

Constructing the Myth of Brussels: The International Community and the Political Elite in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Eldar Sarajlić

Hypothesis

I wish to claim the general hypothesis for this paper at the very outset: the political agenda of the local political elite and the International Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina converge in maintaining the existing non-democratic relations of power. The convergence is based on maintaining the domination of the discourse over the political agenda. It has found particular expression in mutual and systematic production of the *Myth of Brussels* – a discursively reproduced symbolic practice that reflects and constitutes the absence of democratic deliberation on the things of public interest and contributes to the status quo. I will take upon several analytic contexts to make my argument clear: theoretical, historical, power and political. Along the way, I will also try to describe the outlined phenomenon by referring to a set of practical (mostly media) examples.

Symbols and Politics

The given hypothesis builds on the assumption that political relations between two subjects, in any given context, are based on two levels: explicit and implicit. The explicit ones refer to spheres of concrete forms of political agency, mainly through institutional, personal and group associations, be it formal or semi-formal nature. The implicit levels on the other hand are very often dependent on other types of relations – those based on a level of symbols, aiming to impinge on the emotional part of human personality, including both the participants and the adherents of a certain political practice. This is not a recent discovery in human history: political symbols have always been playing a vital role in political development throughout the world. Therefore, critical political science must focus on both planes of political reality, since both can reveal something new about the nature of the given political order. Thus, unlike Feuerbach, Marx, Engels and other subsequent philosophers of the dialectical materialism who claimed all forms of ideas were drawn from material reality, it is very important not to forget that things very often develop in the opposite direction; sometimes, it is the material reality that is the reflection of certain ideas, not the other way around. In other words, symbols are very powerful in politics: they can create, direct and change political reality to a large extent; political anthropology, as a scientific discipline, has done much to prove the fact.

Socialist Past and the Rule of Words

Contrary to its fundamental theoretical creed – that stipulated the supremacy of the ‘material reality’ over ideas – the communist order in the former Yugoslavia, implicitly was all about ideas and symbols. Since the ‘material reality’ was far away from what the political vanguard – the Party – had proclaimed to be the result of the historical course of development, it depended upon a systematic production of discourse that was to justify the nature of the regime. As an offspring of the ultimate ideology, it created, as the Serbian political scientist Nenad Dimitrijević said, a specific “rule of words”, where discourse took over the exclusive role to determine the social reality¹. In other words, there was no ‘reality’ outside the dominant discourse of “class struggles”, “development of socialism” and other language patterns of political explanation. It was an *ideocracy* par excellence, ruled by those responsible for production of ideas – members of the party elite.

It is predominantly believed that the transition period in South-eastern Europe that followed the international demise of communism had stripped the layers of ideology off, leaving the ‘pure’ political reality of the region exposed for comprehension. Many theorists and political practitioners believe the age after ideology has come, when political forms represent no priory determined idea, but the essential nature of things. There is no more ideology, they say – the world has come closer to the ‘real’ reality. In accordance to this belief, the symbolic register of post-communist political elites was understood to be an expression of historical dispositions independent of any ideology.

Reality after Utopia

However, it is very often easy to omit the fact that the talk about ‘reality’, as a specific type of discourse, can be ideologically fashioned as well. A well known fact says that no matter what the ‘substance’ of a particular discourse is, it is always exposed to ideological manufacture: in other words, there are no shortcuts to ‘reality’. The basic difference between the utopian discourse of the wanted ‘reality-to-come’ that had marked the communist narratives and new post-ideology discourses of the future is that the latter build upon the deconstruction of utopias. The ‘reality’ is not supposed to ‘come’ because a certain value, or an idea says so – but because the alternative doesn’t exist. Hence, we say the post-ideology discourses, as political narratives created after the end of communism, are (not utopian but) *dystopian*: they speak of necessity instead of ideals. Where the utopian discourses invoke the desired, dystopian ones announce the inevitable.

