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# **NEWS FROM THE PAST.**

**Survey of the Historical  
Awareness of Serbia's Citizens**

**I**s Serbia living in the past or the present? Are the actions of its political elite and voters motivated by real life or perceptions of the “glorious past”? Is it a typical representative of the “Eastern model of nations”, created and sustained by a blend of the awareness of history, culture and language, the main ingredients of that type of national identity? Are the olden “golden ages” a source, a refuge, or the goal? Do such societies really produce “more history than they can digest” or are they putting off confrontation with the problems of today and their constructive resolution by producing such a myth about themselves? Is this a phenomenon comparable to the “Peter Pan syndrome” at the individual level; is Serbian society refusing to grow up because it feels that everything is safer, warmer, more certain in childhood, i.e. in history?

History seems to be all around us. For numerous historic and present-day reasons, the past is very much present in Serbia's public discourse; it serves as the ultimate political argument, and is the motive for and justification of many actions.

The power of epic poetry lay at the foundations of the upbringing of generations, raised on the myth of the heroic past; history was not only their *magistra vitae* but their commander as well. The eight wars waged between 1875 and 1995 created Serbia's history, yet further mystified its importance as well.<sup>1</sup> It was precisely this prehistory that prompted the communist leadership to write its own "history" when it came to power, a history aimed at overcoming and obliterating the conflicts that had imbued the past of the Yugoslav peoples.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, communist Yugoslavia based its founding myth on its own interpretation of World War II, and the partisan epopee and history, from the one in the movies to the one in the textbooks, was an object of continuous use and abuse.

Historical awareness is one of the major factors constituting a society's value system.<sup>3</sup> Ideas and perceptions of "how we have fared in history" help create the corpus of our perceptions of "ourselves" and "others", the corpus that affects the construction of our judgments of the present and our decisions. History can serve as a good alibi. The public perception of history is the context in which present-day events are inevitably placed. Public perceptions of the past are formed and changed depending on the present-day needs, and each generation writes the history it needs.<sup>4</sup> In dramatic times, "history", that is, the perception of it, undergoes dramatic transformations itself. It changes beyond recognition. Interpretations, even the very "historical facts" can change completely.<sup>5</sup> Some can be "forgotten", and new ones "discovered". These adjustments may require "fine-tuning" as well as "major overhauls".

Serbia has seen two waves of "major overhauls", as well as several intermediate phases of "fine-tuning", on the history site in the past two decades. The first wave of changes in the perceptions of history occurred in the late 1980s, when Slobodan Milošević came to power and the previous communist ideological paradigm was replaced by a nationalist one. And yet again, the ideology that led to it was closely linked to manipulations of history. The Yugoslav peoples had to be envenomed against each other to create a psychological basis for war and the drawing of new ethnic borders.<sup>6</sup> The best basis for fabricating conflicts was again found in history. This operation involved highlighting historic content that presented the history of the Yugoslav peoples as continuous discord and

1 Ljubodrag Dimić, Miroslav Jovanović, Dubravka Stojanović, *Srbija 1804-2004 : tri viđenja ili poziv na dijalog*. Beograd: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2005, pp. 1-7.

2 Đorđe Stanković, Ljubodrag Dimić, *Istoriografija pod nadzorom : prilozi istorije historiografije, I-II*. Beograd: Službeni list SRJ, 1996.

3 Antoni D. Smit, *Nacionalni identitet*. Beograd: Čigoja štampa, 1998.

4 Lisjen Fevr, *Borba za istoriju*. Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 2002, p. 157.

5 Christina Koulouri (ed.), *Clio in the Balkans: the Politics of History Education*. Thessaloniki : Center for democracy and reconciliation in Southeast Europe, 2002.

6 Vesna Pešić, Ružica Rosandić (eds.), *Ratništvo, patriotizam, patrijarhalnost*. Beograd: Centar za antiratnu akciju, 1994.

suppressing the times testifying to their accord. History thus assumed the role of a vanguard as in the mid-eighties. Changes of the past aimed at effecting changes of the present. Violence against the past aimed at sparking violence in the present. We can therefore conclude that history was the first victim of the wars for the Yugoslav heritage, even before they broke out.

