Shared Culture, Individual Strategy and Collective Action: Explaining Slobodan Milošević’s Charismatic Rise to Power

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Slobodan Milošević was the central actor in the recent Yugoslav drama that began with the rise of nationalism and ended with the dissolution of Yugoslavia. How did he emerge as a charismatic leader, and why did the Serbian people follow him to national disaster. It is argued that Milošević owed his charismatic authority to the sense of widespread social discontent he helped be forged by strategically manipulating key cultural symbols of the Serbian nation. The claim that charismatic leadership, far from being an effect of existing real crises, may also become a major cause of prospective ones suggests new ways of theorizing about political charisma.

Introduction

In April 1987, Slobodan Milošević, the recently appointed president of the Serbian Communist Party, visited the small town of Kosovo Polje to help allay growing tension between the ethnic Albanian majority and the minority Serbs. When the police used violence to disperse a noisy crowd of local Serbs and Montenegrins trying to gain his attention, Milošević unexpectedly uttered a phrase that instantly elevated him to the pantheon of Serbian mythology: ‘From now on,’ he stated, ‘no one will ever dare to beat you.’ This sentence enthroned him as a tsar,’ said Miroslav Šolević, a Kosovo Serb activist witnessing the scene (Silber and Little 1996: 38). Immediately, the crowd ‘rewarded him as a hero’ (Doder and Branson 1999: 3) and started chanting ‘Slobo, Slobo.’

Following that incident, Milošević’s fame spread fast throughout Yugoslavia. In Serbia, more particularly, ‘an emerging cult of personality was … evident, with Milošević as Serbia’s paramount charismatic “national leader” (narodna vodja’) (L. J. Cohen 2001: 76; Stevanović 2000). As Dragović-Soso describes the situation:
'Milošević’s photographs adorned shop windows and buses, poets and songwriters composed verses to his glory, people lit candles and chanted prayers for his health, crowds came together and dispersed at his bidding’ (Dragović-Soso 2000: 1). At an ever-growing number of rallies, people would promise allegiance to the new leader’s call and chant slogans such as ‘Sloba, Serbian, Serbia is with you’; ‘Serbia is only asking, when will Sloba replace Tito’; and ‘Slobodan, say when, we shall fly like bullets’ (Banac 1999: 177). In 1988, the tabloid press selected Milošević ‘Man of the Year’. In 1989, a collection of speeches by and interviews with Slobodan Milošević—which to many appeared as no more than ‘a crude propagandist tract … [replete with] arrogant and hollow simplicity’ (Djilas 1993: 81)—became a national bestseller. The climax of adulation for the new leader came on 28 June 1989 at the celebrations held in Kosovo for the six hundredth anniversary of the historic battle of the Serbs against the Ottomans. When Milošević descended from the sky in a helicopter, an estimated two million Serbs from all over the world received him as a messiah. Only a few months later, in December, Milošević became President of Serbia after a referendum-type election in which 86 per cent of the Serbs expressed confidence in his leadership. While Tito’s memory was already fading away, the new president clearly began to enjoy ‘a popularity greater than any Serbian political figure in [the twentieth] century’ (Djilas 1993: 83; Glenny 1992: 31). With the Serbs massively surrendered to his power, Milošević emerged as a charismatic leader in the classic sense of the term. For, as Weber (1978: 242) writes: ‘It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma.’ ‘At a time when institutional gridlock was paralyzing the fragile federation and other communist leaders spoke in a frozen language far removed from the concerns of their peoples, Milošević’s “gift of grace” appeared to many as “manna from heaven”’ (Vujagić, 1995). Riding on a wave of such enormous popularity, Milošević became the protagonist in the already unfolding Yugoslav drama (cf., e.g., ‘The Serbs went to war because they were led into it by their leaders’ (Judah 2000: xi)). Ultimately, he not only helped delay his country’s transition to democracy (Miller, 1997), but also became responsible for the worst war in Europe since 1945. Moreover, by losing that war, he presided over the destruction of Yugoslavia, the bitter loss of Kosovo and the impoverishment of Serbia.

In a nutshell, the origins of the Yugoslav crisis lie in the defects of Tito’s federalist state structure, which ultimately led to what Linz has described as ‘lack of [regime] efficacy’ (Linz 1978: 50), but also the unstoppable economic decline in Yugoslavia during the late 1970s and 1980s. Even so, the dissolution of Yugoslavia was anything but inevitable (Magaš 1993: xxi; Woodward 1995: 21, 50, 70; Vujagić, 1995: 32). In the end, however, in the absence of permanent and effective democratic institutions, the contest over federal structure and economic reform was decided by individual leaders able to stir social discontent and mobilize popular support. Among those leaders, the most prominent was Slobodan Milošević.

This article is about the causes behind the emergence of Milošević as Serbia’s charismatic leader. The chief research task is to examine the reasons why the Serbian people acclaimed Milošević as a charismatic leader, thereby entrusting him with their nation’s fate. To be convincing, any answer to this question must take into account and combine...
three aspects of the problem: First, of what did Milošević’s message to the Serbs consist? Second, how, and why, was such a large part of the Serbian people so well predisposed to accept such a message? And, third, to what extent and under which conditions did historical conjuncture facilitate the acceptance of Milošević and his message?

As I will argue, Slobodan Milošević was able to emerge as a typically charismatic leader when, within a context of endemic economic hardship and institutional instability particularly damaging to an allegedly discriminated-against Serbia, he exploited long-dormant Serbian nationalism and, on the pretext of the sensitive Kosovo issue, helped create a general national crisis. In this light, Milošević must be seen as a political entrepreneur who recognized the importance of ‘cultural identity’ to the Serbian nation and used it as a political resource in his bid for power. Such a view opens some interesting theoretical perspectives in the study of political charisma and its emergence in crisis situations.

