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The Instrumentalisation of Memory in the Balkans:
A Geopolitical Focus on Post-war Serbia

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<u>INTRODUCTION</u>

This research is part of the stream of reflections that emerged to comment on the dominant narratives about the 1990s war in the Balkans put forward by official discourses not only nationally but also internationally. The Balkan war and the Balkans themselves have always been at the centre of European debates as they still represent a third way in which the European Union has not yet managed to emerge as a power of influence. The intention of this research is to analyse the instrumentalization of the memory of the war by the ruling political class, especially in Serbia, in the conduct of political, social, and economic relations both regionally and internationally. Indeed, geopolitical insecurity creates opportunities for domestic actors to spread disinformation within the territory of the state and internationally. In order to demonstrate this, first, the analysis focused on how memory was constructed by representatives of the various Western Balkan governments, particularly Serbia, through education and political discourse. Furthermore, the legacy of the Balkan Wars and the conflicts that arose from the breakup of Yugoslavia continue to shape the political and social landscape of the region. The ways in which these events are remembered and contextualized have important implications for the stability and security of the region as a whole, making it critical to analyze the role of nationalism and memory in shaping national identity in Serbia. Second, the analysis focuses on Serbia and its international relations with the European Union, Russia, and China, seeking to demonstrate the extent to which the arrival of emerging powers in the Western Balkans affects the redistribution of power in the multipolar world. The research will focus mainly on current developments in the region, while taking into account the events of the 1990s.

The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, which claimed more than 130,000 lives, is the largest military conflict to have taken place in Europe since World War II. Through the dissolution of Yugoslavia, come out six different states (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia) and one which still does not yet been recognised from the United Nations, which is Kosovo. About three decades after the start of Yugoslavia's dissolution, significant issues of statehood, illiberal and authoritarian tendencies perpetuated by politically motivated elites, regional and geopolitical insecurity, and a lack of progress in political, economic, and social reforms are prominent topics in the news concerning the former Yugoslav region. Even though they are based on legacies, relationships, cultural identities, and preferences developed during the time of Yugoslavia or earlier, these elements have been reshaped in the context of war and post-war politics and are continuously being challenged and redefined. In fact, if one looks at the media and culture in today's post-Yugoslav societies, one can see how the whole discourse relating to memory, the nostalgia of

Yugoslvaia, the so-called Yugonostalgia, which has always been associated with the Balkans, is socially determined by the ruling political class. The exploitation of nostalgia by Balkan governments and especially the Serbian government underlines how cultural, ethnic, identity politics is still an active process in determining social and economic political choices. In particular, such exploitation refers to the use of historical events and collective memories for political reasons. This can take various forms, including the distortion of historical facts and the propagation of specific narratives to promote nationalistic goals. This exploitation of memory has been a persistent problem in the Balkans, especially in the aftermath of the conflict, when countries in the region tried to deal with their past and establish a shared national identity. This has led to disagreements and disputes over how history is remembered and interpreted, contributing to the persistence of differences within and between nations.

Within this narrative framework is the understanding that ordinary individuals have of these events and their true memory. In fact, research into the way young Serbian and Balkan Serbs understand these events is totally influenced by the description given of the events as, the new generations, have not experienced the war first-hand but experience it through the narratives of family members, the government, and school education, and thus the historical approach. And it is precisely on historical education and identity formation that the Balkan governments rely on to continue to strengthen their nationalist aims, thus influencing their foreign and security policy. To understand the relationship between foreign and security policy, historical memory, ethnicity, culture, identity, reconciliation and peacebuilding, an online search of newspapers and reports was conducted, using data from governmental and non-governmental organisations. A critical examination of political leaders' speeches was also conducted, with a focus on Serbian leader Aleksandar Vučić and his often-controversial references to significant historical events. Historical memory and its commemoration can be seen in the celebration of important days, historical landmarks, monuments, and events in honour of national heroes.

In this strictly national and regional narrative, it is important to analyse the international narrative. As mentioned earlier, the Balkans represent the third way between the western and eastern poles, and due to their strategic geographic location, they represent a junction between the two poles of the world. Even today, there is no great power that prevails in the region, but the major modern powers are trying to impose their influence. Indeed, it is true that, initially, the European Union seemed to be the power destined to dominate the area, but despite the repeatedly expressed desire, the countries of the former Yugoslavia have not yet managed to become members, with the exception of Slovenia and Croatia. This has thus caused the Balkan peoples' optimism and confidence in the EU to wane,

bringing them ever closer to the new powers, namely China and Russia. The final intention is to emphasise that Europe must live up to its promises, and therefore annex the countries of the former Yugoslavia to the 27 member states, in order not to lose this strategic area and to prevent China and Russia from expanding even further.

My hypothesis therefore suggests that historical memory plays a significant role in foreign and security policy and has a considerable impact on relations between formerly conflicting states. Moreover, leaders manipulate historical memory to establish distinct identities and gain political power. Today we can say that the Balkan powder keg is still there unchanged, with its clot of grudges, paid false prophets and political interests of individual nations.

The thesis is divided into three chapters which examine the role of collective memory, and its political use in the Western Balkans, with a specific focus on Serbia. As it was previously stressed, the aim is to analyse how the Serbian's Government is using the tool of the memory of the 90's war to conduct its geopolitical relations not only in the Balkans but also with international actors (European Union, China and Russia).

The first chapter focuses on the persistence of the war and the motivations that led to it in the political, economic, and social systems of Yugoslavia. It begins by exploring how the war and its motivations persist today in the country. This is achieved through an examination of the economic argument, the ethnic nationalism argument, and the cultural (religious) argument. The chapter then moves on to discuss the current state of affairs in Yugoslavia. The second part of the chapter focuses on the political use of history in Yugoslavia. It examines the ways in which history is used by political forces to shape the country's future. The chapter then goes on to discuss the role of memory in Yugoslavia, including the ways in which collective memory is constructed and how it influences political discourse and the development of political and cultural identities.

The second chapter focuses on the issue of extremism and nationalism in Serbia. It begins by defining, framing, and contextualizing extremism in Serbia, as well as discussing Freedom House reports on the country. The chapter then moves on to examining how the Serbian government is using the tool of memory in its relationships with the states of the former Yugoslavia. This is achieved through the construction of collective memory using political forces and the use of education and media. The second part of the chapter focuses on Serbia's geopolitical relations with various international actors, such as the European Union, China, and Russia. It highlights the strategic importance of Serbia and the Balkans for these actors. Additionally, the chapter examines the EU enlargement process in Serbia, the EU's influence vis-à-vis Russia and China, and President Vučić's position on territorial integrity.

Lastly, the third chapter focuses on two main topics related to the current situation in Serbia. The first topic, opposition forces to the Serbian government, focuses on the role of civil society in shaping the country's political landscape. It looks at the ways in which civil society organizations are working to promote change and challenge the existing political power structures. The second topic, future European prospects for Serbia, explores the country's prospects for becoming a member of the European Union. It begins by examining the European Commission's report on Serbia's accession to the EU, and then goes on to discuss Europe's future project in Serbia and Yugoslavia. This includes a discussion of the ways in which the EU is working to promote stability and prosperity in the region, and the potential benefits that Serbia could gain from becoming a member of the EU.

1.1 War heritage in the political, economic, social systems in modern Yugoslavia

The war in Yugoslavia (1991-1995) was not only a contemporary historical event of great political, social and mnemonic significance for the entire West, but also a difficult test for the European Union and a challenge to its ideals of unity and cooperation. Basically, the end of the Yugoslav dream meant for 'united Europe' the failure of that ideal of coexistence between peoples, languages and memories to which the West aspired. The rhetoric of post-war memory politics still rules practically all of the successor states thirty years after the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's disintegration. Even though two of them (Croatia and Slovenia) appear to have put the past behind them in order to enter the European Union[1]. Especially at the beginning of the conflict, the West attempted to clarify the reasons for the Balkan war through a mono-causal explanation based on Serbia's guilt. The centuries-old Serbian hatred of the Muslim and Croatian populations and Belgrade's (Greater Serbia) desires for expansion were considered the only causes for the conflict. It was only years later that a multifaceted view of the reasons that led to the war became widespread. Since then, people have begun to look for the real original causes of ethnic hatred and tensions between the different federal states in the economic crisis that plagued the country and in the exploitation of reality and memory carried out by the nationalist parties through the media, literature and art. As a matter of fact, identity issues were only one of the causes behind the war in the Balkans. In fact, there is no single or homogenous Balkan identity, and, at the same time, it is necessary to avoid exploiting differences and contrasts between the various nations in an instrumental manner, as is the case between the states of the region themselves, first and foremost Serbia[2]. On the one hand, it is necessary to recognise the inheritance of the different cultures that have characterised the region, but on the other hand, they must not be used as foundations and justifications for a clash of peoples. Nevertheless, there has been a recent period in which the issue of identity has taken on a different character, namely the period of socialist Yugoslavia. In fact, socialist Yugoslavia was not so much based on the idea of nationhood, as was the case until the first half of the 20th century, but on the breaking down of class distinctions. In fact, this discourse stems from the end of the Second World War and the narrative that the political

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[1] Petersen, R. (2011). *Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict (Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics)*. Cambridge University Press.

[2] Napolitano, M., Crespi, G., Fruscione, G., Sasso, A., Selvelli, G., & Siragusa, M. (2021). *Capire i Balcani occidentali - dagli accordi di Dayton ai giorni nostri*. In Identità, nazioni, confini di M. Siragusa. Udine: Bottega Errante Edizioni.

elite made of it. Rising from the ashes of the Second World War, this state tried to overcome the national question by incorporating it into the broader struggle in the name of a society without divisions. This experience, however, after guaranteeing peace and prosperity for five decades (1945-1992), famously imploded upon itself also due to the failure to definitively resolve the national and identity problem. Although the identity problem is one of the main causes of the war, it is also necessary to analyse the other causes which, as we shall see, are still a reason for clashes in the region. Therefore, we can identify some major arguments on the reasons for the collapse of Yugoslavia such as: the economic argument, the ethnic nationalism argument and the cultural argument, more precisely the religious one. As a matter of fact, there were numerous causes—not just one—for Yugoslavia's collapse, and the only way to comprehend what transpired was to examine how the main political actors perceived each of these factors. These reasons are still present in the today's political scenario[3].

1.1.1.The economic argument

The economic argument is predicated on the idea that Yugoslavia could not have survived past the late 1970s and early 1980s economic crises and the expanding disparity between developed and underdeveloped regions (republics, provinces). In order to continue their development, the more advanced republics, including Slovenia and Croatia, requested independence. Despite being at the two different ends of the economic growth spectrum, Slovenia and Kosovo both reached the point where they no longer saw any reason to stay in the former Yugoslavia. For the first time in 1987, Slovenian public opinion suggested that the country would be better off economically outside of Yugoslavia than inside. However, Kosovo did not see any economic advantages in staying in Yugoslavia given that its GDP per capita had decreased from 47% to 26% of the Yugoslav average in the post war period, although being permanently expanding in absolute terms[4]. It is undeniable that economic factors played a big part in establishing the backdrop to which political leaders' narratives had to adapt. According to Woodward, the state's issue began as a result of a constitutional dispute that was sparked by the economic crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, if the economic

[3] Jovic, D. (2001). The Disintegration of Yugoslavia. *European Journal Of Social Theory*, *4*(1), 101-120. doi: 10.1177/13684310122225037

[4] Bojicic, V.(1996) 'The Disintegration of Yugoslavia: Causes and Consequences of Dynamic Inefficiency in Semi-Command Economies', in David A. Dyker and Ivan Vejvoda (eds) *Yugoslavia and After — A Study in F'ragmentation, Despair and Rebirth,* pp. 28—47. London and New York: Longman.

crisis had not been exploited to overthrow the central idea of Yugoslav socialism (formulated principally by the leading proponent of socialist self-management, Edvard Kardelj, and replace it with a number of others, the country would not have fallen apart. Contrary to what the proponents of the economic theories of the collapse claim, Yugoslavia actually fell apart just as Ante Markovic's government's economic reforms were beginning to yield some encouraging signs, including the end of inflation and a sharp rise in the per capita income of its citizens. Hope for Yugoslavia's future was raised by the ineffectual government's departure in December 1988 and the appointment of Ante Markovic as the country's new, market-oriented prime minister in January 1989[5]. By the end of January 1990, the inflation rate, which had reached 56 percent in December 1989, had dropped to 17.3 percent. Foreign exchange reserves, which totalled US$5.4 billion in December 1989 and were sufficient to allow the convertibility of the dinar, rose to US$6.5 billion in January 1990 and US$8.5 billion in May 1990. Additionally, industrial productivity has increased, and loans from abroad have been obtained to support economic transformation. The state fell just as the first expectations for a democratic society with a solid economy began to materialise. This dilemma is not adequately explained by the economic theory. Even less was the federation's political transformation driven by economic failure between 1967 and 1974. Instead, they were greatly aided by Yugoslav self-promotion organisation's as a potential alternative to both state socialism of the Soviet type and capitalist society, which both experienced severe crises in 1968. Similar to how Milan Kucan of Slovenia, Franjo Tudjman of Croatia, and Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia declined the European Community's offer to find a political compromise in exchange for significant economic support, the economic factor did not play a major role in the final stage of negotiations about the future of the nation. They chose to stick with their stance, which led to the economic collapse of every post-Yugoslav state with the partial exception of Slovenia. Despite the substantial setback caused by the economic and political crisis, socialist Yugoslavia was neither a tragic failure nor did it have to disintegrate in terms of modernisation. It was the most developed case of all the East European societies in terms of both economy and politics[6]. Economic factors did not directly contribute to the breakup of Yugoslavia, but they were significant in the background they created for political leaders who used them to claim that their party or ethnic group suffered in Yugoslavia. It is true that the economic factor was a significant factor in creating divisions between the various regions of Yugoslavia, which ultimately led to an increase in the population's and the political elite's demands

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[5] *Ibidem*

[6] See note 4

for change. Economic reductionism, however, is never able to fully explain political occurrences because it ignores human actions, or the thoughts and deeds of political actors[7].

1.1.2 The ethnic nationalism argument

In the case of Yugoslavia, ethnicity played a major role in the country's political and social dynamics, especially in the late 20th century. The country was composed of a diverse mix of ethnic groups, including Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Albanians, Slovenes, and others. During the 1980s and 1990s, nationalism and ethnic tensions rose, leading to the eventual breakup of Yugoslavia and the outbreak of violent conflicts in some of its regions. Ethnicity was used by politicians to mobilize support, incite division, and gain power. The conflicts that followed had devastating consequences, including ethnic cleansing and mass killings. The use of ethnicity as a tool of bad politics contributed to the break-up of Yugoslavia and the suffering of its people.

Ethnic nationalism, characteristic of ethnic groups that define their own nation in terms of exclusion, is given by the common descent of the members who make up the group; as a rule, an individual who does not bear the essential ethnic traits is hardly allowed to become a member of the group. Ethnic and national aspects have had important consequences for the borders and state organisation of peoples. The struggles for the recognition of an independent state entity of their own have punctuated the political evolutions and transformations of the region especially in the last two centuries[8]. Despite that, saying that Yugoslavia was kept together by a violent political dictatorship or outright repression of national emotions is far from accurate. But as the fundamental idea of the Fourth Yugoslavia began to crumble, nationalist groupings in both the intellectual elite and the general populace had a propensity to return to attitudes and behaviours that were more typical of the Second World War and earlier periods. As a matter of fact, the idea behind the creation of a Yugoslav state was the official cancellation of the differences between the peoples from both a historical-political and confessional point of view, hence the creation of a single Yugoslav nation. As of 6 January 1929, all national symbols were abolished, including the Constitution, the parties were dissolved[9]. After the end of World War II, the national liberation movement led by Josip Broz, known as Tito, and the Yugoslav Communist Party had gained strength. The partisan movement, monopolised by the communists but an expression of different souls and made up of members from all over the region, soon managed to upset the balance and led to the birth of the Federative People's

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[7] See note 3

[8] See note 2

[9] *Ibidem*

Republic of Yugoslavia[10], made up of 6 nations, whose communities were recognised as constituent peoples. The motto of the new state *"Bratstvo i jedinstvo"* (fraternity and unity) represented the policy of pan-Yugoslav solidarity, cooperation between nations, integration and the creation of a Yugoslav national consciousness. In Tito's Yugoslavia, the memory of World War II assuming paramount importance in education and public opinion and legitimizing the power of the ruling party, the communist ideology promoting egalitarian patriotism and "proletarian internationalism," the identification of an "external enemy," common to all ethnic groups, recompacting the need for internal national unity, all represent elements that consolidate an official nationalism into a multinational state officially aimed at guaranteeing ethnic and social rights to the groups within it. The events since the 1970s that contribute to changes in the political, economic, and cultural conditions within Yugoslavia seem to lead to forms of nationalism that appear profoundly different in the present day[11]. An economically weak and politically delegitimized central government, the revival of "distinctive" local cultures and memories divided historical memories seem to lead, in the 1990s, to the strengthening of rival ethnic and national ideologies that can no longer be reconciled. Also, nationalism was formed by intellectual elites and later accepted by some members of the political elite, particularly in Serbia and Slovenia, when it first surfaced in its most destructive form in the late 1980s. As a matter of fact, Nationalisms take on distinct ethnic-national characters: the nationalism of Slovenia and Croatia is linked to demands for greater democratization and liberalization, including economic liberalization, while that of Kosovo is based on exclusivity ethnicity; Serbia appeals to its former dominance over the state (the "Greater Serbia")[12].

A key moment in the process of the dissolution of the Yugoslav state is identified in the Federal Constitution of 1974. As a matter of fact, it was the innovations contained in Yugoslavia's last constitutional document, drafted by politician Edvard Kardelj, that caused both the economic and political crisis of the late 1970s, and it was again that constitutional text that formed the legal basis that had enabled the dismemberment of the Federation[13]. In addition, by treating the Yugoslav constituent nations as completed and their republics as sovereign states (according to the wording of the 1974 Constitution), the ideological narrative of Yugoslav communism in practice protected and promoted nationalism in its constituent nations. At the same time, that Yugoslav nationalism and the

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[10] In 1963, the country was renamed again, as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).

[11] Kodilja, R. (1999). Identità nazionale e nazionalismo nell'ex-Jugoslavia. Un'analisi psico-sociale. *Studi Politici: Numero Monografico Dedicato All'europa Centro Orientale E Balcanica*.

[12] *ibidem*

[13] Pištan, Č. (2014). Dalla balcanizzazione alla jugonostalgija: dissoluzione della Repubblica Socialista Federale di Jugoslavia. *Istituzioni Del Federalismo*.

Yugoslav state were being weakened, the nationalism of the constituent nations was being strengthened. The very concept that held Yugoslavia together through the consensus of its leaders also had within itself a destructive and disintegrative potential. This tendency was actually also the result of Kardelj's conception, constructed as a radical alternative to both interwar Yugoslav unity and Soviet statist centralism. Because it was based on a fragile political compromise between segments of the elite, Yugoslav unity after 1974 depended more on the interpretation of the real meaning of this concept than on formal procedural rules and effective representative institutions. it is therefore within the Yugoslav political elite that one must look for the seeds of Yugoslavia's collapse in that by promoting a nonethnic basis for Yugoslav unity, the elite made nationalism the main rhetorical antipode to the dominant ideology of the regime. At the same time, by declaring anyone who opposed the regime a nationalist, the regime effectively promoted such nationalism as the main alternative[14]. By excluding nationalism from the public sphere, the Kardeljists weakened it in public and strengthened it in hiding. The weakening of the state made nationalist demands for a strong state (whether Yugoslavia or separate nation-states of constituent nations) plausible. This is how one can explain why nationalism grew as the main alternative to the system of self-rule. Contrary to popular interpretations linking the existence of communist-run strong states with the population's demand for strong (nationalist) states after communism, it can be safely argued that it was the weakness of the state that caused an alternative. Post-communism (like anti-communism) aimed to create the missing state, not to preserve the one that already existed[15]. In all the states belonging to Yugoslavia, different types of nationalism had formed by the 1980s. The idea of a Greater Serbia was perhaps the most impactful of the irredentist ideologies in the Slavic Balkans and it had, also, a fundamental role in the process of the unification of Jugoslavia. The most famous Serbian linguist of the 19th century, Vuk Karadi, also asserted that anyone who spoke the Stokavian dialect should be regarded as a Serb. This is significant because the aforementioned dialect is the most widely spoken form of Serbo-Croatian. Greater Serbia was originally intended to acquire all of Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as several of the areas that are currently partially in Croatia[16].

1.1.3. The cultural (religious) argument
According to various theories put forward to explain the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the failure of the Yugoslav culture, nation, and state to unite was primarily caused by the diversity of the traditions and

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[14] *ibidem*

[15] See note 3

[16] Memorandum 1986 (the Greater Serbian Ideology) by Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences

cultures of the Yugoslav nations (based on the historic divisions between Eastern and Western Christianity as well as between Christianity and Islam). Thus, cultural diversity—particularly linguistic and theological differences—made nations and encouraged people to want to live independently of one another in their own governments. There were simply too many cultural, religious, economic, linguistic, and historical disparities between the Yugoslav nationalities, which led to the permanent destabilisation of the Yugoslav state. Therefore, the country's division was unavoidable and in a way natural[17]. For example, the cultural argument was largely used by Croatian president, Franjo Tudjman in 1997 in order to legitimize and justify both the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the religious conflicts between Croats and Bosniaks, and so between Catholics and Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina. As a matter of fact, a key element to be taken into account is religion, which is capable of acting both as a cohesive force within communities and as a disruptive factor to the outside world. The Balkans present an extremely diverse religious variety, which is the result of the historical legacy of long dominations. The religious argument is strictly linked with the ethno-nationalistic ones.

But compared to many other methods, the cultural argument comes closer to helping us comprehend why Yugoslavia fell apart. It undoubtedly acknowledges the significance of people's views, which were mostly shaped by opinion leaders and ideologues but were largely undervalued in much of today's literature.

1.1.4. The contemporary perspective

The end of the Yugoslav wars saw the emergence of small nations lacking real political and economic effectiveness, with a devastated industrial sector and a shattered economy in the grip of thriving black markets and extremely weak state institutions. Moreover, the dynamics at work played against the small nations, favouring the aggregation and emergence of new supranational political-economic actors capable of global expression. In this context, the European Union was the only possibility. When this system failed, Yugoslavia broke apart, and bloody wars broke out. Following, the post-Yugoslav successor governments started a protracted transition process that lasted decades with the goal of changing their political, social, and economic structures to reflect liberal democratic ideals and a free-market economy. The largest advocate of these values in the area, EU membership, became a teleological fixture in Western Balkans politics. A successful transition more or less required establishing a liberal democratic framework that ensured adherence to the European system of values

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[17] Ibidem

and beliefs in place of the socialist institutions of politics, economy, and society. However, this transition itself was not only delayed in the Western Balkans context compared to the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, it also took place within a very different framework because of the peculiarities of the Yugoslav socialist experience, particularly the fact that disintegration happened through violent conflict[18].

