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Marching the Victorious March: Populism and Memory Appropriation of the Yugoslav Partisans in Today's Serbia

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Abstract

This article examines the changing paradigms in the official politics of memory as linked to the rise of populism and authoritarian democracy in Serbia, focusing on the appropriation of the People's Liberation Movement and the victory against fascism in the Second World War. The article places the memory of the Second World War in the framework of anticommunism and ethnicization as dominant prisms of historical interpretation within state-sanctioned memory politics in contemporary Serbia. Understanding the populist memory politics in Serbia as based on the dichotomy of heroism and victimhood, this article focuses on the heroic aspect of the dominant narratives as exemplified in the notion of Serbia's liberation wars. The Victory Day and Day of Liberation of Belgrade are in focus as the most prominent commemorative events that illuminate the tendency of memory appropriation. After theoretical consideration about authoritarianism in Serbia, populism and memory politics and a brief background on the notion of liberation wars, the article moves on to the analysis of memory politics. The study is based on media discourses, state papers and observation of official commemorations and practices.

Keywords: southeastern Europe; postcommunist; Balkans; World War II; Memory politics

For the 75th anniversary of the victory in the Second World War, the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation launched the Memory Road, the initiative to bring soil from Red Army cemeteries abroad to Russia to be placed within the Patriot Park near Moscow dedicated to the Soviet and Russian armed forces (Walker 2020). One of the countries where the commemorative initiative took place in 2019 was Serbia. Russian and Serbian military and diplomatic officials organized events at 14 cemeteries with graves of the Red Army soldiers who had fought in the battles for liberation across the country together with the Yugoslav Partisans in 1944. Serbian officials took great pride in showcasing the preservation of the cemeteries and memory of the victory against fascism, narrated as the joint achievement of Russian and Serbian forces. Presenting themselves as a bulwark against historical revisionism and equalisation of communism and fascism, the representatives of the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS), which has ruled Serbia since 2012, emphasized that Serbia would never allow rewriting of history (“‘Put sećanja’ – grumen zemlje sa Groblja oslobodilaca Beograda se šalje u Rusiju” 2019).

The Memory Road and other celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Serbia centered on the narratives of the safeguarding of memory of antifascism and standing up against revisionism. At the same time, the commemorations of the victory and liberation from occupation by the communist-led Yugoslav Partisans transpired without a reference to their politics, their Yugoslav and multi-ethnic character, and the socialist state that emerged from their wartime struggle. To become suitable for the post-socialist political elites, the Partisans were

depoliticized and ethnicized as a Serbian army. In addition to that, the commitment to taking care of the graves of Red Army soldiers is a relatively recent phenomenon (Manojlović Pintar 2010), as well as the general dedication to honouring memory of the Second World War.

During the 1990s, the regime of Slobodan Milošević claimed continuity with the People's Liberation War, promoting the similar narratives of the preservation of antifascist memory. Similarly to the above-mentioned commemorations, the regime of the 1990s depoliticized the Partisans and referred to them as a victorious Serbian army. The state actors used the Partisans to legitimize the wars that followed the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia as the defence of freedom, independence, and territorial integrity ("Svetle tradicije NOB" 1998, 1). The Chief of the General Staff Momčilo Perišić, later sentenced at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia for war crimes and crimes against humanity during the 1990s wars,¹ summarized it in his public congratulatory letter for the 1998 Victory Day: "Continuing the traditions of the victorious army of the two Balkan and two world wars, the Army of Yugoslavia celebrates and commemorates the Victory Day as its holiday" (*Borba* 1998, 3). Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), today the second strongest political party, has maintained the narrative of claiming the Partisans' struggle until today (Tanjug 2020).

Between the overthrow of Milošević in 2000 and less than a decade before the Memory Road celebrations in 2020, Serbian state actors did not commemorate the Partisans, either criminalizing them as perpetrators, because of the reprisals at the end of the war, or erasing the communist and Yugoslav aspects of their struggle. After the overthrow of Milošević, the former opposition parties came to power in a form of a very diverse political coalition brought together by anticommunism and the objective to oust Milošević. Official memory politics reflected the general anti-communist political consensus and involved a radical revision of the image of the Second World War and socialist Yugoslavia. This process involved the criminalization of the People's Liberation War and rehabilitation of the defeated political and military movements of the Second World War (Đureinović 2020).

