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REVIEW PAPER

THE PAN-SLAV BROTHERHOOD: RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE SOUTHERN ORTHODOX SLAVS

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ABSTRACT

The national awakening of the Southern Slavs resulted in the concurrent rise of distinct national identities, on the one hand, and the collective perception of the need for pan-Slav unity, on the other. Their distant 'kin'—tsarist Russia—was also embroiled in two opposing approaches to the issue: pro-Europeanism and pan-Slavism, of whom the latter envisaged a Russian-led pan-Slavic federation. Although of cultural characteristics, the pan-Slav movement became political as Russia sought to increase its dominance in the Balkans. By stoking a common identity, increasing groupness, and propagating rhetoric of 'us versus them,' Russia attempted to gain leverage over its Southern Slav brethren; however, the movement saw its ultimate decline with the dissolution of both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the question remains whether the appeals to pan-Slav symbols and ideas espouse a greater feeling of groupness among Russia and Bosnia and Herzegovina today. To answer this question, a theoretical framework of constructivism and symbolic politics theory is employed, with content analysis and review of the relevant literature as the analytical method.

Keywords: pan-Slavism; political psychology; Russia; Orthodoxy; myths and symbols

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Introduction

Often seen as a counter-argument to liberalism and realism, by challenging the very core of what the former take as given, such as the meaning of anarchy, the role of the states or agents' roles within structures, constructivism emphasizes how practices, rules, and norms constitute and reconstitute the meaning of not just the abovementioned concepts but social reality as a whole (Flockhart, 2016). Through the constructivist approach to fundamental principles in international relations (IR), such as anarchy, the balance of power, national interest, etc., one can begin to notice the additions of this theoretical paradigm to the broad field of IR. Understood by many as the absence of an overarching authority with a special ability to reinforce agreements and solve disputes—which compels states to the threat or use of force—anarchy in the international arena is redefined and reinterpreted by constructivists to become something what states make of it, as opined by Wendt (1992). As the dominant theoretical approaches of realism and liberalism were failing to properly ascertain and describe post-Cold War developments, and as argued by Flockhart (2016), constructivism brought several important insights aimed at filling the gaps of previous theories; however, one should not conflate constructivism as an inherently and merely antagonistic approach to realism and liberalism. It, in fact, acknowledges multiple aspects of both "lenses" as it properly understands that, for example, anarchy can nevertheless be conflictual or competitive, but the main difference is that it leaves space for construction and the occurrence of anarchy based on cooperation as well (Flockhart, 2016).

That is, constructivism takes into account the changing nature of the international environment, especially by placing an emphasis on actors (instead of mere structures) who can construct (shape) their realities in significant ways through the meaning they ascribe to the objects (or other actors) they interact with (Flockhart, 2016). Therefore, the meaning attributed to various objects and concepts influences the way in which those who are in the position to attribute such meanings in the first place behave (Bećirović & Akbarov, 2015). Also referred to as social constructivism, this approach allows us to view the world as being in a constant state of flux, rather than the mere fixedness of unchangeable factors—the material structure (Theys, 2018). On the contrary, the ideational structure, constructivists argue, is what gives meaning to this material reality; that is, a common understanding or shared knowledge ascribes meaning valid in certain socially-created contexts (Theys, 2018).

Social construction, the ascription of ideational meaning to material factors, and the focus on the identity of actors in the international arena are the key components of the constructivist approach to foreign policy analysis (Barnett, 2014). What is crucial are actors' understandings of themselves and their position in the world, which is influenced by things such as symbols, language, rules, categories (Sinanović & Bećirović, 2016), and so on. It is precisely this that can explain why actors sometimes don't pursue the most rational of choices (if we measure rationality by what produces the most utility), as the same actors consider their identity and what is most coherent with it, so as not to pursue actions which would be considered as outside of 'who they are.' Thereby, actors can be a great source of change; however, at the same time, adhering to what is 'expected' of them–the reproduction of certain behavior–is what gives primacy and power to structures into which actors are socialized (Barnett, 2014).

In terms of actors' identities, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) define identity as both a practical and analytical category, which is practiced by actors on a daily basis to "make sense of themselves" and, for example, in situations when politicians try to elicit a certain way of understanding related to the identity of their constituents. Furthermore, identity is a collective phenomenon that indicates 'sameness' among one group, which in return, can heighten the feelings of solidarity hence a stronger inclination for collective action (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). A more nuanced understanding of identity was required to make sense of this category; therefore, the alternatives such as commonalities, connectedness, and groupness were put forth which better explain identity as a variable on a spectrum that can be heightened or lowered through particular efforts (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Sharing a common attribute such as religious affiliation; relational ties among a group of people such as geographic location; as well as the sense of belonging to one group can, hereby, help understand actors' identities in a nuanced manner.

