

From Epic to Memic

Balkan National Heroes and Villains across Time, Space, and Genres

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ABSTRACT

Heroes and villains are universal archetypes that, until the fragmented and chaotic nineteenth century, were expressions of the same collective fears and desires: fear of extinction, striving for survival and perpetuation, and expression of collective identity. Despite the universal nature of these functions, different geographical and temporal circumstances have affected the processes of hero and villain construction. Using various genres (epic folk poetry, folklorized art, and internet images), this study traces contingencies and continuities in the hero and villain creation processes in four different countries: North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia.

KEYWORDS

former Yugoslavia, national heroes and villains, epic poetry, folklorized art, internet memes

IZVLEČEK

Junaki in zlobneži so univerzalni arhetipi, ki so se vse do fragmentiranega in kaotičnega 21. stoletja navezovali na iste kolektivne strahove in želje, na strah pred uničenjem in prizadevanje po preživetju, trajanje in kolektivno identiteto. Čeprav so junaki in zlobneži glede na svoje funkcije univerzalni, so različne geografske in časovne okoliščine vplivale na proces njihovega izoblikovanja. Pričujoča študija na podlagi različnih žanrov (epška ljudska poezija, folklorizirana umetnost in internetne podobe) išče naključne okoliščine in kontinuitete v izoblikovanju teh dveh tipov v štirih državah: Sloveniji, Hrvaški, Severni Makedoniji in Srbiji.

KLJUČNE BESEDE

nekdanja Jugoslavija, narodni junaki in zlobneži, epška poezija, folklorizirana umetnost, internetni meme

Introduction¹

Heroes are universal embodiments of people's basic needs and anxieties related to the material, social, and political existence of a community. They protect the land and its livelihood, establish and maintain social cohesion and order,² perpetuate social values and ideals, and serve as symbols of the

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² In this sense, heroization is the attempt to overcome death: material, social, and political

community and building blocks of its collective identity.³ Given that the focus of this study is national identity and considering that each nationhood is a unique result of a specific net of sociopolitical and historical circumstances, the initial assumption is that national hero systems reflect these idiosyncratic circumstances. Moreover, considering that hero systems are produced through various semiotic patterns (genres in particular) specific to different periods of time, this study claims that there is a strong link between the semiotic production of heroes and villains (the manners in which historical figures are glorified and/or vilified) and the time in which the hero systems are produced.

In this respect, the study has two objectives: a) to account for differences in national hero systems related to the specifics of the underlying sociopolitical and historical circumstances of the national context, and b) to identify and analyze changes in hero systems related to the temporal context of their production. To do so, it asks the following questions: a) How do the content and manners of glorification and/or vilification relate to specific national context(s) and differ from one another? and b) How has time, seen from the perspective of changing social mores and values, new media, and genres of communication, affected change in hero and villain systems?

To trace variations in the production of national heroes and villains and their contingency on geographic and temporal factors, the study analyzes material from several genres and from three different periods, collected from four national contexts: Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and North Macedonia. The three periods considered are the pre-nation period between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries, the nation-formation period of the nineteenth century, and the post-1991 sovereign nationhood period. The samples are representative of folk genres popular in these periods: epic poetry from the fourteenth to nineteenth century, and the computer-generated images and memes produced in the twenty-first century.

National heroes through times and genres

Although true national heroes emerged in the turbulent nineteenth century, one should not dismiss the fact that nationally important and celebrated figures such as King Matthias (in Slovenia, Sl. *Kralj Matjaž*), General Nikola Zrinski (in Croatia), Tsar Lazar (in Serbia), and King Marko (in North Macedonia),

alike. See Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 5 and 11–24; Asch, *The Hero in the Early Modern Period and Beyond*, p. 5.

³ Povedák, *From Heroes to Celebrities*, p. 13.

emerging as early as the fourteenth century, form a significant stratum of the national identity that was established and institutionalized much later. They may not be the founding fathers of the modern nations, but, through folklore and epic poetry in particular, they were made inseparable from the nations' memories, history, and nationhood,⁴ hand in hand with nineteenth- and twentieth-century national heroes such as France Prešeren,⁵ Josip Jelačić, Đorđe Petrović (a.k.a. Karađorđe), and Goce Delčev.

The nationalism that arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was built upon these figures had to be submerged in 1945 for the greater good of the newly formed supranational Yugoslav identity, ideologically centered on a single figure: Josip Broz Tito. This was an untroubled period for heroization because there was one figure, one hero – and that was Tito. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the reemergence of the nation states, the political pluralization of these countries affected the processes of hero creation. Although reinvented national figures continued to be revered, new national heroes (or hero-like figures) emerged in the face of the new national leaders, the politicians, who, in a similar manner to old heroes, promised economic, political, and cultural salvation and perpetuation of the nation. However, the absence of a single unifying leader, political pluralization, and the formation of politically divergent and divided audiences (conservatives, democrats, socialists, etc.) brought forth conflicting visions of the nation, and consequently conflicting hero systems. Moreover, the advent of the internet and new digital technologies allowed tech-savvy individuals to assume a role like that of medieval folk singers, producing new genres of glorification and vilification such as cropped images and internet memes. It is this path from the lofty epic language about the medieval king to the ridiculing or cynical vernacular of the meme that this study presents, while also accounting for

⁴ In this respect, an interesting and illustrative case is Slovenia, where, in the absence of military heroes and actual historical figures, literary and folk characters such as King Matthias, Peter Klepec, and Martin Krpan were elevated through the writings of Ivan Cankar, France Bevk, and Ferdo Kozak to the status of national heroes. Simoniti, *Fanfare nasilja*, p. 76; Moric, Peter Klepec, p. 215.

⁵ Although Prešeren is more of a cultural hero, rather than a martial or national hero in the strict sense – as are Josip Jelačić, Đorđe Petrović, and Goce Delčev, all represented as freedom fighters – Prešeren and other Slovenian culture heroes are taken as subjects of analysis to illustrate the difference in the hero systems based on different sociohistorical circumstances. Such figures may not be revered as epic heroes per se, but they nonetheless occupy a significant position in the nation's history, memory, consciousness, and perception of itself.

geographical variations in hero systems, thus adding to the research on the changing nature of heroes, herodom, and hero worship.⁶

The premise is based on a previous study that traced continuities and changes in hero systems.⁷ Focusing on the individual case of North Macedonia, that study pointed out that heroization did not undergo major changes, whereas vilification, once elaborate and respectful, has degraded into ad hominem insults. Moving beyond that previous effort, this study first expands the scope by adding material from four national contexts to trace spatial variations. At the same time, it offers a diachronic account of the changing nature of heroization and vilification.

Data, methods, and objectives

To achieve these objectives, three data corpuses were collected from the internet, each corresponding to one of the periods under consideration and consisting of material from the four national contexts. The data sets consist of epic folk poems and stories depicting fourteenth- to nineteenth-century heroes and villains, folklorized music portraying nineteenth-century national heroes, and twenty-first-century internet memes representing political leaders. The first corpus (epic folk poems) was collected by using the names of fourteenth- to nineteenth-century heroes as keywords, first looking into the national e-libraries (the “dlibs”) of the four countries in order to identify relevant collections and anthologies of folk poems. A corpus of sixteen volumes with eighty-six poems of interest was created, and then further narrowed to twenty-four, using only materials that were readily available on the internet. The folklorized music pieces were gathered from YouTube by using the names of nineteenth-century heroes for a keyword search. The search resulted in eleven videos, two about Josip Jelačić, four about Đorđe Petrović, and five about Goce Delčev.⁸ All the material used in the analysis was translated by the researcher.

Finally, memes were gathered from Google Images by using the names of modern-day politicians as keywords. That search led to other pages, such as Facebook pages, news portals, and so on as sources of material. The initial number of images was 101. The capacity in which politicians were represented

⁶ Kendrick, *The Heroic Ideal*, pp. 2–3.

⁷ Takovski and Muhić, *When the Old Meets the New*, pp. 59–108.

⁸ Unfortunately, I was unable to identify any Slovenian samples of folklorized music celebrating national heroes.

was used to organize the data, and several categories were created, facilitating the choice of nineteen pieces for the final analysis.