The Serbian nation as a collective being was put forward as the main hero of history. Exposed to onslaughts of history, its destiny was fatalistic and preordained.<sup>7</sup> The newly-created history aimed to prove that Serbs had always been on the right side, that they had never waged wars of conquest, that they were the historical winners and that they had never done any harm to their neighbors.<sup>8</sup> This perception was necessary not only to create instantaneous national pride, but to vilify the others as much as possible as well.

The perception of the other is usually there to improve our perceptions of ourselves, but, simultaneously, we need our ideal self-perceptions to additionally humiliate the other.<sup>9</sup> This relationship is requisite for any kind of war propaganda, particularly when the prior positive perception of the new enemy needs to be changed overnight. History is always the first to fall victim at such times.<sup>10</sup> Negative events had to be singled out from its foundation and the positive ones suppressed, a history of conflict had to be created to explain the new war in the offing. All historical eras were used. From prehistory, where the roots were found, to the recent eras that were able to evoke and create memories of us as historical victims. Victimization and creation of a perception of oneself as a historical victim whom the neighbors “stabbed in the back when we were down for no reason” are particularly important in such situations. That is how the paranoid perception of being under threat, a very useful propaganda tool, is created,<sup>11</sup> the perception that foments anxiety and fear and encourages aggressiveness. This is how strong stereotypes of nearly all the neighboring nations, with the exception of the friendly Greeks and Romanians, were created or revived in a short period of time.<sup>12</sup> As the war in Yugoslavia grew more and more complicated, the stereotypes started spreading to the rest of the world, in particular the leading

7 Ivan Čolović, *Bordel ratnika*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 1993, p. 67.

8 Dubravka Stojanović, “Udžbenici istorije kao ogledalo vremena” in: Pešić, Rosandić (eds.), *Ratništvo, patriotizam, patrijarhalnost*, p. 78.

9 Cvetan Todorov, *Mi i drugi : francuska misao o ljudskoj raznolikosti*. Beograd, 1994.

10 On Abuses of History: Radivoj Radić, *Srbi pre Adama i posle njega : istorija jedne zloupotrebe : slovo protiv “novoromantičara”*. Beograd: Stubovi culture, 2003; Miroslav Jovanović, Radivoj Radić, *Kriza istorije : srpska historiografija i društveni izazovi kraja 20. i početka 21. veka*. Beograd : Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2009.

11 Jovan Bajford, *Teorija zavere : Srbija protiv novo svetskog poretka*. Beograd : Beogradski centar za ljudska prava, 2006.

12 Olivera Milosavljević, *U tradiciji nacionalizma ili stereotipi srpskih intelektualaca o nama i drugima*. Beograd: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, 2002.

Western powers. Specific events, primarily the air strikes, played a major role in consolidating these prejudices and, as of the late 1980s, led to the emergence of an autistic perception of the present and the past, which further isolated and threatened a Serbia already under international sanctions. The question arose whether that “outer wall” of isolation was taller and stronger than the one Serbia had erected around itself by its blown-up historical awareness.

A new turn in the present and the past was made in 2000, when Slobodan Milošević's reign was ousted. The new authorities were of the view that their face-off with the previous regime involved doing away with its historic ancestors as well; so they forced a new showdown with history, now in the WWII décor.<sup>13</sup> For a complete victory against the communist predecessors, the new authorities had to beat their historical fathers, Tito's partisans, and establish their mainstay in the enemy camp during that civil war, to reaffirm their own authenticity and distinctness. Draža Mihajlović and his Chetniks had to become the new “historical fathers” of the new democratic order. The perception of the past was abused yet again, and the public was further disoriented.

On top of that, the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s themselves became history over time.<sup>14</sup> But not much headway has been made in interpreting them from the time they were waged until today, i.e. in the past twenty years. The post-2000 Serbian authorities also failed to raise the essential issues that would have helped their citizens understand the events in the recent past and create a clear distance from the ideologies and programs that had led Serbia into the wars which had nearly resulted in its self-destruction. The perception of those wars has thus also remained vague, although its effects are very much alive and still directly affect the everyday lives of Serbia's citizens. This is why the perception of the wars in the 1990s is a burning issue of both Serbia's present and Serbia's future.

