



SABINA DE SILVA
(edited by)

**THE USE
OF CULTURE
IN MODERN
CONFLICTS
AND POLITICAL
COMPETITION**

*An Insight from Ukraine
and the Western Balkans*



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The Use of Culture in Modern Conflicts and Political Competition

An Insight from Ukraine and the Western Balkans

EDITED BY
SABINA DE SILVA



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Preface

DAMIANO PALANO¹

On October 14, 1936, Edward H. Carr delivered his inaugural lecture as the Wilson Chair of International Politics at the University College of Wales. He focused on the theme “Public Opinion as a Safeguard of Peace.” The Wilson Chair had been established less than 20 years earlier, in 1919, at the end of World War I, with the specific aim of promoting a culture of peace and helping create a different climate than that which led to war in 1914. As Carr noted, “The Wilson Professor is required to believe that the study of international politics can reveal the best means of promoting peace between nations” (Carr 1936, p. 846). He shared the same conviction as the chair’s founders, although not all scholars agreed. Many believed that the study of international politics could not influence the achievement of peace, as they felt the causes of war lay elsewhere – in “natural” tendencies or factors beyond human control. Carr acknowledged that these beliefs had been well-founded in the past, but he argued that the sit-

¹ Dipartimento di Scienze politiche, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, damiano.palano@unicatt.it.

uation had changed. “The responsibility of war and peace rests on every one of us” (Carr 1936, p. 847). His role, therefore, was not to create a theory for achieving peace but to “endeavor, within the limits of his powers and opportunities, to promote a truer understanding of the nature of international relations, and thereby contribute to the creation of a balanced and well-informed public opinion on international problems” (Carr 1936, p. 847).

In historical analyses of studies of the causes of war and peace and relations between states, the establishment of the Wilson Chair is often seen as the founding moment of the academic discipline of International Relations. Ironically, it was Carr who initiated the “first great debate” in the field by criticising the utopianism of early 20th-century liberalism, represented by intellectuals such as Norman Angell, author of *The Great Illusion*, Alfred Zimmern, and, of course, former U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, who had inspired the creation of the League of Nations and, with his 14-point manifesto in 1917, outlined the vision of a new liberal international order (Smith 1996; Wilson 1998).

This debate marked the emergence of a rift between the “realist” and “idealist” (or “utopian”) schools of thought in international politics and, by extension, the academic study of its trends. In *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, Carr criticised the utopian foundations he believed had guided the establishment of the League of Nations. One such foundation was the belief that war could be prevented by the force of reason alone by demonstrating the economic futility of armed conflict and by using persuasive action to shape global public opinion. “The whole conception of the League of Nations was from the first closely bound up with the twin belief that public opinion was bound to prevail and that public opinion was the voice of reason” (Carr 1939, p. 55).

Despite his earlier lecture's emphasis on public opinion, Carr was sceptical about its potential to make the world more peaceful, but he recognised the significant role it could play in 20th-century international politics. The experience of World War I had shown that mass warfare required not only the support of soldiers' morale on the front lines but also strong support from the civilian population, who had to endure the war on the home front. Thus, when considering the resources of power, he did not overlook the importance of propaganda. He wrote, in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, "The problem of power over opinion in its modern mass form has been created by developments in economic and military technique, by the substitution of mass production industries for individual craftsmanship and of the conscript citizen army for the volunteer professional force. Contemporary politics are vitally dependent on the opinion of large masses of more or less politically conscious people, of whom the most vocal, the most influential and the most accessible to propaganda are those who live in and around great cities" (Carr 1939, p. 133-134).

Alongside propaganda, 20th-century international politics discovered the power of culture, or rather – using the terminology proposed by Joseph Nye Jr. – soft power. According to Nye, soft power "rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)" (Nye 2004, p. 11). Although the contours of soft power often appear unclear, it is distinct from hard power, which involves the use of coercion (or the threat thereof). Hard power generally entails using military and economic means to control the behaviour of states. In contrast, soft power involves creating consensus through persuasion without resorting to coercion. In other words, a country has high

amounts of soft power if others admire its ideals, desire what it advocates, and share its goals without threats of coercion or promises of reward. According to Nye, American soft power was a tremendous asset in winning the Cold War because its culture spread not only a way of life but also values and a worldview that enabled Washington to defeat its adversaries without resorting to armed conflict. This explanation may seem overly simplistic to many historians and political scientists, but even those who emphasise the importance of military factors today recognise the crucial role of soft power in its various forms. Moreover, many studies have shown that rising powers such as China and Russia, as well as countries like Qatar, are investing enormous efforts to strengthen their soft power to enhance their international image and assert themselves on the global stage.

The investigation conducted in this volume by Silvia Cittadini, Majlinda Bregasi, Thomas Christiansen, Claudia Annovi, and Sabina de Silva is part of the larger project *The Clash of Narratives: The Representation of the Future in Popular Culture and Traditional Media and Their Political Use*, financed by the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and carried out by a large group of scholars. The project had two main objectives: first, to investigate the dynamics through which the old models of the good society adopted by 20th-century ideological families are being replaced – or integrated – with materials mediated by popular culture, and second, to explore how representations of the future influence elites and political choices. Specifically, the project aimed to study the transformations in representations of the future in traditional media and the narratives that are promulgated through digital media, focusing on mutations and negations of the relationship with the past, human-machine and interindividual relationships, transformations of power, global dynamics, and envi-

ronmental conditions. In general, the focus has been on representations of the future in the ideological heritage of 20th-century cultures and political families (utopias, dystopias, past futurisms, declinism, etc.) and the role of popular culture (genre fiction, cinema, comics, TV series) in defining contemporary socio-political imaginaries.

The volume *The Use of Culture in Modern Conflicts and Political Competitions: An Insight from Ukraine and the Western Balkans*, edited by Sabina de Silva, follows the general objectives of the project by concentrating on highly conflictual scenarios, such as those in the Western Balkans over the last thirty years and the Russian-Ukrainian war. As de Silva notes in the introduction of this book, the different scenarios analysed share “the use of culture in the narrative accompanying these forms of conflict, whether latent or open,” because culture “is used to define one’s national identity in an excluding sense toward minorities in the country, (...) to persuade the audience on the lawfulness of political stances, (...) [and] to foment cultural hatred that seemed dormant.” Moreover, during armed conflicts, cultural heritage becomes a military target to be physically destroyed to strike at identity symbols or to construct narratives aimed at weakening opponents.

This exploration of the intersections between culture and international politics represents the first step in research that needs to be continued, both to understand why old and new powers alike invest considerable resources in their strategies of public, cultural, and even sports diplomacy, and to test whether culture – while reinforcing divisions – can also become a factor capable of pacifying conflicts. Perhaps we cannot be overly optimistic about the potential of culture as a tool for achieving peace. However, studying how it is used as an instrument of power can also contribute, to quote Carr’s words in his inaugural lecture as the Wilson Chair of Interna-

tional Politics, “to promote a truer understanding of the nature of international relations, and thereby contribute to the creation of a balanced and well-informed public opinion on international problems.”

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Introduction

SABINA DE SILVA¹

The war in Ukraine has plunged the West into a spiral of insecurity driven by the presence of a war “at the European doorstep”, without a certain and predictable conclusion. At the same time, in the Western Balkans region, there is a resurgence of nationalist sentiments based on ethnic and cultural divisions that risk adding another destabilizing factor to the European neighbourhood.

These different scenarios have an element in common: the use of culture in the narrative accompanying these forms of conflict, whether latent or open. Culture is used to define one’s national identity in an exclusionary manner towards minorities in the country; to persuade the audience on the legitimacy of political instances; to foment cultural hatred that seemed dormant. Finally, culture in its material manifestations is targeted as a military objective to be physically destroyed, to discredit the enemy and assert one’s narrative of events.

¹ Dipartimento di Scienze politiche, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, sabina.desilva1@unicatt.it.

This volume seeks to expose all the ways in which culture is leveraged and narrated in modern conflicts and political competitions, focusing primarily on Ukraine and the countries of the Western Balkans. The choice of this geographical location is driven not only by the urgency to provide interpretative tools for ongoing events but also by the importance these countries hold for the stability of the European continent and the future prospects of their integration into the European Union.

The Structure of the Book

In the first chapter “Cultures, conflict and women’s role in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina: the importance of narrative’s construction”, Silvia Cittadini investigates the link between the emerge of nationalist narratives, based on ethnocultural and religious divisions during the 1990s conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the re-patriarchisation of gender roles in the country. Cultural features and symbols have been used by political leaders to feed nationalist and patriarchal narratives during the conflict and that any alternative voice has been misrecognized at the peace tables. The chapter also investigates the role of women’s organisations in the promotion of a “culture of peace” in Bosnia and Herzegovina and their attempt to emerge in the political arena as a new legitimate narrative.

In the second chapter “Leadership Narratives as Divergent Framing of Conflict: A Discourse Analysis of Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue”, Majlinda Bregasi and Thomas Christiansen analyse the most recent speeches of the two leaders of Kosovo and Serbia in order to see how the political discourses is used to influence and persuade both national and foreign audience

on the lawfulness of their respective political instances. the Kosovar question sees the clash of two different narratives, the Kosovar one marked by the effort of gaining a full international recognition, the Serbian one intent on denying such recognition. Vučić's choice of words in referring to Kosovo - using expedients like "Pristina" or "so-called Kosovo" or the more provocative "southern Province of Republic of Serbia" - indicates the clear will to reject the idea of an independent Kosovo and to impose a certain narrative on the events since the declaration of independence forward. In this sense, language as "means of power, expressing, communicating and shaping thoughts" becomes the "raw materials of politics" and the ability of the leaders to manipulate it determines the gain or loss of attractive power.

In the third chapter, *Unravelling Radicalisation in the Western Balkans: Exploring Cultural Drivers of Violent Jihadist and Far-Right Extremism*, Claudia Annovi explores the way in which ethnic and cultural divisions can foment violent extremism. The chapter continues by analyzing the narrative of ethnic nationalist groups and the use of different narratives to revise historical events and normalize cultural hatred.

In the he last chapter, *The Clash of Narratives in Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Wartime Cultural Diplomacy*, Sabina de Silva analyses the clash of narratives in the recent war between Russia and Ukraine, starting from the construction of the Ukrainian identity after the 1991 independence and the origin of the Russian claim on Ukrainian territory. The chapter also investigates the use of culture for the legitimation and de-legitimation of nationalist issues and the transformation of cultural heritage into a precise target to be destroyed during conflicts.

Cultures, conflict and women's role in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina: the importance of narrative's construction

SILVIA CITTADINI¹

Abstract. The emergence of nationalist narratives, grounded on ethnocultural and religious divisions, during the conflict that inflamed Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s did not only lead to the resurgence of traditional and nationalist values but also to the re-patriarchisation of gender roles and relations. While Yugoslavia was at the forefront of gender equality, the annihilation of women's voices also through sexual violence during the conflict and the monopolisation of the political scene by nationalist male figures left Bosnia and Herzegovina as apparently unable to overcome its internal divisions, and where women appear as passive victims of traditional cultures. Within this framework, this chapter analyses the role of women's organisations in the promotion of a "culture of peace" in the country, to show how the crucial role of women in Bosnian history and for today's peace is overshadowed not only by the internal nationalist narratives but, partially, also by an international community unable to fully recognise their potential.

Keywords: Gender violence; feminism; peace-building; multiculturalism.

¹ Independent researcher, cittadini.silvia@yahoo.it.

Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina is sadly known for the war that inflamed its territories in the 90s and for the particularly cruel crimes that marked the conflict between Serb, Croat and Muslims: Sarajevo, its capital, has been under siege for almost four years, being one of the longest sieges in modern history; mass executions, deportation to concentration camps and violence against civilians have been reported throughout the whole country; in summer 1995, in the town of Srebrenica, located close to the eastern border with Serbia, more than 8000 civilians were killed in few days by the Serb troops led by Ratko Mladić, representing the largest mass-killing since Second World War. Yet, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as one of the autonomous republics of the Yugoslav Federation, was considered an example of multiculturalism and peaceful cohabitation of different ethnic and religious groups. Indeed, since the Ottoman empire, this country has been inhabited by Muslim, Serb-Orthodox and Croat-Catholic people – among others, such as Jews and Roma – who, especially under secularised Yugoslavia, largely mingled also through mixed marriages. According to the census held in 1991, 44% of the Bosnian population declared to be Muslim, 32,5% Serb, 17% Croat and 6% Yugoslav.

However, after the declarations of independence of Slovenia and Croatia and the wars that followed, in 1992 the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina proposed a referendum for the independence of the country, boycotted by the Serb-orthodox political representatives intentioned to remain part of Yugoslavia, together with Serbia and Montenegro. This situation followed the progressive rise in the whole region of nationalist stances and parties, that overshadowed the democratic and anti-nationalist attempts to peacefully lead Yugoslavia

through the transition towards democracy (Sasso, 2015). In response to the declaration of independence followed by the referendum, the Bosnian-Serb leaders resigned from the Parliament and established an Assembly of Bosnian-Serbs in Banja Luka. At the same time, to protest against the declaration of independence, Bosnian-Serbs started setting up roadblocks in major cities, with the support of the Yugoslav National Army that was controlled by the Serb part. The situation quickly turned into an open and extended conflict that lasted until 1996 and saw Croats, Serbs and Muslims, once neighbours, fighting each other and pursuing plans of ethnic cleansing. The dream of a peaceful multicultural Bosnia and Herzegovina fell quickly into a hell of what was presented to the international public as an intestine war between different religious and ethnic groups.

The massacre of Srebrenica in the summer of 1995 urged the necessity to reach a peace agreement, which was then signed in Dayton with the intermediation of the international community, leading to the creation of today's Bosnia and Herzegovina. The agreement has separated the country into two separate entities along ethnic lines – Republika Srpska, of Serb majority, and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Muslim and Croat-catholic population, which, in turn, is divided into ten autonomous cantons – with the addition of an autonomous district of Brčko. Each entity has its own Parliament and Government, and it benefits from large autonomy, while the State is united through a federal Parliament and a tripartite presidency shared by a Serb, a Croat and a Muslim President. This organisation has been largely criticised for its fragmentation and complexity and, most of all, for *de facto* institutionalising the conflict by leaving the control of the territories to those who have occupied them through arms and violence, instead of aiming at the reconciliation of

the country (Gilbert & Mujanović, 2015; McCulloch, 2014). The new state's order, indeed, has also led to a demographic transformation of the country, once ethnically and culturally mixed, with the transfer of Serb families that used to live in mixed areas to "Serb" territories and vice versa.

In this scenario, women have largely been left apart from the political scene and the peace agreements, although they were among the principal victims of the conflict, as sexual violence and mass rapes were systematically used as weapons of ethnic cleansing by all sides. Gender violence, indeed, was not a mere "side-effect" of war's violence but a direct product of nationalist propaganda: in nationalist narratives, the woman is seen as the "mother of the Nation" and as such her body must be protected by the men of her group against the risk of violation by the enemy, who, by violating the body of the woman through rape, is violating the whole nation that he wants to wipe out – the body of the women, then, becomes in this context a battleground (Meznaric, 1994; Weitsman, 2008). Gender and nationalism have always been intrinsically connected, and the rise of nationalist rhetoric has always led to a regression of gender equality, promoting the image of the woman as a caring mother and wife. However, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where before the war, under Yugoslavia, women had acquired positions of power in all sectors, reaching levels of gender equality unknown in many "Western" countries, this regression has been particularly evident with the rise of nationalist groups: women became completely invisible in the political scene and were not included in the peace negotiations (Björkdahl, 2012; Thomasson, 2006).

Today's Bosnia and Herzegovina ranks at the lowest positions in Europe in terms of gender equality and, at the same time, it still struggles against ethnic divisions that are blocking the country's reconciliation, growth and development. What

are the reasons for such regression in terms of women's rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina? Is it the product of traditional cultures that re-emerged with the conflict after the secular parenthesis of socialist Yugoslavia? This chapter aims to investigate these issues by analysing the condition of today's Bosnian women through the lenses of the academic debate on the relationship between women's rights and cultures. With this aim, the analysis also adopts a historical perspective by considering the evolution of gender relations in the country and the role taken by women and women's organisations during and after the war. This is done in order to highlight the agency of Bosnian women and how the misrecognition and misrepresentation of this agency has, on the one hand, contributed to their marginalisation in the country, and, on the other hand, missed the opportunity to support anti-nationalist efforts and narratives that might have had a positive impact in the increasingly divided country.

1. Women's role in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina and before the conflict

The whole conflict and post-war transition period have been dominated by men representing the various conflicting factions, divided through ethnic lines mostly defined by religious belonging. For long, women remained completely invisible as if the conflict did not concern them at all. Also, the impact and significance of gender violence during conflict have not been immediately recognised and addressed by the international community. Consequently, many of those responsible for these crimes have not been held accountable, while the victims had no access to reparation and compensation programs (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2013). The misrecognition of

gender violence during the conflict is surely one of the consequences of the total exclusion of women from the socio-political redefinition of the country. Dayton did not see the participation of even one woman from Bosnia and Herzegovina and this absence did not have only a symbolic meaning in terms of gender relations but also important repercussions for the reconciliation of the country. Women's organisations were among the main anti-nationalist actors during and after the conflict; excluding them from the peace talks, while giving voice to the perpetrators of war crimes, has been criticised for having legitimised a system designed and ruled by men representing nationalistic and patriarchal instances and using ethnic conflict and division in political propaganda (Berry & Rana, 2019; Deiana, 2018; Hadžiristic, 2016; Thomasson, 2006; Women Organising for Change in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Syria, 2018).

This situation is mirrored in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina. When it comes to women's representation in the political sphere, the data are discouraging. Despite the adoption of a series of laws to favour the political participation of women and gender equality such as the Law on Gender Equality of 2003 and the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination of 2009, the creation of the Agency for Gender Equality under the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees in charge of implementing the Gender Action Plan, the social and political situation did not change substantially. One example is the representation of women within political institutions: the Law on Gender Equality foresees a quota system aimed at ensuring that women's representation in governments and decision-making bodies does not fall under 40%. With this aim, electoral rolls must contain at least one woman among the first two candidates, two women among the first five candidates and three women among eight candidates. However, the aim

of 40% of women among elected candidates has never been reached. After the last General elections in 2022, the number of women in the House of Representatives represented only 19% of the total (International IDEA, n.d.). Very similar is the situation at the cantonal level: no woman occupies the position of cantonal prime minister and only 8 hold the role of minister among the 100 cantonal ministers. In addition, there are only five female elected mayors in the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina and they are at the head of communities of less than 10,000 inhabitants (Kandić & Husić, 2023).

It is therefore clear that, despite the legislative efforts, women's participation in the political sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains very limited. This situation, then, is mirrored in all other sectors of society: when it comes to female labour force participation, Bosnia and Herzegovina scores very poorly, highlighting important gender disparities. For instance, only one-third of the overall female working-age population has employment, a percentage much lower not only compared to European standards but also to other Western Balkans countries (Abaz & Hadžić, 2020). The analyses of the reasons for such disparities most of the time point to the widespread gender stereotypes based on traditional and patriarchal values that are reiterated within media and in the public sphere at large. In this context, most women in Bosnia and Herzegovina end up adhering to traditional gender roles of the wife, mother and house-keeper, which, in an economically precarious society such as the Bosnian one, place them in a particular position of vulnerability and at risk of poverty (Abaz & Hadžić, 2020; Deiana, 2018; Hadžiristic, 2016; Stavrevska, 2018). The overall picture that, therefore, emerges from these data and analyses is not edifying, presenting Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country far from achieving European standards in terms of gender equality and anchored

to traditions alien to the ones of a liberal secularised country. But, is this picture fully representative of women's position and agency in Bosnia and Herzegovina? And was it always like that?

