

## Populist Distortion of the Cultural Heritage of Savski Square, Belgrade

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### Résumé

La place Savski à Belgrade est un complexe architectural et urbain créé après la construction de la gare ferroviaire en 1884. Au lieu de revitaliser un quartier pauvre et longtemps négligé, en érigeant un monument surdimensionné à Stefan Nemanja, considéré comme le fondateur de l'État serbe, le populisme néo-traditionaliste a dénaturé l'harmonie et la structure du complexe urbain en introduisant des éléments historiques et idéologiques controversés dans l'aspect et l'esprit du centre-ville de Belgrade.

**Mots-clés:** patrimoine bâti, entité urbaine ambiante, populisme, place Savski, Belgrade

**Keywords:** built heritage, urban ambient entity, populism, Savski Square, Belgrade

Populists are opposing European unity in the Member States and strengthening opposition to European integration in the European Union candidate countries. Populism uses pseudo-historical manipulations to seduce and homogenise public opinion on the idea of a sovereign nation. Manipulations with personalities, ideas, and symbols from the real or fictional past should create beliefs in cultural uniqueness and goals for the future that are rooted in the mythical being of the nation. Distortion of the past has become a means of distorting public urban space such as in the cases of Skopje and Belgrade<sup>1</sup>.

In Belgrade, the foundation of the monument of Stefan Nemanja, considered the founder of the Serbian medieval state, is a populist attempt to revive the Serbian national project from the late 1980s that ended in the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia. The monument was designed in visual and ideological interaction with the Temple of St. Sava, Nemanja's son, the founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The monument was erected on Savski square, in front of the former railway station building. The monument, however, disrupted the architectural harmony of Savski square.

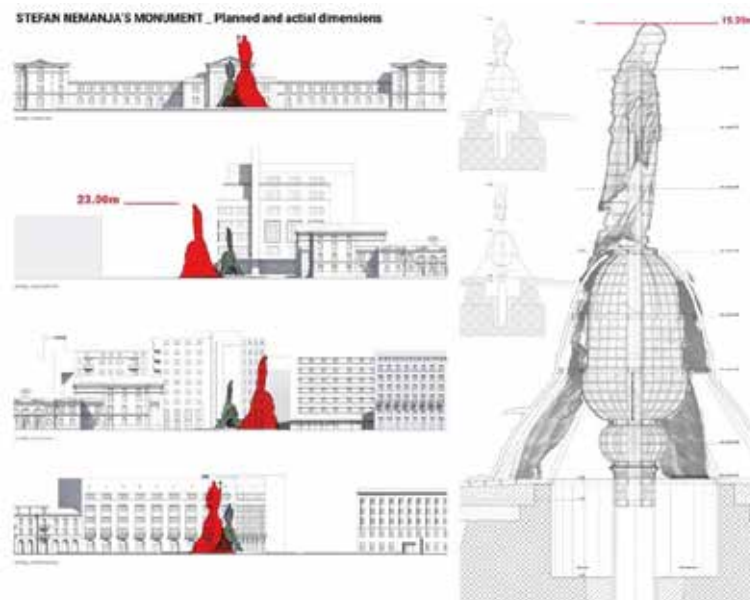
We intended to dissect the populist distortion of the past and urban environment that took place with the foundation of the monument of Stefan Nemanja, and how the forgotten modernist square turned into a quasi-historical post-truth aberration.

### **Savski Square**

Savski square is placed at the edge of Belgrade's central area, within the wider zone of the Sava coast. Its position could be seen as well as an element of the system of squares that belong to Belgrade's central area.

The site began to be used after the construction of the main railway station in 1884<sup>2</sup>.

Its arrangement was generated by the influence of French engineers Alban Chambon, Charles Leroux and Eduard Leger<sup>3</sup>. The square originally emerged as Prince Milos Obrenović sought to develop an independent Serbian part of Belgrade with a strong merchant character<sup>4</sup>. After the establishment of the railway station and until World War I, Savski square was the most important Belgrade hub. In the new kingdom after 1918, this part of Belgrade experienced the first period of degradation and dereliction. After World War II, Savski square was becoming amongst the most degraded parts of Belgrade<sup>5</sup>. The peak of the decay overlapped with the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia and, until recently, the square was considered one of the least desired districts in Belgrade<sup>4</sup>. After 2012, the new political elite began to consider the Sava slope as a lucrative venture, and that resulted in reshaping the urban structure. The most obvious ideological landmark of the new ruling class became the new monument of Stefan Nemanja, oversized, and disturbing the content of the modern square (**Figure 1**).



