

## Strategies of symbolic nation-building in West Balkan states: intents and results

Among the many attempts to define ‘a nation’ Rupert Emerson’s definition from 1960 remains one of the better ones: ‘The nation is a community of people who feel they belong together in the double sense that they share deeply significant elements of a common heritage and that they share a common destiny for the future... The nation is today the largest community which, when the chips are down, effectively commands men’s loyalty’ (Emerson 1960, 95). When the object of this loyalty coincides with the total population of a state, we can call this state a *nation-state*. Today, the nation-state, as it were, has become the only game in town in the sense that all states present themselves as such and take their legitimacy from the People or the Nation. Political leaders pursue policies designed to bring about the nation-state, at least on the rhetorical level. In reality, however, the symbols of the nation may draw one-sidedly upon one cultural or ethnic group in the country to the extent that minorities, in spite of this rhetoric, feel excluded from ‘the nation’.

### State of the Art: Nation-building in the Western Balkans

Processes and strategies leading up to the establishment of a nation-state are often referred to as *nation-building*. The concept of nation-building came into vogue in the 1960s among historically oriented social scientists who studied processes of state construction in established states on the Atlantic rim (Emerson 1960; Deutsch and Foltz 1963). The subjects of the monarch were gradually and imperceptibly turned into citizens who now constituted ‘the nation’. (Rokkan 1999; Kolstø 2000, 16-18). It was no coincidence that the study of nation-building commenced precisely in the 1960s. This was the decade when decolonization in Africa and Asia led to the creation of dozens of new states. In three years alone, between 1960 and 1962, the organization called The United *Nations* gained 28 new members. Many observers, however, felt that when speaking of these recently admitted states the term ‘nation’ was in many cases a misnomer. The new states were ‘artificial’; their populations consisted of many disparate ethnic groups speaking different languages and lacking any sense of common identity (see e.g. Emerson 1960). At best, they had a long process of nation-building ahead of them. The study of ‘nation-building’ was intended to highlight the crucial difference between these wannabe nation-states and the ‘real’ ones. Thus, from the very inception the study of nation-building involved a strong element of comparison between ‘old’ and new states (Deutsch and Foltz 1963).

A new massive wave of state creation followed after the collapse of the two multiethnic Communist states in Europe/Eurasia – Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> From the ashes of the former Yugoslavia no less than seven new states emerged.<sup>2</sup> All of them had a former existence as a substate unit, a republic or province in the disintegrated state. Within the confines of the communist political system they had undergone a nation-building process of sorts (Bunce 1999; Roeder 2007). They had their own institutions, symbols, and other paraphernalia; even so, the identities and loyalties of their respective populations were often highly contested and in several instances led to the outbreak of civil wars. The leaders of these states in various ways and with differing strength try to foster a sense of common identity among their denizens and to link this identity to the state. The new, post-cold war nations, however, are marred with many of the same obstacles to nation-building that could be found in the former colonies, including a plethora of cultural and ethnic groups, some of which felt a stronger ownership to the state than others.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, one new state was created when Czechoslovakia split in two in 1993.

<sup>2</sup> One of these – Kosovo – is currently recognized by only 65 of the UN’s 192 member states.

## **Objective**

The objective of this project is to determine the strategies, strength and effectiveness of nation-building in the Western Balkans. In a first step *the variations of nation-building activities* will be mapped in Albania and the new states in the former Yugoslavia, using existing sources of information and data. In a second step the impact of the various nation-building strategies will be *measured and compared* using new survey data.

## **The focus of this project**

In contemporary political science and journalism the term ‘nation-building’ is used in very different ways, leading to often considerable confusion. To some authors it denotes processes of identity consolidation and ‘national awakening’ among state-less ethnic groups (see e.g. Connor 1994). Others use it as a term for institutional construction and reconstruction of failed states, usually in the wake of war, such as American-led ‘nation-building’ in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq (see e.g. Fukuyama 2006). Our usage of the term differs from both of these definitions. We reserve ‘nation-building’ for *strategies of identity consolidation within states* and distinguish it from ‘state-building’. The latter term in our usage pertains to the administrative, economic, and military groundwork of functional states, the hard aspects of state construction as it were. Nation-building, in contrast, concerns only the soft aspects of state consolidation, such as the construction of a shared identity and sense of unity in the state population. This distinction, if not universally accepted, is at least rather common in political science literature ( Birch 1989, 40; Brubaker 1996, 80-83)

