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“History - One truth or many parallel ones?”

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Let me start by defining history. In his Man Booker Award-winning novel “The Sense of an Ending”, Julian Barnes gives no less than 7 definitions:

- 1) “History is the lies of the victors”;
- 2) “History is also the self-delusions of the defeated”;
- 3) None of the above. “History is the memory of the survivors, most of whom are neither victorious nor defeated”;
- 4) “History is a raw onion sandwich”. Why? “It just repeats itself, it burps. We’ve seen it again and again. Same old story, same old oscillation between tyranny and rebellion, war and peace, prosperity and impoverishment”;
- 5) “History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation” (attributed to Patrick Lagrange);
- 6) History depends on where we place the comma, and how we define the subject and the object in a sentence. “After we broke up, she slept with me” flips easily into: “After she slept with me, I broke up with her”;
- 7) “The history that happens under our noses ought to be the clearest, and yet it is the most deliquescent” (easy to melt or dissolve, in other words, unstable, not firm, neither solid nor clear).

If you doubt that recent history is unclear, let us just take a look at Ukraine. Who started the latest global mess? A bellicose, land-grabbing Vladimir Putin? The NATO in its desire to spread East despite promises made to Moscow 23 years ago? The protestors on Maidan Square? The kleptocrats of the Janukovich regime? US undersecretary of state Victoria Nuland when telling the EU to “f**k off” and at the same time putting together a new government of a sovereign state? One could equally well argue for ANY of these.

Memories. Historical memories. Or maybe myths and mytho-histories? In a sociological sense – to simplify things - myths are an outside regulator of human behaviour. Just like social norms, they affect the individuals; give a route to his or her behaviour, expectations, attitudes. They become the foundation of our beliefs and judgments. Focusing on Balkan myths, the first great myth here is the one about the Balkan male as a brave warrior. Well, firstly, even if they were brave and warriors, for centuries, they fought for foreign flags. If we look at the most recent fighting under own flags, we will discover just how brave the Balkan male **really** was, especially when faced with the opposing side's defenceless civilians - women and children.

Then, we have the myths we **really** love; the myths we nurture about ourselves, whoever the „us“ happens to be. So, Croats are very cultured, very polite and are not really Balkan, but rather 'mitteleuropäisch', right? Serbs – well, apart from being the greatest warriors **ever**, who even managed to defeat the NATO 15 years ago, they also had medieval kings who used golden knives and forks when other European royalty used fingers to dismember a chicken. Bosniaks – the greatest victims ever, innocent victims and nothing else. Macedonians – peaceful and peace-loving descendants of Alexander the Great and his father Phillip. Albanians – peace-loving victims as well and also the most ancient nation in the Balkans, if not worldwide. Greeks – well, isn't EVERYTHING all around us actually of Greek origin? Don't we just LOVE to hate something or someone close to who and what we are and yet just slightly different, so we can denounce him as less worthy than who and what we are.

It's not just in the Balkans that we never take into account the historical context of the myths which we project back and forth in time and speak of our thousand-year-old nation states, even though the nation state is a concept that is just a couple of hundred years old? Anyway, in this football match, the score is: MYTHS 1, HISTORY 0.

Here in the former Yugoslavia, the historical or mythological narrative, which I was taught in school, has been modified to reflect the changes, which happened in the past 23 years. I learnt that Gavrilo Princip was a great hero and that the Great War was the most heroic and most tragic episode in the history of Serbs who won, but lost a third of their population. And that Austro Hungary was a "tamnica naroda", a dungeon for nations. Interestingly, a term now used by many to describe Yugoslavia. Today, the narrative I learnt at school exists only in Serbia. In Croatia, the First World War isn't all that much mentioned. In Bosnia Herzegovina, it is accepted, depending on the ethnicity to which you belong. In the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, it is perceived as a national tragedy because the land and its people were carved up between Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece. In Montenegro and Kosovo, it is perceived as a missed chance to pursue own statehood. Who is right and who is wrong? To paraphrase Pope Francis when speaking about the LGBT population – "Who am I to judge...?"

"In our age, the idea of intellectual liberty is under attack from two directions. On the one side are its theoretical enemies, the apologists of totalitarianism, and on the other its immediate, practical enemies, monopoly and bureaucracy. Any writer or journalist who wants to retain his integrity finds himself thwarted by the general drift of society rather than by active persecution." (George Orwell, Polemic No.2, January 1946)