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The Epistemic Conflict of First and Other Serbia: A Narrative Analysis of Deep Polarisation

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The Epistemic Conflict of *First* and *Other* Serbia: A Narrative Analysis of Deep Polarisation

Abstract: This paper examines the enduring sociopolitical divide in contemporary Serbia between "*First Serbia*" (*prva Srbija*) and "*Other Serbia*" (*druga Srbija*). Moving beyond the conventional Left–Right political spectrum, which fails to capture the nuanced historical and cultural realities of post-socialist Serbian discourse, this study employs a philosophical and narrative analysis to deconstruct the value-laden orientations of both camps. By examining historical foundational texts from the anti-war Belgrade Circle alongside contemporary digital media, op-eds, and conservative critiques, we map how these opposing groups construct their normative frameworks. We argue that the antagonism between *First* and *Other Serbia* is a deep epistemic disagreement rooted in incommensurable narrative constitutions of social practices. While *First Serbia* derives its standards of validity from historicism, collective memory, and spatial continuity, *Other Serbia* grounds its legitimacy in procedural liberalism, universal rights, and European integration. Finally, the paper explores the conditions necessary to facilitate trans-narrative dialogue without reducing deep disagreement to polemical hostility.

Key Words: *First Serbia, Other Serbia, Narrative Analysis, Antagonism, Polarisation*

1.0. INTRODUCTION

There is a deep divide within Serbian society that has received little, if any, internationally sustained academic attention, yet it, arguably, lies at the centre of contemporary polarisation between traditionalist and progressive movements. The divide examined in this paper is that between *First Serbia* (prva Srbija) and *Other Serbia* (druga Srbija). Analysing this distinction is particularly important because it captures a degree of complexity and nuance that the conventional left–right division cannot adequately encompass. The distinction is context-dependent and deeply embedded in the historical, social, and ideological dynamics of Serbian society, making it indispensable for a more adequate understanding of contemporary Serbian political and cultural polarisation.

The methodology employed in this analysis consists of a philosophical deconstruction and critical evaluation of the values, beliefs, and attitudes associated with these cultural and ideological orientations, while also drawing on the broader literature in Serbian political science and sociology. Furthermore, given that the academic literature addressing this phenomenon is virtually non-existent apart from the few important contributions,[1] many of the examples considered in this paper are drawn from blog posts and public speeches by public figures who invoke and weaponise this distinction. Examining these sources makes it possible to demonstrate both how the distinction is employed in contemporary public discourse and the forms of antagonism and polarisation embedded within this cultural divide.

With this in mind, the paper advances a fivefold analytical strategy. First and foremost, we examine the historical foundations of this divide and situate it within the contemporary tension between traditionalism and progressivism. As a second step, we develop a philosophical model of narrativism to deconstruct these complex cultural and ideological orientations into more systematic constellations of beliefs and values. These constellations are understood in relation to a wider social context constituted by historically embedded and specifically Serbian practices. Third, having established the necessary theoretical tools for evaluation, we employ a comparative model designed to identify the distinct value-laden and epistemic requirements underlying each orientation. On the one hand, the *First Serbia* discursive formation draws upon historicism and

[1] One noteworthy example is *Divided we Stand* by Ana Russell-Omaljev (Russell-Omaljev 2016)

collective memory as sources of standards of validity, while exposure to globalist norms may trigger forms of epistemic defence or narrative nostalgia. On the other hand, the *Other Serbia* discursive formation derives its normative and epistemic standards primarily from procedural liberalism and European integration, while simultaneously confronting forms of internal friction and alienation associated with operating within a resistant cultural milieu. Fourth part of the paper asserts that the conflict between *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia* constitutes a disagreement over the very criteria by which truth, evidence, and political legitimacy are determined, and made intelligible, generating an epistemic closed loop in which each orientation struggles to recognise the evidentiary and normative authority of *the other*. The analysis, therefore, claims that this dispute is a form of deep epistemic disagreement. Finally, the paper considers the broader institutional and democratic implications of deep epistemic disagreement and identifies conditions that may help render such disagreement mutually intelligible without requiring its resolution or reducing it to polemicism and mutual antagonism.

