

**SERBIA (RE)BRANDED: DEMOCRACY IN IMAGE AND
SUBSTANCE IN THE POST-MILOŠEVIĆ ERA**

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The Association for the Study of Nationalities 2019 World Convention
New York, NY May XX, 2019

As this work is only in its initial stages, much of its arguments remain hypothetical.
Comments and suggestions are welcome, but this draft is neither for circulation nor for citation.

In June 2006, the Serbian Foreign Economic Relations Ministry announced it was looking for an advisor to “help Serbia create a new image for itself.” As far as Serbia is concerned, the Ministry believed it is still most commonly associated with conflict and instability from the 1990s that witnessed the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in the eyes of the majority of the international community. The primary role of this sought-for advisor would be to “find a way to break away from the negative connotations and place Serbia’s brand into international political, investment, cultural and tourism circles.” The reason for this initiative was a response to foreign media only reporting about Serbia’s negative aspects from the previous decade of war, state collapse, ethnic cleaning, and quasi-authoritarianism. According to Borka Tomić of the Serbian Institute for Public Diplomacy, positive events in Serbia stay buried and unnoticed while sensationalist stories such as bombings, assassinations, Slobodan Milošević, and Ratko Mladić “remain Serbia’s most well-known brands”.¹ Positive aspects of Serbia needed to be pushed into the foreground, but it would ultimately be up to Serbia’s political and cultural leaders as well as ordinary citizens to be actively involved in supporting reforms and creating a positive climate for investment and development; otherwise the job of rebranding Serbia’s image would yield little results.

In the years following, Serbia seems to have made a significant change in its image from that of the 1990s. Whereas Serbia was once regarded – rightly or not – as the primary aggressors in the civil wars that destroyed Yugoslavia; a place synonymous with xenophobia, ultranationalism, and organized criminal activity; and virtually every negative connotation and stereotype associated with the worst aspects of Eastern Europe and the (post) Communist world,

¹ “Serbia Looks for New Image.” *B92*, June 19, 2006.
http://www.b92.net/eng/news/business.php?yyyy=2006&mm=06&dd=19&nav_id=35317

it is now considered “one of Europe’s best kept tourism secrets”.² Today, Serbia is “a country with a thriving foodie scene and cosmopolitan cafe culture, Europe’s biggest music festival, and a history that stretches back much further than just the past quarter century, playing a central role in centuries of European politics.”³ Where CNN and the *New York Times* once painted Serbia as hostile to the United States as Iran and North Korea in their International section, they now tout the country in their Travel section as a land “where East meets West” with “storybook historical districts and venerable fortresses and parks” that are the “legacies left by former rulers” which can be “found in everything from architecture to the cuisine”.⁴ Add to this Serbia’s athletic star power like Novak Djoković, and its music festivals like EXIT and Guča that draw thousands of international tourists annually, and one can certainly say that Serbia has achieved a new image and identity it sought to create for itself more than a decade earlier.

Most notably is Serbia’s capital Belgrade, which throughout the 2010s was posited by journalists, travel guides, and art critics as the “new Berlin” of Europe, or at least Southeastern Europe.⁵ Where it was once seen as a haven for gangsters and war criminals, it now enjoys an almost fabled image and reputation for being “an all-year party city” with “the largest Eastern Orthodox church” amid a charming “historical mismatch of architecture.”⁶ Belgrade’s image alone has transformed Serbia from the peripheral to the trendy, and its vibrant nightlife, trendy cafes, and emerging art scene – complete with its own post-industrial gentrified neighborhood

² Martin Newman, “Serbia: One of Europe’s Best Kept Tourism Secrets?” *Mirror Online*, March 11, 2014. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/lifestyle/travel/europe-short-haul/serbia-one-europes-best-kept-3227101>

³ Ronan O’Shea, “Serbia: A Country Full of Surprises,” *TravelWeekly*, January 4, 2018. <http://www.travelweekly.co.uk/articles/295040/serbia-a-country-full-of-surprises>

⁴ Seth Sherwood, “36 Hours in Belgrade”, *The New York Times*, August 25, 2016 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/25/travel/what-to-do-36-hours-in-belgrade.html> and Mary Novakovich, “11 Best Places to Visit in Serbia”, *CNN*, November 26, 2018 <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/serbia-best-places-to-visit/index.html>

⁵ Mary Holland, “Is Belgrade the New Berlin?” *Vogue*, April 6, 2017 <https://www.vogue.com/article/belgrade-travel-guide-the-new-berlin>

⁶ “Why Belgrade is the Greatest City You’d Never Thought to Visit”, *The Telegraph*, February 15, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/lists/reasons-your-next-city-break-should-be-to-belgrade/>

with microbreweries – was regarded in 2010 as one of the world’s top-ten party towns.⁷ In 2017, it made one of Conde Nast’s fourteen “emerging destinations of the world”.⁸ In 2019, readers and bloggers of Travel Lemming, “a site dedicated to promoting the world’s emerging destinations and encouraging travelers to think beyond the traditional ‘tourist traps’” that is followed by tens of thousands of people on social media, voted Serbia the most popular tourist destination in Europe. As it was described as “perhaps one of the most underrated travel destinations on the planet”, one needed to “get to Serbia fast before word gets out about this incredible hidden destination.”⁹

Yet while Serbia might be lauded as the next great tourist destination, its politics, like the rest of the so-called “Western Balkans” – a term euphemistically used by scholars and policymakers to describe that area of Southeastern Europe still outside the European Union accounting for Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Albania, and Macedonia – remains mired in political mismanagement, illiberal democratic practice, and shows “clear elements of state capture, including links with organized crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration.”¹⁰ Though much of the post-Communist world appears to be suffering from similar fits and bouts of democratic fatigue in the form of illiberal national populist governments of late, academic attention still focuses on the Western Balkans as an area blighted by legacies of authoritarian rule and weak democratic political cultures. Even if states like Hungary and Poland have much more right-wing governments controlling socio-political life, they still are part of “Central Europe”, which was once a showcase for successful democratic transitions, and are

