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Anti-Cult Narrative and Satanic Moral Panic in Serbia: A Case Study of the "Black Rose" Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the characteristics of anti-cult activism and the local features of the satanic moral panic in the Republic of Serbia and its predecessor states, focusing on the construction of the myth surrounding the satanic cult known as the Black Rose (*Crna ruža*). The first part offers a concise comparison between the satanic moral panic in countries under Western cultural influence (primarily in North America and Western Europe) and the anti-cult narrative in Europe's former socialist states. The second part examines in detail the characteristics and genesis of the anti-cult movement and ideology in Serbia and Yugoslavia. The third part presents a case study of the Black Rose phenomenon. Among other findings, it shows that the claims regarding the existence and destructive activities of the Black Rose cult—and the rhetoric accompanying them—are a typical example of anti-cult discourse, while at the same time serving as the main expression of the satanic panic in Serbia and the former Yugoslavia. Beyond distinguishing unsubstantiated claims from those with a factual basis, this study shows that the Black Rose case displays all the key characteristics of the broader satanic panic narrative, alongside specific features shaped by unique historical circumstances and by the religious-political and cultural traits of Serbia during the transitional, post-Yugoslav period. In doing so, it offers an explanation of which social phenomena may have particularly favored the expansion and subsequent decline of both the fear of satanic cults and general anti-cult sentiment in Serbia and the former Yugoslavia.

KEYWORDS: Black Rose, Moral Panic, Satanism, Anti-Cult Movements, Ritual Crimes, New Religious Movements in Serbia.

Western Satanic Panic vs. Anti-Cult Anxiety in European Countries in Transition

Although scholarship has debated it for decades, the concept of moral panic still does not seem sufficiently recognized and accepted by the wider social community. Indeed, the mere mention of this concept can cause confusion or misunderstanding, even among academics and professionals. Anticipated by Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) as early as 1964 (McLuhan 1964), introduced into sociology by Jock Young (1942–2013) in 1971 (Young 1971a, 1971b), and thoroughly developed by Stanley Cohen (1942–2013) a year later (Cohen 1972), the concept of moral panic refers, in short, to an intense feeling of threat and fear in the population regarding an issue that appears to threaten the social order (Jones

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and Jones 1999). Building on Cohen's conception, Kenneth Thompson identifies the following key features of every moral panic: 1. something or someone is defined as a threat to certain general values or interests of the community; 2. the media depict this threat in an easily recognizable, stereotypical, and sensationalist form; 3. public concern rises sharply; 4. the authorities or those who shape public opinion react; 5. the panic subsides or results in social change (Thompson 1998).

The moral panic regarding the assumed widespread prevalence of Satanism and its socially harmful manifestations, popularly known as the satanic panic, originated in North America at the very beginning of the 1980s, from where it soon spread to Western Europe and other culturally close parts of the Western world (deYoung 2000; Jenkins 1992; La Fontaine 1998). Among the key characteristics of this panic were claims about the exceptionally large scale of satanic cults whose members, for ritual purposes, frequently commit some of the gravest criminal offenses, including murder, rape, sadistic injury, abuse and torture, cannibalism, abduction, and a series of other unlawful acts (Ellis 2000; Frankfurter 2006; Introvigne 2016; Jenkins 2004; Richardson, Best and Bromley 1991; Roleff 2002; Victor 1993). As a consequence, considerable attention was devoted to so-called occult crime in both criminological theory and practice (see Hicks 1991; Lanning 1989; Olson-Raymer 1990).

In the rhetoric of the satanic panic, children were described as some of the most frequent victims of so-called satanic ritual abuse (Beck 2015; deYoung 2004; Nathan and Snedeker 1995), while numerous influential individuals from politics, the economy, popular culture, and other prominent social spheres were named as leaders and prominent members of these assumed cults (Hughes 2021; Laycock 2023; Waterhouse 2023). Although it caused serious controversies and prompted significant social debate while it lasted, the satanic panic is considered to have ceased to be part of mainstream scientific and professional discourse in the West by the mid-1990s, subsequently retreating to the margins of social discussion in that part of the world.

