Ivan Negrišorac / Dragan M. Stanić[1]
President of Matica Srpska
Novi Sad (Serbia)

UDC 930.85(497.11:437.6)
061:001.32(497.113)
061:001.32(437.6)
Original scientific article
Received: 10.3.2026.
Accepted: 16.4.2026.
doi: 10.5937/napredak7-65606

Serbs and Slovaks, Matica Srpska and Matica Slovenská: Two centuries of trials and experiences

Abstract: Two Slavic peoples, Serbs and Slovaks, Slovaks and Serbs, serve as a good example of nations with close common origins, who, throughout their existence, have not easily forgotten this shared heritage. This common origin enables them even today, after many centuries, to understand each other well and to have meaningful dialogue. A developed consciousness of kinship, rooted as much in the facts of common origin as in the realities of mutual understanding, allows these two peoples not only to examine the obscure and unclear events of the past but also to project related visions of the future. Only by combining these two profound and distant temporal dimensions, expressed in the intersection we call the ever-relevant present, should one seek to construct one's collective, national destiny and concrete historical reality. Such construction, in turn, should not rely solely on adapting to general, global, externally imposed circumstances but also on actively shaping a sense of meaning that reveals itself to a Slavic people as a credible value of human life, the kind of life that is possible in this time and in this world.

Keywords: Serbs, Slovaks, Matica Srpska, Matica slovenská, Georgije Magarašević, Pavel Jozef Šafárik, Ján Kollár, Svetozar Miletić

Two Slavic peoples, Serbs and Slovaks, Slovaks and Serbs, serve as a good example of nations with close common origins, who, throughout their existence, have not easily forgotten this shared heritage. This common origin enables them even today, after many centuries, to understand each other well and to have meaningful dialogue. A developed consciousness of kinship, rooted as much in the facts of common origin as in the realities of mutual understanding, allows these two peoples not only to examine the

[1] dstanic@maticasrpska.org.rs, https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6385-7070

obscure and unclear events of the past but also to project related visions of the future. Only by combining these two profound and distant temporal dimensions, expressed in the intersection we call the ever-relevant present, should one seek to construct one's collective, national destiny and concrete historical reality. Such construction, in turn, should not rely solely on adapting to general, global, externally imposed circumstances but also on actively shaping a sense of meaning that reveals itself to a Slavic people as a credible value of human life, the kind of life that is possible in this time and in this world.

Unity in the Habsburg Empire

Scattered across the vast expanse of the world, Slavs may sometimes feel that their shared reality does not exist or that it is merely a product of pure fiction. Accordingly, the Serbian historian and archimandrite Jovan Rajić, in his invaluable work *History of Various Slavic Nations, Especially Bulgarians, Croats and Serbs* (1794), drew attention to the large number of names applied to Slavs, noting that "the Slavic peoples have grown and multiplied so much that, after being divided and given different names, it is hardly possible to count them all." (Rajić, 1794, pp. 68). Many of these names are ethnonyms, used to denote peoples and their subgroups, but some are derived from the names of places and regions where they lived. Such toponymic designations can introduce considerable confusion, misidentifications, and unfounded assumptions of identity. That the life of every individual – and indeed of entire peoples – is filled with trials does not require special emphasis, for this simple truth ought to be known to every person. One should continually strive to recognise where the most perilous obstacles of diverse trials lie and where such obstacles may render the path exceedingly difficult to traverse.

Leaving aside the medieval, Cyril and Methodius-era commonality, it can be said that the Serbs and the Slovaks laid the foundations of their key avenues of cooperation at the very beginning of the 19th century, at a time when certain Slavic groups began to recognise themselves through specific characteristics that demanded not only an acknowledgement of Slavic unity but also the highlighting of the particularities of individual peoples. These peoples had emerged as branches of the pan-Slavic mass, ready to shape autonomous worlds with their own distinct languages, religions, histories, cultures, and other specific traits. In such circumstances, it was prudent to cultivate the uniqueness of each Slavic nation, yet one must by no means lose the awareness of the common bond, which is not merely a museum phenomenon or a relic of a long-past history, but an active, living reality that ought to be nurtured through direct communication between members of the two peoples and their respective cultures. Finding themselves within the framework of the same state, the Habsburg Empire, a realm that, over the centuries of its consolidation, increasingly developed grand expansionist and imperial ambitions – the Serbs and Slovaks naturally turned to one another, for in many respects their destinies were very similar. Both peoples, within the Habsburg monarchy, were like two small streams within a vast lake, where the real danger threatened that the waters of these streams might simply merge into the great imperial whole and, as a result, their distinctiveness disappear entirely.

