Banal nationalism - the incorporation of nationalistic sentiment in Serbian life

The scars of the Yugoslav wars are still affecting the Western Balkans. This series of armed struggles with its multitude of names and locations saw neighbours turn on each other, and has directly or indirectly impacted the lives of everyone living in the region. Even today, over two decades after the tragedies, the seeds of the hatred sown between different nationalities and ethnicities have influenced mainstream thought and led to a culture driven by fear, hatred and disdain for the other. This, in turn, has had the effect of fostering a society that is ever fearful about the lack of security in its everyday life, and that is always on the hunt for pariahs that can be blamed for its problems. Since we find ourselves in uncertain times, I find it revealing that the process of peacebuilding continues long after the gunfire has stopped and that, if not done properly, it set back a region back for generations.

Every signifier of heritage can be and has been used as a sign of pride and, by extension, of nationality. These symbols are always susceptible to being turned into nationalistic and sometimes aggressive narratives. From the words you use in your dialect, to the music you listen to or the football club you support, all these things can be used to display a feeling of local patriotism and, when pushed to the extreme, a sense of dominance or pride in one nation over others. This sentiment is almost unavoidable if we consider the nation state, an idea built into the minds of those raised within the European sphere of thought. When considering these ideas of individual differences in the Western Balkans, what stands out for me is the way they have been normalised and incorporated into mainstream and political discourse, the very epitome of banal nationalism. Everyday propagation of supremacist attitudes in news, media and political discussion has become the norm. To best demonstrate the ways in which this permeates everyday life, what follows is a personalised review of a few events from my life, with the reactions of those around me used as additional context.

Growing up as a person with mixed Serbian and Croatian heritage, it was a sour awakening one day in school when my father's name – Mario – was brought up by a classmate as one of the reasons why I was different from them, why I was considered an outsider. I have never hidden the fact that my father was born in Croatia, in Šibenik to be precise, to a Croatian father and a Serbian mother, with all of them considering themselves primarily Yugoslav at the time of my father's birth. With Šibenik being a typical Dalmatian seaside town, Italian influence on everything from architecture and music to food, etc., was obvious. This even included the names given to children, with Italian names being quite common. Therefore with a name like Mario, it was obvious that my father was not Serbian: he was the other and, by extension, so was I. Added to this was my unwillingness to participate in the common children's pastime of sharing and comparing stories about what their fathers and uncles did during the wars, where they went, and what they experienced. While I did my best to be excluded from these conversations, I did listen to them with some morbid curiosity, as if they gave me an insight into some secret history and the personalities of my classmates. An entirely new viewpoint into their lives that I was privy to.

Years later, when finishing some paperwork for university, I left my documentation with the university secretary. When I returned a few hours later, even before we exchanged hellos, I was asked the question, "Where in Dalmatia is your father from?". I was somewhat stunned but, after a pause, he explained that, to him, a man called Mario must either be an Italian or have been born on the Croatian coast, and that he assumed the latter was more likely. I was assuming that the ensuing dialogue would be a negative experience, but it only led to this man reminiscing nostalgically about trips to the Croatian seaside in his youth, all stemming from his assumptions about my heritage based on my father's name. He finished by saying that he did not think many students born today would have the opportunities he had while growing up.

Finding media created in the Western Balkans in the nineties is always an experience of more than mere memories of ugly hair styles and questionable fashion sense, as traditional Western media usually portray it. Having already been covered extensively by anthropologists, Yugoslav war music has been incorporated into the music canon of various countries. Its lyrics range from disturbing and concerning to openly violent. To borrow an often-used example to demonstrate the absurdity of the situation with regards to the music scene: in 1990, the annual Eurovision song contest was held in Zagreb and was won by the Italian song, 'Insieme: 1992' (Together: 1992), which called for Europe to unite. In the same period, popular folk songs in Serbia included Milomir Martić's 'Bando Mudžahadinska' (Band of Mujahideen) or Baja Mali Knidža's 'Tata' (Father), in which he proudly proclaims, "My father is a war criminal. Make an effort and try to indict him." These songs are still listened to even today in some circles, both seriously and ironically, with what most people see as absurd lyrical content. They keep reminding us of an aspect of our cultural history we cannot erase, with some of them even becoming memes on the internet. Since today's younger generations, myself included, grew up after the main conflicts ended, engaging with this kind of media is our method of trying to understand the peculiar ideas and changes which occurred in the nineties: the parallel calls for unity and calls for bloodshed, the way the situation disintegrated from a unified country to fighting in such a short amount of time, and who the people are who still fondly listen to these songs, which you will hear at weddings and birthday parties.

