

**THE INHERITANCE OF KNEZ LAZAR  
- THE SERBIANS ON THEMSELVES AND ON KOSOVO -**

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*Abstract*

*The Serbians' history is one of the most dramatic. The image of knez Lazar is a very suggestive example, of what it means to receive in a certain way at the level of the collective perception, the frustrations of their own historical experiences . The result was the desire to occult, as much as possible, the dark episodes of their own becoming, these being replaced by the mechanisms of the mythical inspired argumentation.*

**Keywords: Serbia; Yugoslavia; Kosovo; knez Lazar; collective representations; myths**

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The most tragic and at the same time most representative character of the Serbian people is, as many believe, knez Lazar, who became, in the aftermath of his death on the battlefield, the object of an extraordinary collective cult. Legends mixed with real events, facts merged with imagination, each period from Serbian history adding to the knez' influence, detailing it or, on the contrary, enhancing its mythic dimension.

One scene in particular was common to many of the old texts, being reiterated on every occasion, transposed literally, plastically or musically. One evening prior to the battle with the Turks from Kosovopolje, prophet Ilie shows himself to knez Lazar, carrying a message from Mother of God. Lazar has to choose between the following two scenarios:

- if he wanted to rule over an earthly kingdom, he should unhesitatingly attack the Turkish army and victory shall be granted

- if he wanted to be the ruler of a kingdom in heaven, he was urged to attack the Turks nevertheless knowing that he would perish, together with all his warriors. But before leaving for the realm of death, Mother of God conveys the request to build in Kosovo a grandiose church, symbol of eternal Orthodox faith.

Lazar doesn't hesitate and will go for the martyr, to be defeated temporally, but to receive the purifying light, brought about only by the self sacrifice. This is in fact the key the Serbian historiography advocates relating to, should we try to understand the motivation behind the acts which outlined the understanding of the Serbians in relation to themselves but with the other peoples as well, along a history scarce in bright episodes. The Orthodox Church from Serbia considers the martyr knez (now belonging with the saints) as the most faithful mirror of the collective soul of this Slavic people.\* The parallel with Christ's sacrifice was correlated with the adaptation of the historic event to the geopolitical situation of Serbia.

United around their Church, the Serbians would make an undefeatable army, but an army of faith, seeking from time to time to identify knez Lazar's spirit, reincarnated in that exemplary hero, able to restore the shine the Serbian people deserves. Numerous heroic lyric cycles, of folkloric inspiration, can be browsed on the this subject and the feeling one has when reading them sways between fascination and repulsion, as in few cases the most enchanting images strangely coexist with the darkest representations. It's a cry of triumph, eventually metamorphosing itself into a collective groan of agony, illustrative of the curse of a collectivity doomed to repeat the experience of Jesus' ordeal. Kosovo is present everywhere, identified with the land of storage of collective Serbian holiness. Athanas Jevititch – a Serbian orthodox prelate, published in French, at Lausanne, in 1991, a collection of historic-religious texts, called *Kosovo File*, where he aimed

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\* Stevan K.Pavlowitch, *Serbia. The History behind the Name*, Hurst.et.Company, London, 2002, pp.9-10; Thomas A.Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo 1389*, New York, 1990.

at familiarizing western readers with one of the essential collective themes of his people<sup>\*</sup>. The coordinator of the volume considered that the myth and the historic reality make up in this instance an indestructible organic unity, all that proves dignified and glorious on the terrestrial realm being in agreement with the Divinity. Jevitch uses the expressions “the Kosovo Testament”, a symbolic will drawn up by knez Lazar through his sacrifice and whose echoes were assimilated by future generations, being cherished forever in the Serbians’ national collective consciousness. For modern Serbia, this image has had a huge mythic significance, suggesting the reunification of a collectivity around a common conception, coagulating energies and keeping Serbian identity alive.

Kosovo would therefore be for the Serbian people not only its favorite myth, but also the reality of a painful historic destiny, should we only consider the Orthodox resistance increasingly desperate as opposed to the powerful pressure to Islamize the area. Lazar’s sacrifice has always been actualized within the Serbian collective imaginary, adapted to the flow of events and political interests. In certain writings, analogies were made between the Serbians’ exodus out of Kosovo and the collective drama of the Jewish people, while other authors from Serbia made connections between the loss of human lives registered in the Serbian population in the period 1941 – 1945 and the Jews’ Holocaust. In fact, the reference to the Judaism, subject to martyrdom, represented an argument which would have contributed to win the international public opinion by the Serbians, especially the western one. But this analogy can also be viewed as a form of collective therapy, a swing between pain and ecstasy, based on the inner feeling of being surrounded and the outer feeling of the final victory of the state of Israel<sup>†</sup>. A sacred optimism, nourishing a multitude of political energies<sup>‡</sup>.

The first ones to escape the Ottoman guardianship, the Serbians were basically after two geopolitical ambitions simultaneously: the reunification of all Serbian territories either under Ottoman trusteeship or under Austrian domination and the reunification of all Slavic peoples in the Balkans under their leadership. This geopolitical project will serve as basis for all Serbian geopolitical devices instituted in the last 150 years.

