

# “Exotic Brotherhoods” in Serbian Media Discourses: The Caucasus

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## **Abstract**

This chapter discusses the question of constructing brotherhoods of nations in the media in the post-Communist and post-Soviet context. It takes as an example the notions of brotherhood that appear in Serbian media with regard to different nations of the Caucasus (Georgians, Armenians, Ossetes). By examining the ways in which a remote region is represented and made sense of in the popular media, the chapter traces how new elements and nations are written into already stabilized historical narratives and “political mythologies”.

The chapter employs the theoretical lens of popular geopolitics. It is concerned with popular, everyday discourse on and representations of countries and groups. On the example of newspaper articles, TV shows, book publications etc. I show how particular understandings of international brotherhood emerge and what symbolic resources they draw upon. I also position these new brotherhoods in a broader context of Serbian politics and trace their role as political tools for a mobilization of particular kinds of historical knowledge.

The article combines Foucault’s understanding of discourse with Berger and Luckman’s theory of the socially constructed nature of everyday commonsensical knowledge, making use of the analytical apparatus provided by the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD).

**Keywords** Serbia, Caucasus, Brotherhood, History, Geopolitics

## 1. Introduction

International friendships are often understood as a “*cumulative process of building trust, growing affinities and deepening cooperation*” between states by institutional means (Oelsner and Vion, 2011: 131), symbols and language being an important component of this process. According to Krotz, bottom-down friendship building initiatives can only succeed if aided by a presence of “parapublic underpinnings” – various cultural and local initiatives which give more everyday substance, emotion and meaning to concrete everyday experiences of the postulated friendship (Krotz 2002, cited in Oelsner and Vion, 2011). Various media formats, blogs, websites, books, TV programmes etc. are able to create such parapublic underpinnings and contribute to discourses on international friendships and brotherhoods.

This article sets out to explore the everyday mediated constructions of brotherhood between Serbia and its “brotherly nations” from the Caucasus. Those brotherhood constructions are analyzed using popular media material, exploring discourses utilized in the media to construct figures of brotherhood. The examples of Serbian-Armenian, Serbian-Abkhaz and Serbian-Ossetian brotherhoods in the popular media are understood as a special case of geopolitical imaginations, built from existing symbolic stocks of historical knowledge. Such geopolitical imaginations easily become part of “popular political mythology”, which tends to resist change or reform (Ćolović, 2014: 69).

I argue that the creation of “exotic” brotherhoods between Serbia and various Caucasus nations is not a mere rhetorical operation securing some instant political gain, but a wider phenomenon of cognitive ordering of history. This is important in countries that underwent systemic changes after the collapse of Communist regimes; in those countries, history has been elevated to an important reservoir of social meaning to be drawn from in both national and international contexts (Mälksoo, 2009: 654f). Fotiadis (2014: 265) states that the emergence of new brotherhoods is typical for times of crisis and change, when old meaning regimes collapse and new alliances are sought. The “parapublic underpinnings” of this process are instrumental in securing public support for the constant presence of history and historical debates in the media. Politicians, societies, NGOs participate in the publically performed discourse on history and build new brotherhoods with a more or less historical rationale. Brotherhood constructions help redefine one’s own identity and determine the enemy, forming new in-groups and out-groups.

The Serbian case is illustrative in this respect. History is permeating public discourses in Serbia, which is understandable given its turbulent recent transformations, especially the 1990s Yugoslav wars and the secession of Kosovo. In the public and media sphere, a “great leap backwards” is observable to the pre-WWII times, which start to play a guiding role for new political life. The 50-year social-

ist period is often overlooked, omitted from the narrative.<sup>1</sup> I argue that the new brotherhood constructions help to stabilize new history interpretations as dominant, providing new points of reference (e.g. non-aligned internationalism or Yugoslav “brotherhood and unity” being replaced with particular international brotherhoods).

Processes of historicization of the political and the social are often accused of enabling the renaissance of militant nationalisms (Kuus, 2004: 475). They also contribute to the Orientalist view that Eastern European and Balkan nations are characterized by innate historicism and a disposition to interpret social change through the lenses of the past (Mälksoo, 2009: 657). Brotherhood constructions can undoubtedly become political tools used to enhance dominant political narratives, especially defining the enemy (Pierzynska, 2016). However, it is important to realize that brotherhood constructions also play the role of re-asserting one’s own agency, which is often perceived as disregarded or even destroyed by international powers in the midst of a “geopolitical game”.

