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The Banality of State Nationalism: Changing Airport Names in the Balkans

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Abstract

This article focuses on the use of banal nationalism outside of the realm of formal politics. I examine several cases of major airports renaming in the Balkans, aiming to uncover distinctive logic behind the state introduction of nationalism in the ostensibly non-political domain. Based on the intended audience (domestic/international) and the chosen commemorative name (accepted/contested), I uncover two paths to banal nationalism: (1) internationally-oriented nation branding and (2) domestically-oriented memorialization. The analysis shows that the same action of renaming the airport can be normalized and taken for granted as assumed by the banal nationalism literature, or it can remain highly visible and disputed, leading to high-profile "hot" nationalism, indicating the failure of banalization. This article calls for more investigation of nationalism in everyday spaces that are not part of formal state domain and politics.

Keywords: banal nationalism; airports; Balkans; national symbols

The study of nationalism is increasingly interested in nationalism outside the domain of formal politics and the high contention associated with it. Whereas nationalism is prominently studied in the contexts of state formation and conflict, it is now widely recognized that nationalism does not disappear in less tumultuous times (cf. Bonikowski 2016). Originating with the work of Michael Billig (1995), a large literature examines banal encounters with nationalism through routine daily activities and material objects that have underlying nationalist symbolism.[1] Such "invisible" nationalism is used by all states; it affects national identity and identifications of citizens, but only occasionally provokes explicit contestations and mostly passes unnoticed. Naming the country's airports falls into this domain: we are not dealing with formal politics, but politics and state nationalism remain in the background of such actions, while other economic and promotional interests also come into play. Additionally, focusing on airports adds an international dimension to the typically domestic action of nationalist commemorative naming. In this article, I examine cases of the renaming of airports in the Balkans, which allows me to question whether and when such issues enter the domain of high contention and nationalist conflict, often seen as typical for the region.

I focus on the introduction of new nationalist symbols in an environment not commonly identified with a state. Naming the airport is a relatively banal action in itself, but it can provoke heated discussions and contestations; however, my cases will show that this is not necessarily always the case. In the former Yugoslavia, the new states had to engage in high stake nation-building throughout the 1990s, making decisions about highly symbolic issues directly tied to the national identity and the vision of the state and the nation, including the choice of the national anthem, flag, coat of arms, the name of the currency, or even the name of the country. In such a wider context, the

decision about the airport name bears comparatively less symbolic weight. This domain, outside of formal politics, allows more flexibility in the use of nationalism, while it involves a larger array of actors and interests. The analyzed cases exemplify differences in the level of contention triggered by the new names, showing that the same type of banal state action of airport renaming can be perceived as "hot" or "cold" nationalism. Using the available evidence, I aim to understand the cases of commemorative airport renaming as a balance between different state goals, the choice between different priorities, and signaling to domestic and international audiences. Ultimately, I aim to answer the question: When does a commemorative name become a case of banal nationalism, and when does it fail to do so? The chosen cases add complexity to the literature on banal nationalism, revealing underlying considerations and priorities behind a relatively mundane action.

In this article I use banal nationalism as a general framework while recognizing that, in some instances, the renaming triggered highly contentious arguments, leading to hot nationalism. I refer to banal nationalism, acknowledging that state actions analyzed here fall outside the formal political arena, distinguishing between public spaces (broadly defined) and official state institutions. This article contributes to the existing literature by explicitly including an international dimension in the study of banal nationalism. It is commonly assumed that states introduce banal nationalist symbols for their citizens to see and consume, reinforcing their loyalty and identification with the state. Airports analyzed here provide an opportunity to consider international audiences. I stress the distinction between the nationalist symbols for domestic and international consumption. One option is to emphasize domestic memorialization—myth-making and identity-building/reinforcement for the citizens. The other option prioritizes foreign audiences, stressing international promotion and wider economic goals. Thus, this article lies at the intersection of banal nationalism, nation branding, and memory politics, showing how they apply to the practice of nationalist (re) naming.

This article is organized in the following way. I start by presenting the relevant literature on banal nationalism, memory politics, and nation branding, explaining how it connects to the topic of commemorative naming. Then, I discuss the logic behind the state use of nationalism through material culture, focusing on symbolic nationalist naming. I introduce the topic of airport names, explaining why the chosen examples in the former Yugoslavia present a good setting to investigate banal state nationalism. I analyze three instances of airport name changes, placing each case in the wider sociopolitical context of their respective countries, using secondary sources that describe the renaming as well as personal observations to gauge the framing and reception of the change. I conclude by drawing comparisons among the cases and outlining avenues for future research.

Existing Literature

This article examines the state introduction of new nationalist symbols in the public space that is vaguely associated with the state, looking at examples of commemorative renaming of the airports in three countries in the former Yugoslavia. This topic speaks to several areas of nationalism literature that are not often put in conversation with each other. First, I refer to the literature on banal nationalism, which focuses on the state use of nationalism in less visible and contested settings, where repeated use and routine presence of nationalist symbols in daily life project a specific vision of the nation-state, which, over time, gets taken for granted. Second, I engage with the literature on memory politics, focusing especially on memorialization and commemorative naming and renaming and its nationalist dimension. Finally, this article also connects to the literature on nation branding, which studies state activities and the use of nationalist symbols with economic and promotional goals in mind, adapting the tools from the fields of marketing and public relations. Engaging with these literatures highlights different considerations that come into play at the time of commemorative (re)naming, hinting at state choices and priorities.

Scholars of banal nationalism concentrate on the presence and representation of nationalism in everyday life, outside the domain of formal politics; they aim to understand how national identity

and belonging are reproduced on a day-to-day basis, often through banal signifiers. Banal nationalism recognizes the presence of nationalist symbols in the background of all states, often as mundane manifestations that do not provoke much discussion or reflection (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002; Goode 2020; Skey 2009). These banal symbols reinforce a sense of collective identity and belonging for the citizens, which states use to foster attachment and legitimacy, with varied levels of success (cf. Dukalskis and Lee 2020; Goode 2021; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; McGlynn 2020). Nationalism scholars distinguish between focus on the study of the state and the ways in which it "attempts to infuse official nationalistic symbols and practices into everyday life" (banal nationalism), and "how citizens understand and appropriate those efforts," focusing on the agency of ordinary people (everyday nationalism) (Dukalskis and Lee 2020, 1053). Of course, these two sides of "nationalism in settled times" (Bonikowski 2016) are closely related. Simply put, states produce banal nationalism in different forms (for example, material, and performative), which is then "consumed" by their citizens (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008; Goode and Stroup 2015; Hearn and Antonsich 2018; Hopf and Allan 2016; Jones and Merriman 2009; Knott 2015; Merriman and Jones 2017; Vucetic and Hopf 2020). Both production and consumption matter.

