

# History: Greater Serbia. A Western-backed Myth

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## The Western-backed Myth of a Greater Serbia

*Much space, time, and effort have been devoted to the recent history of West Balkans, and in particular in the latest political upheavals, about the alleged project of Greater Serbia especially by Western authors either academic scholars or journalists.[i] The issue must be, however, considered together with its counterparts from Croatia (a Greater Croatia) and Albania (a Greater Albania).*

Two focal questions arose here:

1. Were all these projects serious and what was the origin of this maximalist concept of forming national states in the otherwise ethnically mixed area?
2. Whose exact interests were involved and to which extent the interested was ready and capable of realizing such megalomaniac territorial ambitions?

I would argue here that these projects were designed (better to say dreamt), in fact, not in Belgrade, Zagreb, or Tirana, but rather somewhere else.

Of course, neither of the latter capitals would mind if somebody offered the "Greater Entity" on a tray.

But reasonable politicians normally take into account the price for such gains, which would be high indeed.

In fact, Serbia and Croatia did achieve the desired goals, but as collateral gains. Yugoslavia (official titles: the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) after WWI gathered together all (except those in Albania, and Romania) the Serbs living in South-East Europe.

But the state was devised after the wishes of the Slovenes and the Croats, as well as by the

Serbs.

Similarly, Croatia obtained all desired regions from the former Yugoslavia during WWII, under the formal name of the Independent State of Croatia (the ISC)[ii], which was, in fact, a puppet state, under the patronage of Germany and Italy.

It was acquired in 1941 East Srem from present-day Serbia and the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, after the Italian capitulation in September 1943, it was given to the ISC by the Germans the Italian part of Dalmatia, the Italian Adriatic islands, and the Istrian Peninsula.

In a sense, this state had a formal ethnic justification, since the Croats constituted very simple, but not the absolute majority there (there are claims that a simple majority had the Serbs). The Croatian majority was further consolidated by the Croat claims that Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslims were, in fact, the ethnolinguistic Croats.[iii]



Independent State of Croatia, 1941-43

An interesting episode in this context was the appearance of the book *Greater Serbia*,[iv] by a Serb historian Vladimir Ćorović, (needless to say he was a Dinaric Highlander from Mostar in Herzegovina). Despite the title, there is nothing about Greater Serbia in the book, which

appears a concise, historiography account of the Serbian state, from the Nemanjić dynasty to the unification of the Yugoslav lands in 1918. But why he used such a title (*A Greater Serbia. Unification*)?

Was the project concealed in the very title, as a hint for others, to think on the subject (in a testimonial sense)? The author lived in Serbia (in Belgrade as a Professor and later the Rector of Belgrade University) after WWI and it was possibly meant as a memorandum for future generations, but we have no clear indications in the book itself. Nevertheless, the case illustrates how hot topics may be complex and vague, and if taken for granted, ideas may become the cause of conflicts. One may imagine an Albanian or Croat author quoting the book's title as evidence for the Serbian territorial expansionism regardless of the fact that the book itself has absolutely nothing to do with a Greater Serbia.

The case illustrates well the general symptom of "Serbing" (србовање) and Serb nationalism expounded by the Highlander Dinaric newcomers to Serbia from the South Slavic territories across the River Drina. The rationale for such inclination has been twofold:

1. They come from regions with a mixed population, where the nationalistic feelings are strong and serve as a dividing line between nationalities (which reduces, in fact, to the confessional divisions).
2. When arriving in Serbia, "Serbing" has become an entrance ticket for those newcomers and it holds for politics, history, science, literature, etc.

In fact, Serbia and its history appear as the most frequent topic of Dinaric scholars, unlike the autochthonous cultural milieu, which is oriented towards more cosmopolitan subjects and the future.

We have to keep in mind that historically, Greater Serbia as a term is created and launched in political propaganda by the Austro-Hungarian and German authorities and their propaganda machinery for the very practical purpose to cover their own imperialistic aims in South-East Europe.[v]

Another political task was to prevent the liberation of Serbian people in the Balkans. However, some West European Great Powers of a liberal democratic orientation, like France and the UK, as well as have been against the liberation of the Serbs from the purely geopolitical standpoint of preventing the increase of Russian influence in the region and maintaining the system of status quo in the Balkans.[vi]

But the crucial point was that all of those West European imperialistic Great Powers have been both neither capable nor willing to make a focal distinction, that is a crucial point, between national patriotism and nationalistic imperialism, or between the state's sponsored policy and individual policy of political groups and personalities.[vii]

