**The Revival of Serbo-Croatian? The Declaration of the Common Language as an Inspiration for Anti-Nationalism in Former Yugoslavia**

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**Abstract**: With the breakup of Yugoslavia, Serbo-Croatian, as the main common language, was split into what Ranko Bugarski called ’administrative successors’ of a language that seemed to be yet another victim of the wars of the nineties. Nationally oriented linguists, literary theorists and politicians, campaigned tirelessly ever since the early nineties to discursively justify the creation of four new standardized languages: Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin, even though the language itself has not changed, and is seen by linguists worldwide as a single, polycentric, standardized language. Yet recently, a shift has occurred, with a vast number of academicians and public personalities from former Yugoslavia who embarked on a campaign of, for lack of other words, *revitalizing* the linguistic fact that Serbo-Croatian is still spoken in the four states, leading to the writing and signing of the Declaration of the Common Tongue (*Deklaracija o zajedničkom jeziku*) and several conferences on the topic. An overview on the discourse on the topic reveals that such an endeavor seemed to have been in the making for a while, as individual linguists and experts (such as primarily Snježana Kordić from Croatia) have been working on the topic ever since the breakup of Yugoslavia. This article analyzes the discourse of the anti-nationalist language professionals and their collaborators on revitalizing Serbo-Croatian as both a linguistic fact and a symbol of unity. Most of the research has been conducted on the topic of linguistic nationalism, where anti-nationalist discourses and policies have played second fiddle in the research more often than not, begging for more detailed insight.

**Key words**: Serbo-Croatian, anti-nationalism, linguistics, Declaration of the Common Language

**Introduction**

Besides being the best means of communication that humanity has produced over the millennia, language is known, both in scholarly and lay circles, as often being connected to questions of identity ([Greenberg 2004](#_ENREF_10); [Joseph 2004](#_ENREF_12); [Wodak 2012](#_ENREF_32)). When it comes to the Yugoslav (and post-Yugoslav) space, the language spoken by the majority of the people in former Yugoslavia – Serbo-Croatian – came to be presented as the crux of emerging national identities, particularly during the 1990s and the breakup of the Yugoslav state. With the crumbling of Yugoslavia and the wars of the nineties, language came to the fore as one of the most important elements of national identity in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia (Montenegrin nationalist linguists have been active mostly in the 21st century, after the conflicts have passed), with ‘all focus on the same points that heretofore nourished the controversy: the name of the language, the alphabet, the Iekavian or Ekavian form, certain spelling particularities, and above all, vocabulary, especially scholarly words’ ([Garde 2004: 220](#_ENREF_8)). In other words, the Serbo-Croatian language became yet another casualty of nationalism.

Though linguistic nationalism has undoubtedly proven to be more potent than its scientific counterpart in the forms of general linguistics, some instances of a ‘backlash’ against nationalism that was purported through and via language could be seen during the conflict and its aftermath. We are talking about a select few social scientists who have been working on a sociolinguistic level to counter local nationalist claims. Recently, the Declaration of the Common Language has been published, signed by a number of people, led by a clique of professionals, in an attempt to mitigate the vitriol that has been promulgated by nationally-minded linguists since the nineties. Before engaging the subject, however, we need to give a brief overview of the modus operandi of four similar, yet still distinct types of linguistic nationalism in the four mentioned states, in order to put the Declaration (as well as general opposition to linguistic nationalism) in perspective.

**The context: language as a source of strife**

Having been known as Serbo-Croatian in Yugoslavia, the majority language of the former state became highly politicized during the nineties. It has seemingly split along ethnic lines, first into Serbian and Croatian, with Bosnian following suite. Only after the breakup of Yugoslavia did Montenegrin also come into the fray as well, adding up to four allegedly different languages as political successors of the former Serbo-Croatian. Having in mind that from the point of view of linguistics, we are still talking about a single language, classified linguistically as *polycentric* (such as English, with its geographic varieties known as British English, American English, or Australian English), the split had to be based on an emotional, primordialist and recalcitrant nationalist discourse, known by historians of language as the ’Herderian view of language’. In order for that to be accomplished, linguistics as a science had to be dealt away with, and each ’side’ in the conflict chose a specific means of accomplishing that feat in an insouciant nationalist discourse.

