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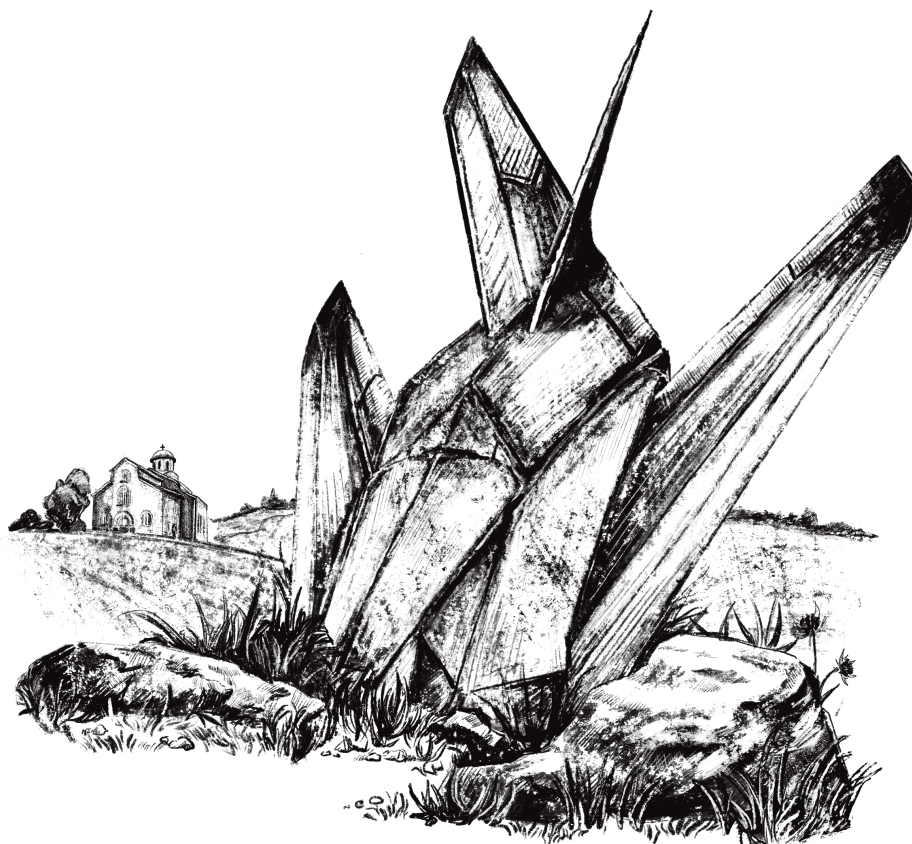
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ДОЛГОЕ ЭХО
ДУГ ОДЈЕК
LASTING ECHO

1999.



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SUMMARY

Our today's perception of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia usually includes flashbacks of Belgrade and Novi Sad burning in the night, bridges over the Sava and the Danube collapsing, Belgrade's Radio Television HQ and maternity hospital in ruins, all the depleted uranium dropped across the country and rising cancer incidence rate. The bombing itself is a reference point that is to some extent outside of time and space: for Russia, the bombing campaign got to be another milestone in the growing disagreements with the West; for the West itself, it still qualifies as one of its "humanitarian interventions" whose goals or timing are no longer even understood by present-day politicians. For Serbia, it is a tragedy as colossal and dark as the ruins of the General Staff headquarters; a tragedy so ghastly it makes all those who experienced it wish to forget it ever happened — and yet, so massive and systemic that it can neither be forgotten nor disregarded.

With this study, we seek to revisit the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia in order to help it reclaim its historical place and time by tracking how it has affected narratives in Serbian culture and public life; what economic and political reality it has shaped; and how it has played out on the regional and global levels. To a large extent, the trajectory of the 20th century was defined by Gavrilo Princip's two shots in Sarajevo. Without the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, World War I would not have started in July 1914. There would have been no Russian Revolution, nor World War II, nor the Cold War that followed. Without the bombing of Yugoslavia, the present-day world would also be very different. Its international legal foundations and the principle of equality of all states regardless of their military power as a basic guarantee were blown up by the bombing campaign in 1999; and those were principles that the global powers had been struggling to achieve for centuries until then.

This study demonstrates that, contrary to the widespread opinion that the countries of the region in question are inherently dependent on the Western European and, more broadly, Western economic system and could not exist outside of it, this is not the case with Serbia: it has quit strong national economic foundation.

Finally, our study is a tribute to the Serbian people who have not been broken by the 1999 bombings or the next 25 years of the West's systemic cover-up campaign of what had happened. By surviving a deep collective trauma, the Serbs have maintained both their national identity and a viable nation-state.

The bombings were only followed by more catastrophes and crises, but at the same time, Serbia's experience over the last 25 years is an example of how a nation can stand its ground and preserve its identity. It teaches us that attempts to rewrite history by erasing events or silencing voices have the opposite effect and always work against the those who stand behind them.

SOCIETY

The Bombing 25 Years Later: Serbian Society

Momo Kapor (born 1937), Nice Day to Die, 1999

*The burned, ravaged and poisoned country lies in deepest darkness. Even the stars have gone out, all but one, motionless — a satellite that akin to a deity decides whether we live or die, and aims aviation bombs at the target with lasers. Lilith, the star of death. Belgrade sprawls helplessly on its hills in the dark, like a slumbering living blanket, waiting for the bombs to destroy its fabric... **We don't see the faces of our enemies, and besides, they claim that they are not our enemies at all. Death, the angel of mercy, comes out of nowhere and with no warning.***

Man (born 1988), an in-depth interview for the project, 2024

I remember March 22, I was sitting and drawing something with markers, doing some homework. The "Battle of Kosovo" was on TV, and my parents were discussing what would happen if war began. Two days later... my carefree childhood ended and it was time to grow up fast. Children living in the West will never understand us.