All kinds of Serbophobes across the globe either in the past or today for the very purpose intentionally refuse to make a difference between the official policy of the state and individual or party statements or the political projects of private organizations, and political movements, which in some cases may be more or less irrational or/and irresponsible. A drastic example of the abuse of the liberation of Serbian people that are labeled by Western Serbophobes is the so-called Memorandum by the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts leaked to the public sphere in 1986 by the Yugoslav intelligence service. However, in this drafted and not finished document there is no single word demanding a kind of privileged

position for either Serbia or the Serbian people in the Yugoslav (con)federation or calling for their political, economic, or other domination. However, everything was on the contrary way. The only thing that the 1986 Memorandum called for was full equality of all Yugoslav republics and nations.

In de facto confederal Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (the SFRY) the Serbian nation was disintegrated, and Serbian people were discriminated against and relegated to the underprivileged status.

Naturally, under such a political atmosphere the Serbian Question was developed into a democratic question as it was put on paper in the 1986 Memorandum, and since the destruction of the SFRY into a state's issue, involving the right of a constituent people (nor republics!) to self-determination. The Serbs have been one of those constituent peoples (nations). All relevant political documents about the Serbian Question in the SFRY clearly make evidence that a Greater Serbia has never been the final or any aim of Serbia which only supported Serbian people in other the Yugoslav republics in their struggle for democratic rights on the territory where the Serbs have always lived as a majority of the population.[viii]

The term hegemony of Greater Serbia, used by all domestic and foreign Serbophobes, is a typical example of a geopolitically constructed stereotype or better to say, a stereotypical prejudice.

However, such prejudice is based neither on historical experience nor on reliable historical facts and archival sources. This myth about Greater Serbia and its hegemony is politically fostered by the members of certain political and nationalistic groups who, in the Goebbels' manner by repeating it constantly simply want to impose it as an internationally recognized truth. Historically, the alleged fight against Greater Serbian hegemonism was and still is a very proper justification for the extermination of the Serbs as a nation, hanging them, executing them, and sending them to the concentration camps of death (for instance, to Jasenovac in Croatia during WWII)[ix] or for the NATO's Alliance barbarian bombing of Serbia in 1999.[x] However, when NATO occupied South Serbia's province of Kosovo-Metochia (KosMet) in June 1999 after the Kosovo War, immediately the process of the recreation of a Greater Albania, ethnically cleansed from all non-Albanians, started.

## A Greater Albania

As for a Greater Albania, the idea came from the town of Prizren in KosMet (the so-called First Albanian Prizren League, 1878–1881), hence outside Albania.

The town of Prizren was mentioned in the 11<sup>th</sup> century when the fortress overlooking the town was constructed. It is located in Metochia (the western portion of KosMet). The town fell to the Bulgarians in 1204 and to the Serbs in 1282. The history of Prizren in the Middle Ages is closely linked to the Serbian King and Emperor Stefan Dušan the Almighty (1331–1355) who held court there and build up the church later in the Ottoman time destroyed by the Muslim Albanians. In 1455, Prizren was occupied by the Ottoman Turks, and in 1570, it became the capital of the Ottoman sanjak (a mid-size administrative province).

A good portion of Prizren's old town, with its traditional Serbian homes in the oriental style,

was burned down by the Albanian mob in the summer of 1999, and much more was destroyed by the Muslim Albanians during the pogrom against the Serbs on March 17–19<sup>th</sup>, 2004 under the very eyes of German troops from the Kosovo Force (the KFOR). The Serbian Orthodox seminary school likewise the nearby Serbian Orthodox Monastery of the Holy Archangel Michael has been burned to the ground by Albanians on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2004.



Nevertheless, for Albanians, the town of Prizren is important mostly as it gave birth to the first program of the creation of Greater Albania in 1878.

On June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1878, Muslim delegates from the Ottoman Balkan provinces, among which the Albanians were in majority, assembled in Prizren to work out a common political platform for the purpose to counter the Russian-Ottoman Treaty of San Stefano (March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1878) and the coming resolutions of the Congress of Berlin organized by the Great European Powers (June 10–July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1878).

The Prizren meeting was organized under the umbrella of the Ottoman authorities. The newly formed Muslim Albanian (First) League of Prizren issued several resolutions on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1878 announcing among other requirements the creation of united “Albanian” provinces within the Ottoman Empire – nothing else but, in fact, a Greater (Islamic) Albania in the Muslim Ottoman Empire. The resolutions were signed by 47 Muslim Albanian feudal lords on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1878. According to this project, the whole KosMet, East Montenegro, parts of Greece, and the western portions of present-day the Republic of North Macedonia would

join Albania into a single “Albanian” province.[xi] The original venue of the First Albanian League of Prizren is today commemorated by a museum in Prizren.