The Habsburg Empire was a vast mixture of peoples, and within this whole the number of Slavs was indeed enormous. For example, in the first issue of *Serbske letopisi* (1824), Georgije Magarašević presents statistical data indicating that, at the time of the publication of the first issue of the journal, the Austrian Empire contained 12.2 million Slavs, 5.23 million Germans, 4.5 million Italians, 3.8 million Hungarians, and so on (Chronicle of Matica srpska, 2023, pp. 37). In other words, the Slavs numbered slightly fewer than the combined total of Germans, Italians, and Hungarians (13.53 million). It is therefore no surprise that censuses in the Austrian Empire were conducted in ways that attempted, through various means, to obscure the national structure – much as today, within the European Union, and under its pressures in other states within its sphere of influence, similar procedures are pursued by imperial strategies designed to facilitate the assimilation of so-called small nations. Data from the beginning of the 20th century (1907), presented by historian Alan Taylor, show that the population of Austria-Hungary was such that there were 23.5 million Slavs (45% of the total population), 12 million Germans, 10 million Hungarians, and three million Romanians, (Taylor, 2001, pp. 298-301) with the number of Slavs once again slightly fewer than the first three nations – Germans, Hungarians, and Romanians (25 million). At the same time, the very numerous Italians are absent from this count, as they had, in the meantime, succeeded in establishing their own unified national state.

It is entirely evident that the European Union's assimilation policy closely resembles that of the Habsburg Empire. At the same time, it is equally clear that the European Union, unlike the role model of over a century ago, has, at least until recently, succeeded in offering far more attractive positive incentives that lead to assimilation processes. In other words, small yet related peoples, such as the Serbs and the Slovaks, can indeed support one another in navigating these complex historical processes, both in the past and in the present. There exists at least one shared and crucial dilemma for all small nations of the world, especially within such mega-state formations as the Habsburg Empire once was, or as the European Union is today. This dilemma can be formulated as follows: Do small nations wish to survive or to disappear? Are materially attractive factors sufficient reason for the sense of belonging to a small nation to be completely forgotten and repressed from consciousness? More specifically, what possible exit strategy exists for small nations under such complex circumstances? Put even more precisely: Is it possible to enable the material advancement of small nations without triggering the effect of submission to assimilation mechanisms, and without leading to the eventual disappearance of that nation? These are questions that undoubtedly demand valid answers, both with respect to the historical situation and the contemporary context.

The spirit of Serbian–Slovak solidarity: Georgije Magarašević and Pavel Jozef Šafárik

Old books, as well as literary and scholarly journals of long, continuous publication, can be highly valuable sources of knowledge and direct lessons on the path to collective, national self-awareness. Among the Slovaks, such a journal is *Slovenské*

pohľady, founded in 1846, while among the Serbs it is the *Letopis Matice srpske*, founded in 1824. These two long-running, continuous journals represented, in themselves, effective bridges over which the exchange of Slovak and Serbian cultural assets took place in the fields of literature, linguistic self-consciousness, philology, and culture in the broadest sense. In the establishment of *Serbske letopisi*, which was renamed *Letopis Matice srpske* in 1873, active participation came not only from the chief editor Georgije Magarašević but also from the Slovak scholar Pavel Jozef Šafárik. At the time, Šafárik was the director and professor at the Orthodox grammar school in Novi Sad, while Magarašević was only a professor, so the two colleagues collaborated closely from the very beginnings of the journal. Šafárik authored a considerable number of texts on the pan-Slavic past as well as the Serbian past and the histories of various Slavic peoples. The foundation of scholarly knowledge regarding Slavic unity on the pages of the *Letopis* was developed precisely thanks to Šafárik. Between 1824 and 1950 (according to research and cipher resolutions by Marko Maletin), a total of 27 of his texts were published, several of which appeared in multiple instalments (See, Maletin, 1968, pp. 401-402). The connection between Pavel Jozef Šafárik and Georgije Magarašević, as well as between the Novi Sad Gymnasium and the city of Novi Sad with the Slovak philologist, represents one of the most remarkable links established between the two brotherly nations (See, Šafarik, 1963; Šafarik, 1996). Šafárik resided in Novi Sad from 1819 to 1831, which was for him a precious period of knowledge accumulation and direct engagement with old Serbian books, both manuscript and printed. On the basis of this insight and knowledge, he developed a substantial part of his Slavic activity, which would only be fully revealed in published works after this Novi Sad period and would have a profound impact on scholarship.

