

Introduction



Where Is Serbia?

This should be, but is not, a straightforward question. In 2022, an answer depended on whether one considered Kosovo, which unilaterally declared independence in 2008, a part of Serbia or not. The Belgrade government refused to recognize the independence of its (former) province, and in this it was joined by around 90 other countries, including China, Russia, India, Brazil and five EU member states: Spain, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Cyprus. A slightly higher number of countries, including the USA, UK, Germany, France and Italy, recognized an independent Kosovo, but the former province of Serbia remained without a seat in the UN. Whichever view one takes, two things seem undisputable: Serbia no longer controlled Kosovo after 1999, while Kosovo had little control over its mainly Serb-populated north, where around one half of the remaining Kosovo Serbs live today.

The problem of Kosovo was not the only reason why the opening question could not be answered easily. Since 1912, Serbia has had at least four different territorial incarnations – not counting the interwar period, when there was no Serbian polity within the framework of ‘first’ Yugoslavia, and the Second World War years (1941–45), because the Territory of the Military Commander in Serbia was a German-occupied land, albeit with a local, collaborationist administration. It is often said that an average East-Central European could have lived in several countries without ever travelling anywhere, and this is also true of the Serbs. On 30 October 2013, *Politika*, Serbia’s

newspaper of record, reported that Kalina Danilović, a housewife from southern Serbia, died at the age of 113. Because local birth certificates did not survive the First World War, the exact date, and probably year, of Kalina's birth was not known. It is believed that she married in 1918, aged around 20 and therefore 'quite late'; the groom was six years younger. Around the same time, the regional media reported the death, in Belgrade, of Slava Ivančević at the age of 117 or 119 (depending on source). If true, Slava – whose recipe for long life allegedly included daily shots of home-made brandy and generous consumption of menthol mints – would have been one of the oldest people in the world at the time of her death.

Subsequently the accuracy of these claims has been challenged, but in any case, a person born in Serbia in 1912, on the eve of the Balkan Wars, when Serbia incorporated Kosovo, Macedonia (present-day North Macedonia) and Sandžak, and still alive in February 2008, when Kosovo declared independence, would have been 96 years of age. Even if they never left their place of birth, they would have still lived in eight different countries. If the year of Slava's birth (1894) was correctly reported, she would have lived in nine countries, spending only the final years of her life in an independent Serbia. She was born in Bihać, present-day Bosnia-Herzegovina, which in the 1890s was an Ottoman province under the Austro-Hungarian occupation; and she died in Belgrade, as one of tens of thousands of Bosnian Serb refugees during the war of the 1990s, when Serbia was, together with Montenegro, part of 'rump' Yugoslavia.

The 2006 declaration of independence, from the Serb-Montenegrin union, by Montenegro automatically made Serbia an independent country once again, for the first time since 1918. Much has been said about Serb nationalism, which, for all the confusion between Greater Serbian and Yugoslav 'projects' during the late 1980s and '90s, was able to mobilize powerful support among the population. It was both a destructive and a

self-destructive force that, unlike the nationalisms of the Serbs' neighbours, did not necessarily seek to create an independent Serbia. Ironically perhaps, Serbia in 2006 in some ways resembled the Austria of 1918 – a former core of a larger, multinational state that became independent by default because everyone else had declared independence after a devastating war.

Even without Kosovo, Serbia remains the largest and one of the most multi-ethnic Yugoslav successor states, with a rich and turbulent history and geographically a strategic location as a land-locked country in the central Balkans, or South-East Europe, depending on one's preference, which exercises varying degrees of influence over Serb communities in neighbouring Bosnia, Croatia and Montenegro. Those parts of former-Yugoslavia not in the EU (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) and Albania have been in recent years termed jointly the Western Balkans – perhaps because the prefix 'Western' makes the Balkans sound less 'Eastern'. However, if joining the EU means leaving the Balkans, then adding 'Western' in front of the Balkans is unnecessary since, with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU in 2007, there is no longer Eastern Balkans. Geography is of course rarely free of political symbolism, and this is perhaps especially true of the Balkans. The Balkans as Europe's Other, its Orient in the Saidian sense, has become a discipline of its own.¹

Serbia borders Bulgaria to the east, Romania to the north-east, Hungary to the north, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to the west, Montenegro to the south-west and Albania/Kosovo and North Macedonia to the south (see Map 0.1). As Serbia's Balkan neighbours have joined the EU and NATO in recent years, or

¹ M. Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*, New York, 1997, is now a classic; cf. M. Bakić-Hayden, 'Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia', *Slavic Review*, 54:4 (1994), 917–31; D. Bijelić and O. Savić (eds), *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, Cambridge, MA, 2005; V. Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination*, New Haven, CT, 1998.



MAP 0.1 Serbia and its neighbours in 2022. Drawn by Joe LeMonnier, <https://mapartist.com/>

exist as de facto western protectorates, it may be possible to imagine that only Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, with its own Serb entity, remain in the Balkans.

According to Serbia's official sources, the country occupies a territory of around 88,500 square kilometres. If Kosovo's 10,887 square kilometres is taken away, the government in Belgrade controls roughly 77,600 square kilometres, a territory similar in size to the Czech Republic, Scotland and Nebraska. According to the 2011 census, Serbia's population (not counting Kosovo) was close to 7.2 million people, comparable to Arizona, Bulgaria and Paraguay, and slightly below the size of the population of Hong Kong. In 2019, that figure was estimated at just shy of 7 million according to the country's Statistics Office. In 1991, Serbia's population without Kosovo was 8 million. In 2019, the UN estimated that due to emigration the population of Serbia (including Kosovo) will decline by almost 19 per cent between 2020 and 2050. According to another study, Serbia (without Kosovo) has experienced an annual decrease in population of 5.4 per cent per year between 2010 and 2020, due to emigration and low birth rate; if the trend continues, it is projected to shrink to 5.79 million people in 2050 – a decrease of almost 24 per cent since the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991.² With 18.5 per cent of its population aged 65 or above in 2015, Serbia falls just below the European average of 18.9 per cent, and below countries such as Germany (21 per cent) and Italy, which has the oldest population in Europe with nearly 22 per cent of over-65s.³

² T. Judah, "Too Late" to Halt Serbia's Demographic Disaster', *Balkan Insight*, 24 October 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/24/too-late-to-halt-serbias-demographic-disaster/>. Similar or even worse projections exist for other Balkan countries, including EU member states Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania.

³ 'Population structure and ageing', *Eurostat*, June 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Population_structure_and_ageing. These figures will likely go down once the tragic death toll of the Covid-19 is considered.

Kosovo's predominantly Albanian population had fought for decades to achieve independence from Serbia, but many ethnic Albanians continue to emigrate, seeking better opportunities elsewhere, even though Belgrade's rule ended in 1999. More than half of the pre-war Serbian population of Kosovo – estimated at c.300,000 – and tens of thousands of Roma have left the province since 1999. These trends, combined with declining birth rates in Kosovo – previously the highest in Europe – means that its population is projected to fall from c.1.8 to c.1.66 million by 2050.

The main reason for the recent depopulation of the Balkans is therefore not ethnic cleansing, but emigration to the West, often of young and well educated. The migrant crisis in the Balkans exists in more than one form. The arrival of Middle Eastern and African refugees, who seek to reach western Europe through the 'Balkan route', presents Serbia with an opportunity to encourage at least some to stay and settle, for example, in its almost depopulated villages. Most would want to continue for more prosperous countries of the EU, but it is possible some might choose to stay, despite rising anti-migrant sentiments following an initial, surprisingly warm reception of migrants by Serbia.⁴

The capital Belgrade is Serbia's largest city by far, with close to 2 million people if suburban areas are included. Other main cities are Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, Subotica, Leskovac, Kruševac, Kraljevo, Zrenjanin, Pančevo, Čačak, Šabac, Novi Pazar and Smederevo; of these, only the population of Novi Sad and Niš exceeds 200,000 inhabitants. According to the 2011 census (which did not include Kosovo, whose largest city Priština/Prishtina is home to around 200,000 people), slightly over 83 per cent

⁴ D. Djokić, "Wait, the Serbs are now the good guys?", *openDemocracy*, 15 November 2015, www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/wait-serbs-are-now-good-guys/, originally published (in J. Plamper's German translation) in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 27 October 2015.

of Serbia's citizens declare themselves as Serbs; the majority, nominally at least, belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose jurisdiction extends into Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo and Montenegro – a legacy of history, as this book shows. Orthodoxy, and a related tradition of *slava*, or *krsna slava*, a celebration of a family patron saint arguably specific to the Serbs, are important markers of Serb identity and tradition. The popularity of religiosity and observation of main religious holidays do not necessarily mean that most Serbs are deeply religious or knowledgeable about religion they formally profess.⁵ Although Serbia is a secular state, the Orthodox church often plays an important symbolic role in the country's politics, and so it is not unusual to see political leaders – both in government and in opposition – allegedly seeking blessing from the Serbian patriarch or another senior bishop. As will be seen, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Serb patriarchs were de facto ethnarchs, that is 'national' leaders. In other words, there is a tradition of blurred boundaries between politics and religion. This is even more pronounced in Montenegro, where Orthodox bishops doubled-up as ruling princes between the late seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, while in more recent times, the Metropolitan of Cetinje had played a major political role in the country.

The Serbian church has dioceses not just across the Balkans but also in central and western Europe, North America, Australia and South Africa. The Serbs are a Diaspora people, and this is another important layer of their identity – though not to the extent that it is the case with Armenians, Greeks and Jews. Perhaps a better parallel may be made with the Russians. Large Serbian and Serbian-speaking communities live in the former Yugoslav 'near

⁵ R. Radić and M. Vukomanović, 'Religion and Democracy in Serbia since 1989: The Case of the Serbian Orthodox Church', in S. P. Ramet (ed.), *Religion and Politics in Post-Socialist Central and Southeastern Europe: Challenges since 1989*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2014, 180–211.

abroad', and, in smaller numbers, across the globe, because of war, revolution and state collapse.

Significant and historically important Serb communities live in neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina (1,360,000 or 31 per cent of the country's population; Bosnia's Serbs mostly live in its Serb entity Republika Srpska [Serb Republic]),⁶ Montenegro (178,000 or almost 29 per cent of the total population identified as ethnic Serbs in 2011, but nearly 43 said their mother tongue was Serbian)⁷ and Croatia (124,000 or 3.2 per cent of total population in 2021, down from 581,600, or 12.2 per cent, in 1991).⁸ There are perhaps 146,000 Serbs in Kosovo today (close to 8 per cent of the population), down from c.300,000 in 1999, according to Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) estimates.⁹

Hundreds of thousands of Serbs were displaced during the 1990s wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo; most initially fled to Serbia, where some settled permanently, while many others moved on elsewhere. Large groups of 'Diaspora' Serbs live in western Europe (especially in Austria, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland), the United States and Australia, including descendants of earlier generations of political and economic (*Gastarbeiter*) émigré communities. A smaller number of Serbs has emigrated to Cyprus, Greece, East-Central Europe and Russia.

