

“Serbs – the People that Ceases to Exist.” Bela Kuga, Demographic Anxieties, and Nationalism in Serbia

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Serbia is experiencing population decline, a phenomenon called “White Plague”. Mobilization campaigns for higher birth rates, however, have so far been unsuccessful - and there is a reason why.



Copyright: Opstanak: “(c) Udruzenja za borbu protiv Bele kuge”

“Survival”

In 2006, a new journal was launched in Serbia, with the evocative title *Opstanak* (“Survival”). It was edited by the “Association for the Fight Against White Plague” (*Udruženja za borbu protiv bele kuge*), established three years earlier by Marko Mladenović, a retired law professor from the University of Belgrade and other concerned citizens. The Association and its journal have taken up the fight against the depopulation of Serbia. Titles of the main articles in the first issue of the journal give a good idea of how they frame their effort: “Children are the question of questions” – “Demographic catastrophe: will Serbs will become a national minority” – “From a gynecological organization: the right time to give birth” – “Renewal (*obnavljanje*) of population” – “Open letter to President Putin” – “Third Serbian Uprising for Survival”. Priests, soldiers, and, of course, happy children adorn photos in the journal.

In an interview entitled the “Khasar Syndrome”, Prof. Marko Mladenović, president of the association, laid out that Europe, after the 20th century’s sexual revolution, now needs a “biological” one. He calls for “*the rehabilitation of maternity*” and accuses feminist ideology to push women away from having children. As expected, he speaks out against abortion, demands a tax on unmarried people and married couples without children, and calls upon all TV and radio channels and newspapers to include programming segments on family planning.[1] In case the Serbian people do not manage to raise natality, a bleak future awaits them, as highlighted in another contribution:

The allusion to the Khasars is probably not accidental: ever since Milorad Pavić’s as much acclaimed as unusual novel “Dictionary of the Khazars” (*Hazarški rečnik*) was published in 1984, have the Khazars occupied a prominent place in the collective imagination of Serbian intellectuals, as a forewarning that small nations can be wiped out from history; and this is exactly the fear driving people such as Mladenović in their fight against so called “White Plague” (*bela kuga*) which is how depopulation came to be called in Serbia. In a 2011 edited volume called “Serbs – the people that ceases to exist” (*Srbi narod koji nestaje*), Dragan Batavlević, another board member of *Opstanak* and professor at the Faculty of Law at the University of Kragujevac, laid out if there was not population policy intervention, Serbs will be “a minority in their own land” in 25 years and in 50 years, they probably live in “enclaves”, and might have disappeared completely in “one-hundred years.”[3] The book came out from the Second National Congress on Children and Natality in Goča in June 2011. Somewhere else, Mladenović compared the plight of the Serbs to the Jews, the only other people in the world with such a tragic fate. He even called for the proclamation of a state of emergency until the “young population of Serbia is not renewed.” According to him, the fourth child must be in the center of attention.[4]

When dealing with demographic and most other societal anxieties, it is easy to come up with obscure quotes in probably any country. Not everything that catches our eyes stands for a larger trend – even though, in hindsight, we often observe that fringe ideas became mainstream at some later point in time. The question is whether articulations of the obscure are part of a wider discursive field and maybe even taken up by decision makers. The mentioned quotes come from professors at respectable faculties. This is per se not a statement about relevance,

but it is a hint that we are talking about something from the middle of society. There are even clearer indicators that the *Udruženja za borbu protiv bele kuge* and its journal *Opstanak* are not just another brainchild of deluded conspiracy theorists: in February 2005, the then Minister for the Diaspora of the Republic of Serbia, Vojislav Vukčević declared his support for the initiative of the Association to turn the day of Saint Trifun into the “Day of the Survival of the Serbian People” on a press conference together with Mladedonivić.[5] The first issue of *Opstanak* was publicly launched in the same ministry. The Minister for the Diaspora greeted the initiators of the journal and stressed the government’s commitment to support families with children and those “who with their family life build Serbia.”[6]

The Fight against the “White Plague”

Government support does not make an idea less obscure but gives it authority. The fight against *bela kuga*, the “White Plague”, is a broad phenomenon in Serbia. The catalogue of the National Library of Serbia includes more than 40 titles, in which “bela kuga” appears. While the first of these titles from 1980 was related to drug use, since the 1990s “bela kuga” is firmly connected with demographic problems. “Bela kuga” is not only a pursuit of authors of different stripes, but also part of political action on the national and local level. Since around 2014, several communities in Serbia hold an annual “Day for the Struggle against the White Plague,” kickstarted on the initiative of a businessman from the town of Požarevac. In Požarevac, the program of that day in 2021 included a speech by the president of a Russian anti-abortion organization who boasted that they had “rescued” 14,000 children.[7] So much for the ideological and geopolitical framework of these initiatives; and it is not only talk: Požarevac and other municipalities as well introduced financial and other measures to privilege families with children.[8] The “Movement for the Child ‘Three Plus’” advises municipalities on such pro-natalist measures, like one-time payments for marriage and childbirth as well as various in-kind support for the second, third and any other child.[9] Similar measures have been enacted by the national government triggered by Serbia’s declining population.

