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To cite this article: Aidan Hehir (16 Feb 2026): Serbian nationalist discourse and the “ethnic cleansing” of Serbs in Kosovo, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/14683857.2025.2611495](https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2025.2611495)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2025.2611495>



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Serbian nationalist discourse and the “ethnic cleansing” of Serbs in Kosovo

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the government of Serbia has repeatedly claimed that the Serbian community in Kosovo is being ethnically cleansed by the government of Kosovo with the support of Western governments. In this article, I demonstrate that there is no objective evidence to support these allegations. I argue that these claims reflect the revival of a particular strain of Serbian nationalism which aims to frame the Kosovo Serbs as persecuted and to instrumentalize this framing for political ends. The claims form part of a broader ‘symbol system’ which necessitates that the Kosovo Serbs are portrayed as persecuted. Those making the claims today – as before – aim to convince the Serbian public that Serbia faces an existential threat. Once convinced, Serbs will – so the nationalists hope – mobilize behind their leader’s political agenda. This has ominous implications for the future of democracy in Serbia and regional peace.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 January 2025

Revised 27 October 2025

Accepted 28 December 2025

KEYWORDS

Kosovo; Serbia; nationalism;
ethnic cleansing;
authoritarianism

Introduction

In recent years, the government of Serbia has repeatedly claimed that the Serbian community in Kosovo is being ethnically cleansed by the government of Kosovo with the support of Western governments. In this article, I demonstrate that while there is evidence that the Serbian community in Kosovo has suffered discrimination, and many undeniably feel the Kosovo security services have behaved unnecessarily aggressively, there is no objective evidence that they are being intentionally ethnically cleansed. I argue that these claims reflect the revival of a particular strain of Serbian nationalism that aims to frame the Kosovo Serbs as persecuted and to instrumentalize this framing for political ends.

The ethnic cleansing claims must, I argue, be understood as intrinsic to a particular Serbian nationalist narrative; they form part of a broader ‘symbol system’ – also employed by nationalists beyond Serbia – which necessitates that the Kosovo Serbs are portrayed as persecuted (Mock 2012, 25). This symbol system has, I argue, been employed by Serbian nationalists throughout history, and the modern claims about ethnic cleansing in Kosovo must, therefore, be seen in the context of this historical

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2025.2611495>

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trend (Vujačić 2017, 123). Those making the claims today – as before – aim to convince the Serbian public that Serbia faces an existential threat; illustratively, President Vučić has claimed that there is an international plot to ‘defeat, humiliate, and destroy Serbia’ (Newsweek 2024). The plight of the Kosovo Serbs is thus but one alleged manifestation of this conspiracy to ‘destroy’ Serbia (Ejodus 2024, 35). Once convinced, Serbs will – so the nationalists hope – mobilize behind their leader’s political agenda.

I first contextualize and summarize the Serbian government’s ethnic cleansing claims before demonstrating the lack of evidence to support them. I then argue that these claims must be understood as a modern manifestation of a powerful Serbian nationalist narrative; to inspire popular revolt against Ottoman rule, Serbian nationalists in the 19th century developed a particular framing of Serbian history, with Kosovo – cast as the cradle of the Serbian nation – at its core (Ejodus 2020, 46). This framing comprised a specific symbol system; the heralding of a previous Serbian golden age; the ending of this age by a defeat – the 1389 Battle of Kosovo – caused by foreign mendacity and disunity amongst the Serbian people; the portrayal of the Serb’s as enduring subjugation and oppression, particularly in Kosovo; the promise of liberation from this plight, via the mass mobilization of Serbs around a saviour (Mock 2012, 155–231; see also, Di Lellio 2009, 23).

I then demonstrate that Serbian mythology and this specific symbol system – especially that relating to Kosovo – were revived and instrumentalized by Serbian nationalists in the 1980s as they sought to seize power (Di Lellio 2009, 24; Mertus 1999, 185; Pavković 2001, 7). To mobilize support, Slobodan Milošević and his allies consciously invoked the Kosovo myth as part of their broader adherence to the symbol system developed in the 19th century. This necessitated that Serbs everywhere be convinced that they faced an existential threat; this was most emotively – but not exclusively – illustrated by claiming that the Serbs in Kosovo were facing extermination as part of a broader plan to persecute all Serbs.

I then demonstrate that the contemporary ethnic cleansing claims made by the government of Serbia form part of a broader narrative that closely adheres to the symbol system created in the 19th century and used by Milošević in the 1980s. The Serbian government thus heralds Serbian heroism in the 1980s and 1990s, blames foreign powers and ‘traitors’ for the destruction of their state, decries the suffering of the Kosovo Serbs as but one illustration of a larger plan to ‘destroy Serbia,’ and appeals to Serbs to rally behind them as they endeavour to liberate all Serbs and forge a glorious future. Ultimately, as was the case in previous iterations of the Kosovo myth, the alleged plight of the Kosovo Serbs is being instrumentalized for political ends.

Contemporary Serbian nationalism

In October 2000, Milošević – then President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – was overthrown following mass protests at the electoral fraud committed during the September general election. Many hoped that Milošević’s demise would precipitate the flowering of liberal democracy in Serbia (Gordy 2013, 22; Stojanovic 2023). The new Prime Minister, Zoran Đinđić, was, however, assassinated by Milošević loyalists in 2003;

liberal forces failed to mobilize around a successor, and political movements adhering to Milošević-style nationalism grew in support (Pribicevic 2004; Bieber 2020, 43).

Following the 2012 parliamentary elections, *Srpska Napredna Stranka* [The Serbian Progressive Party] (SNS) entered government for the first time, in coalition with *Socijalistička Partija Srbije* [The Socialist Party of Serbia] (SPS). The SNS's candidate, Tomislav Nikolić, was also elected President of Serbia. The SNS has led the government and held the Presidency ever since. Many of the SNS's most prominent figures were 'hard-line nationalists' who were members of Milošević's government in the 1990s, including Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, who took over from Nikolić as President of Serbia in 2017 (Dragojlov 2020, 363).¹ Likewise, the SPS – which has been the SNS's junior partner in government since 2012 – was founded by Milošević, and its leader, Ivica Dačić, was his spokesman for eight years in the 1990s.