2.0. *FIRST SERBIA* AND *OTHER SERBIA*: HISTORY AND DIVISION

In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the terms *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia*, we begin with the historical context in which the term *Other Serbia* was first coined. During the Yugoslav Wars, one of Europe's deadliest episodes of ethnic conflict since the Second World War; a group of Serbian intellectuals formed an anti-war movement under the banner of the Belgrade Circle (Beogradski krug). Established on 25 September 1992 under the co-presidency of Miladin Životić, Filip David, and Ivan Čolović, the movement was founded on a commitment to opposing what its members described as *deliberate lies, nationalist madness, criminal war, fascist pogroms, senseless destruction of villages and towns*… (Mimica 2002, 17). Ivan Čolović, one of the founders of the Belgrade Circle, notes that the term *Other Serbia* emerged in response to an article published by Filip David in the newspaper Politika. In that article David argued that the Serbian people needed a Serbia different from the one against which they were fighting, an *Other Serbia*. (Čolović 2022). Decades later, Radomir Konstantinović, a former member of the Belgrade Circle, described *Other Serbia*, in succinct terms, as *a Serbia against villainy*, thereby remaining faithful to the principles upon which the term was originally established and to the moral and political purpose it was intended to serve (Konstantinović 2022). Newspaper archives also reveal that the Belgrade Circle was, at the time, subjected to threats and pressure from the extreme right, which portrayed

the movement as *a bunch of foreign agents* and *traitors*, as another member of the Circle, Vesna Bjekić, recalls (Bjekic 1994).

It is also worth noting that *Other Serbia* was far from a clearly defined or conceptually unified category, even among the members of the Belgrade Circle. In what can, without much exaggeration, be described as the landmark collection published under the title *Other Serbia*, which brought together public lectures delivered by members of the Circle and other academics, one encounters a variety of interpretations and competing visions of what *Other Serbia* was understood to represent. For example, Sima Ćirković conceives of *Other Serbia* not as an alternative to the Serbia against which its proponents stood, but rather as a Serbia capable of synthesising the country's considerable cultural and social plurality and establishing a common ground for all those who live within it (Ćirković 2002, 41). Vladimir Pogačić adopts a more direct approach, arguing that the state they envisioned was, at its most fundamental level, one that says "no" to war and "yes" to peace (Pogačić 2002, 53). Laslo Vegel, on the other hand, proposes that *Other Serbia* should be understood as a liberal state, freed from the shackles of populism and warmongering (Vegel 2002, 56). At the same time, however, he recognises that, given the prevailing cultural and economic structures, such a transition could not be straightforward and would require comprehensive systemic change. Another conception of *Other Serbia* is offered by Zagorka Golubović, who argues that it cannot be built upon the myths of the past and must instead rest on the principle of universality, that is, on universal human rights (Golubović 2002, 69). This position is, for instance, shared by Vesna Pešić (Pešić 2002, 106). Distinct from the predominantly pacifist and explicitly liberal conceptions outlined above are those that understand *Other Serbia* in more utopian terms. Srđan Karanović, for example, conceives of it as an ideal extending from the private lives of individuals to the organisation of public institutions. Although he acknowledges that this ideal may be impossible fully to attain, he nevertheless maintains that it remains something towards which society must strive (Karanović 2002, 151–52).

From this brief historical analysis, we can identify the distinctive character of *Other Serbia* as a construct developed by public intellectuals who envisioned a progressive transformation of the core structures of Serbian society, alongside a fundamental reorientation of Serbia's political and cultural relationship with other states. How does the *First Serbia*, then, enter the picture?

Going back from the article from the newspaper archives, written in 1994 by Vesna Bjekić, the main vision of the *Other Serbia* in the more traditionally oriented intellectual circles, as well as the public in general is that *Other Serbia* is by nature a foreign concept made by the foreign influence to destabilise Serbia and to culturally fragment it, turning it into "another soulless European state". To further characterise the progressive orientation, traditionalist movements have adopted the term *auto-chauvinism* to describe what they perceive as anti-traditional approaches that undermine the role of tradition and history in the formation of Serbian identity (Milovanović 2023; Marković 2018; Hajrić 2019). Zoran Ćirjaković is one of the leading figures in the popularisation of this term. His central claim is that auto-chauvinism ultimately arises from self-hatred, specifically, a hatred of one's own nation, culture, and tradition, and he employs the term to denote what he regards as a propagandistic movement promoted by segments of the Serbian elite (Ćirjaković 2023, 9). In his 2021 book, *Revealing Auto-Chauvinism* (*Otkrivanje Autošovinizma*), Ćirjaković asks how it is possible that, for three decades, there have been people in Serbia who regard virtually every expression of love towards one's own country as a villainous act, and, more fundamentally, what *Other Serbia* truly stands for (Ćirjaković 2021).

Furthermore, contemporary traditionalist writing has witnessed a renewed tendency to invoke the term *Other Serbia* to describe what is understood as the psychological phenomenon of auto-chauvinism or, more broadly, a critical attitude towards one's own national identity and cultural origins. Among the works representative of this tendency are Vladimir Dimitrijević's *Other Serbia for Beginners* (*Druga Srbija za početnike*), Milan Damjanac's *Self-Hating Serbs: Serbian Identity in the Twenty-First Century* (*Samomrzeći Srbi: Srpski identitet u 21. veku*), and Marinko Vučinić's *Other Serbia: On the Dead End of Political Correctness* (*Druga Srbija: na mrtvoj straži političke korektnosti*) (cf. Vučinić 2012; Damjanac 2015; Dimitrijević 2024).

