

How are ethnic identities mobilized before and during conflict? Analysis in relation to the Yugoslav Wars

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Main points:

- The Yugoslav Wars were the European most violent series of conflicts since the end of the WWII.
- Ethnic identities before and during these wars were mobilized on national bases.
- This analysis will look at the general process of the mobilisation of Serbian ethnic identity, arguing that it was generally manipulated by the Serbian leadership.

The Yugoslav Wars, a series of conflicts that began in 1991 and ended a decade later, were the ‘worst outbreak of violence in Europe since World War II (Kaufman, 2001; 165), that killed thousands of civilians and soldiers only within the first six months since its beginning (Engelberg, 1991). After the end of the WWII, in re-established Yugoslavia, the problem of nationality was managed with the creation of a federalist system. However, after the death of its communist leader, Josip Broz Tito, Yugoslavia experienced the re-emergence of nationalist ideas (Kaufman, 2001). Ethnic identities before and during the Yugoslav Wars, regarded for the purpose of this paper as one prolonged conflict, were mobilized on national bases. This analysis will look at a general process of mobilisation of Serbian ethnic identity. Although there were also other methods of mobilisation pursued, for instance, Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, or simply organizing huge rallies and protests, this paper will focus only on few selected ones.

The main argument of this analysis is that the case of Serbian mobilisation can be explained as a process initiated with interlinked methods of propaganda that were generally manipulated by the authorities. Those methods’ role in the mobilisation before the outbreak of conflict was significant, yet, since they had their limitations, they did not result in the mobilisation of everyone. Nonetheless, their dynamics of reinforcing each other and fact of being interlinked resulted in creating a spiral of insecurity, which led to the general mobilisation, which included people that at first opposed it. It is important to mention that the spiral was the main mean of mobilisation during the conflict, yet the ‘before’ methods were as well very much in use then, what will be also presented.

This paper will begin with some general remarks about manipulating mobilisation. It will clarify political leaders motivations for doing so and will apply findings to the case of Serbians. It will also explain why manipulation generally succeeds, and why it succeeded in the case of Serbian ethnic identity. Then, the analysis will present and analyse the methods of mobilisation used by the Serbian authorities before the outbreak of the Yugoslav Wars - using myths, especially the Kosovo myth; playing the victimhood card and revising past atrocities, and spreading fear and insecurity; as well as highlight their limitations. Subsequently, the paper will turn to the result of the methods previously analysed- the spiral of insecurity, which was the main mean of mobilisation during the violent times.

The manipulated mobilisation

There is a general agreement between scholars that the Yugoslav Wars were not spontaneous, but manipulated by political leaders (Denitch, 1994; Gagnon, 1994) of different ethnic communities, and it is hard not to agree with them. However, one can clarify their reasoning by saying that political leaders managed to influence the outbreak of wars due to successful manipulation of mobilisation of ethnic identities. Gagnon (1994) suggested that leaders provoked ethnic wars simply to gain or keep power for themselves. Indeed, this is one of the possible motivations that can be used to explain their actions. Nonetheless, personal gains are not the only explanation that can be introduced- the other one is possible benefits for ethnic groups.

Although when analysing manipulative leaders who wanted to seize and/or uphold power for themselves Kaufman (2001) rightly refers to Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic as an example, it has to be stressed that personal advantages and ambitions were not his only motivation. ‘Serbia entered Yugoslavia with [...] goal of dominance’, and the aim of establishing the ‘Greater Serbia’ that would emphasize its dominance over other nations and ethnic groups constituting Yugoslavia, which was present in Serbian thinking for centuries, was for Milosevic, after all a Serbian patriot (Suro, 1988), a purpose too (Black, 2002).

Before going into details and describing the general nature of the manipulation of Serbs before and during the Yugoslav Wars, it would be worth to analyse what were the factors that made the manipulation work. Of multiple possible explanations, only few will be presented.

