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Research Article

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On Populist Pop Culture: *ethno* as the contemporary political ideology in Serbia

Irena Šentevska*

This study attempts to shift the debate of the contemporary facets of populist ideologies from the realm of institutional politics to the realm of everyday life, popular culture, media and “invented traditions”. My intention is to demonstrate how these realms generate new sources and voices of populism, often downplayed in the academic debates on the subject. The paper stems from comprehensive research on discourses of identity (re)construction in post-Yugoslav Serbia as communicated in pop-cultural media forms (specifically, music videos of all genres), in which I used a sample of 4733 music videos produced between 1980 and 2010 (and later). In this paper, I have chosen to focus on the case of the charity campaign *Podignimo Stupove* and its music video output. The campaign was launched as a pop-cultural initiative to help the restoration of the 12th century monastery Đurđevi Stupovi in Stari Ras, a site of utmost historical significance and value for the national culture. Against the background of institutional changes that markedly redefined the place of religion in Serbian post-socialist society, the music videos discussed in this paper provide a valuable insight into the combined musical, textual and visual language of communication of some longstanding notions associated with “Serbian populism”.

Keywords: populism, pop culture, *ethno*, music video, *Podignimo Stupove*

Introduction

“To each his own definition of populism, according to the academic axe he grinds” was Peter Wiles’ earnest remark in the 1969 volume *Populism (Nature of Human Society)*.¹ Adopting a broad definition of populism as “an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice”,² this paper attempts to shift the debate of the contemporary facets of populist ideologies from the realm of institutional politics to the realm of

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¹ Ionescu, Ghita and Ernest Gellner. (eds.). 1969. *Populism (Nature of Human Society)*. Worthing: Littlehampton Book Services Ltd., 166.

² Albertazzi, Daniele and Duncan McDonnell. (eds.). 2008. *Twenty-First Century Populism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 3.

everyday life, popular culture, media and “invented traditions”.³ My intention is to demonstrate how the mechanisms of interaction and synergy of these realms produce new sources and voices of populism, often downplayed in the academic debates on the subject.

The starting points for this study are two discussions by Serbian scholars, sociologist Nebojša Popov and anthropologist and linguist Ivan Čolović. In his study *Serbian Populism: from a marginal to the dominant phenomenon*⁴ Popov attempts to trace the common grounds and elements of continuity between two paradigmatic populist movements / ideologies – one observed as “marginal”, personified by Dimitrije Ljotić before and during the Second World War, and the other observed as “dominant” and epitomized by the political career of Slobodan Milošević. The other starting point is Čolović’s discussion of “ethno”⁵ as the new political ideology of Serbia in the post-Milošević period. Čolović traces the elements of this ideology in the discourses surrounding the elusive genre of popular music broadly termed as “ethno” and closely associated with the contemporary notions of “world music”.⁶

As a researcher of visual culture, I am particularly interested in visual strategies of communication of ideological messages. In this paper I am focusing on a specific and markedly under-researched media form in Serbia – music video⁷ - in an attempt to identify the paradigmatic strategies of (visual) communication of ‘Serbness’ (conceived as belonging to a homogeneous and exclusive ethnic identity) in this media form. It is important to note at the very beginning the difference between the conventions of visual representations in music videos and general conventions associated with specific music genres. In other words, it is important to note that the subject of study in this article is *not* music, performers and their genre affiliations, but *visual communication in music videos*. This paper stems from a comprehensive PhD research⁸ on discourses of identity (re)construction of post-Yugoslav Serbia as communicated in popular music videos of all genres, where I used a sample of 4733 videos mainly produced from 1980 to 2010. In this paper, I have chosen to focus on the case of the charity campaign *Podignimo Stupove* – specifically, on its music video output. This campaign was launched as a pop-cultural initiative to help the restoration of the 12th century monastery Đurđevi Stupovi in Stari Ras. Music videos produced under the auspices of this campaign and largely sponsored by the Serbian Orthodox church distinctly exploit religious imagery. Due to the longevity of the campaign (which is an interesting phenomenon in itself in the Serbian context) and marking the main religious holidays,

³ Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger. (eds.). 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Popov, Nebojša. 2010. *Iskušavanje slobode: Srbija na prelazu vekova*. Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 61-134; first published as a special edition of *Vreme* no. 135, 24. May 1993.

⁵ Čolović, Ivan. 2006. *Etno: priče o muzici sveta na Internetu*. Belgrade: XX. vek.

⁶ Though important, musicological distinctions and demarcations of “ethno” and/or “world music” genres are less relevant for the subsequent discussion and shall not be further addressed in this paper.

⁷ The only extensive academic study focused on music video production in Serbia is (still) Kronja, Ivana. 2001. *Smrtonosni sjaj: masovna psihologija i estetika turbo-folka*. Belgrade: Tehnokratia.

⁸ Šentevska, Irena. 2014. *Konstrukcija identiteta i medijski tekst: reprezentacija urbanih transformacija Beograda u muzičkom videu*. PhD-thesis. Belgrade: University of Arts.

Christmas and Easter, they have become both a regular feature in the “secular” calendar and an instance of newly-invented traditions. In this paper they are identified as a particularly interesting vehicle of communication both of “Serbian populism” (as discussed by N. Popov) and “ethno ideology” (as discussed by I. Čolović).

The many lives of “Serbian populism” and “ethno” as a political ideology

In his comprehensive discussion of “Serbian populism” Nebojša Popov admits that the very notion of “populism” is problematic as it may be associated with a variety of (often dissonant) concepts, for example: moralism, mystical links between the leader and the people, isolationism, nostalgia for the past, glorification of power, anti-individualism, anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, anti-militarism and “anti-establishment” sentiment.⁹ For the purposes of this discussion, we shall focus on those longstanding aspects of “Serbian populism” which may be (still) communicated in contemporary pop-cultural media forms - in this case, music videos:

1. Populism is usually conceived as an expression of the “organic whole” of the people, a mythical image (as such) unfounded in reality; its ultimate consequence is “biological nationalism”;¹⁰
2. “Serbian populism” was effectively informed by the historical experiences of the Central European and Russian/Soviet realms, which resulted in populist concepts of pan-Slavic and pan-Orthodox (Christian) collectivism;¹¹
3. A common characteristic of populist movements across Europe is a “revolutionary reaction” (Ernst Nolte) to the individualization and detraditionalization of the society; hence the fear of emancipatory changes and hate of their proponents;¹²
4. National salvation demands a return to religious traditions, isolationism, and charismatic leadership - in a word, anti-modernism;¹³
5. “Individualistic thought gave birth to democracy, capitalism, Marxism and Bolshevism, materialism and atheism” (Dimitrije Ljotić); the countermeasure is holy war with its codex of honor and sacrifice;¹⁴
6. “In the small nations, only the nation can be great. In the small nations the utmost moral duty is subordination of the individuals to the community, the people, the state. A Serb is a man who is not a man unless he is a Serb” (Dobrica Ćosić);¹⁵
7. Backwardness and underdevelopment are conceived as “intellectual capital”;¹⁶
8. The “legend of Kosovo” combines pagan, Christian and lay motifs and, as such, provokes both action and reflection, both shooting and singing.¹⁷

⁹ Popov, *Iskušavanje slobode*, 62.