To be sure, the issues of state-building and nation-building are closely interconnected. In the modern world a state, any state, is expected to provide its citizens with distinct services and benefits, such as external and internal security. While we neither will nor can keep ‘state-building’ out of the project, we will not conduct any original research on this. Instead we will refer to accessible statistics and the results of research conducted by others, as background factors for the study of ‘nation-building’ (see below) and concentrate on *state strategies for the manufacture and manipulation of cultural and historical symbols* intended to create a sense of nationhood in a population.

## **Symbolic nation-building**

Lars Erik Blomqvist has claimed that ‘history had produced no single society where the power of symbols has not been recognized. Power has ... always made use of symbols, partly to signify its superior status and partly to forge a bond of identity between rulers and ruled’ (Arvidsson and Blomqvist 1987, 7). Intriguingly, this is a point on which a ‘constructivist’ like Eric Hobsbawm and a ‘perennialist’ like Anthony Smith are in complete agreement. Hobsbawm points out that states and regimes in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries ‘had every reason to reinforce, if they could, state patriotism with the sentiments and symbols of “imagined community”, wherever and however they originated, and to concentrate them upon themselves’ (Hobsbawm 1990, 91). Smith for his part argues that ““nation-building” is not simply a matter of establishing the appropriate institutions... It is one that involves ceaseless re-interpretations, rediscoveries and reconstructions; each generation must re-fashion national institutions and stratification systems in the light of the myths, memories, values and symbols of the “past”” (Smith 1987, 207). Neither of these scholars, however, in their own research moves beyond general statements supported by random examples. By contrast, we aim at a systematic comparison of seven cases, analysed along the same four parameters in all cases.

## **Methodologies. Framework of analysis**

Nation-building, as defined here, may be said to consist of two elements.

1. Deliberate homogenization of the population’s political-cultural identity;

## 2. Policies to link this identity to the state.

Populations may already be more or less homogenous. To the degree that they are, the task of state nation-builders is greatly simplified: it will consist in harnessing this pre-existing identity to the state wagon. To be sure, state leaders may also choose to pursue a nation-building strategy that goes against the grain of the dominant identity in the population, but they do so at their own peril.

The term ‘political-cultural identity’, as used above, is too big and undifferentiated for analytical purposes. Populations may be homogenous in some respects and heterogeneous in other. In those cases where the identity of a population diverges on some parameters and converges on others, an obvious strategy for state leaders will be to focus on the unifying parameters, while at the same time deemphasize and depoliticize the divisive aspects.

In this study we single out four parameters of identity controversies often found in the the Western Balkans: religious culture, ethnic culture, historical imagination, and geographical imagination.

*Parameter 1. Religious culture.* Jose Casanova (1994) has convincingly argued that in the modern world religion retains, and in some societies has recaptured, a crucial public position. This project will focus on the extent to which religious symbols and religious identities are regimented by state authorities for political purposes. An example could be the discussions on which role the Catholic church should play in contemporary Croatian national identity and Orthodoxy in Serbia and Macedonia (see e.g. Perica 2002; Kolstø 2010), or the Albanian authorities’ secularist policies aimed at strengthening a cross-religious sense of national unity (Endresen 2010). A religious policy that gives one particular religion a greater symbolic prominence in the state than other religions will in effect undermine the nation-building project and lead to questions about the sincerity of this project.

*Parameter 2. Ethnic culture.* Interethnic relations is a huge topic in the Western Balkans. This project, however, will focus on ethnic issues only to the extent that they are included in a nation-building strategy. Five of the new states in the Yugoslavia have a ‘titular nation’, that is, an ethnic group which the state is named after. This group is – sometimes vaguely, at other times more explicitly – regarded as the ‘state-building nation’, while the other ethnic groups are included in the ‘state-nation’ as ‘national minorities’. To the degree that the titular ethnic group is granted a higher degree of ‘ownership’ in the state-nation than other ethnic group, this greatly complicates nation-building.

