


Hypochondria as Collective Syndrome? Nationalist-Conservative Hegemony in the Balkans, and How to Fight It

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Abstract. The post-socialist and post-Yugoslav societies have undergone a profound transformation under the influence of nationalist-conservative hegemony. I use hypochondria as a heuristic term to elucidate the mobilising force of nationalist-conservative ideology, and the pervasive feelings, emotions, perceptions and actions it generates. I argue that hypochondria manifests as an anxious fear of existential threats, either internal or external to our being, and propose to analyse it as a collective syndrome. This approach allows us to examine political narratives and practices that indicate an exaggerated, paranoid anxiety rooted in perceived threats to the political community. I draw on psychoanalytic theories to describe and examine social and political symptoms such as observable shared emotions, group behaviours and collective actions. To support the main argument that hypochondria is essential for understanding nationalist-conservative hegemony, I apply Jean-François Bayard's definition of the nationalist-conservative revolution, adapting his seven points to the post-Yugoslav context. Despite the strong grip of hypochondria on post-Yugoslav societies, I briefly present resistances that have challenged both the nationalist-conservative hegemony and the neo-liberal policies, and that offer hope for significant social and political change.

Key Words: nationalism, hypochondria, Yugoslavia, post-socialism, post-Yugoslav states

Hipohondrija kot kolektivni sindrom? Nacionalistično-konzervativna hegemonija na Balkanu in kako se z njo boriti

Povzetek. Postsocialistične in postjugoslovanske družbe so pod vplivom nacionalistično-konzervativne hegemonije doživele temeljito preobrazbo. Hipohondrijo uporabljam kot hevristični pojem za pojasnitev

mobilizacijske sile nacionalistično-konzervativne ideologije, vseprisotnih občutkov, čustev, percepcij in dejanj, ki jih le-ta ustvarja. Trdim, da se hipohondrija kaže kot tesnobni strah pred eksistencialnimi grožnjami, bodisi notranjimi bodisi zunanjimi, in predlagam, da jo analiziramo kot kolektivni sindrom. Ta pristop nam omogoča preučevanje političnih narativov in praks, ki kažejo na pretirano, paranoidno tesnobo, ki temelji na percipiranih grožnjah politični skupnosti. Pri opisovanju in analizi družbenih ter političnih simptomov, kot so opazna skupna čustva, skupinsko obnašanje in kolektivna dejanja, se opiram na psihoanalitične teorije. V podporo glavnemu argumentu, da je hipohondrija ključna za razumevanje nacionalistično-konzervativne hegemonije, uporabljam definicijo nacionalno-konzervativne revolucije Jeana-Françoisa Bayarda in prilagam njegovih sedem točk postjugoslovanskemu kontekstu. Kljub dominaciji hipohondrije v postjugoslovanskih družbah na kratko predstavim tudi odpore proti tako nacionalistično-konzervativni hegemoniji kot tudi neoliberalnim politikam, ki dajejo upanje na pomembne družbene in politične spremembe v prihodnosti.

Ključne besede: nacionalizem, hipohondrija, Jugoslavija, postsocializem, postjugoslovanske države

In Lieu of Introduction: The Diagnosis

Over the past three decades, the post-Yugoslav societies have been profoundly shaped by the nationalist-conservative hegemony. One of its critical and yet overlooked elements, I argue in this article, is hypochondria, which I use as a heuristic term to understand the mobilising potential of nationalist-conservative ideology, widely shared feelings, emotions and perceptions as well as collective actions. I propose to analyse it as a syndrome, which *The Oxford Dictionary of English* (the one that is provided with my laptop) defines 'as groups of symptoms or signs that consistently occur together, or a condition characterized by a set of associated symptoms' (2010). It also provides another important definition for my hypothesis on hypochondria as collective syndrome; it defines it as 'a characteristic combination of opinions, emotions, or behaviour.'

In order to understand hypochondria, I will use various psychoanalytic approaches that might help us to elucidate its functioning at both individual and collective levels. Through a cluster of symptoms ranging from nationalist narratives, religious revival, ethnic conflicts, and territorial obsessions to sexual practices, I will illustrate my argument that a certain collective hypochondria has been a neglected but central and en-

during aspect of the nationalist-conservative hegemony, understood here in Gramscian terms as the enduring intellectual, ideological and cultural dominance that has underpinned the profound socio-economic transformation of the post-socialist Balkans.

Hypochondria is generally defined here as the anxious fear of something that threatens one's existence, and that can be inside but also outside oneself. By framing it as a collectively shared syndrome, I want to analyse political ideologies and narratives as well as practices that testify to the exaggerated, paranoid anxiety based on the shared perception of threats and dangers coming from within and from without the political community. The threatening *other* thus becomes constitutive of what I would call hypochondriacal ideologies such as nationalism that, coupled with religious conservatism, has come to dominate the post-socialist Balkan societies. Not only external 'enemies' but also national, religious or sexual minorities and groups, or simply 'subversive' citizens, could all be seen as dangerous, to be tolerated at best, but at worst to be expelled or annihilated for the survival of the group. Hypochondria within communities could also be observed as an exaggerated response to the 'infiltration' of ideas that might threaten the hegemonic order in a particular community. The group is thus constantly threatened from within by traitors or minorities, as well as from without by the hostile others. So not only is the possibility of *polemos*, as war with the external others, constantly on the table, but the possibility of *stasis*, or of a civil war within the group, is also a constant worry, requiring control, repression and occasional purges of undesirable people and ideas.

