MILITARIZATION, STATE CAPTURE AND CONTAMINATED SOCIETY — CASE STUDY SERBIA (2010—2020)

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Abstract

The key-idea of the paper is that the contemporary social science needs a new and original terminological determination to describe the actual dynamics and character of social changes which are happening during the last decade (2010—2020) in the Western Balkans (especially in the case of Serbia), and that the term state capture has become dysfunctional in describing contemporary social phenomena and relations. This paper proposes a new theoretical perspective and argues that the state capture should be replaced in modern theory by a new term which better explains the real political, socio-economic situation — contaminated society. The term contaminated society is thus introduced into the field of theory as a new and innovative, or original contribution to the analysis and understanding of certain social phenomena and relations present in current Serbia. As a case-study, the examples testifying on growing the specific form of populism — militarization of a public space — as a socio-political context of the contemporary Serbian society are presented.

Keywords: *populism, militarism, captured state, contaminated society*

There is still not a sufficient degree of agreement in the modern social theory on the meanings of terms *populism and militarization,* while the term *state capture* is still more present in public policy papers and strategic documents and reports than in scientific papers. Almost all the concepts or meanings have been constantly re-examined and reinterpreted by scholars in recent decades. The need for such re-thinking is contributed by the development of social science, but also by very dynamic social, political and economic changes going throughout the world.

Populist's precipitating breakdown of democracy

The term populism is used as one of the most appropriate description of the contemporary political practice and, as such, the term is present in media, as well in scientific researches, as one of the most frequent terms last decade. Even, in the last two decades there has been a kind of reanimation of this term which follows the modern course of work in the political space of Europe and it is recognized by

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many scholars as the "rise of populism". This trend, in the current social-political circumstances across the globe, has imposed the need for additional interpretations and redefining the notion of populism.

Contemporary political practice makes populism a diffused concept, as Ilze Balcere has stated and explained that in the professional literature the term populism is usually described as three main conceptual approaches — a specific style of doing politics, an internal organizational form of party and thin ideology (Balcere 2017). Balcere also described populism as a phenomenon that could potentially be found among right-wing, left-wing and centrist parties, citing Tjitska Ackermann's interpretation that it quickly became evident that the populist phenomenon was not limited to the radical right only.

The attitude that populism is a discursive strategy employed by political outsiders on both, the left and right extremes of the political spectrum, is also represented by Bart Bonikowski (Bonikowski 2016). As an example, he offers empirical analyses that he made with Noam Gidron on U.S. presidential discourse when they have conclude that the variation of campaigns and language used by the same politician suggests that populism is not a deeply held ideology, but rather a rhetorical strategy, or what political sociologists call a "frame."

According to Patrick Liddiard, populists in government can also erode the institutional checks on executive power necessary for durable democracy, even in previously resilient advanced democracies, and populist mobilization has precipitated democratic breakdown in the wealthiest democracies to ever revert to autocracy: Turkey, Venezuela, and Thailand (Liddiard 2019). Liddiard predicts that populists are more likely to have future electoral success in the subregions that have weaker connections between voters and parties (Central and Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, the Andes, Central America, and Southern Africa) than other subregions. By describing the examples of three countries with different political systems and ideologies of rulers and ruling political parties, also provides an argument to those who argue that populism is an instrument of governance represented on all sides of the political spectrum (usually seen in a very narrow and one-dimensional pattern — as *left* and *right*).

It is necessary to mention that the still widely applicable analysis of the political model that operates with left and right benchmarks needs to be replaced by a new one in which benchmarks are the degree of militarization, totalitarianism, authoritarianism, i.e. civility of society, pluralism and tolerance. Such an approach offers a wealth of material for understanding populism not as isolated or predominantly present on the political right (comparing to the left), but as a term referring to the level of centralization, unification, uniformity, totalitarianism, dogmatism, loyalty, hegemony and mobilization within a particular political discourse, in relation

to a particular topic (most often it is a determinant of identity) and within any society or community, regardless of the political system, social order or historical period. Populism is seduction to obedience. Understood in this way, populism applied in political practice remains without potential for emancipatory action.

