

SERBIA'S ARGUMENT WITH ITSELF: ANTI-COMMUNISM AS IDEOLOGY AND THE POLITICS OF FORGETTING^{1*}

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Abstract

The paper examines the ideological trajectory of post-socialist Serbia, arguing that anti-communism has functioned as a destructive political ideology that has significantly undermined the country's socio-economic development and democratic consolidation. The author contends that prevailing public narratives attributing Serbia's contemporary difficulties to a "communist continuity" are empirically unfounded, given that Yugoslavia was never a communist state, and that market mechanisms and legal pluralism were gradually institutionalised well before the system's collapse. The analysis traces how the dissolution of Yugoslavia enabled nationalist political elites to construct anti-communism as a legitimising framework, effectively displacing evidence-based policy and discourse with ideological anti-empiricism. The Socialist Party of Serbia is identified as a pivotal actor in this transformation, abandoning class-based internationalism in favour of Serbian nationalism, accelerating the erosion of socialist solidarity and economic principles based on labour. The paper further argues that the shift from labour-based to coercion-based legitimacy, enabled through politically controlled privatisation and violent nationalism, has produced enduring institutional deficits. Nevertheless, the recent developments suggest a generational reorientation towards rule of law, transparency, and solidarity – values that challenge the anti-communist ideological inheritance that has shaped contemporary Serbia.

Keywords: ideology, legitimisation, social transformation, totalitarianism

The Issue

More than three decades after the post-socialist transition, Serbian public discourse continues to produce claims attributing the country's deteriorating conditions to the persistence of communism², of which the current Serbian government is identified

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² No country satisfied Marx's definition of communism. Yugoslavia's institutional architecture, market socialism, self-management, legal pluralism, placed it outside even the looser Leninist party-state

as the most recent manifestation. What these claims share, whether deliberately or not, is a systematic disregard for the historical fact that Yugoslavia, and by extension Serbia, were never communist states. The end of the Second World War brought about the replacement of the monarchy with a republican form of government and the introduction of socialism as the political and economic model of state organisation. The Constitution of the new state guaranteed personal and private property rights, albeit with significant restrictions; market economy principles appeared indirectly in the Constitution of 1968, and were introduced explicitly as one of the foundational principles of the economic order with the Constitution of 1974. Multi-party political pluralism, on the other hand, was absent throughout this period – the constitutional monopoly of the Communist Party was enshrined in the foundational legal order. Nevertheless, participation in public life, including political participation, although problematic in practice, was encouraged within the framework of the single-party system and through the institution of workers' self-management (Dryzek, Holmes, 2002, p.. 58).

Following the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Constitution of 1992 introduced political pluralism and a formally democratic political order and, abandoning collective workers' ownership of the means of production, led to further consolidation of the already nascent market foundations of the economy³. Anyway, Serbia, despite recording economic growth, has fallen considerably behind Croatia and Slovenia, and by the mid-2020s has failed to meaningfully close the gap relative to the developed countries of Europe across institutional, political, and economic indicators.

Attributing the disappointing outcomes of economic and political transition to the historical persistence and ongoing legacy of communism lands itself as an intuitively coherent interpretive framework. However, such an interpretation is better understood as an indicator of the as yet incomplete ideological consolidation of Serbian post-socialist society. In that sense, attributing the absence of meaningful improvements in quality of life to the continuity of communism is an articulation of a legitimization matrix in which the adverse outcomes of political and economic transformation are automatically and unreflectively ascribed to a reified "communist" causality. This unreflective legitimization matrix also promotes anti-empiricism, which is typical of neoliberalism (Mirowski, 2014, pp. 364–365), indicating structural alignment with the neoliberal paradigm⁴, introducing it as a legitimate political instrument. It is an ideological posture, and a constitutive element of anti-communist

definition used by Linz and Stepan. "Communism", in public discourse discussed here, functions as a pejorative construct of considerable emotional charge used to dismiss and denounce any critical evaluation of the socialist Yugoslavia.

³ The self-management system in the economy had, as one of its structural consequences, the underdevelopment of the labour market.