Nevertheless, as foreign policy is aimed at understanding why certain actions are pursued over others by relevant stakeholders, it is an imperative to focus on a number of factors including but not limited to the influences on the psychological and cognitive state of decision-makers (Hudson,

2014). Here, both the affect theory and symbolic politics theory (although mostly employed to describe causes of ethnic violence), can be instrumental; however, the focus is on the latter. Namely, Kaufman (2001) proposed the so-called myth-symbol complex where myths held as true by large groups of people, alongside symbols that serve as "emotionally charged shorthand reference . . ." constitute the ultimate meaning ascribed to events, identities, and concepts (Kaufman, 2001, p. 16). Here, intellectuals and elites come into the picture as those who work on this myth-symbol complex; they search for folk stories and legends which would fit the present needs around which a group of people would be organized. ". . . the point of invoking the symbol is usually to express, to communicate, or to evoke. . . emotions, such as pride or a sense of national grievance, associated with the myth" (Kaufman, 2001, p. 16). Interrelated myths and symbols form a web spun over the actors to whom they appeal.

Building on these arguments is the work of Geertz (1973), who related this web of symbols to culture. The initial point is that culture is a public phenomenon that doesn't exist only in the heads of the people but is manifested in their public behaviors which need to be subsequently analyzed in terms of their meaning (Geertz, 1973). In this web of norms and symbols prescribed by a specific culture, humans, who are endowed with the capacity to "live a thousand lives" end up living only one (since culture is a program of behavior); it narrows down the possible ways in which a group of people views themselves and the world around them (Geertz, 1973, p. 45). This is so precisely because people internalize and self-identify with these cultural symbols and norms which include the language they speak, the music they listen to, the clothes they wear, and the gestures they make (Bećirović, 2012). Therefore, although equipped with the potential for change and action, actors are nevertheless guided by this structural component which allows them to fully function in a complex world filled with various forms of social organization.

The development of pan-Slavism

In 19th century Europe, with the rise of nationalism, a sentiment of groupness between people of similar language and approximate geographical location started to arouse in the Balkans. Following the early writings of a Ragusan chronicler, Mavro Orbini, and his thought that Southern Slavs are a "single people" with a common language, albeit, with different dialects, an increasing number of intellectuals and writers came to ascertain this idea more than 300 years later (Stergar, 2017). Foundations were laid down by figures such as Ljudevit Gaj and Vuk Stefanović Karadžić back in the early 1800s, who held that a common language was the main prerequisite for a nation and that linguistic understanding was of utmost importance for fellow members of one group. In light of this, an agreement between the three peoples–Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs–was signed in 1850, Vienna, thus adopting Serbo-Croatian as their language under their respective empires (Trgovčević, 2016).

Adopting the theoretical framework from above, the key moment here is that the intellectuals and elites were the ones who embraced the pan-Slav movement, both in the Balkans but also in East Europe (Poland and Russia). This is not by coincidence; rather, as Kaufman (2001) describes it, elites often have a leading role in forming ethnic nations, as they are the final profiters of such efforts (Kaufman, 2001). Oftentimes, it is them who posit themselves as the leaders of the masses with appeals to various myths, symbols, and other concepts which arouse emotions in those whom they lead, but frequently for the sake of their selfish needs. Language, as the greatest set of symbols (Dervić & Bećirović, 2019; Yaman & Bećirović, 2016), was utilized as increasing the level of groupness of Southern Slavs. Even though they had distinct self-understanding, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) would argue that, due to the external identification as part of a pan-Slav movement and, later on, a community, the people began to internalize these symbols to a point where their self-understandings of began to change. "External categorizations . . . may be decisive in determining how one is regarded and treated by others [and] in shaping one's own understanding of oneself" (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 15).