Studying heroes, genres, and language

Epic heroes and villains

The study of heroes is inseparable from the genres they were constructed through, such as myths, epic poems, folktales, historical narratives, national anthems, and even memes. Hence, studying these genres provides significant insight into the hero and villain construction processes. The proto-genres of hero construction, those of myth and epic, have been analyzed from various theoretical standpoints such as the functions of traditional stories,⁹ and the manners in which myths validate and support social institutions,¹⁰ reproduce social order, and maintain social control.¹¹ Regardless of the analytical approach, there is broad consensus that mythic heroes are characters that stood out in many respects, such as their preannounced birth, status of demigods, super-human strength, and so on. Their mission is to set out on a journey, face and successfully overcome dangers, and return to society, transfigured and able to teach the lesson of life renewed.¹² Other researchers highlight this to be the vital function of the hero: to face death and danger in order to protect the society and restore peace,¹³ which are acts for which the hero is worshipped and turned into a collective symbol. In this respect, heroization through hero narratives, as noted by May, is important because “it reflects our sense of identity, making the hero a symbol of such identity.”¹⁴ Following the same line of logic, villains are generally a threat, obstacle, or danger to the communal wellbeing that jeopardize the material and social existence and order.

Given their importance, it is not surprising that the language used to construct heroes is marked by a lofty, dignified style filled with elaborate descriptions, winged words, hyperboles, similes, and ornamental epithets combined with names.¹⁵ Odysseus is “shining,” “godlike,” “great-hearted,” and “like Zeus in counsel.”¹⁶ Villains, on the other hand, are described with

⁹ *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (ed. Bremmer), pp. 6–7.

¹⁰ Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, pp. 1–13.

¹¹ Klapp, *Heroes, Villains and Fools*, pp. 56–62.

¹² Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

¹³ Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths*, pp.10–13; Leeming, *The World of Myth*, pp. 3–10; Raglan, *The Hero*, p. 120.

¹⁴ May, *The Cry for Myth*, p. 54.

¹⁵ Beye, *Ancient Epic Poetry*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

awe-inspiring attributes such as “ferocious,” “abominable,” “ghastly,” “flaming,” and “devouring monsters.” Although there is no specific language act that can be ascribed to villains, heroes are most often associated with words of thinking, making plans, proposals, and giving counsel¹⁷ manifested in a few genres, among which are prayer, lament, supplication, commanding, and insulting. The last is of special interest because it is not only a *modus operandi* in the praise and blame system within Homeric society,¹⁸ but intriguingly enough is the dominant principle of villain construction in the twenty-first century.

Folk heroes and villains

Although endowed with great strength and determination like the mythic heroes, folk heroes are not demigods with a preannounced birth. Instead, many of them were real historical figures that became fictionalized through folk genres such as tales, legends, poems, and so on. The heroes of particular interest to this study include King Matthias and Peter Klepec (Slovenia), Nikola Zrinski (Croatia), Tsar Lazar and Miloš Obilić (Serbia), and King Marko (North Macedonia).¹⁹ Although these figures are not national heroes *per se*, their later appropriation in nationhood discourses has been discussed,²⁰ especially in light of the idea that nationalism, under the influence of romanticism, has reached into folklore for the building blocks of the nation’s unifying myth, thus creating a necessary continuity in the process of history construction and the underpinning process of inventing tradition.²¹ Research in folklore, literary studies, and ethnology has examined the disparity and conflict between historical and fictional elements in texts about folk heroes²² such as King Matthias²³ or King Marko,²⁴ the representations of the demonized other, the Arab or its variant

¹⁷ Martin, *The Language of Heroes*, p. 43

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁹ It should be noted that some of these figures, such as King Marko and Peter Klepec, occur in the folk traditions of more than one country. Klepec, in particular, is part of both the Croatian and Slovenian traditions, and King Marko occurs in Serbian and Macedonian folklore on an equal footing.

²⁰ Moric and Perinić Lewis, *Petar Klepac / Peter Klepec / Pitr Kljpec*, pp. 135–137 and 150–153.

²¹ Hobsbawm, Introduction, pp. 6–7.

²² Деретић [Deretić], *Загонетка Марка Краљевућа [Zagonetka Marka Kraljevića]*, pp. 51–52; Димовска [Dimovska], *Фикционалниот Наспрема Историскиот Крале Марко [Fikcionalnost nasprema istoriskit Krale Marko]*, pp. 79–92.

²³ Šmitek, *Kralj Matjaž*, pp. 127–140.

²⁴ Djurić, *Prince Marko in Epic Poetry*, pp. 315–330; Penušliski, *Macedonian Local Traditions*, pp. 331–340.

the Turk,²⁵ the classification of folk epic poems into cycles,²⁶ and narrative patterns and versification in oral folk poetry.²⁷

This research has revealed much about the poetic and mythic structuring of folk literature and the fictionalized presentations of heroes and anti-heroes, but very little about the exact manners in which these figures were semiotically constructed, and the social processes of popular heroization and vilification. Similar observations can be made about the nation-formation heroes of the nineteenth century, praised through various genres including history books, memorial speeches, national anthems, and monumental architecture, and studied by history, political science, and sociology, paying less attention to the linguistic, semiotic, and discursive modes of construction.

National heroes, modern-day politicians, and popular representations

National heroes

A plethora of national heroes emerged in the former Yugoslav countries in the nation-formation period of the nineteenth century. Figures such as France Prešeren (Slovenia), Ljudevit Gaj and Josip Jelačić (Croatia), Đorđe Petrović (Serbia), and Goce Delčev (North Macedonia) all contributed to the national movements and independence, setting the foundations of modern nationhood. Various genres such as poems, stories, national anthems, popular songs, cinema, literature, architecture, and the linguistic landscape praise their roles and significance in national identity discourses, and allow the nation to imagine and perpetuate itself.²⁸ Theories of nationalism have also recognized their role and significance in national discourses and in creating the continuity necessary for perpetuating national identity and unity,²⁹ while at the same time recognizing the importance of folklore and folklorized art in constructing heroes and imagining a nation.

²⁵ Božović, *Arapi u usmenoj narodnoj pesmi*; Стојановиќ [Stojanović], *Арапот во Македонската Народна Книжевност* [Arapot vo makedonskata narodna kniževnost], pp. 195–211; Mlakar, *Krvoločni osvajači in hudičevi vojaki*, pp. 221–242.

²⁶ Banašević, *Ciklus Marka Kraljevića*; Čubelić, *Sustav, raspon i primjeri*, pp. 125–205; Grgec, *Ciklus narodnih pjesama o hrvatskim banovima*, pp. 257–274; Grafenauer, *Hrvatske inačice praobrazcu balade*, pp. 241–272.

²⁷ Banov, *Naracija o junaštvu*, pp. 111–133.

²⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

²⁹ *The Invention of Tradition* (ed. Hobsbawn and Ranger).

Modern-day politicians and means of representation

The dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991 affected the reemergence of previously subjugated historical figures, and the emergence of new political leaders that led the fight for national independence. Figures such as Rudolf Maister in Slovenia,³⁰ Franjo Tuđman in Croatia,³¹ and Slobodan Milošević and Draža Mihajlović in Serbia,³² but also more radical figures such as the Serbian paramilitary leader Željko Ražnatović (a.k.a. Arkan), or Croatia's General Ante Gotovina, convicted at The Hague,³³ were dramatically politicized and received mixed reception and ambivalent social judgement, being heroes and independence fighters for some, but dictators or anti-heroes for others.³⁴ Although the post-1991 political leaders and hero celebrities are not heroes in epic sense of the term,³⁵ their popular reception, the manner in which they are constructed, and the fact that they have also served as unifying symbols of the community (being a powerful mobilizing tool) make them heroic figures no less than their glorious predecessors.

Mass media have played a seminal role in constructing the praise and blame system surrounding these figures. Television in particular has acted as a key storytelling medium relaying archetypal images of heroes and villains alike. The processes of heroization and vilification are processes, Klapp argues,³⁶ in which confusing or unknown factors are simplified by ascription to one great man and complex issues are personified as conflicts between champions and villains. Heroes are praised for achievement, held up as an example, and converted into a cherished collective symbol, whereas villains are amoral, symbols of aggression, traitors, or persecutors.³⁷ With the advent of the internet, and as a consequence the emergence of the participatory culture,³⁸ the processes

³⁰ Velikonja, *Contested Heroes*, pp. 1–17.