Serbia’s demographic predicament is not unique in the Balkans, yet judging by the number of pertinent activities, organizations, and publications Serbian media, experts, and policymakers seem to care even more for the demographic future of their country than in anywhere else in the region. Serbia proper, i.e., without Kosovo, has recorded negative natural population growth in every year since 1992. According to the last census (2022), the resident population of Serbia (without Kosovo) declined from 7.8 million in 1991 to 6.6 million in 2022.[10] Only the number of people above 65 years of age grew, quite significantly. Low fertility, aging, and net emigration are quoted as the main causes of “bela kuga”. One demographer projected that if these trends continued, Serbia’s population would fall to 4.3 million by 2061.[11] While Serbia is in a process demographers call aging, individual citizens do not actually get very old: on average, they die earlier than their peers in Europe. In 2020 (to exclude the substantial drop because of Covid-19) average life expectancy at birth was 77.5 years for women and 71.6 for men in Serbia. For the EU-27, the average values were 83.2 and 77.5 years. Even some of the surrounding countries with similar income levels do much better; men in Kosovo – the nemesis of Serbian nationalists – can on

average enjoy almost six more years of life than Serbs.[12] To be a Serb, especially a man, seems to come with a huge price.

These numbers point to the near total failure of the broad activities against *bela kuga* in Serbia so far – there seems to be an inverse correlation between the intensity of public attention to the problem and its solution. Obviously, reversing demographic trends is something many governments in the world, even in much more prosperous and better governed places find next to impossible. Governments need a long breath especially if they want to arrest the decline of fertility, and in the best case can hope to have a mitigating effect which might lead to slightly more births than in a scenario without any policy-measures at all. France is a case in point, which started pronatalist policies already in the 17th century and pursued consistent population policies throughout the 20th century.[13] The institutional framework for such a policy is not built overnight, neither the popular trust necessary for such institutions to have an impact. Preventing emigration would be easier, if a government is ready to take on the huge political costs of such a move and to take away a fundamental human right from its citizens – the Serbian government, fortunately, does not contemplate to do that (not least because emigration serves as a convenient safety valve and because Serbia’s economy benefits from money transfers by the emigrants).

However, this essay argues that there is an even more fundamental explanation why the proposed cures against population decline have had so little effect so far in Serbia (and most likely also in the future): they are framed in terms of national identity and ontological anxieties, instead of connecting population policies with standard of life-questions. There are two immediate effects of this framing: one is the concentration on pro-natalist measures, especially in form of direct payments according to the number of children, paired with histrionic pro-birth propaganda. Time and time again it was proven that such measures have one-time effects at best and may even be counterproductive because they are harmful to women’s social position. The other consequence of the nationalistic framing is hostility towards immigration: if the nation is said to be on the verge of disappearance, immigration can easily be presented as treason (“population replacement” theories were articulated in this area already before World War One).

The Kosovo Obsession

How did nationalism hijack concerns about demographic developments? Or was it the other way round: did demographers maybe hijack nationalism? In her insightful book on “The ‘White Plague’ Among the ‘Serbs’” (*Bela kuga* među “Srbima”), anthropologist Rada Drezgić describes the process how media, experts and “pseudo-science” spread population panic in the 1980s. In a time when the public mood in Serbia became increasingly nationalistic, leading demographers added to the emerging obsession with Kosovo by highlighting the high population growth of the Albanian population.[14] Demographers spoke of a differentiated or bifurcative fertility development in Yugoslavia and Kosovo respectively, with some nationalities (especially the Albanians) still displaying high birth rates, whereas most of the country has already run through the demographic transition with

fertility rates well below replacement level. In Kosovo, this development was compounded by emigration of the Slavic population in the 1980s, which Serbian nationalists framed as “genocide” and explained by the mistreatment of non-Albanians by the Kosovar authorities. In the late 1980s, the alarmist discourse of leading Serbian demographers, especially of academician Miloš Macura (who in the 1960s was a leading figure in the UN’s population department), was increasingly amplified by media reports about Serbia’s alleged double demographic crisis: low fertility in Serbia proper and high fertility – the highest in Europe at that time – among the Albanians in the Autonomous Province of Kosovo.[15] Demographers produced population projections that predicted the share of Albanians among Yugoslavia’s total population to reach 16% by 2030 (from 4.9% in 1961) and considered this a matter of concern.[16]

