

The Serbian Progressive Party's Re-articulation of the Kosovo Myth within the Internal Dialogue on Kosovo, 2017-2018

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1 Introduction

The politics of preserving Kosovo as part of Serbia has been the official policy of the Serbian Government ever since the UN administration of Kosovo began in 1999. This is reflected in numerous resolutions, declarations and decisions of the Serbian Government and Parliament, reifying that Kosovo is an integral part of Serbia. Serbia has even changed its Constitution in 2006 to incorporate a preamble on Kosovo as its indivisible part and that all Government resources must be directed towards protecting Serbia's interests in Kosovo and preserving it within Serbia (Republic of Serbia, 2006). However, the importance of Kosovo is not only reflected in the official policy of the state, but can be understood as the place and space where Serbian nationhood and statehood emerged. The symbolic importance of Kosovo for Serbia is echoed by the Kosovo myth (Bieber, 2002; Čolović 2002, 2017; Pavlović & Atanasovski, 2016), which centers on the tales of the Kosovo Battle of 1389 on the Field of the Blackbirds, in which Christian forces lost against the Ottomans who remained in the Balkan Peninsula for five centuries henceforth. In current scholarship, the Kosovo myth is examined as a national myth, a specific readings of history, or as “past that has been condensed into [a] founding story” (Assmann, 1990, p. 10). For instance, some research treats it as a narrative with certain fixed boundaries and reference points in the past (Atanasovski, 2019; Bakić-Hayden, 2004; Čolović, 2017; Pavlović & Atanasovski, 2016), or as a (founding) story with political implications that has its origins in the tales of the Battle (Bakić-Hayden, 2004; Čolović, 2017; Judah, 2000; Pavlović & Atanasovski, 2016), in which Prince Lazar, by deliberately losing against the Ottomans, ensures an eternal place for all Serbs in Heaven. This is where the term “Heavenly people” (*nebeski narod*) comes from, which is often heard in Serbian nationalist rhetoric to designate the special status of Serbs as a chosen people (Anzulović, 1999). Hence, the myth has prominently been discussed in relation to Serbian nationalism (Bazić, 2012; Bieber, 2002; Čolović, 2017), as a “sacralized story of the Battle of Kosovo formed in the 19th century in the framework of nationalist discourses” (Čolović 2017, p. 20). As such, Kosovo as a place is raised to a sacralized position in the Serbian political collective (Ejdus & Subotić, 2014) as an ethnoscape, a landscape “endowed with poetic ethnic meaning through [...] the territorialization of ethnic memories” (Smith, 1999, p. 16). There is also a strand of literature offering a historical perspective on the myth, seeing it as contingent,

sometimes more and sometimes less important for Serbian elites and state politics throughout history (Pavlović & Atanasovski, 2016; Pešić, 2019). Less scholarship has been produced on how the Kosovo myth features in contemporary politics of Serbia (for exceptions, see Ejodus, 2020; Vranić, 2019), since it is often discarded as an “issue of the past”. It is entirely absent from discussions on the subversion of dominant hegemonic orders, characterizing the Kosovo myth as a hegemonic order *par excellence*. My article aims to fill this gap and offer a deconstructive reading in which the Kosovo myth can act as the foundation for counter-hegemonic political projects. Simultaneously, such a reading opens up broader questions of the connection between myth and history dominant in memory studies. According to Aleida Assmann, myth refers to “an idea, an event, a person, a narrative that has acquired a symbolic value and is engraved and transmitted in memory. [...] [I]t is used to distinguish between the object of historical knowledge on the one hand and collectively remembered events on the other” (Assmann, 2008, p. 68). By understanding myths in terms of discourses with constitutive elements, this article offers a gateway into re-reading national myths: not only as bounded narratives of the past, but as re-articulations and performative practices that simultaneously constitute “the past” and can be directed towards “the future”.

In terms of the myth’s mobilizing power, it has been researched in connection to nationalism: how its invocation helped unite the Serbian national collective in moments of crisis throughout history (Pavlović & Atanasovski, 2016) or in contemporary contexts (Ejodus, 2020; Vranić, 2019), most prominently in discussions of Slobodan Milošević’s re-articulation of the myth in the Field of the Blackbirds in 1989, on the 600th anniversary of the Kosovo Battle, which sedimented his nationalist project of the 1990s and mobilized people behind this politics (Bieber 2002). Although this is undeniably the case, the Kosovo myth does not only serve to mobilize a national collective, but can serve as a re-articulation that grounds conceptions of self-identity of other political collectives, such as affiliations with specific party politics or the politics of a leader. I argue that the re-articulation of the Kosovo myth helped anchor the counter-hegemonic politics of the newly elected President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić within the so-called internal dialogue on Kosovo. This dialogue was initiated to rethink the state practice towards the Kosovo issue in the aftermath of Kosovo’s declaration of independence from 2008 and its increasing international recognition as a state. One notable result of these deliberations on Kosovo was the idea of partitioning it along ethnic lines. Northern Kosovo, predominantly Serb-populated, would be incorporated into Serbia, and the rest of Kosovo, predominantly Albanian-populated, would be recognized as Kosovan. This debate resulted in increasing polarization of the political field in Serbia, with affiliations created along who supported Vučić’s vision of the solution, and who opposed it, and not anchored around the signifier of the nation.

Consequently, decoupling the research on the Kosovo myth from issues of the past and studies of nationalism, I advocate for a deconstructive reading of the Kosovo myth. By contrast to the above

scholarship, I aim to question the understanding of the Kosovo myth as a unitary narrative of the past and highlight the relationality and iterability of the myth, focusing on the re-articulation of its elements into other discursive constellations and how they are performed. I do so by relying on a discourse-theoretical ontological framework that focuses on performativity and re-articulation of the myth, especially how it ties to anchoring future, not yet realized political projects or other-than-nation collectives.