Already in the first issue of *Serbske letopisi*, Šafárik warned of a disturbing type of discourse prevalent in the scholarship of that era, which was marked by serious forms of racism: "Any Slav who takes into his hands some book on history, geography, pilgrimage, or ethnography, or on statistics and politics, written in a foreign language – and how many are there who do this every day? – must indeed take it with caution; for he must already prepare himself in advance to find himself and his people despised and mocked. Two-thirds of all such books, which deal with these matters, contain nothing else, if they mention the Slavs at all, whether all Slavs in general or only certain branches, than ridicule and disparagement of their national character." (Šafarik, 1824, pp. 101). From this text by Šafárik, it is clear that the Slavs, regardless of their particular branch, faced a common problem: they were subject not only to certain prejudices but even to unambiguous racist ideological preconceptions. For this reason, cooperation among all Slavs on various levels was not only desirable but absolutely necessary.

During this period – specifically throughout the first half and the entirety of the 19th century – Slovaks and Serbs forged their closest bonds within the framework of their education. These encounters took place in Buda and Pest, Győr, Vienna, Pozsony (Bratislava), Prešov, Modra, Banská Bystrica, Timișoara, and other centres across the Habsburg Empire. This rapprochement originated as early

as the 18th century; according to the research of Risto Kovijanić, prominent Serbian participants included Pavle Julinac, Teodor Janković Mirijevski, Jovan Muškatirović, Dositej Obradović, Joakim Vujić, Atanasije Stojković, and others (See, Kovljanić, 1973; Kovljanić 1979). In the 19th century, in addition to authors whose work spanned both centuries (of whom Julinac is the sole exception), a significant number of younger creators emerged. Their education tied them to the geographical environments where these encounters with Slovaks occurred—particularly with Slovak writers, activists, and ideologues such as Ján Kollár, Ľudovít Štúr, František Palacký, Ján Tomka Sásky, and others. Beyond the exceptional contribution of Šafárik, the participation of other Slovaks in establishing the Serbian educational and cultural infrastructure, both within the Austrian Empire and the Principality of Serbia, must not be overlooked. In this regard, the significance of figures such as Andreas Volny and Janko Šafárik is particularly noteworthy. On the Serbian side, a great number of diverse creators emerged who had been educated in these centres of interaction; notable among these students were Svetozar Miletić, Đura Daničić, Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, Jovan Grčić Milenko, Jovan Bošković, Kosta Trifković, and others. On an intellectual level, the communication between Serbs and Slovaks was of profound mutual benefit. Long-standing periodicals – replete with primary source material, analytical essays, and literary works – offer vital landmarks for tracing the historical journey of these small nations through space and time.

The Spirit of Slovak-Serbian Unity: Ján Kollár and Svetozar Miletić

Poetry undoubtedly establishes the most luminous landmarks along these paths: like fireflies, poems emerge in the densest darkness, illuminating the way in a manner that proves not all hope is irretrievably lost. One such "firefly" is a collection of three sonnets by Ján Kollár which, in a translation by Georgije Magarašević, was published in *Serbske letopisi* [Serbian Annals] in 1827.[2] In a unique way, these sonnets highlight Slavic kinship as a compelling thematic challenge for the creation of refined lyrical structures. Kollár inspired many Serbian students and future intellectuals by teaching them how to think, prompting them to contemplate various forms of kinship within humanity, and leading them to recognize not only an intellectual affinity but also the potential for political solidarity.

In the first of the aforementioned three sonnets, appearing under the collective title *Sonnets of Mr. Joan Kollar, Translated from the Czech Language*, the poet presents a lyrical reflection on the possibility of creating the image (*obraz*) of an Angel, both through verbal description and visual media. In both instances, the primary mystery lies in the requirement to depict how that which is sensory-elusive and essentially purely spiritual can become accessible to human senses at all. Consequently, the poet precisely indicates that through this process – which is as much painterly as it is poetic (as he addresses both expressive possibilities here) – this challenge of the creative method must

[2] All subsequent quotations are from, Serbska letopis, No. 10, 1827, pp. 89-91

be resolved, so that it indeed becomes possible to perceive the angel both sensorily and spiritually: "His spirit you can almost see / As it through the clarity of the body permeates." According to the poet's vision, this discernment of the intangible spirit within certain aspects of the corporeal can only rest upon the ability to somehow materialize the phenomena of pure, positive human spirituality (*duševnost*), which find their most profound expression on the angel's face. In this regard, the poet singles out the eye above all, which should be depicted such that it shines toward both heaven and earth, and whose primary, luminous substance is defined by faith and love: "Let the eye shine to heaven with sound faith, / And with pure love to the earth below." Besides the eye, the poet highlights the forehead and the mouth, which must simultaneously express both the absence of worry and the lightness of joy, without which no angelic being can exist. Therefore, the poet advises that no negative emotions, but only positive ones, should appear on the angel's face: "Nor should the forehead frown / When the little lips smile with a jest." Angels are thus, from the standpoint of spiritual aspects, defined as a synthesis of faith, love, and joy; this thematic structure is articulated in the first two quatrains of Kollár's.