The fact that this debate remains unresolved has, if anything, contributed to the further intensification and radicalisation of political and cultural relations within Serbian society. The historical and conceptual ambiguity surrounding *Other Serbia*, as we have mentioned, combined with its subsequent appropriation and reinterpretation by traditionalist movements, has transformed the distinction from a primarily intellectual and anti-war project into a politically charged category of identification and antagonism. As a result, *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia* increasingly function as normative labels through which opposing sides characterise, delegitimise,

and morally evaluate one another. In the following section, we examine a selection of blog posts and public statements produced by figures associated with both *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia* in order to illustrate how this distinction operates in contemporary public discourse and the extent to which it has developed into a relationship characterised by deep antagonism.[2]

Let us first consider a rather extreme case: Pavle Bihali, a far-right political figure and leader of the movement Levijatan (Leviathan). The movement initially emerged as a grassroots organisation dedicated to protecting animals from abuse and providing them with shelter. However, the non-governmental organisation soon transformed into a political entity and participated in the 2020 parliamentary elections (Kostková 2025, 34). In 2023, Levijatan was issued a suspension from its activities by the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office for alleged breaches of three fundamental rules of conduct: endangering minority rights, spreading racial, national, and religious hatred, and operating as a paramilitary organisation (Tuvić 2023). Throughout his years of public activity, Bihali has consistently employed the term *drugosrbijanac* (*Other-Serbian*) to describe his political and ideological adversaries, both in public speeches and on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook. In a 2023 interview, Bihali stated that he hates "Serbs who hate Serbia" more than he hates Albanians, while also warning that his political activities would not cease (Bez Cenzure 2023). What is particularly noteworthy is that Bihali rarely employs more conventional ideological categories, such as progressivists or left-wingers. Instead, he subsumes a broad range of left-leaning and politically opposed figures under the label of *Other-Serbians*. In this sense, the term functions as an antagonistic label through which diverse ideological opponents are grouped together and positioned outside what is understood to constitute the legitimate Serbian political and cultural community.

The extreme case discussed above serves primarily to provide a clearer illustration of how this division can be employed, and, we argue, abused, in contemporary political discourse. Less extreme examples, however, provide a broader window into the ways in which this distinction

[2] The cases discussed here are illustrative, and not representative. They have been selected to capture different ideological positions and degrees of rhetorical antagonism through which the distinction between *First* and *Other* Serbia is employed.

operates beyond its most overtly antagonistic manifestations and across different contexts of Serbian public discourse.

In a blog post, Dragoslav Dedović accuses the *First-Serbians* (*prvosrbijanci*) on grounds strikingly similar to those upon which traditionalists criticise the *Other-Serbians*. He portrays them as a war-profiteering elite indifferent to the plight of those who are worst off, including the working class and those unable to earn a sufficient income to sustain themselves in Serbia. Dedović also adopts elements of the anti-European rhetoric commonly associated with the *First-Serbians* in order to argue that they themselves benefit from neoliberal injustice and contribute to the consolidation of the very political and economic hegemony of which they accuse the *Other-Serbians* (Dedović 2018). The case of Slobodan Antonić is also particularly revealing and carries considerable descriptive value. In a blog post published on the website of the *Movement for the Defence of Kosovo and Metohija* (*Pokret za odbranu Kosova i Metohije*), Antonić identifies a number of public intellectuals whom he regards as opposed to the traditionalist values he advocates. He subsequently argues that the *Other-Serbians* constitute members of an entirely different nation, describing them as "ideological Croats cursed by fate to be Serbs." He further invokes the possibility of civil war, suggesting that, if *Other-Serbians* are characterised by a hatred of pluralism and of those who think differently from them, then such a conflict represents the only possible response (Antonić 2023). In another post, Antonić portrays the *Other-Serbian* as a caricature of the liberal, self-loathing victim and martyr. He attributes to this figure expressions such as "I am ashamed of being a Serb," "You should really hate Serbia such as this one," and "There is something rotten and degenerate in our people," among others. Through this rhetorical construction, the *Other-Serbian* is presented as a morally and culturally alien figure whose perceived hostility towards Serbian identity places them outside the boundaries of the national community (Antonić 2019).