 In the 2000s, the EU stabilisation and association process for the Western Balkans began. A process that led to a rapid opening of markets and increased economic integration with the EU. The Balkan economies remained devastated, poverty was still widespread, but macro-economic data recorded an average annual GDP growth of over 5%. However, these results were due to the inflow of foreign capital. The real economy continued to inhabit rubble as no government undertook any serious restructuring of the economic system. On the contrary, that was the era of the great tycoons, free to exercise oligarchic power, influencing politics and obtaining enormous wealth from the privatisation of old state enterprises. Today it is possible to say that that growth model, based on the so-called Washington consensus of unchecked liberalisation and privatisation, was unsustainable. As a matter of fact, this was demonstrated by the effects of the 2008-2009 economic crisis. The road to Europe had brought only apparent growth. The 2008 crisis hit the Balkan countries very hard precisely because of their excessive integration with the EU. But unlike the EU member states, the post-Yugoslavian states did not benefit from subsidies or money transfers, as they could not draw on European structural funds. Funds that would certainly have alleviated the impact of the economic crisis. The Balkan countries found themselves in the uncomfortable position of being completely penetrated by the EU countries, their rules, their investments, their speculations, yet suffering them without having the guarantees that the member states have. On average, the countries of the region trade 74% of their total trade volume with the EU. The financial sector is largely in the hands of European countries: between 75% and 95% of their banking systems are German, French, Austrian or Greek-owned. Almost all of them have adopted fixed exchange rate regimes with the euro, in some cases even using it as their national currency. However, the Balkan countries have no voting rights in the European forum, cannot take part in decisions that affect them, receive no economic transfers - except for a few crumbs from pre-accession funds (Ipa II) - and have no access to crisis aid. Moreover, the wars of the 1990s led to the establishment of states that were completely subject to the adversities of the time, economically dominated from outside, and politically dependent on foreign powers. The process of Europeanisation, understood as cultural and legislative adherence to the policies and values

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[18] Anastasakis, Bennett, A., Madden, D., & Merdzanovic, A. (2020). Political legacy of Yugoslavia : nationalism and identity in the modern Balkans (Anastasakis, A. Bennett, D. Madden, & A. Merdzanovic, Eds.; First edition.). I.B. Tauris. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781788317986

advocated by Brussels governance, is still unfinished. The possibility of replacing nationalism in its most dangerous forms with a renewed unifying idea, capable of bringing the peoples of the region back into one common home, seems more a good intention than a concrete possibility, at least in the medium term. In fact, even today, national identities play a central role in keeping alive often anachronistic divisions between the peoples of the region. The European promise of the former Yugoslavian countries' accession to the European Union, as declared during the European Council in Thessaloniki in 2003[19], has therefore been broken. More specifically it is stated: 'The European Union reiterates its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. The future of the Balkans is in the European Union'. The Balkan countries today still harbour nationalism and resentment towards the European Union. The local leaders recall the motivations that led to the break-up of Yugoslavia, and the masses, subjugated by propaganda, still believe this[20].

The demise of "the concept of a Yugoslav country" must be the primary lens through which the disintegration of Yugoslavia is examined. As a matter of fact, it is necessary to highlight the point of view of Professor Watchel which states that: "*the collapse of multinational Yugoslavia and the establishment of separate unnational states (...) were not the result of the breakdowns, which manifestly occurred and have been copiously documented, themselves sprang from the gradual destruction of the concept of a Yugoslav nation[21]*". Therefore, it is insufficient to examine the concept and its setting in isolation. It is true that the political elites' efforts to get their fundamental ideas implemented at all costs led to a major portion of the economic and political crises[22]. To sum up, it is possible to agree with Watchel's conclusion that the *'various causes that have been cited for the collapse of Yugoslavia were secondary to the disintegration of the very concept of the Yugoslav nation, and it is to that cultural process we must turn if we wish to see how existing deep-seated*

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[19] The European Council held in Thessaloniki on 19 and 20 June 2003 reaffirmed the European Council's determination to fully and effectively support the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries, which will become an integral part of the EU once the criteria have been met. It endorsed the Council conclusions of 16 June on the Western Balkans, including the annexed "The Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans: moving towards European integration" which aims at further strengthening the privileged relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans Western Balkans, also drawing on the enlargement experience. Press corner. (2003). Retrieved 14 August 2022, from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/DOC_03_3

[20] I Balcani vassalli d’Europa, d. (2022). I Balcani vassalli d'Europa, dalla caduta del Muro ad oggi - East Journal. Retrieved 13 August 2022, from https://www.eastjournal.net/archives/101694

[21] Wachtel, A. (2000). *Making a nation, breaking a nation*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press.

[22] ibidem

rivalries and hatreds were at various times overcome and encouraged and how they re-emerged triumphant[23]'.

1.2 Political use of history

History has a basic function in the construction of national identity, which is why it is constantly being revised and reworked; different historical events are brought together and become part of the national brand. National identities feed on myths, readings and re-readings of history, constructions and reconstructions of tradition. The myths and events that make up the national history of a state are chosen ad hoc and have the function of making the population that has to identify with them feel part of a common destiny. History is constructed and interpreted on the basis of present and future needs, and this has the precise purpose of providing a justification for ancient examples used in a nationalist key[24]. It therefore seems possible to say that historical truth lies somewhere between worthless facts and value judgements. Objective facts exist, but their selection and interpretation are subjective. In fact, most professional historians agree that objective interpretations of historical facts are not possible because historians are influenced by their contemporary societies.

As a matter of fact, the public use of history is a very recent field of study and, for this reason, history and public use of history are not clearly distinguishable. In fact, the public use of history with its current characteristics can be traced back to the turning point of the 1920s and 1930s, when the mass media began to spread and become incisive. Since then, the public use of history became an increasingly vast and varied field in which more and more actors (journalists, politicians, cultural and political associations) operated. The historical knowledge circulating in our society today seems to be less and less carried by professional historians and more and more the prerogative of the media. Between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the great illusion of historiography was to believe it could reconstruct past events as they happened. Today, a more critical and more complex view of history prevails that considers the attainment of 'truth' to be almost completely impossible. History and historical research move towards a critical ascertainment of facts, but it is inevitable that some historical truths will never be achieved[25].

One who speaks about the public user of history is the Italian historian Nicola Gallerano. He gives a definition, meaning, on the one hand, the extension of historical discourse outside the original

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[23] ibidem

[24] Wiersma, J. (2009). Politics of the Past: The Use and Abuse of History. In H. Swoboda & J. Wiersma, *Politics of the Past: The Use and Abuse of History*. The Socialist Group in the European Parliament.

[25] *Ibidem*

scientific and disciplinary sphere intended mainly for specialists and connoisseurs of the subject. On the other hand, he identifies the improper use of history when it is manipulated for propaganda purposes and turned into an explicit instrument of political struggle. It is therefore possible to see how Gallerano's conception of the 'public use of history' goes beyond the places assigned to scientific research. To the public use of history belong not only the mass media but also literature, the arts and places such as schools and historical museums. We can therefore say that all those who are committed to promoting a reading of the past that is polemical towards historical common sense, from the memory of their respective group, make a public use of history[26].

The cognitive procedures and problems of historiography are totally different from those that characterise the public use of history. Historiography makes the past an object of knowledge and, in reconstructing it for cognitive purposes, is bound by rules that serve as a guarantee of autonomy and credibility. Historisation is both process and result that has, among its many fundamental methodological factors, distance, interpretation and subjectivity. In short, the historical perspective must take the necessary distance from its object of study while keeping prejudices and preferences in check, it must do reconstructive/interpretive work and thus lead to a shared, intersubjective and multifocal reconstruction of the past. More precisely, historical truth lies somewhere between valueless facts and value judgments. In contrast, history in its public use has different characteristics:

- It pursues explicit pedagogical intentions (building consensus, conveying values that for one reason or another are deemed decisive in the present).

- It selects topics and sources on the basis of political or ideological priorities.

- It involves memory, individual and collective identities.

However, according to Gallerano, it is unproductive to manifest only a rigid opposition to the use of public history. That because, the public use of history in many cases cannot be ignored because it involves a large part of the cultural agencies operating in our societies. In our globalised society, outside of history books and historiography, there is a lot of history, and this very rich flow of direct or indirect communication about the past, unlike history texts that are often limited to a small group of society, reaches and appeals to a much wider audience, deeply shaping beliefs, mentalities and visions of the past[27].

A significant public use of history has resulted from political forces' propensity to utilise it to strengthen their own legitimacy and undermine their opponents' through frequently erroneous and instrumental reinterpretations of the past. One of the clearest examples of how history is used by the

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[26] Gallerano, N. (1999). *Le verità della storia*. Roma: Manifestolibri.

[27] *Ibidem*

public is when parts of historiography are transferred to official memory or when politics "institutionalises" in commemorations the results of a historical truth by turning them into public memory[28]. It is important first of all to recognise the radical difference between history and memory. The basic distinction is that memory is based on identification with the past, while history is based on the objectiveness of the past. More precisely is important to highlight the difference between history, individual memory, and collective memory. Individual memory is based on personal experience, sometimes based on documents, such as diaries, letters or photographs. The holder of a memory considers himself to be the bearer of a truth, as a first-hand experience that cannot be disputed. History as a critical reconstruction has among its tasks that of correcting individual memories and then placing them in a broader context of explanations and interpretations. Collective memory, on the other hand, is a different matter, a set of memories, narratives and representations of the past shared by a group, sometimes by an entire nation. It is one of the building blocks of the identity of social groups and national identities. Collective memory is conveyed by an experience of the past lived or relived by the memory of those who preceded us along a common generational line; it is the result of an accumulation of knowledge acquired in study or handed down orally and then subjected to a process of simplification and transformed into commonplaces and stereotypes. The creation of memory, both individual and collective, is the result of narration. Through narratives it is possible to come to know, understand and make sense of world, and it is always through narratives that it is possible to build identity. A narrative identity approach assumes that social action can only be understood if we recognise that people are guided to act by the structural and cultural relationships in which they are embedded and the stories through which they construct their identities[29]. It has often happened, and happens, that institutions, states, and political forces have conformed, or even shaped, their public life and collective actions according to their history and memory. They have erected a part of their collective and public history and memory as a constitutive and founding element of their identity and thus have acted politically predominantly in function of their collective history and memory. Such a process is particularly important because it means that the presence or absence of certain memories in the cultural fabric and in the structuring of the identity dimension can be decisive and conditioning because they have effects in the present time and in the future time. This is due to the fact that the memory policies used by groups and institutions are often directed towards the past; but they can also be directed towards the future and thus involve a mobilising factor and a projection into the future, in short, they can be constituent elements of a political project that one wishes to

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[28] See note 24

[29] Pomian, K. (2009). Memory Wars. In H. Swoboda & J. Wiersma, *Politics of the Past: The Use and Abuse of History*. The Socialist Group in the European Parliament.

realise. Obviously it all depends on the type of political project one wants to build and realise, but if conformism is needed, ideological and uniforming forcing will prevail. In this case, the risk is that a tyranny of the past over the present will be produced by the application of paralysing and obsessive memorial devices. This is mainly due to the fact that it becomes necessary to build institutions that have the precise task of cultivating a certain memory, which translates into an imperative, to transmit it in the right way, to regiment individuals and to find the resources to fulfil the task commanded by memory[30]. Individual identity, and subsequently collective identity, is a fundamental component of memory, it is the fulcrum around which the memory policies of the states of the former Yugoslavia revolve, which, precisely in order to assert their power, constructed a collective identity by forcing individual, particular, local or ethnic memories towards that particular collective memory, exerting vigorous control over language, public narratives, the selection and monumentalisation of facts, protagonists and events of the past that converge in the construction of this identity. All of this is a clever and orchestrated public use of history and memory, because historiographical elements deemed essential to reinforce collective identity are adopted in public memory, and memorial fragments equally essential to the national identity process are adopted in official history[31].

1.3 Role of memory in Yugoslavia

The war in Yugoslavia therefore entered the West's collective memory in a traumatic form, cracking the crystal foundation on which the European Union had built its ideology. Memory studies scholars have shown how political elites selectively articulate cultural memory in order to construct and maintain political legitimacy. The disintegration of the Yugoslav state and the emergence of post-Yugoslav nation-states provides a particularly interesting series of case studies to analyse how the past has been framed to fit the current political climate[32]. Memory studies are still a relatively new (but growing) field of research in Southeastern Europe, but a new generation of younger scholars from the region and internationally have, in recent years, contributed significantly to understanding the importance of collective remembrance in contemporary politics[33]. The post-Yugoslav area is widely used as a case study for how states might use the past as a tool to meet their current requirements. In particular, how the memory of World War II was used to stir up ethnic animosities

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[30] Ibidem

[31] See note 2

[32] Pavlaković, V. (2020). Memory Politics in the Former Yugoslavia. *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, *18*(2), 9-32. doi: 10.36874/riesw.2020.2.1

[33] *Ibidem*.

during the hostilities of the 1990s has been extensively studied in relation to how history is used to mobilise ethnic conflicts in the region. The constituent republics of Yugoslavia shared an official history based on socialism, Yugoslavism, "brotherhood and unity" of the national groups, and the united, anti-fascist partisan triumph over the Axis powers in World War II up until the disintegration of the country in 1990. As each new post-Yugoslav state began a process of national "rediscovery," which involves rewriting history from a new, national perspective, this shared history started to fracture in the late 1980s and collapsed in the 1990s. From the 1990s through the formation of statehood in the post-Yugoslav republics until the present, the process of national redefinition and the exploitation of historical relics that support this new national vision has persisted (and still continues)[34].

In the post-Yugoslav countries, the debate arising from the confrontation with the past continues to play an important role, constituting a constant presence in the public discourse and rhetoric of political and cultural actors. In fact, public institutions build resolutions, laws, commemorations around memory, the urban landscape is modified on the basis of the will of political actors, films and TV series are made, schoolbooks are structured, sport is also driven by the use of memory, in particular football. As a matter of fact, in the Balkans, football is connected to political and social life. In those countries a team is an instrument of identity recognition of a city, sometimes of an entire population. There are other places where memory politics are practised besides memorials and commemorative rituals. Education and textbooks have an impact on future generations, and while initiatives to write shared histories already exist, curriculum and educational resources continue to be a battleground for ideologies. More and more museums and memorials have been built around the region as the memory of the wars of the 1990s has grown institutionalised over time; practically all of them adhere to each country's official narratives[35]. Moreover, the temporal proximity to the conflicts of the 1990s, characterised by violence towards civilians, retains an emotional and material impact on the population. It is therefore possible to say that the problems of confrontation with the past originate from above rather than from below. The war in Yugoslavia created the state-administrative entities that exist today, and it was during that historical period that a large part of today's political, economic and cultural elites came to power. The latter, with the aim of preserving their public legitimacy, continue to revive ethnonational narratives, presenting the experience of their people in terms of

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[34] Trošt, T., & David, L. (2021). Renationalizing Memory in the Post-Yugoslav Region. *Journal Of Genocide Research*, *24*(2), 228-240. doi: 10.1080/14623528.2021.1968852

[35] See note 32

heroism, self-defence or persecution depending on circumstances and needs[36]. Obviously, the political use of memory is not exclusive to that of the Yugoslav war, but other historical events forcefully enter the public debate, first and foremost the events of the Second World War, which are already the subject of a conflict of memories that opened in the 1980s and has never been recomposed. In fact, today's élites try to find a relation of continuity between the 1990s, 1940s and the previous centuries, constructing discourses on the destiny of their nation. In particular, similar to the Second World War, each nation engages in some form of victimisation competition, trying to portray the Yugoslav state and its dissolution as being the most detrimental to their own ethnic group. Additionally, each of the nations has undertaken an excessive number of memorialization projects, whether they are connected to distant pasts like the Skopje 2014 project in North Macedonia[37] or the construction of vast memoryscapes in Croatia, Kosovo, and Bosnia-Herzegovina connected to the 1990s wars, which will be analyse in the next later[38]. Lastly, regional relationships, Euro-Atlantic integration processes, and a resurgence of great power geopolitics, which has seen Turkey and Russia asserting their presence in the Balkans in the wake of the European Union's internal crises and enlargement fatigue, have all had an impact on these memory regimes. While the commemoration of the 1990s has been relatively consistent in Slovenia and Montenegro, with very little effect on elections or regular politics, in Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the breakup of Yugoslavia continues to have a significant political impact. As a matter of fact, it seems important to focus on areas where history has been renationalised for the purpose of nation-building, namely in three of the post-Yugoslav countries: Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia and Serbia. The aim is to show how the tension between rewriting history in order to consolidate new national narratives while at the same time adapting to international processes leads to a complication of memory politics and new forms of exploitation of memory for national agendas. In addition, one of the most conspicuous platforms for political leaders to describe their readings of the past and lay out their political agendas for the future

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[36] Crespi, G., Fruscione, G., Sasso, A., Selvelli, G., Siragusa, M., & Napolitano, M. (2021). Il confronto con il passato- *dagli accordi di Dayton ai giorni nostri*. In A. Sasso, *Capire i Balcani occidentali* (1st ed.). Bottega Errante Edizioni.

[37] Skopje 2014 was a project financed by the Macedonian government of the then nationalist VMRO-DPMNE party, with the official aim of giving the capital Skopje a more classical charm. The project, officially announced in 2010, consisted mainly of the construction of colleges, museums and government buildings, as well as the erection of monuments depicting historical figures from the region of Macedonia. The project was seen as politically controversial in its nature and as an effort at nation-building, as it sought to further impose the narrative of Macedonian history, promoting a Macedonian identity with unbroken continuity from antiquity through the Middle Ages to modern times. Karajkov, R. (2010). Skopje 2014: Alessandro, dove sei?. Retrieved 24 August 2022, from https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Macedonia-del-Nord/Skopje-2014-Alessandro-dove-sei-75282

[38] See note 32

is commemorations and memorial speeches. Commemorations, according to Barry Schwartz, are crucial for understanding historical narratives since they *"lift from an ordinary historical sequence those extraordinary historical events which embody our deepest and most fundamental values. Commemoration [...] is, in this sense, a register of sacred history[39]"*[40]. War commemorations play a particularly important role in the former Yugoslavia because of the traumatic experiences of the 20th century there. They do this by appealing to the emotions, evoking heroic stories of state-building, and emphasising the sacrifices made by earlier generations for the country. Commemorations of war serve to define national identities because they are expressions of citizenship and a communal affirmation of the identity of a nation in peril. A nation's cultural memory must include commemorations and other political rituals since they are essential to the development and maintenance of ideological, ethnic, economic, gender, and other identities. Memory studies examine the many remembering and forgetting processes that take place at the individual, social, and societal levels. Central themes of memory studies include the creation of cultural memory and cultural identities. A corpus of reusable texts, images, and rituals unique to each culture in each era, and whose "cultivation" serves to stabilise and manage that society's self-image, establish and manifest the interplay between cognitive (individual) and social (collective) memory symbolically[41].

It seems relevant to highlight how states of Balkans (e.g. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia) have used their narrative of the war in order to shape the memory of the population.

The case of Bosnia-Herzegovina appears to be the most fragmented due to the institutional division drawn on an ethnonational criterion following the outcome of the war. In fact, the country is separated into two administrative entities, the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the State Council of Ministers, for example, there is no Ministry of Culture, no Ministry of Education, and no Ministry of War Veterans, which are only present at the entity level. This shows how there is no hegemonic state narrative, let alone a homogeneous memory policy conducted by public institutions, but rather three poles of memory production, coinciding with the three dominant post-war nationalist forces and corresponding to the country's constituent peoples: the Bosnian (Muslim-Bosnian), Serbian and Croatian. These three poles control all nodes of memory such as monuments, school and cultural programs[42]. Political elites, with the aim of retaining power, strengthen the status quo and were unwilling to invest political capital in reconciliation. On the contrary, they have made

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[39] B. Schwartz, *The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory*, "Social Forces" 1982, vol. 61, no. 2, p. 377.

[40] See note 22

[41] *ibidem*

[42] See note 36.

constant political use of history as a tool for the emotional mobilisation of public opinion. This had a double function, on the one hand providing a distraction from the social problems affecting the country, and on the other hand reaffirming ethnic importance as the central criterion of political representation, which guarantees the dominant forces themselves a stable consensus. As mentioned earlier, there are three poles of memory production in the country, and this causes them to push against each other, recounting both the heroic and liberating character of their own people and the victimisation and suffering caused by their neighbours. The Serb-majority Republic of Srpska, for example, represents the conflict of the 1990s as the founding event of its autonomy. In fact, the Republic self-proclaimed secession from Bosnia-Herzegovina on 9 January 1992 and was recognised, within the Bosnian-Herzegovinian state framework, in the Dayton Accords in December 1995. The rhetoric carried by this sub-state entity gives autonomy the value of a *de facto* statehood that aspires to become *de jure* with full independence[43]. This is reaffirmed by the military parade that takes place annually on 9 January, which, however, has been banned by the Bosnian court, as of 2015 on the grounds that the date, which falls on a Serbian Christian Orthodox religious holiday, discriminates against other ethnic groups in the country such as Muslim Bosnians. During the military parade on 9 January 2022, Milorad Dodik[44], a Serbian member of the tripartite presidency of Bosnia, said as part of the celebrations that *'Every national movement, and ours as well, has only one goal, which is to build a people's state, i.e. their own state. The doubt that it is possible should never cross the minds of us Serbs and other peoples living in Republika Srpska. Because it is possible*'[45]. From this example, it is possible to see how the narrative of war is presented on the one hand as self-defence by the other two communities, but also an affirmation of the goals and rights of one's own people. This is justified by the omission of the historical presence on the territory of the Muslim, Croat and other minority populations. In fact, as stated in a number of judgments of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY)[46], the leadership of the Republic of Srpska committed war crimes against

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[43] *Ibidem*

[44] Milorad Dodik is an ethnic Serbian Bosnian politician, currently a member of the Presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina and previously President of the Serbian Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina from 2010 to 2018. Milorad Dodik is anti-European and pro-Russian and has always threatened the secession of the Serbian part of Bosnia-Herzegovina since the country he now leads is illegitimate as it was built by Muslims and therefore Serbs would have no reason to live there. https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/milorad-dodik/

[45] (2022). Retrieved 19 August 2022, from https://it.euronews.com/2022/01/09/come-trent-anni-fa-i-serbi-di-bosnia-rivogliono-la-secessione

[46] International Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia since 1991, IT-09-92-T D117281 - D114741 22 November 2017

the non-Serbian population during the conflict, including the genocide in Srebrenica, the concentration camps in Keraterm, or the siege of Sarajevo. To date, in the current policies of remembrance, there is no trace of the assumption of these responsibilities, nor a willingness to grant spaces of commemoration to the victims. In fact, in 2003, the Srebrenica-Potočari memorial was built under pressure from the international community. Also, under pressure from the international community, in 2004, the Republic of Srpska published a report partially assuming the commission of crimes against Muslim civilians in Srebrenica, omitting the term genocide but acknowledging the extent of the massacre[47]. In August 2018, however, the Parliament of the Republic of Srpska officially annulled the 2004 report. In other words, it aimed at a systematic rejection of evidence and the role of international justice, glorifying the political and military leadership of the conflict. The nationalist narrative of the Croatian side in the federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina claims the defence of its national interests, as it does not have a single administrative entity of reference or a linear historical path. In fact, the Bosnian-Croat fringes were first allied with the Bosnian state army, then against it, only to be allied again. None of the Bosnian-Croat leaders publicly acknowledged or apologised for the crimes committed by their militias such as the crimes committed in Stpni Do and Ahmići in central Bosnia against the Muslim civilian population, the siege of Mostar and the internment camps in Herzegvovina (Dretelj, Gabela, Heliodrom), where Muslim and Serb prisoners suffered mistreatment and torture. The Bosnian nationalist narrative, on the other hand, describes the war as an aggression by the external forces of Serbia and Croatia, the expression of their respective local centrifugal nationalisms, and places great emphasis on the genocide in Srebrenica[48].