The key thing both of these types of discourse share is their utility to explain and direct social and political behaviour. The ‘explanations’ are not based on rational and analytic thinking, but very often employ simplistic metaphors of ‘good versus bad’ dichotomy that refer to theological and mythological structures of mutually exclusive categories explaining the assumed historical determination. In both cases, the ‘reality-to-come’

¹ Nenad Dimitrijević, *Slučaj Jugoslavija: socijalizam, nacionalizam, posledice*, Reč: Beograd, 2001.

serves as a powerful political mechanism:² it produces power that is bestowed upon those responsible for its creation – the political elite.

'Political Formula' and the Non-Democratic Convergence

There is a point at which the ideological (and non-democratic) character of the socialist regime – depended upon constant production of discursive justifications of the political order – and the political nature of the subsequent transition regimes in South-eastern Europe converge: in both cases, the political elite utilizes an exclusive symbolic discourse to describe and justify the basic parameters of social reality and its political solutions. In phenomenological sense, neither this is new in history of politics – in political science this is labelled as the “political formula”, according to the late 19th and early 20th century Italian political philosopher Gaetano Mosca, which aims to explain the modes of reproduction of political elites and their explanatory matrix. In other words, every political elite must justify its existence and explain publicly why it is to be granted with power by the given political community. Liberal democratic tradition has enabled us to structure this process into a frame of public deliberation about what is to represent the “political formula” in a free and democratic society. Yet, the non-democratic character of the illiberal socialist regime in Yugoslavia is to be found in the fact that there was no public deliberation about the “political formula” upon which the political elite was reproduced. Acting as a revolutionary subject in wartime, it seized power and subsequently saw no need to justify its political mandate to the community.³ The convergence of the non-democratic character of the socialist elite with their post-socialist heirs appears in the context in which the ethno-national elite took hold of power in a period of ethnic struggles and, similarly to the communist party vanguards, introduced an exclusive political formula that required minimal public justification for its rule. As a product of dystopian comprehension, it was understood to be an authentic outlook of the historical reality devoid of ideology layers, and hence a supreme matrix for production of political power. In this context, two notions played the key role in the creation of the new “political formula”: ethnicity and ‘Europe’.

Ethnicity and the Logic of 'Europeanisation'

The supremacy of cultural identities that was established in most of the transitional countries of South-eastern Europe implied a fundamentally ‘European nature’ of the ethnic political order. It was so because the 19th Century romanticism, that had introduced the concept of modern nation based on common culture to Balkan peoples, was essentially a product of European history; hence, the unity of culture and politics as the European way of making modern states after the deconstruction of the socialism was

² One can even say that the latter – dystopian one – is much more powerful, since it outlines the inevitability of a certain historical development with no alternative, unlike the previous one that advocated a particular social project that could have had an alternative.

³ A very useful account is given by Milovan Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957.

understood as a mould for post-socialist ‘return to fundamental nature of things’, a process in which the layers of ideology are rejected and the society returned to what was considered ‘the original trail of history’. To draw political arguments from Europe during the transition period was to call upon the historically approved practice, announcing the inevitability of realization of the European experience, which meant reduction of ethnically complex states to more simple and homogeneous political entities.⁴ The following matrix was to be understood as ‘natural’ from the point of history: to get to Europe, a society needs to be ‘Europeanised’ – divided along cultural lines and established as a set of independent nation-states. This ‘soft power’ of Europe was further strengthened by the sheer geopolitical force and the inferred inevitability of broader integration of the European continent into a single political unit. The symbolism of Europe had thus become an ultimate justificatory mechanism for political practice that needed no supreme explanation, but sufficed in the metaphorical meaning of the definitive historical good incarnated in historical determinacy of being part of Europe. By its very nature it has become subservient to ethno-nationalist ideology and its political values. As a powerful rhetorical tool for political justification, it has also become a constituent part of the ethnic exclusivism that has risen in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1992-1995 war: all of the ethnic elites claimed the ‘non-European’ nature of their enemies and ‘European’ properties for themselves and built the exclusivist ideology upon these premises. Serbs claimed to defend Europe from the Muslim invaders from Asia; Croats claimed to embody the *Antemurale Christianitatis* – the Gate of Christianity – preventing ‘non-European’ peoples to invade Europe; Bosnian Muslims claimed to defend the ‘European civilization’ from the Orthodox barbarism and represent the true European nature of things.⁵