Serbia is an ethnic nation state, despite its constitutional commitment to civic equality of all regardless of ethnic background. Prior to Kosovo's declaration of independence, ethnic Albanians

⁶ [Official Statistics Office, Bosnia-Herzegovina], 'Popis 2013. u BiH', www.statistika.ba.

⁷ Office for Statistics of the Republic of Montenegro, 'Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova u C. Gori 2011. g.', www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje%281%29.pdf.

⁸ State Office for Statistics, Republic of Croatia, 'Rezultati Popisa 2021', <https://popis2021.hr/>.

⁹ 'Kosovo: Serbs', Minority Rights Group, March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/serbs-3/>.

were the largest minority, who made up between 15 and 20 per cent of Serbia's population. A similar number of non-Serbs lives in the rest of Serbia (without Kosovo). The largest ethnic minority among them are Hungarians (c.250,000, down from c.338,000 in 1991), Slav Muslims (c.200,000, many of whom now declare themselves as Bosniaks), Roma (c.150,000, up from c.91,000 in 1991), Croats (c.60,000, down from nearly 100,000 in 1991), Slovaks (c.50,000), Montenegrins (c.38,000, down from c.118,000 in 1991) and Vlachs (c.35,000), a stateless ethnic group whose language is similar to Romanian. Some 23,000 people declared as Yugoslavs in 2011, down from nearly 315,000 in 1991.¹⁰ There is also a small but culturally significant Jewish community, historically strong in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Šabac, Subotica and Zemun. Roughly 75 per cent of 2,500 Serbian Jews are Sephardim and the rest are mostly Ashkenazim. The majority of Serbian Jews live in Belgrade today, joined in recent years by Israeli entrepreneurs and a small number of Orthodox Jews who have moved to Serbia's capital. Since 2019/20, students enrolled at the Faculty of Philology, Belgrade University, have been able to learn Hebrew. Serbia was widely praised when in 2016 its parliament adopted a law on the restitution of Jewish property lost in the Holocaust and during the communist government in Yugoslavia. Much of the rest of former-Yugoslavia must catch up in this respect.¹¹

Serbs like to describe their country as the crossroads of Europe and this, many believe, explains their historical predicament.

¹⁰ [Official Internet presentation of the Government of the Republic of Serbia], 'Stanovništvo, jezik, vera' [2011] (www.srbija.gov.rs/tekst/36/stanovnistvo-jezik-i-vera.php); cf. P. Vlahović, *Srbija: Zemlja, narod, život, običaji*, Belgrade, 2011.

¹¹ R. Shnidman, 'Israelis to teach Serbs how to say "shalom"', *The Jerusalem Post*, 22 June 2019; 'Serbia to Extend Restitution to Holocaust Survivors Living Abroad', *Haaretz*, 5 April 2017; J. Rock, 'The Significance of the Sephardic Language as a Source of Cultural Identification in Sarajevo From a Comparative Perspective', in S. Rauschenbach (ed.), *Sefardische Perspektiven*, 4, (2020), 121–36, 128.

They see Serbia as a meeting place between East and West, and a country that is at once eastern and western – a metaphor wrongly attributed to a thirteenth-century Serbian saint in the late twentieth century (see Chapter 2). Essentially, according to this narrative, Serbia is a defiant victim of the Great Powers' rivalries and interests.

Whatever one's ideological view may be, the country's geography and climate have had a major impact on its history. The physical map of contemporary Serbia (without Kosovo) reveals a north–south river axis, formed by the Tisa, Danube, Velika Morava and its subsidiaries Zapadna and Južna Morava. In the west, the river Drina forms natural part of Serbia's border with Bosnia-Herzegovina; the rivers Danube and Timok flow along the eastern border with Romania and Bulgaria (Map 0.1). Sava, Danube, Tisa and Velika Morava belong to the Black Sea basin, are navigable and connect Serbia with Croatia, Hungary and Romania. The Velika (Great) Morava forms the aquatic spine of the country, before splitting into the Zapadna (West) and Južna (South) Morava. The latter connects Serbia with the Vardar River valley in North Macedonia, and is part of a route that links the central Balkans with the Greek port of Salonica. The Nišava River, in southern Serbia, is part of another aquatic route, towards Sofia and Istanbul, in Bulgaria and Turkey, respectively. River Ibar connects Montenegro, northern Kosovo and south-western Serbia, where it flows into the Zapadna Morava. Kosovo's largest rivers are Sitnica/Sitnicë, which flows into the Ibar, and Lab/Llap, while the Beli Drin/Drini i Bardhë dominates a river network in the valleys of Metohija/Rrafshi i Dukagjinit. Serbia is connected to the Adriatic Sea through Montenegro, including via the Belgrade-Bar railway, built after the Second World War.

Fertile land in Vojvodina in the north and valleys of the rivers Sava, Mačva and Morava represent the main agricultural regions. The further south one goes, hills and mountains become gradually higher – from Avala, near Belgrade (500 metres above sea

level) to the Balkan Dinaric Mountain chain in the south-west of the country, where the highest peaks reach above 2,500 metres. The Carpathian–Balkan Mountains extend from Bulgaria into south-east Serbia, where they are known as the Stara planina (Old Mountain).

Serbia's climate is moderate continental, with regional differentiations; the mountainous regions in the south are exposed to sub-Alpine and even Alpine climates. The country has been traditionally rich in forests, as the name of its central region, Šumadija ('land of forests') attests. Particularly widespread are oak, pine, beech, willow and poplar trees. Roughly 55 per cent of Serbia's territory consists of arable land, while around one-third of the country remains covered in forest. The percentage rose significantly after the Second World War thanks to a state-sponsored forestation campaign in socialist Yugoslavia. According to independent Serbian media, illegal cutting of both state- and privately owned forests has been one of the most widespread crimes in post-Yugoslav Serbia. Each year, hectares of forest are lost due to this, but the authorities appear unable to prevent the crime. In the north-east, there is a small desert, the Deliblatska peščara.

Serbia's rivers are rich in fish, including trout and carp, while wolves, bears, wild boars and a type of wild cat can be found in Serbia's mountains. Serbian farmers typically keep domestic cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, horses, chicken, turkeys and geese; livestock export, especially a local type of pig, was a main source of income in the nineteenth century. The historical presence of eagles, hawks and falcons is evident in many references to the birds of prey in the Serbian epic poetry and heraldic symbols. The country's national symbol today is the Byzantine-style double-headed white eagle with a royal crown, even though Serbia is a republic with no strong popular support for the restoration of monarchy. At the same time, the *krstaš* eagle (also known as the Eastern imperial eagle) is nearly extinct, as are several other animal species previously common in Serbia. The country's rivers

are as polluted as is its air. Some blame the NATO use of depleted uranium ammunition in 1999 for this sorry situation, but Serbia's environmental record and investment in recycling is dismal. In 2018, the government admitted that it invested only 0.7 per cent of its economic output in the environment (by comparison, other countries in East-Central Europe tend to spend around 2 per cent), citing lack of funds. In January 2020 – before the Covid-19 pandemic reached their country – Serbs went out on streets wearing surgical masks to protest high air pollution, responsible for 175 per 100,000 deaths in the country.

Historical Legacies

Nominally at least, Serbia has been set more or less on a pro-western course since the fall of President Slobodan Milošević in October 2000, but the relationship with the 'West' remains complicated. Like all its neighbours still not in the EU, Serbia formally wishes to join the Union. It has been a full candidate for the EU membership since early 2012, but the prospects of joining any time soon are bleak and popular support for the EU has been fluctuating. NATO membership in a near future is an even more unlikely scenario, even though Serbia joined the NATO-led Partnership for Peace in 2006. The most powerful military alliance in history waged one war since it was formed in 1949 – against Serbia, in 1999, as discussed later in the book.

The government in Belgrade maintains friendly relations with China and Russia – with the latter it also shares Slav and Orthodox Christian identity. Serbia and Russia were the core republics of former socialist federations, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, respectively. However, the Serbian Yugoslav and Russian Soviet experiences were fundamentally different, and not least because unlike Serbia in the case of Yugoslavia, Russia sought independence from the Soviet Union that, unlike Yugoslavia, broke up

relatively peacefully.¹² Serbia, on the other hand, sought to reaffirm both its own 'sovereignty' within the Yugoslav federation and, initially at least, to reverse an ever greater decentralization of the country in the late 1980s and at the beginning of the '90s.

Serbia's geographic diversity and complex historical legacies are reflected in varied cultural influences: Byzantine, Ottoman, East-Central European and Mediterranean. The Serbs are South Slavs, who speak the Serbian variant of the former Serbo-Croat language, also spoken in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro, and widely understood in North Macedonia and Slovenia (as well as in Bulgaria and parts of Romania bordering Serbia). Modern Serbia, therefore, is also defined by its Yugoslav legacy. In common with the rest of Eastern Europe, Serbia is a post-communist society.

Together with much of former-Yugoslavia, Serbia shares the legacies of two Yugoslav conflicts. The first occurred in the 1940s, when the original 'Yugoslav Wars' took place within the framework of the Second World War and brutal occupation regimes of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Serbia and Serbs played the central role in the tragic and violent (second) disintegration of Yugoslavia, in the 1990s. Modern Serbia may be said to have been, for much of its existence, a postwar society: following the anti-Ottoman uprisings of 1804–30, after the Eastern Crisis of the 1870s, and in the aftermath of the 1912–18, 1941–45 and 1991–95/1999 wars. The Balkan Wars of 1912–13 were in some ways a prelude of the 'Great Balkan War' of 1914–18, fought within the larger framework of the First World War. Relatively speaking, Serbia may have suffered the highest casualties of all countries fighting in the First World War, losing hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians. During the Second World War in occupied Yugoslavia, around 1 million people lost their lives, roughly

¹² V. Vujačić, *Nationalism, Myth and the State in Russia and Serbia: Antecedents of the Dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia*, Cambridge, 2015.

half of them Serbs. The 1940s war was a complex, multi-layered conflict. One of its key features was a civil war that broke out in western Serbia in 1941 between two ideologically opposed movements, the predominantly Serb Četniks led by a group of former army officers, and communist-led Partisans, whose multi-ethnic leadership also recruited mainly among Serbs in the early years of the war. Deep ideological, regional and generational divisions, as legacies of the wars of the 1940s and '90s remain. Following the collapse of Yugoslavia, right-wing and frequently anti-Yugoslav narratives have become louder and more visible; during the regime of Aleksandar Vučić, they have become de facto mainstream. As a result, a strong socialist and social-democratic tradition, which long predates Yugoslavia, not to mention the heroic resistance to Nazism and Fascism among Serbs, has been sadly marginalized.