By contrast, the emergence and spread of the satanic panic in Europe's former socialist states had significantly different characteristics. These societies spent the 1980s "behind the Iron Curtain" (which, for most of them, meant a highly limited flow of information and news from the West). In the early 1990s, they experienced a radical divergence between state-promoted atheism on the one hand and a newly emerging religious consciousness on the other, along with a general shift from an

identity largely free of national markers to a frequent emphasis on nationally focused rhetoric and nationalist sentiment. As a result, the societies of the former Eastern Bloc, as well as the former Yugoslavia, developed a specific way of perceiving and reacting to moral panic. While in some areas of life and work the understanding of, and social reaction to, the presumed harmful activities of satanic and other cults generally followed the pattern of Western anti-cult activism (see, for example, the criminological publication by Kholopov 2005), in other social spheres we find an influx of new ideas that were not part of the original template of the "Western" satanic panic. The remainder of this paper focuses on the Republic of Serbia's experience with this social phenomenon.

Anti-Cult Panic in Serbia

Although it shares numerous points of contact with the global phenomenon of anti-satanic hysteria, the satanic and, more broadly, anti-cult moral panic in the Republic of Serbia has significant local features. First and foremost, a noticeable delay in the spread of the contemporary satanic panic is apparent in Serbia and its predecessor states. There are many reasons for this. In many instances, Serbia and Yugoslavia have tended to adopt popular social trends later than other countries. This applies especially to the period before the expansion of the internet, when access to information was incomparably more limited and the globalization processes we know today could not yet fully unfold. Furthermore, isolation from the rest of the Western world, particularly from Western Europe and North America, during the dissolution of the SFR Yugoslavia (civil wars, sanctions, economic crisis, hyperinflation, etc.) also helped to keep Serbia largely untouched by the Western wave of satanic panic.

In fairness, Yugoslav society in the 1980s was not entirely without its own local version of this moral panic. As early as 1988, certain media began to speculate about the destructive activities in Zagreb of an alleged cult (*sekta* in Serbian and Croatian: as with other derivatives of the Latin *secta*, the correct English translation is "cult," not "sect," which in English has a different and less negative meaning). The cult was named the Black Rose (*Crna ruža*) and, according to these reports, was driving young people to suicide (Ladišić 1988; Stanivuković 1988). However, this was a distinctly short-lived and narrowly localized episode of social anxiety that died down very quickly, only to gain full momentum in the following

decade, after the collapse of the state. Another element of this early debate about the alleged satanic cult, and at the same time one of the most unusual explanations for the anxiety surrounding it, is the hypothesis (if not a kind of sub-conspiracy theory within the broader conspiracy theory about the Black Rose) according to which the Yugoslav Counterintelligence Service deliberately spread the Black Rose myth for its own operational purposes (Bebek 2019).

As for the FR Yugoslavia, the first successor to the SFR Yugoslavia, the period of its founding (in 1992) and early existence coincided with the decline of satanic panic propaganda in Western Europe and America. However, in line with the tendency toward delayed adoption of social trends mentioned above (which was common throughout Eastern Europe at that time), the satanic moral panic reached its greatest expansion in Yugoslavia precisely then. The initial trigger for this expansion was, by all accounts, a series of incidents with fatal outcomes occurring close together in time, namely several murders and suicides that were tentatively linked to the activities of destructive religious cults (for example, see Luković 1998, 2000). Following these tragic events, public attention visibly shifted toward crime with occult elements and toward the presumed destructive activities of "religious cults," understood as an all-encompassing, stigmatizing category that includes practically all new religious movements, but also some churches and religious communities that, globally, are not considered new or alternative religions at all. In this process of stigmatization and "Satanization" (whether real or metaphorical), all the typical features of the global anti-cult moral panic could be observed.

