

THE INFLUENCE OF THE VIDOVDAN MYTH ON SERBIA'S SECURITY STRATEGY AND FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS KOSOVO

Prof. Dr. Bejtush Gashi

Former Minister of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kosovo

Former Dean of the Faculty of Security Studies

bejtushg2002@yahoo.com

Abstract:

The Vidovdan myth holds a central place in Serbian political mythology and has evolved into a strategic instrument in shaping Serbia's foreign and security policy, particularly in relation to Kosovo. This study examines how the myth is employed to legitimize Serbia's revisionist discourse, justify interference in Kosovo's internal affairs, and construct a permanent threat doctrine. Relying on the constructivist approach in international relations and political discourse analysis, the article argues that Vidovdan functions as an ideological mechanism with significant impact on regional security, Euro-Atlantic integration processes, and Kosovo's international standing.

Keywords: Vidovdan, security strategy, political myth, hybrid warfare, Srpski svet, Serbia, Kosovo.

Cite as: APA style: Gashi, B. (2025). The Influence of The Vidovdan Myth on Serbia's Security Strategy and Foreign Policy Towards Kosovo. *Octopus Journal: Hybrid Warfare & Strategic Conflicts*. <https://doi.org/10.69921/xwhdww76>

(CC BY-NC 4.0) This article is licensed to you under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). When you copy and redistribute this paper in full or in part, you need to provide proper attribution to it to ensure that others can later locate this work (and to ensure that others do not accuse you of plagiarism).

Introduction

National myths are not merely historical accounts or cultural legends; they often serve as powerful tools for constructing collective identity and articulating state security and foreign policies. In this context, the Vidovdan myth plays a unique role in shaping Serbia's political consciousness and security strategy. Rooted in the collective memory of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, this myth has become a symbol of sacrifice, heroism, and the Serbian “historical mission,” persisting in contemporary political discourse.

Vidovdan has transformed from a historical and religious date into an ideological instrument used to justify nationalist policies, revisionist approaches to borders, and the denial of Kosovo's statehood. This approach is not merely rhetorical; it is reflected in Serbia's concrete security strategies, including symbolic militarization, narratives of existential threats, and territorial claims over areas considered part of Serbia's “historical heritage.”

Through its ideological and discursive functions, the Vidovdan myth has become an integral part of Serbia's military, security, and foreign policy strategies. It shapes the formulation of perceived threats and motivates defensive policies aimed at preserving Serbia's territorial integrity and geopolitical position in the region. Using the constructivist approach in international relations and discourse analysis, this study sheds light on the ways in which the Vidovdan myth influences regional politics, stability in the Western Balkans, and Kosovo's efforts toward international integration.

1. The Origin and Evolution of the Vidovdan Myth

The Vidovdan myth is rooted in the historical event of the Battle of Kosovo, fought on June 28, 1389, between Ottoman forces and a coalition of Balkan princes, in which Serbian Prince Lazar Hrebeljanovic played a significant role. This battle occupies a pivotal place in the historical memory of the Serbian people. Although it did not result in a clear military victory, it was mythologized as a sublime act of Serbian sacrifice for the defense of Christianity and national identity.

Over time, the event was transformed into a religious, moral, and political symbol. The Serbian Orthodox Church played a key role in codifying and disseminating the myth. Prince Lazar was elevated to the status of a martyr who chose the “heavenly kingdom” over the earthly one, thereby turning a military defeat into a moral and spiritual triumph.

In subsequent centuries, the Vidovdan myth evolved from a religious and historical commemoration into an ideological and political tool. During the era of romantic nationalism and the creation of the modern Serbian state, the myth served as a mobilizing force for national unification and for legitimizing territorial claims—particularly over Serbian communities located beyond the country’s official borders, such as in Kosovo. By the late 20th century, during the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the myth was vigorously revived as a key element of nationalist rhetoric, becoming both a political and military instrument supporting revisionist ideas and expansionist policies aimed at reasserting control over Kosovo.

The symbolism of Vidovdan was widely employed in political rhetoric to justify specific actions, including military and political campaigns in the region—especially those targeting Kosovo’s independence—thereby generating a constant sense of threat and national victimhood. For example, Slobodan Milosevic’s speech at Gazimestan on June 28, 1989, called on the Serbian nation to mobilize and resist, heavily invoking Vidovdan symbolism to justify his aggressive stance toward Kosovo. Similarly, statements from representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church have frequently revived the myth as a tool to strengthen national sentiment and to support Serbian policies opposing Kosovo’s recognition as an independent state.