³¹ Belaj and Alempijević, *Remembering “the Father of the Contemporary State,”* pp. 79–91.

³² Sindbæk, *The Fall and Rise of a National Hero*, pp. 47–59.

³³ Pletenac, *From Conviction to Heroism*, pp. 111–123.

³⁴ The ambiguous reception and production of heroes is also present as related to heroes such as Yugoslav King Alexander I (Špelec, Alexander I of Yugoslavia), Hungarian General Secretary Kádár (Povedák, “Survivor Heroes”), and Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito (Stevanović, Josip Broz Tito).

³⁵ The ambiguous character of modern political leaders is comprehensively discussed by the Hungarian scholar István Povedák, who identifies them as celebrities (from heroes to celebrities, yet shows how Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán receives no different a popular perception as a messiah and protector than the ancient and medieval folk heroes). Povedák, *One from Us, One for Us*, pp. 153–171.

³⁶ Klapp, *Heroes, Villains and Fools*, p. 61.

³⁷ Klapp, *Notes toward the Study of Vilification*, pp. 72.

³⁸ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.

of producing heroes and villains have been made accessible to anyone with minimum technological knowhow. One of the most popular internet genres of political expression is internet memes, whose composition reduces a complex political issue into in a brief, powerful, and effective statement that engages people. As such, they a perfectly viable instrument for producing the reductions so necessary to the mass-media production of heroes and villains as described by Klapp.

As forms of political participation, memes serve three distinct functions: those of persuasion, grassroots action, and political discussion.³⁹ The last one is facilitated by what Milner has termed as memes' "polyvocal" nature, referring to their potential to express multiple opinions.⁴⁰ In some national contexts, such as China, this potential is mobilized to challenge official (hegemonic) discourses, circumvent internet censorship, and allow free expression of political ideas.⁴¹ In other political circumstances, memes are a modern means of interparty dialogue⁴² that can engage audiences in political debate and participation⁴³ or can be used as dry, sardonic tools to ridicule or delegitimize an opponent.⁴⁴ Very rarely, memes can help construct and perpetuate a positive image of a politician.⁴⁵

Given the difference in the four political contexts, their common history, the post-1991 developments, the scope and strength of the interparty conflicts, and the general political apathy occurring in the four states with varying degrees, the memes produced can be taken as indicators of the social reception of politicians that tend to portray them more critically rather than serve as boosters of their image. To examine this diagnostic potential, I look into two aspects of memes, content and stance⁴⁶ – in other words, who is represented and how.

Data presentation

To help understand the data, each of the three subsections opens with a short overview of the socio-historical circumstances underpinning the hero

³⁹ Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, p. 110.

⁴⁰ Milner, *Pop Polyvocality*, pp. 2362–2363.

⁴¹ Li, *Parody and Resistance*, pp. 71–88; Nooney et al., *Batman, Pandaman and the Blind Man*, pp. 359–375.

⁴² Martínez-Rolán and Otero, *The Use of Memes*, pp. 150–156.

⁴³ Heiskanen, *Meme-ing Electoral Participation*.

⁴⁴ Ross and Rivers, *Digital Cultures*, pp. 1–11.

⁴⁵ Bebić and Volarevic, *Do Not Mess with a Meme*, pp. 43–56.

⁴⁶ Shifman, *Memes in a Digital World*, pp. 367.

systems. The data are given in tables to make geographical differences and similarities more visible.

Fourteenth–nineteenth centuries

The spread of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans was the most significant event in the fourteenth century. Although Slovenia was part of the Habsburg Empire, the Ottoman incursions caused the mobilization of Slovenian noblemen to fight against the Ottomans, a fact registered in Slovenian folklore even though it produced no heroes. Instead, historical figures such as Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus (1458–1490) popularly known as *Kralj Matjaž*, and the fictional figure Peter Klepec were folklorized and promoted as national heroes. Croatia, also part of the Habsburg Monarchy (1527–1918), enjoyed greater autonomy and offered a significant contribution to the Habsburg fight against the Turks. This promoted Nikola Šubić Zrinski, a nobleman and general that lost his life at the Battle of Sziget, into a national hero materialized in Croatian folklore.

Around the same time, the Serbian kingdom had its golden age, which gradually ceased to exist with the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 and the Ottomans taking control of central Serbia in 1455. The battle of Kosovo became a historic and folkloristic platform for the heroization of noblemen such as Tsar Lazar of Serbia, Miloš Obilić, and Vuk Branković. The Battle of Maritsa (1371) between the Serbian nobleman Vukašin Mrnjavčević and his brother Despot Jovan Uglješa against the Turks had a significant impact on the territorial division of present-day North Macedonia and its epic folklore. After the defeat of the Serbian army, Vukašin's son King Marko inherited the small kingdom of Prilep (present-day North Macedonia) and became one of the most popular fictionalized characters in both Serbian and Macedonian folklore. In addition to these noblemen, the folklore of the Balkans has also sung about brave local fighters known as the Uskoks (literally, 'fugitives') and Haiduks (literally, 'bandits'), such as Ivo Senjanin (Croatia), Bajo Pivljanin, Dete Golomeshe, and *Bolen Dojčin* (North Macedonia), and Sluga Milutin, Mali Radojica, and Stari Vukadin (Serbia).

Given the historical significance of the spread of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, it is not surprising that many of the events depicted in medieval epic poetry, folk tales, and legends are about the kings, princes, rulers, and Haiduks or Uskoks, and their fight against the Turks. The antagonism between the rulers as the protectors of people and the terrifying, merciless, tax-collecting Turks was the structuring principle of the hero systems. Within this dichotomy, the most common literary motifs are fights, expression of courage, determination, and fearlessness, and verbal duels of self-praise intended to challenge the

opponent. Table 1 presents the heroes and the villains from each of the countries and the capacity in which they have been glorified or vilified.

Table 1: National heroes and villains from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries.

Hero	Capacity	Villain	Capacity
Country: Slovenia			
King Matthias (1443–1490)	Cunning, brave, intelligent, sleeping hero that will revive the nation	Turks	Savage, merciless, faithless, bloodthirsty, barbaric, burning down villages, dangerous invaders, threat to God-fearing civilized world
Peter Klepec	Feeble boy turned into super-powerful human fighting legions of Turks to protect his people	Turks	See above
Country: Croatia			
Nikola Šubić Zrinski (1508–1566)	Defender of people and Christianity; brave, fearless warrior	Turks	Threat, madmen, infidels, cowards
Country: Serbia			
Tsar Lazar (1329–1389)	Courage, determination, physical strength	Turks	Always in great number but not heroes, craftsmen and apprentices
Country: North Macedonia			
King Marko (1335–1395)	Great strength, courage, determination, but also ambiguous, short-tempered	Turks	Cursed, black demons

Although the Turks carried out only sporadic incursions into the Slovenian lands, their presence was registered and preserved in Slovenian folklore. In the absence of any other threat felt by the Slovenians, they were convenient actors to fill the position of the demonized other, depicted as barbaric invaders threatening the land and religion, which were protected by fictionalized figures such as King Matthias and Peter Klepec. Protection, both popular and religious, is also a common motif in poems about Nikola Šubić Zrinski, such as the one composed by his great-grandson Nikola VII Zrinski in 1647.⁴⁷ In it he describes Zrinski's final battle against the Ottomans in 1566. Some decades later (1684), Pavao Ritter Vitezović, a Croatian writer, published *Odiljenje Sigetsko* (*The*

⁴⁷ Zrinyi, *The Siege of Sziget*.

