

## Book Review: Breakup of Yugoslavia: How One State Became Seven Countries

Bliznakovski, Jovan

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bliznakovski, J. (2015). Book Review: Breakup of Yugoslavia: How One State Became Seven Countries. [Review of the book *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-Building in South Eastern Europe*, ed. by P. Kolstø]. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 7(1), 94-97. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-438722>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Book Review:

## Breakup of Yugoslavia: How One State Became Seven Countries

Jovan Bliznakovski\*

*Strategies of Symbolic Nation-Building in South Eastern Europe* edited by Pål Kolstø, 2014, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate.

The 'reshuffling' of the Balkan map that took place in the 1990s and the subsequent developments have captured popular and scholarly attention worldwide for more than two decades now. While initial interest focused on the violent conflicts that led to the dissolution of the socialist Yugoslav federation, the focus then moved on to issues of state-building and strengthening of democracy (including relations of various ethnic groups within states), and then shifted yet again to the prospect of EU integration.

The book *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-Building in South Eastern Europe*<sup>1</sup>, edited by Pål Kolstø, is useful reading for anyone interested in the region and especially for scholars studying nation-building in the post-1991 context. The volume adopts the perspectives of two influential schools of thought on nationalism and nation-building – the 'ethno-symbolic' approach of Antony Smith and Michael Billig's 'banal nationalism'. This is visible through the emphasis on symbols and rituals as an important part of everyday nationhood, on the one hand, and the focus on practices that (re)construct the understanding of the nation among its members, on the other.

The study has two main aims. The first is to *map the variations of nation-building* among seven post-communist Balkan states, while the second is to *measure the results of (nation-building) strategies* (p. 14). For what concerns the former, it seems that the variations, as well as the commonalities, are mapped successfully. An overview of the seven case studies will show the reader that a specific type of nation-building has become the 'only game in town' in the Balkans, i.e. the clear tendency to envisage the nation *solely on ethnic terms*. For what concerns the second aim, whether the volume is successful in this respect is more open to debate. This is primarily because the main conclusion of the book states that ethnic homogeneity is the decisive factor for 'successful' nation-building. Following the provided data, this hypothesis is at best unconvincing, and this review will attempt to show why.

The introductory chapter, written by Pål Kolstø, and the concluding chapter, written by Pål Kolstø and Vatroslav Jelovica, represent the backbone of the whole book. The theoretical framework, contextual background and methodological design, as well as the main findings and conclusions in a comparative perspective are presented in these two chapters. For what concerns the case studies, symbols and rituals are the centre of the analysis in all of them. They are assessed through four main categories as a framework of analysis: religious culture, ethnic culture, historical imagination and geographical imagination. It is presumed that symbols and rituals are essential resources for the post-communist nation-builders, used both consciously and sporadically. Statues, monuments, commemorations and holidays, addresses of politicians, policy statements, flags, coats of arms and national anthems, (re)naming of streets and so on, are identified by the authors as 'containers of symbolism', which provide links between culture and nation-building policies, objects that provide or diminish the legitimacy of nation-building projects.

\* E-mail: j.bliznakovski@gmail.com

1 The volume is a result of the research project *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-Building in South Eastern Europe: Intents and results*, funded by the Research Council of Norway. The main component of the project, in terms of data collection, has been a survey conducted in all of the countries during September 2011 (a total of 10500 respondents, 1500 respondents per country). The results of the survey can be consulted in the website: <https://www.ffri.hr/cultstud/index.php/istrazivanje/projekti/118-symbolic-strategies> (last visit: 6 March 2015)

In the chapter on Croatia, Vjeran Pavlaković focuses on the ‘reinvention’ of ‘Croatianism’ after the dissolution of Socialist Yugoslavia, showing how there is wide consensus on the narratives of independence forged during the 1990s and cemented in the 2000s. The author presents the Croatian nation-building project as a parallel process and as a reaction to Serbian political aspirations. He also shows how historical narratives, symbols and geographical imagination were unanimously forged in this specific context. In contrast to Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina could not develop such a consensus regarding the character of the state. In her chapter, Ana Dević highlights the conflictual character of Bosnian society resulting from the lack of a shared understanding among the three ethnic groups (Bosniak, Serb and Croat) on the symbolic foundations of the state and the nation.

In his chapter on Serbia, Vladan Jovanović focuses on political myths and historical narratives as the main carriers of symbolic re-construction after the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia. Jovanović discusses the status of an existent polarization that impinges on state loyalty within the Serbian ethnic group, constructed along patriarchal/modern and rural/urban lines. Through this, he shows how ethnic homogeneity is not the single prerequisite for high loyalty, as other factors (such as patriarchal and modern values) also influence it.

In a case study on Montenegro, Jelena Džankić portrays the competition between two parallel nation-building projects tied to two big ethnicities (Montenegrins and Serbs). Her chapter is focused on the Montenegrin inability to construct mutually acceptable symbolic narratives, presenting how this state of affairs is reflected in the actions of the political actors. However, as the chapter convincingly shows, Montenegro is the single case study in the whole sample where violence seems to have no prospect as a response to the lack of mutual symbolic understanding among ethnic groups.

Vjollca Krasniqi gives an interesting overview of the state formation and nation-building of Kosovo, the youngest of the seven states, showing the interplay of internal and external factors in the construction of the nation-building project. Krasniqi’s chapter is the single one in the whole volume that addresses the issue of transferring political values from the West as an important component of the symbolic construction of the nation. Moreover, she presents an overview of existent disagreements between Kosovar Albanians and Serbs over the status and character of the Kosovar project.