In the tercets that follow in this sonnet, the poet concentrates on two characteristic motifs. In the first tercet, the motif of two wreaths appears, which are meant to "encircle the hair, / where flowers, as well as the colours of the rainbow / of its time and region, tremble." It is noteworthy, therefore, that in this image of two wreaths upon the angelic head, subtle coloristic aspects of sensory reality predominate. Thus, the image of hair emerges (though it is not specified whether it is black, brown, or fair), followed by the image of flowers (with neither the species nor the colour defined), and finally, the "colours of the rainbow" are mentioned; here, the chromatic structure of the rainbow spectrum is significantly clearer and can be quite palpably presented to the senses. The poet does not explicitly state the nature or type of these two wreaths; however, within the associative field, two historically and mythologically well-known forms naturally suggest themselves: one is the wreath of poetic glory, most often composed of laurel, awarded to those who are *poeta laureatus*; the other is the wreath of martyrdom, composed of thorny branches, borne upon the brow of the greatest of all martyrs, the God-man Jesus Christ. It would appear that the poet endeavours to maintain both forms of wreaths within the visual field: the one that leads toward eternity through earthly, social recognition, as well as the one that, through martyrdom, is revered only in heaven and in eternity. In any case, there is an evident ambiguity into which the poet leads us with this wreath motif—an uncertainty as to whether the wreath is an expression of social acclaim or of suffering, an expression of something emphatically positive or negative, an expression of joy or of pain.

The poet offers an answer that is at once certain, not entirely unequivocal, yet remarkably striking in the final tercet. In this stanza, he presents that which decisively indicates the angelic nature of the depicted being: "But into all of that, breathe the magical traits / Of Slavic tenderness; / You shall see her in a wretched likeness." In the poet's view, an angel cannot be truly depicted unless its face

possesses – in addition to the aforementioned faith, love, and joy – "Slavic tenderness". Yet, remarkably, what becomes of this Slavic tenderness? While it most befits the angelic countenance and is capable of bestowing precious "magical traits" upon the face it graces, it is simultaneously characterized by its appearance in a "wretched likeness" (*v podobiju hudom*). Its likeness (i.e., its appearance) is "wretched" (*hudo*) – meaning uncomely, poor, or even ill-fated – yet despite such a state, "Slavic tenderness" possesses the capacity to produce something supernatural, miraculous, and ethereal in the beings or images where it manifests.

Through such a lyrical structure and reflective discourse, Ján Kollár raises many questions of profound importance for the entire Slavic world, both then, in the 1820s, and now, at the turn of the 21st century. In the interim between the 19th and 21st centuries, much has changed within the global sphere, the Slavic world at large, and the worlds of individual Slavic nations. These nations have attained statehood; at the dawn of the 21st century, they are developing with significantly greater success and with the realistic expectation that the conditions of their existence are oriented toward further prosperity. Yet, despite the fact that the process of Slavic emancipation has progressed significantly in a positive direction, it remains quite evident that certain aspects of the "wretched likeness" (*podobiye hudo*) continue to disfigure the Slavic countenance. Consequently, this face is no longer inherently beautiful in its own right, but it likely still retains the capacity to evoke something magical and miraculous. In the two-century span that separates the historical publication of Kollár's poems from the current publication of modern Slovak and Serbian poets in the anthology *Slavic Tenderness* (*Nežnost slovenska*), some things have changed while others have remained nearly identical: it is demonstrated in various ways that Slavs, with striking frequency, confer more benefit upon others than upon themselves!

On the eve of the revolutionary events of 1848, the "Serbian youth" of Pressburg and Pest – primarily through the dedicated efforts of Svetozar Miletić – published the almanac *Slavjanka* in Buda in 1847. This publication featured the most significant poetic contribution from Pavle Popović Šapčanin, followed by Svetozar Miletić, and subsequently Jovan Đorđević, Metodije Mladenović, Jovan Ilić, Nikola Vukićević, and Stojan Radonić (See, Kovaček, 2006, pp. 35-54). In this almanac, alongside five other poetic works, Svetozar Miletić published the eponymous poem "Slavjanka", in which he depicted the awakening of the Slavic peoples, the rising of their sun, and the radiance of the "sun of glory" shining upon them. These events are set on Ascension Day (*Spasovdan*); indeed, a concluding note indicates the poem was composed "on Ascension Day". The poem features a varying refrain, where two versions of the final verse appeared across all ten sestets: "The gracious Ascension Day" (*Blagi danak Spasovdan*) occurs seven times, while "The bright Ascension Day" (*Beli danak Spasovdan*) occurs three times. The motif of the "gracious/bright day" appears in all ten sestets, utilizing anadiplosis at the conclusion of each stanza, as well as variations within the verses themselves. Consequently, the final two verses of the first stanza read: "The dawn heralds the bright