Siege of Sziget). That poem depicts Zrinski in his role as a notable warrior, a protector of the people and Christendom:

Never was there (in any place of the world)
A tomb worthier of tears
But here where a world wonder lies
A blossom of a warrior flower
Count Mikula Zrinski, the golden knight
Famous ban of the Slavs, Dalmatians, and Croats.⁴⁸

The image of Zrinski as a glorious warrior is juxtaposed to the denigrating depiction of the Turks, as in *Zrinović i Sulejman (Zrinović and Sulejman)*, written in the nineteenth century by Luka Ilić Oriovčanin:

The Ban fell, rest his soul, he fell at the hands of the Ottoman sultan, dead is the Sultan, so is the Ban, the Sultan out of grief, the Ban from a weapon, The sultan as a woman, Zrinović as a hero.⁴⁹

A similar dichotomy between the brave heroes and the cowardly Turks marks the Kosovo battle cycle of epic poems. The majority of the poems describe Serbian noblemen's unyielding determination and confidence to fight the non-heroic Turks, standing in sharp contrast with the brave, physically superior, strong Serbian men, as these lines from *Kosančić Ivan uhodi Turke (Kosančić Ivan Captures the Turks)* and *Tri dobra junaka (Three Good Heroes)* show:

We can fight with them,
And force them apart easily
Because their army is not of heroes
But old hodjas and pilgrims
Craftsman and young apprentices
Who have not seen a fight⁵⁰

and

Who is this hero
Who strikes but once with the sword
Sharp sword in his right hand
And cuts off twenty heads
It is *Banović Strahinja*.⁵¹

Falling outside of this black-and-white dichotomy, the figure of King

⁴⁸ Vitezović, *Odiljenje sigetsko*.

⁴⁹ Oriovčanin, *Zrinović i Sulejman*, taken from *Usmene epske pjesme I* (arr. Dukić).

⁵⁰ *Антологија народних јуначких песама [Antologija narodnih junačkih pesama]* (ed. Ђурић [Džurić]), *Косанчић Иван уходи Турке [Kosančić Ivan uhodi Turke]*, p. 272.

⁵¹ *Антологија народних јуначких песама [Antologija narodnih junačkih pesama]* (ed. Ђурић [Džurić]), *Три добра јунака [Tri dobra junaka]*, p. 278.

Marko from North Macedonia is portrayed ambiguously. On the one hand, he is endowed with great physical strength (he throws rocks and beats hundreds of Ottoman soldiers) like King Matthias, Peter Klepec, *Banović Strahinja*, and many others, but on the other hand he is a short-tempered, unyielding, capricious wine lover capable of committing crimes. The ambiguity is also present in Marko's relation with the Turks. He is a disobedient Ottoman subject that drinks wine for Ramadan and fights the Ottoman agas, while at the same time he is a loyal Ottoman vassal that addresses the Sultan as "my father," helps him in fights, and even protects his daughter from an Arab, constructed as the demonized other, a gluttonous, pleasure-driven criminal that, a threat to the community, as portrayed in the poem *Marko Krale i crna Arapina* (*King Marko and the Black Arab*):⁵²

Beneath the village, down at the fields
 There came the black Arab
 Demanding great gifts
 Nine kilograms of white wheat
 Nine furnaces of white bread
 Nine barren cows
 But also a lovely lass
 A little lass for a night kiss
 Kissing her all night
 In the dawn, bury her down.

The Arab symbolizes a threat to the biological existence of the people (depriving them of their food), and to their survival (kidnapping young girls threatens reproduction). Under such circumstances, both mythological reasoning and narrative structuring presuppose the existence of the hero to confront this villain and, by defeating him, to save the suffering people.

In summary, the heroes from before the nineteenth century were born out of conflict. Endowed with great physical strength, courage, confidence, determination, and no fear of death, they protect the lands and Christendom from the Turks – who are savage, ravaging, barbaric, and at times cowards.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries: The birth of nationalism

The leaders of the national movements occurring throughout Europe in the nineteenth century were historicized as the founding fathers of the nation and used as building blocks of national narratives discursively constructed through a variety of genres such as folklore, folklorized art, popular songs, history books, monuments, museum exhibitions, national anthems, political

⁵² *Јунак над јунаци* [*Junak nad junaci*] (ed. Бошковски [Boskovski]), *Марко Крале и црна Арапина* [*Marko Krale i crna Arapina*], pp. 55–60, translated by the author.

campaigns, and postcards. Their roles in the national movements (intellectual leaders or army generals), the specifics of the state transformations into independence, and the historical opponents (the Austrian or Ottoman Empire) all contributed to the rise of different hero types and forms of heroization.

In the nineteenth century, Slovenia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, witnessed the emergence of the movement United Slovenia (*Združena Slovenija*). The movement demanded the unification of all Slovenian-speaking territories into an autonomous Slovenian kingdom within the Austrian Empire, and recognition of the Slovenian language, one of the key foundations upon which Slovenian national consciousness was forged.⁵³ In circumstances of strong political allegiance to the Austrian emperor, Jezernik observes, national identity could only be built upon great, learned men⁵⁴ such as Valentin Vodnik (a poet), Janez Vesel (a poet), France Prešeren (a lawyer and poet), Janez Bleiweis (a publisher), and others that became the building blocks of Slovenian national identity praised and revered through history and schoolbooks, the built environment, the linguistic landscape, and public ceremonies.

Similarly to Slovenia, Croatia witnessed the emergence of two national movements underpinning the rise of Croatian nationalism. The Illyrian movement and the Croatian people's rebirth fought to create a Croatian national establishment in Austria-Hungary through linguistic and ethnic unity. Some of the notable young intellectuals involved include Ljudevit Gaj (a writer and philologist), and Janko Drašković, Ivan Mažuranić, and Petar Preradović (poets). A different type of engagement with nationalism and history was embodied by Josip Jelačić, who supported independence for Croatia from the Austrian throne but, due to the higher goal of Croatian independence, actively supported Austrian interests in opposing the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–1849. His struggle against the Magyarization of the country was glorified in Ognjeslav Utješinović Ostrožinski's 1866 poem *Uskrsnuće Jelačića bana* (*The Resurrection of Ban Jelačić*), which in 1906 inspired a certain "B. Županjac" to write the poem *Ustaj bane* (*Arise Count*), relying on Ostrožinski's earlier poem, which was turned into a popular piece of music in the twentieth century.⁵⁵

Unlike the other former Yugoslav Balkan countries, Serbia was the only one to gain independence in the nineteenth century, as early as 1817 following the First Serbian Uprising in 1804, led by Đorđe Petrović (a.k.a. Karađorđe), and the second uprising, led by Miloš Obrenović in 1815. The events are depicted in what is known as poems about the liberation of Serbia and Montenegro,

⁵³ Hroch, *Social Preconditions*.

⁵⁴ Jezernik, *The Role of Great Men*, pp. 73–74.

⁵⁵ Anonymous, *Ustani bane Jelačiću*.

including *Lazar Mutap and the Arab*, *The Battle of Mišar*, *The Battle of Salaš*, *The Beginning of the Uprising against the Dahis*, and *The Departure of Black George from Serbia*.

Finally, North Macedonia had the different and unfortunate fate of being subsumed in the national movements of its neighbors Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece. After the unsuccessful 1903 Ilinden uprising against the Turks and the fragmentation of IMRO, the revolutionary organization fighting for national liberation, the territory of modern-day North Macedonia was divided in 1913 between these neighbors. The Ilinden uprising is a hallmark of Macedonian nationhood, and some of the revolutionaries that participated, such as Goce Delčev, Nikola Karev, and Pitu Guli, are considered the fathers of Macedonian nationhood. The cornerstone figure is Goce Delčev, considered the founding father of the modern Macedonian nation, whose status as a national hero has been evidenced through a variety of genres, such as the national anthem, history books, and modern literature, to more banal forms of nationalism such as tourist paraphernalia, sports cheers, and komitadji⁵⁶ songs, mostly created after the Second World War, performed by Macedonian folk music singers and ensembles. Table 2 lists some of the national heroes and villains that emerged in the nineteenth century, their type of historical engagement, and the manner of their presentation.

Table 2: National heroes and villains of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Hero	Type of engagement	Representation	Villain	Representation
Country: Slovenia				
Valentin Vodnik, France Prešeren, Janez Bleiweis	Poet, publisher, political activist	X	X	X
Country: Croatia				
Ljudevit Gaj, Janko Drašković, Ivan Mažuran, Josip Jelačić	Philologists, poets, general	X, fearless warriors (of the past)	Hungarians	Threat
Country: Serbia				
Đorđe Petrović, Lazar Mutap	Military leaders	Brave, victorious, symbols of the nation	Turks	Defeated

⁵⁶ Komitadjis (literally, ‘committee members’), were members of revolutionary organizations such as the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, which fought for the liberation of Macedonia.