In addition to anticommunism directed at the Partisans and socialist Yugoslavia, the anti-Milošević discourse shared by the Democratic Party (*Demokratska stranka, DS*) and their political allies in the early 2000s was a key factor in the sphere of memory. Deeming the Milošević era a continuation of the Yugoslav communist rule, the political actors constructed the year 2000 as the fall of communism and themselves as the liberators from authoritarianism. The radical revision of the Second World War served the purpose of making a clear break with socialist Yugoslavia, but also with the Milošević regime, which appropriated the antifascist struggle. The staunch anticommunism in memory politics started shifting towards the appropriation of the victory against fascism as the SPS gained more traction and reconciled with the DS, forming a coalition government in 2008.

In 2012, the SNS came to power with its coalition partners, including the SPS. Since then, Serbia has faced a decline of democracy and the rise of authoritarian tendencies that represent the context for state-sponsored memory politics based on right-wing populist discourses. Taking the year 2000 as a significant juncture in memory politics motivated and dominated by anticommunism, the establishment of the SNS rule can be understood as another – populist – turn. Both anti-communist and populist paradigms mirror the international political context. As opposed to the rejection of the antifascist and Yugoslav past by previous governments led by the DS, the current regime appropriates the previously unwanted past and incorporates it into the wider framework of populist memory politics based on the dichotomy of heroism and victimhood. Anniversary celebrations of the end of the Second World War attract large numbers of people, including the far-right actors who also claim the Partisans and the victory against fascism.

Why are the nationalist political leaders suddenly celebrating the communist-led Partisans? Calling it memory appropriation, Jelena Subotić analyzes how the Holocaust memory has become a proxy for remembering communism across Central and Eastern Europe (Subotić 2019). In addition to the inversion of the Holocaust memory in Serbia, the Serbian mnemonic entrepreneurs (Jelin 2003) have appropriated and inverted the People's Liberation War to serve diverse political purposes oriented inwards or outwards. Since the first celebration of the Liberation Day of Belgrade

in 2009 and throughout the consolidation of SNS power since 2012, the end of the Second World War has become a proxy for remembering the wars and uprisings in the Serbian history termed the liberation wars of Serbia. The wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo during the 1990s, which accompanied the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia, are also amalgamated in this concept.

This article examines the changing paradigms in the official politics of memory as linked to the rise of populism and authoritarian democracy in Serbia, focusing on the appropriation of the People's Liberation Movement and the victory against fascism in the Second World War. The article places the memory of the Second World War in the framework of anticommunism and ethnicization as dominant prisms of historical interpretation within state-sanctioned memory politics in contemporary Serbia. Understanding the populist memory politics in Serbia as based on the dichotomy of heroism and victimhood, this article focuses on the heroic aspect of the dominant narratives as exemplified in the notion of Serbia's liberation wars. The Victory Day and Day of Liberation of Belgrade are in focus as the most prominent commemorative events that illuminate the tendency of memory appropriation. After theoretical consideration about authoritarianism in Serbia, populism and memory politics, and a brief background on the notion of liberation wars, the article moves on to the analysis of memory politics. The analysis presented in this article is based on media discourses, state papers, and observation of official commemorations and practices, centering on the state agency and official memory politics rather than the broader culture of war remembrance in Serbian society.

Serbia's state-sponsored memory politics represents an excellent case study for transformations of post-socialist memory politics due to the rise of authoritarian regimes. After the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević, the official efforts to confront the communist past and highlight its repressive side reflected the tendencies, discourses, and practices of post-socialist memory politics across Central and Eastern Europe. The "authoritarian turn" (Bieber 2020, 62) shifted the perspective from anticommunism and focus on the communist terror towards appropriation and celebration of the communist past and actors. The Victory Day and Day of Liberation of Belgrade, as celebrations of the victory of the communist-led and revolutionary Partisans, are the occasions when the turn in official memory politics is most conspicuous.