These questions are at the centre of an interesting article published on the matter by Tea Hadziristic and provocatively entitled "Is Bosnia the worst place in Europe to be a woman?" (2016). As other scholars have pointed out, the image of the woman passive victim of gender violence and subordinate of gender roles is not representative of all Bosnian women, especially from a historical perspective. During the socialist period, Yugoslavia was at the forefront of gender equality on many levels: it ensured a welfare system that granted women broad reproductive rights, maternity leaves, access to social support, etc.- allowing women to take part in the labour market and the public and political life of the country (Doeland & Skjelsbaek, 2018). Significant, in this sense, is the fact that Yugoslavia hosted the largest number of women with a PhD in Europe. The activism and role played by women in the public sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina did not cease with the war. Women's organisations, for instance, were the first to organise initiatives of reconciliation immediately after the war, bringing together women from different ethnic groups, and they have been protagonists of many important peace actions (Björkdahl, 2012; Helms, 2003; Rošul-Gajić, 2016; Thomasson, 2006).

The roots of the regression in terms of women's rights and position in the country during and after the conflict can surely also be found in the economic and political transition that inserted a neo-liberal economy in the country, which dismantled the welfare system but did not lead to real economic growth, leaving the population without the wide social protection mechanisms ensured by the Yugoslav regime. Women

were particularly affected by the economic transition, as they remained without the social support that enabled them to participate in the labour market. According to some scholars, moreover, the rapid regression of women's rights in the area is also due to the fact that in socialist Yugoslavia, despite women's achievements in public life, gender roles were never questioned within the private sphere. This meant that, within the household, the woman remained the main housekeeper and caregiver – the wife and the mother. As a consequence, once the system supporting women in their “family obligation” was lost, the weight of family duties remained solely on their shoulders, posing a serious obstacle to their participation in the labour market and public life, especially in rural areas where pauperisation caused by the economic transition has been more evident (Berry & Rana, 2019; Pupavac, 2005).

However, feminist organisations and scholars agree on the fact that gender inequalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina are mostly due to the reconfiguration of the Bosnian State, which emerged during the Dayton peace talks. The peace meetings that involved exclusively the conflicting parties representative of nationalist stances led to a division of the country that did not bring towards a path of reconciliation, but further reinforced the internal divisions and the power of nationalistic leaders. This state asset affected women's position because, on one side, the reinforcement of the internal ethnic divisions led to the resurgence of traditional and religious – mostly patriarchal – values that served to redefine group's identities along ethnic lines; on the other side, the reached peace agreement froze an ethnic conflict that remained the main, if not the sole, issue addressed by political parties in power and used for propaganda, preventing State's institutions to concretely deal with other issues, such as gender equality (Björkdahl, 2012; Deiana, 2018; Hadžiristic, 2016; Thomasson,

2006). Within a study conducted between 2020 and 2021 on the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Cittadini & della Valle, 2022), most of the interviewees from civil society, when asked on the matter, argued that political parties currently in power do not have a real interest in changing women's position in the country, because their political legitimisation is mostly based on ethnic divisions reinforced by the resurgence of traditional values that, among the other things, keep women in a subordinate position.

In this context, the Bosnian political and public scene is dominated by men who ground their power on ethnic and cultural belongings, within a society that is increasingly divided and attached to cultural symbols and traditions to distinguish them from others. In this context, as described above, women do not find political representation and often remain outside of the labour market. At the same time, though, it is important to highlight that not all Yugoslav achievements in terms of gender equality are lost today. For instance, still today women in Bosnia and Herzegovina reach higher levels of education, scoring better than men in this sense. According to the latest official statistics, in 2020 64% of students completing a Master of Science or specialistic program are female and, in contrast to what it might be thought, these achievements are equally distributed among all disciplines: the only discipline where men are in substantial majority are ITC disciplines, although still 34% of students in this discipline is female (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2022, pp. 46-49). However, when it comes to decision-making positions, both in the public and private sectors, the presence of women in positions of power drops considerably (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2022, pp. 116-119). The main identified reason for this situation is always the

same: the patriarchal values re-emerged after the war that swept away the achievements reached within secularised Yugoslavia.

2. Gender, culture and the colonial gaze

The regression of women's rights and position in Bosnia and Herzegovina together with the rediscovery of traditional and religious values that occurred during the conflict of the 90s that ended the secular and socialist experience of Yugoslavia, at first sight, might seem to confirm the notorious and contested claim of Susan Moller Okin contained in *Is Multiculturalism bad for women?* (1999). In this text, the feminist scholar criticises collective rights aimed at recognising and protecting cultural differences, arguing that the "cultures" object of protection by these rights are often oppressive towards women. In her argument, she brings the example of polygamy in France which would be protected by State institutions in respect of Muslim religion without taking into account the suffering of women living in family contexts that impose these models. Although Okin's claim is praised for highlighting once more the limits of a liberal thought that does not fully consider the significance of gender relations, her argument has also been criticised for pursuing a stereotyped and colonial understanding of "culture".

As Edward Said pointed out, colonialism is a phenomenon not only manifested in the territorial occupation of the colonies, but also in the construction of narratives that clearly define and distinguish a West "liberal", "secular" and "modern" and an East "attached to ancient cultures", "traditional" and, as a consequence, "backward". The construction of these narratives, in turn, is used to justify the economic, symbolic, and

territorial domination of the “West” over the “East” (Said, 1978). In this context, Okin is criticised for pursuing a representation that depicts “Eastern” women as passive victims of illiberal cultures in opposition to the secular values of an Enlightened West, liberated from the burden of tradition. These constructions are the consequence of an essentialist idea of “cultures”, identified, in this view, as unchanging and bounded containers of traditional values. This brings to a simplification of gender-culture relations, which might reproduce and reinforce stereotypes at the base of the oppression of colonial subjects – such as the constructed dichotomy between a patriarchal East and secular and liberal West, but also because it prevents the recognition of the agency of women living in what are considered “traditional contexts” and their resistance against patriarchal oppression (Belli & Loretoni, 2017; Mohanty, 1988).

The Western Balkans, and in particular, the Muslim side of the population residing in this area, are not immune to these colonial constructions and processes. The Bosnian feminist scholar Tea Hadžiristić, for instance, presents an interesting account of the complex interrelation between the Muslim veil, colonial constructions and public policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina through history (2017). She highlights how the veil, under the Ottoman Empire, was not worn exclusively by Muslim women – all women used to cover their head – and the use of burqa-like garments covering the whole body and face started to be used by Muslim women from rich families as a symbol of wealth since it consisted of an expensive dress that poor women could not afford. It was with the decay of the Ottoman Empire and the passage of the country under Austrian rule that the veil started becoming a marker of Muslim women, in a context in which ethnic communities increased their isolation. It was also in this period that the veil

started becoming a symbol of “backwardness”, associated with women’s subjugation and illiteracy, even though women’s role and position was very similar within all the ethnic groups. This association was then reinforced by the Austrian administrators who, willing to “respect” local values, opened schools only for Muslim women focused on family economics, and used under socialism when the process of “unveiling” became an important symbol of empowerment and modernity.

In her work, Hadžiristić shows again how the use of analytical lenses deformed by the prejudices that relegate female empowerment to the West and patriarchal values to the East, not only provide a distorted and exaggerated centrality to supposed cultural symbols, such as the veil, but also prevents to recognise and address the deep roots of women’s subjugation. Both under Austrian and socialist rule, indeed, the focus on the veil and cultural values did not allow political elites to address other issues affecting women, such as family structures and economic independence. In addition, the consequences of the above-mentioned dichotomy are reflected in today’s Bosnian society where both the veil, which, after the secular parenthesis under Yugoslavia, returned to be a marker of ethnic belonging for Muslim women, and feminism are considered as something foreign, coming respectively from the Arab and Western world, although they are both well rooted in Bosnian history and society (Hadžiristić, 2017).

The account of the Bosnian scholar shows the reader the complexity of interpreting cultural symbols and approaches often used as political flags – i.e. the veil, feminism – and the plurality of factors and narratives that need to be taken into account when analysing them in this specific context. In this sense, perceiving Bosnian women as passive victims of backward cultures that are intrinsic to Bosnian history and society might reproduce and reinforce the narrative constructions

that maintain the system of subordination. For this reason, in order to analyse the interplay between conflict, the re-emergence of traditional cultures and gender disparities it is necessary to investigate further how culture is defined and used in this context. Here, narrative constructions and the manipulation of supposed cultural features are essential. We have to take into account that, although it is nowadays agreed upon that “cultures” are not coherent, fixed and bounded containers that determine human behaviour (Benhabib, 2002; Henry, 2000; Phillips, 2007), the way cultural features are interpreted and used to build shared meanings, especially in conflict situations, acquire relevance.

Conflicting groups, in order to legitimise their position, build group identities through narratives told by themselves, as well as by others. In this way, the group’s cohesion is reinforced and the “other” is constructed as the negative to be defeated, justifying the necessity to fight it. In addition, in case of conflict, narratives tend to be straightforward and very simplistic – avoiding critical thinking in favour of aggressive propaganda: the group’s characteristics become clear and coherent, and the distinction between the good, us, and the bad, them, is unquestionably defined. This is typical of every conflict, from the small to the larger scale (Cobb, 2013). The war in the Balkan is peculiar because the conflicting parties have gathered and constructed narratives along ethnic lines, re-proposing cultural myths and religious symbols to reinforce group cohesion and inter-group hatred (Fairey, 2023). In this scenario, the cultural narratives reconstructed around supposed ethnic and religious features have been strongly patriarchal – after decades of secularism and gender equality – and women, within these narratives, have exclusively taken a passive role, i.e. the body to be either defended or conquered through rape (Meznaric, 1994).

These narratives, then, have been legitimised and, subsequently, reinforced by the international intervention that proved unable to recognise the anti-nationalist forces within the country – among which, women's organisations for reconciliation – but boosted the imaginary of a Western Balkan peninsula trapped into a never-ending conflict between irreconcilable sets of values – i.e. cultures. This representation is not only the product of what happened in the 1990s but is, as well, the consequence of narrative constructions that through the centuries have represented the Balkans through a series of stereotypes that made this region a European “other” – i.e. something more similar to the “East” than the “West”: backwards, always in conflict, politically and economically weak, etc. (Todorova, 2009). Consequently, it is possible to assume that this stereotype prevented the recognition of what was behind nationalistic propaganda and informed an approach directed to negotiate exclusively with the representatives of nationalistic stances. As highlighted above, in the construction of groups' narratives, the story that other tells regarding the group is equally important to the story the group tells about itself. For this reason, giving visibility and voice solely to those who wore the dress of the violent and patriarchal nationalists, while excluding anti-nationalistic voices and women, might have fed the stereotype that Bosnia is an intrinsically traditional and patriarchal country, alien to feminism.

3. Women's work towards a culture of peace in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina

As mentioned above, women's organisations gathered and started engaging in activities of support towards victims of the conflict and reconciliation among ethnic groups already dur-

ing the war and immediately after its end. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the first initiatives were mostly aimed at supporting women victims of sexual violence and quickly spread throughout the whole country with the creation of a series of women's NGOs that from the beginning have been active also within the international arena, networking with women's international foundations and NGOs. After the war, they organised the first inter-ethnic meetings among women of different nationalities to boost dialogue and reconciliation (Rošul-Gajić, 2016; Thomasson, 2006). Another example of female activism during and after the war is the one of the Belgrade-based organisation "Women in Black" that, since the beginning of the Yugoslav conflicts, gathered Serbian women opposing Milosević's patriarchal and nationalist policies and expressing their solidarity with all the women victims of the wars through a series of public performances. The activism of "Women in Black" was intended to bring women to the centre of the political scene, giving them visibility, to promote an anti-patriarchal and anti-nationalist agenda, and, for this reason, it has been often the object of violence from nationalist factions (Bilić, 2012).

In more recent years, women's organisations in the area have mostly focused on two objectives: to give visibility and, therefore, find justice, for women who have been victims of violence during the war; and to promote an anti-nationalist and anti-patriarchal narrative. One of the main initiatives that took place with these objectives was the Women's Court held in Sarajevo on 7-10 May 2015. Inspired by similar initiatives organised in other parts of the World, the non-judicial Women's Court had the aim to give visibility and voice to both women victims of war violence and to women who resisted the nationalistic propaganda. The aim was also to promote a new sense of justice, not exclusively limited to compensation but

leading to a systemic change. The event was organised by a consortium of women's organisations coming from all ex-Yugoslav countries and coordinated by Women in Black from Belgrade. Bosnia and Herzegovina was represented by organisations based in different parts of the country and representative of all the national groups. During the days of the event, the organisers held five thematic panels on different topics related to the impact of war on the civilian population and women's perspectives. Testimonies of gender violence and injustice were invited to tell their story and to receive legal support. In addition to this, the event was accompanied by a series of performances – dance, poetry, art-crafts - aimed at using art to convey an anti-nationalist and anti-patriarchal narrative (O'Reilly, 2016).

Challenging the prevalent nationalist and patriarchal narratives that sustained the conflict and relegated women to subordinate roles remains today the main objective of women's organisation in the country. Among the most interesting initiatives, it is worth mentioning the project "Peace with Women's Face" (Cittadini & della Valle, 2022; Džekman & Kanalstein, 2020), launched in 2013 and involving twelve local women's organisations. The main aim of the project is to give visibility to the role of women in Bosnian history, during the war, before and after. With this aim, the consortium of organisations has published three books: "*Rat nije jednorodan*" ("War is not a one-gender affair") (Džekman et al., 2017) which presents the stories of women who died during the last war; "*Homage to significant women of B&H and their achievements*" (Šehabović, 2019), collecting the biographies of women whose achievements are not properly represented in history books; and "*Peace with Women's Face*" (Initiative 'Peace with Women's Face', 2019) on the contribution of women to a culture of peace in the country. The visibility of this publications

has then been increased with the distribution of a documentary film “*One umiru drugi put*” (“They die a second time”)² and the organisation of a public exhibition.

The importance of narrative construction in a context of conflict and the perseverance of opposing narratives based on ethnic belonging that prevent Bosnia and Herzegovina from moving towards a real reconciliation, especially at the political level (Cobb, 2013; Fairey, 2023), highlights the significance and potential impact of these initiatives not only for promoting gender equality in the country but also towards a culture of peace. The creation of shared narratives, in this divided context, is considered a powerful means to dismantle and delegitimise nationalist rhetoric. Other studies have indeed focused on the potential of promoting a collective memory: Tatjana Takševa (2018) analyses how the War Childhood Museum of Sarajevo supports the definition of collective memory and identity by displaying shared experiences of war; the Post-Conflict Research Centre, based in Sarajevo, has been long working on the collection and diffusion of shared narratives critically analysing their potential for peace-building (Fairey, 2023); in this context, another important example is the use of art and memory to share common experiences and promote shared stories and myths, for a collective identity and a culture of peace (Savić-Bojanić & Kalemaj, 2021).

Field research conducted in 2020 on gender policies in the security field in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Cittadini & della Valle, 2022), with interviews with different actors involved in this matter, highlighted how most of the civil society actors

² See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2_2Re5Ntz0.

are sceptical regarding the possibility of a change towards anti-nationalist and anti-patriarchal policies without a radical change in the public narratives. In this context, it is deemed necessary to promote different understandings of peace and security, de-masculinising these sectors, by giving visibility to the hidden role played by women in peace and reconciliation processes. However, the initiatives promoted by women's organisations with this aim are not fully supported not only by national institutions, which, as claimed by some of the interviewees, have the only interest in formally accepting gender-equality norms in order to continue receiving international support, without, though, doing nothing for these norms to be properly implemented, but find hard time also to be supported by international organisations.

An example is the evolution of the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in the country. This Agenda, adopted by the United Nations in 2000 with Resolution 1325, with the aim of enforcing a gender perspective in sectors where women remain often invisible, such as the one of defence and security, started being applied in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2010 with the adoption of the first National Action Plan. At first, the adoption and application of the WPS Agenda in the country represented an achievement and recognition of the work of local women's organisations. The adoption of the Agenda by the United Nations, indeed, was also the result of their work of advocacy for the recognition of the violence suffered by women during the last war and of their role in peace-building. In addition, the first National Action Plan was the product of a strict collaboration between the National Agency for Gender Equality and the local organisations, which were directly involved in its implementation. However, in the plans that followed the first, local civil society organisations lost their central role and the imple-

mentation of the Agenda rather passed to national institutions such as the Ministry of Security and the Ministry of Defence. The institutionalisation of the Agenda brought some concrete results such as an increased presence of women in the Army, which, however, are criticised by civil society for pursuing a militarised idea of peace and security (Cittadini & della Valle, 2022).

The progressive withdrawal of local women's organisations from the institutional implementation of the Agenda resulted in the fact that initiatives such as the above-mentioned "Peace with Women's Face", perfectly in line with the objectives of the WPS Agenda, have been promoted and implemented outside of the institutional framework, limiting their potential impact. In addition, the work of these organisations suffers from the lack of stable funds, since they are economically supported almost exclusively by feminist foundations such as Kvinna till Kvinna. In addition, the lack of collaboration between civil society and national institutions is posing an obstacle to other initiatives. For instance, one of the goals of these organisations is to name the 8th of December as the Day of Remembrance for female victims of war. However, the Bosnian government has never embraced this proposal or officially recognised the 8th of December celebrations, without giving any explanation.

4. *Conclusions*

The numerous and courageous actions and initiatives for peace and reconciliation promoted by women's organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina reflect the agency of Bosnian women and their capacity to mobilise against nationalist and patriarchal narratives. They surely do not reflect the stereo-

type of the woman passive victim of patriarchal cultures, unable to resist gender inequalities and violence. However, during and after the war that inflamed this country in the 1990s, women in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been excluded from all positions of decision-making, especially in politics. This exclusion, surprising if considered the high levels of gender equality reached in Yugoslavia, went hand in hand with the rediscovery of traditional cultures and symbols manipulated by nationalist factions to justify the conflict and sustain nationalist narratives. This might lead us to think that the regression in terms of gender equality in the country is a direct consequence of local cultures re-emerging after the secular parenthesis of Yugoslavia. This association would be, moreover, in line with the claim of the renowned feminist scholar Susan Moller Okin (1999) on the relation between women's subjugation and traditional cultures.

This claim, though, has been harshly criticised especially by post-colonial authors for reproducing an essentialist idea of "cultures" which would sustain the constructed dichotomy between a secular, modern and gender-sensitive "West" and a patriarchal and backward "East" at the base of colonial domination (territorial, economic, cultural) (Belli & Loretoni, 2017). This stereotype, then, would overshadow the acts of resistance against patriarchal domination of women living within societies regarded as "traditional". This criticism resonates in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina: on the one hand, the whole Balkans have been subject to colonial-like constructions that have informed the foreign interventions in this area (Todorova, 2009); on the other hand, the agency of Bosnian women evidently confutes the idea that Bosnian women are passive subjects of their cultures.