All this has led to frequent analyses of history and its abuse by the Serbian public. Most of these analyses have focused on the discourse or actions of the representatives of the elite, on the dominant concept, cultural model or value system offered society. What remains beyond the grasp of these analyses is the reception of the offered concepts, how the public hears, accepts and processes the sent messages. If it is true that the elite is offering an “older and more glorious” past in lieu of the gloomy present, the question arises whether society is accepting the elite's offer to live in the past? Do the elite and society share the phantasm about the “better past”, are both of them willing to use that anesthetic? And if they are, what does society know about history, what is its perception of it? If it does

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13 Dubravka Stojanović, *Ulje na vodi : ogledi iz istorije sadašnjosti*. Beograd : Pešćanik, 2010, pp. 123-156.

14 Tihomir Cipek (ed.), *Kultura sjećanja. Povjesni lomovi i svladavanje prošlosti*. Zagreb, 2011.

know history, what premises is that knowledge based on, or, if it does not know it, are there limits to manipulation?

The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights in 2010 implemented a project aimed at establishing the degree of knowledge of history in Serbia's society. The results of the survey of a representative sample of citizens were published in the book *News from the Past. Knowledge, Lack of Knowledge, Use and Abuse of History*.<sup>15</sup> The analysis was based upon replies to a questionnaire comprising 120 questions demonstrating what the citizens of Serbia think about specific historic events, what they learned in school and had forgotten in the meantime, which prejudices and stereotypes predominate in their understanding of the past, the past of their own nation and that of the neighboring nations. The survey was conducted on a representative sample of 1,086 respondents and the results we arrived at can be considered to represent the opinion of Serbia's citizens.

The project authors and research team departed from the particular weight and importance attached to history in the former Yugoslavia. This was an opportunity to delve into what usually remains beyond the grasp of the standard methodologies focusing on the activity of one side – the creator of historical myths – but not on the receivers, the consumers, the citizens exposed to the “irradiation” of historical truths. The News from the Past project enabled us to gain insight into that other side of the discourse, how the citizens perceive the past, themselves and others in it. We did not test their knowledge of the past, but, rather, endeavored to identify their prejudices, their beliefs and convictions, their pattern of thinking in which they incorporate the information they receive every day. It is on the basis of these perceptions that they make judgments of present-day events, assess and measure them and, ultimately, cast their ballots. This awareness of the past is thus of key importance to life in the present, for it provides the coordinates and an evaluation system. This is why the results of this survey are particularly relevant to the current establishment and should serve as important indicators of the state of mind in Serbia. Furthermore, the survey results will hopefully alert the authorities to the harm that can be done by invoking the past as arguments in creating the present and demonstrate that historical content must be handled with much care because nonchalant enterprises fuel the existing confusion in society, disorient the citizens and further undermine the never strongly established value system in society.

Apart from identifying the prejudices and stereotypes about the past, the project also aimed at determining what the citizens think about their own history and how well they know it, precisely because it is so present in public discourse,

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15 Dubravka Stojanović, Radina Vučetić, Sanja Petrović-Todosijević, Olga Manojlović-Pintar, Radmila Radić, *Novosti iz prošlosti. Znanje, neznanje, upotreba i zloupotreba istorije*. Beograd, 2011.

because so many politicians invoke it when they take crucial policy decisions, because both Serbia's domestic policy and, even more so, its foreign policy is based upon it. This survey was not a history knowledge test. We are under no illusion that citizens anywhere in the world know historical facts. The responses we offered them aimed at giving us an idea of their orientational, not their precise knowledge. We wanted to establish how the citizens oriented themselves in broad strokes, not in fine detail. We were not interested in the degree of their ignorance, but in the type of their ignorance. We aimed at establishing the content of their ignorance, its origins, the layers of prejudice that have covered the knowledge they acquired in school, the sources from which they learned history. We were aware that history is lied about in public and we wanted to establish how it is lied about. That lie was the main topic of our research.

The overall survey results lead to the conclusion that the mistakes the respondents made can be grouped in five categories constituting layers of knowledge: political conformism, mythical thinking, ethnocentrism and narcissism, stereotypes and experiential knowledge.