**Figure 1.** St Nemanja Monument. Planned and actual dimension

The monument of Stefan Nemanja was raised in late 2020 (after the competition in 2017). The distortion of a harmonious, urban unity was brutal and obvious. The sculptor of the monument was Alexander Rukavisnikov, a prominent official artist since the late Soviet era<sup>6</sup>. His choice confirmed the close relations between the Serbian political elite and Moscow. The grand opening of the square with the Stefan Nemanja monument took place on Saint Sava's Day, the 27 January 2021, and the central figure was the president of Serbia.

The populist government established in Serbia in 2012 reflected the weakness of the West and the European Union in South-Eastern Europe. The regime is relying primarily on the regional influences of Russia and its leader, but also matched the stabilitocratic agenda of Germany. Instead of reconstructing the controversial remnants of socialist heritage and the destruction from the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Belgrade has become a landmark of urban distortion, including pseudo-historical memorabilia.

The monument represents the victory over the Byzantine Empire, alluding legitimacy of later Moscow as the Third Rome, thus establishing historical continuity between the founders of the first Serbian medieval dynasty and the forerunner of the first Serbian state and the imperial sphere of influence of modern Russia. The monument is also a representation of the state foundation of the religious cult of Saint Sava. The cult of Saint Sava was a symbol of the liberation movements against the Ottoman Empire. The cult was, however, re-invented in the second half of the 1930s, when Serbian intellectual, political, and clerical circles struggled to adapt to the influences of Italian fascism and German Nazism, implying the penetration of teachings of historicist imperialism or anti-Semitism, also under the influence of Russian tsarist emigration.

The cult of Stefan Nemanja and his son Saint Sava was established based on the Kosovo Covenant, the general memory of the Battle of Kosovo from 1389, and the perished heroes, although little is known about the event, and the Serbs participated in both sides, Ottoman and Christian. The ideological meaning of the Kosovo Covenant was deliberately embedded in official resistance to European integration after the fall of communism in 1989. When the 600 years since the Kosovo battle was celebrated at a monumental gathering in Gazimestan, the president of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević, addressed the gathered crowd with the threat that he would achieve national interests by armed struggle. Also, in 1989 was initiated the construction of the monumental temple of Saint Sava in Belgrade, in neo-Byzantine style, designed in 1935. The monument of his father Stefan Nemanja appears a reinterpretation of such aesthetic representation, as Stefan Nemanja is placed on the symbolic ruin of the same Byzantine Empire.

The latest revival of the cult coincided with the weakness of the West in relations with Russia. The cult established a new spiritual link with the rising Russian world and its idea of a new Russian empire, which inspired the concept of 'Serbian world', a new attempt to unite Serbian ethnic space on the ruins of Yugoslavia. The ideology of the Serbian world of modern Serbian politics, clearly subordinated to the ideology of the Russian world, seizing Kyiv and Ukraine by force, represents Stefan Nemanja as a Russian tsar rather than the founder of the Serbian medieval state. With the appearance of the monument, the Serbian state becomes the Balkan outpost of the Russian empire. Stefan Nemanja was also given a healing function of the recent traumas, as Serbia was clearly defeated during the Yugoslav wars, and Serbian society was isolated, poor, and pessimistic.

In the ultimate symbolic and ideological consequence of the sculptural and ambiantal representation, almost obvious, that the populism of the President of the Russian

Federation is reflected in the populism of Serbian government.

The populist distortion of urban areas and the historical heritage of Belgrade reflects personal, authoritarian political power, the ideological influence of Russia, and the weakness of institutions.

Populism is an autocratic and kleptocratic response to the crisis in European Union foreign and security policy while facing new strategic challenges in relations with Russia. Populism manipulates the real and imaginary past, introducing myths, cults, and historicism, destroying both historical and urban heritage.

The distortion of the past on Savski square began with the erection of the monument to the victims of war and defenders of the fatherland from 1990 to 1999, a silent relativisation of responsibility for war<sup>7</sup>. The monument to Stefan Nemanja is a return to the ideological guidelines from the same decade of 1990-1999, with an aesthetic and ideological reliance on contemporary Russia.

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