A regularity that applies by analogy is the pattern typical of all societies going through crises and transitional periods. In countries undergoing comprehensive social change, the resulting turbulence is, as a rule, reflected on the religious plane as well. Under such conditions, one part of the population tends to show a heightened interest in the spiritual sphere, while another part of the believers shows a decline in religious enthusiasm. In this process, some of the latter, together with a segment of the population that had until then held atheistic convictions, embrace new, alternative religious teachings or other related alternative ideas about spirituality. These conditions create exceptionally fertile ground for the local expansion of religious organizations and spiritual practices that had previously not been widespread in that society.

The crisis that followed the dissolution of the SFR Yugoslavia created fertile ground for the growth of spirituality, which was directed primarily toward the majority Serbian Orthodox Church and toward the other religious groups defined by the Constitution as traditional religious communities. At the same time, conditions also ripened for other forms of spirituality, both in organized religious associations and in individual attraction to different spiritual teachings and systems. In this environment, a spiritual rivalry escalated between "traditional" and "new" religious teachings, accompanied by a tendency to discredit new or alternative religious ideas, both out of genuine conviction about their assumed harmfulness and for quite different, pragmatic motives.

This form of religious intolerance was not limited to non-traditional religious communities but was also directed at larger and more established ones (the Catholic Church, the Islamic Religious Community, etc.), frequently combining national and religious sentiments to discriminate against ethno-religious minorities and to win new believers (Đorđević 1999; Matković 2021a, 2021b). Thus, a distinctive local model of religious moral panic took shape in Serbia. While resting on the general premises of the anti-cult narrative, this model relied heavily on religious-national sentiments stirred up by the civil war. In this process, the "Satanization" of churches and religious communities was applied arbitrarily and indiscriminately, leading, among other things, to the stigmatization of certain churches recognized as traditional under the legal system of the Republic of Serbia. These features therefore emerge as key characteristics of the local spread of the satanic moral panic in the country.

Another important feature of the religious moral panic in Serbia concerns the object of this social anxiety. As shown above, the Western stereotype of the satanic panic relied primarily on allegations of ritual child abuse and on the conspiracy theory of a hereditary, intergenerational, and international conspiracy of Satanists occupying influential positions in society (Frankfurter 2006; Richardson, Best and Bromley 1991; Sakheim and Devine 1992; Victor 1993; Wright 2005). In Serbia and its predecessor states, by contrast, the main concern is the general danger posed by the activities of religious cults, "cult" being, as already noted, the central concept in the discourse of this local moral panic.

On this basis, it can be argued that the main form of the satanic (and, more generally, religious) moral panic in Serbia has the features of a more generalized anti-cult propaganda and activism. This phenomenon thus occupies a somewhat

different position from the claims of the Western satanic panic; its content diverges significantly from foreign hypotheses about satanic ritual abuse, which is a more specific and, in many respects, central component of the global phenomenon. Furthermore, unlike the Western allegations of ritual abuse, the narrative of the domestic satanic panic is dominated by claims of incitement to suicide, which the Black Rose and other hypothetical satanic cults allegedly commit against their followers.

Finally, it is essential to highlight the characteristic that gives the satanic moral panic in Serbia its greatest local uniqueness and distinctive stamp. This is the combination of current socio-political processes with belief in an international satanic conspiracy; such speculations were, as a rule, put forward by laypeople lacking appropriate professional qualifications and expertise. As a result of this ideological combination, a belief emerged in certain social circles in an international political-occultist conspiracy against the Republic of Serbia, orchestrated by Satanists in the top political positions of the most powerful Western nations (especially the USA). The political narrative of an irrational conspiracy of the powerful against Serbia and the Serbian people is thus merged with the equally irrational elements of the anti-satanic narrative, creating a highly specific, if not unique, whole. Consequently, the satanic moral panic in Serbia also takes on the features of a *sui generis* phenomenon.