Hero	Type of engagement	Representation	Villain	Representation
Country: North Macedonia				
Goce Delčev, Nikola Karev, Dame Gruev	Revolutionaries, komitadjis	Brave, committed, unfortunate	Turks	Greedy, uncivilized, cursed

As Table 2 shows, the circumstances of the Slovenian struggle for ethnic and linguistic autonomy and independence produced different types of heroes, such as political activists, intellectuals, and literary figures that were glorified differently than their counterparts in the other three countries, where military leaders were the hero norm. The same may be said of the Croatian linguists and poets, with the exception of Josip Jelačić, whose involvement in the military campaign against the Hungarians promoted him into a national hero. His role as a courageous hero and protector of the people united with the land is manifested in the poem *Ustaj bane (Arise Count)* by “B. Županjac” and its later folklorized version *Ustani, bane, Hrvatska te zove (Arise Count, Croatia is calling)*:

Arise Count
 Arise Count, Croatia is calling
 Arise Count, from your tomb
 Arise Count, Croatia is waking you
 Arise Count, let the sword pass judgement.⁵⁷
 Arise Count, Croatia Is Calling
 It was the year nineteen hundred and three
 When misfortune fell upon Croatia
 Héderváry raised Hungarian flags
 By force they want to Magyarize Croatia
 Arise Count, Croatia is calling
 Arise Count Jelačić!
 Arise Count (Jelačić), Croatia is calling
 Arise Count (Jelačić) save your people!
 There is no hero, no Croatian,
 Like Count Jelačić was!
 Dark soil hides him now
 And green grass covers his grave.⁵⁸

The poem represents Jelačić as an unparalleled hero (“there is no hero like ...”) that protected the people from an imminent national danger: Magyarization. Interestingly, the hero is presented not in his heroic presence, as a

⁵⁷ Marks, Lilijana: Povijesne osobe u hrvatskim usmenim predajama.

⁵⁸ Anonymous, *Ustani bane Jelačiću*, translated by the author.

brave warrior fighting the Hungarians, but in his absence, as a hero of the past, almost a shadow-like figure summoned in a time of grave danger. As such he symbolizes the Croatian cry for help and a sense of helplessness, rather than an actively mobilizing power, as is the case with the Serbian heroes presented in almost a cinematic manner, diegetically constructed rather than mimetically depicted, shown in action rather than constructed in memory as in the poem *Boj na Mišaru* (*The Battle of Mišar*), which signifies the first great Serbian victory against the Turks:

The Battle of Mišar: The First Serbian Uprising
 We saw your master
 Master Kulin Captain
 And we saw Black George
 At Mišar, the wide field
 With George fifteen thousand Serbs
 And with your Kulin Captain
 There were a hundred thousand Turks
 There we were, seeing with our own eyes
 The clash of the two armies
 At Mišar, the wide field,
 One Serbian one Turkish
 Kulin Captain at the head of the Turkish
 Black George at the head of the Serbian
 The Serbian army defeated the Turkish
 Slain was Kulin Captain
 Slain by Black George
 Along with him another thirty thousand Turks
 And the best chieftains among them
 All slain⁵⁹

The battle is presented from an eyewitness perspective as if to legitimize its ontological status. Intense dramatization is achieved by the juxtaposition of the two armies, and the heroic undertaking is highlighted by the common topos of being outnumbered, dramatized by the repetitive use of the verb 'slain'. The significance and the hero-like character of Black George (Đorđe Petrović or Karađorđe) is also evidenced in a later folklorized song titled *Karađorđe Petroviću* or *Mi smo s tobom Karađorđe Petroviću* (*We Are with You Karađorđe Petrović*). Compared to the presentation of Jelačić in *Rise Count*, Black George's character as a unifying force and a symbol of the nation becomes evident:

An eagle screams in the sky, a voice emerges from the depth
 Worry not, you gray bird
 We are with you, Black George

⁵⁹ Anonymous, *Boj na Mišaru*.

When the hour of need strikes, summon us and there we are!
 We have been slaves for too long, now free at last
 Worry not, gray bird, we are with you
 Black George, Black George, Serbian son, our great pride
 Worry not, you gray bird, we are with you Black George.⁶⁰

The lyrics do not represent Black George as a hero in action, but more as a mobilizing force, symbolically a bird watching over his people, his respectful and united descendants. He is revered as an object of national pride, and homage is paid to him by the unspoken oath to commitment and loyalty.

A completely different depiction of Goce Delčev, the founding father of the modern Macedonian nation, is witnessed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century folklore, popular folklorized songs, and elsewhere. In history books, Delčev is presented in the capacity of a revolutionary, a brave komitadji leader, a protector of the people that resolutely fought against the Turks. The same depiction can be found in folk songs. However, unlike the representation of Serbian lords as directly involved in battle, whose heroism is built diegetically, many of these texts construct Delčev as a hero in a mimetic manner, often in the form of a verbal duel in which he expresses his lack of fear of the Sultan, as a popular folk song by the Bapchorki women's choir called *Aber mi dojde od Goce Delčev* (*News Has Come from Goce Delčev*) shows. In it, Delčev demands that the sultan liberate Macedonia, saying:

If you do not free Macedonia,
 I will come to you in Istanbul
 And will walk into your harems
 And will poison all your wives
 To which the sultan's response is:
 I (will) not give up a single meter of the land
 Let knee-deep blood be shed
 Not a foot shall I give from the land
 Until knee-deep blood is shed there.⁶¹

The dialogue vaguely resembles boxers' pre-match exchanges of dialog. Even though the analogy is far-fetched, there is an unspoken grain of truth in the assumption that Macedonian revolutionary heroism is more a result of fragmented resistance and small-scale confrontations with the Turks, which in the absence of a great historic victory can only give rise to heroes that are committed to ideals, are lamented for their brave deaths, and are cherished in the nostalgic memory of the nation. In Macedonian folklore, Turks are

⁶⁰ Serbian Urban Music Ensemble, *Ми смо с тобом Карађорђе Петровићу* [*Mi smo s tobom Karađorđe Petroviću*].

⁶¹ Бaпчoркu [Bapchorki], *Абер ми дојде од Гоце Делчев* [*Aber mi dojde od Goce Delčev*].

presented in a similar way as the Arab in the earlier poems about King Marko: unyielding, gluttonous, robbing the land of goods and young women, repeatedly called “cursed.”

All things considered, the depictions of the three national heroes – Josip Jelačić, Đorđe Petrović (Black George), and Goce Delčev – may be taken as representations of historical circumstances and popular constructions thereof. The Croats lament the absence of Jelačić in times of threat (the fear of Magyarization) with faith that the dead hero may help once again, whereas the Macedonians, having failed to organize a successful attempt at national liberation, construct heroes declaratively committed to the act of resistance and confrontation rather than involved in open confrontation. These heroes are not represented in action like the Serbian national heroes, whose construction takes place diegetically, by their involvement in battle. In this manner, historical experiences and success of the four nations, defined vis-à-vis the more powerful other (the Austrian Empire and the Ottoman Empire), frame and provide content for the national hero systems. The Slovenian reliance on the great learned man, the Croatian ambivalent use of learned men and military heroes, the Serbian pride in and commitment to great warriors, and the Macedonian verbalized herodrom are all shaped by historical forces.

Post-Yugoslav national heroes: The good, the bad, and the meme

After Tito’s death, it was a matter of time until suppressed nationalisms came to surface. Unfortunately, some resulted in armed conflicts and thousands of deaths. What accompanied these events was the fragmentation of a once-unified political space kept stable by the figure of Tito, and the production of conflicting hero-like figures in the face of modern politicians, the leaders of the reborn nations. The newly created national political spaces were inhabited by former communists, now social democrats, and nationalists, former victims of the communist regime, now demo-Christians and conservatives. A bipartisan system was thus created, promoting a bi-hero system. However, in circumstances in which there is only a “single” national discourse, the most pressing questions are: Who is to be its legitimate voice? Who is the leader of the nation, and who is the enemy? Democratic pluralism, unfortunately, allows the coexistence of several mutually opposing leaders.