To further test my main argument, I will use Jean-François Bayard's definition of the national-conservative revolution and apply his seven points (2023, 5–6) to the post-Yugoslav case. I will then propose a counter-hegemonic treatment based on the resistances that have (un)successfully challenged both the nationalist-conservative and the neo-liberal hegemony. Finally, as it is customary in medical practice, I will offer a prognosis in lieu of conclusion, situating my analysis within the wider European and global framework that today confirms the spread of hypochondria as a collective syndrome with potentially disastrous consequences, as we have seen in the recent history of the Balkans.

Hypochondria as Collective Syndrome?

As noted above, I use some psychoanalytic approaches developed to explain hypochondria as an individual condition and disorder in order to

describe and examine social and political symptoms. Here I am aware of the potential risks of scaling up from the individual to the collective level. For this reason, I propose to understand hypochondria, when applied to groups, as a collective *syndrome* rather than a disorder. Syndrome is used here as a less rigid category encompassing behaviours, reactions and emotions shared by a sufficiently large number of individuals to be socially and politically relevant. I use it for descriptive and analytical purposes without pretending to establish causes or to cover all possible symptoms. In other words, I argue that the notion of hypochondria applied to the post-socialist and post-Yugoslav situation will help us to understand some enduring phenomena in this region, such as the continuing hegemony of nationalist-conservative ideology, and the constitution of a large number of political and social actors and their actions, as well as certain socio-cultural habits and shared worldviews.

I take as the reference point Freud's classic article 'On the Introduction of Narcissism' (2006; first published in 1914) in which he relates narcissism to hypochondria as a neurosis that occurs when the libido moves away from the objects in the external world and focuses on the body and its organs. Further developments in psychoanalytic theory help us to understand hypochondria and its features such as a lack of interest in the external world and other people, splitting of the body into a healthy and a sick part – what Sandor Ferenczi called 'autonarcissistic splitting' (in Stathopoulos 2017, 363) – and paranoid fears of persecution coming from outside or inside when an internal organ is seen as a persecutor.

Of particular interest for my argument is the theory of the 'paranoid-schizoid' and 'depressive' positions as developed by Melanie Klein (1975, 176–235). In the 'paranoid-schizoid' position, the child in very early infancy, through projective identification of its own libidinal and aggressive drives and omnipotent fantasies, splits external objects into 'good' and 'bad.' The 'bad' object, in turn, creates a strong fear of persecution and annihilation, as well as the anxiety of paranoia and hypochondria. The theory was later used to explain the roots of racism and hatred of different groups into which one projects the badness, while the goodness is projected into one's own idealised group. The infant will normally overcome this position and enter the 'depressive' one, where it begins to understand the others as a whole and that *good* and *bad* are part of its own self as well as of the external objects. In this position, the child should be able to deal with their own ambivalent feelings and internal conflicts, as well as with consequences of their own aggressions, which cause in-

ner grief and guilt. In order to develop more or less normally, the child should overcome this position as well. Throughout our lives, however, the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions remain in dynamic relationship and their various aspects can be reactivated.

Racism, nationalism, and chauvinism are all based on group membership and thus on a shared worldview as well as on shared emotions of love for one's own group and fear, suspicion or even hatred of others. It is obvious here that individual hypochondriacal symptoms could be shared with others and thus influence collective behaviour such as collective rituals, mobilisation, action, and violence. Finally, we must ask ourselves why in so many nations, communities and groups do we find feelings and narratives that reflect the early paranoid-schizoid position at a collective level or in collective behaviour. Furthermore, how do certain 'targets' activate the elements of this position, and provide a basis for the love of one's own nation and hatred of others (Volkan 1985; see also Caputi 1996)? How does a certain collectively shared hypochondria, as I argue here, develop from this paranoid-schizoid worldview, and how does it influence 'the politics of fear' (Wodak 2021)?

Hypochondria, as underlined above, is understood here as an acute and even chronic awareness of threats and dangers, both internal and external, shared collectively by a sufficiently large number of group members. They may perceive their group as being in a position of 'ontological insecurity'. The notion of *ontological security*, and hence *insecurity*, was first defined by the Scottish psychoanalyst Ronald D. Laing in his book *The Divided Self* (1960) and later used in sociology by Anthony Giddens and, more importantly for us here, for the analysis of collective actors and states in international relations and security studies (see Mitzen 2006; Ejodus 2018; for a Lacanian perspective, see Vulović and Ejodus 2024). Some entities (groups, nations, states) perceive their position as fundamentally endangered and threatened by others and act from a position of ontological insecurity. Moreover, ontological security might even conflict with physical security. As Mitzen explains, 'even a harmful or self-defeating relationship can provide ontological security, which means states can become attached to conflict' (2006, 342). For the Balkan context, it is worth recalling that 'states might actually come to prefer their ongoing, certain conflict to the unsettling condition of deep uncertainty as to the other's and one's own identity' (p. 342).

