the same time, a collection of papers entitled "On the Official Language in the Republic of North Macedonia" (Българска Академия на науките 2020) was published by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, which caused "alarm" in the Macedonian and Serbian media. According to the announcement of its promotion on May 7, 2020, in Sofia, the collection is "the fruit of the efforts of Bulgarian linguists to reach a unified position on the Macedonian language". Moreover, they unanimously and finally concluded that this language is a "southwestern variant of the Bulgarian language" (Преспански n.d.). More than enough for Macedonian linguists to sound the "red alarm" and warn the public of their country that the suffering of the Macedonian national identity continues. As linguist Katica Culavkova said: "Macedonian identity has experienced metaphysical amputation" (Ќулавкова 2023). Now, as she points out, it is threatened with final destruction. "When we thought we were done with identity ultimatums, Bulgaria stepped in with the claim to amputate the other part of Macedonian history, the Slavic one, from the 9th century to 1945" (Ќулавкова 2023).

Serbian linguists, defenders of Serbian national identity, have also intervened in this Macedonian-Bulgarian identity showdown because the book of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences on the Macedonian language also mentions testimonies about the alleged presence of the Bulgarian language in Serbia in the speech of the people from the Danube to Kopaonik. The guardians of the Serbian language were alarmed by the Cultural and Information Center of Serbs in Macedonia – SPONA, reporting that a "brutal attack on the Serbian language" had been carried out, that this was the latest "brutal claim on the Serbian language, and thus on the national, historical and cultural space". The SPONA Center appealed to the professional community in Serbia to react because Bulgarian academics claim that the Bulgarian language is spoken in the area from the Danube to Gevgelija and from Kopaonik to Timok, Pcinja, and Ohrid. Their "alarm" was echoed in the Serbian media, and thus, a commentary appeared in *Večernje Novosti* under the title "The ripping off of the Serbian language. Bulgarians in action". In a statement to this newspaper, RS academic Slobodan Remetić said that "Bulgarians have been attacking the Serbian language for a long time and that they have once again, after a certain period, taken the plunge" (Begenišić 2020).

The latest turbulence on the Sofia-Skopje route arose after the North Macedonian flag was not displayed in Sofia during an informal meeting between the heads of state, Rumen Radev and Gordana Siljanovska Davkova. The Deputy Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Aleksandar Nikoloski, described Bulgarian President Radev as "uncivilized" for this act (Kompas info 2024). This was seen in Sofia as a provocation, to which Skopje responded by reminding it that the development of good neighbourly relations is of key importance for the European future of North Macedonia.

Among those who reacted in defence of the Serbian language and national identity against the Bulgarians, Viktor Savić, a research associate at the Institute of Serbian Language of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, also stood out. He stated that "at the time when the Serbian language was formed, the Bulgarians were not Slavs at all", that they were a nomadic people of the Turkish group who came to the Balkans after the Serbs, and that some Serbian dialects from Metohija migrated to Sofia. However, the Bulgarians only incorporated them into the Bulgarian language because they resembled it. The following headlines accompanied this statement by Savić on the portals: "Bulgarian Academy attacks Serbian; Our roots are in Serbian land; Dr. Savić reveals the painful truth" (Matić 2020).

This kind of alliance of Macedonian and Serbian identity guardians in the fight against these narratives from Bulgaria did not prevent them from also opening up old identity disputes. The occasion was a postage stamp with a map of Croatia published by the Macedonian Post in 2020. It shows a large part of Serbia within the borders of Croatia because the Macedonians mistakenly published a map of the Independent State of Croatia. However, some media outlets in Serbia interpreted this as a provocation by the Macedonian authorities to disrupt good relations between the Serbian and Macedonian people. In an interview with the newspaper *Kurir*, published with the subtitle "They do not mind the NDH, they mind the Nemanjićs and Serbian warriors", art historian Jasmina S. Ćirić spoke about this. She said that in this country, Serbian medieval heritage is "presented as part of Byzantine Macedonia". In contrast, Serbian monastery properties are called "occupation bases", and "the concept of Serbomania orchestratedly replaces the very concept of Serbianness" (Kurir 2020b).

In the last few years, there have been new clashes in the long-standing dispute between the guardians of Serbian and Montenegrin identity, which has intensified since

Montenegro became an independent state.[5] A stronger exchange of "fire" and new lamentations over the damaged identities also occurred when the news was published that the Montenegrin police had detained the Serbian Orthodox Church Bishop Joanikije and seven priests for a procession they organized in Nikšić on May 12, 2020, despite the ban on public gatherings due to the epidemic. Several rallies were held in Belgrade to support the detainees, and the Serbian Orthodox Church supported them through a special prayer service at the Temple of Saint Sava in Vračar, led by Bishop Stefan. "Let us pray especially", he told the gathering, "for our people in Montenegro, where we are currently suffering the most" (FoNet 2020).