It doesn't matter if we deal with populism as skills or attitudes, as a medium through which the message is conveyed or as the essence of what is said, as hardware or software, or populism we understand as both — a form and a content (Pabriks 2017), or in populism we see the same as Balcere — one of the most widely used concepts in today's politics, media and public discourse, actually, with numerous possible derivatives of the same, populism always occurs from political power and on the political scene — in an interaction with the audience. Populism strives for performativity. That is why the audience is so important for the success of populism. Populism is like a magician's trick that aims to seduce, enchant, and overshadow the audience so that people do not see and understand certain things, but so that they believe and think exactly what the magician wants them to think and believe. Like an allegory about the eve of Nazism by Thomas Mann in "Mario and the Magician". Populism becomes impotent when it is unmasked and demystified, when the magic trick is illuminated and presented from different perspectives. Pluralism and constructive criticism deconstruct and demystify populism. Populism only ostensibly advocates and agitates for something that could be described as "the general will of the people," as Rousseau would call it. In fact, populism formulating, labelling and imposing a certain option as something that must be accepted by everyone as common — the need, interest and desire of the masses. That is why any populism leads to totalitarianism, and any totalitarianism is populists.

In this article populism is interpreted as a certain political management and marketing model. Populism is understood as a political strategy or method, which makes populism part of the style of communication (in a broader sense), or public relations (in a narrower sense) of some political leader.

Inhalation of toxic militant-populism

Populism and militarism are strongly interdependent social phenomena that have numerous pervasive elements; even symbiosis is almost organic and inevitable in order for such a political system to survive at all.

Michael Klare describes militarism as the "tendency of a nation's military apparatus (which includes the armed forces and associated paramilitary, intelligence and bureaucratic agencies) to assume ever-increasing control over the lives and behaviour of its citizens; and for military goals (preparation for war, acquisition of weaponry, development of military industries) and military values (centralization of authority, hierarchization, discipline and conformity, combativeness and xenophobia)

increasingly to dominate national culture, education, the media, religion, politics and the economy, at the expense of civilian institutions." (Klare 1978, 121).

Or, as Hugh Gusterson and Catherine Besteman pictorially describeds, militarism "is capillary, shape-shifting, always in motion as it constructs threats, enrolls constituencies, colonizes cultural life, and generates new loci of resistance" (Gusterson & Besteman 2019, 4).

Evans, G. and Jeffrey, N. defined militarism as the "subordination of civil society to military values" (Graham & *Newnham* 1998, 325). A "militant" type of society becomes possible only after a certain period of continuous inhalation of toxic militant-populism. Militarization is not only about producing weapons and war materials, but also about producing citizens, gender identities, family forms, language, ethics, morals, ways of being and ways of seeing the world is already general and common wisdom, as many scholars agreed about (Frühstuck 2007; Bickford 2011; Gonzalez 2010).

Obviously, the process is very complex and implies that militarization is always fighting and striving to dominate the public sphere and, also, non-military social activity, essentials and existential. To militarized society means to impose understanding of the security as the most important public interest and priority as a common believes of all the citizens; to be obsessed of constant creation of feeling such as "being safe and secure", "being jeopardize" or "being victim". That is why producing of different types of crisis it is just a manipulative tactic, a task for political marketing and public policy stakeholders where fear is constant target. To create a specific atmosphere of being dedicated to the issue of common defense — that should be the focus and occupation of people on a daily level. To glorify and celebrate the *military* as an approach to the final solution, as the most efficient method and the best instrument, the ideal vision. In such a society, the government is devoted to military-oriented, not civilian-oriented strategic goals, and society is nurturing military-centralized, opposite civilian-centralized, political culture and collective memory.