¹⁰ Popov, *Iskušavanje slobode*, 63, 75.

¹¹ Popov, *Iskušavanje slobode*, 65.

¹² Popov, *Iskušavanje slobode*, 66-7.

¹³ Popov, *Iskušavanje slobode*, 67.

¹⁴ Popov, *Iskušavanje slobode*, 75.

¹⁵ Popov, *Iskušavanje slobode*, 93.

¹⁶ Popov, *Iskušavanje slobode*, 99.

Political transition in former Yugoslavia was followed by a recomposition of ethnic imagery and representations of nationhood, as the socialist regime was not succeeded by the “rule of democracy”, but the new order pursuing the interests of the ethno-national majority.¹⁸ The dissolution of Yugoslavia meant that the historical project of Serbia as the Piedmont of South-East Europe came to an end: the interests of the nation and the state became one. Return to the pre-socialist traditions also includes an understanding that Serbia is rather a nation than a state and that its authority does not exceed the matters of “Serbhood”.¹⁹ However, this all happens in a state “with a sizeable population with non-Serb ethnic backgrounds.”²⁰

Lacking minimal consensus on the common social (ethical) values, Serbia becomes a battlefield for competing champions of the national cause who seek mass support for their often elusive agendas: one of the most picturesque weapons in this war is popular culture shaped by tribal nationalism dressed in folk costumes. After the year 2000, the political elites currently in power embarked upon a search for a new tradition and ideal ancestors dissociated from the remnants of the “communist” history. They were found in the mythical rural landscapes of pre-modern Serbia, uncontaminated by “foreign” influences and communist “corruption”,²¹ where everything preceding this “historic demise” tends to be rendered in idyllic hues.

According to Ivan Čolović, since the middle 1990s *ethno* music in Serbia has been marketed as a new genre of popular music with folkloric roots which fortuitously evades the negative connotations of turbo-folk (as the overwhelming contemporary “folk” genre, notoriously lacking “artistic value” and, furthermore, being “spoiled” with foreign influences). This music is perceived as “national in spirit and modern in form”, and even “politically correct from the standpoint of democratic standards, as it partakes in the process of intercultural dialogs”.²² What is here at play, Čolović argues, is the same formula which (even since the mid- 1990s) was concocted by the proponents of “good nationalism” while putting forth a political project named *Third Serbia*²³ - a society that would circumvent the extremes of both the radical nationalists and radical anti-nationalists (NGO activists, human rights advocates etc.) For this author, *ethno* is the key to understanding the major elements of ideology or “political faith” of the current Serbian elites. Namely, in the very core of the (globally present) commonplace “stories” about ethnic

¹⁷ Popov, *Iskušavanje slobode*, 171.

¹⁸ Hayden, M. Robert. 1992. Constitutional Nationalism in the Formerly Yugoslav Republics. *Slavic Review* 51, 654-73.

¹⁹ Dimitrijević, Vojin. 2009. *The Concept of National Interest and the International Position of Serbia*, in *Serbia at the Political Crossroads*, edited by Vujadinović, Dragica and Vladimir Goati. Belgrade: CEDET and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 31-48.

²⁰ Vasiljević, Jelena. 2011. *Citizenship and Belonging in Serbia: in the Crossfire of Changing Nationhood Narratives*. Working Paper 17, School of Law, the University of Edinburgh, 16.

²¹ For social restructuring of villages in the Yugoslav socialist state see Milić, Vladimir. 1978. *Revolucija i socijalna struktura*. Belgrade: Mladost.

²² Čolović, *Etno*, 5-6.

²³ See Spasić, Ivana and Tamara Petrović. 2013. *Varieties of ‘Third Serbia’*, in *Us and Them - Symbolic Divisions in Western Balkan Societies*, edited by Spasić, Ivana and Predrag Cvetičanin. Niš: CESK / Belgrade: Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, 219-44.

music, lies the quest for authenticity of music, culture and the human being residing in the ethnic identity. Even the familiar notion of “crossovers” of music cultures and styles in the ethno / world music discourse discloses a deep-seated faith in ethnic communities as distinct and autochthonous entities. It implies that in the “greatest depth” of every human being lies a single allegiance that means something: a “truth”, “essence”, never to be changed in the course of one’s lifetime. Accordingly, even the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia conceives culture “as a closed, homogeneous, determining entity, proscribing that between other closed, homogeneous, determining cultures one (the national) is the most important and most desirable”.²⁴ Thus, the only matrix of identification that the Constitution is able to recognize translates the question of belonging (or not) to the ethno-national majority into the question of loyalty to the political structure regulated by this act.

Video Ruritania

When the “urban-rural” opposition is observed from the perspective of contrasts and conflicts between traditional and modern cultures, in the debates characteristic for the post-socialist Balkans the village is typically attributed with the symbolism of “healthy” (unspoiled) life, grounded in national traditions and folklore. For generations of urban elites in Serbia (with more or less outspoken attachment to a rural family background), the peasants traditionally embody “culture”, conceived as the repository of national genius. It is extremely difficult for them to downplay the peasantry because this undermines their traditional position of spokesmen, if not wholesale inventors of the *Volksgeist*. The “usual suspect” for the crime of abandoning the pastoral life of ancestral past is the generation of “urban peasants” (peasants-industrial workers) - the so-called “centaurs of the Yugoslav economy”.²⁵ Their guilt is furthermore attributed to “communism” and its degradation of the religious (spiritual) life of the nation. Along the lines of romanticist legacy of Serbian nationalism, intellectuals have often dismissed these “mongrels” as “riders of the cultural apocalypse”.²⁶ As a consequence, this ideology has effectively obliterated the contemporary expressions of folk culture.²⁷

Against the background of the post-Yugoslav re-composition of national and ethnic identities, contemporary variations of “ethno” culture (music, cuisine, architecture, tourism etc.) and their accompanying visual imagery constitute powerful contemporary channels of communicating the *national*. In the current cultural discourses, “ethno” is associated with the actualization and revitalization of the national tradition, its re-branding, re-packaging, and use of modern technologies in such processes. As for ethno music, it is considered as a viable contemporary cultural expression only if it is somehow detached from the realm of traditional folk music, techniques and instruments, which otherwise ensnares both the producers and consumers of this music in a rural

²⁴ Brković, Čarna. 2008. Upravljanje osećanjima pripadanja: Antropološka analiza ‘kulture’ i ‘identiteta’ u Ustavu Republike Srbije. *Etnoantropološki problemi* 3(2), 61.