Croatian was thus based on having its fledgling self artificially ’removed’ from ’Serbian’ via a heavy incursion of language purism ([Kordić 2010](#_ENREF_19)). New words were coined in order to artificially separate the newly formed idiom from what was considered to be ’Serbian’ in an almost entirely random fashion, leading to the introduction of the peculiar ’Šreter prize’ for the ‘best’ newly coined Croatian words. In addition to the invention of new words, a heavily emotional, nationalist discourse was developed in which, by sheer proclamation and declaration, language pundits close to the government of the new state went into an all-out discursive attack against the ’Serbian’ language, continuously proclaiming, strengthened by repetition, that Croatian is and always had been separate from Serbian in an iterative, specious ethno-nationalist obloquy. Though all four states engaged in hyperproduction of the ‘retrolinguistic’ ([Jovanović 2012](#_ENREF_13)) metanarrative, Croatian nationalist linguistic production was perhaps the most prolific.

The birth of the ’Bosnian’ language coincided with the birth of the Bosniak national identity as a means of strengthening and justifying it. Having in mind that the ’split’ of Serbo-Croatian had already been occurring, and that the language was already ’divided’ into the warring camps of Serbian vs Croatian nationalism, a far stretch was needed in order to pick up the breadcrumbs of a disassembled language, so some eldritch instances were taken to represent the intrinsic ’Bosnianness’ of the new language, such as the extreme insistence on the velar fricative /x/, as well as the introduction of words of Turkish origin into the language; note that even in today’s ’Serbian’, there are over 8500 words of Turkish origin, making this an exercise in futility ([Greenberg 2004: 136](#_ENREF_10)). Additionally, new grammars of the Bosnian language have started being produced, commonly by simple copying of former grammars of Serbo-Croatian, replacing the old linguonim with ‘Bosnian’.

Having in mind that the breakup of Yugoslavia could be seen as a part-by-part of the country leaving Serbia ([Jovanović 2017](#_ENREF_14)), and since the newly minted languages found their bases on their alleged difference from ’Serbian’, the crux of Serbian nationalist linguistics were seen in a plethora of failed attempts to counter this process by accusations of other nations wanting to ’eat up’ their language ([see: Piper 2003](#_ENREF_22)). Additionally, the Cyrillic script started to be seen as the ’core and soul’ of the Serbian identity and national language, whilst the Latin alphabet became known as ’Croatian’, even though it was older than the very Slavic tribes themselves, before they migrated to Europe. Much of the discourse was reduced to commonly turgid, yet oftentimes maudlin pleas of stopping the ‘dismemberment’ of the language. A 2015 symposium on the alleged ‘destruction’ of the Serbian language was held in Novi Sad, organized by the cumbersomely named ‘Society for the preservation of the Serbian language – the Cyrillic script’, entitled ‘Today’s position of the Serbian language and how to preserve the Cyrillic script in the Serbian people and their language’, supported by the Serbian government, where presenting authors carped that their ideas were not supported by the government.

If Bosnian was a linguistic ‘stretch’, Montenegrin had even more trouble finding instances via which it could be presented as ’different’ from Croatian, Bosnian and Serbian. Based almost entirely on, to say the least, the work of questionable scientific value by one man, the nationally-oriented Montenegrin literature theorist, Vojislav Nikčević, Montenegrin was described as ’special’ and ’different’ by the overuse of allophones *ś*, *ź*, and *ʒ* (which are used in parts of Serbia and Herzegovina as well), as well as on an insistence on the ijekavian pronunciation (which is also used in parts of Serbia, the whole of Croatia and Bosnia); not too many scholarly works have tackled this subject, with extremely rare exceptions ([Kordić 2008](#_ENREF_18); [Nakazawa 2015](#_ENREF_20)), and it has failed to reach any acclaim by the international scholarly community. After the death of Nikčević, Montenegrin linguistic nationalism was continued mainly by one Adnan Čirgić, dubbed by his supporters ‘the first Ph.D. in Montenegrin’, allegedly receiving his doctoral degree ([Đurović 2008b: 15](#_ENREF_7)) at Osijek University, even though it does not boast a Ph.D. program in Montenegrin. The lack of consistency seen in his work ([Đurović 2008a](#_ENREF_6)) is representative of the Montenegrin type of linguistic nationalism, where the author forced the use of the invented palatalized version of the word ’usljed’ in its newly formed version ’ušljed’ (*due to*), yet regularly failed himself in consistently using it, reverting every now and then to the standard version ’usljed’.