⁴ The Serbian transition, in common with the transitions of other post-socialist states, is also amenable to analysis through the lens of its synergy with, or structural alignment to, the ideology of neoliberalism. While this dimension is analytically relevant, in terms of the elite's pursuit of short-term economic interest at the expense of society or nation building ideas, it falls outside the scope of the inquiry here.

discourse. The consequent dissatisfaction with the outcomes of anti-communism thus manifests not as a critical interrogation of the prevailing ideological paradigm in light of social, economic, and historical evidence, but rather as its inverse: a further entrenchment of anti-empirical commitments.

This paper examines and accounts for the social, economic, and historical processes that have defined Serbia's transformation over the past several decades, analysing the systemic shift from a socialist to an anti-communist political order, as well as the structural characteristics that have exercised a decisive influence on the country's political development from the late 1980s to the present. The arguments advanced here support the conclusion that anti-communism constitutes a destructive ideology, and that the elite which has championed it has largely succeeded in nullifying the modernisation achievements of socialist Serbia, thus significantly harming the socio-economic standing and the political and ideological emancipation of its citizens.

The Breakup, the New Path, and the History

The breakup of Yugoslavia would not have been possible without complementary nationalist political elites who profiled themselves on anti-communism and anti-Yugoslavism. These elites agree on two fundamental points: Yugoslavia was a prison of the people, best described as totalitarian and undemocratic, especially during the socialist period (the vision shared by all anti-Yugoslav parties of the newly formed states, which begs the question, who was the jailer?); Yugoslavia, through a redistributive system and the suppression of private initiatives, prevented people from enjoying the results of their own work – therefore, painting Yugoslavia as an unjust society. However, the prevailing outcomes of post-Yugoslav political projects, especially in Serbia, led to disillusionment of citizens with the changes, with a sense that the transitional promises remained largely unfulfilled. For the segment of the population ideologically aligned with anti-communist and anti-Yugoslav positions, the outcome of thirty-five years of rupture with Yugoslavia and socialism has been one of frustration with the results. However, the reaction was further entrenchment of the aforementioned ideological, and one might argue existential, foundations of their worldview, evident in an interpretation of recent history and the present in a manner that does not call it into question.

Setting aside individual motivations and the potential objectives underlying the dissemination of such “anti-” discourses, the present inquiry is concerned with the question of why the discourse of “communist continuity” fails to reflect historical and social reality, lacks empirical grounding, and is incapable of generating constructive transformative potential⁵. History does not repeat itself though similarities could be

⁵ "Constructive transformative potential" is understood as the existence of foundational elements upon which public policies oriented towards social development, with public interest at the centre, may be meaningfully constructed.

seen; as the liberators of Belgrade, Karađorđe and Obrenović, were preoccupied with the removal of the Ottoman flag instead of improving lives of the people (Velmar-Janković 1992, tr. 42)⁶. It would appear that the contemporary Serbian elite⁷ has similarly prioritised the eradication of “communism” over the modernisation and advancement of Serbian society.

Contemporary Serbia achieved its most pronounced economic, social, and cultural development during the socialist period. At first consideration, one might speculatively entertain the counterfactual proposition of whether this trajectory of growth and progress would have been more pronounced had Serbia emerged from the Second World War as a capitalist society – be it a monarchy or a republic. However, while socio-historical processes offer fertile ground for analytical interpretation, historical and social reality is at once too structurally complex and too temporally contingent to be subjected to experimental frameworks capable of adjudicating between the outcomes of two or more distinct approaches to socio-economic organisation. The question of whether an alternative ideological and political order would have produced fundamentally different outcomes is, therefore, analytically irrelevant and epistemologically untenable, principally for two reasons.

First, the same historical trajectory cannot be lived twice, nor can it be subjected to controlled comparison in order to determine which political order and ideological system would, within a given historical context, have proven more successful in modernising society. Discussions of this nature are, by their very constitution, speculative, and in political public life tend towards arbitrariness to a greater or lesser degree. This arbitrariness bears a direct and proportional relationship to the extent to which facts that contradict specific ideological positions are disregarded: the more inconvenient or ideologically incompatible the empirical evidence, the more arbitrary and reality-distant the resulting worldview becomes. The case in point is Serbia, which prior to the socialist period was a capitalist state, a monarchy, that was largely unsuccessful in its efforts to modernise and to meaningfully improve the educational structure and living standards of its citizenry. The specific historical and political context of the interwar period was, if one is to engage in such a consideration, certainly among the principal structural determinants of the slow pace of modernisation. Yet internal conditions were equally inauspicious. Social mobility in Serbia during this period was minimal, attributable in significant part to housing legislation⁸ which, with certain modifications, remained in force until the outbreak of the Second World War (Čalić 2004, str. 234). Furthermore, the project of national

⁶ The work was originally published in 1938.