²⁵ Tenžera, Veselko. 1988. *Zašto volim TV*. Zagreb: Znanje, 129.

²⁶ Živković, Marko. 1998. *Too Much Character, Too Little Kultur*. *Balkanologie* II(2) (accessed: 26. April 2016).

²⁷ See Prica, Ines. 1988. Mitsko poimanje naroda u kritici novokomponovane narodne muzike. *Kultura* (80/81), 80-93.

culture that has ceased to exist. Accordingly, the visualization of ethno music in the form of promotional videos implies a search for visual aesthetics that most effectively communicates the concept of “living tradition”. This transmission demands a modern visual language, created in the city and addressing the urban population. For this population, fascination with the rural ancestral culture assumes a form of “reflexive nostalgia” for experiences that were, in fact, never lived through.²⁸

On the other hand, setting ethno performers with a rural background (for instance, the *frula* virtuoso Bora Dugić) in “high-cultural” (for instance, gallery) spaces suggests an attempt to inscribe these folk maestros in the realm of the official *Hochkultur*.²⁹ Continuity in attempts to introduce Serbian folkloric elements into the realm of high (national) culture discloses a *longue durée* historical process whereby aspects of popular culture claim a position and status of (previously non-existing) “elite” culture in accordance with the (Western) European standards. In “self-colonized” societies,³⁰ each generation creates new cultural forms, imported from the West and crossbred with the existing (traditional) patterns. In Serbia, this process displays clear continuity in the domain of mass media and popular culture, as I attempt to demonstrate using examples from contemporary music video production.

In my journey through the “video Ruritania”,³¹ the imaginary and idealized Serbia with an ancestral rural past, I have identified several distinctive formulas of its communication in promotional music videos and TV programs, falling into two basic categories (regardless of the shifting genre affiliations of the performers):

1. Emblems of national traditions blend with the contemporary signifiers of modernity and mass-mediated culture in arbitrary encounters and “crossovers”;
2. The mythical “ethno country” is conceived as a depository of emblems of national purity, authenticity and difference from the Others (*e.g.* other Balkan or ex-Yugoslav nationalities).

The first mode of representation communicates the notions of “Serbness” against a contemporary mishmash of indiscriminately crossbred local and global influences. It is safe to refer to it as turbo-folk aesthetics of national self-representation, which heavily exploit (often at the same time), for example: the Dionysian imagery of the music festival in Guča, representational formulas familiar from Emir Kusturica’s films, “quotes” from Hollywood, hip-hop imagery, Latino or Turkish soaps, reality shows, documentaries, mockumentaries and travelogues. This, loosely conceived communication of “Serbness” basically aims to entertain the “nation” with humorous contrasting

²⁸ Bojm, Svetlana. 2005. *Budućnost nostalgije*. Belgrade: Geopoetika, 87.

²⁹ See for instance, Bora Dugić’s number *Ja sam mala* (album *Između sna i jave*, 2002) produced for the program *Zvuci Balkana* of the public broadcaster RTS. (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).

³⁰ See Kiossev, Alexander. 1995. *The Self-Colonizing Cultures*, in *Cultural Aspects of the Modernization Process*, edited by Ginev, Dimităr / Sejersted, Francis and Kostadinka Simeonova. Oslo: TMV Senteret, 73-81.

³¹ I have borrowed the reference to “Ruritania” from Goldsworthy, Vesna. 1998. *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

of “ethno” signifiers (music, dance, costumes, food, architecture...) with modern gadgets and lifestyles.³² According to this formula, for instance, turbo-folk / dance stars of the 1990s (like Ivan Gavrilović and Baki B3) might be singing about “hot nights in the discotheque” dressed in “museum” folk costumes.³³ Or the turbo-folk MC DJ Krmak might be singing about narco-agriculture and cocaine addiction accompanied by an ensemble of “ethno” back vocalists.³⁴

The second mode is a distinct representational formula wherein performers assuming the roles of the “voices of Serbness” appear in gentrified ethno villages, often real tourist locations like Stanišići or Galetovo sokače. Ethno villages are both physical and mental constructs of the “new” (post-Yugoslav), urban Serbia, detached from the harsh realities of village life and exclusively concerned with the aestheticization of the rural national past.³⁵ Ethno villages thus acquire Potemkinian attributes: they serve as backdrops for performers who voice nostalgia over pastoral times long gone,³⁶ or even comment on the plights of contemporary Serbs (for instance, in the now independent Republic of Kosovo).³⁷ Ethno villages may also serve as backdrops for *inter-ethnic* musical exchanges and cooperation.³⁸ The stars might be wearing modern urban clothes, driving expensive modern cars, but in the videos they often interact with extras dressed in “museum” folk costumes - as a rule, young and beautiful men and women wearing heavy make-up.

This formula is adopted in many videos of urban pop singers (like Željko Joksimović or Zdravko Čolić) who may often find themselves in gentrified rural environments, for instance, under a spell of a beautiful village girl³⁹ or at a rural wedding.⁴⁰ In such cases the emphasis shifts from communication of the *national* towards the romantic plots and idealizations of the *rural*. This representational formula is occasionally used to spotlight some regional specificities (for instance, of Vojvodina). Here the heavy use of folk costumes and ethnographic detail highlights the cultural complexity and multiethnic life of the region.⁴¹

At times, a music video may become a fictional cinematic recreation of historical events (e.g. the bitter struggle of Serbian *hajduks* against Ottoman rule) which again mainly communicate “the national cause.”⁴² In a variation of the second basic model, performers with different music backgrounds and stylistic affiliations appear in “real” monasteries, churches and cultural

³² See, for instance, Luna ft. Milić Vukašinović & Lepi Mića. *Srbija*. (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).

³³ This telling performance of their duet *Sex mašina* at the studio of TV Kopernikus has, unfortunately, not survived on the Youtube.