The advent of mass media and the internet gave this millennium-old struggle new dimensions, offering new forms of communication and construction of saviors and foes. People may not be interested in folk poetry, but they are nonetheless interested in expressing emotions of admiration and support, or scorn and ridicule toward those whom they perceive as their leaders or enemies. The new participatory opportunities of the internet made heroization

and vilification more accessible to anyone with minimal knowhow. The lack of censorship consequently resulted in more vulgar forms of hero and villain construction. As mentioned, memes may have helped certain political actors and citizens circumvent censorship, express divergent opinions, and contribute to a vivid online political debate, but, more often than not, under circumstances of extreme political polarization, heavy-handed rule, and weak democratic state capacities, as is the case for the four former Yugoslav countries, memes are stereotype-based reductions that usually criticize and ridicule a politician. As such, they are a cynical means of creating negative images and impressions, rather than constructive tools for creating positive ones. Therefore, they function more as a modern means of vilifying rather than constructing and praising heroes. To demonstrate the assumptions made, let us look at few examples from each country, each preceded by brief information about the politician memed.

The modern meme-lore in Slovenia is represented by samples of memes of President Borut Pahor, former Prime Minister Marjan Šarec and one of the most controversial politicians in the country, Janez Janša (currently prime minister, a former minister of defense at the time of Yugoslav dissolution, arrested and court-marshalled in 1988, and again arrested and imprisoned in 2014). The memes present President Pahor as an incompetent leader of the nation more concerned about his public image and physical appearance than the presidency, hence his popular nickname “Barbie.” The first meme presents Borut Pahor in a beauty salon; the highlighted comment reads “While Pahor is turning into Barbie, thousands of refugees are freezing to death. Yes, you are a scoundrel ... Barbie. You, ignoring every problem, are definitely a Barbie.”⁶²

The young former Prime Minister Šarec is presented as a communist affiliated with the figures of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. One meme summarizes Šarec’s political positions on several issues: “Legalization of marijuana: Yes, but the matter has to be completely regulated. / Abortion: Yes. / Teaching religion in schools: No. / Euthanasia: Yes. / Other sexual orientations: Sexual orientation plays no role. / Migrant issue: People that would rather stay at home if they had a decent life. / Candidate trusts in: People.”⁶³ Finally, the Slovenian memes present current Prime Minister Janez Janša in the capacity

⁶² Source: Borut Pahor opozarja na slabšanje politične kulture / resno? [Borut Pahor Warns against Weakening of Political Culture / Really?]. *Had*, available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/2uw7ubcf>>, February 14, 2021.

⁶³ Source: Edgy Šarec memes for existentialist teens, available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/2tjxalnw>>, February 14, 2021.

of a thief (“Scoundrel of the millennium”)⁶⁴ and a moral hypocrite (saying to the people “These are only your assumptions”).⁶⁵

The Croatian meme-lore shows some interesting divergences regarding all three positions (the president, the prime minister, and the former prime minister). In this respect, the memes of former Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović are framed in a masculine, sexist discourse highlighting her physical appearance and presenting her in an intimate fashion, rather than as a public political figure. One meme juxtaposes the physical appearance of English Queen Elisabeth II, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and former President Grabar-Kitarović.⁶⁶ Another one voices the unjust yet popular opinion that the Croatian constituents, at least some, are more interested in the former president’s physical appearance than her political persona, with Kermit voicing the unspoken assumption that appearance is what draws people’s attention to her.⁶⁷

Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković is ridiculed for not embracing his patriotic duty of joining the army allegedly because of his congenital anemia, as he stated in 2017. He is shown with the hash tag Croatian Tragedies and the caption “Everybody goes to the front to defend the motherland, while I have to go to Brussels because I have an anemia.”⁶⁸ In a strip of photos presenting a dialog between Plenković and former Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, the same subject of criticism is reworked into the frame of a playful comment by Sanader, popularly called Čaća ‘Papa’, to whom the current Minister Plenković complains of not being able to go to the army because of his anemia, only to receive the mocking comment by Sanader that a bullet is rich in iron, implying that a possible injury will boost Plenković’s blood iron level.⁶⁹ Sanader, on the other hand – except for being associated with his criminal indictment, and resulting imprisonment (shown with a hit and run gun)⁷⁰ – is also considered a

⁶⁴ Source: Lopov tisočletja [Scoundrel of the Millennium], *Meme generator net*, available at: <<http://memegenerator.net/instance/31393192/janez-jana-lopov-tisoletja>>, February 14, 2021.

⁶⁵ Source: To so le vaše domneve [These Are Only Your Assumptions], *Meme generator net*, available at: <<http://memegenerator.net/instance/42053467/janez-jana-to-so-le-vae-domneve>>, February 14, 2021.

⁶⁶ Source: My New Favourite Female Leader, *Imgur*, available at: <<https://imgur.com/T9WhcV2>>, February 14, 2021.

⁶⁷ Source: The Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, *Imgur*, available at: <<https://imgur.com/gallery/yvNEl8w/comment/1239906849>>, February 14, 2021.

⁶⁸ Source: Everybody goes to the front, available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/17z4poin>>, February 14, 2021.

⁶⁹ Source: Doktor Ivo Sanader, Čaća se vraća Facebook Website, available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/194qoby5>>, February 14, 2021.

⁷⁰ Source: How to Rob a Country: Tutorial by Ivo Sanader, MemeCenter, available at: <<https://www.memecenter.com/fun/221741/ivo-sanader>>, February 14, 2021.

cunning and very influential person obeyed by politicians and non-politicians alike. The last meme shows two dialogues, first between Ivano Balić, a former Croatian handball player, who asks Papa to “fix” a medal for the national team, and a second dialogue between Sanader and Jesus, in which Sanader asks Jesus for a bronze medal, only to be complimented by Jesus for his modesty.⁷¹

Criticizing politicians for corruption and laughing at their incompetence seems like a widespread pattern in the Balkans. However, unlike Slovenia and Croatia, the political circumstances in Serbia and North Macedonia marked by authoritarian regimes orchestrated by a single politician have resulted in the creation of memes that criticize the likes of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and former Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski for their authoritarian rule. Interestingly, visual metaphors symbolizing authoritarian power draw on the same source domain, the unchallenged political rule of Kim Jong-un, applied to the Serbian context (showing the Serbian president presented as North Korean President Kim Jong-un)⁷² and the Macedonian context (showing President Vučić as an authoritarian figure celebrated in a similar manner as Kim Jong-un).⁷³ An intriguing difference can be noticed between the public veneration of President Vučić parodically framed in the celebratory discourse typical of communist regimes such as North Korea, Soviet Russia, Yugoslavia, and others (Nikola Gruevski as Kim Jong-un),⁷⁴ and the individualized expression of loyalty and hero-like praise inscribed on someone’s skin in the form of two tattoos. The first is a Christian cross with the Cyrillic letters *BMPO* (*VMRO*, *IMRO*) written in its inside corners, and the name of the name of Nikola Gruevski encircling the lower left part of the cross, and the second is an image of Gruevski with the comment “Loyal to the grave.”⁷⁵

Unlike the cultlike presentation of some political leaders, Vučić and Gruevski in this case, others are made butts of the public joke, regardless of the state office they occupy. In Serbia, the former minister of foreign affairs,

⁷¹ Source: Skromni naš čaća, *Čaća se vraća Facebook Website*, available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/5899tn8s>>, February 14, 2021.

⁷² Source: Вучић: Одлажем митинг подршке СЕБИ – Пошто ће ту бити и ЖУТИ, а издајници смо и ми и они (тако да је свеједно) ... [Vučić: I am postponing the meeting in support of MYSELF – Because of the YELLOW, yet we are both traitors (so it is the same) ...], *FBR Monitor*, available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/pz6c8w80>>, accessed February 14, 2021.

⁷³ Source: Celebrating Vučić, available at: <<https://tinyurl.com/gjgdizfp>>, February 14, 2021.

⁷⁴ Source : Eastern Europe Roundup June 14th, *The Vostokian*, available at: <<http://vostokian.com/page/14/?author>>, February 14, 2021.