The examples discussed here illustrate how various media contribute to such reassertion by constructing new Caucasus-oriented brotherhoods.

## 2. Serbian historical self and its Caucasus-projection

Serbia has had at least two important “brothers” in the course of history: France and Russia. The Serbian-French friendship was celebrated in Serbia in the 1920s as a remembrance of the French assistance in WWI, but was officially and symbolically “buried” by covering the monument dedicated to this alliance after France took part in the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 (Ćolović, 2014: 70). The Serbian-Russian brotherhood discourse has a long history dating back hundreds of years (Milosavljević, 2002: 267f) and still thrives in the media nowadays (Varga, 2016: 163f; Ćolović, 2014: 69). Varga argues that the Serbian-Russian brotherhood narrative is a symptom of anti-Westernism rather than a genuine concern for values and traditions shared by both nations (Varga, 2016: 176). The “new Russophilia” in Serbia could even be seen as a wider come-back of Russia-enthusiastic narratives in the Balkans (cf. Iršič, 2015). Serbia also entertains more “symmetrical” brotherhoods, e.g. the relatively new discourse on the Serbian-Greek friendship which appeared during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, funded in shared representations of history as a force victimizing one’s nation and the need to exercise historical territorial rights to Kosovo and Macedonia, respectively (Fotiadis, 2014: 470).

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1 As, for example, during the 2014 Military Parade in Belgrade, attended by Putin, celebrating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the city from the Nazis. The official speeches of the Serbian officials were mostly dedicated to the memory of WWI, and references to Communist Yugoslavia and Tito’s Partisans non-existent (Mihajlović, 2014).

The somehow exotic claims about the existence of Serbian-Armenian, Serbian-Ossetian and Serbian-Abkhazian brotherhood can be understood against this background; they seem to be anchored in the dominating perception of history as an unjust force which only big international players can tame to serve their interests. This conceptualization of history is in line with the naturalized undifferentiated view of geopolitics as the game of the powerful few played over the heads of small nations which underlies the whole historical process (O’Tuathail, 1996: 15f) and legitimizes violent actions as self-defense acts.

Different Serbian media outlets dedicated space to the new brotherhoods, often painting them as a “historical self-defense”. The conservative quality broadsheet *Polityka*, liberal daily *Danas*, tabloid *Kurir* (associated with the ruling Serbian Progressive Party), nationalist daily *Glas javnosti*, nationalist weekly *Pečat*, private and state-funded TV stations and many more tackled the issue. Book publications about the Caucasus<sup>2</sup> and audience comments on websites add to the fuller picture of the discourse.

From the SKAD perspective, the Caucasus brotherhood claims in Serbian media form a special, niche discourse (Keller, 2011: 31) – after all, the new brotherhoods are not fully stabilized. This does not diminish the relevance of studying them, as they provide a new perspective on popular representations of history, geopolitics and the nation, questions of high practical significance in the Serbian “nationalizing state” (Brubaker, 1996: 431). Media constructions of the new brotherhoods necessarily create new popular knowledge about the Caucasus region. Various media contribute with different elements of such knowledge, together forming a coherent view on the postulated commonalities between nations, which legitimize the brotherhood claims. They inform about Caucasus-related associations and events, securing the parapublic underpinnings of the discourse. The pervasiveness of one particular reading of the Caucasus in almost all materials is worth a second thought.

The brotherhood claims include some common characteristics. Firstly, they posit a special spiritual connection between the nations on the premise that Serbs, Armenians, Ossetes and Abkhazians all share one Orthodox faith (which is a problematic assumption because the Armenian Apostolic Church, being part of non-Chalcedonian tradition, belongs to the Oriental Orthodox churches; it is not in communion with other churches of the Eastern Orthodox tradition). Secondly and more importantly, the historical fate of the above mentioned nations is problematized and elevated to the status of the main organizer of all knowledge claims in the discourse. This fate is understood as unjust, tragic, with countless references to freedom fight, national emancipation, constant existential threats from one’s neighbors and genocide. Thirdly, the fact that all the discussed nations are in different

2 E.g. *Geopolitika Zakavkazja* (2010), *Hladni mir: Kavkaz i Kosovo* (2009), *Na vratima istoka* (2014) and others.

ways involved in complicated legal and political processes of territorial secession and (non)recognition of sovereignty enables comparisons between them. Very different realities of opposing the secession of one’s province (Serbia in the Kosovo case), supporting the secession of another country’s province (Armenia in the Nagorno Karabakh case), or having proclaimed sovereignty while being a province of an internationally recognized state (South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia) are brought together into a discursive “knot” so complex that it becomes easy to blur the facts with geopolitical imaginations which are far from factual.