Serbia shares the legacy of communist rule with all its neighbours and the Yugoslav legacy with five of them. Two of Serbia's neighbours were part of Serbia in the twentieth century: North Macedonia and Kosovo. Montenegro – which had united with Serbia a week before Croats, Slovenes and others joined to form Yugoslavia on 1 December 1918 – remained in a union with Belgrade for further 15 years after the break-up of the Yugoslav state in 1991. Unlike Kosovo's secession from Serbia following the 1990s Yugoslav war, Macedonia became a separate federal unit, and Macedonians were recognized as a constituent nation of Yugoslavia, at the end of the Second World War. Similarly, it was in 1945 that Montenegro became a republic within Yugoslavia and Montenegrins were recognized as a separate (from the Serbs) nation.

While the Serbian government, and many Serbs, still regard Kosovo as a constituent part of their country, nearly half of Bosnia sees itself as semi-adjacent to Serbia. A close and complex relationship exists between Serbia and Montenegro; many Montenegrins identify as Serbs, or at least believe in common historical, linguistic and ecclesiastical ties with the Serbs. A

canonically unrecognized Montenegrin Orthodox Church was established following the disintegration of Yugoslavia presumably to cement the identity of Montenegrins as a distinct nation. However, the Serbian Orthodox Church remains by far the strongest religious institution in Montenegro, though not without opposition within the country.

The Orthodox Church in North Macedonia had been part of the Serbian Orthodox Church from the early decades of the twentieth century until the late 1960s, when the Yugoslav communist government enabled the establishment of a separate church there. Its autocephaly was not recognized by the rest of the Orthodox world, until in May 2022 the Macedonian Orthodox Church was finally granted autocephaly by the Serbian Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Serbian Orthodox Church had previously unsuccessfully attempted to broker an agreement that would have seen the reincorporation of the Macedonian church as a highly autonomous Ohrid archbishopric, whose historical importance is acknowledged within the Serbian church.

Whatever its leaders argued, Serbia was involved in the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in the early 1990s, where local Serbs fought to remain in a union with Belgrade, as Yugoslavia was breaking up. One of the main stated reasons for the Bosnian and Croatian Serbs' refusal to leave Yugoslavia and live in the newly independent states was their fear of becoming a minority in the countries where the Serbs were victims of systematic mass murder, forced expulsion and conversion during the Second World War.¹³ In addition, most Serbs believe that their enormous suffering in the First World War was inbuilt into the very foundations of the Yugoslav state, and so found it hard to give up on

¹³ D. Jović, 'Fear of Becoming Minority as a Motivator of Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia', *Balkanologie*, 1–2 (2001), <https://journals.openedition.org/balkanologie/674>.

Yugoslavia; they believed in a strong state – whether unitary and centralized or federal. During the Second World War, much of Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and parts of northern Serbia were included in the Independent State of Croatia, a Nazi German and Fascist Italian puppet state. It was run by the Ustašas, an extreme anti-Serb and anti-Semitic Croatian right-wing organization, which committed a genocide against the Serbs, Jews and Roma, and murdered anti-Fascist Croats and Bosnian Muslims as well.

The final Yugoslav war of the 1990s was fought on the territory of Serbia, over the status of Kosovo, initially against independence-seeking ethnic Albanian guerrillas and then also against NATO, which intervened militarily on behalf of Kosovo Albanians, who were exposed to systematic violence and murder by Serb forces. The North Atlantic alliance bombed Serbia and Montenegro between late March and early June 1999, when Belgrade finally gave in. Ironically perhaps, a peace agreement was signed in a run-down café ‘Evropa’ (Europe) on the Kosovo–Macedonian border.¹⁴ Not counting sporadic bombardment of Bosnian Serb positions by NATO aircrafts in the first half of the 1990s, this was the first time NATO waged a war. Also, it was the first time since the Second World War that German troops, as part of the NATO force, intervened militarily, in an area where its occupation regime had been particularly brutal in the 1940s. NATO’s military and western diplomatic interventions paved the way for Kosovo’s contested declaration of independence in February 2008.

To say, therefore, that Serbia’s relationship with its immediate and approximate neighbours – except for Greece and Romania – and with ‘Great Powers’ is difficult would be an understatement. However, as this book will show, Serbs (to the extent that their

¹⁴ In a further twist of historical irony, Prime Minister Pašić received Austria-Hungary’s declaration of war on Serbia on 28 July 1914 while having lunch in hotel-restaurant ‘Evropa’, in the southern town of Niš. That was the beginning of the First World War.

and their neighbours' clearly distinguished ethno-religious identities existed) have also enjoyed long periods of peaceful coexistence and friendly relations with Bosnians, Bulgarians, Croats and Hungarians; even the relationship with Albanians and, prior to the nineteenth century, Ottomans cannot be painted in simplistic colours. Either way, a history of the Serbs and Serbia needs to be understood in a regional context as this book attempts, while keeping focus on Serbia.

Serbia or Serb polities had fought against and had been subjugated by the Byzantine, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Nazi empires. During the Cold War, the main threat to Yugoslavia came from the Soviet Union. As this book shows, the discourses of traditional friendships (Russia, Byzantium/Greece, France, Britain, USA) and traditional enmities (Ottoman Turkey, Austria, Germany, Croatia, Bulgaria, Albanians), popular in Serbia and frequently supported by some outside commentators, are too simplistic. Even those Serbs who describe themselves as western or western-oriented seem insecure about their Europeanness. Serbia's intellectuals often approach Europe uncritically – depending on their ideology, it is either an unquestionably positive or a negative category, a symbol of progress and modernity or of an alien, Catholic, north-western and ultimately anti-Serb and anti-Orthodox world. Europe/West is therefore at once an ideal and an enemy. Regardless of any regional tensions, many Serbs are sympathetic to Arab, African and Asian countries. This is partly a legacy of the Titoist era, when Yugoslavia was a key member of the Non-Aligned Movement, and partly due to opposition to the US foreign policy in Asia and the Middle East, which presumably reminds many of the NATO military intervention against Serbs in the 1990s.

The Serbs suffer from collective traumas (as much as these can be quantified) due to their huge sacrifices as well as victimization in the two World Wars. Leaving aside for the moment the question of their role in the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the wars

of the 1990s, Serbs have suffered enormously historically. During the twentieth century, they were subjected to pogroms and even periodic threats of extermination (as in the Second World War), even as they also came to occupy dominant political positions in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo.

Serbia was the only former-Yugoslav republic against which UN sanctions were imposed during the 1990s, and against which NATO intervened militarily. Serbia is also the only former-Yugoslav republic that experienced a loss of territory, when Kosovo declared independence. The Croatian and Bosnian Serbs also declared independence in the early 1990s, but even Serbia did not recognize formally their statelets, which were eventually dissolved and reintegrated (into Croatia) and reincorporated (into Bosnia), after international intervention.

Stories of epic battles and heroic losses turned into victories are also an integral part of the Serbian national narrative. These include the Battle of Kosovo of 1389, the Great Migration of 1690, the anti-Ottoman wars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the heroic resistance and enormous suffering in the First and Second World Wars, and the most recent conflicts and international intervention against Serbia. In modern times, Serbs have been responsible for violence against their neighbours, during the nineteenth century, in the wars of 1912–18, in the Second World War (when violence committed by Serbs, especially Četniks, against other Serbs was also widespread) and during the 1990s wars. However, anti-Muslim violence of the nineteenth century or the 1912–13 Balkan Wars is on the margins of historiographic and public debates. Serbia, as a society, has a long way to go in dealing with its role in the break-up of Yugoslavia and the violence that ensued. At the same time, Belgrade bookstores sell eulogies to Radovan Karadžić and General Mladić (Bosnian Serb wartime leaders) alongside books about war crimes committed by Serbs in the 1990s.

Culture and Society

Serbia's history has not been just a history of conflict and war. One of the main legacies of its turbulent past is a remarkable cultural and social melting pot, while pockets of cosmopolitanism survive throughout the country. A curious visitor to Serbia today would recognize an eclectic mix of Central and East European, Mediterranean and Near Eastern customs and influences – in architecture, cuisine, social interaction, life philosophy and everyday life. Serbia, especially its urban centres, is in many ways indistinguishable from a modern western, consumerist society. This is the legacy of the late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century modernization and the post-communist transition. First supermarkets opened in the 1950s, and today even smaller towns have shopping malls, while card payments are typically accepted even in remote village stores. Privately owned boutiques selling latest, usually Italian or Italian-inspired, fashion have been common since the 1980s. Foreign journalists and visitors have long noted that Serbia's youth are sometimes indistinguishable in appearance from their trendy western counterparts. Wearing a well-known fashion label and purchasing latest mobile phones is considered essential, even if not many Serbs can easily afford them. They are often forced to buy cheaper copies, sometimes provided by Chinese traders, many of whom settled in Serbia during the 1990s, taking advantage of the friendly relations between Belgrade and Beijing. Not many readers of this book would remember that China threatened to go to war with NATO after the North Atlantic military alliance bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, allegedly due to an error. That said, western commentators sometimes obsess over Russian and Chinese influences in Serbia. Even Belgrade's response to the Covid-19 pandemic was reported with a focus on Chinese, and to a lesser extent Russian medical aid to Serbia and potential implications on the country's foreign policy, rather than on lives saved because of the aid.

Contemporary Serbia is a society of sharp contrasts and contradictions, not unlike other countries that have experienced transition from one-party rule to multi-party democracy, and from state communism to liberal-capitalist system. Poverty mixes with prosperity, while abrasiveness and borderline aggressiveness meet extreme hospitality. Some of the coolest and hippest people and places coexist alongside reminders of Ottoman and Yugoslav socialist pasts. Typically, laid-back attitude can be infuriating, even if it often produces surprisingly efficient outcomes. In Serbia (as throughout much of former-Yugoslavia), things frequently function through *veze* (connections) and exchange of favours, from finding a place in kindergarten and school to enrolling at a university, getting a job, skipping a queue in hospital, all the way to conducting business and politics. Commenting on the same phenomenon in Greece, one historian has argued that this is a legacy of the long Ottoman rule.¹⁵ Certainly, cultural affinities between Serbs and other Balkan peoples, including Greeks and Turks, exist. At the same time, many Serbs are attracted by and identify with Italian, and more generally South European, ‘way of life’, especially concerning fashion, food and music. In common with Croats and other South Slavs, the Serbs are as much if not more South European as they are East European – Balkan and Mediterranean Slavs at once, one might say.

