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CONTENTS:

RELATIONS BETWEEN MONTENEGRO AND ALBANIA DURING THE 70'S AND EARLY 80'S Dragutin PAPOVIC	p.127.
WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION IN MONTENEGRO BEFORE SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA: THE ROOTS OF RETRADITIONALIZATION IN MONTENEGRIN SOCIETY Jovana DJURIC	p.163.
DELEGATE ELECTORAL SYSTEM AND SELF-MANAGEMENT CASE STUDY: MONTENEGRO 1974-1990 Jelisaveta BLAGOJEVIC MILJANIC	p.192.
READING THE STARS IN 1990: SERBIAN MEDIA AND THE RECONSTRUCTING OF THE CONCEPT OF HEAVENLY PEOPLE Srdja PAVLOVIC	p.221.
THE CONDITIONALITY OF ECONOMIC GROWTH ON NATIONAL INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL - THE CASE OF THE COUNTRIES OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE Matea ZLATKOVIC RADAKOVIC	p.238.
SCIENTIFIC REVIEW OF THE MICROSTRUCTURES OF YUGOSLAVIC SOCIALISM - Book review: Igor Duda (ur.), Mikrosocijalizam. Mikrostrukture jugoslavenskog socijalizma u Hrvatskoj 1970-ih i 1980-ih godina Husnija KAMBEROVIC	p.257.
REAFFIRMATION OF MONTENEGRO-BULGARIAN HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS – Book review: Dragan B. Perović, Miroљub Orlandić: Dr Petar Orahovac–Crnogorac, predsjednik bugarske Skupštine Nedžad MEHMEDOVIĆ	p.261.
A THOROUGH, BUT BRAGGING, HISTORY OF ATHENS - Book review: Srđan Jović, Atinska imperija - Istorija Atine do Peloponeskog rata Balsa KOVACEVIC	p.266.
EXAMPLE OF MULTICULTURALITY IN THE MUSEUM INSTITUTIONS IN CETINJE - Book review: Filip Kuzman, Luna podno Lovčena: Kulturno nasljeđe islamskog stanovništva Crne Gore u cetinjskim muzejima Vukan RAZNATOVIC	p.275.
TESTIMONY ABOUT THE SONS OF KING NIKOLA IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR - History Essay Milan SCEKIC	p.278.
INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS	p.287.

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SADRŽAJ:

ODNOSI CRNE GORE I ALBANIJE TOKOM 70-IH I POČETKOM 80-IH GODINA 20. VIJEKA Dragutin PAPOVIĆ	str.127.
EMANCIPACIJA ŽENA U CRNOJ GORI U PERIODU PRIJE STVARANJA SOCIJALISTIČKE JUGOSLAVIJE: KORIJENI RETRADICIONALIZACIJE U CRNOGORSKOM DRUŠTVU Jovana ĐURIĆ	str.163.
DELEGATSKI SISTEM IZBORA I SAMOUPRAVLJANJE STUDIJA SLUČAJA: CRNA GORA 1974 - 1990 Jelisaveta BLAGOJEVIĆ MILJANIĆ	str.192.
GLEĐANJE U ZVIJEZDE 1990: SRPSKI MEDIJI I KONCEPT OBNAVLJANJE CARSTVA NEBESKOG Srdja PAVLOVIĆ	str.221.
USLOVLJENOST EKONOMSKOG RASTA NACIONALNIM INTELEKTUALNIM KAPITALOM - SLUČAJ ZEMALJA CENTRALNE I ISTOČNE EVROPE Matea ZLATKOVIĆ RADAKOVIĆ	str.238.
NAUČNI PRILOZI O MIKROSTRUKTURAMA JUGOSLAVENSKOG SOCIJALIZMA - Prikaz knjige: Igor Duda (ur.), Mikrosocijalizam. Mikrostrukture jugoslavenskog socijalizma u Hrvatskoj 1970-ih i 1980-ih godina Husnija KAMBEROVIĆ	str.257.
REAFIRMACIJA CRNOGORSKO-BUGARSKIH ISTORIJSKIH VEZA - Prikaz knjige: Dragan B. Perović, Miroљjub Orlandić: Dr Petar Orahovac–Crnogorac, predsjednik bugarske Skupštine Nedžad MEHMEDOVIĆ	str.261.
TEMELJNA, ALI HVALISAVA, ISTORIJA ATINE - Prikaz knjige: Srđan Jović, Atinska imperija - Istorija Atine do Peloponeskog rata Balša KOVAČEVIĆ	str.266.
PRIMJER MULTIKULTURALNOSTI U MUZEJSKIM USTANOVAMA NA CETINJU - Prikaz knjige: Filip Kuzman, Luna podno Lovćena: Kulturno nasljeđe islamskog stanovništva Crne Gore u cetinjskim muzejima Vukan RAŽNATOVIĆ	str.275.
SVJEDOČENJA O SINOVIIMA KRALJA NIKOLE U PRVOM SVJETSKOM RATU - Istorijski esej Milan SCEKIC	str.278.
UPUTSTVA ZA AUTORE.....	str.287.