Some of the new states distinguishes between (for instance) ‘the people of Macedonia’ and ‘the Macedonian people’. The former term refers to the nation in the political, encompassing sense as we use it in our research, while the latter is ethnic and refers to the titular group only. To the extent that the official nation-building policy takes its symbolic starting point in the ethnic rather than in the political nation, this policy may easily turn out to be counter-productive: it alienates the minorities rather than give them a sense of belonging. Their only route to become full-fledged members of the ‘nation’ (and not just citizens of the state) is to undergo assimilation, a process which in many cases is strongly resisted by both minorities themselves and by majorities.

Bosnia and Kosovo do not have any titular nationality. In Bosnia the national flag was after long discussions explicitly designed not to reflect the ethnic traditions of any group, but nevertheless remains hotly disputed (Kolstø 2006b). One part of the country, the entity called

Republika Srpska – ‘The Serbian republic’ – is vigorously pursuing a separate nation-building policy aimed at a strongest possible disconnection from the rest of the country.

*Parameter 3. Historical imagination.* In new states ‘newness’ is not regarded as a positive quality: instead, old age is an ideal and state leaders frequently impute onto their political entity a somewhat far-fetched antiquity (Kolstø 2005, 21-23). The founding of the state is pushed back into the remote past; the new state is only the latest incarnation of a perennial state-building project. What is projected into the past, moreover, is not only ‘the state’ but precisely the *nation-state*. The (titular) nation is said to be as old as, or older than, the first state or protostate established on its current territory. Symbolically, this is reflected in the erection of statues to the putative founder of the state; in the commemoration of historical dates, in state insignia, and the like. For instance, Macedonia is today presented as the continuation of the state established by the father of Alexander the Great, Philip II of Macedonia, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. If this were true, this would make Macedonia the oldest nation-state in the Balkans. When it is the history of the titular nation that is being projected into the remote past and ‘rediscovered’ there for nation-building purposes, this underscores the ethnic character of the nation and further alienates the minorities.

State leaders not only construct an antiquity for their states, but also draw upon more recent history to legitimize their nation-building project. In particular, memories about the wars they won – and in fact also the ones they lost – are important building blocs in the construction of nationhood. Paul Connerton has shown how commemorative ceremonies and rituals function to ‘communicate shared values within the group and to reduce internal dissention’ (Connerton 1989, 49). In some cases, however, this can turn out to be counterproductive in a nation-building strategy. In some states the putative members of the nation may identify with – and even have fought on – different sides in a conflict, and what some see as victories and heroes, others regard as national disasters and traitors. This is the case for instance with the memory of World War II in Croatia (Pavlakovic 2008 and 2010; Kolstø 2010). In such cases it requires considerable acumen of nation-builders to create harmonizing historical narratives for nation-building purposes.

*Parameter 4. Geographical imagination.* Nation-building strategies have two prongs: they aim at creating unity within and difference without. The last aspect is no less important than the first. Dissociation – from the Other – follows association with ‘Our Own’ like a shadow. Identity building is relational and contrastive (Barth 1969; Hall 1996; Cohen 2000 and 2003 [1985];). It is not enough to tear down walls among members of the putative nation; one must also erect imaginary boundaries around them that separate them from the outside world.

The boundary construction is often selective: Rather than drawing a border around the national group that is equally strong on all sides, the differences that distinguish the nation from one neighbour may be magnified out of all proportion, while boundaries in other directions may be de-emphasized. Instead of insisting on the uniqueness of the nation, the nation-builders now include the nation into some larger and allegedly superior cultural entity that enhances its status *vis-à-vis* other groups who do not belong to it. Within the geographical area covered by this research the most important axis of differentiation is belonging or not belonging to Europe. Virtually all states in the West Balkans define their nation as ‘European’. The interesting and significant identity contrasts, therefore, do not show up when we ask about where they place their *own* nation in this dichotomy, but where they *place their neighbours*. As Bakić-Hayden (1992) has pointed out, the Balkan nations often engage in ‘competitive orientalism’, placing themselves in Europe and their neighbours in ‘the Orient’.