None of the attempted arguments put forth by nationally minded linguists in all four states were in the meantime recognized by the international linguistic community. To the contrary, linguists who dealt with the issue kept rebuking the arguments consistently, claiming, in accordance to linguistic science, that all four varieties are still a single language, with maximal mutual understanding, stressing this to an even greater extent ever since the nineties ([Pohl 1996: 219](#_ENREF_23); [Thomas 2003](#_ENREF_30)).

**Countering linguistic nationalism – pre-Declaration**

Having in mind that the arguments given by a row of nationalist linguists (and literary theorist presenting themselves as linguists, such as Nikčević) possessed an intrinsic tendency to disassociate themselves from linguistic science in their arguments (though declaratively consistently asserting that their work was ‘scientific’), most opposition to linguistic nationalism in Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Serbia tended to come from a scientific, linguistic perspective, propounded by a relatively small group of social scientists (Bugarski, Kordić, Škiljan, Jovanović), as well as an occasional article written by professional journalists and authors.

The figure of Snježana Kordić stands out significantly among the relatively minor number of linguists who have been tackling linguistic nationalism. A linguist from former Yugoslavia (now Croatia), she had been working on several German universities, and has kept producing regular academic, polemical and critical articles on both a case-by-case basis, as well as publishing her capital work, *Jezik i nacionalizam* (Language and Nationalism), by the Zagreb-based publisher, Durieux ([Kordić 2010](#_ENREF_19)). The monograph has caused a stir in Croatian nationalist linguist circles, exacerbating nationalist linguistics yet again, including an increase in discursive attacks onto her, both from a personal and professional viewpoint, ending up in her not being able to find employment in Croatia, even though being significantly more qualified than most of linguistics within the state. Her work went into detal about Croatian linguistic purism, the invention of new words in order for the newly minted language not to sound like Serbian, as well as into sociolinguistic issues dealing with the connection of nation, ethnicity and language, drawing upon an impressive number of scientific sources. Additionally, she has been consistent in publishing reviews of local nationalist linguistic works, as well as replies to criticisms, commonly in the journal *Književna republika* ([Kordić 2001](#_ENREF_16); [Kordić 2003](#_ENREF_17); [Kordić 2008](#_ENREF_18)), tackling numerous issues with rigorous precision. Her critics have published vitriol against her in a number of media (seldom within a peer reviewed journal), allowing their viewpoint to get maximum reach, as well as to position themselves as being in the right, since she was never allowed to reply in the same media where discursive attacks on her have been published, giving readers the impression that she had no answer to the vituperation against her, which was often promoted as ‘scientific’ and ‘linguistic’ in nature.

In Serbia, the probably best known linguist tackling these issues is Ranko Bugarski, who has demonstrated a different, less ‘belligerent’ style. While Kordić engaged nationalist linguists directly, dissecting and analyzing its vituperance aimed against her, as well as their ideologies and poor scientific work, Bugarski did not engage in direct ‘confrontation’, nor did he analyze local Serbian nationalist linguistics. Instead, he chose to concentrate on the positive representation of scientific linguistics and its scholarly legacy, writing often on topics on language and society, and language and culture ([Bugarski 2005](#_ENREF_1); [Bugarski 2009](#_ENREF_2)), calling the new linguonims ‘administrative successors of Serbo-Croatian’. A single work going into detail about the varieties of Serbian linguistic nationalism is, however, found in the work of Jovanović ([Jovanović 2012](#_ENREF_13)). Bosnian linguistic nationalism has been tackled en passant by Midhat Riđanović ([Riđanović 2003](#_ENREF_24)), whilst Montenegrin saw some analysis in the work of Glušica ([Glušica 2011](#_ENREF_9)) and Kordić ([Kordić 2008](#_ENREF_18)).