Original scientific article

READING THE STARS IN 1990: SERBIAN MEDIA AND THE RECONSTRUCTING OF THE CONCEPT OF HEAVENLY PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT:

The article points out several aspects of the political and media landscapes in Serbia in the last decade of the twentieth century, and offer an overview of strategies employed by the civilian and military structures of power in Serbia aimed at constructing enemies (both foreign and domestic) as well as legitimizing military intervention in neighboring countries in the early 1990s. Much has been written about the political developments in the former Yugoslavia, and the purpose of this paper is to shed additional light upon a few elements of the mechanisms of deception the government in Belgrade used in the war years and beyond (1990-2000). I wish to illustrate the construction of fear used by the political and military elites in order to rationalize the chaotic situation in the country and maintain their grip on power.

KEY WORDS: Serbia; Yugoslavia; 90's; Milosevic; Propaganda;

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SAŽETAK:

Članak ukazuje na nekoliko aspekata političkog i medijskog pejzaža u Srbiji u poslednjoj deceniji dvadesetog veka i nudi pregled strategija civilnih i vojnih struktura vlasti u Srbiji u cilju konstruisanja neprijatelja (i stranih i domaćih) kao i legitimisanje vojne intervencije u susednim zemljama početkom 1990-ih. O političkim zbivanjima u bivšoj Jugoslaviji pisano je dosta, a cilj ovog rada je da dodatno osvetli nekoliko elemenata mehanizama obmane koje je vlast u Beogradu koristila u ratnim godinama i kasnije (1990-2000). Želim da ilustrujem konstrukciju straha koju koriste političke i vojne elite da bi racionalizovali haotičnu situaciju u zemlji i zadržali svoju vlast.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *Srbija; Jugoslavija; 90-te; Milošević; Propaganda;*

It could be argued that, in any given society, the feelings of isolation (social, political, economic, or cultural) of a group and its members, and the helplessness that often derives from such isolation could create and condition a paranoid-like perception not only of one's own reality and immediate environment, but of the world as well. Through a complicated web of causalities, such perception could also gradually induce feelings of one's particular importance, grandeur and generally superiority in regard to others, as well as a belief that the group in question is the subject of others' hate, persecution and conspiracy.

Such convictions are often employed in a community "under siege" as modes of explaining the state of affairs and are used for bringing together (preserving) goals and motivations of individuals, thus enhancing a sense of togetherness among the members of the group. This was how a crisis caused by war for territories and ideologies in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s was rationalized and how violent reactions against individuals and groups perceived as the enemy were legitimized. While such patterns of behavior could be illustrated with numerous examples throughout the world and throughout history, I intend to focus on Serbia in the 1990s.

What was this sinister and apparently effective mechanism? Based on my research I wish to suggest that what we had in Serbia in the last decade of the last century was, among other things, the application of occult, paranormal and prophetic themes by both the state-controlled media and by some of the media that championed the cause of the opposition political parties.² Those were interpretative mechanisms used to explain everyday occurrences in Serbia, as well as to interpret political and economic changes on a global scale. During the 1990s in Serbia, public opinion polls - those "general checkups" of the nation's health - had been used mostly to project the size of an electoral body and give a hint of the political preferences of individual voters (Mihajlovic, 2000; Popadic, 2000, 233). The most common feelings expressed were fear, anticipation and disappointment. Various polls had shown that some 80% of the

² Even though many would argue that this tactic is exclusive to the state-controlled media in Serbia, sources indicate that those media outlets in Serbia that advocate the political programs of the opposition parties, as well as the opposition politicians themselves, had adopted similar methods in manipulating public opinion. The fact that the examples of such manipulative tactics on the part of the Serbian opposition were less numerous does not minimize the importance of the general trend. Moreover, it indicates clearly the attitude of the elite towards power, its political credo and its relationship with the electoral body.

citizens of Belgrade feared a civil war, while 70% were afraid of hunger in the future.³ Other polls concluded that some 38% of the sample group felt constant fatigue and exhaustion, 32% were constantly nervous and angry, while 37% felt that they had had enough of everything. These findings reflected a common theme in a society that had lived through a stressful period of war and other types of prolonged crisis (economic, political, social, and the crisis of identity).