The use of hypochondria I suggest here encompasses the problem of ontological *insecurity* but casts the net more widely by covering more

than the behaviour of the states or political entities and their relations, and subsequent ontological crises. It concerns a significant number of social and cultural practices that involve constant vigilance and obsession with the 'health' and 'purity' of the collective 'body', the pressure to achieve ever greater homogeneity, the actions aimed at clear demarcation and constant reinforcement of collective identity, and the use of symbols and rituals for these purposes. It is equally present in entities that do not have such an obvious problem of ontological *insecurity* but are nonetheless subject to hypochondriacal reactions to anything that is perceived as threatening or corrupting their identity, and thus undermining their stability, potentially leading to dreadful disintegration and even, in the most hypochondriacal visions, to extinction.

The Clusters of Symptoms: From Religion to Sex
From Brotherhood and Unity to the Threatening Other:
The Violent Dissolution of Yugoslavia

Throughout the 1980s, the general public in socialist and federal Yugoslavia was inundated with hitherto marginalised or dissident narratives. After Tito's death, as early as 1983, the influential Belgrade weekly *NIN* noted 'the outburst of history!' (serb. *provala istorije*) (Dragović Soso 2002, 77). But what kind of history was communicated in so many feuilletons, articles, speeches, memoirs, novels, plays, and historiographies? Authors brought what they portrayed as 'secret' and repressed memories to a public hungry for such stories, especially if they had an aura of dissidence. Many of these stories, however, targeted the pillars of socialist Yugoslavia (see Stojanović 2023): the official narrative of the Second World War and the anti-fascist liberation struggle, as well as the policy of 'brotherhood and unity' that was supposed to ensure the peaceful existence of the Yugoslav multi-national federation.

The liberalisation of the Yugoslav public sphere in the 1980s did not lead to the desired pluralism and democratisation that liberals and liberally-minded communists had hoped for, but to a subversion of the previous social contract. Until the first multi-party elections in 1990, citizens were being told by local politicians (based in and operating from different Yugoslav republics) and national intellectuals that they were primarily members of their ethnic nations who should put their own *national* interests first. These interests were portrayed as threatened to the point of basic survival by their very neighbours with whom they had shared decades of communal, if not always harmonious, life. It was suggested that it was

their nation that had paid the highest price for Yugoslavia, either in terms of sacrificed lives (the Serbian version based on the human losses in two world wars), independence and identity (the Croatian version), or, finally, economy and prosperity (the Slovenian version). The narratives of ‘resentment and blame,’ as Sabrina Ramet (2007) called them, focused heavily on the Second World War and the inter-ethnic killings, especially the genocide against Serbs in Hitler’s puppet regime of the so-called Independent State of Croatia, but also the Serb Chetnik massacres of Muslims and Croats. This version of history directly undermined the significance and reputation of the multinational anti-fascist Partisan movement that had won the war against the Nazi-fascist occupiers and their local collaborators. This struggle and victory were part and parcel of the official narrative of socialist Yugoslavia: the Yugoslav peoples overcame the crimes of the occupiers and local traitors and, through the common struggle, signed the pact to live together in the common (federal) state oriented towards a better (socialist) future.

The proliferation of alternative narratives reopened old wounds and were fully exploited by nationalist politicians, whether from the ruling League of Communists of Yugoslavia or from newly formed movements and parties. The democratisation of the political sphere led to ethnicisation and almost immediately to open conflicts between ethnic majorities and minorities in the Yugoslav republics. Through a series of horrible wars, many inter-ethnic crimes were indeed repeated, sometimes in exactly the same places as during the Second World War. Today, new wounds are the main source of nationalist ideology based on victimhood, suspicion and hatred of neighbouring nations.

In other words, the problem of ‘ontological insecurity’ dominated the late 1980s and, after the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, was used to justify ethnic cleansing, massacres, and even a genocide, as the one in Srebrenica. Often these acts were explained by past crimes committed against one’s own group. ‘The time has come to take revenge on the Turks in this region,’ declared general Ratko Mladić after his forces captured Srebrenica in July 1995. Referring to the local Slavic Muslims as ‘Turks,’ he used almost five centuries of Ottoman rule to justify the execution of more than 8,000 men and boys.

Religion, National Purity, and Ethnic Cleansing after Yugoslavia

Religion played the crucial role in the consolidation of nationalist-conservative hegemony in the contemporary Balkans. The churches were

in a sense predestined to lead the nationalist renaissance in opposition to communist atheist rule and Yugoslavia as an ‘artificial’ creation or a ‘prison house of the peoples’ which, so the story goes, the communists had robbed of their *true* identity, tradition and religion. The fact that among Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks, unlike among Albanians, the only solid marker of separate national identity is precisely their religious affiliation made these organisations guardians of the national identity and ‘soul.’ Re-traditionalisation took the place of socialist modernisation and the glorious national past eclipsed the vision of a future classless society. Opportunistically, many rushed to be baptised (although the practice was never banned), religious insignia became a solid proof of national identity, and showing up in churches or mosques an opportunistic sign of political conformity.

If there is any doubt about the nationalist-conservative hegemony and the role of religion, one only has to take a look at the official calendar in Croatia. As well as Christmas and Easter, the calendar closely follows the Catholic calendar, with as many as five special religious non-working holidays for St Stephen’s Day (26 December), Epiphany (6 January), All Saints (1 November), Corpus Christi (a movable feast) and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (15 August). Meanwhile, in Serbia, the calendar seems to focus more on national history and identity: in addition to 11 November to commemorate the First World War, Serbia introduced 15–16 February to mark the adoption of its first constitution. Since 2019 Serbia also celebrates the ‘Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and the National Flag’ as a working holiday on 15 September (introduced in the Serb Republic in Bosnia as well). Whilst St Sava’s and St Vitus’s day remain working holidays, almost all state institutions in the country, including schools, have introduced their own patron saint’s day (a tradition associated with families), which typically requires the presence of priests.

