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**Review article**

# NOT AFRAID OF THE LION: THE ROLE OF VENICE IN MODERN HISTORY OF MONTENEGRO

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## ***ABSTRACT***

The results presented in this article are a segment of the research about the legacy and myths of Venice or the Venetian Republic area of Montenegro. This article explains whether one can find a current, contemporary version of the myth of Venice in Montenegro; and its future significance, if there is any, in the sense of shaping or contributing to shaping the choices and actions of individuals. A detailed comparison with Croatia, a country which has historical, social and “ethnic” similarities, will be fundamental for the study of this entire issue. So we will primarily see what happened through various periods in recent history, or rather what did not happen in Montenegro, and we’ll see what meaning should be given to these events.

## ***KEY WORDS:***

Montenegro; Venice; Legacy; Myths; History.

## ***SAŽETAK***

Rezultati predstavljeni u članku su segment istraživanja o naslijeđu i mitovima Venecije odnosno Mletačke republike na prostoru Crne Gore. U članku se analizira postojanje tog mita, njegove refleksije u savremenom crnogorskom društvu. U članku se takođe prati mogući uticaj ovog mita i njegove tradicije u bliskoj budućnosti i njegov kapacitet da utiče na postupke pojedinaca. U istraživanju se upoređuje stanje

u Hrvatskoj koja ima istorijske, društvene i etničke sličnosti sa ovim prostorom. Istraživanje stoga omogućava kratak osvrt na različite periode novije istorije u kojima možemo pratiti uticaj Mletačke republike, šta je to što se dogodilo ili nije dogodilo u odnosu na prostore u okruženju čime se stvaraju uslovi za kritički osvrt i objašnjenje značenja ovih događaja.

***KLJUČNE RIJEČI:***

Crna Gora; Mletačka republika; Naslijeđe; Mitovi; Istorija.

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***THE MYTH AND ROLE OF VENICE: A BRIEF SUMMARY***

What is the myth of Venice in the Balkans is a subject that we do not have time to deal with today and which, moreover, should be, of course, familiar to all present (Giancarli, 2008). Suffice it to say, very briefly, that this myth originated from different historical facts, albeit transfigured to varying degrees: one of which being the righteousness of Venice, which was seen as a power protecting its citizens from arbitrary acts of the high and mighty, and, to quote a Balkan bishop, as “the true reign, model of all the most venerable freedoms” (Jerkov, 2001). This judgment, which is all in all valid for the entire Venetian rule - one can’t help but recall the centuries-lasting pro-Venetian feeling of Veneto and Lombardy plebs, which was shown multiple times from 1509 to 1797 – is joined, with regard to the Balkans, by other more specific facts: for start, we must consider that Venice is the power under whose flags the hajduks fought in the war of Candia, Morea and others (Lane, 1978). Venice was for centuries the bulwark of Christendom against the Turks in the Balkans; and the lands ruled and defended by Saint Mark’s Republic are the places where many refugees, who periodically escape the interior of the Balkan peninsula, can find a shelter (Jacov, 1991). In the name of Venice and, particularly, fighting for Venice, Christians of the Western Balkans can form the first rudimentary consciousness of themselves, if not of their nation(s) (Milošević, 1988). It is by choosing Venice that Balkan hinterland Slavs, at least the ones closer to the border and who have the ability to migrate and change sides, claim and shape their first conscious self-affirmation and identity. Finally, Venice secures the subjects, even during its decadence (its neutral, uncombative, sometimes even cowardly Eighteenth century), long de-

acades of peace and economic development, which later would be largely idealized, turning in some sort of a “Golden Age” that would stay very long in the memory of the former dominions (Viscovich, 1898).

