

**The Self-Sacrifice of Biljana Plavšić:  
Gender and Nationalism in the Bosnian Serb Media**

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## Abstract

In my MA thesis, I argue that the relation of femininity and ethnicity in Bosnian Serb politics can be defined through the nationalist concept of self-sacrifice or martyrdom. The case study for that topic is Biljana Plavsic, the former President of Republika Srpska (RS), the Serb entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although it can be argued that Biljana Plavsic represents an outlier, I claim that she is marked as an example of the continuation of the tradition of self-sacrifice in Serbian national myth. In Serbian folk tradition, love is a familiar trope that motivates women to sacrifice themselves for their brother or children. Following that, Plavsic sacrifices herself for her children – i.e. the Bosnian Serb population. This matches with one of the supposed roles of women in nationalism – to embody the nation and its tradition. Self-sacrifice is not only a political choice but also, and much more importantly, an essence of femininity and ethnicity in the tragic Serb history. In developing such a discourse important role have most prominent press in RS (*Glas Srpske* and *Nezavisne Novine*), public television broadcast (*RTRS*) and Plavsic herself through her autobiographical book *Svedocim* (“I am witnessing”). Biljana Plavšić's self-representation and the media representation of her from 2009 in RS will be the case study of my research and the point is to see how the link between gender, religion and nation is formed by a focus on the concept of self-sacrifice.



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This thesis is dedicated to the loving memory of my father Milorad.



## Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>                             | <b>1</b>  |
| 1.1 TOPIC .....  | 1         |
| 1.2 CONTEXT.....                                       | 3         |
| 1.2.1. POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES .....    | 3         |
| 1.2.2. BIOGRAPHY OF BILJANA PLAVSIC .....              | 7         |
| 1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....                         | 11        |
| 1.3.1. WOMEN IN NATIONALISM.....                       | 12        |
| 1.3.2. RELIGION AND NATIONALISM: MARTYRDOM .....       | 14        |
| 1.4 RESEARCH DESIGN.....                               | 18        |
| <b>2 CONFESSIONS OF A TRAITOR.....</b>                 | <b>20</b> |
| 2.1 THE CONFESSION DISCOURSE: TRAITOR.....             | 20        |
| 2.2 AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A RESPONSE .....                  | 23        |
| <b>3 WELCOME HOME, PRESIDENT .....</b>                 | <b>30</b> |
| 3.1. THE ANALYSIS OF PLAVSIC'S RELEASE DISCOURSE ..... | 30        |
| <b>4 CONCLUSION .....</b>                              | <b>47</b> |
| <b>5 BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>                            | <b>50</b> |





## List of Abbreviations

BiH – Bosna i Hercegovina (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

GS – Glas Srpske

NDH – Nezavisna drzava Hrvatska (Independent State of Croatia, 1941-1945)

NN – Nezavisne novine

ICTY – International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia

JNA – Jugoslovenska narodna armija (Yugoslav People's Army)

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PDP – Partija demokratskog progresa (Party of Democratic Progress)

RS – Republika Srpska (Bosnian Serb Republic)

RTRS – Radio Televizija Republike Srpske (Radio Television of RS)

SDS – Srpska demokratska stranka (Serb Democratic Party)

SNS – Srpski narodni savez (Serb People's Alliance)

SNSD – Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata (Alliance of Independent Social Democrats)

SP – Socijalistička partija (Socialist Party of RS)

SRS – Srpska radikalna stranka (Serb Radical Party)



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. TOPIC

The topic of nationalism in former Yugoslavia has been researched in various ways in the past two decades. Most of these projects were interested in the rise of nationalism, wartime and the role of dominantly male politicians in the “ethnic conflict” that lasted for four years. Although the topic of women in politics in Bosnia has been dealt with by some scholars, it was rarely focused especially on the Republika Srpska (RS), the Bosnian Serb entity. And there was one woman heavily involved in Serb politics during and after the Bosnian war: Biljana Plavšić<sup>1</sup>. She was the wartime vice-president of the Republika Srpska (RS) and a president in the aftermath of the conflict (1996-1998). In 2001 she surrendered to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), where she pled guilty and was eventually sentenced to 11 years for war crimes. Being a controversial politician, she started as a right-wing nationalist, switched to a pro-Western stance during her presidency, admitted war crimes against Bosnian Muslims and Croats in the ICTY, and has been referred to as a “traitor” by right-wing Serb politicians and media.

In my thesis I don't deal with her rule or the time she spent in prison, but with the aftermath. In 2009, after being released from the prison in Sweden, she was welcomed as a national hero by the incumbent President of the RS, Milorad Dodik. In the following period, Plavšić got big media attention in RS, giving various interviews and publishing an autobiographical book. Through this process, the image of “Biljana, the traitor” completely changed into “Biljana, the victim”. She was portrayed as a woman who sacrificed herself in the name of boundless love for her suffering people.

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<sup>1</sup> In order to make things easier for the readers, I will refer to her in an anglicized form of her last name: *Plavšić*. Her last name is originally written *Plavšić* (Serbian Cyrillic: *Плавшић*) and is pronounced as *Plavshitch*.

I argue that the relation of femininity and ethnicity in Bosnian Serb politics can be defined through the nationalist concept of self-sacrifice or martyrdom. Although it can be argued that Biljana Plavsic represents an outlier, I claim that she is marked as an example of the continuation of the tradition of a higher moral order, as Dubravka Zarkov would put it, “one defined by love.”<sup>2</sup> This means that self-sacrifice in the name of love for the people provides a glorious place in history for that person. In Serbian folk tradition, love is a familiar trope that motivates women to sacrifice themselves for their brother or children. Following that, Plavsic sacrifices herself for her children – i.e. Bosnian Serb population. This matches with some of the supposed roles of women in nationalism – to embody the nation and its tradition and to participate or lead political and national struggles. Self-sacrifice is not only a political choice but also, and much more importantly, an essence of femininity and ethnicity in the tragic Serb history. Biljana Plavsic's self-representation and the media representation of her from 2009 in RS will be the case study of my research and the point is to see how the link between gender, religion and nation is formed by a focus on the concept of martyrdom. In the following subchapters I will explain political and historical background, theoretical framework and research design of my study in more details.

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<sup>2</sup> Žarkov, 2007:211

## 1.2. CONTEXT

### 1.2.1. Political and historical background

Before engaging in further description and analysis of the topic, it is important to go a bit deeper into the political and historical circumstances in Bosnia and Herzegovina with focus on one of its units, the Republika Srpska. This should help the reader to better understand the importance of this analysis, reasons behind the idea for choosing this topic and to more easily follow the chapters that will contain a multitude of references specific to the politics of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska.

Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>3</sup> is a country located in Southeastern Europe, in the Balkan Peninsula, bordering Croatia to the north, west and south, Serbia to the east and Montenegro to the southeast. It is a multi-ethnic country with three constituent peoples: Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims)<sup>4</sup>, Serbs and Croats. During its history it was a principality and a kingdom within more or less its current borders, but mostly it was occupied by foreign conquerors (Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary) until in 1918 it joined the united country of south Slavs – Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (in 1929 renamed to Kingdom of Yugoslavia). In 1941, after Nazi Germany occupied Yugoslavia, Bosnia became a part of the notorious fascist puppet-state, the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). In 1945, after liberation, Bosnia was one of six republics of Socialist Yugoslavia which lasted until 1992. Political and economic crisis in the country as well as the fall of state-socialism in Eastern Europe led to the rise of nationalism and separatism in Yugoslavia. The republics of Slovenia and Croatia declared independence in 1991, which resulted in rebellion in the Croatian region of Krajina dominantly populated by

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<sup>3</sup> In order to simplify and follow the example of other scholars who did the same, I will use the term *Bosnia* and abbreviation *BiH* when referring to *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, as well as the adjective *Bosnian*, if not specified otherwise

<sup>4</sup> In order to avoid confusion between *Bosniak* and *Bosnian*, I will use the term *Bosnian Muslim* when referring to *Bosniaks*, and *Bosnian* as it is noted in the footnote above

Serbs supported by the still existing Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). The escalation of ethnic violence however would turn out to reach its peak in Bosnia.

The Bosnian parliament passed the "Memorandum on the Sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina" by a simple majority in October 1991 in Sarajevo. Serb representatives strongly opposed that legislation and decided to boycott the Parliament and founded the Assembly of the Serb people in BiH, which soon (January 1992) established the Serb Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, i.e. *Republika Srpska*<sup>5</sup>. Bosnian Croats founded their own Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia in November 1991. During the Serb boycott, the Memorandum was passed in the Bosnian parliament and a referendum was announced for February 1992. As Serbs boycotted the referendum as well (the turnout was 64% and Serbs were estimated to make up 33% of the Bosnian population), 92.7% of voters was in favor of independence and on 5<sup>th</sup> March the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence from Yugoslavia. In protest, roadblocks were put across the country in the areas populated by Bosnian Serbs. A series of ethnically-based incidents led to the escalation of war with three sides completely opposed to each other: Army of Republika Srpska (dominantly Serb and supported by Serbia), the Croatian Defence Council (dominantly Croat and supported by Croatia) and Army of BiH (dominantly Bosnian Muslim), with a multitude of paramilitary troops on all sides.

Despite many attempts of peace plans by International Community, the war flared on resulting in a large number of dead and wounded; many of them civilians. Serb forces had initial superiority due to the big amount of weaponry and sources provided by JNA and they eventually controlled about 72% of Bosnian territory. The territories were ethnically cleansed throughout the country with the persecution of Bosnian Muslim civilians in Eastern Bosnia as the biggest example. The city of Sarajevo was under siege for 44 months, thousands of people ended up in concentration camps, a vast amount of women were raped and the largest

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<sup>5</sup> Originally: *Srpska Republika Bosna i Hercegovina*; the name was soon shortened to *Republika Srpska* (Serb Republic). The name is today widely used in Serbian original to avoid the confusion with Republic of Serbia

massacre occurred in small town of Srebrenica in 1995, were Serb forces and paramilitaries killed around 8000 Bosnian Muslim civilians, according to the officially recognized documentation<sup>6</sup>. NATO forces bombed Bosnian Serb positions in 1995 supporting Croat and Bosnian Muslim forces that had in the meantime signed a peace agreement and alliance in Washington, putting a halt to Muslim-Croat hostilities that had raged since 1993. In November 1995, in Dayton, Ohio, a general Peace Agreement was signed solidifying the independent state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, internally divided to two entities (Serb-dominated Republika Srpska and Bosnian Muslim-Croat-dominated Federation of BiH) with the city of Brcko as a separate district. According to the most recent research, the number of killed people is placed around 100,000<sup>7</sup> and the number of displaced around 2,2 million. It was the most disastrous conflict Europe has seen since World War II.