⁷ The conception of elite employed here may be described as the minority which, by virtue of either positional authority or reputational standing, exercises disproportionate access to resources and exerts asymmetric influence over others. See the introductory chapter of *Born to Rule*.

⁸ In its most essential provisions, this legislation, enacted in the absence of state capacity to establish a meaningful social protection system, prohibited the sale or confiscation of houses and plots of land, on the assumption that this minimum of property would suffice to provide the Serbian citizen, in the absence of alternative income, with at least a subsistence level of material security.

consolidation exerted a distorting influence upon the economy through the systematic marginalisation of *anational* – with preferential employment extended to ethnic Serbs deemed politically loyal rather than professionally competent, frequently at the expense of qualified foreign personnel (Ibid., p. 290). These two fact-grounded cases, among many others, are conspicuously absent from anti-communist discourse, for the simple reason that they are irreconcilable with the prevailing narrative of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as an anti-Serbian construction and an impediment to Serbian national progress. Nor do they lend themselves to theories of a global conspiracy against Serbia – a hermeneutic framework in which conspiracy serves simultaneously as an explanation and justification for the failures of the monarchy and, subsequently, for four decades of socialism⁹.

The second reason follows from the first. While history is replete with instances of missed opportunities, it also instructs us that at any given historical moment a society is constrained to operate within the horizon of possibilities available to it – it cannot recover or retroactively exercise the opportunities that belonged to an earlier conjuncture. A society can work only with the results, the historical possibilities that were successfully converted into tangible achievements, that are at its disposal at a specific historical moment. Already by the late 1980s, Serbia had embarked upon a trajectory grounded in anti-communism and the systematic repudiation of the achievements of socialist society as coming from authoritarian dictatorship, orienting itself instead towards a return to the pre-socialist order. Yet, as the Russian aphorism has it – *Факты – упрямая вещь* (“facts are a stubborn thing,” a formulation frequently, if inaccurately, attributed to Stalin, though its origins considerably predate him) – the empirical record resists such ideological recasting. The pattern of state control, authoritarian governance, and proximity to outright dictatorship is not a phenomenon that entered Serbian political life with socialism; it was structurally present well before, most recently with the royal dictatorship introduced in 1929. The configuration of state centralism and interventionism constituted the infrastructural substrate upon which the socialist state subsequently built with considerable facility (Allcock 2000, p. 68). There is a significant implication here: socialism in Serbia did not represent a radical rupture with historical tradition, but was rather one of several possible developmental outcomes that drew upon already existing societal resources. Post-socialist Serbia, by contrast, sought to construct its new order not upon the material, institutional, and symbolic resources available to it at that historical moment, but upon a social formation that had effectively ceased to exist. The socialist Yugoslavia, following a split with Stalinism in 1948, became progressively more liberal during the decades after the Second World War. Post-socialist Serbia ended up looking at the foundational resources that Socialist Serbia had to work with, but not at the legacy of the decades that followed. This foundational paradox largely explains the structural deficiencies of the transition.

⁹ Within this ideological milieu, narratives concerning Western intentions to destroy Serbia circulate in conjunction with claims that Josip Broz Tito, President of the SFRY, was either an Austro-Hungarian or a Soviet agent.

Political and Ideological Realignment

While the questions revolving around defence of the one-party system and socialism may be appealing, they are irrelevant for the approach and interest taken here. Of secondary concern is also the question why has Serbia embarked on the path of anti-communism given that today's Serbian society is, at the very least, sceptical regarding the economic progress and political freedoms compared to the seventies and eighties of the 20th century (Flere & Klajnšek, 2014). However, it does get answered to an extent through the primary questions: what are the results of the anti-communist policy and ideology of post-Yugoslav Serbia, and how did that ideology lead to the results and outcomes that characterise Serbian society and the state today?

