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Cover Photo: Luke James, Tskaltubo Spa, Georgia (2021)

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Foreword

South East Europe and the Black Sea region has been rocked by Russia’s war on Ukraine. Elections in Serbia and Hungary – a country with influence in SEE – have both returned leaders that have so far refused to join much of the liberal democratic world in sanctioning Russia. NATO and the EU are likely to prioritise reassuring its SEE allies and members as Russia cuts gas supplies to Poland and Bulgaria. Speculation grows of Russian advances towards Moldova’s Transnistria, creating a land bridge and isolating Ukraine. The southern Caucasus experience a heavy dose of realpolitik, as the threat of ethno-nationalism continues to bubble in the western Balkans.

This Peace and Security Monitor takes deep dives into the region, distilling actionable policy recommendations, providing clear analysis to decision makers and supporting the Platform’s push for peace and humanity.
Introduction

A monument is a way of remembering the past. Different sections of society will have different perceptions of a shared or competing past.

Memories can become distorted by time and by narrative, subjected to redevelopment; repackaged and repurposed according to the dominant storyteller.

Historical events remains the same, but the reality of the event can be subsumed by a narrative that has grown alongside the rhythm of a - usually predominant - society.

The physical construction of a monument is a manifestation of the storyteller’s metaphysical projection of that particular memory.

It should not be of surprise that monuments can become subject to heated public contention, intellectual confluence of debate and a entry point for conversations about history and shared past.

With different understandings and perceptions of the past, monuments are also prone to trigger conflict and disagreement. Monuments create an ambiguous role in public discourse; to some, they serve as a place and reason to remember and share their positive perceptions about history. Conversely, the same monuments may appear as offensive and ignorant towards others.

Every culture, nation and group of people has its own way of valuing, criticizing and discussing monuments. The role a monument plays in public discourse is thus not only dependent on the event it is claimed to represent, for but also dependent on the current political and social environment.

Monuments can exemplify struggles and obstacles that a country or a group of people has been dealing with over a long time. There is widespread acknowledgment within the transitional justice literature that memorialization – in the form of monuments, statues and museums – has a key role to play in healing the wounds of the past. Memorialisation is an important part of transitional justice and can act as part of a redress package for gross and systematic human rights violations.

Memorials represent a critical terrain where the past is confronted and conflict can be addressed.

Monuments can also represent the storyteller’s glorification of a chosen memory, a projection of what they want a previous memory to be or the beginning of new narrative construction.

With the increasing speed and rhythm of contemporary world politics, monuments are also now subjected to faster interpretation and change.

The function, purpose, appearance and removal of a monument feeds an evolving discourse, binding disparate societies or dividing and separating communities.

The path to finding less controversial solutions for disputed monuments continues.
Podgarić Spomenik, Croatia

The Podgarić Monument, or Spomenik in Serbo-Croatian, was built to commemorate the greater Moslavina and Zagreb community’s uprising against the Nazi backed Ustaše in WWII.[1]

Local government and regional veteran groups made plans in the mid-1960s to construct a spomenik complex to recognize these achievements. Podgarić was designed by Croatian-Macedonian sculptor Dušan Đamonja and Serbian artist Vladimir Veličković.[2] It aimed to symbolise Yugoslav unity with each of its wing’s edges signifying the republics of Yugoslavia.[3]

Due to the reaction against Yugoslavia after the Yugoslav war in the ‘90s, a shift away from left ideals emerged in Croatia. The Croatian far-right has grown over the past couple years;[4] they see these monuments as a promotion of anti-fascism.[5] The current administration, described as right-wing, has shown overt nostalgia for the fascist Ustaše group of the 1930s and ‘40s, including through the politicisation of monuments.[6] 3000 spomeniks in Croatia have been damaged or removed.[7]

Podgarić exemplifies Croatia’s historical, and Yugoslavia’s common, struggle against fascism. The destruction and abandonment of monuments, such as Podgarić, erases Croatia’s left leaning past as a significant part of Yugoslavia. This seeks to obfuscate Croatia’s history as part of a larger republic. The far-right aim to redefine the past and, therefore, their future.[8]

Words by Alex Merrick
Draža’s Monument, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Draža’s monument in Višegrad is one of the many monuments in Bosnia and Herzegovina (all of them in Entity Republika Srpska) dedicated to the leader of the Chetniks’ movement Dragoljub Draža Mihailović. He was sentenced to death in 1946 for high treason and cooperation with Nazi Germany, and responsible for vicious crimes against Bosniaks, Croats, and other non-Serb citizens during World War II.[9] Despite the anti-fascist legacy of the former Yugoslavia and all of its peoples, the figure of Draža Mihailović remains glorified[10] in a large circle of the Serbian political elites in the Western Balkans, and a large portion of the Serbian population in BiH.

The location is also controversial. The monument is located in Višegrad, a picturesque little town in eastern Bosnia, known for its Ottoman bridge over the Drina river. However, since the Bosnian war of 1992-1995, it has become a symbol of the suffering of the town’s Bosniak population. During the war, more than 3,000 Bosniaks were murdered and thrown into the river[11].

The same hats bearing insignia of the Chetniks’ formation, worn in the Second World War and in the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, are still worn today. Annually, hundreds of Ravna Gora Chetnik movement members and sympathizers march through the streets of Višegrad and gather in front of this monument to commemorate the leader, propagating nationalistic rhetoric[12] and invoking fear amongst the Bosniak returnee population. Following EUFOR’s recent reinforcement,[13] this year’s Ravna Gora Chetnik march was cancelled.[14] The commemoration at the monument still occurred but was supervised by EUFOR troops.

Words by Amer Čekić
Memorial of Rebirth, Romania

Memorial of Rebirth (Alexandru Ghildus, 2017)
The Memorial of Rebirth, initially named “Eternal Glory to the Heroes and the Romanian Revolution of December 1989” is the official site of remembrance for the victims of the Romanian Revolution from 1989. It was created by Alexandru Ghilduș, an applied artist,[15] following a project launched by the Ministry of Culture.[16]

According to the artist, the 25 meters white marble column signifies the rise of those who fell during the Revolution, while the black crown on the column depicts the souls of the revolutioners. [17] Since its inauguration on 1st of August 2005 in Revolution Square, Bucharest, it has been at the centre of several controversies among the population.

Due to its strange-looking appearance, the monument has been given over 20 nicknames that highlight its ahistorical value for the population, including ‘olive on a toothpick’, ‘the potato of the Revolution’, or the ‘the vector with the crown’.

Overall, the memorial does not hold any symbolism for those who were present in the Revolution Square in 1989. Being too abstract, it fails to represent the deep suffering of the 1989 Revolution. Many public persons, including a former Mayor of Bucharest, declared that they dislike it and that they don’t understand the symbolism.

The monument has never been accepted by the citizens of Romania as a symbol of human sacrifice, instead, it is considered to be offensive. [18] A petition has been launched to declassify the memorial from the List of the Historic Monuments, a relocation of the monument and the re-launch of a project that seeks to pay respect to the victims, carrying a strong symbolism for the population of Romania.[19]

While the Memorial of Rebirth will continue to be a topic of discussion, there is no response from the Ministry of Culture regarding a potential replacement.

Controversial monuments are a recurring issue in Romania and the Memorial of Rebirth is a good example of a general dissonance between the poor decisions made by the Government and the views of the population.

Words by Cătălina Gemănari
A monument to Miro Barešić was erected in Drage, Croatia in 2016, honouring a man who assassinated the Yugoslav ambassador to Sweden in 1971 and who died fighting in the Croatian war for independence 20 years later. The statue was unveiled in the presence of Croatian state officials, with the outgoing Minister for War Veterans, Tomo Medved, thanking Barešić ‘for an independent, sovereign and free Croatia’. [20]

In this statement, the government is attributing his memorialisation to his military contribution. However, Barešić only served in the military for 19 days before his death in the very early stages of the war and did not participate in any life-saving missions or large-scale operations.[21] If this is the reason for the statue, then thousands of men would receive similar commemoration.

The celebration of Barešić likely stems from his second, more famous, achievement: the assassination of the Yugoslav ambassador.

In considering that a large part of Croatian identity was formed through its War of Independence and separation from the Yugoslav regime, Barešić’s actions may represent the symbolic killing of a state whose existence opposes a nationalist Croatia. The monument’s erection can be seen as a testimony to an enduring Croatian nationalist identity which is being demonstrated through a veneer of military wartime achievement.

The list of attendees to the inauguration of the statue may evidence this proposition. In attendance were senior representatives from the right-wing Croatian Part of Rights ‘Ante Starcevic’, the president of the far-right Authochthonous Croatian Party of Rights, as well as a group of men bearing the insignia of the 1990s Croatian Defence Forces paramilitary unit who chanted the fascist slogan ‘Za dom spremni’ (Ready for the Homeland).[22]

This monument has been an opportunity for political statements from both the right- and left-wing groups after an anonymous anti-fascist group painted the statue’s left hand red, presumably a metaphorical demonstration that he has blood on his hands.[23] Such actions display a clash of the interpretations of Croatian history, now spilling over into the political field.

Words by Daria Grigorieva
Monument of Serbs kidnapped or killed in the Orahovac–Rahovec region, Kosovo

The monument commemorates Serbs who were kidnapped and/or killed in the Orahovac region during the 1998–2000 war in Kosovo. It is located at the entrance of the village of Velika Hoča/Hoca i madhe – in the region called “Metojia” by Serbs – at the foot of Sveti Jovana Crkva (Saint John’s Church). The memorial complex recalls the names of 85 Serbs on stone tablets, of whom about 20 were found to date.

The monument for Serbs who were killed or kidnapped in the Orahovac/Rahovec region exemplifies the challenges of Kosovo social reconstruction and the discrepancy between political elites’ discourses and attitudes, and the rampant issues that still permeate the everyday life between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. While former President Thaci placed flowers at the memorial in 2016 stressing the need for reconciliation between communities[25], the monument has been vandalized[26] on different occasions since its erection in 2009. The Serbian flag placed on the memorial has been taken away. The cross has also been destroyed, which means for Serbs that the monument has been desacralized. Acts of vandalization drive frustration from local Serbs and nurture feelings of injustice[27]. At the same time, it also constitutes a political opportunity for Serbian political elites (from Serbia) to recall both the oppression of Kosovo Serbs on the Kosovo territory, and the protection provided by the Serbian state for them[28].