Brutal ethnic cleansing

Reflecting on Vučić's stance on Kosovo since 2012, Filip Ejodus notes,

Under his watch, the Serbian public discourse on Kosovo, with some exceptions, has shifted to the right. Graffiti in Serbian cities depicts Serbia's military returning to Kosovo. Government-controlled tabloids routinely promote anti-Albanian sentiment. Serbia's rulers and its media defame anyone who publicly advocates a more conciliatory approach to the Kosovo issue while supporting the growth of far-right opposition parties that call for the military reconquest of Kosovo. (2024, 34)

As part of this broader campaign, senior SNS/SPS government figures have repeatedly claimed that the Serbian community in Kosovo is subjected to a campaign of ethnic cleansing waged by the government of Kosovo. The SNS/SPS government's first address to the UN Security Council after the 2012 election – made by Dačić, then Prime Minister of Serbia – alleged there was, 'an orchestrated campaign of intimidation . . . It clearly has the ultimate aim of completing the total ethnic cleansing of Serbs' (United Nations Security Council 2012, 5–6). These allegations thereafter became a fixture of Serbia's statements to the UN Security Council and the General Assembly.

In February 2021, a new coalition government comprising the parties *Lëvizja Vetëvendosje* [The Movement for Self-determination] and *Guxo!* [Dare!] came to power in Kosovo. The new government implemented a more confrontational policy towards Serbia in the context of the EU brokered 'Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue' and also sought to dismantle parallel structures in Kosovo's four Serb-majority municipalities in the north of Kosovo, North Mitrovica, Zubin Potok, Leposavić, and Zvečan. This new approach angered many local Kosovo Serbs, who reject the authority of the government of Kosovo, and tensions 'soared' (International Crisis Group 2024). This led to frequent - and very emotive - claims made by the government of Serbia relating to the mistreatment of the Kosovo Serbs (European Stability Initiative 2024, 3).

Indicatively, having previously described the Prime Minister of Kosovo as 'terrorist scum' (Taylor and Radosavljeć 2022), in July 2023 President Vučić claimed, 'ethnic cleansing against the Serbian people is well organized, planned and supported by international circles . . . everywhere respectable Serbs who could be a point of resistance to Pristina must be arrested, killed or removed from Kosovo and Metohija' (B92 2023a).² At

a meeting of the UN General Assembly in September 2023, Vučić described the Kosovo government as an ‘extremist regime’ waging ‘a terror campaign’ which included ‘ethnic cleansing’ (United Nations General Assembly 2023). On the 25th of September 2023, the day after a Serbian militia group launched what the European Union described as a ‘terrorist attack’ at Banjska in the north of Kosovo (European External Action Service 2023), Vučić told the Russian Ambassador to Serbia that the Kosovo Serbs were enduring ‘brutal ethnic cleansing’ (B92 2023b). During an address to the UN in February 2024, Vučić claimed, ‘we are witnessing well planned, systematic and widespread measures that deliberately create unbearable living conditions and persecute Serbs, thereby rendering the physical survival of the Serb population on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija impossible’ (United Nations Security Council 2024). In September 2024, he similarly alleged, ‘the policy pursued by the Pristina authorities’ involved, ‘the persecution of everything Serbian in Kosovo and Metohija’ (United Nations General Assembly 2024). Vučić is not the only senior politician to have made these claims³ and the Serbian Orthodox Church has also criticized, ‘... the extremely dangerous policy of the authorities in Priština, whose sole aim is the complete expulsion of the Serbian people and the creation of an ethnically Albanian Kosovo’ (Serbian Orthodox Church 2023).

Assessing the evidence

There are myriad international organizations that monitor human rights violations, the most prominent being Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the International Crisis Group, Minority Rights Group International, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, and Freedom House. Likewise, there are authoritative human rights monitors within the UN, such as the UN Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Human Rights Council. If ‘brutal ethnic cleansing’ was taking place in Kosovo, we would naturally expect these organizations to have condemned it. None of these UN bodies or independent organizations has, however, ever claimed that the government of Kosovo is engaged in ethnic cleansing.

The EU Commission also publishes an annual report on Kosovo; it has never alleged that ethnic cleansing is occurring. The OSCE, the UN, the EU, and NATO also have missions on the ground in Kosovo; none of these organizations has ever claimed that the government of Kosovo is engaged in ethnic cleansing. That ethnic cleansing *is* taking place, and all these organizations failed to notice, or that they collectively conspired not to admit it, is not credible.

Serbian NGOs based in Kosovo also publish many reports, surveys, and statements on the living conditions of the Serbian community. New Social Initiative has claimed that Serbs ‘feel intimidated and threatened’ by the deployment of Special Police units in the north of Kosovo (New Social Initiative 2023b 4). They also alleged that local Serbs endure ‘delegitimization, dehumanization, finger-pointing, and criminalization’ (New Social Initiative 2023a). Their 2024 report noted that 66% of Serbian survey respondents believed ‘ethnic tensions’ were the reason Serbs had left Kosovo; 74% believed the government of Kosovo’s policies towards the northern municipalities were motivated by a desire to increase ‘ethnic tensions’ (2024, 21 & 10). New Social Initiative’s Program Manager Marko Milenković likewise noted Kosovo Serbs feel ‘a deep sense of political

insecurity’ (Milenković 2024). AKTIV has made similar claims, noting, ‘heightened political tensions have resulted in profound pessimism within the Serb community’ (2024, 5). They further noted that 95.5% of surveyed respondents ‘believe that the situation in Kosovo is not moving in a good direction’ (ibid, 6). In December 2024, a coalition of civil society organizations based in the north of Kosovo – New Social Initiative, Center for Affirmative Social Action, Institute for Territorial Economic Development, Aktiv, and the Advocacy Center for Democratic Culture – published the report, ‘Ethnization of Kosovo Police: Erosion of Ahtisaari’s Basis of a Civic and Multiethnic Institution’ in which they accused members of the Kosovo police of promoting ‘Albanian ethnonationalism’ and criticized the government of Kosovo and the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo for not taking action to stop this (2024, 2). While these reports raise very serious concerns, none of the reports, statements, op-eds, or surveys by these Serbian NGOs in Kosovo have claimed that ethnic cleansing is occurring. Certain Serbian parties in Kosovo, however, have endorsed the claims made by the Serbian government, most notably *Srpska lista* [Serbian List]. This is unsurprising given the party was ‘created’ by, and remains closely aligned with, Belgrade (Ejdus 2024, 34). A new Kosovo Serb party – *Srpska demokratija* [Serb Democracy] – has also made the oppression of the Kosovo Serbs central to their manifesto.