Authoritarianism, Populism, and Memory Politics: The Serbian Case

Since the SNS won the elections in 2012, Serbia has faced "the authoritarian turn" (Bieber 2020, 62). After a period of democratization that lasted over a decade after the fall of Slobodan Milošević, Serbia "reverted to more authoritarian rule" with the Serbian Progressive Party, consolidating its power under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić (Bieber 2020, 34). The legacies of the previous authoritarian regime remained and the period of democratization was characterized by the failure of the government "to decisively break with authoritarian practices and establish independent and democratic institutions, thus facilitating the return of competitive authoritarian regimes" (Bieber 2018, 337). The SNS regime is hybrid and can be termed an illiberal democracy or competitive authoritarianism, "neither democratic nor fully authoritarian" (Kapidžić 2020, 4). New authoritarianism in Serbia functions within a formally democratic system with patterns of rule that erode and bypass democratic institutions (Bieber 2020, 7). The move towards authoritarian rule in Serbia reflects the situation in most countries in Southeast Europe (Kapidžić 2020, 4) as well as the global crisis of democracy.

If we understand competitive authoritarianism as a civilian regime where "formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents" (Levitsky and Way 2010, 5), both Milošević's "rump" Yugoslavia and contemporary Serbia can be positioned within this framework. There are also many similarities between the two regimes, including the continuity of political actors and war narratives. Rather than emphasizing the

continuities and ruptures, this article accepts the argument that the 1990s “provided an important template and structural features that facilitated the increasing authoritarianism in recent years” (Bieber 2020, 2) and does not engage in the comparison of the two periods of authoritarianism in Serbia.

The state officials and institutions are not the only mnemonic actors and the arena of memory politics is not a static and one-dimensional context. In every society, there is a multitude of actors competing for hegemony of discourse and interpretative patterns and their interpretation of the past (Meyer 2008, 176). Austrian historian Berthold Molden provides a useful definition of memory politics that takes the plurality and competition for hegemony into consideration, understanding memory politics as “determined by the relations of forces between hegemonic master narratives, defiant counter-memories and silent majorities whose historical experience is rarely articulated in the public” (Molden 2016, 125). However, the state is an unrivalled entity in the power and resources it invests to the memory efforts (Wertsch 2002, 10). This is the case with both democratic or non-democratic regimes, but it is the constant confrontation with and negotiation of the past that takes place in democracies (Wolfrum 2010). In all types of regimes, the state takes the lead in the memory work and it outweighs the other competing struggles to purvey historical interpretations in its resources, authority and the ability to restrict the competing efforts (Wertsch 2002). In authoritarian democracies, the state power in the sphere of memory is even more emphasized. The authoritarian regime can be understood as the context which shapes the official memory politics. In these contexts, the state limits the reach of the alternative views on the past, outweighing the competing efforts with its resources and access to media and the willingness to deploy them to disseminate a certain view of the past. This is the case in Serbia, where the government invests in “the industry of memory” (Nguyen 2016), disseminating historical narratives through a wave of travelling and live-streamed commemorations and parades and state-sponsored and freely accessible films and books.

The competitive authoritarianism of the SNS and their coalition partners is based on a populist discourse, which is vital for understanding the official memory politics and its ambivalences. Populism strives to construct “the people” and the defining process of who belongs to “the people” involves “constructing powerful myths that draw on the collective memory of an imagined past” (Bull 2016, 217). While populists claim to speak for the people, they also remain completely vague about who these people are (Arditi 2007). The people are both populist audiences (those who are spoken *to* by populists) and populist constituencies (those who are spoken *for* by populists) and “successful representations of ‘the people’ rely on both of these groups” (Moffitt 2016, 96). The crucial characteristic of the populist discourse is that political actors avoid identifying “the people” while presenting themselves as “having an extreme immediacy or intimacy” with them and embodying the expression of the popular will (Moffitt 2016, 96). In the case of Serbia, the SNS claims to be the true representative of the popular will, as opposed to the corrupted elites who ruled Serbia before and forced the Serbian people to feel ashamed about their past and their heroes and victims. “The people” that the political leaders refer to are “the Serbian people” (*srpski narod*).

The elites and enemies against whom the Serbian populists claim to stand are the previous governments led by the DS and their individual representatives, now active in various opposition parties. The current state officials accuse them of employing memory politics that did not allow the Serbian people to be proud of their history, heroes, and victims. There is no reference to the role of the SPS as the coalition partner of the DS. Moreover, the current political leaders supported the radical revision of the Second World War during the early 2000s and the current SNS leadership advocated and voted in favour of the rehabilitation of the defeated Second World War forces. At that time, the today’s SNS was still in the far-right Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*, SRS), whose main historical claim was to represent the successor of the Chetnik movement, the defeated royalist armed forces of the Second World War who engaged in collaboration and atrocities against civilians. Their embracing of the communist-led Partisans,

incompatible with their politics, does not involve the separation from the Chetniks and anti-communism, but merging of the two movements into the simple claim that “the Serbs are antifascists” (Beljan 2015).