⁷ “The World’s Top 10 Party Towns”, *Traveller*, <http://www.traveller.com.au/the-worlds-top-10-party-towns-im4q>

⁸ “14 Emerging Destinations Around the World”, *CNN*, April 12, 2017
<https://www.cntraveler.com/gallery/emerging-destinations-around-the-world>

⁹ “Travel Lemming Reader Awards 2019: World’s Top Destinations”, *Travel Lemming*
<https://travelling.com/reader-travel-awards-2019/?fbclid=IwAR3bnQ-i5Mc7nG9Zo0vC8TZVAtLU8mFE0nLnBhDr02UMQQ2N-ogEBWfdrdo>

¹⁰ European Commission, *Communication: A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans*. COM(2018) 65 Final.

members of the European Union; an association that almost seems to exonerate any state of systemic wrongdoing and, at the very least, chalk problems up to a cadre of illiberal political leaders that has temporarily capitalized on EU mismanagement. Serbia, on the other hand, was never afforded any benefits of doubt, and begins any study on it with political, social, economic, cultural, and historical handicaps.

Though much has been accomplished in the last two decades, Serbia's transition to democracy, like nearly all states in post-Communist Europe, remains a work in progress. Positive images of countries with a vibrant nightlife in capital cities say little about the functionality of government and the quality of democracy. Trendy restaurants and cafes in tourist-friendly city centers belie the wage stagnation and job scarcity for a population increasingly indifferent to these improvements, much less able to afford a meal or a drink in these locations. One or maybe two urban cities that are written up as the "new" Western-likened city of choice leave out the countryside with smaller cities and towns where life is increasingly peripheral and disconnected to the center. Some areas may benefit from natural beauty that, with initiative, can sell itself as "rustic", "Old World", or, if properly marketed "Habsburg" to the traveler willing to adventure off the proverbial beaten path, but more often than not, these areas retain an atmosphere of post-Communist decay, with drab "blokovi" apartments serving as a skyline and a poorer population bereft of the advantages of the free market. Belgrade is one thing; Kraljevo is another. Dubrovnik gets all the tourists; Karlovac is a sparsely-populated economically dilapidated town that has never recovered from the wars of the 1990s. Mostar's fame is its iconic bridge, which has been used as an emblematic symbol for nearly every book cover, conference poster, and academic brochure on the Balkans denoting some idealistic ethnic co-existence. Realistically, the city remains institutionally divided between Bosniaks on one side of the river and ethnic Croats

on the other. Additionally, people seem to also forget the bridge was detonated in the 1990s by ethnic Croats. The post-Communist world may finally be “coming in from the cold”, as the cliché often says, by opening up to tourism and integrating into the EU, but nearly every country and territory in Central and Southeastern Europe have seen significant drops in population due both to an overall decline in birthrates and a statistical rise in emigration to Western Europe, North America, or the Anglo-Saxon Pacific.¹¹ Serbia may be great for tourists but its people have become more pessimistic within a growing political culture of disappointment.¹² Croatia’s Dalmatian coast may be a top tourist destination during the summer, but it becomes almost deserted when the season is over, and ordinary Croats increasingly cannot afford to live in Dubrovnik as it gets parceled into time shares and Air B’nb’s. This apparent paradox between positive external images and an internal political culture of disappointment underscores an inconvenient reality that democratization and modernization for many countries in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe has yet to produce the results originally hoped for by its citizens.

What explains this disconnect between external image and internal sentiment? How has Serbia’s external image improved while the quality of life for its citizens atrophied since 2000? The short answer is that successive Serbian governments seem more interested in what the outside world thinks of Serbia than its own people. The outside world brings in not just tourism, but also economic investment and political cooperation, and a country with a positive image and reputation is not only the quickest way for international perception to change, but for it to be part

¹¹ Mark Rice-Oxley and Jennifer Rankin, “Europe’s South and East Worry More about Emigration than Immigration”, *The Guardian*, March 31, 2019
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/01/europe-south-and-east-worry-more-about-emigration-than-immigration-poll>

¹² Jessica Greenberg, *After the Revolution: Youth, Democracy, and the Politics of Disappointment in Serbia* (Stanford University Press, 2014).

of a global network of developed states. If “branded” the right way, countries like Serbia can market themselves as modern, innovative, and receptive to global markets in Germany, the United States, Italy, and China. A longer explanation is that democracy in Serbia is institutionally consolidated, but it has failed to produce a democratic political culture that has reconciled the tumultuous transition from single-party authoritarianism, a decade of secessionist wars and isolation, the entrenched corruption that stemmed from it, and subsequent peace settlements with political, social, and ethnic communities in Serbia, throughout the former Yugoslavia, and with Europe. In so many words, the absence of this political culture is the absence of Serbia’s new democratic government branding a new image and offering a new set of cultural narratives for its own people. If a state is only concerned about what the world thinks of its national image while ignoring what its own people think and need, it risks losing the social capital necessary to transform democratic structure into democratic political culture and will, at absolute best, reduce the state to little more than a few tourist destinations that serve the interest and curiosity of backpacking trendsetters.