The idea of ‘mixing’ and of a shared Yugoslav identity was and still is hypochondriacally regarded as either a betrayal or a danger to the genetic purity of one’s own nation. The obsession with ‘pure blood’ was not only focused on separating men and women of different origins, but was disastrously applied to the soil as well. Moreover, the plan to create ethnically pure territories was implemented not only through physical violence and ethnic cleansing, but also through legal and administrative means. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the newly formed independent states introduced citizenship laws that prioritised individuals belonging to their ethnic majority or their co-ethnics in nearby regions

(Štiks 2015). This resulted in varying degrees of discrimination against individuals from different ethnic backgrounds or of those originating from other republics. The acquisition of citizenship in the newly independent states was linked to employment, access to health care, eligibility for property ownership, and the enjoyment of civil and political rights. Many full citizens were transformed overnight into foreigners, residents, or stateless persons. As a result, many left their homes, moved to other post-Yugoslav states where their origins offered greater security, or emigrated abroad.

As an example of hypochondriacal citizenship policies, one should mention that in February 1992, the Ministry of the Interior of newly independent Slovenia secretly erased from the citizens' register about 25,000 persons who had no proof of Slovenian citizenship at the time (Deželan 2012). Most of them had immigrated from other Yugoslav republics or their parents had previously settled in Slovenia. For a new country the idea of having so many minority members was unbearable and, in the context of Yugoslavia's dissolution, they were perceived as undesirable and potentially dangerous. Their documents were confiscated and subsequently invalidated. Numerous deaths were recorded as a result of the loss of health care, along with several cases of suicide, and many simply left Slovenia. The case of the 'erased' (slov. *izbrisani*) only came to light in the early 2000s. It tarnished the image of Slovenia's successful and exemplary 'transition.' It was not until 2012 that the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg condemned Slovenia over this case.

Ethnic Hypochondria Today: Symbols, Territory, Borders

Ethnic killings and cleansings, repression and informal pressures on individuals (such as loss of employment or exposure to insults, destruction of property and physical assaults), together with the general atmosphere of fear, led to significant changes in the ethnic composition of the post-Yugoslav states. They all homogenised around the ethnic majority, which included a general assimilation to the dominant ethnic identity regardless of complex family histories and origins. Even after the wars, the imperative of ethnic consolidation remains high on the agenda. Although Bosnia-Herzegovina has survived as a multi-ethnic state, the process of ethnic homogenisation has taken place at the sub-state level (entities and cantons) despite the significant refugee return. This has been exacerbated by the ongoing ethno-centric migrations: Croats from Bosnia migrate across the border to Croatia, mainly to Split and Zagreb; Serbs from Bosnia and Montenegro to Serbia, mainly to Belgrade and Novi Sad;

while Bosniaks from the Sandžak region (in Serbia and Montenegro) often choose to continue their lives in Sarajevo.

Anyone who still doubts the use of terms developed to deal with individual psychological disorders to explain political and thus collective processes and outcomes, need look no further than post-war Bosnia. Hypochondria there is even legally institutionalised through ethnic electoral participation and ethnically designed official positions. Bosnia was already condemned by the European Court of Human Rights back in 2009 for discriminating against citizens who are not Serbs, Croats, or Bosniaks but Jews, Roma or the 'others,' who are legally barred from running for the state presidency and other ethnically marked positions. To no avail. There is even a special constitutional provision called the 'vital national interest' (serb. *vitalni nacionalni interes*) whereby any law could be stopped if the 'national interest' of one of Bosnia's three constituent peoples is declared to be *vitally* threatened. It has been used to block any unwanted reform and to paralyse the entire system until the interests of Bosnia's ethnic entrepreneurs were met. Predictably, this reduced the entire political system to the deals between ethnic leaders. Moreover, the system of 'two schools under one roof' institutionalised the educational apartheid and the segregation of Bosniak and Croat children in municipalities where they live together. It is based on the 'national subjects' such as language, history, and even geography, which must be taught separately. Children who speak the same language are taught different standard uses of that language in order to separate their written and oral expressions as much as possible, and are taught different histories and, to make things even more absurd, different geographies.

At the ground level, as in Northern Ireland, one can observe ethnic markings of the territory. This is particularly true in multi-ethnic but now divided cities such as Mostar or Brčko, where football fans with strong links to nationalist parties and the criminal underworld are often involved in mural painting, and where monuments to the fallen soldiers, national flags and symbols clearly signal the territorial 'ownership.' In the absence of physical barriers or 'peace walls,' citizens use mental maps and know exactly where the front lines were in the 1990s, which cafés to visit, and where *not* to go.

Borders are constitutive of any nation building, especially when they could be culturally and linguistically porous. The re-drawing of the maps in the Balkans on the basis of 'historical' or 'ethnic' rights remains an inevitable feature of the nationalist imaginary. It usually involves claiming

parts of the territory of neighbouring countries and attempts to create a greater state (e.g. a greater Serbia, a greater Croatia, a greater Albania, a greater Hungary). The idea that the existing borders could be changed (in 'our' favour), thus finally uniting all members of 'our' nation and drawing clear lines between 'us' and 'them,' still animates the political imaginary and mobilises the masses.