The Georgian break-away republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are the case in point. They are depicted as victims of Georgian extermination policies, and their independence proclamations as logical consequences of this existential threat. However, the realities of Soviet Georgia and the actual ethnic composition of its autonomous regions are not problematized. Abkhazia and Ossetia are used as extrapolations to represent the recent history of the Krajina Serbs and their self-proclaimed independent state (Srpska Krajina), whose 1995 defeat by Croatian forces caused an enormous refugee crisis. Estimated 200.000 Serbs left Croatia for Serbia in a dramatic march through war-devastated Bosnian territory (Shattuck, 2003: 169). Painful memories of this crisis are echoed in texts which speak about Abkhazia; some of them go as far as to claim a similar expulsion to have happened to the Abkhaz, disregarding the real history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century forced migration in the Caucasus (Cornell, 2000: 144).

Expulsion, ethnic cleansing and genocide are also main building blocks of the postulated Serbian-Armenian friendship. Armenians and Serbs are proclaimed to be brotherly nations not only because of their Christian heritage, but mainly because of the historical experience of a planned extermination. Contrary to the mainstream Western representations of the Serbs as main culprits for the Yugoslav wars, the self-positioning of the political elite in the media in 1980s and 1990s concentrated on the existential threat to the Serbian nation within the borders of Communist Yugoslavia (Anžulović, 1999: 109f). This belief has somewhat lost its privileged place in the media by now, especially given the pro-EU stand of the ruling Progressive Party and the pervasive government narrative of “looking into the future”. However, the new brotherhood constructions bring the past back to the fore. They oppose the acceptance of any responsibility (“guilt”) for the recent war. This happens most often in a framework of a “geopolitical analysis”, as in an Armenia-related TV programme where a geopolitical analyst and Caucasus-expert asserts: “*We Serbs disregard all that is Serbian in Serbia nowadays; we accept guilt for things we are not guilty of, and forget about others’ guilt for our suffering*” (Igić, 2010).

It is symptomatic that the actors who set the brotherhood discourse and define its ramifications belong to the intellectual elite: they are academicians, journalists, geopolitical analysts etc. A well-known war correspondent praises the Ossetes as a nation who “knows everything about Serbia” and is “familiar with the story of

Kosovo". Moreover, in Ossetia, "the history has stopped". The historical reference is packed together with a geopolitical analysis of the Caucasus' position as a soft underbelly of the USSR (Lazanski, 2014). Other geopolitical analysts point to the need of strengthening contacts between Serbia and Armenia in order to learn how to manage one's position in today's multipolar world (Igić, 2010). The brotherly discourse highlights the need to forge new contacts as vital for overcoming the low international status of Serbia, Russia being one of the countries to seek closer ties with. Intensification of actual contacts would undoubtedly give more substance to its own claims.

The new brotherhoods are defined not only from within, but also, as is usually the case, against a common enemy. Interestingly, there are two main enemies: the West on the whole and Turkey. It seems that elevating Turkey to the role of an important enemy is needed in order to build the posited Serbian-Armenian brotherly relationship. The Armenian genocide, an event that organizes Armenian understanding of history and nation, connects to the motif of the Serbian genocide in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (extermination policies of the Independent State of Croatia). According to a historian, "*genocide that we experienced during WWII started on the Armenian territory in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century*" (Igić, 2010). The new brotherhood enables a revitalization of this motif that became somewhat "inappropriate" in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars. It is a reminiscence of what Russell-Omaljev (2016: 103) calls the post-Milošević narrative of nationalist elites which foregrounds the victimhood and suffering of the Serbs oppressed first by the Ottomans and later the international community – elements connecting them with the Armenians. Some studies point to a revitalization of the nationalist rhetoric from the 1980s and 1990s (Veljanovski, 2014: 100), and new brotherhoods may serve as a tool in such discursive operations.