Intentional propaganda

In February 2024, the European Stability Initiative’s (ESI) investigation into the Serbian government’s claims found that the Serbian population in Kosovo had declined from 129,000 in 2002 to 100,000 in 2024, which, they noted, constituted ‘a shocking population decline’ of 22% (2024, 5). However, they also found that there had been a population decline of at least 20% in 13 of the 25 districts within Serbia; in eight, there was a population decline greater than in Kosovo. This trend was especially apparent in the districts bordering Kosovo (ibid, 7). Serbs, they noted, were obviously not leaving Serbia because they were being ethnically cleansed; the reason, rather, was primarily to seek employment abroad (ibid, 10). This also, they argued, explained the Serb population decline in Kosovo; the ESI thus concluded, ‘we are witnessing a collapse in the Serbian population both in Serbia and in Kosovo ... What we are seeing in Kosovo is part of a wider development including Serbia itself’ (ibid, 8). The claims about ethnic cleansing were, they stated, ‘intentional propaganda’ (ibid, 10).

Similarly, the Parliament of the European Union adopted a resolution on the 19 October 2023, which condemned ‘Serbian authorities and media’ for ‘the dissemination of lies about “ethnic cleansing” and “pogroms” in Kosovo, for which there is no evidence’ (European Parliament 2023). The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia likewise criticized, ‘The brutal campaign of dehumanization of the Kosovo Albanians and discrediting the Kosovo leadership’, alleging that it was proliferated with the intention of ‘mobilizing citizens towards new conflicts’ (2023).

There is, therefore, no objective evidence to support the claim that the Kosovo Serbs are subjected to a campaign of ethnic cleansing waged by the Government of Kosovo. Why then do the claims continue to be made? The simplest explanation is that those who make these claims genuinely believe them. However, the weight of evidence refuting these allegations far outweighs the evidence advanced in support of the claims. Indeed,

those who make the claims – especially President Vučić – generally do *not* offer any supporting evidence (European Stability Initiative 2024, 3). I argue in the following sections that these claims derive from a determination to proliferate a long-standing framing within Serbian nationalism of Kosovo as the besieged cradle of the Serbian nation to mobilize Serbs in support of nationalist leaders.

Kosovo and Serbian nationalist mythology

Serbian nationalism has for centuries framed the Serbs as imperilled to inspire mass mobilization against a contemporary ‘enemy’ (Vujačić 2017, 263; Dragojlov 2020; Malcolm 1998, 338). Steven Mock notes that the 19th century Serbian nationalist mythologizing – discussed further below – comprised a symbol system with four key elements; the heralding of a previous Serbian ‘Golden Age’; a specific defeat – caused by treachery/disunity – which brought this era to an end; ongoing injustice and persecution; and the valorization of a hero who would lead the Serbs to overthrow their oppressors and start a new Golden Age (Mock 2012, 155–231).

Defeat and subjugation are central to this narrative; while nationalist historiographies tend towards heralding glorious victories, there is also a strain of nationalism – not unique to Serbia⁴ – which focuses on what Mock describes as ‘the moment of fall’ which brought a Golden Age to an end and led to ongoing subjugation/persecution (ibid 27). The nationalist ‘myth or collective memory of defeat’ is, Mock argues, ‘a vital function in a national myth-symbol system’ as it serves to ‘focus attention . . . on the qualities of the heroic age that were destroyed, and on a prescription for mobilization and renewal’. Additionally, evoking this defeat, ‘reinforces in-group-out-group boundaries by attributing the decline, or at least the circumstances leading to it, to the agencies of an enemy that can be externalized’. The ‘golden age’ can be restored, so the nationalists claim, ‘by means of a revived ethnic solidarity . . . Highlighting the moment of fall, therefore, invites a sense of continuity with the current age of regeneration’ (ibid 27). As discussed below, these elements can be identified in Serbian nationalist mythology, though they are certainly not only identifiable in the case of Serbia.⁵

The Kosovo myth and Serbian national awakening

Modern Serbian nationalism stems from a particular framing of Serbian history, which began to emerge in the 19th century when Serbia was part of the Ottoman Empire (Mertus 1999, 184; Di Lellio 2009, 15; Malešević 2017; Vujačić 2017, 123). Those seeking independence crafted a historical narrative – with Kosovo at the centre – to inspire a Serbian national awakening (Pavković 2001, 7; Malcolm 1998, 79). Kosovo’s centrality to Serbian nationalism stems from two issues in particular: the idea of Kosovo as the ‘cradle’ of Serbian culture, especially the Serbian Orthodox church, and its being the site of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo (Pantelić 2011; Glenn 2000, 11).

Yet, though Serbian folk tradition referred to the Battle of Kosovo for many centuries after 1389, the idea of Kosovo as the ‘cradle’ of Serbian nationalism – because of the battle and the orthodox churches located there – only emerged in the 19th century (Kotur 1977; Mertus 1999, 184; Di Lellio 2009, 15). ‘Vidovdan,’ the annual 15 June (as per the Julian calendar) celebration of the battle, though portrayed as a tradition dating back to 1390,

was in fact ‘a nineteenth-century invention’ (Malcolm 1998, 78–79). The Kosovo myth was, therefore, created and invoked in the 19th century not because it reflected a genuine society-wide belief in Kosovo as Serbia’s heartland, but because it ‘embodies the spirit of patriotism and active resistance of the Serbian nation’ and could thus be instrumentalized to inspire resistance to Ottoman rule (Di Lellio 2009, 23). Kosovo’s status within Serbian nationalist mythology as ‘Serbian Jerusalem’ has therefore been consciously ‘constructed’ by those within Serbia seeking to make a broader ‘political argument’ (Ejdus 2020, 3–4).⁶

In accordance with the ‘symbol system’ identified by Mock, those who stoked the Serbian nationalist awakening routinely portrayed the Nemanjić dynasty (1166–1371) as a period of prosperity and achievement (Mock 2012, 101). This was used both to inspire Serbs to believe they were capable of greatness and to serve as a vivid means by which their contemporary plight as an ostensibly subjugated nation could be portrayed as unjust and intolerable (Malešević 2017; Vujačić 2017, 137). The 1389 Battle of Kosovo was framed as the moment this ‘glorious pre-Ottoman past’ came to an end, leading to centuries of persecution, and thus it became the focus of sustained mythologizing (Malcolm 1998, 79; see also, Glenny 2000, 11).