First of all, it is argued by many experts that the most effective method of influencing people is repetition. As long as the lie is being repeated, it does not matter how big it is, as people would believe in it anyway (Brown, 1963). What is interesting, this can be linked to the ‘Big Lie’ technique used by Adolf Hitler and then Joseph Goebbels during Nazi Germany. The latter one once commented on this technique: ‘If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it’ (Jewishvirtuallibrary.org, n.d.). It applies to Serbs whose media, as it will be presented later on in the analysis, were feeding them with constant and continuous repetition of arguments and statements, most of which were simply misinformation, on why they should hate and fear members of other nations and ethnic groups.

Secondly, much of people know in general ‘[...] is vicarious knowledge and is not based on personal experience. We accept the truths of authorities and experts whom we respect and who have socially recognized positions and titles’ (Oberschall, 2000; 993), or arguments that are repeated by masses. It applies especially to the case in question, as during the Yugoslav Wars the means of communication were developed to much lesser extent than now, and thus people had limited possibilities to check in other sources if what they were being told about particular events were true or not- especially bearing in mind the fact of repeated lies raised above. Both mentioned explanations can be illustrated with Misha Glenny (1996) quoting Andrej Gustincic talking before the outbreak of war in Bosnia with a Serbian woman, who repeated a popular belief of her countrymen that ‘there were lists of Serbs [...] marked down for death’ (Glenny, 1996; 170). Although no one saw such lists, it did not prevent people from believing in their existence.

However, the argument of this paper states that the Serbian ethnic identity’s mobilisation was ‘generally manipulated’. It does so because, in order for any manipulation to truly succeed, there is a need for some ground on which the manipulation would be based. The case of Serbia provides such motive- interethnic hatreds, associated with ‘long-standing bitterness’ (Kaufman, 2001; 3) and negative emotions. Although some scholars trace them back to the 1389 Battle of Kosovo field, hatreds are much more likely to be explained by more recent events- namely the interethnic atrocities committed during WWII. Nonetheless, ‘ethnic hatreds

are renewed in each generation by mythologies that are typically modern revisions of older stories with quite different messages' (Kaufman, 2001; 11). Myths and mythologies are the first of the interlinked propaganda methods of mobilisation that will be analysed.

Methods used before the outbreak of violence and their limitations

Myths, mythology and the Kosovo myth

Mythology is important for every state, nation, and ethnic group as it provides a ground around which a sense of peoples' collectiveness can be built. Myths are usually one of the core elements in the process of intellectual development of nations or ethnic groups. Serbs have had their myths too, and those have contributed to embracement certain characteristics by their nation. The Serbian leadership used mythology as a mean of mobilisation. What is important to stress, it manipulated myths, especially the Kosovo myth, to its own political gains.

The myth of the Kosovo battle tells the story of a fight between the Christian forces under the Knez Lazar of Serbia and the soldiers of Sultan Murad (Mihaljcic, 1989). It has been the most powerful and the most important myth for all Serbs (Kaufman, 2001). With time, 'the date on which the battle took place [...] became a key marker on the Serbian national calendar' (Bieber, 2002; 96). It is also recognized as an official religious holiday. The Kosovo myth was of particular importance for the political development of Serbia in the XIX century (Bieber, 2002). Along with other myths emphasizing the moral superiority of Serbs, it began promoting the idea of the 'Greater Serbia', already mentioned above. Although it has always had a fundamental meaning for Serbs, during the communist time it lost somewhat of its importance, as elements of nationalist character were not welcomed in Yugoslavia.