The article will be structured as follows: after the introduction, giving a short overview of the field and situating my argument, I will devote a brief section to the theoretical framework, after which I will discuss the methodological premises. The core of the article will be an analytical study of the internal dialogue's discourse, in which the re-articulations of the Kosovo myth will become apparent in connection to the counter-hegemonic project of Aleksandar Vučić. Finally, the conclusion offers a summary of the findings, situates them in a broader context of current politics in Serbia and offers avenues for future research.

2 Theoretical Framework: Re-articulation, Performativity, Citationality

The first step towards elaborating a deconstructive reading of the Kosovo myth is to problematize the notions of performativity and articulation. This article is guided by the assumption that there is no discourse that precedes articulation or performative acts, but that discourses emerge in a constitutive interplay between these two, for the demonstration of which I utilize performativity theory (Butler, 1988; Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993) and discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Performativity refers to the notion that discourses produce the effects that they name: there is no identity/essence of subjects *per se*, but that which we might call identity is constituted through a “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1988, p. 519) that make the abstraction of normative discourses appear natural. Butler's thinking is informed by Foucault's idea that discourses have material effects, producing “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1972, p. 49). This does not only relate to gender, but can also be discussed in connection to nationalism, for instance in Billig's (1995) elaboration on banal nationalism as routinized practices that sustain national identification, or the study of everyday performative practices that constitute the sedimented discourses of nationhood (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). This sedimentation is a fixation of meaning which has the appearance of being “natural”/unchangeable, but is merely a repetition (or re-articulation) of a normative discourse. Here, performativity does not solely refer to performativity as a bodily practice, but as a material one, since the body is also considered material (Carpentier, 2018a).

Since I argue for the constitutiveness of discourse and performative practices (Palonen, 2018b), it follows that meaning is not a given, and it does not follow from an inherent property of the signifier, but is constituted in an interplay between discourse and practice in a contingent manner, always subject to

change and internal reconstitution (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). This way of understanding the relation between discourse and performative practice places the notion of *articulation* at its center. In the words of DeLuca (1999, p. 334), “in a world without foundations, [...] without given meanings, the concept of articulation is a means to understanding the struggle to fix meaning and define reality temporarily”. There are no discourses “out there” waiting to be re-produced, but articulatory practices (re-)produce connections between so-called “elements” (as possible units of meaning in a field of discursivity) and “moments” (as discursive units with a particular meaning) fixed and materialized as part of a discourse, which we can also call “nodal points” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). *Articulation* is therefore a practice central to meaning-making.

The deconstructive notion of iterability – the sign’s capacity to be repeatable in different contexts (Derrida, 1988) – is crucial for understanding how subjects cite/articulate and perform sedimented discourses through the body and the material. Iterability connects to the Derridean notion of *différance* (Derrida, 1982; Derrida, 1988, Hollywood, 2002), as a *re-articulation* of something familiar (i.e. taking as a basis naturalized discourses), into something else, something *different*, whose meaning both *differs* and *defers* from the already familiar. This connects to Butler’s notion of performative agency: “performativity never fully achieves its effect, and so in this sense ‘fails’ all the time; its failure is what necessitates its *re*iterative temporality, and we cannot think iterability without failure” (Butler, 2010, p. 153). If this were not the case, we would forever live in a world that would be impossible to change, always re-subjectivating into and re-producing given discourses. This is, however, not the case, since all discourses are contingent sets of articulations, some of which appear more sedimented, naturalized, or fixed than others (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1990; Butler, 1994; Marchart, 2007).

What does all this have to do with the re-articulation of the Kosovo myth? If the myth is conceptualized as a discourse in post-structuralist terms, that is, as a set of moments that are contingently grounded and always subject to re-articulation and change (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), then the mentioned performativity through repetition and its constitutive failure is key to offering a deconstructive reading. Repetition of a discourse creates a dissonance between the “originary” statement and what is repeated (which we call *citationality*), carrying traces of the original message into the practice of repetition (Derrida, 1988). Since there are no discourses that precede articulation, the very act of articulation establishes the Kosovo myth anew each time it is brought about, leaving room for constitutive gaps of possibility for performatively dis-articulating and re-articulating it in a new light. Generally speaking, even the “Kosovo myth” is a re-articulation of something prior, namely the Battle of Kosovo gets embedded into the nationalizing political projects of the Serbian elites and state throughout history (Pavlović, 2009; Pavlović & Atanasovski, 2016). It should be emphasized that this article does not utilize deconstruction as a method, but merely relies on a deconstructive *reading* of the Kosovo myth as an entry point into the

discussion on originality and repetition. Accordingly, the myth is never a stable discourse that has its reference points in the past, but its constitutive elements can be re-articulated into other discursive constellations, such as political projects that ground a community in the present or the future. One of those projects is the mentioned internal dialogue on Kosovo initiated in Serbia in mid-2017 that constituted the project of partitioning Northern Kosovo.

3 Methodological Framework

The methodological framework of this study is rooted in discourse theory that draws from post-structuralist ideas – known as the Essex school approach (Glynos et al., 2009; Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). This approach sees all social practices as discursive and defines discourse both in terms of a structure and in terms of a practice (Howarth, 2015; Laclau & Mouffe, 1990). In the previous section, I have already elaborated on the notion of articulation, which is also a central methodological category. Articulatory practices (re-)produce connections between elements of discourse as possible units of meaning in an infinite field of discursivity, and moments of discourse as units that have a particular meaning in relation to other such articulated moments. Any form of anchoring a discourse around a specific moment is considered a nodal point (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) and is an analytical category that reveals temporary fixations of contingent discourses. Such momentary fixations of meaning open up a discussion on performativity of discourses through citationality, for instance in speeches performed at certain politically laden sites that establish a relation of contiguity with previous such moments. Such a performative analysis is inspired by Palonen's (2018a, p. 396) account of moments as categories that “enable us to grasp the significant processes of identification and disidentification as well as challenges to and establishment of new structures of meaning.” New structures of meaning or challenges to existing ones emerge through *political* practices: those interventions that aim to institute, or stabilize certain meanings (Laclau, 1994), while bearing in mind that an absolutely fixed meaning is not possible, only a partial one.