⁷⁵ Source: Balkan Nationalists Bring Back Personality Cults in Tattoos of Ruling Politicians, *Global voices*, available at: <<https://globalvoices.org/2014/11/09/balkan-nationalists-bring-back-personality-cults-in-tattoos-of-ruling-politicians/>>, February 14, 2021.

now speaker of the national assembly, Ivica Dačić, is often ridiculed for his controversial behavior resulting from his incontrollable drinking. In this respect, Dačić is notoriously known for his habit of entertaining guests at official receptions, including the prime ministers of Turkey, Greece, and Russia, among others. One image shows him eagerly replying to someone's comment "I don't know this song," with: "I do."⁷⁶ Dačić is made to appear a laughing-stock not only among the general audience but among his associates, as seen the meme where President Vučić calls him a little piglet in the presence of an Arab sheikh. President Vučić talking to a sheikh, is saying: "Don't be afraid, it's not a piglet. It's Ivica [Dačić], I told you about him."⁷⁷

The representation of former Macedonian President George Ivanov is also marked by ridicule and denigration. He was laughed at for his political insignificance, incompetence, and buffoonery, as was President Dačić. The Macedonian president is infamously remembered for his confusing, tautological answers, such as "A reasonable compromise is a reasonable compromise," when asked by a journalist about his own interpretation of what "reasonable compromise" means regarding the twenty-seven-year name dispute with Greece. It is upon this tautology that the next meme builds by replacing "reasonable compromise" with the hashtag #Ж, a popular reference to former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski.⁷⁸ However, this ridicule, when compared to that of the former leader of the opposition, now acting Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, seems benign. The political opponents of acting Prime Minister Zaev consider him a national traitor, a homosexual, and an incompetent political figure based on his involvement in many political processes and events that have altered the Macedonian domestic political landscape. One such event was the Colorful Revolution, a 2016 social movement that accelerated the fall of Gruevski. Zaev's support of the protesters earned him the label "faggot" (his participation in the 2016 mass protest was commented on with "brainless faggots"),⁷⁹ a term that Gruevski's patriotic and religiously conservative supporters used to label all the movement's supporters. In addition, his unconditional, even submissive,

⁷⁶ Source: Lepi Jovica [The Beautiful Jovica], *Demonajzer Tweeter Website*, accessed at: <<https://twitter.com/demonajzer/status/977901561602076672>>, February 14, 2021; currently not available.

⁷⁷ Source: What scared the sheikh, accessed at: <<https://zokstersomething.com/2013/01/11/sta-je-uplasilo-seika/nije-prase/>>, February 15, 2021; currently not available.

⁷⁸ Source: Македонија: Твитер-хаштаг за премиерот – #Ж [Macedonija: Twiter-hashtag za premierot, Macedonia: Twitter Hashtag for the Prime Minister], *Global voices*, available at: <<https://mk.globalvoices.org/03/13/13277/>>, February 15, 2021.

⁷⁹ Source: Gruevski drzavnik broj 1 [Gruevski: Politican No. 1], accessed at: <<https://tinyurl.com/2sgpn3dh>>, February 15, 2021; currently not available.

political support of foreign diplomats and policies, especially his non-patriotic attitude toward the name dispute with Greece, resulted in him and his supporters being labelled traitors and sellouts. In one meme he is compared to a donkey (or ass) with the caption “I promised my ass, no running away from it now.”⁸⁰

Bearing all this in mind, the meme constructions of the politicians in the four countries are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Meme presentations of nations’ presidents, prime ministers, and politicians.

Country	President	Prime minister	Opposition leader, former prime ministers, politicians
Slovenia	Incompetent, obsessed with physical appearance	Marxist	Thief, self-interest, hypocrite, incompetent
Croatia	Object of sexuality	Coward	Corrupt and influential
Serbia	Authoritarian	X	Buffoon
North Macedonia	Incompetent, uninfluential	Sexual deviant, traitor, sellout	Authoritarian, cult of personality

According to the meme-lore selected, the language used reveals a rather negative, even insulting, attribution of present-day politicians. In this respect, one may rightfully consider memes to be instruments of negative presentation, vilification in a sense, rather than heroization. The exception to this assumption is former Macedonian Prime Minister Gruevski, whose figure is religiously celebrated (see Figure 14). However, his persona, like that of Serbian President Vučić, is criticized for being authoritative. Such criticism cannot be identified in the Croatian and Slovenian meme-lore. What underlies this difference is the political circumstances (levels and scope of democratization, political governance, independent state institutions, free media, and other elements) in the four countries. Slovenia and Croatia are reported to be (semi)consolidated democracies, whereas Serbia and North Macedonia are authoritarian states.⁸¹ It is no wonder, then, that the memes produced are reflections of the otherwise institutionally diagnosed state of political affairs. In addition, politicians worldwide, the Balkan states not being an exception, are accused of corruption and embezzlement. Such is the case with Slovenian Prime Minister Janša, former Croatian Prime Minister Sanader, and to an extent Serbian President

⁸⁰ Source: *Gjorgji skrsenio Facebook Website*, accessed at: <<https://tinyurl.com/2sgpn3dh>>, February 12, 2021; currently not available.

⁸¹ Freedom World Scores.

Vučić and former Macedonian Prime Minister Gruevski, who are additionally targeted for abuse of power and authoritarian rule. Incompetence, inefficiency, and scandalous behavior are also among the qualities often ascribed to modern-day politicians. Such is the case with Slovenian President Pahor and his obsession with his physical appearance, Croatian Prime Minister Plenković and his lack of courage and a firm political attitude, former Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Dačić and his publicly unacceptable behavior, and former Macedonian President Ivanov and his politically insignificant persona. Finally, the theme of sexuality also appears in close relation to politicians from the four countries. In this respect, presenting former Croatian President Kitarović in the capacity of a sex object rather than a political figure can be seen as a way of symbolically removing her political power, even the potential to have power, by substituting her public figure as a politician with the private one of her own body. Somewhat differently, Macedonian Prime Minister Zaev is labeled a homosexual to denigrate his involvement in the social movement that brought Gruevski's regime down in 2016. In this respect, denigrating a public figure by labelling him negatively with non-heterosexual pejorative terms is a reoccurring topos of criticism in the Macedonian meme-lore produced by rightwing conservatives.

Finally, it seems that the twenty-first century is not a century of heroes. Except for the religious reverence toward Gruevski, due to his cult figure among his followers, who have worshiped and praised him through more than one genre,⁸² all other political figures are satirically constructed, either vilified as thieves or ridiculed as incompetent buffoons. However, the assumption that twenty-first-century politicians are not elevated to the position of heroes may be misleading. On the one hand, I considered only one genre of modern-day expression of political attitudes – memes – which rarely if ever communicate positive information about their targets. On the other hand, there is strong reason to believe that the political followers of Janša, Sanader, Vučić, and Zaev speak of their leaders with truly heroic language in genres such as political polls, news reports, interviews with supporters, spontaneous conversations at the local store, dinner-table conversations, and so on, which unfortunately lie beyond the scope of this study. Based on the discussion so far, Table 4 summarizes the potential continuities and discontinuities in hero and villain construction in the four countries.

⁸² For more comprehensive insight into Gruevski's cult, see Takovski and Muhić, *When the Old Meets the New*.

Table 4: Cross-comparison of heroes and villains across geographical and historical contexts.