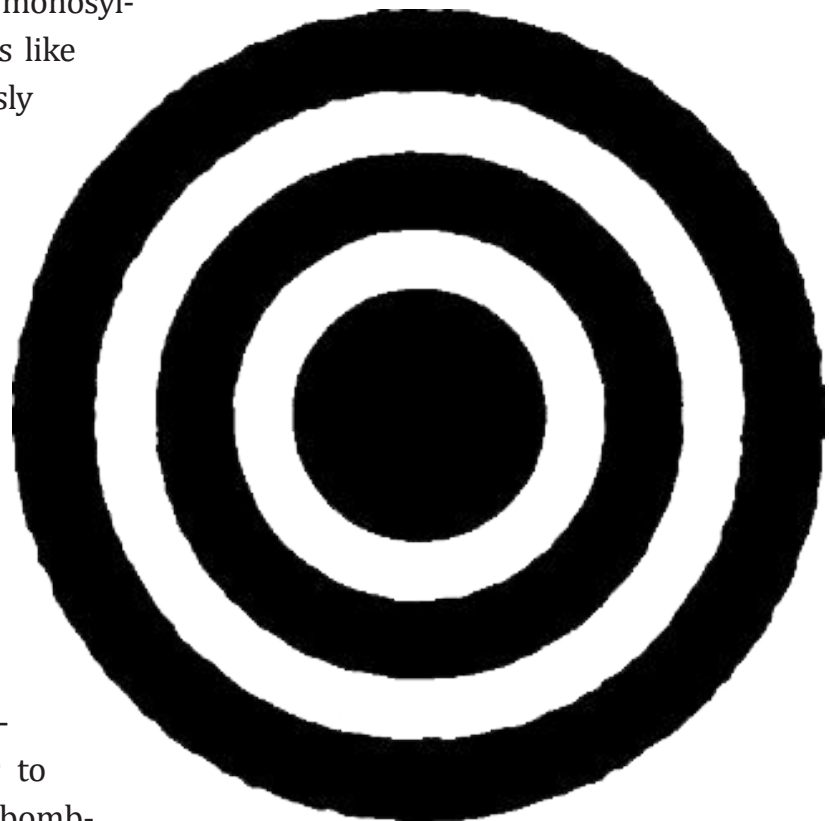
These recollections are separated by twenty-five years. In 1999, Momo Kapor was 62, and our respondent was 11. He knows that his childhood ended in 1999. What Kapor knows is that the allies betrayed him twice. The first time was in 1944, when the carpet bombing of Belgrade suddenly began, depriving a seven-year-old boy of what little remained in the middle of the war — a friend. The second time was in 1999, when a bomb hit the Cubura neighborhood, forever erasing New York (and in a broader sense, the West), which he loved so much, out of his life. For these two, like for so many others, it was not the fear of death or the memories of it that defined their views. Many Serbs did not even go to bomb shelters. It was the *betrayal*. The violation of shared history, of the idea of a beautiful West that is so pure and so full of respect for individuals — the West that the Yugoslav youth had dreamed of for many years. The treachery of the world whose history, culture, and even separate buildings and streets the Belgrade intelligentsia, sitting in smoky kitchens and listening to Bob Dylan records released in Yugoslavia under license, knew maybe better than that world itself. A barbaric act.

The phenomenon of cultural trauma — when key historical events integrate into the core that shapes a certain community's collective sense of self — is not yet so

well-understood in the social sciences. The concept itself is no more than 20 years old. Why should we use it to describe Serbian society? Probably because it couldn't but fit. Studying the Serbian people, it's impossible to use only quantitative and qualitative sociological research. The country that gave the world the gift of Milos Crnjansky's works, the movie *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* and the rock band *Ekatarina Velika* could not help but to process the nation-wide shock through culture. Films, literature and music can often give a better understanding of how a society perceives certain events than questionnaires and interviews. Fiction, various kinds of music and cinema are the highest form of sociology and, at the same time, its most reliable part. Mainly that is because every day the assessments they give and the portrayals they create are tried for honesty and fairness. Their popularity or lack thereof is contingent on how accurately and intimately they reflect society's innermost feelings.

It is important to note that Serbian culture — be it written, visual, or musical — has always been deeply social and political. The global trend towards turning a dialogue with society into something like eating a burger, i.e. turning it into the mass-market entertainment industry, acted as a catalyst for the increasingly wide-spread «culture of oblivion», the desire not to touch upon painful topics, to think and feel in monosyllables. However, in societies like Serbian, which continuously undergo socio-political cataclysms, attempts to «forget» either fail, become a farce, or ingrain painful experiences even more deeply in the fabric of society.

Therefore, a natural part of our research is a journey through Serbian culture, both popular and niche, because it in itself is an integral part of the answer to the question «How did the bombing affect Serbia and the Serbs?». In addition to conducting the sociological research and in-depth interviews, we studied how the



TARGET

bombing is reflected in Serbian culture, which allowed us to translate visual, audio and written images into academic writing.

In terms of methodology, this study employs postcolonial approaches adapted to the Balkans relying primarily on the research by Maria Todorova, Vesna Goldsworthy and Božidar Jezernik. This allows us to conceptualize the bombing campaign not only as an act of aggression, but also as an act of reclaiming and reforming the geopolitical, as well as social and cultural space of the Other by the West. It is important to note that Yugoslavia's otherness was conceptualized differently by different members of the collective West. For European countries, as Todorova and Galsworthy point out, the FRY and the Serbs were not the Other in the full sense of the word, but rather, an inferior version of the Self, i.e., Europeans, that was in need of development and accession to the "European" family. For the Americans, on the other hand, the otherness of the Serbs was absolute. They were the opposite of the West seen by Washington as a rogue state of the same kind as Iran, DPRK, Iraq, Cuba or Libya. America's attempts to put Serbia on the Western track of development essentially were no different from the approach the U.S. applied to Afghanistan or Iraq.

It is worth noting that first, the FRY and then Serbia have been perceived by the West as an actor deprived of capacity for representation, i.e. an actor that has no "right to vote." According to Vyacheslav Morozov, a situation where a nation-state like Serbia is denied the possibility of representation in the international community is unthinkable. The West's political and cultural initiatives in the wake of the bombing campaign did not seek to isolate Serbia as such. In fact, the efforts of the collective West were rather aimed at changing the identity of Serbia and the Serbs and transforming the country's national idea in the state-forming discourses. Given this, one of the key objectives of this study is to give the voice to the Serbs themselves.