Another category that is central to this study is the empty signifier. Discourse theory presupposes that the social is a lacking structure (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008): any social discourse lacks a transcendental foundation, a center of fixity, which in turn enables an infinite play of articulations and meanings to co-exist and compete for hegemony, aiming to become sedimented and offer, at least contingently, a center of fixity around nodal points (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Discourse theory calls this the structural undecidability of the social. As Howarth (2015, p. 11) points out, “[t]he struggle for hegemony is [...] conceived in terms of the production of ‘empty signifiers’, which function to represent the ‘absent fullness’ of an ontologically lacking social order.” In Laclau's (1995, p. 89) words, in a situation of “generalized social disorder [...] ‘order’ becomes the name of an absent fullness, and if that fullness is

constitutively unachievable it cannot have any [...] form of self-representation.” Concretely, the “fullness is present [...] as that which is absent and needs as a result to be represented in some way” (p. 89), which is why Laclau calls the empty signifier a positive impossibility of signification. As only *particular* contents (signifiers) under certain circumstances can represent this absence, a particularity comes to represent an impossible universality implied by an equivalential chain of signification. The relation “by which a certain particular content overflows its own particularity and becomes the incarnation of the absent fullness of society” (p. 89), of a universality unifying the chain of signification into an equivalential order, is what Laclau calls hegemony, or a hegemonic relation. Thus, the production of empty signifiers is necessary for instituting (counter-)hegemonic orders. The ‘presence of an absence’ that the empty signifier embodies is what enables identification of subjects with it. Empty signifiers thus succeed to hold together an entire chain of signifiers that embody diverse demands, by extending the equivalential logic of the chain of signification (Laclau, 1996) and striving to represent a universality through their particularity. Empty signifiers incarnate a community’s or a project’s absent fullness and in populist discourses where an “assemblage of heterogeneous elements [is] kept equivalentially together only by a name”, this equivalential logic can lead to “singularity, and singularity to identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader” (Laclau 2005, p. 100). The name or the body of the leader can become an empty signifier, something which I will address in the analysis in which Vučić incarnates a solution to the Kosovo-Serbia dispute, whatever particular content it might take on.

Lastly, discourse theory presupposes that affect is an inalienable dimension of discourse, that is, it understands affective investment as the “force” of discourse, while practices of signification can be considered as the form of discourse (Laclau, 2005, p. 101), be it signification through language or the material (Carpentier, 2018a). As mentioned, the Kosovo discourse has a strong mobilizing potential and is invested with affective meanings. What can be observed in the internal dialogue is an attempt at *dis-articulating* Serbian politics towards Kosovo from the affects of love and pride that constitute it. To this end, new lines of antagonism are drawn, i.e. articulating the other as an enemy, as somebody who “prevents me from being totally myself” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 122). The analysis will also be devoted to identifying the shifting frontiers of antagonism characterized by a radical difference between the in- and out-group, and the homogenization of the self (Carpentier, 2018b).

Data collection: The analysis is based on statements and speeches of SNS officials, most prominently Aleksandar Vučić, and other figures such as the Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, and Director of the Serbian Office for Kosovo and Metohija, Marko Đurić. It focuses on the question of how the SNS, acting within the Government, shaped the public debate to include discussions of partition. The data was gathered from the news outlet *Danas* and the daily news programme *Dnevnik 2* aired on the public broadcaster RTS in the timespan between May 2017 when Vučić became president, and September 2018 when the

internal dialogue officially ended. The corpus consists of 2150 articles on Kosovo from *Danas*, and 307 *Dnevnik 2* shows. I have utilized Atlas.ti to code my corpus for subjects, nodal points and political practices. Used only as contextual data, I also conducted an interview with Marko Đurić in November 2017 and with Milovan Drecun, the Head of the Parliamentary Committee on Kosovo and Metohija, in June 2018, both members of the SNS.

4 The Internal Dialogue on Kosovo

The internal dialogue was a process that was initiated immediately after Aleksandar Vučić came to office as President of Serbia on 31 May 2017. Only two days later, he announced that during his presidency, he wanted to “open up a social dialogue about the Constitution, our attitude towards Kosovo and Metohija and the region” (RTS, 2017d). Consequently, on 24 July 2017, Vučić published an authored text in the daily newspaper *Blic*, in which he called on different segments of Serbian society to come together and debate on finding a potential solution to the Kosovo issue. In the ensuing months, a working group was formed in the Serbian Government to assist the dialogue with the academia, economic and political experts, health, education and sports institutions/organizations, civil society etc. (Radna grupa, 2017). Marko Đurić led the group, explaining that the internal dialogue was initiated because of the non-implementation of the Brussels agreement and as a response to all layers of the Kosovo Albanian society dealing with the statehood question as a priority (personal correspondence, November 2017). Hence, the internal dialogue should not be understood as comprising of only those debates that occurred during the official round tables, but as a larger debate that was carried out in the public media with the effort to discuss a potential solution for Kosovo. This dialogue intersects with the official Belgrade-Pristina dialogue mediated by the EU, with the EU even acknowledging and welcoming it in their reports (EU Stabilisation and Association Council, 2017). Any solution that might come about within the Brussels dialogue also needs to be broadly accepted by the Serbian public, specifically because the Kosovo question is coupled with the Serbian Constitution that can only change through a referendum. This is why the internal dialogue and the Brussels dialogue discourse cannot fully be separated.

