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# The denial syndrome and its consequences: Serbian political culture since 2000

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## Abstract

Since the outbreak of the War of Yugoslav Succession in 1991 and the subsequent atrocities, a significant portion of Serbian society, including the upper echelons of the government, has displayed symptoms of the denial syndrome, in which guilt is transposed onto the Croats, Bosniaks, and Kosovar Albanians. This syndrome is also associated with a veneration for the victimized hero, with sinister attribution error, and with tendencies toward dysphoric rumination. In the Serbian case, it has also been associated with efforts to whitewash the role played by Serbs such as Milan Nedić and Draža Mihailović during World War Two and has reinforced feelings of self-righteousness in Belgrade's insisting on its sovereignty over the disputed province of Kosovo. © 2007 The Regents of the University of California. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## Introduction

Social scientists and lawyers alike have long been aware of the tendency of parties who have committed crimes, especially heinous crimes, to deny their own guilt, even

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blaming the victim. Stanley Cohen notes three forms of denial: honest declarations based on what the person making the denial believes to be the truth; outright lying in order to avoid admitting what the person in question knows to be the truth; and something in between, in which a combination of selective perception, selective recollection, and selective interpretation all combine in order to block the recognition of information which the person in question cannot bear (Cohen, 2001: 5; Riddy, 1997: 322–323). It is this third form of denial which I am calling here ‘the denial syndrome’ and which figures both as a way of coping with guilt which may be comprehended at the unconscious level, and as a means to assert one’s own superiority over one’s accusers. An accused person in denial insists on his own innocence, declares that he has been wrongly accused, and may even want his victim to make amends to *him*. What I wish to accomplish in this article is to sketch out behaviors which could usefully be described as constituting a ‘denial syndrome’ and to identify the factors which lead to its development, its ramifications, and its consequences. Although drawing upon literature from psychology and sociology, I shall connect the denial syndrome to Serbian political culture since the fall of Milošević, identifying that culture as one of escapism and denial.

Cohen warns that “whole societies may slip into collective modes of denial” and adds that this result need not presuppose blatant forms of “thought control” (Cohen, 2001: 10). But such denial may operate at any of a number of levels, including denial of knowledge of an atrocity, denial that one can be held responsible for an atrocity, denial that the event should be interpreted as an atrocity, and denial that the event even took place. To this list one may add denial of the victim (Cohen, 2001: 96), in which the perpetrator blames the victim and endeavors to acquire the status of victim for himself. To the extent that large numbers of people in a society come to see themselves collectively as ‘the victim’, then those who criticize them for crimes are false accusers, dissemblers, the real villains. This, in turn, feeds into feelings of collective national solidarity, which is to say a fierce nationalism which those imbued with it believe to be a defensive form of nationalism. In the Serbian case, the nation has been compared with Job, with the Jewish nation, even with Christ crucified, and, in a recent Christmas homily, the Serbian Orthodox patriarch advised Serbs that they could become again like innocent children, cleansed of all guilt.

Since it is widely understood that xenophobic nationalism is a vital part of Serbian culture today, perhaps we may begin by noting that not every occurrence of the denial syndrome should be assumed to have nationalistic dimensions. As will be shown, however, the addition of xenophobic nationalism to the denial syndrome creates a powerful concoction in which the society is able to escape into a mythic reality in which a people (in this case, the Serbs) are portrayed as simultaneously heroic and victimized. The place of the anomalous victimized hero in this scheme is crucial, and will be critical to understanding the resulting syndrome.

### **The denial syndrome—lessons from psychology**

In the lead-up to and during the war years (1991–95 and 1998–99), Serbs were subjected to a propaganda barrage which fostered and reinforced dysphoric

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