As such, the Serbian *myth* of 1389 – as understood today – was created at beginning of the 19th century to inspire Serbs to revolt (Di Lellio 2009, 15; Malcolm 1998, 78–79; Pavković 2001, 7). As Jasna Dragović-Soso notes,

The idea of ‘avenging Kosovo’ and reclaiming sacred territory, sustained by the Serbian Orthodox Church and the teachings of the epic songs during the centuries of Ottoman rule, was combined in the 19th century with the rise of modern nationalism and figured strongly in the Serbian ideal of liberation from foreign occupation and unification in an independent state. (2002, 124)

Hence, the roles played by Prince Lazar – who led the army that fought the Ottomans – and Miloš Obilić – who assassinated Sultan Murad, the leader of the Ottoman forces, before being killed himself – acquired a particular mythological quality (Vujačić 2017, 130).⁷ The treachery of Vuk Branković was framed as key to Serbia’s fate, and subjugation thereafter, and thus his role was heralded as illustrative of the cost of Serbian disunity. This led to the popularizing of the slogan *Samo sloga Srbina spašava* [Only unity saves the Serbs], which became a potent means of ostracizing Serbs who criticized or opposed the nationalists.

By invoking the Kosovo myth, Serbs were thus enjoined to revolt against their persecution and the occupation of their lands – especially Kosovo, the ‘cradle’ of their civilization – and rally behind valiant leaders, portrayed as akin to Prince Lazar, who sought to end the Ottoman persecution of the Serbs and forge a new golden era (Vujačić 2017, 138). This framing manifested in the first Serbian uprising from 1804 to 1813, led by Đorđe Petrović or ‘Karadžorđe.’ Following his defeat, Miloš Obrenović – ‘Miloš the Great’ – took up the mantle and led the second Serbian uprising in 1813 (Perović 2017, 227). Though more successful, this culminated in Serbia being granted what amounted to enhanced autonomy rather than full independence; Serbian nationalists – especially those who collected and published Serbian folklore such as Vuk Karadžić – thus continued to use the 1389 Kosovo myth to inspire revolt against oppressive Ottoman rule. Indicatively, in 1844, Serbian stateman Ilija Garašanin published *Nacertanije*, which outlined plans

for the overthrow of Ottoman rule and the creation of a greater Serbia modelled on 'the Serbian Empire of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and the rich and glorious Serb history' (Sell 2002, 72). In 1867, Ottoman troops were finally expelled, though Kosovo remained under Ottoman control. Serbia was formally recognized as an independent state at the 1878 Congress of Berlin, though, to the great disappointment of Serbian nationalists, Kosovo remained within the Ottoman empire (Daskalovski 2003, 16; Perović 2017, 234). They thus continued to agitate for the expansion of the borders of Serbia to include Kosovo, and other Serb-majority areas such as Raska, to 'liberate' the Serbs there and reclaim their spiritual homeland. These areas were eventually absorbed into the Kingdom of Serbia following the Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913, but were lost again during World War I when the Austro-Hungarian army occupied Serbia. The Serbian army eventually pushed the Austro-Hungarian army out and following the war the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – which included Kosovo – was established. In 1929 it changed its name to The Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Milošević and the return of Serbian nationalism

In 1941, the Axis powers invaded and occupied the Kingdom of Yugoslavia before being routed by the communist Partisans in 1945 (Perović 2017, 256). Serbs were the single largest nationality in the Partisans, but when establishing the new Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), the Communist Party sought to negate Serbian nationalism and specifically, 'suppress the Kosovo myth' (Sell 2002, 72). The Communist Party's emphasis on forging a pan-Slavic identity under the banner 'Brotherhood and Unity' was a conscious attempt to quell nationalism within the new state and thus prevent a recurrence of the inter-ethnic hostilities that had erupted during World War II (Gow 2003, 35; Gordy 2013, 5). Serbia thus became but one of six constituent republics within the SFRY.

Though overt expressions of Serbian – or indeed any – nationalism were punished, Serbian nationalists continued to operate inside the SFRY; indeed, though its adherents were smaller in number, their zeal became more acute as the government of the SFRY took further measures to disempower Serbia (Vujačić 2017, 221). In 1974, to the alarm of Serbian nationalists, two provinces within Serbia – Vojvodina and Kosovo – were granted enhanced autonomy, including the power to veto legislation proposed within Serbia and voting rights at the Federal Presidency, though unlike the six constituent republics – Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia – they did not have the right to secede (Dragović-Soso 2002, 67; Marko 2023, 23–28; Krieger 2001, xxxi). Additionally, the Kosovo Albanians were gradually granted enhanced rights within the SFRY; in 1970, the University of Pristina was established, and 'an Albanian national renaissance began in Kosovo' (Judah 2000, 38). Though the 1970s are regarded as 'golden years' for the Albanians, in 1981, Albanians rioted across Kosovo (Skendaj 2014, 39). The disturbances began at the University of Pristina when students protested at poor food and facilities. The protests quickly spread, and the protestors demanded independence for Kosovo (Malcolm 1998, 334–335). For the Serbian nationalists, this was seen as an existential threat (Dragović-Soso 2002, 116).

Reviving the Kosovo myth

President Tito's death in 1980, coupled with a series of economic crises, led to the re-emergence of nationalism throughout the SFRY, but especially in Serbia, 'the floodgates of historical revisionism were opened' (Dragović-Soso 2002, 78; see also, Gow 2003, 40). Serbian writers were afforded considerably more freedom to express themselves than political movements or journalists, and in the early 1980s they – mostly notably Dobrica Ćosić – published a plethora of novels, plays, and revisionist history texts (Dragović-Soso 2002, 89; Sell 2002, 43; Ramet 2005, 197). Their purpose was not simply to unearth the 'truth' about the past, but to mine the past for examples of the persecution of the Serbs that would underpin claims about Serb suffering in the present (Norris 2016, 2). These works stressed that though Serbs had been the leading group – and suffered the most casualties – fighting against the forces of fascism during World War II, Serbia had been 'punished' when the SFRY was created (Perović 2017, 257; Malcolm 1998, 338). Serbia was thus presented as having 'won the war but lost the peace' (Dragović-Soso 2002, 108–114). The Serbs were thus framed as unjustly treated within the SFRY, but it was the plight of the Kosovo Serbs in particular that was highlighted as an exemplar of the Serb's fate.