Since the dialogue was primarily carried out by the SNS-led regime in Serbia, I will briefly introduce the party’s background. Scholarship puts many labels on the SNS, from center-right (Spasojević, 2019), center-right and populist (Vranić, 2019), right-wing and pro-EU (Dragojlov, 2018) to moderate (Castaldo, 2020). More recently, research has pointed out the authoritarian tendencies of the SNS-led regime in Serbia reflected in the shrinking of media freedom, non-fair elections etc. (Bieber, 2018, 2020; Castaldo, 2020). Even though the SNS describes itself as “a political organization with a clear democratic orientation” (SNS, 2011), it also has to be viewed in light of its genesis story, as a party that was formed through a schism in the extreme right Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska Radikalna Stranka* – SRS) in 2008

(Dragojlov, 2018), when Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić decided to form a more moderate pro-EU party called Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka* – SNS). It won the majority of votes in the 2012 parliamentary election, and secured the presidency under Nikolić (Stojić, 2013). In the 2014 election, Vučić secured the Premiership, won the Presidency in 2017 and has been in power ever since, with the SNS winning an absolute majority in the most recent 2020 election, which the opposition largely boycotted, naming no conditions for free and fair elections as the reason.

Primarily since 2017 when Vučić won the presidency the opposition in Serbia has become increasingly marginalized, media freedoms limited, and the conditions for free and fair elections worsened due to the ruling SNS's exploitation of state resources (Castaldo, 2020). Strong leader politics is cultivated in Vučić's Serbia (Lavrić & Bieber, 2021) and the image of Vučić as a strongman is often compared to Orban's image in Hungary (Enyedi, 2020). Furthermore, what constitutes Vučić's subjectivity as a strong leader is his affiliation with the former nationalist regime of Milošević (holding the prominent position of Minister of Information between 1998 and 2000) as well as his former ties to radical right-wing politics in Serbia, all amalgamated with his calls for economic stability and progress towards the EU. As mentioned earlier, I argue that the debate initiated within the internal dialogue on Kosovo has further helped polarize the political field in Serbia along the lines of supporting Vučić's politics or opposing it. The political community was built around a leader, not around a nation or a people as alternative nodal points. Even though national affiliation is still important, for instance in delineating Serbs from Albanians, the nodal point of the discourse is Vučić himself and his politics, since even some members of the Serb community were outcast as "the others" and as helpers of Albanians if they did not support Vučić's solutions. Given the prevalence of Vučić as an articulatory subject in the material, most attention will be devoted to him, as well as some of his supporters from SNS, such as Marko Đurić and Ana Brnabić.

4.1 Connection between the Kosovo Myth and the Idea of Partitioning Northern Kosovo

Before diving into the discourse analysis, it is necessary to map out the elements of the Kosovo myth and how they get re-articulated into other discursive constellations (such as the partition discourse) through citationality. I will turn to existing literature here. Bieber (2002) offers an insightful account of the myth's relation to Serbian nationalism. The first dimension of this relation is the myth's incorporation into the "commemorative calendar of the nation" (p. 96) by remembering the Kosovo Battle of 1389 once a year on 28 June, St Vitus Day (*Vidovdan*); the second is the symbolic and physical claim to Kosovo as a territory; and the third is the myth's establishment of a "historical continuity between the contemporary Serbian nation and the 'Serbs' of the Middle Ages" (p. 96). Čolović (2017) discusses the Kosovo myth as a religiously inspired narrative that political figures have used throughout modern Serbian history, focusing on the Orthodox cultural heritage in today's Kosovo, and territoriality. Similarly,

Ejdus & Subotić (2014) talk about Kosovo as a sacralized territory, and Ejdus (2020, p. 52) about Kosovo as both Serbia's perceived cradle and its tomb, a place where Serbia and a sense of Serbdom emerged and a place that is constituted as eternally Serbian because of the victims that lie buried there. It is obvious that *territoriality* plays a significant role in articulations of the myth, although it might not be constitutive of the legend of the Kosovo Battle per se, which centers on Serb victimhood and religiosity and the idea of the Serbs as a heavenly people (Anzulović, 1999; Čolović, 2002). This legend gets entangled with Serbian nationalism and a distinct claim to the territory of Kosovo is formed in the process (Bieber, 2002). I argue additionally that the Kosovo myth has turned into a social imaginary in Serbia, that is, a sedimented horizon that “structures a field of intelligibility” (Laclau, 1990, p. 64) of what can be said, felt, and otherwise practiced in relation to Kosovo. There is a consensus in current scholarship on the importance of Kosovo for Serbian conceptions of self-identity (Bieber, 2002; Čolović, 2002, 2017; Vujačić, 2015). It is almost unimaginable to articulate Kosovo as *not* Serbian or Serbia's, with actors from the entire political spectrum subscribing to this demand (Spasojević, 2016; Vranić, 2019), which also translates into Serbian foreign policy as efforts to “fight” for preserving it (Ejdus, 2014). **The Kosovo social imaginary** structures the claim to Kosovo being Serbian and its nodal points are: the notion of the territory of Kosovo being Serbian (and Serbia's); a historic right to that territory; the Serbian people who live, have lived and have died there, constituting the territory as eternally Serbian, even if not under sovereign control of Serbia; and the so-called Kosovo pledge, which Prince Lazar's army took before the Kosovo Battle to give their lives defending Kosovo. This pledge is often re-articulated in current political practice as a vow to never give up Kosovo, fight for it with any means necessary united as a political/national collective. These nodal points are affectively invested with *love* for Kosovo as a sacred place and symbolic space, and *pride* of the pledge to never give it up. Thus, Kosovo is invested with strong affective meanings and the Kosovo social imaginary relies heavily on Serbia's (affective) claim to the place.