The study of democracy and good governance in Serbia and other countries of Central and Southeastern Europe can fill multiple bookshelves; however specific research into “nation branding” is a comparatively new body of research, and resides largely outside conventional social scientific research. The subject has its roots in business and marketing, though even there it involves an intersection of economy, politics, and culture.¹³ Though the notion of “branding”

¹³ Simon Anholt (2010), *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Melissa Aronczyk (2013), *Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press; Browning, C. S. (2016). “Nation branding and development: poverty panacea or business as usual?” *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 19(1): 50-75; Cánepa, G. K. (2013), “Nation branding: The re-foundation of community, citizenship and the state in the context of neoliberalism in Peru”, *Medien Journal*, 37(3): 7-18; Jansen, S. C. (2008), “Designer nations: Neo-liberal nation Branding – Brand Estonia”, *Social Identities*, 14(1): 121-42; Kaneva, N. (2011), “Nation branding: Toward an agenda for critical research”, *International Journal of Communication*, 5: 117-41; Szondi, G. (2008). “Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding: Conceptual Similarities and Differences”, The Hague: Netherlands Institute for International Relations “Glingendael”; Volcic, Z. &

implies creating value through the commodification of something into goods, it still involves constructing an image, or symbol, that not only contains a recognizable message, but projects a set of carefully crafted narratives. Thus, “nation branding” is something that roughly I define as the careful and deliberate creation and dissemination of collective identity along economic, cultural, and political axioms for public consumption. This should be quite familiar to anyone studying theories of national identity and political culture, as the term implies efforts by the state to promote some sort of desired image to an audience; an image that tries to encapsulate the best the state and society can offer into a series of bite-size narratives and slogans. To this end, the remodeling of states with a particular brand extends established academic discussion beyond concepts of nationhood and identity to a point where the state itself functions as a commodity within an increasingly globalized marketplace. Though the concept of branding is a tool that creates value for commodification and therefore reflects something marketable, the practice of crafting and projecting an image of state and society to consuming publics has been a fundamental component of modern nationalism since at least the late eighteenth century. The specific idea of branding a nation for economic gain has a particular business-oriented angle to it, and indeed the founding practitioners of nation branding hail from marketing, rather than social scientific disciplines; however, commodified culture is a critical part of state-sponsored imagined communities and invented traditions.

As brands, states are expected to live up to a certain image it projects.¹⁴ This might initially sound overly simplistic, and even a little stereotypical, but there are a number of states that possess an image, an identity, or even a reputation, the public takes as given; positive or

Andrejevic, M. (2011), “Nation branding in the era of commercial nationalism”, *International Journal of Communication*, 5: 598-618.

¹⁴ Aronczyk, M. (2008). “Living the brand’: Nationality, globality, and the identity strategies of nation branding consultants”, *International Journal of Communication*, 2: 41-65

negative. Norway is praised for its social democracy; Sweden for its artsy yet affordable furniture; Finland for its technological innovations and education system; Italy for its cuisine; France for its art; Germany for its engineering; Japan for its aesthetics; Canada for its friendliness; and Switzerland for his high standards of living. At the same time, Nigeria is stigmatized for its corruption; Russia for its dysfunctionality; Iraq for its violence; Haiti for its poverty; and China for its pollution. With this in mind, nation-branding programs introduced and justified as initiatives that can produce tangible economic outcomes, such as increased foreign investment or tourism. At the same time, by articulating visions of the nation through a market-oriented paradigm, nation branding serves as program for what the state wants it to be seen as. By this, nation branding presents an image with a set of narratives about state and society meant for consumption.¹⁵ Like the association of a commodity with a set of traits and characteristics, nation branding attempts to sell the state and its society to global markets and consumers.

Most studies of nation branding say very little about the internal dynamics of the state. If, as most studies define it, nation branding is aimed at constituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms, there is an implication that external audiences are indeed preferred over internal citizenry. For developed democracies, this isn't much of a problem since the state is promoting and projecting its internal qualities. However, for states transitioning both to free market capitalism and democracy, the temptation to advertise a state with weak political institutions and a relatively withdrawn citizenry can be quite problematic. At best, the state brands itself as little more than a tourist destination with little else to promote. At worst, the state

¹⁵ Browning, C. S. (2016), "Nation branding and development: poverty panacea or business as usual?" *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 19(1): 50-75; Kaneva, N. (2011), *Branding Post-Communist Nations: Marketizing National Identities in the "New" Europe*. New York: Routledge; Varga, S. (2013), "The politics of nation branding: Collective identity and public sphere in the neoliberal state", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 39(8): 825-845

spends so much energy and attention on external imagery that it neglects investing in its own public, its own infrastructure, and its own social capital.

Thus, a country like Serbia can lauded in international press for its image turnaround, but if faith in government and politics decreases as modernity increases, nation branding remains little more than an exercise in neoliberal commercialism that promotes a country or region based on what a target audience of internationals want to see, rather than what its own people need. What is necessary is that the state needs to brand its desired image to its own people before it advertises itself to the world. But more than just a few catchy slogans and stock photos of choice locations for foreigners to visit, *internal nation branding* takes on much of the patterns and practices of state-sponsored political culture from the 19th and early 20th century associated with statecraft and development in social scientific literature. As the last two decades have shown, Serbia, along with most other former Yugoslav republics have made significant strides towards democratic consolidation, but continue to struggle in replacing an endemic illiberal political culture with a more democratic one. Put another way, the state has transitioned towards some procedural form of democracy, yet still lacks a compatible political culture to first replace the narratives left over from the 1990s and second to include the public to participate in political and civic life. Thus, in order to complete democratic consolidation and ensure an active and empowered democratic citizenry, the state – or more specifically state leaders – needs to promote, or brand, a set of narratives and ideals to its population to follow and uphold. This type of internal branding, as it is called, is absolutely crucial not just for democracy and good governance, but also for its brand image abroad. Just as corporate branding campaigns can only be as effective as the quality of the product it promotes, so too a state, if it observes and recognizes its civic and cultural achievements, will help to create a more robust and developed

society. Conversely, a state that is perceived only as a mere factory producing consumable items, or a seasonal location for travelers rarely interested in venturing beyond the tourist-trodden city centers risks a citizenry detached from socio-political life and feeling unimportant.¹⁶

One of the biggest problems that has contributed to Serbia's weak democratic political culture is that its political and cultural elites have failed in taking advantage of the plentiful reservoir of symbolic capital in Serbian history, both recent and distant, in which a compelling set of democratic, civic-minded, and cosmopolitan narratives entirely different from the ones appropriated by ethnocentric nationalists in the later 1980s could be fashioned for a new, post-communist, post-authoritarian, democratic Serbian political and cultural identity.¹⁷ Not only have the democratic parties failed to provide an alternative set of symbols and narratives to those used by the Milošević regime, but they have to an extent co-opted various elements of existing narratives of victimhood and mistrust of other groups from the 1990s into democratic political rhetoric. Much of this is associated with the open-ended issues surrounding Kosovo, but it is also connected to the tenuous relations shared with other former Yugoslav states. Each group adheres to its own reading of history and, in particular, the nature of Yugoslavia's dissolution and resulting civil wars of the 1990s which tends to emphasize the victimhood and suffering of its own people while overlooking and downplaying the suffering it caused for others. That Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, and Albanians have all failed in facilitating political cultures of reconciliation and cling instead to their own versions of the past reinforces mutual feelings of animosities and prevents the establishment of a culture of openness and inclusiveness.