The International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was set up in The Hague in May 1993 (but its jurisdiction reaches back to 1991) and since then has indicted 161 individuals. By 2008, 45 Serbs, 12 Croats and 4 Bosnian Muslims had been convicted of war crimes in connection with the war in Bosnia. Some trials, such as those of former President of RS, Radovan Karadzic, and former Bosnian Serb general, Ratko Mladic, are still in process. The Tribunal was often criticized for provoking tensions instead of promoting reconciliation, as polls have shown a generally negative attitude towards the ICTY among the Serb and Croat public. As 68% of indictees have been Serbs, and Croat leader Franjo Tudjman and Bosnian Muslim leader Alija Izetbegovic died without having been indicted, many see this as reflecting bias, while the advocates of the Tribunal claimed it was reflecting the factual balance of the crimes committed during the war. According to Robert M. Hayden, the ICTY's

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<sup>6</sup> After research, the number is declared by the Memorial Center Srebrenica-Potocari and officially recognized by the authorities of the Republika Srpska in 2004. [http://www.potocarimc.ba/ba/liste/nestali\\_a.php](http://www.potocarimc.ba/ba/liste/nestali_a.php)

<sup>7</sup> A formal study by the Research and Documentation Center of Bosnia and Herzegovina concluded in 2005 that 100,000 people were killed during the Bosnian war: 64,000 Bosnian Muslims, 25,000 Bosnian Serbs and 7,600 Bosnian Croats. [http://www.idc.org.ba/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=section&id=35&Itemid=126&lang=bs](http://www.idc.org.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&id=35&Itemid=126&lang=bs)

actions are among the major causes of mutual recrimination within the former Yugoslav countries and between them: “Essentially, the ICTY has enjoyed some popularity amongst various peoples in ex-Yugoslavia until one of their own heroes has been indicted, at which point the popularity of the Tribunal drops remarkably” (Hayden, 2011:6). Polls from 2005 show that, while 67.9% Bosnian Muslims believe that ICTY trials are fair, 51.9% Bosnian Croats and 79.2% Bosnian Serbs disagree (Ibid, 7).

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a much divided society, with political representatives of the two entities and three ethnic groups having opposed views on the future of the country. While Bosnian Muslim politicians argue for the abolition of entities, Croat leaders often state the need for an entity of their own. On the other side, Serb politicians do not hide that they would prefer the Republika Srpska as an independent state or in union with Serbia. Seventeen years since the end of the war, opinions of it are completely different. While 95% of Bosnian Muslims and 73.2 % of Croats see the war as a Serbian aggression, 83.6% of Serbs claim it was a civil war (Ibid.). That also reflects the political situation in the country where even officially non-nationalist parties have strong nationalist stances (SNSD<sup>8</sup>, SDP<sup>9</sup>). As Selimovic describes it, competition for war-time victimhood leads to the relativization of suffering and result in a complex mix of partial acknowledgments and partial denials of the suffering of the other (2010:55). Every political event is colored with nationalist arguments from all three sides and used for a revival of “patriotic” feelings among the population.

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<sup>8</sup> The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (*Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata*, shortly *SNSD*), is the party of current President of RS, Milorad Dodik. Although officially a member of the Socialist International, their stances are often nationalistic, arguing for the eventual independence of RS

<sup>9</sup> The Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska partija BiH*, shortly *SDP*), is the party of the current Bosnian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zlatko Lagumdžija. Although officially a member of the Socialist International and promoting plurality in BiH, their members are dominantly Bosnian Muslims and often have nationalistic stances.



### 1.2.2. Biography of Biljana Plavsic

Biljana Plavsic is a former President of the Republika Srpska (1996-1998), one of the leading Bosnian Serb political figures during the Bosnian War (1992-1995) and a convicted war criminal for which she spent seven years in prison (2002-2009). She was born on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1930 in Tuzla, Kingdom of Yugoslavia (now Bosnia and Herzegovina), and spent most of her life in Sarajevo. She graduated biology at the University of Zagreb and as a Fulbright Scholar went to the Cornell University in New York, where she spent two years doing botany research at the Boyce-Thompson Institute. After that, she specialized in electron microscopy in London and plant virology in Prague and Bari. She returned to Sarajevo, where she became a university professor and the Head of the Department of Biology at the University of Sarajevo. She is a highly accomplished scientist with over a hundred of published scientific works and papers.

Plavsic entered political life in 1990, before the first multiparty elections since World War II, and joined the newly-founded Serb Democratic Party (SDS). Being a strong anti-communist, she was never a member of the League of the Communists of Yugoslavia. The elections of 1990 brought her and Nikola Koljevic<sup>10</sup> to the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was at the time still a part of Yugoslavia. Big political and economical crisis, as well as the start of conflicts in the neighboring republic of Croatia, led to the increase of ethnic tensions in Bosnia as well. Serb representatives left the Parliament and founded the Assembly of Serbian People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, deciding to boycott the referendum on the independence of BiH. After Bosnia declared independence, Plavsic and Koljevic resigned from their positions in the Presidency and took the roles of Vice-presidents of the Serb Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, where they will stay until the end of the war.

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<sup>10</sup> Nikola Koljevic (1936-1997), Bosnian Serb politician, university professor, translator and an essayist

In the first years of war, Plavsic distinguished herself promoting hardcore nationalist stances and praising people such as Arkan<sup>11</sup>, the Serb paramilitary war leader, and Vojislav Seselj<sup>12</sup>, the ideologist of the Greater Serbia. She held inflammatory speeches and her interviews often contained insulting and derogatory references for non-Serbs. She called ethnic cleansing “a natural phenomenon”, Bosnian Muslims “genetically deformed material that embraced Islam”, and she was often quoted saying that “there are 12 million Serbs and even if six million perish on the field of battle, there will still be six million to reap the fruits of the struggle”, which she later dismissed as not her words but of one wounded soldier she visited<sup>13</sup>. She was nicknamed “the Iron Lady”, in comparison to Margaret Thatcher. Most of these statements were coming from 1992, as later on she was more concerned with the humanitarian work and less involved in discussions and meetings. Yet she was one of the rare, if not only, Bosnian Serb politicians that was a strong opponent of Slobodan Milosevic. Since Milosevic was portrayed as the leader that all Serbs long waited for, that meant going against the norms and even undermining the widely-renowned authority of Milosevic. In 1993, at the beginning of the discussion on Vance-Owen peace plan in the National Assembly of RS, she even refused to shake hands with Milosevic, whose wife Mirjana Markovic openly stated that Plavsic’s war-mongering was evidence of a hormonal disorder<sup>14</sup>. Plavsic, however, was dissatisfied with Milosevic’s politics, continuation with the communist period and the influence he had on most of the Bosnian Serb leaders, especially Radovan Karadzic.

After the end of the war and the final verification of the existence of the Republika Srpska, Karadzic had to withdraw from his power position under the pressure of International Community, and he chose Biljana Plavsic as his successor. In the presidential elections of

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<sup>11</sup> Zeljko Raznatovic (1952-2000), widely known as Arkan, was a career criminal before the war and the founder of the paramilitary group Serb Volunteer Guard, notorious for war crimes against Croat and Muslim population

<sup>12</sup> Vojislav Seselj (1954), the leader of the Serb Radical Party, far-right politician, ultra-nationalist and promoter of the idea of Greater Serbia; accused by the ICTY for war crimes, he voluntarily surrendered and is still on trial

<sup>13</sup> Vreme, 19 December 2002, <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=329572>

<sup>14</sup> Vreme, 10 May 1993:36-37

1996, Plavsic was confirmed as the new President of RS and a first female sovereign in modern Serbian history. That however brought a complete change in Plavsic's political attitude: she started accusing Karadzic and Momcilo Krajisnik<sup>15</sup> of criminal activities, corruption, financial manipulations and neglecting of north-western parts of RS, especially the city of Banja Luka. Plavsic soon got support from politicians and people from that region but also from the West. After long political struggle, in 1997 Plavsic dissolved the National Assembly and appointed Milorad Dodik, the leader of oppositional Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), as the Prime Minister of RS. She left SDS and founded her own party, Serb People's Alliance (SNS), made mostly of former SDS members. That was the biggest political overturn in the history of RS. Plavsic and Dodik started co-operating more with the International Community, accepting certain demanded reforms and meeting various foreign leaders, from Madeleine Albright, the US State Secretary, to Jacques Chirac, the president of France. Her residence in Banja Luka was protected by the peace corps of IFOR, as she was afraid that Karadzic might order her assassination, after often being called a traitor by the officials of SDS and Seselj-supported Serb Radical Party of RS (SRS).

In 1998, the reform coalition "Sloga" (Unity), which consisted of Plavsic's SNS, Dodik's SNSD and the Socialist Party of RS (SP), lost the election to the coalition of SDS and SRS. That marked the end of Plavsic's political career. In 2000, International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) indicted Biljana Plavsic for war crimes against the non-Serb population in Bosnia. The indictment consisted of following charges:

- two counts of genocide (*Article 4 of the Statute of the Tribunal*: genocide; complicity to commit genocide)
- five counts of crimes against humanity (*Article 5 thereof*: extermination; murder; persecution on political, racial and religious grounds; deportation; inhumane acts)

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<sup>15</sup> Momcilo Krajisnik, former President of the National Assembly of RS (1992-1996) and Serb member of Bosnian Presidency (1996-1998), one of the founders of SDS. Indicted by ICTY and in 2006 found guilty of crimes against humanity; serving a 20 years sentence.

- one count of violations of the laws or the customs of the war (*Article 3 thereof: murder*)<sup>16</sup>

She voluntarily surrendered to the ICTY on January 10, 2001, and was provisionally released on the 6<sup>th</sup> September of the same year. On the 16<sup>th</sup> December 2002, after bargain with the prosecution, Biljana Plavsic declared herself guilty of persecution of non-Serb population in Bosnia on ethnic and religious grounds and other charges were dropped. She was sentenced to 11 years in prison and served seven years in the women's prison Hinseberg in Frövi, Sweden. Swedish authorities decided to release her in October 2009 because of her good conduct, and she went to Belgrade, where she lives today.

She is divorced, without children.

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<sup>16</sup> From the ICTY's Amended Consolidated Indictment, <http://www.icty.org/x/cases/plavsic/ind/en/kra-cai020307e.pdf>

### **1.3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

A great deal of analytic work has been done in different parts of the world on the relations of gender and nationalism with the emphasis on the place of women in the nation and state. A considerable and important literature has been produced by feminists in the past decades locating nationalist and gendering practices in many countries and how these practices and discourses intertwine and construct notions of male and female roles in the society. However, not much of these have gone further to explore the significance of religion and the concept of martyrdom within these relations and constructions. The research conducted in this study lies at the intersection of several disciplines: gender studies, cultural studies and social anthropology. In this section I will explain which existing scholarly theories I used in this analysis and the importance of their application.