The claim to territory is the essential element that, through citationality and re-articulation, connects the Kosovo myth, the Kosovo social imaginary to the recently introduced idea of partitioning Kosovo along ethnic lines. The idea of partition might seem counterintuitive to the territorial claim, since, after all, if Kosovo is partitioned, the largest portion of the territory would belong to Kosovo Albanians. However, the claim is still relevant, precisely because Serbia does not seek to abandon its territorial claim altogether, but merely condense it in a portion of territory where it can exert governance – namely, Northern Kosovo, which becomes the locus of political contestation initiated by the internal dialogue. By politicizing Northern over central and Southern Kosovo (where the site of the Kosovo Battle and the majority of the Serbian cultural/religious heritage is located), the partition discourse re-articulates the myth in a new light, transposing it to Northern Kosovo.

4.2 Introducing the Idea of Partition

The idea of partitioning Kosovo along ethnic lines was not new, but rather a political re-activation of an old idea. Even the late Prime Minister of Serbia Zoran Đinđić advocated partition in the early 2000s, although it was not a favorable option then (Danas, 2018a; RTS, 2017e). This was also a possibility in the 1990s, with the former President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia Dobrica Ćosić advocating it (which he later elaborated on in his books *Kosovo* from 2004 and *Kosovo 1966-2013* from 2013). Even in 2013, during the height of negotiations in the Brussels dialogue before the Brussels agreement was reached, then Prime Minister Ivica Dačić claimed that “[the EU/international community] does not let me talk about partition or delineation anymore, even though I am convinced that this is the only possible solution” (RTS, 2013). Vučić officially articulated the idea of “*razgraničenje*” (which can be translated as partition, delineation or re-bordering) on 9 August 2018, after the official roundtables of the internal dialogue ended (Danas, 2018f). As he announced on 26 July 2017, just a few days after the dialogue began, he had his own suggestion and would announce it once he had heard all proposals from the public (Valtner, 2017), which might indicate that the dialogue was envisioned as a platform to justify an already elaborated idea of partition.

As my discourse analysis has revealed, the internal dialogue acts as a destabilizing moment aiming to politicize previously sedimented meanings, that is “de-mythologize” and “de-emotionalize/rationalize” Serbian politics towards Kosovo. The de-mythologization and rationalization was tied to a new vision of Serbia’s future, a future in which Serbia is imagined as economically prosperous and part of the EU, for the realization of which the “mythological” and “emotional” approach to Kosovo posed an obstacle. Hence, an attempt was made to substitute the Kosovo social imaginary with the imaginary of EU integration. This new social imaginary is incarnated in the empty signifier of a “compromise” solution to the Kosovo issue – an absent solution that would ensure that both Serbia and Kosovo are equally satisfied and dissatisfied, that would lift all obstacles in Serbia’s path towards the EU and ensure an economically prosperous future. Within this dialogue, various nodal points articulated by the SNS take the place of representing the compromise, but most importantly this is “*razgraničenje*”, as mentioned above. “*Razgraničenje*” transposes Serbia’s claim to Kosovo on the one hand from a symbolic into a physical realm – from claiming the symbolic space of Kosovo as Serbian to claiming the physical place of Northern Kosovo as Serbian – and on the other from a historical moment into a future one, with increasing articulations of substituting “our past” with “our future”. The “mythological” approach to Kosovo is part of the conflict-ridden past, whereas EU membership is part of the prosperous future. As the dialogue progressed in 2018, Vučić himself came to embody the solution, his body acting as an empty signifier onto which various demands could be inscribed. As Drecun also emphasized, with Vučić Serbia has the unique historical opportunity to unify around the idea of a compromise solution and Vučić, with

his broad public support, has the means to implement such a solution (personal correspondence, June 2018).

4.3 De-mythologizing, De-emotionalizing and Economizing the Kosovo Issue

Immediately upon taking office, Vučić called for a “social dialogue about the Constitution, our attitude towards Kosovo and Metohija and the region” and that Serbia should renounce its “mythical approach” to Kosovo (RTS, 2017d):

Our attitude should be harmonized with the problems of daily life, with issues our people from Kosovo and Metohija face, with what we consider to be factual interests of our state. But [...] let us remember what the role of the Albanians is. Let us put things into a rational perspective, on a national level.

A crucial aspect of the internal dialogue’s initiation was the intended constitutional change, specifically relating to its preamble on Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia. In connection to this, Vučić called for wider societal talks with the aim to reach an “agreement” that would testify to “our effort to do something for our country”: “if it fails, then it means that we have once again prioritized the country of our forefathers, instead of the country of our children” (RTS, 2017d). The juxtaposition between past and future, in which the Kosovo myth is articulated as part of the past, whereas renouncing it is articulated as part of the future, is a re-occurring theme in Vučić’s statements. During the celebration of St Vitus Day (*Vidovdan*) that has great symbolic significance for the re-articulation of the Kosovo myth in political discourse, Vučić claimed that Vidovdan should not remain a myth, but become “our clear history which will give us the material from which we can build up a better future” (RTS, 2017c). By distinguishing between “myth” and “history”, clearly prioritizing history over myth, Vučić attempts to entirely commit the reading of Vidovdan to a “factual, historic” domain, and take it as a historic lesson that can help Serbia be guided towards its future. Additionally, Vučić stated that he believes “even Prince Lazar would want us to fight for an earthly Serbia and not a heavenly one”, an earthly Serbia that is characterized by “labor, the number of meters we build in highways and railroads both in Serbia and Kosovo, new jobs, and especially new people we give birth to” (RTS, 2017c). This juxtaposition of “myth” on the one hand, and “reality” on the other, is part of the logic of “de-mythologizing” Serbian politics towards Kosovo. It is also about a transposition from the symbolic into a physical realm (that structures the new claim to Kosovo), in which the earthly is equated with materiality and economic progress (highways, roads, jobs, a larger national collective), and the heavenly with “overcome” ideas that should remain in the past.