day, / The bright Ascension Day", while the same position in the final stanza reads: "A gracious day has dawned for you – / The gracious Ascension Day." (Miletić, 1999, pp.61-62)

In terms of genre, the poem functions as a true *budnica* (a patriotic awakening song), aimed at mobilizing all Slavic peoples – and specifically the Serbs – toward the monumental historical tasks that lie ahead for the Slavs. Within this national-awakening and political poem, Miletić employs the metrical pattern of the symmetrical octosyllable (widely prevalent in many Slavic folkloric traditions) and its catalectic form in the final two verses of the sestet stanzas. Through this structure, he depicts the *Slav-gora* (Slav-mountain), the abode of *Slava* (Glory), who summons the Slavic nations and the Serbian youth to her side. This mythical figure of *Slava* is modelled after the Angel described by Ján Kollár; she is entirely imbued with luminous energy and the accompanying spiritual layers that fill this radiant, divine substance: "When Slava stepped before them: / The whole mountain trembled from her, / As if the sun hovered over it, / All the light of heaven gathered: / To hasten the bright day, / The gracious Ascension Day." Regarding the manifestation of these spiritual substances, the poet particularly emphasizes love, grace, wisdom, and Salvation (*Spasenije*): "Love shines from her eyes, / Her chest is the throne of grace, / Her clear brow the abode of wisdom, / Above it the wreath of Salvation: / for it shall celebrate the Bright day, / The gracious Ascension Day." The poem subsequently mentions a certain "Book of Secrets" containing divine messages regarding the origin of heavenly light (*svita*): "And she reads the little book of secrets, / Brought down from the heavens above, / Where it is written by God's own hand, / From whence the dawn falls upon the world: / When the bright day descends, / The bright Ascension Day." Finally, the poet points to the significance of Liberty (*Sloboda*) and the song that celebrates it, as well as the importance of the Angelic figure who aids in the preservation of divine laws on earth. The blooming of flowers serves as a testament to the natural rhythms kept in force by these divine laws: "When Liberty cries out its song, / As if the face of an Angel sounds the trumpet, / If she smiles – the mountain buds, / If she walks – flowers spring up behind her; / And the bright day dawned, / The bright Ascension Day."

The beauty of flowers in this world, therefore, serves as a constant reminder of God and the operation of divine laws; thus, the act of picking and gifting flowers carries the significance and purpose of disseminating the divine faith and an order grounded in the authority of the Lord. Consequently, the group of young Serbs venturing toward "Slav-gora" is tasked precisely with gathering flowers from that enchanted Slavic mountain to distribute them throughout the world: "Young Serbs pick flowers, / Woven into a single bouquet: / 'Behold, Slavjanka! More joyfully, / The Slav places a blossom on his helmet: / When he celebrates the bright day, / The gracious Ascension Day.'" The allegorical signal indicating that the Slavs place flowers specifically upon a *helmet* – a piece of military equipment – rather than a civilian article of clothing such as a hat or cap, is particularly noteworthy. It is as if this choice foreshadowed the events that would unfold just one year later during the revolutionary upheavals of 1848. In those events, both Slovaks

and Serbs were compelled to take to the barricades to secure the national rights that had been denied them within the Habsburg Empire – rights which even the Hungarian revolutionaries of 1848 were unwilling to grant to the Slavic peoples.

The Ascension Day (*Spasovdan*) of which Svetozar Miletić sang is not merely a day of salvation for the Serbs, but for all other Slavs as well; in the Serbian political thought of that era, these two perspectives were inextricably linked, just as they were in the thought of the Slovaks. In this "mirroring" of Ján Kollár within Svetozar Miletić – as well as in many other figures who bridged Slovak and Serbian cultures and connected these two nations with other Slavic peoples – Serbs and Slovaks operated from the standpoint of civic ideals proclaimed by the French Revolution, expressed in the rallying cry: *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!* These programmatic positions were not permitted to all within the complex, multi-ethnic Habsburg Empire, and the Slavs were the first compelled to highlight this injustice and revolt against such a state of affairs. Consequently, Miletić structures the final stanza of his poem as if the ideals he discusses are truly universal and humanitarian, enabling cooperation among the many peoples and nations of the world: "And to him who loves brotherly harmony, / Offer him a single flower, / Let it serve him in his glory: / Then let your voice sound the praise: / A gracious day has dawned for you—The gracious Ascension Day!" At that time, Ascension Day for Serbs, Slovaks, and all other Slavs was envisioned as an Ascension Day for all humanity. This is undoubtedly a confirmation of the universality of the ideals of the French Revolution and the specific manner in which the Slavs understand and interpret such ideals.