**The Declaration**

In 2016, the Declaration on the Common Language found its place in online spaces, signed by over 8000 people, supported by the Allianz Kulturstiftung and ForumZFD, together with four conferences on the topic of the common language, in Podgorica (Montenegro), Split (Croatia), Belgrade (Serbia) and Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), available at http://jezicinacionalizmi.com/o-projektu/. The *raison d’etre* of the enterprise is summed on the website:

When asked whether Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia and Serbia use a common language – the answer is positive. This is a common standard language of a polycentric type – that is, the language spoken by several peoples in more than one country with recognizable variants - such as German, English, Arabic, French, Spanish, Portuguese and many others. This fact is corroborated by the common standard of the dialectal base of the standard language, the ratio of the same to different instances in language and consequent mutual intelligibility. The use of four names for standard variants - Bosnian, Montenegrin, Croatian and Serbian – does not mean that they are also four different languages. Insisting on a small number of existing differences and the violent separation of the four standard variants leads to a series of negative social, cultural and political phenomena, such as the use of language as an argument for segregating children in some multi-national environments, unnecessary "translation" in the administrative use or the media, bureaucratic constraints, as well as censorship (and necessarily auto-censorship), in which linguistic expression is imposed as a criterion of ethno-national affiliation and a means of proving political loyalty.

The core of the argument is the acceptance of both linguistic reality (that Serbo-Croatian is still a *single* language), as well as social and political reality of four linguonims (that it nowadays possesses novel *names*, namely, Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian). One of the initiators, the Belgrade-based writer Vladimir Arsenijević, spoke how the goal of the Declaration was to ‘diminish and put a stop to the damage that nationalist identity politics in the region were producing’ ([Telegraf 2017](#_ENREF_29)), whilst Ana Pejović, another amongst the initiators from the ‘Krokodil’ society in Belgrade, told RFE that ‘the idea behind the Declaration was the promotion of literature, primarily literature being written in a language that we all understand mutually, yet call it by different names’ ([Sandić-Hadžihasanović 2017](#_ENREF_25)). The acknowledgment of the social understanding of the linguonims at hand is seen in the very next paragraph of the Declaration:

We, the signatories of this Declaration, believe that the fact of the existence of a common polycentric language does not call into question the individual right to express affiliation to different peoples, regions or states; any nation, nation, ethno-national or regional community can freely and independently codify its variant of common language; all four current standard variants are equal and one cannot be considered a language, and the other variants of that language; polycentric standardization is the democratic form of standardization closest to the actual use of language; the fact that it is a common polycentric standard language leaves the user the option to name it as he wants; between standard variants of the polycentric language there are differences in linguistic and cultural traditions and practices, the use of letters, the mood of the book as well as on other language levels, which can also show different standard variants of the common language on which this Declaration will be published and used; standard, dialectical and individual differences do not justify violent institutional separation, but rather contribute to the vast wealth of common language.

Additionally, Pejović spoke, drawing upon the paragraphs above, that the ‘text of the declaration is highly mild. In essence, it invites to freedom and the idea that everybody can name their language as they see fit, respecting the idea that we are talking about a common polycentric standardized language’ ([Sandić-Hadžihasanović 2017](#_ENREF_25)). Compared to, for instance, the works of Snježana Kordić during the last two decades, the Declaration could indeed be described as mild, even somewhat placid and mellow, even though some of the proponents of the Declaration, such as the playwright, Borka Pavićević, spoke with some fervor, saying that ‘the identification of the nation with language led to nationalist kitsch’ ([M. K. 2017](#_ENREF_15)). Enver Kazaz of Sarajevo University spoke how ‘this Declaration helps Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as her cultural spaces and identities, to understand an important fact – that language is not solely an ideological means, and it should not be such’ ([M. K. 2017](#_ENREF_15)). The last paragraph of the Declaration went into detailes about the practical issues it promotes:

Therefore, We, the signatories of this Declaration, are calling for the abolition of all forms of linguistic segregation and language discrimination in educational and public institutions; for stopping the repressive, unnecessary and speechless harmful practices of language separation; for the termination of rigid definition of standard variants; avoiding unnecessary, meaningless and expensive ’translations’ in court and administrative practice as well as means of public information; the freedom of individual choice and appreciation of language diversity; language freedom in literature, art and media; the freedom of dialectical and regional use; and, ultimately, the freedom of ’mixing’, mutual openness and permeation of different forms and expressions of common language to the universal benefit of all of its speakers.