Based on the views of Klare, Evans, Jeffrey and other mentioned scholars, it can be concluded that when a government for a long time applies militarism to increase control over the lives and behavior of its citizens and use militarism as the dominant discourse of national culture, education, media, politics and economy, that has also a toxic effect on gender identities, family forms, language, ethics... actually a total of social substance.

Toxicated society — case study Serbia

In searching to assess up to which level the assumption about toxicated/militarized society is applicable in the case of Serbia today and how this certain term is related to the actual and unique characteristic of the contemporary Serbian society

(2010—2020), and can we argue that the process of militarization is part of the strategic change (means planed), several criteria were applied:

a   All the cases are unique in the history of Serbia,

b   All the cases are related to a certain period of time (2010—2020),

c   All the cases are organized or facilitated by the state executive government,

d   In all the cases are clear transfer and overflow from the military sector into the civilian sector,

e   All the cases are multidimensional and multisectoral interconnected,

f   None of the cases is just an ad-hoc event; they are repeating in the same or similar shape, becoming a part of the systemic events and behavior.

Many examples have been found that meet the criteria. The list of the examples below could be much longer. For this article, just few are presented:

1. In spite that Minister of Defense is not military officer, but civilian servant, and has no military rank, he very often wears paramilitary clothes. These clothes are not an official uniform and the symbols on that imitation of the uniform are not official symbols, but some improvisation which should give the visual impression that they are official army symbols.

2. A great spectacular (as media describe it) Military-Police Parade "Defense of freedom", was held in 2019 in Niš, a town in southern Serbia. That was the first and the biggest of this kind of parade organized out of Belgrade. Initially, the parade was planned for March 24, the 20th anniversary of NATO launching airstrikes against Serbia and Montenegro.

3. The International Armament and Military Equipment Fairs have been held permanently each two years at the Belgrade Fair since 2010. Every new event is exceeding the results of the previous one.

4. The largest public television station in Serbia, Radio Television of Serbia, used 70 cameras to TV broadcast an in-live of 9-hours military maneuver at 2018. It was the largest and longest TV broadcast of a military exercise in the history of Serbia.

5. From 2019, as part of the regular school curriculum, high school students attend military education classes on the role and tasks of the Serbian Army and how to become a professional soldier. This is a completely new program and nothing similar has existed in Serbia since 1991, the time of the break-up of Yugoslavia (ruled by the Communist Party in a one-party system).

6. Football players and fans of the "Red Star" club installed a tank, a military vehicle, in front of their football stadium. They drove another military vehi-

cle through the centre of Belgrade. Police did not react. Even the football fans got support from The Minister of Internal Affairs.

7. The ruling political party, Serbian Progressive Party (SPP)[2], very hierarchically organized, with strong party discipline and managed by absolutely authoritarian role of the president of the party (and president of the Republic of Serbia), is the biggest party in Europe and the number of members was continually growing during the last ten years (about 10% of the total population). In the parliamentary elections in 2020, after 8 years of ruling the state, the SPP won the most convincing victory since its founding and won the largest number of seats in the republican parliament. Most of the democratic opposition political parties and citizens boycotted these elections, and political analysts assess the work of this parliament as one-party.

8. The constant increase in the number of extreme political organizations and their actions, the increase in the number of magazines on weapons, a huge number of murals and graffiti on the streets glorifying people convicted of war crimes, organizing camps where children carry wooden rifles and learn to throw bombs, foundation of nongovernmental organisations offering to citizens trainings in handling weapons, building huge monuments to warriors from the far past, selling replicas of weapons in shopping-malls... are just some of the examples that can supplement this list.

Militaristic populist goals

The relationship between militarism and populism can be easily recognized in the comment by military analysts and journalist from Serbia, Aleksandar Radić: "We have a government that is obsessed with media presentation. And really, it would be best for them to make a military brigade for parades and ceremonies. And that these people train all year round and whenever they need it, they appear on television. And to show how nice they are marching."[3]

Two[4] years later, commenting on military exercise on Pešter 2021, A. Radić explained that "Pešter has primarily the function of being the reason for a live television broadcast. Watch carefully how many TV shots you will see with politicians and how many with the army. The army is just a decoration to create an image of

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[2] The SPP is the largest party in the national parliament (42% of the MP), runs the government on the national level and all of local municipalities, and the party president is also the president of the state.

