

Vladimir Abramović

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, Serbia

A Brief Overview of Narratives Forming Serbian Perception of Europe

In this paper we will present some of the narratives that have influenced Serbian perception of Europe between the late Middle Ages and the early 20th century. The perceptions were prevalently ambivalent. Their main source stems from the conflicting feelings born out of kind of “cultural shock” experienced by Serbian students in European universities during the 19th century. These experiences were transferred via letters or literary works, but also directly, in their political and professional work in which they tried to apply their skills and knowledge for creating the institutions of the modern state. Although not as important, narratives from previous centuries provided a background on which these ambivalent attitudes could further develop.

Keywords: Serbia, Europe, perception, image, narratives, ambivalence

It could be rightfully argued that the Serbian perception of Europe is ambivalent and controversial. It is the case now, in the 21st century, it was the case in the late 20th century, and it was the case in the 19th century. Europe was naturally seen as a role model for the organization of the state and society. However, at the same time, due to the conditions of Serbian population, which was predominantly agrarian, traditional and patriarchal, Serbia was also a fertile ground for the spread of populist, collectivist and egalitarian ideas, which negated the European value system and conceptual model. It could be also argued that these ideas, which rejected basic European values, were also formulated in

Europe.¹ But regardless of this sort of dualistic influence, is it possible to determine how the image of Europe was formed by the Serbian public?

The answer is obviously yes; however, such a topic demands more space than the constraints of an article, as well as thorough, painstaking research. In this paper we will focus on identifying certain narratives that have influenced perceptions of Europe in Serbia, or among Serbian people. In doing so, we'll try to present a brief historical cross-section since the Middle Ages up to the early 20th century.

Medieval sources that would allow us to reconstruct perceptions of Europe are almost nonexistent. There was the *Razumnik-Ukaz*, belonging to a genre of apocalyptic literature, a compilation and adaptation of Byzantine Greek texts with an addition of original Bulgarian material, which also existed in a Serbian copy. There is a description in it concerning the peoples of the world, where different nations/ethnicities were described as certain animals. For example, the Frank is a lion, the German is an eagle, the Bulgarian is a bull, the Serbian is a wolf, etc. However, it is unlikely that we will ever be able to estimate the influence of such a narrative on the formation of an image of the world, because we lack the sources that could help us gauge the impact.²

Some geographical characterization is present in Constantine the Philosopher's hagiography of the despot Stefan Lazarević (1389–1427). When describing the world, he mentioned eastern and western rulers, while at the same time he keeps Serbia as a central reference point. For example, the Ottoman sultan and other Asian rulers (Persian, Egyptian etc.) are naturally named "eastern rulers", "eastern kings" or "eastern emperors", while the Hungarian king and other European rulers were named "western rulers" or "western lords". However, curiously, on one occasion Constantine mentions that the divisive line between eastern and western rulers lies along the Hellespont. i. e. the Dardanelles, which would designate the Serbian despot as one of the western rulers.³ Other than a mere geographical designation, the syntagm "western rulers"

¹ Stojanović, *Ulje na vodi* [Oil on water], 75-84.

² Petkov, *Voices of Medieval Bulgaria*, 533-534.

³ Константин Филозоф, *Житије деспота Стефана Лазаревића* [Hagiography of the despot Stefan Lazarević], 76.

holds no value or emotional charge. The only thing Constantine made sure was properly mentioned was that Stefan Lazarević was equal to his eastern and western peers.