Following the ideational approach to populism by Mudde and Kaltwasser, populism is here understood as “a discourse, an ideology, or a worldview” (2017, 5). It is a “thin-centred ideology” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 6) which is why populism often appears connected to other ideological elements, even seemingly incompatible but important for appealing to a broader public. This is precisely what is new about populist memory politics if we take into consideration that memory politics has always been selective and intertwined with political legitimacy and identity-building and that right-wing politics is not a new phenomenon. Its thin-centered nature and incoherence in ideology differentiate contemporary populism and its memory politics from the other forms, involving “a mixed bag of beliefs, stereotypes, attitudes and related programs which aim to address and mobilise a range of equally contradictory segments of the electorate” (Wodak and KhosraviNik 2013, xvii).

This characteristic of populism makes it easier to understand the strange bedfellows of Serbia’s memory politics, such as the antifascist and communist-led resistance of the Second World War and war criminals of the 1990s sentenced at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), celebrated shoulder to shoulder. Another important aspect of the populist ideology in the sphere of memory is the appropriation of the historical events and actors incompatible with the politics of the populist leaders for the purposes of broader appeal to “the people.” It explains the glorification of the Partisans by the SNS representatives in power, who are otherwise more politically oriented towards their wartime enemies, the Chetniks.

In addition to its contradictory nature, populist memory politics is about the interpretation of the past through the dual lens of heroes and victims, while denying “many horrific skeletons” in the cupboard of national history (Wodak 2020, 281). Populists across Europe and beyond have mobilized memory and heritage for their cause (De Cesari and Kaya 2020). They have been searching for “new narratives of the past, present, and future” and establishing new commemorative practices and sites of memory, shifting blame and guilt and revising historical facts (Wodak 2020, 281). Similarly to the way memory politics works in nation-states in general, a heroic narrative is constructed through “the selection and representation of ... key events, actors, and places to establish a meaningful framework in which to interpret the existence and continuity of the nation and people” (Wodak 2020, 283). The common narratives of the past constructed by right-wing populists see “the people” as either heroes or victims of evil (Wodak 2020, 280).

In the case of the Second World War in Serbian memory politics, the dichotomy of heroism and victimhood reduces the wartime experience to the genocide against Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia and the victory against fascism by the communist-led Partisans. Domestic collaboration with the Axis powers and complicity in the Holocaust does not exist in the dominant narrative. While many current actors actively endorsed rehabilitation of the defeated forces of the Second World War during the first post-Milošević decade, they now silently separate themselves from the active role they played in revising the Second World War history. The appropriation of the People’s Liberation War and its ethnicization as Serbian replaced the previously hegemonic discourse of Serbian victimhood under communism. This article focuses on the heroic aspect of the dichotomy of memory politics.

The Liberation Wars of Serbia

As an umbrella term for all wars and uprisings of Serbian history, the notion of the liberation wars of Serbia (*oslobodilački ratovi Srbije*) underlies the populist memory politics of the SNS. The concept stems from the 1990s but it has rapidly regained relevance since 2012, embodying the contradictory nature of the populist understanding of history through the narrow lens of

heroism and militarism. The focus on heroes and victims implies deliberately leaving out the dark episodes of national history such as collaboration during the Second World War and responsibility for war crimes and genocide during the 1990s wars. The notion of the liberation wars of Serbia is written in the establishment of a governmental committee for the preservation of their memory and the national calendar that this board adopts, a blueprint of the official memory politics.

The Board for the Preservation of Traditions of the Liberation Wars of Serbia was established already in 1997 as an inter-ministerial committee responsible for initiating, coordinating, advising, and following various forms of memory work and observing existing and new memorials (*Odluka o osnivanju Odbora za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije*, n.d., vol. 38/97, 46/01, para. 2). The Government of Serbia establishes the Board and its members are five ministers and a state secretary. The activities and public presence of the Board can be traced back to 2013, after which the existence and work of the Board became more evident in the public. The Board started issuing public statements and announcements of upcoming commemorations and media have increasingly mentioned the Board as the organizer of commemorations and reported about its meetings (Tanjug 2015).