Finally, we consider Dimitrije Boarov's criticism of Aleksa Đilas and his vision of a pluralist Serbian state. In his polemics with Boarov, Đilas frequently employs the distinction between *First-Serbians* and *Other-Serbians*, while maintaining that the national question remains of central importance to contemporary political discourse in Serbia (Boarov 2013). In his book *Ruins and Walls* (*Ruševine i zidovi*), Đilas advocates a more pluralistic political approach and a strategy of European integration while simultaneously emphasising the importance of

safeguarding national interests and preserving Serbia's cultural and traditional heritage (cf. Đilas 2013). In an interview concerning the book, Đilas famously stated that Serbs are "bound by destiny to be nationalists," while nevertheless defending global integration and the need for a more liberal society (Milanović 2013). Boarov criticises Đilas for attempting to legitimise nationalism and a conception of a strong state by presenting them under the guise of a progressive commitment to European integration. Furthermore, he accuses Đilas of displaying a deliberate ignorance of Serbian history and of advocating a new economic model based on neoliberal capitalism that, in Boarov's view, would further strengthen right-wing elites inclined towards extreme nationalism (Boarov 2013).

The discussion and the number of possible examples could be extended considerably, but such an exhaustive account is not the purpose of this paper. The examples considered here have been selected primarily to illustrate both the ideological indeterminacy of the distinction and the persistent antagonism it generates; an antagonism that may, at times, develop into threats of, or even forms of, real-world violence, as illustrated by the case of Bihali and the rhetoric attributed to Antonić. Furthermore, these examples provide the empirical and conceptual basis for the philosophical analysis that follows, insofar as they allow us to identify the core beliefs, values, and antagonistic assumptions that require further deconstruction. To undertake such an analysis, however, we must first establish an appropriate theoretical framework. We argue that the most fruitful conceptual toolkit for deconstructing these socio-political orientations can be found in contemporary theories of narrativism. In the following section, we therefore examine the particular account of narrative theory that will serve as our primary methodological framework and establish the theoretical premises upon which the remainder of the analysis will proceed.

3.0. NARRATIVE THEORY: SETTING UP THE PHILOSOPHICAL TOOLS

The method of analysis employed in this paper consists of a philosophical deconstruction of the socio-political views outlined above through the theoretical framework of narrativism. Narrativism is an approach that has received considerable attention in the twenty-first century, particularly in relation to cultural and social analysis, conceptions of the self, psychology, ethics, and theories of meaning (cf. Currie 2010; Gerrig 1999; Ulatowski and Van Zyl 2022; Speight 2014). As Anthony Rudd notes:

Over the last two or three decades, various philosophers, including MacIntyre, Taylor, and Ricoeur (as well as psychologists, sociologists, theologians, and others) have argued that the notion of narrative has a central role to play in our thinking about personal identity and about ethics (Rudd 2007, 541).

To specify more precisely the philosophical commitments underlying our analysis, we adopt a particular form of narrativism developed by Alasdair MacIntyre, supplemented by elements of narrative hermeneutics found in the scholarly work of Hanna Meretoja. MacIntyre himself cautions against regarding him as the founding figure of modern narrativism, noting his intellectual indebtedness to philosophers such as Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur, as well as to the psychiatrist Oliver Sacks and the psychologist Jerome Bruner (MacIntyre 2016, 240). Regardless of this intellectual modesty, MacIntyre remains, we argue, the thinker whose conception of narrativity is most useful for the purposes of this paper. This is particularly so because his account emerges from, and is informed by, the multidisciplinary philosophical project he has developed throughout the course of his intellectual career. Meretoja's analysis introduces an interpretative dimension that is particularly important for the present discussion. It enables us to show how narratives shape beliefs, values, and attitudes while simultaneously connecting these internal structures to the ways in which they are externalised and expressed in social and political life. In Meretoja's account, narratives possess both ontological and epistemological dimensions (Meretoja 2014, 145), both of which are essential to the argument advanced in this paper.

Gregory Jones is right to assert that the notion of narrative is central to MacIntyre's philosophical opus, insofar as one of the fundamental premises of his philosophical project is that individual lives and social practices are, at their core, structured in narrative form (Jones 1987, 53). Although MacIntyre never provides a fully systematic elaboration of his conception of narrative, his account contains three interconnected elements: a conception of selfhood, a metaphysical cosmology, and an account of the virtues (Lukić 2026, 39). MacIntyre's conception of selfhood is inseparable from the embeddedness of the individual within the social practices of a particular tradition and culture in which the self operates (MacIntyre 1981, 205). Narrative provides the unity necessary to orient an agent towards a telos that is itself traditionally informed.[3]

[3] In MacIntyre's later work, the concept of telos also acquires a theological dimension informed by his commitment to Thomist philosophy (cf. MacIntyre 2008, 4).

In short, we understand and interpret our lives as stories, while simultaneously existing as parts of larger narratives shaped by our relationships with the external world, and most importantly, with the traditions and communities within which we are situated.