The answer cannot bypass the role of the Socialist Party of Serbia. The first thing that needs to be addressed is the name itself. History is full of names of political parties and organisations whose programmes and actions are the opposite of what one might conclude from the name. The ideologies of organisations also change over time. During the Civil War in the United States of America, the Republican Party advocated for state universities, the abolition of slavery, and public investments, while the Democrats, especially from the South, mostly advocated for the preservation of slavery. The emancipation movements of black Americans saw in the Republican Party a political articulation close to their own interests and mostly supported the political representatives of that party by voting for them. However, the collapse of the stock market and the Great Depression that followed led to a reorientation of black voters who saw in Roosevelt's New Deal a chance to improve their own socio-economic and political position and started to abandon the Republican Party en masse, which was opposed to the state intervention as an instrument for containing the crisis. Following this shift, Roosevelt won a second term in 1936. With the Second World War and the country's resources stretched, Roosevelt, under pressure from the predominantly black union the "Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters", banned racial discrimination in federal agencies and the defence industry (Putnam 2020, 230). The anti-racist and anti-segregationist policies of the Democrats were continued by Lyndon Johnson, who in the period from 1964 to 1968 ensured the passage of three laws that established the foundations of racial inclusion in the US legal system. With the profiling of the Democratic Party as the party of desegregation and civil liberties, the Republican Party, on the other hand, turned to a different ideological position. Nixon built his victory in the 1968 elections on the discontent of anti-segregationists, which brought him a huge number of votes in the southern United States and also got him re-elected in 1972. With that strategy, he placed the Republican Party on a platform of hostility towards civil liberties and racial equality¹⁰. This inversion of ideological positions in the United States took place over a long period of time and under the influence of a number of socio-economic and historical factors. In transitional Serbia, however, the collapse of one political order opened the way to a much faster, but no less complex, ideological transformation.

¹⁰ More in Putnam (2020), Chapter 6, Race and the American "We".

The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), formed in 1990 by the unification of the League of Communists of Serbia and the League of Socialist Working People of Serbia (political organisations formed under the auspices of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia), soon rejected the Marxist-Leninist ideological elements that until then had been foundational to both political alliances. At the same time, Serbian nationalism became part of the platform of the newly formed SPS which, along with its insistence on Yugoslavism, led to the Yugoslavism being often seen among other Yugoslav ethnicities as a synonym for Serbian nationalism and chauvinism¹¹. Within Serbia this identification led to an internally conflicted construct where one could be a Serbian nationalist and a Yugoslav, and where the party could bring together both, those who held the ideas of communism closer to their hearts, and nationalists for whom the Serbian national revival, in a right-wing interpretation, was the ultimate goal. By introducing nationalism into its programme, the Socialist Party of Serbia practically rejected the international, class, socialist element of its own political and ideological platform. In addition, the multi-party system brought to the scene parties for which anti-communism and anti-socialism were the backbone of their ideological and political activities. The coalitions that followed and which the SPS had to make in order to govern were always marked by an even further departure from socialism because the nationalist parties with which the SPS cooperated, as anti-communists, could not make compromises towards the left – only the SPS with its two-headed political platform could rely on the nationalist part of the programme and in this way secure broad popular base for itself. On the other hand, the nationalist parties, where the current President of Serbia originates from, could, instead of civic solidarity which is “the necessary precondition for the practical realization of social rights in a democracy” (Kohn, 2024), only offer *sabornost* (a version of congregationalism) in place of socialist collectivism and solidarity – a concept that emerged between the two world wars (Cvetković, 2025), presented as an old Serbian tradition that needed to be revived. There are two important consequences of this.

First, the introduction of *sabornost* into Serbian political and public life and the invocation of the ghosts of Nikolaj Velimirović, Justin Popović, and to a lesser extent Dimitrije Ljotić¹², not only led to the collapse of solidarity, one of the fundamental values of socialism, with people of other nations and ethnicities, but also to discrimination within the Serbian ethnicity itself by dividing it into true and false Serbs, the first, Orthodox, and the second, liberal, Serbia. This shift indicated a move from a post-totalitarian, (Linz & Stepan, 1996) to a totalitarian regime due to self-management and decentralisation. Pluralism that originated in the one-party system of socialist Yugoslavia, especially strong in culture (Flere & Klajnšek, 2014, p. 242), was in the multi-party system in the third decade of the 21st century replaced by the

¹¹ The politics of Yugoslav continuity was duplicitous and mainly driven by prospects of claiming of the material state heritage of the socialist Yugoslavia.