First, there is a considerable body of literature where general questions related to the comprising of the social construction of gender in nationalism are addressed. These questions are mainly connected to the links between women and ethnic/national processes and state practices (e.g. Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1989; Peterson 1999; Nagel 1998). Second, there is a significant scope of literature on Serbian nationalism specifically, its imagery, historical development and the relation with gender (e.g. Colovic 2002; Pavlowitch 2002; Zarkov 2007). Third, there is some literature which refers to the connection between religion and nationalism (e.g. Brubaker 2011; Perica 2002), the concept of martyrdom (e.g. Fields, Owens, 2004) and how it is gendered (e.g. Hasso 2005). All of this literature is used in more details later in the study. Finally, it is also important to mention the literature on transitional justice and social interaction (e.g. Branscombe, Doosje 2004; Selimovic 2010; Hayden 2011) that helps to understand the significance of International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia,

as well as the relations and emotions attached to its work and influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Thus, in this work I use this body of literature in order to apply established theories on the representation of women in nationalism (by creating a set of guiding principles) to the case of Biljana Plavsic, former President of Republika Srpska and a convicted war criminal, so that to see the peculiarities related to the discourse about and after her release from prison, with a specific focus on the concept of martyrdom in the triangular relation of gender, religion and nationalism in the popular media in RS. I use these theories to exemplify how gender and religious motives can be instrumentalized as a political strategy for securing the popularity of a female politician in nationalist discourse in general and Bosnian Serb official media discourse in particular.

### **1.3.1. Women and Nationalism**

Many scholars have analyzed nationalism as a phenomenon, its basis and historic development in different parts of the world. Snyder defined nationalism as “the doctrine that a people who see themselves as distinct in their culture, history, institutions, or principle rule themselves in a political system that expresses and protects those distinctive characteristics” (2000:23). Anderson saw nationalism as a “universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (1983:3); not as the awakening of nations to self-consciousness but as *inventing* nations where they do not exist (Ibid, 6). Therefore, according to Anderson, nation is an imagined political community: imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign (Ibid.). Brubaker argues that nationalism does not have a fixed nature; on the contrary, it is a highly flexible political language which frames political arguments by appealing to the patria, the fatherland, the country, the nation (Brubaker, 2011). There is a variety of areas in which

nationalism shapes discourses and practices: social movements, religious communities, state apparatus, NGOs, etc. Spike Peterson finds it as a territorially based subset of political identity that takes one of the two related forms: state-led and state-seeking. It can be problematic as it is often a reason behind the conflicts of ethnic groups, nations and countries, but also because it can create a negative climate within a state, based on elite privileges and political representations (Peterson, 1999:35).

Specific research on Serbian nationalism provides a closer look into its symbolism and history, which is very helpful in this case. I agree with Colovic's idea of "nationalization", i.e. the process of transference of historical figures from folk memory and the popular imagination into a system of ideas which form the image of a nation. These characters have to be purified of any possible unclear and ambiguous features in order to enter the Pantheon of Serbian national heroes (Colovic, 2002:59). The case of Biljana Plavsic can be analyzed as an example of that process. Nationalism, in general, is often very tied to traditionalism and imposes specific roles in the society for all the groups that obtain space at the covered territory.

Although it is necessary to have in mind that society is not only divided along ethnic and gender lines, but also along class, age, educational and other lines, women's position in nationalism has been classified in a similar way by many scholars (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989, Peterson 1999), which means that nationalism and state construct men and women differently. For the purpose of this study, I rely on Anthias and Yuval Davis's five ways of women's participation in ethnic and national processes and in relation to state practices.

These are: as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities; as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups; as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture; as signifiers of ethnic/national differences (as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses

used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories; and as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1989: 7).

My focus is on the last category where female agency is recognized beyond the standardized ideas of women as symbols and victims. In accordance with that is also Spike Peterson's claim: "As both agents and victims (not mutually exclusive categories), women are increasingly visible in processes of political conflict" (1999: 51). An example of such combination of agency and victimhood can be martyrdom, a concept that requires more analysis and the case study of Biljana Plavsic and the media representation of her after the release from prison in 2009 is my humble contribution to it.

### **1.3.2. Religion and Nationalism: Martyrdom**

Religion and nationalism have long been contested terms as nationalism was understood as a distinctively secular phenomenon, which emerged in the time of decline of religion, the Age of Enlightenment, i.e. the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Anderson, 1983: 7; Brubaker, 2011: 1). Brubaker's concern about such an understanding brought him to the developing of four distinct ways of studying the connection between religion and nationalism. These are: to treat religion and nationalism as analogous phenomena; to specify ways in which religion helps explain the origins and power of nationalism; to treat religion as part of nationalism and to specify modes of interpenetration and intertwining; and to posit a distinctively religious form of nationalism (Brubaker, 2011:1-2). In this study I will use the second approach in order to see the influence of religion on the development of nationalism which led to its continuous presence in the mundane nationalist discourse, since Serbian nationalism is very tied to the Orthodoxy due to the historical reasons. Probably the most important reason is that it was the



only Serbian institution that existed during the ages of Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian rule, gathered Serbs and preserved their customs (Pavlowitch, 2002:78).

Religion has contributed to European nationalisms in various ways, from promoting literacy and standardization of vernacular languages to generating modes of social and political relationships (Brubaker, 2011:8). Particular forms of nationalism were shaped by particular religious traditions (English nationalism by Puritanism, German by Pietism, Polish and Croatian by Catholicism, Israeli by Orthodox Judaism, etc) and Serbian is no exception, having strong ties with the Eastern Orthodoxy. The connection between religion and nationalism can be seen in the number of official Eastern Orthodox believers who practice religion that practically overlaps the number of people that claim to be Serbs (Serbia 84%, Montenegro 74% (including Serbs and Montenegrins) and Bosnia 36%). A similar pattern is noted with Bosnian Muslims and Croats.<sup>17</sup> In the years of the break-up of Yugoslavia, it was considered by many that the Serbian Orthodox Church is set to be the guide for the Serb people in the time of the great transformation in Europe and its agenda was to contain several patriotic themes, with the strong emphasis on national history and culture of Serbs, Kosovo<sup>18</sup> and the memory of Ustasha genocide of Serbs in World War II<sup>19</sup> (Perica, 2002: 131). Orthodoxy is therefore not only a religion in an otherwise officially secular state, but a national institution of the highest importance in Serbia. Its strong connection with the nation provides the basis for the religious discourse within Serbian nationalism that is not tied only

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<sup>17</sup> Percentages are taken from the census in Serbia in 2002 and in Montenegro in 2003. The percentage for Bosnia is an estimate, as Bosnia has not had a census since 1991 due to political disputes. Sources:

[http://tripalo.hr/knjige/hrvati\\_u\\_bih/vuksic.pdf](http://tripalo.hr/knjige/hrvati_u_bih/vuksic.pdf) ;

[http://www.predsjednikrs.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=110&Itemid=158&lang=rsyu](http://www.predsjednikrs.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=110&Itemid=158&lang=rsyu)

<sup>18</sup> Kosovo and Metohia is a region with disputed sovereignty: Serbia considers it as its autonomous province, while Kosovo authorities (predominantly Albanian) claim it to be an independent state from 2008. It is a place of the legendary Battle of Kosovo, the myth of which is one of the basis of Serbian nationalism. In the last two centuries it has been a place of various ethnic tensions between Serbs and Albanians which culminated in the Kosovo War (1998-1999). It is perceived as one of the most politically unstable regions in the world.

<sup>19</sup> The fascist puppet-state of The Independent State of Croatia (1941-1945), or NDH, was a place of notorious crimes against the Serb population of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina perpetrated by the Croatian Ustasha regime. The extermination camp Jasenovac was among the biggest in Europe of the time with different estimates of victims varying from 80,000 to 700,000, mostly Serbs, Jews and Roma.

to Serbia, but to the Republika Srpska as well. It is important to emphasize that there is practically no difference between Serbia and RS in Serbian nationalism. The concept is shared and it refers to the unity of all Serbs wherever they live. Any differences can be related to the local-patriotism: in the Republika Srpska the bigger emphasis is on the relations of RS and Bosnia, while in Serbia the focus is more on the situation in Kosovo and relations with Montenegro.

Since I argue that in the case of Biljana Plavsic martyrdom is a concept through which the relation of femininity, ethnicity and religion is defined in Bosnian Serb nationalism, I follow the research of several scholars on the topic of self-sacrifice. Fields and Owens (2004) claim an ascription of martyrdom can be recognized as such when political objectives or leadership or a critical mass of the community share the vision of the individual. They give many examples such as Jan Palach's self-immolation in Prague 1968 in protest against Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia: "At the time, most of the bystanders and passers-by just continued about their business, but years later, Palach is remembered" (Fields and Owens, 2004: 61). The most important function of a martyr is that the sacrifice of an individual for the achievement of the goal of the social or political group is personalized into 'he/she did it for me' (Ibid, 70). It therefore personalizes responsibility and feelings of guilt or shame.

Although that place is usually reserved for men, women's agency is contesting that stereotype. Frances S. Hasso found this in her research on Palestinian female suicide-bombers, whose acts were usually contesting the masculinity of Arab men and the Islamic institution of *shahid*, i.e. a martyr who dies to achieve victory or greater cause. It is important to add at this stage that the first martyr in the Islamic tradition was actually a woman – Sumayyah bint Khayyat (*shaheeda*). Hasso noted the shift in media discourse on the roles of women as martyrs in Palestine since 2002 as one's last kiss to her children was described as "giving them power as a fighter and a martyr, which is higher than the quality of maternity"

(Hasso, 2005: 34). The braveness of these women “generated an increased public display of militance among Arab women and girls throughout the region“ since they were seen as “heroes of Islam for defending our holy land“ (Ibid, 35). They have “situated their bodies and explained their actions in ways that both reproduced and undermined gender-sexual norms” (Ibid, 44). The situating of Plavsic herself and by the media follows this pattern as well, because of her political position that is usually seen as a 'male role'.