There are unlikely narratives that could provide us a window into attitudes towards Europe – namely, Serbian epic poetry. It is important to note that the oldest songs were thematically concerned with medieval persons and times;⁴ however, they were created and recorded in subsequent epochs, from the 16th to the 18th century.⁵ Of course, images of foreign lands are quite rare in them, but the descriptions are striking and telling. Turks and the Ottoman Empire are more present, due to the nature of relations between the Serbian medieval state(s) and the Ottomans. However, there are songs that address the relations with Latins, i.e. peoples who followed Roman Catholicism, regardless of their ethnicity. One of them is “Tsar Dušan’s Wedding”, devoted to the marriage of Serbian medieval emperor Dušan (1331–1356). We will not analyze the song in a literary manner, but we will paraphrase it briefly, in order to present its narrative and points. The song tells the story of the proposal and wedding of emperor Dušan to a girl named Roksanda (Roxana), who was a daughter of the Latin king Michael, ruler of the city of Ledjan.⁶ King Michael accepted the proposal, under the condition that Dušan must not invite to the wedding his nephews of the Vojinović family, since they are notorious troublemakers. Dušan accepts these conditions and sets off with his entourage. The Vojinović family is displeased and unhappy because of his decision, but they are unable and unwilling to disrespect the emperor’s wishes. However, they instruct the youngest son, by the name of Miloš, whom Dušan has not met, to join the entourage under a disguise and help his uncle in case of need. The remainder of the song is dedicated to the various tricks and challenges that are presented to Dušan by the Latins, in order to prevent him from taking the girl. However, these obstacles are defeated with the help of Miloš Vojinović, who only at the end reveals his true identity.⁷

⁴ The pre-Kosovian and Kosovian cycles of songs, i. e. the songs concerning topics and persons predating and following the battle of Kosovo in 1389.

⁵ Ђурић, *Антологија* [Anthology], 14-21; 693-700.

⁶ It is uncertain which city or country is meant by that name.

⁷ Ђурић, *Антологија* [Anthology], 163-180.

The explicit characterization of Latins is present in verses said by two older Vojinović brothers while they were watching the emperor's procession departing:

*The Tsar is travelling to far-off lands
With no stout hero in his train – no one
Of his own kin to stand by if, amongst
The foreigners some treachery befall.
'Tis known of old, Latins are perfidious:
No good towards our uncle do they wish –
But, uninvited thus, we dare not go.*⁸

It is interesting to note that both emperor Dušan and Miloš Vojinović are historical personalities, although the events in the song are entirely fictitious.⁹ The song was written down at the beginning of the 19th century by the Serbian language reformer Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787–1864), who heard it from the storyteller and bard Tešan Podrugović (ca. 1775–1815).¹⁰ However, the exact date of the song origin is impossible to determine. But it could be said that its message in regard to “treacherous Latins” was heard many times over.

Contacts with Europe were formed on a more permanent basis in the 19th century, when Serbia won its autonomy and subsequently independence from the Ottoman Empire. One of the European ideas that took a firm hold in Serbia in the first half of the 19th century was *prosvešćenije*, i. e. enlightenment, meaning education. It was taken at face value, albeit somewhat naively and idealistically.¹¹ Education indeed was a tool for social mobility. But also, realizing that they lacked cadres necessary to build a modern state, Serbian authorities sent numerous scholars abroad to study on European universities. They were expected to bring their knowledge and expertise back home and help the development of Serbian state and society.¹²

⁸ Locke, *Serbian Epic Ballads*, 59.

⁹ Ђурић, *Антологија* [Anthology], 30

¹⁰ Ђурић, *Антологија* [Anthology], 696

¹¹ Милићевић, *Јеврем Грујић* [Jevrem Grujić], 35.

¹² Стојановић, *Калдрма и асфалт* [Cobblestone and asphalt], 240-241.

These students were the ones who got their impressions of Europe firsthand. They are significant because they were either descendants of influential and affluent families, or because they would acquire high status in Serbian society due to their education.

One of the telling examples of the impact of Europe on Serbian scholars was the case of Jevrem Grujić (1826–1895), one of the forefathers of liberalism in Serbia and one of the founders of the Serbian Liberal party. As a gifted young man, he was awarded a state scholarship for studying abroad in 1849. He first went to Heidelberg in Germany, which was a renowned university centre. Contact with that city and the country left a significant impression on him. However, his experiences there were rather disappointing. Due to the influence of Pan-Slavic patriotism, he already harbored resentment towards Germans, as they were seen as “oppressors of the Slavs”. During his schooling in Serbia, he demonstratively refused to learn the German language, although he took private lessons at a later date. The final tipping point of his stay in Heidelberg was during a lecture on German history, when the professor remarked that “Slavs are worthless barbarians”.¹³ He sent a request to the Serbian government to change university, and he was granted a transfer to the Sorbonne in Paris, where he enrolled in 1850. The encounter with Paris left an impression on a much higher level of magnitude than it was the case with Germany – it could be said without exaggeration that the bright lights of Paris profoundly dazzled young Grujić. In letters sent to his family in Serbia, he described the wonders of the city, expressing his bewilderment.¹⁴