On one hand, discourses of reconciliation encounter obstacles in practice. On the other hand, narratives of protection against oppression do not allow Serbs in Kosovo to free themselves from the grip of Belgrade. In Kosovo, reconciliation between communities should be supported by the production of a shared collective memory promoted notably through non-antagonistic commemorative monuments.

Words by Emilie Fort
Enver Hoxha’s Pyramid, Albania

One of the most evident examples of Albania’s communist heritage is Enver Hoxha’s Pyramid, completed in 1988 and installed in Tirana’s city centre.

It was built as a memorial representing the dictator’s power and achievements. Since the early 1990s its functions have changed; over the years it has been a cultural centre, offices, NATO headquarters, a nightclub and a private tv station. It is now abandoned.[29]

It has been described that the continuous switch of functions of the Pyramid reflects the urge of Albanians to reject the “unwanted” heritage from a painful past.[30]

The attempts to forget such a past, however, could generate a knowledge gap in younger generations. Research has shown the memory of conditions under the communist regime could be forgotten.[31]

Some argue that the Pyramid should be removed, reminding locals of the brutal dictatorship. Generally, anti-communists and democrats argue for its demolition. Many others believe that memory is a value that should not be overlooked. [32] Among them, socialists and civil society consider the Pyramid as a symbol of a progressive Tirana rather than of communism. [33]

Erion Veliaj, socialist mayor of Tirana, argued that while history needs remembering, the building needs a new purpose and meaning; the building should remain as the memory it represents but it will be put to be a better social use.[34]

The Pyramid is qualified as a monument of culture, which means that its exterior is legally protected. The monument cannot be removed but its function can be changed.[35]

Today it is being refurbished. The aim is to turn Hoxha’s memorial into a civil society-run educational centre – with labs and classrooms – where young people can learn about new technologies and coding techniques for free.[36]

*Words by Federico Zoni*
On January 17, 2022, a restored Et’hem Bey Mosque in Tirana was inaugurated by Turkish President Erdogan, the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama[37]. Originated from the Ottoman era, it has been a landmark monument of the Albanian capital and its historical centre. Like any other religious site, the Mosque was closed under the oppressive communist regime during the Cold War.

TIKA, the Turkish International Cooperation, and Development Agency, funded the project. Its funding illustrates a general trend in Albania.[38] Since AKP rose to power in the 2000s, Turkey’s political, economic, and commercial influence in the Balkan region has increased, especially in the countries with Muslim populations. The Et’hem Bey Mosque is part of a broader programme of restoring Ottoman mosques in Albania.[39] Moreover, following the earthquake of 2019 in Lac town, Turkey has significantly contributed to its reconstruction, by funding over 524 apartments[40].

Restoring religious sites for Muslims across Albania is a positive development for a population that has traditionally felt like a “discriminated majority” whose rights were suppressed under the Communist regime[41]. Nevertheless, the local Muslim community has grown increasingly suspicious of Turkey’s and TIKA’s role. Indicatively, the Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH)[42], owner and administrator of the Mosque, was notably among the absentees from the inauguration. Turkey’s increasing role has raised concerns over the potential implications of its generous approach in the region, due to its leadership’s tendency to link its development policy with political goals. President Erdogan has already started using Turkey’s role in the country as leverage to intensify pressure for the illegal extradition of FETO supporters[43], the Gulen movement that has been labeled as a terrorist organization in Turkey since 2016.

As a result, the rich cultural heritage representing more than 1.5 million Albanian people faces the risk of falling victim to intergovernmental bargaining and the geopolitical aspirations of an authoritarian foreign leader.

Words by Ioannis Alexandris
In recent years, it has become a tool for political activism.

In one such instance, the charging Red Army soldiers displayed costumes of pop-culture heroes accompanied by the phrase, "In Step with the Times". This alludes to how the Monument no longer holds political relevance and value in Bulgarian society.[47] Later in 2014, the scene was painted with the colors of the Ukrainian flag. [48] Since then, the site has become a recurrent space to voice political opinions and discontent over the Monument itself and its location.[49]

In response, Russian officials have expressed outrage and have called on Bulgaria to protect Soviet monuments and punish those responsible for desecrating the memory of the Red Army.[50]

In 2022, district mayor Traicho Traikov vowed to dismantle and relocate the Monument after failed attempts and lack of political will since 1993.[51]

If the Monument is not, at the very least, relocated to a less central location of the city, the Monument will continue to be a site of polarization and even mistrust of governmental officials. On the international stage, it will continue to reveal the political dimensions of the Monument and the deep influence of Russia in Bulgaria.
Tskaltubo Spa, Georgia

Tskaltubo is a grandiose and beautiful semi-abandoned USSR spa resort in Western Georgia. One of many Tskaltubo Spa buildings. (Luke James, 2021)

Tskaltubo’s visitor list famously includes Joseph Stalin,[52] whose private rooms you can walk through. Workers of the Soviet Union invoking Article 119[53] of the USSR’s constitution, ‘right to rest and leisure’, as well as the Soviet elite[54] also visited the 25+ sanatoria and bathhouses. It fell into disrepair following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Today, it feels abandoned. It isn’t.

Tskaltubo courts controversy for two main reasons; IDPs and political domination.

IDP’s who sought refuge from the ’93 Abkhaz war still today feel forced to live at Tskaltubo.[55] Estimates from 2020 range from a couple of thousands[56] to 5000 IDP’s.[57]

In September ’21, during elections, it had been reported that the Government had intended to close the sanatoria after rehousing the IDP’s.[58] One of many Tskaltubo Spa buildings. As of October ’21, IDPs were still living here. (Luke James, 2021)

Despite this, in January this year, frustrated by the continued neglect and distrust of the Government, it was reported that Zurab Kiria took his own life at Tskaltubo.[59]
Despite this, in January this year, frustrated by the continued neglect and distrust of the Government, it was reported that Zurab Kiria took his own life at Tskaltubo.[59]

Politically, the Mayor of Tskaltubo was clearly warned to “coordinate” with the government in October ’21.[60]

In 2019, described as “Russian-linked”[61] and “de facto leader of the Georgian government”,[62] Ivanishvili, declared his intention to buy and refurbish Tskaltubo.[63] Critics called it a land grab,[64] seizing state property.[65]

The now imprisoned ex-President Saakashvili also promised a similar renovation programme in 2009.[66]

In the short-term the Tskaltubo Spa will remain controversial as it appears the IDPs are still occupying the buildings, against what seems to be the government line. In the mid-long term the future ownership and utility of the Spa remains unknown.

The grandiose symbolism of what Tskaltubo Spa means to the legacy of the Soviet Union means that its ongoing monumentalisation will likely remain controversial to the Georgian and former Soviet Union people. The possible acquisition of the Spa by an individual or government is likely come with a constructed narrative attached to the acquisition, creating new purpose to its current function and the prospective owner’s vision of what Tskaltubo once was, or could have been.

Words by Luke James
“Equestrian Warrior” or “Alexander the Great”, North Macedonia

In 2010, the North Macedonian government embarked on a major urban redevelopment project titled “Skopje 2014.” One of the most prominent elements of which was a towering statue of a warrior on a horse titled “Equestrian Warrior”, a thinly veiled depiction of Alexander the Great which was widely recognised as such.

While many at home celebrated its erection as a celebration of Macedonia’s long and remarkable history, it ignited international tensions. Greece proclaimed it to be “provocative” and appropriating of their Hellenic heritage and cited it as an example of Macedonia’s irredentist politics towards Greek culture.

Following the signing of the 2018 Prespa agreement, the figure was officially renamed to “Alexander the Great” and accompanied by an explanatory plaque of his connection to the Ancient Hellenic period.

However, the same day these plaques were destroyed or removed by unknown perpetrators, to considerable online admiration.

This incident is representative of the overall division surrounding the future of the monument. Seeing it as a potential diplomatic poker chip in its relations with Greece and a way to emphasize the shortcomings of the previous government that erected it, the government has politically gestured its willingness to remove the statue.

In opposition, many in the population see the statue’s removal as a concession of Macedonian national identity.

Talks on the permanent removal of the statue remain ongoing but indecisive. However, in light of the takedown of a similar statue of Alexander the Great from the Skopje airport and comments made by the Mayor of Skopje about his wish to see the statue removed, it seems likely that soon there will be a renewed push for action.

Word by Nia Chigogidze
Fallen Fighters and Victims of Fascism, Croatia

On the Croatian Peljesac peninsula, just outside the village of Gornje Pijavičino, is the Monument to the 'Fallen Fighters and Victims of Fascism'. This Yugoslav monument to the 395 partisans and civilians killed in Italian and Ustasha camps was designed and built by Ivan Mitrović and Zlatko Jerić in 1983.

Looking closely at the monument its controversial nature against the backdrop of a post-Yugoslav world becomes apparent. The Partisan figures now have bullet holes shot in them, as does the obelisk. The NDH soldiers are untouched.

This vandalism reflects the re-emergence of long suppressed nationalism in the 1990s and rejection of the Yugoslav and partisan/socialist mantra of ‘brotherhood and unity’. The monument could now be viewed a testimony to the ultimate failure of that ethos of post-war Yugoslavia which tried, through these monuments, to bind a disparate nation, torn by WW2.[79]

The monument consists of a concrete obelisk in typical Yugoslav post war style, and a bronze relief which depicts civilians being murdered by the Fascists and then Partisans capturing the Italian and Ustasha soldiers from the wartime Independent State of Croatia.

However the story does not end here. In 2016 the picture below was taken with graffiti which says ‘Death to fascism! Down hitlerova NDH, Down Milosevic and Tudman!, Down Nato vassalage! Cheers Partisan’. This was soon removed but highlights the contested nature and history of what these monuments represent and will continue to do so. They still challenge and this one in Pijavičino still has a role to play and is a silent, even though wounded, participant in that debate.