The reasons for the regression of gender equality in the country must then be found elsewhere and the importance of

narrative-constructions during and after the conflict might suggest a direction. As highlighted by scholars focusing on conflict and peace-building (Cobb, 2013; Fairey, 2023) and activists working for the reconciliation of Bosnian society, cultural features and symbols have been used by political leaders to feed narratives sustaining the political power gained during the conflict. As often happens in contexts of conflict, these narratives are grounded on clear-cut symbolic constructions – the men defending their own land, embodied by the woman/motherland. The main problem here is that these narratives have not been de-legitimised and deconstructed during the transition period but actually reinforced during the peace negotiations when only the nationalist stances found voice and representation. The absence of any anti-nationalist and anti-patriarchal voice at the peace table not only legitimised and reinforced the power of the conflicting parties, but also stressed the idea that Bosnian society does not produce alternative voices.

If we look at the composition of the peace tables of the Bosnian conflict in the light of the works on the western construction of the Balkans, it might be possible to assume that this absence is the consequence of a misrecognition: the international community intervened in the conflict was not able to recognise and give the right weight to the anti-nationalist and anti-patriarchal voices present in the country because the historical stereotypes depicting its populations as backwards, always in conflict, patriarchal, etc. distorted their view, giving more space to whom perfectly reflected the Balkan stereotype, e.g. the violent nationalist man. In this way, a vicious circle is reproduced: culture is used as a bounded box of traditional values to draw on, on one side, by the nationalist forces to legitimise their power and, on the other side, by the international community to easily interpret the complexities of the

conflict. In light of these considerations, the continuous and courageous work of Bosnian women's organisations reminds us of the dangers of narratives using culture as the sole lens for analysing divisions emerging in contexts of conflict and of the necessity to look beyond stereotypes to recognise and give voice to actors able to deconstruct the narratives feeding ethnic and gender violence.

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Leadership Narratives as Divergent Framing of Conflict: A Discourse Analysis of Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue

MAJLINDA BREGASI AND THOMAS CHRISTIANSEN¹

Abstract. This chapter focuses on Discourse Analysis as a micro study of political culture and conflict resolution in a specific context (that of relations between Kosovo and Serbia). The concept of political culture is highly complex and multi-layered. Its dynamic nature makes its effect on politics nebulous, especially as a means of resolution of conflict. The focus of this article is on political leader discourses against the background of the dialogue process between Kosovo and Serbia, under the mediation of the European Union. We analyse recent speeches by the political leaders of both countries to see how speaker mentality influences the conflict resolution process. We show how complex hitherto irreconcilable issues are concretely represented and framed in two speeches each by the leaders of Serbia (President Vučić) and Kosovo (Prime Minister Kurti) at two international events, respectively, the 78th session of the UN General Assembly of the United Nations in New York (September 2023), and the Pace Samite Forum, in Paris (November 2023), and attempt to deconstruct their strategies, aims and purposes.

Keywords: Political culture; Discourse Analysis; Kosovo; Serbia

¹ University of Pristina ‘Hasan Prishtina’ majlinda.bregasi@uni-pr.edu; Università del Salento thomas.christiansen@unisalento.it.

Introduction

In the range of pathologies associated with state weakness, such as the lack of institutional cohesion, political fragmentation, and the disconnection between state and social actors, Kamrava cites as the most glaring one, the state's status, in particular its diminished standing in the international arena, and its ability proactively to promote or even to defend its interests in dealing with regional and international forces and actors (Kamrava, 2016, p. 8). To examine this issue, we concentrate on two speeches each by the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo at two almost contemporaneous international events, respectively the 78th session of the UN General Assembly in New York (September 2023) and the Pace Samite Forum, in Paris (November 2023).

Kosovo proclaimed its independence from Serbia (of which it was an autonomous province called Kosovo and Metohija) and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (of which Serbia was a constituent state) in 2008 and was immediately recognized by many members of the international community, among which the USA and many members of the EU (most notably, Germany, France, the UK, Italy). However, many key international players still do not recognise it: most notably Russia; China; and, within the EU, four members (most notably Spain and Romania). Its very existence then, though taken for granted in many quarters, mostly among the Kosovari of ethnic Albanian descent, is still hotly contested and denied in others, in particular in Serbia itself and in some areas of Kosovo where the majority of the population is ethnically Serbian. Gaining recognition from all EU members and as much of the wider international community as possible remains the focus of Kosovan diplomacy while the reverse is true of Serbian diplomacy, where the priority is on reversing the events of 2008 and returning "Kosovo and Metohija" to the Serbian fold.

1. *Political Culture*

Since the early 1990s, there has been an effort to introduce the concept of political culture into the emerging theoretical framework of conflict resolution studies. The two classic studies *The Civic Culture* (Almond and Verba, 1963), and *Political Culture and Political Development* (Verba and Pye's, 1965) try to show how democracy can be possible only with the presence of a "political culture consistent with it" (Almond and Verba, 1963, p. 3). The latter widened the political culture approach into a global framework for the comparative analysis of political change and regime legitimacy in developed as well as developing countries (Dalton and Welzel, 2014).

Even though the role of culture in politics is studied from many angles and perspectives, political culture remains a complex, multilayered and often nebulous concept. As Almond (1998) said: "What we learned from *The Civic Culture Revisited* was that political culture is a plastic many dimensioned variables, and that it responds quickly to structural change". Some criticisms have been raised about the difficulty of giving to political culture an effective role with its relational element. Indeed, the ambiguity of how culture affects political structures or how political structures affect culture remains a crucial limitation of the approach (MacQueen, 2009, p. 14). This ambiguity is important in the case under examination because we can see the consequences of particular modes of political participation in certain political structures.

2. *Fragile Politics*

A major priority for Kosovo is dealing with the lack of legitimacy and authority in the northern part of the country where the state struggles to maintain control over its territory and

provide security against external and internal threats. The majority ethnic Serbian population who live in this part of Kosovo rejects the authority of the government of the independent Kosovan state. Since the end of the armed conflict between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA - or UÇK in Albanian) and the Yugoslavian Army acting on behalf of Serbia (1998-1999), they have continued to live as if they were still in Serbia and to seek protection and direction not from Pristina (or either the EULEX authorities or KFOR) but Belgrade. In Kosovo then, we are dealing with a context of multiple community identities (e.g. Albanian, Serb, Turkish, Romani, Bosnian), where the dominant identity (Albanian) is contested by a minority identity (the many Serbs who remain loyal to Belgrade). In such conditions, the authority of the new state may be weak, and instability is a constant threat, affecting the whole population, whatever their ethnicity. More specifically, where political orientations are contested, for example in this case, the very nature and identity of “Kosovo” – independent state or province of Serbia –, political culture operates as a source of conflict (Kamrava, 1995, p. 692).

In the divided town of Mitrovica, there are two parallel municipalities, two universities, one on the north side of town, for Serbian students, and one, on the south, for Albanian ones. In a few words, there are two rival communities inhabiting the same city. In this circumstance, it is very easy for incidents to ignite spontaneously, or to be fanned deliberately and escalated by organised groups, often armed, whose strategy is to destabilise the community, to spread fear, with the ultimate goal of making long overdue reconciliation impossible, and of thwarting all attempts to bring the decades-old state of conflict to an end.

According to Charles Call, such situations constitute a ‘security’ and ‘legitimacy gap’. A ‘security gap’ is when the state cannot “provide minimum levels of security in the face of or-

ganised armed groups”. [...] A ‘legitimacy gap’, which is the most difficult to conceptualise and operationalize, occurs when a “significant portion of the political elite and society rejects rules regulating the exercise of power and the accumulation and distribution of wealth” (Kamrava, 2016, p. 10).

In such a complex and difficult situation for an independent Kosovo to implement political decisions, especially in the face of a powerful ethnic minority, the state’s power to function properly is diminished. A weak Kosovan state is what the current regime in Serbia wants both for its own political and economic interests, and to show to the international powers who supported Kosovan independence that they were mistaken and have failed. As regards NATO and those of its members who participated actively in the military intervention in Kosovo, which led to the withdrawal of the Yugoslav Army in 1999, and eventually (in 2008) to the establishment of an independent Kosovo, Serbia seeks revenge (or justice) for what it sees as a wanton act of aggression against (or invasion of) a sovereign democratic state.

We will examine how these complex hitherto irreconcilable issues are represented and framed in the speeches of Kosovan Prime Minister Kurti and the Serbian President Vučić, by trying to deconstruct their strategies, aims and purposes.

3. Values and Assumptions

Politics “is about moral values” (Lakoff, 2009, p. 43). Values and assumptions are two conceptualizations that political culture operates with to affect society and to increase its commitment to these same values. Each political leader represents their policies under the premise that they are “right” or “morally justified”.

“Values and assumptions bear particular importance for conflict resolution processes and, specifically, peace agreements as these official texts seek to implement a specific set of mechanisms for future political development” (MacQueen, 2009, 16). Values are seen as preferable political actions in relation to decisions, structures, and institutional organisation. They represent the community’s priorities in a certain historical moment, so they are fluid by nature, because they can change with the times. For this reason, they must be interpreted within their original contexts.

Assumptions relate to particular events, actions, or decisions which are promoted or demoted by a certain political culture. That is, political culture consists of assumptions about the political world where it “defines the range of acceptable alternatives from which groups or individuals may choose a course of action” (MacQueen, 2009, p. 17). In our corpus, we identify these “values” and “assumptions” that shape political processes, including the post conflict reconstruction.

4. Political Truth Production

When people interact, they do not communicate only with respect to social roles, boundaries, and bonds, they also communicate representations of the world. When politicians interact, they are communicating in order to represent the world according to their opinions and values, which they promote, and even impose. The objective of a political discourse is to affect the acceptance of an opinion through argumentation, or to generate acceptance of an opinion without argumentation to reach further conclusions. In the second case, we are dealing with classic propaganda (Baldi, Savoia, 2010). In such a state of affairs, the question is often not

whether the truth is spoken or not, but whether the audience is convinced or not. “There is no doubt that if we are concerned with language and politics, we have to be concerned with truth and falsity in relation to a real world in which human interests and human suffering are real” (Chilton, 2004, p. 49). The aim of political elites is to modify the presentation of reality by producing the political truth and presenting it as the historical truth for the purpose of obtaining authority, legitimacy, and power.

Political discourse is seen as a rhetorical discourse par excellence, because rhetorical structures have communicative functions. “Basically, they can be defined in terms of specific transformations of grammatical structure, such as additions, deletions, permutations, or substitutions, as in the case of alliterations, rhymes, or parallelisms at the morphosyntactic level, and metaphors, irony, or understatements at the semantic level” (van Dijk, 1987, p. 35).

5. Analysing political discourse

Language, as manifested in political discourse, is the raw material of politics, and elites manipulate it to manage a flexible, increasingly fragmented, but highly dynamic and yet fragile society. Leaders gain or lose their power using political language effectively or not, and people become powerless or gain strength, deceived or informed, through these discursive strategies (Corcoran, 1990, p. 54).

In the region of the Balkans, radical changes have occurred in all aspects of life, in politics, economics, social structures, values and even identities. All of the Balkan states emerged from authoritarian regimes, and, in an authoritarian society, changes are mediated significantly through the power

of language, carefully controlled by various sources of authority (Cao and Tang, 1993; Chilton et al. 2012; Bregasi, 2020).

Edelman (1987 [1964], p. 65) says that there is no politics without symbols and rites, nor can there be a political system based solely on rational principles, excluding any symbolic connotation. He further emphasises that the research into discourse analysis should not be based only on lexical analysis, but also on the way in which speakers, who belong to different social contexts, respond to different types of language.

When we look at Vučić's speech, one element that immediately catches the attention of even the ordinary reader is the very name of Kosovo, which is called 'Kosovo and Metohija' by Vučić. Indeed, the very identity, nature and even location of the referent of the expression "Kosovo" is of course the central issue that divides these two leaders. In his speech, that we are analysing further, Vučić refers to the area which Kurti would define as "Kosova" (the Albanian version of 'Kosovo') no less than 37 times. On six occasions, he uses the English version of the official Serbian name "Kosovo and Metohija"; twice "Kosovo, southern Province of the Republic of Serbia"; and, to refer explicitly to the Kosovo of which Kurti is PM, he uses the expression "so-called 'Kosovo'" ten times (note also the use of the quotation marks, which amplify the effect of 'so-called'), thereby signalling his refusal to accept it as a reality. On another six occasions, he avoids the name "Kosovo" altogether, substituting it with "Pristina" as in "Pristina prime minister, Albin Kurti". Significantly, for the remaining 13 times, he uses the neutral, unqualified phrase 'Kosovo'; Kurti, by contrast, consistently uses the phrase 'Kosova'.

We can conclude from this simple analysis of how Vučić refers to this territory that, while for the majority of the time (24/37 or over 66.66%), his refusal to entertain the idea of an independent Kosovo is emphasised and apparently beyond doubt, in 13/37 (or just under

33.33%), his position is more ambiguous, there being no explicit rejection. The pattern here seems to be a discourse style which is overtly dogmatic and intransigent. However, on closer inspection, it displays subtle changes of stance and position which may either be viewed as inconsistencies or, more charitably, as indications of a degree of latent flexibility and pragmatism. It is as if he is playing two roles: the most obvious, his preferred face so to speak, the strident and untiring defender of his cause and principles; and secondly, a hidden face, that of a seasoned politician, quietly open to negotiation and compromise... if the occasion demands.

There also appear to be hidden layers when it comes to reference to individuals in Vučić's speech: whether he uses names or, as would be more normal in diplomatic circles, their titles. When referring to Vladimir Putin, Joe Biden, or Antonio Guterres, he avoids names and uses titles: "President of Russia"; "President of the United States", and "Secretary General" [of the UN], as well as a situationally identifiable "German Minister". He is not consistent in this practice however as he refers to US Secretary of State Blinken by name twice and most markedly he explicitly refers to Albin Kurti on two occasions:

Today, in Kosovo, southern Province of the Republic of Serbia, the blunt violence is taking place, exerted against the Serbs by the separatist authorities of Albin Kurti.

Only last week, after who knows which failed round of the dialogue in Brussels, Pristina prime minister, Albin Kurti, after rejecting the European proposal for de-escalation, addressed the public in front of one of the main buildings of the European Union and in front of the millions of viewers of the media that were present conveyed to not so many remaining Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija that the Serbs will, I quote 'suffer and pay for the mistake they made'.

Using the name, especially in the case of Kurti, constitutes a move away from the objective, diplomatic arena into the per-

sonal one, and is more reminiscent of everyday political discourse where rivals may criticise and accuse each other in a combative manner. That Vučić uses such a discourse here is perhaps indicative both of his desire to minimise the authority of his nemesis, Kurti, and of his feeling of desperation, anger or frustration with, and lack of respect towards, the forum in which he finds himself.

While Vučić is constructing his narratives, where Serbs are victims of an autocratic regime, and its powerful allies Kurti paints the exact opposite picture:

Serbian army has 48 forward operating bases around our border, 20 of them are military, 20 gendarmeries, and it took Jakes Olivan from National Security Council of White House to come out together with Secretary Blinken and say that this amassing of troops around the border of Kosova is unacceptable and they have to withdraw in order to bring us back to rather peaceful situation with decrease tension.

6. *Frames and Metaphors*

Language conveys power, through expressing, communicating and shaping thoughts. According to Lakoff (2009), frames or “scripts” are complex narratives the kind we find in anyone’s life story, as well as in fairy tales, novels, and dramas are made up of smaller narratives with very simple structures. Chilton (2004) considers frames as theoretical constructs with some cognitive and neural reality, which are related to the conceptualization of situation types and their expression in language. Fillmore (1985) discovered that words are defined in relation to conceptual frames, as he identified that groups of related words, called “semantic fields,” are defined with respect to the same frame. Language gets its power because it is

defined relative to frames, prototypes, metaphors, narratives, images, and emotions (Lakoff, 2009, p. 15). This theoretical framework is important for our analysis because both political leaders in focus here use cultural prototypes, themes, images and icons to build their contrasting narratives.

7. A Tour D'Horizon of the theoretical framework

The cognitive approach considers political discourse as a product of individual and collective mental processes (Chilton, 2004, p. 51) and, at this level, the concept of metaphor plays a vital part, as it does, throughout any human's conceptual system, which, according to Lakoff (1980, p. 454) is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.

Metaphors are at the bedrock of language. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1987, 1999) they constitute a structured sets of mappings dealing with some of the most fundamental concepts, e.g. argument is war, more is up, love is a journey, theories are buildings, ideas are food, as well as the propensity to envisage time in terms of motion and space (see also Christiansen, 2013).

Kövecses (2010, p. 42) observes that metaphors have two facets; they may be based on knowledge or on images / schema. The former explains how only a small number of source concepts may generate a whole set of associations constituting a complex cognitive mapping. Other types of metaphor that are by their nature vague and rely mainly on images establish isolated links that do not require a whole series of interconnected associations. Both these aspects of metaphors are important to political discourse as they explain how they may at once form the basis of complex and detailed narratives in relatively few words as well as create abstract but powerful

images that leave a deep impression and have great persuasive power. This is because as, Lakoff (2009, p. 38) points out:

Neural binding allows these permanent general narrative structures to be applied to ever new special cases. That's why the same narrative structures keep recurring, from war to war, from celebrity to celebrity, from one political figure to another. [...]

A metaphor that one may use to describe the way that metaphors function cognitively is of a journey in which a traveller moves from one point, the source domain, to another, the target domain (see Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 236-7). Generally, the source domain is concrete and the target domain is more abstract. In this journey, the traveller ideally follows the rational line. There is an obvious link with political discourse here, especially that where parties hold starkly opposed opinions, as is the case here. "If the traveller gets stuck at any point of the journey (the rational argument), he or she will need a companion to help him or her reach the destination – in our case, the political leader would appear to be the best and the only companion available" (Bregasi 2017; Bregasi and Bikaj, 2022). Political discourse is thus conceptualised precisely like a metaphorical move or journey.

8. *Analysing narrative roles*

Each frame has a role (similar to a cast of characters), and there are relations between the roles, and scenarios performed by those playing the roles (Lakoff, 2009, p. 22). This can be seen in the following extract from Vučić's speech

The attempt of cutting my country into pieces, which had formally started in 2008 by the unilateral declaration of inde-

pendence of the so-called Kosovo, has not ended yet. Precisely the violation of the UN Charter in case of Serbia was one of the visible precursors of numerous problems we are all facing today, and that go far beyond the borders of my country and scopes of the region I come from.

The metaphorical construction ‘the attempt of cutting into pieces’ comes after a very curated introduction, where Vučić draws a parallel between ‘great powers’ which make decisions and ‘small Serbia’ which has suffered as a consequence. The attempt of cutting, a spatial-temporal metaphor contextualised in 2008, partially represents reality. The NATO decision to intervene in Serbia was made in 1999, after ethnic cleansing was carried out by the Yugoslav Army and Serbian-backed paramilitary groups in Kosovo. Moving historical facts into another time frame helps Vučić to produce a political truth and represent Serbia as a victim, while avoiding responsibility for the reasons that led NATO to intervene.

Only further in his speech, does Vučić mention the reasons why all 19 NATO countries took the decision to intervene in Kosovo:

Pointless and meaningless explanations like the police terror that Serbian authorities had carried out in its southern Province a decade earlier, humanitarian crisis, expelling of the local Albanian population, were only a drop that spilled over the glass of lies and nonsense, in order to justify the violence against a sovereign country, and in order to undermine its integrity.

But all these reasons for Vučić are only ‘a drop that spilled over the glass of lies and nonsense’. Modifying the reality by denying ethnic cleansing, and the humanitarian crisis, helps Vučić construct his narrative in order to build up the authority and legitimacy of Serbia to reject the recognition of Kosovo, and to influence other countries to do the same.

