

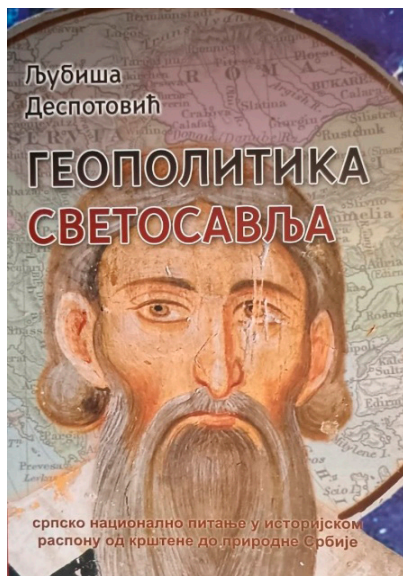
REVIEWS

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Book review

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Dajana Lazarević*
*Institute for Political
Studies, Belgrade*

SOLELY SVETOSAVLJE SAVES THE SERBS



Despotović, Ljubiša. 2025.
Geopolitika Svetosavlja – Srpsko

*nacionalno pitanje u istorijskom
rasponu od krštene do prirodne
Srbije.* Novi Sad: Arhiv Vojvodine;
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378 pp.

In 2019, the first edition of the unique scientific work by Prof. Dr. Ljubiša Despotović, *Geopolitics of Svetosavlje – The Serbian National Question in the Historical Span from Baptized to Natural Serbia* (Despotović 2019a), was published. In 2025, the second and expanded edition appeared (Despotović 2025). Within the Serbian academic community, there is a whole array of scholars dealing with various aspects of geopolitics, but none have studied Serbian Orthodoxy – Svetosavlje¹ – as thoroughly and exclusively as Prof. Dr. Ljubiša Despotović.

Before delving into a deeper analysis of the work itself, it is necessary to explain certain

* E-mail: dajanalazarevic93@gmail.com; ORCID: 0009-0001-2534-450X

¹ Svetosavlje could be translated as: Spirituality in the Saint Sava way.

concepts without which the meaning of this book cannot be adequately understood. First, Despotović does not attempt to glorify the Serbs falsely – Serbian history already contains ample evidence of national rises and falls. The author deals with the geopolitical position of Serbia and the Serbs, the formation of their national identity, language, and faith, the loss of linguistic unity among the Serbs, religious stratification, and the loss of historical territories.

Second, Despotović openly relies on earlier Serbian historical and cultural tradition in his work, adopting terms such as “Baptized Serbia” from the time of King Constantine Bodin and his rule over Bosnia (1081–1101), Duklja, and other Serbian lands (Dimitrijević 2019). This term is especially significant because it merges two identity-defining elements: Serbian and Christian.

It concerns the formation of an original Serbian cultural code (identity) based on the values of the Christian Faith. Therefore, a Serb is a Christian, with all the moral principles Christianity entails, and these concepts are inseparable.

Looking at the bigger picture, we realize that Serbia and the Serbian people are not the only Slavic nation that went through this type of cultural “encoding.” Take, for example, Kievan Rus, the first East Slavic European state, which

accepted Christianity in the 10th century, specifically in the year 988, thanks to Prince Vladimir (in Orthodoxy: Saint Equal-to-the-Apostles Vladimir the Baptizer of Rus) (Velimirović 1988). Adopting Christian values and worldview radically transformed the previously pagan East Slavic, or Russian, people. It can be said that true Russian civilization begins with the reception of the Christian faith and the wise decision of Prince Vladimir the Great.

There are many such examples, and beyond the identification of the Serb with the Christian, the same can be said for the entire Slavic race. Slavs are Christians, and that is an inseparable part of their cultural code, even though, after the Great Schism of the Churches, they experienced a split within their tribal community. Those who, like the Serbs, remained Orthodox have remained deeply and inseparably connected to this day, with the best example being Serbian-Russian relations, which are reflected in the work of Ljubiša Despotović (Despotović 2025, 60–65).

Thirdly, Despotović also refers to the works of his fellow scholars (Milomir Stepić, Petar Milosavljević, Dušan Proroković, Radoslav Gaćinović, Kosta Čavoški, Darko Tanasković, Zoran Petrović Piroćanac, Vasilije Krestić, Milorad Ekmečić, Momčilo Subotić, Zoran

Milošević, and others, including foreign scholars), demonstrating the continuation of a comprehensive academic tradition of researching Serbian national identity, the acquisition or loss of historical territories, as well as the suffering of Serbs throughout history due to various forms of open or covert “clashes” with adversaries.