Finally, the concept of cultural trauma is another pivotal element in this research. The bombing campaign inflicted a deep cultural trauma that found expression in various dimensions of Serbia's art scene and public life. The study pays a particular attention to the mechanism of discursive reproduction of cultural trauma represented by the collective West's efforts to perpetuate the construct of Serbia's "collective guilt" in the sociopolitical space. In this study, we also hope to have successfully applied Aleida Assmann's matrix to the Serbian material. Assmann argues that forgetting can be different, ranging from "therapeutic" to "punitive," but the forced forgetting of historical trauma that deprives people of the right to analyze and heal this trauma, coupled with the attempts to rewrite history cannot end well for the initiators of such a discourse.

Most sociological studies aimed at identifying the overall preferences of Serbian citizens in the last 25 years have focused on questions about their attitudes towards major

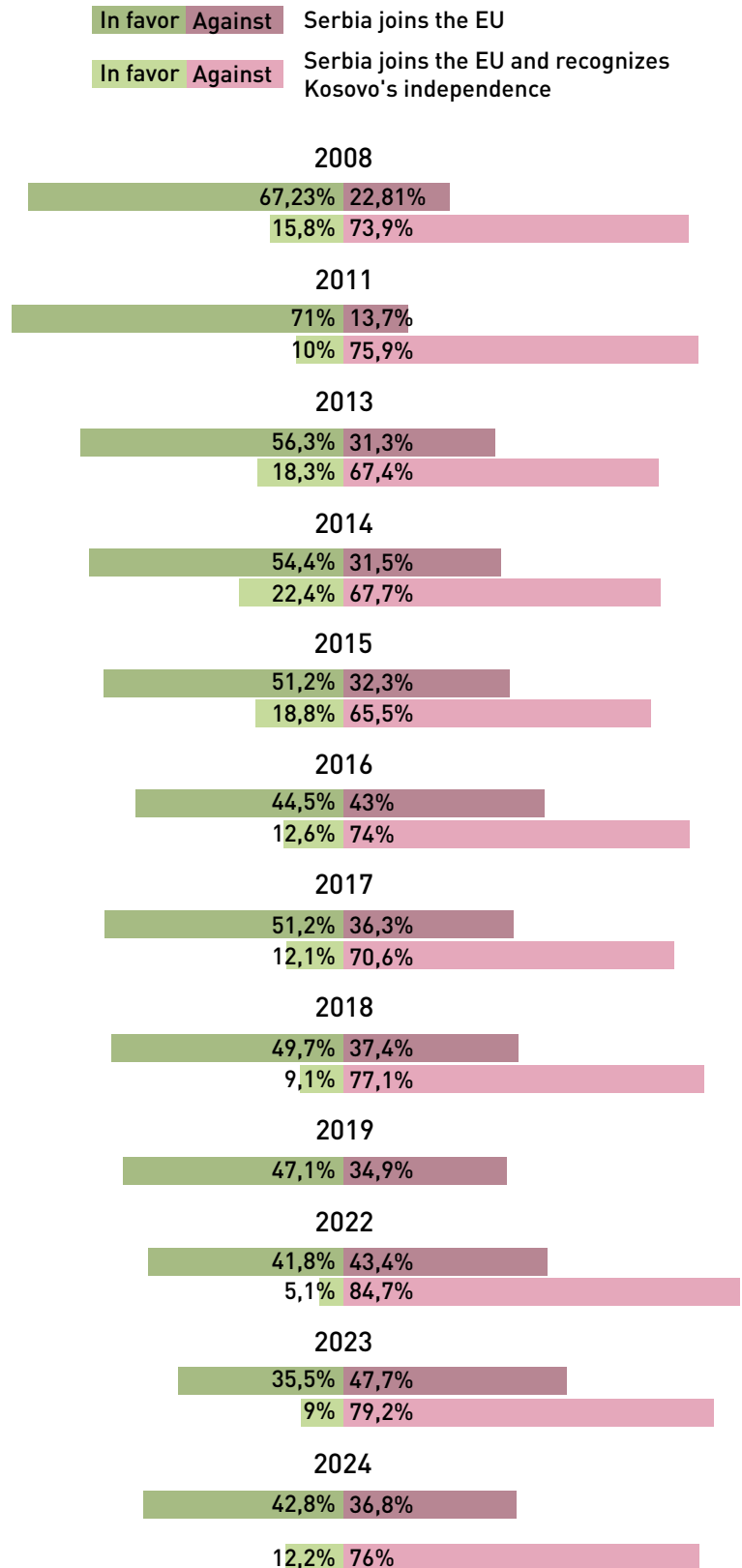
international players and accession to the European Union.

It is easy to see why joining the European Union is linked to the Kosovo issue. That said, we have not found a single comprehensive study that would aim to understand how the traumatic experience of the bombings has affected the way Serbian people perceive the existing reality, the leading powers, the economic course of their country or its course of development in general. At the same time, partly the answer to the question of how, where and why Serbian society is going is actually tied to the events of 1999.

*“Thus, the century ended, and at the beginning of another, we were given a clean sheet of paper on which to write the history of Serbia from scratch”**

We conducted our sociological research online. The sample consisted of 1,150 respondents, it is relevant in terms of volume and accurately reflects the gender and age structure of Serbian society. The respondents were asked to answer 30 questions about their personal

Surveys on EU accession, Serbia, 2008-2024



Source: *Нова српска политичка мисао (New Serbian Political Thought)*

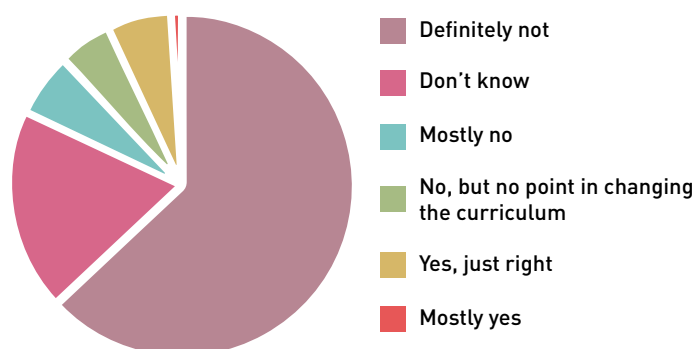
* https://www.prometej.rs/education_post_type/otimanje-kosmeta-uzimanje-duse

experience of the bombing, their attitude to the cultural artifacts related to the bombing, and their stance on a number of political issues and historical events. In addition, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted with eyewitnesses of the events of 1999 to gain a deeper understanding of the narratives of the bombing that now exist within Serbian society.