¹⁶ Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*, Palgrave Macmillan (2007).

¹⁷ Michael Rossi, "In Search of a Democratic Cultural 'Alternative': Serbia's European Heritage from Dositej Obradović to OTPOR", *Nationalities Papers* vol. 40, no. 6 (November), pp. 853 – 878.

Since the breakup of Yugoslavia, Serbian political culture has been characterized as being locked in some proverbial tug-of-war between pro-Western democratic reformers and ethnocentric national populists. Conservative political and social groups that continue to adhere to the prevailing cultural narratives of the last twenty five years understand Serbia to be a state and a society that fights for and defends what it is rightfully, and historically, entitled to, but is continually besieged and beleaguered by external powers and internal contagion from fifth column elements who are all determined to keep Serbia and its people weak, divided, and impoverished. Since the mid-1980s, a reading of Serbian history that places it at odds with its neighbors and casts Serbs as perennial victims of other state policies and national programs has developed into a highly sophisticated political culture that has been given institutional backing from conservative elements in the Serbian government, Serbian academic circles, nationalist organizations, and the Serbian Orthodox Church.

At the opposite end, many of the traditionally progressive intellectuals and civic groups largely conclude that in order to support Western democratic values, they must disassociate themselves from as much existing Serbian culture as possible. Organizations like the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, the Humanitarian Law Center, the Center for Cultural Decontamination, and Women in Black are all social organizations that have long regarded Serbian political culture as inimical to liberal democratic values, and view most of Serbia's elected officials today as quasi-nationalists who have perpetuated many of the beliefs and prejudices from the Milošević era. But as pro-Western as they may be, these groups offer neither any strategies for reform nor any consideration for alternative models of Serbian identity that are accepted by people outside their small academic social circles and international supporters. Because of their critical positions towards national identity, these groups lack both popular

constituencies and broad social support among the Serbian public, who mainly see them as haughty, elitist, condescending and altogether out of touch with public sentiment. As a result, groups like these that could serve as catalysts for new approaches in Serbian political culture have not only failed in providing forums of public dialogue and debate on reform in the crucial years following Milošević's ouster, but have left the utilization of any usable Serbian political culture compatible with Western and Central European development outside any workable socio-political framework. Without offering any positive alternative images of Serbian identity, these organizations remain peripheral, unpopular, and insignificant.

In short, there are two general models of political culture in Serbia today that offer some form of collective identity. One is the narrative of Serbia that resists chronic interference from external enemies bent on Serbia's weakening and further fragmentation by rigidly upholding principles of national, cultural, and religious identity. The other is an unorganized mishmash of countercultural ideas and interests that stand against the perceived omnipresence of Serbian ethnocentrism and nationalism but offer little by way of new ideas or solutions. Neither seems to provide any practical connection with current political, economic, and social challenges. In the middle reside the majority of Serbia's citizens who feel increasingly alienated and distrustful of their political and civic leaders who seem to disregard their interests and concerns. Serbia's troubled path towards liberal democratic consolidation has not been due to a lack of democratic culture, but by national elites who have either continued to appropriate a previously non-democratic political culture for democratic purposes, or have failed to appropriate alternative narratives of Serbian history and culture altogether. The failure in constructing a post-Milošević narrative capable of easing the difficulties of transition and reintegrating Serbia into Europe remains the greatest challenge to the state.

This study argues in favor of such an alternative set of cultural narratives to Serbia's nascent democratic state by noting that symbolic capital is readily available and has been a part of Serbia's cultural heritage for at least three centuries. The prevailing political culture of Serbia most often cited as detrimental to democratic consolidation represents only an interpretative fraction of what is available and largely, if not entirely, characterizes a national group emerging from the breakdown of a multi-ethnic state only to descend into civil war, ethnic cleansing, population exchange, redrawing of sovereign boundaries, and international isolation. A more culturally nuanced approach to Serbia's democratic social capital appreciates the rich history, heritage, and memories of state and society that are congruent with international values of social democracy, receptivity to, and cooperation with its European neighbors. Though work on "crafting" a democratic culture congruent with political and economic commitments of state have been written about elsewhere, studies like these on Serbia and other Balkan countries remain relatively scarce; overshadowed as they are by prevailing studies on structural integration within the European Union.¹⁸ This study this draws theoretical inspiration from the collection of works on nation branding, but heavily emphasizes its potential – and necessary implementation – for internal consumption.

A larger sample of Serbian collective identity contains a set of cultural attitudes and values that were fundamental components of state and society from mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and among Serb communities in the Hapsburg Empire since the early eighteenth. These narratives, while hardly as unified, as popular, or as infamously well-known as exclusionary ethnocentric variants of the 1990s, incorporate the cosmopolitan history and character of the city of Belgrade, the development of an early modern Serbian economic and

¹⁸ See for instance, Nicolai Petro, *Crafting Democracy: How Novgorod Has Coped with Rapid Social Change*, (Cornell University Press, 2004).

political society in the Hapsburg Empire, and the general support for establishing standards of education, constitutional law and jurisprudence, arts and literature, a market economy, and democratic civil society that were on par with standards in Vienna, St. Petersburg, Paris, Budapest, and Prague. To this, it is also possible to examine the economic modernity and affluence of the Yugoslav period under Tito, the active culture of dissidence among Serbia's student population in the 1990s, and the grass-roots communitarianism of the Serbian Orthodox Church. None of these elements are obscure moments in Serbian history; however, they have not undergone the same type of politicized appropriation as histories of war, struggle and victimization that have characterized the state over the last twenty-five years. More to the point, these narratives have been neither politically nor culturally expedient while Kosovo remains a center issue. Nevertheless, this study argues that these alternative cultural narratives can serve as the foundation of a Serbian democratic political culture that is older and more rooted in Serbian history than those narratives that see Serbia as a bulwark against Western democratic modernization. What is more, these narratives provide links between specific Serbian identities that are compatible with patterns of modernization, development, and integration found throughout Europe both at the time of their conception and in the present.