Naturally, an important reference point within the discourse is the recent past. The 1995 refugee crisis is regarded as one of the biggest tragedies in Serbian history and officially commemorated as such. In 2015, Serbian patriarch Irinej classified world genocides in order of severity, placing Serbs on the 3rd position "right after" Jews and Armenians (N1 Vesti, 2015). The usability of Holocaust as a "symbolic prop" for Serbian martyrdom and its usage by Serbian Orthodox Church was discussed elsewhere (David, 2013); the Armenian genocide is used analogically.

The Nagorno-Karabakh issue can similarly function as a trigger for the troubled Serbian province of Kosovo, which declared independence in 2008 with enormous support from the international community, establishing a precedent relevant to all global separatist movements. Popular knowledge has it that Nagorno-Karabakh is an exact analogue to Kosovo, although in reality it is hard to logically defend the parallel. This Azerbaijani province, populated by an Armenian majority, seceded from Azerbaijan in 1991 and sought to be re-united with Armenia, but was never officially recognized by any country, including Armenia itself. The complicated details of the international status of *de facto* states do not make it through to pop-

ular media representations, which seems to be true for Serbia and Armenia alike. In 2014, Serbian media reported about Armenian football fans greeting the Serbian team in Yerevan with a transparent stating “Karabakh is Armenia, Kosovo is Serbia”, with comments underscoring the “shared religion and political situation” of Serbia and Armenia (Telegraf, 2014). Similar messages and images are produced by Serbian Twitter and Facebook users, often with references to the common Christian faith uniting two brotherly countries. Especially interesting visual messages contain Serbian and Armenian coats of arms superimposed against each other, Serbian and Armenian flags merging into one another and stylized “archaized” Cyrillic letters used to convey the messages of political equivalence between the Kosovo and Nagorno Karabakh cases (Facebook, user Orthodox Army).

The following table, adapted from Keller (2011: 59) summarizes the most important elements structuring the discourse, the way it defines the “issue” to be tackled and solutions proposed, as well as the competing knowledge regimes which frame it.

**Table 1: structure of the “Caucasus brotherhoods” discourse**

<b>Elements</b>	<b>Statements and “issues” to be solved</b>
1. Problem	The existence of one’s own and the brotherly nations threatened by the geopolitical game of great powers
2. Causes	Geopolitical interests of the great powers Disregard for one’s own history, lack of historical knowledge Lack of contacts between the brotherly nations Lack of knowledge exchange between the brotherly nations
3. Proposed solutions	Intensification of contacts Turning away from the West Russia Acknowledging the Serbian genocide in the 20th century Dissemination of geopolitical knowledge
4. Knowledge struggles	Civic vs. ethnic understanding of the nation West (EU, NATO) vs. East (Russia) values Modernity vs. tradition Socialist “brotherhood and unity” vs. new exotic brotherhoods
5. Values	Tradition, Orthodoxy, nation, “blood and soil”

It is important to realize that the Serbian-Armenian brotherhood discourse does not operate only on the symbolic plane. It has a strong material base for Armenians have been present on the Serbian territory since the Middle Ages (Siekierski, 2016: 212). In 2011, there were 222 persons declaring Armenian nationality in Serbia (Popis, 2011). A legend tells a story of an Armenian regiment deserting the Ottoman army during the Kosovo Battle in order not to face the Serbian ene-

my who shared its Christian faith. A small monastery, Jermenčić, in south-eastern Serbia is said to have been built by those Armenian soldiers (Živković, 2015).

Some descendants of Ottoman Armenians residing in Serbia were interviewed for a TV programme aired in 2009 by the Serbian public broadcaster (RTS). The programme places great emphasis on the “inextricable bond between the Serbian and Armenian nations” and features adult children of Armenian refugees talking about their families’ fate in Serbia. In the words of one of the protagonists, Serbs are “a nation most tolerant, for other nationalities and religions” (Manojlović, 2009). Interestingly, although those Ottoman refugees who arrived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were effectively fleeing to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and later to Yugoslavia, this country’s name is never mentioned. Neither the Kingdom nor the Republic of Yugoslavia are referred to; the brotherhood discourse allows only for national, and never civic, categories.<sup>3</sup>