Serbia is a highly centralized state, with almost all political and economic power located in Belgrade. At the same time, it was the only former-Yugoslav republic with autonomous provinces, Kosovo in the south and Vojvodina in the north. As this book shows, both provinces were in different ways legacies of large-scale migrations of Orthodox Slavs (but not just them) between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. Vojvodina’s autonomy today is as fictional as Serbia’s sovereignty over Kosovo. However,

¹⁵ R. Clogg, *A Concise History of Greece*, 2nd edn, Cambridge, 2002, 4.

despite a high degree of centralism, key political decisions concerning ‘ordinary’ people are frequently made locally. For better or worse, town mayors and local businessmen are often the ones who determine ‘when it’s sunny and when it’s cloudy’, as a popular Serbian saying goes.

Reality TV programmes and tabloid press (which make their British counterparts appear almost high culture in comparison) are hugely popular. At the same time, excellent theatre plays are sold out months in advance, local playwrights and writers often reach celebrity status that their British counterparts can only dream of, and Serbia’s film and TV series production is arguably the strongest in former-Yugoslavia. In addition to books by local writers, Serbian reading public has access to a wide range of international authors thanks to a remarkably vibrant publishing industry. The *Prosveta* bookstore – once the location of a bookshop owned by Geca Kon, a Serbian-Jewish publisher murdered by German occupation authorities in 1941 – on the Knez Mihajlova Street in downtown Belgrade even had a dedicated section to Japanese literature and culture.

Most Serbian publishers receive state funding, which enables them to survive – one of the legacies of the Yugoslav socialist era. Things have been changing for the worse in recent years, due to budget cuts. Nevertheless, excellent bookshops stubbornly survive on high streets dominated by clothes retailers, betting shops and casinos, as well as numerous cafes and restaurants. Public libraries throughout the country regularly host poetry readings and book launches. The Belgrade Philharmonic, opened in 1923, is internationally renowned. Serbia is a birth country of acclaimed classical music performers (including violinists Stefan Milenković and Nemanja Radulović) and composers (Isidora Žebeljan, who died in 2020, aged just 53). Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF), founded in 1967 by Mira Trailović and Jovan Ćirilov, has maintained its excellent reputation despite decreasing state funding, alongside other cultural venues such as the

Yugoslav Drama Theatre, founded in Belgrade in 1947, and the Serbian National Theatre, established in Novi Sad in 1861 (then part of the Habsburg Empire). Indeed, Serbia has a rich cultural scene; practically every town in the country has its own film, theatre or music festival and a literary prize. Museums and galleries are popular, and entry prices are relatively low and sometimes free. 'High culture' remains both of high quality and affordable. These are also legacies of socialism and Yugoslavia.

A start-up tech industry has blossomed in recent years. This is partly due to young Serbs returning home from the West to set up companies in an environment that allows more time to develop business (outdated laws notwithstanding) than places such as the Silicon Valley. There is also a tradition of internationally recognized technological innovation, at socialist-era 'Vinča' and 'Pupin' institutes (the latter is named after Mihajlo Pupin, the famous Serb-American scientist and inventor, born in Habsburg Hungary, who taught at New York's Columbia University). In the early 1980s, Vojislav Antonić invented *Galaksija*, a 'Do It Yourself' personal computer and an affordable Yugoslav answer to Commodore and Spectrum computers that were out of reach of most people at the time. Political isolation and economic restrictions of the recent decades have forced young (and no longer so young) Serbs to learn how to fix and sometimes build their own PCs, so as a result there exists a widespread, self-taught expertise that is arguably superior to that in the more affluent West. In late 2019, slightly over 80 per cent of all Serbian households possessed internet connection (a seven per cent growth in comparison to 2018). This is comparable to neighbouring countries, and only just below the EU average of around 90 per cent in 2020.¹⁶

¹⁶ The data is for Serbia without Kosovo, where an even higher percentage of households have internet. 'Godišnje istraživanje o upotrebi informaciono-komunikacionih tehnologija, 2019', Republički zavod za statistiku,

Serbia might be described as at once a conservative, patriarchal and modern society, in which atheist values meet religious beliefs, and where many are prepared to turn to fortune tellers and sorceresses to seek solution to their problems. Traditional societal norms coexist, and sometimes mix, with liberal and even semi-anarchic values. Serbia is the birthplace of ‘turbofolk’, a kitschy brand of music that combines elements of the Yugoslav-era ‘neo folk’ (symbolized by Belgrade-based, Bosnian-born Lepa Brena, real name Fahreta Jahić), with techno and dance music. It was named by Rambo Amadeus (Antonije Pušić), a richly talented Montenegro-born musician and performer based in Belgrade, who was mocking the genre. Turbofolk music is usually performed by highly sexualized female singers, who also regularly feature in reality shows and help sell the scandal-filled tabloid press (a similar phenomenon in Bulgaria is known as *chalga*). The veteran of the genre is Svetlana Ražnatović Ceca, the widow of Željko Ražnatović Arkan, Serbia’s notorious gangster and paramilitary leader murdered in 2000 in a Belgrade hotel lobby by a paid assassin. The genre is associated with the extreme nationalism of the 1990s and regional, not only Serbian, macho culture. Paradoxically perhaps, Ceca and other Serbian singers are popular across the Balkans, including in Croatia and Slovenia. Some turbofolk performers have in the meanwhile become gay icons and, in the case of Jelena Karleuša (the wife of footballer Duško Tošić, who once played for Portsmouth and Queens Park Rangers in England), advocates of LGBTQ rights.¹⁷

At the same time, an underground culture has been flourishing despite, or perhaps because, more than three decades of political

www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/vesti/20190920-godisnje-istrzivanje-o-ikt/?a=27&s=
‘Digital economy and society statistics – households and individuals’, *Eurostat*,
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Digital_economy_and_society_statistics_-_households_and_individuals.

¹⁷ Eurovocious, ‘Queer as Turbofolk’, a 3-part article at www.balkanist.net, September–October 2014.

and economic crises, wars and international isolation. Yugoslav Serbia was home to a strong post-punk and New Wave scene of the 1980s, which featured groups such as Šarlo Akrobata, Disciplina Kičme (whose London reincarnation Disciplin a Kitschme formed in the 1990s), Ekatarina Velika, Električni Orgazam, Idoli, Obojeni Program and Partibrejkers. The early 1990s saw the emergence of a new generation of grunge and indie rock groups that toured the country collectively under the name *Brzi bendovi Srbije* (Fast bands of Serbia) – an ironic commentary on President Milošević’s promise to introduce west European-style fast trains. Members of some of the above-mentioned 1980s bands formed a ‘super group’ that in 1991 released an anti-war track and campaigned for peace in Yugoslavia. Belgrade-based Bajaga & Instruktori performed in Sarajevo in July 1991 (during the war in Slovenia) at a concert for peace broadcast by Yutel, Yugoslavia’s first, short-lived independent TV. Music by bands such as Darkwood Dub, Kanda, Kodža & Nebojša, Oružjem Protivu Otmičara and Plejboj provided the soundtrack for anti-Milošević protests of the 1990s. Djordje Balašević, a singer–songwriter, poet and actor, who has been compared to Bob Dylan and Vladimir Vysocky, became the symbol of anti-war and anti-nationalist voices in Serbia. His death in February 2021 from Covid-19 provoked spontaneous scenes of public mourning and grief across former-Yugoslavia unseen since the death of President Tito in 1980. Indeed, with some notable exceptions, pop and rock culture provided a rare space for critical thinking and anti-war, anti-nationalist activism and progressive ideas, channelled through the now defunct Radio B92.¹⁸

¹⁸ M. Colin, *This Is Serbia Calling: Rock ‘n’ Roll Radio and Belgrade’s Underground Resistance*, London, 2001. The B92’s once flagship political show ‘Peščanik’ (Hourglass – the title of a well-known novel by Danilo Kiš) aired for a while as an independent radio programme, before transforming into a website (www.pescanik.net) that publishes critical commentary on topical Serbian and international issues.

The 'exit' from the Milošević era was symbolized by a music festival of the same name held annually in Novi Sad since 2000. The Exit quickly became one of the best music festivals in Europe this century, regularly hosting the world's premier pop, rock and hip-hop artists. It is simplistically thought of as a symbol of a 'European Serbia', where a more traditional gathering of brass bands held annually in Guča, western Serbia, is supposed to represent 'traditional Serbia', even though it regularly attracts regional and international guests and performers. Acclaimed Serbian-Roma trumpet player Boban Marković and his band are among those regularly playing at Guča, when not performing at venues such as London's Barbican. Marković has collaborated with classically trained violinist Félix Lajkó (Lajko Feliks), an ethnic Hungarian from Vojvodina known for his work with 'world music' acts from around the world. There are numerous other excellent trumpet and brass bands from Serbia whose success probably owes something to the genre-defining music of Goran Bregović. Irish folk-rock, sung in a Serbian-accented attempt at Irish pronunciation of English, is hugely popular thanks to veterans of the genre Orthodox Celts and the bands they inspired, such as Irish Stew of Sindidun (the Celtic name for Belgrade dating to third century BC). There is also a rich and diverse hip-hop scene. Among those distinguished for their politically and socially engaged lyrics are Bad Copy, Prti Bee Gee, Marčelo (real name Marko Šelić), Sajsi MC (Ivana Rašić) and Smoke Mardeljano (Miloš Stojanović). A regional variant of Reggaeton and Auto-Tune sound is hugely popular. Kosovo-born Rasta (Stefan Djurić) is arguably the genre's biggest performer and producer, having founded the successful 'Balkaton' label.

Belgrade's club scene is internationally renowned. Once a strip joint, the boat-club '20/44' (the city's geographic coordinates) is a cult venue that attracts leading local and international DJs, often prepared to waive their fees to play there. One of the club's resident DJs, Slobodan Brkić (a.k.a. DJ Brka), is a London School of

Economics graduate and a former advisor to late Prime Minister Djindjić. Belgrade-born Gramofonedzie (real name Marko Milićević) is a world-famous DJ, whose music has featured in the top 10 singles lists around the world. The ‘New Serbian Scene’ of the recent years includes excellent indie and pop-rock acts, including Goribor, Nežni Dalibor, Repetitor, Svi na pod!, Zemlja gruva (featuring Konstrakta and Zoe Kida) and Kralj Čačka (real name Nenad Marić), who is sometimes described as a Serbian Tom Waits.