When considering what sets of images and narratives a state wishes to present to its people, a core question is what are the primary goals of the state over the next five to ten years? For Serbia, is it membership in the European Union? Is it increased international economic investment? Is it retaining the country's best and brightest instead of losing them to the increasing pool of emigrants and *gasterbejteri*? Is it empowering its public to take a more active role in civil society and democratic social capital? Any or a combination of these objectives

involve a number of steps that harness culture to politics that deliberately projects a narrative of what the state envisions to be.

The first step is one that is often overlooked: the deconstruction and disassociation of symbols with old narratives. In Serbia's case, much like other similar cases throughout the post-Yugoslav and post-Communist world, this involves the involves addressing and reconciling with chauvinistically ethnocentric political cultures crafted in the 1990s in the wake of Communist collapse. As articulated in much literature, the immediate post-Communist period saw a vacuum of both political and cultural hegemony from the previous forty-five years that high amount of "formlessness" amid the upheaval.¹⁹ When changes occur too rapidly for societies to assimilate, it leads to a period of formlessness in which individuals and groups find their past highly interpretive, in which cultural knowledge from the previous political order no longer useful in making sense of the world around them. Into this interregnum that Antonio Gramsci notes arise sharp inconsistencies between attitudes and behaviors that can often be exploited by ambitious groups offering a retreat into parochialism, nativism, and populism. Even if politics eventually stabilizes, as did much of Central Europe in the 1990s following guarantees of stabilization by the European Union, culture oftentimes remains harnessed to these initial periods of uncertainty that perpetuate parochial calls to faith, family, and fatherland. Even in the absence of minority groups where these narratives would be more pronounced, the state continues to perpetuate an understanding that the "nation" – that is the primary ethnic group of state – is beleaguered by threats of globalization, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and secularism. One only need look at current political cultures in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia to get a sense of the paradoxical discrepancy with states that are institutionally consolidated democracies yet

¹⁹ Harry Eckstein, "A Culturalist Theory of Political Change", *American Political Science Review* 82:3 (1988).

still retain a political culture of intolerance and xenophobia in the absence of strong borders and other forms – physical or metaphorical – of protectionism.

For a country like Serbia, the highly documented cultural legacies of illiberal ethnocentric political culture, while certainly not as organized as it was in the 1990s; nor as mobilized against minorities, and now more recently migrants, as their Central European neighbors are today, is still a primary component of its national image. Deconstructing these narratives is the first step towards rebranding a state that not only allows for new cultural approaches to be considered, but most importantly alters the political environment that allows illiberal political movements to keep getting elected to office. This process of deconstructing the old political cultures doesn't mean rewriting history; rather it implies undergoing a process of cultural audit that discards elements that are inimical to democratic government, and recrafting and reinterpreting those key cultural symbols, narratives, values, and identities that are non-negotiable. These core identities, values, and beliefs are often what gets lost in policy briefs on how a state can somehow improve. For Serbia, this often involves “letting go” of the disputed territory of Kosovo in favor of some vague and innocuous promise of greater EU integration that never seems to come. In short, a first step in internal rebranding is for socio-political leaders to engage in a type of cultural audit that discards narratives and identities that are no longer congruent with contemporary goals and objectives. Yet at the same time, this cultural audit needs to recognize those core cultural values for the next step.

Once old symbols and narratives have been deconstructed, a second step is to actively craft a new set of identities and cultural values that promote cooperation, inclusion, and social democratic values, while still retaining distinctive cultural identities. This often involves delving into national history that is neither publically known nor appreciated because it has not been

officially appropriated into political culture. Yet within this collection historical events, places, and people, a veritable treasure-trove of information can be offered as a “usable past” in crafting new identities and, most importantly, branding new images. Within studies of nation branding, this isn’t anything radically different from the ways in which political culture has been crafted in states since the 19th century onward. It involves consensus from the country’s social and political elites in choosing key cultural and historical elements that reflect the goals and aspirations of the state.

Though I have written about Serbia’s democratic cultural capital elsewhere, it is worth reviewing some of its potential uses within a framework of nation branding. Two significantly important elements of modern Serbian culture that can be branded for its people is the multiethnic character of Serbia’s northern province of Vojvodina and the cosmopolitan nature of its capital city Belgrade. While there are plenty of other elements in Serbia’s history that can be utilized, Vojvodina and Belgrade serve a number of immediate purposes. Vojvodina offers an excellent showcase of Serbia’s multiethnic and multireligious character, which not only stands directly opposite of the inter-ethnic antagonism and conflict in Kosovo, but also demonstrates that Serbia is not the ethnocentric and xenophobic state often (wrongly) attributed to it by Western media. Additionally, Vojvodina is home to a number of comparatively developed cities and towns like Novi Sad, Sremski Karlovci, Sremska Mitrovica, Vršac, and Subotica; all of which are rich in their own early modern history in the development of a modern Serbian state, and can offer additional centers of international investment and tourism.