## CONFORMIST "KNOWLEDGE"

Political conformism as a source of historical consciousness is more about forgetting than about remembering. This layer of "knowledge" has been the consequence of deleting the historical facts learnt in school, under the influence of the everyday media propaganda in Serbia over the past two decades. That means that the way in which citizens remember and perceive history largely depends on the "flavor of the day", the clear or less clear message of the authorities, or, more precisely, the current official interpretation of history. Given that these interpretations have undergone radical changes in the recent years, we were eager to establish which of them have persisted, what the citizens were the most receptive to, how they ranked and "processed" the relayed "guidelines" in their minds. Such memory is adjusted to the wishes of the authorities and ensures one the comfortable position Olga Manojlović-Pintar talks about, "the sweet oblivion"<sup>16</sup> offering release from mental exertion and enabling blissful indifference. This politically "correct" memory is important to the citizens, because it addresses their present-day problems and absolves them from responsibility. They are calm because they think what the authorities want them to think, they do not stand out, they do not enter into the risk of autonomous thinking. Of course,

16 Olga Manojlović-Pintar, "Rat i nemir – O viđenjima socijalistike Jugoslavije, Drugog svetskog rata u kome je nastala i ratova u kojima se raspala", in: *Novosti iz prošlosti*, p. 83-107.

the other layers of knowledge to be analyzed in this text also fall within political conformism, but they are elaborated in different groups because of their specific features.

The respondents' answers to the questions on WWII and the wars in the 1990s may serve as the best indicators of the effects of political conformism. The survey results showed that most of the incorrect answers were given to these questions, i.e. that these topics were "forgotten" to the greatest extent. This can easily be explained precisely by the fact that these events are both extremely sensitive and the closest in time, wherefore the personal memories of the respondents or the memories of their recent ancestors are still fresh. For instance, one third of the respondents have forgotten what happened on May 9, 1945 and why Victory Day is commemorated, although it had been pompously celebrated for decades, with military parades marching through the heart of Belgrade. Only 21% of the respondents knew the date when Belgrade was liberated in WWII, although it had for decades been the most important city holiday and many schools, streets and the leading city award for scientific and artistic achievements bore its name.

The greatest conformist perplexity arose when the respondents were asked about collaboration during WWII, given the pandemonium in their historical consciousness created by the messages sent out by the authorities, particularly after 2000. Forty-one per cent of the respondents said that Chetniks were anti-fascists, while 47% said they had collaborated with the occupiers, which vividly demonstrates the split historical consciousness and the major divisions in Serbian society. Answers to the question about Milan Nedić, Serbia's Prime Minister during Nazi occupation, were particularly interesting as well. This is how the citizens found their way through the maze of controversial messages relayed by the authorities, which have frequently absolved Nedić: one third (36%) said he had collaborated with the occupiers, one third justified his actions (14% think he was a pragmatic politician, 10% think he was the victim of communist terror and 6% qualified him as the savior of the nation), while one third decided they knew nothing about him. This division into three nearly equal groups best testifies to the confusion and uncertainty among Serbia's citizens when it comes to their perceptions of fascism and anti-fascism and WWII on the whole. Even more conspicuous is the "ignorance" the respondents demonstrated with respect to the wars in the 1990s; it corroborates how relevant a factor conformism is in the creation of opinions on history. The citizens are not prepared to exert efforts and draw conclusions, they are "fulfilling the wishes" of the authorities and opting for the "right answer" on the fly.

## MYTHICAL “KNOWLEDGE”

A set of questions was aimed at uncovering the mythical layers affecting the creation of knowledge about the past. The belief in the greatness of one's nation and the territory that belonged to it in history and in its antiquity stood out as the two key categories. For instance, 63% of the citizens believe that Thessaloniki and Belgrade were part of Tsar Dušan's empire in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, while 45% think that Dubrovnik was within the borders of the Serbian state at some point in history. These historically incorrect perceptions of the greatness of one's own nation are equally spread across all age groups, showing that they are not just the consequence of political propaganda in the recent years, but a widespread belief in one's own greatness. The fact that gives rise to greatest concern is that the percentage of those who believe that Dubrovnik was a Serbian city (55%) is the highest among the respondents with the highest education levels, while only 37% of the respondents who had only completed elementary school accepted that myth.

Questions regarding the antiquity of the nation yielded similar results. The perception of the antiquity of one's own nation arose as the strongest component of historical consciousness and national arrogance. Such consciousness is best nourished by the idea of the historic lag of all others, particularly the neighboring peoples, and the non-acceptance of the fact that others may have had a past just as long and as successful as your own. The answers to the question on how long Serbs have lived in the Balkans are illustrative. If we add up the answers that they have always lived there, that they were the indigenous inhabitants (39%) and the answers that they arrived before the Croats (29%), we arrive at the sum of 68% of respondents, who believe that the Serbs have a considerable advantage over the neighboring, rival nation, while only 22% accept the fact that the two nations came to the Balkans together. Although they studied the migrations of South Slavs several times in school, the citizens suppressed that knowledge, opting to believe in the myth of themselves as the “most ancient nation”, which rules out the possibility that the nation perceived as our historic enemy can be our historical peer.