The study of material culture and its nationalistic potential is also broadly related to commemorations and memory politics. Pierre Nora (1989) argued about the importance of deliberate work on the creation and maintenance of commemorative spaces (*lieux de mémoire*). The commemorative aspect of national symbols is commonly analyzed in times of change, usually following a regime change because of the implicit need to symbolically break with the past (Bernhard and Kubik 2014). Scholars interested in nationalist commemorations and renaming investigated examples of the creation and destruction of monuments (Forest and Johnson 2011), change of street names (Azaryahu 1997; Azaryahu and Kook 2002; Gill 2005; Palmberger 2012; Palonen 2008; Villamil and Balcells 2021), and even the names of the whole cities (Feldman 2005). The symbols more directly identified with the state were also a subject of study, including the design of banknotes (Raento et al. 2004; Unwin and Hewitt 2001), and symbolic nation-building through flags, coats of arms, and national anthems (Kolstø 2006). This literature is interested in conflicts and contestations around such symbols, especially when different nationalisms and nationalist narratives clash with each other. For example, Jones and Merriman 2009 and Merriman and Jones 2017 focused on contestations between Welsh and English nationalisms over banal issues like road signs, while Torsti 2004 examined separate domains of "history culture" by each ethnonational community in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina, which included language and alphabet use and even banal objects such as tourist guidebooks.

Finally, the topic of renaming airports also relates to the literature on nation branding. This literature lies at the intersection between public relations/marketing and politics/nationalism studies. Nation branding has been defined as a "compendium of discourses and practices aimed at reconstituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms" (Kaneva 2011, 118). Kaneva shows that many studies of nation branding focus on practical aspects; few take a more critical look at the subject. Advocates for nation branding present this practice as historically rooted (Olins 2002), an additional tool for public diplomacy (van Ham 2008), and an antidote for nationalism (van Ham 2001). The goals of nation branding are primarily economic and promotional: making a country an attractive traveling destination and the preferred choice for foreign investors, even if that involves using stereotypes (Aronczyk 2013; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Kaneva and Popescu 2011). It is usually assumed that nation branding is externally oriented towards foreign audiences (Aronczyk 2013; Kaneva 2011; Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016; but see Bolin and Ståhlberg 2023 on new insights on domestic audiences based on the case of Ukraine). Given that the cases of airports analyzed in this article have a clear link to the foreign public, as well as the economic and promotional side, this literature should be considered when examining state decisions about renaming major airports.

In this article, banal nationalism provides a general framework for the analysis (we are dealing with state use of nationalism outside of the official political arena), while memory politics and

nation branding explain two sets of underlying considerations that come into play when deciding on renaming.

State and Banal Nationalism

Airport names provide a good example to study the use of banal nationalism. Airport names are visible and noticeable by the larger public (primarily, travelers) but they are not automatically perceived as a state domain, especially in comparison to other symbols that can be automatically linked to a state (such as national flags or anthems). While states play a role in naming airports, these names are not seen as issues that primarily concern the state, which fits the purview of banal nationalism. Next, adding commemorative names to existing airports clearly connects to the domain of memory politics: chosen names should be symbolic and worth memorialization. Finally, renaming a major airport is an action that falls into the domain of promotional management and branding. Airports play a special role: they bring in foreign travelers and tourists, and for many of them they provide the first glance at the country, signaling that economic and promotional dimensions also come into play.

In this article, I am interested in investigating the possible logic behind state involvement in commemorative naming in the first place, while keeping in mind the fact that other actors and interests also play a role in such actions. More directly, I am interested in investigating under which circumstances a new commemorative name becomes an example of banal nationalism, and under which conditions it does not. The act of renaming has political, economic, promotional, and symbolic values attached to it. Any state facing the choice of renaming a visible public object would have to consider the risks and opportunities associated with the chosen name. Opportunities can include higher visibility and name recognition, while simultaneously communicating the specific story behind the name, providing opportunities for national promotion, and reinforcing the importance of the chosen "national hero." The risks include a possible backlash (signaling the choice of a contested nationalist symbol) or a simple lack of recognizability of the commemorated figure (leading to a lack of positive engagement with the name and a missed opportunity for visibility and promotion). Ultimately, deciding on commemorative names is an act of balancing between different interests, accounting both for domestic and international audiences. By making a choice, some elements will be prioritized over others. Finally, the new name will enter the public space where it will be used. The name might provoke contestation (ending with hot nationalism), or it can end up being routinely used without much reflection (ending with banal nationalism). I summarize this logic in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Logic of Banal State Nationalism.

Memory politics comes into play through the choice of commemorative names to serve the role of national symbol. Nationalism concerns choices regarding remembering and forgetting (Anderson [1983] 2006; Renan [1882] 2011); national symbols that are invoked as worthy of remembering are meaningful to domestic audiences, and their choice reveals specific values and narratives that political elites aim to preserve. I assume that a commemorative name will be meaningful for domestic audience. However, a chosen name can be problematic in cases where it triggers contestation and conflict around it, pushing contested cases of memorialization into the area of hot nationalism. On the opposite side, the name can relatively easily fit the general patterns of memorialization efforts in a country, ending up being accepted and used without much discussion or reflection, thus becoming an example of banal nationalism. We also have to consider the audience that will be exposed to the new name. International airports are interesting cases since, unlike most actions of commemorative renaming analyzed in the literature, they are clearly visible to foreign visitors, not merely the domestic public. Therefore, one should consider whether international audiences will make sense of the renaming effort (the name could simply not be meaningful to foreigners) and whether the chosen name might create international backlash, dispute, or confusion.