Today, the Vidovdan myth is not merely a symbolic date on the Serbian calendar; it constitutes a mytho-political doctrine that interweaves collective memory, a survivalist strategy, and Serbia’s foreign policy. It serves as both a cultural and historical foundation for Serbia’s position on Kosovo—justifying the refusal to recognize its statehood and directly influencing Serbia’s political and propaganda activities across the Balkans.

2. The Political Use of Myths in State Strategy Formation

In the political history of many states, myths have functioned as sources of legitimacy for major political decisions, mass mobilization, and the construction of a coherent national narrative. They are not merely elements of collective culture but serve as essential frameworks within which political discourse unfolds—shaping foreign policy, national defense strategies, and the state’s broader strategic visions. In the case of Serbia, the Vidovdan myth stands out as a prominent example of the fusion between historical symbolism and state policy.

Since the late 1980s to the present day, Serbian political elites—regardless of regime changes or ideological shifts—have consistently preserved the strategic core of the myth, reproducing and adapting it in various

forms to suit contemporary needs. In this context, the myth is not a passive historical memory but has been transformed into an active instrument of policymaking.

2.1. The Myth as a Tool for Legitimizing Serbia's Foreign Policy

In official Serbian discourse, claims over Kosovo are not grounded solely in legal or political arguments, but primarily in a “historical and spiritual heritage” which, according to official narrative, derives from the Vidovdan myth. The invocation of this myth lends political legitimacy to Serbia's unwavering stance on rejecting Kosovo's independence, even in defiance of international pressure, international court decisions, and European integration processes.

A historical example is Slobodan Milošević's speech at Gazimestan on June 28, 1989, where he invoked the Vidovdan myth to mobilize Serbian public opinion and justify his opposition to Kosovo's autonomy, stating: “This is the moment when we must stand united to defend our sacred land, to defend Kosovo—the heart of Serbia.” Likewise, the Chief of Staff of Serbia's Armed Forces in the 1990s, Dragoljub Ojdanić, stated in interviews: “The memory of the Kosovo battle and the myths tied to Vidovdan give us the moral strength and motivation to defend Serbia's territorial integrity, including Kosovo.” Similarly, during the 1990s crises, Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Pavle frequently emphasized the Church's and the Serbian people's protective role in Kosovo, directly linking it to the Vidovdan legacy and declaring: “Kosovo is the spiritual and historical heart of Serbia, and we are obligated to protect it as our most sacred possession.”

The instrumentalization of the Vidovdan myth in Serbian political discourse functions as a legitimizing mechanism for rejecting Kosovo's independence. This mythic process provides political support for a narrative that presents Serbia as the guardian of a sacred historical and spiritual heritage in the face of continuous international challenges. Within Serbia's security and foreign policy strategy, Kosovo is treated not merely as a territorial issue but as a key element of Serbian national identity, justifying its official rejection of Kosovo's independence through historical, moral, and cultural arguments tied directly to heritage and national sovereignty.

2.2. The Vidovdan Myth as the Axis of Security Strategy: From Historical Symbolism to State Instrument

The Vidovdan myth directly influences Serbian conceptualizations of security threats and the structuring of its military and defense doctrine. Serbia's security strategy draws upon mythic elements such as the memory of sacrifice, a sense of encirclement by enemies, and a moral duty to defend “sacred territories.” This logic fosters a perpetual state of ideological mobilization, facilitating the use of conflict-laden rhetoric during political or international tensions.

In recent decades, high-ranking Serbian military officials have repeatedly tied the strengthening of military capabilities to the need to defend Serbia's “sacred heritage” in Kosovo and the region. This includes strategic and military cooperation with states such as Russia and China, both of which support Serbia's position on Kosovo. Within this framework, Serbia has provided support not only to formal military structures but also to paramilitary groups and organized criminal networks operating in a coordinated manner throughout the Balkans. Serbian intelligence services and units such as the “Jedinice za specijalne operacije” (Special Operations Units) have played a crucial role in coordinating and supporting these structures, which often operate beyond the scope of public and international oversight.

These paramilitary and criminal organizations—closely intertwined with state structures and military intelligence services—have been and continue to be used as instruments of Serbia's foreign and security policy. They exert political and military pressure, contribute to destabilizing the situation in Kosovo and the broader region, and create a climate of fear and control over local communities. This collaboration between state and non-state actors reflects a hybrid strategy aimed at maintaining influence and dominance within a persistent context of regional tension.