### **Rival nation-building projects**

Sometimes, state leaders are not at liberty to ignore or depoliticize potentially divisive identity issues in the population. This is the case when forces outside the state leadership, from within or without the country, insist on putting these issues on the political agenda. To the extent that the state leaders formulate strategies to confront these challenges – as they inevitably will have to do – we can talk of *reactive nation-building strategies*, in contrast to the proactive strategies in which they themselves take the initiative.

Groups with alternative visions of the nation may not only be able to politicize a certain parameter, but may also capture the political power and get a chance to put their alternative nation-building into practice. In these instances we have a succession of nation-building programs with different vectors. A rival nation-building project may be a project that has been pursued by a political group which has previously been in power, but is now in opposition, or a program for a group that has never been able to capture power.

### **Containers of symbolism**

The four parameters of symbolic nation-building outlined above – religious culture, ethnic culture, historical imagination, and geographical imagination – may find expression through a variety of what we will refer to as ‘containers of symbolism’. Examples of such containers are:

- presidential addresses and official policy statements;
- textbooks and school curricula;
- commemorations and national holidays;
- flags, coats of arms, and national anthems;
- stamps, coins and bank notes;
- monumental buildings, museums, statues, and monuments;
- naming and renaming of streets, buildings, parks, etc;
- prestige projects like national airlines and national sports programs.

This list is not exhaustive; other containers may well exist and when the project is started and we have had a chance to examine in greater detail the peculiarities of nation-building in the various states included, we may decide to include also some other containers. Even those, these will be the most important sources that will be mined for symbolic content.

### **Nation-building strategies: From qualitative to quantitative analysis**

To map the variations of nation-building projects in the new states in the former Yugoslavia today, extremely important as it is, will only be the first step of this project. The next and more audacious one is to try to measure *the results* of these strategies: do they have the desired effect, or are they a waste of effort?

Only a few scholars have discussed the effectiveness of nation-building as understood in this project, and most of them in a cursory, off-hand manner only. Joseph Rothschild (1981, 228) argues that ‘the state does command integrative resources that have enabled it, in a number of historical cases, to mould the demographic raw material of its populations into authentic, organic political and cultural communities, that is, into nations’. John Breuilly (1985, 24), on the other hand, suggests that state-initiated nation-building ‘will have very little effect on the population’, but he emphasizes that this is ‘largely speculation’. Is it possible to move beyond speculations and theory and find any empirical answers to these important questions? We believe it is, and propose one method that we will employ in this project.

*The criterion of failure vs. success must be the correspondence between the idea of nationhood that is propounded by the state leaders and the collective self-understanding (identity) of the population.*

Failure would mean that the state does not gain acceptance in the population as their *nation-state*. Conversely, success would mean that the population *identifies* with the state and for that reason attaches its *loyalty* to it. National identification and political loyalty, thus, are two aspects of the same process. By the same token, a state that achieves the loyalty of the population enjoys, by definition, *legitimacy*. It should be emphasized that it is the state and not the regime that enjoys legitimacy, even if many state leaders try to collapse these two kinds of loyalties into one. It is, of course, quite possible to be in hard opposition to the current regime and still regard oneself as a ‘patriot’, indeed, often as more patriotic than the powers that be.

We still need a method to operationalise this criterion for nation-building success. Here, we will use Albert Hirschman’s trichotomy of ‘exit, voice and loyalty’ as a template for the measurement of nation-building success (Hirschman 2004). For our purposes, however, the model will have to be adjusted somewhat. For Hirschman ‘loyalty’ is one possible reaction to decline (in firms, organizations and states), while we will regard loyalty as an indication that the nation-project is *accepted* by the population. Moreover, while Hirschman discussed only the *individual* reactions of the customers, members, and citizens, we will introduce a distinction between individual and collective responses. Thus adjusted the Hirschman model looks like this:

	<i>Exit</i>	<i>Voice</i>	<i>Loyalty</i>
<i>Individual responses</i>	emigration (actual, or express wish for)	Expression of sympathy with rival nation-state project	Expression of sympathy with existing nation-state project
<i>Collective responses</i>	secession (actual, or express sympathy for)	organize politically for rival nation-state project	support politically existing nation-state project