Figure 1 considers two aspects of nationalist renaming: (1) whether the chosen name unproblematically complements existing commemorative patterns or whether it provokes disputes— memorialization efforts can be seen as accepted or disputed— and (2) whether the commemorative name is recognizable/meaningful to an international audience or (only) the domestic public. This leads to several possible outcomes. First, the chosen national symbol can be recognizable for an international audience, and noncontroversial, which indicates the successful use of banal nationalism for nation branding. Second, the chosen commemorative name can be internationally recognizable but contested, leading to international controversy due to the use of disputed nationalist symbols. A state facing international contestation has a pressing need to justify the choice of the contested symbol while asserting its place in the international arena and getting support for the contested symbol internally. This is clearly a case of hot nationalism. Third, the commemorative name can illustrate the case of successful domestic memorialization, where the chosen nationalist symbol is primarily legible for domestic audiences that accept it without much contestation, while the commemorative name remains mostly unintelligible for foreign audiences. This is the case of successful domestic memorialization. Finally, there is a possibility of domestically contested memorialization, which refers to the use of internally contested nationalist symbols. I expect that such naming attempts will most likely end up being abandoned due to the lack of widespread popular support and unclear benefits.

The successful cases outlined above would result in banal nationalism through the acceptance of a new commemorative name and its use without further deliberation or reflection. Among these cases, internationally recognizable symbols would provide additional value through international promotion. The contested case shows clear tradeoffs: commemorative names can be recognizable, possibly even domestically accepted, but still create disputes and problems for the state that tries to use such contested names. In other words, international disputes would necessarily test the legitimacy of the current regime rather than improve it. Unsettled nationalist symbols will lead to hot nationalism, and states using contested commemorative names will be pushed in the area of nation-building, and explaining and justifying the importance and appropriateness of the chosen name. The examples presented in this article show two paths to successful state use of banal nationalism: domestically-oriented memorialization and internationally-oriented nation branding. Furthermore, I show that challenges to banal nationalism can be domestic and international. Distinguishing between the domestic and international public that accepts, challenges, or ignores state use of symbolic nationalism adds a new dimension to the study of banal nationalism, commemorative politics, and nationalist naming.

Nationalism and Airport Names in the Balkans

Naming airports is not something that is necessarily seen as a matter of contentious politics.[2] Airports and air travel more broadly are seen as a convenient way to communicate and promote national identity using visual tropes (often) relying on stereotypes (cf. Subotić 2018; Enloe [1989] 2000). While airport names can include a commemorative name of a person, from the position of aero transport, the important thing is the official IATA code for the airport, which is usually tied to the airport location, other naming aspects are irrelevant.[3] Many airports don't use eponyms; among those that do, they tend to refer to historical figures related to politics, science, and culture.[4] In the former Yugoslavia, airports were named using geographical toponyms related to their location. These names were practical and did not bear any larger symbolic meaning, nationalist or otherwise. Following the breakup of the country in the early 1990s, each of the new states embarked on the process of nation-building, including the creation of new state symbols (such as the adoption of new national flags, anthems, currencies, etc.). These state symbols were deliberately chosen to reinforce new ethnic visions of the national identity and to facilitate the building of new ethnic nations (cf. Kolstø 2014).[5] Renaming public objects and places (including streets, schools, or even whole towns) was pursued throughout the region, reflecting the larger trend of removing the names associated with former communist regimes in Central and Eastern European countries, but also including the nationalist dimension tied to the breakup of Yugoslavia (Azaryahu 1997; Gill 2005; Palmberger 2012; Palonen 2008; Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu 2017). Airports in this region escaped the renaming frenzy since their names did not carry problematic political or national connotations.

Yet, in the 2000s, several major airports in the region received commemorative names; given the formal significance and the ownership structure of the airports, in all cases the name change was formally approved by the respective state government.[6] First, in February 2006, the Belgrade airport Surčin (named by the municipality Surčin, a part of the city of Belgrade where the airport is located) changed its name to Nikola Tesla. In December of the same year, Skopje airport was renamed Alexander the Great, further highlighting already contentious relations with Greece centered on national identity, legacies, and collective belonging. Finally, in 2016, the Zagreb airport Pleso (named after the location of the airport) was officially renamed commemorating the first Croatian president, Franjo Tuđman. These name changes created an interesting puzzle. Given the timing of the changes, it is far from clear why such changes occurred and what their purpose was. To understand the logic behind the name changes, I examine how each change was framed by the media and who the intended audiences were; in particular, whether those were primarily domestic or international. I focus my attention on the visibility and contentious potential of these changes. Tracing the name changes, their timing, responses, and the arguments they provoked, I seek to understand the ways in which banal state nationalism is used in these cases, resulting in hot or banal nationalism. In other words, I aim to understand why states that worked to consolidate their identity since the early 1990s using nation-building policies initiated these changes after an intense initial phase of nation-building was over. Why bother with them at all?

Note on Methodology

This article takes an inductive approach.[7] The idea for this project came gradually as I was traveling across former Yugoslavia (privately and for fieldwork purposes). Being tuned in to notice the use of nationalist symbols, I first observed the changes at the airports that were more or less visible to the travelers, so some of them could hardly be missed while others were positioned in the background. Starting from these initial observations, I tracked the formal timings of the name changes and searched for the news communicating it to the public (at the time), trying to understand how these relatively unexpected changes were explained and justified. Relying on public announcements and the framing of the renaming at the time it was happening, as well as their current visibility, I worked to understand the underlying logic, the opportunities they provided, and the risks they created.

The three cases were chosen based on my direct experiences of visiting these airports after renaming and witnessing first-hand how the name changes were implemented in practice, such as visibility in the display and use of the new names. These cases inspired me to try to make sense of nationalist renaming, especially given that the successful use of banal nationalism is often implicit, insinuated, and unnoticed (Fox and Van Ginderachter 2018; Hearn and Antonsich 2018). The analysis of the procedure for name changes in chosen cases confirmed this: airport names were not publicly discussed in the parliaments (or other political arenas) prior to the change; rather, they were announced as already-made formal government decisions.

During the research for this article, I also became aware of other cases of commemorative airport name changes in the region that seem to follow a similar logic. I do not analyze them in-depth in this article but they are briefly summarized (and possibly left for more detailed research in the future). I was also reminded of an unsuccessful attempt at the name change of Sarajevo Airport in 2005 to commemorate Alija Izetbegović, the first president of an independent Bosnia and Herzegovina and a Bosniak political leader. This decision was suspended by the Office of High Representative with an explanation that "it will not contribute to the reconciliation process."[8] This aborted case of airport renaming can be classified as "domestically contested memorialization" in the scheme presented above (Figure 1); it was clearly a matter of contentious and highly visible hot domestic politics.