Matica srpska and Matica slovenská: Towards Intercultural and Transcultural Dialogue

Only through profound mutual understanding, underpinned by full respect for specific national cultures, can we facilitate the desired intercultural dialogue and the development of a transcultural European sphere that does not seek to submerge the distinctive identities of small nations. It is only within such a framework that we can establish a shared intellectual perspective – one in which cultural differences are perceived as an enrichment of the European landscape rather than as obstacles to the implementation of "melting-pot" projects, wherein nations are reduced to a mere "ethnic mass" tasked solely with serving as carriers of labour and consumer potential, defined exclusively by the trajectories of international capital movement. And capital – as is well established – remains fundamentally indifferent to potential visions for the humanization of the world. This indifference persists unless such a vision can be shown to serve the acquisition of profit, at which point capital will exert every effort to co-opt and instrumentalize that vision, transforming it into a mere source of revenue and surplus value. We must collectively resist such an exclusively economistic and utilitarian conception of contemporary society in order to secure the dignified survival of our two peoples, Serbs and Slovaks, as well as all other numerically small nations.

In accordance with such objectives, it is imperative that we maintain a rigorous practice of dialogue and a series of responsible exchanges of

ideas. Such efforts – one must hope – will prevent the gravity of the subject from being compromised by the pressures of politicking or economism, or by bureaucratic or flippantly media-driven reasoning. Furthermore, these efforts must be safeguarded against various forms of ideological imposition emanating from major centres of power, as well as from the majority outvoting of dissenting views in favour of "conforming" positions. The envisioned discourse must remain the free expression of free individuals who seek to nurture institutions of human conviction and build societies that regard the freedom of individuals, social strata, and entire nations as the ultimate prerequisite. These norms of elementary freedoms serve as the foundation for a society open to new and more humane perspectives on existence. Should this be achieved, there is hope for us all – for the institutions we represent, and for the political communities and societies in which we operate. It is the hope that even if we remain a distinct voting minority, we can still persevere by remaining true to our identity without endangering others. For freedom is meaningful only if it encompasses the right to be different – provided that such difference does not fundamentally jeopardize the rights of others to their own difference.

In practical terms, this implies that the 1999 bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the military operations cynically titled "Merciful Angel" cannot be interpreted as an act of defending freedom; rather, they must be understood precisely as an assault on liberties and the destruction of the established civil order. While the current era sees the consolidation of the rights of marginalized groups – including gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals, the Roma, Black people, members of colonial communities, migrants, and various specific phenomena within the scope of social and cultural queer theory – one should not so readily overlook the obligation to secure the rights of entire nations. From the perspective of military-hierarchical and state-bureaucratic apparatuses, such nations may be regarded as somewhat atypical or peculiar. This obligation is particularly urgent when such nations in no way endanger the fundamental norms of international law. In this context, it necessitates a careful concern for the rights of Serbs and Albanians, as well as all other minorities in Serbia. It should be noted that these minority rights, dating back to Socialist Yugoslavia—and subsequently within the Republic of Serbia – were established at a level far exceeding both past and present European standards. To bomb such a Serbia constitutes a "crime of crimes", an act that cannot be justified by any serious, morally or legally grounded argumentation.

The "crime of 1999" serves as an ominous harbinger of a highly uncertain future for those who are disfavoured by powerful and unscrupulous centres of political, state, and military authority. In this context, the destiny of Europe would largely depend on its capacity to uphold the fundamental right to difference for those who are deemed unsympathetic and undesirable. Should the spirit of military-administrative subjugation of small European nations prevail, it will lead to the demise of the very idea of Europe, which is inconceivable without dialogue and a substantive understanding of the Other. In this sense, the role of small nations in the construction of Europe ought to be immensely important and incomparably greater than their actual economic, political, and military power. Without heeding the voice of small nations,

the spirit that gave rise to the European Union will be extinguished within Europe. When that foundational essence and core idea is betrayed, we can realistically anticipate numerous other forms of betrayal and significant distortions. A substantial dialogue about all such events and processes is already underway and will undoubtedly continue in the years and decades to come.