Traditions themselves shape not only our practices but also our worldviews. They nevertheless differ in their practical accounts of rationality, the assessment of truth, and justice. In short, according to MacIntyre, traditions differ in their metaphysical cosmologies (MacIntyre 1988, 349). The meaning of both our private and social practices therefore varies according to the tradition within which they are situated. Likewise, our values, beliefs, and attitudes are shaped by the meta-narrative of that tradition. Furthermore, for MacIntyre, no conception of the good can exist independently of a tradition, nor can the tasks and purposes that a particular tradition prescribes to its inheritors (Blagojević 2020, 18). More precisely, although traditions are historically constituted, a single tradition may nevertheless encompass a plurality of particular narratives. For example, within the contemporary liberal tradition, the fact of pluralism has become a dominant feature, allowing for the coexistence of multiple narratives and worldviews. Each of these narratives shapes our practices within a broader traditional framework, as well as our conception of the good and, consequently, our understanding and cultivation of the virtues (Lukić 2026, 78).

The relationship between the narrative of *the self* and the wider social narrative must, in order to achieve narrative unity, be intelligible. Our actions, dispositions, and commitments become intelligible only in relation to the social context, tradition, or narrative within which we are situated, or, as MacIntyre puts it, as part of "a project itself intelligible only against the background of some equally large or even larger scheme of beliefs" (MacIntyre 1981, 28). We take intelligibility to be a key concept both in MacIntyre's philosophical project and in the narrative analysis developed in this paper. To understand an action as intelligible is to situate it within the wider constellation of beliefs, motives, practices, relationships, and events that constitute a particular tradition. Intelligibility can therefore be understood as a framework of reason-giving in which particular actions acquire meaning through their relation to a broader conception of the *telos*. No action can be understood in complete isolation, since every action presupposes a wider infrastructure of beliefs, motives, purposes, and social practices that renders it meaningful. Our beliefs, intentions, actions, aspirations, goals, and values are thus shaped by the social narratives

within which we are embedded, as well as by the human and political relationships that constitute those narratives. They become intelligible only within the boundaries of this wider social and traditional context. In this sense, MacIntyre's conception of intelligibility expresses the dependence of our self-constitution on the social narratives and traditions that provide the background against which our lives, commitments, and actions can be understood (MacIntyre 1981, 208).

Finally, as mentioned previously, an important addition to the present framework is Meretoja's account of narrative hermeneutics. This approach rests on the view that narratives are necessarily socially and politically constituted and that individuals consequently find themselves interpreting and deciphering meaning within the worlds shaped by such narratives (Meretoja 2018, 50). This ontological premise is broadly MacIntyrean in character; however, Meretoja supplements it with an explicitly epistemic account centred on experience. Narrative hermeneutics can therefore be understood as a contextual approach that places particular emphasis on both the passive and active dimensions of experience. Meretoja stresses that interpretation is not always a deliberate or directed act. Rather, we continuously interpret the contexts in which we find ourselves, often without consciously intending to do so. Interpretation, in this respect, operates both consciously and unconsciously, shaped by the narratives through which we have previously made sense of the world and which subsequently guide the values, beliefs, and attitudes we attach to a particular object of interpretation. As the following analysis will suggest, this largely unreflective dimension of interpretation may also have important consequences for the emergence of social and political antagonism.

The outline and central premises of the narrativist approach adopted in this paper have now been established. We therefore have the necessary conceptual tools to analyse the primary conflict at hand. Having examined the historical evolution of the concepts of *Other Serbia* and *First Serbia*, considered empirical cases illustrating the extent of the division and antagonism between these orientations, and established the philosophical framework required for their analysis, we can now turn to the central task of the paper. The following section will therefore assess these socio-political orientations through the narrativist framework developed above.

4.0. THE DEEP NARRATIVE DISAGREEMENT OF THE *FIRST* AND *OTHER* SERBIA

Let us now return to the ideological dimension of both *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia*. Evaluating these orientations simply through the conventional categories of liberalism and conservatism would fail to do justice to their complexity, as both contain important nuances rooted in the particular historical development of Serbian social and political practices. In this respect, Michael Freeden's analysis of the morphology of ideologies is particularly important, namely:

Political concepts are not simply stipulative or arbitrary constructs, but complex entities that inject order and meaning into observed sets of political phenomena and hold together an assortment of connected ideas. Words and their meanings are invariably the product of the social dimensions of language, and political concepts are doubly related to a sociohistorical context from which they emanate and which they seek to interpret and shape.