Discourse of ‘Europe’ and Political Power

The discourse of ‘Europe’ in Bosnia and Herzegovina, obviously, is not innocent to the recent past of authoritarianism and exclusive elite ownership of the political domain; even more, it bears strong ideological implications and explains the political formula upon which authoritarian regimes justified their power much more than anything else. Just as the ancient myths spoke about a certain order of things (cosmology) and were implicitly utilized to define the social structure and determine patterns of domination, the elite discourse of ‘Europe’ in Bosnia and Herzegovina also aimed to structure certain relations of (political) power. Given the history of discursive attachments to the ‘Europe’ in the public sphere, one can say ‘Europe’ as a symbol represents nothing more than a rhetorical instrument employed to create and legitimise a given political power. On a subconscious level it has called for ideology of domination, not for pluralism and democracy.

⁴ „Bosnia and Herzegovina is the last multicultural country in Europe“, cried Prime Minister of Republika Srpska in an editorial that aimed to show the ‘superficial’ character of the existing Bosnia and Herzegovina that is destined to disintegrate along the ethnic lines. See more in *Nezavisne Novine*, 24 April 2008, pg.11.

⁵ An extensive account on this and other similar mythological discourses is given in Kolstø, Pål (ed.) *Historijski mitovi na Balkanu (Historical Myths in the Balkans)* Institut za istoriju, Sarajevo, 2003.

Crucially important for the current state of affairs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the notion of 'Europe' still represents a rhetorical tool for justification of non-democratic and exclusivist political powers, hindering a sound democratic development of the country and preventing the break-up of the historical cycle of exclusive elite dominance over politics. I wish to make a claim that it is Europe itself – embodied in the European Union and other agents of the International Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina – that further contributes to creation of the ideological discourse of 'Europe' that makes no substantive change but helps non-democratic powers to legitimise their political practice and maintain the existing status quo, through recognition of the discourse as *the* democratic practice.

The Myth of Brussels and Political Practice

There is another understanding of 'Europe' that participates in the overall phenomenology of the Myth of Brussels, which has been developed by Europeans themselves. The genesis of the metaphor of 'Europe' as a nucleus of what is subsequently to become the Myth of Brussels roots back to the late 18th Century, when the dichotomy between faith and reason has been established as a paradigm for modernity's progress. Since industrial, political and social revolutions had taken place in the continent, the very name of 'Europe' turned into a metaphor for depicting reason and modernity as antitheses to faith and religion. In the modern axiology, 'Europe' was to describe the new trans-historical good that was revealed in history itself. But, unlike the nature of a metaphor as such – which has no autonomy of its own but stands *instead of* some other subject which it aims to describe – 'Europe' has gotten its symbolic autonomy and started to live a life of its own. The subsequent progress of history and its contingent symbols gradually drained the explanatory content of this notion, leaving it as an empty shell applicable in various contexts which sought to establish the ultimate axis of good versus bad. The life of 'Europe' as a rhetoric metaphor has found its particular place in the periods of uncertainty and turmoil, mostly during revolutions and transitions that called for plain explanatory patterns for making sense in times of confusion. Such a period was the one after 1989, when 'Europe' turned into a useful metaphor for depicting the transformation from communist authoritarianism to capitalist democracy: the Myth of Brussels as an overarching narrative of progress and socio-political transformation from poverty to opulence has been established as a cornerstone of public comprehension. A similar scenario appeared in most of the former communist and socialist countries in South-eastern Europe which adopted a new way of explaining politics: finally, the ideas gave got their full and explicit existential power (denied formally during the reign of communism's dialectical materialism) making political discourse – as a network of political ideas and the sphere of symbolic exchange – to be understood not as a symbolic representation of the politics, *but as political practice par excellence*. To act politically was to engage in the exchange of symbols and recognise the primacy of narratives over direct political action. Ideology, as the practice of producing words and discourses to create legitimacy of political power has come again to the very centre of political existence. This was obviously the logic behind the involvement of many European powers in the post-Yugoslavian war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which have very often