Martyrdom is a great constitutive element of the Christian tradition. The image of Christians as those who are hated by the world, just like Christ, throughout the history was almost inescapable, according to Justin Watson: “[t]hose who have suffered for the faith, especially to the point of martyrdom, have provided the Christian tradition with a potent image of heroism“ (1999:126). The presence of the concept of martyrdom is therefore quite clear in Serbian nationalism due to strong national mythology which is based on the self-sacrifice of Prince Lazar and his knights at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 and the Serbian Orthodox Church keeps a special place among their saints for them. As Čolović writes, “In order for the nation to be defended from attack and conquest, from the penetration of the enemy into her body or tissue, there must be sacrifice; warriors must lay down their life on the altar of the nation” (2002: 54). Plavsic, a woman performing a ‘male role’, reproduces and undermines gender norms of the importance of self-sacrifice in Serbian nationalism.

#### 1.4. RESEARCH DESIGN

My research is based on the critical analysis of discourse used in Bosnian Serb media after Biljana Plavšić's release from the prison and interviews she gave from 2009 to 2011. The assumption is that discourse is involved in the construction of social situations, identities and relationships between individuals (Fairclough, 1985:739). This critical analysis should be useful because of the consistent use of membership categories that highlight women's role in the private sphere, e.g. wife, mother (Wodak, 1997:24), and the possible change of that discourse in this case study. I was paying attention to the use of language about Biljana Plavšić and the images of her during that period. I focus on nine articles and two short interviews relating to Plavšić in editions of the two most important dailies in RS, *Glas Srpske* (GS) and *Nezavisne Novine* (NN), as well as one interview for the *RTRS*, the public TV network of Republika Srpska. Data is collected from the archive of *Glas Srpske* in the National Library of Republika Srpska in Banja Luka; from the online archive of *Nezavisne Novine* (<http://www.nezavisne.com/arhiva.php>) and through internet research. Another important source of data is Plavšić's autobiography entitled *Svedočim* ("I Witness"), written in prison and issued in two parts in 2005.

*Glas Srpske* and *Nezavisne Novine* are the most popular RS dailies and are believed to be close to the official politics of the entity. *Glas Srpske* is the national daily newspaper of RS and its headquarters are in Banja Luka. It was founded in 1943 and changed names several times throughout its history until it settled upon *Glas Srpske* ("Voice of Srpska") in 2003. Since September 1992, it is closely tied to the National Assembly of Republika Srpska and the national television broadcaster, *RTRS*. It is important to mention that GS's name from 1992 till 2003 was *Glas Srpski* ("Serbian Voice"). *RTRS*, or *Radio Televizija Republike Srpske* ("Radio Television of Republika Srpska"), was founded in 1992 in Banja Luka and is

known to be closely tied to the authorities of the entity since its foundation. *Nezavisne Novine* (“Independent Newspaper”) is a daily newspaper based in Banja Luka founded in December 1995. For long time they were an opposition newspaper, supporting *SNSD* and its leader, the current President of RS, Milorad Dodik. As *SNSD* came to power in 2006, *Nezavisne* can hardly be called oppositional as it hasn’t distanced itself from the party since. It was the first media in RS to publish articles about war crimes committed by Serbs. Its founder and owner, Željko Kopanja, was the target of a car bomb attack that took his legs in 1999. It was never revealed who was behind this attack, although suspicions were going towards certain former paramilitary leaders who might be dissatisfied with the *NN*’s unveiling of their groups’ crimes during the war.

Analysis of the discourse in these media from RS is supposed to show the pattern established by Biljana Plavsic herself in her autobiography. This pattern puts Plavsic in the role of a martyr for the higher cause of the Serbian nation and Republika Srpska. The image of “Biljana the traitor” established at her conviction completely changed into “Biljana the victim” upon her release from prison. She was portrayed as a woman who sacrificed herself in the name of boundless love for her suffering people. Self-sacrifice is not only a political choice but also, and much more importantly, an essence of femininity and ethnicity in the tragic Serb history. In the following chapters I will explore these issues first through the analysis of earlier discourse in the media about Biljana Plavsic and her autobiographical book, and then analyze the media discourse and imagery from 2009 till 2011 in the chosen dailies and public TV broadcaster.

## 2. Confessions of a Traitor

### 2. 1. THE CONFESSION DISCOURSE: BILJANA THE TRAITOR

After finishing her presidential mandate in 1998, Biljana Plavsic started to face stories about a secret indictment. That year in Vienna she was asked by journalists about her feelings and possible fears of secret accusations from the ICTY, to which she replied: “I’m not afraid of the Tribunal’s secret indictments, because if we take into consideration that more than 20,000 young men died for Republika Srpska and that more than 600,000 Serbs were expelled from their homes, what is the significance of some individuals ending up in the Hague?”<sup>20</sup> After being indicted by the ICTY in April 2000, Plavsic voluntarily surrendered on January 10, 2001, plea-bargained with the Tribunal and eventually on December 16, 2002, she declared herself guilty for persecution of Bosnian Muslims and Croats on ethnic and religious grounds during 1992 and was sentenced to 11 years of prison. In her confession, she stated repentance for the crimes committed against the non-Serbs in Bosnia and regret that she departed from the RS leadership structures too late as she realized that they are not on the path and example of St. Sava<sup>21</sup>, but that the fruits of their labor are graves, refugees and isolation.<sup>22</sup>

Becoming the first high official of Bosnian Serbs to admit war crimes, Plavsic faced mostly negative reactions from Republika Srpska. Mirko Sarovic, at the time Serb Member of the Bosnian Presidency and a high official of SDS, stated his disillusion with Plavsic’s act: “The behavior of Biljana Plavsic has nothing to do neither with justice nor legality of the Tribunal in Hague. I personally believe it is a result of pure trade and I would not be surprised

<sup>20</sup> Dani, 641, 25 September 2009

<sup>21</sup> St. Sava (1174-1236), born as Rastko Nemanjic, is one of the most celebrated saints among Orthodox Serbs and one of the key figures in Serbian history. He was the founder of Serbian Orthodox Church, its first Archbishop, writer, diplomat and legislator.

<sup>22</sup> Plavsic's admission of guilt in the ICTY (in Serbian) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gzqlkj1RWrc>

to see Plavsic as a witness against Milosevic”<sup>23</sup>. Other RS officials were also disapproving of her confession, claiming it can be damaging for the legitimacy of RS itself. Mladen Ivanic, the time Prime Minister of RS, quickly responded to such comments that trials in The Hague are trials of individuals, not institutions, entities or countries<sup>24</sup>. Yet the stir caused by Plavsic’s confession was not to be so easily stopped and it went beyond the boundaries of RS. In Serbia, Vojislav Seselj, the leader of the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS), stated that Plavsic is the greatest traitor and the most beloved fake witness in The Hague, a claim he would even repeat in his closing argument before ICTY in March 2012<sup>25</sup>. Kosta Cavoski, a university professor of law, a friend of the Karadzic family and an outspoken critic of the ICTY, openly accused Plavsic in his editorials in *Glas Javnosti* of being a traitor of the Serbian nation: “[s]he threw her personality in the mud of betrayal and made a dirty rug out of herself”<sup>26</sup>. Cavoski claimed that by admitting the crimes, Plavsic heavily implicated Milosevic, Karadzic, Mladic and Krajisnik, and that she should have stood up to the prosecutors by stating what were the real reasons for the start of war, how Alija Izetbegovic withdrew his signature from the Carrington-Cutileiro peace plan in 1992 and that Serbs were afraid of their constitutive rights being abolished. Since she did not do any of that, she “trampled the bodies of all those who put their lives on the grounds of Republika Srpska”<sup>27</sup>. According to Cavoski, Plavsic is an example of what happens to the traitors of the nation, because her mentors despise her and her people are cursing her name: “People who do politics strive for, among other things, immortal fame. The only things that are left to Biljana Plavsic now are a terrible curse and eternal shame”<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Kebo, Amra, *Bosanske reakcije*, IWPR

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Sabljakovic, Dzevad, *Seselj*, DW

<sup>26</sup> Cavoski, Kosta, *Put bez povratka*, Glas Javnosti

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Cavoski, Kosta, *Da li se izdaja isplati?*, Glas Javnosti

Other printed media, such as *NIN*, were also quite judgmental of her decision to admit the crimes. In the editorial “Red Cloud’s Betrayal”, journalist Dragan Jovanovic compared Plavsic with Red Cloud, the legendary Native American war leader, and Serbs with Native Americans: “Sitting Bull ‘killed himself’ in an American prison in 1890. In the same way Serbs love to kill themselves in The Hague. And “Witnessing Biljana” surrendered herself voluntarily just as chief Red Cloud”<sup>29</sup>. Jovanovic continues by accusing the Serb “chiefs” of being prepared to sell everything and comparing the decrease in territory size and population of the Indians and Serbs, because that is how it happens when leaders surrender. Obviously, he's also trying a classic move of equating the Serbs with unambiguous victims of a stronger power. One of the key sentences about Plavsic, however is very much like Cavoski's accusations: “Who’s being called a sister by Carla Del Ponte and Madeleine Albright, poor may she and her name be forever and ever”. As we can see, an anti-Plavsic climate ruled among the political authorities in RS and in the media in both RS and Serbia since 2002. Plavsic was depicted as a traitor of Serb national interests and most of the accusations towards her had political connotations, having in mind the previous conflict between her and Karadzic’s SDS.

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<sup>29</sup> Jovanovic, Dragan, *Izdaja Crvenog Oblaka*, NIN



## 2.2. PLAVŠIĆ'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A RESPONSE

Plavšić's response to all of that came in the form of an autobiographical book, *Svedočim* ("I Witness") that was written in prison and published in 2005 in Banja Luka. In this book she positioned herself as a high official of the RS who was not informed of many things that were happening but who did everything to help her people. She accused Karadžić and Momčilo Krajišnik, the war-time president of the National Assembly of RS, of illegal businesses and poor leadership. When talking about her appointment to the Presidency of BiH, Plavšić described it as a sacrifice she gave to her people: "It was an honor for me, but also, knowing myself and my attitude towards obligations, it was my great sacrifice. I was responsible for the most usual type of work if I would take it as obligatory. It was always very much emphasized in my understanding. And the commitment such as that, to represent my people and its interests in the Presidency and to try to tone it with the interests of others – my dedication to such a mission must be enormous and such an obligation must always come first" (Plavsic, 2006:20). She continues in a similar manner throughout the book, emphasizing how she put the people before her: "I was never thinking about myself, Biljana Plavšić, as a member of the Presidency but as a human being that took over the huge commitment of representing its own, Serb people. And that obliged me to the sense of sacrificing, but voluntarily" (Ibid, 28). In this way, she completely reversed the official narrative of herself being a traitor that never cared for the RS but for her own cause, i.e. less years in prison and release of some charges. Plavsic represented herself as a woman who wanted to help her people in troubled times and in the end even sacrificed her own freedom because of that.