Unlike the fragmented memory in Bosnia, the Croatian one follows a more compact approach. The dominant narrative is that of a victorious independence process that, however, passes through two key historical moments: the defeat of Vukovar in 1991 and the reconquest of the Krajina region through Operation Storm (Oluja). The former, saw the massacre of civilians by Serbian militias while the latter, re-established the territorial integrity of the country. The latter, however, resulted in the expulsion of a large part of the area's Serbian population and victims. The orientation of Croats institutions towards the memory of the 1990s was initially characterised by a process of European integration that culminated in Croatia's accession to the European Union in 2013. During this period, the institutions became more oriented towards reconciliation, leading up to 2009 when the joint visit of Croatian President Ivo Josipović and Serbian President Boris Tadić to the Vukovar area, who

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[47] See note 36

[48] Pavlaković V., *Symbols and the culture of memory in the Republika Srpska Krajina*, "Nationalities Papers" 2013, vol. 6, p. 893-909, https://doi.org/1 0.1080/00905992.2012.743511.

mutually paid tribute to the civilian victims caused by their own militias. This conciliatory attitude, however, took a turn for the worse as of 2014, when nationalist aims of confrontation with the past re-emerged and pressure from Brussels after Croatia's entry into the EU, also due to the post-crisis economic situation that favoured the electorate's turn to the right[49]. However, it is true that nowadays there is a new change of course that began in 2020 when, on the 25th anniversary of Operation Storm, Zagreb's deputy prime minister Borsi Milošević, a member of the Serb minority party (SDSS), attended the celebrations in Knin, while veterans' minister Tomo Medved, from the right-wing party (HDZ), went to the village of Grubori to commemorate a massacre of Serb civilians committed by the Croatian army. The memorial speeches not only showed that a different kind of narrative was possible, in which the legality and validity of Operation Storm was not questioned, while acknowledging the Serbian civilian victims. Despite that, nationalists in Serbia and Croatia were angry by this historically significant symbolic action because it denied them the kind of polarising politics they had long enjoyed. In addition, the administration unveiled a number of initiatives aimed at enhancing the lives of those living in former combat zones, and the Ministry of Veteran Affairs committed to take part in commemorations of Serbian casualties. Additionally, Serbs who left Croatia more than 20 years ago have been extended an invitation to come back by Archbishop Marin Barii. This commemoration represented a radical shift in the region's commemorative culture and showed the political will at the highest levels to use commemoration in a healing, rather than antagonistic, manner in the wake of the destructive wars of the 1990s, though it is still to be seen how these symbolic acts can be translated into action[50].

To sum up, to prevent future conflicts in a period in which regional cooperation is more important than ever, youth need to learn how to think critically, and the Yugoslav successor states need to encourage historical dialogue and intellectual interchange on all levels. Every country, every ethnic group, and every state must face their own histories and behaviours. It is necessary to consider the opinions of others in order to do it in an open and forward-thinking manner, including both the neighbours inside and outside of the border. No one truth exists. However, there are enough facts to allow people to create their own ideas and make differentiated moral judgments based on the facts.

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[49] Stanković. (2019). A contemporary philosophical perspective on cultural memory in Croatia. In *Framing the nation and collective identities : political rituals and cultural memory of the twentieth-century traumas in Croatia /* (pp. 50–63). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group,. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315145730-3

[50] *Ibidem*

This is exactly what is required if one wants to learn from, overcome, and provide the groundwork for the European Union's integration of the Balkan region[51].

After having pointed out some examples of states' narrative in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, it the next chapter the focus will be on the political use of history in Serbia, focusing also on its relations with the major powers that have an influence on the region such as European Union and Russia.

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[51] Swoboda, H. (2009). Diversity in historical education: a Balkan Example. In H. Swoboda & J. Wiersma, *Politics of the Past: The Use and Abuse of History*. The Socialist Group in the European Parliament.

CHAPTER 2: Extremism and collective memory in Serbia: political and geopolitical implications

2.1 Defining, Framing and Contextualizing Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia

The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, which claimed more than 130,000 lives, is the largest military conflict to have taken place in Europe since World War II. All three wars involving the breakup of Yugoslavia had Serbia as a participant (the war in Croatia 1991–1995, the war in Bosnia 1992–1995, and the war in Kosovo 1998–1999)[52]. Through the dissolution of Yugoslavia, come out six different states and one which still does not yet been recognised from the United Nations, which is Kosovo. The Republic of Serbia currently has established and sustains formal diplomatic ties with the Republics of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Kosovo is not acknowledged as an independent republic, due to the stagnation of the relation between Serbia and Kosovo itself. Furthermore, the Albanian demand for independence was not accepted by the Serbs, who were only prepared to grant an autonomous status. Kosovo has been recognised by 74 states in the world, including 86% of NATO members and 81% of EU members, the opposition of some major powers (Russia, China, India, Brazil) and the hesitancy of some European states (Spain, Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia and Romania)

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[52] After the death of President Tito, the difficulties already present in Yugoslavia became even more evident, such as a very serious internal economic crisis that led to the emergence of nationalist parties with different visions of their role in the region. Slovenes and Croats wanted to take part in the innovation processes of Western Europe, the Serbs led by Milošević were motivated by the ideal of the realisation of a 'Greater Serbia', the Kosovars wanted to escape Serbian control. Clashes took place at an early stage in Slovenia and Croatia, which proclaimed independence through a referendum in 1991. Subsequently, the war with Bosnia-Herzegovina began, which lasted from 1992 to 1995 and pitted Serbs, Croats and Muslims against each other, three peoples who had lived in peace for centuries. Ethnic cleansing operations by the 'Bosnian Serbs', led by Karadzić, led to massacres like the one in Srebrenica in July 1995, in which more than 8,000 Muslim men lost their lives. Sarajevo, a city that symbolised peaceful coexistence between cultures, was forced into a siege that is remembered for being the longest and most violent in the history of modern warfare. In November 1995, agreements were signed in Dayton, that put an end to hostilities in Bosnia-Herzegovina and defined the political and institutional structure of the Bosnian state as it still exists today. Despite that, the violence in the region did not cease, as actions by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and Serbian repression intensified in Kosovo in 1998. It was not until March 1999, with the NATO intervention in the Balkans, that the conflicts in Yugoslavia came to an end. In 2000, the Milošević era came to an end and he was arrested in April 2001 and subsequently handed over to the Hague Tribunal. Yugoslavia has since then entered the collective imagination as 'ex-Yugoslavia', an unstable land reeling from a violent fratricidal war, shrouded in a veil of nebulous confusion about its own history. Ennio, D. L. (2016). Parte seconda Dopo il bipolarismo, che cosa? 2.6. Dopo l'eclisse della Jugoslavia. *In Storia delle Relazioni Internazionali, III: Dalla fine della Guerra Fredda a Oggi* (pp. 48-58). Roma: Editori Laterza.

remain[53]. After the death of President Tito, Slobodan Milošević was firstly the former president of Serbia and, in 1997, President of Yugoslavia. Milošević was one of the leading exponents of the resurgent Serbian nationalism and so the ancient plan of creating a "Great Serbia". During his government he attempted to ethnically purge non-Serb groups from Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo and integrate these regions into Serbia for much of the decade between 1991 and 1999 through war[54]. However, he was strongly challenged for his authoritarianism and condemned for his actions by the international community. During his mandate civil war broke out in 1991, and one of the biggest atrocities was the Bosnian Genocide, which was a campaign of extermination and eviction that was primarily directed against the Bosnian Muslim community. Bosnians were targeted because, according to the ultra-nationalist Serbian mythology adopted by the Milošević dictatorship, they were Muslims whose religious ancestry extended back to the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans in the 15th century. Ethnic Albanians in Kosovo were also targeted subsequently. By turning to Islam, the Bosnians in this story were actually Serbs who had "abandoned" or "betrayed" their forebears. Therefore, they were traitors and defenders of the nearly 500-year-long Ottoman control in the area. For these Serbian nationalists, the murder of Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo served as a morality play, paying back decades of imagined Ottoman injustice. They viewed themselves as dedicated to upholding Christendom and purging it of an outside influence that had established itself in southeast

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[53] From the collapse of Yugoslavia come out six internationally recognised countries, and one which still does not yet been recognised from the United Nations, which is Kosovo. Indeed, Kosovo has always been a problem due to the presence of a multi-ethnic society (e.g., Serbs, Albanians). In order to overcome the problem between the various ethnic groups was introduced by the Security Council of the United Nation the UN Resolution 1244 which placed Kosovo under the provisional control of an international body - the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) - while, with regard to the status of the province, it called for its autonomy while reaffirming the sovereignty of Serbia. There has always been great difficulty of coexistence between the two countries. Meanwhile, the UN-sponsored negotiations on the status of Kosovo had continued to see the two sides entrenched in their respective positions: the Albanian demand for independence was not accepted by the Serbs, who were only prepared to grant an autonomous status. In this stalemate, the K. Parliament unilaterally declared Kosovo's independence on 17 February 2008, and the constitution came into force in June of the same year. Despite the fact that Kosovo has been recognised by 74 states in the world, including 86% of NATO members and 81% of EU members, the opposition of some major powers (Russia, China, India, Brazil) and the hesitancy of some European states (Spain, Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia and Romania) remain. Nowadays, there are still several disputes between Serbia and Kosovo that will be elaborated in the chapter. Anastasakis, Bennett, A., Madden, D., & Merdzanovic, A. (2020). *Political legacy of Yugoslavia: nationalism and identity in the modern Balkans /*. I.B. Tauris.

[54] Jagiełło-Szostak, A. (2020). Links between foreign and security policy and historical memory: the case of Serbia – Kosovo relations. *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, *18*(2), 59-84. doi: 10.36874/riesw.2020.2.3

Europe[55]. Therefore, based on the reciprocal dynamics of the socio-political environment that formed following the wars of the 1990s, there is a pervasive and unresolved culture of extremism in Serbia. Possible explanations include the close relationships between the most important political figures in modern-day Serbia and the war era or the connections between far-right parties and the political mainstream through coalitions that frequently blur the lines between them[56]. As a matter of fact, the actual President Aleksandar Vučić was Minister of Information in the last years of Milošević's rule and that underline the strict relationship between them. In particular, Vučić's regional policy is inspired by that of Milošević, albeit with significant differences, which enabled the current Serbian president to win the elections again in April. Indeed, Vučić's regional policy, according to political scientist Jasmin Mujanovic, aims to "*establish a strongman government at home to cope with the perceived loss of stature after the fall of Milošević; position himself as a key military and political power in the Western Balkans; undermine the political and territorial integrity of neighbouring states - primarily Bosnia and Kosovo - using local actors in these states to maintain a controlling stake in the domestic politics of these polarities, with the aim of eventually 'reincorporating' portions of their territory into a large 'renewed' Serbian state*"[57]. [58]

The "Greater Serbia" strategy is being maintained by Vučić. He has long envisioned this strategy as the former general secretary of the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party. A dream that Vučić is quietly preserving, at least in his rhetoric, but one that Milošević tried to realise with a ten-year process of Yugoslavia's dissolution. One may even argue that Serbia has returned to Milošević's rule under Vučić's administration, albeit in a different way. Whereas the latter was overtly authoritarian, frequently used coercion or even the killing of journalists and political opponents, and was denounced by the West for the Yugoslav wars, Vučić exploits democracy to present himself as a progressive and pro-European reformer. To gain the support of the EU, he renounced his radical and nationalist views, but he never really changed. The modern Serbia and Milošević's Serbia are very similar in their fundamentals as two "authoritarian" regimes. Therefore, Milošević's government was openly authoritarian because it resorted extensively to intimidation or even elimination of political opponents and journalists, and was condemned by the West for the Yugoslav wars, while Vučić's government exploits democracy in order to to appear as a progressive and pro-European reformer. To win the

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[55] *Ibidem*

[56] Perry, V. (Ed.) (2019). *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st-Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag.

[57] Mujanovic, J. (2020). Vučić's Serbia is Waging Political War Against its Neighbours. Retrieved 7 September 2022, from https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/31/Vučićs-serbia-is-waging-political-war-against-its-neighbours/

[58] Ibidem

support of the EU, he gave up his extreme and nationalist views, but as will be seen later, he never truly transformed. In other words, Vučić's system has a "softer" appearance because his authoritarianism has succeeded where Milošević's partially failed: he has total control over all institutions and the media, won the Western world's support, and positioned himself as a regional leader capable of ensuring peace[59].

2.1.1 Freedom House Reports on Serbia

Despite the fact that Serbia is a parliamentary democracy with competitive multiparty elections, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which is currently in power, has steadily reduced political freedoms and other civil liberties while exerting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organisations. Serbia is ranked 62/100 in the Global freedom statutes of Freedom House Report and is therefore classified as a partially free state[60]. Especially, it is relevant, as stated before, the limitation on political and civil rights. What seems relevant to note from the Freedom house report is the political participation section[61]. The Freedom House's methodology is based on making question and giving points (0 to 4) in order to analyse the degree of freedom in every country. In the

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[59] Fruscione, G. (2020). Serbia: From Milosevic to Vučić, Return Ticket. Retrieved 7 September 2022, from https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/serbia-milosevic-Vučić-return-ticket-27699

[60] The oldest American organisation supporting and defending democracy abroad is called Freedom House. This organization published a report that used social scientific analysis techniques to evaluate the degree of freedom in every nation on earth, assigning each one a numerical score and classifying it as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free. Freedom in the World is the title of the report. For 195 countries and 15 territories, the study includes numerical ratings and related descriptive materials. 210 countries and territories are evaluated by external analysts using a combination of fieldwork, interviews with locals, information from news articles, NGOs, governments, and a range of other sources. The analyst's conclusions are then scrutinised by knowledgeable advisors and local experts. Freedom in the World examines the electoral system, political plurality and involvement, government performance, freedom of expression and of religion, rights to associations and organisations, the rule of law, and personal liberty and individual rights for each nation and territory. The report's methodology is made through the analysis of the 10 political rights indicators and the 15 civil liberties indicators, which are presented as questions and they are worth 0 to 4 points, with 0 denoting the lowest degree of freedom and 4 denoting the highest. For each indicator are established some questions (usually 3 or 4) that are always the same. For the year under evaluation, the results from the preceding edition serve as a benchmark. Although gradual changes in conditions—in the absence of a signal event—are occasionally recorded in the scores, a score is typically changed only if there has been a real-world development during the year that warrants a decline or improvement (for example, a crackdown on the media, the nation's first free and fair elections). Our history. (n.d.). Retrieved December 27, 2022, from https://freedomhouse.org/about-us/our-history

[61] Serbia: Freedom in the world 2022 country report. (n.d.). Retrieved November 21, 2022, from https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2022

report of 2022 for Serbia were made two questions related to political rights of citizens and media freedom, to which interesting answers were given. Analysing the questions made for political rights it is interesting to explore both the possibility of creating different political parties while, and the possibility, for these political parties, to obtain power through elections. In the specific, the points given to the first question is 3/4 while for the second one is 1/4. Analysing these answers, it is possible to make the conclusion that political parties are free to be established and typically operate without any formal limitations but the possibility of win election is low. Therefore, there have been peaceful transitions of power between opposing parties during the past 20 years, and the political system is still reasonably competitive. However, the SNS has employed a number of strategies to unfairly lower the election chances of the opposition. Also, there is no general cap on the amount of private money that parties and candidates can raise and spend, campaign finance laws are not consistently enforced. The SNS arranged the use of thousands of proxy donors to get around restrictions on individual donations and conceal the genuine source of money, according to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN). Indeed, Spontaneous elections' scheduling can be manipulated, independent state institutions can be under pressure, and public funds can be mobilised to assist its campaigns. Subsequently, analysing the question made for the existence of free and independent media, in this case the points given by reporters of Freedom House is 2/4. Media freedom is threatened by lawsuits or criminal charges against journalists for other offences, a lack of transparency in media ownership, editorial pressure from politicians and politically connected media owners, direct pressure and threats against journalists, and a high rate of self-censorship. This is true even though the constitution guarantees freedom of the press and defamation is not a crime. Through ad hoc contracts and other indirect subsidies, the government and the ruling party have some influence on the private media. SNS supporters own a large number of private broadcasters. The political opposition and other people who are seen as the government's enemies are frequently the targets of slander campaigns by some private national broadcasters and well-known tabloids. Independent investigative organisations are increasingly being harassed, threatened, and violently attacked by government agencies and law enforcement. Many officials of the government have publicly threatened journalists, and Vučić constantly disparages independent media in public.

Physical assaults, defamation campaigns, and harsh tax inspections have all been directed at journalists. During a press conference in March 2021, a reporter from the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK), an independent investigative organisation, questioned Vučić about the government's alleged connections to organised crime. After that press conference, KRIK was the target of a slander campaign by government media and individuals with SNS affiliations in an obvious effort to undermine the agency's work. Media supervisor groups assert that the multiple lawsuits

against KRIK and the death threats that its journalists have received are part of a deliberate strategy to stifle KRIK's ability to operate. International NGOs denounced the KRIK's relentless persecution and urged the government to stop the slander campaign[62].

However, Serbia, is ranked 46/100 in the democracy percentage and status, being classified as a Transitional or Hybrid Regime[63]. Compared to 2021, it has dropped two positions. In particular, the intimidation of civil society organisations by government officials and government media, as well as violence against peaceful protestors organised or allowed by the authorities, caused the civil society rating to decrease from 5.50 to 5.25. Additionally, the government's continuous and escalating pressure on independent media and journalists as well as the state-owned Telekom Serbia's growing media domination caused the ranking of independent media to fall from 3.25 to 3.00. As a matter of fact, additionally, Telekom attempted to get into partnerships with the private United Group, its main rival, and the owner of the only two important TV stations in the nation, N1 and Nova, as well as their primary broadcaster, the SBB cable network. Observers have viewed these actions as measures to restrict journalistic freedom and strengthen the influence of President Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which is powerful both nationally and regionally[64]. Serbia's democracy continues to deteriorate in 2021. That year was a less eventful year following the turbulent events of 2020, which included the declaration of a state of emergency, the suspension of parliament, a brutal crackdown on civil protests, contested elections, and the creation of a quasi-one-party parliament after the opposition boycotted the elections. Opportunities to enhance democratic governance and election circumstances, however, were not taken advantage of. The political crisis has worsened, and democratic institutions have been further undermined by the continuous erosion of media freedom

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[62] *Ibidem*

[63] The region spanning from Central Europe to Central Asia is evaluated by Nations in Transit 2022 in terms of its democratic climate. A scale from 1 to 7, with 7 denoting the highest level of democracy, is used to provide ratings. The Democracy Score is a simple average of the seven variables; it is also presented as a percentage, with 0 denoting the lowest level of democracy and 100 denoting the most. Freedom House categories each nation into one of the following regime types according to the Democracy Score: Consolidated Democracies (5.01-7.00), Semi-Consolidated Democracies (4.01-5.00), Transitional or Hybrid Regimes (3.01-4.00), Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes (2.01-3.00) and Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes (1.00-2.00). Nations in Transit does not rank governments in and of themselves, nor does it rank nations only based on official goals or legislation. Instead, the practical impact of governmental and nongovernmental actors on a person's rights and freedoms is taken into account when assigning a country, a rating. Nations in transit methodology, Retrieved December 27, 2022, from https://freedomhouse.org/reports/nations-transit/nations-transit-methodology

[64] Serbia: Nations in Transit 2022 Country Report | Freedom House. (2022). Retrieved 6 September 2022, from https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2022

and associational freedom as well as multiple high-profile corruption scandals that have exposed possible connections between state officials and organised crime. President Aleksandar Vučić's announcement that early parliamentary elections will take place in the spring of 2022 marked the beginning of a new period of inter-party engagement, but little progress was made in either of those areas during the year. Most opposition parties stopped participating in dialogue in September, and the ruling parties' overall conduct in 2021 revealed a lack of political desire for open debate. Elections in various municipalities revealed continuous governmental party control of the media, intimidation of voters, and other irregularities. In addition to the announced early parliamentary elections, the regular presidential elections, the Belgrade city elections, and other municipal elections were all scheduled to take place on 3 April 2022, making the end of 2021 a significant pre-election time. Nearly all opposition parties that had abstained from the 2020 elections chose to run in the 2022 elections, despite the termination of the Parliament-mediated negotiations and the stagnation of the electoral environment. Although this suggested that political life in 2022 may return to normal, President Aleksandar Vučić again won the elections, highlighting the fact that electoral conditions have not been improved[65].

These examples make it clear that Serbia is a country undergoing a democratic transition, justified by the presence of different party formations, but still embedded in the dynamics of an authoritarian regime, justified by the opposition's failure to gain too much political power, but also by the lack of independence of the media. These are just some of the characteristics that a regime must have in order to be described as an authoritarian regime with a nationalist aims. Therefore, it becomes plausible to assert that the Serbian state has been drifting toward authoritarianism since Vučić's election to office in 2012. While there hasn't been much advancement on the road to the EU, Serbia has seen a slow loss of the rule of law and media freedom during this time. Last but not least, notwithstanding the regime's rhetoric, neither Serbia nor the Kosovo issue are reliable sources of stability in the Balkans. Despite this, the international world offers the Serbian president a lot of support. Leaders like Vučić are viewed as "factors of stability" in the Balkans, despite the fact that the only stability gained is the lack of regime change and the local government's continued pursuit of the EU as a foreign policy goal.