I also acknowledge the use of interpretive methods to confront the lack of direct evidence that would allow me to undeniably conclude what was the state logic behind the changes: there are no officially available data on internal discussions within each government that led to the name changes.[9] Therefore, whereas we know that state officials were involved in airport renaming, we do not have direct evidence explaining how the renaming decision was made: state agency remains hidden. My remarks about "state logic" in this article should be considered keeping this in mind. Most literature on banal nationalism implicitly or explicitly recognizes this "evidence problem" (cf. Fox and Van Ginderachter 2018, 547). Instead, I rely on indirect evidence, placing each case of airport renaming in the larger sociopolitical context. I also take into consideration how each new commemorative name is "used": whether it was/is visibly displayed and advertised, and how. I should add that I did not focus on the reception of the new names by ordinary citizens, given my focus on the emergence and use of banal state nationalism and the rationale behind the introduction of the commemorative airport names. However, to gauge general popular reception, I occasionally refer to the popularity of chosen nationalist symbols using the available national surveys conducted in these states.

Belgrade Airport: Nikola Tesla

According to information on the Belgrade Airport webpage, the origins of the airport date back to 1910 (initially for military purposes), with commercial flights having operated since 1923.[10] The Belgrade airport has been at its current location since 1962; it was seen as a regional hub in southeastern Europe until the breakup of Yugoslavia and the international sanctions imposed on Serbia throughout the 1990s (cf. Subotić 2018). Such a situation, including the introduction of visa traveling requirements, severely limited international traveling, curtailing the importance and development of the airport. In the 1990s, Serbia was an internationally isolated country ruled by Slobodan Milošević's regime that pushed the country into several conflicts, while consolidating his power internally using Serbian ethnic nationalism and politicization of culture, among other things (Gordy 1999). The democratic changes occurred only after the overthrow of Milošević in October 2000, leading to a gradual opening of the country, signaling the end of political isolation and opening to the world. Serbia's dealing with the past after the democratic changes was contentious and questions of collective guilt and responsibility, as well as national heroes, remain unsettled (cf. Gordy 2013).

In February 2006, it was announced that Belgrade Airport was permitted by the Government of Serbia to change its name to Nikola Tesla, with the explanation that this was one of the activities

commemorating 150 years since Tesla's birth.[11] The choice of the name can be seen as surprising. Nikola Tesla is a globally recognizable name: he was an internationally renowned inventor and mechanical engineer, best known for his contributions in designing modern alternating current electricity systems. He was born in 1856 into an ethnic Serb family in the territory of the Austrian Empire, in modern-day Croatia. Despite being an ethnic Serb, Tesla never lived in Serbia; he moved around the Austrian Empire, eventually ending up in the United States, where he lived most of his life. However, Tesla was not an unknown figure in Serbia or the former Yugoslavia more broadly. He was recognized and celebrated for his scientific successes. His name was used to name schools and streets around the country; the Nikola Tesla Museum in Belgrade was established in 1955[12] and his statues were erected in different towns across Yugoslavia. Most significantly for the domain of banal nationalism, his face was used on official currency: in communist Yugoslavia, Tesla's statue was on 500 dinar banknotes, and in Serbia today his face is reproduced on 100 dinar banknotes. He is recognized and celebrated in Serbia, despite the fact that his connections with Serbia (apart from his shared ethnic identity of being a Serb) are tenuous. Therefore, he cannot be seen as a central national figure in Serbia, regardless of generally positive connotations. Croatia also commemorates Nikola Tesla, presenting him as a Croatian-American of Serb origin—the memorial center in the village where Tesla was born opened in 2006.[13] One could imagine that renaming the airport Nikola Tesla could have provoked some contention, possibly coming from the neighboring Croatia where Tesla was born. However, this did not happen, and the news of renaming was presented in a matter-of-fact way without drawing nationalistic connotations. At the time of renaming, the Serbian government was headed by Vojislav Koštunica (the Democratic Party of Serbia), and the choice was presented as non-controversial. After the period of intense use of ethno-nationalism in the 1990s, often drawing symbolic nationalistic references from the Serbian medieval kingdom and the Orthodox Church, the commemoration of Tesla can be seen as a shift indicating a new symbolic direction for Serbia—less contentious and confrontational towards the West.

What is the underlying logic behind this change? The name Nikola Tesla is internationally known (indicating possible orientation to international audience/travelers), and his figure cannot be associated with the belligerent Serbian ethnonationalism of the 1990s. For a country looking for a new positive and recognizable national symbol after the isolating period of the 1990s, Tesla would be a good choice: a globally known scientist and inventor who is a fellow Serb, untainted by the aggressive nationalism of the 1990s.[14] Furthermore, the name and image of Nikola Tesla are familiar to the general population and their use can also be seen as a sign of continuity in memorialization, given that his name was also commemorated during the period of communism, but without communist ideological connotations that tainted many other symbols from that period. At the time of big political changes, Tesla as a national symbol can be seen as a great example of banal nationalism: it is recognizable, it preserves existing commemorative patterns, and it does not provoke antagonism or even much reflection.

Nation branding refers to the "commodification of the nation" (Aronczyk 2013), and using Tesla's image as a brand is clearly visible in this case. When traveling through Belgrade's airport, I could easily notice Tesla's image used as a logo on all Air Serbia's planes (Figure 2). During the flight, the cabin crew distributed the printed menu (both in Serbian and English languages), which claimed to be inspired by Tesla's favorite dishes, connecting food both to Nikola Tesla and to Serbia (Figure 3). Such evidence again points to the international audience and the goal of presenting Serbia in a positive light with an explicit connection between the country and a famous scientist. Additionally, one could note the importance of Tesla's name for Belgrade's airport when examining more recent news about a decision regarding the concession for managing the Belgrade airport in 2018. The new operator of the airport, Vinci Airports, dropped the name of Nikola Tesla from the airport logo, prompting media reassurance that the airport hadn't changed the name, despite the new logo.[15] It is difficult to unambiguously conclude what led the Belgrade Airport and the Government of Serbia to choose Nikola Tesla for its commemorative name: we don't have access to closed-door deliberation behind this choice. However, the available evidence points to the logic of

Figure 2. Nikola Tesla's Image on the Air Serbia Airplane, Belgrade Airport (January 2022).

nation branding: choosing a familiar figure without obvious negative associations and using the new name as a brand and figure as a logo (Figure 2) to promote the country, primarily to international travelers, while keeping the positive connotations for domestic travelers and the local public. We could speculate that if Serbia wanted to improve state legitimacy, indicating a break with isolating ethnonationalism of the Milošević era, nation branding using the name and image of Nikola Tesla would be a good strategy: Tesla would not be perceived negatively, and its recognizability would help country internationally. This is what seems to be happening in Belgrade: the airport is commonly referred to as Nikola Tesla Airport, and his image is on display for international travelers who might learn for the first time about Tesla's connection to Serbia, possibly improving the state image in the process (though this would be hard to unambiguously conclude based on the available evidence presented here).