The most intriguing were the responses to the questions about individual beliefs in numerology and astrology, prophecy and horoscopes, as well as in the inevitability of punishment (in the forms of an epidemic or a natural catastrophe) for NATO member-states. Approximately 50% of those interviewed believed that events of cataclysmic proportions would take place in NATO countries, while 11% regarded the question as utter nonsense.

The level of education was a variable in the answers. For instance, 60% of those with an elementary school education believed in the doomsday scenario and the suffering of NATO countries, and no one discounted the possibility. Among university graduates, 30% expressed their firm belief that some kind of punishment will be imposed upon NATO countries in the future (but by what or whose agency remained unclear).

These surveys also suggested that believers and devoted practitioners of Eastern Orthodoxy had shown a greater inclination towards believing in supernatural phenomena than those who identified themselves as either agnostics or atheists.

It is necessary to note here that the perceived greater inclination towards occultism and superstition among the Eastern Orthodox Christian believers in Serbia had been used by those wishing to emphasize (and castigate) the oriental character of Eastern Orthodoxy, thus removing it from the European cultural, historical, and political context all together. Turning towards superstition and horoscopes in times of hardship is neither specific to the South Slavs, nor a characteristic solely of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, but rather a common reaction by people in times of crisis.

³ These findings and all subsequent figures/percentages were taken from an opinion poll conducted in Autumn 1999 in Belgrade. The complete report was published as: "Srecko Mihailovic." Ed. Javno Mnjenje Srbije: Izmedju Razocarenja i Nade, CPA/CPS. Beograd, 2000. See also: Popadic, Dragan. "O mentalnom zdravlju naroda." *Republika*, No. 233. Beograd, 2000.

I would propose that a greater inclination towards such beliefs could be the product of frustration and hopelessness which, in turn, creates the need to employ the tools of superstition in order to ease anxiety. One expects people to act angrily and in an irrational fashion after so many lost battles and broken dreams, as was the case with 1990s Serbia.

What should be kept in mind here, however, is the fact that the ruling elite in Serbia in 1990s had played a pivotal role in nourishing such sentiment among its citizens. On a general note, as theorists of the authoritarian state (eg. Adorno, et al.) had pointed out, superstition is considered to be one of the generic components of the authoritarian personality, which derives from the need of an individual to ascribe responsibility to external agents that he/she cannot control in any way, (Andro, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson & Stanford, 1950,236).

Keeping in mind the authoritarian character of the government of Serbia in 1990s and the fact that the public sphere had been entirely controlled by it, and judging by the type of literature produced in Serbia, as well as the fact that the market was flooded with books on “formulas of light,” prophecies, horoscopes, numerology and conspiracy theories, one could readily suspect the involvement of the state apparatus in all this. Various healers and prophets were constant features on almost every TV show and it was difficult to find a newspaper or a magazine in Serbia that did not have a section with horoscopes. Moreover, there were specialized magazines devoted to occultism and the paranormal, such as *Trece Oko* (The Third Eye), *Tajne* (Secrets), *Sesto Culo* (The Sixth Sense), *Cudo* (Miracle), *Zona Sumraka* (Twilight Zone), *Nostradamus* (Nostradamus), *Horoskop-Horoscope*, (*Trece Oko*, avgust 1993; *Sesto Culo*, jun 1996; *Horoskop*, april 1998).

This flourishing market could also be explained in a less dramatic fashion. One suggestion would be that those magazines were designed as a form of entertainment and a way of escaping the gloomy reality of everyday existence or as a counterbalance to the all-encompassing and constant politicization of Serbian society.

Furthermore, the attraction to the supernatural and paranormal, and to literature devoted to these subjects, could be seen as a marginal activity, and an insignificant segment of the publishing industry and its market in Serbia. This explanation is particularly appealing if one favors the view that the state apparatus and the party in

power in Serbia at the time were busy battling numerous political opponents and, thus, were not likely to devote much time and energy to regulating the publishing activities of such fringe groups. It also implies that the population was being manipulated by the sources and powers that reside outside of the system and that the system, once relieved of the pressure of everyday political and economic struggle, would deal effectively with those issues.