2.1.2 Serbia's extremism: independence of Kosovo and its consequences

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[65] *Ibidem*

The war of the 1990s further highlighted the rupture between Serbia and Kosovo. Indeed, Serbia has never recognised Kosovo's independence[66], but it is seen as an occupied southern territory and is therefore regarded as an internal threat to the Serbian state. Moreover, for the Serbian government, Kosovo has remained 'untouchable' and is referred to as part of Serbia. For Serbs, Kosovo is the 'holy land', 'the cradle of Serbian culture, history and statehood' and the central element of Serbian identity. Being deeply rooted in Serbian national identity, psychology and geography, Kosovo possesses symbolic and mythical significance. At the same time, the memory of the Kosovo Albanians points to the struggle against Serbian domination. Their identity is based on 19th century nationalism and "supranational identification with Euro-Atlantic structures". Indeed, as it was described in the first chapter, one of the key components of Serbian national identity is the link between the Serbs and Orthodox Christian religion. It is straightforward to observe how the Serbian Orthodox Church employed a national myth and narrative to exert direct impact on the conflict in Kosovo since religious institutions have the capacity to influence social groups. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has academically constructed the so-called Kosovo myth in which Kosovo is seen as a 'pledge' or 'covenant' or the 'Jerusalem of Serbia' and it is from the SOC that essential parts of the Serbian national identity were formed, and from there that the imagery and symbols of Kosovo were preserved and kept alive[67].

The conflict between the two states is historically traced back to the Battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389, the memory and commemoration of which is fundamental in the interpretation of relations between the two countries. However, foreign and security policy should be discussed starting with Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008, which in fact shaped the politics of these states. Indeed, in the period between 1998 and 2008, Kosovo was under the aegis of international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and NATO and was treated

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[66] Although the Kosovo parliament declared independence in 1990, Kosovo was still recognised by the international community as part of Serbia. On 17 February 2008, Kosovo unilaterally announced its independence from Serbia.

Kosovo's independence has been recognised by about half of the 193 countries that sit on the UN, albeit with important exceptions. Russia, China and Serbia, which continue to consider Kosovo a Serbian province. To these are added several European countries, Spain, Cyprus, Romania, Slovakia and Greece, which are known to have strong secessionist movements within them. In an attempt to block Kosovo's independence, the Serbian government appealed to the International Court of Justice, which, hearing the matter at the end of 2008, ruled in a judgment (criticised by many) in the summer of 2010 that the declaration of independence was not in violation of general or particular international law. To date, despite the fact that the two sides have tried to normalise their relations (also favoured by the EU), tension seems to grow cyclically between the two countries. https://www.opiniojuris.it/il-kosovo-dalla-jugoslavia-allindipendenza/

[67] Judah, Tim. 2009. *The Serbs. History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* – THIRD EDITION New Haven: Yale University Press.

as an international protectorate. NATO's KFOR[68] mission is still active in the country, since 1999, to promote its security and stability. Serbia annually prepares the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (NSS) and it is interesting to note that the need for Preservation of sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia[69]. Among the various NSS published, it is important to mention the 2009 NSS in which the Republic of Serbia identified the secession of Kosovo, alongside Bosnia and Herzegovina, as the greatest threat to Serbia's national security. Both states are considered to have a negative impact on the stability of the Western Balkans[70]. Furthermore, the new 2021 National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia emphasises the importance of Kosovo to Serbia more than the 2009 strategy, stating that "*in addition to the protection of the Serbian people and other non-Albanian populations, special attention will continue to be paid to the preservation of Kosovo and Metohija. [...] special attention will continue to be paid to the preservation of the Serbian cultural and spiritual heritage, the protection of state property and the property of economic entities and citizens of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija*[71] ". The NSS 2021 also notes that the regional security situation is strongly influenced by problems of legacy, historical contradictions and the consequences of clashes between peoples and states in the recent past in the Balkans.

As it was previously stated, between Serbia and Kosovo's relationship has never been pacific. Moreover, problems arose this summer due to the refusal of Serbia and Kosovo to mutually recognise identity documents and vehicle number plates. Pristina demanded that Serbs in Kosovo abandon Belgrade's plates, replacing them with new ones bearing the words 'Republic of Kosovo'. What might seem a trivial detail carries with it a highly symbolic side: for Pristina, it is a matter of imposing its sovereignty, while the Serbian communities experience the replacement as a violation of their

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[68] When NATO's 78-day bombing campaign against Milosevic's dictatorship failed to stop the violence in Kosovo, KFOR was founded. Resolution 1244 (1999) of the United Nations Security Council and the Military-Technical Agreement between NATO, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Serbia provide the legal foundation for the operation. The initial goals of KFOR were to prevent resumption of hostilities, create a secure environment and guarantee public safety and order, demilitarise the Kosovo Liberation Army, aid in global humanitarian efforts, and work in tandem with the international civic presence. KFOR still helps to preserve a safe and secure environment in Kosovo and everyone's ability to move around. Nato. (2022). NATO's role in Kosovo. Retrieved November 2021, 2022 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_48818.htm

[69] DEFENCE STRATEGY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA. (2009). Retrieved 31 August 2022, from http://www.voa.mod.gov.rs/documents/defence-strategy-of-the-republic-of-serbia.pdf

[70] Ibidem

[71] DEFENCE STRATEGY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA. (2021). Retrieved 31 August 2022, from http://www.voa.mod.gov.rs/documents/defence-strategy-of-the-republic-of-serbia.pdf

identity[72]. In the north, Kosovo Serbs erected roadblocks, sounded air raid sirens and fired into the air. Thousands of Serbs - more than 10,000 according to local sources[73] - demonstrated in the northern area of Kosovska Mitrovica, the northern Kosovo town divided by the Ibar river, to demand the withdrawal of the measure, chanting nationalist slogans amidst a waving of Serbian flags. But the issue of number plates is not the only reason behind the new tensions. The Kosovo Serbs, together with the Belgrade leadership, have long accused the authorities in Pristina, and in particular Prime Minister Albin Kurti - a radical politician with strongly anti-Serbian views - of discriminating against them and of not respecting the agreements already concluded in the framework of the EU-facilitated dialogue, starting with the 2013 agreement on the creation of a Community of Serbian Municipalities in Kosovo. In addition, collective resignations of Kosovo Serb civil servants in Kosovo occurred - described as 'historic' by the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić - the first since 2013[74]. The protests seemed to have temporarily subsided with the reaching of an agreement between the two sides at the end of August, brokered by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell: the agreement stipulated, among other things, that Kosovo Serbs could move freely within the country with their (Serbian) identity documents and that the Kosovo government would therefore not introduce a requirement to possess a Kosovo identity document. The Kosovo government had, however, maintained the obligation for Serbian inhabitants to switch to Kosovo number plates, publicly condemning the violent incidents directed against those who had already changed their number plates: both this summer and more recently, some cars switched to Kosovo number plates had been set on fire, allegedly by Kosovo Serbs. The 'licence plate crisis', which cyclically rekindles tensions between Belgrade and Pristina, prompted NATO last August to reinforce patrols in Kosovo[75]. On November 2022, the situation is still the same of this summer and the preoccupation of the EU and the NATO is very high. As a matter of fact, The EU High Representative for Foreign Policy has summoned Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti to Brussels for 'an emergency meeting'[76].

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[72] Fruscione, G. (2022, December 27). Serbia e Kosovo: "Pronti a combattere". Retrieved January 2, 2023, from https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/serbia-e-kosovo-pronti-combattere-37143

[73] Tanjug. (2022, December 22). Kosovo-metohija serbs hold peaceful mass protest at Rudare. Retrieved January 2, 2023, from https://www.tanjug.rs/english/politics/4588/kosovo-metohija-serbs-hold-peaceful-mass-protest-at-rudare/vest

[74] Fruscione, G. (2022, September). Tra Kosovo e serbia è 'Guerra delle Targhe'. Retrieved November 21, 2022, from https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/tra-kosovo-e-serbia-e-guerra-delle-targhe-31835

[75] Bechev, D. (n.d.). The latest Kosovo-serbia tensions reveal the EU's diplomatic limits. Retrieved November 21, 2022, from https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/08/25/latest-kosovo-serbia-tensions-reveal-eu-s-diplomatic-limits-pub-87755

[76] Ibidem

What it was described until now has the goal to highlight the fragmentation of the region and the presence of nationalistic aim of Serbia's government. As a matter of fact, the Yugoslav war is not a distant memory but is still present and daily dictates relations between the countries in the area, international actors and international organisations. Moreover, it does not only affect governments but the citizens themselves, just think of how the young Serbs in Kosovo and the young Kosovars have no relationship with each other and that their lives are still completely divided.

2.2 Serbia's memory instrumentalization: the construction of a collective model

2.2.1 The political forces perspective

As it was described in the first chapter, various nations have different perspectives on history, which can frequently be either an opportunity or a barrier for the advancement of bilateral ties. It should be remembered that not all historical figures or events are incorporated into historical memory or policy. Usually, only events with a strong emotional impact, such wars and conflicts, are mentioned in historical accounts. The historical memory of ethnic wars is still quite present in post-Yugoslav communities. They were responsible for the Balkan nations' emancipation, which led to their expulsion from Serbia's area of influence. Kosovo's independence in 2008 or the Montenegrin velvet divorce in 2006 are recent examples of similar events. In particular, geopolitical insecurity creates opportunities for domestic actors to spread disinformation inside the territory of the state as well as internationally. Every state uses cultural elements as a symbol of its independence and national identity, including its language, monuments, heritage sites, and heroes. Serbia's current multi-ethnic and multi-religious structure is predetermined by a weighed-down historical memory. Therefore, it is crucial for both bilateral ties as well as foreign and security policy that Serb identity be preserved, particularly for those living in Kosovo and other regions that are somewhat connected to Serbia's history and culture. The threat of failure to establish an agreement in bilateral ties stems from the Serbian element's strong correlation with the historical memory of Kosovo Albanian people and leaders who have lived in the same region (Kosovo) for decades[77]. The activities that have public legitimacy, such as public lectures in official institutions or given by politicians, actions of the state, and those activities are carried out only within the limits of the law, define the most appropriate tool of analysis for the relations between Kosovo and Serbia in the context of historical memory. This strategy, known as "a governmental policy of remembrance," has as its major objective the

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[77] Jagiełło-Szostak, A. (2020). Links between foreign and security policy and historical memory: the case of Serbia – Kosovo relations. *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, *18*(2), 59-84. doi: 10.36874/riesw.2020.2.3

preservation, removal, or redefinition of particular social memory contents. As it aims to alter public memory and increase the legitimacy of the governing party, the state policy of remembrance is linked to the idea of state propaganda. Through school teaching and public communications, it serves the purpose of regulating the information that is disseminated, guiding public opinion, and influencing societal norms. It is possible to observe state leaders (Prime Ministers, Presidents, Ministers of Foreign Affairs, and Defence), as well as official political parties, libraries, museums, the Internet, official TV, ethnic minorities/communities (such as Albanians in Serbia and Serbs in Kosovo) and their representatives, such as NGOs and associations, in the relations between Serbia and Kosovo[78]. According to political scientist Jacques Rupnik, Serbian nationalism is re-emerging in an increasingly radical way and is attempting to assert its power in a region that has not yet fully recovered from the war of the 1990s. This is after what appears to have been a period of moderate, pro-European nationalism under President Boris Tadić. As a Matter of fact, the ethnic cleansing that culminated in the 1990s conflicts against Bosnians and Albanians, two largely Muslim communities, was exaggerated. Politicians in Serbia believed that leaders found guilty by international tribunals of crimes committed in the 1990s contributed to the humiliation and revealed an international conspiracy aimed at undermining the Serbian state. Additionally, among the politicians in Belgrade, the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s is viewed as a catastrophe and Serbia is the victim of immense injustice, to the point that it is ashamed of its history and flag. Following that, President of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić established the ceremony for the Day of Unity, Freedom and the Serbian National Flag, which is celebrated on 15 September each year. The ceremony is in memory of the breakthrough of the Thessaloniki front in the First World War[79]. The 2021 event was attended by, among others, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, Serbian government ministers, Serbian Patriarch Porfirije, Parliament Speaker Ivica Dačić, Serbian member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Milorad Dodik, representatives of Serbs in the region, ambassadors and many citizens. As reported by the official website of the Serbian government, the president said during the ceremony that "*this is a celebration of identity, which clearly states who we are, where we come from and where we are going[80]*". He also reiterated how this is a celebration of Serbian identity, where language, culture and religion are united, but also the values of the entire society, which make a civilised, organised country, capable of remembering, but also of knowing why and what to do. Vučić goes on

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[78] See note 2

[79] Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and National Flag marked. (2021). Retrieved 1 September 2022, from https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/178351/day-of-serbian-unity-freedom-and-national-flag-marked.php

[80] President Aleksandar Vučić's speech during the ceremony for the Day of Unity, Freedom and the Serbian National Flag on 21st September 2021.

to talk about how on that 15 September, the only goal was to achieve freedom at any cost, and that day was only the first in a long series of days when, at any price, Serbia and freedom were chosen. The Serbian president concluded by reiterating what has been said so far and urging Serbia and its citizens to pursue a plan for the future in which Serbs will be proud of the flag, freedom, peace and the future. It is interesting, however, to note the words of other government representatives, such as those of Serbian Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin, who evoked "*the need to create a united 'Serbian world*'". These were followed by those of the Serbian member of the Bosnian presidency, Milorad Dodik, among the guests of honour at the celebrations in Belgrade: "*Our country is not Bosnia and Herzegovina, but Serbia*", Dodik said in front of the crowd, arousing enthusiasm. From these speeches, reported on the official website of the Serbian government, one can see Vučić's willingness to refer to past, glorious histories of Serbia and to emphasise how the people, in the name of Serbia, must pursue freedom and self-determination. These are very strong nationalist words, glorifying Serbian superiority[81].

2.2.2 The education and media perspective

As stated in the first chapter, collective memory is also built through films and education, not only through political speeches. Indeed, a relevant example is the screening, on July 2022, of the film about the 'liberation of Srebrenica' by Bosnian Serb forces in July 1995. Significant is the choice to screen this documentary on the same day as the 27th anniversary of the massacre of the Bosnians, classified as genocide by the international courts[82], in particular by the International Court of Justice[83]. The screening of the film, initiated by the nationalist organisation Alternativa Orientale, took place at the Serbian Cultural Centre of the Holy Despot Stefan Lazarevic, in the local Orthodox parish house in Srebrenica, a few kilometres away from the Srebrenica Memorial Centre. Vojin Pavlovic, organisation's president, said that the documentary will present the testimonies of soldiers and generals of the Bosnian Serb army who took part in what he described as the liberation of Serb villages in the area in 1995. The movie also features a speech by war criminal Ratko Mladić, which

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[81] Ibidem

[82] Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro), Judgment, I.C.J. Reports 2007, p. 43.

[83] BIRN - Balkan Investigative Reporting Network. (2022). Retrieved 1 September 2022, from https://birn.eu.com/

goes against an amendment made on July 2021 on the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina[84]. This amendment provides for a prison sentence of six months to five years for anyone who publicly glorifies, denies, minimises or attempts to justify crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes established by final judgement, thereby targeting a group of people or a member of such a group on the grounds of race, colour, religion, ancestry or national or ethnic affiliation in a way that incites violence and hatred towards such a group or its member. Pavlovic states that the screening of the documentary is not a glorification of the killings of Bosnians nor the glorification of Mladic, who was sentenced to life imprisonment by the UN Tribunal, but that it is simply a glimpse of crimes against Serbs committed by the Bosnian army from the area protected by the international community[85].

After having analysed how the government and some nationalist groups have used the tool of memory through national parades and projection of movies, it seems relevant to analyse how the young generation is dealing with the memory of the war. So, analysing education, and in particular history education, since this is how the official interpretations of historical events are presented [86]. As a matter of fact, the new generation did not experience the massacres of the Yugoslav war first-hand but relives everything thanks to the collective memory of that war. This younger generation is aware of what transpired and how it continues to affect Serbian society on a lay level[87].

By comparing various theories identified in books and research articles[88], it is evident that Serbian youth, who did not participate in the war, have clear signs of what is referred to as a collective memory

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[84] Enacting the Law on Amendment to the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Official Gazette of BiH Nos. 3/03, 32/03, 37/03, 54/04, 61/04, 30/05, 53/06, 55/06, 32/07, 8/10, 47/14, 22/15, 40/15 and 35/18 (July 2021). Dr. Valentin Inzko - High Representative. http://www.ohr.int/about-ohr/general-information/

[85] Dzaferagic, N. (2022). Nationalists to Show Film Praising Serb Forces on Srebrenica Anniversary. Retrieved 1 September 2022, from https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/01/nationalists-to-show-film-praising-serb-forces-on-srebrenica-anniversary/

[86] Bar-Tal, D. (2013). *Intractable Conflicts: Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[87] Jovanović, R., & Bermúdez, Á. (2021). The next generation: Nationalism and violence in the narratives of Serbian students on the break-up of Yugoslavia. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism, 21*(1), 2-25. doi:10.1111/sena.12339

[88] Bermúdez,A. (2019). *The Normalization of Political Violence in History Textbooks: Ten Narrative Keys. Dialogues onHistorical Justice and Memory Network Working Paper* Series, No. 15. Available at: http://historicaldialogues.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/WPS-15-Bermudez-Final.pdf AND Bar-Tal, D. (2007). *Sociopsychological Foundations of Intractable Conflicts. American Behavioral Scientist*,50(11),1430–1453. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764207302462 And Haste, H., & Bermúdez,A. (2017). The Power of Story: Historical Narratives and the Construction of Civic Identity. InM. Carretero, S. Berger, & M. Grever (Eds.), Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education.Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

of the conflict. Due in part to the conflicting ideologies that emerged after Slobodan Milošević's downfall and the role played during the wars by Serbian political elites, young people are caught between an "ethno-national" and "cosmopolitan" identity. Since textbooks and other educational resources are seen as epistemic authorities, they reach practically all young people in a society, and their content is regulated by the state, education is one of the most significant ways to transfer historical beliefs[89]. In addition, history textbooks frequently convey a single narrative while largely marginalising competing opinions. History frequently distorts or omits all evidence in support of opposing views, i.e., those that do not fit into the narrative framework justifying violence[90]. In order to contextualise young people's understandings of the recent violent past, research on history teaching in Serbia and the Balkans is crucial. A wealth of literature has shown how the violent wars of the 1990s led to the rewriting of history in the former Yugoslav nations to reflect the new reality, which included elements of victimisation and the unfavourable representation of others[91]. In particular, there has been significant progress in Croatian history education from the days when it was largely influenced by the philosophy of ethnic nationalism. These advancements are still hotly debated and ambiguous, though[92]. Croatian and Serbian textbooks were compared, and it was discovered that in both, "we" are portrayed as the victim of the "them." Even though some Croatian history textbooks use a contemporary viewpoint, Serbs continue to have a bad reputation. While North Macedonian textbooks are alleged to have a myth of self-victimization and continue to promote ethno-centric narratives[93], Montenegrin history textbooks that previously followed a nationalist ideology appear to have undergone a major revision during the early 2000s[94]. Instead of promoting civic ideals, Serbian and Kosovo textbooks actively encourage interethnic animosity[95]. Due to Bosnia and Herzegovina's

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[89] Gashi, S. (2020). Kosova under Yugoslavia (1945–1999) in the History Textbooks of Kosova and Serbia. In G.Ognjenovic & J. Jozelic (Eds.),Nationhood and Politicization of History in School Textbooks: Identity, theCurriculum and Educational Media. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

[90] See note 36

[91] Ibidem

[92] Pavasovic-Trošt, T. (2018). Ruptures and Continuities in Nationhood Narratives: Reconstructing the Nation through History Textbooks in Serbia and Croatia.Nations and Nationalism,24(3), 716–740.

[93] Stojanov, D., & Todorov, P. (2020). The Myth of Victimization in Macedonian History Textbooks, 1991–2018. In G. Ognjenović & J. Jozelić (Eds.), Nationhood and Politicization of History in School Textbooks: Identity, the Curriculum and Educational Media. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

[94] Knežević, S., & Čagorović, N. (2020). Ideological Changes in the History Textbooks of Montenegro. In G. Ognjenović & J. Jozelić (Eds.), Nationhood and Politicization of History in School Textbooks: Identity, the Curriculum and Educational Media. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

[95] See note 37

extremely complicated educational system, the situation is more complicated than it initially appears to be. There is a power struggle among the three political elites in power, and each of them has a set of textbooks that glorifies their own people, nation, and state while demeaning minorities and neighbouring states. Similar to other successor republics, Serbia has seen several significant revisions in its history textbooks during the past 30 years. The first significant alteration occurred in 1993 with the introduction of "war time text books," which provided justifications for the ongoing wars[96]. After the Democratic Revolution in 2000, textbooks either avoided discussing recent wars or gave them a kinder portrayal, while those released between 2005 and 2009 brought back victimisation tales. Recent research on the history textbooks used in Serbian high schools found that their narratives normalise violence and, to some extent, support a culture of conflict. Indeed, it is evident how three main themes return when young people recount incidents of violence related to the breakup of Yugoslavia, learned from family narratives, the media, and particularly from history education[97]. The first theme is victimization, the harm done to their own group by another group or groups, while they largely ignore the violence committed by their own group. The second theme is delegitimization of opposing groups. Indeed, these are described as cruel, brutal, and immoral by attributing to them the intention to commit violent acts against their own group and as terrorists. Finally, they justify their own group's participation in violence as self-defense in the face of an external threat. Young people, therefore, tend to normalize violence in the narrative of the breakup of Yugoslavia as it is seen and presented in schoolbooks as an inevitable breakup, where different ethnic groups play a principal role. In fact, in Serbian history books, as well as those of other former Yugoslav states, four main themes return: the artificiality of Yugoslavia, Tito as the only thing holding Yugoslavs together, the emphasis of cultural differences, and the existence of ancient hostilities, this narrative framework serves to justify violence. In other words, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which Tito's rule kept together, is portrayed as a man-made construct that temporarily masked profound cultural disparities and long-standing animosities amongst ethnic groups. When history is told in this way, violence and rift are unavoidable results of suppressed innate inclinations[98]. Moreover, this style of recounting historical events tends to avoid discussing the intricate social, economic, and political dynamics and

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[96] Trošt, T. P., & Trbovc, J. M. (2020). History textbooks in war-time: The use of Second World War narratives in 1990s war propaganda in the former Yugoslavia. *War & Society, 39*(4), 290-309. doi:10.1080/07292473.2020.1811472

[97]Jovanovic, R. (2020). Intercultural Education in Post-Conflict Societies: Historical Narratives of the Breakup of Yugoslavia in Serbian High School History Textbooks (R. Contini, Ed.). In 2026011499 1406194006 C. N. Veloria & 2026011500 1406194006 C. Pica-Smith (Eds.), *Intercultural Education: Critical PersnPedagogical Challenges and Promising Practices*. Nova Science.