drawn conclusions and acted not upon the reality in the field – war crimes, mass atrocities – but upon the discourse of Balkan political leaders.⁶

At this point, the understanding of ‘Europe’ as the essence of the Myth of Brussels that aims to explain the development of transitional countries from autocracy to democracy, merges with the specific local understanding of ‘Europe’ as the cradle of ethnically defined nation-states. As an ambivalent notion, its discursive usage creates an environment in which the notion loses its meaning and its communicative function, becoming a pure rhetorical tool for production of ideology. Hence, when the international officials call upon the ‘European future’ of Bosnia and Herzegovina – meaning by that political transition to democracy – the discourse is being perceived and used by the local political elites as an implicit legitimacy for the establishment of exclusive ethnic units (nation states in perspective). In such context, the entire domain of politics revolves around language games, in which all subjects determine their own meaning of prevailing categories and act upon their particular interests.

Exactly this is the state of affairs in today’s Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ‘rule of words’ as the primacy of political discourse in determining social reality is omnipresent. The Myth of Brussels, as one of such powerful discourses, which is used as a symbolical practice that outlines dystopian future of Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of Europe, represents an everyday rhetorical practice employed by all participants in the public sphere. All of them infuse their own meaning into the discourse of the ‘European path’ of Bosnia and Herzegovina: internationals believe the country is to become a mature democracy once it joins the EU, while the locals think the ethnic complexity of the country will finally be resolved in accordance to the logic of European history, in which all ethnic groups will have a nation state of their own. Without any substantive knowledge of these facts, the representatives of the International Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina utilize the discourse of ‘Europe’ and European Integration in a certain theological manner upon which the only alternative is the state of hell and permanent poverty and conflict.⁷ The reasons behind this behaviour are somehow discernible: lacking a constituted authority over the political issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the members of the International Community and EU structures in this country use the metaphor of ‘Europe’ and the Myth of Brussels to put pressure on the responsible political elite to make decisions and embark upon necessary democratic reforms.⁸ While this can be, to a certain extent, understandable for the immediate post-conflict context in which all categories are blurred and deconstructed by war, it is not clear why the discourse of the International Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina hasn’t move forward ever since. It is still stuck in between Scylla of ‘Europe’ and Charybdis of the

⁶ In this context, during most of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and afterwards – all the way until Kosovo in 1999 – Slobodan Milošević was being recognized as the stability factor in the Balkans, instead of the main cause and subject of the war.

⁷ This is very often the case with the rhetoric of the High Representative, who makes frequent claims that „there is no alternative to the European future of BiH“ or that an alternative would be „perpetual war“ and dismay. Literally, everyday editions of newspapers in Bosnia and Herzegovina are full of such statements. See for example Dnevni Avaz on 23 April 2008, pg. 5.

⁸ „European future must not be taken hostage by politics“ said Mr. Miroslav Lajčak, the present High Representative. Ibid.

‘Balkans’ – as eternal enemies and irreconcilable dialectic parts of a single universe. Most obviously, such a discourse doesn’t contribute to the establishment of a deliberative democracy that entails rational and public dialogue on vital social and political issues, but embeds a mythological symbolic structure into the public register of politics.