It is worth mentioning that according to the resolution by the Second Albanian League of Prizren in November 1943, the whole KosMet had to be included in post-WWII Greater Albania which at that time already existed as it was created by B. Mussolini in April 1941 with the capital in Tirana. After the occupation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia by the Axis forces in April 1941, KosMet was partitioned among the three victors: Germany, Bulgaria, and Italy. The northern portion of KosMet, including rich Trepča mines, was put under German control. Bulgaria received a small strip of territory in the southeast while the rest of KosMet, East Montenegro, and West North Macedonia were placed under the Italian occupation zone. In accordance with a decision taken by the German and the Italian ministers of foreign affairs in Vienna on April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1941, the Italian-occupied regions of KosMet were to be unified with Albania. Subsequently, in July 1941, the biggest part of KosMet found itself under a new civilian administration as part of pro-fascist Kingdom of Albania.

From mid-1941 to September 1943, most of KosMet was administered from Tirana by a “Minister for Liberated Areas,” with the Italian troops ensuring the public order and ethnic cleansing of non-Albanians mainly the Serbs and Montenegrins. Indeed, around 100.000 ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins were forced to emigrate from KosMet during WWII following around at least 10.000 exterminated. Many of them were deported to a forced labor camp or to work in the Trepča mines. Only by April 1942, there were circa 70.000 Serbian refugees from KosMet registered in Belgrade.[xii] The Italian portion of occupied KosMet was put under the German administration after the capitulation of Italy in September 1943. The Germans established a notorious Skanderbeg SS Division, approved by A. Hitler himself in February 1944 as a volunteer military force composed of the Albanians from KosMet. The division numbered almost 7.000 men but it was quite enough to terrorize the local Serbian and Montenegrin population. The division is as well as responsible for the rounding up of 281 Jews, who became deported and sent to their deaths in the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. The final activity of the Skanderbeg SS Division, before it was disbanded, was to assist the German troops in their withdrawal from KosMet in November 1944. Nevertheless, that was for the first time that the project of Greater Albania by the First Albanian League of Prizren became realized in the practice.

## Who Is Behind the Projects of Greater National States in the Balkans?

Generally, all three “projects” (Greater Serbia/Albania/Croatia) originated from the regions of ethnically and religiously mixed populations. The centers for Greater Serbia projects should be searched at Knin (present-day Croatia), Pale (near Sarajevo in Bosnia-Herzegovina), and Priština (KosMet). For good reasons.

The Serbs living in Šumadija (Central Serbia), for instance, had no compelling reasons to fight for a Greater Serbia, as those Croats living in (Slavonian) Zagorje felt no need for a larger Croatia. Similarly, the Albanians in Albania had no particular need to join KosMet’s Albanians, in particular in view they were physically disconnected from the area across the massive mountains like Prokletije (the Accursed Mountains) separating Albania from Yugoslavia.[xiii] But those living outside the main body of their nations, mixed with the people of different religions, races, or cultures, felt it would be better for them to live in a common (national) state with their kinship people. And it was them who initiated the



disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (the SFRY) with exception of Slovenia, but this was a particular case of running away from a country facing unpredictable turmoil and disaster.[xiv]

The situation was a phantasmagorical one since the burden of the troublemakers was transferred from those retarded regions, populated by belligerent Highlanders, to the “mother” states. And the trick has proved very successful indeed. In order to detect the troublemakers, one first looked at the capitals of the existing states, Belgrade, and Zagreb (Tirana is still hardly suspected). In Belgrade, it was Bosnian-Herzegovinian Vojislav Šešelj who stirred the interference into Croatia’s and Bosnia-Herzegovina’s affairs, not Slobodan Milošević (the President of Serbia of Montenegrin origin). Similarly, it was a Croat General Gojko Šušak, a minister of defense of F. Tuđman’s Republic of Croatia, a notorious Croat Nazi-Ustashi from West Herzegovina, who was the principal dog of war in Croatia. We still do not know many details concerning the links Tirana-Priština, but the rationale for the connection should not be much different from those mentioned above.