With this in mind, among the Southern Slav groups, various undertakings for unification started to unfold: Croats aimed to unite all Croatians under one unit to be recognized by Austria and Hungary. Realizing that in the *Sabor*–the parliament of Croatia under Hungarian occupation–Hungarians were exerting their interests at the expense of the Croatian minority, the idea of commonness of Southern Slavs was set in motion by a bishop, Josip Juraj Strossmayer, and a historian, Franjo Rački, who asserted that Serbs and Croats were a common people referred to by different names (Trgovčević, 2016). On the other hand, pan-Slav ideas in Serbia were

advanced and collected by František Zach, whose work served as the inspiration for a document produced by the former Prime Minister of Serbia, Ilija Garašanin who envisaged the liberation and unification of all Serbs in *Načertanije*—the blueprint for the creation of Great Serbia (Hadžiabdić et al., 2013). In the lead-up to the Great War, there were two adversary forces among the Southern Slavs. The dominant one aimed to assert separate national identities of these people against the occupying forces, hence why the Serbs aimed at uniting all Serbs; the Croats requested the unification of the Kingdom of Dalmatia and Croatia, whilst the Slovenes went under a cultural awakening which brought Slovenian language into their schools (Hadžiabdić et al., 2013).

The other of the two forces was the pro-unification of the "same people with three names" (Trgovčević, 2016). At the proclamation of war in 1914, one of the ways in which Serbia veiled its war goals, was under the pretext of the South Slavic brotherhood of Croatia, Slavonia, Serbia, and Bosnia, which was to be subsequently liberated. Not long after that, ideas of a common state of the aforementioned 'kin' were found in different authors' pieces, of which Jovan Cvijić's *Jedinstvo Jugoslovena,* produced a geographic map of the soon-to-be Yugoslav (Yug - south) state (Trgovčević, 2016). This is another valuable moment, as the map can be interpreted as a tool that shaped the imagination of Southern Slavs, as it is a symbolic representation of "the antiquity of specific, tightly bounded territorial units" (Anderson, 1983, p. 175). The second purpose of a map is that it gives meaning to geographical features, such as rivers, mountains, and plains, which become regarded as "ours." In the words of Benedict Anderson, the map can "penetrate[d] deep into the popular imagination, forming a powerful emblem. . ." (Anderson, 1983, p. 175).

Additionally, international efforts were made to spread the pan-Slav efforts, with their institutionalization in 1915 when representatives of the Serb and Croat communities founded the Yugoslav Committee in Paris. Although not without difficulties, their endeavor came to fruition in July 1917, when the Corfu Declaration was signed, signifying a common future–the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes–which would be a parliamentary monarchy recognizing the three peoples but also reconciling the two dominant forces: self-determination of each of the peoples (which included the equalization of the two scripts, calendars, and the three religions), and the unification of Southern Slavs (Hadžiabdić et al., 2013). The Yugoslav efforts were seen as successful in the overall pan-Slav movement, even though such failed to encompass fellow Bulgarians, let alone establish a political unit stretching further to other 'Slav lands' (Dobbeleer, 2020).

The counterparts to the Southern Slavic brotherhood were the Polish and Russian pan-Slavs, although with different interpretations of how the unification of their people should come about. Whilst the former possessed the intellectual, linguistic, and cultural properties of advancing the idea of a union, the latter had an advantage in terms of the material means of exercising their vision of what a pan-Slav union (or federation) should look like. This led to the immediate clash between the two; however, it was clear that the Russian Empire posited itself as the leader and the center of pan-Slavism (Nowak, 1996). Despite the fact that it was never pursued as an official foreign policy aim by Russia, it did comprise an element of the Russian view of itself, especially as a protector of the Orthodox Slavs from the Ottomans (Kohn, 1960). This echoed in the works of famous Russian writers at the time, who discussed the bond by 'blood' (Slavism) and the religious bond (the Orthodox faith) between the Southern, Central, and Eastern European Slavs (Kohn, 1960).

Other authors wrote of the pan-Slavic discourse, largely driven by Russian pan-Slavists and, later, Slavophiles, who based their view of the brotherhood along the lines of cultural and religious affinity (Dialla, 2009). It is indisputable that a pan-Slav awakening was on the horizon; however, by taking on an increasingly political character without a firm base, it resulted in a less-than-widespread adoption among both the Russian and the South Slavic people. In tsarist Russia, the pan-Slav discourse remained within the circle of philosophers and authors such as Nikolai Yakovlevich Danilevskii, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevskii, and such who wrote of the pan-Slav Orthodox unification, whilst Russian diplomats and foreign-policy makers saw it as misguided, favoring the preserving of the status quo (Gülseven, 2016). What was a political reality of the time, and what served as a buttress of the pan-Slavic thought, was that both the Southern Slavs and Russians were either governed by or surrounded by non-Slavic, European, and Turkish empires alike (Gülseven, 2016).