It is indisputable that by addressing the fundamental issues that led to the creation of the Slavic Matica institutions, we are merely strengthening and consolidating the foundational, original, and declarative spirit of a united Europe. Observing the contributions of our two institutions – Matica slovenská and Matica srpska – to cultural history and the desired strengthening of the national identity of both Slovaks and Serbs, I believe the positive results are more than evident. Perhaps less visible, though nonetheless certain, are the contributions of these two institutions to the construction of a Europe founded on tolerance, multiculturalism, and transculturality. In this regard, all Slavic Matica institutions could certainly achieve much more, but this will only realistically occur if the mutual relations between these entities are elevated to a higher degree of substantive understanding and a civilized resolution of existing problems. The attempt to create some kind of overarching, superior authority to unify existing institutions is not a recipe for success. On the contrary, it would lead to specific forms of concealing existing problems and the introduction of a series of mimicry-based procedures. We, who have experienced the "hard" or "less-hard" forms of communist statehood, can surely accurately assess how forms of "Ketman" (as defined by Czesław Miłosz) can appear even in entirely different, post-communist circumstances – circumstances which are declaratively opposed to every form of hypocrisy and social deformity of that type, but which in practice increasingly legalize specific forms of "Ketman" as a standard mode of behaviour. The criteria of political correctness increasingly open the door for such deformed manifestations of language, speech, action, and human conduct.

When considering the paths of cooperation between Matica slovenská and Matica srpska, it should be noted that these two institutions somehow managed to survive within the Habsburg Empire, though at that time their elementary existence was seriously threatened. Matica slovenská thus suffered a hiatus in its continuity for nearly four and a half decades: abolished in 1875, it had to wait for the collapse of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire to resume its work, being eventually restored in 1919 within the new state of Czechoslovakia. The figure most responsible for the creation of this state was, without doubt, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who became the country's first president. It is, however, noteworthy that Masaryk – due to his consistent criticism of Austrian-Hungarian propaganda directed against the Kingdom of Serbia on the eve of the First World War – was elected an honorary member of Matica srpska in 1927 as an expression of belated recognition.

Since its re-establishment in 1919, Matica slovenská has operated continuously to this present day. The interruptions in the continuity of Matica srpska were significantly shorter but more frequent. The first interruption was caused by the attempt of the Hungarian administration in 1836 to ban the institution for "formal-legal reasons"; however, after a year

and a half of persistent legal advocacy, the leaders of Matica restored the institution's operations in 1837. The second interruption occurred during the revolutionary events in Pest in 1848–1849, a period marked by a bloody conflict between the Hungarian army and the Serbian national movement. The third and fourth interruptions were caused by the First World War (1914–1919) and the Second World War (1941–1945), with the institution having to wait for regular peacetime circumstances to resume serious cultural work. The strong understanding between Serbs and Slovaks was further bolstered by the decisive stance of the Slovaks that a new state, Czechoslovakia, should be formed upon the ruins of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire following the First World War. On the other hand, the territories of Bačka, Banat, Baranja, and Srem were annexed to the Kingdom of Serbia, and subsequently to the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes; these decisions were precisely those reached at the Great People's Assembly in Novi Sad on November 25, 1918, where the most prominent participants were representatives of the Slavic peoples – Serbs, Bunjevci, Slovaks, and Rusyns. The founding of the Matica slovenská in Bački Petrovac in 1932 also contributed to this cooperation, demonstrating that Slovaks in the Vojvodina region and throughout Serbia represented a vital and reliable link between the two nations.

It must also be emphasized on this occasion that the ties between leading figures in the spheres of culture, Slavic solidarity, ideology, and politics were established much earlier – in the 18th century, when Serbian Šajkaši (river flotilla troops) and frontiersmen settled in Komárno, and particularly during the Romantic period when young Serbs studied in Pozsony (modern-day Bratislava) or Trnava, while some young Slovaks came to work in the Serbian Gymnasium in Sremski Karlovci or Novi Sad. Furthermore, representatives of the two nations often met in Buda, Pest, or Vienna, where they quickly found a common language. This was an era when relations were nurtured by figures such as Andreas Volny, Pavel Jozef Šafárik, Ján Kollár, and Ľudovít Štúr on one side, and Georgije Magarašević, Jovan Hadžić, Teodor Pavlović, and Svetozar Miletić on the other.