A predominantly collectivist society, Serbia is nevertheless the birth country of some hugely creative and globally renowned individuals. These include conceptual artist Marina Abramović and fashion designers Zoran (Ladičorbić, a reclusive New York-based designer praised as a genius of minimalism) and London-based Roksanda Ilinčić (whose clients include the Duchess of Cambridge, Keira Knightley, Michelle Obama and Melania Trump). Abramović may be the best known but is not the only highly accomplished international artist; others include Raša Todosijević, another conceptual artist, painters Mića Popović, Leonid Šejka, Ljubica Sokić, Vladimir Veličković and sculptors Toma Rosandić and Olga Jančić. Serbia is also home to internationally celebrated naïve and marginal artists, notably those based in and near Jagodina, central Serbia and Kovačica, a predominantly ethnic-Slovak village in Vojvodina.

Acclaimed twentieth-century writers Ivo Andrić (the only Yugoslav to receive a Nobel Prize in Literature), Miloš Crnjanski, Milovan Djilas, Danilo Kiš, Milorad Pavić, Vasko Popa and Mehmed-Meša Selimović have belonged to and shaped the modern Serbian literature. The same may be said of Branko Ćopić, Bora Ćosić, Dobrica Ćosić (they are not related), Filip David, Oskar Davičo, Mirko Kovač, Borislav Pekić and Aleksandar Tišma, as well as the first post-World War II generation of writers, including David Albahari, Vladislav Bajac, Svetislav Basara and Dragan Velikić, and their literary heirs such as Srdjan Valjarević.

Meanwhile, Belgrade-born Zoran Živković is a widely translated author of science fiction. Some of these authors came from ethnically non-Serb or mixed backgrounds but wrote in the Serbian variant of the Serbo-Croat language and adopted Serbian culture and identity that did not contradict their other identities nor identification with Yugoslavia. Although male dominated, the Serbian literary scene has produced prominent female writers, poets and playwrights, including Isidora Sekulić, Desanka Maksimović, Vida Ognjenović (who has also been a leading member of the Democratic Party), Milena Marković, Biljana Srbljanović and Radmila Petrović – who, again, represent different generations and literary forms. North American- and British-based writers of Serb origin, Vesna Goldsworthy, Téa Obreht and Charles Simić, a Pulitzer Prize-winning Serbian-American poet, are among internationally renowned contemporary authors who belong to different generations and literary genres. Walt Bogdanich, a celebrated investigative journalist and a three-time recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, is another well-known Serbian-American.

In recent years, Belgrade has re-emerged as a cultural centre of former Yugoslavia. For example, Centre for Cultural Decontamination regularly hosts events featuring participants from across former-Yugoslavia. Belgrade is home to a regional writers' festival *Krokodil*, while prominent contemporary Bosnian, Croatian and Slovenian writers regularly publish their books with Serbian presses and in some cases have moved to Belgrade. Internationally renowned scholars of Serb origin are numerous and include economist Branko Milanović and Gordana Vunjak-Novaković, a professor of biomedical engineering at Columbia University.

Serbia and the Serbs have made an important contribution to the world cinematography, including award-winning directors belonging to the Yugoslav 'Black Wave' of the 1960s and '70s (such as Dušan Makavejev, Živojin Pavlović, Aleksandar Petrović and Želimir Žilnik). The 'Prague School' group came into the

limelight in the late 1970s and early '80s (Srdjan Karanović, Goran Marković, Goran Paskaljević and Bosnian-born Emir Kusturica). Their contemporary Slobodan Šijan directed several cult films based on satirical plays written by Dušan Kovačević. Srdjan Dragojević emerged in the early 1990s, and was followed by several younger, award-winning directors, including Stefan Arsenijević, Stevan Filipović, Maja Miloš, Oleg Novković and Mila Turajlić. Actors such as Milena Dravić, Bekim Fehmiu, Dragan Nikolić, Ljubiša Samardžić and Velimir-Bata Živojinović achieved international fame during the Yugoslav era, in some cases thanks to the hugely popular Partisan film. Živojinović was particularly popular in China, while Gojko Mitić became a star of East German Western movie production and was popular in the USSR as well. Mirjana Karanović and Jasna Djuričić are leading contemporary Serbian actresses, while Croatian Serb Rade Šerbedžija, a highly respected and popular actor in socialist Yugoslavia, forged a successful international career after emigrating to Britain and then the USA in the 1990s. Meanwhile others, such as London-based Branka Katić, are usually cast in smaller roles of stereotypical East Europeans. Younger Serbian actors Miloš Biković, Milan Marić and Milena Radulović have found success in Russia, while Belgrade-born, Denmark-based Danica Ćurčić is a rising star of Scandinavian cinema and TV. Hollywood directors and actors of Serb origin include Peter Bogdanovich, Karl Malden (i.e. Mladen Sekulovich) and more recently Soviet-born actress and model Milla Jovovich and Canadian-American actress and producer Kata Stanić. Well-known Australian Serbs include transgender model Andreja Pejić and actress and singer Holly Vallance (Vukadinović).

Serbia's sportswomen and men, such as tennis stars Novak Djoković and Monika Seleš (an ethnic Hungarian from Vojvodina) and basketball player Nikola Jokić are historically among the world's best in the sport in which they have competed. The emergence of Ana Ivanović and Jelena Janković in 2007–2008 as number

r female tennis players in the world coincided with Djoković's rise and made Serbia one of the strongest tennis nations globally for a few years. Serbia's water polo team has in recent years won Olympic, World and European championship gold medals and is arguably the most dominant ever national team in any sport. Serbia has also produced outstanding men and women national teams in basketball, volleyball and handball. It might be argued that the country's success in collective sports is largely thanks to the creativity of its hugely talented individuals. Serbian basketball players (such as Radivoj Korać, Dragan Kićanović, Vlade Divac, Aleksandar Djordjević, Dejan Bodiroga and Predrag Stojaković) and coaches (Aleksandar Nikolić, Ranko Žeravica, Dušan Ivković, Božidar Maljković, Svetislav Pešić and Željko Obradović) are historically among Europe's best. Borislav Stanković, a longtime president of the International Basketball Federation (FIBA), the world basketball governing body, was arguably one of the most influential executives in international sport. Their success is in many ways the legacy of the 'Yugoslav school of basketball', which made Yugoslavia a sport superpower in the 1970s and '80s alongside the Soviet Union and the United States.¹⁹ (Gregg Popovich, one of the greatest American basketball coaches ever, has Serb roots, as did late Pete Maravich, considered among the most talented basketball players ever). Similarly, Yugoslavia challenged the post-World War II dominance of Soviet chess players. Serbian grandmasters Svetozar Gligorić, Borislav Ivkov, Milunka Lazarević, Ljubomir Ljubojević and Alisa Marić (who served as Serbia's Minister of Youth and Sport in 2012/13) were among the best in the world. Major football silverware has eluded the country at senior level, but Serbia won the Youth World Cup in 2015 (by defeating Brazil in the final). The Yugoslav-era international

¹⁹ V. Perica, 'United They Stood, Divided They Fell: Nationalism and the Yugoslav School of Basketball, 1968–2000', *Nationalities Papers*, 29:2 (2001), 267–91.

success of Serbian football teams Red Star and Partizan Belgrade represented the achievement of the Yugoslav football. Serbia's most popular sport has produced some exceptionally gifted and successful players and coaches, including Radomir Antić, Vujadin Boškov, Dragan Džajić, Vladimir Jugović, Miljan Miljanić, Dragan Stojković, Dejan Stanković, Dragoslav Šekularac, Velibor Vasović and Nemanja Vidić, to mention but a few.

Creativity, unpredictability, emotion, and so on have often delivered results, and sometimes puzzled outside observers. Djoković and Jokić, one of the best tennis players of all time and one of the most uniquely talented basketball players in the world, respectively, on the surface appear like two very different personalities and athletes. Djoković combines gluten-free and vegetarian/vegan diet and Oriental meditation with extreme hard work and dedication. Jokić, on the other hand, by his own admission enjoys the Serbian carbs and red-meat-rich diet, has a laid-back attitude and sometimes appears to be out of shape physically. Yet, both have succeeded thanks to a combination of talent, hard work, imagination, improvisation and *inat*. This apparently typical Serbian emotion, which cannot be easily translated into English, means doing things out of spite and stubbornness, often repeatedly, even if such actions may be counterproductive and self-harming. Both have been nicknamed 'Joker' – partly because of their surnames, but also due to their sense of humour, which sets them apart from usually serious and earnest public appearance of many of their fellow countrymen. However, one cannot help but wonder if there is something 'Balkanist' in the Joker moniker, especially regarding Djoković. He remains far less popular than Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, his greatest tennis rivals from Switzerland and Spain, respectively, despite often outperforming them on court. Even western commentators have noted that Djoković remains un(der)appreciated, and some have wondered if this might be because he is from Serbia.

In common with other patriarchal societies in South-Eastern Europe, Serbian women are frequently discriminated against, both in public and at home. According to a 2016 study, 46 per cent of women in Serbia have experienced some form of abuse or violence, while every third woman was victim of domestic violence. These figures do not differ much from those in the EU, where every third woman over the age of 15 has been a victim of physical and/or sexual violence.²⁰ Despite this, many women in Serbia have reached the highest levels of their profession, through combination of talent, ambition, survival strategies, sexuality and, inevitably, *veze* (not necessarily in this order and not always due to all these factors). Ethnic, religious, sexual and other minorities are frequently discriminated, sometimes openly, although many Serbs would say that they belong to a tolerant, non-racist nation. Dragan Maksimović, a well-known Serbian actor, was beaten to death in late 2000 by a group of football hooligans who assumed he was Roma. One of the most talented young Serbian writers today is Meti Kamberi who as a Roma has experienced racially motivated discrimination and violence. On the other hand, Serbian Roma and Muslim folk singers, such as late Šaban Bajramović and Džej Ramadanovski, are hugely popular; the former even has a monument in his hometown of Niš. Not to mention that Bosnian, Croatian and Macedonian folk and pop-rock musicians remain popular in Serbia, regularly performing in sold-out concert arenas in Belgrade.