In view of the generalized image of Serbs as bloodthirsty nationalists supporting the 1990s wars in the foreign media, which did not distinguish between various currents in Serbian society (Papanikolatos, 2000), and the trauma connected to such stigmatization,<sup>4</sup> the new exotic brotherhoods emerge as one way of boosting the lost self-esteem and reasserting one’s agency with historical references to “positive” processes which defy the claims of the foreign media, e.g. the welcoming of Armenian refugees from Turkey. They also allow for replacing the old Yugoslav narrative of brotherhood and unity (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*) of all nations inhabiting Yugoslavia, impossible to be upheld after the war, with new ones.<sup>5</sup> The new exotic brotherhoods are more easily manageable than the Yugoslav brotherhoods of the past – distant nations are less likely to cause historical resentments typically arising between neighbors. Russian, Greek and Caucasus friendships take up the vacant position on the friendship scale, bringing new possibilities of meaning ordering and production, which are in line with broader discursive shifts in the understanding of history, e.g. the move towards celebrations of WWI rather than WWII.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Yugoslavia was, after all, a country comprising of many nations and nationalities.

4 After the Yugoslav wars broke out, foreign media were first accused of pro-Serbian sympathies (Sadkovich, 1998: 10f), which may have added to their anti-Serbian zeal upon the end of the war.

5 Stojanović (2010: 14) even says that “brotherhood and unity” has been replaced with the myth of eternal hatreds between South Slavs.

6 The celebration of WWI foregrounds only Serbian agency, as it was the Kingdom of Serbia which took part in the war, whereas the memory of WWII connotes not only the Communist Yugoslav past, but also a concerted effort of all nations and nationalities which formed the Partisan forces. However, the 2015 rehabilitation of the Chetnik commandant Draža Mihajlović points to a “nationalization” of the WWII memory and crowns the attempts to “include the Chetniks into the anti-fascist movement” which were present already since 1990s (Kuljić, 2002: 414).



Following Foucault and Keller, I understand the material infrastructure of the discourses of Caucasus brotherhoods as its *dispositifs* (Keller, 2011: 56). The *dispositifs* of the Serbian-Armenian brotherhood discourse include only 4 low-profile organizations (The Armenian-Serbian Friendship Club, Union of Armenians in Serbia, Armenian Women’s Centre, Armenian Centre for Development of Science, Economy and Culture (Siekierski, 2016: 215), which again shows the relatively niche, unstable character of the mediated knowledge about the Caucasus. This scarcity notwithstanding, the brotherhood discourses establish their knowledge claims by the authority of their elite proponents: well-known journalists, intellectuals and Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>7</sup>

However, the brotherhood claims seem to operate mostly symbolically and not to reflect on everyday realities. The personal story of one Armenian activist, who experienced longstanding problems with Serbian consular authorities and recently died of cancer (Mladenović, 2013) is a sad example of the discrepancy between the everyday life of people and the ideological claims which order their (mediated) knowledge of the world.

### 3. Conclusion

There is more to the Serbian “Caucasus-brotherhoods” than the obvious anti-Westernism of their political orientation and contestation of what is perceived as an unjust way of representing Serbia in the foreign media. They have to be regarded as one of the ways of adjusting to the perceived “geopolitical game” being played by the great powers in the peripheries such as the Balkans or the Caucasus. The understanding of geopolitics in those narratives paints a gloomy picture of national victimization on the one hand, and an honorable moral victory of small nations on the other. Such dichotomies have a long history to draw upon, going back to the 1389 Kosovo Battle as both the starting point and climax of this type of historical representation.

Paradoxically, at the same time, the symbolic brotherhoods offer a way to step out of the black-and-white understanding of international geopolitical games by calling to forge new contacts and establishing initiatives for cultural exchange. By highlighting one’s agency, they invite a more “positive” interpretation of Serbia’s position on the international plane. As such, the brotherhood constructions are both inclusive and exclusive (excluding elements which can “victimize” Serbia, e.g. the

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7 It is worth pointing to the role of a distinct category of intellectuals coming from “brotherly” countries who live in or are otherwise connected to the country where the brotherhood discourse emerges. In Serbia, such intellectual is for example Babken Simonian, Armenian translator of Serbian literature who actively participates in promoting Serbian-Armenian connections, e.g. through his book *From Ararat to Kosovo*.

West, Turkey etc). Although they could be viewed as one more emanation of nationalism and historical manipulation, they also contain a potential for overcoming them.

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