³⁴ DJ Krmak. *Cijelo selo šmrče bijelo*. (Youtube access: 26. April 2016).

³⁵ Božilović, Nikola. 2011. Vulgarizacija tradicije popularne muzike u Srbiji. *Teme* XXXV(4), 1323-52, 1347.

³⁶ See, for, instance, Lepa Lukić. *Balada o majci* (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).

³⁷ See the duet of the Serbian folk diva Vera Matović and Montenegrin-Serbian bard (*gusle* player) Milomir Miljanić Miljan. *Izbečica*. (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).

³⁸ See the video *Tamburaši*, the result of collaboration between the Serbian music ensemble Legende and Bosniak folk star Halid Bešlić (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).

³⁹ Željko Joksimović. *Zaboravljaš* (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).

⁴⁰ Zdravko Čolić. *Kad pogledaš me preko ramena* (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).

⁴¹ See, for instance, Garavi sokak. *Zašto, zašto srećo* (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).

⁴² Bojana Nikolić. *Oj goro* (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).

monuments preserved from the past, in order to communicate current messages (of national homogenization, patriotism and loyalty, spirituality etc.),⁴³ or simply to wish a happy Christmas or Easter to the Orthodox community. It is within this (recently invented) tradition that we can situate the music video output of the campaign *Podignimo Stupove - Let's Raise the Tracts* (of St. George).

Raising the Tracts of Saint George

The monastery Đurđevi Stupovi in Ras claims a specific position in the geography of the Serbian medieval state with its symbolic presence in the contemporary national culture. Located in the vicinity of today's city of Novi Pazar, in the Raška⁴⁴ region at the south of Serbia (Sandžak), the monastery was erected in 1171 as an endowment of the Grand Prince Stefan Nemanja, founder of the Serbian medieval dynasty of the Nemanides (Nemanjić). It was named after the church dedicated to St. George and its two flanking towers, high pillars (in old Slavic languages - *stolp*, *stub*). Stefan Nemanja allegedly built this church to commemorate his gratitude to St. George for freeing him from dungeon-caves, where he was imprisoned by his brothers. Lead by the Grand Prince (Veliki Župan) Tihomir, Stefan Nemanja's elder brother, they "attempted to restrain his overly independence".⁴⁵ According to some historical sources Nemanja was imprisoned in 1165, and seized power in 1166, and according to others he was captured in 1167 and released in 1168. In his gratitude to St. George Stefan Nemanja dedicated the monastery Đurđevi Stupovi⁴⁶ to the warrior saint. The construction was completed in 1171, and the church was decorated four years later. This monastery was a favored destination of another member of the Nemanjić dynasty, the last Serbian ruler based in Ras, King Stefan Dragutin (1253-1316) who chose Đurđevi Stupovi for his place of burial.

Frescoes from this monastery have a particular value for Serbian medieval art, as they were painted in the best traditions of the Komnenos style. The most impressive among them is the depiction of St. George on a horse, located above the main entrance to the church. After the Second World War, the first protective conservation works of the monastery were carried out in 1947. The site was subjected to more systematic archeological and architectural research (conducted by the National Museum in Belgrade) in the early 1960s. The works were resumed in 1968 by The Institute for Cultural Heritage Preservation

⁴³ See, for instance, the video of the vocal duet Pirg. *Molitva* (Youtube access: 27. April 2016).

⁴⁴ On the relationships between the toponyms "Ras" and "Raška" for the Serbian medieval history see Kalić, Jovanka. 1977. Ras u srednjem veku: pravci istraživanja. *Novopazarski zbornik* (1), 55-61.

⁴⁵ Trijić, T. Vladan. 2011. *Odnos prvih Nemanjića prema Svetom Georgiju u svetlu dokumentarnih i narativnih izvora*, in *Đurđevi stupovi i Budimljanska eparhija*, edited by Radujko, Milan. Berane: Episkopija Budimljansko-niškička and Polimski muzej / Belgrade: Filozofski fakultet, Institut za istoriju umetnosti, JP Službeni glasnik and Pravoslavni bogoslovski fakultet, Institut za teološka istraživanja, 69-78, 72.

⁴⁶ For a comprehensive bibliography on Đurđevi Stupovi (which includes the historical sources, monographs, other publications, research on medieval art, history, conservation-restoration works, architecture, painted decorations, applied arts, manuscripts and books) see Melcer, Bojana. 2004. *Manastir Đurđevi Stupovi u Rasu: bibliografija*. Niš: Centar za crkvene studije / Ras: Manastir Đurđevi Stupovi.

Kraljevo (Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture Kraljevo). They included research, conservation and restoration works⁴⁷ that intensified between 1971 and 1982, and were conducted as part of a larger project of restoration of medieval sites in the region of Stari Ras. Beside the monastery of Đurđevi Stupovi, Raška valley, often referred to as the “cradle” or “embryo” of the eponymous Serbian medieval state, contains the monuments Petrova crkva, Kapela kralja Dragutina and the famed monastery of Sopoćani, including the remnants of the Serbian medieval capitals Ras, Jeleć and Deževa - all scattered around the town of Novi Pazar.⁴⁸ The monastery Đurđevi Stupovi has been on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites since 1979. It was also included in the Transromanica Cultural Route, which promotes the common Romanesque heritage of twelve regions in Europe, from Tâmega and Sousa in Portugal to Alba Iulia in Romania.

The famed monastery was abandoned in 1689, during a military campaign in the Ottoman-Habsburg wars. The monks, headed by their archimandrite, lead Serbian refugees to exile in Pécs, and subsequently the monastery was burnt by the Ottomans. In 1722 they began to extract and use its ancient stone for the construction of the nearby fortress of Novi Pazar. The wars of the 20th century only furthered the demolition: during the Balkan Wars, the Ottoman army used the monastery as a fortified military post and in 1912 it was heavily damaged in artillery strikes. The last major demolition ensued in 1941 when the stone from the monastery was quarried for construction works by the German army.

Nevertheless, in 1999, the year of NATO military intervention in what was then the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) in response to the Kosovo crisis, the Serbian Orthodox Eparchy of Raška and Prizren launched restoration works at the monastery, aided by the ministries of culture and religion of Republic of Serbia, and numerous corporate and private donors. When three monks from the monastery of Sopoćani came in 2001, headed by the Father superior Petar (Ulemek),⁴⁹ the monastery began a new life. The energetic abbot, often referred to as “a priest for the 21st century” and “cyber monk”,⁵⁰ started his missionary work on behalf of the monastery with great enthusiasm.

