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When the Stone has the Scent of Orthodoxy – How the identity of the Serbian people in Kosovo and Metohija is changing



Branislava Vučković: *Erasing Memory – Transmission of Serbian Culture in Kosovo and Metohija*, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Priština, in Kosovska Mitrovica, Kosovska Mitrovica, 2026

The complex reality in Kosovo and Metohija is becoming gloomier and more tragic by the day, and the fact that this is an organised, planned, and coordinated project of ethnic cleansing of the Serbian population by the self-declared Kosovo authorities with silent support of their mentors from the West is laid out in the book *Erasing Memory – Transmission of Serbian Culture in Kosovo and Metohija* by Branislava Vučković, Assistant Professor at the

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Faculty of Philosophy in Kosovska Mitrovica. Walking across the expanses of our southern province in the theoretical footsteps of the famous French philosopher and mediologist, Régis Debray, it is a testimony of the heroic sacrifice and expulsion of the Serbian population, but also of the horrific vandalism and destruction of Orthodox monasteries, churches, and graveyards, which erases any trace of the Serbs' right to live on their ancestral land. Material memorials are burned and trampled, graveyards are dug up and demolished, crosses are broken, including the stone that is crushed, pulverised and dispersed because they are reminders of the Serbs, as carriers of symbolic memories. It is as if a whisper: "*nothing is accidental*", comes from every page of this monograph, not large in size, but rich in information that strives to tame the space and accumulated layers of the past, intertwined and multi-layered in a cluttered space and time.

In an era of warped values, intellectuals do not have the right to remain silent, no matter how high the price. This was the opinion of Régis Debray when, after returning from Macedonia, he wrote an open letter entitled "Letter of a traveller to the President of the Republic" (13 May 1999), informing the then-president of France, Jacques Chirac, that the situation in Kosovo was "ugly". Spending four days in this part of Serbia, which was demonised in the Western media, he talked to ordinary people in Priština, Prizren, Peć, and other towns and villages in Kosovo and Metohija, choosing the locations and interlocutors on his own in order to witness an exodus of a people, but not of the Albanian as the global media claimed in unison. "In the little village of Lipljan I saw ... a house that projectiles turned to dust, three little girls and their grandparents massa-

cred, and no military facilities in a three-kilometre radius", the French writer reported objectively, adding that in Prizren, "in the Gypsy quarter, I saw two civilian houses that had been turned into ash two hours before, with multiple casualties amongst the rubble". Brutal, anti-Serbian narratives hid the truth, Debray shouted, but nobody wanted to hear cries of the injustice done to an entire people, even though it was published by *Le Monde*. The former associate of Che Guevara and former advisor to French President François Mitterrand was immediately designated as "pro-Serbian", but he managed to raise suspicion among the Western public that not everything was as portrayed in the media.

Nearly three decades afterwards, in the footsteps of his mediological teachings, Branislava Vučković examines the reality in Kosovo and Metohija, analysing the material eradication of Orthodoxy and Serbian cultural heritage. Ideas, memories, pictures, and myths are transmitted through time via state institutions and people as carriers of symbolic meanings. In other words, if they are gone, the so-called state of Kosovo will build an architecture of new memories and narratives to justify the violent statehood and synthetic creation of new identities. That is why the daily expulsion and intimidation of the Serbian population is always accompanied with violence against the monuments of their existence, whether it is burning churches, ploughing over and digging up of cemeteries, demolishing monuments, or raiding schools. The destruction of identity is thorough, comprehensive, and in the long-term the essence of the strategy of Albanisation, Vučković suggests, citing numerous examples and illustrations of the crimes that prove it. She interprets the concept of *transmission*, borrowed from Debray,

through the dynamic of collective memory, without which there is no cultural identity. By severing ethnic continuity and imposing different cultural forms, a new mediological perspective is created, where, in the absence of cultural heritage, institutions, and the people, history is revised and falsified, oblivion is imposed, and a new reality is promoted. Transmission carries messages across generations, so stone is not just a construction material – it is a specific archive that does not allow the past to be pushed out from a certain area. Therefore, the land of Kosovo and Metohija is not just a territory stolen with support from a part of the international community, but also a treasure trove for Orthodoxy, Serbian culture, and tradition, and a key to self-understanding and identity.

By structurally dividing the book into three chapters, the author maps out the three pillars of Kosovo and Metohija's transmission – cultural heritage, state institutions, and the people, as carriers of symbolic memories. Methodologically sound, with a careful narrative, gradual in theory, authoritative, and with a distinctive style, she searches for Serbian stones dispersed throughout the area, exposed to political violence and the passage of time. Monasteries such as Gračanica or Visoki Dečani have been standing for over 700 years precisely because they were built of stone, but their purpose is in the preservation of Saint Sava's Orthodoxy as an anchor in the spirit of the nation. Stone cannot be created as a political idea that comes into existence overnight, so the church is an important institution that brings the people together. From the viewpoint of Debray's mediology, when extremists concertedly drive people away from a certain territory, they attack stone monuments more than they attack

the people, because stones are a medium of transmission. The communication practice in ethnically diverse environments builds a collective *We*, but only transmission enables cultural understanding and memory. Without material carriers, there is no collective memory, reconstruction of the past, or a new place for ceremonial gatherings.