The Government's official decision to establish the Board, most recently revised in 2016, lists the responsibilities of the Board in the sphere of memory of liberation wars. The responsibilities include: giving incentive to institutions, organizations, associations, and citizens to nurture the traditions of liberation wars and develop patriotism; following, coordinating, and directing the activities of institutions, organizations, and associations regarding commemorations of important historical events; evaluating the initiatives for memorials and initiating and following the preservation and maintenance of existing memorials; and cooperating with institutions responsible for taking care of memorials of Serbia's liberation wars abroad (*Odluka o osnivanju Odbora za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije*, n.d.).

The Board is also in charge of establishing a program of commemorations of events and persons related to liberation wars. The State Program for Commemorating the Anniversaries of Historic Events of the Serbian Liberation Wars, as the program is officially called, describes "the significant anniversaries, commemorative days, national and religious holidays, as well as important Serbian personalities, together with a brief description of why specific days are commemorated and exhaustive explanations of the protocol for each of them" (David 2014, 477). The most recent versions of the program were passed in 2009, 2013, and 2016 (Odbor za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije 2009; 2013; 2016). The program is essentially a national calendar that was largely ignored during the 1990s and early 2000s. In the authoritarian democracy in Serbia today, it forms the base of the official memory politics and illuminates how history is narrated in populism.

The introductory remarks of the 2009 and 2013 program list the strengthening and further affirmation of the principles of patriotism, antifascism, understanding and cooperation and the fight against antisemitism as its main goals (2009, 1). At the same time, the program is represented as one of the documents through which "the Republic of Serbia entirely rejects every relativization of crimes committed against innocent civilians in the past, attempts of historical revisionism and rehabilitation of political organizations, armed units and individuals responsible for the crimes committed" (2009, 1). Among the historical events listed in the program are the 1389 Kosovo battle, the anti-Ottoman uprisings and dates important for the Serbian statehood in the 19th century, First World War battles and the armistice, and the beginning of the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia.

The program has always entailed several dates from the Second World War, including its beginning in Yugoslavia in April 1941, the battle on Kadinjača and Sarmian Front and a memorial day dedicated to victims of genocide in the Second World War, which emphasizes the Serb victims (2009, 4–5). Victory Day has also been on the official calendar. However, the language that describes the events of the Second World War, emphasizing the struggle of the

People's Liberation Movement against the occupation and domestic quislings was preserved from the earlier, Yugoslav, period. None of the Second World War dates, except for the Remembrance Day of Victims of Genocide and local commemorations, were officially commemorated after the fall of Milošević.

After 2012, the new regime embraced the program and the notion of liberation wars. The Day of Liberation of Belgrade, the Fighter's Day, and the Day of Uprising in 1941, public holidays abolished in 2000, were reinstated in the 2013 program (Đureinović 2017). The 2016 program illuminates the populist turn in the official memory politics, listing 59 dates to be commemorated throughout a year (Odbor za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije 2016). The government added several new dates for every historical period either celebrating military battles or honoring Serbian victims, including anniversaries related to the war in Kosovo and its aftermath and a day of remembrance for the victims of the 1995 Operation Storm that ended the war in Croatia. When it comes to the Second World War, the program introduced additional anniversaries related to the Partisans or crimes against civilians in Serbia as well as three international days: The Holocaust Remembrance Day, International Day against Fascism and Antisemitism, and International Roma Genocide Victims Remembrance Day. A new section is the list of memorial school classes that include Victory Day and the Liberation Day of Belgrade (Odbor za negovanje tradicija oslobodilačkih ratova Srbije 2016, 30), in addition to several Second World War dates dedicated to victims.

While this was not the case during the first decade after the fall of Milošević, the national calendar of anniversaries of the liberation wars demonstrates what the political elites led by the SNS consider a relevant past worthy of commemorating at the state level. The liberation wars narrative that underpins the populist memory politics implies that all wars fought by the Serbian armed forces were for liberation and that they have never engaged in offensive warfare. The other half of the mnemonic dichotomy is about equally innocent Serbian victims. In this way, the national calendar constructs the master commemorative narrative (Zerubavel 1995, 6) of the Serbian people always standing on the right side, as a small nation fighting the empires, occupation and secessionist terrorists, and suffering great losses. This narrative is central to populist memory politics after 2012.