¹² The first two Serbian Orthodox bishops and theologians, and Ljotić while layman, were particularly influenced by Velimirović. All three viewed Western liberalism as spiritually corrosive and a threat to Christian civilisation. Also known for collaboration with Nazi Germany.

expectation of absolute and unquestioning conformity with the nationalist ideology of right-wing proveniences – if you are not with us unconditionally, you are an enemy of Serbhood. This totalitarian ideology has in the arsenal of ethnic consolidation and mobilisation included the narrative of the unity of Kosovo Albanians, who all think as one. It is evident that the Kosovo Albanian population does not constitute a monolithic political bloc, and that – beyond the shared consensus on independence from Serbia – significant internal divergences exist, as is characteristic of any large ethnic group, which by its very nature cannot be ideologically homogeneous. The ongoing turbulence in Kosovo's political landscape attests to the profound challenges of achieving broader societal consensus at a juncture where independence itself has effectively been relegated to a settled matter, and the central question has shifted to one of social, institutional, and political ordering – namely, what kind of society and polity Kosovo ought to become. Totalitarianism lamented the absence of a hive mind, observing that, regrettably, many Serbs acted independently, in accordance with their own convictions and perceived self-interest. The ideals of solidarity and the public, collective good – capacious enough to accommodate a plurality of differences – have been supplanted by ideological uniformity and the principle of *sabornost*.

Second, this change in collective ethos went hand in hand with a change in fundamental economic principles. “If we don't know how to work, we know how to fight” said SPS leader Slobodan Milošević in the spring of 1991, definitively severing ties with the value foundations of the economic doctrine of socialism and setting the context for the economic transition that was yet to come for the country. The fundamental principle of the socialist economic order was embodied in the introductory part of the 1974 Constitution through the principle “From each according to his abilities – to each according to his work”. While the SPS continued the practice of political control of economic resources, inheriting the continuity of socialism, at the same time, through privatisation and political control of the private sector, it slowly converted political into economic capital. The SPS controlled directly and indirectly who and under what conditions could perform profitable jobs, especially those that depended on state permits, import quotas, and access to credit. During the 1990s, Serbia had a couple of annulled privatisations, which was of little significance as the ownership structure itself was secondary and partially irrelevant when it came to elite control over resources. Particularly deleterious was the transformation of the foundational value matrix underlying the economic order of post-socialist Serbia. Individual and collective economic success was no longer legitimised through productive labour; instead, it came to be predicated upon coercion and appropriation – ranging from wartime profiteering to what may be characterised as violent and compradorial privatisation (Antonić, 2022; Vratuša-Žunjić, 2010). In this reordered framework, economic advancement ceased to be grounded in labour, and was instead reconstituted upon the exercise of force and predatory accumulation.

Both of these transformations, one operating through the political system, the other through the economic, speak to the detrimental effects of Serbia's departure from socialism. Neither the replacement of the principle of solidarity with *sabornost*, nor the shift in value orientations and the mechanisms of individual and collective

action – which severed the link between socio-economic outcomes and the results of labour, and introduced force and coercion as legitimate mechanisms of individual and collective economic prosperity – have offered, nor by their very nature could they have offered, anything constructive.

The Outcomes

The Serbian political elite preferred to expend its energy and resources on contesting and dismantling knowledge of Serbian national history during the Second World War and the socialist period that followed¹³ rather than articulating a vision of a national future that would lead Serbia and its society towards modernisation. In this endeavour, the Serbian political elite relativised national role in the struggle against fascism – and what was, by any measure, a historically significant victory – and, through the rehabilitation of the Chetnik movement (which would not have been possible without the support of the Socialist Party of Serbia), aligned itself with the losing side of history, placing the national reputation and self-perception in an ethically deeply problematic position.