The monument attests to a moment in time and an event in the history of the region and, in that sense, it should not be destroyed or removed. Its current damage, which resulted from an expression of resurgent nationalism,
is testament to similar sentiments which the memorial itself was built to memorialise and should not be repaired. The damage is also a record of intolerance.

Monument to fallen fighters and victims of fascism (Marc Hastenteufel, via Hastenteufel, 2018)

*Words by Peter Chilvers*
Monument of fallen Soviet soldiers in Kallithea, Greece

The Fallen Soviet Soldiers Monument (FSSM) in Kallithea, is one of last works of the Russian orthodox, socialist realism sculptor Vyacheslav Klikov. On the 19 March this year, it was vandalised with graffiti of the Ukrainian Azov Battalion, a supposedly far-right, neo-Nazi military outfit.

The monument is unambiguous: Klykoy uses the compositional and colour contrast as a clear message vector - the commemorated past is always present as we engage with heartache of the mother depicted in the monument. She links the distant ideological act of Nazi resistance with a sense of place - both in Kallietha and in the 'Soviet-Greco' family (i.e., the Motherland).

After the collapse of FSU in 1990, Kallithea, received an upswell of 'repatriated' Greeks leaving Russia.

Their social integration and self-identification as 'Greeks' has not been smooth. This set up a deep tension between 'native' Greeks and the returning FSU Greek diaspora. As Heath and Wamer (2019) state, monuments produce 'narrative continuity'. In this way, the FSSM produces a distinctly Soviet narrative shaping the Greek future.

The monument is dedicated to Soviet soldiers who escaped from Nazi captivity and fought in the Greek partisan detachments during World War II; an origin of which, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, serves as an acute reminder of Greece's own challenges of integrating its Former Soviet Union (FSU) diaspora ('Soviet Greeks').

Still taken from a video posted in Athens, In Athens, a rally against fascism was held near the monument to the Soviet soldier (news.gr, 2022)
The recent graffiti is emblematic of the Greeks fierce resistance to any form of ‘occupation’ – the monument presented itself as a target to reassert this ethos. Russia appeared to feel targeted – with the Russian MFA commenting, plus others.[90]

However, the monument, like other soviet/anti-fascist pieces across SEE[91], will remain controversial, especially where the ‘realist’ narratives they construct fail to help communities and countries of complex ethnic origin, navigate and engage in new emerging futures. This is critical for the stability of Greece, especially as the Russo-Ukraine War marks the return[92] of the question: ‘what is a desirable future and who is included in it?’

Words by Phil Tovey
The “Big Three” Monument in Crimea

On February 5th 2015, a monument of Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill was unveiled in Crimea, commemorating the Yalta conference. This marked its 70th anniversary, during which the leaders met to discuss Europe’s postwar reorganization. By erecting a monument of the allied powers in Crimea, it signaled power and unity at a time of Russia’s illegitimate annexation and flagrant hostility. For Russia, the Yalta conference still stands for “a pinnacle of great power comity and accommodation.” For many Central European countries, however, the Yalta conference stands for betrayal of their countries where deals were made at their expenses.

Especially, Crimean Tartars object the “big three” monument. Under Stalin’s Soviet Union, Crimean Tartars became victims of mass deportation, falsely accused of cooperating with the Nazis. During deportation and exile, miserable conditions lead to many deaths of hunger, lack of oxygen and diseases.

A monument dedicated to Stalin is thus a clear affront, as it reminds Crimean Tartars of their persecution and the destruction of their statehood.

To them, the erection of the monument is “an open demonstration of the attitude to the memory of Crimea and [their] people.” Ongoing discrimination and harassment of Crimean Tartars by occupying Russian forces, such as the detention and disappearance of Tartar leaders and activists and attempts to keep kids from studying the Crimean Tartar language at school, wakes memories of the Crimean Tartar past and is likely to further amplify their hostility towards the Russian built monument.

The future of the monument and the history it tells, decisively depends on the further development of the war in Ukraine and the status of annexed Crimea. Short-term, the monument will remain controversial, now representing a hypocritical reminder, that war and history should not repeat itself. Long-term, it could manipulate the shared history in Crimea, where the different experiences of minorities are either protected or diminished.

Words by Sophia Zademack
Kazani, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Kazani is the name of naturally occurring pits located on the outskirts of Sarajevo on the slopes of the Olympic mountain Trebević. The site is infamous as during the war years of 1992 and 1993 Sarajevo citizens were summarily executed, most of which were ethnic Serbs and Croats. The executions were carried out by the 10th mountain brigade of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, under command of Mušan Topalović, nicknamed Caco. The exact number of victims has never been determined.

The controversy tied to this place is twofold. First, Caco was found guilty of crimes by the military court in Sarajevo and was executed by the Army of the Republic of BiH whilst attempting an escape from the authorities in 1993, only to be buried as a Shahid (a martyr and hero) in one of the biggest funerals in post-war Sarajevo with an estimated 10,000 attendees. Secondly, the overall event is seen as a stain on the defense of Sarajevo. The event was not tried as a war crime. This is due to the complicated court proceedings following the war which failed to convict war crimes.

As the US Ambassador to BiH recently hinted when visiting the site, the process of reconciliation cannot commence in its entirety, until full recognition and judgment of those killed and those who have done the killings has been passed. The issue of the monument and its contents will still be debated by political parties and civil society for years to come in Sarajevo.

Words by Petar Kovačević
Our Lady of Ljeviš / Bogorodica Ljeviška, Kosovo

Serbian King Stefan Milutin erected Bogorodica Ljeviška orthodox church in Prizren, in Kosovo and Metohija region, in the early 14th century[114][115]. After the Ottoman conquest, it was pillaged and converted into a mosque before becoming a church again in 1912[116][117]. Bogorodica Ljeviška had an immense value to the Serbian Orthodox population of Kosovo[1] and has also been revered by the parts of the Muslim community[118]. This monument is considered a part of the UNESCO World Heritage site since 2006, together with other Serbian medieval monuments in Kosovo[119][120].

Kosovo’s Albanian side, on the other hand, emphasizes its sovereignty over all the monuments on its current territory[127][128]. Because of the unstable security situation of the Serbian monuments of medieval Kosovo, they have been added to the List of World Heritage in Danger. At the same time, the political strife regarding Kosovo’s membership in UNESCO and the cultural appropriation of orthodox religious monuments is one of the important conflict points between Belgrade and Pristina governments[129][130][131].

Ongoing diplomatic contestation between Belgrade and Pristina, and neglect of the rights of national minorities on freedom of expression could further fuel religious and ethnic tensions and endanger a fragile status quo in this part of the Balkans.[132]

After the Kosovo War and the unilateral proclamation of an independent Kosovo State in 2008, the government in Pristina strives to become a member of international institutions, including UNESCO[121]. Kosovo’s application to UNESCO has sparked an ongoing political controversy with the government in Belgrade that sees this and other medieval monuments in this region as a part of its cultural heritage[122][123]. In an argument against Kosovo’s membership, the Serbian side is underlining the Kosovo ethnic unrest of 2004[124]. During this event, Bogorodica Ljeviška and other cultural monuments were vandalized, and the orthodox minority were subject to violence[125][126].
The Mikoyan Monument, Armenia

Anastas Mikoyan was an Armenian who became one of the most influential statesmen of the Soviet Union. However, his successful career in the Soviet Union made him one of the most controversial politicians in Armenia. Indeed, his name was enough to cause a stir in Armenia when the Yerevan municipality proposed to erect his monument in the Yerevan center.

The idea to put the monument up was initiated by his relatives and Yerevan authorities widely supported this proposal. However, the statute secretly went missing from the foundry before it was erected. No one including the sculptor Gagik Stepanyan knows what happened to the monument. Hayk Demoyan who voted against the decision believes that “it certainly is kept in a hidden place waiting for the right time to be erected.”

But what is it about the monument that creates such a controversy? The debate about him circles around if he is a “hero or villain”. For some Armenians, he is a hero who helped Armenia to grow after World War II. However, others think he is “a symbol of treason” and accused of being the “executioner” of many Armenians by signing the verdicts against them. Therefore, the decision of having his monument in the heart of Armenia was widely criticized.

What next?

The Yerevan municipality unintentionally opened a discussion on an unrevealed topic by proposing the monument. This should be taken as an opportunity to discuss the Armenian Soviet past to have a better future.

Words by Maya Ezgi Avci
Conclusion

As the examples above showed, monuments can help to initiate discourse but can also be a an indicator and warning for drivers of conflict and violence, dividing society further. In the South East Europe and Black Sea Region, many monuments were built or symbolism adopted representing the clash of identities between the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and emerging - or re-emerging - nations states.

A monument is a way of remembering the past. There will always be groups of people who aim to obfuscate the true meaning of a monument. In a post-truth world facts and memories can become purposefully and inadvertently distorted.

When discussing monuments, a holistic and informed view on history will enable a monument to be put into context. If this is guaranteed, an inclusive discussion about the meaning and the future of a monument can take place.

If a country cannot learn from its mistakes, it will be doomed to repeat them. Avoiding this, as well as cycles of conflicts, should be the overarching aim of all efforts that are made towards the conversations about monuments.

Consequently, monuments are an important contribution to peace, peacebuilding and peacekeeping. Not only should they be included in such efforts, but also should they be seen as contributor to discussions, public perception and transitional justice.