Methodological Approaches in the Study of Charismatic Emergence

In general, the emergence of charismatic authority and its ensuing political action are studied in one of two ways (or sometimes a combination of both). In the first, élite theorists and social psychologists attribute charismatic emergence to the presence of some leader with extraordinary personal qualities that he (or she) employs to attract a mass following. In this sense, Milošević has been seen as someone ostensibly possessing ‘charismatic’ qualities that enabled him to magnetize the Serbs and ignite their nationalistic aspirations. Social anthropologists and cultural theorists, on the other hand, explain charismatic emergence on the basis of a pre-existing system of shared cultural values and beliefs in society that, when triggered by exogenous pressure, is likely to facilitate the appearance of charismatic leadership. This view admits a necessary congruence between the rise of Milošević and some persistent features of Serbian political culture associated with an eventual yearning for charismatic leadership. Both views are reductionist (for a critique of reductionist theories in the study of political charisma, see P. Smith 2000). The first reduces the study of political charisma to a leader’s personality traits, the second to general cultural dispositions and the primordial attachments of the ‘charismatic community’. Therefore, a more synthetic approach is necessary which will try to explain charismatic emergence by taking into account: the structure of political opportunities; the purposeful action of power-seeking individual leaders; and the cultural forms and symbolic structures that underpin charisma.

In what follows, I will briefly discuss the foregoing approaches of explaining Milošević’s charismatic rise, while including the chief methodological problems associated with each of them. Then, I will propose an alternative, more synthetic explanation in which charismatic emergence will be seen as resulting from the strategic action of self-interested individuals who, in crisis-prone environments, utilize cultural structures and symbols for enhancing their own political power. Against such a background of Yugoslav economic and institutional crisis, the argument will run, Slobodan Milošević owed his charismatic emergence to the sense of widespread social discontent he helped forge by strategically manipulating key cultural symbols of the Serbian nation.
Social Psychological Explanations

Given that charismatic authority is distinctly personal, it often appears to derive from some unusual characteristics of a leader’s personality ‘by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities’ (Weber 1978: 241; also classic is in this respect is Lasswell 1948). ‘To be charismatic,’ Dean Keith Simonton (cited in Madsen and Snow 1991: 1) drives the point home, ‘is to possess some mysterious attribute that provides the foundation of exceptional influence, whether that influence is exerted in intimate inter-personal contacts or before immense crowds of people.’ In this light, then, Milošević’s personal history and traits should be ‘closely examined as important factors in explaining [his rise to power and] the authoritarian system he established’ (Cohen 2001: xiv).

If we were to follow this personality-based approach, we would normally devise a mapping of personal qualities or attributes that would help explain why the leader is seen ‘as superhuman, far above the domain of the usual and even beyond the bounds of the rare and exceptional’ (Willner 1984: 128). Unfortunately, Max Weber’s classical theory has left us with no ‘clear statement or catalogue’ of personal qualities in charismatic leaders (Tucker 1970: 70). The closest Weber (1978: 1112) came to describing such qualities is the statement that charismatic leaders are ‘bearers of specific gifts of body and mind that [are] considered “supernatural” (in the sense that not everybody could have access to them)’. These ‘supernatural gifts’ include, for instance, an impressive physical appearance and manners, extraordinary intellectual strength of mind and general composure, exceptional oratorial or other public-agitating skills, and the performance of heroic deeds or miracles.

Slobodan Milošević cannot be said to display any of the personal qualities associated in the relevant literature with the rise of charisma. Besides being diminutive in size and physically unimpressive, he has ‘narrow intellectual horizons and limited vocabulary’ (Djilas 1993: 81). Lacking the histrionic skills of the orator, but also the public geniality of the politician, he almost never appeared in public or on television.8 To many, Milošević gave the impression of an ordinary Communist apparatchik,9 whom his early associates derided as the ‘little Lenin’ (Cohen 2001, 1997) and the last United States Ambassador to Yugoslavia — a person who came to know Milošević well—simply describing as a ‘slick con man’ (Zimmermann 1997: 7).

A comment must be made here about Mirjana Marković, Milošević’s wife. As if to verify the old saying that behind men of destiny always stands a great woman, Mirjana (or ‘Mira’, to her friends) played a significant political role during Slobodan Milošević’s rise and fall, and had enormous influence in Yugoslav politics (Djukić 2001). Between them, the couple had developed such an attachment that one was often not certain if crucial state decisions were taken by Slobodan or his wife. However, the qualities of this ‘fiercesome Lady Macbeth’—as L. J. Cohen (2001: 114) dubbed her—did not supplement, let alone substitute for, her husband’s nonexistent personal charisma.

Be that as it may, personality-oriented explanations of charismatic emergence seem to subscribe to the ‘great men’ theory of history, in which everything is primarily shaped
by the acts of men (and women) of destiny endowed with extraordinary personal qualities. This, however, reduces analysis to a social-psychological search for particular leadership traits, a line of search long abandoned in the related literature. Even when such traits are present they cannot sufficiently explain the emergence of charismatic authority without embedding analysis more fully into the surrounding social and political realities, or without taking into account the personal strategies of the individuals involved.

Cultural Primordialist Explanations

While élite and social psychology theorists attribute charismatic authority to the appearance, more or less out of the blue, of some ‘great man’ with exceptional personal qualities, for social anthropologists and civic culture theorists such leadership derives, in a more or less straightforward way, from previous cultural conditioning of a certain charismatic following. Thus, in a typical formulation of this approach, Milošević’s ‘political ascendancy and initial consolidation of power depended primarily on factors having more to do with the cultural underpinnings, rather than the structural features, of Serbian polity’ (Cohen 2001: 80). Therefore, this logic goes on, Milošević emerged as a charismatic leader simply because he ‘intuitively understood and effectively expressed the nationalist yearnings of large numbers of Serbs on both the elite and the popular levels’ (Cohen 2001: 80).

Let it be said right away that explanations of political phenomena based on primordial attachments are quite common, particularly in studies of the Balkans. ‘Balkan mentality,’ writes Todorova (1997: 181), ‘has been one of the most exploited mythologemes in popular discourse and an operative term in many scholarly studies.’ The persistence of such stereotypes is no doubt more pronounced in the study of modern Yugoslavia as they lurk in the work of a long line of authors from Jovan Cvijić (1918) and Rebecca West (1982 [1940]) to Robert Kaplan (1994) and beyond. To all these authors, the Yugoslav, particularly Serbian, political culture is distinguished by a set of beliefs and values that tend to end up in the quest for charismatic authority. Among the chief characteristics of Serbian political culture are: The persistence of old-fashioned patriotic values, as well as a teleological obsession with the nation’s ‘historical uniqueness’; an exaggerated emphasis on sanguinity, territoriality and ancestral myths, reinforced by an emotive rhetoric of belonging to the same community; a deep sense of victimization combined with a belief in near-future redemption and ultimate national regeneration; and a sense of superiority vis-à-vis other ethnic groups that leads to collective self-centeredness, fear of the Other and, ultimately, contempt for pluralism. Taken together, these produce what Tismaneanu (1996) has aptly called a ‘culture of disillusionment’, within which strong yearnings for providential leaders, messianic saviors and other political entrepreneurs ready to thrive on promises of salvation often develop.