The research group also took advantage of the results of the educational project by the Prometheus publishing house, completed in 2019 to mark the 20th anniversary of the Yugoslavia bombing. The results of these studies are presented below.

Serbian society remembers the bombing experience well. For most people, personal experience serves as the main source of information about these events.

Does the school curriculum cover the bombing to a sufficient extent?



"I can't forget, and I couldn't even if I wanted to, but I don't want to forget"

*"'You were so young, but do you remember?' they often ask me. I remember"****

73% of people disagree with the statement that the 1999 events did not affect their generation. And at the same time, the overwhelming majority of the respondents believe that these events were not sufficiently reflected in works of fiction or school history curriculum. According to the respondents, it is customary not to mention the Yugoslavia bombing. Keeping silent, according to one of the prominent cultural memory researchers Aleida Assmann, is a technique of practical forgetting that removes a traumatic event from communication, but does not erase it from memory.

"history books are not updated, other countries are writing textbooks"

"it makes sense to create things that will deter further attacks... to explain, to give constructive advice for the future"

Opinions on who is to blame differ somewhat. The vast majority (about 70%) tend to blame Europe and the United States for what happened; at the same time, Yugoslav politicians get the blame too (53%).

*** Korpa sa igračkama, https://www.prometej.rs/education_post_type/korpa-sa-igrackama/

“there is no excuse for those who made the decision”

“they were wrong and there was no need for the bombing whatsoever”

It is worth noting that this does not mean there is a positive consensus in Serbia on Slobodan Milosevic.

Despite the fact that many Serbs have a negative opinion of his actions, only a minor segment blames the leader of the last Yugoslavia for the tragedy of 1999.

“he was definitely neither a good leader nor a visionary; a good banker, but not a good tradesman”

“at first I had this negative opinion shaped by the media and other people’s opinions, and while researching it on my own I softened a bit, which this does not mean that I support him”

The data also shows that the policy adopted by the US and the EU later on has not led to warmer relations: over 75% of the respondents believe that Washington and Brussels have not atoned for what they did to the Serbs.

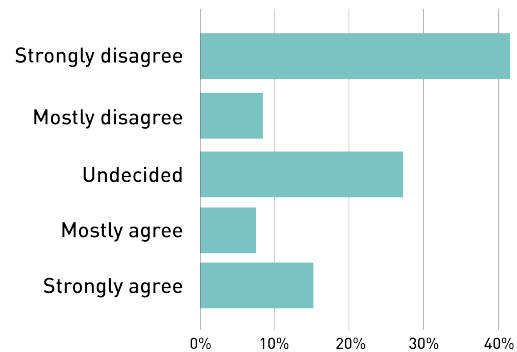
Moreover, there is a consensus on the motivation of the Western countries. The respondents pointed out that the aggression was a tool for the US to establish itself politically and economically in the Balkans: “The main goal was to turn Kosovo into a colony without calling it a colony.”

“an indicator of the superiority of the United States, America is not the one and only global policeman to have the right to decide which institutions and which ideology should be established in a state”

“political games that are not about us being vile Serbs, but about us having resources”

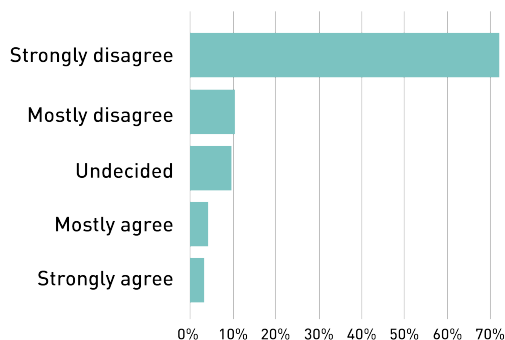
“I don’t know if any UN resolution is worth anything, it’s just a formality that was adopted, but not a single provision has been implemented, it’s a facade for the Americans to de facto colonize Kosovo and Metohija”

If Milosevic had lost power earlier, the bombing wouldn’t have happened

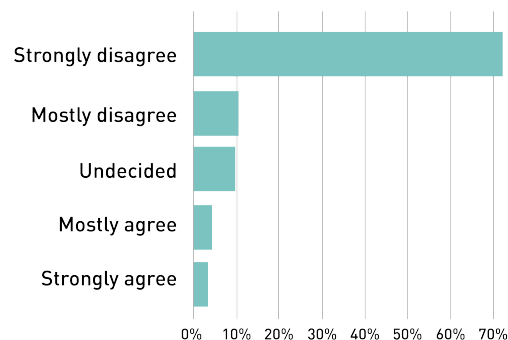


This interpretation, which is familiar and most common in Serbian society and po-

Europe has atoned for the bombing through aiding Serbia's development



The US has atoned for the bombing through aiding Serbia's development



political circles, clashes with the principled position of the United States and the EU that the past (the NATO bombing and its causes) has to be kept separate from the future (the status of Kosovo and Metohija and the European integration of Belgrade) and creates a vicious circle when it comes to the dialogue between the West and both the Serbian public and the political elites.

Despite the fact that Serbian society recognizes that the bombing and the Kosovo conflict in general had a negative impact on Serbia's development (78% of respondents share this opinion), the majority does not want to forget this experience: 52% vs. 32%. Among the respondents, 66% believe preserving the historical memory causes Serbia no harm, while 51% are convinced that 1999 marks the most important event in Serbian history.