[98] Ibidem

institutions that actively influence the choices made by various individuals. Additionally, entire ethnic or religious groups are accused of violent behaviour, erasing any distinctions between them. It demonstrates a distorted and oversimplified account of the facts, which sustains the culture of hostility and legitimises violence[99]. As a result, it shapes how the conflict is remembered collectively and supports the use of violence by one's own group. Finally, Serbian textbooks show that the homogenisation of ethnic groups places history within a general framework that uses nationalism as its main explanatory tool. Serbian history books have certain 'strategic silences' representing the missing elements of the stories that allow for distortions and certain types of conclusions. In other words, certain events of special significance are left out of the narrative. In fact, these strategic silences have in common that they refer to violations committed by one's own ethnic group and the experiences of the victims. Thus, allowing for an explanation of the conflict that makes it much easier to subscribe to beliefs based on victimisation and delegitimization of the opponent[100]. For example, the war in Croatia is described briefly and without much explanation of its origins or the Croatian point of view, but Operation Storm, during which the Serbs were forced to flee Croatia, is described in detail, thus placing the blame for the war solely on Croatia. Similarly, the war in Kosovo is often limited to NATO's bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and there is no evidence of events prior to March 1999, when the bombing began[101]. Although more investigation is required before firm conclusions can be drawn about the relative significance of formal history education for how young Serbs perceive the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, it is undeniable that history education misses the chance to present information that might broaden young people's perspectives and assist them in critically evaluating the violence of the past.

There are various examples of the rivalry between Serbia and Kosovo, which are seen as a source of instability in the Balkan region. It is clear from this analysis that young people, and not just them, justify using violence to settle disputes as a calculated action taken to fulfil specific objectives. By critically examining historical instances of violence and exposing the social, economic, and political processes that made them possible, it appears vital to start with school education in order to prevent violence. Furthermore, civilizations must attempt to change their collective memories of the past in order to recognise their own role in the war, learn about the collective memories of other ethnic groups, and create a stable and lasting peace. The examples provided show that Serbian society is still

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[99] See note 92

[100] Ognjenovic G., & Jozelic, J. (2020). Nationhood and Politicization of History in School Textbooks: Identity, the Curriculum and Educational Media. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

[101] Obradovic, S. (2016). Don't Forget to Remember: Collective Memory of the Yugoslav Wars in Present-day Serbia.Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology,22(1), 12–18. https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000144

far from reaching a stable and enduring peace since the narratives fail to include learning about the history of the opposing group and recognising the wrongdoings of one's own group[102].

2.3 Serbia's strategic relations with EU, China and Russia

2.3.1 Western Balkans in the international asset: Serbia as a key actor

In analysing international relations, the state's memory policy is essential, because decisions are made on behalf of the entire state and country. It seems also relevant to analyse the relation of Serbia with the major international actors in order to understand how Serbia is still looking forward to a return to the project of Great Serbia. Also, due to the appearance of new global players on the international scene which have generated a multipolar world. Indeed, geopolitical insecurity creates opportunities for domestic actors to spread disinformation inside the territory of the state as well as internationally. In particular, actors that will be analyse are the European Union, Russia and China. As a matter of fact, these international actors are interested in the Western Balkans because they represent an important bridge between the east and the west, and controlling them will have an importance in security and stability matters. So, Western Balkans are increasingly becoming an area of geostrategic competition between the EU and other international actors aiming to extend their influence in the region. Therefore, if the EU intends to strengthen its role in the global landscape and become a clear and credible geopolitical actor, it is crucial that it demonstrate that it is capable of playing a leading role in the Balkan[103]. In particular, Serbia is the Western Balkan nation that is growing the fastest. The nation is working to mend its relations with the European Union, Russia, and China despite various obstacles. In the past, Serbia has been flexible in its geopolitical alliances and has seen no obligation to remain committed to allies if they were no longer helpful for the implementation of its regional agenda[104]. This is mainly due to the fact that Serbia is seen as a catalyst for all Western

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[102] See note 92 – 100 - 101

[103] Stângaciu, A. (2021). il futuro dei balcani occidentali nell'unione europea tra le riforme e la difficolta di sviluppo economico. in 2288850107 1564769611 l. herța & 2288850108 1564769611 a. corpădean (eds.), *International relations and a rea studies: focus on western Balkans* (pp. 91-114). international relations and area studies: focus on western balkans Laura M. Herța, Adrian G. Corpădean editori presa universitară clujeană.

[104] 2022 Serbia: Strengthening of foreign policy and affirmation of international status. (2022). Retrieved 13 October 2022, from https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/2022-serbia-strengthening-of-foreign-policy-and-affirmation-of-international-status/5065?#

Balkan nations and as an essential element for regional stability and peace[105]. Yugoslavia's foreign policy during the Cold War was founded on the ideals of neutrality and non-alignment, which were related to its historical conception of playing a balancing role between the East and the West. As a result of its political alienation from Western Europe, Yugoslavia became involved in the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in the late 1950s with Egypt, Indonesia, and other nations, holding NAM's first leaders conference in Belgrade in 1961. The reason behind the creation of NAM was also the fact that Serbs perceive international organisations as wanting to take away their history, This was done in response to Yugoslavia's lack of institutional ties to the EU and political discussions regarding any potential membership. As a matter of fact, the EU, USA, China, Russia, and Nonalignment Movement make up the quadrilateral on which Serbia's foreign policy framework is founded[106]. Following a decade of conflict and authoritarianism in Serbia following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, when the Milošević regime was overthrown in Serbia, the first democratic, pro-Western administration since the Second World War was established in January 2001. Belgrade started prioritising EU membership as a way to break with its totalitarian history. The belief that EU membership was in their countries' best interests was promoted by a succession of democratic, largely pro-EU Serbian governments. The Covid-19 outbreak and the EU's economic woes, which forced the EU to become more inward-looking and integration-focused and less eager to broaden, provided proof that anti-Western political parties and social organisations continue to contest this position. Serbia has a sizeable population that harbours pro-Russian sentiments. By favouring non-Western external actors, this narrative allows voters to mentally distance themselves from the EU, while invoking historical and romantic ideas of neutrality in foreign policy and security/defence. This mental and historical distancing from the political traditions of Western Europe underlines a desire for a return to authoritarianism, linked to the relation with Russia and China, which is characterised by a continuous pro-Serbia narrative.

2.3.2 The EU enlargement process in Serbia

As stated before, key international players have determined that Serbia is the focal point for the melting of tensions in the Western Balkans and the driving force behind the region's countries' membership into the European Union. Serbia is best equipped to respond quickly to the challenges of the negotiation process and establish itself as the Western Balkans' engine for European integration

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[105] Ibidem

[106] Markovic Khaze, N. (2022). Perceptions of the EU in the Western Balkans Vis-à-vis Russia and China. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, *27*(Issue 1), 81-108. doi: 10.54648/eerr2022006

thanks to its strong and well-developed human resources and logistical infrastructure[107]. While there are no indications, let alone guarantees, that the EU will expand or that Serbia will become a full member, the EU asks Serbia to harmonise, or to subject its foreign policy to the EU. Through a complicated system of rewards and penalties during the pre-accession negotiating process, the EU played a crucial and proactive role in the promotion of democracy and the internal change of the Western Balkan republics. The most successful of the EU's policies and tools used to promote democracy has been political accession conditionality, which is the credible prospect of joining the EU following extensive democratic reform (others being political conditionality, economic development and transnational exchange). Additionally, successful EU democracy promotion has shown that accession conditionality, even the most credible kind, needs favourable political circumstances in the target nations' domestic arena in order to be fully effective. In other words, the conditionality for EU membership appears to be a powerful and important element in the democratisation of the region around Europe. However, if the EU offers less than membership or affiliation that might eventually lead to accession, the impacts grow weaker and more erratic[108]. Despite the growing number of studies revealing China's and Russia's expanding influence in Western nations, the EU can claim to have the most significant influence in candidate nations. A neo-Titoist foreign politics that sought to use access, support, and resources from Russia, China, and others was created as a result of the post-Yugoslav geopolitical deadlock, which also gave plenty of room for exploring and expanding relationships with non-European entities. This strategy, which once appeared to be tactical in character, has evolved into a core idea in foreign policy. Additional rationale came from a decade of conflicting feelings about EU enlargement as official Belgrade tried to use its stalled Europeanization as leverage. Belgrade has chosen to allow for the penetration and deepening of these countries' presence in various spheres of the economy and society even while Serbia continues its EU admission negotiations[109].

Taking a step back, it seems relevant to highlight the major steps in the process of European integration. The Republic of Serbia signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the European Union on 29 April 2008, which came into force on 1 September 2013. The Agreement confirms the perspective of the Republic of Serbia to become a member of the European Union and regulates mutual relations between the two parties until the achievement of full membership. Serbia's

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[107] See note 97

[108] Schimmelfennig, & Scholtz, H. (2008). EU Democracy Promotion in the European Neighbourhood. *European Union Politics.*, *9*(2), 187–215. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116508089085

[109] Shopov, V. (2022). MAPPING CHINA'S RISE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS. *European Council on Foreign Relations 2022*. https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/

application for EU membership was submitted on 19 December 2009. The Commission issued a favourable opinion on 12 October 2011 and recommended granting Serbia the status of candidate country. The European institutions verified that Serbia met the Copenhagen Criteria[110] and the *acquis communautaire*[111]. On 1 March 2012, the European Council granted Serbia the status of candidate country. The actual accession negotiations started on 21 January 2014 but are still in standby so far. As a matter of fact, Serbia and the other candidate states have to give up a certain degree of sovereignty in order to conform their political, legislative, and other systems to the EU acquis and to meet the requirements and recommendations of the European Commission[112].

2.3.3 The EU influence vis à vis Russia and China

Due to this stagnation in the process accession of Serbia in the EU and so the lack of coherence in the EU's policies, considering also the Western Balkans' exclusion from the EU during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Western Balkans administrations have pursued a number of agreements with non-Western (and even anti-Western)[113]. Therefore, a second consequence of that is the increase of euro-scepticism in Western Balkans population and in particular in Serbia. All this has led to the democratic deficit of candidate states, which is a relevant issue today for the European Union. the leaders of the Western Balkan countries are unable to see their futures in the EU as clearly as they did during the pre-accession negotiations some 20 years ago. As a result, compared to when there were 10 new members in 2004, the process of European integration has grown more unclear, difficult,

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[110] Copenhagen Criteria (Art 49 TEU): The nation must first fulfil the essential requirements for membership. They were primarily established during the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993. A functioning market economy and the ability to deal with competition and market forces in the EU are prerequisites for membership, as are the capacity to accept and carry out effectively the obligations of membership, including adherence to the goals of political, economic, and monetary union. Additionally, countries seeking to join must have stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities. Article 49 – C 202/43 *On criteria of accession Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union* https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M049

[111] The French phrase "acquis communautaire" refers to the totality of European Community laws, including the EC's goals, substantive rules, and policies, as well as primary and secondary legislation and case law, all of which are incorporated into the European Union's legal framework (EU). The phrase is most frequently used about the steps candidate nations are taking to become members of the Union. To be admitted to the EU, they must adopt, put into practise, and uphold the entire acquis. This frequently entails establishing or altering the necessary administrative or judicial organisations which supervise the legislation, in addition to modifying national laws. https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/acquis-communautaire

[112] See note 106.

[113] Ibidem

and delayed. As initially reported, this Euro-scepticism is amplified by the influence of non-Western actors offering economic incentives for a closer relationship with states in the Balkan region. The development and strengthening of these relations decrease the candidates' willingness of diverting their governments' attention away from the reforms needed to become member of the EU in exchange of specific political or economic benefits. As a matter of fact, Serbia has signed a Free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2019 which came into force in 2021. Serbia is also part of China's Belt & Road Initiative[114], with China financing several infrastructure projects

Thanks to this agreement, Serbia is the only European country that has an EAEU Free Trade Agreement and being a member of the Belt &Road Initiative[115]. One of China's aims is extending Chinese rules and standards, along with securing preferential access to the European market. In order to do this, the BRI plans to build seven corridors, one of which will traverse the Western Balkans. This is the case with the so-called "Balkan Silk Road," a corridor that connects Athens, Skopje, Belgrade, and Budapest in the first place, fostering trade between the Mediterranean and Central Europe (and so, Western Europe for a second time). As a matter of fact, it seems relevant to underline the words of the two political experts Florian Biber and Nikolaos Tzifakis which highlight the unwillingness of China to present a political plan for Western Balkans but only economical[116].

As it is evident from these two examples China and Russia are increasing their political and economic influence in Serbia. As a matter of fact, Russia and China, differently from the EU, have not the aim to spread democracy and its values and so to adapt the Serbian's law to the European rule of law and EU standards but they have primarily economic and political interests in the region. In specific, they provide soft loans for infrastructures and other projects, they were the first to respond to calls from

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[114] The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a larger Chinese effort to redefine globalisation with "Chinese features." Its investment arms. The anticipated impact of the BRI's planned huge investment across geographies on global industry and global innovation is one of its unanswered problems. The New Silk Road initiative, which was announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, pays homage to the historical significance of the traditional Silk Road, which, in Xi Jinping's view, demonstrated over the course of its 2000-year existence that nations with diverse racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds can coexist in peace and advance as long as they maintain their unity and mutual trust, equality and mutual benefit, mutual tolerance, and capacity for mutual learning. In more concrete terms, the BRI is a plan for the global construction of infrastructures connecting Europe and China to provide access to markets and strategic raw materials and to mitigate the consequences of US diplomatic offensives and post-2008 protectionism. *Made in China 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative*. (2018). ISPI. https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/made-china-2025-and-belt-and-road-initiative-21113

[115] *Serbia - EAEU Free Trade Agreement Now In Effect - Silk Road Briefing*. (2021). Silk Road Briefing. https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/07/14/serbia-eaeu-free-trade-agreement-now-in-effect/

[116] Bieber, F., & Tzifakis, N. (2020). *The Western Balkans in the World Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries*. Routledge.

western Balkans leaders at the beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic to provide medical equipment and other supplies, while the EU had imposed some restriction. The public perception of Russian and Chinese aid in reacting to Covid-19 almost definitely influenced public opinion towards these countries, even if the EU ultimately generously assisted Western nations in fighting the pandemic[117]. The strong ties between Russia and Serbia, for what concern international relations, can be found in the non-recognition of Kosovo as an independent state by Russia. As a matter of fact, Russia, and China, have veto power in the United Nation Security Council, and so they use their veto power in order to prevent Kosovo from international recognition of its territorial sovereignty. Obviously both countries have different reasons in order to make this decision. On one hand, China, similar to some EU member states (Spain and Catalonia), is living internal disorder in Tibet and Xinjiang and the recognition of Kosovo from China would constitute a precedent in this sense. On the other hand, Russia is using its veto power to increase even more its influence in the region, and to prevent the process of "occidententalization". Indeed, Russia significantly lowers the possibilities of achieving a final agreement between the Kosovar and Serbian administrations, which was started by the EU in 2011 and where both Kosovo and Serbia are expected to acknowledge each other, by preventing Kosovo from receiving international recognition. However, since a final agreement is still a requirement set forth by the EU in Chapter 35 of the negotiation framework with Serbia, Serbia cannot aspire to join the EU without a formal agreement between the two parties. The consequence of that is the presence of an ally, close to the EU, in the international panorama[118]. The origin of the relationship between Russia and Serbia are historical and cultural. As a matter of fact, these two countries have always been ally since the Pan-Slavic movement of the 19th century and the support of Russia for the independence of Serbia from the Ottoman Empire. Russia sided with Serbia when it entered World War I; in the Kosovo crisis, it firmly opposed Kosovo independence and denounced NATO bombing of Serbia. Russia supports Serbia by using its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Moscow blocked two UN Security Council resolutions in 1994 and 2015 that denounced Bosnian Serb brutality, the latter of which recognised the 1995 Srebrenica tragedy as a genocide. This soft power also took the form of "vaccine diplomacy" during the pandemic[119]. Russian economic influence is mostly felt in the energy industry, and its share of regional GDP is steadily decreasing. The largest concentration of Russian energy influence is in Serbia, where it meets almost all the country's gas needs and controls a number of assets, including the Lukoil gas station

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[117] See note 106

[118] Ibidem

[119] Stanicek, B. (2022). Russia's influence in the Western Balkans. *EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service*, *PE 733.523*.

network. In addition, Russia's government has always have accepted the nationalist desires of Serbian minorities to weaken the governments that have illegally, according with the Serbian narratives, taken control of the states, such as in Kosovo, Bosnia Herzegovina, or Montenegro. So, Russia, contrary to China, is using the soft power of ideology rather than economic in order to increase its influence in the Western Balkans. On contrary, the EU is progressively reducing its interest in the western Balkans, leaving behind itself the so called "power vacuum", even if it continuously reaffirms its willingness to overlap the impasse of the enlargement. As a matter of fact, these indicate that if the EU does not act quickly to offer new political perspectives to the Western Balkans states, by initiating the negotiation process with all of them, then Russia and China will continue to pursue their political and economic priorities in the Western Balkans at the expense of the region's interests and those of EU countries. In other words, the EU allows other actors to exert their political and economic power in the region if they do nothing, which is not in the interest of the EU. However, it is necessary to draw the conclusion that the Western Balkan states have already drastically altered their stance toward the EU, particularly in terms of speech. Serbia is a case in point; despite having been in negotiations with the EU since 2014, Aleksandar Vučić, the president of Serbia, is adopting a more confrontational tone and threatening that Serbia will tilt even more toward Russia and China if the European project is not realised soon[120]. A situation like this illustrates, yet again, the growing influence of the emerging powers in the WB and, as a result, the obvious loss of influence of the EU, despite the fact that 82.5% of the overall population of the Western Balkans (but only 35% in Serbia) remains in favour of EU integration, according to the latest Ipsos report. As a matter of fact, in the past the majority of Serbians supported deeper connections with Russia, according to a mid-2016 NSPM magazine poll, which found that 72% supported such an alliance vs only 8% for NATO. However, a survey conducted in February 2022 found that when given the option between the EU and Russia, half of Serbs chose to remain neutral. This is also linked with the recent development of the Eu – Ukraine relationship. In fact, it appears that the Russian war on Ukraine has shifted public sentiment in the EU in favour of quickly giving Ukraine EU membership but not the Western Balkans. Moreover, the Eu has continuously reaffirmed its willingness to enlargement process due to the successful EU-Western Balkans meetings (most recently in Zagreb, 2020, Brdo, 2021, and Bruxelles 2022). Ethnic tensions, severe unemployment, a young exodus, and precarious constitutional structures are giving Russia a chance to expand its already considerable influence in the region[121]. In the same way, as it was previously argued, also China is expanding its influence in the region not

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[120] See note 116

[121] See note 119

only in the economic sphere but also in culture, academia, education, media, and even with a range of political parties and local government. China is a key partner in the government's ambitious road infrastructure construction programme, for example with the construction of the Belgrade-Budapest rail. Chinese companies have entered numerous economy sectors, from steel to tyre production, in energy and renewables, in mineral extraction, e.g., in Serbia alone, Chinese investment reached €10.3 billion. Despite that, for the moment, the Eu remains the principal economic partner for the Balkans, but China's influence will increase through the years. As it was previously argued, China has tried to present itself as a strategic investor who doesn't meddle in countries' internal politics and is willing to turn a blind eye to certain issues like State aid, corruption, or labour regulations[122]. China has tied its relations with Serbia also trough political, media, educational and cultural entities, and it has found an opportunity thanks to Covid-19. As a matter of fact, The Covid-19 pandemic made the geopolitical rivalry and divergent viewpoints in the area worse. Beijing's representations also urged students to write about China's methods towards the pandemic. Chinese-supported web pages produced content critical of Western ideals and focusing on China's charitable endeavours in the region. China seized the chance to establish itself as a prominent partner in light of the "vaccine diplomacy" by contributing masks and vaccinations. Along with millions of euros worth of medical supplies and equipment, the response to the pandemic led President Vučić to kiss the Chinese flag and lambast the EU for its lack of cooperation. Days before the EU revealed its significant medical help and investment package for the region, this gesture was made[123].

2.3.4 President Vučić position on territorial integrity

Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that Serbia remains one of the few countries that have not condemned Russian invasion into Ukraine. As a matter of fact, Serbia also rejects the need to introduce sanctions against Russia[124]. President Vučić has made a speech during the General Debate of the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 2022, in which he made clear its point of view on the territorial integrity, using as example the comparison between the war in Ukraine and

[122] Stanicek, B., & Tarpova, S. (2022). China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans. *EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf
[123] *Ibidem*
[124] Dopchie, R. (2022). THE INCREASING INFLUENCE OF EMERGING POWERS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A BRIEF ANALYSIS. *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs Institute for Research and European Studies - Bitola*, *8*(2), 307–320. https://doi.org/10.47305/jlia2282307d

the war in Kosovo of the 90s[125]. As a matter of fact, Serbia is in favour of all member states' territorial integrity, including that of Ukraine, but many speakers claim that this is the first war to take place on European land since the Second World War. However, President Vučić affirms that this is not true because it is never acknowledged that Serbia's territorial integrity was infringed despite the fact that it did not invade any other sovereign nations. President Vučić stated that "*We ask for a clear answer to the question I've been asking my interlocutors, leaders of many countries for years — what is the difference between the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Serbia, which was grossly violated, and for which you provided international recognition and legitimacy?[126]*" he also added that no one has ever provided an answer to this question. The territorial integrity of any single sovereign State has not been violated by Serbia, nor has it threatened in any way, as it did in 1999, that anyone would intervene or engage in hostilities against it. That did not stop NATO, however, from striking a sovereign nation without the Council's approval.