Heralded once again as the cradle of Serbian civilization, Kosovo was said to have been 'occupied' by Albanians (Daskalovski 2003; Blumi 2006; Vasquez 2009, 356). Albanians were certainly in the majority in Kosovo;⁸ according to Serbian nationalists, this was due to Albanian immigration, the forced displacement of Serbs by Albanians, and the Albanian's ostensibly rapacious capacity to breed (Limani 2017, 273; Blumi 2006; Mertus 1999, 11). A petition in January 1986, signed by over 200 Serbian intellectuals, alleged that the SFRY government was not acting to stop systematic violence against Serbs and the desecration of Orthodox churches in Kosovo. The claims were, 'placed in the context of an ancient historical struggle between Serbs and Albanians' (Sell 2002, 45; see also, Dragović-Soso 2002, 138). It was, however, the publication of excerpts from the 'Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences' in the Serbian tabloid *Vecernje Novosti* in September 1986, which served as the 'bombshell' that propelled this movement into public prominence (Dragović-Soso 2002, 177). The authors alleged that the SFRY had discriminated against Serbs, unfairly divided Serbia, and, most controversially, that Albanians were committing 'physical, political, legal, and cultural genocide' against the Kosovo Serbs (Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences 1986).⁹

Milošević and the Kosovo myth

Though Milošević initially distanced himself from the Memorandum, he soon came to embrace the themes therein and advance a program which was 'strikingly similar to that of the Memorandum' (Pavković 1998, 514; see also, Dragović-Soso 2002, 184). As he rose through the ranks, Milošević implemented 'a carefully orchestrated campaign of nationalist hysteria' (Glenny 2000, 628). This campaign is closely aligned with the symbol system established by the nationalists in the 19th century; the invocation of a glorious past; the identification of a specific defeat, caused in part by Serbian disunity, which ended the Serb's glory; the condemnation of an ongoing injustice which must be ended;

the heralding of saviour who would emancipate the Serbs and lead them into a new Golden Age (Ramet 2005, 150; see also, Pavković 2001, 7).

Milošević and his supporters routinely invoked Serbia's glorious past, framing Serbia as not only once prosperous and mighty but also a defender of small nations and of European values (Ramet 2005, 149; Malcolm 1998, 59; Pavković 2001, 7). Serbia, Milošević claimed, had once been, 'great, brave, and proud' and historically Serbs had, 'liberated themselves and when they could they also helped others to liberate themselves'; prior to the Ottoman invasion the Serbs stood as, 'the bastion that defended the European culture, religion, and European society in general' (Milošević 1989). This framing of the Serbs as heroic defenders of European values was contrasted with the framing of Albanians as servile facilitators of foreign rule and 'alien' Islamic values (Daskalovski 2003; Blumi 2006). The Serb's resistance against Italian and Nazi forces during World War II was likewise heralded as more recent evidence of their collective bravery and former glory (Malcolm 1998, 312).

In the 19th century, Serbian nationalists cited the 1389 Battle of Kosovo as the iconic moment of defeat; Milošević framed the creation and composition of the SFRY as an analogous national tragedy and the source of the present injustice and persecution endured by the Serbs. The SFRY's composition was, he claimed, 'intended to dilute Serb influence' (Sell 2002, 41). Milošević blamed this 'evil fate,' on the Serbian leadership in 1945, who, because of their 'vassal mentality', had acceded to the SFRY being created in such a way that it had 'humiliated Serbia' (Milošević 1989). A clear parallel was drawn between two iconic moments when the Serbs had ostensibly experienced defeat because of 'disunity' amongst the Serbs; the 1389 trauma was, Milošević claimed, caused by, 'the tragic disunity in the leadership of the Serbian state at that time' and the unjust composition of the SFRY likewise occurred because 'the Serbian leadership remained divided, prone to compromise to the detriment of its own people' (Milošević 1989). Those who opposed Milošević were 'vilified by a hysterical media' and cast as traitors – akin to Vuk Branković in 1389 – conspiring with external forces to destroy the Serbian people (Dragović-Soso 2002, 116; LeBor 2002, 125; Malcolm 1998, 343; see also, Sell 2002, 73). Slogans chanted at pro-Milošević rallies included, 'Slobodan, we are all with you – only traitors are against you!' (Mertus 1999, 178).

Milošević also repeatedly highlighted the plight of the Serbs in Kosovo as the most egregious example of the Serb's fate within the SFRY. The claims about the persecution of the Kosovo Serbs contained in the 1986 Memorandum became Milošević's 'intellectual underpinning' which he copied, 'almost word for word' (Sell 2002, 46; see also, Malcolm 1998, 341). In 1987, when speaking to a crowd of Serbs in Kosovo who claimed to be oppressed by Albanians, Milošević declared, 'no-one should dare to beat you' and overnight he became the figurehead of Serbian nationalism (Malcolm 1998, 342; Limani 2017, 289). Thereafter, Milošević and his allies in the media perpetuated stories about Albanian's murdering and raping Kosovo's Serbs. Milošević repeatedly heralded their suffering as a rallying cry to mobilise Serbs to defend their brethren and reclaim 'the heart of Serbia' (Milošević 1989). In 1989, he declared, 'Every man in Serbia is ready to head for Kosovo if the terror is continuing there' (Sell 2002, 94). These claims were a wilful exaggeration (Sell 2002, 72; Glenny 2000, 628; Malcolm 1998, 356).¹⁰

Milošević presented himself as 'Serbia's national saviour' who would free the Serbs from oppression, restore their honour and prestige, and reunite Serbian lands (LeBor

2002, 124; see also, Judah 2000, 49; Mertus 1999, 186; Pavković 2001, 7). As he rose to power, a cult of personality grew up around him, which he and his supporters consciously stoked (Malcolm 1998, 342). This was further enabled by the Serbian Orthodox Church, which conveyed a near-divine blessing on his rule (Mertus 1999, 177). This was most apparent when he addressed a crowd of approximately one million Serbs at the site of the Battle of Kosovo on the 600th anniversary in 1989. Arriving by helicopter, Milošević descended ‘like a messiah’ before condemning discord and disunity, and portraying himself as ‘the figure of national unifier and protector of a strong Serbia’ (Vučetić 2021, 237). During the speech, Milošević claimed that if Serbs united under his leadership, he would ‘build a society, rich and democratic, and thus contribute to the prosperity of this beautiful country’ (Milošević 1989).