Even though the Declaration had a fairly ‘mellow’ form, acknowledging the right of the four nations to dub their language with their national names, the Declaration has quickly been criticized, to which we shall turn to in the paragraphs to come. As shall be shown, the majority of the protests against the Declaration has come from Croatian officials, while in Bosnia and Montenegro, it has failed to stir the media waters.

**Reactions to the Declaration**

We can broadly categorize the reactions to the Declaration into negative and positive ones, each ‘side’ being relatively equal to the other in terms of production. On March 2017, the Croatian Academy of Science and Arts, led by their president, Zvonko Kusić, opined how ‘initiatives that are questioning the right of the Croat people to their own language with their own national name are absurd, futile and senseless’ ([F. Ć. 2017](#_ENREF_3)), in a *straw man* move, having in mind that the Declaration not only never denied a people ‘their own language’, but specifically stated that Serbo-Croatian *can* be called by local national names, with the caveat of keeping in mind that all the four states speak a single language with four names. The Croatian Minister of Culture, Nina Obuljen Koržinek, spoke how Serbo-Croatian was a ‘political construct’ that ‘never came to fruition’ ([Derk 2017](#_ENREF_5)), contrary to established linguistic science. The Association of Croatian Defenders and Martyrs of the War for the Fatherland ‘warned’ against the ‘aggression towards the Croatian language’. According to them, they have witnessed the ‘continuous ideological attack on the pillars of Croatian culture and Croatian identity, which is the Croatian language’, attacking Snježana Kordić in the text as well ([Glas Slavonije 2017](#_ENREF_26)). The Belgrade Faculty of Philology’s Predrag Piper gave his view by stating that the Declaration is a ‘provocation’ ([Srna 2017](#_ENREF_27)), stressing that Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin are ‘variations of the Serbian language’, claiming he spoke ‘in accordance to facts’. The Serbian nationalist linguist viewpoint often claims that Serbo-Croatian is indeed a single language, yet that it should be called Serbian, and that the other nations are ‘stealing’ it ([Jovanović 2012](#_ENREF_13)), so Piper’s view can be seen as a fairly representative one. Nikola Tanasković, often writing for the popular Right Wing portal in Serbia, *Nova srpska politička misao* (New Serbian Political Thought), opined how the Declaration was a ‘a scam under the guise of common sense’, as its authors have a ‘messianic complex’. According to him, ‘there was no other reason for the Declaration, except to justify the so-called “Bosnian” and “Montenegrin” languages’; he is also of the opinion that it campaigns for the ‘right for your language not to be called Serbian’ ([Tanasković 2017](#_ENREF_28)). Whilst Croatian nationalist linguists will admit to the existence of Serbian – going long ways in trying to represent Croatian as intrinsically different in the process – in Serbia, denying Bosnian, Croatian and Montenegrin is a common trope. In Bosnia, the *Slobodna Bosna* portal carried over the Croatian *Index.hr* text in which the Declaration was presented as ‘adding fuel to the fire’ ([Index.hr 2017](#_ENREF_11)). There were no reactions from Montenegro to be found.

Positive reactions were seen mostly in the liberal media, such as Radio Free Europe (in its local version, *Radio slobodna Evropa*), in which Pejović stated additionally that ‘there were more positive reactions, I have to say, especially from positive people, from people who invoked common sense, as well as the fact that it is rather interesting to see somebody finally say that the emperor is naked, yet we do not plan to stop here, as we do not think it is enough’ ([Sandić-Hadžihasanović 2017](#_ENREF_25)). The liberal, Belgrade-based weekly, *Vreme,* known for its fierce criticism of government policies and nationalism, carried over the whole Declaration in March ([Vreme 2017](#_ENREF_31)), while Drago Pilsel, writing within a column for the Belgrade-based *Ekspres,* wrote that the Declaration could help in combating segregation and inter-national distrust, stressing that he supported the work of Snježana Kordić ([Pilsel 2017](#_ENREF_21)). The N1 television reported without bias in all of their affiliates, in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia. Though reactions within the Montenegrin media sphere were rare, the CdM portal presented a positive review in their text ‘There is Richness in Diversity: The Declaration of the Common Language has been Presented’ (*Raznolikost je bogatstvo: Predstavljena Deklaracija o zajedničkom jeziku*) ([CdM 2017](#_ENREF_4)).