Case Study: Allegations Concerning the "Black Rose" Cult

The most striking example of the satanic moral panic in Serbia is the myth of the existence and highly destructive activities of a religious cult called the Black Rose. The Black Rose is the name of the presumed main satanic organization in Serbia, to whose operations—and alleged members—numerous crimes have been attributed for decades. The allegations surrounding the Black Rose include most of the standard accusations that form an integral part of the global satanic moral panic. These include: the existence of a worldwide satanic network of which the Black Rose is a part; its highly destructive nature, well-organized structure, and hierarchy; a large membership ready to commit some of the gravest criminal offenses; and the involvement of influential public figures, among others.

All of this makes claims about the Black Rose's existence and malevolent influence the most characteristic local manifestation of this moral panic.

However, as noted earlier, certain specific features can be observed, relating primarily to the destructive and self-destructive activities attributed to its members.

As already mentioned, the first allegations about the existence of the Black Rose date back to the SFR Yugoslavia of the late 1980s, in the Zagreb area, and ran parallel to the development of the "Darkers" (*darkeri*) subculture among Zagreb youth at that time (more precisely, to the media's discovery of its existence). For clarity, this was the local name for a youth subculture associated with the post-punk and gothic rock music scene. Based on the available data, we take the view that the actual beginning of the anti-satanic hysteria in Yugoslavia can be dated to the media exploitation of this subject in several Yugoslav print outlets during 1988. However, the first anxious and negative articles about the "Darkers" appeared at the end of the previous year (Ladišić 1988). The basis for the satanic panic was anxiety about the growing numbers of the "Darkers" subculture and, in particular, about several suicides of Zagreb teenagers who were speculated (with or without basis) to have belonged to the "Darkers" movement (see Ladišić 1988; Miškulin 2019; Stanivuković 1988; Tomić 1990).

The fact that this subculture, the musical genre around which it formed, and its followers were still a novelty within the mainstream culture of the Yugoslav state, and that they were recognizable by a specific ideological outlook, image, and lifestyle, was exploited to create a stigmatizing environment and to spread through the media unverified or deliberately false information about the true nature of this youth movement. In this context, social anxiety peaked with the claims about the existence of the satanic cult called the Black Rose, which was allegedly responsible for driving young people to suicide. During this period, a series of sensationalist (and, as later proven, deliberately fabricated) media reports appeared which, to increase circulation, viewership, or listenership, presented the supposed social danger posed to Yugoslavia by this satanic organization. In the same wave of moral panic, various public figures were accused of belonging to the group, which further increased interest in the subject. All of this led to a palpable rise in social anxiety and to an atmosphere of persecution and lynching, to which teenagers—members of the "Darkers" movement—and other people accused of taking part in these occult activities were exposed. To calm the situation, the police issued an official statement denying the existence of a destructive organization with these characteristics. In line with the general pattern of a moral panic (Cohen

1972; Thompson 1998), interest in the topic declined over time, and the Black Rose story was set aside (Drach 2013; Miškulin 2019).

The same topic resurfaced in the newly formed FR Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Typical newspaper articles described young people gathering in cemeteries in certain towns of Vojvodina, in the north of the country, allegedly accompanied by various forms of socially deviant behavior; this phenomenon was (again without valid verification) attributed to the activities of the Black Rose. In 1993, after incidents in two barracks of the Army of Yugoslavia, the Black Rose story was widely exploited. These were two separate but closely timed cases of mass murders of soldiers committed by young men doing their compulsory military service, who then took their own lives; certain media later declared them, without any valid factual basis, to be members of the Black Rose cult (Švarm 1996). This exploitation of the Black Rose bogeyman continued throughout the 1990s. These allegations were frequently combined with various speculations about presumed criminal activity linked to religious cults in general.

During the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, in line with the model of religious destabilization under wartime and other crisis conditions described above, the story of the satanic cult called the Black Rose gained powerful new momentum. This was probably also helped by the global rise in anti-cult anxiety that marked that year and the approaching turn of the millennium, particularly regarding the activities of millenarian religious communities and various doomsday cults.