Contextualizing the contemporary ethnic cleansing claims

The claims the SNS/SPS government routinely makes about the Kosovo Serbs enduring ‘ethnic cleansing’ are, therefore, clearly not without historical precedent. The idea of the Serbs as a uniquely persecuted people is deeply rooted in Serbian nationalism and reaches its apogee in relation to Kosovo.¹¹ As such, the current claims about ethnic cleansing in Kosovo must be seen as but the most recent rendering of a century-old symbol system central to – though not unique to – Serbian nationalism.

Reviving the Kosovo symbol system

Viewed in this context, is it not surprising that – as noted earlier – there is no evidence to back up the ethnic cleansing claims currently being made by the Serbian government; these claims are intended to evoke a visceral response amongst Serbs which transcends facts. By understanding the place of these claims within the broader symbol system – as detailed below – the suffering of the Kosovo Serbs, repeatedly described by the SNS/SPS government, is revealed as but one element of a broader narrative repeatedly invoked by Serbian nationalists.

The four related elements of the symbol system – Serbia was once glorious; it suffered an unjust defeat, enabled by traitors, which led to its people’s subjugation; Serbia is facing an existential threat and enduring persecution; Serbia’s past glories can be realized again if Serbs unite behind the purported saviour – are evident in the SNS/SPS government’s statements and policies.

The current Serbian government routinely valorizes Serbia’s past glories, highlighting Serbia’s resistance to the Islamic incursion into Europe in the 14th century and its resistance to ‘imperialism and evil ideologies’ during both World Wars (Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). The SNS/SPS have also repeatedly sought to portray the Serbs as having fought valiantly during the dissolution of the SFRY in the 1990s. The SFRY was destroyed, Vučić claimed, by ‘western intelligence services, which were supported by the national corrupted elite’ (United Nations General Assembly 2024). Milošević is framed as a leader who sought to preserve the SFRY in the face of these domestic and international opponents who conspired to destroy it; according to Vučić, Milošević was ‘a great Serbian leader who undeniably had the best intentions’ (Knezevic 2018).

Senior figures in the government have also actively stoked historical revisionism and sought to rehabilitate Serbs who were convicted of war crimes at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). A report by the Council of Europe noted, 'In Serbia, the nationalist narrative is accompanied by open support provided by ruling political parties to convicted war criminals' (Council of Europe 2023, 61). Indicatively, prior to the 2023 general election, the SNS formed an electoral coalition with the Serbian Radical Party led by Vojislav Šešelj, who was found guilty of crimes against humanity by the ICTY. Revisionism has, according to the programme director of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights in Serbia, 'intensified in the roughly 12 years since the Serbian Progressive Party and its leader, President Aleksandar Vučić, took power, to such an extent that it has become standard practice' (Todorovic 2024).

Related to this historical revisionism, since 2012, the SNS/SPS governments have repeatedly portrayed NATO's military campaign in 1999 as a totemic moment of defeat. During a speech to the UN General Assembly in 2023, Vučić accused the West of 'cutting my country into pieces' when it launched its 'brutal attack' in 1999 (United Nations General Assembly 2023). NATO's intention, Vučić claimed, was to 'destroy Serbia' (2024).

The SNS/SPS governments have likewise repeatedly claimed that a conspiracy is still underway to destroy Serbia, which the persecution of the Kosovo Serbs forms but one part. During the 2023 general election, for example, Vučić alleged that Serbia was being targeted by enemies who were conspiring 'to destroy Serbia' (Sarajevo Times 2024b). In December 2023, mass protests erupted across Serbia as people railed against what they – and many independent observers – believed was electoral fraud committed during the parliamentary and local elections on the 17th of December.¹² Vučić claimed the protesters were planning a coup and warned of 'the interference of an important country in the electoral process of Serbia in the most brutal way' (Gec 2023). In August 2024, protests were held across Serbia against plans for new lithium mining factories; Vučić again alleged that a coup was being planned (Euractiv 2024). He also claimed that the protesters were engaged in a Western-backed 'hybrid warfare' against Serbia (Associated Press 2024). Serbia's Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin likewise declared that the UN General Assembly Resolution to designate July 11 as 'International Day of Reflection and Remembrance of the 1995 Srebrenica Genocide' constituted, 'the finalization of the conspiracy' against Serbia (Todorovic 2024).

The need for unity in the face of the alleged conspiracy is also routinely avowed. In December 2020, the Serbian government established the annual 'Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and the National Flag,' which was to be celebrated 'in all areas where Serbs are around the world, symbolizing the unity of the Serbian people' (Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020). In 2024, the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement to mark the celebration, which called for 'the entire Serbian people' to demonstrate 'internal solidarity' during 'this difficult and challenging period' (2024). Critics of the government in the media and civil society within Serbia are regularly portrayed as seeking to sow disunity and support foreign forces who wish to destroy Serbia. Vučić has, indicatively, warned that 'media aggression' is part of a plan hatched by the Government of Kosovo and NATO to bring about 'the end of Serbia' (Sarajevo Times 2024b). Željko Bodrožić, head of the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia, stated that the SNS/SPS have portrayed the media as 'enemies of the people' noting

‘Vučić feeds the need [of] the Serbian public . . . to feel like perpetual victims, that they’re a chosen people that are being threatened’ (Hajdari 2023).

Finally, Vučić has also presented himself as a saviour figure who will lead ‘proud Serbia’, to ‘economic progress, accelerated growth, new technologies and innovation’ (United Nations General Assembly 2024). Vučić described Serbia under his rule as, ‘more successful in everything’, ‘advancing the most rapidly’ and ‘the only island of freedom in Europe’ (Ministry of Defence Republic of Serbia 2023). He repeatedly invokes the injustices Serbia has ostensibly recently endured when vowing to lead the nation forward; at the 25th anniversary of the NATO intervention he stated,

You have not done your dirty work of breaking this country into pieces, because this nation is stronger, and Serbia is stronger. Serbia will resist, you cannot take away our freedom, we will not give it and we will never voluntarily admit that you take Kosovo from us (Sarajevo Times 2024a).

He has vowed not to let, ‘anyone to break the Serbian spirit or shatter the Serbian unity ever again’ (Ministry of Defence Republic of Serbia 2023) and promised, ‘Ahead of us is a good and great future for Serbia’ (Sarajevo Times 2024b).