One tends to agree with the view that literature of this kind was a convenient way of escaping the reality of a devastated country, especially if such a view referred to individual members of a group and their need to transcend the profanity of their everyday existence in an unconscious and collective way.

Upon closer examination, however, the falsity of claims about its non-political content and fringe character can be easily revealed.

First, what is apparent from the pages of these magazines is the dominance of political themes.

- “*Programming the Brain in American Schools – The Demonic Project of the American Government,*”
- “*The Era of Aquarius and the New World Order,*” and
- “*Americans Admitted that their Army is Using Black Magic,*” as well as
- “*The U.S. Government Sold its Soul to Aliens in Order to Become the Only Superpower and Subdue Other Nations on the Planet,*” and
- “*Nemanjic Dynasty and the Third World War.*”

Moreover, these articles mentioned Serbian politicians more often than Serbian folk singers and other local celebrities. The magazine *Horoskop* repeatedly published profiles of prominent political figures such were Slobodan Milosevic, Dobrica Cosic, Vojislav Seselj, and others. The content of such publications performed the important political function of expressing, reinforcing and canonizing a belief that the local power structure and its exponents are the true representatives of a Serb collective being.

The strength of the argument about the peripheral nature of those publications and the lack of government influence on them is further diminished if we know that *Trece Oko* (The Third Eye) was published by the government-controlled *Borba Inc.* In turn, *Borba Inc.* was originally established and had been funded by the federal government of

Yugoslavia. The magazine *Horoskop* was published by *Politika Inc.*, yet another government-funded and controlled publishing corporation.

Television shows that featured prophets and astrologists were prime-time events on the state television and TV stations closely connected to the government of Serbia. At one point in early 1992, the Belgrade daily *Politika*, in its subsidiary *TV Revija* (TV Review), began publishing photographs of a local healer and prophet, claiming that he was able to project positive energy through his printed image to readers who managed to collect a sufficient number of his photos.

Long before magazines such as *Zona Sumraka* (Twilight Zone) came into existence (1995), the biggest Serbian daily, *Politika*, introduced regular sections on astrology and Chinese horoscope. In March of 1992, the science editor of *Politika* organized (and his newspaper sponsored) a unique event in Belgrade – the transfer of mental images from the Russian city of Novosibirsk to Belgrade. The same editor in one of his articles claimed to have discovered an unusual scientific study that successfully solved a number of cases of alien abduction.

At the beginning of 1992, amidst the constitutional, political military, and economic crisis in the former Yugoslavia, *Politika* began publishing a series of articles about miracles of parapsychology in the former Soviet Union. While Slovenia was seceding from SFR Yugoslavia and Croatia was bracing itself for war, and while the politics of nationalism and populism were on the rise in Serbia, readers of *Politika* were presented with details of paranormal occurrences in “Mother Russia”.

For example, the author of that series of articles claimed that the former General Secretary of the Soviet Union, Leonid Breznev, had died of some sort of telepathic aggression rather than of cancer. There was also lengthy and detailed descriptions of the case of a “*flying woman from Moscow.*” (*Politika*, 17. march 1992; *Politika*, 14. may 1995; *Politika*, january- february 1992).

Some years later, the editorial policy of *Politika* placed less emphasis on paranormal activities involving individuals and devoted more space to various conspiracies by Western historians and philosophers. A common theme in those articles were secretive groups that control the planet, and people who carry the “sign of beast,” as well as the magical significance of the numerical combination 666, that, according to findings by *Politika*, could be detected in the new EU-issued Passports, (Vasic, 2000).

Conspiracy theories do not necessarily fall into the category of superstition but both spheres share certain common features.

First, they both place an individual in the position of a helpless toy in the hands of mighty and invisible forces. Such positioning implies that the methodological apparatus of history, sociology or economics is insufficient for the analysis of one's private situation. Only through the analysis of these mighty forces could one explain and rationalize one's daily existence. It goes without saying that the only people who possess such analytical tools and are blessed with secret knowledge are experts in occultism and the paranormal.

Second, the content and framework of conspiracy theories have many elements of pseudo-rational forms of thinking which, in turn, are the basis of superstition.

How are we to interpret the fact that the mainstream media in Serbia in 1990s devoted so much time and space both to endorsing irrational modes of thinking and to actively encouraging them? One is tempted to suggest that such encouragement rested on the existing beliefs in superstition and the paranormal, and that the structures of power were taking advantage of that.⁴ One could also argue that what occurred in Serbia at the time was the process of rehabilitating the imaginary at the expense of the rational and that such state-sanctioned rehabilitation was the direct product of the economic, social, political and cultural crisis in the country.