This was another reason for the Montenegrin side to activate accusations and complaints that Serbs continued to deny their national identity. The then Prime Minister Marković complained that "the denial of Montenegrin identity and the right to their state is more radical than it was a decade and a half ago" (Čolović 2020). The artistic director of the Montenegrin National Theatre, Željko Sošić, reacted more strongly to the new denials of Montenegrin national identity, saying in an interview with the Montenegrin newspaper Dnevne novine that Montenegrins are "faced with obvious clerical-fascist, hostile attacks" on their people and state. "We are", he explained, "the only people in the world to whom someone dares to say that we are not who we are, that we do not speak the language we speak, that we do not have the name we have and that we belong to something else, and that we do not know it" (Čolović 2020).

The latest example of the identity struggle between the guardians of Serbian and Montenegrin national identity is the broadcast of the song "Heart of Serbia", which is accompanied by a video dominated by national and historical symbols, mainly in the territory of Cetinje, in the narrative of the guardians of Montenegrin national identity marked as the "capital of Montenegro". "The video represents a shameless misuse of the cultural assets and symbols of Cetinje", assessed the president of the Cetinje municipality, Nikola Đurašković (Janković 2024).

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[5] A built national identity makes the community capable of working in the direction of achieving the political unity necessary for the functioning of society and the state, which would be lacking in Montenegro and thus lead to the destructive actions of a certain group. Without a developed consciousness and with the disappearance of national memory, the ability to appreciate the values that have been handed down to us is lost. Insufficient awareness of national identity leads to the need for conflict under the pretext of preserving national unity, even where it is not in question, and against the aspirations of those who supposedly strive for their own goal, i.e. the disintegration of the state (Šijaković 2018).

The identity war has also flared up between Serbian and Croatian identity formations. The reason for the new showdown was the news that on a European Union website, where children were offered interesting information about EU member states, the article about Croatia states that "The famous Croat Nikola Tesla was among the first to discover X-rays" (Radio televizija Srbije [RTS] 2020b). Although the EU removed the controversial item about Tesla (RTS 2020a), the question of the origin of the famous scientist was reopened.[6] For the Serbian Ministry of Culture, this was an insidious attack by Croats on Serbian identity, and it immediately issued a public statement stating that this was "a forgery repeated countless times to shamelessly appropriate and Croatize Serbian cultural and historical identity". The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dačić, further intensified the rhetoric by stating that "Tesla was a Serb who, if he had lived in Croatia during World War II, would have ended up in the Jasenovac concentration camp" (Kurir 2020a). When the editors of this EU website changed the controversial sentence about Tesla, in the sense that it did not state his nationality, but only that he was "Nikola Tesla, born in Smiljan (present-day Croatia)",[7] the Serbian side welcomed this as a victory for its identity. In contrast, the Croatian side experienced it as a shock. "Serbs organized everything – Croats in shock", reads the title of an article on a Croatian portal (Dnevno hr 2020).

The incident on the Serbian-Croatian identity "border" was caused by an article in the Zagreb-based *Večernji list*, published on May 21, 2020, under the title "Americans write about a Croat who is celebrated by the whole world, but forgotten here". This Croat forgotten in Croatia is the famous geophysicist, climatologist, and astronomer Milutin Milanković (1879–1958), born into a Serbian family in the village of Dalj, today in Croatia, where he was buried at his request (Vitas 2020). A major conflict between Serbian and Croatian identity guardians erupted when *Matica Srpska*, in its edition "Ten Centuries of Serbian Literature" (*Deset vekova srpske književnosti*), published the works of the Dubrovnik writer Marin Držić (1508–1567).

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[6] Taking into account the fact of the suffering of the Serbian people within the Independent State of Croatia and the information about the suffering of as many as 91 members from the Tesla family, it is completely unnecessary to continue the question about the origin of the famous scientist who, quite possibly, would have shared the fate of his relatives if he had shared the place of residence with them at that time (RTS 2021).