According to Drezgić, the demographers’ warnings about Kosovo’s “population explosion” were initially limited to expert circles, that is, until Slobodan Milošević’s advent to power in 1986.[17] One reason for that was the dominance of a liberal approach towards questions of population on the level of high politics. The right to choose was enshrined in Yugoslavia’s 1974 constitution and afterwards in the constitutions of the republics and autonomous provinces, it precluded direct state intervention into questions of procreation. In contrast to its communist neighbors to the east (Romania and Bulgaria), Yugoslavia did not pursue pro-natalist policies, neither did it take any measures to limit abortion (which for many women was the default family planning method). Into the late 1980s, the dominant family planning paradigm was that the state should guarantee conditions for “humane reproduction” and prioritize the welfare of mothers.[18] With Milošević this all changed: voices from the margins that had problematized Kosovo as a problem for Serbia became mainstream, once Milošević had discovered the mobilizing power of Kosovo. This was a dialectical process: those obsessed with Kosovo utilized the new importance attributed to their warnings to embolden their own status and gain an interpretative hegemony – the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and its infamous 1986 manifesto are a case in point –, while Milošević could exploit the authority of academics and intellectuals to legitimize his own agenda. The result was a hodgepodge of voices from academia, arts, media, and politics that created an increasingly self-referential rhetoric about Kosovo and rendered Kosovo a powerful explanation for a variety of “problems” intriguing Serbian nationalists.

Kosovo’s demographic development was one of the reasons in the growing uneasiness of Serbia’s elite about the constitutional arrangement of 1974 that gave wide-ranging autonomy to Kosovo and a seat on federal presidency. It served well to present the Albanians of Yugoslavia as backward or even worse, as counterrevolutionary. Concerns about the “differentiated” reproductive behavior of Serbs and Albanians – who in these discourses were always presented as monolithic blocs – marginalized almost all other demographic issues and became *the* problem to be solved by population policies in Serbia. “Balanced” demographic development – i.e., raising fertility in so-called “low-fertility” regions and reducing fertility in “high fertility” regions – was the catchword of the day. Exploiting growing political tensions between the governments in Belgrade and Prishtina, demographers made a push to transform the prevailing welfare-based population policy paradigm into a more directly interventionist (and discriminatory) one. Their fifteen minutes of fame came when in 1987, the parliament (*skupština*) of Serbia announced the elaboration of a set of measures to solve the “demographic problems of Kosovo.” The Serbian

Academy of Sciences and Arts took upon itself the task to provide scientific advice and in February 1988, organized a conference on the “Problems of the Policy of Population Renewal in Serbia.” Academician Miloš Macura, Serbia’s preeminent demographer, provided the position paper to be discussed at the conference.[19]

This proved to be a low point in the politicization of demography in Serbia. Serb demographers and other speakers did not mince their words and denigrated the Kosovar Albanians. Macura highlighted that in Kosovo, the population was differentiated not only by ethnicity, language, religion, but also demography. High population growth of the Albanians puts pressure on the other nationalities. This “explosive demographic process,” which none has so far tried to slow down, enjoys the “moral support by secessionist ideology which rests on ideas of national exclusivity and the slogan of an ethnically clean Kosovo.” Macura deplored that the “demographic expansion of the Albanians” and the “demographic dispersion of all other populations” have so far been a political taboo.[20] The sole Kosovo-Albanian voice at the conference, Musa Limani, dismissed Macura’s position as unacceptable, unscientific and non-Marxist. According to him, not high fertility but the lack of economic progress was Kosovo’s main problem. The demographic behavior of its population was commensurate to its level of development. Furthermore, demographic transition among the Albanians had already begun. Limani criticized Serb media for their alarmist and inflammatory language about Kosovo-Albanian fertility.[21] This was a courageous stance – speaker after speaker blasted him for that. One accused Kosovo politicians and intellectuals to pursue an “irrational population policy” because of their “obscure national aims”, which lead their own people into destitution while asking the rest of Yugoslavia to “pay the bills” and ignoring their “well-meaning advice.”[22] One speaker criticized the head of Kosovo’s family planning council, a professor of law at the University of Prishtina, for having five children.