Manipulating a population that was already displaying a considerable attachment to supernatural mode of thinking seemed to be a rather pragmatic move on the part of the ruling elite. Such manipulation was not, in essence, based on coercion and force, and did not provoke resistance within the population. It was relatively easy to fabricate a prophecy; one did not have to follow rules and regulations, nor were there any restrictions in that respect. The truthfulness of prophecies (or the perception of it) was almost never questioned. Its acceptance by the general public depended entirely on the popularity and the media profile of the prophet.

⁴ One of the most significant books of prophecies that has never lost its charm and appeal among the reading public in Serbia is Kremansko Prorocanstvo: sta je bilo, sta nas cek, edited by Dragoljub Golubovic and Dejan Malenkovic. (third edition Beograd, 1987). The book has gone through numerous editions in various publishing houses in Serbia. The book is the collection of prophecies by two brothers, Milos and Mitar Tarabic, from the village of Kremna in central Serbia. It would be safe to say that this collection of prophecies is still the central reference point for anyone in Serbia who ventures into the realm of the unknown and represents a blueprint against which the accuracy of all new prophecies is measured.

Visions of the future and prophecies were far removed from any factual base and that characteristic might have been where their strength lied. The further removed a prophecy was from the social context, the more credible it became. Furthermore, a prophet was perceived as a medium that only conveyed a message initiated by an unknown (cosmic or divine) source. The personal responsibility of the prophet was never an issue, since he/she was not perceived as the one who generated the message. If need be, the falsity of his/her claims could have been easily explained by emphasizing the frailty and unreliability of human nature.

It is possible to compare the role played by modern day prophets in Serbia to that of medieval sorcerers. They were mediums through whom a higher power spoke, and the truthfulness of their words was never questioned. These extraordinary personalities were thought to represent, and through their messages convey, the purest expression of the spirit of Serbhood. The failure to predict the future correctly was seen either as the result of a loss of energy on the part of the prophet, or as the product of some strange and unwanted psychic intervention from outside sources.

Every once-in-a while a new prophet would appear on TV and in the newspapers. Such “*substitute psychics*” were called upon only in the time of immediate crisis, and only when the existing psychic network proved to be grossly inaccurate in its predictions. These replacements, however, had to strictly correspond to particular set of expectations and had to conform to a clearly delineated field of action. Naturally, minor variations were acceptable but, in general, there could not have been any compromise in regard to their social status, place of birth, and educational and cultural background. They were representatives of “*common folk*,” usually older (and predominantly male) peasants from the heartland of Serbia, whose education consisted of their life experience and whose cultural background was closely interwoven with traditional Serbian culture. In other words, they were representatives of that acclaimed “*Slavic soul*” – the people of simple means that were blessed with an uncommon gift. They were perceived as being spiritually strong and independent because they drew their energy from that deep well of the pure and generous tradition of the Serbian collective being

and announced their visions in a traditional manner using the language of the common people.⁵

One example of such a “substitute prophet” in Serbia was *Grandfather Miloje*, a prophet from the Morava Valley. Miloje’s prophecies were published in Belgrade in 1993, and the book became an instant bestseller despite persistent rumors that its content was entirely constructed by its editor and that a man by the name of Miloje never existed. Grandfather Miloje had predicted that Bill Clinton would die on May 19, 1996 and that former Russian president Boris Yeltsin would be defeated by Mikhail Gorbachev, and would end up being assassinated (Matic, 1993).

The fascination with an allegedly fabricated text and with its allegedly non-existent author only proved the effectiveness of the use of archetypes in manipulating the public perception of reality. The real purpose of introducing (or inventing) Grandfather Miloje seemed to have been the need to legitimize the present rather than to call upon the past in order to predict the future. His authority as a prophet was needed to ultimately strengthen the charisma of the late Slobodan Milosevic, since Miloje had made specific references to the former Serbian president and his role in shaping the future of his people. Miloje told us that Milosevic was “the only one capable of battling the Devil,” and that “he must not fall from power under any circumstances,” (Popadic, 1992).

Salman Rushdie, when talking about nationalism and its mechanism of recalling the past, makes mention of a “*return to the absolutism of the pure.*” In the case of Serbia in the 1990s and its population’s attraction to the supernatural, those voices from the past, visions and fantasies that belong to the times when “there was no time yet” ultimately had a negative impact on the mental health of the general population (Marabout, 1974, 39).