Among these names, Despotović adopts from Petar Milosavljević, Doctor of Philological Sciences, the concept of “Natural Serbia.” The author Despotović, however, proposes a way to unite Baptized and Natural Serbia through Svetosavlje. However, to avoid the conclusion that such designations of “Serbia” are archaic or utopian, we will focus only on the concept of Svetosavlje, which is indeed the main and incomparable element of Serbian national identity (Despotović 2025, 14–34).

As previously mentioned, the Russian people have their own Prince Vladimir, a saint who transformed people from paganism into Christianity; and the Serbs have their first enlightener, the founder of the Serbian Church, diplomat, writer, father of the state and the nation, Saint Sava. Despotović openly refers to him as the “saint civilizer” (Despotović 2025, 14). As a people, the Serbs existed even before Saint Sava, which is indisputable. However,

their national identity and self-awareness were strengthened through the devoted work of Saint Sava and his Orthodox Christian legacy, known as Svetosavlje. Let us not forget that Svetosavlje is also martyr-like and thus pleasing to God, as it was destined for crucifixion from its inception – between the Byzantine and Roman churches, between the Heavenly and Earthly Kingdoms, and other trials.

Despotović emphasizes the influences of both East and West on Svetosavlje, and they certainly exist. However, the ideal is for Svetosavlje to be “above East and West,” in the words of Saint Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. One of the characteristics of such Svetosavlje is reflected in the folk saying: “A brother is dear, whatever his faith,” which is especially important and necessary to recognize in the “powder keg” that is the Balkans (Đorić 2024).

Correctly understanding Svetosavlje is fundamental to understanding autochauvinism among Serbs, which has gained traction among Serbian people (Damjanac 2015). In certain circles, Svetosavlje is viewed as Serbian fascism (a complete distortion of the idea of Svetosavlje-style nationalism of Saint Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović), which certainly is neither its basis nor its goal. The definitions and

aspects of healthy Svetosavlje are presented in the book by Ljubiša Despotović, which is symbolically divided into two parts: Baptized Serbia and Natural Serbia.

In the section on Baptized Serbia, the geopolitical position of Serbia and the Serbs is analyzed, as well as the aforementioned Serbian autochauvinism; also addressed are security aspects – the clash of Christian and (radically) Islamic powers in the Balkans. In the section on Natural Serbia, linguistic, cultural, and religious elements are examined. However, we see the reformation of the previously mentioned cultural code in which being Serbian was equated with being Christian. With the arrival of the Ottomans in the Balkans, we see the emergence of “Serbs of the Muhammadan faith” (Despotović 2019b). Natural Serbia would encompass even them within its borders; there is awareness that they are Serbs, even though they have adopted a new faith. However, this leads to forming artificial (or, as Despotović terms them, synthetic) nations.

During the dissolution of Titoist Yugoslavia, the Serbs were denounced, demonized, and vilified. We still suffer the consequences to this day, and the burning issues regarding language, culture, historical role, territorial affiliation, and the fateful path of the Serbs remain unresolved.

Widely accepted discourses assure us that Serbia is on the “European path.” Still, it seems that the Western world, of which Europe is undoubtedly a part, is making considerable efforts to fragment even the small territory of Serbia and to convert the Serbs culturally (Milošević and Lazarević 2024).

Despotović shows a gracious light upon the Serbian people, which has preserved them for centuries from all historical hardships, and that is Svetosavlje. Only Svetosavlje has the power to unite Baptized and Natural Serbia, as it represents the foundation of Serbian national identity, the main codifier of culture, and a unique and righteous worldview based on the image and deeds of Saint Sava and the religious tradition inherited from him.

It is important to emphasize that writing and promoting such a work as *The Geopolitics of Svetosavlje* takes great courage. The scholarly apparatus is presented, the ideas and motives are visible from the first sentence, yet there is also a psychological-emotional coloring in this book, courage, and patriotism. These characteristics further enrich the book and bring it closer to a broader audience.

We wholeheartedly recommend the book for reading, wishing our people to remain on the path of Svetosavlje, mutual love, understanding, and truth.

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