The revival of monastic life at the ancient establishment started a far-reaching campaign which engaged many high-profile personalities from Serbia's pop-

⁴⁷ On the history of the monastery from an architectural standpoint see Nešković, Jovan. 1984. *Đurđevi Stupovi u Starom Rasu: postanak arhitekture crkve sv. Đorđa i stvaranje raškog tipa spomenika u arhitekturi srednjevekovne Srbije*. Kraljevo: Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture; For the history of architectural research on the monastery see Nešković, Jovan. 1977. Arhitektonska istraživanja Đurđevih Stupova u Rasu. *Novopazarški zbornik* 1, 97-110.

⁴⁸ For a wider perspective on the built heritage of the region of Stari Ras, see Čanak-Medić, Milka and Branislav Todić. 2013. *Stari Ras sa Sopoćanima*. Novi Sad: Platoneum / Prizren: Eparhija Raško-Prizrenska, esp. 50-81.

⁴⁹ For the biography of Father Petar and his early missionary work on behalf of the monastery (which included a trip to Australia), see his interview with Roknić, M. 2013. *Kordun, zemlja bez ljudi*. *Vesti online*, 25. August 2013 (accessed: 26. April 2015).

⁵⁰ On the phenomenon of “new monasticism” in Serbia see: Trkulja, Andrea / Smiljanić, Dragana / Velić, Jelena and Uroš Miloradović. 2002. *Istraživanje - Novo monaštvo: s verom, bez podataka*. *Vreme*, 10. October 2002 (accessed: 26. April 2015).

cultural and media sphere, in accordance with the remark made by the monastery's hieromonk Gerasim: "Even in the times of the Nemanides, although Stefan Nemanja was the main *ktitor* (founder), the construction engaged the entire nation, everyone according to his capacities".⁵¹ The first artists who made a contribution to the campaign were members of renowned Serbian choirs and opera singers who performed at the concert of spiritual music held in the Atrium of the National Museum in Belgrade. The singers were followed by painters who donated their works to the monastery, and icon-painters who contributed to a grand auction exhibition planned in Belgrade's Gallery of Frescoes.

Before retiring to the monastery, hieromonk Gerasim was an active musician and athlete (soccer player). Hearing about the campaign, many of his friends and acquaintances decided to make a contribution. Among the athletes, soccer players on the national team,⁵² the volleyball representation, soccer clubs Partizan and Crvena zvezda, basketball players Bodiroga, Đorđević, Divac, Stojaković, Tomašević, Šćepanović and others took part. Pop musicians Đorđe Balašević, Ana Stanić and members of the bands Eyesburn, Darkwood Dub, Partibrejkers, Bajaga i Instruktori, Riblja čorba, and Van Gogh were joined by the actors Danilo Lazović, Nebojša Dugalić, and Nenad Jezdić. The theatre performance *Vaskrsni Đurđevdan* was broadcasted by RTS and Studio B. Hieromonk's good contacts with media professionals greatly helped the public visibility of the campaign.

The music "department" of the campaign soon gained a form of independence in their efforts to maintain a continuity of production for the benefit of the monastery. Receiving a blessing of His Eminence Artemije the Bishop of Raška and Prizren, the Music Ensemble Stupovi continued its activities within the missionary campaign *Obnovimo sebe - Podignimo Stupove* (Let's revive ourselves – Let's raise the Tracts). The musicians are also members of the Society of Friends of the Monastery Đurđevi Stupovi in Ras (Društvo prijatelja manastira Đurđevi Stupovi u Rasu). Their work on behalf of the campaign is now conceived as a permanent activity. They participate in religious and secular cultural events, with a visible presence in Serbia's contemporary cultural production.

An important part of the permanent activities of the campaign's "music department" is video production. Music videos are an important means of animating the public for the causes of the campaign. By far the largest number of videos released is dedicated to marking (celebrating) the (Orthodox) Christian holidays, Christmas and Easter. The continuity and regularity of their production is somewhat of a curiosity in itself. Namely, cultural production in Serbia is strongly marked by a lack of opportunities for independent initiatives (those deprived of permanent funding by the state) to survive the harsh economic realities in the cultural sphere. The longevity of the campaign *Podignimo Stupove* makes it a rare instance of economic sustainability in the Serbian cultural context.

⁵¹ Ćirić, Sonja. 2002. *Podignimo stupove*. *Vreme*, 21. November 2002 (accessed: 26. April 2016).

⁵² Among them, Mateja Kežman made the largest donation.

As we have already noted, Christmas and Easter music videos produced under the auspices of this campaign claim a special place in the typology developed in our discussion of “video Ruritania”. Concerning the fact that the Serbian media landscape had practically no previous experience with music videos (recurrently) associated with religious holidays, these videos have established a new “genre”, a distinct niche of the music video production. Apart from their overall novelty in the Serbian context, they have established a new language of communicating national identity identified with belonging to a religious community. I argue that this particular language qualifies them as powerful conduits of some longstanding aspects of “Serbian populism”.

From pop to populism... and back (to the monastery)

The language of communication of belonging to the ethno-national/religious community (in other words, the communication of “Serbness”) in music video output has evolved and transformed since the early stages of the campaign *Podignimo Stupove*. Below, we trace this evolution, using a selection of paradigmatic examples.

An early instance of this output was the Easter video *Podignimo Stupove*, which featured the music of Ljuba Ninković and lyrics of the “holy bishop Nikolaj”, *Saborna vaskršnja pesma (Slava tebe gospodi)*. Ljuba Ninković, a prominent member of the Musical Ensemble Stupovi, is a veteran rock musician from the renowned Belgrade band *S vremena na vreme*.⁵³ Nikolaj Velimirović (1880-1956) was bishop of Ohrid and of Žiča, and an influential Serbian theological writer. During the Second World War, he was detained as an *honorable prisoner* (Ehrenhäftling) of Dachau. After the war, he chose not to return to socialist Yugoslavia and spent the rest of his life in exile in Europe and the United States. For his missionary work, he was considered an Apostle and Missionary of the New Continent and has been enlisted as an American Saint.

The early version of this video brought together several pop-cultural “traditions” - notably the “tradition” of charity videos in the Band Aid style (*Do They Know It's Christmas*, 1984)⁵⁴ which had its counterpart in socialist Yugoslavia,⁵⁵ and the “tradition” of exalted children singing in the style of the Belgrade’s choir *Kolibri*. One innovation in this video comes from the fact that the children who took part (along with notable musicians, actors and soccer player Mateja Kežman) held in their hands an icon of the Mother of God.