This thesis is also corroborated by the answers to the question of whether the Croats had a state in the Middle Ages; as many as 62% of the respondents had readily forgotten what they had learned in school and said that they did not. We were even more surprised by the answers to the question about when Montenegro first gained its independence. Only 19% of the respondents accepted the fact they had learned in school, namely that Montenegro became an independent state at the same time as Serbia, at the 1878 Berlin Congress. An amazingly large percentage, 40%, said it



was created in 2006, when it left the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. That was one of the most shocking things we learned as we conducted the survey, because it testifies to a deep unawareness of the history of other, neighboring nations, and simultaneously of the strong mythical consciousness that “others” can only be much “younger” than us. This may be a consequence of the poor relations with Montenegro at present, a sort of disdain, but this astounding result demonstrates that not even all the public holidays celebrated by the recent common state, not even all those photographs of Njegoš and stories about the valiant battles the two nations had fought together, have left a more permanent impression.

The perception of the Turks and “Turkish yoke” plays an extremely important role in the matrix of mythical thinking. The period of Ottoman rule holds a special place in the history of all Balkan countries. It is the borderline, the historical watershed serving as the imaginary line between good and evil, the mythical boundary between us and them, the hateful, eternal enemy. Turks are the historic buzzword that explains everything; they are our mental border between the old and new eras. The *News from the Past* survey corroborated these views as well. Forty-eight per cent of all answers to the question about the most significant event in Serbia's history had to do with the arrival or withdrawal of the Turks. Most came from the youngest age group, which indicates that this myth has recently been revived at full force by various sources of cognition.

The respondents' answers to the question on how they would describe the period of Ottoman rule are particularly indicative when assessing the power of mythical thinking. As many as 76% of the respondents qualified it as a centuries-long Turkish yoke, while only 23% were willing to accept the moderate, rational answer that, like all other empires, the Ottoman Empire had its periods of rise and fall. What is particularly interesting is that this question yielded the fewest “Don't Know” answers of all 120 questions, only 1%. This testifies to the power of the myth about the Turks, that the citizens think they know everything about that period, that they are sure and have no dilemmas about it. This is the only question on which the respondents reached a general consensus: both the men and the women, both those with elementary and college education, both those in central Serbia and Vojvodina agree on one thing – a yoke is a yoke and the other offered, rational and correct answer cannot be true.

The survey results testifying to the power of the mythical level of historical consciousness confute the stereotyped notion that only less educated citizens are susceptible to historical myths. Quite the contrary. They corroborate the thesis that the need for mythical thinking is stronger than the knowledge acquired in school. They also demonstrate that the educated elite is simultaneously the producer and the consumer of myths.

## ETHNOCENTRIC AND NARCISSISTIC “KNOWLEDGE”

The *News from the Past* survey results allowed us to demonstrate how the combination of the cultural model, education system and nationalist ideology created a specific ethnocentric and narcissistic perception of the world. To begin with, this is clearly illustrated by the fact that 21% respondents listed Serb scientist Nikola Tesla as the most important figure in world history. Second place on the list also went to “our man” – but totally unexpectedly to Josip Broz Tito (10%). A foreigner – Adolf Hitler – took third place (8%), ranking above the much less popular Jesus Christ, who won 5% of the votes and came in fourth. The fact that the respondents listed national historic figures among the greatest men in world history clearly demonstrates that they perceive the rest of the world as less important, that their own nation, its heroes and greatness are the first to come to their minds.

The respondents’ answers to questions on the events Serbs participated in together with other nations also provide an interesting illustration of the existing ethnocentrism. Replies to the questions on who is to be credited the most for the creation of the common Yugoslav state are a typical example. Most of the respondents, 48%, opted for various answers testifying to the strong historical consciousness that Yugoslavia was created by Serbs or their political representatives; the Croats won 2% and the Slovenes only 1% of the votes.