Vučić and his co-nationalists have also been accused of promoting a modern variant of the ‘Greater Serbia’ project attempted by Milošević. The idea was first articulated in September 2020 by Serbia’s then-defence minister, Aleksandar Vulin, when he declared that President Vučić, ‘should establish a Serbian world. Belgrade should unite all the Serbs. [The] President of Serbia is president of all Serbs’ (Karcic 2023). At the 2023 ‘Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and the National Flag,’ Vučić condemned those who, ‘want us to be scattered over a thousand places, to not have the same language, to not have the same names and surnames, and to not have the same flag’ and promised, ‘We can live in many countries, but we have a single national flag, the red-blue-white tricolour, we have our Serbian name and surname, we have our lineage, which we are not ashamed of’ (Ministry of Defence Republic of Serbia 2023). In July 2024, the first ‘All-Serb Assembly’ was held in Belgrade. Under the slogan ‘*Jedan narod, jedan sabor*’ [One people, one assembly], Serbs from across the region gathered to ‘show the unity of the Serb nation’ (Soria-Metais 2024).

Conclusion: The future of Serbian democracy and regional peace

Since coming to power in 2012, the SNS/SPS government in Serbia has repeatedly claimed that the Kosovo Serbs are enduring ethnic cleansing without any objective supporting evidence (European Stability Initiative 2024; The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia 2023). The primary aim of this article is to explain why these claims are being made by the government of Serbia. My argument is that these claims form part of a broader strategy to consolidate power, one which was previously employed by Serbian nationalists in the 19th century and again by Milošević in the 1980/90s, and also by many nationalist leaders across the world throughout history, as evidenced by Mock’s analyses of the use of ‘symbol systems’. The article thus demonstrates that the ‘ethnic cleansing’ claims should not be seen in isolation, but rather that they cohere with a nationalist framing/mythologizing that can be identified beyond Serbia.

In the 1980s, Milošević and his fellow nationalists wilfully exaggerated the plight of the Kosovo Serbs because this ‘provided the rhetorical framework for a systematic political mobilization of the Serbs’ (Pavković 2001, 7). Milošević’s claims regarding the Kosovo Serbs were designed to sweep him to power, and were but one – albeit very important – part of a broader symbol system comprising four key elements which derived from the Serbian nationalist narrative created in the 19th century; Serbia was once glorious; the Serbs suffered an unjust defeat at the hands of foreigners and Serbian ‘traitors’; Serbs are enduring great suffering – especially in Kosovo – and face an existential threat; Serbia’s past glories can be realized again if Serbs unite behind the purported saviour. Without declaring that the Kosovo Serbs were suffering, the effort to mobilize mass Serbian support would not have been as effective as it proved to be. As Zidas Daskalovski noted, ‘the legend of “lost” Kosovo’ invoked by Milošević was an ‘indispensable factor’ (2003, 15). As such, regardless of their actual material conditions, the Kosovo Serbs had to be portrayed as persecuted to enable the broader symbol system to achieve the desired national mobilization (Glenny 2000, 628; Malcolm 1998, 356; Sell 2002, 72).¹³

Today, the Kosovo Serb’s plight is again being exaggerated and instrumentalized by Serbian nationalists seeking to catalyse a mass mobilization amongst the Serbs to further their own agenda. Claiming that the Kosovo Serbs face extinction implies that Serbia itself is also imperilled because Kosovo and Serbia are, in the national mythologizing, inseparable, as evidenced by the nationalist slogan, *Kosovo je Srbija* [Kosovo is Serbia]. This facilitates nationalists who can best present themselves as the only effective protectors of the Serbs; Vučić thus ‘presents himself as the guardian of Serbian national interests’ and the only person capable of ‘protecting Kosovo Serbs’ (Ejdus 2024, 35).¹⁴ The fact that the current claims form part of a broader symbol system used previously has ominous implications for the future of democracy in Serbia and regional peace.

In the short term, the mass mobilization generated by creating a sense of existential crisis ultimately facilitates the SNS/SPS as they push Serbia further towards authoritarianism. Despite initial hopes that the SNS/SPS government would guide Serbia to EU membership, since they came to power in 2012, they have turned Serbia towards authoritarianism (Dragojlov 2020, 349; Fiket et al. 2023; Pavlović 2019). Corruption has increased since 2012; Serbia is today ranked as the joint fourth most corrupt country in Europe (Transparency International 2024), and the Global Organized Crime Index reported, ‘criminal networks are widespread’ (2023). In 2019, Freedom House downgraded Serbia’s rating from ‘Free’ to ‘Partly Free’; their most recent country report warned that the SNS/SPS government has ‘steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organizations’ (Freedom House 2024). Reporters Without Borders have condemned the SNS/SPS government for repeatedly portraying their critics in the media and civil society as ‘traitors’ conspiring with foreign powers to destroy Serbia (2023). Serbia’s rating in the World Press Freedom Index has declined from 79th in 2022 to 98th in 2024 (Reporters Without Borders 2024). This escalating authoritarianism has been enabled by the proliferation of nationalistic narratives – including the claims that the Kosovo Serbs

are being persecuted as part of a broader plan to ‘destroy Serbia’ – derived from the oft-invoked symbol system described earlier.

The continued proliferation of this ‘intentional propaganda’ will likely enable the further degeneration of civil liberties and media freedom in Serbia (European Stability Initiative 2024, 26). Highlighting the plight of the persecuted Serbs in Kosovo narrows the scope of public debate to a focus on the existential threat ostensibly facing Serbia and steers political debate away from issues which the Serbian government would rather avoid – such as inflation and corruption – towards questions of who can best ‘save’ beleaguered co-nationals and the heart of Serbian civilization (Ejdus 2024, 35). This enables Vučić to assume the mantle of national saviour and encourage Serbs to mobilize around his increasingly authoritarian leadership (Zila 2023, 1019).¹⁵ As veteran Serbian human rights advocate Sonja Biserko noted, ‘Kosovo is used to unify the Serbian people’ (Mlloja 2024).