The adoption of Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999), which was contemplated by the agreement with NATO and confirmed and guaranteed Serbia's partial sovereignty and full territorial integrity, did not stop many Western nations from unilaterally recognising the independence of the so-called "Kosovo" and from violating Serbia's territorial integrity once more. Despite the fact that Serbia continues to suffer the effects of flagrant violations of fundamental rules of international public law, the nation has not abandoned the guiding ideals of the UN[127]. President Vučić did not lost any chance to underline the mistrust of its government on the UN and other International Organizations because they have made some bad decisions and they had not been acting in favor of Balkans' future. Indeed, Presiden Vučić, during its speech, affirmed that Belgrade is managing this process under extremely complicated conditions, including aspects of a hybrid conflict and a dishonest assault against Serbia by the international community in various domains[128]. In particular, he remembered the remarks and claims made by international media that Serbia will attack its neighbours and pose a threat to regional stability. Naturally, it has never occurred, according to the words of Serbian President. And it was only one of many lies spread against the Serbian Republic. Only to be stopped from speaking the

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[125] *Serbia*. (2022). General Assembly of the United Nations. https://gadebate.un.org/en/77/serbia

[126] *1 Elements for a Statement by President of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić at the General Debate of the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly 21 September 2022, New York Main theme: „A watershed moment: transformative solutions to interlocking challenges"*. (2022). General Assembly of the United Nations | General Debate. https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/77/rs_en.pdf

[127] See note 119

[128] See note 117

truth —that the concept of inviolability of borders must be equally applied to all — Serbia was depicted as a potential source of instability in the area. Serbia contributed to regional stability in the past and will continue to do so. In conclusion, Serbian President affirmed that "*Serbia, actually continues contributing to peace, stability and reconciliation process in the region, whereby it certainly gives significant contribution to global security[129]*".

The Western Balkans could experience new political dynamics as a result of the conflict in Ukraine. And so, a significant number of EU members like Germany have already called for a faster integration of that region of Europe into the EU and NATO. While, Russia and China may work more closely together in the area, which would raise the geopolitical stakes even more[130].

To sum up, the position of Serbia on its relations with the EU and other International Organizations, Russia and China is ambiguous. As a matter of fact, during President Vučić's speech at the General Debate of the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 2022, he affirmed that Serbia has strong ties with the EU and he highlighted its confidence on the potentiality of Balkans' countries to live on as allies and partners with a shared goal of joining the European Union. But, at the same time, President Vučić had stressed again the awareness of international actors' government on the choices that they had made were not always in favour of the future of the region and the peace of the world, which have led Serbia's government to strengthen its relations with China and Russia, two emerging countries that are threatened the international scenario as we know until today. It would be interesting to see and analyse the future actions of international actors in the region taking into consideration that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine may intensify Sino-Russian cooperation in the Western Balkans and hasten regional integration attempts by the EU and NATO. Foreign policy stances that are neutral, like Serbia's, are more likely to become unworkable in the future.

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[129] Ibidem

[130] Shopov, V. (2022). MAPPING CHINA'S RISE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS. *European Council on Foreign Relations 2022*. https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/

CHAPTER 3: Opposition and Prospects for Serbia in Europe

This chapter will analyse both the opposition forces to Vucic's Serbian government, in particular the role of civil society, and the Serbian future prospects, focusing in particular on the European future prospects. Indeed, as it was highlighted during all the research Serbia is a partially free state, according with the report of Freedom House of 2022, because it has competitive multiparty elections, but it has reduced political freedoms and other civil liberties. So, it is necessary the intervention of civil society in order to promote democratic reform and protect human right, in order to build a more stable and prosperous future for Serbia and the region as a whole. The integration of Serbia into the European Union is still a priority for Serbia even if the country is gradually losing trust in the European Union due to the lack of access to it. In this chapter, therefore, the analysis will focus on the importance of civil society and the importance of the EU fulfilling its promises of enlargement, thus avoiding the increased influence of Russia and China in the region.

In addition to the analysis of various documents and books, in this chapter I have adopted the methodology of interviews that were conducted with three experts on the subject: a PHD, an Italian Diplomat and a Serbian military attaché. The interviews are included in the appendix to the chapter.

3.1 Opposition forces to the Serbian government: Civil society

As it was described in the second chapter Serbia is a parliamentary democracy with competitive multiparty elections, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which is currently in power, has steadily reduced political freedoms and other civil liberties while exerting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organisations. President Vucic was elected for the first time in 2014 and he was re-elected in 2022, with unfair elections. Over the past 10 years, the Western Balkans have experienced a rise in civic initiatives and demonstrations. These have addressed numerous issues, from the destruction of cities and the environment to corruption scandals. Although their success has been mixed, they demonstrate that many citizens in the region are unhappy with the ineffective leadership of the governing bodies and are willing to participate in society. These local initiatives and new methods of civic engagement are deserving of further consideration as they hold the potential to advance democratization in the area. By addressing issues that have a direct impact on citizens' daily lives, these initiatives have a strong ability to bring people together and increase their sense of agency, regardless of their ethnic background. Although they may have limited success or fade quickly, they still generate a new energy in public discussions and the collective memory, opening the door for new possibilities for change in the future. These local civic initiatives and new

forms of engagement should receive further attention for their potential to promote democratization in the region[131]. In other words, civic activism is fundamental to revive European democracy because of participative democracy, Citizens are not just politically active during elections but also engage in direct activism to impact political decisions, policies, and take part in governance. For this reason, is necessary to talk about the role of civic society in Serbia and how they are trying to overcome the situation of a less developed democracy[132]. Indeed, one recent event organised by European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) together with its Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) and Engaged Democracy Initiative (EDI) was in January 2022. During the panel "Unleashing the potential for change through civic movements and initiatives – What can the latest developments in Serbia tell us", the topic was on the civic movements potential and its role for democratisation of Serbian societies. During the panel it was demonstrated that a significant number of residents in the area are strongly dissatisfied with the absence of responsibility from the governing authorities and eager to actively participate in their communities[133]. The panel provided a chance to showcase the latest report by the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) on the topic of civic movements and efforts in the area. The document suggests that local civic initiatives and innovative forms of public involvement are deserving of greater examination in order to assess the possibility for democratization in the region[134]. The document states: "*With their focus on tangible and concrete issues that affect the daily lives of citizens, they have a high potential for mobilisation and the ability to overcome ethnic divisions and strengthen citizens' sense of agency. Even if they have a limited impact that dissipates quickly, they still create a new momentum in public discourse and collective memory, from which new structures of opportunity for possible future change emerge*[135]".

The authors suggest that external entities like EU Member States and international organizations should offer support for national and regional cooperation. To make the goals of social movements lasting, it is crucial to give them resources and improve their abilities. This way, they can either opt for keeping a close watch or participate in elections. Džihić, one of the authors of the paper, stressed that the interests of small groups and elites hinder citizens from interacting with the state, even though

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[131] Džihić, V, Djolai, M., Vračić A., Vasiljević, J. (2021) Unleashing the Potential for Change through Social Movements and Civic Initiatives. publication. comments by Florian Bibier

[132] Capano, G. (2017) Manuale di scienza politica. Bologna: Il mulino.

[133] Ewb and Tanjug (2022) Civic initiatives in the Western Balkans potential for social and political change, European Western Balkans. Available at: https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/01/25/civic-initiatives-in-the-western-balkans-potential-for-social-and-political-change/ (Accessed: February 1, 2023).

[134] Ibidem

[135] See note 131.

civil society is the minority group. Hence, citizens must collaborate with international and non-international entities to build their power and translate their increased participation in social movements into political change. After years of democratic change failures by various actors, such as the EU or governments, citizen mobilization is now considered critical. It's also important to note that the EU doesn't have a unified stance on the Balkans, as seen in the disagreement over the name of North Macedonia with Greece and Macron's proposal to alter the EU accession process, which will be explained and analysed later[136]. Bojana Selaković, program director of the Civic Initiatives[137], during the Panel expressed her idea that protests against the Serbian authorities have become more complex compared to the 1990s, due to official support from the international community. According to Selaković, there's a lack of trust in institutions, which is a crucial factor for change. She also emphasizes that any type of protest, including environmental ones, is a demonstration for the rule of law[138]. During the same Panel, Marina Pavlić, an activist from the Kreni-Promeni movement[139], stated that the recent protests in Serbia showed that people have power and that they must recognize that their actions have an impact. Pavlić noted that the government is intimidated by excessive democracy, but when it fails to serve the people, it faces pressure from mass protests and demands from protesters[140]. Lastly, during the panel, activist Miran Pogačar emphasizes the importance of genuine communication and organized joint action to counteract populist PR and Twitter activism. He asserts that new political parties and a different approach to politics are necessary. Pogačar concludes that the recent protests were a result of the government's inappropriate use of force and that political party leaders focus more on PR instead of leading and organizing citizens. She concluded saying "*People need new political parties and new politics*".

To sum up, during all the panel, which was one of many initiatives that is cited in this thesis, emerged the idea that civil society is fundamental to subvert the authoritarian government. So far, civil society

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[136] *Ibidem*

[137] Civic Initiatives is an association of citizens for democracy and civil education, which was found on 1996 and it has been working on the realization of democracy in Serbia. A group of prominent NGO activists who were involved in the anti-war movement and democratic opposition since 1990 established Civic Initiatives. The organization was created to address the need for a strong foundation for democratic values by supporting citizen activism and advocating for improved legal frameworks for civic engagement. About Us (2023) Graanske Inicijative. Available at: https://www.gradjanske.org/en/about-us/ (Accessed: February 2, 2023).

[138] Panel Discussion "Unleashing the potential for change trough civic movements and initiatives" European Fund for the Balkans (2022) YouTube. YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FHxxFUJgR8 (Accessed: February 2, 2023).

[139] Serbian environmental movement

[140] See note 138

has managed to resist the regime's attacks, continuing to express critical views that increasingly reach Serbian and international public opinion. The critical attitude of civil society is becoming a bigger and bigger problem for the ruling leadership, which seems to want to silence every critical voice, be it the media or non-governmental organisations. Despite all these initiatives and the presence of more than thirty thousand NGOs and activist's groups, it is not enough. Indeed, it is interesting to cite the words of the leader of the deputies of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Aleksandar Martinović, who described the activities of civil society organisations that are discussed in the Serbian parliament in March 2021 and that are often discussed lately. He states that: "*They all work the same way, they take money out of Serbia, they receive money from abroad, they spend some of it here, and the money they can't spend on luxury cars, flats, fake projects that are never realised. […] The Serbian people must know this. These are not non-governmental organisations. Let us not lie, let us not speak the language of birds, let us use clear human language. In reality, these are criminal organisations. They do not pay any taxes in Serbia; their projects are far from transparent*"[141]. The Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) was specifically targeted by an MP who accused the organization of being involved in an attempted coup and assassination attempt against the Serbian President, among other things. In response to these allegations, CRTA released a statement inviting the prosecution office to hear witnesses, including the MP, and ask them to provide evidence to support their accusations. The statement also noted that if the prosecution office fails to act, it would demonstrate that the MP's accusations are irresponsible and baseless and that they are using parliamentary immunity to target certain individuals and organizations. The accusations made by the MP against CRTA and civil society in general, surprised and confused many people[142]. The effort to suppress the non-government sector has been ongoing for some time. Civil society organizations, together with the opposition and critical media, have been viewed as the primary opposition to the regime. In order to reduce the influence of civil society, the government creates GONGOs (government-established non-governmental organisations[143]), which aim to take over the role of civil society organizations and impose the government's agenda. This phenomenon is not unique to Serbia and has been seen in other former Soviet republics where repressive regimes use "government-

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[141] Obradović, V. (2021) Serbia: La Criminalizzazione della Società Civile, In Serbia è in atto un tentativo di screditare la società civile. Gravi e pesanti attacchi sul conto di alcune organizzazioni non governative serbe sono giunti dai banchi del parlamento, in particolare dal capogruppo del Partito progressista serbo, Aleksandar Martinović. Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso. Available at: https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Serbia/Serbia-la-criminalizzazione-della-societa-civile-209519 (Accessed: February 2, 2023).

[142] Ibidem

[143] See note 132.

established non-governmental organizations" to silence criticism of human rights abuses. These organizations, according to research by the Belgrade Civic Initiative Association, usually exist to support the government and its initiatives, and to compete for public funding allocation[144]. In former Soviet republics, authoritarian governments have established various 'government-affiliated non-governmental organizations' that employ armies of trolls to suppress criticism of human rights abuses. These organizations, according to research by the Belgrade Civic Initiative Association, typically exist for two purposes: to support the government and its initiatives, and to compete for public funding allocation. The ruling leadership is trying to criminalize civil society by taking concrete actions[145]. The Ministry of Finance recently drew up a list of 20 individuals and 37 non-governmental organizations, asking for access to their bank data from after January 1, 2019. This raise concerns as most of the organizations on the list have a critical view towards the government. The Serbian government, as part of its obligation to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF[146]), has taken steps to monitor the financing of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, the purpose of this list seems to be to discredit and criminalize the critical NGOs, as they are mostly organizations with a stance against the government. The recent statements by SNS members against civil society organizations are just a part of a larger strategy to marginalize and undermine these organizations[147]. As it is evident from these two case studies, civil society is fundamental in bringing the change of the stagnant situation in Serbia but also in all the six countries of the ex-Yugoslavia. Significant are also the words of the PHD Jasmin Mujanovic which, during the interview conducted through phone on January 2023, stated that: "*I think the moment for "change" in Serbia has passed, at least for the time being. The more immediate question is how and when Vucic himself will be removed from power. That is almost certain not to be a peaceful transition of power; it will likely require some kind of*

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[144] See note 141.

[145] Media Campaign Against Civil Society and Media – Case of control by the administration for the prevention of money laundering | (1970) Građanske Inicijative. Available at: https://www.gradjanske.org/en/media-campaign-against-civil-society-and-media-case-of-control-by-the-administration-for-the-prevention-of-money-laundering/ (Accessed: February 2, 2023).

[146] The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is an international organization responsible for monitoring money laundering and terrorist financing activities globally. Established in 1989, it has its headquarters in Paris. The inter-governmental group sets international standards designed to stop these illegal activities and the damage they cause to society. With 39 members, the FATF creates standards to aid national authorities in pursuing illicit funds related to crimes such as drug trafficking, illegal arms trade, cyber fraud and other serious offenses. Over 200 countries and territories have pledged to implement the FATF's standards as part of a coordinated effort to prevent organized crime, corruption, and terrorism. https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/home.html

[147] Ibidem

public revolt. Exactly how significant a revolt that will be, and the scale of the regime's reaction in turn remains to be seen[148]". Comparing the answer of the expert Jasmin Mujanovic, with the answer of the Military attaché of Serbia, is interesting to see the two different points of view, one of a scholar and one of official of Serbian army and so a member of the Serbian institution. The Military attaché stated that: "*I absolutely do not believe in government control over the press and even less over institutions. Instead, it is the oppositions, in their normal democratic work of opposing the government, that have for some time denounced the absolute control exercised by the incumbent government over every aspect of public life and over the press[149]*". These two answers show that there is still a long way to go, but that the road is good even though not all civil society is involved in the process of democratic change due to the important impact of government's ideas. Indeed, as it was shown during all the thesis, it is fundamental the use of political propaganda of Vucic and all Serbia's government in controlling the state. Because of this, the government emphasises the use of historical events for political purposes, and thus the politicisation of history, such as the war of the 1990s. there is no doubt that governments need to talk about the war because of the huge impact it had not only in Serbia but throughout the Balkans, but it is even more important to emphasise the way in which this war is instrumentalised by institutions. While it is certainly true that certain structural, historical events favour the achievement of a political goal, those alone are not enough to cause it. Indeed, as the PHD Mujanovic stated "*The Western Balkans never experienced a period of substantial lustration after the 1990s, and thus the primary ideological and political projects of that period remain as pronounced today as they were then, or at least are at an alarmingly similar level[150]*". regional, ethno-confessional and social tensions had, albeit to varying degrees from area to area, their own historical background in which a series of political, social, individual, and collective figures prepared the clash and dissolution of the Yugoslav state.

Moreover, as history teaches us (just think of what happened in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021), it is not correct to transfer the idea of European democracy to other countries as they differ in ideals and characteristics. Indeed, the idea of European democracy can be a valuable reference and source of inspiration for other countries, but it is not necessarily appropriate or correct to simply transfer it wholesale to other cultures and societies. Democracy is a complex and nuanced system of government, shaped by the unique historical, political, social and cultural context of each country. they have its own challenges and constraints, and the specific form of democracy that works best in one country may not be the best solution for another. In addition, different countries may have

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[148] Appendix 1: interview with PHD Jasmin Mujanovic

[149] Appendix III: Interview with Military attaché of Serbia

[150] Appendix 1: interview with PHD Jasmin Mujanovic

different priorities and values, which may influence the way democracy is implemented and practised. there is no doubt that the principles of democracy, such as the rule of law, protection of individual rights and representative government, may be universal, but the specific form and practice of democracy must be adapted to the local context and circumstances to be effective and sustainable. Therefore, the intervention of civil society seems to be necessary to initiate change from below and to succeed in establishing a suitable model of democracy[151].

3.2 Future European prospects for Serbia

3.2.1. Serbia accession to European Union, report of the European Commission

The Balkans have been and still are the meeting and clash point between what we summarily call Western and Eastern cultures but which we should more honestly call Western and Eastern 'interests'[152].

The idea of revitalising the European project through enlargement in the Balkans stems from certain undeniable geopolitical necessities and brings with it a basket of risks and opportunities. Geopolitical needs concern the competition for primacy in the projection of influence in the region. In fact, as never before in the recent history of the Balkans, foreign actors have established and conflicting positions. One only must think of Turkey, which through its NGOs, cultural institutes and investments in infrastructure, medicine, education and finance has strengthened its ascendancy in Bosnia and Kosovo. Secondly, Moscow's actions cannot be ignored, characterised by its special relationship with Serbia and its use of a range of 'hybrid' instruments, from arms sales to the laundering of mafia capital, from the breeding of Euro-sceptic political leaders to the implementation of cyberattacks or support for coups[153]. All this without forgetting energy leverage and supplying European markets with Siberian gas. Finally, Xi's China sees in the Balkans the European port of the new Silk Road, the logistical hinterland to maximise the benefits from the acquisition of the Greek port of Piraeus. The biggest problem underlying the projection of Russian and Chinese influence, apart from depriving Europe of important human and material resources, relates to the promotion of systems of governance far removed from those defended and promoted by Brussels. Indeed, despite its limitations, EU action has always been characterised by the defence of individual and collective rights and the effort to

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[151] Andjelic, Neven. (2023) Covid-19, state-power and society in Europe: Focus on Western Balkans. S.l.: springer nature.

[152] Margelletti, A. (2022) "Il presente e il futuro dell'Europa passano (ancora una volta) dai Balcani occidentali," *CeSPI Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale* [Preprint].

[153] See note 151

improve democratic and liberal institutions. Conversely, Moscow and Beijing export an authoritarian model that is insensitive to liberal-democratic political planning. For them, the Balkans are merely a source of resources to be exploited and not a territory in which to develop the living standards of the local population. Their action is aimed at normalising unstable areas without acting on the factors at their origin. For this reason, the reopening of the Balkan enlargement dossier has, among its objectives, that of preventing the spread of a model of relations between states based on mere convenience and, secondly, that of neutralising the rise of unrepresentative or even self-referential and anti-European political systems[154]. However, in order to avoid hypocrisy, it is not possible to omit the fact that the economic opportunities arising from a market of some 17 million people and a territory of great strategic value due to its geographic position are as tempting to the East as to the West. The discriminating factor lies in the dividends of the inclusive or exclusive exploitation of these resources[155]. Beyond the great international competition, European enlargement in the Balkans is an internal EU challenge. In terms of risks, the decision to give the Union a new lease of life through the entry of new members could unleash the wrath of those northern European countries that are reluctant to increase the number of Brussels members, especially with states that are part of the Mediterranean cordon, traditionally disinclined to parsimonious management of public coffers and inclined to redistribute migrants from Africa and the Middle East more fairly. Not to mention the need, in the face of new entries, to revise the European budget and change the trajectories of structural funds for the renewal of the Balkan countries' productive, social and institutional architectures. A critical issue, the latter, felt even more strongly at a time like the present, when the entire continent needs fresh capital, in the form of loans and subsidies, to mitigate the devastating economic impacts of the new coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, a further risk that cannot be ignored is that of the levels of democracy in the candidate countries. If North Macedonia is to be considered a virtuous example, the same cannot be said for Albania, which, despite the giant strides it has made since the end of the communist regime, still has to live with the deleterious role played by criminal conglomerates in public political dynamics. Showing too much flexibility or deviating from the political principles required for EU membership could offer new arguments to Polish and Hungarian populisms and contribute to creating new rifts in Brussels and Strasbourg[156]. Therefore, to every risk there is also an opportunity. For the Balkans, EU membership could really mean putting an end to the fault lines of

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[154] European Found For the Balkans (no date) Unfulfilled promise: Completing the EU enlargement to the Balkans - Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group. Available at: https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Unfulfilled-Promise-Completing-the-EU-Enlargement-to-the-Balkans.pdf.

[155] See note 151

[156] See note 154

conflict gripping those countries, laying solid foundations for peace and dialogue between Serbs and Albanians, between Croats and Serbs, between Orthodox and Muslims, laying the foundations for solid and lasting economic growth. Just as after the Second World War, when the birth of the European Community ushered in a new era of peace and cooperation between countries that had fought each other for centuries, so the enlargement of the EU in the Balkans could turn the rifts of the Yugoslav wars into a page, however sad, of the history books alone.

It is then relevant to analyse how is going the process of accession of Serbia. As it was previously stated, Serbia has applied for membership of the European Union in 2009 and in 2011 the European Commission gave to Serbia the status of candidate, in line with the Treaty of European Union and the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union[157]. The European Council granted the official status of candidate country to Serbia at its meeting in 2012. The actual accession negotiations began in 2014, following the preparatory phase of the negotiations, and are still ongoing[158]. It is therefore relevant to analyse how far the negotiations have come through the document published by the European Commission on October 2022: "*Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy*"[159]. As a matter of fact, 22 of 35 chapters have been opened in negotiations, including those on the fundamentals and the green agenda and sustainable connectivity (Cluster 4). Two chapters have been provisionally closed. Serbia accepted the revised enlargement methodology in June 2021, and the progress of negotiations will depend on the rate of rule of law reforms and the improvement of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. After the early parliamentary elections and dissolution of Parliament in February 2022, the speed of reforms slowed down. The government has been operating in a temporary capacity with limited power since then because of delays in finalizing election results. The recommendation from last year that Serbia has met the requirements for cluster 3 (competitiveness and inclusive growth) and is technically ready to begin that cluster is still valid. In addition, Serbia, like most of the international community, including the EU, voted for UN General Assembly resolutions and for Russia's suspension from the Human Rights Council in response to Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. However, Serbia did not

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[157] COM/2011/0668 final */ COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL Commission Opinion on Serbia's application for membership of the European Union. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52011DC0668&from=EN

[158] *Ibidem*

[159] COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT (2022) Serbia 2022 Report Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy. Brussels.

align with the EU's restrictive measures or statements by the High Representative against Russia and maintained close ties with Russia, raising questions about Serbia's direction. For Serbia to progress in its EU accession negotiations, effective planning and coordination as well as sufficient resources for EU accession across all institutions is important. Additionally, for EU accession, it is crucial that Serbia prioritizes responsible and objective communication about the EU, which is Serbia's main political and economic partner[160]. In analyzing the report of the European Commission, the attention will be on the: chapter 10 (information society and media) and chapter 31 (foreign, security and defense policy). Indeed, in chapter 10 the European Commission highlight the stagnation on changing policy for what concern the regulation for media. Some modifications were made to the laws regarding electronic media and public broadcasters as a result of discussions between political parties before the April 2022 elections, but they were not enough. As a matter of fact, The Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (REM) is still failing to fully fulfill its duties, effectively monitoring and enforcing compliance with program content requirements among broadcasters. Despite the re-election of two members whose terms expired in December 2021, the REM Board continues to work with all members in office. However, concerns remain about the financial stability and capacity of the REM staff and the lack of independence needs to be more rigorously addressed. The measures identified in the media strategy should be addressed through amendments to the Electronic Media Act, which was originally scheduled for the second quarter of 2022. In April 2022, the REM issued a call for tenders for the award of four national television broadcasting licenses, which were ultimately awarded to the same previous holders for a period of eight years. This process has been widely criticized by media associations and other stakeholders for lack of transparency, as no up-to-date market analysis was published before the invitation. Radio Television Serbia (RTS) was not included in state budget funding for 2022, while Radio Television Vojvodina (RTV) received support from the state budget thanks to an amendment of the law on temporary funding of public media services[161]. The Serbia Report 2022 demonstrated progress in certain areas, little or no progress in other fields, whereas no progress was made regarding freedom of expression.