Along with the pronounced perception of one’s own importance, this layer of historical thinking is rife with belief in one’s own positive role in history; 70% of the citizens are convinced that Serbs only waged liberation wars, while 51% think that Serbia won all the wars it ever fought. Furthermore, as many as 40% of the respondents believe that Serbia’s literacy rate was higher than that of the other nations which joined Yugoslavia in 1918, which demonstrates that the citizens perceive their country as the best one even when that obviously could not have been the case.

## STEREOTYPED “KNOWLEDGE”

The stereotyped way of thinking has added a special layer to knowledge and perceptions of history. This particularly pertains to the negative stereotypes formed about the nations Serbs were in direct or indirect conflict with over the past two decades. These recent hostilities altered the historically positive perceptions of some nations and they were replaced by nations lauded by the propaganda in the 1990s, as the answers to the question “Who broke through the Salonika Front?” best illustrate. As many as 42% of the respondents omitted the

then Serb allies, the French and the British, with whom Serbia had not had good relations in the recent past, and brought in its contemporary allies: the Russians (11%) and the Greeks (16%), while, true to the spirit of ethnocentrism, 16% credited only the Serbs for the breakthrough of the Salonika Front.

Even more striking are the results we obtained from the answers to the question: "Who perished in Jasenovac?". Only 14% said Croats, too, were victims of that concentration camp, while 85% opted for various combinations comprising Serbs, Jews and Roma. Like the Salonika Front example, this one also demonstrates that the nations with which we do not boast good relations now, are not seen or perceived as our potential allies or fellow sufferers, which again demonstrates that the present-day criteria and needs are much stronger than any knowledge acquired in school. These examples also indicate that the knowledge gained in school is superficial and easily withdraws in the face of stereotypes created to serve the current political needs, which opens ample room for manipulation, abuse and propaganda that employs the simplest signals.

## EXPERIENTIAL "KNOWLEDGE"

The *News from the Past* survey revealed another interesting level of historical consciousness, something we can call experiential knowledge, what the citizens remember, their recollections running counter to the "flavor of the day" and thus, to the otherwise strongly developed conformism. The citizens' views on the Yugoslav state are the best illustration of such experiential knowledge. Not one topic has been more exposed to attack and negative stereotypes than Yugoslavia since the first inter-ethnic clashes broke out in the mid-1980s. Everything was directed at fully discrediting Yugoslavia, particularly its last, communist period from the wars in the 1990s and the war crimes committed in them, during the war crimes trials in The Hague, to the genocide lawsuits the states initiated against each other before the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Nevertheless, the citizens' memories of that period of their history are positive and their assessments of it are extremely affirmative. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents said they were sorry Yugoslavia had fallen apart. This answer is logical given that as many as 82% of the respondents said that life had been better in Yugoslavia than today and only 5% said that it had been worse. The reasons for such assessments can be found in the explanations the respondents gave: 40% said that Yugoslavia had secured its citizens a better and easier life, peace and the chance to travel, while 17% said it had signified accord, understanding and equality. Their views are definitely the consequence of the fact that Yugoslavia was succeeded by a period of terrifying wars and misery. What is, however, relevant

is the finding that in their qualifications of Yugoslavia, more precisely, of the lives they had led in it, the respondents did not jump on the bandwagon of standard political opportunism. On the contrary, they strongly resisted the powerful anti-Yugoslavism and anti-communism that have dominated the public discourse for over 20 years now, demonstrating that, in addition to the analyzed layers, there is also an experiential layer that protects memory from the deposits of ideology.

The question about where Serbs got most of their knowledge of history was important for our deliberation of the levels at which historical consciousness is formed and the factors affecting its creation. As many as 76% of the respondents said that they had learned their history in school. But their answers to specific, elementary school level questions showed they do not possess school knowledge of history. Firstly, their replies showed that their knowledge was extremely weak; most of them would have failed a history test. More relevant is the conclusion we arrived at: that their perceptions of history were the least influenced by the knowledge they had acquired in school, which was deeply buried under various layers of information they had been swamped with during the various political and historic situations they'd lived through. Their ignorance, therefore, is not a commonplace, benign ignorance that would lead us to conclude that these citizens are simply ill-educated. What is at issue here is what Olga Manojlović Pintar called refusal of knowledge and false stupidity, what Sanja Petrović-Todosijević calls "engaged ignorance".<sup>17</sup> What is at issue is the conscious decision to find comfort in ignorance, allowing for the denial of reality and, as a result, exacerbating confrontation with the past and the present.