[7] Perfidious removal or opportune listing of only the most basic biographical data while omitting the facts about the origin of a fruitful scientific worker represents not only an attack on his personality and work, but also on the nation to which he belonged. A scientist devoted to his work did not consider it appropriate to emphasize his own national affiliation, but his family genesis and origin within the Serbian Orthodox and priestly family give the right to claim that his national affiliation could not be determined only territorially (Subotić 2020, 34-39).

The Croatian public was alarmed by statements issued on this occasion by *Matica Hrvatska* and the Croatian Writers Association, among others. Matica stated it was "obliged to react to this shameless theft". *Matica Hrvatska* found the reason for the Serbian "annexation of the Croatian literary corpus", that is, the Dubrovnik writers from the 16th and 17th centuries, in the desire of the Serbian cultural elite to "repair the Serbian literary-historical discontinuity, which caused understandable national frustration" (Blic 2020). In other words, the Serbs did not have writers created in the aforementioned two centuries, so they are stealing them from the Croats to fill this vacuum. The Croatian Writers' Association (DHK) sent a public letter of protest to the Serbian Embassy in Zagreb. Croatia, the letter states, has become "a victim of the plundering of its cultural heritage", behind which lies the "political idea of Greater Serbian hegemonism" (DHK 2020).

The Croatian writer and member of the Presidency of Matica Hrvatska, Slavica Stojan, went the furthest in denigrating Serbian national identity. In an article for *Dubrovački list*, she compared Serbs to bugs that needed extermination. "When something like that creeps into the house, one must fight it seriously or leave it. One must fight the bugs, never let them overwhelm the house, but patiently and permanently eradicate them", Slavica Stojan wrote in the article (Oslobođenje 2023).

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

Relations between ethnocultural minorities and the majority in heterogeneous societies, such as the breakup of Yugoslavia, have always been complex and often conflictual. Consequently, such conflicts have been characterized as "intractable" or "deeply rooted" due to the psychological dimension that prevails over rational policies and economic reasons. Problems between majority and minority communities, which could be treated on an iterative level, are complicated by how ethnocultural groups perceive both themselves and the "other" through the lens of their history, viewing them as a threat directed against their existence.

News about the new Balkan identity conflicts does not come from an independent source but is published by the "warring parties", limiting themselves to the conflicts in which they participate. However, there is no doubt that these conflicts are interconnected, flow into each other, and are better understood when viewed together. It can then be observed that the leading cause of these conflicts and the primary source of the discomfort and hatred that accompany them are not, at least not primarily, the famous Balkan differences (ethnic,

cultural or religious) but the common understanding of national identity among the Balkan political and cultural elites and its use to achieve the same kind of goals. Everyone exaggerates and overestimates its value, reducing politics to the so-called politics of identity and, thus, culture to an instrument of such politics based on national interests. As social anthropologist Stef Jansen has noted, researching the lives of people in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina, "by emphasizing (ethno)national 'culture', the inhabitants of BiH primarily, if not exclusively, present themselves in an identity register, which is presented as a relevant criterion for understanding life" (Jansen 2020, 44). This, he adds, is the basis of nationalist rhetoric, which "has been able to mobilize many people, but has also been able to demobilize alternative approaches to politics" (44). The examples of recent identity conflicts in regional contexts testify to the fact that politics based on the "identity register" is today dominant in the Balkan countries (it seems especially in the countries that emerged after the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), that it demands that every people that claims the status of a nation must first of all have an autonomous and homogeneous culture, which means that its basic task is to sacrifice for it, fight and suffer in the confrontation with those who threaten its national identity. The fact that this task is unachievable does not worry the Balkan political and cultural elites much because the continuous struggle for national identity ensures their acquisition and maintenance of power and privileges.

When these identity battles are viewed as part of a broader picture and compared with each other, it can also be seen that the "warring parties" are mainly applying the same strategy. It consists of not primarily talking about the victories and successes of fighters on identity borders, but rather about hostile attacks on national identity and its suffering. National identity exists almost exclusively in that context, in that discourse of vulnerability, grief, and cultural and political panic. In the examples given (identity attacks from the domain of culture, language, and other ornamentation) cited in this manuscript, the victim is a victim of crime, abduction, appropriation, renaming, extermination, suppression, obliteration, annexation, and various calculations. If these terrible things had not happened to it, as Čolović well notes, we would know almost nothing about it (Čolović 2020).