Within Vojvodina, one of the most important factors to Serbia’s modern national development was the settlement of large numbers of Serbian communities in the so-called Hapsburg Military Frontier (*Vojna Krajina*), a part of what is now Vojvodina, in the late

seventeenth century. An equally crucial factor resulting from this was the sustained independence and administrative growth of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the only institution that remained intact from the medieval period with the ability to preserve and nurture collective consciousness. Through a series of agreements between the Austrian emperor Leopold I and the Serbian Patriarch Arsenije III in 1690, over 200,000 Serbs had migrated from their ancestral lands in Kosovo and other regions of Ottoman-controlled southern Serbia to resettle in Hapsburg territory in which religious autonomy and limited self-government were granted in exchange for active military service along the Hapsburg-Ottoman border. New centers of Serbian ecclesiastical authority were soon established, with a Serbian Orthodox Metropolitanate centered in the town of Sremski Karlovci, with officials that acted as veritable diplomats, civic administrators and negotiators for the Serbian community, and could be found as often at royal courts and general assemblies as they were in monasteries and churches. Though primarily mindful of their religious commitments, the Metropolitans of Karlovci had a notably progressive outlook in actively supporting higher education and civic development as a way of preserving collective identity via socio-economic development. The patronage of the Serbian Orthodox Church, coupled with the institutional support received from Vienna, provided a fertile environment for the growth of an active bourgeois society of merchants, civil servants, doctors, lawyers, and teachers who founded Serbia's first modern publishing houses, gymnasiums, lyceums, and civic organizations.

Within the Military Frontier, the city of Novi Sad grew into the most culturally developed Serbian urban center of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and was aptly referred to as the "Serbian Athens" (*Srpska Atina*) due to its role as a center of learning, commerce, and artisanship. By 1850, Novi Sad boasted nine political and literary journals that were published

and printed on Cyrillic presses. Its first *čitaonica* (reading room), opened in 1842, and a National Theater was founded in 1861. The literary foundation *Matica Srpska* was founded in Budapest in 1826 and moved to its present location in Novi Sad in 1864 where it served as the first real national institution of Hapsburg Slavs and the most important cultural institution for all Hapsburg Serbs. *Matica Srpska* was, and remains to this day, an entirely self-funded organization that relied on the contributions of its members. Wealthy benefactors also supported the upkeep of *Matica Srpska*, chief of whom was Sava Tekelija, one of the richest and most influential Hapsburg Serbs of his time, who contributed funds to not only keep the foundation alive, but through the Tekelija Fund provided scholarships for young Serbs seeking education in universities throughout the Hapsburg empire.

More recent activity in Novi Sad is the annual hosting of the much famed EXIT Music Festival, which began as a protest movement in music against the Milošević regime, and was billed as the youth of Serbia's collective shout to the world that there still remained an alternative, globalist, internationalist, and cosmopolitan identity that existed beneath the official surface of illiberal nationalism and xenophobia. In the years since Milošević's "exit" from politics, the EXIT festivals became one of the biggest music venues in Southeastern Europe, and one of the most popular throughout the entire European Continent. In addition to billing top musical performers, EXIT Festival continued its role of raising social awareness over political issues such as trafficking and sexual exploitation in the region, gender equality, economic issues, environmentalism, unemployment, and substance abuse. Despite the many fears that it has lost its original intention of being a symbol of democratic openness and has given way to large corporate sponsors and advertising media, EXIT still represents a strong affirmation of the

multiethnic character that has always described Vojvodina, and remains the largest, and quite possibly most effective, event shared between Serbia and the rest of the world.

Already known as one of the great centers of nightlife and an emerging destination for tourists, Belgrade has more than two hundred years of history serving as the urban center of the first modern state in Eastern Europe. Belgrade's blending of Serbian and European cultures culminated in the decade preceding the First World War under the constitutional monarchy of King Petar I Karadjordjević in what has come to be known as Serbia's "Golden Age of Democracy" (1903 – 1915).²⁰ Having received his education in Geneva and Paris, King Petar was deeply imbued with the ideas of Western liberalism and parliamentary democracy, and personally translated John Stuart Mill's essay "On Liberty" into Serbian. It is this period in which Stojanović notes Serbia is regarded by its historians as a "European liberal-bourgeois state", a "liberal monarchy", a "modern parliamentary state", in which a flowering cultural achievement and political liberalism marked the "brightest days in the history of modern Serbia", and conclusively, if somewhat euphorically, the "most democratic state in the world" in political outlook.²¹

What also marks the first two decades of the twentieth century as an exceptional synthesis of Serbian and Western democratic narratives was the strong sense of South Slavic unity among Serbia's leading cultural intelligentsia. In 1874, the Liberal newspaper *Istok* published an article that proposed Serbia assume the role in the Balkans that Piedmont had taken for Italy more than a decade earlier. This implied that leadership in Belgrade actively support liberation movements among Serbs and other South Slavs still under Hapsburg and Ottoman rule, with a goal of eventual unification into an enlarged and self-sufficient state. Under King

²⁰ Dubravka Stojanović, *Kaldrma i Asfalt: Urbanizacija i evropeizacija Beograda 1890 – 1914*. Belgrade: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2008.

²¹ Dubravka Stojanović, *Srbija i Demokratija 1903 – 1914*. Belgrade, Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2003;

Petar, a vibrant Serbian intellectual movement attracted artists, writers and thinkers from all over Southeastern Europe. In 1904, the First Congress of Southern Slav Youth was held in Belgrade to commemorate the centennial anniversary of the First Serbian Uprising, which was celebrated by the attendees as the first Balkan liberation movement. Those Serbs, Croats, Slovenes and Bulgarians in attendance agreed on a joint-resolution to lend aid to all South Slavic communities still living under foreign occupation and stressed the importance of educational development as a means for liberation.²² Alongside the Youth Congress was the First Yugoslav Artistic Exhibit. It too was a commemoration of the First Serbian Uprising a century before, and like the Youth Congress used the centenary anniversary as a means of emphasizing the shared cultural and historical heritage of Southern Slavs, displaying over 450 works of art from throughout Southeastern Europe. Prominent art critics including the young Serbian female painter Nadežda Petrović and the Croatian sculptor Ivan Mestrović hailed the works of fellow contemporary Paja Jovanović as the crowning achievement of Serbian pictorial art, whose paintings on the life of Tsar Dušan, particularly *The Proclamation of Dušan's Law Code*, were lauded for its realistic imagery as well as visualizing the political and social achievements of a South Slavic state. The Artistic Exhibit functioned as a sort of World's Fair for South Slavic artists who found common interests that spanned national and religious divisions.