In other charity videos, the Music Ensemble Stupovi had many opportunities to leave the music studio and perform outdoors. The monastery Đurđevi Stupovi

⁵³ Mostly active during the 1970s, this band is considered among the pioneers of the Serbian acoustic rock scene who incorporated folk music elements into rock music.

⁵⁴ One example of an ironic approach to this “tradition” is Sasha Baron Cohen’s charity video for the film *Brüno* (2009), which assembled such notable celebrity-activists as Bono, Vox, Sting, Elton John, Slash (ex-Guns N’ Roses) or Snoop Dogg, all for the cause of promoting LGBT rights (and Brüno himself).

⁵⁵ Namely, when Yu Rock Misija released the video *Za milion godina* (1985), making a contribution to the international campaign against poverty in Ethiopia, launched by the rock musicians Bob Geldof and Midge Ure. Ljuba Ninković was also a contributor to this project.

naturally became a stage and backdrop for many acts that soon abandoned the minimalism of Band Aid style for more lavish imagery employing captivating folk costumes and medieval imagery. Accordingly, the “Band Aid Easter video” was released again, in its second, much more elaborate version. This time the dramaturgy was considerably different. The dramatic opening of the video shows a documentary segment with stark images from war-affected areas in the 1990s: however, the columns of refugees which appear here are unambiguously identified as “Serbian”. The song (and the video) then rapidly changes tone: in a live-action segment the popular actor Nenad Jezdić leads a column of Serbian refugees from some “distant past”. Then the video goes as follows: Monastery Đurđevi Stupovi. Landscape. Flowers and a butterfly. A child (app. 2,5 years of age) dressed in white “ethno” costume.⁵⁶ Nenad Jezdić seems upset. His horse bucks. Flags. Easter egg. The refugees enter the monastery. The monastery suddenly transforms into a fortress.⁵⁷ Here we encounter another popular actor, Aleksandar Srećković Kubura, accompanied by many more children dressed in white. One girl sits with a white lamb in front of an icon with the image of Christ. She looks up and then exclaims the Paschal greeting ‘*Hristos voskrese – radost donese* (Christ is arisen - joy he has given). The background voices respond: *Vaistinu!* (Indeed he has!) End of video.

The activities of the campaign Podignimo Stupove are intensified during the major religious holidays. The music video “specials” re-focus the public attention from the importance of the monastery Đurđevi Stupovi and its revival, to the importance of the revival of the Serbian religious culture as such (especially in Belgrade). In another example, in the Easter video *Radujte se* (Rejoice) the action takes place around the Cathedral of Saint Sava (Hram Svetog Save) in downtown Belgrade. It is noteworthy to remind that Saint Sava, a Serbian prince and Orthodox monk, was born Rastko Nemanjić, as the youngest son of Stefan Nemanja, founder of the monastery Đurđevi Stupovi. In this video, a lovely girl dressed in a folk costume plays the traditional instrument *gusle*, and a lovely young man (also dressed in a folk costume) takes a position to perform by the monument to the “founding father” of post-Ottoman Serbia Karađorđe Petrović (1768?-1817), in front of the Cathedral. Pop singer Sergej Četković is leading a children’s choir (everyone is wearing modern clothes). A priest is holding an icon and children venerate it with a kiss. People play guitars and frulas and knock Easter eggs. They send Easter SMS messages. There comes a motorbike. Veteran rocker Bora Đorđević gets off and makes the sign of the cross upon joining the mixed choir. Children are dancing the folk dance *kolo*. Actors Aleksandar Srećković Kubura and Nebojša Ilić greet each other with “traditional” three kisses. Someone plays a harmonica. Actors from the popular film *Montevideo* (2010) play soccer.⁵⁸ In the

⁵⁶ For a discussion of the style of dress associated with “ethno” imagery, and the concept of “ethno boutique”, see Čolović, *Etno*, 113, 264. White costumes have a special place in this imagery because they whitewash the ethnic specificities and thus, ultimately, broaden the audience base for the performers. Compare, for instance, the Eurovision Song Contest entries of Greece in 1995, Ireland in 1996, Serbia and Montenegro in 2004, Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2006 and Greece in 2010.

⁵⁷ The filming location for this segment was the medieval fortress of Smederevo, on the opposite (north) side of Serbia.

⁵⁸ This film recounts the events leading to the participation of the [Yugoslavian national football team](#) at [the first FIFA World Cup in Montevideo](#) in July 1930.

closing shot people raise a huge banner with the Easter acclamation *Rejoice! Christ Has Risen*.

In other Easter videos (e.g. *Hristos voskrese /radost donese/* or *Pesma nedelji*) urban images and the symbolism of modern life are intertwined with mythical landscapes and signifiers of a distant rural and/or heroic past. The same video might feature rock musicians (like Žika Jelić of *YU grupa* and Cane of the *Partibrejkers*) tapping Easter eggs on Belgrade's messy rooftops, and blossoming orchards filled with children and choirs of pretty girls dressed in folk costumes. The Christmas video repertoire of the Music Ensemble Stupovi usually has children as the main protagonists: children enact scenes from the Bible in improvised costumes, get kisses from their mothers, form processions and sing in choirs or as back vocals, usually dressed in white. Accompanied by Ljuba Ninković and his popular actor-brother Boda Ninković, in the video for *Alphabet Song (Azbučna pesma)* released with the "blessing of His Holiness the Patriarch of Serbia" and undersigned by the Archbishopric of Belgrade-Karlovac, the children (all dressed in white) address the Lord and explicitly state what they love the most (besides the Cyrillic alphabet) - in the following order: the monastery of Gračanica (in Kosovo), other children and schoolchildren, the Gospels, life, health, truth, language, Kosovo and beauty etc.⁵⁹ The song concludes with the lines "and everything else loved by the children of the world".