This goes a bit through the entire Balkan territory of the Republic, or to be precise its Eastern-Adriatic side; but it is particularly true, especially with regard to the economic development of the eighteenth century, for Montenegro, or rather to the Bay of Cattaro, as proved by the professor and ambassador Sbutega in several of his speeches, particularly the one at the Venice Conference in November 2012, and in his landmark book on the history of Montenegro (Sbutega 2007). It should be specified that it is precisely in the eighteenth century, and under the, at that time, stable, universally recognized and accepted reign of Venice, that Europe “discovered” Dalmatia, if I may use the very apt definition of Larry Wolff (Wolff, 2006). So there is a deep link between both the internal and external identity of the inhabitants of the Balkans and the republic of Venice: that is how these people got or learned to define themselves, and how they were perceived from outside, by the Enlightenment intelligentsia of Western Europe and later during the nineteenth-century Romanticism. Venice, with its former Balkan territory, in fact constitutes at its height a stable and widely-accepted milieu, which all sides see as quasi-perfect. The Franciscan monk and Croatian poet Andrija Kašić Miošić even talks, in the middle of the eighteenth century, about the “honorable, peaceful and heavenly state in which we find ourselves under the wing of our Most Serene Prince» (Graciotti, L “homo Adriaticus...”, p. 18). The sentence is strong and surely excessive, but it says much about the mood which was no more present only among the lower classes; and, furthermore, about a myth in the making. Besides, another proof of the persistence and untouchability of the myth is the policy, notoriously respectful towards the Venetian heritage, which was pursued throughout the nineteenth century, and partially even up to 1914, by the Hapsburg Empire, which wanted to present itself as the legitimate heir and successor of the Republic, revering its symbols and sensibilities. Even in the nineteenth century, Venice is in fact a positive myth for everyone: for the former subject population, both in the current Croatia (and Slovenia) and in Montenegro, for the new authorities, for outside observers and travellers.

But here, a peculiarly Montenegrin fact should probably be reaffirmed: Montenegro as a state, or at least as an autonomous and almost independent entity, was made possible only thanks to the centuries-lasting help, influence, example of Venice

and to the constant interchange with its *bocchesi* domains<sup>1</sup>. Most likely, that made a huge difference with Croatia, where the Republic didn't help creating or shaping a local power.

### ***THE COLLAPSE OF THE ADRIATIC UNITY***

At one point during the nineteenth century, things changed. Venetian reign had, in fact, united the Adriatic: it is true that Venice never managed to dominate the entire coast, but still, a rival civilization or an enemy state didn't ever appear on those waters. The strategic axis between Ragusa and Ancona, though being for a long time a competitor (at least an economic one) of Venice, belonged however to the same culture, to the same way of thinking, speaking, acting, particularly to that Koine well-described by Professor Graciotti and many other scholars alongside him. This civilization was essentially not interested in ethnic factors and had no assimilation aims: this meant that Italians and Slavs, Catholics and Orthodox could be a part of it and recognize themselves in it, regardless of their linguistic and religious affiliation<sup>2</sup>. But the Italian unification, and, in particular, the third war of

1 "La presenza di Venezia sul litorale fu importantissima anche per la storia della parte continentale del Montenegro. Gran parte del commercio e praticamente tutti i legami culturali con l'Europa, anche quelli con la Russia, si svolgevano attraverso i territori veneziani. Venezia era stata per secoli l'unica potenza cristiana presente nella regione, alleata nelle guerre contro i turchi e disponibile a offrire aiuto militare, politico ed economico oltre che rifugio durante le incursioni ottomane. Grazie alla Repubblica, nel Vecchio Montenegro, cioè nell'insieme dei territori confinanti con quelli veneziani, si era sviluppato il nucleo di uno stato dove Venezia aveva istituito il primo potere civile, rappresentato dai governatori, cosa che fu essenziale per lo sviluppo dello stato montenegrino" (Venetian presence on the coast was fundamental for the history of the continental part of Montenegro, too. Most of the trade and basically every single cultural bond with Europe, even the ones with Russia, could only be conducted through Venetian territory. Venice had been for centuries the only Christian power in the region, ready to ally in the wars against Turks and to provide military, political and economic help, as well as a safe shelter during Ottoman raids. Thanks to the Republic, in Old Montenegro, that is in the areas bordering Venetian dominions, the very first core of a State rose up. There Venice established the first civilian power, embodied by the governors, something which was essential for the development of the Montenegrin state": Sbutega, A. (2007), *op. cit.*, pp. 230-231. My translation.