Literary works continued to find congruency between Western European and Serbian ethics and were most visible in the writings of Bogdan Popović and his student Jovan Skerlić, himself an avid supporter of Serbian cultural history from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Through his critical works on Serbian literary history, Skerlić is credited for separating Serbian patriotism from overly emotional embraces of traditionalism. He was opposed to

²² Jelena Miljković-Djurić, *Tradition and Avant-Garde: Literature and Art in Serbian Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.

extreme forms of both Westernization at the expense of Serbian identity, and even more so Pan-Slavism at the complete rejection of all Western values and ideas. The strength of the individual, he believed, lay in the ability of finding one's destiny through personal experiences in one's own environment. While ideas could be borrowed from the outside, foreign models were not to be aped, nor should daily life be neglected for a romantic past that never actually existed. Still, Skerlić was convinced that Serbia's future lay in its acceptance of Western values within its own cultural matrix. In this regard, he may be considered an adherent of "Neoslavism", which rejects the classic Slavophilic conceptions of a romanticized past based on kinship and blood, and emphasizes the application of Western ideas of citizenship as a basis for social equality of all Slavic communities.²³ Represented in the form of political myths, the past, he believed, was a tool to navigate one's own path to a modern European democracy, not to be jealously safeguarded as a barrier to modernity. In this, Skerlić drew inspiration from Svetozar Marković and particularly Dositej Obradović, one of Serbia's greatest intellectuals as well as one of its most progressive thinkers of his time. It was in the writings of Obradović that Skerlić and other likeminded Serbian Yugoslavists found the link between Western political thought and Serbian patriotism.

Obradović was born in the Temesvár region of eastern Banat in 1743 and developed a passion for reading at an early age. Enamored by the lives and experiences of many of the Church Fathers, he ran away to Hopovo monastery in Fruška Gora in 1757 and for three years was a tonsured monk. However, having saturated the monastic libraries and realizing there was more in life than insular piety, he left the monastery in 1760 and set forth on travels that led him throughout Europe and the Near East. His autobiography narrated his forty year "adventures" to "his fellow men and to tell them whatever good and sensible things I have heard and learned

²³ Ivan Čolović, *The Politics of Symbol in Serbia*. London: Hurst, 1997.

from others.”²⁴ While living in Germany for many years, he enrolled at the university at Halle in 1782, and attended lectures by Professor Johann August Eberhard on “philosophy, esthetics, and natural theology” It was at this “abode of the Muses and of all manner of divine sciences” where he became an avid proponent of contemporary trends in rationalism and enlightenment while deeply lamenting the absence of such learning and literature in his homeland.²⁵ Deciding to publish works in Serbian, Obradović spent most of his professional life in Leipzig and Vienna where he worked extensively on promoting a modern Serbian literary language and modern Serbian literature. While never abandoning his Orthodox faith, nor losing any sense of connection between intellectualism and personal religious piety, he became particularly critical of the attempt by organized religion at stifling individual creativity, as well as its emphasis of ritual and custom over true belief and reason. It was this extensive scholarship that led Karadjordje, the founder of the modern Serbian state in 1804, to invite him to Belgrade as Serbia’s first Minister of Education, which he served until his death in 1811.

Hopeful optimism is indeed an appropriate way of characterizing much of early modern Serbian social and political development. Even as early as the 1860s, Serbian intellectuals were utilizing narratives and symbols from as recent as a century before as a way of finding congruency between their own cultural traditions and larger patterns of European civilization. Serbian civil society in both Novi Sad and Belgrade was marked by strong desires to become part of a European community of nations, and while many intellectuals acknowledged Serbia’s current subordination to more advanced societies in Western and Central Europe, the question of how changes necessary for progress, modernity, and democracy could be made while simultaneously fostering pride in the uniqueness of their own identities and values had shaped

²⁴ Dositej Obradović, *The Life and Adventures of Dimitrije Obradović, Who as a Monk was Given the Name Dositej: Written and Published by Himself*. Trans. George Rapall Noyes. U of California P, 1953, p. 107.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 282 – 3.

the writings and philosophies of nearly every social, political, and cultural thinker at the time. Far from being wary of other cultures, Serbian elites proudly envisioned their country to be a future member among them. These narratives demonstrate two critical points to modern Serbian historical memory: that receptivity to Western ideas, values, and ethics has long been a part of Serbian national development, and that this receptivity was championed by leading national figures and institutions. These developments, argues Petrovich, “flourished because of Serbia’s receptivity to Western European culture and its ability to absorb that culture without being absorbed by it, to assimilate it while yet preserving its own national cultural identity”.²⁶

Belgrade retained its chic character throughout much of the Yugoslav period as well, as the city remained in close communication with the West and its citizens enjoyed some of the widest degrees of social, economic, and intellectual freedoms of any single-party state. Whereas other Eastern European cities had been reduced to Europe’s cultural periphery by decades of Soviet-dominated socialism, Belgrade remained at the cutting edge artistic and literary scenes and produced a generation of Yugoslavs that could travel anywhere throughout Europe and abroad, find work in other countries, and remain altogether connected with the rest of the world. Indeed, one of the prevailing attitudes among Serbs, and most other former Yugoslavs, was that they felt superior to their fellow communist neighbors in nearly all aspects. Being “Yugoslav” meant not backwardness and tribalism, but cosmopolitan, worldly, and “Western”.