In Freeden's account, the concepts employed within a particular ideology or ideological movement derive their meaning from the social world and, in turn, provide the conceptual resources through which that world is interpreted and evaluated. These structures of meaning can only be fully understood within the socio-historical contexts from which they emerge, as individual concepts remain connected to a wider infrastructure of meanings that informs and sustains them and their usage (Freeden 1994, 146). This understanding of ideology, or of ideological constellations, is closely aligned with the narrative framework developed above. It therefore allows us to approach *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia* as inherently context-bound constellations of beliefs, values, and concepts embedded within Serbian society and culture. With this framework in place, we can now return to the earlier portrayals of First Serbia and Other Serbia in order to identify their constitutive elements and examine the components that render them complex ideological systems.

Other Serbia originated as an anti-war movement and as a progressive constellation of beliefs oriented towards the creation of a better and more inclusive society. At the same time, it was conceived as an alternative to the dominant vision of Serbia during the 1990s, as articulated, for example, by Ćirković and Golubović. According to these accounts, *Other Serbia* was to be imagined as a state no longer bound by national myths and legends and instead committed to the principles of procedural democracy. However, characterising *Other Serbia* simply as a liberal-democratic project would also fail to capture its internal complexity. Some of its proponents expressed reservations about liberalism, particularly insofar as it was associated with forms of

economic hegemony incompatible with their vision of *Other Serbia*. Nevertheless, the central point upon which these different conceptions converged was its fundamentally anti-war character. This orientation has, however, undergone a significant transformation over the past two decades. Although the Yugoslav Wars have ended, their political and cultural legacy continues to shape the Balkans, and Serbia in particular. In the post-war context, some proponents of *Other Serbia* have increasingly framed their position in terms of acceptance, responsibility, and reparation. This development is illustrated by a letter issued by Mustafa Cerić, President of the Bosniak World Congress, in which he expressed gratitude to the *Other Serbs* for their efforts to promote the acceptance of responsibility and reparative engagement with crimes committed during the wars. At the same time, Cerić contrasted this orientation with *First Serbia*, directing particular criticism towards Aleksa Đilas for what he regarded as his continued commitment to a nationalist political orientation (Cerić 2021).

The same can be said of *First Serbia*, which is far from constituting an ideologically homogeneous orientation. Its various proponents may share a commitment to national tradition and the defence of Serbian collective identity while also diverging sharply over European integration, the appropriate intensity and political expression of nationalism, the relationship between nationalism and democracy, and questions of economic and public policy. These disagreements reveal, like with the *Other Serbia*, that *First Serbia* is not a unified ideological doctrine. Both of these ideologies are a contested constellation of beliefs whose internal boundaries and priorities continually shift, as the public discussions examined above have demonstrated.

We argue that this apparent disorder stems from a crisis of MacIntyrean intelligibility, as well as from the differences in narrative practices characteristic of these competing socio-political orientations. These differences, in turn, shape both the active and passive processes through which individuals interpret the beliefs, motives, and intentions of *the other*. An intelligibility crisis is understood as a disruption of the narrative framework through which individuals make sense of their social world and find meaning in their practices (Cíbik and Lukić 2025, 1375). The causal mechanism is therefore relatively straightforward. If narrative unity provides intelligibility by connecting individual beliefs, practices, relationships, and aspirations to a wider social framework of meaning, the disruption of that unity deprives individuals of an established basis upon which these elements can be understood and evaluated. Individuals who previously shared a broadly

intelligible social context may consequently begin to interpret its practices, values, and institutions in fundamentally different ways.

The loss of intelligibility also generates a need to reconstruct meaning. However, because such reconstruction draws upon different narrative resources, experiences, and interpretative practices, members of the same social or ideological orientation may arrive at competing accounts of what has gone wrong, who is responsible, and what ought to be done. Serbian society has undergone a series of profound systemic transformations, particularly when these developments are situated within the longer trajectory of social change from the Yugoslav period to the present. Questions of national identity and of the future direction of Serbian society have consequently become deeply divisive. The answer one gives to the fundamental normative question of "What is to be done now?" depends on the particular narrative resources through which the preceding social transformations are interpreted. It is around competing answers to this question that the broad orientations of *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia* emerge. Yet neither orientation provides a fully unified response. Because the reconstruction of meaning takes place through a plurality of social practices, experiences, and narratives, members of both camps may agree on the broad diagnosis of what has been lost while nevertheless disagreeing about its causes, the appropriate response, and the kind of future towards which Serbian society ought to move.