She describes the real hierarchy within the RS authorities from the start of the war in Bosnia, where she placed Karadzic and Krajisnik together at the top of the pyramid, while below them were their "executive levers" as she calls them: Momcilo Mandic, the Minister of

Justice, and Mico Stanisic, the Minister of Internal Affairs. On the other hand, she and the Vice-president Nikola Koljevic are described as surplus in the sharing of power: “The two of us were elected in a democratic election and in a certain way we were giving legitimacy to this *authority*, though [we were] *powerless*. *Power* was in hands of those who were not elected and therefore had no feeling of *responsibility* for what they did, and anyway that feeling was strange to them” (Ibid, 105). Furthermore; she accuses Karadzic of giving a mandate to Krajisnik to substitute him when he is not around, while there were officially two vice-presidents (Plavsic and Koljevic): “I am accused of what I should know according to my position and did not know. That is what is written in the indictment. [...] I, who did not even know what Keraterm and Omarska<sup>30</sup> meant until 1994, am *responsible* for the existence of those camps in 1992” (Ibid, 96). She continues by claiming that she would have behaved differently if she had had the information that was hidden from her: “It’s amoral to talk and write about the crimes of others when ours are doing the same. If I knew the truth, I would still be with my people, I would not abandon them, because it was not done by the people, but in that case I would not talk about the crimes committed by others. My engagement would be turned towards legality, I would ask for *responsibility*, for replacement of people” (Ibid, 109). Also, she claims that she was not aware of how much the other Bosnian Serb representatives at the time knew about the ethnic cleansing and other war crimes against non-Serbs: “Much later, maybe before the end of the war, but afterwards too, people were talking and newspapers writing that certain things that should not have happened, actually happened. Even today, when I write this, I still cannot believe that municipality *authorities* were lying to me, that is, hiding the truth from me” (Ibid, 69). She proceeds by asking why no one informed her, characterizing the way she was put into a high position and then ignored as amoral and criminal. As we can see, she often used words “power”, “authority” and “responsibility”,

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<sup>30</sup> Omarska, Keraterm and Trnopolje were the notorious concentration camps in Bosnia held by the Bosnian Serb Army during middle and late 1992. According to the ICTY prosecution, several hundreds of inmates (mostly Bosnian Muslims) were killed in each of those camps.

depicting herself as practically powerless official, with no real authority in comparison to Karadzic or Krajisnik, but with strong sense of responsibility for the RS and its population.

In many places in the book she emphasizes that the politics of the RS during the war was created without much of her knowledge: “There was maybe still some hope that some miracle would happen and save BiH from the catastrophe that it was rushing to. [...] Hope was however reserved for those who were not *informed* enough. Apparently, further developments of events were known for the *informed*. And those were definitely Karadzic, Krajisnik, Buha<sup>31</sup> and Milosevic” (Ibid, 43). On the other hand, Plavsic claims that sometimes even her personal driver knew more than she did about the situation, but she did not want to find out things in that way: “My *influence* was smaller than what one MP had and bigger than the ordinary citizen had. Maybe it’s hard to believe, but it’s a fact. The essence is that I was not involved in the negotiations in and out of the country. [...] As I was at almost every session of the National Assembly, I did know more than an ordinary citizen, but since I could not vote, my *power* of deciding was smaller than that which any MP had in their hands” (Ibid, 18). As seen above, she continues with emphasizing words such as “power” and “influence”, which was in the hands of others, according to her. Those others are those who were “informed” about everything, unlike her. And although she was close to resigning a few times, she still decided to stay, because she swore in 1992 that she would, “serve the people till the end of the war as much as my possibilities allow me to do so” (Ibid, 70). Her service to the Bosnian Serb people as a woman and a politician soon enough becomes the central part of her book.

Finally, she responded directly to the comments describing her as a traitor: “Not only the Tribunal in the Hague, but also some Serbs proclaimed me *a traitor* for the same reasons, because of the *truth* and readiness to *sacrifice myself* for the *people*. They do so in order to

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<sup>31</sup> Aleksa Buha (1939), Minister of Foreign Affairs of Republika Srpska (1992-1998), one of the most prominent leaders of the SDS in the 1990s.

proclaim despicable thieves and cowards as heroes” (Ibid, 105). Plavsic adds to that how she did everything possible to promote RS in the best way: “[I] was telling the *truth* about my *people* and cutting down the layers of lies and prejudices that fell on Serbs during the war. [...] I was never defending the regime, only the *people*” (Ibid, 138). She states her disappointment in the politicians she was working with for years: “Did my *people* ever know that working with such persons is the biggest *sacrifice* that I had to endure because of it?”<sup>32</sup> (Ibid,107). She describes herself as someone who was “a shoulder to cry on” for the people, someone who directed all her thoughts and emotions to people’s destinies. The book is full of her experiences of wartime and facing desperate refugees, starving and tired soldiers and various atrocities, such as the killings of Serb civilians in Sijekovac in the early days of the conflict.<sup>33</sup> According to her writings, she never wanted anything for herself but for the homeless, wounded, parentless children, etc: “[I] was prepared to share with my *people* all its troubles. I would be ashamed of myself I would think about myself before the *people* at any point” (Ibid, 94). She claims she was not ruling but serving her people and feeling and thinking about the dangers for Serbs in Bosnia: “There was no mistake, the same way a *mother* feels when her *child* is in danger” (Ibid, 47). The emphasis on the “people” is more than obvious: she sacrificed herself for the people, she defended only the people, she was telling the truth to the people, etc. It implies that her aim with the book was to increase the importance of her sacrifice in the name of the RS in order to oppose the discourse on her as a traitor of that people. She goes so far as to compare her relationship with the Bosnian Serbs to the feeling between a mother and her child, i.e. unconditional love.

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<sup>32</sup> The words were emphasized by me, in the original text there was no emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> The Sijekovac massacre refers to the March 1992 killings of 47 Serb civilians by the Croatian Army that illegally crossed the border in the village Sijekovac, near Bosanski Brod, Bosnia. According to the official understanding in RS, it is one of the events that triggered the start of the Bosnian war.

Dubravka Zarkov finds such discourse to be in function of a bridge linking different traditions and establishing a continuity of the history of Serb suffering and sacrifice from medieval times, through revolutions and world wars all the way to the present:

The uninterrupted continuity of that history is reinforced by language, where epic and lyric poetry narrates one long myth, as the myth of the past and the myth of the present, for the future. In that myth, femininity has a special place. Bravery, military skills, beauty, motivation, they are all there. But they are all less significant. Beyond them lie the boundless love and self-sacrifice of the Serb maiden soldiers. [...] So few of them are depicted with guns because they do not fight with guns, but with love and self-sacrifice, with spiritual beauty of their own, as well as of their people, unacknowledged and betrayed (2007: 210-211).

Plavsic's self-depiction follows that traditional pattern, where martyrdom is not a political choice but is defined through the essence of both femininity and ethnicity in dominant narrative of the tragic Serb history. Self-sacrifice and devotion are in such cases situated by the conditions supposed to be alien for women (war, politics and nationalism) but defined by the unconditional love and as such they embody the national tradition.

What is also interesting is her positioning herself as a woman in politics opposing the standard patriarchal beliefs: "According to their understanding<sup>34</sup>, in the time before the war and during the war especially, there is no place for a woman. Talks, negotiations, that is men's business, and as closer people are to the rural understandings of life, such beliefs are closer to them. Many of them belonged to the borderline between countryside and town. [...] I can maybe accept the traditional understanding of women's engagement in politics, but in this case it went beyond this simple idea; it was full of dishonesty and disrespect" (Ibid, 48). Plavsic here finally takes a stance not only as a politician, but as a woman. She points out the

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<sup>34</sup> Referring to Radovan Karadzic, Momcilo Krajisnik and their co-workers.

gendering of Serbian nationalism in terms of “the naturalization of domination between groups and reproducing the ‘foundational’ binary of sex difference and masculine dominance” (Peterson, 1999:55). Her dissatisfaction with such understanding implies that her political role entailed the reproduction of hierarchical differences which renders women invisible.

These excerpts from her autobiographical book *Svedočim* formed a strong background for the media discourse that followed her release from prison in 2009. Plavsic created a certain image of herself in this book, in an attempt to oppose the then official discourse in the Republika Srpska on her admission. She begins as a politician, not hiding her patriotic belonging, yet she finishes as a woman whose relationship with the people is compared to the relation between a mother and her child. She places herself as someone who did not rule and decide, but served, listened and helped Bosnian Serbs in their darkest hours. Her devotion is, according to the book, beyond question, embodying the tradition of martyrdom in the name of the nation. It reinforces the narrative of continuous suffering of the Serb people throughout history and poses Plavsic as a bond between this tradition and the current situation, defining femininity and ethnicity through this higher moral order of love (Zarkov, 2007:211).

She opposes all the accusations from the position of a legitimate democratically elected official (a powerful “western” form of legitimacy in the face of accusations of backwardness, Byzantine traditions, etc. among the Serbs), but also from the position of a woman and a human being. She neither justifies nor hides the crimes committed by Bosnian Serb forces, yet she firmly insists it was not the politics she strived for and that people voted for in the beginning of the 1990s. Although Plavsic was an example of the increase of woman’s visibility in political conflicts, she ties her agency much more to the decision to admit guilt and sacrifice herself in such way so her people would stay “clean”. Her inflammatory nationalistic speeches at the start of her political career and the high position she obtained were way less visible in her autobiography than her alleged powerlessness in that

position and feeling of responsibility for her troubled people. Plavsic puts herself in a lower decision-making position in the RS leadership but a higher moral one in comparison to her, as she claims, irresponsible co-workers from the war period. Such an image soon enough took on new elements in the media discourse in the RS after her release, as we will see in the following chapter.

### 3. Welcome Back, President

#### 3.1. THE ANALYSIS OF PLAVSIC'S RELEASE DISCOURSE

The representation of Biljana Plavsic in the Bosnian Serb media dramatically shifted after the change of ruling political structures in RS; that is, after her former associate, Milorad Dodik, became the Prime Minister once again in February 2006. Three years later, in October 2009, the Swedish authorities released Plavsic from the Hinseberg prison because of her good conduct during imprisonment. This caused various reactions in the region of former Yugoslavia, which varied from highly negative to highly positive. The latter were, without a question, coming from RS, from media and from official government positions. Dodik himself came to Stockholm Arlanda airport in an official jet of the RS government and brought her to Belgrade, where her relatives live.