Despite the many useful insights it may yield, however, no theory based on primordial attachments and belief systems alone is able to explain charismatic political action. To paraphrase Kitromilides, (1996: 168) such approaches are bound to turn into ‘sociological metaphysics’ unless they provide convincing answers as to which...
cultural beliefs, values, myths or identities may become politicized, as well as the conditions under which they may eventually lead to the emergence of charismatic authority. For, as David Laitin (1986: 97) correctly observes, a theory that predicts charisma as directly resulting from certain cultural values is inadequate as long as it fails to specify which aspect of one’s cultural identity will become the basis for charismatic emergence. In short, political cultures cannot tell us whether a charismatic leader will ever emerge; they can only tell us what main themes such leaders are more likely to utilize as their mobilizing resources once they have actually emerged.

Towards a Synthetic Explanation: Charisma and the Politicization of Culture

To be sure, there always exists a relationship between culture and politics. To say the least, it is through culture that ‘communication within [a] community is intensified, making it far simpler to transmit the messages from the ruler to the ruled and enhancing the solidarity … between the two parts’ (Schöpflin 2000: 85). The relationship between culture and politics, however, is not an unmediated one. To affect politics, cultural themes must first enter the political discourse through a process of politicization. In this sense, culture becomes a valuable resource for political agencies (e.g., the state, political parties or individual leaders) trying to manipulate certain aspects of a community’s cultural identity in order to forge a connection between culture and collective action (Cohen 1974). This is particularly evident in environments affected by acute crisis within which ‘political entrepreneurs have an opportunity to create new visions and state new truths’ (Laitin 1986: 91). In such crisis-ridden settings, individual political leaders realize that, to gain legitimacy, the easiest (and cheapest) way is through appeals to commonly shared cultural values that seem to be under threat. Through promises for crisis resolution and ultimate salvation, those leaders can attract and mobilize large followings. From this viewpoint, and against the backdrop of endemic crisis, culture, when manipulated by skillful political leaders, may become a solid basis for collective action.

The question immediately arises: Which aspects of a community’s culture are more susceptible to exploitation by adventurous political entrepreneurs so as to yield a broad constituency ready for collective action? Answering this question will not only enable us to explain ‘the conditions that make such leaders [as Slobodan Milošević] possible and popular’ (Woodward 1995: 15), but also to understand the logic and mechanism of the emergence of charismatic leadership in crisis-prone environments. Mere reference to general nationalist feelings—those being evident in almost all national communities—is certainly not enough to generate large-scale mobilization. What seems necessary is invocation by some leader of an imminent threat to a nation’s most fundamental myths supplemented by the leader’s credible promise for rescue or salvation.

National myths are sets of beliefs and perceptions that comprise a nation’s worldview about itself and others (cf. Eliade 1963, Cohen 1985, Hobsbawm 1983). Most fundamental are those national myths related to the twin conditions for every nation’s physical existence and future viability—namely, the rights to life and property; hence the high resonance of such myths among the members of a national community when
they find the lives of their brethren and national territories in jeopardy. It is such myths revolving around themes of national integrity, external threat and ultimate redemption that become more easily subject to manipulation by political entrepreneurs. The way in which Slobodan Milošević emerged as a charismatic leader in the late 1980s through appeals to the perennial cultural myths of Serbian identity is ‘an exemplary illustration’ (Schöpflin 2000: 85) of this; for, riding on widespread, but poorly founded fears about the integrity of the Serbian nation in post-Titoist Yugoslavia, he managed to present himself as a messiah. In fact, Milošević’s ‘particular genius in 1987 and after was to offer promise after promise of “salvation” to Serbian opinion … but to achieve this he had to keep raising the stakes’ (Schöpflin 2000: 368)—until, that is, the ultimate destruction of Yugoslavia.

Following on from this rationale, my attempt to propose an alternative, more synthetic explanation of Milošević’s charismatic emergence will develop into a three-stage model. In the first stage, the imposition by Tito in postwar Yugoslavia of a federal state structure created a common arena for political action for both the constituent republics and the nationalities living within them. Within that setting, available resources and rewards were distributed to peoples of diverse ethnic cultures depending on their proximity to the national center. As the Titoist state had initially put a high premium on central power, the tight federal structure was most favorable to Serbian interests. Things began changing in the 1960s, however, when both domestic and international developments gradually caused the Yugoslav state to decentralize, accompanied by demands for broader powers to be given to the autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina at the expense of Serbia.11

In the second stage, amidst a rapidly deteriorating environment both domestically and internationally, decentralization led to a new structure of opportunities and rewards. The 1970s and 1980s were a period of both institutional instability and economic decline in Yugoslavia. The growing scarcity of resources combined with decentralization led the constituent nationalities to compete fiercely for state goods such as jobs, funds and contracts and for national status. The threat of losing their formerly dominant position caused widespread discontent among the Serbs. In both Serbia and the other republics, ‘former differences between communists and non-communists, party members and “normal” citizens, were completely overshadowed by the much more important lines of division according to national and ethnic allegiance’ (Lendvai 1991: 257). The scene was set for ethnic conflict.