Secondly, Serbian society is pluralistic in its very constitution, a fact that both *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia* broadly recognise. Yet their persistent antagonistic exchange suggests that this shared recognition does not translate into a genuine acceptance of pluralism. Serbian society contains a rich plurality of social and private practices, including religious, cultural, traditional, modern, and progressive forms of life. These practices are shaped by the wider social narratives within which they emerge while simultaneously shaping the ways in which the agents participating in them interpret their social world. Different narrative practices provide their participants with different frameworks through which beliefs, values, and social realities are interpreted and evaluated. What appears meaningful, justified, or reasonable within one set of practices may therefore fail to possess the same meaning or justificatory force within another. When these divergent interpretative frameworks are combined with the antagonistic relationship between *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia*, disagreement moves beyond the ordinary level of conflicting opinions and develop into a form of deep epistemic disagreement.

In his influential philosophical work, The Logic of Deep Disagreements, Robert Fogelin argues that parties engaged in deep disagreement lack the common ground necessary for argument to function, thereby rendering their disagreement resistant to rational resolution (Fogelin 1985, 2a). To return to MacIntyre, we cannot reasonably expect agreement between individuals whose worldviews are grounded in fundamentally different metaphysical cosmologies. Such traditionally situated beliefs, values, and attitudes may fail to generate agreement precisely because they rely on different standards of truth assessment and value determination. Consider, for example, the question of whether God exists. Depending on one's answer, an entire constellation of beliefs and values may be structured differently. Deep disagreements may therefore concern broader and competing worldviews (cf. Ridder 2021) or extend to the most fundamental commitments upon which those worldviews rest (cf. Pritchard 2021).

If one pays close attention to the underlying premises of *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia*, it becomes apparent that their conflict constitutes a form of deep disagreement shaped not only by their respective practices but also by fundamentally different procedures of political and moral deliberation. The asymmetry between the two orientations lies in the sources from which they derive normative authority. *Other Serbia* typically advances claims grounded in universal human rights, procedural democracy, and European normative standards. *First Serbia*, by contrast, grounds political and moral judgement primarily in historically embedded national practices, collective memory, and a teleological conception of Serbian identity. That leads the disagreement to occur prior to the level at which ordinary argument can begin. For *First Serbia*, appeals to universal or European standards appear as alien impositions lacking sufficient grounding within its national and teleological framework. Conversely, for *Other Serbia*, appeals to national memory and historically inherited practices do not carry independent normative authority and instead appear as dangerous or obsolete forms of sentimentality. The asymmetry, therefore, consists in the fact that each orientation evaluates political claims through a different source of intelligibility: one primarily through universal and procedural standards, and the other through historically situated and teleologically constituted national practices. Because of this, neither side accepts the basic evidentiary currency of the other.[4] This creates a specific “epistemic closed loop" that reinforces

[4] In this respect, the conflict bears a striking resemblance to the liberal–communitarian debate that stood at the centre of political-philosophical discussion several decades ago (cf. Kymlicka 2020).

the connection with Fogelin's deep disagreement. Each attempt by one orientation to justify its position may therefore strengthen the commitments of the other, since the reasons offered are judged according to standards whose authority is itself contested.

Thereby, the deep epistemic disagreements arising from the crisis of intelligibility also help explain the profound antagonism between the two opposing orientations. As noted in our discussion of Meretoja's narrative hermeneutics, interpretation operates both actively and passively. Public discourse, and, indeed, the open disdain expressed by the two camps towards one another, undoubtedly contributes to the formation of a polarisation that has increasingly become embedded in Serbian public narrative. However, passive interpretation becomes particularly significant once evaluative judgements extend beyond individuals who explicitly identify with either camp to those who merely hold a particular set of beliefs associated with one of them. It consequently becomes relatively easy for an individual to become a target of disdain and to be categorised as an *Other Serbian* or a *First Serbian* on the basis of particular beliefs or attitudes. As we have seen, this is a strategy employed by Pavle Bihali in his extremist political rhetoric. In this sense, the terms become offensive attributes through which one side seeks to characterise and delegitimise the other.

The narrative analysis together with the historical and empirical account developed in the first part of this paper, has provided us with a diagnosis of the dynamics underlying the relationship between *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia*. More specifically, it has shown how crises of intelligibility, divergent narrative practices, and competing sources of normative authority contribute to the emergence of deep epistemic disagreement and, consequently, persistent political antagonism. The remaining question is therefore normative: what follows once the underlying structure of this disagreement has been identified? The final part of the paper addresses this question by considering what kinds of structural or procedural conditions might render such deep disagreement intelligible and politically manageable without presupposing that either orientation must abandon its fundamental narrative commitments.

5.0. NOT THE *FIRST*, NOT THE *OTHER*, BUT UNIFIED SERBIA

It is tempting to fall into the trap of suggesting that perhaps we should simply "get along." The immediate question, however, is: on whose terms? There are potential solutions grounded in both liberal proceduralism and nationally embedded traditionalism that might appear capable of

resolving the dispute. Yet, as the preceding analysis has shown, this is a deep epistemic disagreement in Fogelin's sense: the parties lack the common ground that rational argument requires to function. Nothing in what follows is offered as a solution to that disagreement, nor could it be. What we offer instead are theoretical indications of the kind of structural conditions that would need to be present for the disagreement to persist without functioning as mutual delegitimisation; considerations we leave to institutional and legal bodies to develop, test, and, where appropriate, adopt.