Recommendations

- Local grass roots initiatives should be authorised oversight of the monument or building by local authorities. These are the people who understand and live its history so should have a better idea of what its role is in their local community.
- Statues of people often seem to generate most resentment, or heroised onto pedestal. To avoid this, monuments should try to represent ideas. Ideas are harder to change the meaning.
- More money and time should be set aside to engagingly educate the populace on their own history, specifically in the classrooms. This should include school field trips to monuments where the discourse around them is heated. This helps the younger generation understand their country's often uncomfortable history and the difficult discourses that surround it.
- More governmental funding to foster public dialogue highlighting the historical genesis of the monuments and buildings, possibly with televised debates, public events and consultations or with funding set aside for historical monuments to ensure they do not fall into disrepair.
- Governmental committees should be set up to begin dialogues about how best to memorialise history, whether a person or the idea they stood for should be memorialised and what the discourse around the monument could potentially be. This will hopefully cut off any tension the monument could create.
- When it comes to sites that hold significant spiritual or religious value, such as with Our Lady of Ljeviš in Prizren, the people who utilise the sites most often must be guaranteed safe approach and usage. This could be having people making sure nothing threatening is happening or just by educating the community, so they understand and are more accepting of the monument's usage.
- For monuments that provoke violence or heightened tension within a community or the society as a whole, such as with Draža's Monument in BiH, a referendum could be taken. It should be either locally or nationally, dependent on the monuments reach. The movement of the statue out of the public eye would still allow the public to learn about its history. However, the implied glorification of what the monument stood for has now been taken away.
References


[3] Ibid.


[6] Ibid.


[8] Ormer Benjakob, These Far-right Nationalists Didn’t Like What They Read Online About World War II — So They Rewrote History (Haaretz, 4 August 2021) <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/premium.HIGHLIGHT.MAGAZINE-these-nationalists-didn’t-like-what-they-read-online-about-wwii-so-they-rewrote-it-1.10084302> [accessed 04 April 2022].


[135] Id., p.1.; Jirair Tutunjian, (2016), Anastas Mikoyan: Hero or Villain?

The KSC will influence the political landscape in Kosovo, as the political landscape in Kosovo will have an influence on the KSC. The repeal of the KSC is legally and constitutionally possible, and has been previously floated in Kosovo, to swift international condemnation. UNMIK limits its engagement with the KSC, likely for political expediency in Kosovo and neutrality. Prime Minister Albin Kurti has been described as an ethno-nationalist hardliner, who believes the KSC is “fait accompli”. He denies KLA war crimes and wants to see Kosovo entrusted with its own judicial institutions. Kurti and his Vetevendosje party’s resistance to the KSC will be measured by domestic political pragmatism and the shadow of the international community.

Kosovo was considered to "lack the capacity and political will to investigate alleged war crimes" committed by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) "during and in the aftermath of the conflict in Kosovo". Kosovo was "pressured" by the international community, particularly the EU and US, to establish the KSC. Met with resistance, particularly from the “nationalist” segments of Kosovar-Albanian society - including the now ruling Vetevendosje party - Kosovo incorporated the Chambers and the Specialist Prosecutor’s Office into its constitution on 3 August 2015. The headquarters are in the Hague.

It is controversial in Kosovo, as many consider former KLA fighters as “freedom fighters” against Milošević’s Serbia. At the UN Security Council Briefing on Kosovo on 20 April Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs described the KLA as "the real butchers [of the Balkans]".

The letter and spirit of the Law on Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor’s Office that amended Kosovo’s constitution rejects the idea that power or political influence should influence the course of justice.

Despite this, powerful actors in Kosovo, the wider region, and on the international stage often voice their opinion on the Court.
The KSC’s President judge Ekaterina Trendafilova said “the court was facing increased efforts from within Kosovo to hinder ongoing legal proceedings”. [8]

The KSC itself has already had an impact at the highest levels of Kosovar politics. In June ’20, former President Thaçi signalled a willingness to enter negotiations with Serbia’s President Vucic. The meeting was facilitated by the Trump administration, and some speculated a recognition agreement was on the table. [9] Following Thaçi’s resignation after his indictment at the KSC, his successor Albin Kurti notably suspended dialogue with Serbia. [10]

This shows that developments at the KSC will influence the political landscape in Kosovo, just as much as the political landscape in Kosovo will have an influence on the KSC.

The Project

This stakeholder analysis examines how Kosovo and the international community’s most serious attempt at achieving justice for crimes committed during and in the aftermath of the Kosovo war meshes with the realities of power politics.

Methodology

Actors will be assessed according to the following criteria;

1. Power they may have in Kosovo
2. Power they have over the KSC; actual or perceived
3. Position on the KSC
4. Interest they have in the KSC
5. Needs
6. Values

Over the course of the next two South East Europe and Black Sea Region Peace and Security publications, various stakeholders in Kosovo will be analysed to map the relationships and power dynamics between the KSC and the various interlocutors in Kosovo. Understanding these actor’s positions, interests and needs will contribute to the crafting of Kosovo’s effective transitional justice.
Actors

**UNMIK**

UNMIK is the UN interim administration mission in Kosovo, established in 1999. The new head of mission, appointed in November, Caroline Ziadeh, by April had still not yet met with the Kosovo President or Prime Minister, but had met with the opposition. She recognised that meeting with both is “pre-requisite for constructive and positive engagement” in Kosovo.

The purpose of UNMIK continues to be called into question as the US and Albania again recommended its closure, stating it has achieved its aims. The UK continues to call for its review, and recommends it must “adapt to serve current conditions”. France has made similar remarks. Other states however explicitly or tacitly supported UNMIK (Gabon, Norway, UAE, Kenya, Ghana). This likely demonstrates some resistance to UNMIK in Kosovo domestically, and mixed support for UNMIK internationally. Despite this, UNMIK’s mandate remains broad – albeit reduced over the last decade – playing a substantive and supportive role in Kosovo. This means UNMIK remains a powerful actor in Kosovo.

**Power over the KSC**

UNMIK does not have any official control over the KSC, as it handed war crime investigations to EULEX in 2008. Despite this, UNMIK describes itself as continuing to “support” the Kosovo Specialist Chambers, dedicating an annexed document detailing the KSC’s recent activities in UNMIK’s April ‘22 UNSG report.

**Position on the KSC**

UNMIK chief Caroline Ziadeh voiced concern of rumours in Kosovo that UNMIK “harbours an agenda”. This was likely a veiled allusion to the political establishment in Kosovo. Prime Minister Kurti publicly opposes the KSC whilst President Osmani is more tactful in her analysis. Both have notably not yet met the new UNMIK chief.

The UN mission must remain neutral, and will have the objective of reminding audiences in Kosovo of their neutrality. For example, under the previous UNMIK chief, Zahir Tanin, UNMIK’s messaging over engagement and support to the KSC was notably restrained. It is likely that UNMIK will continue to adopt a strategic posture regarding the KSC, limiting its public support to the KSC for political expediency in Kosovo and in the region.

**Interests in the KSC**

UNMIK’s interests are clear in its mandate to strengthen justice, rule of law and human rights in Kosovo. In 2018, UNMIK voiced “grave concern” following attempts to repeal law on the KSC. In 2021 the previous UNMIK chief, Zahir Tanin met with the President and Registrar of the KSC, at UNMIK Headquarters. They discussed the KSC’s ongoing work, with Zahir Tanin “reiterating UNMIK’s strong support to the strengthening of the rule of law in Kosovo”. According to UNMIK’s own mandate, UNMIK remains deeply interested in promoting “security, stability and respect for human rights in Kosovo and in the region.”
Logically, this would include the KSC’s work, but UNMIK is likely to be conscious of balancing notions of justice that the KSC provides against perceptions of damage that the KSC could cause to reconciliation.

 Needs

To operate UNMIK needs funding and international support. UNMIK’s budget is decided yearly by the UN General Assembly - its ’21-’22 budget is $44,192,100.[30] The UN Security Council Resolution that created UNMIK, Resolution 1244, can only be repealed when the Security Council (UNSC) agrees to repeal it[31] or issue a new overruling resolution.[32] It is highly likely that Russia and China will block any moves to repeal or overrule, due to Russia’s allegiance to Serbia and other geopolitical realities.

UNMIK does not need the KSC to survive, but UNMIK itself is a product that is entirely dependent on the fragile international system. From a transitional justice and values-based approach UNMIK remains by mandate heavily interested in developments at the KSC.

Despite this, considering UNMIK’s fragile financial needs, politically strategic public position and it passing war crimes investigations to EULEX in 2008, UNMIK should not be considered a key stakeholder for the KSC.

Prime Minister Albin Kurti and his Vetevendosje party

Power in Kosovo

In February ’21 Albin Kurti’s Vetevendosje party became the first party since Kosovo broke away from Serbia in 1999 to win more than half of the votes cast,[33] later forming a majority government with non-Serb minority parties.[34] Kurti later poached another MP from rival Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK).[35]

Prime Minister Albin Kurti is an Albanian national, and a 20 year pro-Albanian activist. He was imprisoned by Serb forces during the war. He leads the Vetevendosje “self-determination party”, which he co-founded in 2005.[36]
Kurti has notably clashed with UNMIK’s authority during Kosovo’s formative years.[37] Kurti was banned from sitting in Parliament due to letting off a tear gas canister in 2015 when in opposition - he was protesting an internationally backed deal which many believed gave preferential treatment to Serbia. He describes dialogue with Serbia as being low on his political agenda, with “jobs and justice” being his priority.[38]

Kurti publicly states that he would vote to unify Albania and Kosovo in a referendum.[39]

The Vetevendosje party has been recently described as “taking all three of the state’s most important positions – president, prime minister and parliament speaker”. [40]

Former President Hashim Thaçi’s rival Albanian party, the PDK, boycotted the April ’21 Presidential election and claimed President Vjosa Osmani “will serve Kurti alone.”[41] This is not fully accurate, as Osmani leads her own political initiative “Guxo” and is a coalition partner with Vetevendosje.

During the local election in September ’21, Osmani resisted Kurti’s calls for a postponement to the election.[42] Osmani is also clear in her narrative of a “Sovereign and independent Kosovo,”[43] a notable contrast to Kurti’s preferred course of action for unity with Albania.