The communist movement that led the Yugoslav people, including Serbs, from the Second World War into socialism was an authentic movement that emerged from within Serbian society itself (Dryzek, Holmes, 2002, p. 58). The rule of the Communist Party was not brought in on the tanks of the Soviet Union, as was the case in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany, for example¹⁴. This form of historical revisionism – which seeks to erase decades of Serbian societal and economic achievements – effectively depicts the Serbian nationalist, anti-communist elite, as profoundly anti-Serbian. From the ideological position described, one that demands exclusivity and totalitarianism, everything that can be associated with the preceding ideological period is presented as a foreign element to be eliminated. The consequence is that Serbian society has been dispossessed of its own achievements in a manner that is violent – not only on the symbolic level – and that social organisation is being sought to be legitimised by appealing to a history predating the Second World War, of which the evidence suggests:

“King Alexander entered the arena of political and party struggles; he placed himself at the head of a group of unscrupulous people without ideas and ideals, with the sole aim of satisfying his personal accounts. Equipped with all the advantages of his position and dignity, relying on the strength of the army, gendarmerie and police, using the budgets of the state, provinces and municipalities, which are spent without any popular

¹³ The reinterpretation and revision of history is not unique to the period under discussion, but is characteristic of earlier periods as well. For a more detailed overview, see the book *Prošlost dolazi (The Past is Coming)* by Dubravka Stojanović, which examines changes in history textbooks in Serbia from 1913 to 2021.

¹⁴ For the first-hand account and the reasons why the Western allies decided to support the Partisans and not the Chetniks see MacLean's book *Eastern approaches*.

oversight, the king is waging a fight against democracy in Yugoslavia, not caring that in this fight he is destroying the foundations of the Yugoslav state.” (Pribićević 2018, pp. 284–285)

The political elite of Serbia in 2026, Aleksandar Vučić, Siniša Mali, Ana Brnabić, and others, are a direct consequence of decades of anti-communism. This is a generation that grew up and was formed in the period before and during the collapse of Yugoslavia, the abandonment of socialism, the massive spread of anti-communism and nationalism. Changes in the topology (to use this metaphor) of social space and possible and desirable models of social action, that is, what is imposed on actors as functional behaviour with relatively certain outcomes, culminated in the collapse of rules and the opening of space for different models of social action. The aforementioned actors are the part of the same generation that accepted and promoted force and violence instead of work that would contribute to the development of the future of Serbia, and *sabornost* instead of solidarity and public interest, on which mutual relations and the social life of communities are based.

It cannot be argued, however, that the process of homogenisation which produced the new Serbian elite was inevitable. The assassinations of Ivan Stambolić¹⁵ in 2000, Zoran Đinđić¹⁶ in 2003, and Oliver Ivanović¹⁷ in 2018 eliminated the most prominent and consequential political actors who had articulated coherent ideological and political alternatives to the prevailing order, thereby clearing the field where the contemporary political elite has been able to pursue its interests largely unimpeded. The conclusion that subtly yet compellingly asserts itself is that the degree of violence characteristic of post-socialist Serbia is indicative of a profound deficit of societal consensus – consensus that would otherwise serve as one of the foundational pillars of political legitimacy. In its absence, power has been compelled, at least at critical junctures, to fall back upon coercion. The exercise of force and violence by the state, particularly within the political life of a society, is invariably a potential indicator of a legitimacy deficit: the greater the recourse to violence, the more attenuated the legitimacy of those who hold power.

A deficit of legitimacy further implies that the resources required to sustain the political order are increasingly directed towards the suppression of discontent rather than towards the productive capacities of the state and society. The self-reinforcing dynamic between political and economic grievances results in social dissatisfaction and instability – a condition which, in the Serbian context, lends itself to a particular

¹⁵ Served as President of the League of Communists of Serbia (SKS) from 1984 to 1986, Prime Minister of Serbia from 1978 to 1982, and President of Serbia from 1986 to 1987. The court established that the order for his murder was issued by Slobodan Milošević, then President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

¹⁶ Leader of the Democratic Party and a reformist, serving as Prime Minister of Serbia at the time of his assassination. As a counterpart to the then President of Serbia, Vojislav Koštunica, Đinđić, though opposed to communism, was a proponent of social values grounded in labour, education, solidarity, and a forward-looking orientation, all of which resonated with core values of socialist Yugoslavia.

¹⁷ A Kosovo Serb politician and leader of the opposition to the policies of the Serbian government.

consequence: the lived experience of socialism, shared by a substantial portion of the present population, emerges in collective memory not as a perfect or necessarily desirable system, but as one that was appreciably more stable and considerably more legitimate than the contemporary order. As noted at the outset of this paper, a society can draw only upon the symbolic, cultural, and material resources that constitute its present. And those resources are, by any measure, considerably different relative to those available in the 1980s.