Not unlike in the rest of Eastern Europe, homophobic views are common in Serbia and are frequently publicly expressed by conservative and right-wing politicians and religious leaders. The 2010 pride parade in Belgrade provoked riots and violence

²⁰ T. Ignjatović, 'Numbers Speak: Violence against Women in Serbia', Heinrich Böll Stiftung/Gunda Werner Institute, 2017, www.gwi-boell.de/en/2017/09/11/numbers-speak.

committed by right-wing groups and football hooligans, resulting in the banning of the march in the following few years. Although recent pride parades have been held peacefully, they require strong police presence to guarantee the safety of the participants. At the same time, Dragojević's 2011 film *Parada*, which offers a critical look at the Serbs' homophobia, received not just international acclaim (winning, for example, the Teddy award at the 2012 Berlinale), but was also a huge hit in Serbia and across former-Yugoslavia, where homophobic views are similarly widespread. Turbofolk, which originated as a music of the nationalist, gangster, macho Serbs, has in recent years brought the LGBTQ community closer to the mainstream. One of the country's most popular pop singers and Serbia's only Eurovision Song Contest winner Marija Šerifović is both gay and Roma (and, one might add, has a Muslim-sounding surname). When she was appointed Prime Minister of Serbia in 2017, Ana Brnabić was one of the few female leaders in the world; she is also openly gay and is an ethnic Croat. In 2019, it was reported that Brnabić's partner gave birth to a baby boy. Serbia's laws do not recognize same-sex marriage and civil partnership, nor are gay couples allowed to adopt. Despite all this, Brnabić is not known as an LGBTQ rights champion.²¹

Serbs are sometimes perceived from outside as a nation united in its anti-western nationalism. Many authors, both Serbian and non-Serbian, on the other hand, point out that the society has been traditionally divided into the 'first' (anti-modern, conservative, pro-Russian) and 'second' (modern, liberal, pro-western) Serbia. During the 1990s, some western authors portrayed

²¹ C. Baker, 'The *Molitva* Factor: Eurovision and Performing National Identity in World Politics', in A. Dubin et al. (eds), *Eurovision as a Cultural Phenomenon*, London, 2023, 96–110; B. Bilić, 'Ana je tu: Figure zazora, klasne privilegije i premijerka Ana Brnabić', *Sociologija (Belgrade)*, LXII (2020), 378–96.

the Serbs as perennially associated with violence, as a nation of metaphorical vampires, as one scholar has argued.²² In popular films and series produced in the West since the 1990s, Serbs have joined, if not replaced, Russians as the stereotypical evil East Europeans. Ironically perhaps, James Bond, the quintessential saviour of the West in this movie genre, was likely modelled on a Serbian World War II spy; another Yugoslav (and a Serb through his mother's family), may have also inspired Ian Fleming's famous secret agent.²³

Both Serb nationalists and their staunch critics have tended to view Serbia and Serbs as homogenized categories. In reality, there exist visible social, political and cultural differences between the Serbs of Serbia and Serbs of Bosnia, Croatia and Montenegro, and between the Serbs of Vojvodina and of central and southern Serbia. Contemporary Serbia unites, not always easily, historical traditions of 'Ottoman' and 'Habsburg' Serbs. Bosnian and Croatian Serbs are similarly divided by the different imperial legacies, but at a closer look, they also share important historical experiences: both were part of the society of the Habsburg Military Border (discussed later in the book); they also share the victimhood identity (anti-Serb Habsburg pogroms in the First and the *Ustaša* genocide of the Serbs in the Second World War). Montenegro represents another complex case, for many Montenegrins have identified with the Serbs, while even among those who feel as a separate nation many acknowledge common history and origins with Serbs. Serbian history has been characterized by a remarkable plurality of opinions and regional identities, as this book shows.

²² T. Longinović, *Vampire Nation: Violence as Cultural Imaginary*, Durham, NC, 2011. The origin of the 'vampire' phenomenon is, incidentally, associated with the Serbs, as discussed later on in the book.

²³ D. Popov, *Spy/Counterspy*, New York, 1974; V. Ivanović, *LX: Memoirs of a Yugoslav*, London, 1977, 360–61.

How Unique Is Serbian History?

It has been suggested sometimes that anti-modern, anti-western, corrupt and aggressive groups and forces have dominated Serbia's history since the nineteenth century and that this explains the country's recent predicament.²⁴ In other words, a direct line may be drawn between Garašanin and Milošević/Vučić – similar to the 'Mazzini to Mussolini' or the 'Bismarck to Hitler' theses in the Italian and German cases, respectively. So, is there a Serbian *Sonderweg*, a special Serbian path in history?²⁵

Some key developments in the history of Serbia and the Serbs may indeed appear unique. For example, since the mid-nineteenth century, the Serbs have had adopted several national ideologies, which may be broadly defined as Serbian (including a maximalist, 'Greater' Serbian version) and Yugoslav. However, the Croats, and to a lesser degree the Slovenes, have also embraced or wandered between a wider Yugoslav and a more particularistic type of nationalism, which, in the Croat case, also included a 'Greater' Croat idea (briefly, and tragically, fulfilled during the Second World War). Not to mention the similarly complex identities of the Bosnian Muslims, Macedonians and Montenegrins; groups which, incidentally, Serbs have generally regarded as part of

²⁴ See, for example, O. Milosavljević, *Činjenice i tumačenja: Dva razgovora sa Latinkom Perović*, Belgrade, 2010, and *U tradiciji nacionalizma ili stereotipi srpskih intelektualaca XX veka o 'nama' i 'drugima'*, Belgrade, 2002; L. Perović, *Dominantna i neželjena elita: Beleške o intelektualnoj i političkoj eliti u Srbiji (XX–XXI vek)*, Belgrade, 2016; L. Perović et al. (eds), *Srbija u modernizacijskim procesima XIX i XX veka, 3: uloga elita*, Belgrade, 2003; D. Stojanović, *Kaldrma i asfalt: Urbanizacija i evropeizacija Beograda 1890–1914*, Belgrade, 2008.

²⁵ V. Vujačić, *Reexamining the 'Serbian Exceptionalism' Thesis*, Berkeley, CA, 2004, https://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/2004_03-vuja.pdf, is the best work on the subject; cf. J. Kocka, 'German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German "Sonderweg"', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23:1 (1988), 3–16; H. Walser Smith, 'Introduction', in his edited *Oxford Handbook of Modern German History*, Oxford, 2011, 1–28; S. Levis Sullam, *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Origins of Fascism*, Basingstoke, 2015.

a wider Serb nation, an idea which also have had its adherents among many Montenegrins, as already mentioned.

Although in some respects these developments are specific to Serbia and Serbs, one should not rush to declare Serbia's history unique. Germany, Italy and Japan have dealt with their difficult pasts (in the case of Germany especially of the Nazi and communist eras, but increasingly in respect of its imperial past as well) with varying degrees of success and these societies remain divided. Post-socialist transition has revealed deep divisions in countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania. The legacies of civil wars fought in the 1930s and '40s in Spain and Greece, respectively, survive. Even in the United States, where a civil war was fought in the mid-nineteenth-century, divisions caused by it are felt to this day. The polarization in American society over the question of racial equality became especially pronounced during the Trump presidency (2016–20). Not to mention the extent to which Brexit has divided the United Kingdom, flared old and created new debates about the legacy of the British Empire.

Some, perhaps many, Serbs see themselves as a heroic people who only wage defensive and just wars. The myth of a nation built on resistance against more powerful enemy (Ottomans in 1389 and 1804, Austria-Hungary in 1914, Nazi Germany in 1941, the Soviet Union in 1948 and NATO in 1999) is a strong part of the Serbs' identity, but a similar, 'insurrectionary nationalism' exists elsewhere, notably in Poland.²⁶ A related discourse rests on a belief that Serbia selflessly sacrificed its independence for the sake of other South Slavs in 1918 and again in 1945, only to be eventually betrayed and abandoned by them and by Western Allies. In another related narrative, the Serbs are a Diaspora people, forced by a Muslim enemy (Ottomans, Albanians) to leave their spiritual home in Kosovo. Inevitable parallels with the Jews

²⁶ J. Connelly, *From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe*, Princeton, NJ, 2020, ch. 5.

have been made, and not only by Serbs. When in December 2014 then Serbian prime minister Aleksandar Vučić visited Israel, his host and Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu stated that ‘[t]he friendship between the Jewish and Serbian peoples goes back to thousands of years, to the time of the Roman Republic [c.509–27 BC]’, to which Vučić responded that ‘everything that Prime Minister Netanyahu have [sic] just said about our past has been something very true and yeah, we shared in a way the same destiny’.²⁷ Nobody seemed to mind, or perhaps did not know, that the Balkan Serbs do not appear in historical sources before ninth century AD.

Orthodoxy and Ottoman heritage, and historic ties with Russia, seemingly place Serbia outside the European mainstream. (Meanwhile, even the most ardent ‘Cold Warriors’ would not deny that Russian art, music and literature are ‘European’ – at least this was true prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022). However, as this book shows, modern Serbian history is also part of European history and Serbian nationalism developed under central and west European influences. Besides, west European history represents just one aspect of Europe’s past. Countries such as Greece, Bulgaria and Romania, today EU and NATO member-states, share the Ottoman and Orthodox historical legacies with Serbia; in addition, Bulgaria and Romania are, like Serbia, post-communist societies.

There are certain developments specific to Serbia’s history, certainly within the former-Yugoslav context. For example,

²⁷ Netanyahu also stated that a Serbian Jewish Rabi was the progenitor of Zionism (see Chapter 3) and made a reference to Jewish and Serbian suffering in the Second World War. ‘PM Netanyahu meets with Serbian PM Vučić in Jerusalem’, Belgrade, Tel Aviv, 1 December 2014, <https://embassies.gov.il/beograd/NewsAndEvents/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-meets-with-Serbian-PM-Vucic-1-December-2014.aspx>. On the identification with the Jews across Yugoslavia, see M. Živković, *Serbian Dreambook: National Imaginary in the Time of Milošević*, Bloomington, IN, 2011, ch. 8.

medieval Serbia was the most powerful and enjoyed independence for the longest time among the South Slav polities (not counting Bulgaria). For a long period, it was part of the Byzantine ‘commonwealth’, but it maintained strong economic and cultural ties with Venice and Dubrovnik, as evident in medieval architecture, for example. Most Serbian kings were canonized by the Orthodox Church; the tradition of holy kings and dynasties may be specific to former-Yugoslavia, but it existed elsewhere – in Hungary and France, for instance. At the same time, medieval Serb rulers sought recognition from both Constantinople and Rome, and some were baptized as Catholics. Even the rich tradition of epic poetry and oral history is not a solely Serb but rather a Balkan phenomenon.

This book explores key developments such as large-scale migrations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that made the Serbs a nation of migrants. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that the ‘migrations of the Serbs’ usually involved, in addition to Orthodox Slavs who identified or were identified as Serb, ethnically and even religiously different groups of peoples, including Albanians, Bulgarians and Vlachs. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, a polycentric, multi-layered pre-modern Serb identity emerged, fostered by the Orthodox church and oral tradition. Similar patterns may be observed elsewhere, for example, in the case of Bulgarians, Greeks and Romanians.