Kosovo’s parliament, led by Kurti’s Vetevendosje, had decreed that it would no longer allow Serbs living in Kosovo to vote in Serbian elections in Kosovo. Kurti had influenced Parliament stating “establishing polling stations in majority Serb areas of Kosovo would be against the constitution”. [44] The international community has voiced concerns over Kurti’s decision. In a joint statement on 23 March, France, Germany, Italy, the UK, and the US—collectively known as the Quint—expressed “great disappointment” in Pristina for failing to “demonstrate its commitment to the principle of protecting the civil and political rights of all its citizens, including of members of minority groups.”[45]

On Kosovo’s TV T7 on 1 February, Parim Olluri, editor in chief at Periskopi, said that in relation to low protest turnouts over energy prices “no one has the courage to protest… they are all afraid of Kurti’s government”. [46]

By way of political expression and representation of the Kosovar people during the 2021 election, Albin Kurti’s Vetevendosje’s government is the strongest political party in Kosovo since its declaration of independence from Serbia. His approval is particularly high among young Kosovars.[47] Despite this, Kurti’s nationalist rhetoric is polarising and he has been described as a "source of instability"[48] and a "hard-liner". [49]

In the short-mid term Albin Kurti and his near majority 59 seat Vetevendosje party (66 seat majority coalition) will likely be the most powerful actor in Kosovo. Whilst his messaging of unification into a “greater Albania”[50] is popular in Kosovo,[51] it is highly likely that Serbia, the international community and possibly even his President may seek to restrain such moves, limiting Mr Kurti’s power.

Power over the KSC

The first basic foundational principle of the law on KSC ensures that it “shall be independent in the exercise of their functions”. [52] This means that the ruling Vetevendosje party legally has no decision making power over the KSC’s proceedings.
Despite Kurti’s “unprecedentedly strong majority,” Vetevendosje’s numbers would not meet the two thirds (80/120) required in Kosovo’s Assembly to change Kosovo’s constitution and repeal Article 162 on the KSC. An attempt to debate the repeal of the KSC in 2018 only received 43 signatures, and was condemned by the United Nations and the EU. It is seems unlikely that Kurti’s Vetevendosje party could strike a deal with historic rival Albanian parties PDK or the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), who have 18 and 15 seats in the Assembly respectively, to repeal Article 162 and close the KSC down.

The legal, constitutional, and international monitoring means Albin Kurti’s Vetevendosje government almost certainly has no overt power over the KSC. Additionally, the KSC’s international staffing and location in the Hague should safeguard from clandestine influence, further reducing Kurti’s Vetevendosje party – or any party’s – power over the KSC.

**Position on the KSC**

Kurti’s position ultimately stems from the belief that war crimes cases in The Hague against Kosovo Liberation Army ex-commanders are an “assault on the wartime guerrilla force” that “liberated” Kosovo from Serbia. Further, Mr Kurti alleges that the KLA “did not commit war crimes or crimes against humanity.”

Albin Kurti has described the KSC as “not transparent” and that it is a “fait accompli” – casting aspersions on the KSC’s impartiality, neutrality and competence.

“I believe that this will be harmful for state-building in Kosovo, for justice in Kosovo, and for the Kosovo Liberation Army and its values.”

He has suggested that Kosovo’s institutions have “strengthened” to such an extent that Kosovo “is able to address all accusations and indictments in the future.” He concludes he would prefer the cases to be heard in Kosovo.

Kurti and his Vetevendosje party are likely to continue pushing three key narratives about the KSC’s investigations:

1. The KSC lacks true Kosovar “consent”, local ownership and legitimacy.
2. The KLA did not commit war crimes or crimes against humanity.
3. The pursuit of justice should be against Serbian war crimes.

These positions on the KSC are entrenched into Kurti and Vetevendosje’s political DNA, and are highly unlikely to change.

**Interest in the KSC**

Kurti’s calculations on the KSC are likely to be highly complex. Political opportunity and ideology are likely to be Kurti’s two key interests.

Balkan affairs expert, Nevenka Tromp, suggested that as a Kosovar politician Kurti might see the KSC as a way to keep Hashim Thaçi side-lined. Whilst this has probably been a consideration, Kurti’s cost-benefit analysis has likely been more intricate than this. In coalition with the popular President, Kurti’s Vetevendosje seems to have cemented itself as the dominant force in Kosovar politics in the short-mid term – regardless of Thaçi’s case status at the KSC. However, Kurti may have calculated that any conviction at the KSC and subsequent imprisonment may fuel further Kosovar-Albanian nationalism, driving Kosovar-Albanian’s negative perception of the KSC further.

This may present an opportunity for Kurti to criticise the decision, seizing available socio-political capital, further solidifying his own position.

Simultaneously if Kurti, the statesman, could resist the temptation to call for the repeal of Art 162 and remove the KSC, Kurti will likely satisfy the international community. This would enhance and protect his own international reputation. Kurti could claim the narrative that although he disagrees with the decision, his is not obstructive in the KSC’s machinery of justice.
Whilst this course of action is not unreasonable, any criminal conviction has the potential to formally criminalise to some extent the KLA’s actions during and immediately after the war. Kurti, a former Secretary of the Office of the General Political Representative of the KLA, would likely double-down on the narrative that the KSC is a “fait accompli”.

Despite a wide mandate, including aiding and abetting “in the planning and preparation” no open-source information points towards the KSC’s interests in Kurti’s role as a Secretary of the Office of the General Political Representative of the KLA, nor does any open-source information point towards Kurti’s involvement in any crimes during or in the aftermath of the Kosovo war. This would indicate that Kurti does not need to have any interests in relation to self-preservation at the KSC.

Kurti and his Vetevendosje party are deeply interested in developments at the KSC. They are primarily driven by ideological resistance to anything that may discredit Albanian nationalism, which includes the work of the KSC. Their instincts to resist the KSC however will be measured by domestic political pragmatism and the shadow of the international community.

Needs

As Kurti’s Vetevendosje party’s already enjoys significant and growing political freedom of manoeuvre in Kosovo, his government’s priority objective will likely be facilitating the receipt of funding. As the economy is still developing, Pristina relies on development assistance.

Funding into Kosovo comes from different sources, with the EU being the “largest provider of financial assistance to Kosovo”. Together with the EU, the US and the UN deliver majority of financial assistance to Kosovo. These are the three key parties that critics believed “forced” Kosovo to create the KSC, with the EU making the KSC a condition of accession. Kurti and his Vetevendosje party will likely continue to tread a fine line between satisfying domestic needs of pro-Albanian ethno-nationalism, whilst managing the international community’s transitional justice expectations that are politically attached to development assistance.

From a values-based approach Albin Kurti’s Vetevendosje government remains heavily interested with any developments at the KSC. It is likely that Kurti’s critical position to the KSC’s work will harmonise with his rhetoric and increasingly hostile posture towards Serbia and Kosovo Serbs.

Conclusion

The UN’s mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, holds a tenuous position in Kosovo. UNMIK is entirely dependent on international support and funding. Although its mandate remains heavily interested in developments at the KSC, it has no legal involvement or oversight in the Court, and purposefully adopts a neutral public position regarding the Court’s activities.

Kurti and his Vetevendosje party are outwardly critical of the KSC and seem to be restrained only by the international community’s shadow. Albin Kurti has seen previous PDK and LDK leaders try a “policy of maxing up cooperation with Brussels” that has “brought no rewards for the people of Kosovo”.

Kosovo recognises that the stalling EU accession and visa free travel for its citizens, the proverbial carrot, is not forthcoming as the EU had previously signalled.

With frustration in Kosovo growing about these delays, Kurti may calculate that he has a window of opportunity and sufficient domestic political support to bring the debate of the KSC’s legitimacy back to the table, despite the threat of financial assistance and conditionality to EU accession being suspended.

Kurti’s government continues to court the United States, who notably did not mention the KSC in the UNSC 20 April meeting.
Unlike the Kosovo Specialist Chambers, which has the impression of being imposed upon Kosovo by the international community and has negligible local support, a transitional justice strategy that is inherently more legitimate should be designed by all parties in Kosovo. The KSC should ensure timely and effective indictments, trials and judgments. The status quo seems to be linked to rising ethno-nationalism in Kosovo. Current politics should be separated from the wartime the past. A robust and comprehensive effort should be made in Kosovo and the international community to develop a truth and reconciliation commission. This should be done by investing political, bureaucratic and financial resources in promoting a national framework for dealing with the wartime past. Monitoring missions by the OSCE and UNMIK should be maintained or enhanced.

Recommendations

- Unlike the Kosovo Specialist Chambers, which has the impression of being imposed upon Kosovo by the international community and has negligible local support, a transitional justice strategy that is inherently more legitimate should be designed by all parties in Kosovo.
- The KSC should ensure timely and effective indictments, trials and judgments. The status quo seems to be linked to rising ethno-nationalism in Kosovo.
- Current politics should be separated from the wartime the past.
- A robust and comprehensive effort should be made in Kosovo and the international community to develop a truth and reconciliation commission. This should be done by investing political, bureaucratic and financial resources in promoting a national framework for dealing with the wartime past.
- Monitoring missions by the OSCE and UNMIK should be maintained or enhanced.


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On March 10, the International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan announced the filing of an application for the arrest warrants of three individuals in connection to the ongoing investigation into the armed conflict in South Ossetian in 2008 [1]. Arrest warrants have been requested for Lt.-Gen. Mikhail Mindzaev, Gamlet Guchmazov and David Sanakoev who held the positions of de facto Minister of Internal Affairs, Head of the Preliminary Detention facility of the Interior and de facto Human Rights Ombudsman of South Ossetia at the time of the events under investigation [2].

The prosecution argues that based on their examination of collected evidence, they have strong reason to believe that said individuals bear criminal responsibility for acts of "unlawful confinement, ill-treatment, hostage taking and subsequent unlawful transfer of ethnic Georgian civilians in the context of an occupation by the Russian Federation" [3].

The prosecution contends these crimes took place shortly after Georgian forces were driven out of South Ossetia in August 2008, following which South Ossetian forces began capturing particularly vulnerable Georgian civilians, such as the sick and the elderly, who had not been able to flee. According to the statement by Karim Khan, such captured civilians were not given a valid reason for detention, afforded procedural rights, were kept in unfit conditions and made subject to illegal transfer to the Russian Federation, torture and other inhumane treatment [4].