Having discussed interethnic tensions in the Balkans, we must fully acknowledge the ongoing tensions and continued struggles of the people living in Kosovo. A lot of the blame for the current situation lies with the government of Serbia, since its hostile stance towards the people of Kosovo has been a major reason for the ever-increasing tensions and instabilities which negatively affect citizens stuck on both sides of the conflict, no matter their political affiliations. Repeated calls for escalation and military intervention have been parroted by government figures many times every year. This all came to a very visible escalation when, over a single night, graffiti several metres long popped up across Belgrade with the words "When the army returns to Kosovo" written in Serbian Cyrillic over the red, blue and white Serbian tricolour. The intention and statement this message wanted to convey was obvious to everyone. The mysterious and dubious origin of these graffiti aside, what is striking about such divisive statements is the indifference that most ordinary people feel about them. For keen-eyed observers, this was a clear message about the direction Serbian politics would be heading in. However, for most people I've spoken with, it was just another reminder, indistinguishable from those they have seen many times every day for years, that their security is still in the hands of others. To them, this is a repeat of an existing condemnation of the other that is staining their country. Open calls to military intervention have become commonplace, evoking memories of years before, when this was their normality.

An important takeaway from all the events mentioned is that such rhetoric is not only used by people who are inherently hateful, and that occurrences of these violent sentiments are not constantly increasing. Some of the talking points heard in daily conversations come from people that are simply worried: scared about a future in which they feel that their fate will be determined by powers outside of their control, or by countries which seem distant and uncaring. In some cases these topics, though divisive, are considered suitable subjects for comedy. For some of us they are becoming a canvas where we can ridicule our shameful history, or in some cases our present. In contrast, a tourist could visit the Balkans and not notice anything that would point towards extreme nationalistic sentiment or underlying contempt for the other. The purpose of this article is not to admonish a whole region, country or people, but to point out the normalisation of this behaviour and the lukewarm response that the media, signs and displays of national supremacy arouse in people who have lived in these conditions for years, forced to see the same regurgitated statements: the increasing lack of reaction to narratives that people have seen and been made to engage in for decades. The aim is not to say that people are wrong for engaging in these portrayals of the other, since they are effective propaganda and inherently hateful. The learning point for us should be to look at how these depictions are formed: both bottom-up, from citizens whose worldview was shattered within days of the outbreak of war in some cases, and top-down, as government talking points used to steer the discourse away from local issues and towards topics of supranational tension. It aims to show how these narratives, by being

repeated so many times, have resulted in hatred and tension coming to feel banal. Even in conditions where people are statistically unlikely to be harmed, insistence on the otherness of people around them who differ in any significant way around them leads them to feel insecure and increasingly distrustful. Several intercultural cities and towns, common all over the Balkans, are now being physically split in half, with different sides dedicated to different ethnic groups.

For the Green movement, these are questions we need to have an answer to. Despite how contrived it might seem at times to most of the political spectrum, a struggle for immutable reconciliation has been a successful characteristic of the Green movements in the Western Balkans, one which their supporters often praise and cite as one of the core values they identify with. In this respect, the pluralistic values in the founding principles of the European Union are ones that we Western Balkan Greens strive towards, often viewing them as important guidelines, even though many of us still live outside of the EU. We see that many countries in Western Europe that are now perceived as inseparable were once mired in conflict and war. Using the prevailing geopolitical theory of the twentieth century, we saw that tensions evaporated when culture, economics and convenience became too intertwined and harmonised to justify any disruption to the lives of the citizens. This approach to international relations, once the cornerstone of European international policy, has been rocked somewhat in recent years, but it is up to us as hopeful people to call for pacifism and reconciliation. However, in certain post-war societies, such as mine, the first step must be to admit guilt and acknowledge that we should stop the normalisation of calls to war and incitement to violence. Instead, we should share meta-narratives that steer away from the concept of the other and focus on building bridges and reconnecting with our neighbours – not only as different countries politically, but also mutually, as citizens, and as humans.

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