As we know, the project of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Serbs, led by Radovan Karadžić, has been to integrate Serb regions of Bosnia-Herzegovina into the unified Serbian national state. In such an enlarged state they would not feel like a national minority and would even be dominating the population, considering the difference in mentalities between Serbs from Serbia and trans-Drina Serbs (Transdrinariods). In order to prepare the fusion, R. Karadžić (born in Nikšić in Montenegro) initiated in 1993 together with a Bosnian-Herzegovinian leading Serb historian Milorad Ekmečić (who was at that time an emigrant in Serbia, and employed as the Professor of national history at the Belgrade University) the law passing from the local Bosnian-Herzegovinian, Ijekavian dialect to Serbia’s Ekavian one as an official standardized language of the Serbs from Bosnia-Herzegovina. The uniforms of the Army of Republika Srpska (in Bosnia-Herzegovina) have been a copy of traditional Serbia’s one, as used in WWI and abandoned in Tito’s Yugoslavia. The army, whose commanders used to be good J. B. Tito’s officers, that are atheists, became suddenly devoted Orthodox Christians and good members of the Serbian Orthodox Church with the HQ in Belgrade.

The overall strategy of the Transdrinariods has been standing on three pillars: 1. “Serbing”, 2. “Serbing” and 3. “Serbing”. It is this term which the political (sic) tool of those former ijekavians in Serbia (V. Šešelj’s radicals) keep on repeating like parrots: “We Serbs”, “Our Serbia”, etc.[xv] A Herzegovinian Vuk Drašković and his followers started with the same slogans but reversed the tactics when rupturing with V. Šešelj and adopted the politics of a moderate conservative nationalism.

As for a Montenegrin Highlander Slobodan Milošević, his principal concerns were staying in power, and all other issues were subordinated to this objective. He did not support the extremist politics of the Croatian and Bosnian-Herzegovinian Serbs, and at the end of the civil wars of 1991–1995 adopted a critical attitude towards the maximal territorial demands of the local Serbian leaders over the River of Drina. When he was in a straight conflict with Bosnian Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, there was even a feeling among some observers, particularly from abroad, that R. Karadžić was up to replacing S. Milošević as the “leader of all Serbs”. However, neither of them was pure Serb, but, in fact, the Montenegrin, but nobody cared.[xvi]

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## Notes

[i] Regarding the question of a Greater Serbia project, see in [Vasilije Đ. Krestić, Marko Nedić (eds.), *The Great Serbia. Truth, Blunders, Abuses*, Papers presented at the International scientific meeting held in Belgrade from 24 to 26 October 2002 in the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade: Чигоја штампа, 2003].

[ii] Better to say the Genocidal State of the Croats. However, the Croats became the most privileged nation in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia when it was created for them united administrative province under the name Banovina Hrvatska (Governorate of Croatia) in August 1939 in the form of a Greater Croatia. Regarding its inner policy, the ISC was independent what resulted in the barbaric extermination of up to one million of its citizens of whom the majority have been the Serbs (circa 700.000). The ISC lasted from April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1941 to May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945 (up to a week after the German capitulation). It had 102,725 sq. km. in 1942 with 6,663,157 citizens. The ISC was internationally recognized by Germany, Italy, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Japan, Spain, National China, Finland, Denmark, and Manchuria [Dr. Stjepan Srkulj, Dr. Josip Lučić, *Hrvatska povijest u dvadeset pet karata*. Prošireno i dopunjeno izdanje, Zagreb: Croatian Information Centre (Hrvatski informativni centar), 1996, p. 105].

[iii] As a high-rank Ustashi stated, the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslims (today Bosniaks) were “the Croatian flowers”. About Yugoslav Muslim Bosniaks, see in [Robert J. Donia, *Islam under the Double Eagle: The Muslims of Bosnia and Hercegovina, 1878–1914*, Boulder–New York: Columbia University Press, 1981; Robert J. Donia, John V.A. Fine, Jr, *Bosnia and Hercegovina: A Tradition Betrayed*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994; Mark Pinson (ed.), *The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina: Their Historic Development from the Middle Ages to the Dissolution of Yugoslavia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1996; Marko Attila Hoare, *The Bosnian Muslims in the Second World War: A History*, Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2013].

[iv] Владимир Ћоровић, *Велика Србија. Уједињење*, Београд: Култура, 1990. Originally, the book was published in 1924. However, the second edition several years later had only a title: *Unification* as a term *Greater Serbia* was omitted.

[v] About the relations between Austria-Hungary and Serbia just before WWI, see in [Владимир Ћоровић, *Односи између Србије и Аустро-Угарске у XX веку*, Београд: Библиотека града Београда, 1992].