In the third and final stage, as often happens in crisis-ridden environments, political leaders found it easier to attract mass support not by addressing the crisis itself, but through appeals to commonly shared cultural (ethnic) identities. Large numbers of people, otherwise divided among themselves along deep cleavage lines, may still form a cohesive community by credibly invoking shared cultural symbols. This is so because ‘people who share ethnic identities … also share a myth of kinship, and so the symbolic basis of solidarity is already available’ (Laitin 1986: 100). Slobodan Milošević, by lifting the lid on the longstanding taboo of ethnic rivalries within Yugoslavia and endorsing a Serbian nationalist agenda, strategically manipulated cultural symbols and politicized ethnic identities.
Consistent with the foregoing model, analysis will move on four distinct, albeit inter-related, levels, each corresponding to a specific section of this article. First, we review the general social, economic and political situation in Yugoslavia in the years preceding Milošević’s appearance. Although Tito’s political construct had serious defects and peripheral nationalisms were on the rise, there were no clear signs in Yugoslavia that the federal state was about to collapse. Second, we concentrate on the particular grievances that gave rise to Serbian nationalism. By 1986, shortly before Milošević’s emergence, those grievances had been crystallized and publicly expressed in the Memorandum by the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences. Of those grievances, the most serious were about the alleged persecution of Serbs in Kosovo (and Croatia), and the continuation of Serbian dominion over Kosovo. Third, we concentrate on Kosovo, the centerpiece of Serbia’s national myths. It was this particular aspect of the Serbian cultural identity that Milošević chose to politicize and use as the chief political resource for his charismatic emergence. And finally, we shed light on how Milošević captured power by exploiting two weapons of which modern charismatic leaders are particularly fond: mass protest rallies and manipulation of the mass media.

The Context: Serbian Nationalism

If, for as long as Yugoslavia existed, the essence of its politics had been the national question (Banac 1992: 169), its thorniest issue was that of Serbian supremacy in the federal state. After liberation from the Axis forces in 1944, Marshal Josip Broz Tito, Yugoslavia’s Communist leader, established in the multiethnic country a Soviet-styled federation of six republics, each given equal status (and strong veto power). Serbia, the largest of the republics, consisted of three parts: Serbia proper, or ‘inner’ Serbia; the autonomous province of Vojvodina; and the autonomous region (oblast) of Kosovo. With this structure, Tito attempted to replace the mythical idea of ‘narodno jedinstvo’ (national unity’) of the pre-war state based on the notion that Serbs, Croats, Slovenes and other Southern Slavs were simply different names for parts of the same ‘Yugoslav’ nation, with the idea of ‘bratstvo i jedinstvo’ (‘brotherhood and unity’). According to the former idea, all Yugoslav peoples were one; according to the latter, these peoples were many, but united. Tito’s break with Stalin in 1948, however, caused a revival in Yugoslavist unitarism and tightened bureaucratic centralism. Even so, although Serbia was nominally equal with the other republics, in practice she clearly was superior to the other federal state republics in both political and economic matters. Things however began to change in 1962 when Tito, in yet another act of his famous pragmatism, abandoned unitarism and instead pursued a policy of gradual state decentralization.12

As feared, the process of decentralization involved several unpleasant surprises for Belgrade, which in due time would cause deep Serbian grievances. The removal by Tito in summer 1966 of Aleksandar Ranković, a top Serbian leader in the Titoist élite who was vice-president of Yugoslavia and head of state intelligence, was the first of such surprises and an early signal of the effects of decentralization and growing national liberation in the Yugoslav state. In the aftermath of Ranković’s fall, a series of constitutional amendments recognized the Bosnian Muslims as a separate nationality. Meanwhile,
demands for extending autonomy to Vojvodina and Kosovo became quite loud. ‘As
post-Ranković reforms strengthened the power of regional bureaucracies in territories
populated by Serbs or considered vital to Serbian existence, including Kosovo, Croatia,
Bosnia, and Macedonia … the proposition that Tito’s regime was purposely anti-
Serbian grew more tenable’ (Miller, 2000: 272). Such fears were strengthened in 1972
when Tito also purged the most capable leaders of the Serbian League of Communists.

A far more unpleasant surprise for the Serbs was the 1974 Constitution, which institu-
tionalized state decentralization and political liberalism. In effect, the Constitution
shifted most power from the center to the republics and the autonomous provinces.
The change became particularly dramatic in the cases of Serbia’s two autonomous
provinces—Vojvodina and Kosovo—which were now granted real autonomy rights
such as home rule and their own police forces. For the Serbs, this was a wholly unac-
ceptable development. ‘The autonomy granted to Kosovo [and Vojvodina] by the 1974
Constitution was for the Serbian population tantamount to a return to the time of the
Ottoman Empire,’ lamented two prominent Serbian intellectuals, Mihailović and
Krestić (11). From Serbia’s point of view, the situation could not have been worse. The
Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts presented the rationale in the following way:

Although the largest Yugoslav republic in territory and population, Serbia had been
dispossessed of its attributes of statehood by the new constitution promulgated in 1974.
The spectre of disintegration hovered not just over Yugoslavia but also over Serbia.
Because its two autonomous provinces had the de facto prerogatives of full-fledged repub-
lies, Serbia found that its hands were tied, for the republican government could not take
sovereign decisions affecting the republic as a whole. Serbia’s provinces even entered into
coalition with other republics, as a result of which the Republic of Serbia invariably found
itself outvoted at the federal level. (Mihailović and Krestić 1995: 1010)

Tito died in May 1980 and, as Banac (1992: 173) has eloquently put it, ‘his legacy was
really mortification by grievance’. The Serbs, more particularly, expressed their griev-
ances in a number of highly symbolic acts (for the development of Serbian nationalism
under Tito and after, see more particularly Helfant Budding 1997, 1998). The first was
the attack against decentralization made in 1981 by the Serbian Communist League
under the pretext of unfavorable conditions for Serbia, since decision making in that
republic was constrained by the disruptive acts of the autonomous provinces. More
important symbolically was the mass attendance by Serbs at Ranković’s funeral in
August 1983, which took the form of protest against the disadvantaged position of
Serbs in Yugoslavia, particularly in Kosovo. As Dobrića Ćosić, a well-known Serb intelle-
tlectual and novelist who had switched from communism to nationalism, noted at the
time, Ranković’s funeral was ‘above all a nationalist demonstration’. Then, in 1986, the
Memorandum from the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts was leaked to the press.
Because of its significance, this document deserves more detailed analysis.

The Grievances: The Memorandum by Serb Intellectuals

Nowhere can one find a better expression of the Serbian nationalism that seemed to
have plagued Yugoslavia in the 1980s than in the Memorandum, a 74-page document
drafted by members of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts which came to public knowledge in September 1986. For far from expressing the ideas of an academic body standing aloof, the Memorandum in fact ‘echoed opinions whispered throughout Yugoslavia’ (Silber and Little 1996: 33), and gave voice to deep grievances felt by the Serbian nation (for the role of intellectuals in the development of a nationalist culture, see, among other sources, A. D. Smith, 1991: 91–98). Even a brief review of that text will clearly reveal the political situation in Yugoslavia from the Serbian point of view just before Milosević came onto the scene.