In Serbia, for example, the situation still seems fluid, with no one able to give the right answer as to where exactly Serbia's borders are. The Kosovo issue continues to plague Serbian politics and regional relations. Seen as a sacred land, Kosovo is convenient for all politicians who claim to be fighting for the 'heart' of Serbia. The story is hypochondriacal at its core: it recalls the 'Great Replacement' theory (allegedly the Serbs lost Kosovo due to Albanian demographic superiority); it is full of mythology about the lost battle in 1389 against the Ottomans; it recalls Christian martyrdom at the hands of Muslim infidels; and it also imitates the Jewish tradition ('Next year in Prizren,' as nationalist banners often proclaim).

On the other side, we also find the idea of creating a Greater Albanian state, consisting of Albania, Kosovo and parts of Macedonia. If Serb nationalists insist that Serbs have been replaced by Albanians, Albanian nationalists stress their 'autochthonous' presence in the Balkans, long before Slavs settled in the region. In August 2023, inspired by the construction of a tunnel linking Tetovo in North Macedonia and Prizren in Kosovo, Kosovo's prime minister Albin Kurti even tried to interpret God's intentions. He explained to the crowd how something had gone slightly wrong somewhere between God's design and the earthly embodiment of His idea, and how this mistake should be corrected. He concluded that Albanian-populated Tetovo and Prizren should be united by the ongoing infrastructure project because 'in the eyes of God in the sky [they] have been one city and when they fell on earth, they were separated by Sharri Mountain, and became Tetovo here and Prizren on the other side.' He concluded: 'Let's make Prizren and Tetova one with the road axis that connects us with this tunnel.'¹

Obviously, there are borders that should be torn down to unite the members of the same nation – such as those that separate Croats in Croa-

¹ The full statement is published on the official website of the Republic of Kosovo's Office of the Prime Minister: <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/blog/prime-minister-kurti-ending-his-visit-to-tetovo-lets-help-and-support-each-other-for-each-others-sake-not-against-anyone-else/>.

tia from those in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbs from Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia, and Albanians scattered across three countries – and there are borders that must be built and patrolled. The Balkan route, used by tens of thousands of migrants and refugees every year, prompted an ethno-national counter-mobilisation. Like Hungary and Poland, Slovenia put up barbed wire, and Croatia was given the task of heavy policing of the tiny piece of land between Bosnia and Slovenia. In general, the EU has tasked the Balkan states with filtering migrants. Although migrants have no intention to stay in these countries, their very presence has provoked an anxiety and brought us back to hypochondriacal tropes of ‘great replacement,’ ‘infiltration,’ and even ‘danger.’ If Orban portrays refugees as being paid by Soros to invade and undermine the Hungarian nation, in Bosnia it is mostly Muslim migrants who are seen as a potential asset for Bosniaks and a threat to the fragile ethnic balances. In reality, migrants are mostly concentrated in Bosniak-dominated areas where they are also unwelcome, especially in border towns.

EU member Croatia faces another problem when it comes to its dwindling population. It cannot sustain its economy (especially tourism and construction businesses) without a massive influx of foreign workers, brought these days from the Philippines and Nepal. It must open its borders, which means that ordinary Croats now have to confront, literally overnight, the cold mechanism of global economy and their own position in such a world: in a country that has been generally allergic to different ethnicity, namely to Serbs, or to different accents of the same language,² the streets are now filled with very different people from those with whom Croats have lived in the past. Racist attacks are already taking place in both Croatia and Serbia and the far right, with its strong base among football fans and neo-Nazi groups in these countries, presents the situation as a struggle for the purity of both blood and soil.

Other Battlefields: Language, Memory, and Sex

Despite the achievement of national independence and ethnic consolidation, other dangers still seem to loom over the post-Yugoslav nations. One is not only fighting against neighbours and external evils, but one must

² To illustrate this point, at the time of writing, a group of teenagers in Vukovar were violently attacked by Croatian nationalist football fans because these hooligans thought the teenagers spoke with Serbian accents. It turned out that the beaten teenagers, like their attackers, were ethnic Croats (Miličić 2024).

also be prepared to fight on the home front as well. In the post-Yugoslav space, language remains the old battlefield where the war against contamination and impurity is constantly being waged. As recently as of January 2024, for the first time in history, the Croatian Parliament adopted the Law on Croatian Language ('Sabor usvojio Zakon o hrvatskom jeziku' 2024). The law was drafted by major cultural institutions, dominated by nationalist intellectuals, with the aim of 'protecting and cultivating' the Croatian language, and fighting against international influence. The latter actually refers to the eternal 'danger' posed by the simple fact that Croats, Serbs, Bosnians and Montenegrins share a common language. The 'contamination' lies not only in anglicisation but above all in the porosity of the linguistic borders between South-Slavic peoples: anyone could be contaminated by Serbian through TV series, the Internet, YouTube and TikTok, or simply through conversation! In Serbia, similar attempts at 'protecting and cultivating' the language are constantly being pushed by such institutions as the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Serbian Orthodox Church: there they focus on the use of the Cyrillic alphabet, which supposedly has been endangered by the Latin alphabet. Most books and journals are indeed published in Latin script, including numerous nationalist tabloids such as *Informer*, *Kurir* and *Alo*, and people use Latin script more often in informal communication. But the problem only exists if one rejects and even finds threatening the established fact that modern Serbian society uses both scripts equally.