Memory Politics after the Fall of Milošević

The authoritarian turn shifted memory politics away from the anti-communist consensus after the fall of Slobodan Milošević in 2000 that resembled the general paradigm in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (Ghodsee 2014). Since the fall of communism in the early 1990s and especially in the last two decades, political elites in East European countries sought to construct "their national identities on the memory of Stalinism and Soviet occupation, as well as on the search for continuity with pre-communist nation-states" (Subotić 2020, 2). The official memory politics of the Second World War in Serbia during the first years after Milošević had been ousted embodied the transnational trend.

The Second World War and Yugoslavia are inseparably entwined (Sundhaussen 2004, 374). As the People's Liberation War represented the mythical birthplace of Yugoslav state socialism (Stojanović 2010, 17), the revision of the Second World War also aimed at the negative reevaluation of Yugoslavia. Searching for a replacement for the ideologically unsuitable Partisans, the actors of the official memory politics constructed the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland, more commonly known as the Chetniks, as an antifascist movement and a new role model for the post-socialist nation-state.

The current highest state officials from the SNS played an important role in the process of a radical revision of 20th-century history, promoting the discourse of national reconciliation.² They endorsed the legislation that reevaluated the Chetniks as antifascists (*Zakon o pravima boraca, vojnih invalida i njihovih porodica* 2004) and the subsequent process of judicial rehabilitation of Dragoljub Mihailović that ended in 2015 (Dulić 2012).³ Already during this period, they were

against the negative portrayal of the Partisans that went hand in hand with Chetniks' positive reinterpretation and advocated national reconciliation through equalization of former adversaries (Narodna skupština Republike Srbije 2004). During the parliamentary debate on the changes of the Veteran Law, as MPs of the far-right Serbian Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka, SRS) that the SNS broke from in 2008, Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić connected both the Chetniks and the Partisans to the 1990s wars. As Nikolić explained, "I can say with pride: Everyone who have gone to defend the Serbian lands and people since 1991 can freely call themselves both Chetniks and Partisans" (Narodna skupština Republike Srbije 2004).

The discourse of national reconciliation is directly linked to the understanding of the Second World War as a civil war between the Partisans and Chetniks as two Serbian resistance movements. Memory actors from all levels of memory work (Conway 2010) narrated the revision of the Second World War as leading to the rectification of the divisions within the Serbian nation caused by the civil war. According to this war interpretation that relativizes positionalities and differences between historical actors, both the Chetniks and the Partisans fought for a national cause.

In the context of the anti-communist memory politics of the DS government, the gradual shift to celebrations of the end of the Second World War started towards the end of the first decade of their rule. Two factors are crucial for understanding why the previously staunchly anti-communist political actors would turn to celebrate the communist Partisans after almost a decade of continuous attempts to write them out of national history. First, Kosovo proclaimed independence in 2008 and Serbian officials counted on the support of Russia in this context. Economic relations with Russia also became more important. Hence, in 2009, the Liberation Day of Belgrade was celebrated with Dmitry Medvedev as the guest of honour ("Svečana akademija povodom Dana oslobođenja Beograda" 2009). The second factor is that the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička partija Srbije*, SPS) formed the government together with the DS in 2008. The SPS, now the second most influential political party in Serbia, has presented itself as the keeper of the legacies of the People's Liberation War since the early 1990s, criticizing anti-communist memory politics and rehabilitation of the defeated forces.

Before 2009, the Liberation Day of Belgrade, as well as of other cities in Serbia, was not officially celebrated. The Cemetery of Belgrade Liberators, where the Partisans and Red Army soldiers who had died in the fights for the liberation of the capital were buried, was decaying until it was quickly cleaned and renovated before Medvedev's visit. Rather than Victory Day, May 9th was marked primarily as Europe Day.