Beginning with the admission that the country was undergoing a ‘severe crisis’ (95), intensified by the fact that the ‘present-day political system in Yugoslavia is increasingly contradictory, dysfunctional, and expensive’ (105), the authors of the Memorandum set out to explain the different facets of the crisis and propose solutions. As they saw it, the overall crisis consisted of three interrelated components: an economic crisis, a political-cum-constitutional crisis, and a specifically Serbian national crisis.

The economic crisis was the easiest to see for it was evident in the ever-continuing decline in national productivity, falling growth rates, galloping inflation, shortages in consumer goods, rising unemployment, decline in personal incomes, falling returns on investments and high foreign debt (for the economic situation in Yugoslavia, see more particularly Lydall 1989, Dyker 1990 Madžar 1992 Woodward 1995). For the authors of the Memorandum, economic slowdown had begun around the mid-1960s and coincided with the second facet of the crisis, the policy of state decentralization which started around the same time. This had fragmented the national Yugoslav economy and created autonomous ‘republics and provinces increasingly [seeking] to make their economies autarkic’ (97). It was the third facet of the crisis, however, according to the Memorandum’s authors that presented the gravest threat to the country: the alleged discrimination against the Serbian nation by the federal authorities. This was evident in three major areas: the economic subordination and relative neglect of the Serbian economy, the politically inferior status of the republic of Serbia within the federal state, and the attempted genocide against the Serbian nation.

Serbia’s economy, the Memorandum accused, had been lagging behind for many years since ‘according to all relevant indices … it was consistently below the Yugoslav average, and the gap was widening’ (119–120). This was attributed largely to a deliberate policy of lower rates of investment in Serbia than in the other republics, especially Slovenia and Croatia. More basically, however, Serbia’s economic plight was blamed on her ‘politically inferior status, from which all other relationships flowed’ (122). Amidst accusations of a ‘vindictive policy’ by the federal authorities towards Serbia, the Memorandum explained:

The discrimination against citizens of Serbia who, because of the representation of the republics on the principle of parity, have fewer federal posts open to them than others and fewer of their own delegates in the Federal Assembly is politically untenable, and the vote of citizens from Serbia carries less weight than the vote of citizens from any of the other republics or any of the provinces. … The watchword of this policy has been ‘a weak Serbia ensures a strong Yugoslavia’. (125)
Given the above picture, the *Memorandum* authors concluded: ‘Whether it is a case of economic or political matters, the [Yugoslav federal] system can serve as a textbook example of inefficiency’ (105). ‘Systemic’ inefficiencies, however, cannot in themselves generate the kind of crisis that often causes the emergence of charismatic authority. Bad economies and cumbersome political systems do not lead to tearing countries apart; usually, they lead to the necessary adjustments that good economic planners and capable political engineers propose. How are we to explain Milošević’s hijacking of the *Memorandum* grievances and his rise to power as a charismatic leader? The answer lies, I submit, in Milošević’s successful politicization of the third set of grievances the *Memorandum* contained—namely, the accusations of ‘physical, political, legal, and cultural genocide’ of the Serbian populations in Kosovo and Croatia. However, a crucial difference existed between these two areas. In Croatia, the Serbian population had been subjected to a ‘subtle but effective policy of assimilation’ (131), but the situation for Serbs in Kosovo was presented in more dramatic colors. There, following the ‘albanization of Kosovo and Metojih [that] were carried in full legality’ (128) under the provisions of the 1974 Constitution, ‘the exodus of Serbs [from those lands] in Socialist Yugoslavia exceeds in scope and character all earlier stages of the great persecution of the Serbian people’ (129). It is, therefore, to the Kosovo issue that our attention must now turn.

**The Catalyst: Kosovo**

Kosovo, and the mythology surrounding it, has been the centerpiece of the Serbian nationalism that developed in Yugoslavia after Tito’s death. This mythology, originating in the fateful 1389 battle on the Field of Blackbirds at Kosovo Polje, where the Orthodox Christian Serb prince Lazar was defeated by the Ottoman Turks, has always had an enormous effect on Serbian national consciousness. As historical tragedies and sorrows often have greater national impact than historical glories (Renan 1994: 17), the Kosovo defeat assumed legendary dimensions in Serbian minds and was incessantly injected into tales, legends, epic poetry, songs, romantic literature and political propaganda. For the Serbs, Kosovo became their sacred land: a Serbian Jerusalem. The point should not be underestimated. The authors of the *Memorandum*, for instance, considered Kosovo ‘the cradle of the Serbs’ historical existence’. Although this claim has been made repeatedly in modern Serbian history, here we will present only three examples. In an 1889 speech to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of the historic battle, Serbia’s foreign minister, Cedomil Mijatović, asserted the following:

An inexhaustible source of national pride was discovered on Kosovo. More important than language and stronger than the Church, this pride unites all the Serbs in a single nation. …

The new history of Serbia begins with Kosovo—a history of valiant efforts, long suffering, endless wars, and unquenchable glory. (Judah 2000: 16)

Fifty years later, at the celebration marking the anniversary of the same battle in 1939, Serbian Orthodox Bishop Emilijan would state with similar rhetorical immodesty:
'Beside the name of Christ, no other name is more beautiful or more sacred [than Kosovo]' (Silber and Little 1996: 72). And, even more recently, in the words of Matija Bećković, a contemporary nationalist Serbian intellectual echoing the feelings of the masses of Serbs already marching behind Milošević: Kosovo is the costliest Serbian word. It was paid by the blood of the whole people. ... Kosovo is the equator of the Serbian planet. The ceiling of the lower and the foundation of the upper world. Here the conscience of the Serb people was split into the period before and after Kosovo. Kosovo is the Serbianized story of the Flood, the Serbian New Testament. (Banac 1992: 174)

Why is Kosovo so important in Serbian national culture? The best answer is perhaps offered by Anthony D. Smith (1991: 14), who claims that a 'historic territory, or homeland' is probably the most fundamental feature of national identity.17 ‘A “historic land”,’ Smith explains, ‘is one where terrain and people have exerted mutual and beneficial influence over several generations. The homeland becomes a repository of historic memories and associations, the place where “our” sages, saints and heroes lived, worked, prayed and fought. All this makes the homeland unique’ (Smith 1991: 9; but also see A. D. Smith, 1981, 1996).18 Now compare this to the following precis by the Memorandum authors:

The Serbs in Kosovo and Metoija not only have their past, embodied in cultural and historical monuments of priceless value, but also their own spiritual, cultural, and moral values now in the present, for they are living in the cradle of the Serbs’ historical existence. (129)

Given the paramount importance of Kosovo to the Serbs,19 it is not surprising that the outbreak of Serbian nationalism began in that region.20 In 1981, already a year after Tito’s death, a violent rebellion of ethnic Albanians—forming the overwhelming majority of Kosovo’s population—broke out in Pristina against Serbian supremacy (on the Albanian revolt of 1981, see more particularly Mertus 1999: 17–93). The Albanians in Kosovo demanded full independence from Serbia and that Kosovo become a separate Yugoslav republic. Although the federal police and army crushed the rebellion immediately and declared a state of emergency in the region, no longer could any Yugoslav citizen ignore the size of the problem or the dangers it represented. Disaffection, to be sure, became more pronounced among the Serbs. Not only had they been profoundly shocked by the violent irredentism of the Albanian population in Kosovo, but they also realized that they could not enforce sovereign decisions in the federal organs because of opposition from the autonomous provinces.21 Still worse, the wave of emigration of Serbs from Kosovo that began in 1981 did not stop even after the Kosovo Albanian uprising was put down.22 For many years, Serbian families continued to move north on the road from Pristina to Belgrade. By 1986, when the Memorandum came to public attention, processions of desperate Kosovo Serbs could be seen in front of the Yugoslav Federal Assembly. ‘Given the symbolic significance of Kosovo in Serbian mythology, a highly charged nationalist atmosphere was in the making,’ wrote Vujačić (1995: 27). The Memorandum authors lamented:

In the climate created by the ruling ideology [in Kosovo] ... the [Serbian] language is being suppressed, and the Cyrillic script is progressively disappearing. ... No other Yugoslav
nation has had its cultural and spiritual integrity so brutally trampled upon as the Serbian
nation. No one else’s literary and artistic heritage has been so despoiled and ravaged as the
Serbian heritage. (134)

Only a few months later, in April 1987, Slobodan Milošević ended his famous Kosovo
Polje speech with the words that launched him as a charismatic leader: ‘Yugoslavia does
not exist without Kosovo. Yugoslavia disintegrates without Kosovo. Yugoslavia and
Serbia will not give Kosovo away.’

The Leader: Charisma in Action

The system established in Yugoslavia by Tito was premised upon the suppression of
nationalism and the active participation of the masses in politics. Milošević emerged
as a charismatic leader by violating both these premises. From his first appearance in
April 1987 until his election to the Serbian Presidency in November 1989, Milošević’s
march to power was no less short than it was impressive. It is worthwhile to follow this
trajectory briefly and examine the tactics the Serbian leader employed.

After the Kosovo Polje speech in April 1987, Slobodan Milošević consolidated his
power with breathtaking speed. First, he gained absolute control in the Serbian
Communist Party during the eighth session of the party’s Central Committee in
September of the same year. In a dramatic meeting, shown live on television,
Milošević removed the moderate Dragiša Pavlović, the Belgrade Party leader. Only a
few months later, in December 1987, a similar fate awaited Milošević’s mentor, Ivan
Stambolić, who was expelled from the post of Serbia’s president. Already in full
control of Serbia’s party apparatus, Milošević could now turn his attention to gaining
the Serbian people. His twin tactics to achieve this end—both typical of charismatic
leaders—were orchestration of huge protest rallies and manipulation of the mass
media.23

The first mass rallies (the so-called ‘rallies of solidarity’ or ‘truth rallies’) were staged
in the summer of 1988 in Vojvodina, and turned against the local party élites. ‘Under
the illusion that Milošević had delivered their national freedom, it took little effort to
stir up the masses,’ write Silber and Little (1996: 59). So, tens of thousands of Serbs
shouting slogans like ‘Kosovo is Serbia’, ‘Vojvodina is Serbia’ and ‘Slobodan our hero,
Serbia will die for you’ gave their public acclamation to Milošević’s nationalist project.
In the autumn, the mass protest rallies spread to Montenegro, Yugoslavia’s smallest
republic, with similar force. In November, hundreds of thousands of Serbs turned out
for a mass rally in Belgrade.24 From his high rostrum, Milošević had no difficulty
endorsing the creeping nationalism in the crowd and declare: ‘Every nation has a love
which eternally warms its heart. For Serbia, it is Kosovo. That is why Kosovo will
remain in Serbia.’ By January 1989, the old Titoist party leaders in both Vojvodina and
Montenegro had been toppled and replaced by new men loyal to Milošević. It was now
time for settling accounts in Kosovo.

An early attempt in 1988 to purge the Kosovo Party leadership failed after the Treпča
miners organized a general strike in defense of their province’s autonomy. In February
1989, however, Milošević finally succeeded in jailing Azem Vlassi, the ethnic Albanian
leader, and replacing him with his own men. With the autonomy of Vojvodina and Kosovo already abolished and Montenegro a faithful ally, Serbia gained control of half the votes on Yugoslavia’s federal presidency. In March, as if to officially seal his political victories, Milošević proclaimed a new Serbian constitution, which was ratified by the Kosovo assembly. This constitution stripped Kosovo of most of its autonomous powers, including control of the police, education, economic policy and choice of official language. Serbia was believed to be whole again and her leader enjoyed an ever-growing cult of personality.

The second factor, besides the mass protest movement, that greatly facilitated Milošević’s ascent to power was the support he enjoyed among Serbia’s intellectuals as well as his control and successful manipulation of the mass media. Like the rest of the population, the vast majority of Serb intellectuals, most of them erstwhile opponents of the Communist regime, rallied behind Slobodan Milošević in large numbers and with great enthusiasm (perhaps the best treatment of the topic is provided by Dragović-Soso 2002). Indeed as Slavoljub Djukić (2001: 207) puts the matter,

[Milošević] succeeded in something that no Serbian politician had managed: he was widely accepted by the intelligentsia. … It was difficult to recognize certain learned individuals who had courageously opposed Tito’s regime now rallying with such fervour around the Serbian leader. … They opened the door of history for him, with a love that made the flower of the Serbian intelligentsia hardly recognizable.