“it made us stronger both individually and collectively”

“We will not forget; because we are Christians, children of Patriarch Pavle, we do not hate anyone, they hate us as much as we can love them”

“These 78 days taught us what we will pass on to our children. I’m not talking about the history that is written in textbooks to suit the times. I’m talking about the bravery, the struggle of an individual, the fearlessness of a mother, the heroes who saved newborns amid the bombing... about the pride of being a Serb, love for your assaulted land, love for monasteries and faith, about not betraying Serbia and Christ at gunpoint...”^{***}

However, in order to fully heal from those wounds and turn the page of history, the memory of traumatic events must be presented in the court of public opinion and the witnesses must speak out and be heard. Aleida Assmann calls this “therapeutic forgetting” — leaving the burden of the past behind by preserving the memory of events.

^{***} https://www.prometej.rs/education_post_type/jedno-secanje/

konstantan nemir sramota za cijelo čovječanstvo **ratni zločin**
 ta tema ne treba da se spominje gorjele zgrade **velika nepravda i nepoštovanje našeg naroda** podvrgnuti uništavanju
 ne smijemo da zaboravimo opet moramo truditi da neke rane prenesemo da liječimo
 nasilje i nepoštovanje Sramotno i potpuno nepotrebno. **veliki stres**
 konstantan strah da će se zaratiti **strah ponos prkos** Pako i terrorism
 pravedan svijet u kojem je kojem smo težili **Strahuje** bombardiranje je ostavilo utjecaj na čitavu državu
 Nepravda i zločin **nonsens u istoriji ratovanje** **Žrtvu našeg naroda**
 Nezakonito i katastrofalno **divljački postupak**
 Bijes, inat i ponos Bruka u istoriji međunarodnog prava **Surovo. Nepotrebno.** bijes, nepravda, tuga, razočarenje
 stravični zločin jer su stradali civili **totalno nelegitimni** svi nosimo traumu iz tog perioda
 kao neki divlji narod Bliskog istoka **Žestoko i bezobzirno.** velika trauma za cijeli život
 Veliki broj civilnih žrtava koje su oni nazvali kolateralna šteta.

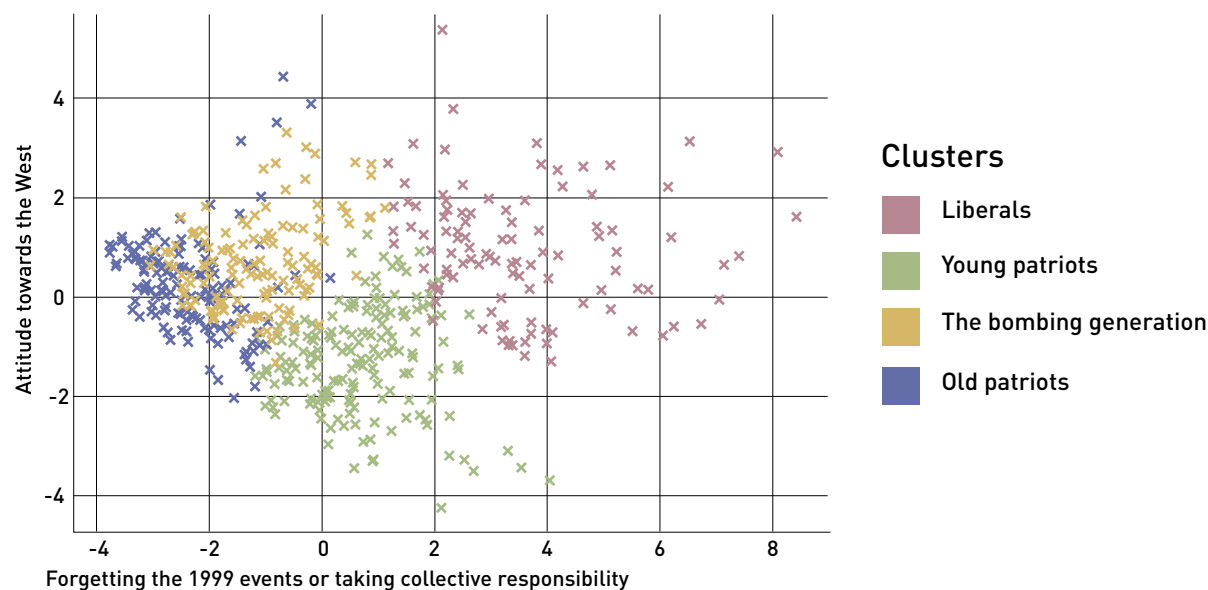
“We must not forget, but we must continue to work and heal”

At the same time, despite the seemingly unanimous nature of Serbian public opinion, in reality the respondents can be divided into four “clusters”, which by and large quite accurately reflect the current distribution of political preferences among Serbs in general. The first cluster includes the generation born in the 1970s and 1980s, whose youth was marked by the breakup of Yugoslavia and the bombing. They blame the West for what happened and have an ambiguous opinion on the role played by Milosevic and the Yugoslav politicians. The next cluster is the 1990s generation. At the time of the bombing, these people were children; in a way, they are the most traumatized generation of Serbs. They tend not to blame the Yugoslav politicians for the bombing, have extremely negative views on the United States and the EU and support the annual commemoration of the March 24, 1999 events.

“Like a phoenix from the ashes, send a strong signal — you can destroy as much as you want, but we can always rise again”

The third cluster comprises what can be called the liberal segment of Serbian society. These people tend to feel that to a certain extent they share collective responsibility for the bombing and believe that the EU and the United States have partially redeemed themselves, while the blame for the bombing rests with the Yugoslav leadership.

Visual representation of social clusters in Serbia based on their attitude towards the 1999 events and political preferences



“first and foremost, we are to blame, we made the wrong decisions”

The fourth and last cluster includes respondents born in the 1950s and 1960s. They can be characterized as the unappeased: they do not feel any responsibility for the bombing, nor do they blame Milosevic and the rest of the Yugoslav politicians; they do not believe that the United States and the EU have sufficiently atoned for what they did to Serbia. Interestingly, the difference between the second and fourth groups lies in their attitude towards Russia: the older generation does not believe that without Russia’s help the 1999 situation could have been even worse, while the younger generation tends to be more positive about Moscow’s role.