However, the acquaintance with Paris was also perceived as a form of defeat. Essentially, it was a conflict born from the clash between feelings of (exaggerated) importance and values of the Serbian nation and the visual reality of the legacy of an ancient European civilization. As Grujić’s biographer Jovan Milićević explained the general feeling of Serbian students in Paris: “Here they were forced to see, more convincingly than anywhere else, how much their Serbia was poor, small and unsophisticated, and that brought them, although they

¹³ Милићевић, *Јеврем Грујић* [Jevrem Grujić], 36-37.

¹⁴ Милићевић, *Јеврем Грујић* [Jevrem Grujić], 37.

probably had not admitted it even to themselves, to a feeling close to despair.”¹⁵ Indeed, among Grujić’s preserved notes there’s one with two columns: the first was called “Great Paris”, where famous landmarks were listed, and the other was named “Misery”, where he listed various scenes of poverty, grief and disarray, as if he was trying to mitigate that pervasive feeling of near-despair.¹⁶

Similar attitudes toward German lands, and subsequently Europe, could be gleaned from the travelogues of Ljubomir Nenadović (1826–1895), a writer, minister of education and diplomat, who was also a student in European universities. He is also significant for our study, because he was a member of a very influential family, who provided the Serbian state with numerous statesmen, diplomats, soldiers and officials.¹⁷ Besides travelogues from his student years (*Letters from Greifswald, Letters from Switzerland, Letters from Italy*, 1845 – 1851), he also wrote in his more mature years (*Letters from Germany*, 1868 – 1870), when he was in a self-imposed exile, due to his family’s participation in a conspiracy against Prince Mihailo Obrenović (1839 – 1842; 1860 – 1868).¹⁸ It is clear from his writings that he had a significant amount of respect for the technical skills and abilities of Germans; however, he ridiculed their perceived submissive mentality towards authority, especially state authority.¹⁹ His style is quite developed, humorous and witty; it is difficult to quote passages in order to illustrate the images of Europe he tried to convey to his readers without making them look torn out of context – such observations would simply appear during a description of, for example, a carriage ride or a walk. However, he claimed during his travels in Pomerania in 1845 that “not even a hundred years have passed since Europe became, what we say, European. Only the French Revolution closed the door to the Middle Ages /.../ and transplanted freedom and equality on all sides and in all countries.”²⁰ His curiosity

¹⁵ Милићевић, *Јеврем Грујић* [Jevrem Grujić], 38.

¹⁶ Милићевић, *Јеврем Грујић* [Jevrem Grujić], 38.

¹⁷ Ненадовић, *Одабрана дела* [Selected works], 8

¹⁸ His brother Svetozar was executed for taking part in the conspiracy. Ненадовић, *Писма из Италије* [Letters from Italy], 9.

¹⁹ Ненадовић, *Одабрана дела* [Selected works], 15; 193-194.

²⁰ Филиповић, Стојиљковић, *У сусрет духу Европе* [Meeting the spirit of Europe], 2.

was sparked and he went on travelling the continent in search for values he accentuated as pan-European.²¹

Nenadović was quite perceptive and critical towards people and occurrences that, in his opinion, deviated from proclaimed ideals. These are also the points in his narrative where his ambivalence towards certain European nations is more clearly visible. He was present in Wiesbaden in 1870, when France declared war on Prussia. His disappointment is evident – he claims that the river Rhine will be ashamed of the 19th century, when its waves will carry the blood of the two most enlightened nations – French and German. The letter is concluded with an ironic ode to “beautiful Germania”, a beacon of mankind: “Whoever loves the true development of humankind, should wish you all the best; therefore – illuminated by your light and warmed by it since childhood – I’m finishing this letter standing up and devotedly shouting: long live Russia!”²²