It was the strength of this cosmopolitan heritage and a sense of being a part of Europe’s contemporary cultural community that provided much of the impetus for protest among various elements of Belgrade’s youth under the politics of Milošević. Many university students remembered life in the final years of Yugoslavia and supported the social and media freedoms

²⁶ Michael Boro Petrovich, *A History of Modern Serbia, 1804 – 1918*. 2 vols. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1976, p. 577.

they and their parents enjoyed for decades. To them, the politics of Milošević and the utilized historical memories of an ethnocentric and narrow-minded Serbian political culture were not only unfamiliar to them, but altogether backward and irrational. To them, Yugoslav, and by extension Serbian, identity was all about being part of a large dynamic society in Europe. It was reflected in their secular Western-oriented lifestyles that owed its existence both to the relative openness of Tito's Communist system and to the experiences of travelling to, working in, and communicating with other parts of the world that system was linked to. Indeed, throughout the organized student protests against Milošević in the winter of 1996 - 97, a large banner reading "Belgrade is the world" was carried at the head of column of marchers to emphasize Belgrade being an international city and its members conscious of their connection with the rest of the world.²⁷

This spirit of protest continued throughout the 2000s up to the present time against a series of unpopular decisions made by equally unpopular governments. Recently, efforts by Belgrade city officials to revitalize areas for development have produced a number of public responses against what is effectively high-priced gentrification at the expense of local identities and industries. State leaders eager to rebrand their country as business-friendly, cosmopolitan, and Western, have undertaken a number of grand-scale projects meant to modernize their cities at the expense of infrastructure, landscape, and affordability. Among Serbia's most infamous is the so-called Belgrade Waterfront Project that is the centerpiece of current Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's plan to turn Belgrade into a regional hub of business, technology and luxury living. While promoted in international media as a sign that Belgrade is adapting to 21st century trends in globalization, Belgrade still lacks modernized transportation, including a metro. In

²⁷ Andjelka Milić, Ljiljana Čičkarić, and Mihajlo Jojić. "A Generation in Protest." *Protest in Belgrade*. Ed. Mladen Lazić. Budapest: CEU P, 1999. 168 – 189.

addition, the decision to locate the project in an already inhabited part of the city, as opposed to more open areas on its outskirts, means local officials loyal to Vučić have engaged in eminent domain by seizing large areas of both public and private property for the project. This resulted in the demolition of a number of city blocks, including much of the area of the Savamala neighborhood, which had only recently showed signs of a post-industrial neighborhood revitalized into a number of art lofts, beer gardens, and affordable apartments for Serbia's reemerging art scene. Though promoted internationally as the first in a series of major building projects in Belgrade, the seizure of land by state and city officials for the purpose of some future rich neighborhood, is seen by many locals as little more than a land grab where a handful of political insiders get rich.

Beyond the Belgrade Waterfront project, Serbian officials have publically and politically boasted about taking part in a number of transnational infrastructural projects with regional powers. Alongside the growing influence of Russian, Turkish, and Chinese presence in the last region in Europe outside the EU, Vučić has looked quite favorably towards Russian pipelines, Turkish hydroelectric dams and Chinese roads and factories; yet all of these projects have come without much public input and have offered even less public information. At issue are the future stakes in any Serbian firms that often get incorporated into larger firms like Gazprom, as well as potential environmental fallouts from roads or dams. These, along with the Belgrade Waterfront project, have led to a series of protests under the banner “Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd”; a play-on slogan that, at one reading, says “we’re not surrendering/giving up Belgrade” (ne damo Beograd), and another that says “don’t drown Belgrade” (ne davimo Beograd). Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd spurred a number of additional civic movements against the increasingly entrenched Serbian Progressive Party; both in formal organization and throughout social media. One online

movement known as *Odbranimo reke Stare planine* (We Defend the Rivers of Stare Planine) has been instrumental in raising public awareness against state and local political efforts to harm, if not destroy, large tracts of environmental and wildlife preserves throughout the country for industrial building projects. If anything, it has galvanized an otherwise apathetic and disillusioned youth to take action at the local level in engaging in grassroots activism and environmental cleanup.

The preceding examples of Serbia's historic compatibility with Western democratic values challenge many of the prevailing assumptions made in the last twenty years about its political culture being endemically rigid, anti-Western, ethnocentric, and chauvinistic. As stated previously, these examples are far from exhaustive, and offer only a sample of what could be appropriated by state institutions for a "usable past". While I have focused on narratives that are particularly "Serbian" in political cultural character, a series of equally compelling narratives and symbols can be derived from the Yugoslav period, both interwar as well as communist, in which shared values and issues between Serbs and other ethnic groups coincided to form a multiethnic and cooperative society. Additionally, there is plentiful symbolic capital to be drawn from historic individuals like Nikola Tesla, whose scientific contributions are internationally renowned, and contemporary celebrity athletes like Novak Djoković, whose athletic achievements and personal charisma have made him into a veritable one-man brand name in improving Serbia's international image.

Responsibility for "activating" a series of symbols into useable democratic narratives all rest with political, civic, and cultural organizations. The ease of constructing of new democratic narratives out of a series of preexisting symbols however, depends on their use in current

political culture, as well as their potential receptivity in popular memory. Yet while these commemorations affirm the importance of these figures in Serbia's historical memory, a primary mechanism for building comprehensive public awareness of and acceptance for alternative political cultures is through education, both in grade schools and in universities. To date, secondary and high school Serbian history textbooks remain rather bland in coverage, with little change to the presentation of material since the communist period. Nevertheless, the establishment of a widely accepted set of liberal democratic narratives in Serbia can not only ease the transition of the state towards eventual EU membership, but it can inculcate a sense of public awareness that their own traditions, cultures, and historic figures are just as democratic as any other European community. Interpreted in a way that emphasizes Serbia's historic yearning to be a part of that European community while still retaining a national character and pride in its own heritage, a balance between the apparent cultural divide separating "Serbia" from "Europe" may finally be bridged. The key to branding a new image of Serbia is therefore not just in projecting images of tourist-friendly cities within a few catchy slogans, but first and foremost through the "selling" of a new, democratic, vibrant, and inclusive Serbia to its own public. It must also be accompanied by an active pursuit of cultural reinterpretation that emphasizes additional narratives that validate the democratic, inclusive, and cosmopolitan character of the Serbian people.