A month after Vidovdan, Vučić published an open letter to the Serbian public in the daily newspaper *Blic* (Vučić, 2017), which can be understood as a performative moment of initiating the internal dialogue. In it, Vučić calls all citizens of Serbia to reconsider their attitudes towards Kosovo:

It is time for us as a nation to stop putting our heads in the sand, and try to be realistic, not to allow ourselves to lose, or hand over to somebody what we already have, but also not to wait to regain something that we have already lost long ago. [...] We Serbs did not want to be responsible enough to understand the strength and desires of Albanian [national interests]. [...] The solution does not lie in our myths and conflicts, nor does it lie in denying and negating all our national and state interests.

Temporally, Vučić is situating “our myths” and “conflicts” into the realm of the past, whereas a possible solution would be part of a future in which Serbia at least maintains what it “already has” in Kosovo. Although Northern Kosovo is not explicitly mentioned, it is considered the only area where Serbia has a degree of governance through its institutional framework still in place. Given that Northern Kosovo is directly adjacent to the Serbian border/boundary and has a history of resisting integration into the Kosovo state framework, it can be argued that he is referring to this area, specifically because “what we already have” and “what we have lost long ago” are brought in connection to Serbian and Albanian national and state interests. He might also be referring to the Serbian medieval cultural heritage in Kosovo, but as the introduction of the idea of partition reveals, Northern Kosovo becomes the locus of contestation as of 2018, articulated by Vučić as important in “territorial” and “strategic” terms, in terms of the “Serb population that lives there” and its energy infrastructure and natural wealth (RTS, 2018c).

Vučić is also calling for a “realistic” approach to solving the Kosovo question, which is part of the previously named attempt to “rationalize” Serbian politics towards Kosovo. One of his main tasks as new head of state is to confront the Serbian nation with the inconvenient truth which they have chosen to ignore (by “burying their heads in the sand”): that Albanians have their own legitimate national and state interests, which they have expressed through declaring independence from Serbia. This “truth” cannot be ignored by simply relying on “myths” or the conflict-ridden past: Vučić explicitly acknowledges the contradiction inherent in Kosovo’s declaration of independence and Serbia’s claim to Kosovo as Serbian, something that Serbia needs to overcome if it wants to progress towards the future. In acknowledging this, Vučić constitutes himself as a truth-teller, a leader who is not afraid to make unpopular choices and who realistically and rationally seeks solutions. The internal dialogue has spurred a process of public-opinion-making in terms of the Serbian political collective’s stand towards dealing with Kosovo. To a survey claiming that 80 percent of people would prefer a “frozen conflict” in Kosovo instead of a solution, Vučić (RTS, 2018h) replied: “I will do everything I can, without regard for my political career, to change the minds of the 80 percent of people who think that frozen conflict is the best solution. [...] I will certainly not make any decisions against our people, but I will try to convince the majority [...] that peace [and stability are] more important to us than anything else.” Similarly, the Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić claimed in an authored piece for BIZ Life magazine that her “wish is that

the Serbian society accepts a different reality and changed circumstances, and turns towards the future, while leaving the past and the myths of the 1990s in the previous century” (RTS, 2017b).

On the one hand, history and its connection to the “mythologized” view of Kosovo is problematized, while on the other, integral elements of the Kosovo myth, such as the sanctity of the territory of Kosovo, are re-articulated. The former is evident in Vučić’s explicit distinction between the myth-laden tales of Kosovo and the “factual” historical record, asking (RTS, 2018g): “We Serbs tell ourselves that for 600 years now, we have kept the entire Kosovo and Metohija under our control, but my question is: how come our consul was murdered in 1890 [...]? Were they consuls in their own country, in their own territory?” Vučić is referring to the Consulate of the Kingdom of Serbia in Pristina formed 1889, while the Kosovo Vilayet was under Ottoman rule, which was later integrated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes following the First and Second Balkan Wars and WWI. Vučić establishes a historical equivalence between the Serbian and Kosovar states now and these territories in the wake of the 20th century. By doing so, he questions the assumption that Kosovo has always been Serbian by emphasizing “factual” historical record of consuls representing Serbia in what was essentially a different state/empire.

Problematizing the sanctity of Kosovo as part of the mythical narrative is evident in Vučić’s increasing conflict with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) as the main subject behind constituting Kosovo as a holy land. The conflict is not with the entire Church, but only those representatives who oppose Vučić’s possible “compromise”. When the Church issued a declaration opposing a possible partition, Vučić (RTS, 2018i) said: “Everyone talks about the holy land, but no one wants to live in the holy land. I am sure they [the Church] have a better vision of Serbia’s future than I do. The people will certainly speak their word, and everyone will have their own cross to bear, as our Church would say – some of us today and some in the future.” It is evident that the symbolic ownership of entire Kosovo loses its appeal in Vučić’s attempt to institute his counter-hegemonic project of partition. Instead, as part of the de-mythologization effort, the sanctity of the land (heavenly Serbia) is juxtaposed with the reality of life (earthly Serbia). If Serbia is fighting for a piece of land that no Serb wants to live in, then how justified is that fight for the future of Serbia?

In terms of de-emotionalizing/rationalizing Serbia’s approach towards Kosovo, many subjects in the internal dialogue articulate Kosovo as being an “emotional” issue in Serbia, frequently juxtaposing it with a “rational” or “realistic” approach that is needed instead. This was the case with the fourth internal dialogue roundtable gathering prominent academics, former diplomats, political analysts, where some put into question whether emotions should prevail when trying to find a durable solution for Kosovo (RTS, 2017a). By contrast, the SOC has perhaps most prominently articulated Kosovo as an emotional issue of the entire Serbian nation that the state needed to respect and uphold. For instance, Vladika Porfirije

(RTS, 2018f) said that the question of Kosovo and Metohija was so important and painful, that we cannot allow it to be misused for individual or political party interests, calling Kosovo the “most costly [precious] Serbian word”, a saying that has resonated many times in Serbian public discourse. Because Kosovo is constituted as the most precious issue for Serbs, losing or giving it up would cause great pain to the entire nation.