However, not everyone had an ambivalent relationship towards Europe and European values. Svetozar Marković (1846–1875), a political activist and philosopher of socialist provenance, considered Europe as an example which was not supposed to be followed. In his famous work *Serbia in the East* he idealized Serbian patriarchal social organization epitomized in *zadruga* and *opština*,²³ contrasting it with the fledgling European industrial and capitalist society. He claimed that these developments led to massive pauperization, prostitution, drunkenness and debauchery²⁴ – societal evils that are to be avoided at all costs. Therefore, Serbia should strive to prevent the dissolution of *zadruga* and to destroy, by revolutionary means, various states in the Balkans, establishing a pan-Balkan federation of municipalities and counties, uniting nations as free peoples and equal workers.²⁵

We have mentioned the most prominent Serbian students who went abroad; however, there are those who were also significant for the

²¹ Филиповић, Стојиљковић, *У сусрет духу Европе* [Meeting the spirit of Europe], 2.

²² Ненадовић, *Писма из Италије* [Letters from Italy], 145.

²³ *Zadruga* is a form of an extended family with common ownership over property, money and domestic animals. *Opština* (municipality) is a union of several *zadrugas*.

²⁴ Марковић, *Србија на истоку* [Serbia in the East], 31-33.

²⁵ Марковић, *Србија на истоку* [Serbia in the East], 177-181.

development of the Serbian state, but who were not as distinguished as Nenadović and Grujić. They nonetheless left their observations in the form of letters sent to friends and relatives, which allowed their impressions of Europe to trickle down to the Serbian populace. Their writings are significantly less political than works of aforementioned more prominent authors, and their letters show more touching perceptions of contemporary Europe.

Some are full of wonder, penned by simple young men, who were overwhelmed by the cities where they went to study. Dimitrije Matić (1821–1884), statesman, professor and minister of education and justice wrote: “Pest had already dazzled me a lot, and Bratislava to a lesser extent, but not like this immeasurable Vienna”.²⁶ He also praised the beauty of Linz and Salzburg.²⁷ Nonetheless, when writing about his last day in Heidelberg, Matić parted his way with “ingenious Germania”, whom he thanked for his education and experiences, but also warned it in following manner: “But I’m telling you as we part ways, do not think of gaining any Danube territory, as your patriots say, because it was never yours. There lives a Slavic people, who will be able to fight for their independence.”²⁸

On the other hand, Dimitrije Gerasimović (1855 – 1906), doctor, colonel and the chief of military medicine in Serbia, had quite different experiences in Vienna. He described the atmosphere there as “miserable and suffocating”, lamenting that he would be able to breathe freely only if he left the city, which for him represented “real slavery, languish and mourning”.²⁹

Paris had undoubtedly left great impression on Serbian students, as it was already mentioned. Jovan Dučić (1871–1943), poet and diplomat, remarked: “In Paris, I will take a look and breathe a little more, and to tweak a little my ‘bourgeois’ taste in order to send you new things.”³⁰

There is another telling sign of how Europe was perceived by the Serbian public at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century –

²⁶ Филиповић, Стојиљковић, *У сусрет духу Европе* [Meeting the spirit of Europe], 16.

²⁷ Филиповић, Стојиљковић, *У сусрет духу Европе* [Meeting the spirit of Europe], 20.

²⁸ Филиповић, Стојиљковић, *У сусрет духу Европе* [Meeting the spirit of Europe], 29.

²⁹ Филиповић, Стојиљковић, *У сусрет духу Европе* [Meeting the spirit of Europe], 19.

³⁰ Филиповић, Стојиљковић, *У сусрет духу Европе* [Meeting the spirit of Europe], 46.

and that is in the names of Belgrade *kafanas*.³¹ If we contrast them with Belgrade street names, we will see interesting differences. Streets were named after various geographical locations that designated boundaries of historical, medieval or future Serbian states, i.e. they have shown projected intentions of the Serbian national programme.³² However, *kafanas* were named freely, without state intervention, hence they bear names such as “White Petersburg”, “America”, “Europe”, “New York”, “Bosporus”, “Dardanelles”, “Little Geneva”, “Little Constantinople”, “Little Paris”, “Port Arthur” etc. It could have been a sign that Serbian society was interested in broadening its horizons beyond what the elites meant to present them with.³³

In conclusion, we can say that Serbian perception of Europe was formed by narratives formulated chiefly in the 19th century, although previous centuries also provided a background or context for their emergence. Those narratives were introduced to the general populace primarily by students who went to universities abroad, and were exposed to European ideas and civilization. Their understanding and experiences were transferred via literary works or letters, but also personally, upon their return to Serbia and employment in different governmental institutions. As we had the opportunity to see, they had various impressions, some good, some bad, but mostly ambivalent. What are the causes of this? Surely, in the case of German lands, they were rooted in conflicting Germanic and Slavic nationalisms and patriotic feelings.