A telling example of this strategy is the terrorist attack of September 24, 2023, in the village of Banjska in northern Kosovo, where a heavily armed group carried out a coordinated assault on the Kosovo Police, killing police officer Sergeant Afrim Bunjaku—who was later honored with the title “Hero of Kosovo.” After the attack, the group retreated and took shelter in the Serbian Orthodox monastery in Banjska, a site of symbolic and spiritual importance to the local Serbian community, aiming to reinforce the perception that their action was a defensive act in protection of “sacred territories.” Milan Radoicic, the political leader of Kosovo Serbs in the north, publicly claimed responsibility for organizing the attack. Serbian official rhetoric framed the incident as a defense of historical and spiritual heritage, linking it to the “moral obligation” inherited from the Vidovdan myth.

This terrorist act was accompanied by strong nationalist rhetoric in Belgrade, where it was portrayed as a defense of “sacred territories” and a response to “threats” against Serbia and Serbs in Kosovo. Statements by Serbian military and political leaders tied their actions directly to the moral imperative of Vidovdan to protect historical and spiritual legacy.

International investigations and reports from security and anti-crime organizations indicate that these paramilitary units have worked closely with criminal networks involved in arms trafficking, drug smuggling, and contraband—leveraging their networks to bolster influence and control in the region. This interweaving of state policy with organized crime, legitimized through the mythic rhetoric of Vidovdan, creates a dangerous backdrop for regional stability and efforts to normalize relations with Kosovo. In Serbian state media, this rhetoric is used to rally national unity and justify any military or political action against international recognition of Kosovo—framing every development as an “attack on Serbia” and a call for a strong, unified national response through both formal and informal channels.

Thus, the Vidovdan myth is not merely a cultural or historical element—it is a central component of Serbia’s security strategy and state policy, feeding and justifying a complex network of military, paramilitary, and criminal actions aimed at preserving influence and control in the Balkans.

3. Strategies of Myth Instrumentalization: Five Dimensions of Vidovdan’s Influence on Serbian Politics

The instrumentalization of the Vidovdan myth represents a complex mechanism that spans multiple key dimensions of Serbian politics and society. This myth is used as a strategic tool to consolidate national identity and legitimize state policies across different levels. Five primary dimensions are analyzed below:

1. Diplomatic Dimension:

Serbia strategically employs the Vidovdan narrative in international forums such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe to oppose Kosovo’s independence. According to Bieber (2018), this narrative provides Serbia’s foreign policy with a historical and moral framework, portraying Kosovo as the “historical heart of Serbia” and thus justifying its refusal to recognize Kosovo.

2. Media Dimension:

Serbian state media outlets, including RTS and the Sputnik agency, use the myth to propagate narratives of historical victimhood and threats against Serbia. According to Pudar Draško and Grujić (2020), this reinforces public opinion against recognizing Kosovo and bolsters nationalist policies.

3. Educational Dimension:

In Serbian school curricula, the Vidovdan myth is presented as a divine sacrifice for the protection of the nation and its territory, cultivating among younger generations a sense of moral and historical duty to preserve territorial integrity.

4. Religious Dimension:

Religious rites and ceremonies of the Serbian Orthodox Church—including the Vidovdan memorial mass and pilgrimages to historic monasteries in Kosovo—play a vital role in preserving and reinforcing the myth within public perception and in consolidating collective Serbian identity. These ritual practices affirm the link between religious and national identity, strengthening the narrative of sacrifice and spiritual devotion to the “sacred Serbian land.”

Prominent religious leaders have highlighted the sacrificial and spiritual dimensions of the Vidovdan battle, interpreting it as a foundational act of national identity defense. For example:

- Patriarch Irinej declared during the 2018 memorial mass:

“The defense of Kosovo is a sacred duty and a responsibility of the entire Serbian nation. This land is blessed and part of our national soul.”

- Metropolitan Amfilohije emphasized:

“Kosovo is the foundation of our faith and the existence of the Serbian people. Every effort to preserve and protect this land is a sacred sacrifice that unites us all.”

- Bishop Teodosije of Raška and Prizren stated:

“The monasteries in Kosovo are not only religious centers but symbols of our shared identity. They connect us to our past and give us strength to face the future.”