A 1992 publication by the Center for Demographic Research in Belgrade on the “Demographic Problems and Population Policy of Kosovo and Metohija” reiterated these claims and did not include any voice from Prishtina.[23] It stressed the need for state policies to reduce population growth in Kosovo, allegedly for its own sake. The volume used a clearly discriminatory and alarmist language, for example describing the demographic behavior of the Albanian population as “irrational and deviant”, “disturbed”, and “expansive” – a framing that suggested urgent intervention. The study projected Kosovo’s population to reach more than four million people in 2050 if there was no change. Culture and nationalism were said to be the main reason for the Albanians’ high fertility rate. The fact that Kosovo had practically lost its autonomy in 1989 and the Albanian majority was facing political repression was not mentioned once.[24] Such publications amplified Serbian fears of Albanians, who were portrayed as expansionist, while the Serbian nation was said to be on its way to disappearance.[25] The fact that most Albanians are Muslims could only strengthen these fears.

Demographic knowledge, models, and projections became part and parcel of the Serbian nationalistic-revanchist discourse on Kosovo. Vuksan Cerović presented the reproductive behavior of Albanians as part of their “counterrevolutionary” efforts, undermining socialism and detaching Kosovo from Europe.[26] In his view, this was a deliberate plot against Serbia: “The demographic expansion (...) creates the conditions for future deviant and excessive situations, for the growth of nationalism and separatism and pressure on the Serbs and

Montenegrins to leave the homes of their grandfathers.”[27] By 2030, Cerović quotes from demographic predictions, Kosovo might have more inhabitants than Serbia proper. On top of that, “excessive” fertility prevents economic development and reproduces poverty, despite the large sums of money allocated to Kosovo’s development. Nonetheless, there is no family planning in Kosovo, complains the author.[28] Macura, in a volume on Kosovo’s past and present, characterized the “natality problem” as one of the “more serious and far-reaching” ones.[29] He reiterates his stance – which mirrored international debates of the 1960s and 1970s about the connection between demography and development, in which he had participated – that natality needs to be reduced first before economic development can kick in (and not the other way round, as claimed by Kosovar demographers).[30]

Demographic Nationalism Continued

As Wendy Bracewell has noted, the sense of demographic doom fed into the overarching fear among Serb nationalists that Serbia might lose Kosovo.[31] As we know today but Serbia fails to acknowledge, this is exactly what happened – despite large-scale violence by the Serb state to prevent this in the 1990s, in the course of which the “population problem” was briefly solved, by forcing one million Albanians out of Kosovo whereas Serb refugees from Bosnia and Croatia were settled there. With Kosovo gone, the motivational cause of the pseudoscientific discourse about the demographic threat posed by Albanians is gone as well. But the demographic anxieties of the 1980s and 1990s have left a lasting legacy because of their discursive institutionalization through repetition: population development, and in particular low fertility, emigration, and population decline are almost invariably debated in a nationalistic frame in Serbia, up to this day. Even without the Albanians as a threat, this frame evokes images of a dying nation and buttresses demands for strong state intervention. The remedy of choice continues to be pronatalist measures, especially in the form of financial incentives and calls on women to have more children. As observed by Bracewell almost thirty years ago, such propaganda presents childbirth as patriotic duty, thus making reproductive decisions a collective matter and pushing back against emancipation.[32] Pronatalism also directs attention away from fields where policy might really have an impact on population development, such as supporting people to live more healthy lives. If a population ages, than its citizens should at least enjoy a long and healthy life.

The *bela kuga* discourse also stands in the way of one, and maybe to only possible ‘solution’ to negative population growth in Serbia (and the other countries of the region): immigration. If the nation is said to be on the verge of extinction, and many people believe that this is the case, immigration of non-nationals will be a hard sell for any policy-maker – past fears of the demographic “expansion” of Muslim Kosovo-Albanians can easily be repackaged into more generalized fears against immigration by non-Europeans, likely also to be Muslim. The *bela kuga* anxiety complex thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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[1] “Hazarski sindrom,” *Opstanak*, no 1, 2006, 6–9.

[2] “Srbi – narod bez pomlatka,” *Opstanak*, no 1, 2006, 20.

[3] Dragan Batavelić: “Predgovor,” in ibidem (ed.): *Srbi narod koji nestaje*. Beograd: Udruženje “Opstanak”, 2011, 3. The authors of this volume come from dubious “universities,² such as UNION and ALFA in Belgrade, APEIRON in Banja Luka, etc.

[4] Marko Mladenović: “Bela kuga u Srbiji. Uzroci, posledice i predlozi mera“, *Dobrovoljački glasnik* 16, no 28, 2006, 152.