The government of Serbia’s rhetoric also, of course, impacts relations between the Serbs and Albanians living in Kosovo. Falsely claiming that the Kosovo Serbs are being ‘ethnically cleansed’ by Albanians has caused division and increased tension between the two communities; a report by the Kosovar Center for Security Studies on inter-ethnic relations in roundtables across Kosovo reported ‘the spread of disinformation was identified as a key factor attempting to maintain fear among the population’ and that this was having a corrosive impact on the ability of Serbs in Kosovo to engage with their Albanian neighbours (2025, 2–3). The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia likewise warned that by lying about their welfare in Kosovo, the government of Serbia had turned the Kosovo Serbs into ‘hostages’ and likened them to the Serbian ‘victims of the Milošević regime’ in the late 1980s and 1990s (2023). Additionally, the Serbian government has cracked down on Serbs who dare to challenge their prevailing narrative about ethnic cleansing in Kosovo through ‘coercion and intimidation,’ thereby creating a climate of fear amongst the Kosovo Serbs (Ejdus 2024, 34).

In the long term, claiming that the Kosovo Serbs are enduring ethnic cleansing and Serbia itself faces an existential threat threatens regional peace. The claims made about the plight of the Kosovo Serbs, and the framing of Kosovo as having been unjustly separated from Serbia by Albanian ‘terrorists’ and malign foreign forces, naturally encourage the conviction amongst Serbs that Kosovo should be reclaimed. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia warned that the rhetoric has ‘greatly radicalized public opinion in Serbia, thus mobilizing citizens towards new conflicts’ (2023). Coupled with the increasingly belligerent rhetoric emanating from Belgrade about uniting all Serbs within a ‘Serbian World’, this, of course, raises the spectre of future conflict in Kosovo. Armed Serbian militias – allegedly supported from Serbia (Borger 2023) – have certainly increased their activities in Kosovo in recent years; in September 2023, a Serbian militia group attacked the Kosovo police in Banjska, and in November 2024, a canal near Zubin Potok was blown up. The government of Kosovo has uncovered many arms caches in the north of Kosovo in recent years and alleges that they were supplied from Serbia (Si 2024). The Serbian government’s ethnic cleansing claims have stoked the aggressive Serbian nationalism underpinning these developments. Should these claims continue to be made, the potential for an escalation of violence in Kosovo grows.

Notes

1. Both were then members of *Srpska Radikalna Stranka* [The Serbian Radical Party] which formed a coalition government with Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia in 1998. From 1998–2000 Nikolić was deputy Prime Minister of Serbia and then Deputy Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, while Vučić served as Minister of Information.
2. 'Kosovo and Metohija' is the official title of Kosovo within Serbia.
3. In October 2021 Nikola Selaković, then Serbia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, claimed the Kosovo government was waging, 'an organized campaign of ethnically motivated violence and discrimination against Serbs' (United Nations Security Council 2021, 6). Serbia's Prime Minister Ana Brnabić also accused the government of Kosovo of waging, 'a campaign of systematic and widespread violence against Serbs and the deliberate creation of unbearable living conditions for them' (United Nations Security Council 2023b, 9). In April 2023 Serbia's Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić told the UN Security Council, '[The government of Kosovo's] goal is to expel all Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija' (United Nations Security Council 2023a).
4. Mock identifies similar symbols of defeat in the nationalist narratives promoted by Israel, France, Czechia, Latvia, Catalonia and Ghana in particular (2012, 1–6).
5. Indeed, the vast literature on 'ontological security' attests to the fact the nations create cohesion and group identity through the proliferation of myths and narratives designed to exemplify ostensibly innate national characteristics; see (Chernobrov 2016; Patterson and Monroe 1998; Steele 2008; Subotić 2009),.
6. Filip Ejodus in fact argues that Kosovo 'replaced' Bosnia as 'Serbia's object of desire' in the 19th century because acquiring control over Kosovo was deemed more achievable than Bosnia which was then under Austro-Hungarian rule. Hence the need to create the myth of Kosovo as Serbia's heartland (Ejodus 2020, 46)
7. While Prince Lazar certainly existed, there are some who suggest that Obilić was an invention (Judah 2000, 8; Di Lellio 2009, 18)
8. The official 1981 Yugoslav census recorded Kosovo's population as 1,585,000, with Albanians making up 77.5% of the populations, Serbs 13.3% (Sell 2002, 69).
9. The memorandum also claimed that the Serbs in Croatia were facing annihilation (Dragović-Soso 2002, 180).
10. Between 1981 and 1987, Kosovo had the lowest murder rate and the second lowest rate of rape in Yugoslavia; 71% of rape cases involved people from the same nationality. There were 31 cases of Albanians committing, or attempting to commit, rape against a Serbian woman. There were five cases of inter-ethnic murder; three involved Serbs killing Albanians (Malcolm 1998, 339; Sell 2002, 79).
11. According to Noel Malcolm, Serbian nationalists present, 'the whole history of the Serbs in Kosovo as an unending chronicle of ethnic martyrdom' (1998, 338).
12. The Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability reported that 'electoral engineering that is neither legal nor legitimate' had marred the elections (2023). The European Parliament likewise passed a resolution in February 2024 condemning 'the incumbents' persistent and systematic abuse of institutions and media to gain an unfair advantage' and the 'numerous procedural deficiencies' (European Parliament 2024)
13. The Bosnian Serb political elite have also increasingly 'portrayed [Bosnian] Serbs as perpetual victims of oppression' (Žila 2023, 1012).
14. This is not the exclusive reason for making these claims, of course. Alleging that the Kosovo Albanians are terrorizing the Kosovo Serbs certainly aligns with a long-standing feature of Serbian nationalist discourse whereby Albanians are maligned as an inherently 'violent' other (Malcolm 2006; Nikolić 2003). Additionally, portraying the government of Kosovo as 'terrorists' attacking the Serb minority is a means by which Kosovo's international reputation is degraded and its further integration into the international system is impeded (Ejodus 2024, 35). That Vucic repeatedly makes this

claim at the UN General Assembly can be taken as evidence of the desire on his part to do exactly this.

15. Since the collapse of a railway station canopy in Novi Sad on November 1st 2024 which killed 16 people, there have been regular and often very large protests against the government of Serbia. The protests have been primarily focused on criticizing the Serbian government's corruption rather than its stance on Kosovo or foreign policy in general. Many protestors have, in fact, explicitly endorsed Serbian nationalist tropes and carried placards with the slogan 'Kosovo is Serbia' (Qerka-Gashi 2025). However, it would be wrong to frame the protestors as 'nationalists' as the composition of those involved is clearly quite diverse (Ivkovic 2025). President Vucic branded the protests a 'color revolution' backed by Western powers eager to overthrow him (Stojanovic 2025).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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