As a shadow case that follows the same logic, one could mention another airport in the former Yugoslavia: St. Paul the Apostle in Ohrid, North Macedonia. Similar to the figure of Nikola Tesla, there are no immediate negative connotations regarding St Paul, though his connections with Ohrid are tenuous, and ethnic connotations do not make sense. It seems that the name aims to refer to the importance of Ohrid for the spread of Christianity in the Balkans in the early Middle Ages and tourist promotion.

Figure 3. Lunch Menu on Board of Air Serbia Flight from Belgrade to New York (January 2022).
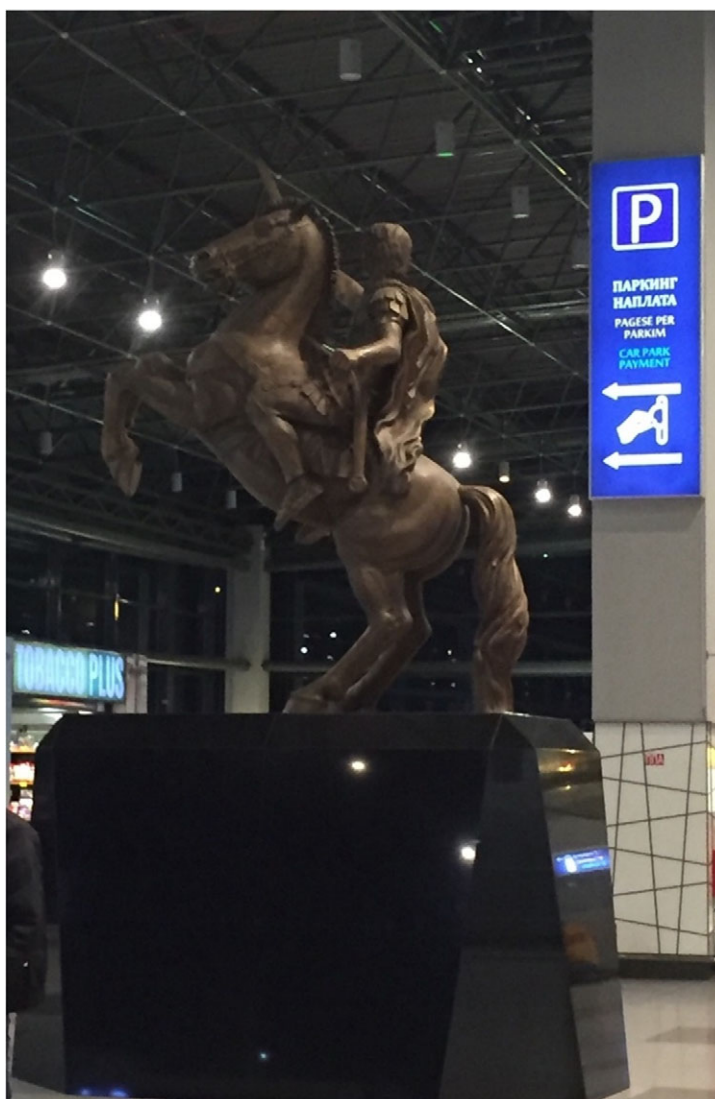
Skopje Airport: Alexander the Great

The commemorative name of the airport does not necessarily have to be a domain of banal nationalism and tourist promotion; the case of Skopje airport shows that the airport name can be tied to high-stakes politics. The airport in Skopje was initially built in 1928, with Yugoslav carrier Aeroput introducing the first domestic flights to Belgrade and, later, international ones as well. It functioned as a regional airport until the breakup of Yugoslavia, and it continued to function after Macedonian independence as the main airport in the new country. Macedonia did not have

experience of political independence prior to 1991, since its territory was at different times incorporated in different larger states and empires. After independence, the new state faced immediate challenges of state and nation-building, further complicated by internal ethnic diversity and problematic relations with neighboring countries.[16] In particular, Greece officially challenged the name choice for the new country, claiming that it signaled a threat to Greece and its identity, especially its northern province, also called Macedonia (see Armakolas and Siakas 2022 for an overview of the dispute seen from the Greek side). This was relatively unexpected for Macedonians: within Yugoslavia's federal structure, Macedonia was used as the name since 1945, and the name was not perceived as controversial. The dispute complicated Macedonia's international standing, worsened its economic and political positions, and created additional uneasiness over the identity of the country. The naming issue was settled provisionally through the use of the acronym FYROM (the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), and it was finally settled only in 2018 with the signing of the Prespa Agreement. As a consequence, state nationalism, the politics of naming, commemorations, and their symbolic connotations were matters of hot politics right from the start of Macedonian independence.

Initially, Skopje Airport was not a part of the dispute. The eventual renaming of the airport in 2006 to commemorate Alexander the Great can be seen as a convergence of two processes: a search for collective identity and the nation-building that was occurring in all successor states of former Yugoslavia (cf. Kolstø 2014, and especially Risteski and Hysa 2014) and a prolonged international dispute with Greece over the name of the country with clear costs for Macedonia (for example, Greece vetoed its aspiring NATO membership and blocked its EU accession negotiations, creating collective frustrations). The renaming of the airport was part of a much larger nation-building project, centred on primordial claims of national origins tied to ancient Macedonia and Alexander the Great (cf. Vangeli 2011; Vangelov 2017; 2019). Immediately after independence, there were some attempts in Macedonia to use symbols associated with ancient Macedonia (for example, the use of the "Star of Vergina" on the national flag, cf. Risteski and Hysa 2014) that were immediately denounced by neighboring Greece; however, avoiding the use of "ancient" symbols did not lead to warmer relations with Greece.[17] The official turn towards the "antiquization" of Macedonian national identity followed the electoral victory for the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE in 2006 and is directly tied to its leader and prime minister Nikola Gruevski. It was clear that such a project was openly hostile to Greece (see, for example, Smith 2011) but it also created divisions among ethnic Macedonians and estranged other ethnic groups in the country, especially Albanians. To assert this new narrative of ancient national origin, the Macedonian government initiated a project named "Skopje 2014" and focused on commemorative activities of renaming (including the main highway "Alexander the Great," the main sports stadium "National Arena Philip II," streets, and buildings to commemorate ancient "national heroes"; cf. Vangelov 2019, 11) and material culture (erecting colossal statues, fountains, buildings, and fixing facades of the existing buildings to reflect the "classical" style). The project "Skopje 2014" was a top government priority (Stefoska and Stojanov 2017) and was highly disputed from the start. Renaming the airport to commemorate Alexander the Great was a part of this larger trend.