The language itself that he is using evokes a sense of insecurity and threat, which have a profound and demonstrable effect on anyone exposed to such discourse repeatedly. The reason for this is that the neural circuits have become fixed in the listener's brain. And the speaker creates that fear for political ends. As Lakoff (2009, p. 40) states: "The fact that imagining and acting use much of the same neural structure has enormous political consequences".

9. *The role of frames*

Frames are complex structures constructed by simple narratives. Simple narratives have the form of frame-based scenarios, but with extra structure. In Kurti's speech we are dealing with a general rescue narrative. It has a number of "semantic roles", that is, main characters, actions, and instruments. The characters are: the Hero, the Victim, the Villain, the Helpers. (Lakoff, 2009, p. 24). Each frame has a role (similar to a cast of characters): relations between the roles, and the scenarios performed by those playing the roles.

In Kurti's speech, these roles are: Victim - the Albanian people, state of Kosovo; Hero - Kurti, Villain- Vučić, Serbian State; Helper - NATO and the EU.

In the discourse of Vučić some of these roles are not clear, even if we could name them as: Hero- Vučić, Victim- Serbian People, Villain- NATO and EU members, Helpers - Russia. Vučić is vague not only about the identity of the "great powers" but he also avoids providing crucial detail about the wrongs that he alleges were committed against his country, in particular in 1999. "We know from cognitive science and neuroscience that such narratives are fixed in the neural circuits of our brains. We know that

they can be activated and function unconsciously, automatically, as a matter of reflex.” (Lakoff, 2009, p. 34).

10. Russia and Ukraine as a reference narrative

As regards Russia, Vučić’s discourse is more straightforward. He refers to it three times, twice of which to underline the historic friendship between it and Serbia (“centuries-long traditional friendship” and “traditional ties”)

The sentence “They didn’t laugh out loud when Russian President used the very same words, justifying his attack against Ukraine” is however notable in that again it refers to the Euro-Americans, but without naming them (using only the anaphor ‘They’), putting them in a contrastive position to Russia. The strategy here seems to be to treat the countries of Europe and the USA in a similar way to the concept of an independent Kosovo outside of Serbia in two different, apparently contradictory ways: on the one hand, a community of nations and organisations that Serbia is happy to be part of, and with which it aspires to integrate more; on the other, as unnamed dark forces that have worked against Serbia’s interests in the past. Again, this could be seen as inconsistency, or as a deliberate strategy, displaying opportunism: a mental agility that allows one to keep all options open in the rapidly changing geopolitical situation of the 2020s.

Vučić:

Nevertheless, worse than anything is that all those who committed aggression against the Republic of Serbia, lecture today about territorial integrity of Ukraine, as if we didn’t support the integrity of Ukraine, and we do support it and we will keep supporting it, because we do not change our politics and we do not change our principles, regardless of centuries-

long traditional friendship with the Russian Federation. To us, every violence is the same, every violation of the UN Charter is the same, regardless of the strength of the power that exerts it or inevitably similar excuses it makes for its illegal and immoral behaviour.

The assertion that “every violence is the same, every violation of the UN Charter is the same” is interesting in that it tacitly concedes that the actions of the Russian Federation, its historic friend and ally, in Ukraine are reprehensible. However, the subtext is that such misdemeanours are justified by the fact that certain (unnamed) great powers (Villains) did the same thing in their invasion (or intervention) in Serbia (Victim) in 1999. The rhetoric is passionate and forceful but the actual point being made is once again couched in layers of ambiguity. The central message is that the great powers (Villains) think they can do whatever they want, ignoring their own transgressions while condemning others (the Helpers) for doing comparable things. What the precise “things” are, and how exactly they are similar - a major point for his argument, one would think - Vučić again fails to elaborate upon. In fact, he dismisses the need for such elaboration by espousing the morally dubious principle that “every violence is the same etc.”; in essence, if A breaks one rule, then B has the right to break the same rule, even in a far more grievous manner, and expect to be treated in the same way. In any case, the argument that a large wrong can be justified by an earlier smaller one can be described either as unfounded or sophistic. It certainly does not reflect the way that legal systems treat such matters, as one of their central tenets is that there are what have been called “gradations of evil”: the rationale behind the concept of *lex talionis* (making the punishment or penalty fit the severity of the crime) as encapsulated millennia ago in the Biblical phrase: “an eye for an eye” (Book of Exodus 21, p. 23-27).

The entire discourse of Vučić is about territorial integrity, using it as a main conceptual metaphor to accuse EU mem-

bers of ‘aggression’ against Serbia making a parallelism with the Ukraine situation. Moving the spatial and temporal context of Kosovo in 1999 to Ukraine in 2022 is an effective strategy to produce the reality that best suits his ends. In this way, Vučić justifies not only Serbia’s politics against Kosovo, but also the fact that Serbia is the only country in the region which did not condemn Russia for its aggression in Ukraine. These kinds of formulations reflect key aspects of the trajectory of politics and indicate the future direction of its development.

On the other hand, Kurti presents a narrative which mirrors that of Vučić but in which the actors are the same, but with inverted roles:

On the other hand, we have to really focus on geopolitical situation where we have no alternative because we don’t want to have other alternative except EU and NATO [Heroes], but then there are countries [Villains] who think and do otherwise. So, this also is making the situation much more difficult, because obviously Russian Federation [Helper of the villains] was enjoying the destabilization attempts of the Balkans where they can have a spillover effect by the means of outsourcing of the aggression that they have already done almost two years ago in Ukraine [Victim].

11. *Territorial integrity*

Territorial integrity is seen by both leaders as key value and as the basis for the normalisation of relations between the two nations, but the way it is constructed leads one down a dead end.

Kurti starts his speech with spatial and temporal arguments to build his narrative in order to make it look more like reality than a political truth:

TABLE 1. Analysis of Kurti Speech

Kurti speech	Deconstruction of the speech
<p><i>On the 24 of September exactly</i> we have had this incursion of a terrorist paramilitary group from Serbia in the North of our country nearby an orthodox Monastery in Banskja in Zvečan, they have assassinated one Kosovar policeman and obviously they wanted to cause escalation of a larger proportion so they can create a general chaos as a pretext for Serbian Army to enter in Kosova.</p> <p>So for the security of our country, we have to take care of these Wagner wannabe groups who wants to cause destabilisation.</p>	<p>Temporal structure Exactly: emphasising the correctness of the temporal structure. Incursion: what happened a terrorist paramilitary group from Serbia: Who did the act in the North of our country: where did it happen near an orthodox Monastery in Banskja in Zvečan: emphasising the correctness of the spatial structure they have assassinated one Kosovar policeman: the second act Assassinated: not killed, so the action was premeditated Kosovar policeman: the victim is a representative of the state they wanted to cause escalation of a larger proportion: the third act. A hypothetical one introduced by the adverb obviously, to make it look real. Create a general chaos: the fourth act, hypothetical a pretext for Serbian Army to enter Kosova: the fifth act, the most important one, which still remains a hypothetical act. Wagner-inspired groups: evoking real criminal groups to empower the effect.</p>

Source: Personal elaboration by the authors

It is evident that this speech is a kind of journalistic report, where Kurti plays the role of the reporter who tells the story from the place, respecting strictly the rules of a good report, which has to fulfil the five Wh-s: who, what, when, where, and why. The audience is helped to believe his version because Kurti has put them within a narrative which is familiar from popular culture and which they have seen thousands of versions of on TV and other media.

Even if it is a smart strategy employed to make the story undoubtedly look real, we have to say that it remains Kurti's version of the story and we know that Kurti is not a journalist, but a politician. Our duty is to see beyond the story and to make it as clear as possible for the readers. "Neural binding allows these permanent general narrative structures to be applied to ever new special cases. That's why the same narrative structures keep recurring, from war to war, from celebrity to celebrity, from one political figure to another" (Lakoff, 2009, p. 38).

Kurti is using the rescue frame to widen the narrative and thereby draw attention to the importance of the situation of Kosovo in the context of the wider geopolitical situation in Europe.

Whereas in the Balkans I think there is an additional risk because the Russian Federation can outsource its expansionist hegemonic drive. (It) can do that through official Belgrade and through different groups like Wagner and Night Wolves who have been seen in the Balkans from Republika Srpska in Bosnia to Serbia. So I worry because it will be more convenient and easy for them to have the spillover effect in the Balkans.

In doing this, he is transferring the fear that he has evoked in his original, core, narrative to a new narrative about new events (Lakoff, 2009, p. 41):

The brain supplies the reasons. First, stresses like fear (of terrorist attacks), worry (say, about finances, health care, and soon), and overwork tend to activate the norepinephrine system, the system of nega-

tive emotions. The result is a reduced capacity to notice. Second, the right conceptual framework must be in place in order to recognize apparently different events as the same kind of event.

12. *Duality*

In Vučić's references to the Western countries, he mentions Europe, in its various incarnations (Europe, the European Union, the Council of Europe), 17 times. Each time, the context is of Serbia's partnership with or membership of such organisations. By contrast, he mentions the USA only once (although he does mention the US State Secretary [sic] Blinken twice), and also Euro Atlantic integration twice (in a phrase which he uses twice in different parts of the speech).

More strikingly, that the NATO 1999 intervention (which was to lead to the establishment of a Kosovo independent of Serbia) was carried out by European nations and by the USA is a point he does not make explicit. Elsewhere, and with no hint of irony, he speaks of "western powers" and of "powerful countries", almost as if these were separate from Europe or the USA. This displays then a narrative which is selective in what it represents and in how it presents the relationships between the same.

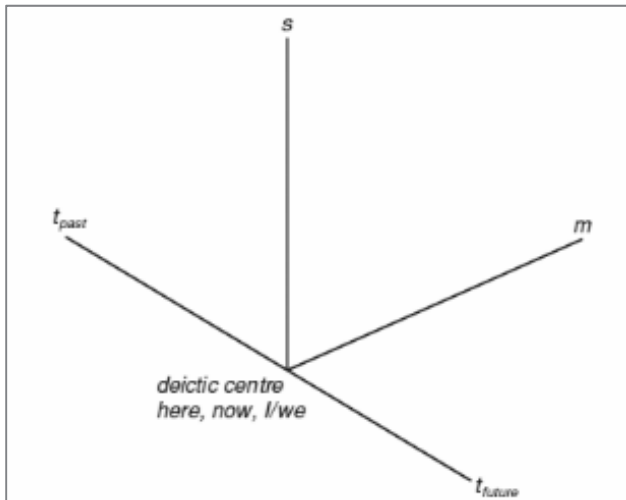
As regards the Kosovo intervention by NATO, his language gets emotional, drawing a specific parallel between the behaviour of certain UN members then with now: "[...] almost all western powers brutally violated both the UN Charter and the UN Resolution 1244, which had been passed in this renowned Organization, as they denied and violated precisely those principles they are defending today, and it happened 24 and exactly 15 years ago." It is again notable that, despite his indignation, he still fails to specify precisely who he believes deserves such criticism, which is in itself revealing, more in what he does not say than what he actually says:

“When you accept a particular narrative, you ignore or hide realities that contradict it. Narratives have a powerful effect in hiding reality” (Lakoff, 2009, p. 37).

13. *Morality*

Spatial representation in discourse is particularly important in the study of political discourse, and morality and lawfulness can have a conceptual representation in spatial terms. If politics is about cooperation and conflict over allocation of resources, such resources are frequently of a spatial, that is, geographical or territorial, kind (Chilton, 2004, p. 57). In his book ‘Analysing Political Discourse’, Chilton (2004, p. 58) represents the dimensions of political deixis by this diagram of three axes, space, time and modality.

Fig. 2. The Dimensions of Political Deixis



Source: Chilton P. (2004:58)

The centre represents the origin of other dimensions, space (s), time (t) and modality (m) axes. People tend to put themselves at the centre of this diagram. “At the remote end of s is Other. Participants that have roles in the discourse world as agents, patients, locations, etc., are located closer to or more remote from Self, whether or not the discourse indicates the location explicitly by way of some expressions such as ‘near’, ‘close’, ‘remote’, etc” (Chilton, 2004, p. 57). All the other entities (arguments) and processes (predicates) are situated by the speaker related to ontological spaces determined by their coordinates on the axes of the diagram, as depicted in the Figure.

Politicians consciously put other people, events and objects along a scale of remoteness from the Self (*hic et nunc*), relying on underlying assumptions and indexical cues. On the scale of m axis Self represents the epistemic truth and the deontic right. According to Saeed (1997), the deontic meaning is intertwined with various forms of social understanding including the speaker’s moral and legal beliefs, as well as their perceptions of power and authority. Self represents moral and truth and all other versions of them are situated further away from the deictic centre.

In this sense, instead of a list of specific grievances, backed up by historical data, Vučić makes recourse to abstract principles which are afforded a high profile in his speech. He uses forms of the term “principles” 22 times (and “values” which is used synonymously with principle only once: “And in such a world, I believe that one small Serbia, by raising its voice and fighting for universal values of principles of inviolability of internationally recognized borders”).

Interestingly, in Vučić’s discourse, the notion of principles is usually related directly to the UN Charter, and by doing this, he is setting Serbia up as a defender of those of the UN

Charter against the unnamed powers who wish to ignore them, or only selectively apply them:

I am the President of Serbia in my second presidential term; on countless of occasions, I was under different political pressures, and I am a political veteran, and what I will tell you today is the most important for me. Principles do not change from one circumstance to another. Principles do not apply only on the strong one, they apply to all. If that's not the case, then, they are no longer principles. And that is why I believe that in the modern world there will either be principles, and the same rules will apply to all, or, as the world, we will end up in the deepest divisions in our history, in the most difficult conflicts and in problems we will not manage to cope with.

By portraying Serbia, the Victim, as valiant, steadfast, yet relatively powerless, but at the same time defender of fundamental codified principles (the weak who fight for justice), Vučić is creating a typical narrative where the 'good' win: where David eventually defeats Goliath.

As regards, morality and morals, Vučić uses forms of "moral" five times, three in two successive paragraphs:

While for three days in a row we pledge from this place to respect of principles and rules of the UN Charter, precisely violation of the respective is rooted in most of the problems in international relations, and implementation of dual standards is an open invitation for all those who strive to achieve their interests through war and violence, by violating norms of international law but also basic human moralities.

All the speakers so far - and I believe all who will speak after me - spoke about the necessity of changes in the world, underlining their country as the example of morality and commitment to the law and world justice.

Morals are arguably less clear-cut notions than principles, their being the subject of religious discourse and ethics. Unlike principles, they are not codified in law or in charters like that of the UN, instead they are typically laid out or exemplified in texts of a religious nature.

By complaining about powerful countries thinking they have the right to impose their morals on others, Vučić is in effect recognising the fact the notion of morality may be open to different interpretations. His point seems to be that smaller nations like Serbia have a right to defend their version of morality against those of more powerful nations, and as such is treating morals as something relative and negotiable, whereas elsewhere he treats principles as fixed and non-negotiable.

Kurti, by contrast, does not cite morality or principles explicitly. Rather he draws parallels between republics and empires, between democracies and absolute monarchies. In this way, he alludes to political philosophy of the past (ancient Rome and the Enlightenment) and makes it clear to anyone who can recognise the allusions what his principles are, and what he considers moral:

...They are part of the big conflict of our times and that is the conflict between democracy and autocracy, but I would also say between Republic and Empire, or democratic Republic and Monarchy, monarchy in the authoritarian sense. Because we have these phenomena, where certain countries formally are democratic, but if you look inside, you have one Leader, one Party one Church, no political pluralism, not much care for human rights, not rule of law in place, therefore it resembles much more like XIX century monarchies, and democracy is fighting not only with autocracy but also with presidents who are more king wannabe [gesticulating with an ironical face] ...

14. *Conclusion*

In the corpus analysed, the specific topic of different traditional cultures associated with Serbians and Albanians (the majority of the Kosovo population) is not touched upon by either of the speakers, although it is of course the proverbial elephant in the room. This fact is in itself interesting but is probably accounted for by the forums in which the leaders' speeches are given. In any case, as linguists, such matters are not our primary concern.

In this article we have focused on frames and narratives, which could be described as "the culture of the political discourse". In doing so, we have applied discourse analysis to the culture of communication, in the anthropological sense, because the language as manifested as discourse is the principal means by which identities and ways of thinking, both of individuals and communities, are constructed, created, shaped, and either maintained or modified. As Claude Lévi-Strauss, the anthropologist and ethnologist, said "Qui dit homme dit langage, et qui dit langage dit société." (Claude Lévi-Strauss, 1955).

The linguistic examples discussed here come from political speeches, which presumably have been carefully drafted and redrafted. They are then irrefutably the product of conscious political choices, and our duty is to not take such decisions in blind faith, but to question everything carefully. Are these Heroes going to win? Is it possible to free these Heroes from their frames? We think it is possible, but readily admit that it will not be easy or something that will happen of its own accord. We say this because the cultural models which are in our brains influence our unconscious most of the time. Since cultural narratives define our possibilities, challenges, and actual lives, people will go on voting for their favourite political

leaders for as long as they see them as Heroes, or at least as long as they see their rivals as Villians.

However, Heroes/Leaders are in a position to analyse a situation better than the people/voters, and to identify and evaluate the various solutions. They thus have the opportunity, and the duty, to guide their audience towards future scenarios, and equally importantly to create new narrations in order to make the same comprehensible, and palatable. Hitherto, in the conflict between Kosovo and Serbia, each leader has limited himself to constructing a simple narrative that they know their own community will immediately recognise and understand. This is because they are in essence repeating stories that each community has been telling itself for decades, even centuries. If leaders do not modify the way that they speak or the narrative frames that they use, they will never succeed in convincing the other side, and political discourse will remain sectarian and progress towards reconciliation will continue to be slow. There is a real need therefore that the leadership of both countries embrace the responsibility of making an attempt to change their narratives and discourse styles in order that new avenues of understanding and comprehension can be opened up and explored.

In short, if leaders want to act like simple politicians and merely repeat what they know their voters already believe, and want to have confirmed, then there is little hope for progress. However, if instead, they choose to act like statespeople, or opinion makers, with the capacity to think outside the box, they can start to steer the narrative towards the ideals of progress and freedom, and thereby guide their respective peoples away from the never-ending spiral of conflict, towards new narratives that engender and foster mutual understanding.

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Unravelling Radicalisation in the Western Balkans: Exploring Cultural Drivers of Violent Jihadist and Far-Right Extremism

CLAUDIA ANNOVI¹

Abstract. This article delves into the complex dynamics driving violent radicalisation within the Western Balkans, specifically examining the realms of extreme far-right and jihadist ideologies. Starting from the useful concept of “unresolved culture of extremism” proposed by Perry (2019) to describe Balkan ecosystems, this study explores the multifaceted factors contributing to the emergence and subsistence of violent extremist phenomena. By adopting a comprehensive analytical framework, the research investigates drivers of radicalisation at meso and macro levels and highlights how their combination can produce peculiar and persistent forms of violent extremism. The article offers a nuanced understanding of how historical conflicts, unaddressed grievances, vulnerability to external narratives and lingering socio-political tensions contribute to the perpetuation of extremism.

Keywords: Violent Extremism; Western Balkans; Radicalisation

¹ Università La Sapienza di Roma, claudia.annovi@uniroma1.it.