History is another crucial battlefield where hypochondriacal vigilance is continuously required. Almost all post-Yugoslav societies adopted nationalist visions of their history based on two main premises: anti-Yugoslavism and anti-communism. Therefore, history textbooks are the preferred tool of this new interpretation of modern history based on national victimhood, enmity with neighbours, and historical revisionism when it comes to the Second World War and its outcome, namely the victory of the Partisans led by Tito and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Stojanović 2023). Historical revisionism usually means the rehabilitation of Nazi-fascist collaborators who are branded as nationalist or simply as patriots who opposed the multinational communists. History textbooks are ethnicised and purged of others, with particular intolerance for the idea of South Slavic unity, Yugoslavia as a state project, and the socialist ideals of 'brotherhood and unity.'

In Croatia, the fear of Yugoslavia is so acute that the name of the country to which Croatia belonged for almost 70 years is rarely publicly men-

tioned, and then only with trepidation. It has become something of a taboo (Markovina 2018) in a country where the Yugoslav idea was born and where, as early as 1866, a bishop with the apparently non-Slavic surname of Strossmayer founded the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb as the future South Slavic cultural capital. Major Croatian cultural and political figures of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries fought for a Yugoslav state in which Croats would achieve independence together with other South Slavic peoples. Now all this history had to be reinterpreted without mentioning the huge Yugoslav elephant in the room.³

The powerful Althusserian ‘ideological state apparatuses’ such as the state and its media, the church and schools, make it much easier to forget and learn the new ‘truths’ about the past. *The Past is Coming* (2023), to use the title of Serbian historian Dubravka Stojanović’s latest book that analyses ideological manipulations in Serbian history textbooks over the last hundred years. Battles are still raging there, and even the outcomes of the First and Second World Wars are still undecided. In other words, we do not yet know what might happen in the past! It will be, of course, dictated by current or future ideological hegemons.

Finally, sex remains a hideous enemy and the privileged litmus test for hypochondriacal reactions. One must be vigilant about sexual minorities, hybrid identities, gender fluidity, and female bodies. Accused of destroying the family, emancipated women and LGBTQI+ persons undermine the ‘healthy’ body of the nation. Since its future existence depends on sexual practices, they must be controlled and should produce as many ethnically pure national members as possible. Education and modernisation are blamed for undermining women’s role as protectors of home and tradition. The fight against women ranges from abortion bans, as in Poland, to collective prayers in public spaces in Croatia for the salvation of women. Sexual minorities are seen as further endangering the nation

³ Two illustrations from the world of sport come to mind that show how hypochondria works on an everyday level. The basketball club Cibona from Zagreb was one of the most successful clubs in Yugoslavia, winning the Yugoslav championship several times. In its arena, the word ‘Yugoslavia’ is simply replaced by the word ‘state’ without any further definition (e.g. Cibona won the ‘Cup of the State’), while the titles won in independent Croatia are clearly marked ‘Champion of the Republic of Croatia.’ Hajduk, the famous football club from Split, had their historical photos doctored to erase the red star, which was Hajduk’s emblem during the Second World War, when Hajduk represented anti-fascist Yugoslavia. The red star remained part of the club’s emblem until 1990.

by killing it biologically and by indulging in forbidden sexual pleasures that know no bounds. Again, the demographic threat looms, as does the image of the nation disappearing under attack from external and internal enemies.

Conservative Revolutions and the Nationalist-Conservative Hegemony in the Balkans

Having presented the cluster of hypochondriacal symptoms and analysed them as a necessary part of the nationalist-conservative hegemony in the Balkans, I will attempt to situate this hegemony in a broader historical framework. For comparative purposes, I use Jean-François Bayard's article on conservative revolutions in contemporary Africa (2023), in which he draws on the experience of the inter-war period in Europe to develop seven key points of conservative revolutions. I find them relevant for understanding the post-socialist conservative revolutions (and subsequent hegemony), for which the inter-war period and the Second World War remain the crucial historical and ideological references.

Bayard's first point is that 'the conservative revolution provides a national identitarian repertoire at the moment of the shift from empire to nation-state.' The end of socialism, or the shift from socialist multinational federations and the Soviet bloc to the independent nation-states, was indeed marked by the return of nationalism with its conservative 'national identitarian repertoire.' The Velvet Revolutions were all about national independence from Soviet influence and troops. Nationalism provided a solid basis for mass mobilisations in the former socialist multinational federations as well as a coherent and massively supported narrative for post-socialist societies, which in most cases looked back at the anti-communist nationalists of the 1930s and the 1940s for inspiration.

Since socialism was presented as an unwanted break, it was finally time to go back to exactly where *we* were stopped when the Soviets 'kidnapped' our part of Europe or, in the Yugoslav context, when cosmopolitan atheist communists denied *us* the right to enjoy *our* national identity and even religion in *our* own independent state. The affinity with the extremist right-wing movements and regimes was and still is obvious. It could be observed in the open or silent rehabilitation of the Horthy regime in Hungary, the Ustasas in Croatia, the Chetniks in Serbia, the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian ss troops, the Iron Guard in Romania, or Banderist nationalists in Ukraine. The removal of the socialist regimes was a gift to the far-right movements and their nationalist and conservative ideolo-

gies as well as an opportunity for their historical rehabilitation, despite their affiliation with Nazi Germany and the mass crimes they committed against members of other national or religious groups. This rehabilitation could be clearly seen in the renaming of the streets in Croatia and Bosnia after notorious Croat fascists, in the judicial rehabilitation of the Chetnik leaders in Serbia, but also in today's Ukraine where streets are often named after Stepan Bandera and his troops responsible for mass killings of Poles and Jews.