Their function was to displace an individual, at least temporarily, from the envelope of everyday life and to try and position him/her on the ethereal levels of an aesthetic existence. Such visions and fantasies made it less difficult for an individual to step out of his/her own reality of daily existence and cross the boundaries between two worlds: to inhabit that other reality even for a brief moment. The appeal of such a voyage is so

⁵ It should be kept in mind that the phrase “those in power” refers to both the government and to political parties in the opposition in Serbia. Even though the public discourse in Serbia is almost entirely created and controlled by the government, one should not forget the fact that the opposition parties are able to exercise a certain amount of control over segments of the society.

strong that people live and re-live those special moments, waiting for them to happen again. (Cailor, 1950, 125). This is what constitutes the nostalgic feeling about the “*good old days*.”

As a rule, prognoses for the future were bright and always invited a support for the government in power. Every so often, readers had been presented with an abbreviated version of the scenario for achieving the centuries-old political dream of Greater Serbia: (Politika, 9. March 1992).

Astrologist Soka from Vukovar spoke yesterday. She said that the Republic of Srpska Krajina will cease to exist as an independent state because it will become a part of the union of Serbian states whose capital will be in Ohrid! That big new state will be a monarchy and its monarch will come from the Nemanjic family. In the future, the world will call this war a world war, and Croats will be of Eastern Orthodox faith, and will respect and celebrate, as the Serbs do, the family saint. (Politika, 22. November 1992).

What is important to note here is both the timing of this revelation and its source. This vision of a future Serb state appeared in the Serbian press during the *London Peace Conference* (May-December 1992), at a time when the popular sentiment in Serbia was that of an approaching victory on the battlefield, as well as of an imminent and favorable political settlement. Even Slobodan Milosevic, during his flight to London, remarked that the Serbs “are the winning party.” (Silber & Little, 1996, 258). The astrologist was a woman from Vukovar, a Croatian town that was obliterated by Serb artillery and ethnically cleansed of its Croat population.⁶

By mid-1990s, TV-Prophets and numerous miracle-workers had replaced astrologists and parapsychologists, and the initial thin quasi-scientific façade had disappeared.⁷

⁶ This author had the opportunity to review a confidential report by the Yugoslav Army Special Forces operating in and around Vukovar. According to that report, during the eighty-plus days of the siege the Special Forces units fired 1,485,000 rounds of mortars and artillery shells at the town. The ferocity of this attack and the level of destruction of the town becomes more obvious if we remember that St. Petersburg (Leningrad) was hit by some 24,000 shells during the nine hundred-day siege in the Second World War. (This information is displayed on the Memorial Plaque at the Piskarevski Bridge in St. Petersburg.)

⁷ This author personally witnessed the event and recorded the speech for the Montenegrin independent magazine MONITOR (Podgorica). Even though some of the recordings had been confiscated and destroyed by the members of the Serbian paramilitary units operating in the area (‘Arkan’s Tigers’ led by Zeljko Raznjatovic Arkan and and ‘White Eagles’ led by Dragoslav Bokan), a brief article on the subject appeared in the magazine MONITOR (Podgorica, June 1992).

There were indications that those in power in Serbia were also susceptible to supernatural beliefs,⁸ (Monitor, June 1992; Borba, 14-15. August 1999). I would suggest that the popular fascination with the paranormal was not only and exclusively the result of manipulative tactics, (Andro, 1976, 28).

In the spring of 1999, some senior members of the *Yugoslav Left* (JUL) political party established in Belgrade the *Yugoslav Committee for Coherence and Invincibility*.⁹ The role of this committee was to work according to the instructions of Maharishi Mahesh on training some one thousand yoga-flyers to protect Yugoslavia with the power of their positive energy.¹⁰ Among the project's many supporters were the *Yugoslav Ministry of Defense* and the *Ministry of Health*. Journalists have alleged that in the early 1990s the Yugoslav Army established *Group 69*, a secret organization that was to deal with the issues of psychological warfare and paranormal activities. According to the report, this group consisted of various specialists for parapsychological phenomena, a number of high profile politicians, prophets, astrologists, intellectuals, opponents of the New World Order and a number of army officers¹¹ (Glas Javnosti, 4. January 2000). Further reports on the activities of this group appeared on the pages of *Zona Sumraka* (Twilight Zone), where the author of the article admitted to cooperating with this group since 1993. According to him, *Group 69* was formed as a section of the *General Headquarters of the Yugoslav Army* with the purpose of researching and eventually using new weapons for defending the country. He further stated that the group sent positive signals to the outside world from the very beginning of the Yugoslav crisis and preferred peace and cooperation to war. However, he argued that once attacked, those yoga-flyers fought valiantly against the intruders and had emerged victorious. Moreover, the author claimed that this group successfully used a special procedure called the "Serbian Mirror." Readers were given no details about the nature of the weapon itself other than