Conclusion

As it was mentioned in the opening of this text, the arguments presented here are not in defence of communism or socialism, and whether they should or should not be defended would be a separate and very different discussion. Socialism, and by proxy communism, are part of Serbian history; they are facts, and are treated as such. This article dealt with the path the Serbian society took after the collapse of socialism, looking at the ideological shift in the legitimization matrix from solidarity to *sabornost* (instead of civic solidarity for example), and from labour to force and coercion as a means of individual economic prosperity. That ideological shift required a construction of 'communism' as an ideological device, a scapegoat required to obscure the lack of societal and state building capacity of the new political order. This created a mechanism for displacement of blame for negative outcomes of transition from those with real social agency to an abstract and largely hollow concept of 'communism'. All this occurred to the detriment of Serbian society at large.

Three decades after the Dayton Agreement, the demographic composition of contemporary Serbia has undergone a generational shift: the population now includes young people who possess neither direct lived experience of, nor formative trauma from, the wars of the 1990s, nor any personal memory of socialism and socialist Yugoslavia. Their sole substantive experiential frame of reference is the Serbia of anti-communism, under whose ideological aegis they have been culturally, politically, and axiologically socialised. It is from this vantage point that the emergence of the student protest movement following the tragic events in Novi Sad on the 1st of November 2024¹⁸ might seem surprising. This sense of surprise is reinforced by the movement's resilience and persistence, as well as by the values it articulates and promotes – namely the rule of law, transparency, and solidarity – each constituting a direct antipode to the governing ideology of the Serbian state.

It would be inadvisable, however, to romanticise the new generations. Without any intention to question the agency of young people in contemporary Serbia it should be noted that they cannot harbour a particular resentment towards a socialist order in which they did not live; they do however harbour one towards the destructive

¹⁸ The collapse of a canopy at the railway station in Novi Sad, Serbia's second largest city, a direct consequence of systemic corruption emanating from the highest levels of the Serbian government, which resulted in the deaths of sixteen people.

trajectory of the Serbian political elite, whose only meaningful counterpoint is a qualitatively different set of values – values that are, in their essential character, socially cohesive and constructive. While they possess a clear understanding of the kind of state in which they do not wish to live, a segment of the politically active youth, unlike their anti-communist predecessors, appears to hold at least a rudimentary conception of the kind of state and society they wish to inhabit.

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RASPRAVA SRBIJE SA SAMOM SOBOM: ANTIKOMUNIZAM KAO IDEOLOGIJA I POLITIKA ZABORAVA

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Sažetak

Rad ispituje ideološku putanju post-socijalističke Srbije, argumentujući da je antikomunizam funkcionisao kao destruktivna politička ideologija koja je značajno potkopala socio-ekonomski razvoj zemlje i demokratsku konsolidaciju. Autor zastupa stav da su dominantni javni narativi koji teškoće savremene Srbije pripisuju „komunističkom kontinuitetu” empirijski neosnovani, imajući u vidu da Jugoslavija nikada nije bila komunistička država, te da su tržišni mehanizmi i pravni pluralizam bili postupno institucionalizovani znatno pre raspada sistema. Analiza prati kako je raspad Jugoslavije nacionalističkim političkim elitama omogućio konstruisanje antikomunizma kao legitimizujućeg okvira, čime je politika i diskurs zasnovani na dokazima efektivno zamenjeni ideološkim anti-empirizmom. Socijalistička partija Srbije identifikuje se kao ključni akter u ovoj transformaciji, napuštanjem klasnog internacionalizma u korist srpskog nacionalizma i ubrzavanjem erozije socijalističke solidarnosti i ekonomskih principa zasnovanih na radu. Rad dalje argumentuje da je prelazak sa legitimiteta zasnovanog na radu na legitimitet zasnovan na prinudi — omogućen politički kontrolisanom privatizacijom i nasilnim nacionalizmom — proizveo trajne institucionalne deficite. Ipak, nedavna zbivanja ukazuju na generacijsku preorijentaciju ka vladavini prava, transparentnosti i solidarnosti — vrednostima koje osporavaju antikomunističko ideološko nasleđe koje je oblikovalo savremenu Srbiju.

Ključne reči: ideologija, legitimacija, društvena transformacija, totalitarizam

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