The popular media in RS were ecstatic about her return from prison. *Glas Srpske (GS)*, after acknowledgment of her release, had a front page with Plavsic's image and the clear message in the title: "Welcome back, President"<sup>35</sup> (*Dobro dosla, Predsjednice*). The texts that followed this very important information were describing the decision of Swedish legal institutions as rightful and deserved. So, in the editorial of *GS* on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2009, with the simple title "Biljana Plavsic", it states that "every human being with good intentions rightly understands the release as rightful". Such people are, for example, Milorad Dodik: "She served her punishment and is free according to all laws, earthly and divine ones. I'm happy that Biljana Plavsic will soon become a free person". Similar reactions came from the President of RS, Rajko Kuzmanovic ("she harmed no one, accused no one and finally faces justice, i.e. her freedom") and the President of the National Assembly of RS, Igor Radojicic ("it's good news and this should have happened before"), but also from Carl Bilt, Swedish

<sup>35</sup> It is important to note that word *president* in Serbian can have a masculine (*predsjednik*) and a feminine form (*predsjednica*). In this title and throughout the analyzed texts, Plavsic was addressed as *predsjednica*.



diplomat and a former High Representative in Bosnia who stated: “justice is justice and it has to be accomplished”(GS, 15 September 2009:2-3). Krstan Simic, the Prime Judge of the Constitutional Court of BiH, claimed that “Plavsic is a free human being the moment she leaves the prison, a human being that atoned and paid for her sins, and no one has any right to ask her any question after that” (GS, 27 October 2009:3).

This is followed by powerful and even poetic adjectives related to Plavsic in the GS discourse. She is “a highly moral statesman who bravely and with her head up high admitted her share of responsibility for the tragic happenings of the past war, although she didn’t order a single misdeed” and for that she went “through Golgotha during past eight years”. She “carried her cross with dignity” and now she is “born again” (GS, 15 September 2009:4). Christian discourse is quite evident in these examples; Plavsic is compared with Jesus and his sacrifice. While he sacrificed himself by surrendering to the Romans to save humanity, she sacrificed herself by surrendering to the ICTY to save her people. Christian references however don’t stop there. It is interesting how article authors of GS noted that Plavsic would be released on the Day of St. Parascheva (Petka), a widely-honored female saint of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The cult of Parascheva is spread through the Balkan Peninsula and in Serbian tradition she is considered as the patron of women (especially spinners, weavers and embroiderers). It can probably be compared to the cult of the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholicism. The legend says that when Parascheva was 10 years old, she heard in a church the Lord's words: "Whoever wants to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." (Mark 8, 34).<sup>36</sup> The reference to her in relation to Plavsic’s release therefore is no surprise. Plavsic admitted guilt and served her punishment (i.e. took up her cross), followed the path of the female saint and now she has been rewarded on this very saint’s day.

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<sup>36</sup> [http://www.spc.rs/sr/sveta\\_petka](http://www.spc.rs/sr/sveta_petka)

It is worth mentioning at this stage of analysis that in Serbian history and nationalism many important dates have been related to certain saint's days, starting with St. Vitus Day (Vidovdan) and the legendary Battle of Kosovo in 1389. Vidovdan is considered a day of special importance to ethnic Serbs and a source of patriotism as it continued to be a date for numerous important historical events, from the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 that started World War I to the anthological speech of Slobodan Milosevic at the Gazimestan field in 1989 (even his arrest in 2001 happened on this day). St. George Day (Djurdjevdan) is known as the day when the insurgent hajduks<sup>37</sup> would gather every year to start their actions against Turkish rule. In 1804, the First Serbian Uprising against the Ottoman Empire started on St. Tryphon Day (Trivundan), while the Second started on Palm Sunday (Cveti) 1815. As we can see, saint's days have big importance in Serbian history and nationalism, and Plavsic's release on the day of St. Parascheva is not an exception. Gender aspect is here also evident, as Plavsic was released on the day of a female saint, rare in the Eastern Orthodox calendar. So, as hajduks were compared to St. George who killed the dragon, or the Second Serbian Uprising to the triumphal entry of Jesus Christ to Jerusalem, Biljana Plavsic gets compared with St. Parascheva.

The celebration of Plavsic's sacrifice reached the greatest heights in the editorials of *GS*. So, Miroslav Filipovic in his editorial "Biljana Plavsic" claims that Plavsic defended the highest moral values – justice and truth, and that she endured the years in prison with dignity and chivalry: "[S]he showed that, in the end, it is worthwhile sacrificing oneself for the truth" (15 September 2009:4). According to Filipovic, however, Plavsic did not sacrifice herself only for the Serbian people but for everyone:

[E]ven for those who give her the most derogatory names. The thing is that they can not understand it, because they are blinded and poisoned with hate that feeds their

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<sup>37</sup> Hajduk is a term most commonly referring to romanticized hero figures of outlaws or freedom fighters in the Balkans under the Ottoman occupation

destructive spirit. [...] They just cannot realize the essence of sacrifice of Biljana Plavsic, who took the responsibility for herself and blame of everyone for everything.

Only the bravest and the wisest can do it (Ibid.).

The comparison to Jesus Christ, as one can see, comes up again, especially to his famous words: “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke, 23:34). As Christ’s martyrdom was not understood by the Roman soldiers and the enraged mass, Plavsic’s sacrifice, according to Filipovic, is not understood and properly valued by everyone in Bosnia and the region. This comparison can be also seen in the following sentence: “[S]he raised herself high above the pathological hate and non-tolerance that are ruining this unfortunate country” (GS, 15 September 2009:4). This editorial gives one way of praising Biljana Plavsic which relies on Christian background and relates her martyrdom to that of Jesus, but also to bravery and chivalry, two virtues usually attached to masculinity (Nagel, 1998:245). What is obvious is the application of the traditional portrayal of a martyr related only to masculinity, as Colovic noted it during the Yugoslav wars, on a female figure. According to Colovic, “the battle for the nation is not only something patriotic but something very masculine”(2002:48). Plavsic as a woman disrupts the standardized heroic role reserved for men. The gender aspect of her martyrdom is therefore mixed: from one side, she is compared to St. Parascheva, but on the other, she gets knightly virtues in order to be equal with all the heroic men from Serbian history.

This is expected as Plavsic is a woman performing a “male” role: politician, leader of the nation, war leader. According to Anthias and Yuval-Davis, women’s role in national liberation struggles varies, but generally they are seen by the hegemonic patriarchal structures “to be in a supportive and nurturing relation to men even when they have taken the most risks” (1989:10). Customary and religious norms usually construct women as primarily biological reproducers, yet they can be treated differently in different nationalisms, based on

presumptions of their capacities and potentialities. From Plavsic's example we see that her high political position draws on the combination of addressed virtues in the above mentioned editorial. Although in a usually male role, she is not a man and although a woman, she is not faced with traditional constructions of women in relation to nationalism. Joane Nagel describes this as the exception that proves the rule, just as Margaret Thatcher did. However, although Nagel agrees that women usually involve on a symbolic level in nationalist discourse, culture and movements, she claims that women can exploit patriarchal views of women in order to help or lead nationalist struggles, because "women are less likely to be seen as dangerous or 'up to something'" (1998:253). Women are therefore more and more visible in nationalism and not only as symbols and victims. Biljana Plavsic is an example of a woman who is an agent in Serbian nationalism from the time of her political engagement in the 1990s to the current time after her release from the prison. Filipovic's editorial was not the only way of representing Plavsic in the media after the release.

In another *GS* editorial, "A Letter to Biljana", published on the day of Plavsic's release, Nedeljko Zugic invites a bit different way of admiring her sacrifice; maybe less religious, but poetic nevertheless (28 October 2009:4). The whole editorial is written in the style of a personal letter, where Zugic is addressing Plavsic herself, but with the second person formal pronoun *Vi*. He welcomes her to "a better life" and states how "the people's feeling of justice is called Biljana Plavsic" (Ibid.). Zugic addresses her as a "female martyr" (*mučenica*), "the altar of all our flaws" (*žrtvenik svih nasih mana*), "the victim of the history of hell" (*žrtvenica istorije pakla*) and "empress" (*carica*). According to him, she saved not only her soul but the soul of her people as well. The Christian reference, however, was again unavoidable: "it is a sign that you have been observed by God's all-seeing eye, as well as all the martyrs for their people" (Ibid.). Yet, in this editorial the emphasis is much more on Plavsic's female agency. Although a martyr, she is also an empress, the true leader of her

tormented people, who decided to take the blame instead of the entire nation. Plus, addressing her in a formal way gives a sense of admiration and meekness because of her glorious deed. In this case, what puts her in “the Pantheon of the Serb national heroes” (Čolović, 2002:59) is not just the religious connotation but, above all, her decisiveness and tenacity in her choice. That can give her a place alongside the great historical leaders, from Czar Dušan to King Petar I, and she would deserve it as a woman, though performing a traditionally male role. Nevertheless, what we can see here is what Zarkov calls “embodying the nation through the attributes of love, devotion and self-sacrifice” (2007:211). Plavsic’s martyrdom is represented as an essence of femininity, ethnicity and continuously tragic Serb history.

Stevan K. Pavlowitch found other examples of myth-making of martyrdom in Serbian history, such as glorifying the Serbian military retreat across Albania in the WWI<sup>38</sup> or inflating numbers of the dead in the Jasenovac extermination camp: “The figures were quickly inflated as the real ones were not horrible enough, both at the official level and at the popular level to make up for the suffering and to achieve glory in greater martyrdom” (2002:154). The myth of the Battle of Kosovo (1389) was always linked with the incumbent situation, connecting like a bridge different historical periods and political conditions. Therefore, the continuation of Serbian martyrdom can, interestingly, also be seen in the Socialist Yugoslavia that promoted national plurality under the slogans of brotherhood and unity:

The Communists had been good at enlisting in the service of their cause all the myth-making propensities of Serbian history. They had transformed defeats beyond all recognition by dwelling on the heroism that accompanied them. The Germans’ seven successful anti-insurgent drives were turned into the seven offensives of partisan mythology. Like the contemporaries of the battle of Kosovo in 1389, those who had to

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<sup>38</sup> Instead of surrendering to Austro-Hungarian forces, Serbian military along with king Petar I and other political officials, retreated across Albania in 1915 to reach Greece where they recuperated, returned to the war and eventually liberated Serbia in 1918. The retreat across Albania was marked with disastrous Serbian casualties from hunger, illness and enemy attacks.

knuckle under in the early 1940s knew how to embellish their defeats in order to restore morale and turn a brave face towards the future (Ibid, 155).