Thus, religious visits and ceremonies in monasteries like Dečani and Gračanica serve as ritual acts articulating a spiritual and historical bond with the territory, turning the Vidovdan myth into a key instrument of social and political mobilization. Through these rites, the Serbian Orthodox Church reinforces a narrative that tightly binds religious faith to the preservation of national identity.

5. Paramilitary Dimension:

The Vidovdan myth is employed by Serbian paramilitary groups as an ideological justification for military interventions and destabilizing actions in Kosovo and the region. The sacrifice of Prince Lazar and the concept of the “sacred Serbian land” create a sense of historical and spiritual mission, legitimized as the defense of national heritage.

An example is the Special Operations Unit (JSO), an elite Serbian force accused of war crimes, which used and cultivated this mythology to justify its actions. Other structures, such as the Territorial Defense and the Serbian Volunteer Guard (led by Arkan), also relied on this narrative to boost morale and legitimize military actions. Furthermore, criminal organizations like the Zemun Clan, linked to former JSO members and intelligence services, utilize the myth to justify their illicit and destabilizing activities—operating in the shadows with covert state support.

A current example is the terrorist attack on September 24, 2023, in Banjska, where an armed Serbian group attacked Kosovo Police. Official Serbian rhetoric described the event as the defense of historical heritage and the Vidovdan legacy, emphasizing the importance of controlling Kosovo as the “spiritual heart of Serbia.”

The Vidovdan myth functions as a “political technology,” serving as a tool for constructing and directing Serbia’s hegemonic political narratives in the region. Through its symbolic and emotional content, the myth is instrumentalized to pursue specific political objectives:

- **Legitimizing the concept of “Srpski svet” (The Serbian World):**

The myth is leveraged to support regional strategies aimed at Serbia’s cultural, political, and at times institutional expansion into territories inhabited by Serb communities outside its national borders. It

serves as a historical and moral justification for aspirations toward a new form of trans-territorial Serbian integration aligned with the ideology of national unification beyond the nation-state.

- **Reinforcing a sense of encirclement and victimhood:**

In times of crisis, such as the Banjska incident, the mythic narrative is activated to portray events as attacks on Serbian faith, culture, and identity. This generates a permanent sense of threat and a “us vs. them” mentality, fostering political and cultural isolation, undermining trust in interethnic and international dialogue, and justifying unilateral actions framed as “self-defense” and community separation.

- **Justifying divisive discourse and institutional disengagement:**

Hybrid rhetoric and events like Banjska are used to strengthen mistrust and rejection toward Kosovo’s institutions, especially among local Serbs in the north. These positions are backed by a blend of myth, historical legacy, and existential insecurity—contributing to the creation and maintenance of a parallel political and cultural identity aligned with Serbia.

In this way, the radicalization of the Vidovdan myth and its instrumentalization through hybrid strategies—including paramilitary operations on the ground, the use of religious symbols, and efforts to shape international perceptions—represent a core component of Serbia’s foreign and security policy. This model embodies a new form of “national survival warfare” that uses historical narrative to justify actions both within and beyond formal state politics.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The analysis of the use of the Vidovdan myth in Serbia’s hybrid conflict strategy in Kosovo and the region reveals a deliberate and multifaceted deployment of the myth as a tool for mobilization, legitimation, and destabilization. In this context, the following measures are recommended:

- **Strengthening intelligence mechanisms and international cooperation** to detect and prevent paramilitary operations that use historical narratives as ideological justification for destabilizing actions. This requires improved information sharing between the authorities of Kosovo, Serbia, and international institutions.

- **Promoting intercommunal dialogue**, focusing on the construction of a shared historical narrative that avoids the instrumentalization of myths for political and military purposes. Such a process would contribute to reducing tensions and fostering reconciliation.
- **Supporting educational and cultural institutions** to develop programs that promote critical approaches to history and its political usage, with an emphasis on educating about the impact of myths on ethnic and regional conflicts.
- **Monitoring media outlets and propaganda campaigns** that exploit religious and historical symbols to create one-sided narratives, as well as establishing accountability mechanisms in cases of disinformation dissemination.
- **Considering legal regulations regarding the organization and conduct of public Vidovdan celebrations**, particularly when such events are used for political purposes or to mobilize groups with extremist tendencies. This process must strictly adhere to the fundamental principles of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), especially articles guaranteeing freedom of expression (Article 10), freedom of assembly and association (Article 11), and the rights of national minorities as defined in the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. A careful balance is needed between maintaining public order and preventing actions that incite hatred, violence, or discrimination, while simultaneously safeguarding fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly, and the practice of culture and religion.
- **Legal review of the potential restriction or regulation of public Vidovdan celebrations**, drawing from international precedents—such as German laws that ban nationalist speeches and the dissemination of extremist ideologies from the pre-WWII era—with the goal of preventing the instrumentalization of Vidovdan for destabilizing purposes. This process should avoid infringing on democratic rights and instead promote cultural and historical pluralism in the region, while preserving good bilateral relations between involved states. The jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) emphasizes that restrictions on freedom of expression are justified only when they pose a threat to public order or the rights of others, such as in cases of incitement to racial or ethnic hatred (e.g., *Handyside v. United Kingdom*, 1976). This legal approach may serve as guidance for evaluating public activities grounded in historical symbols that risk being exploited for extremist or destabilizing goals.