The renaming of the Skopje airport was never an issue of banal nationalism: the name was clearly tied to symbolic nation-building and identity claims at the highest level. Alexander the Great is a widely known historical figure and his name—especially the Macedonian version, *Aleksandar Makedonski* (Alexander the Macedon)—has an instant connotation with Macedonia. However, Alexander the Great is a Hellenic figure and it is obvious that the choice of a new name would further worsen relations with Greece.[18] At the same time, the turn towards antiquity was justified with nation branding goals of attracting tourists and investors, as "an investment in Macedonia's international recognizability and competitiveness in a global marketplace" (Graan 2013, 161; Vangeli 2011).[19] Unsurprisingly, the change of the airport name caused immediate negative reactions in Greece.[20] The nation-building project around the antiquization of Macedonia was highly visible, especially in the capital, Skopje, including the airport. One of the central public

structures built as a part of the project "Skopje 2014" was a massive fountain in the main square, with the figure of Alexander the Great on horseback towering above the square and the surrounding buildings. A smaller replica of the statue was erected at the passenger terminal of the renamed airport, which also looked too big, given the size of the terminal, and was impossible to miss (Figure 4). Even though the official deliberation behind the change of airport name is not publicly available, it is safe to conclude that the renaming was a part of the larger nation-building process, which was highly disputed; it was never seen as a matter of banal nationalism and everyday politics, domestically or internationally. The domestic opponents to the antiquization and "Skopje 2014" project (that the airport was essentially a part of) pointed out high costs, the promotion of a monoethnic narrative in an ethnically diverse country, deliberate antagonization of neighboring Greece, the imposition of the project without public consultation, and its kitschy execution (Graan 2013, 163). The supporters of the project saw it as a way to assert one's place in the world

Figure 4. Statue of Alexander the Great at the Skopje Airport (Summer 2016).

demonstrating Macedonia's historical continuity since antiquity, and praised the makeover of the city. Occasionally mentioned nation branding and tourist promotion were clearly overshadowed by the nation-building controversy. The Greek side was unwilling to accept a name that commemorated a figure they saw as exclusively Greek, seeing renaming as a clear provocation, leading to international contestation (Armakolas and Siakas 2022). The resolution came only recently in the course of the Greek-Macedonian negotiations over the name issue, where the renouncing of the airport name Alexander the Great was presented as a sign of goodwill for the resolution of a long-term international name dispute. The airport named Alexander the Great finally changed its name back to Skopje Airport in February 2018.[21] The final settlement of the name dispute followed shortly with the country changing its constitutional name to the Republic of North Macedonia. The renaming of Skopje Airport was ultimately unsuccessful: the chosen name was contested domestically and internationally, and it never got to be taken for granted. Independently of whether we focus on the occasionally used rationale of nation branding for international visibility and promotion or the wider goal of nation-building, the name of Alexander the Great remained in the domain of hot nationalist politics. This example signals how contestation does not go together with banal nationalism.

One comparable case of internationally disputed commemorative airport naming can be found in respect of the Pristina Airport in Kosovo, which, in 2010, was renamed Adem Jashari. Jashari is considered the founder of the Kosovo Liberation Army and a hero for ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, while Serbian authorities consider him a terrorist. One could imagine that any normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo would have to address the naming of the main Kosovo airport to commemorate such a controversial figure: it is hard to imagine that this name would ever become a matter of banal politics in Serbia-Kosovo relations.

Zagreb Airport: Franjo Tuđman

In Zagreb, airfields had existed since the early 20th century, and the Yugoslav carrier Aeroput had operated commercial flights since 1928. The airport moved to its current location in 1962. It continued functioning after Croatian independence, gradually increasing the number of passengers, and also serving as a UN hub during the war in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina. Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. Franjo Tuđman was the first president and the leader of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and played a key role in the process of state and nation-building (Đurašković 2016; Pavlaković 2014). The Croatian nation-building process sought to distance Croatia from its Yugoslavian past while insisting on the continuity of the Croatian nation going back to the Middle Ages and the unity of all ethnic Croats, dismissing the existing ideological divisions among Croats to foster national reconciliation. Insisting on new ethno-national myths, the memorialization of new national heroes, the creation of new public holidays, and renaming public spaces were all parts of the symbolic nation-building occurring throughout the 1990s (Pavlaković 2014). It is widely recognized that Tuđman built his legacy around the struggle for Croatian independence, disregarding more contested and violent aspects of this process (2014, 37). The modern Croatian state founding myth is thus closely intertwined with Tuđman and his role as the "father of the nation."

The Zagreb airport did not get the commemorative name until the early 21st century, and the name change was tied to a planned major upgrade and expansion of the airport. The name change of the Zagreb airport to the Airport Franjo Tuđman was formally announced in February 2016. According to news sources and the timeline, this was an initiative originating from the Social-Democratic government led by Zoran Milanović (therefore, the initiative did not originate from Tuđman's own political party, HDZ).[22] The initiative had broad support among the population in Croatia across the political spectrum.[23] The new terminal opened in March 2017, marking a makeover of the airport building, displaying the new name above the main entrance (Figure 5); however, the name is not visibly displayed elsewhere around the airport.

Figure 5. Zagreb Airport Building Displaying New Name (Summer 2023).