The next major escalation of satanic moral panic began in 2002, after two teenagers from Belgrade, students at the same gymnasium, committed suicide in quick succession (A. A. 2002; NIN 2003). Following the legacy of previous waves of satanic panic in Serbia and its predecessor states, the media's aggressive promotion of shocking and usually entirely unsubstantiated allegations received new impetus during this and the following period. In 2003–2004, the media intensively covered damage to tombstones in several cities across Serbia and other acts of vandalism committed by juvenile delinquents, which were also frequently interpreted as the work of the Black Rose or other satanic cults.

In the years that followed, several murders marked by particular cruelty or by the irrationality of their execution (as a rule, owing to the insanity of perpetrators who had a mental illness) were heavily presented in the media as "cultic crimes," and their perpetrators were tentatively labeled "Satanists"—most often, precisely,

members of the Black Rose. Importantly, this discourse shifted to some extent from the media into the judiciary. Indeed, in several court cases, the reasoning of the judgment contained statements explicitly describing the offenses charged against the defendants as ritual crimes, "cultic rituals," or the result of "cult influence" or "satanic inspiration," without any factual basis for such claims (see, for example, case files K. 201/07; 5K. 21/16; K. 24/19). As a general regularity, it can be observed that, to this day, the local manifestation of this moral panic shows a relatively steady tendency in which various extreme incidents (most frequently homicides and suicides) are, according to a well-worn, formulaic pattern, attributed shockingly, sensationally, and without adequate factual support to the activities of satanic cults, and in particular to the Black Rose.

Despite decades of intense social anti-cult propaganda, the existence and operation of an organization called the Black Rose with the stated characteristics has not been proven to this day. Here the fundamental pattern of the global satanic moral panic can be recognized: the absence of evidence for the alleged (most often highly shocking and logically hard to conceive) criminal activities. At the same time, it should be noted that, hypothetically speaking, an organization, or rather an informal group of people gathered under the name Black Rose, could quite conceivably have existed for a certain period before or, even more likely, after the local outbreak of this social anxiety in the late 1980s. However, this circumstance should not, by itself, be interpreted as confirming the accusations unless there is correspondence between the actual group (or groups) and the actions of its members on the one hand, and the allegations made on the other.

Furthermore, once intense social anxiety had emerged, it is entirely realistic to assume that some individuals (primarily young people) may have reacted to the claims of the moral panic in a counterproductive way, taking them precisely as an incentive to form some association, for which the stigmatized—and thus, for young people, particularly attractive—name Black Rose may have been chosen. This could explain the statements of certain young people (assuming, of course, that their claims are true) who on specific occasions declared that they belonged to a community of that name. The discrepancy between their descriptions of the activities of such communities (most often groups of young people united by shared youth interests) and the allegations of criminal activity made against the Black Rose religious cult in anti-cult propaganda is highly conspicuous. In any case, as in the global satanic panic described above, a feedback effect of

emphasizing unsubstantiated allegations of this kind can easily be imagined in Serbia as well; this phenomenon can be explained scientifically through the mechanism of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1949), the looping effect (Hacking 1995), and the phenomenon of ostension (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983).

In short, spreading accusations and urban legends about the Black Rose, instead of suppressing destructive activity for which there is no real confirmation in practice, may produce exactly the opposite result: the emergence of groups and individuals ready to engage in certain legal or illegal activities precisely under the notorious—and therefore alluring—name of the Black Rose, or under the general banner of satanic religious-ideological beliefs. However, even if one or more organizations oriented toward committing certain crimes associated with Satanism did objectively exist, we believe it is unrealistic to expect large-scale operations, a high level of danger to protected social interests, a high degree of organization and structure, or a long existence. The main arguments in support of this view are: the difficulty of concealing serious criminal offenses (especially if they are numerous); the fact that the members of such organizations, according to the parameters described above, would most likely be young people lacking sufficient life experience, with little family and social independence and with limited material resources, capabilities, and scope for action; the frequent shifts of interest and the turbulent, pubertal and post-pubertal changes in attitudes and principles common in this population group; and the like.