Furthermore, European policies on the protection of minority rights and the promotion of cultural coexistence, as outlined in the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Strategy for Tolerance and Intercultural Dialogue, emphasize the importance of dialogue and the prevention of instrumentalizing cultural heritage to fuel division or conflict. Within this framework, a cautious and balanced assessment of legal frameworks governing Vidovdan celebrations would help prevent their use as destabilizing instruments while protecting freedom of expression, culture, and religion—and ultimately contributing to stability and lasting peace in the region.

The Vidovdan myth continues to play a key role in processes of conflict and stability in the Balkans. Despite its historical and cultural nature, its intentional and strategic instrumentalization within hybrid tactics demands a well-informed and coordinated approach between local and international actors to prevent conflict escalation and promote sustainable peace in the region.

References

1. Bieber, F. (2018). *Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. *East European Politics*, 34(3), 337–354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2018.1490272>
2. Council of the European Union. (2013–2020). *Brussels Agreement and the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue*. Official documents. Retrieved from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/>
3. Gashi, B. (2018). Minority rights and security challenges in the Western Balkans. *Journal of Balkan Security Studies*, 5(2), 45–62.
4. Glenny, M. (2001). *The Balkans: Nationalism, war, and the great powers, 1804–1999*. London: Penguin Books.
5. Ignatieff, M. (1994). *Blood and belonging: Journeys into the new nationalism*. London: BBC Books.
6. International Crisis Group. (2013). *Serbia and Kosovo: The path to normalization* (Europe Report No. 231). Brussels: International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/kosovo/serbia-and-kosovo-path-normalization>
7. Miskovic, M. (2017). The Vidovdan myth and Serbian national identity. *Journal of Balkan Studies*, 45(2), 145–162.
8. Millosheviq, S. (1989, June 28). *Speech at Gazimestan*. Yugoslav Historical Archives. Belgrade.
9. Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. (1986). *The SANU Memorandum*. Belgrade: SANU.
10. Ristić, L. (2010). The Kosovo myth: Serbian nationalism and the politics of history. *Balkan Insight*. Retrieved from <https://balkaninsight.com/2010/06/28/the-kosovo-myth-and-nationalism/>
11. Radio Television of Serbia (RTS). (2019–2024). *Broadcasts and commemorations of Vidovdan*. Retrieved from <https://www.rts.rs/>

12. Sputnik Serbia. (2020–2024). *Analyses and commentary on the “sacred Serbian land”*. Retrieved from <https://rs.sputniknews.com/>
13. Todorova, M. (1997). *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
14. Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Online Reports and Institutional Documents

1. NATO/KFOR. (2023). *Report on troop reinforcements and patrol activity following the Banjska attack*. Retrieved from <https://europarl.europa.eu>, <https://koha.net>, <https://cna.al>, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net>
2. European Parliament. (2023). *Resolution on EULEX–KFOR cooperation in the investigation of the Banjska incident*. Retrieved from <https://europarl.europa.eu>
3. White House National Security Council. (2023). *Statement on Serbian troop movements near the Kosovo border*. Washington, DC: White House. Retrieved from <https://whitehouse.gov>
4. NATO Parliamentary Assembly. (2023). *Report on the withdrawal of militants from Banjska*. Retrieved from <https://koha.net>, <https://reuters.com>, <https://n1info.rs>, <https://telegrafi.com>
5. EULEX Kosovo. (2023). *Documents supporting Kosovo Police investigations following the Banjska attack*. Pristina: EULEX.
6. Kirby, J. (2023, September 25). *Statement on the coordinated terrorist attack in Banjska*. U.S. National Security Council Press Office.