⁸ Devotion to Easter Orthodoxy and the insistence on its absolute connection to the Serbian heritage, tradition and history was a constant theme in the mainstream media. Belgrade writer Momo Kapor wrote that "Even the cosmonauts have noticed from space how our sacred places such as Patriarchy of Pec together with Hilandar are illuminated by some strange light. That is the positive energy which is ours, eternal and indestructible" (*Borba*, Beograd, 14-15 August, 1999).

⁹ The Yugoslav Left (JUL) political party was led by Mirjana Markovic, the wife of late Slobodan Milosevic. Mrs. Jara Ribnikar, former communist leader, and Prvoslav Markovic, the Executive Director of Laza Lazarevic Mental Hospital, both senior

¹⁰ The closest comparison in North America to those Serbian yoga-flyers is the Canadian Natural Law Party. In Serbia, however, even before the formal establishment of this committee, members of this group took part in several local election campaigns and acted on behalf of the ruling political parties (Socialist Party of Serbia and the Yugoslav Left).

¹¹ Glas Javnosti (Beograd, 4 January, 2000). According to the report, one of the members of Group 69 was the Army Colonel, Svetozar Radisic, who was also the Editor-in-Chief of the Yugoslav Army monthly *Vojno Delo*, and a regular contributor to *Trece Oko*.

that it had been based upon the past inventions by the physicist and inventor Nikola Tesla. The practical results of the use of the “Serbian Mirror” were such that some of the enemy died (*Turgut Ozal, Francois Mitterand, Yitzak Rabin*), some lost members of their immediate family (former German Chancellor *Helmut Kohl* lost his son, and the Czech president *Havel* lost his wife), while others got away with minor injuries (*Bill Clinton* only broke his leg), (*Zona Sumraka*, 30. november 1999).

Speculations about the validity of claims made in the articles were “put to rest” in an interview with the spokesperson for the Yugoslav Army (VJ), Colonel Svetozar Radisic, that appeared in *Politika*. In this interview, Colonel Radisic referred to the use of the paranormal, black and white magic and the “Serbian Mirror,” as well as yoga-flyers, as a “multidimensional defense against the New World Order and a struggle that, besides the army, must encompass all state institutions” (*Politika*, 27. september 1999).

This trend continued more or less unchanged through the late 1990s, and the end of the millennium has served as a convenient context for venturing further into the unknown. Predictions that came after 2000 were intended to have a soothing effect upon the population. All dealt with the state of affairs in Serbia at the time and closely corresponded to one other. For example, a certain grandmother *Vuka* predicted that Slobodan Milosevic would stay in power while Bill Clinton would “fall as a rotten pear” and another prophet, *Zorka*, said that no one would be able to harm Slobodan Milosevic and that Kosovo “will be ours again.”

Such rosy visions of the future were supported by yet another prophet, *Vanga IV*, who said that the KFOR troops would withdraw from Kosovo and that Serbia would be successfully ruled by “a group of wise people, including one woman” (*Politika*, 15. January 2000).

The usage of prophecies and prophets as tools in gaining and strengthening one’s political status acquired a new dimension during the presidential election campaign in Serbia in the fall of 2000. That campaign had shown, among other things, that the ruling coalition in Serbia had no exclusive right on the political using of deeply ingrained popular beliefs in supernatural. The leaders of the opposition parties and some of the independent media (*Danas* daily, for example) had adopted the tried and true tactics of the ruling elite. The new player in this field of dreams and fantasies was the *Serbian Democratic Opposition* (DOS).

In the midst of the presidential campaign, the presidential candidate for the DOS, *Vojislav Kostunica*, made a point of visiting the village of *Kremna*, the birthplace of the late *Tarabic* brothers, well-known Serbian prophets. His stay in *Kremna* featured prominently on the pages of several independent newspapers. Upon his arrival at *Kremna*, *Kostunica* was greeted by *Jovan M. Tarabic*, a descendant of famous prophets. “Welcome Mr. President! It was said that a man of the people would come and bring prosperity, and that he would save our people from misery.” When asked who that man might be, *Jovan M. Tarabic* replied: “Mr. *Kostunica*, of course!”