"*Ethno* cosmopolitanism", as voiced by the children in this video, joins the choir of praises to the monastery Đurđevi Stupovi coming from different sides of the Serbian cultural landscape. The symbolism of resurrection attached to the revival of its monastic life implies a symbolical beginning of the "overall spiritual revival of the Serbian people".⁶⁰ Nevertheless, this revival happens while the Serbian shrines in Kosovo and Metohija are still under threat (from their un-Christian and un-Serbian enemies). In the words of the bishop of Raška and Prizren, Artemije Radosavljević: "This all happens in 'ill times' when... God allows evil to take a moment of triumph. ... When God wants and when He says so, the Serbian resurrection (Easter) will shine (again)".⁶¹

The bishop wrote this in his introduction to the publication which marked the launch of the campaign *Podignimo Stupove* in 2002, issued, symbolically "*na Vaskrsni Đurđevdan*" (on Easter holiday of St. George). His words can also be read as a potentially "extreme" political statement: Kosovo and Metohija, Serbia's holy lands, may be temporarily seized by the enemies, but when the time is right (when God says so) they will "resurrect" under the rightful (Serbian) authority. In the meantime, as good Christians, all we can do about it is sing and pray. The same message is conveyed by the song (and the video) (a

⁵⁹ *Azbuku Bože volim, Gračanicu i decu, dake i evanđelje, život i zdravlje, istinu i jezik, Kosovo, lepotu.*

⁶⁰ Erceg, Rade. 2008. *Obnovimo sebe, podignimo Stupove!*. *Glas javnosti*, 22. January 2008 (accessed: 26. April 2016).

⁶¹ Radosavljević, Artemije. 2002. *Manastir svetog Georgija u Rasu*. Ras: Pravoslavna eparhija raško-prizrenska / Manastir Đurđevi Stupovi, 4.

spin-off project of the campaign *Podignimo stupove*) *Hajde Jano* by Asim Sarvan. On this occasion, Sarvan, the other prominent member of the band *S vremena na vreme*, changed the lyrics of the popular traditional song *Hajde Jano kuću da prodamo* into *Hajde Jano kuću da ne damo*, arguing (in a subtle and non-aggressive manner) against the Albanian dominance (authority) over Kosovo. The video released in 2008 was supported by the Serbian ministry for Kosovo and Metohija.⁶²

The release of one of the latest Easter videos of the campaign (2014) titled *O Isuse, slatki Spasitelju* (Oh, Jesus, sweet Savior) was widely reported in the media. For instance, Belgrade's tabloid *Kurir* (21 April 2014) listed in detail the filming locations (the elementary school "Jelica Milovanović" in Sopot, the Belgrade churches Ružica, Vaznesenjska, Sv. Apostola Petra i Pavla, Sv. Jovana Vladimira, the church in Veliko Selo, the monasteries of Vavedenje, Rakovica, and Slanci in and around Belgrade, and the secular spaces of Skadarlija, Milošev konak and the home of the family Mojsilović). The lyrics again combined several poems written by the bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. Members of the Music Ensemble Stupovi were joined by the Folklore Ensemble Prelo and frula soloist Milinko Ivanović Crni with his frula accompaniment called *Frulaši Svetog Nikole Srpskog*. In the *Kurir* feature, one of the protagonists in the video, the young actress Brankica Sebastijanović, wished a Happy Easter to all Orthodox Christians. On his part, the composer and music producer Andrej Andrejević explained:

*"This song, like the previous spiritual songs of the Music Ensemble Stupovi, aims to impart the word of Christ to us, sanctify in Grace our souls and fill them with joy. Saint Nikolai the Serb (Saint Nikolaj Velimirović of Ohrid and Žiča) advised the Christians to sing spiritual songs and psalms at their gatherings. There is a sublime force in singing, because spiritual songs comfort and bring people together."*⁶³

Accordingly, composed of celebrities and anonymous faces, "high-cultural" and pop-cultural figures, institutional and grassroots agencies, joined and supported by media professionals, the heterogeneous choir assembled by the campaign *Podignimo Stupove* openly advocates singing in unison. Their song is a hymn to the resurrection of the Serbian national identity, after the ice age of "communist" *brotherhood and unity* with other South Slavic nationalities, and the general marginalization of the Serbian Orthodox Church.⁶⁴ As we have seen, this song is composed not only of musical and lyrical references to the Serbian medieval (religious) past and pre-modern cultural traditions, but also of lavish visual imagery which brings together the ancient and the new, and

⁶² Another spin-off video of the campaign, *Ne od ovog sveta* of the vocal duet Pirg, is conceived as a "road movie" depicting a humanitarian tour of the deprived Serbian communities in Kosovo i Metohija. For a recent discussion of the national mythologies (Serbian and Albanian) attached to the Kosovo problem, see Tepšić, Goran / Nakarada, Radmila and Mirjana Vasović. (eds.). 2015. *Etnički stereotipi i nacionalni mitovi kao prepreke pomirenju u srpsko-albanskim odnosima*. Belgrade: Fakultet političkih nauka.

⁶³ N. N. 2014. *Vaskršnja pesma: Novi muzički spot u akciji Obnovimo sebe, podignimo Stupove*. *Kurir*, 21. April 2014 (accessed: 26. April 2016).

⁶⁴ On this subject see Dordević, B. Dragoljub. 1984. *Beg od crkve*. Knjaževac: Nota; for a discussion on the historical reasons behind this marginalization, see Radić, Radmila. 2003. *Verska elita i modernizacija - teškoće pronalazjenja odgovora*, in *Srbija u modernizacijskim procesima 19. i 20. veka: 3. Uloga elita*, edited by Perović, Latinka. Belgrade: Čigoja štampa, 153-90.

obliterates the existing social inequalities and conflicts. It may even bring together “the soccer players of Partizan and Crvena zvezda who appeared in the video (Hristos Voskrese) rubbing shoulders”.⁶⁵ This imagery invites the members of the ethno-national/religious majority (and only them) to assume their places in the imaginary ethnic community of “equals before God”.

Some of the messages conveyed by this hymn belong to the longstanding traditions of “Serbian populism”. It addresses the community perceived as an “organic whole”- Serbs by religious affiliation and upbringing (where being a “Serb” is the primary identification of an individual, which takes precedence over all other notions of belonging). “In the small nations, only the nation can be great.”(Dobrica Ćosić).⁶⁶ This nationalism is “cultural”, rather than “biological”,⁶⁷ but still has the nation as its main point of identification (and loyalty). The theme of joint efforts of different segments of the society for the sake of a common cause (raising the Tracts of St. George) resonates with collectivism not uncommon for the “communist” period (as well). The symbolical revival often associated with this campaign may be discussed as a form of reaction to both the individualization and detraditionalization of the contemporary society, especially its rejected legacies of socialist Yugoslavia. As signifiers of the present, modern gadgets and “foreign imports” (mobile phones, motorbikes, leather jackets and so on) are welcome as long as they do not disrupt the image of an ideal and homogeneous ethnic community and its core values (defense of the nation, its material and immaterial treasures, the codex of honor and sacrifice for a common cause, subordination of the individual to the community etc.). The idealized images of “video Ruritania” resonate with the notions of backwardness and underdevelopment as “cultural value” (as we have seen, even as “intellectual capital”). The “legend of Kosovo” is invoked (again) in aestheticized images that provoke both action and reflection, both shooting and singing, to return to Nebojša Popov’s discussion of the *longue durée* facets of “Serbian populism”. The peculiarity of “invented traditions” (like Christmas and Easter music videos in post-socialist Serbia) is that the continuity with historical past that they recall is largely factitious.⁶⁸ They confirm (again) that “selective use of the images from the past usually legitimizes the existing social order”.⁶⁹