At the level of sedimented affects that constitute the Kosovo social imaginary, what the counter-hegemonic project of “*razgranicenje*” aims to do is *dis-articulate* the meaning of Kosovo in Serbia from these affects in the attempt to institute an alternative vision of Serbia’s future that is marked by economic progress and EU membership. For instance, Vučić is “rationalizing” the Kosovo question in Serbia as something that needs to be looked at realistically, rationally, detached from emotions. Vučić expressed his concern “that the decisions we make [regarding Kosovo] are too emotional instead of rational and that we are prouder of our past instead of thinking of our future” (Danas, 2018e). In order for Serbia to progress into a European future, *fear* about a possible solution needs to be concurred. In April 2018, Vučić (RTS, 2018d) stated that “we have to act responsibly and not simply say ‘we will not accept anything [on the table]’. No, we have to participate in the negotiations and we have to fight and try to find a solution. And we need not fear a solution.”

In seeking to formulate a compromise, Vučić always maintained that the people would decide in a referendum, constituting the solution as *of* and *for* the collective. Vučić (RTS, 2018e) stated that “if we ever have a solution, then we will call for a referendum. [...] Will my party accept this offer? Hardly. Will the public in Serbia accept it as well? Responsible people will! How many responsible people? Well, emotions have always prevailed with us instead of responsibility and a serious attitude [*ozbiljnost*].” De-emotionalizing the Kosovo issue also serves the purpose of drawing frontiers between those who support Vučić’s suggestions, whatever they may be, and those who do not: the supporters are articulated as rational and responsible and are part of the political “us”, while those who are emotional and irresponsible are part of the political “them”. A rational approach to Kosovo is something good for the future of Serbia, while an emotional approach is the opposite.

The economization of the Kosovo question is a steppingstone towards realizing Vučić’s counter-hegemonic project. By articulating Kosovo as an obstacle towards economic prosperity, the current political practice becomes unsustainable. Vučić explicitly articulates reaching a compromise and the betterment of economy as interdependent issues (RTS, 2018b):

I am sure that, if we reached some kind of a compromise with the Albanians, one which we would be equally satisfied with, or equally dissatisfied with, our trade exchange with Germany would reach seven or eight billion. [...] We would lower unemployment by five percent in a year, year and a

half. That means our salaries would be much higher. [...] They would reach 500 EUR by the beginning of next year without any problems.

Part of this vision of a better future is substituting “old” narratives around Kosovo with economic prosperity, primarily as part of Serbia’s EU integration process within which it could reach a compromise with the Albanians.

4.4 Re-articulating Political Frontiers within the Partition Project

What forms the bedrock of the project’s logic of articulation is the re-drawing of political frontiers between them and us: everyone who supports Vučić’s vision is constituted as “us”, and everyone who opposes it as “them”. A moment that further antagonized Serbs and Albanians in the dialogue was the arrest of Marko Đurić in late March 2018, when he entered Kosovo illegally in order to participate in a roundtable of the internal dialogue in North Mitrovica, emphasizing the brutality of his arrest and savagery of the Albanians (Simić, 2018). He has also frequently called for Serb unity in seeking a compromise (RTS, 2018a), and has not shied away from politicizing Northern Kosovo, for instance supporting the unilateral formation of the Community of Serb Municipalities in Northern Kosovo after his arrest (Fonet, 2018). Once the question of partitioning the North gained traction in the dialogue at the end of July and beginning of August 2018, an increasing number of Kosovo Serbs started to voice their concern about this idea. Apart from the SOC, a number of North Kosovo NGOs (together with NGOs from Serbia) have compiled a letter sent to Federica Mogherini, the EU mediator in the Brussels dialogue, to rethink the EU’s support of re-drawing Kosovo’s borders. They warned about the “dangerous principle of ethnic ownership of territory” which could create a chain reaction in the region and an exodus of people from the “wrong ethnicity” into the newly created ethnically claimed territories (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2018). Additionally, between 3 and 4 August 2018, various Serbian and Kosovan actors increasingly warned about the possibility of incidents in Northern Kosovo that would allow for partitioning it (Tasić, 2018). For instance, the SOC warned about an “incident, either in the form of the proclamation of the alleged autonomy of the North or the takeover of Lake Gazivode by the Kosovo police” which would “directly serve to [...] cement the territorial division and permanently endanger the civilian population” (Danas, 2018d). The opposition in Serbia also issued several statements about the necessity to prevent heightened tensions between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo (Danas, 2018b). To all of this, Vučić’s has responded with the statement that “there is no difference” between “those who are in favor of an independent Kosovo as a whole, and those who think that we should still propagate tales from the time of Dušan’s Tsardom” (RTS, 2018j), a time when Kosovo was part of Serbian lands. By equating anyone who might be opposing Vučić’s proposal for a compromise (opposition parties, NGOs, members of the international community, Albanians etc.), with anyone who supports Kosovo as an independent state in its current borders, Vučić articulates a political “us” around himself as a leader and

the project he constitutes. In this manner, Vučić acts as an empty signifier able to unify and accommodate a range of demands: a solution for the Kosovo question, better future for Serbia and its offspring, economic prosperity, better international relations with great powers etc. Illustrative of this is the promise of the North Kosovo leaders that they would support any solution offered by Vučić. Goran Rakić, the mayor of North Mitrovica, claimed: “we do not know what the compromise solution is, but we conveyed a message to President Aleksandar Vučić that he has our absolute support” (Danas, 2018c). The trust lies not with the Serbian Government, but with Vučić as a leader. Even though no concrete solution is articulated (as mentioned, *razgraničenje* can mean a variety of things), the range of possible nodal points that could incarnate a concrete solution is bound by one commonality: Vučić as a leader who will find the solution. The demand that Vučić places on its political subjects is not to trust in a concrete plan, but to trust in him and his ability to solve the issue.