Branislava Vučković is rooted in the Kosovo and Metohija milieu, competent in situating the horizon of interpreting messages that circulate in the public space. She sees power and ideology as an important formative framework that determines the broader socio-cultural milieu. In other words, transmission is not spontaneous. It is an "indicator of values", the author claims, stating that "mediation separates the message from its primary source, translates it into collective memory, turning the idea into a concrete social construct" (Vučković, 2026, p. 43). The repository of memories is the connective tissue of the community, source of its strength and uniqueness, the author points out brilliantly, understanding that by reconstructing the past, a basis for the present and future of Serbian life in these areas is created. That is why this monograph requires careful reading and analysis, calling for a multidisciplinary and deep knowledge of the reader. Like Debray, Vučković also searches for dusty layers of the past, a "mediological Gospel", where "a bone was in the beginning of everything", which, extended with stone, created a monument embedded into a space. The French philosopher believes that this negates time, but also marks certain culture and message. Branislava Vučković takes it a step further: "During the pre-war, wartime, and *especially the post-war period* of the ethnic conflict in Kosovo and Metohija, Serbian cultural

monuments (sacral, secular and funerary) were targets for destruction” (Vučković, 2026, p. 63). Reports of the Serbian Orthodox Church show 76 cases of vandalism against monuments as early as August 1999, with another 35 desecrated churches and monasteries after the 2004 March pogrom. The world is silent about the fact that these were acts of vandalism, with blasting, burning, demolition, and similar eradication of the traces of Serbian existence. With physical destruction, Albanian extremists permanently change Orthodox churches as places for worshippers to gather, who later leave, discontent due to the loss of spiritual identity. The remaining religious objects are then renamed into *Kosovo-Byzantine heritage*, which is the property of Albanians who also lived in these areas.

With the disappearance of Serbian cultural heritage, the content of the messages kept for centuries by the Serbian community also disappears. A new memorial landscape is created with the aim of confirming Albanian autochthony, by directing the process of so-called *Kosovisation* to the area itself, and not the culture and the people who lived in it. Of more than 400 Orthodox graveyards, only a few dozen have remained in areas where Serbs still live, while the majority have been destroyed, overgrown, or silently left to oblivion. Dematerialisation of tombstones leaves Serbs without links to the past, and without those it is only a matter of time when the cultural identity will also change. At the same time, the Greater Albanian ethno-nationalist identity is installed in the beginning of everything, combined with supranational political centres of power from the West. The fact that the instruments for preventing the continuity of Serbian memory are numerous is shown by the author who trans-

lates the current relationship of political power with growing repression and expulsion of Serbs. State institutions, found in healthcare and education, are the only archives of collective memory. By closing them, intimidating employees, arresting and punishing citizens, the self-declared Kosovo authorities displace and sever the link of cooperation with the heartland (state of Serbia), derogating its existence and functioning in this region. The names of towns are Albanised (Novo Brdo – Novobërda; Devet Jugovića – Bardhosh, Srbica – Skënderaj...). Streets, especially in the parts formerly inhabited by the Serbs, are given names that glorify the Illyrian origin of Albanians, important figures from Albanian national history, or the names from the recent struggle for so-called Kosovo independence. The newly-established political reality also brings a new ideology, which entails a comprehensive shift in the culture of memory, with new official holidays and different monuments. Violence precedes the erasure of memory, and in order to carry this out, the so-called Kosovo authorities aim “in the direction of integration of Serbian institutions into the Kosovo system” (Vučković, 2026, p. 109), permanently severing transmission. The Kosovo and Metohija Coordination Centre registered 287,000 internally displaced persons, predominantly Serbs, but also Romani, Gorani, and members of other ethnic groups. Torn away from their homes and natural environment they nurture the culture of memory, occasionally visiting ancestral places, but their numbers are diminishing as they do not want to take too many risks due to security incidents. Institutional persecution continues with the announced Law on Foreigners, which will prevent the remaining Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija from

staying there unless they register with the “Kosovo Civilian Register”, essentially accepting the functioning of the self-declared state. As the author concludes – “memories are kept by people”, but the question left without an answer is how long they will be here in order to preserve transmission.

The book *Erasing Memory – Transmission of Serbian Culture in Kosovo and Metohija* is essential for any good-willed reader who wants to know the

truth about cultural heritage of this part of Serbia, so we warmly recommend it. Along with the author, the publisher also deserves recognition – the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Priština, with a temporary seat in Kosovska Mitrovica. This is also a way of showing gratitude to a good friend of Serbia, philosopher, journalist, and mediologist Régis Debray, who was among the first to see what kind of fate others have prepared for us.

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Damaged Serbian cemetery
in Kosovska Mitrovica
Photo: Tanjug



Damaged Serbian cemetery
in Kosovska Mitrovica
Photo: Tanjug



Damaged Jewish Cemetery
in Pristina

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