2 Croatian historian Horvat, J., quoted by Šimunković, Lj. (2001), *La politica linguistica della Serenissima verso i possedimenti "di là da mar": il caso della Dalmazia*, in Graciotti, S., *op. cit.*, page 97, clarifies: "Non imponendo nuove riforme, non avendo cura della vita intima dei sudditi, Venezia ha consentito che la popolazione restasse primitiva, se il suo sviluppo venga misurato con il criterio contemporaneo del progresso economico, ma ha conservato la sua identità, la sua lingua, le sue usanze, i suoi principi: la sua manifestazione spirituale è rimasta intatta" ("by not imposing new reforms, not caring about the intimate life of subjects, Venice allowed the population to stay primitive, if we are to measure its development according to the current economical progress standard. Yet they maintained their identity, their language, their habits, their principles: their spiritual display stayed the same" - my translation). Judging from a pretty different side (he was close to Italian nationalism), Praga, G.



independence with the first attempt to extend the conquering of the new kingdom to the eastern Adriatic shores too, breaks that cultural unity. Italian irredentism is guilty of it - speaking of guilt *lato sensu*, of course -, for it then inaugurates a habit of using the legacy of Venice (in cultural, historical, artistic, urban terms, etc.) as a proof of the Italian character of the entire oriental side of the Adriatic (Rizzi, 1998). It is said and written in those years, the years of Lissa - despite the irony of a battle, that same battle that pushes back Italian imperialism, won by Austria thanks to the maritime wisdom of its former Venetian subjects (as well as to the shocking Persano's incompetence) - that wherever a sign of Venice is to be found, it's on the Italian territory. We have heard many times, in different ways and sauces and from different nationalisms, the likes of such arguments, which are hardly surprising or unique. Yet, when it comes to the Adriatic milieu with its originally a national civilization, the appropriation from the Italian or rather from the nationalist side means that the Slavic majority has to suddenly become wary of everything Venetian, everything that was up until then loved unconditionally. The very same symbols which had hitherto united the coast and Dalmatia and had represented its identity against the semi-barbaric and backward inland become instead the marks and instruments of an external threat, which aims to erase the centuries-old richness and diversity of the Adriatic, by turning it into an Italian lake. Even if that reality means alienating a space which had always been, in its eastern side, mostly Slavic but deeply in love with Venice and of course, through her, with Italy; that is, with a captivating version of Italian culture, the bearer of beauty and prosperity and certainly not a warmongering or threatening one. After Lissa, the political struggle between the autonomists, who have become de facto irredentist (though always denying this affiliation), and the ones who advocate the unification of Dalmatia and Croatia becomes very harsh really fast: the cultural clash is unmitigated and history is one of the central points of this fight (Rizzi, 1998). What Italians or Italophiles see as the legacy of civilization of Venice is judged by Croatian nationalists as the secular oppression or even as some sort of proto-colonialism. Italians and Croats know all too well and see clearly that the Habsburg Empire's decades are numbered, which means it will be soon left to nationalities' looting and partition; thus the cultural struggle between them has to become a race about who takes over first, and once and for all, the disputed lands. The main rule of this game being negation and destruction of everything proves, on that territory, the presence and therefore the right of the enemy nation.

Nothing similar, however, is happening in Montenegro, and this is what has to impress us. It is true that the Bay of Cattaro is actually claimed to be Italian by the irredentist movement; nonetheless different political and social conditions - the exclusion from the Kingdom of Dalmatia, the smaller size of the Italian-speaking minority, the essential fraternity between Montenegro and the Bay of Cattaro, which ensures that even the Catholics of the coast crave more the reunification with Cetinje rather than annexation to an expanded Kingdom of Croatia or a new Austrian-ruled entity of the southern Slavs - all of this explains how the clash between Italians and Slavs here, in short, does not happen (Sbutega, 2007). This, in turn, clarifies the persistence of the myth of Venice throughout the entire nineteenth century and beyond; the age of nationalism does not ruin the image of the Venetian Republic in Montenegro, since there isn't a real point of conflict between Italians and Slavs, and because the latter were already developing identity of their own, which would later be the Montenegrin one. Which, if doesn't coincide with the Venetian-shaped or philo-Venetian identity of a century earlier, has no incompatibility with it, neither aims to remove the memory of it.