According to Dialla (2009), one faction of the Russian foreign policy stakeholders, the Slavophiles, not only framed their ambitions in a some-

what messianic discourse of supranational spiritual solidarity based on the Orthodox faith, but they also saw the management of the so-called Eastern Question–who gets to control former Ottoman territories–in pan-Slav terms. Mainly, the liberation of all Slavic peoples would come about by the ultimate fall of both the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, whose Southern European territories would come under the control of the Russian empire (Dialla, 2009). This, but also the work of Gülseven (2016), showcases that Russia's primary ambition was to proliferate its influence in the Balkans and the means of achieving its ends were, among others, the use of pan-Slavism, the Orthodox faith, and the myths, legends, and symbols of the two. It is reiterated on this occasion that the Russian pan-Slavism was a cultural phenomenon, offering a spiritual awakening for the Russian identity, juxtaposed to the material supremacy of Western Europe at the time. Gülseven (2016) states that pan-Slavism was "not a political but a purely cultural phenomenon . . . which had two fundamental aspects: Pravoslavie (Orthodox Christianity) and Slavdom (union of Slavic people)" (Gülseven, 2016, p. 335).

Furthermore, Gülseven (2016), adds that, due to a change in the Russian foreign policy approach after the defeat in the Crimean War (1853-56), pan-Slavism was advanced by the means of public diplomacy and institutionally through the Slavic Benevolent Committee. The former is related to the work of the Russian ambassador to Constantinople, N.P. Ignatiev, who adopted a novel strategy centered on reversing the losses of the 1856 Paris Treaty through informal and direct meetings with Ottoman officials (Gülseven, 2016). Even though the Russian Foreign Minister, Gorchakov, favored the Concert of Europe, Igniatev oftentimes pursued policy contrary to the official aims of Russia, as he perceived that the Western powers were "trying to isolate Russia by forming an anti-Russian coalition" (Gülseven, 2016, p. 337). At this point, the pan-Slav efforts became strictly political, as Igniatev saw it as fitting that the Southern Slavs should pursue a revolt according to the Russian interests, thus placing his brothers into a position of mere objects.

The institutional materialization of pan-Slavism came about by generous financial donations, exchange of students, support for newspapers disseminating pan-Slavic propaganda, and the establishment of profound connections between the intellectual elite, which allowed the Slavic Benevolent Committee (Russian handmaiden) to add to the Russian political weight in the Balkans (Gülseven, 2016). Not only were exchange students monitored in terms of their support for Russian political presence after their arrival to their home states, but the Russian language was brought among the official correspondence between the Southern Slavs and the Committee, as well. In a way, this was an attempt at Russification rather than pan-Slav unity; however, it was framed to make it seem like the latter through appeals to ancient historical myths and legends, religious affiliation, and the fact that there was a common threat to both Southern Slavs (in terms of their aspirations for self-determination), and Russians (declining power and prestige after the Crimean War losses) (Gülseven, 2016).

What is important to underline here is the combination of rationalist as well as the approaches of symbolic politics in the explanation of the directions taken by Ignatiev and his contemporaries. Namely, it was rational for Russia to preserve the status quo and focus on internal issues, such as rebuilding the economy and improving its material capabilities following the Crimean War. Nevertheless, as Kaufman (2001) asserts, rationalist approaches, in terms of pursuing security and the highest level of utility, simply cannot account for certain events. Therefore, by adding symbolic political explanations, we see that sometimes symbols and stories are used to increase the levels of groupness, following mythical narratives which claim superiority of that group over others–which was highly present in pan-Slav discourse. Furthermore, since people have unstable opinions (Rizvić & Bećirović, 2017) and, in cases where a rational decision (the conduct of a cost vs. benefit analysis) comes second, due to the prevalence of emotions aroused by the myth-symbol complex, it is relatively easy to see how actions that aren't the most rational could be pursued (Kafuman, 2001). The only caveat here is that Kaufman (2001) directs his theory towards conflict and dissolution, but the argument here is that appeals to myths, symbols, and fears can be utilized for the purposes of increasing groupness and promoting unity, although with varying degrees of success.

Pan-Slavism today

The movement saw its rise concurrent with the 19th-century European revolution and managed to proliferate across the southern and eastern parts of the continent, short of being taken upon as the official foreign policy of the self-proclaimed leader–the Russian Empire (Kohn, 1960). A

bright moment in pan-Slav history was the Yugoslav creation of a common state for the three peoples under one flag. Nonetheless, not only did the units of 'pan-Slavs' collapse at the turn of the 20th century but, during the last years of the movement, it was subsumed within a kind of 'pan-Russism' which didn't enjoy a wide audience (Kohn, 1960). The collapse of Yugoslavia itself can be attributed to the elites' pursuit of diverging narratives, symbols, and myths which cultivated stronger distinct national identities, and, once the environment was ripe for conflict, en-masse mobilization ensued; as put forth by Kaufman (2001).