An equally important factor for Milošević’s ascent to power was the mass media, which, even from his less than auspicious beginning at Kosovo Polje in April 1987, stood willingly behind him.25 ‘We showed Milošević’s promise [in Kosovo Polje] over and over again on TV. And this is what launched him,’ Dušan Mitević, the head of Television Belgrade said later (quoted in Silber and Little 1996: 39). The nationalist manipulation of the news intensified, particularly during the mass rallies that shook the country in 1988 and 1989. According to the testimony of Branka Mihajlović, a news editor at the time, ‘crowd sizes were exaggerated, Milošević’s heroic status and popularity were stressed, and nationalist emblems unacceptable to most viewers (četnik badges and old Serbian flags) were not shown’ (Thompson, 1994: 88). The press, with the notable exception of only a few minor newspapers, also became an obedient instrument of the Serbian leader, especially useful in ‘cultivating educated, urban opinion, whose non-cooperation would be most dangerous to the government, and for intimidating those who could not be coerced by demonstrating how outnumbered they were and by denying them a hearing’ (Thompson, 1994: 64).26

Thus moving from triumph to ever greater triumph, the adoration of hundreds of thousands of Serbs for the person of Slobodan Milošević in the celebration of the six hundredth anniversary of the battle of Kosovo on 28 June 1989 came as no surprise. According to one estimate, it was ‘the greatest gathering of Serbs ever’ and ‘they came from all parts of Yugoslavia, from Europe, North America, and Australia’ (Doder and Branson 1999: 4). In front of the enormous crowd, Milošević delivered his message: ‘Six centuries later, now, we are being again engaged in battles and are facing battles. They are not armed battles, although such things cannot be excluded yet.’27 A few months later, in December, after a referendum-type election, Milošević was confirmed
President of Serbia. With all power in his hands and with the support of the vast majority of Serbs, Milošević assumed full control of his country’s fate.

Conclusions

The rise of nationalism in Yugoslavia followed by the collapse of the regime and the dissolution of the Yugoslav state cannot be explained without placing the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević at the center of analysis. The chief question this article has tried to answer is how a formerly unknown politician such as Milošević rose to become the charismatic leader of the Serbian nation. To be sure, to say that the ethnic mobilization of the late 1980s in Yugoslavia and its dramatic consequences during the 1990s are solely (and directly) attributed to Milošević is no less useful than trying to explain that country’s destruction by a mere ‘atavistic resurgence of primordial identities’ (King 2000). A better answer is provided when one begins to understand how cultural symbols are manipulated by political leaders in order to gain or sustain power (for an excellent analysis of symbolic politics in ethnic wars, see Kaufman (2001) esp. 165–201 on the fall of Yugoslavia; along similar theoretical lines, see Brysk (1995)). My argument has been that the Yugoslav crisis of the late 1980s was the outcome of the irresponsible politicization of national myths and other shared cultural symbols by a self-interested political leader. By lifting the lid on the longstanding taboo of ethnic rivalries within Yugoslavia and endorsing a Serbian nationalist agenda, Slobodan Milošević forged a feeling of deep crisis among Serbs, which he then promptly exploited to rise as a charismatic leader. By successfully politicizing cultural themes, he was able to link deeply ingrained cultural attitudes with individual political preferences. In this sense, Milošević’s rise is best explained as the combined outcome of a strategy consciously pursued by some self-interested leader and the mass response of Serbs to a prolonged and multifaceted crisis.

Such an explanation opens up some interesting theoretical perspectives in the study of political charisma. In Weber’s classical theory, charismatic emergence is associated with severe crisis situations. Although Weber (1978: 1111–1112) does not use the word ‘crisis’ in the relevant passages, he does say that charismatic leaders appear ‘in moments of distress—whether physic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, or political’. In situations such as that in Yugoslavia in the 1980s—what Aristide Zolberg (1972) has aptly termed ‘moments of madness’—it is highly likely that charismatic authority will emerge. In the classical theory, therefore, the mechanics of charismatic emergence are simple enough: the outbreak of a major crisis often brings the population to yearn for a charismatic leader, who, by successfully resolving the crisis, proves his charisma. Here ‘crisis’ is total crisis, meaning that the danger involved must be: nationwide in both character and scope; tangible, in that it involves some actual, as well as specific, national disaster; and imminent, in that the disaster, when it has not already occurred, is impending and rather inevitable. Usually, total crises emerge from large-scale war, violent regime change and national economic catastrophe. In contrast, crises affecting only specific individuals or parts of a national community (e.g., the pensioners, the young), crises lacking the element of actual national disaster (e.g., a capital markets...
crisis), or crises whose full outcome is either uncertain or deferred (e.g., the depletion of natural resources) are not total crises and do not usually lead to charismatic emergence.

Evidently, no total crisis in the above sense can be said to have applied in Yugoslavia during the 1980s. Although plagued by a number of serious problems, when Milošević rose to power the country still had a working political and economic system. How then can we explain (let alone, predict) the rise of charisma in the absence of total crisis? The answer, I propose, lies in expanding the concept of crisis to include not only ‘total’, but also endemic crises. Such crises develop in uncertain political environments lacking solid institutions or other mechanisms for resolving internal conflicts and where a sense of general disorder and widespread malaise prevails. In such crises, as Abner Cohen (58) has written, when ‘continuous subversive processes operating in society … become a serious threat … when men go through stress … there is an active search for a new equilibrium, for a modified symbolic order to accommodate the self within the new alignments of power’—these are the moments when charismatic leaders emerge. When the populace increasingly long for the perceived decline to stop, demanding radical solutions, there may emerge political entrepreneurs who, by employing easily comprehensible narratives, slogans or other tactics, succeed in symbolically presenting reality as if it were in a situation of total crisis. The case of Slobodan Milošević demonstrates that the rise of charismatic leadership, far from being the effect of an existing total crisis as is generally accepted by the classical theory on political charisma, often becomes a major cause of a prospective one.

Notes


[4] In particular, as Woodward (1995) explains: ‘Despite the deterioration of the economy, social order, and political system over the decade 1979–89, there was also still room for major actors to pull back from confrontation, for political groups to emerge with an outcome other than militant nationalism, and for political management to divert the momentum of incompatible national interests and economic reform into a peaceful compromise and genuine political reform.’ For an alternative view, however, see especially Bunce (1999) 73–74, 99; Ramet (1992).