As we can see, the popularization of national heroes is a constant concern of modern state, whether during peace or war time. Colovic speaks of two kinds of time and space in the popularization of heroes. While in war period this gets more intensive and more frequent, in peacetime these “moments of public evocations are adapted to the rhythm of national holidays and anniversaries of historical events” (2002:61). If we take into consideration already mentioned importance of various saints’ days in the national mythology, it gives us another explanation of the increase of significance of the St. Parasheva’s Day as the day of Biljana Plavsic’s release. Since it is a period of peace, Plavsic is not on news everyday or on posters on every wall as during the war. The importance of her release is therefore tied to the religious holidays and to the higher moral order, i.e. the Pantheon of national heroes.

When referring to Plavsic, the grammatical gender that is used could be very significant in this analysis. The mainstream discourse of Serbian language often uses only masculine forms for professional titles even when women are concerned and in this case a shift is noticed. Every title given to her had female form: *predsjednica*, *mučenica*, *žrtvenica*, etc. instead of the commonly used masculine forms: *predsjednik*, *mučenik*, *žrtvenik*. It is definitely not used unintentionally. Feminizing these titles draws Plavsic in the traditional discourse on national heroes. She has, even linguistically, being accepted in the high society of Serbian heroes as a woman. Her male roles are therefore also given female shape and we witness an interesting exchange of characteristics. Plavsic, a woman, gets various traditionally masculine virtues, and traditionally male roles get female traits. The influence of such events on the shifts in the mainstream discourse use of gender forms would be an interesting topic for further research, especially in the fields of politics and sport.

Plavsic herself made a gendered statement in an interview for *Nezavisne novine* (NN) in 2011, upon the arrest of Bosnian Serb war-time general Ratko Mladic, where she invited him to take responsibility for the misdeeds during the war. She talked about how Mladic was hiding for so long and that she would not be able to do that for even one night, because of herself and because of her people:

*I was expecting from these men, heroes, to say ‘Let’s go there, to the Hague, and state: the guilty one is me, only me and no one else, especially not the Serb people.’*

*That is what I expected of them* (NN, 29 Jun 2011).

The gender reference is quite clear in this example: Plavsic, as a woman, took the responsibility and the blame, while men who were also accused of war crimes proved not to be masculine enough. The virtues associated with military men proved not to be true, according to Plavsic, as they were not capable of taking responsibility for their own actions. True leadership skills, as defined in Zugic’s editorial, are therefore associated with womanhood instead of violent masculinity. Female agency, although suppressed in patriarchal hegemony of the structures of nationalism, achieves better results than expected masculine virtues of politicians and generals, according to Plavsic.

Another important aspect of this interview, and of the entire discourse for that matter, is the evoking the relation towards the ICTY and the notion of collective and individual guilt. Branscombe and Doosje defined collective guilt as a “distress that group members experience when they accept that one of them is responsible for immoral actions that harmed another group” (2004:3). Opinions concerning the value of the feeling of collective guilt is highly divided both between and within national groups as it can refer to a more distant past (in the cases of the history of colonialism, e.g. UK, France, Spain) or to a closer one (conflicts in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Northern Ireland, etc.). For the same reason, the official aim of the ICTY was to try only individuals in order to avoid the issues of collective guilt among the

former Yugoslav countries. However, the interpretation of trials and sentences in the public of these countries was in most cases completely opposite<sup>39</sup>. The trials to Slobodan Milosevic, Ante Gotovina or Naser Oric were understood by their numerous compatriots as the trials to the entire ethnic groups. That was especially noted in the case of Serbs, since the majority of the indictees of the ICTY were Serbs. This reflects the failure of the ICTY in establishing a constructive relationship with the people in Bosnia, which was already claimed by some authors such as Selimovic (2010:52).

However, Plavsic's admission of guilt is here represented as the sacrifice for the people; she admitted guilt so the Serb nation would not be collectively blamed. This different understanding of the relation between people's representatives and collective guilt is an important finding of this research which could show a change in standardized discourse on the ICTY trials, the accused and the prosecution (often depicted as highly negative by the media in Serbia, Croatia and BiH). The changes in relation towards the ICTY, however, would ask for a further research on the construction of relationship between the ICTY and Bosnian people and this is hopefully a small contribution to someone's future work in that field. Nevertheless, this finding is also important for my analysis since Biljana Plavsic is most probably the only political leader in the world (but definitely for former Yugoslav countries) that admitted guilt for war crimes and was welcomed back home after release as a heroic figure, because of her sacrifice for the people she represented and led for a certain period. The welcoming of the released indictees of ICTY as heroic figures is quite common (as in the cases of Serbian generals Sljivancanin and Radic in Belgrade or Bosnian Muslim Naser Oric in Sarajevo), yet neither one of them accepted guilt for the war crimes.

The pictures in newspapers that followed her release were showing great emotion displayed by Plavsic and people who welcomed her back in Belgrade. The front page of *GS*

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<sup>39</sup> Poll results from 2005 on the fairness of the ICTY were mentioned in the Introduction chapter, the subchapter on the political and historical background (pg. 4)



on 27 October 2009 entitled “Biljana Plavsic is FREE” (*Biljana Plavsic SLOBODNA*), shows a smiling Plavsic holding hands with PM Dodik (image 1). The pictures in the article show Plavsic in strong hugs with her family (image 2), surrounded by journalists and greeting everyone who was there to welcome her. On the day of her visit to Banja Luka, the article had an image of Plavsic sending kisses and visiting the Church of Christ the Savior in the centre of the city. The general message of these images is joy and relief after her release that is not only felt by Plavsic or political elites, but by the people of RS as well. Another important aspect is the role of PM Dodik who is shown here almost as Plavsic’s savior – he brought her back to her people, where she belongs. He appears as a caretaker of a frail old lady that seems quite small and fragile in comparison.



Image 1: The cover of *Glas Srpske*, 28.10.2009 Image 2: From the article in *GS*, 28.10.2009

It is, however, quite interesting to note that Dodik welcomes and greets Biljana Plavsic as a national hero, having in mind his statement from 1996, i.e. just after the end of the war and before the 1996 general elections in BiH: “We are convinced that we have round us better Serbs than those in the SDS. Dr Mladen Ivanić<sup>40</sup> is a better Serb than Momcilo Krajisnik... Zivko Radisic<sup>41</sup> is a better Serb than Biljana Plavsic” (Colovic, 2002:198). Although she and

<sup>40</sup> Mladen Ivanić (1958) is a Bosnian Serb politician, the leader of the Party of Democratic Progress (PDP) and a former Prime Minister of Republika Srpska (2001-2003).

<sup>41</sup> Živko Radišić (1937) is a retired Bosnian Serb politician, former leader of the Socialist Party (SP) and the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1998-2002)

Dodik soon after became political allies, we can see here another complete change in the discourse on Plavsic, similar to this one in the official media: from a “bad kind of Serb” to a Serbian heroine. In both cases it served to revive the “patriotic” feelings and to judge on other people’s “Serbness”. However, in this case we can also see a change in the use of gender. Plavsic’s gender was not mentioned by Dodik at all; on the contrary, she was equalized with Krajisnik, as a “bad Serb” (in the masculine form: *Srbini*). In the current media discourse, a positive one, supported by Dodik himself, her gender gets more emphasis as we saw in the previous examples.

The special bond between Plavsic and Bosnian Serbs, depicted by Plavsic herself in the autobiographical book as the relation between a mother and her child, is emphasized by the *GS* survey among the citizens of RS about her release. The title of this section in *GS* is *Srpska govori* (“Srpska Speaks”), which should give us an idea that these are the representative opinions for the entire entity. Therefore, it is no wonder that every respondent comes from a different city in the RS: Trebinje, Banja Luka, Istočno Sarajevo, Foča, Doboj, Prijedor, Zvornik. Every one of them, of course, states their personal joy over Biljana Plavsic’s release. They consider her not to be guilty in the first place, but brave enough to persist in defending the dignity of her people. In a typical letter, one contributor wrote:

I always liked her as both professor and a president. And I am glad to see her free. She fought for the interests of her people and carried her cross with honor. Thank God that she is finally free (*GS*, 28 October 2009:2).

As we can see, the most commonly used words are, besides *sloboda* (freedom), related to the newly-established image of “Biljana the Martyr”: *čast* (honor), *dostojanstvo* (dignity), *hrabrost* (bravery). The discourse of her working with the people and for the people is also very visible in this section of *GS*. What we have here is the way of confirming the established opinion on Plavsic by the media through the use of ordinary people’s opinion. Such an

opinion is, however, also highly influenced by the same media, since Plavsic from the break-up with SDS had lost support in certain cities of RS that were pro-Karadzic and the majority of the *GS* survey respondents were from these cities. Plavsic was there considered as a traitor, yet as the political climate changed in general in RS, the opinion of her was apparently also changed due to different media portrayal of her.

As we can see, emotions play an important role in reports of Plavsic's release. *GS* reporters spent a day with her family and noted every moment of her arrival from Sweden: "A bit before she flew away from Sweden, she managed to phone her family. She was extremely excited and said that she is coming in three hours. For her closest ones, those were the longest three hours in their lives". It continues with a conversation with Plavsic's sister-in-law, Vasilija, who claimed that Plavsic is a much better cook than she is: "I will not torment her with my untasty food, but for today, schnitzels in sauce are prepared for her when she comes" (*GS*, 28 October 2009:2). Then the reporters turn to Plavsic's brother, Zdravko, who went to check his sister's apartment to make sure everything was in order. And then finally, "[t]he phone rang, the long awaited information came – Biljana was coming home from the Belgrade airport" (*Ibid.*). The *Nezavisne novine* (*NN*) were also interested in the reactions of her brother a couple of days before her release:

I can't wait to see her as I haven't since the day she was imprisoned. She didn't let me come to visit her because of my health condition. We often talked over the phone and the most important thing is that she feels good (*NN*, 22 October 2009).

Both newspapers were apparently focused on the reaction of those closest to her upon her release. In the *NN*'s article it is also mentioned how she would be able to perform her favorite activities after leaving the prison, such as taking a walk or going to church. All of this is supposed to bring the whole situation much closer to the readers, making them identify with Plavsic's family and religious devotion and evoking big emotions.

Another aspect of this is the restoration of her femininity. Since she is celebrated as a woman who obtained a traditionally male position, she is now to be represented as a family person, a woman who can also cook well and is full of caring for her closest ones. The traditional role of women is not to be neglected despite her presence in the “men’s world” of politics. This is also a response to many attacks on her femininity by her political opponents. Mirjana Markovic, the wife of Slobodan Milosevic, stated in 1993 that Plavsic’s war-mongering was evidence of a hormonal disorder. Marko Vesovic, a writer from Sarajevo, during and after the war called her “the wolf with a vagina” and “Arkan’s bud”, including some other inappropriate terms involving female genitalia<sup>42</sup>. Therefore, *GS* decided to show what they consider as the true and respectable image of Biljana Plavsic – a loving and caring woman, loved by her family, relatives and the nation; not sexualized as in those other discourses. As a divorced woman now living without a male partner, she cannot be seen to be sexual, not to mention that she is older, past the age of properly sexualized females.