Official data on *actions*, such as emigration and political organization, will be found in available statistics and handbooks. To measure attitudes we will organize large-scale surveys. We will engage a polling institute to survey 1,500 respondents in each state. The questionnaire will in all cases contain a number of identical questions. In addition, they will in each country contain a number of country-specific questions that reflect the peculiarities of nation-building in the various countries. Although this vast endeavour will inevitably be costly, we have collected quotes from several pollsters in all countries and found out that one serious polling institute, IPSOS, undertake it for 111,317 euros. Project coordinator Pål Kolstø has previous experience with opinion surveys, having conducted polls in five post-Soviet states.

**The problem of coding and how to alleviate it**

A comparative research of complex social actions and phenomena will always have to deal with the problem of coding: in order to become comparable along a certain axis or parameter, they must be simplified and pigeon-holed into one specific box in a matrix. Dubious or wrong coding may entail serious distortions down the analytical line. The coding problem is aggravated the higher up on the scale of abstraction we move. This we will combat by moving *down* as far as possible on this scale. Even so, a number of questions on relatively high levels

of abstraction are unavoidable in our research. Thus, for instance, when in our discussion of ‘geographical imagination’ we will have to code the various nation-building projects as either Europe-oriented, or oriented towards Asia /the Balkans. This will have to be done by analyzing various political statements, actions and symbols that may sometimes be ambiguous. One of the great advantages with a study of symbols, however, is that the questions in our surveys can often be made very specific. Thus, on religious identity we may for instance ask very specific questions such as:

- In Macedonia: Do you support the erection of the Orthodox Millennium cross on the Vodno Mountain overlooking Skopje in 2001?
- In Croatia: Do you think that Catholic bishops ought to participate in the annual Bleiburg commemorations of Ustasha victims?
- In Montenegro: Do you support the decision to demolish the Serbian Orthodox church on Mount Rumija in 2005?

Since the questions we ask differ in various countries, we are now seemingly moving into a terrain where comparison becomes impossible, but that is not the case. To reiterate, what we want to compare across cases is *support* for the various nation-building projects, not their actual *content*. The challenge, therefore, is to identify the issues in each country that are truly contested and can separate the wheat from the tares on the identity question, not to identify issues that can be found in all countries.

While symbols are multivalent and may carry with them entire worldviews on the ‘inside’, they are most of the time also wonderfully concrete on the ‘outside’. This means that two persons may support the same symbols on very different philosophical grounds, *but they nevertheless both support them* and that is what concerns us here. Thus for instance, to return to the role Alexander the Great plays in the current Macedonian nation-building project, Albanians tend to regard him as (at least) half Illyrian and therefore one of *their* ancestors. Even if the ethnic Macedonians and the ethnic Albanians interpret his legacy differently, the Alexander cult may in fact draw them closer together.

### **Background factors**

The combination of idiography—the country-specific content analysis of nation-building in the various national projects—with quantitative analysis will take us further in the study of comparative nation-building than any previous researchers have ever attempted. Even so, it is important to recognise the limitations of the adopted method. It will enable us to determine to what degree there is a *correspondence* between the nation-building project pursued by the state leaders and the self-identity of the population, but not the *causal direction* in this relationship. It is conceivable that through their various national programs the state leaders are *not* trying to nudge the identity trajectory of their citizens in a certain direction, but simply flow by the current and articulate and reinforce attitudes that are already prevalent in society. To ascertain whether such a correspondence exists would nevertheless represent a major breakthrough. Moreover, in the cases where our research reveals *a lack of correspondence* we may, we believe, interpret this in causal terms as a *failure* of nation-building: the nation-building project has had no or little *effect*. Thus, what we may call ‘the Rothschild-Roeder hypothesis’ is, as so often in the social sciences, easier to falsify than to verify.