Blocked in the North by the presence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Serbia had to do with an extension towards the South and at the same time towards the West, in order to have access to the Adriatic Sea. In the South as well as in the East, it came into conflict with the competitive nationalism of the Bulgarians and of the Greeks.<sup>§</sup>

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<sup>\*</sup> Archimandrite Athanase Jevitchitch, *Dossier Kosovo*, Lausanne, L’Age d’homme, 1991.

<sup>†</sup> *Ibidem*, p.41.

<sup>‡</sup> *Ibidem*, p.117.

<sup>§</sup> Aymeric Chauprade, Francois Thual, *Dicționar de geopolitică*, Grupul editorial Corint, Bucharest, 2003, p.180.

Kosovo is also claimed by the Albanians, who believe they had been around in that particular region as descendents of the Illyrians before the Serbians. But the thesis of the Illyrian origin of the Albanians is considered to be strictly hypothetical by certain researchers. On the other hand, the Serbians' national movement of political emancipation started in Central Serbia and only towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was signaled in Kosovo. Kosovo was annexed by Serbia in 1912 at the same time with Macedonia, the relations between Albanian and Serbian ethnics being always tensed. In 1946 communist Yugoslavia will allow the crystallization of the Albanians' national identity in Kosovo and Macedonia, the emergence of the Albanian elite being undeniable. After 1989, Slobodan Milošević decided to suppress the Albanians' autonomy from Kosovo, encouraging the modification of the ethnic ratio in the region to the favor of the Serbians, setting up a Development Fund created in order to settle some Serbian ethnics in Kosovo. The Albanian community from Kosovo resisted due to the system of traditional clans solidarity, illegal activities and organized crime. An independent Kosovo state is considered non-sense by the Serbians, the plastic image being that of an empty shell.

There are also voices arising from the side of Albanian nationalists, who envisage the long term destiny of Kosovo province within Albania and remind us that back in 1912 the leaders of the Albanian political emancipation movement did not agree at all with the idea of the annexation of Kosovo by Serbia. Over 50% of the Albanian population would have found themselves outside the historical borders of Albania.\*

The Serbians have built a compensatory image on themselves and on their history, a representation able to enlighten to the extent possible the dark past episodes, asserting an unbreakable faith in the future of their collective destiny. Gradually, the myth of the heroic people, isolated by a satanic worldwide conspiracy, grew larger and larger. Each literary, artistic, ideological movement had its share to contribute to creating this image. The Serbians consider themselves the descendants of glorious forerunners, yet a more careful analysis of their history shows us plenty of romantic episodes as well as catastrophic failures. Bravery was not always doubled by wisdom, foresight was often identified with weakness. As later discovered, the effects can be devastating; errors were acknowledged but on the long run the details got diluted and all that left was the recollection of the moments of courage. Sociological surveys and interviews conducted in the 90's, on representatives of the politico-ideological elites in Serbia as well as on laymen, prove the persistence of a dangerous state of mind, a mixture of sterile daydreaming, fierce frustration, longing for revenge, and resignation. A Western observer wrote on this collective perception:

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\* Also see: Wayne Vucinich (ed), *Kosovo: Legacy of a Medieval Battle*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991; Michel Roux, *Les Albanais en Yougoslavie. Minorité nationale. Territoire et développement*, Maison de sciences de l'homme, Paris, 1992, etc.

„It is the outline of a torn imperial nation which got to o far and then lost, maybe more than it deserved, in the cruel game of world politics. A suggestive comparison can be drawn with Russia: the other post-imperial Orthodox nation which now also looks back to the times before the First World War in search of a new-old identity. But a more suitable comparison can be drawn with an even closer country, of a similar size: modern Hungary, divided by the Treaty of Trianon from 1920, which gave away territories formerly Hungarian to neighboring countries, including Yugoslavia. Like Hungary, this Serbia will be physically depressed due to national self-compassion but which will sometime gradually and painfully return to Europe as a nation-state more or less democratic and liberal”.\*

The Western world remains in many aspects a world admired and detested at the same time, source of many dangers threatening the national identity undeniably. The former partners of the Serbians in the political construction called Yugoslavia proved to be eventually unreliable. The Croatians would have always served the German world or Italy, their insolent Catholicism being doubled by the large scale cruelties during the Pavelic regime. The Slovenians made Belgrade envious due to their prosperous economy but also because they have always gravitated towards West, not to mention the same Romano-catholic rite they remained faithful to until the end. The Muslims reminded the Serbians of the sad period of domination by the Ottoman Empire. The image of the US suffered significant mutations, darker clothes being put on, after years of considerable support for Tito’s Yugoslavia. From the America of the 90’s came disappointment, bombardments and death of the joy of living.

The inheritance of knez Lazar proves to be extremely challenging therefore, especially from a psychological point of view. Maybe the feeling this adored image generates is so complex that actual history can no longer assimilate.

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\* Timothy Garton Ash, *Istoria prezentului. Eseuri, schițe și relatări din Europa anilor 90’*, Ed.Polirom, Iași, 2002, p.211.

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