I argue that the founding moment of Vučić’s new vision of Serbia’s future, (re-)constituting him as the empty signifier, is his speech in North Mitrovica on 9 September 2018, which the media called “Vučić’s Gazimestan”. Vučić has emphasized throughout the internal dialogue the importance of Northern Kosovo, especially the “strategic importance of this territory”, with its many infrastructurally significant sites, natural wealth, and the majority Serb population (RTS, 2018c). This speech illustrates the main elements of his counter-hegemonic project: the de-mythologization, de-emotionalization/rationalization and economization of the Kosovo question. Vučić claimed: “myths, dreams and premonitions are not my job, nor is my job a lunatic vision of Kosovo without Albanians, or even worse – without Serbs. Reality is my job” (Predsednik Republike Srbije, 2018), which re-constituted him and his vision as rational, realistic and responsible, contrary to previous political practice anchored by myths, dreams and premonitions. His vision might even be able to transform what he has articulated as a “historic” conflict between Serbs and Albanians into a utopian vision in which Serbs and Albanians respect each other in peace: “I want ideas for a better future, how to protect our own country, our institutions, how to protect peace and build bridges of trust between us and the Albanians, so that we can [...] – after centuries of wars and conflicts – [have] centuries of decent, rational and, why not, even friendly relations with the Albanians.”

All that is currently unattainable – peace and friendship with Albanians – will be reached once a compromise solution is realized. In order to be able to build bridges of trust, Serbia needs to get “big” again, but not in the sense of Greater Serbia dominant during the 1990s:

Today, without spilling a drop of blood, we are getting bigger, because today, after many years, Serbia is working hard, not fighting with anyone, because it invests in life, and does not throw resources around – because our children are growing up, we are not burying them like we did after

the bombing [of 1999], because we are relying on knowledge, work, not on guns. [...] My intention is for Serbia to be big, but not to conquer the Balkans and the world, but to conquer the future.

By re-appropriating the common conception of Greater Serbia that characterized Milošević's rule and its Kosovo politics, resulting in war and Kosovo's declaration of independence, Vučić re-articulates his own Kosovo politics as a break with previous practices. Instead of pursuing the physical ownership of entire Kosovo, which he calls mythical and unrealistic, Vučić is pursuing physical ownership of Northern Kosovo as its most important part, due to reasons explained earlier. Through his speech in North Mitrovica and his visit to Northern Kosovo in September 2018, Northern Kosovo is *performed* as the most important part for Serbia, one that comes to incarnate Serbia's entire claim. In this performative moment, the hegemonic claim is once again transposed from a symbolic into a physical and from a historic into a future realm when certain things can be achieved, such as a compromise.

5. Conclusion

The article has offered a deconstructive reading of the Kosovo myth and mapped out how its constitutive elements, such as Serbia's claim to territory, get re-articulated by the SNS to form a counter-hegemonic project of partitioning Kosovo that came about in the internal dialogue initiated in 2017. The partition project can be seen as a set of political practices that aimed to destabilize the notion of Kosovo being Serbia and dis-articulate the Kosovo social imaginary from the sedimented affects of love and pride that constitute it. The most important subject behind this re-articulation was Aleksandar Vučić who aimed to de-mythologize, de-emotionalize/rationalize and economize Serbia's approach to Kosovo. This research shows that the Kosovo myth cannot be simply viewed as an issue of the past, or a fixed narrative, but must be understood as a discourse whose elements can even constitute a counter-hegemonic project such as partition. Kosovo is still very important for Serbian politics and still has a big mobilizing potential, although the claim to Southern and central Kosovo is re-articulated into Northern Kosovo. By defining national myths through the lens of discourse theory, this article opens up a discussion on (mis-)uses of the past. The "past" does not simply exist out there waiting to be used, but is re-constituted with each re-articulation, as the Kosovo myth has shown. This blurs the boundaries between distinguishing history as factual and myth as fictional retellings of factual events and prompts us to think of the representational and constitutive nature of discourse, which can have implication for re-reading other national myths beyond this study.

On a case-study level, even though the idea of partition was never implemented and the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue is still ongoing (although losing its momentum since late 2018), the analysis has shown that Kosovo has played a big role in helping Vučić and the SNS-regime consolidate their power. The Kosovo issue turns into a defining subject of contestation for the SNS leadership during their rule. Kosovo still has a big mobilizing potential in Serbia that is generated (and performed) at different defining moments

– it is not a constant. As a social imaginary, it remains uncontested until it is destabilized or questioned by certain practices. This is evident in the most recent violent protests of July 2020 before the Serbian Parliament, in which some protestors from the opposition sang the famous song “Oh Kosovo, Kosovo!” (*Oj Kosovo, Kosovo!*) and shouted “Arrest Vučić!” and “Traitor!” as a sign of Vučić “handing over” Kosovo against the people’s will (Danas, 2020). Even though the protests were not directly aimed at Vučić’s politics towards Kosovo, but came about as a reaction to the announced coronavirus lockdown measures and increasingly authoritarian governance, Kosovo was articulated in a chain of equivalence as a demand against defining issues of Vučić’s rule. The opposition in Serbia is currently fragmented to the point where the only commonality they share is being against Vučić, similar to the opposition movement against Milošević in the 1990s. This insight simultaneously constitutes another avenue for future research, namely how the diverse aspects of Vučić’s governance and Vučić himself as an empty signifier succeeded to simultaneously fragment and unify the political landscape in Serbia.

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