Country	Category					
	14th–19th c.: heroes (noblemen, warriors)	19th c.: heroes (warriors)	21st c.: heroes	14th–19th c.: villains (Turks)	19th c.: villains	21st c.: villains
Slovenia	Cunning, brave, intelligent, super-powerful humans	X	X	Uncivilized, merciless, faithless, barbaric, infidels	X	Incompetent, obsessed with physical looks, thieves, hypocrites
Croatia	Defenders of people and Christianity, brave, fearless, determined	Brave, fearless warriors	X	Threat, infidels, cowards	Threat	Sexual objects, cowards, corrupt, influential
Serbia	Courage, determination, physical strength, warriors	Brave, victorious, symbols of the nation	X	Great number but non-heroic	Defeated	Incompetent, low intelligence, buffoons, authoritarian
North Macedonia	Great strength, courage, determination but also ambiguous	Brave, committed, misfortunate	Revered	Cursed, black demons	Greedy, uncivilized, cursed	Unintelligent, sexual deviants, sell outs, traitors, authoritarian

Seen from the horizontal (geographical) perspective, all the heroes from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century are presented as noble warriors, protectors of people and Christianity, endowed with great physical strength, courage, and determination. At the same time, the Turks are the demonized others, presented as uncivilized, barbaric, and a threat to peace, prosperity, and Christendom. Major differences in the hero systems exist in the representation of nineteenth-century heroes. These divergences can be presented in relation to the underpinning historical circumstances. Thus, the Slovenian national movement, and partly the Croatian movements, based on a struggle for cultural transformation and peaceful political transition to nationhood, resulted in the absence of warlike figures more typical of the other three contexts. The history-based divergences between Croatia, Serbia, and North Macedonia (the unsuccessful Croatian fight against the Hungarians, the successful Serbian overthrow of the Turks, and the unsuccessful Macedonian attempt at national liberation) are also reflected in the hero systems and manners of heroization. Whereas the Croatian poet feels helpless regarding the return of Josip Jelačić, and the Macedonian bard expresses hopelessness after the death of the beloved

komitadji Goce Delčev or places him in a duel with the Turks (“News Has Come from Goce Delčev”), the successful Serbian nationalist project, and the independence gained as a result, are reflected in nationalist folklore in which the heroes are the symbols of the collective and a mobilizing force of the proud nation, as is the case with Đorđe Petrović. The representation of the nineteenth-century villains (Hungarians and Turks) follows the same historical contingencies. The Hungarians are a threat to the Croats, against whom the national hero should stand. The Serbian defeat of the Turks resulted in their presentation as defeated and unworthy of heroic deeds, and so they are women. For the Macedonians, the same Turks appear as greedy and cursed because they were not overthrown.

Unlike these binary hero and villain systems, organized around the principle of positive presentation of heroes and negative presentation of villains, the twenty-first-century hero-like figures, politicians, are constructed in a rather negative fashion judging from the modern meme-lore, which is more critical and cynical than praising. Citizens of the four countries equally ridicule and criticize their politicians for power abuse, financial embezzlement, political incompetence, unacceptable public behavior, sexuality (including deviance), and political threats. The most pronounced differences are the critique of the authoritarian rule of Serbian and Macedonian politicians; this is a line of criticism not noticed in Slovenia and Croatia, which are characterized as countries with a higher index of liberty, democracy, and human rights by organizations such as Freedom House⁸³ or Reporters without Borders,⁸⁴ and also reflected in the meme-lore. Although Slovenians and Croats criticize their leaders for corruption and immorality, they never do so on the grounds of authoritarian rule, as is the case in Serbia and North Macedonia. North Macedonia seems to be an interesting case in two aspects. First, former Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski is the only politician religiously praised, and current Prime Minister Zaev is the only figure depicted as a traitor, which is not surprising given the very sensitive issue of Macedonian national identity and the recent change of the country’s constitutional name. Be this as it may, the general tone of the meme-lore is rather sardonic, and even insulting, and has no polyvocal nature, as discussed in literature.⁸⁵ This finding does not completely undermine the assumption that memes can contribute to political debate and politically balanced representation. It simply points to the fact that political memes in the Balkans are tools of negative ridicule rather than constituents of positive

⁸³ Freedom World Scores.

⁸⁴ Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and North Macedonia on the *Reporters without Borders* website.

⁸⁵ Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, p. 110. Milner, *Pop Polyvocality*, pp. 2357–2390.

discursive constructions of politicians. Such elements may be sought in other genres such as polls, interviews, and everyday interactions, to name a few.

Diachronically, the heroes of the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries were brave, strong, determined warrior-protectors of the people, revered and celebrated in epic poetry and other genres in a lofty manner. Similarly, the construction of the national fathers as heroes follows the same pattern of glorification. Despite the history-based difference in the tone of representation (lamentation in the Croatian case, glorifying pride in the Serbian case, and hope in the Macedonian context), the heroes of the nineteenth century are also ascribed the qualities of courage, determination, and acting as beloved symbols of the nation praised not only in epic poetry, but also in later folklorized genres such as folk-pop music and other non-folk genres such as history books, national anthems, and the linguistic landscape. The villains in the past, mostly Turks, were barbaric, aggressive, self-interest driven, and cowardly, but never lacking intelligence, obsessed with physical appearance, or denigrated on the basis of sexual deviance. Neither are the heroes of the twenty-first century unanimously praised for their bravery and determination, or celebrated as symbols of unity. Instead, these figures are more anti-heroes than heroes, at least judging from the ridiculing tone of their depiction. Thus, the languages of heroization have changed from laudable, praising, and epic-like in the centuries preceding the twenty-first, to the language of the heroes of the twenty-first century lacking such epithets. On the other hand, the language of the villains has also changed from representing villains as a threat to constructing them as corrupt, immoral, unintelligent, and sexualized.

Conclusion

The hero and villain systems are shaped by geographical and temporal forces. Their creation is a result of the sociohistorical circumstances lived and experienced by the community that produces them. Historically significant events such as military confrontations and the struggle for national independence are indivisible from the historical figures that took part in them. The outcome of these processes and the figures' involvement are reflected in the hero systems produced. Victorious heroes such as Đorđe Petrović are laudably celebrated, whereas less fortunate heroes such as Jelačić or Delčev are nonetheless praised, but with the use of a different, more lamenting tone. The same may be said of villains.

In addition, hero and villain systems are also contingent on the time of their production. The lofty, elevated, epic style of praising fourteenth- to

nineteenth-century heroes only slightly changed in the language of nineteenth-century folk artists praising the nations' founding fathers, finally acquiring rather cynical overtones in twenty-first-century meme-lore. This assumption is embedded in the title of this study, referring to the transformation of the hero systems from "epic to memic," the later marking the loss of dignified language typical of the former.

Finally, it seems that modern times and the inner struggles within nations, unlike the unifying fight against an external enemy in past centuries, have abolished one of the most necessary conditions of hero construction: the capacity of a figure to serve as a unifying symbol of the entire collective. The conflicting forces in modern societies, expressive of social divisions, and people's disillusionment in modern leaders are reflected in modern hero systems, which actually lack heroes. The lack of faith, a necessary psychological hero system prerequisite, has resulted in a cynical construction of the modern alleged protectors and leaders. From epic praise of their heroes (real historical figures), these societies have shifted to fragmentary, recycled reproductions of the images of people – serving not to unify, but to be laughed at.

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Od epov do memov

Balkanski narodni junaki in zlobneži skozi čas, prostor in žanr

Povzetek

Materialno, družbeno in politično preživetje se je od nekdaj izražalo v liku narodnega junaka – nekoga, ki varuje in/ali osvobodi deželo in je simbol kolektivne identitete. Različne družbeno-politične razmere ustvarjajo različne junake in zlobneže, odvisno od žanrov, ki so takrat na razpolago. Na podlagi teh izhodišč avtor v študiji išče kontinuitete in razlike v sistemih junakov, oblikovanih v treh različnih obdobjih in štirih različnih državah na Balkanu. Obravnava obdobje otomanskega cesarstva (14.–19. stoletje), obdobje oblikovanja držav (19. stoletje) in obdobje po letu 1991 v Sloveniji, Hrvaški, Srbiji in Severni Makedoniji. Prvi cilj študije je pokazati, kako se specifične družbeno-politične razmere v treh različnih obdobjih odražajo v posameznih sistemih junakov in zlobnežev. V ta namen je podan pregled zgodovinskih okoliščin in vseh štirih državah ter njihovega vpliva na zgodovinske osebnosti in njihovo prikazovanje v vlogi junakov in zlobnežev. Drugi cilj je prikazati, kako se je proces heroiziranja spreminjal skozi čas, od procesa poveličevanja v obdobju, ko je bila narodna enotnost dovolj močna za ustvarjanje junakov v epskem smislu, do procesa posmehovanja in preziranja v sedanjem obdobju razdrobljene narodne in politične enotnosti ter razkroja človeške komunikacije. V študiji torej avtor sledi »nazadovanju« od junaških epov preteklosti do sarkastičnih in cinčnih memov sedanjosti na Balkanu.