Bayard argues that the conservative revolution is the fruit of the war. This point, together with the third point about attributing all political misfortune to the Other, inside and outside, both apply to the contemporary Balkans, with a specific addition: there the conservative revolution was not only the fruit of the war but, as I have argued, its essential ingredient. It was crucial to the mobilisation for war and was consolidated during the war and thanks to the war. It reigned supreme in the immediate post-war period and continues to influence societies with the war-like rhetoric of threats, struggle for survival and hatred. The 'new man' promised by the old conservative movements (Bayard's fourth point) simply becomes the 'old man' who must be resurrected as he supposedly was before the communist regime. Indeed, the theme of national resurrection, redemption and 'renewal' is very much present in nationalist-religious discourse.

Furthermore, warlike machismo, patriarchal heteronormative attitudes and violence (which we find in Bayard's fifth point) are part of the masculine post-socialist worldview, which often finds outlets in neo-fascist groups, football fans or in the conspicuous display of power and virility. The invention of tradition (Bayard's sixth point), coupled with religious orientation regardless of the actual faith, is directly linked to historical revisionism as well as to the introduction of old or new national symbols, holidays, myths and legends. The main media such as state or private television, films, documentaries and history textbooks are all involved in disseminating the newly invented or reinterpreted traditions.

Finally, the fear and hatred of ethnic or religious minorities, people of different sexual orientations, and migrants is fully in line with Bayard's seventh point of the inter-war conservative revolutions in Europe. The difference is that today, 'cultural, social or national humiliation' often takes the form of global capital and local capitalist relations that have transformed the relative socio-economic equality of the socialist period into deeply divided societies. Frustration with a system that works for

the few is, however, not channelled into struggles for social justice, but carefully directed against national enemies and traitors.

In conclusion, the post-socialist nationalist-conservative hegemony has its specificities compared to the model proposed by Jean-François Bayard, but it still has dangerous affinities with the nationalist and conservative right-wing movements of the 1930s and the 1940s. As shown above, many hypochondriacal symptoms unite both the inter-war period and our present.

Treatment: Counter-Hegemonic Forces and Their (Un)Successful Subversions

Since the late 1980s, the pendulum across the post-Yugoslav space has swung sharply to the right. For the past thirty years the collectively shared hypochondriacal symptoms have been shaping political systems, ideological positioning and values, and broadly shared views of national identity. Chronic existential anxiety, coupled with paranoia, constitutes a destructive collective syndrome that has mobilised large numbers of citizens and even led them to violent behaviour and crime.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the weak resistance to the nationalist-conservative hegemony came mainly from liberals and social democrats, who were themselves preoccupied with how to fit their agenda into the new ethno-national paradigm. They usually promised a more inclusive society, both for ethnic and sexual minorities, and the rule of law framework, with only occasional concerns for social rights and justice amid the ravages of post-socialist neo-liberal restructuring. To illustrate, centrist and centre-left politicians have never dared to question the role of the church, let alone the generous funding it receives from the state budget. Religious education in schools is a case in point. Brief social-democratic governments in Croatia never dared to question it (promoting civic education instead), and in Serbia it was the democratic opposition, and its liberal prime minister Zoran Đinđić, who opened the school doors to church officials.

So, what might be suggested as a treatment in this situation? Any behaviour, ideas and practices that challenge and undermine nationalist-conservative ideology and hegemony as well as the associated hypochondriacal symptoms. Here I will briefly highlight some of the attempted 'cures' by individuals and activist groups to illustrate the repertoire of (un)successful counter-hegemonic treatments.

The anti-war movement promoted the values of peace, tolerance and

coexistence even during the period of heavy fighting and numerous war crimes against civilians. It included an active anti-war movement in Serbia as well as anti-war networks in Croatia, involving a large number of liberal, left-wing and feminist activists and intellectuals who never stopped communicating across newly established borders. There were also many individual heroes who risked their lives to save their neighbours. Here I will only mention two cases: the ‘Schindler from Ljubuški,’ Nedjeljko Galić, a Croat from Herzegovina, forged documents to save more than a thousand Bosniaks from concentration camps; Srđan Aleksić, a Serb from Trebinje, saved his Bosniak neighbour, only to be killed himself by Serb soldiers. The memory of their deeds lives on, showing the power of ‘good people in an evil time,’ in the words of Tito’s granddaughter Svetlana Broz who collected many similar stories.

Furthermore, the ‘anti-nationalist’ civil society sector was at the forefront of the liberal challenge to the nationalist-conservative hegemony. Usually branded as ‘traitors,’ ‘anti-war profiteers’ and ‘Sorosoids,’ it was a loose coalition of human rights activists, the first LGBT groups, ethnic minority and anti-fascist associations, and journalists who, often with the support of Soros’s Open Society Foundation, founded liberal-minded media outlets such as the weekly *Vreme* and Radio B92 in Serbia, and more openly left-wing magazines such as *Feral Tribune*, *Arkzin* and later *Zarez* in Croatia. During the war, they promoted the idea of a liberal, inclusive society based on human rights and the rule of law, within a broader framework of EU integration. In the 1990s, amidst the killings, these groups and outlets were the only progressive platforms. If in the 1990s they were able to penetrate closed borders and in the 2000s openly challenge the new nationalist-conservative hegemony, the subsequent events in the 2010s have marginalised and utterly transformed this scene.