[3] http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a555253/Strategija-odbrane-i-Zakon-o-vojsci-ministru-veca--ovlascenja-i-cuvanje-RS.html, N1, Petar Gajić, 24. dec. 2019.

[4] The next two paragraphs were added during the preparation of the publication and were not part of the conference presentation.

politicians for public opinion. [...] In practice, in Europe, no one makes live television broadcasts of military exercises. There is no need to put so much pressure on the public and to create an atmosphere that we are a garrison-state that someone will attack any moment. [...] If we continue like this, in 5 years we will have more military parades than Yugoslavia from 1945 until the breakup."[5]

The same military exercise was the motive for the former head of the Military Security Agency, General Momir Stojanovic, to explain that "Other armies have practice to organize such military exercises also, but they are organized without fanfare and without so much presentation in public. [...] Never before has been so much media pomp about what the army is supposed to do according to the constitution. [...] What has been happening in recent years is that everything in this country is happening exclusively by the orders, approval and ideas of one person, I think that does not send a message to some potential centers that could endanger the security of our country or territorial integrity. What has been happening in recent years is in the function of an internal market-war. We don't need to parade; we don't need so many parades and so many public military exercises. Public exposure of the army in any form, even in the form of a parade, is unnecessary."[6]

What can be the function of this kind of militaristic populism, the propaganda and popularization of the army, uniforms, weapons…? Some of conclusions can be:

a) To raise the political rating and political authority of the government.

b) To create new national myths.

c) To flirt with traditionalism.

d) To mobilize nationalists and militarists as political activists.

e) To create collective paranoia as a psychological mechanism for manipulating public opinion.

f) To impose militarization as a collectively wanted and expected response to national vulnerability and threat to national security.

g) To create legitimacy and justification for the investment in the military industry and the purchase of weapons.

h) To cover up or justify privatization of the military industry.

i) To animate public attention, make a social life more dynamic and impose militant topics (and language) as permanently present in every-day life.

j) To make uniforms popular and to involve citizens into sharing government's enthusiasm for (para)militarism.

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[5] N1 Beograd, Novi dan, broadcasted 27. jun. 2021.

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVCBHj9J7-U&t=1408s, July 6, 2021. "Radić: Vežba na Pešteru pokazno gađanje iza kojeg stoje trgovci oružjem" (Radić: An exercise on Pešter is a demonstration shooting behind which are arms dealers).

Truth mutated into lies and deceptions

The *state capture* has become an almost unavoidable determinant used to describe the executive government methods of managing and the standard of the human rights and freedom of all of the Western Balkan countries. The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, in their "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament" (2019) comment that today, the countries (Western Balkans) show clear elements of state capture, including links with organized crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration and, also, organized crime's foothold on the Western Balkans remains strong, whether in terms of trafficking in human beings, drugs and weapons or risk of criminal infiltration of the political and economic systems. Another explanation coming from the EU Institute for Security Studies, also dated in 2019, saying that captured political systems, the suppression of independent institutions and weak law enforcement are all features that accompany corruption, as is standing in the publication "Balkan Futures — Three Scenarios for 2025" (Čeperković & Gaub 2018).

Nives Miošić-Lisjak from Croatia, in her political analyses published in the "Captured state in the Balkans" (HBS 2017) explained that capture produces numerous negative effects — from creating new or widening existing inequalities, through generating a sense of inability and pointlessness of public action, to political apathy and disinterest in politics on the part of citizens. Even, she points out that the citizens are aware of the mechanisms leading to capture, but they consider them to be part of the "normal" and sometimes "expected" behaviour of politicians. In the same publication, diplomat and journalist from Sarajevo, Zlatko Dizdarević, brings more critical observations and questions when he is saying that an old truth mutate into lies and deceptions, while the new criteria for good and evil, smart and stupid, wise and snobbish, have already become established. He is asking how we came to the situation that successful maintenance of people in this state of slavery and obstruction — is a planned and carefully sustained business.