In the chapter on Macedonia, Ljupcho Risteski and Armanda Kodra Hysa present the peculiarities of two rival nation-building projects across different time frames, initiated by the titular group (Macedonians) and contested by the largest minority group (Albanians). The authors portray the main symbolic assumptions that affected the foundations of the Macedonian state in 1991, establishing it as a nation-state of the titular group, and the effects of the constitutional changes from 2001 that made Macedonia a state of shared constituency among several ethnic groups. Risteski and Kodra Hysa also discuss the most novel developments in the Macedonian nation-building project initiated around 2009 and connected with the ‘Skopje 2014’ project.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, in her chapter on Albania, Cecile Endresen concludes that a ‘strong’ imagined community has been constituted over the course of 100 years, highlighting existent differences in the dominant narratives through the whole period. She shows that in the case of Albania, loyalty is high in symbolic terms, but distrust towards the state and its institutions is prevalent. Moreover, similar to the Serbian case, a regional North/South divide is constructed to respond to the symbolic (re)construction of the nation after 1991. As in Serbia, different degrees of loyalty are subject to regional dividing lines.

The authors define the success of nation-building as reaching a high level of ‘correspondence between the idea of nationhood that is propounded by the state leaders and the collective self-understanding (identity) of the nation’ (p. 15). As mentioned, whether the book is successful in measuring the ‘success of nation-building’ is open to contestation. The level of correlation between the idea of nationhood and the collective self-understanding of the surveyed citizens is pictured

<sup>2</sup> ‘Skopje 2014’ is a project funded and implemented by the Macedonian Government, which aims to reconstruct the center of the Macedonian capital by using neo-classical architecture and introducing new monuments and museums.

through a 14-point 'loyalty index', established on the basis of the responses given to 13 survey questions (pp. 15-16). The selection of variables that form the index can be debated: for example, questions on geographical imagination are not present, while historical imagination and religious culture are represented through one single question each. The survey's questions mainly cover the topic of ethnicity (self-understanding, perception of inclusion, importance of identity, evaluation of interethnic relations and so on.), but also the acceptance of state symbols, which are however assessed through a vague 'do you like the official... (flag, anthem)?'. Some of the questions directly target national pride and willingness to stay in or leave the country, but as the book also shows these responses may be heavily influenced by ethnic belonging.

This seems significant, particularly because the main conclusion of the book states that higher ethnic homogeneity leads to higher loyalty and more successful nation-building. The correlation between ethnic homogeneity and loyalty is strong but still not straightforward when observed through the results of the loyalty index. Macedonia has substantially lower ethnic homogeneity than Serbia, however, it places relatively higher on the loyalty index – almost the same as Croatia, which is even more ethnically homogenous. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro are close on the chart on ethnic homogeneity (size of the titular group), but Montenegro has a much higher loyalty index (though both countries strongly differ in their religious homogeneity). Albania and Kosovo have similar levels of ethnic homogeneity (Albania has the highest in the whole group), but still scores relatively lower than Kosovo on the loyalty index (again, religious homogeneity is lower in Albania). The most consistent cases, in terms of both simultaneously having substantially high ethnic and religious homogeneity, excluding Kosovo (that fits in the hypothesis perfectly), are Croatia and Serbia, which score third and fifth respectively on the table of loyalty contenders, and both have substantially lower grades than the first two – Kosovo and Albania.

In fact, the level of correlation between ethnic group belonging and loyalty is strongest in three of the most ethnically 'conflicted' states in the sample: Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia (see Table 9.5, p. 235 of the book). Montenegro, which is formed by two relatively large ethnic groups, has a lower value on correlation between ethnicity and loyalty. Consequently, it is possible that ethnicity has different symbolic meanings and 'weight' across ethnically heterogeneous states that influence loyalty (in terms of the question surveyed). This is well illustrated throughout the cases of Croatia and Serbia, where the only statistically important predictor is age and not ethnicity (old people are more loyal than young people). In most cases, other factors are also significant besides age, such as the rural-urban divide and gender.

All this shows that further efforts will be needed to precisely pinpoint the role of ethnic homogeneity as a prerequisite for political loyalty in the Balkans (or in the book's terminology, successful nation-building), as well as its relation to other independent factors. This provocation is one of the most valuable aspects that this book delivers.

When it comes to nation-building strategies in the post-Cold War world, there is one important aspect that the book seems to overlook. This is the *transfer of political values* from the West as a result of the engagement of the international community in the region. Excluding the chapter on Kosovo, where Krasniqi clearly connects the characteristics of the Kosovar project with the 'discourses on democratization, liberal democracy, modernization and Westernization' (p. 145), all the other chapters discuss this issue either more marginally or not at all. Thus, an important aspect of the behaviour of the international community that is crucial for symbolic nation-building is left unexplained, and this represents one of the striking weaknesses of this volume.

With all the above in mind, this book still is highly recommended reading for scholars of nation-building, the Balkans, or, as it is most common – both.

**Jovan Bliznakovski** is a political scientist with research interests in the fields of multicultural policies, identity politics and nationalism. He holds an MSc in political science from the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. He works as a Programme Director in the Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' (IDSCS) in Skopje, Macedonia.