Context

The ICC initiated an investigation into the Situation in Georgia back in 2015, at the request of then prosecutor Fatou Bensouda, who argued there was reasonable ground to believe the crimes falling under the jurisdiction of the Court had been committed in Georgia during the August 2008 conflict in South Ossetia [5].

In particular, the prosecution at the time referenced the alleged killing of civilians and peacekeepers by South Ossetian, Georgian, and Russian forces; and the forcible displacement of ethnic Georgians by South Ossetian authorities. The latter of the two alleged crimes is the one the recently requested arrest warrants connect more closely with.

In January 2016, the ICC’s Pre-Trial Chamber authorized the prosecution to open the investigation, citing that the presented evidence provided sufficient basis to believe that crimes within the ICC’s jurisdiction have been committed in the situation in Georgia, and an investigation was likely to serve the interests of justice [6].

The prosecution’s application for the arrest warrant presents the most significant development of the case since 2016, when the ICC carried out an official investigative visit to Georgia following the authorization to open the investigation [7].

Outlook

It is now up to the Pre-Trial Chamber to approve or reject the request for the issuance of the warrants.
This decision will be made based on whether the Chamber believes the arrest to be necessary for ensuring the persons’ appearance at trial, or preventing them from obstructing the investigation[8].

The trickier part will come if the Pre-Trial Chamber indeed rules to issue the arrest warrants. The ICC depends entirely on the cooperation of countries where defendants are located to execute the arrest warrants, as it does not possess a police force of its own [9]. As demonstrated by previous cases, this is far from a full-proof system [10]. The prospect that any issued arrest warrants will not be acted on, presents as a real possibility whenever there is a lack of political will for partnership with the ICC in the countries of the defendants’ residence.

The response issued by the authorities in South Ossetia to the prosecutor’s filing of the arrest warrants leaves little ambiguity on the possibility of ICC-South Ossetian cooperation. The authorities announced they “categorically reject” interacting with the ICC on the issue, calling the arrest warrants baseless, unconnected to justice, and a result of the ICC’s attempt to revitalize itself against the backdrop of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian “crisis” [11].

In contrast, Georgia strongly welcomed the application for the arrest warrants, marking it as “one more victory for Georgia” and additional proof of the gross violations committed against the Georgian population during the 2008 war [12]. In the statement issued by the Georgian Ministry of Justice, the authorities hailed this development as a logical continuation to the 2021 Judgment by the European Court of Human Rights, which found Russia in breach of six articles of the convention in the aftermath of 2008 war on South Ossetian territory[13].

The Ministry went on to note that they would continue to work actively with the Hague Court on the investigation. Notably, in 2017 the ICC and the Government of Georgia signed a cooperation agreement building on the legal obligations of Georgia as a state party to the ICC, and establishing improved channels of cooperation, specifically in the aim of supporting the investigation into the 2008 war [14].

The issuance of any arrest warrants filed for by the prosecution, would represent a significant step forward in the Situation in Georgia investigation. But, in light of the timing for the application for the arrest warrants coming shortly after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February, they hold the potential of carrying a much greater symbolic and political significance for the region. This link was explicitly drawn by the prosecutor Khan himself, when he referenced that his Office has been seeing similar patterns of criminal behavior behind the requested arrest warrants in their preliminary examination of the ongoing Situation in Ukraine [15].

With the ICC’s investigation into the Situation in Georgia previously coming under criticism for lack of engagement, delays in investigation and the ICC’s lack of familiarity with Russia’s neighborhood region [16], a major development on the case could serve to send Russia a message of the West’s readiness to follow up on human right’s violations with decisive action. Showing that they mean business could also stand to reinforce the ICC’s standing in the eyes of Russia’s current government, which as of now has continuously avoided issuing a response or making contributions to the initiated investigation into the Situation in Ukraine [17].
References


[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.


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[13] Ibid.


With Serbia’s parliamentary elections in April 2022 the number of women MPs dropped from 99 to 94 out of 250 seats.

The Gender Equality Law is seen by proponents and supporters as ambitious and game-changing. Its complementary Gender Equality Strategy 2021-2030 takes into account challenges presented during the implementation of the previous Strategy.

Serbian traditional attitudes towards women and men’s roles in society, as well as the lack of sustainable and stable financial allocation towards gender equality mainstreaming mechanisms is detrimental to the overall progress on gender equality.

The continued technical and financial support by the EU to Serbia, as well as Serbia’s status as a candidate country to the EU is favorable to the integration of gender mainstreaming in policies, laws and overall projects.

Drivers of gender equality in Serbia

In 2021, the World Economic Forum (WEF) placed Serbia in spot 19 on the Global Gender Gap Index, compared to 39 in the previous year. The Global Gender Gap Index reviews gender-based gaps and progress amongst 153 countries. Serbia was placed above countries like the Netherlands, Austria and the United States. However, in WEF specific rankings on Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival and Political Empowerment Serbia ranks at 54, 52, 89 and 21 respectively.

Domestic Political Arena

What catapulted Serbia’s rank globally, stems from the increase in women ministers in government from 19% at the beginning of 2020, to 43.5% at the beginning of 2021. With regards to numbers in parliament, the current parliament elected in 2020 comprises 99 women MPs out of a total of 249 seats. This number, which represents 39.7%, can be attributed to the introduction of a minimum quota of 40% of candidates from "the less-represented gender" on electoral lists, both in parliamentary and local elections. However, the final results of the parliamentary elections on 3 April 2022, dropped the number of women MPs to 94 out of 250 seats, or 37.6%. Even when Serbia’s latest elections have dipped the number of women MPs, introducing quotas has proven to be effective, at least in the political arena, in reaching gender parity faster.
However, disparities between men and women are less elusive at a local level, where only 20 municipalities out of 174 are led by women.\[^{12}\] In fact, at the same time Serbia was celebrating their gender equality milestone of women ministers in government, only 6% of women held executive positions at a local level.\[^{13}\]

Normative Framework

Along the years, and as a result of political dialogue with the European Union (EU) Serbia has introduced several normative instruments towards gender equality.

As of May 2021, and after five years of drafting, Serbia’s parliament adopted the Gender Equality Law, which replaced the Law from 2009.\[^{14}\] Under this new Law, gender equality means equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities to women and men, equal representation in political, economic and cultural life, and equal participation at all levels of decision-making “taking into account biological, social and cultural differences between men and women” for “social development”.\[^{15}\] This definition is progressive, not only referring to biological differences, but also gender differences between women and men as is recognized under the Istanbul Convention.\[^{16}\] Proponents and supporters describe the Law as ambitious and all-encompassing.\[^{17}\] It encourages positive action measures to be streamlined amongst state and non-state actors, imposing more obligations on employers and public entities. Among its new developments are, the valuation of unpaid domestic work, the recognition of the environmental and digital dimensions of gender inequality, and the introduction of concrete duties on gender mainstreaming for public and other authorities in the field of education.\[^{18}\] Last but not least, the Law introduced higher fines for employers, political parties and trade unions for non-compliance with the Law.\[^{19}\]

Accompanying the law is the Gender Equality Strategy (GES) 2021–2030 which substitutes the GES 2016–2020.\[^{20}\] It draws up holistic measures to pursue the achievement of gender equality. The strategy underpins the importance of equality between women and men, as well as persons of different gender identities, to be a precondition towards societal development.\[^{21}\] With the GES, Serbia commits to continue the harmonization of its policy with standards established under international and European legal frameworks.\[^{22}\]

Challenges

Despite clear statutory initiatives, strategies and cooperation in the past years, inequalities between men and women are still present throughout economic, social and political spheres. The effectiveness of the policy framework implemented by Serbia along the years has been hampered by a multitude of factors. These factors are recognized in the GES 2021–2030 and include:

- Deeply rooted cultural patterns and norms on gender roles and stereotypes;
- Insufficient implementation of rules and regulations and delayed action plans or lack thereof;
- Inconsistent gender mainstreaming in policy
- Unequal access to resources, unequal resource distribution and unequal distribution of benefits for women;
A lack of comprehensive data collection towards gender-responsive policy making;
- Stable, transparent and sustainable funding;
- Lack of cooperation with relevant stakeholders such as civil society and academia; and,
- The regressive effects on gender equality due to Covid-19 related measures.[23]

Similarly, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) noted that the previous GES did not fulfil its goals in relation to the inclusion of women in the economy/labour force. It added that the GES lacks support measures to women who suffered the effects of COVID-19 policies, namely, through gained care responsibilities and the increase of domestic violence.[24] UN Women listed similar challenges faced during the implementation of their “Support to Priority Actions for Gender Equality in Serbia” Project (GEF Project) 2018–2021, further citing a lack of visibility of gender issues on the political agenda.[25]

Accordingly, both national authorities and international authorities such as the CESCR and UN Women have perceived similar challenges. [26] As awareness of these factors at the national level is pivotal to enact change, the GES 2021–2030 lays out specific aims, taking into account previous challenges. For example, it now explicitly determines ‘responsible and participating institutions’ under the description of each measure to be implemented.[27] This will make sure that synergies exist amongst national ministries and authorities.