The term *state capture* is much more related to the economy-relations and operating with economic categories, which is logically, since that the author of the term state capture is the World Bank. Also published in the "Captured state in the Balkans" Đorđe Pavićević, professor from the Faculty of Political Science from Belgrade (Serbia), explained that the usual conceptions of *state capture* are not comprehensive enough to capture all important elements of the new style since that leaves many important features out of sight. According to Pavićević, a more precise qualification of the Serbian state could be given in terms of a hijacked and appropriated state. Still, since the term *hijacked* or *appropriated* state, which also can be

easily associated with an economic issue, can mean that this term(s) is also not comprehensive enough. So, why do we need some new term? The answer is to make the understanding and illumination of a disquieting trend in contemporary politics in the Western Balkans — the militaristic populism — more theoretically precise.

In the case of *state capture*, citizens still think that corruption is not normal and welcome, citizens are able to distinguish what is true and what is a lie, what are the criteria for good, what for evil, and what is legal — what is a crime. In the case of *state capture* citizens still have critical attitudes and can define common collective interests in a constructive way and to express expectation from the government to lead the nation in a responsible way by respecting law. In a *contaminated society* they do not. In the case of *state capture*, human rights and freedoms are suppressed; the space for public and political action is very limited and directly controlled by the rulers, while most citizens recognize such a situation as repression and the government as illegitimate. In the case of *state capture*, the popularity of rulers is declining, while in a *contaminated society*, despite large social differences, increasing enrichment of the political elite, *juridical insecurity*, strengthening corruption and diminishing all kinds of human rights and freedoms, the popularity of the ruler grows and the number of members of the ruling party grows.

What else can be recognized as some characteristics of a *contaminated society?* That can be collective disorientation and confusion about the real political situation at the national and international level; blurred & unclear expectations from the future, ideas and vision of development; Anxiety, even Paranoia; socio-economic dysfunction and unproductively; self-isolation from international cooperation, exchange and mobility; Amnesia about the national past; irrational management and misuse of public resources and wrongfully defined public interests; irrational behaviour of the citizens; collective hallucinations and hysteria; lack of critical public opinions and constructive behaviour; diminishing or derogation of capacity of institutions; raised degree of authoritarianism and totalitarianism; creation of social cohesion predominantly around national defence issues and patriotism; created national scientific technological and economic development dependent on and blackmailed by owners of the military industrial complex[7].

Conclusion

The analysis is the beginning of a social change. Any strategy plan, problem-solving strategy or decision-making process directly depends on how some problem

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[7] The term "military-industrial complex" was created in 1961 by Dwight Eisenhower, former U.S. President.

have been analyzed and understood. The way how we do understand the world we are surrounded with we are expressing by using a certain terminology and it is directly related to the process of constructing some political alternative and social change strategies.

Many recent social-political changes in Serbia, among militarization is the dominant one, caused such broad consequences that makes the term *state capture* (as predominant economic term) not comprehensive enough to capture and explain all of the important new social-political characteristics. Cumulative effects of the militaristic populism led to the contamination of public space, public opinions, social relations, political scene and culture, and leave enormous consequences on all kinds of human activity. This type of populism — militaristic populism leads society into military culture. Society contaminated with the military culture is not an inclusive and tolerant society, shows clear symptoms of collective disorder and hardly can interact with other societies and neighboring states in a manner of trust, cooperation and peace, nor can find inner potential to contribute to history with managing global developing goals. More likely, in the best case, that society will be a source only of instability and tensions. In the case of Serbia, the *state capture*, as a process of the economic transformation, followed by militarization, was a pre-stage and it created the foundation of the *contaminated society*.

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