Metaphor of ‘Europe’ and Politics of Elite

It has become obvious by now that the utilisation of the metaphor of ‘Europe’ in the political discourse of Bosnia and Herzegovina is not grounded in rational thinking and argumentation but in the employment of theological (eschatological) categories of the eternal goodness versus the perpetual badness. The problem with these categories lies less in their explanatory simplicity (and subsequent mythological and semi-mythological usage) *but in their convergence with the non-democratic priorities and practices of the local political elite*. In other words, by resting on the symbolic level that speaks of ‘Europe’ as of higher good (without rational argumentation) the International Community acts in accordance with non-democratic political practices of the political elite in Bosnia and Herzegovina that has been using similar rhetoric patterns to justify its power since the coming of socialism in 1945. In this way, it locks the chain of elite domination over affairs of common interest and allows the political elites to perpetuate the production of exclusive “political formula” without the need for public deliberation.⁹ The most important (and surprising) thing in this regard is the fact that this practice disables the finalization of the transition process from the illiberal socialist autocracy to liberal democracy in the concrete historical experience of Bosnia and Herzegovina. What I mean by this is that what makes transition relevant in Eastern and South-eastern Europe is not so much the change of regime, *but the change of the reproductive pattern of political elite and its “political formula” as the mechanism for generation of political legitimacy*. Acting in the manner it does at the moment – with production of the Myth of Brussels as the matrix that entails no grounding in public reason (or any reason whatsoever) – the International Community actually helps local elites to disable the finalization of the transitional process in Bosnia and Herzegovina in total. In order to do politics while staying on board as the ‘exceptional subject of politics’ at the same time, the agency of the International Community converges with the agenda of the local ethno-political elite (which, as outlined earlier, converges with the communist party elite of the socialist regime) making the completion of the transition an impossible project.

The Refuge of Politics

⁹ In the context in which a single “political formula” predominates over the public domain without necessary grounding in public deliberation high levels of social exclusion that exist in transitional societies are not very surprising. This is exactly the case with Bosnia and Herzegovina, where, according to the UNDP National Human Development Report (NHDR 2007), more than 50% of the population is, on one or more bases, excluded from mainstream social processes. More than 20% of the population faces extreme exclusion, while 47% of it has limited choices for improvement of the position. See more in *National Human Development Report – Social Inclusion*, UNDP, Sarajevo, 2007.

A secondary, but nonetheless important consequence of this convergence is that leaving politics to rest on the symbolic level, where metaphors of 'European Future' and the 'Balkan Past' serve as points for absolute validation, the politics based on rationality takes refuge from the public sphere, enabling non-democratic forces to take over the political field and impose non-rational means of public justification. Displacing 'the political' from the public domain – where it could be driven by dialogical reasoning between different subjects of politics – creates the space for extreme and essentially non-political (as non-democratic and ultraconservative) sentiments to upsurge and take over the leading role in social and political development.¹⁰

In order to propose a course of action related to one aspect of the democratic development of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the break-up of the chain of elite domination over politics – that disables full realization of the transitional project – I would outline the emerging need to return the process of the country's democratic development to the tracks of reason and rational argumentation. Obviously, the modernising problem Bosnia and Herzegovina faces has a lot to do with the absence of rationally grounded politics that would have the capacity to transcend ethno-religious givens and affiliations as main causes for war and exclusion. It is surprising to witness a wholesale giving up on reason and deliberation as fundamentals of political existence and embracing the givens of history and culture that entail no rational justification and explanation. It is also surprising to see the International Community, the sum of Western democracies' liberal tradition, embarking upon the systematic production of a mythic discourse that makes no substantial change but perpetuates the status quo. What Bosnia and Herzegovina desperately needs is to discard the domination of the self-explanatory concepts in the public sphere – such as the metaphors of 'Europe' and 'Brussels' themselves – and return the political – as rational, reasonable and dialogical – values into its public domain.

¹⁰ Such is the gradual increase in emergence of radical and exclusivist groups and organizations, from associations of Chetniks to sympathizers of Muslim radicalism and Second World War fascism that is taking part in Bosnia and Herzegovina.