[Serbian Nationalists Bring Back Hate Speech](http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbian-nationalists-bring-back-hate-speech%22%20%5Co%20%22serbian-nationalists-bring-back-hate-speech)

Nationalistic rhetoric from officials and ethnic insults in the media have helped encourage Serbian far-right groups to draw up lists of 'traitors' and 'spies'.

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| http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/file/show/Images/Images.New/nemanja/SNP-Nasi-plakati-strani-agenti.jpg |
| Posters that list "foreign agents" were put up by Naši |

January 2013 saw an ominous revival of hate speech in Serbian newspapers and magazines, with Albanians subjected to racist slurs, Croats labelled compulsive thieves and a regional public broadcaster accused of being a front for Zagreb's interests.

Such rhetoric showed that anyone who criticises nationalism now runs the risk of being targeted over their ethnic origin or labelled 'anti-Serb'  – an insult used to denigrate liberals, people with Western attitudes and everyone who in some way opposes the government's ideology.

Fears have been raised that the divisive rhetoric of 1990s Serbia is on the rise again, and right-wing organisation Nasi has already put up posters listing names of 'foreign agents' including media and non-governmental organisations that are, or so they believe, connected with the CIA.

Such groups want the state to launch investigations, file espionage charges and officially label all such organisations receiving international funding as 'foreign agents', mimicking a law introduced in Russia last year that echoed communist-era paranoia by ordering Western-backed NGOs to publicly identify themselves as agents of foreign powers on all their official literature.

The rise of far-right extremism followed the election last year of a new government which contains many officials who formerly served under strongman leader Slobodan Milosevic at a time when nationalist discourse escalated into armed conflict.

The increase in divisive media rhetoric since then has angered local rights campaigners and raised concerns internationally.

Serbia, as a member of the Organisation for Cooperation and Security in Europe, OSCE, has "signed commitments both to promote freedom of expression and to combat intolerance and discrimination", warned the OSCE's  mission to Serbia in a written statement to BIRN.

**Patriotic emotions simmering**

Nationalistic feelings have been stoked by last November's acquittals of Croatian generals Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markac by the Hague Tribunal and the inability of the international community to find an adequate legal response to the war crimes committed during Zagreb's 'Operation Storm' in 1995, when 200,000 Serbs were expelled from Croatia.

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| http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/file/show/Images/Images.New/nemanja/gotovina,%20markac,%20aerodrom.jpg |
| *Gotovina and Markac arriving in Zagreb I Photo by Beta* |

The UN-backed Tribunal's acquittal of Gotovina and Markac of crimes committed during the offensive strengthened the belief among those who were previously undecided that a historic injustice was being inflicted on the Serbian people, while also fuelling conspiracy theories that the international community has an 'anti-Serb' plan for the Balkans.

In the same month as the Hague ruling, the Serbian constitutional court decided not to ban far-right organisations, and both events have emboldened nationalist extremists to step up their campaigns, believes Milan Antonijevic, director of the lawyers' committee for human rights, YUCOM.

"In these campaigns, minorities are presented as enemies, lists of traitors are being made, and this gained momentum at the begining of 2013," Antonijevic told BIRN.

Progress in EU-mediated negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina has also angered many who consider Kosovo to be Serbia's holy land and interpret the talks as another step towards the forcible division of Serbs.

Meanwhile a dispute over the issue of increased autonomy for Serbia's northern Vojvodina region has further annoyed the nationalists, said Sonja Biserko, head of Belgrade’s Helsinki Committee.

On January 14, nationalist activists burned the region's provincial flag in front of the offices of the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina, which has been campaigning for more autonomy – something that right-wingers see as a threat to Serbian unity.

"Extreme groups are the extended arm of the government that wishes to cancel the autonomy of Vojvodina at all costs," Biserko told BIRN.

Far-right activists believe that some media and non-governmental organisations are taking Western cash in order to push policies which are against Serbian interests.

Weekly magazine Pecat on January 18 accused some of the journalists at Vojvodina's public broadcaster RTV of being "anti-Serbian warriors" and a part of a "Croatian lobby" which wants independence for the region.