[5] “Saradnju Udruženja za borbu protiv bele kuge i MInistarstva za dijasporu,” Feb 2, 2005, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/19778/saradnja-udruzenja-za-borbu-protiv-bele-kuge-i-ministarstva-za-dijasporu.php>

[6] “Predstavljen novi časopis Udruženja za borbu protiv bele kuge,” June 14, 2006, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/51967/predstavljen-novi-casopis-udruzenja-za-borbu-protiv-bele-kuge.php>

[7] “Održan Dan borbe protiv bele kuge,” Sep 17, 2021, <https://pozarevac.rs/obelezan-dan-borbe-protiv-bele-kuge/>

[8] “Održan Dan borbe protiv bele kuge,” Aug 30, 2017, <https://pozarevac.rs/odrzan-dan-borbe-protiv-bele-kuge/>

[9] “Medjunarodna akademija o natalitetu – Opštini Veliko Gradište uručena plaketa ‘Zlatna kolevika’,” Sep 20, 2021, <http://velikogradiste.rs/2021/09/me-unarodna-akademija-o-natalitetu-opshtini-veliko-gradishte-plaketa-zlatna-kolevka/>

[10] *2022 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings. Age and Sex*. Beograd 2023, 11.

[11] Ivan Marinković: “Značaj starosne strukture stanovništva pri definisanju mera populacione politike,” *Zbornik Matice Srpske za društvene nauke* 167, 2018, 538.

[12] Data from Eurostat (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/>). Some figures from the neighborhood for average life expectancy at birth for females and males in 2020: Albania – 79.6 for women/75.2 for men; Greece – 83.9/78.8; Croatia – 80.9/74.7; Bulgaria – 75.1/68.0; Romania – 76.6/69.2; North Macedonia – 75.5/71.1; Bosnia-Herzegovina – 77.5/73.1; Montenegro – 77.0/70.8. It seems that the inland Balkan diet has the opposite effect on lengthiness of

life than the acclaimed Mediterranean one.

[13] See Leslie Tuttle: *Conceiving the old regime: pronatalism and the politics of reproduction in early modern France*. Oxford 2010; Paul-André Rosental: *Population, the state, and national grandeur: demography as political science in modern France*. Bern et al. 2018.

[14] Rada Drezgic: “Bela kuga” među „Srbima“. *O naciji, rodu i rađanju na prelazu vekova*. Belgrade 2010, ch. 3 (from p. 85).

[15] See *ibidem*, 88–92.

[16] *Ibidem*, 33.

[17] Rada Drezgic: “Od planiranja porodice do populacione politike – promena vladajuće paradigme u srpskoj demografiji krajem 20. veka,” *Filozofija i društvo* 37(3), 2008, 195.

[18] See e.g. Dušan Breznik, Miroslav Rašević: “Razmatranja o populacionoj politici u Jugoslaviji,” *Stanovništvo* 11(1-2), 1973, 5–13.

[19] Miloš Macura: “Uvodna reč,” in: Macura, Miloš (ed.): *Problemi politike obnavljanja stanovništva u Srbiji*. Beograd: SANU, 1989 5–10.

[20] Miloš Macura: “Pretpostavke, načevele i ciljevi,” in: *ibidem*, 239–40.

[21] Musa Limani: “Osobenost pada nataliteta na Kosovu,” in: *ibidem*, 173–181.

[22] Mihailo Marković: “O marksističkom pristupu politici,” in: *ibidem*, 185.

[23] Dragana Avramov (ed.): *Demografski problemii populaciona politika Kosovo i Metohije*. Beograd: Univerzitet u Beogradu, Institut društvenih nauka, Centar za demografska istraživanja, 1992.

[24] See also Drezgic, “Od planiranja porodice do populacione politike,” 197.

[25] See Wendy Bracewell: “Women, motherhood, and contemporary Serbian nationalism,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 19(1-2), 1996, 26.

[26] Vuksan Cerović: *Kosovo. Kontrarevolucija koja teče*. Belgrade 1989, esp. ch. “Političke posledice kosovskog nataliteta”, 327–33.

[27] *Ibidem*, 328

[28] *Ibidem*, 330–1.

[29] Miloš Macura: “The Problem of Natality in Kosovo,” in: Gordana Filipović (ed.), *Kosovo. Past and Present*. Belgrade 1989, 190.

[30] Macura, “The Problem of Natality in Kosovo,” 193-4.

[31] Bracewell, “Women, motherhood, and contemporary Serbian nationalism,” 27.

[32] See Bracewell, “Women, motherhood, and contemporary Serbian nationalism.”