When talking about the chapter 31, linked with the security policy, the European Union requests that Serbia improves, as a matter of priority, its alignment with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, including sanctions, and avoid actions and statements that go against EU positions on foreign policy

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[160] Ibidem

[161] COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT (2022) "Chapter 10: Information society and media," in *Serbia 2022 Report. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy*. EUROPEAN COMMISSION, pp. 102–104.

and also, implement the action plans for the implementation of new national security and defence strategies in a manner fully reflecting Serbia's EU orientation in these areas. As it was described in the previous chapter Serbia has not directly sanctioned Russia's invasion[162]. And, also, Serbia has maintained strong ties with Russia, and some statements and actions taken by high-ranking Serbian officials have been in direct opposition to the positions of the European Union on foreign policy. more precisely, in 2021, Serbia's alignment with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy was at 64%. However, as of August 2022, that rate dropped to 45%. Serbia aligned with EU declarations and decisions on Russia and Ukraine, including sanctions against the former leadership of Ukraine. Despite that, Serbia has not aligned with any restrictions against Russia and most EU declarations and decisions related to Russia and Ukraine. Serbia also continues to maintain close relations with Russia, including receiving visits from Russian officials who are on the EU sanctions list[163].

The process of EU enlargement, although very slow, is still ongoing and this is evident from the analysis of the report prepared by the European Commission. Despite the fact that Serbia is undertaking various reforms to comply with European principles, it is still far behind in terms of media freedom, as the Serbian government exercises great control over the media and other communication tools in order to control civil society. And, also, the report stressed the second main theme of this thesis, how Serbia is trying to maintain strong relations both with European Union and other international actors such as Russia and China.

3.2.2 Europe future project in Serbia and Yugoslavia

The European Union has made a commitment to support the Western Balkans on their path towards EU integration. The EU's engagement in the region is driven by the belief that the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU is crucial for the stability and prosperity of the entire region[164]. However, the integration process has been slow, and some have criticized[165] the EU for not doing enough to support the Western Balkans, or for not keeping its promises to the region. There are several

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[162] COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT (2022) "Chapter 31: Foreign, security and defence policy," in *Serbia 2022 Report. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy.* EUROPEAN COMMISSION, pp. 134–137.

[163] Ibidem

[164] Fruscione, G. (2022) *L'ue e l'allargamento ai balcani: Tra Promesse E IPOCRISIE, ISPI.* Desk Balcani. Available at: https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/lue-e-lallargamento-ai-balcani-tra-promesse-e-ipocrisie-35542 (Accessed: January 28, 2023).

[165] See note 151

reasons why the EU may not be seen as fully maintaining its promise in the Balkans. The EU has been facing internal challenges such as the debt crisis, Brexit, Covid-19 pandemic and the migration crisis, which have absorbed much of the EU's attention and resources. The accession process of the Western Balkans countries is complex and requires the fulfilment of a large number of conditions, some of which are difficult to achieve. The situation is made more complicated by the illiberal turn in Hungary and Poland which has bring politicians in EU countries to question the wisdom of welcoming Balkan semi-democracies. For leaders like French President Emmanuel Macron, the EU's internal consolidation trumps expansion as a priority. In other words, there is a lack of political will among some EU member states to prioritize the Western Balkans and move forward with enlargement. The ongoing disputes between some of the Western Balkan's countries that need to be resolved before the EU can move forward with the integration process, such as the already explained case of Serbia Kosovo. However, the EU has been making some effort to keep its promise in the Western Balkans. The EU has been providing financial and technical assistance to the region and continues to support the countries in implementing necessary reforms. Despite these challenges, the EU continues to support the Western Balkans on their path towards EU membership, but the process is slow and uncertain[166]. From the Western Balkans' point of view, on one side, the area has strong connections to the European market and has advantages in terms of trade and some freedom of movement due to its relationship with the EU. However, on the other hand, the Western Balkans are facing issues with a resurgence of authoritarian rule and excessive nationalism[167]. As it was previously argued, in 2018, the organization Freedom House downgraded Serbia's status to "partly free" due to President Aleksandar Vučić's dismantling of democratic checks and balances established after the Milošević era. This has led to the EU's vision for the Balkans being viewed as ineffective and has caused progressive citizens in the region to question the EU's commitment to democratic and liberal values. In particular, not only in Serbia but in all the region the pro-democratic groups in the Western Balkans are facing challenges as they are forced to either justify the EU's partnerships with corrupt leaders or seek alternative models for change without the EU's involvement. The ongoing issues of depopulation and migration are also hindering progress. In general, leaders in the Balkans prefer the presence of Russia and China as it provides them with more opportunities for financial gain, rather than aligning with the EU[168]. The weakening of the EU's demands for reforms in areas

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[166] Ibidem

[167] Cvijic, S. and Bechev, D. (no date) Geopolitical Europe should prove its mettle in the Balkans, IWM WEBSITE. Available at: https://www.iwm.at/blog/geopolitical-europe-should-prove-its-mettle-in-the-balkans (Accessed: January 28, 2023).

[168] Ibidem

crucial to the maintenance of power, such as the media, judiciary, police, and public sector employment, is an acceptable compromise for Western Balkan leaders. For the EU to fulfil its goal of promoting democracy, the accession process must work in conjunction with domestic efforts, rather than against them. Some propose that increasing regional integration could improve economies and prepare Western Balkan countries for eventual EU membership in a decade or two. The concept of a "mini-Schengen"[169], that now is called Open Balkans, has gained popularity in recent years, with Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania supporting it. However, regional cooperation alone will not provide substantial economic growth or address democratic issues. Another problem can be seen in the fact that only three countries of the Wester Balkans are part of this cooperation. As a matter of fact, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo are being considered to join the Open Balkan Initiative established by Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia. However, these countries are hesitant to participate in the initiative because they view Serbia as a significant security concern due to the historical and current issues in the region. Additionally, Serbia's claim that Kosovo is still its territory creates a political obstacle for its participation in the initiative[170]. Also, Benjamin Haddad, director of the Future Europe Initiative at the Atlantic Council in Washington, and Damir Marusic, senior fellow at the Atlantic Council argue, along with other European diplomats, that the Open Balkans Initiative is an alternative to the European Union rather than a means to achieve the goals set out in the EU enlargement plan to join the EU[171]. Despite that, the idea of an Open Balkans, similar to the Common Regional Market and EU enlargement, is a positive concept that would benefit all parties involved if executed properly. However, the region's progress is hindered by the fact that the most

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[169] Mini-Schengen is the initiative of Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania to increase regional cooperation. Indeed, in 2021, this initiative for the Balkans was proposed by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, and Former North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev during a meeting in Novi Sad, Serbia in October 2019. This initiative was publicly announced in Skopje, North Macedonia, on July 29, 2021, and aims to implement a shared customs system among member states starting January 1, 2023. In particular, the aim is to establish a common regional market and facilitating the free movement of goods and services between these three states that have the willingness to become member of the European Union. MAZREK, S. (2022) Open balkan: The "mini -schengen" of the balkans - ankasam: Ankara Kriz ve Siyaset Araştırmaları Merkezi, ANKASAM. Available at: https://www.ankasam.org/open-balkan-the-mini-schengen-of-the-balkans/?lang=en (Accessed: January 29, 2023).

[170] Ibidem

[171] Haddad, B. and Marusic, D. (2021) The Balkans don't believe the EU anymore, Foreign Policy. Foreign Policy. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/25/balkans-dont-believe-eu-anymore-albania-macedonia-rama-vucic/ (Accessed: January 29, 2023).

populous country in the Western Balkans is currently ruled by an aggressive and genocidal autocrat. Therefore, the future of the Open Balkans Initiative and a common regional market is uncertain[172].

The main issue is Serbia and its actions towards the majority of the region, which are not related to political and economic collaboration but instead stem from the aggressive and dominant aspirations of the leaders in Belgrade. Specifically, Serbian Interior Minister Aleksander Vulin has suggested that Serbia aims to unite all Serbs in the Western Balkans under a formal political and institutional structure, creating a larger Serbia with Belgrade as its capital and Vucic as its unchallenged leader[173]. He has advocated for the unification of all Serbs in the Western Balkans under a single state, referred to as a "Serbian world," with Belgrade as its capital and current President Vucic as its leader. This idea has been promoted in political rallies and on national television and has been used as a means of exerting pressure on neighbouring countries, particularly Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro. These three countries are part of the initiative but many of their population and territories are believed by Vulin and Vucic to eventually be included in this new Serbian state. As a result, Serbia is perceived as a threat to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of these countries, which is why there is little interest in building deeper ties with the current regime[174]. Considering the words of the political scientist and PHD Mujanovic during the interview conducted and quoted in the appendix, very few people, either in the US or the EU, seem willing to face this fact. He also adds that politics can never replace policy. As long as Belgrade remains faithful to the ideals and aspirations of the former regime of Slobodan Milosevic, no progress can be made in this region. This is not merely a question of implementation, but a question of substance and thus bad policy[175].

The EU needs to assert its power over its surrounding areas by speeding up enlargement. However, the challenge is to do so without jeopardizing reforms in countries hoping to join. The EU has not yet developed an effective plan to achieve this. Changes such as the Revised Enlargement Methodology[176] imposed by France in 2020 will not prevent authoritarian practices in the Western

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[172] Mujanovic, J. (2021) Belgrade's 'Serbian world' fantasies jeopardise Balkan Cooperation, Balkan Insight. Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/02/belgrades-serbian-world-fantasies-jeopardise-balkan-cooperation/ (Accessed: January 29, 2023).

[173] Ibidem

[174] Karabeg, O. (2021) Most: Pokušava Li Vučić da Bude 'Predsednik Svih Srba'?, Radio Slobodna Evropa. Radio Slobodna Evropa. Available at: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/most-vucic-srpski-svet/31375113.html (Accessed: January 29, 2023).

[175] Appendix 1 Interviews to PHD: Jasmin Mujanovic

[176] On 25 March 2020, the Council endorsed the Commission's communication 'Strengthening the accession process - a credible European perspective for the Western Balkans' of 5 February 2020, which aims to give new impetus to the accession process by making it more predictable, more credible, more dynamic and subject to stronger political leadership.

Balkans but will likely prolong membership talks[177]. Making modifications to the membership negotiation process is ineffective without first fixing the decision-making process. Indeed, the Italian Diplomat that works for The European External Action Service (EEAS), during our interview has suggested to make some changes in the decision-making process. As a matter of fact, the requirement of unanimity in the EU accession process hinders the ability to reward democratic leaders, like North Macedonia, while also being unable to penalize countries falling behind, like Serbia under Vučić. The current process allows individual member states to block progress due to personal disputes or domestic politics by requiring a unanimous vote on each step towards membership. The solution is to implement qualified majority voting in enlargement talks and enforce a system that ties the release of EU funds to compliance with the rule of law[178]. For the EU's transformative power to have a positive impact, reforms in decision-making during accession process must be accompanied by a bottom-up movement from the Western Balkans. This requires civil society actors to advocate for transparent politics and push for change, including through political participation. The EU must first establish its objectives and assert its influence in its own region before it can effectively impact the wider neighbourhood or the world. The Italian Diplomat has also explained his idea that the EU should find a way to deliver on its promises. he also adds that the EU in its history has always had two constants the first is that it goes through dozens of crises (the most recent being the 2008 crisis, the covid-19 migration crisis), but these have never allowed it to abandon the project of the European union and its values. In fact, the idea of the EU has always been reinforced. The second constant is that the EU has always delivered on its promises of well-being and prosperity[179].

A similar point of view is expressed by the military attaché's words. Indeed, he suggested a kind of loss of confidence on the part, in this case Serbian, but in general of both states with candidate status and states that have already begun the accession process. In any case, he underlines the importance, however, that Europe has and how it should not abandon the Balkan project but should continue the accession negotiations with more speed. On the other hand, with regard to the issue of the Chinese and Russian presence in the region, the military attaché did not mention it. Quoting his words: "*Apart*

The new process is based on objective criteria, strict positive and negative conditions and reversibility. Credibility is enhanced by an even greater focus on fundamental reforms, starting with the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration, and the economies of the candidate countries. Allargamento: Applicazione della nuova metodologia a Montenegro e Serbia (2021) Consilium. Available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/press/press-releases/2021/05/11/enlargement-new-enlargement-methodology-will-be-applied-to-montenegro-and-serbia/ (Accessed: February 5, 2023).

[177] See note 171

[178] Appendix I1 Interviews to Italian Diplomat that works for The European External Action Service (EEAS)

[179] See note 151

from promises about the European perspective of the respective countries, nothing concrete has happened regarding their accession to the EU. The general perception is that the EU constantly avoids taking a concrete position on the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU[180]."

To sum up, the aftermath of the collapse of Yugoslavia is still evident today through ongoing unresolved border disputes that arose from the break-up of the country. These disputes have the potential to impede the development of the Western Balkans and progress towards European integration. The European Union and international law's role in resolving these disputes is intricate and multi-dimensional, and it requires a thorough understanding of Yugoslavia's legacy and the ways in which it continues to affect the region today.

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[180] Appendix III: interviews to Military attaché of Serbia

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Interviews to PHD: Jasmin Mujanovic

1. What role did ethnicity generally play among ordinary people in the former Yugoslavia? Was it really such an issue, or was it mainly triggered by the political elites who were pursuing different objectives? Also, how is history important to forge collective memory, in this specific   case?
   Furthermore, the idea of redrawing the borders of the Balkan countries along ethno-national lines to solve the pending disputes in the region has been hypothesised, what is your opinion? Do you think that to still talk about Greater Serbia, Greater Albania and Greater Croatia is to turn back the hands of history and deny the values on which the EU itself is founded?

Ethnicity had been a significant, even salient issue in regional politics since the latter half of the 19th century. Exactly how significant an issue it was, however, in any given moment, in any particular locality varied. For instance, Bosnia was largely spared the worst of the late 19th and early 20th century sectarian violence, typified by the Balkan Wars. On the other hand, Bosnia became the locus of the intertwined conflicts that characterized the period of the fascist occupation during the 1940s. Throughout the duration of the second Yugoslav state, ethnicity remained a sensitive issue for the ruling regime, especially given how polarized and factitious such questions had become during the first Yugoslav period.

Moreover, for certain communities the issue had particular salience. For example, there was not a single generation of Bosniaks born between 1918 and 1995 who did not experience significant episodes of sectarian violence: after 1918 and into the 1920s; during the 1940s; and then again during the 1990s. And even during that interregnum between 1945 and 1992, the actual political status of the Bosniak community was severely compromised, and they were not even "recognized" as a distinct nation by the communist authorities until 1969. Similar narratives can be found about Albanians and Macedonians as well, so it is not to suggest the experience of the Bosniak community was unique in this regard.

2. Considering the almost absolute control that the Vučić regime exerts over the media and institutions and the very frequent and brutal attacks launched against its opponents, do you think it will be more difficult to trigger a change of power in Serbia? How the media can be

used to create collective memory? This control leads to a great consensus among the population or if there is a perception of an authoritarian regime

The EU has long, tacitly, accommodated and even facilitated such irredentist politics in the region. It certainly did so in the 1990s and has continued to do so. For instance, one of the chief champions of the so-called "land swap" deal between Kosovo and Serbia was the EU's then foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini. Which is to say, yes, such proposals and ideas violate the idea of the *theoretical* "European project". But the actually existing EU is one characterized by people like Mogherini, Orban, Milanovic etc. and they clearly embrace such reactionary politics.

3. In the thesis, I talk about the instrumentalisation of the memory of the war of the nineties, do you think this is used to influence internal relations in the Balkans? in Serbia specifically? and for international relations? Do you think that there are multiple and diverging narratives about the war or only one main narration pushed by the government? do you think it is still right to talk about the war and to relate it to today?

I think the moment for "change" in Serbia has passed, at least for the time being. The more immediate question is how and when Vucic himself will be removed from power. That is almost certain not to be a peaceful transition of power; it will likely require some kind of public revolt. Exactly how significant a revolt that will be, and the scale of the regime's reaction in turn remains to be seen. But that's a process almost wholly seperate from the question of historical memory. The reality is that the mainstream perception of the whole of the Yugoslav dissolution and the accompanying wars in Serbia is revisonist and has, arguably, become even more revisonist since the mid-2000s when there was a brief period of liberalization.

4. During the wars, the EU failed to find a common position and strategy to avert the worst outcome. It was too preoccupied with itself, with German unification, with the Maastricht Treaty. Today, 30 years later, it again risks losing its credibility, security interests and geopolitical role in the region. Do you think the EU is currently committing another historic mistake by failing to deliver on its enlargement promises?

Revisionist histories are key to the continuing power of nationalist governments, in particular in Serbia, but also in the RS entity in Bosnia, but also Croatia. In Croatia, we are also witnessing a period of significant revisionist retrenchment, and the associated resurgence of the far-right. The fact

that the nationalist HDZ has only been out of power for a handful of years during the entire independence period is quite indicative of the stranglehold nationalist ideas and leaders have even on that society. As for whether it is "right" keep talking about the war, the reality is it is hard not to. The Western Balkans never experienced a period of substantive lustration after the 1990s, and so the primary ideological and political projects of the period remain as pronounced today as they were then or are at least on an alarmingly similar level.

5. What is your main recommendation, to avoid having the EU lose its credibility, security interests and geopolitical role in the Western Balkans? What do you think on the presence of Russia and China in the Balkans?

The EU long ago lost credibility in the region, and enlargement has obviously been a moot point since at least the early 2010s. So, the question is really whether the EU wants to be a relevant factor in the Western Balkans at some future point? From the current vantage point, the answer seems to be clearly no. Of course, that will have significant consequences for the bloc in time – indeed, it is already consequential. But for the time being, it can be brushed under the rug. That, however, will not remain an option in perpetuity.

I've long argued that the fundamental problem in the Western Balkans as concerns both the EU and the U.S., and which likewise relates to the growing presence of China and Russia, is that the whole of the region is simply a consequence-free zone. Everything is allowed, nothing is off limits, and no action, no matter how brazen or destabilizing, ever merits anything vaguely resembling a reaction on the part of the West. The EU has not even sanctioned Milorad Dodik, and it wants to talk about counter Russia and China? It's laughable. Until those changes, claims of restoring or preserving "legitimacy" and "credibility" are just empty rhetoric.

Appedix II: Interviews to: Italian Diplomat that works for The European External Action Service (EEAS)

1. What role did ethnicity generally play among ordinary people in the former Yugoslavia? Was it really such an issue, or was it mainly triggered by the political elites who were pursuing different objectives? Also, how is history important to forge collective memory, in this specific case?
   Furthermore, the idea of redrawing the borders of the Balkan countries along ethno-national lines to solve the pending disputes in the region has been hypothesised, what is your opinion?

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Do you think that to still talk about Greater Serbia, Greater Albania and Greater Croatia is to turn back the hands of history and deny the values on which the EU itself is founded?

There are many international theses on the role of ethnicity in the Balkans, but two stand out in particular. The most widely accepted thesis is the belief that what dominates is a kind of ethnic-religious tribalism that renders this region hopeless. While the more correct one, in my opinion and not only, is the one according to which in reality the evils of the former Yugoslavia are the evils of politics, what has happened is not the fault of ethnic religious hatred but of how bad politics has instrumentally used these sentiments. One only has to read Yvo andric - Bridge over the Frost or Chronicles, a letter from 1920, who is the first to say that ethnicity and religious differences played a fundamental role in this region but in instrumental terms. Indeed, even in times of peace, this hatred is always present. The wars in the former Yugoslavia were wars of secession triggered by the collapse of the USSR in 1990 and the fact that the leadership thought that nationalist assertion could be a way to preserve what was still there. So, it is the leadership, and thus those with political power, who played on ethnic and religious differences that started the war massacre of the 1990s. The fundamental fact to highlight is that ethnic-religious hatred alone does not make massacres, but it takes politics and bad politics in particular.

2. Considering the almost absolute control that the Vučić regime exerts over the media and institutions and the very frequent and brutal attacks launched against its opponents, do you think it will be more difficult to trigger a change of power in Serbia? How the media can be used to create collective memory? This control leads to a great consensus among the population or if there is a perception of an authoritarian regime

It is important to analyse the whole country situation, to look at the administration as well, otherwise there is no clear vision and possibility to comment. In Belgrade's political communication, there is a need to keep one foot in two or more stirrups. It keeps one foot in the European stirrup and wants to demonstrate regional leadership. But it holds stirrups on the need to focus not only on Europe, thus leaning on Russia and China and beyond. One must therefore take this into account to make an analysis on communication policy.

What's more, one must also analyse the political communication of the entire 20th century, with the movement of non-aligned countries claiming the origin of this need to keep one's feet in two stirrups right there. There is always a thread of continuity and so this modern-day communication is not august from the role in which Belgrade has always communicated. In 2000 Milosevic was ousted, the new

president immediately posed the problem of how to communicate what Serbia had become after Milosevic's ouster. Vucic's communication is not abstracted from all this and he is a very solid leader in control of the country.

3. During the wars, the EU failed to find a common position and strategy to avert the worst outcome. It was too preoccupied with itself, with German unification, with the Maastricht Treaty. Today, 30 years later, it again risks losing its credibility, security interests and geopolitical role in the region. Do you think the EU is currently committing another historic mistake by failing to deliver on its enlargement promises? What is your main recommendation, to avoid having the EU lose its credibility, security interests and geopolitical role in the Western Balkans? What do you think on the presence of Russia and China in the Balkans?