*In summa*, the negative reactions were, similar to the nationalist linguistics prior to the Declaration, concentrated on straw-manning and ethno-nationalist fears of losing the language, whilst the positive ones stuck to linguistics as a source of inspiration, strengthened now by their emphasis on practical implications and the mitigation of national divisions. The majority of the negative reactions are seen in the Croatian media space, where the support for the Declaration is weakest in potency. More support and fewer negative visions were seen in Serbia, whilst the Declaration failed to pique more interest in Bosnia and Montenegro.

One notable change in relation to the pre-Declaration opposition to linguistic nationalism – within the Declaration itself, as well as within the positive reactions to it – was the fact that acceptance of the fact that various peoples/nations are allowed to call Serbo-Croatian how they see fit, with the proviso of understanding that it is still, from the point of view of linguistics, a single language. This, however, did not function as a deterrent for tose nationalists, primarily in Croatia (as well as in Serbia, though to a somewhat lesser extent), to see it as yet another ‘attack’ on one of the most important markers of their particular national identities.

**Conclusion**

Based on the examples seen in the pages above, we can categorize the discourse in which the Serbo-Croatian language serves as an inspiration for a unifying, atni-nationalist narrative, in two parts:

1. One is the standard scientific (linguistic) approach, wherein Serbo-Croatian has been analyzed from the point of view of linguistics as a science. Having in mind that the split into Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian and Bosnian has been conducted to the contrary of linguistics and scientific factography, the simple analysis of the language itself, as well as of the non-scientific work of nationalist linguists, has served as a unifying factor ever since the split during the 1990s.
2. The other is more ideological and socially oriented, and can be said to have formally begun with the publication of the Declaration, though the very essence is grounded in a scientific *Weltanschauung*. Such a view has been promulgated by a fairly small clique of social scientists during the last several decades, and only with the 2017 Declaration did it arrive to a more serious state.

The pathos of the Declaration can additionally be classified into three categories, namely:

1. scientific (based on linguistics as a developed science),
2. ideational (as a means of combating division and nationalism), and
3. practical (calls upon the realization of a single language for the sake of better communication).

The *reactions* to the Declaration, based on a county-by-country bases, in considering their intensity can be categorized as follows, with Croat sources leading in their primarily negative reactions to it:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Croatia** | **Serbia** | **Bosnia** | **Montenegro** |
| **positive** | weak | mid-level | weak | weak |
| **negative** | strong | mid-level | weak | weak |

However, whether the Declaration will yield any significant practical policy or instigate social change is a question yet unanswered, and it remains to be seen in the future. Beside leading Croatian politicians, who have disparaged the Declaration, almost no political organization and individual has taken the Declaration as a relevant issue. Though at this point not more than a conjecture, it is possible that at the current state of affairs in the four countries – with poverty, corruption and nepotism as the key instances within the functioning of the state, society, politics and corresponding institutions – this anti-nationalist unifying attempt is low on the scale of importance for both relevant political players, as well as members of society who might agree with its purpose and content. The strongly negative reception of the Declaration particularly in Croatia can perhaps be understood in a broader, socio-political context. As Serbo-Croatian is seen as a remnant of ‘Yugoslavism’, and having in mind that ‘Yugo-nostalgia’ is seen as a primarily negative instance in Croatia (to a much larger extent than in other post-Yugoslav countries), it is perhaps to be expected that the Declaration would be seen in a negative light, as the anti-Yugoslav sentiment in Croatia has had a fertile ground to grow on during the several last decades.

The Declaration, having been made public by early 2017, so far has not yielded any change by the end of the calendar year. This does not mean that this cannot change, though chances are arguably slim. In still ethnically galvanized societies who are additionally troubled by severe unemployment rates and a lack of potential positive futures at the levels of the individual, as well as of the society, it will be rather difficult to see the Declaration achieve any significant successes in the near future. That, however, does not mean that it cannot serve as a positive instance for socio-political change in the *longue duree.*

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