### ***THE TWO WORLD WARS***

This lack of hostility between the myth of Venice and the Slavs' national revival is therefore unique to Montenegro, at least regarding its duration in time; and it can be argued, we believe, that it even survives the veritable day of reckoning between the opposed Adriatic nationalisms, that is World War I and in particular its end. As widely acknowledged, one of the reasons behind Italy's entry into the war, if not the main one, is the will to seize as much space as possible on the eastern Adriatic coast; this being also the motivation of the strong resistance offered by a largely-Slavic Austro-Hungarian army on the Italian front (as opposite to the poor display they gave against Russians). After Habsburg Empire's final defeat and dissolution, however, Italy seemed as if it was about to take the entire Dalmatian coast; the Italian race to conquer the Adriatic is then justified, even publicly, with an alleged right for inheritance from Venice. Saint Mark's lions scattered through Dalmatia do not expect anything but liberation coming from the Italian army and the Italian, says - among others - Gabriele D'Annunzio. His rhetoric goes on to become the ruling praxis when the poet leads the occupation of Fiume. From the city's town hall he shouts, in June 1920: "All the lions from Istria [...] all the lions from Dalmatia, from Zara, from

Sebenico, from Traù, from Curzola, from Ragusa, from Cattaro, all the lions from the walls, the gates, the towers, the lodges, the castles, the podesterie, all of them today are looking at Fiume. This is the liberation of lions [...]. This is the resurgence of Venetian power” (Rizzi, 1998).

Given this context, not to mention the then ongoing occupation of various parts of the eastern coast by the triumphant Italian fleet, it’s hardly surprising that assorted group of Croatian nationalists and plain vandals (more or less backed by the Yugoslav authorities, yet never openly supported) react by relentlessly targeting the same lions of Saint Mark, the clearest symbol of Venice and, as such, the easiest excuse for any Italian adventure. The destruction of lions is a recurring moment of the anti-Italian protest in Croatia throughout the whole biennium 1918-1920, as a direct response to an invasion threat or as an open challenge and a reaffirmation of the Slavic character of the territory (Rizzi, 2005).

None of this is happening in Montenegro. Nor is it surprising: in 1918 and in subsequent years Montenegrins do not certainly fear an Italian occupation, as they are likely busier with their forced annexation to Yugoslavia, which soon evolved into a civil war. We again quote prof. Sbutega, who informed us of the ethnic and geographical nature of the struggle between Whites and Greens: “separatists” are particularly strong in Old Montenegro, just above *Boka* (Sbutega, 2007). And given that Italians are rather allies - albeit in an over-cautious and limited way - of so-called Greens, it appears very unlikely that the anti-Italian sentiment was present among the population of those areas. Therefore, not being in that mood, there’s no way nor another evident reason a Croatian-alike *leontofobia* - let alone a broader rejection and destruction of Venetian heritage - could have developed there. In fact the sole removal of a lion of St. Mark in Montenegro in those years seems to have happened in Castelnuovo-Herceg Novi in the twenties, when a lion was moved from the city walls to the officers’ club and then to the local museum (Rizzi, 2005). As we can see, even this single episode is, at most, a concealment, certainly not a destruction; which instead routinely happened in those years in Croatia (see in particular the facts of Traù, 1932). Not by chance, this isolated Montenegrin de-lionization could only take place in the city which is still the most “Serbian” in Boka (the irony of the story being, of course, that its centuries-old Serbian Orthodox majority was made possible precisely by the Venetian conquer of the city from the Turks) (Rizzi, 1998).

In any case, be it because of the presence of the rather pro-Italian Greens, the remoteness of the Italian imperialist threat or the minimum size of the “unredeemed” community, Montenegro, during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, seems like it hasn’t nurtured any anti-Italian or anti-Venetian sentiment.

Such an unfortunate result will, to be reached, need all the stupidity of the Fascist regime. After the Axis invasion and partition of Yugoslavia, in 1941, Mussolini indeed suffered from a dangerous delusion that he can rule Montenegro as a puppet state; then unleashes a brutal crackdown of the following uprising, not to forget the harshness of the Italian occupation in the formerly friendly region.

By the way, if there is little doubt Italians had occupied Montenegro with the hope of getting cooperation from locals, it is also true that they were immediately aware of the grave mistakes they made and of the humiliations inflicted on the Montenegrins; this clearly appears even in the diaries of Serafino Mazzolini, who the regent Italians had appointed for a king, and who never came (Rossi, 2005). Political responsibilities aside, there is no doubt that the criminally-driven occupation of a proud and warlike country such as Montenegro could only lead to national and nationalist responses. Yet, again, we must distinguish between what happened in Montenegro - where for instance the partisans destroyed the winged lion at the entrance of Porta Marina in Cattaro, installing in the same place a memorial stone in the honor of Tito and of the victory of the partisans - and the systematic and scientific cancellation that the Ustaše tried to achieve in Croatia (Rizzi, 1998). If Montenegrin war-time leontophobia, however, fits as an understandable reaction to Italians’ aggression and violence, anti-Venetian stance under the Independent State of Croatia is a very different issue.