But what about other countries, for example France? Nationalism could be safely excluded as a cause, as different forces here were at play. The relative ignorance about Serbia among the French public, along with its well-developed civilization, surely caused a sort of cognitive dissonance among Serbian students. They were coming from a country that had recently liberated itself from direct Ottoman rule; they were

³¹ Kafana was initially an establishment which served coffee (i. e. a coffee-house). They were introduced to the Balkans by the Ottomans in the early 16th century. Later, they would serve other kinds of beverages and by the end of the 19th century they became centers of social life.

³² Стојановић, *Калдрма и асфалт* [Cobblestone and asphalt], 76-81.

³³ Стојановић, *Калдрма и асфалт* [Cobblestone and asphalt], 79.

very patriotic and nationalistic, in some cases extremely so. Inspired by liberal and freedom-loving European ideals, they were convinced that the whole of Europe was well acquainted with their struggle and that it, surely, had the same perception of Serbia as they themselves had.

Reality soon shattered this worldview. However, it could not be said that their patriotic feelings were extinguished, quite the contrary. As for a second impression – one of admiration towards French civilization – it quickly became evident to what extent Serbia was behind developed European countries, in every sense. Although it seems that this fact should be self-evident, one ought to bear in mind that Serbian students were coming from a predominantly static and immovable agrarian society, and that their scholarships enabled them to actually see the world outside their immediate surroundings. All of this shook them profoundly, and they developed an ambivalent attitude towards Europe. It was seen as a beacon, a role model to be imitated, but also as a nemesis that could destroy the fabric of Serbian society, robbing it along the way of its uniqueness and identity.

Bibliography

- Ђурић, Војислав. *Антологија народних јуначких песама* [An anthology of folk epic songs]. Српска књижевна задруга: Београд, 1983.
- Филиповић, Даница, Стојиљковић, Дејан. *У сусрет духу Европе: европски градови са старих слика* [Meeting the spirit of Europe: European cities from old pictures]. Универзитетска библиотека „Светозар Марковић“: Београд, 2006.
- Константин Филозоф. *Повест о словима – Житије деспота Стефана Лазаревића* [A story about letters – Hagiography of the despot Stefan Lazarević]. Просвета – Српска књижевна задруга: Београд: 1989.
- Locke, Geoffrey N. W. *The Serbian Epic Ballads. An Anthology*. Nolit: Belgrade, 1997.
- Марковић, Светозар. *Србија на Истоку* [Serbia in the East]. Просвета: Београд, 1946.
- Милићевић, Јован. *Јеврем Грујић. Историјат светоандрејског либерализма* [Јеврем Грујић. History of the St. Andrew's liberalism]. Нолит: Београд, 1964.

- Ненадовић, Љубомир П. *Одабрана дела* [Selected works]. Матица српска – Српска књижевна задруга: Нови Сад – Београд, 1971.
- Ненадовић, Љуба. *Писма из Италије* [Letters from Italy]. Београд: Рад, 1986.
- Petkov, Kiril. *The Voices of Medieval Bulgaria, Seventh-Fifteenth Century: The Records of a Bygone Culture*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- Стојановић, Дубравка. *Калдрма и асфалт. Урбанизација и европеизација Београда 1890-1914* [Cobblestone and asphalt. Urbanization and Europeization of Belgrade 1890-1914]. Удружење за друштвену историју: Београд, 2009.
- Stojanović, Dubravka. *Ulje na vodi. Ogledi iz istorije sadašnjosti Srbije* [Oil on water. Essays on the history of the present of Serbia]. Pešćanik: Beograd, 2010.