However, not all the suffering of Balkan national identities has the same weight. It is not the same level of observation when you hear that something has been taken from you, appropriated and/or reshaped, and when you learn that the bearers of a "monolithic identity" claim that you are mistaken if you think your identity exists. When the guardians of identity lament the losses that occur when an identity is marked as a victim of appropriation and the

erasure of its treasures, and when they accuse almost all their neighbours of this, we will not worry about the fate of the identities they protect, because the goal of lamenting such losses is not to show the devastation that the "kidnappers" have left behind, but rather to highlight the inexhaustible wealth of an identity that has not been significantly damaged, even though it is "kidnapped" and "appropriated" by culturally poor neighbors.

Denial of neighbouring identities most often occurs during so-called identity panic, when a particular community feels threatened. The mainstay of the observed identity denial strategies relates to claims that some of our neighbours are "fictional", i.e., "nonexistent" nations, created by hostile great powers using apostates from "our" country and "our" faith. Identity deniers also claim that members of these "fake" nations have suffered for generations from collective remorse over past betrayals and that this is why they hate us in the first place (Marković 2024).

Spending the third decade since the end of the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia, we are witnessing the persistence of the politics of irreconcilable identities. Although in circles inclined to analytical and critical reflection on reality, it has long been believed that such narratives are primarily oriented towards preserving the political power of local elites, a large part of the population still considers the conflicts of the 1990s to be unfinished. Collective identities (ethnic, religious, cultural) persist as an issue that often wins in competition with the need for orderly institutions, the rule of law, and the living standards of citizens. The fact that the political priority of the European Union has remained for too long, "the stabilization of the Western Balkans, instead of finding long-term and sustainable solutions to frozen conflicts and the democratization of the countries of the region" (Barišić 2024, 88), makes the problem even more complex. Therefore, this region is still recommended as a space where, in the name of "irreconcilable" identity differences, dissolutive processes with significant potential for new instability and conflicts can be activated.

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Милован Суботић[*]

Институт за стратегијска истраживања, Универзитет одбране, Београд, Република Србија

КОНФРОНТИРАЈУЋИ ИДЕНТИТЕТИ НА БАЛКАНУ КАО БЕЗБЕДНОСНИ ИЗАЗОВ[**]

Резиме

Идентитет, било да је реч о националном/етничком, верском/конфесионалном или културном, представља један од кључних детерминатива којима појединац или заједница одређује ко су, чему припадају и(или) у шта верују. Међутим, иако идентитетско одређење има значајну улогу у изградњи заједништва и припадности, оно може постати и извор нестабилности, што је нарочито изражено у мултиетничким и мултиконфесионалним друштвима. Када се различити идентитети доведу у супротстављен однос, односно када се користе као средство политичке манипулације, долази до пораста тензија. Историја је препуна примера у којима су разлике у идентитету биле покретач ратова, масовних страдања и друштвених подела. Уколико се идентитет представи као недодирљив и монолитан, односно када се перципира као искључив и непроменљив, он се манифестује као покретач и одржилац нестабилности. Пример дисолутивних процеса у бившој Југославији, са почетка деведесетих, у име идентитетских разлика, један је од еклатантнијих. Последице ове антагонизације присутне су и данас, у трећој деценији од завршетка компликованих сукоба на овом подручју. Опстајање реторике из деведесетихи даље доводи до радикализације, јачања популизма и настојања да се идентитетске политике овдашњих земаља наметну као прворазредно политичко питање. Иако се у круговима склоним аналитичком и критичком промишљању стварности већ одавно сматра да су овакви наративи примарно оријентисани ка очувању политичке моћи овдашњих елита, велики део популације и даље сматра сукобе из деведесетих незавршеним. Колективни идентитети (етнички, верски, културолошки) и даље опстају као питање које неретко односи победу у такмичењу са потребом за уређеним институцијама, владавином права и

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[*] Имејл адреса: milovan.subotic@mod.gov.rs; ORCID: 0000-0001-8729-5742.

животним стандардом грађана. Чињеница да политички приоритет Европске уније превише дуго остаје „стабилизација Западног Балкана”, уместо напора да се успоставе одржива и дуготрајна решења у оквиру демократизације држава региона, проблем чини још сложенијим. Стога се и даље овај регион препоручује као простор на којем се, у име „непомирљивих” идентитетских разлика, могу активирати дисолутивни процеси са значајним потенцијалом за нову нестабилност и конфликте. У раду се, полазећи од основних поставки идентитета, као конфронтирајуће категорије, анализира опстајање конфликтне реторике на простору бивше Југославије, која је и даље заснована на „непомирљивим идентитетским разликама”, односно какав утицај има овако успостављена „истина” на политичку и безбедносну стабилност региона.

Кључне речи: Балкан, идентитети, сукоби, пропаганда, безбедност.