Introduction

Describing and analysing the social dynamics of what is referred to as the “Balkan cauldron” has been a significant challenge for decades. The Western Balkans appear as a multifaceted and complex geographical and social space, characterised by a diversity of ethnicities, cultures, and religions often in conflict with each other. The 2022 CIA World Factbook provides an accurate portrayal of the ethno-religious mosaic in this region. In Serbia, citizens of Serbian ethnicity constitute 83.3%, Hungarians 3.5%, and Bosnians 2%, with 84.6% being Orthodox, 5% Catholic, and 3% Muslim (CIA Factbook, 2022a). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose capital Sarajevo was long considered an exemplar of multi-ethnic coexistence and multiculturalism, 50% of the population is Bosnian and Muslim, 30% Serbian Orthodox, and 15% consists of Croatian Catholics (CIA Factbook, 2022b).

Contrary to the Sarajevo example of peaceful coexistence before the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, the tensions between these cultural and religious universes continues to be the common thread in the political and social dynamics of the entire area, serving as a prism through which to understand its profound issues. The recent experience of war and ethnic cleansing in the region, founded on policies of violent ethno-national and sectarian distinctions, has left behind a deeply weakened social fabric, enduring tensions between ethnic majorities and minorities, and an extremely fragile intercommunity social capital (Perry, 2019). Following the conflicts of the 1990s, the challenging transition to democracy, marked by a profound ethnicisation of politics (Balkan Insight, 2023), has not resulted in straightforward democracies but rather in models of partitocracy (Kleibrink, 2011) or elastic authoritarianism (Mujanovic, 2017). The continued manipulation of

collective traumas for political purposes by elites has further exacerbated existing fractures between different communities (Knežević, 2018). In addition to this, foreign powers keep on interfering with regional politics in order to expand their influence in a geopolitically and economically crucial region (Rrustemi et al., 2019).

In this context characterised by a precarious socio-political stability and deep ethnic and cultural divides, phenomena such as violent extremism have been able to take root and flourish over the years. Since 2012, nearly a thousand citizens from Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the ranks of the so-called Islamic State (IS) or Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) (Shtuni, 2019). Moreover, after the fall of the Islamic State in the Middle East, many jihadist fighters have returned home, in some cases with families, and imported not only a more consolidated extremist ideology but also combat experience gained in the field (Annovi & Perteshi, 2022). At the same time, the complex reconstruction of multiethnic and multicultural states after a conflict that was built and developed upon these divisions has given rise to new forms of far-right ethno-nationalism that slightly vary according to the ethnic and religious group they belong to (Dyrstad, 2012; Buljubašić, 2022). As highlighted by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia in February 2022, while jihadist extremism is shrinking and communities seem more resilient to Islamist propaganda, Serbian ultranationalist far-right extremism “has been on the rise for years, as evidenced by the increasing number of ideologically motivated violent acts” (Balkan Insight, February 11, 2022). Similar trends have been recorded in other countries in the area: in recent years, various demonstrations organised by Croatian neo-Nazis were held in Zagreb, formed among football fan groups, displaying

symbols and slogans of the Ustasha, the ultranationalist organisation allied with the Axis during World War II (ANSA, 2017); in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the activity of several ultranationalist groups divided along ethnic lines has been identified, including the Chetnik Movement, close to Serbian nationalism, and the Zrinjski ultras, aligned with Croatian groups (Buljubašić, 2022); finally, in Kosovo, eight organisations affiliated with the far-right galaxy have been singled out, half of which are Serbian (Balkan Insight, 2022).

The pre-existing cultural and religious fractures are also deeply influenced by recent changes in the international context. On the one hand, the war in Ukraine is now a divisive element within Balkan societies, divided between supporters of the political and military initiatives of the Kremlin and those who support Ukrainian claims (Global Initiative, February 14, 2023), while the exact number of foreign fighters who have joined one side or the other is still uncertain. On the other hand, the global context of increasing disinformation and fake news, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, seems to have contributed to spreading and normalising extremist narratives and conspiracy theories that often tend to dehumanise and attack different ethnic groups, considered as rivals and enemies (Suner, 2020). Moreover, the governments of the Western Balkans continue to be caged in an unresolved past and a sectarian logic, while the cleavages they have created exacerbate social divisions and hinder the possibility of a lasting solution. As emphasised by Perry, the Balkan countries seem to be characterised by an “unresolved culture of extremism” (2019, p. 13), rooted in the 1990s war logic, that now hinders any potential effort to counter violent extremism.

Hence, starting from the concept of “culture of extremism” as an analytical prism, this article aims to thoroughly analyse the nature of violent extremism in the Western Balkans

and why it takes on such distinctive characteristics in this region. To this end, the paper is divided into five main chapters. The first chapter provides a general overview of the literature on jihadist and far-right extremism and offers an analytical framework to investigate the underlying factors of these phenomena. The second chapter examines the macro-contextual dynamics that have contributed and continue to fuel various forms of Balkan extremisms, while the third section focuses on meso-level (or relational) dynamics that can serve as pull factors in radicalisation processes. The fourth chapter considers the recent case of the war in Ukraine, delving into how the ongoing conflict influences the extremist culture of the area.

1. *Balkan extremisms and drivers of radicalisation:
an overview*

While terms such as radicalisation and violent extremism have firmly entered both media and academic discourse over the past two decades, a universally agreed-upon definition remains elusive, and the academic debate regarding the nature of these phenomena is still ongoing. The primary reason for this controversy lies in the fact that, being evolving phenomena closely tied to the context and time of their development, there is a wide array of diverse variables to consider, and each radicalisation process differs from one another.

Nevertheless, in defining a conceptual framework useful for analysing the various types of violent extremism in the Western Balkans and the different variables aligning to lead to them, it is necessary to provide definitions for both violent extremism and radicalisation.

The term radicalisation refers to a “complex process of metanoia and socialisation that leads individuals to legitimise political violence as a normal form of political action” (Marinone et al., 2022, p.16). In many cases, extremist ideology, regardless of its nature and orientation, is an intrinsic factor and is often characterised by extremist and Manichean views of society and politics. For this reason, although the different steps that characterise this process cannot be clearly distinguished, radicalisation is believed to involve, primarily, a progressive socialisation to an extremist system of beliefs and views that can, subsequently, pave the way for the acceptance of violence as a legitimate tool (Antonelli, 2020).

Violent extremism, on the other hand, can be defined as “a set of attitudes that lead individuals to embrace discourses and behaviours centred on a culture of hatred that promotes discrimination based on race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, severe disability, or illness” (Marinone et al., 2022, p.4). Broadly speaking, violent extremism is defined by three recurring factors. Firstly, a rigid value system that contributes to building Manichean views of reality and developing a profound intolerance towards certain social categories (Kharroub, 2015). The second factor is the promotion of a political, ideological, or religious project that is inherently anti-systemic and, therefore, aims to replace or undermine existing governmental structures (Annovi et al., 2022, p.20). Finally, the promotion, more or less direct, of violence as a legitimate means to achieve goals constitutes the third factor (Neumann, 2013; Striegner, 2015).

In the last thirty years, the ecosystem of the Western Balkans has witnessed the emergence and development of various types of violent extremism, each deeply linked to the cultural, religious, and ethnic context to which it belongs. In general, two

macro-categories of Balkan extremism can be distinguished: jihadist extremism and nationalist far-right one.

Jihadist-inspired extremism is defined as a political project, based on a rigid and radical interpretation of Islamic principles, aiming to elevate the status of the Muslim community by excluding and fighting the Other – conceived as non-Muslim individuals and political authorities (kuffar) and apostates (muratidun) – and to restore Islamic principles in society (Bak et al., 2019; Sedgwick, 2015). In the specific case of the Western Balkans, although the various Islamic communities are organised geographically and ethnically and have experienced radicalisation at different times and in different ways, the various forms of extremism all seem to fall within the ideological framework of Wahhabism and Salafism (Kyuchukov, 2018) and are connected to the idea of global jihad launched first by al-Qaeda and subsequently embraced by the Islamic State.

Right-wing extremism, on the other hand, can be defined as a form of deeply anti-democratic ideological and political extremism that is sharply opposed to any form of equality and is generally rooted in xenophobic, racist, antisemitic, supremacist, fascist, or Nazi tendencies (Acik et al., 2022). Violence, in this ideological framework, is understood as a legitimate means to protect the racial, religious, ethnic, or cultural “purity” of a given community (Jupskås & Segers, 2020). Unlike the more unitary and homogeneous jihadist extremist ecosystem, right-wing extremism in the Balkans is a mosaic of diverse ideologies and political positions, closely linked to the ethnic and cultural identity of the individual and the historical events of a given community in a given geographic space. An exemplary case of the heterogeneity of the right-wing landscape is Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the ideological spectrum is mostly divided along ethnic lines and includes ultranationalist, neo-fascist, and neo-Nazi movements – among

these, Croatian neo-Nazi ultras groups in Mostar and the ultra-nationalist Serbian Chetnik Movement (Bećirević, 2021).

At first glance, jihadist extremism and right-wing extremism are antithetical to each other, as they represent opposing forms of extremism. However, in the unique socio-cultural context of the Western Balkans, unresolved identity issues, frozen historical conflicts, and ethnic and social polarisation represent the common fertile ground for both forms of extremism. Indeed, both religious identities and ethnic and cultural affiliations, that were weakened and nullified by Tito's socialism in former Yugoslavia, have found a new space for self-assertion since the fall of the regime, entering into conflict with each other and radicalising in an attempt to claim the primacy of one over the other. Furthermore, both phenomena produce fundamentally similar narratives, inclined to generate fear and distrust towards the Other, differing, however, in the cultural system of belief – namely, a rigid interpretation of Islamic principles for jihadist extremism and symbols belonging to ultranationalism for far-right one. Hence, beyond the common substrate and the substantial convergence that seems to characterise them, the two phenomena seem to interact in a process of reciprocal radicalisation (Cole & Pantucci, 2014): the ideological narratives of the one emerge, develop and strengthen in response to those of the other, hence resulting in a dynamic of violent or non-violent reactions and counter-reactions (Pauwels, 2023).

Given, therefore, the profound complexity of extremism in the Western Balkans and the various variables at play, it is necessary to analyse the different factors (or drivers) that contribute to jihadist and far-right radicalisation, referring to a three-level analysis model – macro, meso, and micro – to provide clarity.

The macro level of drivers encompasses all those macro-dynamics at the socio-economic, historical, cultural, and political level – e.g., wars, political, economic, climate crises – that interact with the individual and/or the group and may contribute to radicalisation. The meso level includes all interpersonal dynamics involving other individuals – friends, family, or the community at large – or specific narratives, often found in certain extremist groups, that can contribute to an individual’s radicalisation, acting as intermediaries, accelerators, or catalysts. Interpersonal factors include pull factors – namely, specific external conditions attracting the individual towards accepting violent extremism, leveraging the individual’s need for belonging or recognition. Finally, the micro level corresponds to the individual level, gathering all those strictly personal factors and dynamics contributing to increasing personal vulnerability. Among these are personal traumas or issues related to the individual’s relationship with society. The individual level mainly encompasses push factors, identifiable as strongly personal dynamics that tend to distance the individual from society and make them more susceptible to radicalisation. However, given the primary focus of this article on extremism culture in the area and the socio-cultural and political dynamics underlying it, this last level of analysis will not be considered.

2. The role of contextual dynamics: the macro-level drivers of radicalisation

The macro-level of analysis includes all those macro-structural changes that can directly or indirectly influence a process of radicalisation. As emphasised by Jensen and Larsen (2019), there is a strong connection between macro-level structural

problems that influence individual and shared experiences and the identity formation of an individual and a group. Consequently, the analysis takes into account the role of the government, the social dynamics – both within a given country and abroad – as well as significant events or phenomena at the regional and international levels (Marinone et al., 2022, p.18). The analysis of the literature on drivers of radicalisation in the Western Balkans has identified three different possible clusters:

1. Breakdown of macro-structural elements maintaining positive peace;
2. Background of interethnic and communal conflicts;
3. Regional and international dynamics.

The first macro-category, in general terms, includes any weakening or breakdown of all those structural elements that contribute to maintaining a healthy social order. A useful index for identifying those elements that, if absent, lead to the erosion of social order is the Positive Peace Index (PPI), developed by the Institute for Economics & Peace. The PPI measures the level of social resilience of a country and defines its degree of positive peace, understood as a set of factors that guarantee sustainable peace and peaceful growth in a given society. Measurement indicators of the Positive Peace Index include the acceptance of others' rights, fair distribution of resources, free information, good relations with neighbouring countries and between ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, a high level of human capital, low corruption, a favourable economic context, and government functioning (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2022). In the latest 2022 ranking elaborated by the Institute, the Western Balkan countries obtained the worst results in Europe, with factors such as high corruption, conflicts between different ethnic and religious groups,

and the malfunctioning of government bodies having the greatest impact (Ibid., p. 29). These factors prove to be critical elements that can contribute to the radicalisation of social actors: ethnic and cultural polarisation among the different communities in the Balkans and the general lack of trust in governments, perceived as corrupt and engaged in political games distant from the population, seem to fuel feelings of alienation and generalised hatred towards both institutions and other ethnic and religious groups (Bertran & Santacreu, 2021; Buljubašić, 2022). Moreover, as maintained by Bertran and Santacreu (p.333), the crisis of institutional trust and polarisation provide also a breeding ground for the development and proliferation of conspiracy theories (present in both far-right and jihadist environments).

The second macro-level category, the background of inter-ethnic and communal conflicts, is a crucial element for the analysis of drivers of radicalisation in the Western Balkans. The Balkan wars in the 1990s represent a cultural watershed in the history of the region and continue to be not only a widely discussed topic and a point of collision between ethnic communities but also a catalyst in the ideological, rhetorical, and political formation of extremist groups. In this sense, it is worth highlighting two dimensions on which the wars in Yugoslavia and their consequences have had the greatest influence: the development of a political and social culture based on identity and the spread of extremist narratives (Kapidžić et al., 2021; Peci & Demjaha, 2021). As emphasised by the High Representative of the international community in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Valentin Izko, in May 2020, the consequences of the “imperfect peace” that concluded the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina continue to weigh deeply on Bosnian politics (Izko, 2020). In the country, as in others in the region involved in the bloodiest wars (Serbia and Kosovo, for exam-

ple), the territorial and ethnic claims underlying the conflicts have remained unfulfilled, and the hatred and resentment that have arisen from them have produced a strongly polarised and ethnicised political arena (Kapidžić et al. 2021; BalkanInsight, 2023). Consequently, the political game is now dominated by political figures – also defined as “ethnic entrepreneurs” (Kapidžić et al. 2021, p.133) – who pursue an identity-based political culture, reinforcing ethnic and religious fractures. The frequent reference, today, to the “Enemy” during the wars of the 1990s to denote political opponents of different ethnic or religious backgrounds fuels a dichotomous mentality based on a “Us versus Them” discourse (Wentholt, 2019). The consequences of these identity-based political strategies are twofold: on the one hand, they strengthen the idea of the existence of a homogeneous identity that is entitled to a certain territory, while on the other, they facilitate the spread of extremist rhetoric.

The spread in Balkan societies of extremist narratives linked to the war constitutes a second macro-driver of radicalisation and a leitmotif of extremist groups in the area. The historical memory of the marginalisation, violence, and genocide suffered by Muslims in the area has transformed Islam from a simple system of belief into a pragmatic strategy of territorial resistance and a metaphor for ethnic identity itself (Shtuni, 2019). It is worth noting that the experience of the conflict seems to have represented, for many Muslims in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina who left to join IS in Syria and Iraq starting from 2012, a humanitarian stimulus to intervene and fight alongside co-religionists: faced with the atrocities suffered by Muslims in Syria and Iraq, the awareness of what it means to be a victim of heinous violence seems to have played a central role in the radicalisation of these individuals, as emerged from a series of interviews with former Kosovo for-

eign fighters (Ibid, p.10). Similarly, the experience of the war continues to provide cultural and historical references to fuel the rhetoric of far-right formations, each of which adopts and instrumentalises a specific narrative (Perry, 2019). While, for example, Serbian ultra-nationalists (including the Chetnik movement) in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina deny the truth of the Srebrenica genocide and glorify war criminals, presenting themselves as the true victims of Albanian expansionist aims (Buljubašić, 2022), Croatian neo-Nazi and ultra-nationalist movements often organise commemorations for Axis collaborators during World War II and idolise Ustasha movement leaders (Obucina, 2012).

The third category of macro-level drivers of radicalisation includes structural changes at the political and socio-cultural levels and impactful regional and international events. Regional dynamics include both strictly Balkan and, in a broader sense, European dynamics. On the one hand, the ongoing territorial disputes between the various countries in the region tend to cyclically reignite conflict, often transforming legal or governmental disputes into ethnic and religious clashes between different communities. The so-called 2021-2022 “license plate war” regarding Pristina’s decision to ban Serbian license plates in the country is a clear example of how a dispute between governments can reignite violence (ISPI, 2022). On the other hand, the geographical proximity to the European Union and the impact of its dynamics makes it crucial element to be considered. At social level, it is worth remembering that the reactivation of various jihadist cells and far-right groups in the EU has had a direct influence in the last twenty years. Geographical proximity has indeed facilitated the circulation of extremist individuals and terrorists, as demonstrated by the fact that, in the 1990s, jihadist networks began to use the Islamic Cultural Institute of Milan as a transit point and recruiting cen-

tre for jihadist fighters who wanted to join fighter organisations in the Balkans (Maniscalco & Rosato, 2017). At the political level, two purely European dynamics seem to directly influence the extremist ecosystem of the Western Balkans: the state of the European integration process of the Balkan countries and the spread of forms of extra-parliamentary right-wing extremism and far-right parties. On the one hand, the fluctuating behaviour of the European Union regarding the enlargement dossier seems to discourage the expectations of the population, which often sees this hypothesis as a possibility to accelerate a still slow economic growth, hence reinforcing, on the contrary, anti-EU and “anti-Western” sentiments (Bonomi and Reljic, 2017; Balkan Insight, 2023). On the other hand, the victories obtained by extreme right-wing parties at the polls and the reactivation of violent far-right groups within the European Union could contribute to strengthening the Balkan counterparts. As highlighted by Balkan Insight (2019), it seems that in 2019 representatives of the supremacist group Generation Identity, active in various European countries, had contacted Serbian counterparts to invite them to various conferences and events. The creation of international far-right networks, as well as the spread of extremist narratives rooted in the same cultural ground – hostility towards migrants, Muslims, LGBTQ+ communities, and ethnonationalism – could therefore contribute to expanding this concrete threat (Dzihic, 2023).

Regarding more properly international developments, two different dynamics must be taken into consideration: the investments and expansionist ambitions of third countries in the area and the outbreak of conflicts abroad in which one or both parties involve extremist factions.

Given its geographically significant position, the Balkan region has historically always represented an area of primary interest for several third countries, interested in expanding

their influence in European neighbouring countries. Starting from the 1990s – in the case of Bosnia, even from the 1960s – Western Balkan countries began to receive substantial funding from Muslim-majority states, including Gulf countries, Turkey, and Iran. These states provided weapons during the wars and converted the financial aid, after the end of the conflicts, into Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) to support the economic recovery of the Balkans (Rrustemi, 2019, p.35). The physical and cultural presence of these powers has significantly contributed to spreading extremist ideologies (including Wahhabism and Salafism) that promote a sense of pan-Islamism, and above all, has facilitated the entry of imams, preachers, and jihadist militants (Rrustemi, 2019; Sabic-El-Rayess, 2021). Hence, in a region where an extremely tolerant form of Islam had been promoted for more than 600 years, the spread of a radical religious culture more susceptible to extremist drift facilitated the radicalisation process within numerous Muslim communities (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2021). Today, the influence of these countries also translates into media presence: IslamHouse, a Gulf-based website that often hosts content from extremist preachers, also publishes in Balkan languages (Dukić, 2023), thus continuing to spread extremist culture through message and content dissemination.