When it comes to the manipulation of this myth by the Serbian leadership for the purpose of mobilisation, there is a couple of things that are important to stress. First of all, the version of the myth was determined by contemporary, at that time, social and political usage, and therefore it served for eliminating the historical separation between past and present, equating leaders of the past (Knez Lazar) with those of the present (Slobodan Milosevic), grouping past enemies (Turks) together with present ones (Albanians) (Bieber, 2002), what empowered the

position of the leader and created an atmosphere of enmity between Serbs and others. Moreover, using the myth, the ethnic cleansing of Albanians by Serbs was portrayed as simply a continuation of an ancient conflict. Thus, the Kosovo myth was used to mobilize Serbs through justifying deeds and atrocities committed by them, making them believe that what they did was only part of a historic circle of violence. The myth became the core element of Serbs' mobilisation in 1998 (Bieber, 2002). Furthermore, the celebration of the 600th anniversary of the Kosovo Battle was a direct mean of mobilising people. As Kaser and Halper wrote 'Some million and a half Serbs came from the Diaspora' (1998; 91) to take part in the celebration.

However, it can be argued that for Serbian politicians the most important aspect of this myth was that the fact of representing Serbs as defenders and martyrs, what in turn allowed them for pursuing another of their methods, namely playing the victimhood card.

Playing the victimhood card and revising past atrocities

For a long time before the eruption of violence, the Serbian leadership was strongly emphasizing martyrdom of Serbs, stressing their national suffering, what in turn resulted in the creation of the cult of victimhood. Of much importance was the fact that every group/nation constituting a part of Yugoslavia had a history of being repressed by others and dominated by them (Kaufman, 2001). Milosevic used this in a manipulative and chauvinist way to mobilise people, making them believe that atrocities they were committing were only a payback for past atrocities committed against Serbs, and thus giving them justification to calm their consciences. It was very much similar to what the Kosovo myth was used for. This point can be illustrated with Serbian official explaining the existence of the Omarska Camp, set up shortly after the outbreak of war in Bosnia in 1992- what in turn proves using the 'before' methods during the conflict- where Muslims and Croats were being killed as a 'payback for the [...] Jasenovac camp' (Oberschall, 2000; 989), where in turn many Serbs lost their lives during World War II. He said: 'During World War two the Croats killed us; this time it was the other way round, we killed them.' (Cohen, 1998; 479).

Justifying violence as a payback for past brutalities can be linked directly to another mean of mobilisation, that was simply revising them. It also strengthened the sense of collective

victimhood. An interesting fact is that although the Serbian leadership was eager to keep reminding of barbarism and crimes that happened to Serbs, it was not so enthusiastic to recall in public the violence perpetrated by them. Nonetheless, it was an influential method since there were many people whose memories of those atrocities were live, as they experienced them during the World War II. Radovan Karadzic, the Bosnian Serb leader, once said that ‘The Serbs are endangered again [and their nation] well remembers genocide. Those events are still a terrible living memory. The terror has survived 50 years’ (quoted in Sudectic, 1988; 84). Constantly reminding Serbs about their victimhood and revising past brutalities turned into spreading fear and insecurity.

Spreading fear and insecurity

Fear was rightly classified by Lake and Rothchild in their article as the emotion poisoning ethnic relations (1996). Fear and insecurity were spread in Yugoslavia in many more ways than through means of mass communication, for instance through education or arts, however, the focus here will be put solely on news media. TV, press, as well as radio sets, considered by some as ‘the ancestors of satellite television and internet as disseminators of information’ (Jourde 2007; 81), were used by the Serbian leadership also to revise past atrocities, emphasize and strengthen the sense of the Serbian martyrdom and victimhood, and propagate leadership’s embraced version of the Kosovo myth, however, they played the most vital role in the direct spread of fear and insecurity. Those media were used to spread extremist propaganda, falsified and fabricated news focused on exaggerating historical crimes, demonizing other groups, and encouraging fanaticism that was meant to mobilize people to commit violence. Milosevic, after coming to power used the ‘state-controlled media [...] to build further an atmosphere of resentment, hatred, and fear among Serbs by purveying a distorted picture of ethnic relations’ (Kaufman, 2011; 180). In effect of spreading fear and insecurity, hatred and mutual hostility were circulating. They enabled the spiral of insecurity to emerge.