The main recommendation is that the EU must find a way to live up to its promises, also for its credibility, Moreover, looking at the map there is a black hole in the middle, the Balkans, and that is what needs to be resolved. One can well understand the European doubts and hesitations in quickly admitting these countries to the EU. Ever since the Thessaloniki summit in 2003 there was an agenda that made clear Europe's intentions for enlargement but did not set out the timetable for this. Geopolitics helps to understand why these countries were given candidate status despite the fact that no timeframe was given. That is, why otherwise these countries would gravitate towards other countries (Russia and China). Of course, there are also other reasons including economic and social benefits. To continue working to get the Balkan countries to join the European institutions and to make this prospect, which has been promised many times, a reality. The EU should also implement an internal reform and also change the accession process from qualified majority voting, for example. EU in its history has always had two constants the first is that it has gone through dozens of crises, after each crisis the idea has returned and EU has grown stronger, always able to come out stronger than it went in. The second constant is that the EU has always delivered on its promises of well-being and prosperity.

Appendix III: Interviews to Military Attaché of Serbia

Clarification from the interlocutor: 'I would like to clarify that the answers to the questions below express my personal position only following a telephone interview with Dr. Camilla Palcani.

1. What role did ethnicity generally play among the people in the former Yugoslavia? Was it really such a problem or was it mainly triggered by political elites pursuing different goals?

For centuries, the Balkan area experienced a history of migration and domination that exacerbated nationalism, hatred, rivalry and violence due to widespread and profound ethno-confessional heterogeneity. The resulting Balkan wars were partly provoked by the pseudo-historical theses of writers, psychiatrists and politicians who pursued different goals based on different ethnic identities founded on divisions that not even Titoism had managed to erase. The ethnic problem has been an integral and structural part of all wars of national liberation since the beginning of the Ottoman decline. The main reason is perhaps simple and can only be found in the deep ethnic differences. When the contrast is ethnic, cultural and religious, but also ideological and political, compromise is impossible. When identity is involved, the answer is either complete tolerance or total intolerance.

2. What do you think of the use of the historical event for political purposes? Can you give me some examples?

While it is certainly true that certain structural, historical events favor the achievement of a political goal, those alone are not enough to cause it. There must be something more, or someone, that sets that situation in motion and channels it in the desired direction. The examples could be endless, but I cite the example of the former Yugoslavia where regional, ethno-confessional and social tensions had, albeit to varying degrees from area to area, their own historical background in which a series of political, social, individual and collective figures prepared the clash and dissolution of the Yugoslav state. Before the weapons, they killed with words or rather created a public opinion that supported the clash. In my opinion, the influence of individual historical events, however powerful they may be, must be weighed up, even if in several cases it comes in handy in resolving issues far removed from those officially propagated and achieving political ends. The events that took place and are taking place in the Balkans are a good example of this.

3. Considering the Serbian government's control over the media and institutions, do you think it will be more difficult to trigger a change of power in Serbia?

I absolutely do not believe in government control over the press and even less over institutions. Instead, it is the oppositions, in their normal democratic work of opposing the government, that have been denouncing for some time the absolute control exercised by the incumbent government over

every aspect of public life and the press. I recall that in April last year, fair and free parliamentary elections were held for the renewal of the single chamber of parliament at the same time as the elections for the new President of the Republic. Following those elections, the incumbent President was re-elected for a second term with 58 % of the vote even though the coalition led by his party did not achieve an absolute majority in parliament.

Confirming the fairness of the conduct of the elections, which were monitored by international observers, there were a few cases of dubious irregularities on the eve of the vote, whereas no irregularities were found during the voting operations. At the end of the elections, the observers stressed the correctness of the results of the presidential and parliamentary elections.

4. in the thesis I talk about the instrumentalisation of the memory of the 1990s war, do you think it serves to influence internal relations in the Balkans? in Serbia specifically? and for international relations? Do you think there are multiple and divergent narratives about the war or only one main narrative pushed by the government? Do you think it is still right to talk about the war and relate it too today?

Let us say at once that it happens in the Balkans to grow up and live immersed in a suffocating historical culture that emphasises collective pain and trauma, persecutions and wars in a time continuum that links even very distant epochs that lead to influencing relations between peoples still searching for their independence and living space.

It is said that in the Balkans, the past never passes, in the sense of a destiny where wars are emphasised and traced back through the centuries and interconnected up to the present day. Balkan societies are generally attributed a special attention to the wars of the past and their memory, a sort of obsession that is, always and for all, a very effective element in directing contemporary collective relations between states. The risk is that today the memory of war is amplified, causing history and societies to be plunged into an interrupted atmosphere of conflict.

5. During the wars, the EU failed to find a common position and strategy to avoid the worst outcome. It was too preoccupied with itself, with German unification, with the Maastricht Treaty. Today, 30 years later, it again risks losing credibility, security interests and its geopolitical role in the region. Do you think the EU is currently making another historical mistake by failing to deliver on its enlargement promises?

In my view, it is possible that the process of enlarging the European Union to include the Western Balkan countries has been slow and ineffective. However, the situation may have changed recently. The current crisis in Ukraine presents an opportunity for the EU to speed up the enlargement process, but this will only happen if there is sufficient political will within the EU to admit the Western Balkan countries as members. This is important because there is a risk that the Western Balkan countries may turn to other forms of integration if they are not accepted into the EU. Unfortunately, enthusiasm for EU integration has declined, and the citizens of the Western Balkans have grown resistant to the EU's policies, which they view as conditioning, blackmail, and humiliation. The EU has a negative attitude towards the Western Balkan states, treating them poorly. Despite the recent conflict between Russia and Ukraine, this attitude has not improved much. However, it has sparked discussions about whether the EU is willing to fully accept the Western Balkan countries into membership. If the EU is indeed willing, the challenge becomes how to make it happen. It has been 19 years since the Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans was created, which outlines a plan for the Western Balkan states to join the EU. Apart from promises about the European perspective of the respective countries, nothing concrete has happened regarding their accession to the EU.

The general perception is that the EU constantly avoids taking a concrete position on the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU. The leaders of the EU must recognize that in order to extend the peace initiative of the EU to the rest of Europe, it needs to be implemented in the Western Balkans. By granting these countries membership in the EU, it will ensure lasting peace and stability in the region. As long as the Western Balkans remain unstable, the EU will be unable to effectively address important issues and challenges or maintain its strategic position on the global stage.

In this regard, French President Emmanuel Macron recently launched an initiative for the creation of a European political alliance including the Western Balkan countries. Since the EU is a political, economic, cultural and values alliance, why is it necessary to propose the creation of a new political alliance?

<u>CONCLUSION</u>

This dissertation has shown the instrumentalization of the memory of the war by the ruling political class, especially in Serbia, in the conduct of political, social, and economic relations both regionally and internationally.

Thirty years have passed since the beginning of the war in the former Yugoslavia, but the situation still looks the same today, in fact one has the impression that the war and tensions never ended. The Balkans still appear to be apparent demarcations in the eyes of the West, but autocracies as far as domestic politics are concerned, a region where sentiment and nationalism still prevails.

The persistence of the war in Yugoslavia can be attributed to a complex interaction of political, economic and social systems. Political factors, such as ethnic tensions, historical animosities and conflicting national aspirations, were the main drivers of the conflict. Ethnic tensions had been simmering for decades, but the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation was the spark that ignited the conflict. The lack of a unifying political vision and the inability of political leaders to resolve differences peacefully further contributed to the escalation of violence. Indeed, ethnicity and religious differences have played a key role in this region, but in instrumental terms, as these have always existed. The evils of the former Yugoslavia are the evils of politics, and what happened is not the fault of ethnic-religious hatred but of how bad politics used these sentiments instrumentally. Economic factors, such as the economic crisis, unequal distribution of resources and corruption, also played a role in the persistence of the conflict. The economic crisis that hit the region in the 1990s contributed to the decline in living standards, exacerbating social and economic inequalities. These inequalities, combined with corruption and mismanagement of resources, further fuelled the conflict. Obviously, the economic crisis of 2008 had a major impact on Europe and consequently on the Balkans. Social factors such as cultural and religious differences and lack of social cohesion have exacerbated the conflict. The different cultural and religious backgrounds of the Yugoslav population created a complex tapestry of identities, often at odds with each other. The lack of social cohesion and the inability of different groups to work together towards common goals created an environment in which violence could flourish. Conflict resolution requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of violence, including political, economic and social factors. In this way, we can learn from past experiences and work towards a more peaceful and stable future.

This is the fragmented scenario of Yugoslavia in which the governing powers of the Balkans and Serbia in particular are embedded, a country analysed because of its complex history and the ways in which national identity and memory have been used for political purposes. the Serbian government

has used the construction and manipulation of collective memory as a tool in its dealings with these states, often resorting to nationalistic rhetoric to assert its position on historical events and territorial disputes. This has contributed to strengthening extremist ideologies and fuelling tensions in the region, making Serbia an emblematic example of the ways in which nationalism can be used for political purposes and the potential consequences of such use. The relationship between extremism and collective memory in Serbia is complex and deeply intertwined. The construction and selective manipulation of national memory by the Serbian government has had significant political and geopolitical implications for the country and the region as a whole. The government's use of memory as a tool in its relations with the states of the former Yugoslavia highlights the ways in which collective memory can be exploited for political ends, but also the potential for such use to exacerbate existing tensions and contribute to the strengthening of extremist ideologies. The consequences of this dynamic are far-reaching and affect not only the relations between Serbia and its neighbours, in particular the situation with Kosovo, but also the stability of the region as a whole. it is therefore necessary to address these threats posed by extremism and the role of collective memory in the formation of national identity. This can be achieved through a more nuanced and inclusive approach to history that acknowledges and respects the complexities of the past and promotes peace and stability in the region. Who should face these threats seems to be particularly the civil society but also the European Union, which is also facing the increasing influence of Russia and China in the region. The aim of civil society and the European Union is to help strengthen Serbian democratic institutions and promote greater transparency and accountability. By promoting a more open and honest dialogue about the country's past and its relationship with the states of the former Yugoslavia, Serbia can work towards building a more peaceful and prosperous future. The opposition and prospects for Serbia in Europe are intricately linked to the role of civil society. The country has undergone significant political and social changes in recent years, and civil society organizations have played a crucial role in advocating for democratic reforms, promoting human rights, and challenging the policies of the government. Despite facing significant challenges, including limited funding and a lack of political space for expression and organization, civil society remains a vital force for positive change in Serbia. Despite these obstacles, the potential for civil society to shape the future of Serbia and its relationship with Europe remains strong. Through continued advocacy and grassroots activism, civil society organizations have the potential to bring about positive change and promote greater integration with Europe. The integration of Serbia into the European Union remains a key priority for the country, and the role of civil society will be critical in determining the success of this process. By promoting democratic reforms, protecting human rights, and advancing the cause of tolerance and inclusiveness, civil society organizations can help to build a more stable and prosperous future for Serbia and the

region as a whole. In sum, the opposition and prospects for Serbia in Europe are closely tied to the role of civil society, and the future success of the country will depend in large part on the continued efforts of these organizations. Through their advocacy and activism, civil society organizations have the potential to shape the future of Serbia and its relationship with Europe in positive and meaningful ways.

In conclusion, this dissertation has shed light on the manipulation of the memory of the war by the ruling political class in Serbia, which has had far-reaching impacts on the country's political, social, and economic relations, both domestically and globally. The instrumentalization of war memory has become a powerful tool for those in power, used to shape public opinion, to justify political decisions, and to advance particular agendas. While this has provided a convenient means of gaining and maintaining political power, it has also contributed to the persistence of ethnic and national tensions and has hindered progress towards reconciliation and cooperation in the region. Ultimately, this study highlights the need for a critical examination of the ways in which the memory of conflict is used in the pursuit of political gain, and the importance of promoting a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the past. Despite the situation in the Balkans is contradictory and intricate, it also offers the possibility of a future of peace and cooperation between its different inhabitants. This future depends on the region's ability to overcome historical divisions and recognise the richness and diversity of its culture.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This dissertation has analyzed the instrumentalization of the memory of the war in the Balkans, particularly in Serbia, by the ruling political class in the conduct of political, social, and economic relations both regionally and internationally. Thirty years have passed since the beginning of the war in the former Yugoslavia, but the situation in the region remains unresolved, with ongoing tensions and a persistence of conflict. This can be attributed to a complex interaction of political, economic, and social factors, including ethnic tensions, conflicting national aspirations, historical animosities, economic crisis, unequal distribution of resources, corruption, cultural and religious differences, lack of social cohesion, and the inability of different groups to work together.

The break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s was marked by a series of bloody conflicts that lasted for over a decade and resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of people. Even today, the reasons for the persistence of the war in Yugoslavia are the subject of academic debate and speculation. Moreover, the reasons that led to the war are still present today. These include the fact that the war was the result of ethnic nationalism. That is, the idea that an individual's primary loyalty is to their own ethnic group, rather than to the state or nation as a whole. This led to the emergence of nationalist movements in Yugoslavia, with each ethnic group fighting for independence and control of its territory. The cultural (religious) argument is another perspective that was offered as an explanation for the conflict in Yugoslavia. The different ethnic groups in the region had deeply rooted cultural and religious differences, which intensified with the break-up of the country, as they found themselves living together with several different religions. These religious differences led to the perception of the other as foreign and contributed to violence and conflict in the region. Finally, there is also the economic reason that the war in Yugoslavia was fuelled by economic competition and the struggle for resources. The ethnic groups in the region, particularly the Serbs and Croats, had long-standing economic and political tensions, which only worsened when the country began to break up. The wars in Croatia and Bosnia were largely motivated by the desire to control valuable resources such as oil, minerals and fertile land.

The persistence of the war in Yugoslavia was the result of a complex interaction of political, economic, social and cultural factors. A deep understanding of these factors is essential to fully understand the reasons for the conflict and to help prevent similar situations from occurring in the future. Furthermore, it is argued that the political use of history played a significant role in

perpetuating the conflict. The manipulation of history and memory by political leaders has been used to mobilise nationalist sentiments and fuel wars.

The issue of extremism and collective memory has become increasingly important in Serbia, with political and geopolitical implications that go beyond the country's borders. Understanding the factors that contribute to extremism and the ways in which collective memory is used to shape political narratives is crucial to understanding Serbia's current political landscape and the challenges the country faces. A key factor that has contributed to extremism in Serbia is the independence of Kosovo, a former Serbian province. The independence of Kosovo has been a source of political tension and social unrest in Serbia, with many Serbs seeing it as an unjust betrayal of their history and culture. This has led to an increase in extremism and a politicisation of Serbia's collective memory, with political forces using history and memory to mobilise political support and promote their agendas. In addition to the role of political forces, education and the media also play an important role in shaping Serbia's collective memory. Through the education system and the media, dominant narratives about Serbian history and culture are established and perpetuated, influencing public perception and shaping public opinion.

Regarding Serbia's strategic relations with the European Union, China and Russia, each of these international actors has its own interests and goals and their influence in Serbia varies. The EU is involved in Serbia's enlargement process and works to promote political and economic reforms in the country, while China and Russia are also present in Serbia, seeking to promote their own interests and secure strategic alliances. Russia and China were among the first to respond to calls for aid from Western Balkans leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the EU imposed some restrictions, which has influenced public opinion towards these countries. As a matter of fact, due to the stagnation in the process of Serbia's accession to the EU and the lack of coherence in the EU's policies, as well as the exclusion of the Western Balkans from the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Western Balkans have pursued agreements with non-Western and even anti-Western actors. This has led to an increase in euro-scepticism in the Western Balkans, particularly in Serbia, and a democratic deficit in candidate states. The leaders of the Western Balkans are no longer as confident in their future in the EU as they were during pre-accession negotiations 20 years ago, making the process of European integration more unclear, difficult, and delayed. The influence of non-Western actors offering economic incentives has exacerbated this euro-scepticism, decreasing the candidates' willingness to prioritize reforms needed to become members of the EU. Serbia has signed a Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2019 and is also part of China's Belt & Road Initiative,

which aims to extend Chinese rules and standards and secure access to the European market. Relations between Russia and Serbia are rooted in historical and cultural ties, dating back to the Pan-Slavic movement of the 19th century and Russia's support for Serbia's independence from the Ottoman Empire. Russia has always been a staunch ally of Serbia and its economic influence is felt especially in the energy industry, where it meets almost all of Serbia's gas needs. The Russian government has also accepted the nationalist wishes of the Serbian minorities, which has further increased its influence in the region. Furthermore, Serbia, as much as it has condemned Russian action in Ukraine, has not implemented any kind of restriction towards Russia.

Finally, President Vučić's stance on territorial integrity is an important factor in understanding the current Serbian political landscape. A strong advocate of Serbia's territorial integrity, President Vučić has sought to maintain the country's sovereignty and resist international pressure to compromise on Kosovo's independence issues. Thus, the issue of extremism and collective memory in Serbia is complex and multifaceted, with political and geopolitical implications that go beyond the country's borders. Understanding the factors that contribute to extremism, the ways in which collective memory is used to shape political narratives and Serbia's relations with the European Union, China and Russia is crucial to understanding the country's current political landscape and the challenges faced by its citizens.

In line with what has been said so far, the forces of opposition to the Serbian government and Serbia's future prospects in Europe are analysed. The Serbian government is facing opposition from a range of civil society organisations and individuals who are dissatisfied with the government's current policies and actions. These groups play an important role in promoting democratic change and holding the government accountable for its actions. They support reforms in areas such as human rights and the rule of law and play a crucial role in promoting government transparency and accountability. Indeed, A recent event organised by the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) together with its Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) and the Engaged Democracy Initiative (EDI) took place in January 2022. During the panel 'Unleashing the potential for change through civic movements and initiatives - What can the latest developments in Serbia tell us', the potential of civic movements and their role in the democratisation of Serbian societies was discussed. The authors of the report suggest that civil society plays a crucial role in the promotion of democracy in the Western Balkans, particularly in Serbia, where the government has consistently curtailed political and civil liberties. The report emphasises the need for external entities, such as EU Member States and international organisations, to support national and regional cooperation. By providing

resources and improving the capacities of civic movements, they can increase their participation in social movements and translate this into political change. The report also emphasises the importance of citizen mobilisation in the promotion of democracy. The panel discussion focused on the role of civic movements and initiatives in promoting democratisation in Serbian societies. The speakers emphasised the importance of trust in institutions, the recognition of citizens' power and the need for authentic communication and organised joint action. The speakers also emphasised the need for new political parties and a different approach to politics. The group discussed the importance of civil society in resisting authoritarian rule and promoting democracy in Serbia.

The Balkans are a meeting and clash point between Western and Eastern cultures and interests. The revitalization of the European project through enlargement in the Balkans stems from geopolitical necessities and brings with it a basket of risks and opportunities. The projection of Russian and Chinese influence in the Balkans raises concerns about the promotion of authoritarian systems far removed from those defended and promoted by the EU. The EU's objective in reopening the Balkan enlargement dossier is to prevent the spread of a model of relations between states based on convenience and to neutralize the rise of unrepresentative and anti-European political systems. However, the economic opportunities arising from a market of some 17 million people and a territory of great strategic value are tempting to both the East and the West. The challenge for the EU lies in avoiding hypocrisy and ensuring the inclusive exploitation of resources. The decision to give the Union a new lease of life through the entry of new members could unleash the wrath of northern European countries and lead to revisions of the European budget and the trajectories of structural funds. Serbia applied for EU membership in 2009, and actual accession negotiations began in 2014. According to a Communication from the Commission on EU Enlargement policy published in October 2022, 22 of 35 chapters have been opened in negotiations, with two chapters provisionally closed. EU membership could mean putting an end to the fault lines of conflict in the Balkans, solidifying peace and dialogue, and promoting economic growth. However, there is a risk of showing too much flexibility and deviating from the political principles required for EU membership. The European Commission published a report on Serbia's accession to the EU, which provides an overview of the country's progress in meeting the criteria for EU membership and the challenges it still faces. The report highlights reforms in areas such as the rule of law, human rights and the economy, but in particular the analysis focuses on the role of the media and the military security sector, providing recommendations on future actions Serbia needs to take to meet the criteria for EU membership.

The European Union (EU) has made a commitment to support the Western Balkans on their path towards EU integration. Despite this, the integration process has been slow and criticized by some who believe that the EU has not done enough to support the Western Balkans or has not kept its promises to the region. The EU has faced internal challenges such as the debt crisis, Brexit, Covid-19 pandemic, and migration crisis, which have absorbed much of its attention and resources. The accession process of the Western Balkans is complex and requires the fulfilment of many conditions, some of which are difficult to achieve. Additionally, the illiberal turn in Hungary and Poland has made some EU politicians question the wisdom of welcoming Balkan semi-democracies, leading to a lack of political will to prioritize the Western Balkans. Furthermore, ongoing disputes between some Western Balkan countries need to be resolved before the EU can move forward with integration. Despite these challenges, the EU continues to provide financial and technical assistance and support reforms in the Western Balkans. They have strong connections to the European market and have trade and freedom of movement benefits due to their relationship with the EU. However, they are also facing issues with authoritarianism and excessive nationalism. The EU's vision for the Balkans has been viewed as ineffective due to the downgrading of Serbia's status to "partly free" by Freedom House in 2018 and the rise of anti-democratic leaders. This has caused progressive citizens in the region to question the EU's commitment to democratic and liberal values and to seek alternative models for change. The presence of Russia and China is preferred by leaders in the Balkans as it provides more opportunities for financial gain, rather than aligning with the EU. The concept of a "mini-Schengen" or Open Balkans has gained popularity in recent years, with Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania supporting it. However, regional cooperation alone will not provide substantial economic growth or address democratic issues, and only three countries of the Western Balkans are currently part of the initiative. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo are considering joining, but they view Serbia as a security concern and are hesitant to participate. Additionally, the Open Balkans Initiative is seen by some as an alternative to the EU rather than a means to achieve EU enlargement goals. The main issue in the Western Balkans is Serbia and its aggressive and dominant aspirations, which stem from the aspirations of its leaders in Belgrade. Serbian Interior Minister Aleksander Vulin has suggested uniting all Serbs in the Western Balkans under a single state with Belgrade as its capital and President Vucic as its leader. This idea has been promoted in political rallies, causing concern among the other countries in the region. The future of the Open Balkans Initiative and a common regional market is uncertain due to these ongoing political tensions.

In conclusion, this dissertation has shed light on the manipulation of the memory of the war in the Balkans and the role of nationalism in the persistence of conflict in the region. The instrumentalization of memory has significant political and geopolitical implications and highlights the need for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to history. The opposition and prospects for Serbia in Europe are closely tied to the role of civil society, and the future success of the country will depend in large part on the continued efforts of these organizations. Through their advocacy and activism, civil society organizations have the potential to shape the future of Serbia and its relationship with Europe in positive and meaningful ways.