Similarly, the Russian strategic culture of hybrid warfare in the region directly influences the extremist ecosystem, especially the one related to the far right. The Western Balkans represent a key region for the Kremlin, which invests massively in six areas: politics, economy, society, information, religion, and culture (Rrustemi, 2019, p. 107). While Russia has always had an economic role in the region and supported governments close to Moscow (primarily, the Serbian one), it is interesting to highlight, in this case, the Russian influence in the other four mentioned areas, which have always been essential

for pushing a pro-Russian agenda at the expense of the West and fuelling divisions between extremist groups and beliefs.

From a cultural point of view, one of the pillars of Russian strategic doctrine in the region has always been to strengthen academic and para-academic ties, especially in Serbia, in the field of social sciences and international relations. The underlying goal of this cultural policy, started in the mid-1990s, was to strengthen the idea that the unipolar world after the fall of the Soviet Union was dangerously dominated by the United States, NATO, and the EU – which would lead to an inevitable corruption of genuine Serbian national and ethnic identities – and that protecting Serbia’s territorial integrity was a mission in which Russia could play a “natural” partner role (Dević, 2019) in light of linguistic, cultural, and religious Pan-Slavic affinities that united the two. It was precisely thanks to the prolonged presence of prominent Russian academics such as Yelena Gus’kova and Aleksandr Dugin that Eurasianism was consolidated, based on the idea that unleashing conflicts to end the dominance of the Atlanticist order and capitalist system was right and that protecting ethnicities and territorial integrity was essential (Ibid, p. 121).

Besides this, emphasising the role of Russian religious influence in the region is deemed necessary. Indeed, the Kremlin have always used the Orthodox Church, especially in Serbia, as an important leverage (Conley & Melino, 2019) to strengthen the cultural and religious ties with Balkan countries and (Džombić, 2014) and to affect the regional political scenario. As a consequence, over the last thirty years the Serbian Orthodox Church has become a significant agent of Serbian nationalism, expressed through its assertiveness in the social sphere and foreign relations as well as its attempt to reinforce the narrative that there is an existing religious “brotherhood” between Russians and Serbs (Dević, 2019).

The fact that the defence of the Orthodox faith, imbued with supremacist and nationalist tones, constitutes one of the ideological cornerstones of various extremist formations in the area speaks volume of the cultural impact that Moscow can have by exploiting religious ties (Demjaha and Peci, 2021).

To the same extent, information, and especially disinformation, is a central tool that reinforces the perception of Russian influence in society and culture (Rrustemi, 2019). Russian activities in the field of information seem to have motivations similar to the other social and cultural activities in which they participate – namely, shaping people’s opinions regarding Russia, the West, and NATO. For this reason, Russian strategic influence develops through the dissemination of Russian media – such as Sputnik and Russia Today – that publish in the languages of the region and the support of all local pro-Russian newspapers and channels (Svetoka & Doncheva, 2021).

In addition to these indirect (and yet, powerful) forms of Russian leverage in the Balkans, it is worth mentioning also another issue – namely, the direct support to far-right extremist groups or narratives. This type of influence aiming to redirect the political and social culture of the region towards far-right extremism takes various shapes: the presence of Russian nationalist organisations on the territory, such as the Night Wolves, the organisation of “patriotic youth camps” in Russia, and the training of police forces in the Republika Srpska (Wallner, 2023).

Finally, the last element to be considered as a macro-driver of radicalisation is international events of wide geopolitical impact. As far as jihadist extremism is concerned, two disruptive events can be mentioned: the emergence of large transnational jihadist organisations and the outbreak of conflicts in which Muslims are involved and/or fight. On the one hand, the emergence of transnational jihadist groups such as

the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda has contributed to increasing the socio-political influence of jihadist networks between the Balkans and Europe in two ways. Firstly, the rise of a state entity like IS and the continued armed offensives launched by Al-Qaeda in different regions have provided a political benchmark for violent Islamist activism. On the other hand, precisely because of a culture of pan-Islamism that tends to create parallels between the sufferings of Muslims in the Balkans and those of coreligionists elsewhere, many have been pushed to join armed groups in conflict zones for humanitarian reasons (Shtuni, 2019). The impressive number of Kosovo citizens (405) who left for Syria and Iraq to join IS between 2011 and 2018, as well as some significant interviews to jihadist returnees, reinforce this assumption (Annovi & Perateshi, 2022, p. 43). Concerning far-right extremism, the conflict between Ukraine and Russia in 2014 and its relapse in 2022 has been and continues to be a driver of extreme importance. Although this issue is discussed later in this paper, it is worth remembering that precisely in light of massive Russian influence in the Balkans, the invasion of Ukraine has mobilised numerous far-right extremists who have openly supported one side or the other or have left to join different factions (Dukić, 2023).

3. The role of relational dynamics: the meso-level drivers of radicalisation

Meso-level drivers include the various dynamics serving as catalysts or intermediaries in the process of radicalisation that are directly influenced by macro-drivers as well as individual-level drivers. The analysis of meso-dynamics of radicalisation in Western Balkans has highlighted two categories:

1. Collective and community dynamics,
2. Extremist Narratives

Within the first category, three clusters of analysis can be identified: the attractive influence of the group closest to the individual; the presence of an extremist community or environment defined by ethnic, cultural, or political features; and the role of the Web.

The first cluster encompasses membership in a group in a narrow sense, whether it be family or a group of peers, where extremist attitudes and ideologies are rooted (Annovi et al., 2022, p. 49). Many young extremists have been radicalised within a small and restricted network of friends and family, where the bond is stronger (Kharroub, 2015). As emphasised by Vicente, “peers act as facilitators pushing their friends into an environment where radical ideas are shared, expressed, and lived, promoting bottom-up radicalisation processes” (2020, p.13). This phenomenon is often observed not specifically in the Balkans; rather it is a distinctive feature of jihadist and right-wing extremism elsewhere (Annovi et al., 2022; Acik et al., 2022).

The belonging to a more structured environment defined by ethnic, religious, or cultural affiliations is considered as a second relational radicalising factor. In this regard, the term introduced by Waldman (2008) of “radical milieu” is particularly useful in describing the extremist context in the Western Balkans. Indeed, it identifies an ecosystem that can correspond to a community, subculture, movement, or any informal group. Concerning the extremist jihadist milieu, clandestine mosques and groups formed around Salafist mentors and preachers seem to have played a fundamental role in the extremist radicalisation of certain individuals in the area. For instance, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, jihadist radicalisation oc-

curred due to the progressive decline in the importance of official mosques, generally playing a moderating role, in favour of alternative spaces for Salafist learning through a process of “educational substitution” (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2021, p.5). A similar phenomenon has been observed also in Kosovo, where extremist imams often operated in clandestine mosques and were connected to broader networks of Islamist imams (Qehaja and Perteshi, 2018).

Regarding the radical milieu linked to the extreme right, three environments seem to play a fundamental role: the Serbian Orthodox Church, the subculture of football hooliganism, and the presence of organised far-right groups. As mentioned earlier, the Serbian Orthodox Church continues to play a fundamental role in radicalising its believers, also thanks to the influence of the Kremlin (Džombić, 2014). By promoting a religious culture deeply tied to ethno-nationalist principles, it mobilises numerous Serbian Orthodox believers, aligning them with radical groups that present themselves as advocates for the Serbian ethnicity and Orthodox religion. Similarly, far-right movements continue to be present in the region, although exact numbers are uncertain. According to a study conducted by Džombić (2014) using 2011 police data, there should be about 30 far-right groups (with a total of 5000 members) active in Serbia, identifying with nationalist, Nazi, clerical-fascist, and ethno-nationalist ideologies, including groups like *Obraz*, the Serbian National Movement, *Dveri*, and the *Chetnik* movement (Kelly, 2019). Tellingly enough, a distinctive feature of Balkan far-right extremism is the role of football hooligan groups. In all countries in the area, but specifically in Croatia and Serbia, hooligan groups like the *Zrinjski* in Mostar constitute an extremist milieu where ethno-nationalist and supremacist narratives circulate, albeit without

a substantial cultural and ideological substrate (Perry, 2019; Petrović & Stakić, 2018).

Finally, the Internet represents an additional relational radicalisation factor that has acquired a crucial role in recent years. The investigation of the communication strategies of the Islamic State, which heavily invested in disseminating material on the web and “extremist entrepreneurs”, has highlighted how the Web can be useful for extremist groups – namely, for recruitment, for dissemination of extremist material and content, and as an extremist “market” where coordination is spontaneous (Sageman, 2008). Groups of different ideological and political orientations in the Balkans have exploited the full potential of the network. On the one hand, both radical galaxies use the Internet and social networks to disseminate extremist video, written, and audio material. For example, numerous virtual groups and blogs affiliated with the Serbian far-right spread conspiracy theories or hate speech (Dukić, 2023), while Bosniak Salafist preachers strive to create a closed virtual space (the so-called “echo chambers”) of alternative information for potential followers to radicalise through documents, books and infographics (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2021). On the other hand, foreign investments in the information sector facilitate the creation of a global extremist community, connecting geographically distant members and followers. Beyond the case of jihadist extremists in contact with military organisations in Syria and Iraq, an example is the creation of online groups where European members of Generation Identity engage with far-right extremists in the Balkans, inviting them to participate in events and conferences (Dukić, 2023; Wallner & White, 2022).

The second category of meso-level drivers is extremist narratives, which constitute an important resource for “extremist entrepreneurs” to radicalise and recruit individuals by operat-

ing on two distinct levels. On one hand, they offer a hegemonic and dominant vision of history and contemporaneity, constructing a collective and shared cultural, national, or religious imaginary (Wentholt, 2019). On the other hand, they are essential for the identity construction of a closed group, defining insurmountable lines of demarcation between the community of belonging and the Other, politically, religiously, or culturally characterised (Aghabi et al., 2017).

Starting from the premise that, broadly speaking, the concept of alterity is the first pillar of extremist narratives, it is worth analysing briefly some of the most frequent rhetoric among right-wing and jihadist groups in the Balkans.

In general, far-right rhetoric develops around four macro-themes: hate speech towards the enemy (varied depending on the group or faction), ethnonationalism, historical revisionism, and conspiracy theories.

A recurring theme within these formations is ethnonationalism and the political demand for a reorganisation of borders and territories based on ethnic and religious community membership (Dukić, 2023). This type of rhetoric has its roots in the past, specifically in the wars in former Yugoslavia and the political disputes that led to them. However, in recent years, the spread in Europe of movements and ideologies such as Generation Identity, claiming an ethnically homogeneous Europe, seems to have strengthened narratives that overcome Balkan boundaries and attempt to speak to a broader audience (Ibid.).

As mentioned earlier, constructing an enemy is crucial for strengthening an extremist group or culture, and while on some issues different groups seem to align, on others, they differ profoundly. In general, the rhetoric of different factions converges on hate narratives towards migrants, the LGBTQ+ community, Muslims, the Roma population, NATO,

and the European Union (Dukić, 2023; Bertran & Santacreu, 2021): migrants are presented as a territorial, cultural, or religious threat, while the Atlantic Alliance and the EU are considered political enemies. However, the political and historical distance between different regional factions also emerges rhetorically: while, for example, a frequent target of the narratives of Serbian ethno-nationalist groups is Nazism as a state threat, for neo-Nazi groups in Kosovo and Croatia, the main adversaries are communism and Serbia (Dukić, 2023). In general, this type of narrative serves a dual function: dehumanising the enemy to facilitate violence against it and normalising cultural, ethnic, and religious hatred in society.

A third recurring motif of far-right rhetoric is historical revisionism, especially related to World War II and the wars of the 1990s. Throughout the former Yugoslav region, the denial or relativisation of crimes committed during the wars of the 1990s is extremely common, becoming an integral part of far-right culture (BalkanInsight, 2023). Among Croatian and Albanian groups, for example, the rehabilitation and glorification of Nazi war criminals from World War II are frequent, while within the Serbian extremist ecosystem, the Srebrenica genocide is often described as the “liberation and defence” of the Serbian nation against “Islamic fundamentalism” (Igreć & Zavetnici, 2017). What is even more worrying is that these types of narratives are not confined to extremist environments. As emphasised by BalkanInsight (2023), in August 2023, the Srebrenica Memorial Center published its annual report on genocide denial, recording 90 instances of genocide denial in the media or public statements, coming from both right-wing and left-wing politicians, between May 2022 and May 2023. The spread of revisionist narratives in the political arena poses a potential risk to the political as well as so-

cial environments, as it facilitates its normalisation in society at large and the heightens the risk for hate crimes.

The last frequent narrative is that of conspiracy theories. Several researchers and academics (Blanuša, 2020; Bieber et al., 2020; Dukić, 2023) have highlighted how the Balkans seem particularly vulnerable to conspiracy theories, exacerbated by Russian disinformation in the region and the COVID-19 pandemic. The belief in conspiracy theories like the Great Replacement – the idea that governments are encouraging migration to replace the white Christian population with Muslim citizens – seems to be particularly recurrent among far-right groups, alongside those related to the spread of COVID-19 and an alleged deep state, understood as a group composed of politicians, officials, and celebrities secretly controlling the fate of the world in collusion with Soros (Bieber et al., 2020; Dukić, 2023). The spread of these conjectures exposes society to multiple risks. On one hand, their circulation among younger individuals, heavy users of virtual platforms, increases the possibility of a shift to mainstream culture and lays the groundwork for the radicalisation of followers and widespread polarisation. On the other hand, their instrumentalization by ethnic or extremist entrepreneurs undermines the internal political arena in different countries and enhances intercommunity suspicion.

In contrast, jihadist extremist narratives seem to develop more around themes of marginalisation and the suffering of the Muslim community, both regionally and globally, and its political demands. The trauma of war and the violence suffered by the Muslim community in the 1990s have left an indelible mark on the historical memory and religious culture of the region, skilfully exploited by internal and external actors (Kraja, 2021). Narratives from the Islamic State during its most flourishing period, as well as those of local Salafist

preachers, leverage the sense of injustice and marginalisation experienced by Muslim believers to fuel feelings of revenge and moral and ethical superiority (Annovi et al., 2022; Sabic-El-Rayess, 2021). Moreover, the theme of victimisation not only develops within regional borders but also extends internationally, connecting the exclusion experienced by Bosniak or Kosovar Muslims with the discrimination experienced by Muslims abroad to reinforce the idea of global jihad. The consequences of this type of narrative are thus twofold: on one hand, they contribute to strengthening internal connections within the extremist group, and on the other, they fuel hatred and anger towards the alleged enemy, whether geographically distant (United States, Europe) or close (other ethnic and religious communities and governments).

4. The impact of the war in Ukraine on extremism in Western Balkans

As previously highlighted, major internationally impactful events continue to resonate significantly within the Balkan extremist landscape. In particular, various conflicts abroad over the last two decades, narrated by one or both parties involved as a struggle for survival, appear to have a profound impact on extremist militants. These individuals identify with the “victims” of the war, whether real or perceived, or align themselves with the political ideology of one side or the other.

However, few transformations in the international context have had the significant influence of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine on right-wing extremism in the Balkans and, broadly speaking, on the society and politics of the area. Considering the prominent role that Russia continues to play, directly or indirectly, in the region, the Russo-

Ukrainian issue constitutes a crucial factor in extremist mobilisation in these countries. While, for some extremist movements, the Kremlin represents a crucial ally or a political, religious, and cultural benchmark, for others it is an adversary to be fought due to its continuous interference in regional politics, its communist past, or its attempts to invade a country with legitimate borders (Wallner, 2023). Moreover, the impact of this war goes beyond mere expressions of support: in the conflict in Donbas in 2014, a significant number of foreign fighters from the region joined the ranks of either the most extreme Ukrainian factions or Russian military formations – estimated between 70 and 300 in the first two years (Perry, 2019) – while the exact number of fighters departing from the Balkans since 2022 remains unknown.

As with any political issue, the divisions within the far-right galaxy regarding the conflict in Ukraine follow ethnic and religious divisions within the region and are deeply connected to diverse historical and cultural backgrounds. The support for the Kremlin expressed by far-right Serbian or Orthodox militants – including those affiliated with groups such as *Obraz*, the *People's Patrol*, the *Night Wolves*, and the *Serbian Chetnik movement* – did not come as a surprise, given Russia's efforts to insist on the pan-Slavic identity that unites populations in the Balkans and Russia and its continuous demonisation of the West (Wallner, 2023). The sentiment that aligns Orthodox Serbs with Russians, based on "Eurasian" values (Wallner & White, 2022) and the Orthodox Church, is also evident in slogans at the demonstrations of these organisations and echoed online, such as "Serbs and Russians are brothers forever," "Crimea is Russia, Kosovo is Serbia," and "Serbia sits on one chair, the Russian one" (Petrović, 2022). Furthermore, the support of Serbian extremist factions for Kremlin initiatives is also linked to political and military ties

between the two, as Russia actively supported Serbia in previous disputes and conflicts – primarily the crises in Republika Srpska and Kosovo – and Russian military personnel provided military training to young Serbs to prepare them for the front lines (Turcalo, 2021; Buljubašić, 2022).

On the other hand, many Croatian neo-Nazi groups close to the Azov Battalion, including extremist factions associated with the Zrinjski Mostar ultras, sided with Ukraine in the conflict, criticising Russia’s narrative about the alleged need to “denazify” Kiev (Wallner, 2023; Buljubašić, 2022). In this case as well, the reasons behind the alignment of Croatian neo-Nazi groups appear to be political: some Croatian fighters claimed that their loyalty to Kiev was an expression of gratitude, both for being among the first countries to recognise Croatia’s sovereignty in 1991 and for the assistance provided after the earthquakes in Zagreb and Banovina in 2020 (Global Initiative Against Organized Crime, 2023).

While it seems that the flow of foreign fighters from the Balkans to the Russo-Ukrainian front has been smaller than in 2014, and extremist demonstrations in support of Russia have become less frequent and crowded, the responsiveness of the far-right galaxy to the war in Ukraine encourages a reflection on the potential threat these groups may pose in the region. As Perry (2019) highlights, the relative ease with which numerous Serbian militants depart for Russia or openly support extremist positions reflects a substantial normalisation of both the phenomenon of foreign fighters and, more broadly, of extremist hate speech in the public sphere. A 2022 investigation by the Belgrade Center for Security Policy revealed that hate speech and hate crimes linked to the far-right galaxy have increased in recent years, with one in four interviewees supporting the actions of far-right organisations (Petrović & Ignjatjević, 2022). Similarly, the continuation of the conflict

in Ukraine and the appeal that military rhetoric associated with it exerts on these groups could further radicalise the positions of their members, pushing them to undertake violent actions domestically or to join military organisations abroad. If narratives based on ethnonationalism, aligned with one side or the other, do not find adequate institutional barriers and continue to be influenced by polarised rhetoric created around the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the risk of further radicalisation of the far-right galaxy in the Western Balkans and a hypothetical reaction from jihadist counterparts could reignite the latent violence in the region.