Moreover, this is consistent with data presented by members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, according to which satanic delinquent groups in our country are highly local and autochthonous, with no organizational network or central administration coordinating multiple connected communities (Luković 1998, 2000). Hence, the stereotype of a traditional, or rather very long-standing, well-organized, mass, internationally integrated, locally networked and widespread, highly destructive satanic organization called the Black Rose must be characterized as a local form of the unsubstantiated allegations of the satanic moral panic.

An interesting circumstance is the regularity observed in the relationship between the expansion of certain youth and music subcultures on the one hand, and the rise and fall of the narrative about the Black Rose and other satanic cults on the other. Specifically, with regard to heavy metal and its extreme subgenres, during the period of significant popularity of the first wave of extreme metal in

Yugoslavia (which ended in the early 1990s), a certain number of typical offenses with occult elements were recorded (vandalism in cemeteries, satanic graffiti, certain sacrilegious acts against churches, etc.). With the decline in the popularity of metal during the rest of the 1990s, the number of such occult offenses also decreased. However, when its popularity revived around 2000, the number of typical "occult offenses" rose again. Conversely, with a renewed decline of this musical genre (primarily its extreme subgenres), which occurred roughly at the end of the first decade of the 2000s, the number of criminal offenses and misdemeanors with occult features appears to have fallen again (Matković 2016, 2025).

The same regularity is confirmed by identifying the period in which crime with occult elements was most widespread in Serbia. A comparison of cases analyzed in earlier research shows that a large share of criminal acts against religious buildings, religious monuments, and tombstones occurred in the first half of the 2000s (Matković 2016). This period coincides precisely with the local rise in the popularity of black metal, the most radical form of the extreme metal counterculture, some of whose internationally prominent members were associated with identical criminal acts (Introvigne 2016; Matković 2022, 2024; Patterson 2013). If we consider that so-called "satanic dabblers"—that is, teenage Satanists and pseudo-Satanists—are, as a rule, the main group identified as members of alleged destructive cults and, at the same time, used to prove the truth of the satanic panic's claims (Emerson and Syron 1995; Fine and Victor 1994; Langone and Blood 1990; Lowney 2002; Simandl and Naysmith 1988), it is easy to assume that the rise and fall of the moral panic narrative about the Black Rose may have been closely connected with the rise and decline of extreme metal and related subcultures among local youth.

More recently, the frequency of allegations about the Black Rose's activities has declined, along with fewer direct links between specific crimes and the cult's alleged operations. Moreover, the anti-cult narrative occasionally suggests that the Black Rose is no longer active, or at least not active in physical reality, having moved its operations into cyberspace. On the one hand, these trends could reflect an objective awareness of changing social circumstances, specifically the decline in popularity of certain, mostly teenage, groups and subcultural movements whose members are traditionally stigmatized as members of religious cults and are consequently typical targets of accusations of belonging to the Black Rose.

Similarly, growing public awareness (see, for example, the following internet discussions: Reddit 2021, 2023, 2025) of the extreme dubiousness, or even complete impossibility, of a destructive criminal cult operating undetected for decades may also have contributed significantly to the decline of this local form of the satanic panic. On the other hand, one cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the reshaping of the satanic panic narrative in Serbia was influenced to some extent by several studies that explained the phenomenon of religious moral panic in detail on scientific grounds and demystified the real nature of the story of the Black Rose and related presumed satanic cults (Matković 2016, 2021a, 2021b, 2025). In any case, whichever reasons prevail, this shift should be welcomed as a sign that the moral panic narrative is being successfully abandoned, so that fabricated claims and groundless accusations are avoided and attention can be focused on actual crime, as well as on real social problems in the field of freedom of conscience and religion, their abuse, and their violation.

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