The nineteenth-century tradition of anti-Ottoman resistance, which anticipated the much better-known Greek revolution, was one of the reasons why Serbia, alone among the future component parts of Yugoslavia, except for tiny Montenegro, enjoyed political independence in the nineteenth century. At the same time, democratic institutions, developed on the French and Belgian models, set Serbia apart from the rest of the South Slav political space, however limited and problematic nineteenth-century Serbia’s democracy had been. The domination of the People’s Radical Party in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has led

some authors to conclude that Serbia had already then become a one-party state; but such authors seemingly ignore political conflicts between the Radicals, Liberals and Progressives, and between the Radicals, the monarchy and the military, not to mention a rather remarkable freedom of press in Serbia at the time. During the interwar Yugoslav period, there existed a greater political plurality among Serbs than any other Yugoslav group. The Serbs, it might be further argued, also offered the strongest and most sustained democratic opposition to King Aleksandar's dictatorship, which at the same time relied on the Serb political and military support.

As previously mentioned, the Serbs suffered enormous casualties in the two World Wars. Without considering these traumas, one cannot fully understand the modern Serb nationalism. For this reason, it is not easy to draw a direct line between the early twentieth century and contemporary Serb nationalism, as has been done in some centenary-driven histories of the First World War. Early twentieth-century Serbia experienced both economic and political sanctions (as discussed later on), and wars against its neighbours over contested territories it claimed – on equally dubious historical and ethnic grounds as its neighbours. Although the contexts were entirely different, and separated by more than mere passage of time, it is indeed tempting to suggest that these events anticipated Serbia's predicament of the late twentieth century. In the early 1990s, Serbia came under international sanctions because of its role in the war in Bosnia; at the end of the decade, NATO intervened militarily against Belgrade over its treatment of Kosovo Albanians. A century earlier, Serbia had also become involved in Bosnia. Following the assassination in Sarajevo of the heir to the Habsburg throne on 28 June 1914 by a Young Bosnian student, Austria-Hungary decided to finally eliminate the threat it believed the Serbian and South Slav nationalisms posed to it. However, even the most radical Serbian nationalist of a century ago was in favour of political unification with other South Slavs;

by contrast, modern Serbian nationalism is characterized by its rejection of Yugoslavia [literally: the land of South Slavs] and Yugoslavism.

The Serbs' geographic dispersion, not entirely reversed by the twentieth century wars, throughout former Yugoslavia is another legacy of history and another key component of the modern Serbian identity. After the Second World War, when Yugoslavia reemerged as a communist-led federation, Serbia was the only Yugoslav republic that was federalized as well, while a large number of Serbs lived in other Yugoslav republics. Alone among the federal republics, Serbia included two autonomous provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina). It might be argued that there was a strong case for creating autonomous provinces elsewhere, specifically in Croatia and Macedonia, and perhaps in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well.

With the secession of Kosovo, Serbia is also the only former Yugoslav republic that has disintegrated following the break-up of Yugoslavia. During the 1990s wars, Bosnia and Croatia temporarily disintegrated as well, with the secession of Serb entities in these two republics, but eventually re-integrated (albeit partially in the case of Bosnia, whose Serb entity enjoys a wide autonomy). All this was achieved and may have been only possible with outside support.

Therefore, some historical developments are specific to Serbia, but it is too simplistic to speak of a Serbian *Sonderweg*, a single path and inevitable outcomes in the history of Serbia. The existing generalizations about Serbia are not necessarily based on any real understanding of the country's complex history and ignore an incredibly heterogenous society. For example, during the 1990s, Belgrade was both the centre of the most destructive nationalism in former-Yugoslavia and arguably the most cosmopolitan city in the region. Bosnian, Croatian, Macedonian and Slovenian music were regularly aired on radio and TV channels, including those owned by the state. A number of Sarajevo's most talented artists such as Muslim-Serb film director Emir Kusturica, Croat-Serb

musician Goran Bregović and Yugoslavia's biggest pop star Zdravko Čolić, a Bosnian Serb, moved to or spent significant periods of time in the Serbian capital after the war in Bosnia broke out in Spring 1992. They have been criticized, some more than others, for abandoning their own city, which for three and a half years was exposed to sustained bombardment from Bosnian Serb forces but remain popular regionally and internationally. Despite tensions, Serbia's sizeable Muslim Slav community continues to live in the Sandžak region (in Raška, the nucleus of the medieval Serbian state), while further north, Vojvodina is home to significant Roman Catholic Hungarian, Croat and Slovak communities.

Even after Kosovo's secession in 2008, Serbia remains one of the most multi-ethnic states in the Balkans. The tradition of religious coexistence in the Balkans is usually, and rightly, associated with Sarajevo and Bosnia-Herzegovina more generally. Less well known is a similar tradition in Serbia. For example, the Holy Archangel Orthodox Church and the seat of the Serbian Orthodox patriarchate in Belgrade are in the same street as the Jewish community centre, and just a few hundred meters away from the Synagogue and nearby the Belgrade Mosque. The thirteenth-century Mileševa monastery in south-western Serbia is within a walking distance from a sixteenth-century Ottoman Mosque that holds one of the oldest copies of the Quran in the Balkans.

There is no typical Serbian food, there is no specific Serbian look, and there is no uniquely Serbian modern architecture – which makes Serbia a rather typical European country. Yet, in common with the rest of the Balkans, a rich historical legacy survives, despite the wars and destruction that are usually associated with the region. A visitor to Serbia would be able to see Orthodox monasteries, Roman Catholic cathedrals, Ottoman-era mosques and Ashkenazim and Sephardim synagogues. They would be able to enjoy the Hungarian secessionist architecture in Subotica, a mix of Central European architecture (built in the late nineteenth

century to ‘Europeanize’ the city by replacing Ottoman-era buildings) and socialist-era brutalism in Belgrade, and the somewhat chaotic charm of Niš and Pirot or the Oriental feel of Novi Pazar.

No Serbian meal begins without *meze*, a set of starters/tapas style dishes that typically include feta-like cheese, *kajmak* (clotted cheese spread), *ajvar* (a dip made up of roasted peppers, and, in some variations, aubergine), *pršuta* (prosciutto) and *proja* (corn bread), *lepinja* or *pogača* (local versions of flat bread and focaccia, respectively). Boiled or fried eggs, cheese, *kajmak*, *pršuta* or *slanina* (bacon) are traditionally eaten for breakfast, as are *kačamak* (maize porridge) and *popara* (bread porridge). Fresh and dried fruit is another essential part of the regional diet. In recent years, Serbia has become one of the world’s greatest producers and exporters of raspberry, with 80–100,000 tonnes exported annually. *Šljivovica*, *loza*, *dunjevača* and *viljemovka* (plum-, grape-, quince-, apple brandy, often home-made and collectively known as *rakija*) are drunk as both aperitif and digestif – sometimes during breakfast time, but more commonly later in the day or evening. There is a long tradition of wine making, revived in recent years, especially in eastern and central Serbia and in Vojvodina. Local breweries were first opened in the nineteenth century, by Bohemian beer makers. Beer goes well with Serbian meat-rich diet. Probably the most popular dish is *ćevapčići* (lit. little kebabs), grilled minced meat sausage-like food similar to Turkish kebabs; a burger version is called *pljeskavica*. Other types of grilled meat, usually pork, beef and chicken, are also popular, as is *pečenje* – roast pork, lamb and veal. Chicken, turkey and duck are traditionally eaten as well. Popular dishes also include *musaka* (Serbia’s version of the better-known Greek dish) and *sarma* (rice and minced-meat-filled cabbage leaves). Meat and meat-based dishes have not always been consumed as regularly as today, because they used to be unaffordable for most people. Rather like in the case of Latin American countries, the Serb traditional diet has consisted of protein-rich beans and corn. The former may be said to have been

Serbia's national food, offered in a variety of ways, most commonly as *prebranac* (baked beans) and *pasulj* (a thick bean soup), both of which come in a vegetarian version or served with bacon or sausage. The 'Serbian bean soup' is a popular dish across former-Yugoslavia and in Austria and Germany, countries with large Serbian and former-Yugoslav émigré communities. Other traditional food includes *gibanica* (cheese-filled pastry) and *burek* (similar to the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern varieties), usually accompanied by *jogurt* (a slightly thicker type of Turkish and Middle Eastern *ayran*). These and similar dishes may be found throughout the Balkans and are part of the region's Ottoman and in some cases Byzantine-Greek and Venetian-Dalmatian legacy and influences.

However, there is also a strong Central European influence on Serbians' diet. Widely eaten pork or veal *šnicle* are sometimes served rolled, breaded and filled with *kajmak*; this type of schnitzel is named, for reasons not entirely clear, after Karadjordje, the leader of the 1804 Uprising. Other common dishes include Hungarian-style *gulaš* (goulash) and *paprikaš* (paprikash). For a country rich in rivers, fish is not as central as red meat and poultry to the Serbs' diet, but fish soup and *pohovana riba* (fried white fish in batter) are popular and typically eaten on Orthodox fast days.

Serbia is home to excellent *kafanas* (traditional restaurants, some of which serve sophisticated, local version of *nouvelle cuisine*), which often have live music bands. There is a strong café culture. Serbs of all ages love to spend hours in Central European-looking cafes drinking Italian coffee or *turska kafa*. Unlike Bosnians and Greeks, many Serbs continue to call the Turkish coffee by its original name, though in recent years there has been a trend of using a neutral name such as 'brewed' coffee – probably the final stage of de-Ottomanization of Serbia that started in the nineteenth century, as discussed later in the book. Italian restaurants and fast-food kiosks selling (sometimes excellent) pizza and pasta may be found throughout the country, while Chinese/Asian fast

food has also become popular. A recent phenomenon is a greater choice for vegetarians and vegans in Serbia's restaurants, though meat-based offerings continue to dominate.

The historic hotel 'Moskva' in Belgrade, where our imaginary visitor to Serbia might have stayed, symbolizes the country's rich and complex past particularly well. Its Central European appearance today in fact owes much to the St Petersburg architecture (despite its name). Among other delicacies, the hotel café sells the *Moskva šnit* (*Schnitte*), an Austrian-Hungarian-style cake often consumed by Belgraders after servings of *ćevapčići* or *sarma* in one of the city's many *kafanas*. The hotel is located in the central Belgrade square *Terazije* (a word of Ottoman Turkish origin) and is reached via the Balkanska Street when approached from the main bus and – until recently – train stations. This run-down uphill street preserves an Oriental feel, due to the presence of the city's last surviving craftsmen. It includes an impromptu flea market where local Roma and Middle Eastern migrants sell miscellaneous items that somehow, improbably, seem to find their buyers. Gavrilo Princip and other Young Bosnians lived in this neighbourhood before they made their last journey back home, several weeks before the 1914 Sarajevo assassination. A monument to Princip – unveiled on 28 June 2015 – stands in this part of the city. The Terazije Square also leads to the pedestrianized Knez Mihailova Street, whose early twentieth-century European architecture and numerous cafes bring Parisian and Viennese flavours to the city. This fashionable street serves as the Belgrade's promenade and connects the Terazije Square with the Ottoman-era Kalemegdan park and fortress.