The author of the report took it upon himself to describe not only *Kostunica*'s visit to the village, but to present his readers with a brief but effective historical account of the entire region. While praising the natural beauty of *Kremna*, the author repeatedly referred to it as the “Serbian Delphi” and as a place where people live long and prosperous lives. He even managed to incorporate into his narrative a part of the title of one of *Milan Kundera*'s books:

Fertile land. In the foothills of the mountain Tara, in a landscape so beautiful as if it has been created by a divine hand, lies hidden the village of Kremna. Shielded by pine trees. From every rock a mountain spring flows. People say that when the sun rises it does so first over Kremna and only then over the rest of the world... A snake-like dirt road leads to this Serbian Delphi, the homeland of Tarabici's... Even though it might not seem that way, there are no miracles here. Here, human spirit and nature have been establishing a relation of mutual respect for centuries and have acquired the fine balance of 'the lightness of being.'

Kostunica's visit to *Kremna* was depicted as nothing short of a religious experience and as the ultimate confirmation by the late prophets' descendant of *Kostunica*'s worthiness to become the future president of Serbia. He traveled to *Kremna* to be embraced by a spiritual authority as the victor in the upcoming elections and as the savior of Serbia. However, his comments regarding the visit and the treatment he got confirmed the general attitude of the elite towards the better part of the Serbian society. *Kostunica*'s response to *Tarabici*'s enthusiasm was that “the upcoming elections are our last chance to save Serbia and we will make sure to do that. These elections are not simple ones because only after the elections Serbia will show its real face.”

This entire episode could be analyzed within the category of the so-called “well-intended deception,” that is, a sophisticated, manipulative tactic used for centuries by many rulers and institutions (religious and civic) in order to gain the necessary support among the populace. Judging by the final results of such tactics in the past, it is not entirely clear how “well-intended” these deceptions have been, (Kovacevic, 2000, 1080).

Given the evidence, one wonders whether the population in Serbia had been the object of manipulation and mind games by the elites at the time, or whether the representatives of the power structure believed in and were guided by the rules of the paranormal.¹² I would suggest that, in the case of Serbia at the turn of 21st century, the two options were not mutually exclusive but complemented each other in an effort to preserve the status quo. The homology between the individual and the group in Serbia of the period only reinforced the idea of such a merger. The ideological construction that was offered as an explanation of the political events, economic and social changes was analogous to the construction that tries to explain and rationalize those same occurrences on an individual level. The economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations were presented to the population as an event that has been initiated and conditioned by outside forces.¹³ Following the same logic, it had been suggested to the citizens of Serbia that their own personal life experience and future prospects were subject to various stellar occurrences and magical powers. In an unprecedented environment of isolation, paired with a series of lost military conflicts, it seemed that the paranoid perception of the world was the main characteristic of public discourse in Serbia in the late 1990¹⁴ (Banac, 1993,134-164; Bakic-Hayden, 1995, 4-54; Jelavich, 1951; Pavlovic, 1997; Basic & Pavlovic, 1992; Banac, 1984).

¹² For a brief but insightful analysis of Serbian nationalism, see: Danilo Kis, “On Nationalism.” in *Why Bosnia? Writings on the Balkan War*. ed. Rabia Ali & Lawrence Lifschultz. Stony Creek, Conn. 1993, pp. 126-128.

¹³ For more details on the nature of the political system in Serbia, see: “Separating History from Myth: An Interview with Ivo Banac.” *Why Bosnia? Writings on the Balkan War*. ed. Rabia Ali & Lawrence Lifschultz. Stony Creek, Conn. 1993, pp. 134-164; Bakic-Hayden, Milica. “Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia.” *Slavic Review*, 54-4 (Winter 1995); Jelavich, Charles. “Nikola Pasic: Greater Serbia or Yugoslavia?” *Journal of Central European Affairs* XI (July 1951); Stokes, Gale. *Legitimacy Through Liberalism: Vladimir Jovanovic and the Transformation of Serbian Politics*. University of Washington Press, 1975; Pavlovic, Aleksandar. *The Fragmentation of Yugoslavia: Nationalism in a Multinational State*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997; Basic, Husein and Milika Pavlovic. *Smrt Duse / Podrum Podgorica*, 1992, Montenegrin PEN Center. For more general analysis of the issue of nationalism and national consciousness among the South Slavs, see: Banac, Ivo. *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*. Ithaca and London: Cornell, 1984

¹⁴ The author is indebted to Dennis Sweeney for pointing out a possibility of such a characterization and for elaborating on the broader connotations of the term “new age fascism.”

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