The choice of the name can be seen as controversial for some, including the Serb minority in the country. However, using Tuđman's name for commemorative purposes has been common throughout Croatia, even when facing protests.[24] The first Croatian president was a controversial figure, and his positive legacy tied to Croatian independence can be disputed once one takes into account the role of Croatia in the 1990s regional conflicts and his authoritarian tendencies in domestic politics (see, for example, Milekic 2019; Traynor 1999). However, within the country, he is commonly presented as a founding father of modern independent Croatia and a great statesman of undisputed historical importance.[25] One can conclude that there is a clear contentious potential in renaming the airport to commemorate the first Croatian president but such a contention is dulled by the fact that renaming the airport followed a larger trend of renaming different public spaces and material objects (bridges, parks, streets, squares, schools, etc.) to commemorate Franjo Tuđman around Croatia, revealing the centrality that his figure has as a national symbol in Croatia.[26] Additionally, for the majority of Croatian citizens, independent of their political orientations, the commemorative naming of yet another public object to celebrate the first president was not seen as controversial or problematic. Major political parties, including Tuđman's right-wing HDZ and the left-wing SDP, supported renaming.[27] Finally, the possible contention tied to Tuđman's name is "visible" only for (some) travelers from neighboring countries; it remains invisible for most international tourists and travelers. Unlike in Belgrade and Skopje (at the time when the airport had the name Alexander the Great), there are no visual displays of the name or Tuđman's figure (apart from the name at the entrance to the terminal building; see Figure 5).

The available evidence connected to the timing of the renaming of the airport (2016) and a larger trend of commemorating Franjo Tuđman in Croatia (present in the country and persisting over time) indicates that this renaming primarily falls into the realm of domestic memory politics, aiming to stabilize the foundational myth of the Croatian state where the first president is presented exclusively in a positive light. Given the wide domestic acceptance of the name change, this was a case of successful domestic memorialization. Repeated state use of "Tuđman" to name different public spaces for commemorative purposes normalized such practices, moving it into the domain of

routine, and thus banal nationalism. At the same time, the name issue remains completely invisible to international travelers: there are no displays in the airport building that would point to the significance of the name, despite the presence of diverse promotional materials for international visitors. Thus, it seems that the renaming effort was mainly oriented toward the domestic audience: on the airport website, the full name of the airport is only mentioned on the main page; elsewhere, the shorter logo that references only the city name is used. The same situation is repeated in the airport building (Figure 6). One can conclude that the domestically-oriented state use of banal nationalism was successful, since the airport name mostly remains unnoticed in the background, and does not provoke contestation.

A similar case following the same commemorative logic is exemplified in Ljubljana Airport, Slovenia, which, in 2007, on the occasion of expansion and opening of the new terminal was given a new commemorative name, Jože Pučnik. Pučnik was a Slovenian public intellectual, dissident, and one of the leaders of the Democratic Opposition of Slovenia at the time it seceded from Yugoslavia. While Jože Pučnik is not a controversial figure (in comparison to Franjo Tuđman), both airports celebrate individuals who are seen as central to their countries' independence from Yugoslavia and, in a manner of banal nationalism, remind citizens of the importance of these political figures and creating ties between them and national identity.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article follows the trend of studying processes and practices that perpetuate national belonging in everyday life (Mylonas and Tudor 2021). More precisely, I investigated when state interventions in the symbolic nationalism realm led to banal nationalism. To examine this question, I used the examples of commemorative nationalist renaming of major airports in the Balkans. There are no prescribed ways for displaying commemorative symbols in public spaces like airports, allowing flexibility in their use. My analysis shows two successful paths to banal nationalism by means of commemorative airport renaming: (1) domestically-oriented memorialization and (2) internationally-oriented nation branding. Banal nationalism in these cases means internalizing the name and the associated nationalistic symbolism and its unreflective use: banal nationalist symbols are perceived as a part of the landscape of everyday life that are not debated and actively engaged with. The domestic path to banal nationalism occurs through memorialization and myth-making for the domestic audience, confirming the importance of the chosen national hero (the case of Zagreb airport appears to follow this logic). The international path to banal nationalism also engages with foreign audiences, choosing a national hero who is well-known internationally and who can put the state in a positive light (the case of Belgrade Airport fits this pattern).

Figure 6. Logo of Zagreb Airport, Passenger Terminal (Summer 2023).

The commemorative nationalist naming can also be unsuccessful in cases where the chosen name provokes contention and conflict, as was the case with Skopje Airport. Such cases remain visible and disputed rather than settling in invisible banal nationalism.

I asked earlier: why bother to rename these airports at all? The analysis showed that each renaming followed larger trends in memorialization: Nikola Tesla has been commemorated since the 1950s, the symbolism of Alexander the Great fits into the national "antiquization" project of the Grueski government, and Franjo Tuđman is widely commemorated around Croatia as the founder of modern independent Croatia. Each commemorative renaming thus fits existing commemorative patterns in the country. When choosing the commemorative name, each state had to decide on its priorities, for example, whether to focus on the domestic or international public. States also needed to weigh the risks of backlash and opposition to the chosen name; underestimating them could lead to high contention and hot nationalism (as was the case in Skopje, where airport renaming was caught in a highly disputed process of nation-building). I should immediately add that available evidence only shows state involvement in renaming decisions, while exact state deliberations and motivations remain hidden (as is often the case with expressions of banal nationalism). However, I showed that in each case, renaming fits larger commemorative patterns, which points to trends in state use of nationalism, while ultimate state intentions cannot be deduced with available data (they are only implied by referring to general logic presented above).

I see two key contributions of this project in the field of nationalism studies and banal nationalism. First, this article engages with the international dimension of banal nationalism. So far, this aspect of nationalism was linked primarily to public diplomacy and nation branding, focusing on foreign policy goals such as the creation of a positive state image abroad and the promotion of business interests. I link these considerations to domestic settings in which commemorative decisions are made. The fact that I focused on the international airports allowed me to naturally account for both domestic and international audiences as I examined the meaningfulness of renaming for the domestic and international public in parallel. Both can accept or reject the commemorative name; accepting (or at least ignoring) the new name is necessary for banal nationalism. Second, this article further dismantles the division between hot and banal nationalism, showing that the same mundane state nationalist acts can lead to different levels of contention, pushing some cases into the domain of hot nationalism while leaving others cold. I believe this is especially important for the study of nationalism in the Balkans. The study of nationalism in the region usually focuses on its antagonistic side; this article shows that nationalism in the Balkans also includes routine less visible banal nationalism.