[5] Viewing the matter from this perspective, to ask whether the breakdown of Yugoslavia would have happened had Milošević not appeared on the scene is equivalent to asking if the Bolshevik Revolution would have occurred without Lenin, the New Deal without Roosevelt, or World War Two without Hitler. What is certain, however, is that ‘a less charismatic and more rational leader could have realized a more modest, but also more realistic Serbian national program without the tremendous human, material and moral cost which the nation had to pay under Milošević’ (Vujačić, 1996: 34; also see Glenny 1992 31, 33).
Or, as Ivan Stambolić, Milošević’s erstwhile mentor and patron once wondered: ‘Why did the Serbian people desire this great illusion named Slobodan Milošević …? I emphasize the Serbian people wanted the illusion’ (quoted in L. J. Cohen 2001: 43).

From this viewpoint, nationalism must be seen ‘as the macrosociological outcome of rationally pursued strategies by individuals’ (Laitin 1986: 100). Or, to quote another author: ‘Nationalism enters the scene when a nation, or at least political leaders claiming to speak for the nation, focus on a political project’ (Bunce 1999: 13)

In the words of General Petar Gračanin, a General of the Yugoslav army and Serbian President from 1988 to 1989: ‘Slobo was psychologically incapable of speaking in front of … large crowds’ (quoted in Silber and Little 1996: 67).

Doder and Branson (1999: 3) portray Slobodan Milošević as a ‘gray communist apparatchik’ and, similarly, Dijlas (1993: 89) describes him as a classic ‘chamber politician’ and a ‘quint-essential apparatchik’.

Given that nationalism is a belief system, this applies more urgently to theories using nationalism as an independent, not a dependent variable.

Cf. ‘The battle throughout the Tito decades over who cuts the federal “cake” (the central moneybag) and how, gradually became the central political feature of the domestic scene. What was first called “localism” or “particularism” was gradually transformed into national friction as competing investment projects coincided with the borders between the six constituent republics’ (Lendvai 1991: 256).

As Banac (1992: 172) explains: ‘The reasons for Tito’s shift are complex but essentially had to do with the realization that his federal system was in danger of being devoured by creeping Serbian hegemonism after the passing of the Partisan generation.’


‘Since its disclosure,’ notes Dragović-Soso (2002: 177), ‘the Memorandum has become probably the most-cited text of contemporary Serbian nationalism, both in former Yugoslavia and abroad; it has been widely regarded as a “blueprint of war”, a programme of “Greater Serbia”, Milošević’s Mein Kampf and even an incitement to “ethnic cleansing”.’ For an excellent analysis of the Memorandum, see Helfant Budding (1998).

Mihailović and Krestić 1995: 93–140. All references to the Memorandum come from this source, and are indicated by the appropriate page numbers.

As Benedict Anderson (12) explains: ‘[N]ationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which … it came into being.’ For the Serbs, such cultural systems are the homogenous nation and the Orthodox Christian community.

Besides the Field of Blackbirds battleground, Kosovo is the location of several old Serbian religious and spiritual centers, birthplaces and other important historical sites. For more recent accounts emphasizing the significance of Kosovo in the process of national identity formation in modern Serbia, see Hastings 1999, White 2000, Pavlowitch 2002.

It is because of this uniqueness, adds Gellner (1998: 107–108), that ‘the entire weight of the romantic literature is on the side of fetishisation of landscape, of national culture as expressed in land-use and its territorial delimitation’.

‘Kosovo’s fate remains a vital question for the entire Serbian nation,’ asserts the Memorandum (130).

‘It was the question of Kosovo, Miranja Marković recalls, that was the “trigger” or “catalyst” for greater “self-awareness” among the Serbian people regarding their situation as an ethnic group in the country’ (quoted in Cohen 2001: 40). And, as Bunce (1999: 95) adds: ‘What made the Kosovar crisis all the more difficult for the Serbian leadership and the Serbian public was that Kosovo summarized all-too-efficiently (and in an area of enormous historical significance for Serbs) what was wrong with Yugoslavia.’
Although Serbia had three seats on the collective presidency of Yugoslavia, in practice the two autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina were often hostile to Serb interests.


It is quite telling that Milošević referred to his mass protest movement as the ‘anti-bureaucratic revolution’. His very choice of words, writes Vujačić (1995: 31), ‘confirmed in dramatic fashion a well-known Weberian truth: that nothing is as alien to the spirit of charisma as the spirit of bureaucracy’.

The mass coalition Milošević managed to build included ‘Serb nationalists of all social strata, both anticommunist and communist; unskilled and semiskilled workers; police; junior army officers of predominantly Serbian nationality; anti-Titoists purged from the party in campaigns that included a hint of anti-Serb bias; country people; and local party bosses’ (Woodward 1995: 92–93).

The most important of Yugoslavia’s mass media, RTS (Serbian Radio-Television), was under the virtual monopoly of the Belgrade communist authorities. For a fascinating account demonstrating the role of media for Milošević’s ascent to power, and the subsequent destruction of Yugoslavia, see Thompson, 1992.

For instance, Politika, Yugoslavia’s major daily, became saturated with articles attacking Serbia’s alleged enemies (such as the Albanians in Kosovo, the Croats and the Slovenes, the Vatican, the CIA). Meanwhile, the back pages of the paper were ‘given over to interminable obsessive features on Serbia’s past: its dynasties, its battles, its unique sufferings’ (Magaš 120).

The speech of Slobodan Milošević at Kosovo on 28 June 1989 can be found at www.srpskamreza.com/library/facts/Milosevic-speech.html.

In this respect, it would be interesting to ask if the end of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia would have been so peaceful had Boris Yeltsin, Václav Klaus or Vladimír Mečiar had exhibited a charismatic appear similar to Milošević’s.

Similarly: ‘Charismatic authority … always results from unusual, especially political or economic situations, or from extraordinary physic, particularly religious states, or from both together. It arises from collective excitement produced by extraordinary events and from surrender to heroism of any kind’ (Weber 1978: 1121; emphasis added).

This is what Pierre Bourdieu describes as ‘plena potestas agenti’.

References