In their tenacious fight against every symbol of Venice, Pavelić’s militias behaved in fact in accordance with an accurately designed program, aiming to erase and literally scratch away even the memory of anything “foreign” - let alone a foreign dominance - from Croatian soil. And, thanks to this scientific approach, they basically managed to eliminate once-copious Venetian lions from the zones they controlled. Whilst, in Montenegro, the only ones who showed a cold-blooded vandalism against symbols of Venice were the Chetniks, who in 1943 destroyed the St. Mark’s column in Perast (Rizzi, 2005).

After all, there's no reason to believe the occasional, war-time anti-Italian anger, while it certainly couldn't simply vanish once peace was declared, remained significantly longer in Montenegrin mentality and society after war and occupation. On the contrary, it can be argued that the entry of Cattaro in UNESCO as world heritage site in 1979 reiterated the importance of the Venetian legacy as a fundamental part of Montenegrin identity and, in a sense, a side Montenegro offers to the world. It doesn't either seem a coincidence that in 1989 it was decided to relocate a lion of San Marco even at the old Antivari, more than four centuries after the fall of the city in the hands of Turks; as though to point out to the observers that, between all the numerous and different components of the history and culture of Montenegro, Venice embodies its showcase and its privileged link with Europe and the world (Rizzi, 1998).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

But now we can ask ourselves: if such a myth of Venice continues to exist to this day, though for sure in different forms after 1797, what could be its place, its importance in the current and future Montenegro?

First of all, it seems to us that the age-old links with Venice, showed in art, history and through the refined looks of Cattaro and Perast, are commonly read amongst Montenegrins as the best proof of their link to Europe, or rather of their belonging to it. And this is certainly true; in this sense, again, one should know how differently things happened in Croatia, where with the integration into the European Union an entire other background, based on Habsburgian and Mitteleuropean bonds, resurfaced<sup>3</sup>. We can give at least two reasons for this: on one hand, the controversy with Italian nationalism was, at least partly, alive and sensitive up to a couple of decades ago (one can recall that the Italians have maintained certain positions up to the Yugoslav wars, if not further), which means Croats had a good motive not to emphasize some specific connections; on the other hand, the administrative and cultural center of Croatia is Zagreb, which has never had ties with Venice, owing instead to

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<sup>3</sup> As a student, in Rome, I had the opportunity to hear (at some conference I can't unfortunately recall) an intelligent and wise consideration on Croato-German relations by professor Slobodan Novak. As far as I am aware, those thoughts never made their way into a book or a paper.

the Habsburgs its belonging to Europe (not to mention the well-known connections between German-speaking world and Croatia-Slovenia at the time of the renewed independence of these republics) (Pirjevec, 2011).

In Montenegro, however, Venice and Europe are synonymous. What then one should be careful about, we believe, is not to make Venice a controversial topic in a public debate; given that Montenegrin public opinion is divided almost in half since the last century, once between Greens and Whites and more recently between secessionists and unionists. Venice does not only belong to the side which favours, so to speak, more direct links with Western Europe; it must belong instead to all Montenegrins, first of all because Venice, on its own, represents a hybrid civilization, flourished in the West but, as a daughter of Byzantium, always linked to the Orient. In this sense, the Venetian civilization could embody the common heritage and a bridge between the different ways of thinking and different mentalities of Montenegrins, with their various historical, economic, religious backgrounds. But, as professor Roberto Valle noted in the preface to Antun Sbutega's *History of Montenegro*, "the diversity of the Balkans is an irreplaceable part of the European civilization, which in itself is polyphonic"; and Venice, a civilization constituted from the interaction of two or more worlds, is the best self-introduction of a country like Montenegro, which derives its wealth from its diversity, but which remains wholly and proudly European.

We have tried through this brief report to describe as in Montenegro - unlike in Croatia - that the old and deep-rooted myth of Venice has never turned upside down and transmuted in hatred towards the Venetian domination, thus never unleashing the leontophobia that showed up in Dalmatia and elsewhere as a practical consequence of this hatred; the quasi-total absence of a struggle between the Italian irredentism and the Slavic nationalism in Montenegro being the main reason for this missing mutation.

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