“Few monasteries have been reconstructed with such pomp as Đurđevi Stupovi”.⁷⁰ As we have seen, the campaign *Podignimo Stupove* has brought together (very) different segments of the Serbian society - from anonymous individual donors to institutional and corporate ones; from public figures from the realms of pop music, visual arts, opera, film, theatre, television and sports to the top-ranking church officials; from the national public broadcaster (RTS) to the Serbian Orthodox Church; from national institutions of heritage

⁶⁵ Čanović, Gordana and Senka Lučić. 2011. *Manastir nastao zahvaljujući zatočeništvu*. *Politika online*, 15. September 2011 (accessed: 27. April 2016).

⁶⁶ Again, in the words of Dobrica Ćosić: “a Serb is a man who is not a man unless he is a Serb”.

⁶⁷ Mateja Kežman (Slovenian by origin) was not “born a Serb” (neither were Emir Kusturica, Fahreta Jahić Lepa Brena and other major public figures and celebrities, but their formal adoption of (Serbian) Orthodox Christianity secures their symbolical position (and privileges) of “true Serbs”.

⁶⁸ Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 2.

⁶⁹ Đerić, Gordana. (ed.). 2009. *Pamćenje i nostalgija*. Belgrade: Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju / IP “Filip Višnjić”, 177.

⁷⁰ Čanović and Lučić, *Manastir*.

protection to UNESCO; from local authorities to state ministries; from reporters to advertisers; from tourists to pilgrims, from schoolchildren to academics etc. Even the music video output of this elaborate campaign must be observed against the background of the overall “revival” of the institutional roles of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the post-socialist period.⁷¹ This revival comprises the symbolical and ritual associations with (both left- and right-wing) political parties; systematic efforts to introduce religious instruction into the previously secular school curricula or to increase the presence of the Church at the universities; rise of the media visibility of the Church officials and institutions; religion-inspired campaigning against the LGBT rights, rights of abortion or human rights in general; blessings and general support to the “holy warriors” for the national cause⁷²; penetration into the military and police forces; advocacy of ethnophilia (*svetosavlje*) and theodemocracy (*sabornost*); lack of self-reflection and critical discussion⁷³ of the role of the Church in the war and criminal activities associated with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, its economic and political system. The list goes on.

Conclusion

This study was an attempt to approach the often loose and inconsistently defined (even contested) concept of populism from the perspective of the presence and circulation of ideas associated with “Serbian populism” in a specific segment of the popular music industry in the country, organized around the charity campaign *Podignimo Stupove* - namely, its music video output. The prolific activities of this campaign have spanned 13 years (2002-2015) and are still ongoing, the longevity of the campaign being a phenomenon in itself in the Serbian context. It is now established as a permanent feature both in the airplay of the public broadcaster (Radio Television Serbia) and the religious calendar. As such, it provides valuable material for discussion of the ways in which popular culture may be used to communicate the dominant narratives of identity, belonging, and (in the last instance) loyalty to the (both “imagined” and real) ethno-national community. Popular culture studies (all too often neglected in the Balkan academic context) offer, if not a key to understanding, then a fresh perspective on observing the changes in communication of the longstanding notions associated with “Serbian populism”.

The music videos discussed in this study give us an ample insight into the combined musical, textual and visual language of the communication of ideology. What makes them particularly interesting for a discussion of the contemporary aspects of populist ideologies is their mode of addressing “the people”, perceived as a homogeneous ethno-religious community - as it were, a pre-modern political formation. Their strands of populism run in two opposite directions: on the one hand, using the support and material infrastructure of the institutional system (the Church, state ministries, the system of heritage protection, the media, tourist industry etc.) to promote their cause, they

⁷¹ On the problematic aspects of this revival, see Blagojević, Mirko. 2009. Revitalizacija religije i religioznosti u Srbiji: stvarnost ili mit?. *Filozofija i društvo* 2, 97-117; The bibliography on this subject is vast and shall not be further referenced in this paper.

⁷² See Milošević, Predrag. 1989. *Sveti ratnici. Borilačke veštine u Srba*. Gornji Milanovac: Dečije novine / Priština: Jedinstvo.

⁷³ Some notable exceptions include the critical reflections by Mirko Đorđević and Pavle Rak.

legitimize that system. On the other hand, addressing the “higher instances” (God himself) and shifting the sphere of identification / loyalty from the “earthly” to the “heavenly” domains might also work towards deligitimizing the institutional elites currently in power. Namely, the revival of religious life in the post-socialist states in the Balkans also means the restoration of the belief in the “eternal” and pre-political, in the modern sense of the term “political”. In other words, belief and trust in God might also connote and resonate with distrust in democracy and the modern political system personified by the leading political figures of the day.

Generally speaking, aestheticized images of golden ages of the past that never were raise many questions regarding their true purpose in contemporary Serbian society: namely, does this society actually live in the present? Are the actions of the current elites and “the people” motivated by real-life concerns or the imagery of this “glorious past”? Does this uncritical attachment to the past imply that this society is, so to speak, future-blind? Or is this masquerade designed merely to distract the subjects of an irresponsible state from the reality of their present social downfall and degradation? In the words of the historian Dubravka Stojanović: do such societies indeed produce “more history than they are capable of consuming?”⁷⁴ This article perhaps raises more questions than it hopes to answer. However, it may serve as a fine illustration of how populist political arguments may be served to the “people” in colorful Christmas or Easter wrappings. This imagery replaces the visions of a “communist” bright future with the visions of a “God loving” glorious past (in the times generally less interested in future). They all serve the same purpose – as ideological anaesthetic for the misery of the present.

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⁷⁴ Stojanović, Dubravka. 2010. *U ogledalu ‘drugih’*, in *Novosti iz prošlosti: Znanje, neznanje, upotreba i zloupotreba istorije*, edited by Dimitrijević, Vojin. Belgrade: Beogradski centar za ljudska prava, 13-31, 13.

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