

Regional Report: Serbia's Nationalist Revival

Author: [Milanka Saponja](#)

Government accused of failing to stem resurgence of Serbian nationalism.

The ghost of Serbian nationalism that many had hoped died with the ousting of Slobodan Milosevic two years ago is back, a group of prominent intellectuals recently warned.

They point to a new wave of chauvinism in key institutions, notably the Yugoslav army general staff, the Orthodox Church and the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, SANU.

The intellectuals - Dragan Velikic, Vladimir Arsenijevic, Predrag Cudic, Filip David, Milos Djordjevic and Mirko Djordjevic, Bogdan Bogdanovic, Radmila Lazic and Laslo Vogel - say their worry is not just confined to the resurgence of nationalism, but the failure of the government to oppose it.

The nationalist revival largely stems from widespread disenchantment with the slow pace of the post-Milosevic authorities' economic and political reform, their failure to significantly raise living standards and reluctance to tackle Serbia's wartime record.

Referring to the latter, the intellectuals, who issued their warning at the end of last month, worry that archrivals on the Serbian political scene, moderate Serbian prime minister Zoran Djindjic and the nationalist-oriented Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica, are too busy fighting for power to present a joint front against Milosevic's brand of ethnic bigotry.

By continuing to employ many former regime officials, and, in Kostunica's case, openly "flirting" with those who once voted for Milosevic, the two leaders show no desire to raise the question of Serb responsibility believing that it could affect their popularity, the intellectuals say.

The nationalist revival, they argue, has led to the strengthening of right-wing parties, organisations and politicians, notably the extremist Vojislav Seselj who performed unexpectedly well in Serbia's presidential elections.

One of the main engines for the resurgence is SANU - whose memorandum on Serbia's national goals published at the end of the Eighties helped fuel the rise of Serbian nationalism.

At the beginning of November, SANU organised an international meeting seen by many as an attempted comeback. At the gathering, delegates laid all the blame for the Balkan wars on other states, namely Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. It presented its controversial memorandum as a harmless analysis that in no way encouraged Belgrade's aggressive politics.

Miljenko Dereta, head of the NGO Civil Initiative, said, "After keeping quite for some time, the academicians are slowly returning."

The academy, together with the army and the Orthodox Church are believed to be fuelling the growth of hundreds of right-wing groups.

One such organisation is the “Svetozar Miletic” movement, founded in the northern ethnically-mixed region of Vojvodina, which, says nationalist academician Vasilije Krestic, was set up to help preserve the country’s “national identity and integrity” in the face of demands by Vojvodina “secessionists” for autonomy.

Nebojsa Krstic, the former leader of another group, *Obraz*, had his own column in the official army weekly, and some clerics allowed it use Church premises for meetings that focused on conspiracy theories and anti-Semitism.

Obraz also organised a campaign for the defence of the indicted former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic. On more than a few occasions, its members put up posters in towns across Serbia with the slogan “Every Serb is a Radovan”.

And together with Milosevic’s Socialists, it prevented American photographer Ron Haviv from staging an exhibition of war photos he took in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia.

The media also say the military and *Obraz* are very close and claim the latter’s offices are situated in army headquarters in Belgrade. Vojvodina parliament speaker Nenad Canak claims the group is “a para-military arm of the army”.

Another nationalist group is the students’ association “St Justin the Philosopher”, based at the language faculty at the University of Belgrade, which openly advocates religious intolerance.

In addition to a resurgence of right-wing political activity, there have been attempts to rehabilitate World War Two-era quislings such as Milan Nedic and the Chetnik movement.

Nedic, Serbian prime minister during the German occupation, has managed to find a place in the second edition of the book “One hundred most prominent Serbs” published last year.

A theatre play in which Nedic is presented as “a patriot who saved the Serbs from the more powerful enemy” has been staged more than 400 times in Belgrade.

State television is broadcasting a marathon series of 30 episodes on Draza Mihajlovic’s Chetniks, presenting it as an anti-fascist movement. The fact that some of its units did in fact fight against the Germans is cited as proof.

But a blind eye is turned to the very essence of the Chetnik platform - the establishment of a Greater Serbia.

“This is a sad reflection of the myths and false beliefs of the nationalist right,” said Milos Vasic of the Belgrade weekly *Vreme*.

The intellectuals say that only a firm hand from the Serbian and Yugoslav governments can neutralise the nationalist resurgence. But so far there is no sign that this is about to happen.

Milanka Saponja Hadzic is a Belgrade-based IWPR contributor.

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