The News from the Past survey has shown that history is an important ingredient of the coordinate system of thought in Serbia. Although the respondents initially said that they were not very interested in history and that they did not know much about it, their replies showed that their way of thinking was dominated by the perceptions publicly "fuelled" for over two decades now and that the targeted consumers embraced the system of myths and stereotypes more than successfully. The primary purpose of the survey was not to establish the degree of their knowledge of the past, or lack of it, but to demonstrate the strength of the prejudices and misconceptions about "our place" in the present and the past. True, the low level of knowledge we ascertained is a relevant finding since, apart from the high percentage of those that had circled the incorrect answers, we found in replies to nearly all the questions a very worrying percentage of respondents (around 30%) who had opted for 'Don't Know'. This 30 so percent of the citizens, who did not even try to reply to the questions, who were so unsure of their knowledge that they did not even try to guess which of the

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17 Sanja Petrović-Todosijević, "Nacionalno vreme - Okvir za samopercepciju građana Republike Srbije", in: *News from the Past*, pp. 61-83.

offered replies was the correct one, are susceptible to all forms of manipulation and propaganda. Such a high percentage leads to the conclusion that the situation is very dangerous, because it can easily lead to a majority support of attractive and risky political adventures.

But, as noted, the real objective of the survey was to grasp the matrix of thought of the respondents and delve through the closely-knit multi-layered fabric of misconceptions determining their behavior, reasoning and decisions. The fact that most prejudices were voiced by the youngest respondents, the ones aged between 18 and 29, gives rise to the greatest amount of concern. This generation was born after 1981. They were starting school at the time Milošević came to power and spent their school years in crises, wars, hatred and fear, unable to travel and broaden their horizons, all of which left a lasting and irreversible imprint on them. Another worrying fact is that not even the respondents with the highest level of education proved much more resistant to stereotypes than those with less education. The results show that they are even more susceptible to mythical thinking on many issues than the respondents with the least education, which may be taken as proof of the thesis on the middle class as the key champion and disseminator of national awareness, which, as Ernst Renan noted<sup>18</sup>, rests on the misunderstanding of history.

The results showing that Central Serbia "was in the lead" in stereotypical thinking over Belgrade and Vojvodina did not come as much of a surprise, but a comparison of the replies provided by voters of different parties did. First of all, we found very slight, almost negligible differences among the voters of most parties, i.e. the voters of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and the Democratic Party (DS) think very similarly. This analysis of the voters corroborates the views of party analysts who claim that there are not enough distinctions between the programs of these parties and that the Serbian political stage has turned into a monolith. We were particularly surprised by the fact that the replies of DS voters, who should be closer to the center, were very similar to, or even more radical than those of the right party voters of rightist parties, which indicates that the convergence of the Serbian political spectrum has not taken place in the center, but right of it. Only the replies of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) voters significantly differed from all others. Their replies to all the questions were totally different, displaying a much greater openness, a lesser influence of stereotypes and a greater impact of knowledge on their assessments.

Education experts now face a dilemma: has the overall environment resulted in the domination of political orientations preventing knowledge from prevailing

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18 Ernst Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* Paris: Sorbonne, 1882.

over misconceptions, or has inadequate education facilitated the prevalence of the mythical over the rational? There is no doubt that the type of education offered by our school system is inappropriate, because the processes and key issues remain invisible underneath the piles of amassed facts learned by heart. This is best corroborated by the survey results proving that the level of knowledge of even the best educated respondents is very low. With such a poorly educated population, the political elite has no trouble changing paradigms, changing views overnight, and imposing any propaganda as the view of the majority. Propaganda and stereotypic messages would encounter stronger obstacles if historical situations were elaborated from various perspectives in school, if historical events were thought about and if there were critical thinking. The entire environment of values needs to change as well, in order to incorporate in the new system more reliable knowledge and developed critical and analytical thinking, which ought to be the fundamental objectives of the new education model. Only then would it be possible to effect an in-depth transformation of society and the “others” would not only serve to facilitate the achievement of a national monolith and collectivism more easily and successfully, but to facilitate comparisons, cooperation and the creation of sustainable stability as well.