The first such indication follows from the analysis itself is that the value-laden terminology of *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia* should be consciously avoided in public and institutional discourse. The more these terms circulate, the more polarised the narrative becomes, since the narrative is partly constituted through the terminology by which its opposing orientations are articulated. Because both orientations operate through an us-versus-them dynamic akin to that of contemporary populism (cf. Mudde 2004; Loobuyck 2025); continued use of this vocabulary reinforces the antagonistic structure it describes. This is a precondition noting that any institutional intervention conducted in these terms will already have taken a side.

We have also seen that both camps, in different ways, affirm pluralism, although tend to act against it. Being true to the Rawlsian-inspired fact of pluralism and firmly accepting that both views can reasonably coexist in the Serbian community while also be non-compatible comprehensive doctrines is the second step (cf. Rawls 1993). In order to achieve this, it is important to recognise that, although both orientations are familiar with each other's practices, they tend to disregard their significance. At the end of the day, both remain part of the same broader tradition, yet they are constituted through different narratives within it. Drawing on MacIntyre, we can therefore suggest that trans-narrative dialogue requires actors to learn the narrative logic of the opposing side as a "second first language". This is where this papers theoretical intervention comes to be of particular importance.

What such a requirement might look like in practice is illustrated, rather than modelled, by *An Tionól Saoránach*, the Irish Citizens' Assembly, which brought together randomly selected citizens across socioeconomic, geographic, and generational lines (ICAP 2019). Its contribution was designed to change the terms under which disagreement was conducted. For example, the participants were required to render their reasons intelligible to those who did not share them,

without being required to abandon those reasons. This is, admittedly, a narrower achievement than completely dissolving disagreement; however, we want to be explicit about that narrowness and consistent with Fogelin's account. Nothing here suggests that a deliberative format overturns the resistance to resolution that characterises deep disagreement, despite the attractive nature of Rawlsian liberal proceduralism. This format may, more modestly, alter the function that persistent disagreement plays within a society, shifting it from a source of existential antagonism described above towards a form of disagreement that is not an attempt at mutual delegitimisation.

Whether, and how, such a structure could be designed for the Serbian case we have explored, what body would convene it, what would prevent its capture by either orientation, how public-service media or educational institutions might be reformed to support rather than undermine it, are questions of institutional and legal design that exceed the scope of the present project. We raise them here as theoretical indications and not policy recommendations, in the hope that they may be taken up by those working on institutional design specifically. What the preceding analysis does establish is the more limited claim that any such proposal would need to satisfy. It cannot presuppose the normative authority of either narrative constitution as a condition of participation, on pain of being rejected by the side whose authority is not presupposed. This shared minimal ground, that members of both *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia* understand themselves as members of the same national community is the condition without which no solution, however designed, could be legitimate to both.

6.0. CONCLUSION

The main premise of this paper has been that *First Serbia* and *Other Serbia* cannot be adequately understood through conventional Left–Right political spectrums. Instead, by applying a MacIntyrean narrative framework supplemented by narrative hermeneutics, we have demonstrated that their antagonism constitutes a deep epistemic disagreement rooted in divergent and, in crucial respects, incommensurable narrative constitutions of social practices. The conflict between these two orientations, we argue, involves a fundamental disagreement over the very criteria by which truth, evidence, and normative authority are determined. While *Other Serbia* derives its normative legitimacy primarily from universal human rights, procedural democracy, and European integration, *First Serbia* grounds its normative framework in historically embedded national practices, collective memory, and spatial continuity. Furthermore, the resulting crisis of

intelligibility generates an epistemic closed loop in which each side continually delegitimises the foundational premises of the other, thereby reinforcing the very antagonism that makes the disagreement resistant to resolution.

With that being said, addressing this entrenched socio-political divide does not require the imposition of an artificial procedural liberal consensus, nor does it demand that either orientation surrender its core commitments, as doing so would inevitably be rejected by at least one side. Instead, moving towards a unified civic space, towards, in other words, unified Serbia, requires abandoning value-laden and antagonistic terminology while recognising the fact of reasonable pluralism. Under the structural and procedural conditions necessary for trans-narrative dialogue, participants can learn to articulate and understand the narrative logic of the opposing side as a "second first language." In this way, deep disagreement may persist without functioning as existential hostility, transforming an otherwise intractable ideological conflict into an intelligible and democratically manageable disagreement.

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