“Russia was going through hard times in 1999, many people criticize [its stance], but it’s our fault that we could not cope on our own, Russia cannot always help while they have their own problems, no one could help”

“The Serbian people know history well, and so they do not hold a grudge against the then-current [Russian] government. Russia could not even solve their own problems then because of perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union. We are not angry, because the people supported us back then, and the government helped here and there, there were instances when they participated in negotiations and tried to protect us somehow”

The conducted online research and in-depth interviews show that there is a con-

sensus among the Serbs about the bombing. Even in 2024, twenty-five years later, the majority (70%) sees it as unjustified aggression and a bleeding wound.

The Serbs express a need to form a consensus-based model of future development that would incorporate these events as a formative experience for several generations, including those who did not live through it personally but felt it as a cultural trauma. This trauma is not discussed and covered enough for what happened to finally become part of history instead of the recent past. Moreover, as will be shown later, Western countries, if anything, are doing everything they can to ensure that the trauma of the bombing continues to hurt Serbian society. Their refusal to take any responsibility for the suffering of the civilian population, their selective approach to the shared history of Serbia and the West, as well as the pointed depersonalization of the bombings, resulted in a certain interpretation of these events in Serbian culture. The bombing is seen through the tragedy of an ordinary person against the backdrop of an unfolding great tragedy.

Thus, the hashtag #forgivenbutnotforgotten, popular in the Serbian media space, does not accurately reflect reality, because in fact it is #notforgivenandnotforgotten.

Yugoslavia Bombing in Serbian Culture

Cinema

Since its inception, cinema has been inextricably linked to propaganda, power and identity. Serbia is no exception. According to Serbian cultural studies expert Aleksandar Jankovic, “the history of Serbian cinema is the history of politics and ideology. Starting from the moment when a Serb first picked up the camera (*The Life and Deeds of the Immortal Leader Karadjordje*, 1911, directed by Ilija Stanojevic), the underlying motivation of any film production was, on the one hand, the glorification of the then-current state ideology, and on the other, the chance to somehow weave a big Story into the film... All the prominent figures of Serbian cinema, making films about the birth of a nation or about someone’s personal problems, actually directly or indirectly made films about the leadership/ for the leadership.” Despite the fact that Aleksandar Jankovic exaggerates somewhat when talking about the interpretation of the 1999 NATO bombing, it is impossible to completely disagree with him.

In broad strokes, until recently there were two narratives regarding the 1999 events in Yugoslavia. One of them has the bombing as the backdrop to the general crisis within Serbian society and the state, “run ragged by the Milosevic dictatorship.” It only exacerbates a situation that has already turned into a tragedy, becoming in a way its climax. The other narrative paints the bombing as a tragedy in and of itself,



The Balkan Line (Balkanska meza), directed by Andrey Volgin, 2019.

an act of aggression against ordinary people, who in turn are just trying to survive. The key point is that for almost twenty years these narratives, woven into films, have demonstrated the clash between two versions of the events that led to the NATO aggression: a “pro-Western” interpretation, often created with European and American funding and designed to justify the actions of NATO and the EU, as well as the subsequent consolidated anti-Serbian position on the “Serbian issue” in the Balkans; and the second interpretation, the national one, which for a long time was forced to either adapt to the commercial distribution situation and the political reality of the 2000s Serbia, or to find the cracks to worm itself into European genre film competitions.

Before our eyes, literally at this very moment, a “heroic” narrative is taking shape in the Serbian cinema, where the bombing ceases to be a depersonalized “thunder from the sky”. Its emergence can be linked to the fact that the process of EU enlargement to the Balkans is obviously stalling, and the Western cultural space is not at all interested in solving issues concerning intraregional reconciliation (one after another, sponsored by various foundations, films are being made that show the Serbian atrocities in

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and against Kosovo Albanians).

Over the same period of time (from the late 2010s to the present day), largely in response to the stagnating European integration process,



Before our eyes, literally at this very moment, a “heroic” narrative is taking shape in the Serbian cinema, where the bombing ceases to be a depersonalized “thunder from the sky”

the current Serbian political system has emerged. It is based on two pillars: a foreign policy balancing between all foreign actors and a domestic policy targeting a broad and rational national segment, thinking along the lines of “the art of the possible”. *The Balkan Line* (2019), a joint Russian-Serbian production, was the first manifestation of these changes in filmmaking. With its dramatic opening scene being a recreation of real events — the bombing of a Belgrade maternity ward, the film explores the themes of both the tragedy of an ordinary person and their heroic resistance.

Serbian films about the bombing: a timeline

The first film, *Wounded Land*, was predictably released in 1999 and contained all the characteristic features of a Milosevic propaganda piece, which is why it was consigned to oblivion after the regime change. The following year, only seven feature-length films were shot in Serbia, four of which had to do with the bombing. These are *War Live* (directed by Darko Bajic), *Sky Hook* (directed by Ljubisa Samardzic), *Land of Truth, Love and Freedom* (directed by Milutin Petrovic) and *Dorcol-Manhattan* (directed by Isidora Bjelica). Out of these four, the “bombing as a backdrop” narrative is present in *War Live* (where the greatest evil is political officers of the cinema world assigned by the Milosevic regime to oversee the main characters’ activities; in general, the film skillfully balances between barbs against Milosevic and showing the devastating aftermath of the bombing that was not at all “targeted”), *Land of Truth, Love and Freedom*, and *Dorcol-Manhattan*.



The Load (Teret), directed by Ognjen Glavonic, 2018

The “bombing as a tragedy” narrative is central to *Sky Hook*, which has become an iconic Serbian film. Bombs fall on the basketball court, killing the main character — an ordinary guy (Nebojsa Glogovac) who does not care about politics, does not wish anyone harm, and whose protest against the bombing naturally manifests itself in the form of rebuilding a destroyed basketball court.

We believe it is also important that this allegory — deliberately or otherwise — shows that everything was being indiscriminately destroyed, including national sports, the love of which united Americans and Serbs at international competitions only days before.

Many Serbian directors whose films tangentially touched on the topic of the bombing aimed to “fit the bill.” Thus the films where Milosevic and his regime appear to be the greater evil were made. In addition to the aforementioned films, these are *Cordon* (2002) and *Professional* (2003).

A number of films released in the mid-2000s used the bombing as the backdrop to the main plotline, yet they sent a clear political message.