[vi] Михаило Марковић, „Патриотизам, национализам и великокрпство“, Vasilije Đ. Krestić, Marko Nedić (eds.), *The Great Serbia. Truth, Blunders, Abuses*, Papers presented at the International scientific meeting held in Belgrade from 24 to 26 October 2002 in the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade: Чигоја штампа, 2003, 117–122.

[vii] Here, it has to be clarified the term nationalism. In principle, and historically, there are two different understandings of the term. First, in its extreme variant, it is understood as chauvinism or even as racism as it refuses to recognize the existence of some of the people or to establish political, economic, financial, cultural, etc dominance over them. However, on the other hand, nationalism is understood as



a form of struggle for the liberation, affirmation or unification of certain ethnolinguistic groups. See more in [John Hutchinson, Anthony D. Smith (eds.), *Nationalism*, Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 1994]. In essence, the struggle for the liberation of ethnolinguistic compatriots cannot be labeled as nationalism in the context of the first meaning described above.

[viii] About Yugoslavia, see in [Branko Petranović, Momčilo Zečević, *Agonija dve Jugoslavije*, Beograd: IKP Zaslona, 1991; John B. Allcock, *Explaining Yugoslavia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000].

[ix] About a genocide against the Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia during WWII, see in [НД Хрватска држава геноцида, Београд: Двери српске, Часопис за националну културу и друштвена питања, 2011].

[x] Vladimir Jovanović et al, *Crime in War – Genocide in Peace: Consequence of NATO Bombing of Serbia*, Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2012.

[xi] Петер Бартл, *Албанци од Средњег века до данас*, Београд: CLIO, 2001, 94–102.

[xii] Robert Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Kosova*, Lanham, Maryland–Toronto–Oxford, 2004, 191.

[xiii] The Accursed Mountains is a geographical region – a range of peaks extending along the Albanian border with Montenegro and Serbia (KosMet), and westward into Albania, where they are known as the Albanian Alps. The highest peak of this range is in KosMet – Mt. Đeravica (2.656 m.).

[xiv] About the destruction of ex-Yugoslavia, see more in [Jelena Guskova, *Istorija jugoslovenske krize 1990–2000*, 1–2, Beograd: ИГАН, 2003].

[xv] A similar rhetoric was used by Bosnian-Herzegovinian Transdrinariod Dr. Zoran Đinđić in Serbia who with his (quasi) Democratic Party fought to transform Serbia into the colony of the West. This political project was also supported by many of the trans-Drina Dinariods who have been living in Serbia after WWII. Most probably, Dr. Zoran Đinđić was like Dr. Vojislav Šešelj a part of the conspiracy against Serbia designed by the secret intelligence service of Bosnia-Herzegovina or/and Croatia. That Dr. Zoran Đinđić was a Western political marionette was clear even for some Western mass media, like for *The Guardian*. Most probably, he was the CIA's agent. Anyway, for the West, the only acceptable borders of a puppet Serbia as a member of the EU and the NATO have been the borders of Serbia according to the Berlin Congress decisions in 1878, if not the borders of the Ottoman province of the Pashalik of Belgrade in 1803. The rest of Serbia's territories have to be given to Serbia's neighbors.

[xvi] Slobodan Milošević (1941–2006) was born in East Serbia's town of Požarevac in a Montenegrin family from Montenegro. From 1960 to 1964 he studied at the Faculty of Law of Belgrade University and joined the Yugoslav communist party, rapidly rising in party's pyramidal hierarchy. From 1973 to 1978, he was a director of Tehnogas and, from 1978 to 1983, a director of Beobanka. He became a member of the Presidium of the Central Committee of Serbia's branch of the Yugoslav Communist party (the Union of Yugoslav Communists) in 1982 and 1986 the President of Serbia's communist party. He was elected for the President of the Republic of Serbia in 1990. He was murdered in the prison-room of the Hague Tribunal on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006 [Bernd J. Fišer (priredio), *Balkanski diktatori: Diktatori i autoritarni vladari Jugoistočne Evrope*, Beograd: IPS–IP Prosveta, 2009, 535]. About Slobodan Milošević and Serbia's politics under his administration, see in [Robert Thomas, *The Politics of Serbia in the 1990s*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999; Leonard Dž. Koen, „Miloševićeva diktatura: Institucionalizovanje vlasti i etnopolulizma u Srbiji“, Bernd J. Fišer (priredio), *Balkanski diktatori: Diktatori i autoritarni vladari Jugoistočne Evrope*, Beograd: IPS–IP Prosveta, 2009, 481–534].

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