"Based on insight into the ethnic origin of most of the managers... it is hard to resist the conclusion that the Croatian lobby is responsible for this crime," said the article in the magazine owned by Milorad Vucelic, a former ally of Milosevic.

The OSCE warned such rhetoric could put journalists in danger.

"Hate speech as a direct attack on the right to be and to think differently could jeopardise the safety of those whose names are listed and could potentially endanger the functioning  of RTV," the OSCE said in its statement to BIRN.

The government however has denied any involvement.

"I do not support witch-hunts, wherever they come from, because that brings no good to anyone, " justice minister Nikola Selakovic told B92 this month.

**Racist rants unpunished**

RTV's management has said it will press charges over the Pecat slur.

"The article... openly uses hate speech that is reminiscent of the nationalistic rhetoric of the 1990s," RTV said in a statement.

The Independent Association of Journalists meanwhile warned that such articles "encourage the far right to systematically make lists of unfit media and organisations, accusing them of anti-Serbian acts" and represent a step back towards the rhetoric of the Milosevic era, when people were divided into 'patriots' or 'traitors'.

Antonijevic meanwhile said that although civil society groups had reacted strongly to the incident, "it is notable that there has been no response from the state government".

However, instead of apologising for the racist remarks, the article's author published a series of further pieces using the same kind of language and insisting that "hatred towards Serbs has become a virtue in our society".

Some of the most disturbing examples of recent nationalist rhetoric have been openly racist.

One prominent daily newspaper published a story this month about the arrests of Serbs in Kosovo on Orthodox Christmas Day on January 7 under the headline "Shqiptars Make Arrests for Christmas".

The use of the term 'Shqiptar', in its Serbian version 'Siptar', is a way of mocking Albanians and presenting them as an inferior race to Serbs, in a similar way to how the term 'Ustase' was sometimes used to label Croats as fascists in the Serbian media at the beginning of the 1990s wars.

The tone may not be as hysterical as in the past, but such inflammatory headlines help inspire ethnic hatred, suggested Antonijevic.

"Any cooperation with Albanians is considered to be treason. This has to come to an end because it leaves people with a feeling that they should hate all other nations," he said.

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| http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/file/show/Images/Images.New/nemanja/JSO.jpg |
| Screen shot of the former Serbian interior ministry special operations unit's press announcement |

Even more disturbing rhetoric has emerged online, when people claiming to be members of a notorious Serbian interior ministry special operations unit which was disbanded a decade ago issued a military threat to ethnic Albanians in Kosovo.

"We are calling on patriotic organisations, political parties and individuals to join us in any form of fight, including an armed one, against Albanians," said a statement[published online](http://www.scribd.com/doc/120095564/%D0%A1%D0%B0%D0%BE%D0%BF%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%9A%D0%B5-%D0%88%D0%A1%D0%9E-12-%D1%98%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%83%D0%B0%D1%80-2013) this month.

The authorities again did not condemn the use of hate speech but simply said the letter could not be taken seriously because the unit was defunct.

**Ghosts of the 1990s**

Some official rhetoric meanwhile has echoed racist media discourse.

A cultural adviser to Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic this month accused Croats of being "kleptomaniacs" and petty thieves after the Zagreb authorities launched a huge new monument on the Split-Mostar highway to its version of the Cyrillic alphabet which is seen by many Serbs as part of their national identity.

"They will always steal other people's lighters and glasses from the table," raged presidential adviser Radoslav Pavlovic, a scriptwriter for film, television and theatre, who was also angered by a pronouncement by the Croatian Academy of Sciences claiming Cyrillic as its own country's heritage.

At a sensitive political moment when the nationalist ghosts of the 1990s appear to be reawakening, politicians must temper their rhetoric if they want to avoid damaging relations with Serbia's neighbours and inflaming racist sentiments at home, said Antonijevic.

"Politicians don't have the right to stand up for hatred and spread intolerance," he said.

The OSCE meanwhile insisted that hate speech must be tackled, "particularly in political discourse, while recognising the importance of balancing respect for freedom of expression with the obligation to combat discrimination".