Slovaks and Serbs know each other relatively well and possess a substantive mutual understanding—a relationship that has endured for at least two centuries. For those of us who today care for Matica slovenská and Matica srpska, and who contribute to the cultural development of the two nations, it is a privilege not only to be aware of the contributions of our great predecessors but also to provide new content and direction to these positive relations in our own time. Deeply convinced of the strength and significance of such contributions, I am also certain that Matica srpska and Matica slovenská today, in the third decade of the 21st century, are not only capable of formulating cultural policies beneficial to the nations they represent, but are also able to provide the authentic and active contributions necessary for the stabilization of at least this part of Europe inhabited by Serbs and Slovaks.

The Serbian and Slovak testimony to peaceful and tolerant inter-ethnic relations – and to efforts directed toward authentic contributions and the building of a significantly broader cultural and political space in today's Europe – should be taken into serious account and considered earnestly.

Founding Assembly of Matica Slovenská, Bački Petrovac, August 15, 1932
Photo: Museum of Vojvodina Slovaks

For if the Slovaks were able to survive the trials of life under the Habsburg Empire, and the Serbs the trials of both the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, they will surely know how to survive and overcome the challenges of life in contemporary Europe and the European Union. For Europe itself, and particularly for the survival of the European Union, it is far better – even salvific – for numerically small nations to emerge from the realm of darkness, silence, and invisibility. Should this fail to happen, Europe will negate the finest part of its own tradition, and that part of its heritage of which we should all be ashamed, and which we must avoid at all costs, will prevail.

References

Chronicle of Matica srpska: First issue [*Letopis Matice srpske: Objavlenije i Prva častica*] (1823–1824). Facsimile edition (ed. I. Negrišorac). Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 2023. [In Serbian]

Chronicle of Matica srpska: Second and third issue [*Letopis Matice srpske: Druga i treća častica*] (1825). Facsimile edition (ed. I. Negrišorac). Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 2024. [In Serbian]

Eliáš, M. (2010). From the history of Slavic Maticas of nations. Martin: Matica slovenská. [In Slovak]

Kovaček, B. (2006). Jovan Đorđević. Novi Sad: Matica srpska. [In Serbian]

Kovijanić, R. (1973). Serbian writers in Bratislava and Modra in the 18th century. Novi Sad: Matica srpska. [In Serbian]

Kovijanić, R. (1979). Serbian romanticists in Slovakia. Novi Sad: Matica srpska. [In Serbian]

Maletin, M. (1968). Content of the Chronicle of Matica srpska 1825–1950: Content by authors. Novi Sad: Matica srpska. [In Serbian]

Miletić, S. (1999). Collected works, vol. I (eds. Č. Popov & D. Mikavica). Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva. [In Serbian]

Milisavac, Ž. (1986). History of Matica srpska: Part I: 1826–1864. Novi Sad: Matica srpska. [In Serbian]

Milisavac, Ž. (1992). History of Matica srpska: Part II: 1864–1880. Novi Sad: Matica srpska. [In Serbian]

Milisavac, Ž. (2001). History of Matica srpska: Part III: 1880–1918. Novi Sad: Matica srpska. [In Serbian]

Negrišorac, I. (2026). The Vow of Matica srpska: A guide to the oldest cultural institution. Novi Sad: Matica srpska. [In Serbian]

Pamätnica – Spomentnica – Pamjatnaja kniga: 4. kongres matíc a inštitúcií slovanských národov (2020). (eds. M. Gešper & Z. Pavelcová). Martin: Matica slovenská. [In Slovak]

Pavel Jozef Šafarik (1795–1861) (1963). (ed. Đ. Sp. Radojičić). Novi Sad: Matica srpska. [In Serbian]

Pavel Jozef Šafarik: Life and work (1996). (ed. M. D. Stefanović & M. Harpanj). Novi Sad: Matica srpska. [In Serbian]

Popov, D. (2001). History of Matica srpska: Part IV: 1918–1941. Novi Sad: Matica srpska. [In Serbian]

Rajić, J. (2002). History of various Slavic peoples, especially Bulgarians, Croats and Serbs, vol. I–IV (ed. I. Negrišorac). Novi Sad: Matica srpska – Orfeus. [In Bulgarian]

Serbske letopisi, No. 10. (1827). [In Serbian]

Šafarik, P. J. (1824). Character of the Slavic people in general. Serbske letopisi, prva častica, vol. 1, 64–99. [In Serbian]

Taylor, A. J. (2001). The Habsburg Monarchy 1809–1918: A History of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary (translation M. Nikolajević). Beograd: Clio. [In Serbian]

That Way, Not Otherwise (*Tako, a ne inače*): Commemorative volume on the 150th anniversary of the transfer of Matica srpska from Pest to Novi Sad (2014). (eds. D. Stanić & Đ. Đurić). Novi Sad: Matica srpska. [In Serbian]