When Is Serbia?

There can be no continuity of nation, state and even territory between medieval polities associated with Serbs and the modern Serbian state. For most of the timeframe this book covers, no country called Serbia existed. This is a common problem facing

a historian writing a 'national' history. Authors of synthetic histories of Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece and Romania, for example, face similar challenges. As do historians of Italy and Germany, two major European countries that were created in the nineteenth century, and which have long, complex and often controversial histories.

My position is presentist by default, but at the same time I try to not read history backwards. I have written a national history in an era in which historians have rightly challenged the national framework and sought to study the past in transnational and global contexts, or to focus on local, micro and personal histories. Writing this book, I have become even more convinced that this is the only right approach to studying the past. History of Serbia and of the Serbs cannot be understood without understanding broader regional and European contexts. At the same time, writing a critical national history remains important, and not least because the history of Serbia is, in my view, frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted, due to presentist simplifications or ignorance. Moreover, nation states arguably continue to offer the dominant form of political organization in the modern world. Their monopoly over territorial rule was reasserted and grew stronger during the 'migrant crisis' of 2015 and especially the Covid-19 pandemic, paradoxically as a result of two very global crises.

It is sometimes said that each generation writes its own histories. If so, mine was conceived, researched and written during the 1914–18 centenary commemorations, the anxiety caused by the 'migrant crisis' and finally the Covid-19 pandemic. The developments of the recent years have shaped my thinking about the past, both consciously and unconsciously, making this book different from previous histories of Serbia. The book stands out in three other respects. First, it is the most complete single-volume history of Serbia, with due consideration given to medieval and early modern periods – most similar books tend to start around 1800, with the important exception of Sima M. Ćirković's history

of the Serbs, which however focuses on pre-modern developments. Second, I place Serbia in wider regional and European context. Finally, unlike most other similar works, I have tried to move beyond the history of high politics and diplomatic relations, providing the reader a sense of how some of the events described impacted individuals, both the elites and the 'ordinary' people. All this, I believe, makes this book unique among the existing histories of Serbia in any language.

My perspective has been also influenced by the wars of the 1990s, though perhaps less so than in the case of my eminent predecessors Ćirković, Stevan K. Pavlowitch and Holm Sundhaussen, whose histories of Serbia appeared during the first decade of the century. My book builds on their work, together with earlier relevant studies, from Leopold Ranke's pioneering history of the 'Serbian revolution', Slobodan Jovanović's still unmatched work on nineteenth-century Serbia, Andrej Mitrović's studies on early twentieth-century history, through Traian Stoianovich's *histoire totale* and Michael B. Petrovich's classic two-volume textbook on Serbia between 1804 and 1918, to a monumental, multi-volume *History of the Serbian People*, written (in Serbian) in the 1980s by crème-de la crème of Serbia's historiography.²⁸

The reader is presented with my own interpretation of the history of Serbia and Serbs. This is not the definitive account of the Serbian history – no such thing is possible anyway – but it covers a full span of Serbia's known history, from the sixth century Slav migrations to the present day. The reader should approach the book as a critical synthesis, a mix of analysis and narrative, rather than an encyclopaedia or a chronologically presented list of facts. Similarly, images included in the book are meant to illustrate, not cover all key events and personalities associated with the Serb history. I hope that the reader will be able to learn something new,

²⁸ Full references are provided in footnotes that follow and in the Further Reading.

wish to know more and rethink what they had known about Serbia, even when they may not agree with my analysis, focus and direction. Equally, I have written a book that should be easily accessible even to readers with no prior knowledge of Serbian history.

The book traces key developments surrounding medieval and modern polities associated with the Serbs. It is a history of states, institutions and societies that Serbs have helped build and in which they have lived, almost always together with others. While researching and writing the book, I did not consciously seek to unearth common themes and threads that would hold the narrative together. However, several of these may be identified, including migrations; Serbia's relations with neighbouring empires and peoples; Serbia as a society formed in borderlands and peripheries of larger territorial entities (Byzantine, Ottoman and Habsburg empires, the Iron Curtain, the EU); the polycentricity of Serbia (i.e. more than one Serb centre has existed through history); and a surprising vitality of Serb identity, which in different incarnations through centuries has shown an ability to survive through reinvention.

Whenever appropriate, analysis informs narrative and new interpretations challenging conventional wisdoms are offered. The modern period is arguably more relevant for understanding Serbia's current predicament and we have far more sources about it than about medieval and early modern history. As a historian of the modern era by training, my focus should not be surprising, but the book is much less modern-centric than I had initially envisaged it to be. While researching and writing – numerous versions of each chapter – I kept being 'pushed' back to more distant pasts, to find answers and explanations for later events. In the end I gave up, persuaded that a history of Serbia, however concise, should not be merely a history of the modern period.

Studying medieval and early modern eras has been challenging and rewarding in equal measure, but it has also been necessary. States associated with Serbs, or at least Serb rulers, existed through the Middle Ages, while Serbs and Serbianized or Serb-identifying

populations played an important role in the Early Modern history of East-Central and South-Eastern Europe, as one of the peoples living in the Habsburg–Ottoman–Venetian borderlands. Much of our understanding of Serbia's distant past is steeped in nineteenth- and twentieth-century romantic interpretations of pre-modern history. By studying the earlier history, I am not suggesting an uninterrupted continuity between the medieval and modern Serbias; on the contrary, doing so has I hope enabled me to challenge more convincingly the 'continuity thesis' and in the process interrogate and rethink the national framework.

To try to understand why Serbia is where it is today, it became necessary to start at the 'beginning', or at least 'the beginning' about which speculation is possible from what survives of the sources. This allows us to neatly begin our journey with the migration of the Serbs to the Balkans (from an unknown location in East-Central or North-Eastern Europe), which probably occurred in the seventh century as part of wider Slav movements, and to round it up with the current migrant *crises* – one, better known, concerning Middle Eastern, Asian and African refugees passing through Serbia *en route* to western Europe; another one caused by a large number of Serbs emigrating to more promising west European and north American destinations, which was only temporarily halted by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The origin, migration and formation of the earliest polities associated with the Serbs in the ninth and tenth centuries inform much of Chapter 1. The following chapter then looks at the rise and fall of the Serb kingdom of Raška within and against the Byzantine imperial framework starting in the late twelfth century, when Grand *Župan* Nemanja and his sons laid the foundations of a powerful regional dynasty and a state with its own political and religious institutions.²⁹ Medieval Serb rulers first sought to

²⁹ The rulers of Raška were known, between the mid-twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, as grand *župans* – the overall leaders among *župans*,

'enter' the Byzantine empire and then, in the fourteenth century, to replace it. The fall of the short-lived Serb-Greek empire of Stefan Dušan (king 1335–46, emperor 1346–55) had begun even before the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans gained pace in the late fourteenth century. The Lazarević-Branković despotate, as the most important successor state of Dušan's empire, lasted for 70 years after the Ottoman victory against a Serb-led coalition at Kosovo in 1389. Post-Kosovo Serbia even prospered politically, culturally and economically for a while, despite being squeezed between the Ottomans from the south, Hungary from the north and Bosnia from the west. Smederevo, Serbia's last medieval capital, was finally conquered by the Ottomans in 1459, six years after the fall of Constantinople.

Keeping with the 'empire' theme, Chapter 3 discusses the Serb society under the Ottomans, and large-scale Serb migrations into Hungary and the Habsburg empire as well as towards Venetian-held Dalmatia, between the sixteenth and late eighteenth centuries. During this period, two 'Serbias' may be said to have emerged along the Ottoman–Habsburg imperial border, one centred around the Velika Morava valley south of Belgrade, and another north of the Danube, in the lower Pannonian basin of then southern Hungary. Chapters 4 and 5 trace the emergence of the modern Serbian state and nation during the long nineteenth century. Serbia was formed almost by accident, following an uprising in the Belgrade pashalik (a popular name for the sanjak of Smederevo), which began as a Porte-supported rebellion of Christian peasants and merchants against the Janissary misrule. The Great Powers' rivalry, and Serbia's aspirations towards and links with large Serb and other South Slav communities in its

who governed over smaller territories called *župas*, first mentioned in Emperor Constantine's *De Administrando Imperio*. This word of uncertain origin survives as a toponym and as a surname (e.g. Županič, Župančič, Župan, Župić) across former-Yugoslavia. Župa has also been used to describe administrative and ecclesiastical territorial units in Bulgaria, former-Yugoslavia, the Czech and Slovak lands and Poland.

neighbourhood, eventually led to the recognition of an independent principality in 1878 (kingdom in 1882). This event marked the end of the Ottoman rule, but subsequent wars with the Ottoman (1912) and Austro-Hungarian (1914–18) empires would have profound consequences well beyond the region. Chapter 6 looks at Serbia in the First World War, the formation, and short life, of the interwar Yugoslav kingdom, and the Second World War. Serbia and Serbs emerged from the war, in which they formed two rival resistance movements, experienced collaboration, civil war and genocide to become one of six Yugoslav federal republics in 1945, as discussed in Chapter 7. The new socialist Yugoslavia defined itself in opposition to the Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia of the interwar period. Yet, the ‘Yugoslav Serbia’, and Serbs, as the largest and most regionally dispersed of the Yugoslav nations, represented the core of Tito’s socialist federation. At the same time, Serbia was the only Yugoslav republic that itself was federalized, with the establishment of the provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo. The final Yugoslav crisis began as a constitutional crisis, as Serbia’s leadership attempted to revise the terms of Serbia’s participation in the Yugoslav federation. The last chapter traces the violent break-up of Yugoslavia over the ‘Serbian Question’, and Serbia’s tribulations during the ‘dark’ 1990s, when Serbs tragically sought to ‘right the wrongs’ of the past, through the wars in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo. The chapter concludes by looking at the painfully slow transition of the post-Milošević years, and a return to populism, in line with similar developments elsewhere in the world, during the past decade, after a decade-long democratic reform. At the time of finishing the book, Serbia, like the rest of the world, was dealing with the extraordinary challenge posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. As the book was going to print, the war in Ukraine broke out. The future history of Serbia, while unpredictable, will be inevitably shaped by these experiences and the world that emerges out of them.