In contemporary times, one simply doesn't get to hear a lot about pan-Slavism. Firstly, the languages have become increasingly impossible to be understood by the different Slavic peoples, making this argument irrelevant to any appeals to pan-Slav unity. Secondly, although the Eastern European, Slavic states share common state symbols such as their flags and coat of arms, there doesn't exist either literature or discourse aiming at the unification of the different nation-states; the movement merely saw its demise in the 20th century, and its utility can be seen in explaining the 19th-century Russo-Turkish relations, especially the Russian policy towards the Slavic subjects of the latter. Nevertheless, in today's state flags, we can observe the blue, white, and red pan-Slav colors as with Russia or Serbia (Dobbeleer, 2020). However, what has to be added is the increased use of the Christian Orthodox symbols during the conduct of official state relations as well as military parades.

For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), the Bosnian Serbs, adherents of the Orthodox faith, have employed religious symbols, songs, and folk stories during the celebration of Republika Srpska Day (Mišljenović & Matavulj, 2022). Proclaimed unconstitutional, the Day was celebrated and attended by top-ranking officials and politicians not just from the B&H's entity but also from other countries; most notably the Russian ambassador to B&H. Interestingly, among the attendees and those marching were other groups from Russia, carrying the Russian, Serbian, and the flag of Republika Srpska; all three colored in white, red, and blue. Religious figures and symbols were also noticeable. The patriarch Porfirije performed a liturgy on the unconstitutional Independence Day, which is considered the beginning of the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina by its other two ethnonational groups (Veselinović & Katić, 2022). In contrast, this didn't stop the Bosnian Serbs and their supporters from placing religious symbols on army vehicles, performing a mass, or singing religious songs for "the Orthodox cross" (Mišljenović & Matavulj, 2022).

Special icons were also created entailing religious and map symbols, which most certainly increased the groupness of this part of the B&H population (BL Portal, 2020). Among the pro-Russian club called Night Wolves–which has been under the eye of state institutions and the United States for corruption–were members associated with the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, who stated that they support their fellow Orthodox brothers and that, in fighting off enemies from Republika Srpska, they are ready to fight "to blood" (BIRN BIH, 2022). In their interview for another media outlet, they claimed that they respect and nurture the Orthodox faith and the freedom of the Orthodox Serbs living in B&H (RTRS, 2021); thus, it is illustrative of the power the Christian Orthodox symbols have even today if such can mobilize groups of people to travel across the continent in support of an unconstitutional ceremony. Although there are some traces of pan-Slav symbols, they have, however, been subsumed by particular ethnonational and religious symbols, which are more reflective of the recent past in the Balkans (the dissolution of Yugoslavia), which does not go against the omnipresent power of the Orthodox faith.

Conclusion

For concluding remarks, we can gauge what the pan-Slav movement has become. Simply put, it was—and it is—nothing more than an attempt of the intellectual elites to mobilize a movement that was to serve their interests, thus further propelling them into power, with an extreme emphasis on the Russophile pan-Slavs. This is an important conclusion to be made, as it proves the two-way power of symbolic politics: the myth-symbol complex and appeal to emotions can serve to increase the levels of commonness among people, but it can also be utilized to create divisions, differences, and to extrapolate them onto the wider population. It is precisely the Russian pan-Slav elites who saw it as only fair that Russia be the bearer of the movement as a whole. In this way, the broad appeals to myths, symbols, and religion served as the ultimate vehicles for their goals and, in a particular manner, an opportunity to increase the level of three variables that Brubaker and Cooper (2000) say constitute identity: groupness, commonality, and commonness. Moreover, if we are to follow Kaufman (2001),

pan-Slavism would be nothing more than a failed attempt at 19th-century nationalism, for the awakening of which, the elites and intellectuals were instrumental.

Taking this into consideration, we reach a point of certainty that one of the primary reasons why pan-Slavism, as a movement for unity stretching across Eastern, Central, and Southern Europe, didn't quite come to fruition. It is due to the lack of proper common myths and symbols to be appealed to and to be disseminated by mentioned actors. If following this technique of espousing a form of nationalism, the elites have to bridge the gap between history and mythology abundant in symbols that provide answers to current challenges and needs. This was too cumbersome for pan-Slavs as neither geography, lack of linguistic understanding, different material structures, as well as lack of evidence of a common history didn't produce enough of a spark for mobilization.

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