5. Conclusions

While tackling the complex theme of radicalisation and violent extremism remains a particularly challenging endeavour, analysing the diverse nuances these phenomena assume in the Western Balkans and the numerous variables at play entails delving into the history, culture, religion, and politics of an entire area. As this article has sought to demonstrate, the “unresolved culture of extremism” that continues to characterise the socio-cultural, ethnic, and political dynamics of the region is the result and combination of a series of factors that, only in this specific territory, shape very peculiar forms of extremism, albeit connected to a broader context. The geographic location of these countries has allowed them to become a crossroads of cultures, religions, and ethnicities historically belonging to different cultural spheres; yet, precisely this location has transformed them into an area of influence warfare between numerous foreign powers. The memory of war and the fractures it generated in the social, ethnic, and religious fabric that governments have failed to adequately

heal seem to condemn these countries to a kind of silent conflict, permeated, precisely, by the extremist culture for which a sustainable solution has not been found.

The analysis of the Western Balkans in relation to extremism and radicalisation offers a detailed and articulated perspective on the complex dynamics characterising the region. Several key points emerge clearly from the description. In conclusion, the in-depth analysis of socio-cultural, historical, and political dynamics in the Western Balkans provides a comprehensive overview of factors fuelling extremism in the region. Addressing these challenges requires an integrated institutional and social response aimed at preventing radicalisation and polarisation and promoting social cohesion.

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The Clash of Narratives in Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Wartime Cultural Diplomacy

SABINA DE SILVA¹

Abstract. The chapter analyses the different narratives involved in the Russian-Ukrainian war and the use of these different narratives by the parties in conflict for their own political legitimacy. The chapter focuses on the two ways in which culture is used in the conflict: as an offensive means, through the use of fake news and the physical destruction of Ukrainian cultural symbols; as a defensive means, to build a national identity and position the country in the global scenario.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy; Ukraine; Russia: Cultural Heritage

Introduction

On February 24, 2022, the hands of the Western world's clock that marked the passage of nearly a century of peace on the European territory, stopped turning. While it is true that the European territory had been the stage, just 30 years earlier, of

¹ Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, sabina.desilva1@unicatt.it.

the horrors of the Yugoslav Wars, it is also true that, aside from military, economic, and political interferences from third-party states, the Yugoslav Wars were mostly civil conflicts rather than so-called aggressive wars.

This is precisely the most destabilizing factor in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict: a deliberate aggression against a sovereign state, in defiance of international law, and under the astonished eyes of an international community wholly unprepared for such an eventuality. The war in Ukraine caught us off guard, but it was in front of our eyes all along. Since 2014, Putin has been carrying out a slow but steady reconquest - both cultural and territorial - of a territory he deems “rightfully his”.

The conflict within the armed conflict is primarily a conflict of identity: the battlefield sees two different narratives about the events leading to Ukraine’s independence and what that independence entails. On one side is the Russian narrative, which considers Ukraine an extension of its own territory, without its own specific cultural identity. On the other hand, there is Ukraine pushing to assert its identity autonomy - understood as specific cultural and linguistic assets.

This clash of narratives is also reflected in the country’s internal affairs, which, since independence, has embarked on a slow and challenging journey towards democracy. This journey has been marked by sudden accelerations and abrupt halts, alternating moments of Russification and Ukrainianization, and the ability of the various governing elites to hold together the diverse voices that make up the country’s social fabric. Often, these two tendencies have translated into a power struggle between the pro-Russian political oligarchy - finding its communicative medium in the Party of Regions (PdR) in the eastern regions - and a civilian population, if not entirely pro-European, strongly determined to restore dignity

and centrality to Ukrainian identity (Zola, 2022; Zarembo, 2023). The vibrancy of civil society, its growing demand for democracy, and the allure of the values and economic development model proposed by the European Union are the ingredients that have marked the post-independence political life of the country, characterized by two revolutions within a few years - the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Euro-maidan in 2013. But the two revolutions also marked the inevitable loss of control and influence by Moscow, even in those historically Russophone and Russophile eastern territories (Zola, 2022). The new Ukraine emerging from the Euro-maidan posed a threat to Russia as it embodied “the symbol of a successful democratization and Europeanization,” the success of an alternative model to the Russian one (Bellezza, 2022). The conclusion of this journey, as of today, seemed unavoidable.

1. Russia and Ukraine: One People?

Since its independence, the Ukrainian state has been perceived internationally as a loose, fragmented entity, divided between two identities, one Western and one Eastern, in perpetual conflict, burdened by an unresolved identity issue (Wilson, 2000). The annexation of the Donbass region following the referendum in February 2022 has given rise to a narrative that sees the annexation as the historical revenge of a “Donbass people” strongly pro-Russian, culturally and ideologically distant from the rest of the country (Zarembo, 2023). However, this narrative risks fuelling a myth of Soviet exportation, simultaneously nullifying the efforts made by Ukraine, which, despite enjoying independence and international recognition, must continually assert its right to exist.

To understand the origins of Russian claims and the Ukrainian counter-narrative, it is useful to delve into the unique history of this region. The term Donbass (an abbreviation of “Donetsk coal basin”) refers today to the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. Historically, the boundaries of the industrial region were slightly different and included territorial portions belonging to both Ukraine and Russia – such as part of the Donetsk region, the southern part of the Luhansk region, the eastern part of the Dnipro region, and the western part of the Russian Rostov region. The Donetsk coal basin held strategic importance for Soviet economic development, to the extent that Lenin claimed, “Without Donbass, socialist construction would have remained merely a good intention” (Zarembo, 2023; 28). As a result, the “Soviet myth of Donbass,” based on heavy industry and the work of metallurgists and miners, could not tolerate any regional identity other than a Russian one. The Soviet regime repeatedly pursued a process of “de-Ukrainization,” aimed at suppressing not only the Ukrainian identity of the region but also the specific peculiarities of the area, presenting Donbass as a “monolithic whole” (Zarembo, 2023; 30). According to the first official census conducted by the Tsarist Empire in 1897, in the territories of present-day Donetsk and Luhansk, 62% and 68.9% of the population, respectively, spoke Ukrainian². A percentage too significant for the unity of the Soviet regime, which initiated a fierce de-Ukrainization process in 1932, involving the suppression of the language and physical annihilation – through what

² <https://likbez.org.ua/ua/census-of-the-russian-empire-in-1897-ukrainian-province.html>.

went down in history as the Holodomor, the famine-induced extermination of Ukrainian peasants – and typical mechanisms of terror. Russian language instruction was imposed in schools, while Ukrainian-speaking teachers and intellectuals were dismissed, arrested, or deported (Kuromiya, 1999). The memory of the suffered repression was still vivid in the region when its inhabitants, in 1991, were called upon to vote in the referendum on the country's independence. On that occasion, in Donbas, the “yes” vote won with over 83% of the votes. The new independent Ukraine had to contend with a national legacy made up of a substantial portion of the population considering themselves of Russian nationality and an even larger portion considering themselves of Ukrainian ethnicity but continuing to use Russian as the primary language in everyday life (Kulyk, 2018).

It is not surprising that the reconquest of their identity and national autonomy began with the rediscovery of the language. The new Constitution declared Russian a minority language and elevated Ukrainian to the national language (Avellis, 2022). Simultaneously, the central government pursued a process of Ukrainianization and de-Russification, although not without contradictions: in the eastern regions, local governments continued to foster a regional identity strongly tied to the mining and metallurgical sector – now in sharp decline (Skumin, 2013) – rather than a more generic and inclusive Ukrainian national identity. Additionally, any initiative for cultural revival that spontaneously arose among the civilian population was strongly hindered (Zaremba, 2023). However, data from the national census of 2001 – the first and last conducted through official channels – show a drastic decline in the number of people self-identifying as Russian. According to the national census, 77.8% of the population identified as Ukrainian, compared to 17.3% of the

population identifying as Russian³. The Russian population constituted the majority in Crimea (58%), while in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, it was around 38.2% and 39%, respectively. Except for these three regions, where Russian was the dominant language, 67.6% of the overall population indicated Ukrainian as their native language. However, the categories of “ethnicity” and “language” appear strongly blurred and overlapped, with 15% of citizens identifying as Ukrainian while simultaneously indicating Russian as their mother tongue, and 4% of citizens identifying as Russian while simultaneously indicating Ukrainian as their mother tongue. This data demonstrates that the concept of identity, often reduced to the categories of ethnicity and language, proves to be, in Ukrainian reality, a concept in continuous evolution and change (Bondarenko, 2022). Interpreting the Ukrainian ethnic composition in a mutually exclusive binary key would be a simplification unsuitable for explaining the complexity of the social reality, at least before the war. Above all, as Portnov points out, being Russophone does not imply an equally clear pro-Russian stance (Portnov in Zarembo 2023; 44).

A similar investigation was conducted in the subsequent years by the International Institute of Sociology in Kyiv (KIIS), which administered a similar questionnaire to the population in 2012, 2014, and 2017. The KIIS research demonstrates a progressive increase in the number of respondents identifying as Ukrainian over the years (81.8% in 2012 and 88.3% in 2017), corresponding to a decrease in respondents identifying as Russian (from 5.6% in 2012 to 3.9% in 2017),

³ <https://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/>.

with 3.9% declaring dual nationality. Particularly significant is the specific data from the eastern and southern regions, historically close to Russia, showing an increase in people identifying as of Ukrainian ethnicity (from 66.6% to 77.9%), with 8.3% of individuals choosing both nationalities (Kulyk, 2018).

Regarding linguistic practices, in 2017, 68.3% of respondents considered Ukrainian as their native language, 13% considered Russian, and 18% chose both languages, with a clear distinction between the central-western regions (86% in favor of Ukrainian) and the southeastern regions (40% in favor of Ukrainian). The surveys provide a snapshot of a “bottom-up de-Russification process” (Kulyk, 2017; 16,17), interpretable in light of the upheavals in Ukraine during those years – the two revolutions in 2004 and 2013 – and especially Russia’s aggressive policies following the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbass in 2014. These events generated a stronger attachment to Ukrainian cultural roots and a consequent detachment from Russia within Ukrainian civil society (Kulyk, 2017). This population’s distancing from “Russianness” has manifested in three different directions: a shift of citizens from Russian ethnic and linguistic identification to Ukrainian, or at least mixed identification; an increase in the use of the Ukrainian language even among historically Russophone populations; an identification of the use of the Ukrainian language and the celebration of Ukrainian culture as tools supporting the central government.

2. The construction of the Ukrainian identity between two revolutions

The season of revolutions in Ukraine paved the way for a “process of public reflection on national identity,” in which

the country, driven by civil society, sought to position itself more towards Europe than its Soviet past⁴.

The first step in this direction was taken by the protests that erupted after the 2004 election, which pitted pro-European Viktor Yushchenko, and Viktor Yanukovych, pro-Russian, in opposition. These protests were known as the Orange Revolution. The electoral competition was marked by tensions, fraud, and irregularities, prompting popular outrage that took to the streets demanding new elections. In the subsequent vote, Yushchenko won with 52% of the votes, initiating a period of economic and social reforms “clearly inspired by Europe” (Giffoni, 2022; 24). However, the failure of the reforms led to a dramatic loss of support for Yushchenko and the rise of Yanukovych, who won the 2010 elections. The latter pursued a divisive policy, emphasizing cultural and linguistic differences between the western and eastern parts of the country, while centralizing executive power (Bondarenko, 2022).

The authoritarian turn of the government and unfulfilled election promises for the Russophone population quickly led to Yanukovych’s loss of popularity. His refusal to sign the Association Agreements with the European Union, partly due to pressure from Russia⁵, sparked the protests on November 21, 2013, known as Euromaidan (Miranda, 2014). The protest movement, spreading across the country and renamed by Ukrainians as the “Revolution of Dignity,” was a cross-cutting

⁴ https://www.huffingtonpost.it/guest/memorialitalia/2023/02/25/news/la_guerra_dindipendenza_ucraina_di_simone_atilio_bellezza-11431918/.

⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/11/21/ukraine-drops-eu-plans-and-looks-to-russia/>.

movement capable of transcending political divisions and uniting a multitude of demands, from the fight against corruption to protesting police violence, to the demand for an expansion of civil rights (Bondarenko, 2022). The common thread of the protests lay in the citizens' desire to set a new political agenda that would bring the country closer to European values and governance mechanisms. Perhaps less consciously, civil society, through the Revolution of Dignity, was laying the foundation for the construction of a new identity narrative, adopting as slogans and symbols elements related to the history and myth of the warrior Cossack people, renowned for their courage and libertarian spirit (Walker, 2015).

Meanwhile, Janukovych's regime reacted with violent repression and the banishment of any form of protest, escalating tensions and violence that led, between February 18 and 20, 2014, to a violent clash in which more than a hundred people lost their lives, including protesters and members of law enforcement, forcing Janukovych to flee to Russia (Cuscito, 2014). The elections on May 25, 2014, brought Petro Poroshenko to power, initiating a process of democratic consolidation, albeit fragile and imperfect (Giffoni, 2022). The process of democracy building in Ukraine could not ignore a broader nation-building process that would regulate and interpret the new identity demands. Poroshenko responded to this need by strengthening the process of Ukrainianization through two laws: the 2017 Education Law, which mandated Ukrainian as the only language for school instruction, and the 2019 Language Law, which required national media to broadcast exclusively in Ukrainian (Bondarenko, Zola, 2023).

Meanwhile, the Russian response to Euromaidan did not delay, and on February 20, 2014, amidst the clashes in Kiev, Russian army units without insignia entered Crimea to incite revolts against the national government⁶. On March 16, 2014, a referendum – not officially recognized by the United Nations due to the confirmation of pressures on voters exerted by Russian occupying forces present in the territory⁷ – affirmed the peninsula’s accession to the Russian Federation with 95.32% of favourable votes (de Guttry, 2014). In Donbas, Janukovych’s oligarch supporters, fearing the loss of their political and economic influence following the ex-President’s ousting, expressed dissent about the new political direction, fuelling separatist movements in the region (Kudelia, 2014). The Russian government managed to co-opt the protests in Donbas by infiltrating agitators and paramilitary militias, leading the occupation of public buildings, hoisting the Russian flag, and proclaiming the establishment of the People’s Republic of Donetsk and the People’s Republic of Luhansk (Pishchikova, 2019). In June 2014, under the pretext of supporting what the Kremlin described as a “genuine popular uprising and a civil war within Ukraine,” the Russian army occupied Donbas, sparking an open conflict (Zola, 2023; 117). The Minsk agreements of February 2015, marking a ceasefire, actually only had the ability to freeze the conflict, with alternating periods of renewed clashes and heightened tensions between the central government and the two Republics, for-

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26414600>.

⁷ United Nations General Assembly, A/RES/68/262. Territorial integrity of Ukraine, 27 March 2014.

mally still under Ukrainian administration but de facto under Russian control. In September 2022, following two referendums held in the two Republics, the accession treaty to the Russian Federation was formalized, providing the ideological pretext for the invasion in February of the same year, described by the Kremlin as a “peacekeeping operation”⁸.

3. To the Origins of the Russian Narrative

On July 12, 2021, in a lengthy essay, Vladimir Putin laid the ideological groundwork for what would be the invasion of Ukraine⁹. In the article, the Russian President explains how Russian and Ukrainian peoples are “historically united,” in a reading of Russian Empire history considered by many as revisionist (Zola, 2022). Putin describes the cooling of Russian-Ukrainian relations as a “tragedy” and emphasizes how Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians – considered “sister nations” – have common origins in the Kievan Rus’, regarded as the ancestor of the Russian State. These peoples, sharing a common language and Orthodox faith, are now bound by “common heritage and destiny.” In reality, the Kievan Rus’ was a kind of medieval proto-state consisting of various separate state entities, covering a territory from the Black Sea to Finland, interconnected and centred around the fortified city of Kiev, a political and economic hub but lacking a precise ethno-national identity (Cella, 2021). The Kingdom had a

⁸ https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2022/02/22/news/crisi_ucraina_russia-scenario_guerra_lampo_attacco_peacekeeper-338719674/.

⁹ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

short life, experiencing a rapid decline that led to complete subjugation to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth around the year 1000 A.D. Putin's historical reconstruction opposes that put forward by several Ukrainian historians who highlight how, during the time of the Kievan Rus', the Tsarist Empire did not yet exist, and in fact, Moscow had not even been founded – the city's foundation year dates back to 1147, when the Kievan Rus' was already under Polish-Lithuanian rule (Balcer, 2021). Ukrainian historians also agree that Ukrainian and Belarusian populations developed a strong sense of belonging to Lithuanian institutions and culture, constructing their own identity in opposition to the Russian one. Ukrainians and Belarusians adopted the name "Ruthenians," a term referring to the inhabitants of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania first and later of Western Ukraine (Cella, 2021). Following the Russian conquest of Lithuania in the 1600s, the centralizing efforts of the Tsarist regime, aiming to bring local populations into a broader Russian identity, changed the name of Ruthenians to "Russians" and that of Ukraine to "Little Rus'." According to Putin's narrative, even today, the Russian conquest of Lithuania was a moment of liberation for Ukrainians and Belarusians, whose purity and unity with Russian society would have been corrupted by Western Lithuania. Consequently, in this narrative of events, Ukrainian culture is nothing more than a byproduct of the original Russian identity.

The Russian President reiterated these concepts in a public speech on the occasion of recognizing the separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in February 2022. On that occasion, Putin clearly stated that Ukraine is "not a real coun-

try” but rather the result – or rather the fault – of concessions in terms of autonomy made during the Soviet period - by Lenin first and then by Khrushchev - and accused the country of denying its tradition of brotherhood with Russia¹⁰. The construction of Ukrainian identity itself, therefore, is based on a series of historical injustices against Russia¹¹. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, following the Russian invasion, also declared that Ukraine “does not have the right to be a sovereign nation”¹².

In light of these statements, it is evident that the independence of Ukraine is not only seen as the result of a great historical injustice but also as a consequence of what Putin defines as “the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century,” namely, the collapse of the Soviet Union (Giannotti, Natalizia, 2017). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, millions of Russian citizens, who were on the territories of the states that gained independence from this dissolution, found themselves physically separated from the Motherland: the *leitmotif* of Putin’s policy is the constant attempt to “reunite” these two Russias¹³. With the loss of Ukraine, Russia also loses its “strategic depth,” which had allowed it to project itself towards the Black Sea and maintain a certain “distance of security” from the European continent (Giffoni, 2022). Conse-

¹⁰ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹¹ <https://www.valigiablu.it/ucraina-russia-genocidio/>.

¹² <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-lavrov-questions-ukraines-right-sovereignty-ifax-2022-02-22/>.

¹³ https://www.huffingtonpost.it/guest/memorial-italia/2024/01/10/news/la_diplomazia_culturale_di_putin_nadiia_koval_la_cultura_russa_come_strumento_di_influenza_e_dominio_di_s_bellezza-14787627/.

quently, the progressive loss of soft power, in terms of attractiveness and control, following the events of 2004 and 2013, could only throw Russia into a deep state of alarm and consternation towards an enemy that threatens the very foundations of Russian imperialist ideology. The occupation of territories “belonging to Russia by right,” such as Crimea or Donbass, is nothing more than a “restitution of a grave political wrong and the restoration of a plundered national identity” (Walker, 2015). It is precisely this imperialistic logic that has led several analysts to speak of an “anti-colonial struggle in reference to the resistance offered by Ukraine” (Mikhelidze, 2023; 16). The slow and arduous *nation-building* process that Ukraine has undertaken since its independence, through a journey of reappropriation of its national cultural identity, can thus be read as an equally slow and arduous process of decolonization from Russian political and cultural imperialism.