Celebrations of the Victory and Liberation since 2012

On May 9th, 2018, hundreds marched in the Immortal Regiment through the center of Belgrade, a memorial procession where participants carry photographs of their ancestors who fought in the Second World War. The Victory Day ritual originated in Russia in 2012 and it has taken place in Serbia since 2016. At the head of the procession was Miša Vacić with Serbian Right (*Srpska desnica*), a far-right political party close to the SNS regime whose leader Vacić had been convicted of hate speech, discrimination, and possession of illegal weapons ("Miša Vacić osuđen na godinu dana uslovno" 2013). Explaining his participation in the procession, Vacić emphasized: "We want a free world, a world liberated from fascism and Nazism, we want Kosovo liberated from Siptar extremists, free Novorossiia liberated from Nazis from Kyiv. The message is that we believe in the final victory just as our ancestors did 73 years ago. We believe in the victory of people's freedom" (Informer 2018).

The commemoration in 2018 was not the first time that the Serbian far-right honored the victory of communist-led antifascist armies. In 2016, Boško Obradović from Dveri, a far-right group turned political party now in opposition, marched in the first Immortal Regiment organized in Serbia ("Besmrtni puk' prvi put u Beogradu" 2016). The discursive ambivalence of right-wing and far-right populism is evident in Vacić's statement, combining antifascism, ethnically homogeneous

Kosovo, and independent Novorossiia as ideas representing the freedom of the people. Such ambivalences surface in the right-wing and far-right populist discourses promoted by both state actors and from below.

State officials exemplify the populist incoherence and contradiction, appropriating the People's Liberation War and adapting it to their politics which is equally incompatible with the Partisans, as the politics of Vacić and Serbian Right. The "mixed bag" (Wodak and KhosraviNik 2013, xvii) of the populist memory of the Second World War contains the central themes of the 1990s wars, refusal to come to terms with the independence of Kosovo and the alliance with Russia, in addition to other wars and uprisings of the modern history. The Serbian army and the notion of liberation wars of Serbia integrate these contents of memory into one militarized master commemorative narrative of Serbian heroism and struggle for freedom (Zerubavel 1995, 6).

While the DS reluctantly commemorated the Partisans, the authoritarian regime led by the SNS fully embraced the end of the Second World War as the victory of the Serbian army that deserves to be celebrated pompously. The Victory Day on May 9th and Liberation Day of Belgrade on October 20th constitute the most prominent occasions commemorated at a large scale that illuminate the populist memory politics. With military parades, eternal flames, re-enactments, and other new or revived practices continuously added to the commemorative repertoire, these celebrations are textbook examples of the invention of traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992) and the repurposing of those from the earlier periods such as socialist Yugoslavia.

The scale of commemorative practices has been steadily growing since the ten days of celebrations that culminated in a spectacular military parade for the Liberation Day of Belgrade attended by Vladimir Putin in 2014 (Robinson 2014). The military parade under the title "The March of the Victorious" became a benchmark for commemorations, introducing the Army of Serbia and Ministry of Defence as key agents of the institutional level of memory work (Conway 2010, 6–7). Militarization of commemorative practices couples the armed forces from the past with the Serbian army in the present, constructing one thread of heroism and righteousness that goes through and unites the entire Serbian history.

The wars of the 1990s feature in Second World War commemorations today. On the discursive level, the coupling of the Partisans and the Army of Yugoslavia from the 1990s wars constructs the Serbian armed forces as righteous heroes fighting on the right side throughout history. Beyond the Second World War anniversaries, the celebration of the Serbian heroism in the 1990s wars and commemoration of Serbian victims have become the focal points of the official memory politics, including the glorification of the military commanders sentenced for war crimes. On a practical level, prominent military figures of the armed conflicts of the 1990s take leading positions in the antifascist commemorations. The 2014 military parade was led by General Ljubiša Diković, the Chief of the General Staff of the Serbian Armed Forces at the time, considered a hero from the war in Kosovo.⁴ Diković was later decorated with a gold award plaque of the Ministry of Defence for the military parade ("Dodeljene nagrade za 'Korak pobednika'" 2014). The 2019 Immortal Regiment procession in the city of Niš involved Vladimir Lazarević as the central speaker, a general convicted by the ICTY for war crimes against Albanians during the Kosovo war. Embodying the contradictory populist memory politics of the glorious heroic past, Lazarević, a 1990s war criminal speaking at a Victory Day celebration, depicted the Immortal Regiment as standing for the freedom-loving patriotism, regardless of the strength of the attacking enemy, as demonstrated in the Serbian history from the anti-Ottoman uprisings to the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (Beta 2019).