Immediately after the death of Tudjman in 1999 and the fall of Milošević in 2000, the political scene in Croatia was occupied by liberals and social-democrats, and in Serbia by right-wing and left-wing liberals, as well as by dissatisfied nationalists (disappointed by the outcomes of the wars, Serbian defeats and the loss of Kosovo). Once in power, they could not resist the temptation to at best flirt with patriotic sentiments and at worst continue to promote nationalist-conservative hegemony. In other words, throughout the 2000s, this hegemony was challenged to some extent (for example, with the apologies to war victims and attempts at inter-ethnic and inter-state reconciliation) but never fully confronted.

What was never questioned in the 1990s and the 2000s, but rather ac-

cepted as an inevitable fate by almost all political and social actors, was the capitalist transformation of post-Yugoslav societies. It would take another decade and the financial crash of 2008 to see the rise of the New Left across the region in the 2010s. It challenged the so-called 'transition' as well as the nationalist-conservative ideological hegemony. Furthermore, the New Left movements, organisations and groups openly promoted cross-border cooperation and shared knowledge on how to fight for urban and natural commons, and how to advance participatory democracy. Social movements were formed from student rebellions (which inspired each other from Belgrade and Zagreb to Ljubljana and Skopje), the Bosnian citizens' plenum movement demanding social justice across ethnic lines, the Right to the City protests that mobilised masses in Zagreb and Belgrade, to the struggles for natural habitats (see Štiks and Stojaković 2021). Despite many failures, this new left has had some significant electoral successes in the 2020s. It joined the liberal-left government in Slovenia in 2022, it won the city of Zagreb in 2020, and it entered the Belgrade and national parliaments in Serbia under the green-left umbrella in 2022 and 2023. They showed that it is possible to think and mobilise outside the contours of nationalist-conservative hegemony, and even to openly confront it by changing focus, vocabulary, and actions. Predictably, this new left drew inspiration from the anti-fascist struggle of the Second World War, socialist self-management, non-alignment, and the legacy of the Yugoslav supra-national framework.⁴

Lastly, one must mention the initiative that addressed head on one of the main hypochondriacal symptoms, namely language and its control. *The Declaration on the Common Language* signed in 2017 by more than 200 leading intellectuals, artists and writers across the former Yugoslav region, and subsequently followed by more than 10,000 individual signatories, caused a small political earthquake.⁵ It simply called for the free individual use of the common language of Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro, in all its standard variants, and for an end to the ethnic segregation of schoolchildren. It struck at the heart of the nationalist projects

⁴ Culture and art remain the privileged terrain where the nationalist-conservative hegemony is constantly questioned. There is not enough space in this text to do justice to numerous writers, artists, actors, film and theatre directors who are working intensively across the post-Yugoslav region to promote a different version of their societies, from inclusiveness to more radical social change.

⁵ The text of the Declaration is available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaration_on_the_Common_Language.

that still operate within the nineteenth century Central and Eastern European fantasy that each nation must have its own separate language. By insisting on 'commonality' it openly provoked the dominant narrative of enmity and hatred between historically, culturally and linguistically closely related peoples. The *Declaration*, one might add, moves beyond the Kleinian 'depressive' position, which requires a more realistic and complex view of one's self and the others, to another imaginary in which the other is someone with whom we might want to share more than just language. The protectors of the supposedly endangered Cyrillic as well as the drafters of the Law on Croatian language could be seen as directly irritated not only by the Declaration as a public document, but also by everyday communication across borders. It is made possible precisely by the shared language and new technologies, leading to a new creative hybridity in the post-Yugoslav space.

In Lieu of Conclusion: A Prognosis

In this article I suggested that hypochondria as a collective syndrome has been an overlooked but crucial and enduring element of the nationalist-conservative hegemony in the post-socialist Balkans. This hegemony has led to devastating wars, the criminalisation of society, the primitive accumulation of capital through plunder and privatisation campaigns, and massive emigration. It will continue to maintain a strong grip on post-Yugoslav societies through the ideological apparatuses such as religious institutions, the political system and its parties, as well as the existing media and the school curricula.

However, this hegemony has many cracks through which light can enter and create subversive strongholds. Today, we can see the rise of social and political resistances and the search for alternatives. It is difficult to predict whether these counter-hegemonic practices could lead to significant reversals, despite some important social and political victories in the last decade. The future will also depend on the European and global context where too many hypochondriacal symptoms are clearly visible, from extreme violence, brutal wars, the rise of the far right, the return to an obsolete model of national sovereignty to the spread of religious and ethnic intolerance. The Balkan 'dark avant-garde' of the 1990s, one might say, ominously foreshadowed the world of the twenty-first century.

Note

Work on this paper was supported by Social Contract in the 21st Century, a research project based at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and funded by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARIS, P6-0400). A draft of this article was

first presented at the conference 'Religion et révolution conservatrice: perspectives comparatives' at the Geneva Graduate Institute (23–25 October 2023).

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