4. Culture as an Offensive Weapon: The Russian Attack

The Russian offensive operates essentially on two fronts. On one hand, the delegitimization of the enemy in its identity claims, and on the other, the physical destruction of symbols of such claims.

From the outset, the aggression against Ukraine has been framed by President Putin as a rescue operation for the Ukrainian people, subjected to a corrupt and indolent political class (Giffoni, 2022). Through extensive use of media

channels such as television, radio, and the internet, a large number of falsified images and distorted historical reconstructions are produced to generate confusion among the audience, making it difficult to expose fake news¹⁴.

The Russian information warfare strategy aims to delegitimize the Ukrainian government, accusing it of hidden sympathies for Nazism. The accusation of Nazism is a recurring theme in Russian propaganda, used in 2004 to delegitimize the government of Yushchenko, who emerged victorious from the electoral campaign, and later in 2014 to justify the annexation of Crimea. The goal was to present the Ukrainian government as corrupt, despotic, and on the brink of failure, isolating the country internationally, preventing possible intervention by the European Union and NATO on its behalf (Walker, 2015). At the same time, Ukraine, portrayed as a puppet state at the mercy of the West trying to corrupt its values, provides a perfect ideological pretext for Russia, committed to protecting the Russian-speaking population on Ukrainian territory, whose human rights and physical safety are seen as seriously threatened (Lange-Ionatamišvili, 2014).

The disinformation and delegitimization campaign is accompanied, on the military front, by systematic destruction of archaeological sites, monuments, and Ukrainian cultural landmarks. The UNESCO has been tracking cultural sites destroyed or damaged since the beginning of the conflict. As of January 10, 2024, the list includes 337 sites, including 126 places of worship, 148 buildings of historical and/or artistic

¹⁴ <https://www.wired.it/article/russia-fake-news-youtube-guerra-ucraina/>.

interest, 20 museums, 19 monuments, 13 libraries, and 1 archive¹⁵.

The most affected areas are those in the Donbass region, Odessa, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Kyiv, witnessing the destruction of highly representative places and symbols of Ukrainian culture. Examples include the destruction of the Holocaust Memorial and the Karazin University in Kharkiv, considered the country's best university, active for over two hundred years¹⁶; the bombing of St. Catherine's Cathedral in Kherson, one of the most important Orthodox places of worship in the region¹⁷, and the attack on the Ivankiv Local History Museum in Kiev, where the works of artist Maria Prymachenko, a spokesperson for local folklore, were destroyed¹⁸.

Mariupol was the scene, in March 2022, of the horrific destruction of the Drama Art Theater, a temporary shelter for 1,000 civilians, costing the lives of 600 people¹⁹. There were also acts of looting by the Russian army, which stole about 2,000 artifacts from art galleries and museums in the cities of

¹⁵ <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco?hub=66116>.

¹⁶ <https://www.lettera22.it/kharkiv-kyiv-sarajevo-lomicidio-rituale-delle-citta/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.avvenire.it/mondo/pagine/ucraina-cattedrale-kherson>.

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/01/cultural-catastrophe-ukrainians-fear-for-art-and-monuments-amid-onslaught>.

¹⁹ <https://www.ilpost.it/2022/05/04/teatro-mariupol-bombardamento-guerra-ucraina/>.

Donetsk and Mariupol in Donbass²⁰ and about 15,000 artifacts in the city of Kherson²¹.

These numbers reveal a certain systematicity in the destructive process, allowing us to affirm that Ukraine is experiencing a true “urbicide,” intended, in the words of architect Bogdan Bogdanovic – former mayor of Belgrade from ‘82 to ‘86 – as the “ritual murder of cities” (Sekulić, 2002, Barattin, 2004). This technique became infamous during the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict from ‘92 to ‘95, where the destruction of cultural and identity symbols was used as a means to deny the identity and existence of a specific community on the territory. Ukrainian Minister of Culture, Oleksandr Tkachenko, uses the term “cultural genocide²²” to indicate the precise intent of denying and erasing the Ukrainian identity through the destruction of specifically Ukrainian cultural capital, attempting to impose its own narrative and authority not only on the occupied territory but also on the historical narrative of events (Gertholtz, 2022). A report from the University of Maryland’s Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM) demonstrates that 10 of the archaeological sites hit were not near military targets, suggesting they were chosen as specific military targets – like the Ivankiv Historical and Local History Museum (Bassett et al, 2022). The PEN America report also speaks of “Indiscrimi-

²⁰ <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20221014-cultural-cleansing-new-russian-attacks-on-ukraine-spur-cultural-preservation-efforts>.

²¹ <https://www.rsi.ch/info/mondo/Tutto-il-patrimonio-culturale-perso-in-guerra-1841540.html>.

²² <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2022/09/13/its-cultural-genocide-ukraines-culture-minister-trying-to-salvage-the-countrys-artifacts>.

nate and disproportionate attacks,” listing a number of destroyed places of worship and local cultural centers, which served as important places of aggregation, as well as dozens of libraries and archives that preserved the historical memory of the country (PEN America, 2022). The report also emphasizes that in the occupied territories of Luhansk, Donetsk, and Kherson, a cultural replacement is underway: Russian Education Minister, Sergei Kravtsov, announced the impartation of teaching in Russian and the replacement of Ukrainian textbooks, while Ukrainian symbols and flags have been removed and replaced with the Russian flag²³. Many historians and art scholars, both Ukrainian and international, refer to this as “cultural cleansing” (Pasikowska-Schnass, 2022). This modus operandi is not unfamiliar to Russia, which has already implemented it during the annexation of Crimea in 2014. After the occupation of Crimea, the Russian government established its own governing structures and imposed the ruble as the official currency (PEN America, 2022). At the same time, Russia embarked on a process of eradicating Crimean Tatar culture – a Turkish ethnic group native to Crimea subject to repression, persecution, and mass deportations by the Soviet regime after World War II²⁴ – banning the use of the Ukrainian and Tatar languages in schools²⁵ and taking control of the media²⁶. In that case as well, the local cultural heritage was

²³ <https://ui.org.ua/en/postcard/glory-to-ukraine-memorial/>.

²⁴ <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-tatar-deportation-parliament-genocide-/27360343.html>.

²⁵ <https://khp.org/en/1558108888>.

²⁶ <https://www.rferl.org/a/crimea-pro-russian-tatar-tv-station/27648579.html>.

systematically attacked through damaging actions or expropriation, to the point that UNESCO defined Russia's actions as a "long-term strategy to strengthen [Russian] historical, cultural, and religious dominance over the past, present, and future of Crimea"²⁷.

In addition to the damage to cultural works, Russian occupying forces also pursue intimidating tactics through actual executions: in October 2022, orchestra conductor Yuriy Kerpatenko was executed for refusing to hold a concert celebrating the occupying forces in Kherson²⁸.

5. Culture as a Defensive Tool: The Ukrainian Response

It has already been emphasized that the consolidation of Ukraine as a nation was not an automatic result of gained independence but rather the outcome of a continuous effort of reshaping identity and ensuring international recognition as a separate entity from Russia. The tendency, therefore, might be to think that being Ukrainian is simply everything that is not Russian (Wilson, 2023). However, interpreting the Ukrainian identity narrative solely in opposition to Russian culture risks being reductive and belittling to the broad cultural reservoir made up of Ukrainian history, myth, and epic.

²⁷ UNESCO, Executive Board, 212th, 2021, Follow-up to decisions and resolutions adopted by the Executive Board and the General Conference at their previous sessions, part I: Programme issues, E. Follow-up of the situation in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (Ukraine), 212 EX/5.I.E.

²⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/16/russian-troops-kill-ukrainian-musician-yuriy-kerpatenko-for-refusing-role-in-kherson-concert>.

The two revolutions and, even more so, the experience of the two wars in 2014 and 2022, “have accelerated both the civic and the social construction of Ukrainian identity,” spreading and solidifying the “constitutive myths” of the nation (Hutchinson, 2018). The battle for a common ideal – democracy, the rule of law, a leaning towards European values – and against a common enemy – Russia – has awakened the national consciousness of a people that rediscovered itself as a nation (Wilson, 2000), polarizing public opinion and overcoming the stereotype of Ukraine as a divided nation.

Several surveys conducted by the Rating Group in 2022 show that 83% of respondents believe that Ukrainian should be the only national language²⁹, and 92% self-identify as Ukrainian³⁰, while the number of people agreeing with the Putin’s narrative that sees Russia and Ukraine as “one people” has dropped from 41% before the war to 8% in April 2022³¹.

After the Orange Revolution in 2004, the task of the Ukrainian ruling class was to involve the rest of the world in the ongoing identity-building process in Ukraine. For this purpose, cultural-informational centers were established with Decree 142/2006, promotional entities of Ukrainian culture abroad operating within the structures of Ukraine’s foreign

²⁹ Rating Group (2022), The Sixth National Poll: The Language Issue in Ukraine (March 19, 2022).

³⁰ Rating Group (2022), The Tenth National Survey: Ideological Markers of the War (April, 27, 2022).

³¹ Rating Group (2022), The Eighth National Poll: Ukraine During the War (April 6, 2022).

diplomatic missions³². For the first time, cultural relations were understood as a specific asset of foreign policy, and the responsibility for their implementation was delegated to specific centers. The goal of these cultural-informational centers is to promote cultural cooperation between Ukraine and third-party states, disseminate information about Ukrainian language, history, and culture, maintain contacts with the Ukrainian diaspora abroad, and simultaneously promote tourism for foreigners. Despite their importance, the activities of these cultural centers were usually limited to representative activities, lacking strategic coordination and adequate financial resources (Bureiko, 2021).

After the Maidan Revolution in 2014 and the Russian invasion of Crimea, Ukrainian cultural diplomacy took on a new urgency: no longer just promoting national culture but also providing a global audience with an alternative narrative to the Russian one about events in Ukrainian territory. The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to the need for greater institutionalization of practices and activities of Cultural Diplomacy by establishing the Office of Public Diplomacy, a special department under the MFA with the goal of developing relations with civil society, cultural institutions, and media in third countries, promoting Ukraine's image (Tereshchuk, 2019).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs made a considerable effort to legitimize its narrative in the global media space through a

³² Council of Europe, Steering Committee for Culture, European Programme of Cultural Policy Reviews – Cultural Policy in Ukraine National Report, CDCULT (2007)14 23 April 2007.

targeted campaign of nation branding, aiming to demonstrate to Western allies the country's adherence to European values. The Ministry adopted the image of a sailboat on a blue background with the slogan "Ukraine: Our Boat," followed by the description "our sail that leads us to Europe. Home," later incorporated into the new symbol of the MFA depicting a trident (Walker, 2015). The intent of the campaign was clear: to clarify that Ukraine's path led to the European Union. The consolidation of a Ukrainian narrative goes hand in hand with the need to counter the Russian disinformation campaign. In 2014, a series of private initiatives emerged engaged in debunking, such as "Ukraine Today," a private group channel broadcasting in Ukrainian and English via satellite and on YouTube, providing information about events related to Euromaidan and the occupation of Crimea³³, StopFake.org, a fact-checking platform established by journalists and journalism students to debunk Russian fake news³⁴, and the non-governmental organization, Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UCMC)³⁵.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued the national rebranding effort by establishing, with Decree No. 430/2017, "The Ukrainian Institute," a specialized state institution subordinate to the MFA with the aim of increasing Ukraine's recognition abroad³⁶. The Ukrainian Institute of

³³ <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0825/Ukraine-Today-jumps-into-the-Ukraine-Russia-media-war>.

³⁴ <https://www.stopfake.org/en/media-about-us/>.

³⁵ <https://uacrisis.org/>.

³⁶ <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/npas/250094619>.

fers financial support for international tours of musicians and artists, distributing films, and organizing art exhibitions. Also, in 2017, the “Ukrainian Cultural Foundation” was established, tasked with administering state financial support for cultural and creative industries and preserving Ukrainian cultural heritage³⁷. In March 2021, the foreign ministry approved a Public Diplomacy Strategy 2021-2025, which identifies Public Diplomacy as a functional area of Ukrainian foreign policy, naming its priorities, goals, and instruments. The Strategy also designates seven key areas for Public Diplomacy and specifies the institutions responsible for each area (Bureiko, 2021).

The Ukrainian Institute and the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation have played a crucial role since the beginning of the conflict, documenting the country’s cultural losses and promoting Ukrainian culture and artists (Pasikowska-Schnass, 2022), aided by the government’s establishment of a specific emergency fund for the protection and preservation of cultural heritage³⁸. The cultural and creative industries sector has shown unexpected vitality and readiness to respond to threats to its cultural heritage since the beginning of the war. Museum staff and civilian residents have moved mobile artworks to safe locations and protected monuments with sandbags and fire-retardant coverings³⁹. The response of museum directors was immediate: the National Museum of the History

³⁷ <https://ucf.in.ua/en/p/about>.

³⁸ Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, May 17, 2022 No. 616.

³⁹ <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/lviv-ukraine-statues-wrapped-heritage-protection/index.html#:~:text=Residents%20of%20the%20Ukrainian%20cultural,being%20wrapped%20in%20protective%20sheets.>

of Ukraine in Kyiv moved its heritage to city warehouses⁴⁰, while the Odessa Museum of Fine Arts erected barbed wire along its perimeter⁴¹. Creating a network of national and international support, grassroots initiatives have multiplied, offering financial support to museum workers, such as the Museum Crisis Center, Heritage Rescue Emergency Initiative, The Center to Rescue Ukraine's Cultural Heritage, and the Ukrainian Emergency Art Fund (PEN America, 2022).

More broadly, civil society has experienced an incredible awakening and cultural awareness, engaging financially and militarily in the conflict. A survey conducted by the Mobilise Project in May 2022 showed that a large portion of the population has engaged in social and civil activities: 60% of respondents stated that they donated funds, 31.6% engaged in volunteer actions, 5.8% volunteered in territorial self-defence, while 2.7% took part in civil resistance actions such as demonstrations, protests, and civil disobedience.

In addition to the physical protection of cultural heritage, the government and civil society are also channelling their efforts into numerous cultural diplomacy activities abroad to reclaim Ukraine's cultural sovereignty and spread Ukraine's voice abroad, with massive investment in terms of Soft Power. The Ukrainian Institute has systematically engaged in cultural diplomacy initiatives to "deepen global awareness of and appreciation for Ukraine's distinct national Culture," using all

⁴⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/7/24/the-kyiv-museum-staff-who-stayed-to-protect-cherished-artefacts-2>.

⁴¹ <https://observer.com/2022/03/across-ukraine-museums-are-scrambling-as-they-prepare-for-the-worst/>.

the tools that the discipline provides and increasing its presence abroad (Sheiko, 2023). An example is the presence of the Ukrainian Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale, with a dense program of meetings, discussions, and talks focused on decolonization⁴², or the Ukrainian Pavilion at the La Manufacture festival of Avignon with a large theatre program⁴³. Touring, targeted art exhibitions have been organized to raise global awareness about the horrors of the war, such as “The Captured House”, hosted in Berlin, Brussels, Rome, Paris e Amsterdam⁴⁴ and “Postcards from Ukraine”, which captures the architectural devastation by Russian troops⁴⁵.

Many initiatives have also arisen spontaneously, such as worldwide tours organized by the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra, composed of 75 Ukrainian musicians who are refugees abroad (Pasikowska-Schnass, 2022), and by the Kyiv Philharmonic Orchestra, engaged in a veritable fight on the “cultural front,” aimed at introducing the music of great Ukrainian composers to Europe and the United States.

The Ukrainian Institute, along with various Ukrainian political⁴⁶ and cultural⁴⁷ figures, is carrying out a diplomatic negotiation aimed at cultural boycott and suspension of cultural cooperation with Russia. They are urging theaters and cultur-

⁴² <https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/ukrainian-pavilion-public-programme-at-the-59th-la-biennale-di-venezia-2/>.

⁴³ <https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/avignon-la-manufacture-off-festival-2/>.

⁴⁴ <https://thecapturedhouse.com/>.

⁴⁵ <https://ui.org.ua/en/postcards-from-ukraine/>.

⁴⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/07/ukraine-culture-minister-boycott-tchaikovsky-war-russia-kremlin>.

⁴⁷ <https://krytyka.com/en/articles/amplify-ukrainian-voices-not-russian>.

al venues not to reproduce works in the Russian language or collaborate with Russian artists, and they are encouraging Ukrainian artists to refuse to perform with Russian artists. During the PEN's World Voices festival held in New York in May 2023, Ukrainian writers refused to appear at the scheduled panel because the event was supposed to host another panel with Russian artists. Unable to find a compromise, the organizers of the festival cancelled the "Russian" panel⁴⁸.

6. *Conclusions*

Culture, meant "both as a function and a source of identity" (Said, 1994), can serve various strategic objectives in times of war. The prevalent use of information channels alongside traditional tools of war makes it essential, for the involved parties, to have the ability to control their own narrative, in order to shape domestic and foreign opinion. On the one hand, shaping the narratives of the conflict itself and of the historical reasons that led to the conflict can serve the purpose of delegitimizing the political instances of the enemy and discrediting its historical memory. On the other hand, having the control of the narrative can also help defending and redeeming one's position in the world, creating new alliances, and reinforcing national cohesion.

Culture does not reside only in intangible assets - such as historical memory, shared values and practices – but it is also expressed in symbols and spaces that constitute the material

⁴⁸ <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230528-war-and-words-ukraine-russia-writers-dilemma>.

cultural heritage of a population. Recent history offers numerous examples of how cultural heritage had become a strategic military target: destroying the material proof of the life of a people on a territory means denying its own right to exist. Russia is pursuing a precise intent to deny the existence of Ukrainian as 'other than' the Motherland of Russia.

To understand how the modern conflicts unfold means to understand how to cope with their consequences. It is very difficult to predict the fate of the conflict, but it is important to understand that the winner will be the one entitled to impose its own narrative to the proof of the history.

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The war in Ukraine has thrown the West into a spiral of insecurity dictated by the presence of a war “at the European doorstep” without a certain and predictable conclusion. At the same time, in the Western Balkans region, there is a resurgence of nationalist sentiments based on ethnic and cultural divisions that risk adding another destabilizing factor to the European neighbourhood. These different scenarios have an element in common: the use of culture in the narrative accompanying these forms of conflict, whether latent or open. Culture is used to define one’s national identity in an excluding sense towards minorities in the country; to persuade the audience on the lawfulness of political instances; to foment cultural hatred that seemed dormant. Finally, culture in its material manifestations is chosen as a precise military target to be physically destroyed, to discredit the enemy and assert one’s narrative of events. This volume seeks to expose all the ways in which culture is leveraged and narrated in modern conflicts and political competitions, focusing primarily on Ukraine and the countries of the Western Balkans. The choice of this geographical location is driven not only by the urgency to provide interpretative tools for ongoing events but also by the importance these countries hold for the stability of the European continent and the future prospect of their integration into the European Union.

Sabina de Silva is a PhD Candidate in Institutions and Policies at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. She is also an Associate Researcher at Cespi (Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale), focusing on the Western Balkans, the EU enlargement process, and Cultural Diplomacy.

The Use of Culture in Modern Conflicts and Political Competition

SABINA DE SILVA (edited by)

EDUCatt - Ente per il Diritto allo Studio Universitario
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Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.7234.22.35 - fax 02.80.53.215
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