COVID-19 effects

Emergency measures, taken in response to the crisis, did not account for the unfavourable position of women and other vulnerable groups during a state of emergency. The effects of COVID-19 measures on the progress of gender equality are, however, not isolated to Serbia. Rather the effects of COVID-19 measures are felt globally – where research suggests, that the time that it will take to eliminate the gender gap in the economy has increased from 99.5 years to 135.6 years.[28]

Financial dilemma

One example of a funding dilemma in gender equality can be seen in the sphere of gender-based violence (GBV) in Serbia. Specifically, support to the victims of GBV is dependent on non-governmental donors for funding.[29] Although the Law stipulates that measures against GBV shall be financed from the national, provincial and local budgets, these measures will only be implemented from 2024.[30]

However, Serbia has introduced gender responsive budgeting (GRB) in their Budget System Law viewing gender equality as a budget goal.[31] As such, the national budget shall allocate appropriate resources to gender equality policies and planning to reduce the gender gap. The UN reports that 62% of budget programs at national and provincial level have included GRB. [32] Further, capacity building activities of public employees is taken into account to ensure the GRB-related knowledge.[33] In fact, members of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces have attended trainings on GRB.[34]

It remains to be seen, if the continuous use and strengthening of GRB will mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, prepare for future crises and ensure sustainable and stable funding.
Entrenched social norms and roles in society

The most prominent obstacle, which Serbia has acknowledged, is the prevalence of gender-based stereotypes and preconceptions based on patriarchal cultural patterns and norms.[35] By the same token, the CEDAW Committee expressed concern over growing anti-gender movements in the public domain, including by high-ranking politicians, which impose resistance on gender equality and women’s rights.[36] It observed that such rhetoric has breached the political agenda and directly influenced education through which traditional views on the role of the women are perpetuated. [37] The International Network for Human Rights also observed the pushback from conservative groups whose claims of upholding traditional Serbian values in respect to gender and family roles have been normalized and are being pinned against the gender equality movement. [38] Possibly, because of this, only three political parties addressed issues of equal pay, women’s access to employment and domestic violence during the 2022 election campaigns.[39] Those were: United for the Victory of Serbia, Moramo and the Socialist Party of Serbia.[40] The Serbian Progressive Party, the political party of Serbia’s president, was not one of them.

To tackle the challenge of increasing anti-gender rhetoric, the GES 2021-2030 reiterates its commitment towards integrating gender equality perspective in public policies on preschool, primary school, high school and higher education.[41] It commits to establishing new teaching programs which showcase the contribution of women in science and culture, to revise textbooks and eliminate gender stereotypes or discriminatory language, to implement national campaigns to encourage girls and boys to choose non-traditional job professions and to introduce compulsory gender equality educational programs for teachers.[42]

Serbia’s accession to the EU as an incentive for gender equality

Former Head of the EU Delegation to Serbia, Ambassador Sem Fabrizi, referred to gender equality as “a fundamental value of the European Union”. [43] As such, accession negotiations with the EU are a driving force for prioritizing gender equality in the political agenda, considering Serbia needs to align its legislation with EU standards if it expects to join the EU. Therefore, Serbia’s desire to join the EU is a contributive factor to progress of gender equality in the country.[44]

Matching EU Standards

Serbia began compiling data for a yearly Gender Equality Index in 2016.[45] This Index aims to measure the progress that is made in the field of gender equality. In fact, under the EU Commission’s umbrella of assistance – the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance Programme (IPA) – Serbia became the first non-EU country to mirror the same approach and collaborate with the European Institute for Gender Equality.[46]

In 2018, the EU Commissions’ report on Serbia’s accession negotiations to the EU observed that a new law on gender equality was needed.[47] Thus, Serbia accelerated the adoption of the new law and complementary GES which in turn is in line with the EU’s acquis Communautaire - or the EU’s entire body of laws which binds member states and which Serbia, as a candidate
country, is required to accept before formally joining the EU.[48]

Further, the EU funded GEF Project which ran from 2018 through 2021 is being replaced by the GEF Project Phase II which is expected to run from 2022 to 2025. Similar to Phase I, the project is carried out in collaboration with UN Women and state institutions. Through the GEF Project II, the EU continues to provide support to impulse the implementation of legal and strategic framework at all levels of government.[49] Importantly, it impulces the participation of civil society organizations in the national gender equality discourse.

Without the EU’s financial and technical influence, Serbia’s multitude of projects, initiatives and normative changes in gender equality would likely be different. As the EU accession is an important goal to Serbia, the EU’s framework continues to have a big influence on Serbian law-making. The cooperation between Serbia and the EU continues, and thus it is to be expected that further changes according to EU gender equality acquis will be made.

**Comparison to other SEE/BSR countries**

In the Balkans, gender stereotypes and roles are deeply rooted in society and women are expected to take on traditional roles such as care giving responsibilities e.g., child care.[50] Therefore, initiatives for gender equality are heavily debated.

Despite possible backlash, and similar to Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia have gender equality laws in place. [51] North Macedonia is in the process of drafting one, but does currently have a Law on Equal Opportunities of Women and Men 2015 which will be replaced once the gender equality law has been adopted.[52]

In contrast to Serbia and Montenegro, BiH, Albania, Georgia and North Macedonia’s constitutions do not contain an explicit provision on gender equality.

**EU Incentives**

EU’s support to other non-EU countries in the region correlate to their status as candidate or potential candidate countries. For example, North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro, as well as BiH and Kosovo as candidate and potential countries respectively, can also receive financial support from the EU through the IPA as part of their accession negotiations.[53] Yet, Serbia is currently the largest recipient of EU financial assistance in the Western Balkans.[54]

**Political Representation**

North Macedonia has 42% women MPs in parliament but women hold 2.47% of leadership positions at the local level (2 out of 79 mayors are women).[55] In Georgia, women MPs representation is 19.3% in parliament and 15.5% at a local level (however, only 1 of 64 mayors is a woman).[56]

President Vučić’s next cabinet is yet to be announced however, in his outgoing government 11 women hold ministerial positions (out of 24), but at a local level only 22 women hold leadership positions (out of 169).[57] At parliament, women MPs represent 39.7% of the seats.[58] Comparatively, women in Albania dominate leadership in parliament with 12...
women out of 17 cabinet ministers, and overall 35.7% women MPs.[59] This leadership of women in cabinet placed Albania as one of the top five countries to have a majority of women in government.[60]

Learning Opportunities

In making a comparative overview, Serbia can also learn from some of its neighbouring countries who have introduced effective measures in the field of gender equality.

Gender Impact Assessments

Georgia has introduced (not mandatory yet) gender impact assessments (GIA) with a view to analyse the effect of policies and legislative amendments on gender relations and equality. These GIAs are carried out by a parliamentary working group.[61]

Gender-Sensitive Oversight

The OSCE has highlighted Albania’s good practice in regards to gender-sensitive oversight in parliament which includes approaching policies, budgetary allocations and overall decision-making in parliament with a gender lens with a goal to analyse possible gender-blind or gender-biased assumptions.[62] The Women MPs Alliance went from being an informal group to a recognized, voluntary based group. Still, as is the norm, the Alliance is underfunded.

Training Tools

North Macedonia is achieving more understanding on gender equality as it implemented mandatory training tools for incoming MPs on international and national standards concerning gender equality.[63]

Across borders and despite legislative frameworks, initiatives, gender quotas and training materials, challenges towards achieving gender equality still remain. But, awareness of issues concerning women and men’s inequality in social, political and economic spheres is growing, as the Gender Equality Law and the GES shows. Best practice examples such as the GIA in Georgia, gender-sensitive oversight in Albania and training tools in North Macedonia are measures which Serbia has yet to implement and which are certainly good suggestions for the future.

Conclusion

As the examples in other countries show, change is possible and developing. Serbia has still a long road to go ahead of achieving gender equality, however, the latest Gender Equality Law and its complementary GES have ambitious goals. After some trial and error, and hand-in-hand with the EU, Serbia is prepared to implement measures comprehensively.

Recommendations

- To tackle anti-equality backsliding, Serbia must robustly follow the GES proposed educational reform which integrates gender sensitive education to contribute to eradicating root causes of gender inequality. Engaging the youth in issues of gender-based violence, gender equality and reproductive health will bring awareness to harmful stereotypes and roles in society.
- To properly implement the Gender Equality Law and respective GES, stable and sustainable financial resources should be ensured along all levels of government (national, provincial and local). Further, implementation oversight of the GES is essential to closely monitor the progress and mitigate challenges.
- Understanding the pivotal role the media can have towards challenging society’s perceptions on gender roles, the Serbian government shall, through public channels such as media, radio and television, explicitly convey the message that the need for gender equality is beneficial towards overall societal well-being. This would reaffirm the government’s commitment towards gender equality and challenge traditional perspectives.
References

[1] Throughout this article, the use of women/men as opposed to female/male is referenced to acknowledge not only the biological differences between women and men, but also the socio-cultural factors that contribute to gender differences. To achieve gender equality, the socio-cultural dimensions (roles, expectations, attitudes, self-perceptions) between women and men must be taken into account.


[8] Ibid, 16.


[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid, 22


[30] Ibid.


[33] Ibid.


[37] ibid, para 33(a).


[40] ibid.


[42] ibid.


[46] Kristaps Petermanis, ‘Serbia is the first country outside the European Union to calculate its Gender Equality Index’ European Institute for Gender Equality (16 December 2015).


[63] ibid.
Russia is beginning to build narratives of aggressive Romanian influence in Moldova, with the likely objective of justifying “defensive” military action liberating Transnistria.

Significant evidence of Russian propaganda that has been reconstructed and transmitted as autonomous, domestic news has been detected in Romania. The hybrid and local undertones lack connection with the primary source and thus enable the propaganda and misinformation to obtain a new destabilising meaning in the Romanian public debate.

On the margins of Romanian society, Russian propaganda attracts nationalists, religious extremists, anti-Americans, Russophiles, anti-Western and anti-liberal individuals.

The goals of Russia’s propaganda and disinformation campaign are the weakening of trust in NATO and the EU, and the revival of historic hostilities between states.

The Kremlin’s strategy has been to depict Russia as a defender of Christian traditions and a conservative power.

There is a strong link between the anti-establishment, anti-vaccine and pro-Kremlin community in Romania.

The unique relations between Russia and Romania

Diplomatic relations between Romania and Russia have been historically unique, characterised by fluctuations and ambiguity. Consequent to the post-World War II Soviet occupation and Russia’s implications in the communist regime, Romanians are highly cautious against Kremlin’s propaganda and disinformation.[1]

In 2003, the two countries signed a political treaty on the relations of friendship and cooperation, followed by other collaboration agreements and high-level dialogue. After Romania became a member of NATO and the European Union in 2004 and 2007, Russo-Romanian relations have developed to a new complex and ambiguous era.[2]

Characterizing the Kremlin’s propaganda and disinformation in Romania

A 2022 study conducted by Euro-Atlantic Resilience Center (E-ARC), which was founded at the strategic initiative of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, shows that 54.7% of the participants considered that they were exposed to fake news and disinformation. 27.3% Romanians attribute those to Russia, while 17% consider the EU as the principal source of disinformation in Romania.[3] The 17% of the population believing that the EU spreads disinformation is likely to be vulnerable to Russian disinformation campaigns.
In the 2020 National Defence Strategy, it has been acknowledged that foreign disinformation is a ‘security threat’. President Klaus Iohannis also made a reference to an enemy that uses disinformation and cyberattacks instead of tanks, while other Romanian politicians or government officials completely avoid references to Russian disinformation. Despite public reluctance in tackling propaganda and disinformation, there are some private efforts, such as Veridica.ro. They are actively deconstructing Russia’s propaganda campaigns in Romania and other neighbouring countries, by investigating, monitoring and publishing analyses on ‘fake news, hate speech, propaganda, kompromat, populism’, by organising trainings for journalists, and developing media literacy activities.