In addition to the armed conflicts of the 1990s, the First World War is another important content of "the mixed bag" of Second World War memory. The notion of Serbia's liberation wars includes the First World War. The large-scale commemorations emerged in 2012 and intensified around the centenary of the beginning of the war in 2014. The Armistice Day on November 11th has been a state holiday since 2012, celebrated as a public holiday and a day off when all schools, universities, and businesses are closed. The state introduced a commemorative badge with Natalie's Ramonda flower to be worn on the Armistice Day, aiming to elevate the flower to the symbol of the war remembrance

similar to the poppy in Great Britain. These state-sponsored efforts coincided with the rise of the large-scale commemorations of the Second World War.

The First World War is not only an important commemorative occasion on its own, but it also entwines with the Second World War. This is evident in the “March to the Drina” song from the First World War becoming an inseparable part of the Victory Day and Liberation Day commemorations. At the 2014 Liberation Day parade, a platoon dressed in the uniforms of the First World War was positioned in front of the central stand with the most important guests, unifying “a hundred-year tradition” (Belić 2014). The invention of the Days of Freedom (*Dani slobode*) in 2018 cemented the world wars’ merge (FoNet 2018). The two-week celebration takes place between October 20th and November 1st, linking the liberation days of the capital city in both world wars with the goal of “showcasing the memory of the heroic days of our history” (FoNet 2018). The March of the Victorious (*Marš pobednika*), originally the title of the 2014 military parade, emerged in the context of the Days of Freedom and has become a regular practice as a memorial procession dedicated to all who gave their lives for the liberation of Belgrade (Beoinfo 2019).

Concluding Remarks

In the last two decades, the official politics of memory in Serbia has gone through two junctures. After the fall of Slobodan Milošević in 2000, the delegitimization of socialist Yugoslavia and its legacies became the most significant purpose of state efforts in memory politics as political elites constructed anti-communism as the source of legitimacy. The process of turning socialist Yugoslavia into a dark episode and a wrong turn in national history involved a radical revision of the Second World War that criminalized the communist-led Partisans and rehabilitated various Axis collaborators as national heroes.

The more recent transformation of post-socialist memory politics is the populist turn that has transpired since the Serbian Progressive Party came to power in 2012. This article used the examples of Victory Day and Liberation Day of Belgrade to map the main characteristics of populist memory politics in Serbia’s authoritarian democracy. As the populist ideology in general, the memory politics based on populism is contradictory and merges seemingly incompatible historical events and actors, from the communist-led multi-ethnic Partisans to the war criminals of the 1990s. Military history is amalgamated into the notion of the liberation wars of Serbia, the foundation of hegemonic narratives and blueprint for the populist memory politics that interprets the national history through the dichotomic perspective of heroes and victims, bravery and innocence. The Serbian army is a key factor in this context, not only for dominant narratives revolving around it as righteous and heroic but also because of the all-encompassing militarization of commemorative practices that has gained momentum since 2012. With military parades, eternal flames, re-enactments, and other new or revived practices, celebrations of the Victory Day and Liberation Day of Belgrade represent textbook examples of the inventions of traditions and their repurposing in the context of contemporary populism.

Disclosures. None

Notes

- 1 Perišić was found guilty by the Trial Chambers and sentenced to 27 years in prison in 2011, but was acquitted on appeal in 2013.
- 2 See: Djokić, Dejan. 2002. “The Second World War II: Discourses of Reconciliation in Serbia and Croatia in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s.” *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans* 4 (2): 127–40.

- 3 Dragoljub Mihailović was sentenced to death at a public trial in 1946 and executed shortly afterwards. The 2015 court decision proclaimed the trial and sentence unfair and politically motivated, but the years-long process was also about revising the history of the Second World War in the courtroom. At the final stage of the process, Oliver Antić, the advisor to SNS leader and former president of Serbia Tomislav Nikolić, took over the case representing the plaintiffs.
- 4 During the war in Kosovo in 1999, approximately 1,400 Albanian civilians were killed in the area of responsibility of the 37th Motorized Brigade of the Army of Yugoslavia. General Ljubiša Diković was the commander of that brigade at the time and he has not been held accountable for these crimes. See: Fond za humanitarno pravo. 2012. *File: Ljubiša Diković*. Belgrade. <http://www.hlc-rdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Ljubisa-Dikovic-File-and-Annex.pdf>. (Accessed June 29, 2022)

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