Since she first returned to Belgrade and was welcomed there by her family and supporters, the turn was to come to Banja Luka, to the Republika Srpska, when she eventually came back there. Upon her long-awaited arrival in Banja Luka, Plavsic stated her joy and relief that she is a free person after seven years:

I finally became someone who can [visit Banja Luka]. I am still adapting to freedom and it’s both difficult and pleasant period. But finally I obtain no political position and I can live the life I was dreaming about. [...] And you are living in a beautiful city. Not only Banja Luka, but the whole Republika Srpska is being built. I felt that and it helped me survive and come here today (*GS*, 11 November 2009:3).

This was another emphasis on her strong connection with her people, after her autobiography and *GS* articles upon her release. She sacrificed herself for RS and the development of RS

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<sup>42</sup> <http://www.e-novine.com/region/region-tema/46385-Ovo-naa-borba-disanje.html>

gave her strength to persist in her torment, come out of the prison and return where she belongs. The same article informs the readership of Plavsic's visit to the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Banja Luka, "where she prayed and lit the candles" (Ibid.) after visiting her mother's grave. The triangle of religion, gender and nationalism is quite obvious here: Plavsic is represented as a very religious woman, whose acts are therefore in accordance with Orthodoxy; and her visit to the mother's grave is supposed to show her human and family side, something that has been negated by her opponents before.



*Image 3: Snapshot of Biljana Plavsic's interview for the RTRS, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2010*

Biljana Plavsic gave an interview to *RTRS* in January 2010, on the anniversary of the proclamation of Republika Srpska in 1992. The interviewer called her in a female form *predsjednica* and the written title was referring to her as *bivša predsjednica* (former president). The interview was hold in her apartment in Belgrade and while she was talking, in

the background were books and religious icons (image 3). Thus, she is obviously again compared with Christian saints, as her postures and gaze give the impression of her inner peace. The tone of the interviewer was notably calm. The atmosphere was supposed to seem friendly and warm with the reminding of her religiousness and professional accomplishments (university professor of biology). During the interview, Plavsic claimed that she was never thinking about what could happen to her, but only about “the things that matter”, referring to the people. She claimed she would always appreciate moral level of people before nationality, although she considered herself as *velika Srpkinja*<sup>43</sup> (feminine form of “great Serb”), adding that if she knew what SDS leadership was doing, she would never joined them (*RTRS*, 12 January 2010). She continued about the time she spent in The Hague and the feeling of guilt:

We didn’t pass the moral exam during the war. I was telling the truth when I said at first that I was not responsible for war crimes. Later, however, I read many papers and documents, saw many signatures ... It was all lead by the party<sup>44</sup>. Then I realized the truth. The truth was that Serbs were also doing crimes.

Interviewer: You realized that there is something that we should be ashamed of?

Plavsic: Yes.

Interviewer: Being a great believer, how did you face these acknowledgments?

Plavsic: It was hard. I could not understand why Serbs would do something that is not part of their tradition. We went through so many wars and remained honorable and chivalrous. And now, some of us abandoned God, turned their back on our faith. How can someone burn down the mosque? Someone in there is also praying to the God, one God, just like we do. As a religious person, my obligation was to tell the truth. And I would never let my tormented people suffer because of it (*Ibid*, 19 January 2010).

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<sup>43</sup> Not to be confused with *Velika Srbija* (Greater Serbia); *velika Srpkinja* (or *veliki Srbin*, in masculine form) refers to someone who is very patriotic about Serbian nation and very religious.

<sup>44</sup> Referring to the SDS.

As seen in this part of the interview, Plavsic was reviving the story of her sacrifice for the people whose tradition is different from what happened during the war. She understands it as the loss of religious tradition in Serbs, in that way demonstrating the importance of Orthodoxy in Serbian national culture and reclaiming herself as an example for Serbs; being religious and prepared to sacrifice for the higher cause.

In the interview for *NN* in 2011, Plavsic repeated many things she claimed in her autobiography, e.g. about the desire of Bosnian Serb people in 1992 to survive and not to create “some Greater Serbia” she said she never heard of (*NN*, 29 December 2011). Just like in *GS*’s articles, *NN* were also referring to Plavsic as *predsjednica* (feminine form of president), continuing the same pattern that started two years earlier. This gives the notion of continuity in the discourse on Biljana Plavsic in the media from the Republika Srpska. Although *NN* had fewer articles on Plavsic about her release than *GS*, the discourse is similar. The intersection of her gender and traditional patriarchal understandings of nationalists produced the change in the mainstream discourse and constructed a special place in Serbian history for the former president of the Republika Srpska.

Based on Marie Mulholland’s article on decision-making and gender in Northern Ireland, I find it important to see what kind of consequences the discourse on Biljana Plavsic’s self-sacrifice can have in the future. Mulholland, paraphrasing Nancy Fraser, distinguishes affirmative and transformative action:

By affirmative remedies for injustice I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them. By transformative remedies, in contrast, I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework (Mulholland, 2001:176).

This brings us to the question: can the discourse on Biljana Plavsic have transformative action in the relation between gender and nationalism? It is hard to say that the media discourse on this event and Plavsic's self-portrayal can lead to a restructuring of the hierarchical norms in the nationalist mainstream. Certain changes in this framework have been noticed in this analysis: the change in the use of grammatical gender and the acceptance of a woman in a traditionally masculine role. However, this is followed by giving usually masculine virtues to Plavsic and the silent reinforcing of the female role in nationalism (family, cooking). The standardized characteristics of the relations of gender, religion and nationalism were dominant in the media discourse. Though bringing certain new aspects, this case study does not disturb the underlying framework of Serbian nationalism. The importance of Plavsic's role is, on the other side, high since the discourse she encouraged with the autobiographical book set in place a different idea of female roles in the intersection of nationalism and religion: a woman politician who takes the traditional male role and sacrifices herself for the greater cause of her troubled nation.

A particular female form of martyrdom was not supposed to be created as Plavsic was placed into these 'male' roles as a way not to disturb the usual configuration. In the media discourse, she fits in the usual patterns of heroic figures of the Serbian nation, which are predominantly male. Yet it cannot be said that the discourse on Plavsic did not bring some changes in the female constructions in Serb nationalism, never mind how small they may seem. She has been treated differently in respect to her femininity: the mainstream discourse of masculine forms was changed; her release was related to the day of St. Parasheva, a female saint; her femininity and ethnicity was emphasized in order to make links with the tradition; and the discourse was far less sexualized than the ones used before by her opponents. This proves that the different construction of femininity is possible within nationalism as long as there is political need for the changes in the mainstream discourse.



## 4. Conclusion

In my thesis, I argued that the relation of femininity and ethnicity in Bosnian Serb politics can be defined through the nationalist concept of self-sacrifice or martyrdom. My claim derived from the critical discourse analysis of media reports and interviews and from the works of various mentioned authors related to the topics of gender, religion and nationalism. My work consisted of the analysis of nine articles and two short interviews in editions of the two most important dailies in the Republika Srpska, *Glas Srpske* (GS) and *Nezavisne Novine* (NN), as well as one interview for the *RTRS*, the public TV network of the Republika Srpska. The case study was chosen on the basis of my personal knowing about the political situation of the country, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and its ethnic Serb-dominated entity, the Republika Srpska, where I am coming from.

Biljana Plavšić, the vice-president of Republika Srpska (RS) during the Bosnian war (1992-1995) and a president in the aftermath of the conflict (1996-1998), was the case study of my thesis. Being a controversial politician, she started as a right-wing nationalist, switched to a pro-Western stance during her presidency, admitted war crimes against Bosnian Muslims and Croats in the ICTY, and has been referred to as a “traitor“ by right-wing Serb politicians and supporting media. However, in October 2009, after being released from the prison in Sweden, she was welcomed as a national hero by the President of the RS, Milorad Dodik. In the following period, Plavšić got big media attention in RS, giving various interviews and publishing an autobiographical book. Her public image was changed as she was portrayed as a woman who sacrificed herself in the name of boundless love for her suffering people.

The results of the study enable to me to conclude that the concept of martyrdom has been used to give new image of Biljana Plavsic, a woman, politician and war criminal. The media discourse upon her release was in accordance with the image she created herself in the

autobiography *Svedočim*, and continued in the interviews she gave in the following two years. This was done in order to promote Plavsic in the high order of Serbian national heroes in time when other war-time heroes, such as Ratko Mladic, are compromised with war crimes they are accused of and with the long period of hiding that was burdening both Republika Srpska and Serbia. Therefore, Plavsic, as a woman who stood up against Karadzic in 1997 and admitted war crimes in 2002, is placed as a moral vertical and a role-model for other Serbs, male and female. In that way she gives the legitimacy to the compromised war-time institutions of RS affirming the continuity of its existence and a solid defense to any claim against the Republika Srpska and its current authorities.

The gender perspective of this analysis mirrors in the different approach of the media in relation to the construction of femininity in politics and nationalism. Although performing traditionally male roles of politician and martyr for the greater cause, Plavsic's femininity was emphasized by the media in so that she gets accepted as a Serb woman in patriarchal structures and understandings of women's place in the nation. Some might understand that Biljana Plavsic represents an outlier, but I conclude that she is marked as an example of the continuation of the tradition of female self-sacrifice in Serbian nationalism. She does not disturb the standard configuration of the position of women in nationalism, but fits into the traditional pattern of women that both represent and defend their people with love, self-sacrifice and spiritual beauty. The function of that pattern is to embody the nation and its tradition. Plavsic however managed to raise it to another level – that of participating and leading people in national and political struggles. Being someone that embodies the nation, she fulfils the pre-conditions set by patriarchal structures of nationalism and acquires space to perform her femininity in traditionally male roles.

I consider this study to be contributing to the research on women and nationalism in such way that we now may have different perception of Serbian nationalism, its connection to

the Eastern Orthodox religion and the female roles in this intersection. Another important contribution is that this is one of the rare studies relating the Republika Srpska, since practically all previous analysis referred to Croatia, Serbia and the Bosnian Muslim-dominated parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I managed to touch some other topics such as the shifts in the mainstream discourse use of gender forms and the relation between the ICTY and Bosnian population of all ethnicities and religions. I believe that this study will provide the basis for further scholarly research with more material for the analysis of these phenomena.



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