Distinguished from the Cold War’s comprehensive disinformation campaigns, current campaigns have distinct approaches in each targeted country. In general, the objectives of Russia’s propaganda and disinformation campaigns are likely to be the weakening of trust in NATO and the EU, the destabilization of cohesion and governance between Western countries.

By undermining faith in political parties, leaders, and public institutions, or by upholding ideological divides, Russia’s influence seeks to divide its adversaries. Alleged interference in the Brexit and US vote are an example of this. In Romania, the Kremlin’s objective has been to depict Russia as a defender of Christian traditions and a conservative power, rather than trying to shift Romanians’ anti-Russian opinions.

Russian narratives are deconstructed and transmitted as autonomous, local news. The hybrid and local undertones lack connection with the primary source and thus enable the propaganda and disinformation to obtain a new meaning in the public debate. The causality link between Kremlin’s primary and secondary narratives to the local ones found in Romania can be discovered by analysing and comparing the Kremlin’s primary and secondary narratives to the local narratives found in Romania.

It has been found that Russia uses various sources for spreading fake news, such as Sputnik, RT news, pro-Russian media, Romanian news outlets, as well as bots and trolls.

The development of local narratives

Primary Russian narratives are transformed into secondary narratives in the ex-communist countries or the Balkans. The secondary narratives are repackaged by domestic political extremists, appearing to become local endemic narratives.
country thanks to its strong leaders, such as Ivan the Terrible, or Stalin. This narrative was then transformed in a secondary narrative claiming that ex-communist countries have weak and traitorous leaders. Hence, Russia must help with democratic elections, when in reality it is installing dependent governments.

According to PressHub, Sputnik.md also claimed that Dominic Samuel Fritz, a German citizen elected as Mayor of Timișoara in 2020, is in fact a spy for the Germany’s Federal Intelligence Service.

As Russia’s war has proceeded, many analysts are now believing that Russia is seeking a landbridge through Ukraine to Moldova’s Transnistria. Russian outlets have begun building a narrative of Romanian military aggression in Moldova, trying to lay a pretext for possible military. On 26 April Russian daily MK reported:

“Romania is behind all the actions. Romania has prepared an army for the invasion. Some of the Romanian military has been disguised as Moldovan troops... President Sandu and most of the Moldovan government are citizens and agents of Romania.”

This narrative is likely to be pushed throughout the first half of May.

**Target audience in Romania**

Russian propaganda usually attracts anti-Western and anti-liberal individuals, religious extremists, anti-Americans, and Russophiles. A 2017 poll conducted by the nonpartisan think tank Pew Research Center revealed that 74% of Romanians considered that being Orthodox was important to truly identify as a national of Romania. This shows that similar to Russian - Romanians are likely to analyse an information space based on Orthodox values. Research shows that Russia uses the Orthodox Church as a tool of influence in Romania. This shows a possible susceptibility of Orthodox Romanians to Russian disinformation.

At the initiative of Romanian Academy, another poll was conducted by INSCOP Research in 2019, indicating that 27.2% of the participants were nostalgic for the communist era.

Moreover, a different survey initiated by NATO and conducted by Populus showed that 85% of
Considering that approximately a third of Romania’s population is nostalgic for the communist times, it is on one hand likely that they are also prone to believe Russian propaganda, or agree with Russia’s arguments. On the other hand, the Populus survey shows that overt Russian propaganda would not receive much approval in Romania either. With the different facets of public opinion and the strong support of NATO, Russia faces obstacles in extending its propaganda in Romania. Russia thus presumably needs to resort to other avenues, resorting to “hidden propaganda”. This makes it harder for people to detect it and raises the number of people being vulnerable to Russian propaganda without realizing it.

Stakeholders involved in Russia’s campaigns

The Embassy of the Russian Federation in Romania actively supports various pro-Kremlin narratives, as a way of strengthening Russia’s propaganda in Romania.[42] For instance, the second secretary of the Russian Embassy in Bucharest, Paul Alekseyenko, is the founder of 20 active Facebook groups. Those register from 130 to 47,000 members, allegedly sharing pro-Kremlin information amongst each other.[43]

Amongst the Embassy’s spread of narratives include the unproductive role that the EU and NATO have had in Romania as well as promoting Russian goals.[44]
In order to facilitate the implementation of Russian propaganda, the Russian Embassy also supports festive events and pro-Russian exhibitions. For instance, recently it held an exhibition on Syria, “Chronicle of War in photos” [45]. The exhibition aimed to promote Russian activities in Syria and was visited by various pro-Kremlin journalists [46].

Another structure that contributes to Russia’s goals in the country is the Alliance for Romanian Unity (AUR) political party. AUR made itself popular in Romania by using words such as ‘faith’, ‘liberty’, ‘family’ and ‘motherland’. [47] With a nationalist discourse, AUR focuses on issues that are of interest to Russia and disseminates them through multiple Facebook groups and news outlets that are linked with the party itself. [48] Amongst other topics, AUR promotes theories about the moral corruption of the West, COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the government, and the foreign influences stealing the Romanian resources. [49] AUR supports Russia’s points of views and reiterates them in Romania. This can be seen in the example of homosexual and LGBTQI+ rights in the educational system. In 2013, a Russian law banned the “promotion of non-traditional sexual relations to minors”. [50]

Subsequently to this, AUR engaged with its followers, asking them whether they would like the party to advance a proposal for a parliament bill on “the protection of children against gay propaganda in Romanian kindergartens and schools.” [51]

Due to the complicated relationship between Russia and Romania, AUR avoids direct references to Russia. However, Calin Georgescu was nominated as AURs’ Prime Minister candidate. Georgescu is an expert in sustainable development who praises Russian state policies. [52] In this context, academics Despa and Albu believe that this creates legitimate common interests between Romanian stakeholders and Russian state campaigns. [53] There are other public personalities, such as Iosefina Pascal, who is known as an online activist, who is sceptic towards COVID-19 and who organized various protests against measures during the pandemic. [54] Her public criticism was amplified by Russian criticism towards COVID-19 policies. [55]

Despite this, the AUR now seems to be trying to disperse allegations of Kremlin links and to depart itself from pro-Kremlin allegations. In the context of growing allegations of AUR being a pro-Russian party, AUR leader George Simion for instance declared that Russia is the biggest threat for Romania. [56]

Russian propaganda during the Russian-Ukrainian international armed conflict

Since the war between Russia and Ukraine has started, Russian propaganda has intensified. [57] According to a narrative spread by Russia, the Russo-Ukrainian international armed conflict is fabricated. [58] It has been shown that those who oppose to COVID-19 vaccination are now spreading pro-Kremlin narratives. [59] The linkage between those two – seemingly unrelated topics – becomes apparent, when looking at Russian claims in connection to the war. Accordingly, biological laboratories in Ukraine, Australia and the United States were discovered. Furthermore, Russia interferes that the laboratories were secret, hiding facilities were they produced biological weapons, and also acted as ‘natural outbreaks of diseases’. [60] This idea has immediately resonated with the anti-vaxxer community, who is now declaring that the war in Ukraine has been set up to cover up the origins of the COVID-19 virus, which were created by the United States. [61]

As the pandemic is coming to an end, the anti-establishment, anti-vaccine community is shifting its focus to a pro-Kremlin discourse. [62] Populist politicians and their followers that were receptive to the anti-vaccine seem to be shifting from the “fake virus” identity to the “fake war” identity.
Romanian authorities and international community should facilitate the establishment of an ecosystem comprised of civil structures, aimed at stopping new propaganda transmissions and creating awareness on the issue.

New civil structures should focus on trainings for Romanian, Moldovan journalists, media owners, people serving in public institutions, business owners, and other group categories that are in contact with propaganda and disinformation. Hereby, preventive research regionally and internationally should be conducted, deconstructing and exposing propaganda.

A system of early public notices on potential propaganda and disinformation should be established, ensuring that people are familiar with the original, primary narratives. This will enable them to consider various sources when informing themselves.

Romanian authorities ought to launch a strong online campaign promoting media and digital literacy. This campaign should especially target the most vulnerable groups that are exposed to Russia’s propaganda and disinformation.

Recommendations

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Conclusions

Russia is aiming to uphold a certain distrust in Romanian democracy, making Romanians question the choices of maintaining membership to NATO and the EU. While there is little evidence on links between Romanian newspapers and Russian propaganda, there are certainly indicators that some stakeholders, such as AUR, may act on opportunity in order to keep their relevance following the pandemic. While it is hard to declare AUR pro-Russian, it should certainly be viewed as an indirect promoter of Kremlin’s narratives.[64]

Furthermore, Russia makes use of Romanian moral values to disseminate its propaganda. The elaborated narratives and the way they were placed in society serve as examples how Russia uses existing structures and values to disseminate its own narratives and interests.
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[15] Ibid.


[57] 24/7 News Bulletin, ‘Who is doing Russian propaganda in Romania and how exposed are we? Russia is now like in the 1950s: the lie is true, the war is peace’ (24/7 News Bulletin, 21 March 2022) <https://247newsbulletin.com/politics/170158.html> accessed 21 April 2022.


The Peace & Security Monitor is produced by the Platform for Peace and Humanity

The Peace & Security Monitor
South East Europe & Black Sea region
Issue 3
April 2022

Platform for Peace and Humanity
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