This article investigates the use of banal nationalism in the broadly conceived public domain, proposing a typology of state uses of banal nationalism based on intended audiences and levels of contention. Much more work remains to be done in this field. In the future, we should further explore links between banal nationalism and regime legitimacy in a democratic context as this question was mostly examined in non-democracies (see, for example, Dukalskis and Lee 2020; McGlynn 2020). One should also examine the choices of nationalist symbols, looking into who gets marginalized or excluded by the choices of commemorative nationalist symbols, and to what effect. Next, we should also further unpack how banal nationalism connects to memorialization more broadly. For example, does the use of Nikola Tesla's name to promote a dish cheapen him as a nationalist symbol? Or, how does the practice of naming public objects or spaces affect the meaning initially ascribed to the name of the person who is commemorated? What is the link between commemoration and commodification of nationalist symbols? These things should be further debated and examined in a broader range of domains and cases.

Crucially, we still lack much data that would uncover deliberate motivations behind state uses of banal nationalism. State deliberations behind banal nationalism remain hidden by default, and scholars struggle to understand state intentions when choosing specific nationalist symbols to put in the public sphere. We need better data access to fully understand the logic behind state use of banal nationalism. Finally, I focused on the state side of the story of banal nationalism; more work remains

to be done investigating the reception of different strategies in the use of banal nationalism by different audiences.

Notes

1   Anthony Smith's ethno-symbolic approach to nationalism also stresses shared symbols, myths, and memories (cf. Smith 1999).

2   For a description of the airport name controversy, see Dingfelder and Morris (2015).

3   International Air Transport Association: https://www.iata.org/en/publications/directories/code-search/

4   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_eponyms_of_airports

5   For example, Billig (1995, 41–42) discusses the adoption of a new Croatian currency, kuna.

6   Despite the fact that airports are not part of the state, in all analyzed cases the airports have a special status that gives the respective state governments a say when it comes to major strategic decisions concerning the airports, including their names.

7   Methodologically, I rely on the work by Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012), in particular their acknowledgment of the link between inductive logic of inquiry and interpretive research.

8   The High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina at the time, Paddy Ashdown, referred to the consultation with the Peace Implementation Council in making the decision (https://web.archive.org/web/20070926234242/http:/www.ohr.int/ohr-dept/presso/pressr/default.asp?content_id=35695).

9   Regarding the evidence problem, Fox and Van Ginderachter (2018, 547) refer to "top-down stealth nationalism" since banal nationalism is present everywhere, but its logic/template mostly remains unseen.

10   https://beg.aero/lat/korporativno/istorija (retrieved 04/30/2023); among analyzed cases, only the Belgrade airport website has a section explicitly dedicated to its history.

11   https://www.teslasociety.com/serbia150.htm

12   https://nikolateslamuseum.org/en/

13   https://mcnikolatesla.hr; for the differences in how Nikola Tesla's ethnic and national origin is presented, one can consult his Wikipedia page in English, Croatian, and Serbian (consulted 4/30/2023).

14   For example, Jovanović (2014, 112) cites a survey where Tesla was voted as one of the persons that "best represent the values of the Serbian people."

15   According to Vinci Airports, their corporate branding (used across all airports that they manage) avoids the use of commemorative names; news about the new airport concession commonly featured an explanation about the Tesla's name; for example, https://www.danas.rs/vesti/ekonomija/aerodrom-nikola-tesla-beograd-promenio-logotip-ali-ne-i-ime/.

16   One should keep in mind that Yugoslavia was a federal country, and each federal republic had an institutional structure prior to the independence: the state institutions were not built from scratch. Also, Yugoslavia's federal units had their dominant ethno-national identity embedded in the institutional structures (cf. Bunce 1999; Wachtel 1998). Historically, the national identity

of Macedonia and Macedonians was challenged by its neighbors, including Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia.

17 A narrative of the ancient origins of Macedonia was considered fringe in the official Macedonian historiography, where the mainstream narrative focused on the Slavic origins of Macedonians; this changed after 2006, creating a new major division among ethnic Macedonians (cf. Vangeli 2011; Vangelov 2019).

18 Official explanation from the Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time was that the Greek claim of provocation was misplaced since Alexander the Great is respected in many countries and does not belong to a single country (https://time.mk/arhiva/?d1=01&m1=01&y1=1991&d2=31&m2=12&y2=2012&all=0&dnevnik=1&fulltext=2&timeup=2&show=1&q=презимето%20на%20александар%20летна%20од%20аеродромот&read=899135ad653dd2a).

19 Different narratives and conflicts related to the implementation of the project Skopje 2014 are investigated in the documentary "Скопје Продолжува." I thank Reviewer 1 for the recommendation.

20 https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/45802/a-stir-over-name-of-skopje-s-airport/.

21 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-macedonia-name-airport-idUSKBN1FD2TS; https://www.rferl.org/a/mecedonia-removes-airport-sign-greece-alexander-name-dispute-skopje/29060724.html; https://apnews.com/article/a0b08260b75f49f09a9886331f43dd64.

22 Milanović was Prime Minister from December 2011 to January 2016. The formal agreement for the name change was given by Tuđman's family, the city of Zagreb, Zagreb County, and the town Velika Gorica (where the airport is located). https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/obitelj-odobrila-ime-dr-franje-tudmana-zracnoj-luci-zagreb-1024979; https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/nova-zracna-luka-u-zagrebu-nosit-ce-ime-franje-tudmana-1063017; https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/od-danas-i-sluzbeno-nova-zagrebacka-zracna-luka-nosit-ce-ime-franje-tudmana-303449.

23 https://danas.hr/hrvatska/ekskluzivna-rtl-anketa-istrazili-smo-sto-hrvati-misle-o-aerodromu-franje-tudjmana-aa6822ae-b9ec-11ec-b80f-0242ac120051

24 https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/10/the-greatest-monument-of-former-croatian-president-unveiled-in-zagreb-12-10-2018/; https://balkaninsight.com/2015/07/13/tudjman-takes-zagreb-15-years-after-death/.

25 See Tuđman's biography at the website of the Croatian Office of the President (https://www.predsjednik.hr/bivsi-predsjednici/franjo-tudman, retrieved 9/15/2023). The official HDZ newspaper *Snaga Zajedništva* (Power of Togetherness) widely features Tuđman in all its issues (2019–2023), including his sayings, references to his historical roles, and photos.

26 For example, in the early 2000s, another controversy followed the conflict over the name of the new bridge close to Dubrovnik, which was initially planned to be named "Dubrovnik" but, after the request by the mayor of Dubrovnik, the name was changed to "Franjo Tuđman" (http://old.dubrovniknet.hr/novost.php?id=16613#.ZFF1aS-B005); for the list of places named after Tuđman, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_places_named_after_Franjo_Tuđman.

27 See note 23.

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