Limitations

All methods used by the Serbian leadership that were presented above—that is using mythology and adopting the Kosovo myth to its own needs, playing the victimhood card, revising past atrocities, as well as spreading fear and insecurity, were extremely important for mobilisation leading to conflict. However, as those methods were limited to some degree, they did not result in the mobilisation of everyone.

The main limitation that can be applied to every each of the means raised above is the fact of pretty good ethnonational relations in Yugoslavia prior to the eruption of violence. People generally did not have reasons to complain about relations with their co-workers or neighbours of different ethnic identity or nationality (Yugoslav Survey, 1990). The interethnic relations of Yugoslavia prior to the war can be further characterized as full of mutual respect, seen for instance in common intermarriages among ethnic groups (Kaufman, 2001) and intercultural celebrations of national and religious holidays. Another limitation was the fact of ‘grass-roots resistance to nationalism’ (Oberschall, 2000; 992), what enables to argue that there was a resistance to ethnic identity mobilisation as well.

One more argument can be applied. Kaufman considered the Serbian mythology as being much about ‘glorious irrationality’ (2001;171). Some of the Serbian individuals that were more educated than masses could have been restrained seeing that myths portrayed the Serbian nation in a romantic way, and understanding that it did not have as much in common with reality, as leaders wanted people to believe. Likewise, they could have thought of playing the victimhood card by the Serbian leadership in a similar way.

As stated above, those methods did not result in mass mobilization. However, what they did through the dynamics of reinforcing each other and fact of being interlinked was leading to the emergence of the spiral of insecurity, which resulted in the general mobilisation, even of those that previously were reluctant to mobilise.

Spiral of insecurity

Although spreading fear and insecurity through mass media can be regarded as the factor that prevailed for causing the rise of the spiral of insecurity, it is important to remind that all of the methods analysed above contributed to its emergence. It is also important to mention again that all those means of causing mobilisation used before the outbreak of the war were used also during the violent times.

Although the spiral of circulating insecurity, embracing interethnic hatred and hostility and eventually resulting in perpetuating violence was the result of instruments used before the conflict began, it became a mean of mobilization itself. One can even argue that it became the central instrument of Serbs' mobilisation and the only one that the manipulative Serbian political leadership did not have to supervise. The spiral of insecurity can be explained with the notion of security dilemma- '[...] what one does to enhance one's own security causes reactions that, in the end, can make one less secure' (Posen; 28). People began mobilizing themselves primarily in order to increase their self-defence abilities, simply because of the feeling that if they failed to do that, they would be harmed- either by members of other groups, or their countrymen. However, when mobilized, they were more likely to commit acts of violence that were causing mobilisation of other ethnic groups/nations and violence being perpetrated by its members in revenge. The spiral was circulating.

Nonetheless, as indicated above Serbs mobilized also because they feared their nationals. Thus, not only the interethnic murders of civilians, torturing people, or destruction of their cities influenced their mobilization- it was also the conviction that it was safer to take a side and actively take part in the atrocities perpetrated by compatriots, rather than being endangered by both sides- external and internal. This possibility of being threatened not only by outside enemies but also by their countrymen made those Serbs who previously were reluctant to mobilise to do so.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the general process of the mobilisation of Serbian ethnic identity before and during the Yugoslav Wars, arguing that it was generally manipulated by the Serbian leadership. For the purpose of doing so, it firstly clarified the motivations of Slobodan Milosevic, and then explained why the manipulated mobilisation of Serbs was possible. Furthermore, this paper argued that the Serbian ethnic identity was mobilised before the conflict with a set of interlinked methods- using myths, playing the victimhood card and revising past atrocities, as well as spreading fear and insecurity- which had their limitations, yet through the dynamics of reinforcing each other created the spiral of insecurity that was the main mean of mobilisation during the Wars and mobilised even those that previously were reluctant to do so. Nonetheless, the ‘before’ methods were used also for the duration of conflict.

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