Among them are *Falling into the Paradise* (2004) and *Awakening from the Dead* (2005). The former is worth describing in more detail. Film critic Djordje Bajic rightly points out that it “gives the impression of a Serbian film that was tailor-made to reflect foreign ideas about what a Serbian movie should be like”; i.e. it is essentially an example of “autobalkanization” and “autochauvinism”. The American character (a pilot whose plane was downed) is shown exclusively in a positive light, while the Serbian characters sarcastically say that “if the Americans knew us better, they would realize that there is no need to bomb us — we can be much better at blowing ourselves up.” The fact that an American plane was shot down by a drunk Serb operating a MANPADS obviously devalues the military success of Colonel Zoltan Dani’s air defense battery. *Falling into the Paradise* got funding directly from several Western companies — Neue Impuls Film (Germany), Mact Productions (France), Rocketta Film and Rotterdam Films (the Netherlands), as well as the state-owned German TV channel ARD-1.

From the late 2000s to the mid-2010s, the topic of the bombing remains in the public eye, despite the absence of new Serbian-made feature films. The end of the decade is marked by Goran Radovanovic’s film *The Ambulance*, as well as several niche films (horror/exploitation), such as *Life and Death of a Porn Gang* (2009) and *Zone of the Dead* (2008), which pokes fun at the consequences of depleted uranium bombs for the Serbian environment.

Notably, during that period and through those films the issue of how the bombing affected the environment was introduced into the Serbian national cinematographic discourse, albeit in a grotesque form.

In the next decade, the theme of the bombing resurfaced in 2013 with *Mamarosh* (directed by Momcilo Mrdakovic), followed by a film about the suffering of Serbs in Kosovo (*Enclave*, 2015, directed by Goran Radovanovic) and the joint Serbian-Dutch production *The Sky Above Us* (directed by Marinus Groothof), which shows the fear and horror of war through the eyes of three people working in the RTS building.

Then came Ognjen Glavonic's infamous *The Load* (2018). Its fundamental difference from the other films, which posited that things were even worse under Milosevic and did not focus on the tragedy of the bombed Serbian towns and villages, is that it puts the blame for the bombing on the Serbian people. This was preceded by *Depth Two* — — Glavonic's documentary about the cover-up of the massacre in the Kosovo village of Suva Reka, where Serbian policemen shot Albanian civilians. *The Load* places the blame square on the taciturn, hard-working ordinary people who transported the bodies from Kosovo to the training grounds outside Belgrade. In this regard, Glavonic's works fit in well with a number of Western films about the Yugoslavian wars, where the Serbs are painted as ruthless murderers (*Behind Enemy Lines* (2001) and *In the Land of Blood and Honey* (2011), just to name a few, as well the less straightforward *Savior* (1997), which is harsh on all parties to the conflict, but mainly on the Serbs). *The Load* was funded



From the late 2000s to the mid-2010s, the topic of the bombing remains in the public eye, despite the absence of new Serbian-made feature films

by were the European Cinema Support Fund (Eurimages), Institut Français, the Dutch Hubert Bals Fund, and the American National Endowment for Democracy. It is extremely rare for the latter to act a direct sponsor, but this was apparently a special case.

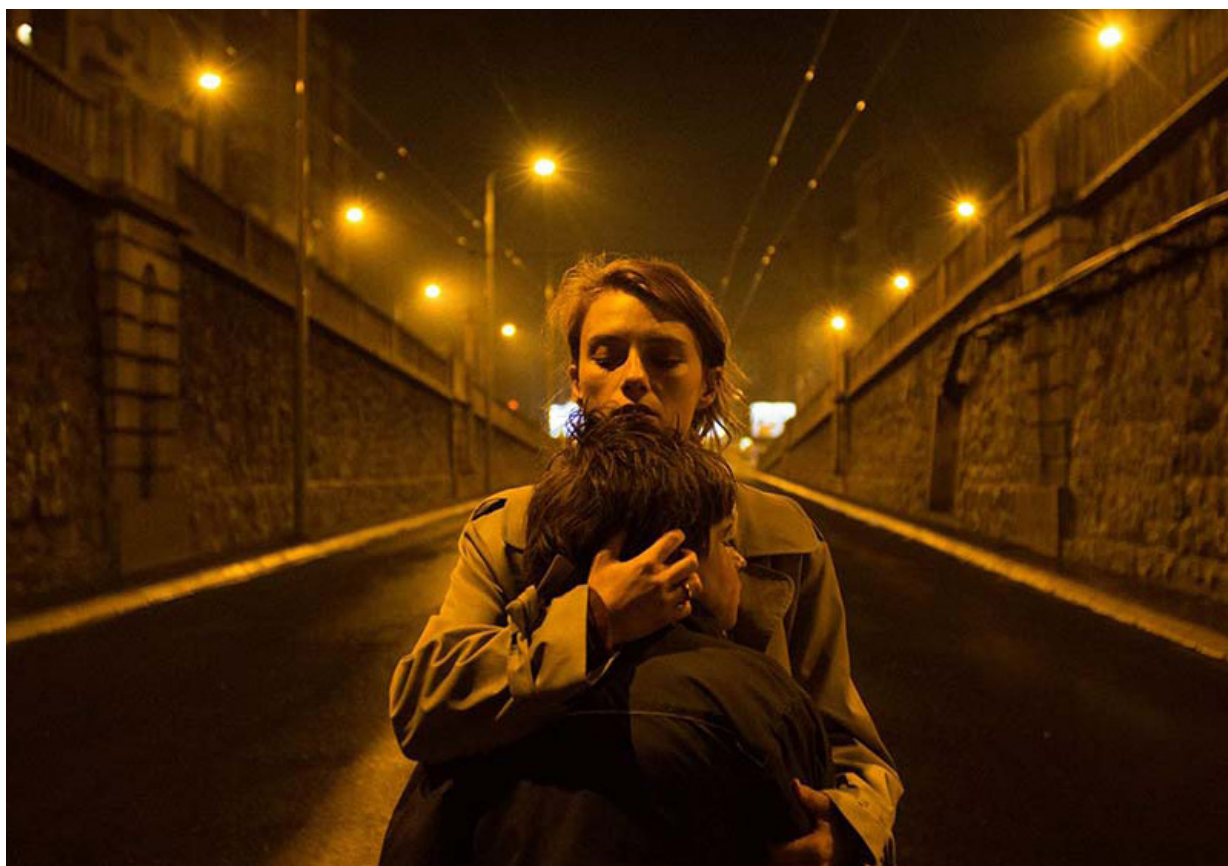
These films share the underlying narrative that “it used to be worse.” They convey that in the grand scheme of things, the bombing was not the worst thing that had happened to the Serbs; as the characters joke in one of the films, Serbs managed their own destruction just fine.