Even if we have to be careful with the conclusions we draw from the survey results with regard to causality, we can still push the quantitative part of our research one step further. We may ask about the *preconditions* for a high/low degree of correspondence between a certain nation-building program and societal attitudes. It is a reasonable assumption that certain

background factors are more conducive to nation-building than others. These background factors may be taken from various population statistics and aggregated indices compiled by other researchers, and our survey data may be measured against them. Regression analysis may tell us whether they have a significant impact or not. Such factors may be divided into the following categories:

*Successful state-building (as defined above). Expected modal tendency: loyalty*

- GDP per capita;
- unemployment rate;
- crime rate;
- Human Development Index;
- Failed State Index.

The assumption here is that successful state-building facilitates successful nation-building .

*Heterogeneity in the population. Expected modal tendency: exit or voice*

- ethnic heterogeneity;
- religious heterogeneity;
- linguistic heterogeneity;
- economic heterogeneity (measured by the GINI-index).

The assumption here is that a high degree of heterogeneity complicates successful nation-building (cfr. the definition of nation-building as deliberate attempts to homogenize the population). Our data will allow us to determine which ethnic, religious and economic groups that most strongly reject -- or embrace -- the nation-building project.

*Past history of violence between/among the various population groups: expected modal tendency: exit*

- The Minorities at Risk Project data set
- PRIO and University of Uppsala data set on armed conflicts

The assumption here is that this tendency is related to the length and severity of the violent conflict, and inversely related to the time that has passed since the conflict.

*Democracy. Expected modal tendency: unclear*

- Level of democracy (taken from Freedom House Index);

In this case we do not know which modal tendency to expect. On the one hand it, seems like a reasonable assumption is that nation-building through participation (= democracy) will give the population a sense of ownership in the state and further successful symbolic nation-building (loyalty). At the same time, democracy makes it possible to promote also rival nation-building projects (voice). However, history has shown a number of examples of authoritarian/totalitarian leaders who have been wizards of symbolic manipulation, Hitler being a case in point. This means that we may expect loyalty also at low or no democracy. A possibility is that the co-variation could be curvilinear: loyalty at both very high and very low levels of democracy. In any case, if our research documents that there is no or low correspondence between democracy and successful nation-building that would be an extremely interesting finding in its own right.

### **Institutional partners**

- Institute of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages at the University of Oslo
- Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka, Croatia.
- Center for Political Studies, Zagreb, CPI (Centar za politološka istraživanja)

## Research team

The research team will consist of

- Project coordinator Pål Kolstø, who will spend 50 per cent of his *research time* as professor at the University of Oslo on this project. For one year he will be paid 50 per cent of his salary from the project and will be able to spend 66 per cent of his *total time* on the project.
- Cecilie Endresen, Ph.D., who will be paid 100 per cent salary as project member for six months.
- Vjeran Pavlakovic, local project coordinator for our Croatian partner institution, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, University of Rijeka. Pavlakovic will spend 50 per cent of his research time as associate professor at the University of Rijeka on this project. Other researchers at the University of Rijeka who will be associated with the project include Vjekoslav Perica, Vanni D'Alessio, and Mila Orlić.
- Survey analyst from Center for Political Studies, Zagreb, CPI (Centar za politološka istraživanja), who will be in charge of analyzing survey data.
- Local country participants in Serbia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro (Pavlakovic will cover Croatia and Endresen Albania). Country participants will be selected among the top social scientist and humanities scholars in their respective countries.
- Subcontractor: IPSOS - Strategic Puls, survey institute with offices in all countries included in the project.

## Research output

The research team will produce one edited volume together which will be published by a renowned American or British publisher. We aim for a level 2 publisher. The book will also be issued in a parallel BCS edition, which will be published by a Croatian publisher. Kolstø and Endresen will edit the English-language book and Pavlakovic the BCS version. Kolstø will also write a theory chapter for the books.

Country participants will in addition to their respective book chapters also write one specialized article on symbolic nation-building in 'their' country in an international refereed journal.

The survey analyst will be co-author of data-based articles and book chapters.

We will arrange two workshops for all participants, both in Croatia. The main topic of the first workshop will be to hammer out the survey questionnaires. Prior to the workshop all country participant will have presented a list of possible questions on nation-building to include in the questionnaire in their country. The second workshop will be devoted to a presentation and discussion of draft chapters to the book.

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