*It is important to emphasize that in the films sponsored by the West (the EU and occasionally the US) the bombing is always a backdrop, just one of the aspects of the “Milosevic hell” engulfing Serbia at that time. Basically, the films implicitly shift responsibility for the bombing to the Serbian political leadership, exposing it as a cruel, incompetent gang that brought about the country’s collapse. However, *The Load* is the pinnacle of this line of thinking, as it blames not just the thieving Yugoslavian politicians, but the people themselves.*

The story told by *The Load* is the embodiment of the “autobalkanization” approach, which, unfortunately, is a flaw that affects not only Western-sponsored films or directors aiming for international film festivals. The cheerful self-deprecation and dehumanization in *Falling into the Paradise*, featuring rakiya, roshtilj and gun shots into the air, was aimed mainly at the Serbian audience — the film was an epic box office flop, and its director Milos Radovic was castigated. At some point, as is the case with Glavonic’s film, autobalkanization ceases to be funny, though the main character still looks like a typical “drunk-on-rakija Serb” (ironically, he is played by Bulgarian actor Leon Lucev — there were no takers in Serbia).

At the core, all these films impose one type of discourse: that the Serbian state and society were wrong, broken, sick. In this dysfunctional reality, some individuals can maintain their personal dignity, but society as a whole cannot. The Load strips the Serbs even of the right to personal dignity.

None of the “sponsored” films put death caused by the bombing in the foreground. This is the message that Western foundations implicitly or explicitly convey to Serbian society: “You failed as a society and a state, and the bombing was a logical — if not fair — outcome of that failure.”



The Erl-King (Bauk), directed by Goran Radovanovic, 2024

As a matter of fact, Serbian society found the strength not to lose the will to live in the midst of that hell on earth, and the attempts to downplay it or force it out from the Serbian perception have essentially failed.

The box-office performance of the Western-sponsored films is a clear indication of that: *The Load* (2018) got only \$28,000. It was this interpretation of the 1999 events — deeply flawed in its own right and blind to the reality and the sentiment of different generations of Serbs — that gave rise to the need to rethink 1999 from the perspective of national heroism. It is also an important reason for increasing dissatisfaction with the relations between Serbia and the West as a whole.

Thus, it is in 2018-2019 that the two completely different films with polar opposite perceptions of the NATO bombing hit the box office — the “sponsored” *The Load* and the joint Russian-Serbian production *The Balkan Line*. Each represents a potential scenario for the future development of Serbian cinema: more autochauvinistic self-flagellation, along the lines of “we were not bombed enough, we need more” (a remark from actor Sergei Trifunovic’s blog that has become a meme) or showing the damage caused by NATO as a starting point for any story set in 1999. It is already clear that the new Serbian cinema has chosen the latter option.

The tragedy of ordinary people in the midst of the bombing is explored in the Serbian film *78 days* (2024, directed by Emilija Gasic), made as a video diary chronicling the lives of three sisters during the bombing. Another interesting film is *Kosare* (in production, directed by Balsa Djogo), which for the first time ever in the history of Serbian cinema will show the heroism of the Serbian defenders of Kosovo and Metohija during the fiercest battle for Kosare.

This seems to indicate a significant destigmatization of the topic: previously it was hard but not impossible to show the tragedy of civilians being bombed; a direct anti-war statement demonstrating the true scale and real casualties of the NATO aggression, however, was nothing short of a taboo in Serbia until recently.

Goran Radovanovic’s *The Erl-King* should also not go unmentioned. The film, which has not yet made it to wide release, shows the attempts of young parents to protect their child from the horrors of the NATO bombing, even if that means lying. The film, produced by Serbian-Russian actor Milos Bikovic, with Vladislav Opeyants as director of photography, premiered at the MIFF and will be screened in Russian movie theaters. This is an important point, since it was Russia’s participation in Serbian film production that finally broke the vicious circle of Serbian cinema’s dependence on Western sponsors and Western festivals.

Music

Unlike Serbian cinema, Serbian music and musical culture as a whole are permeated with slightly different narratives about the bombing. If we take Serbian music made around the time of the bombing itself, it is worth highlighting several key aspects. To begin with, there was traditional patriotic discourse, most evident in songs by Riblja Corba band, such as *Samo Sloga Srbina Spašava* (“Only Unity Saves the Serbs”), and *Zemlja* (lit. “Land”, performed by Aleksandar Erakovic, Dejan Pejovic, etc.). The lyrics in these two songs contain the traditional leitmotif of the Serbian *inat* — the importance of national unification in the face of an enemy. Both songs served as part of the Yugoslavian state propaganda at that time, along with *Volimo te otadžbino naša* (“We Love You, Our Homeland”), which became the unofficial state anthem during the bombing.

Zemlja, performed by several Serbian rappers (Gru, 357, Who’s The Best, Ana Stanic, Ivana Pavlovic, Acme) remains a captivating artifact of those days. It articulates a number of narratives that now resonate with Serbian society: the unwillingness to forgive the West for the bombing (“možda će

Bog da vam oprosti... ja sigurno neću!”, lit. “maybe God will forgive you... I certainly won’t!”); and the historical importance and lasting continuity thereof (“Svaki dan, dokle više? Istorija piše. Treći put u istom veku, ovde se otežano diše”, lit. “Every day, how much longer? History is written. For the third time in a century, it’s getting hard to breathe here”). At the same time, the song repeatedly emphasizes the Serbs’ moral high ground: “I give you words – you give me rockets from the sky; you hit me with a stone, and I hit you with bread again.” (“Ja vam šaljem reči, vi rakete mojim nebom, vi mene kamenom, ja vas opet hlebom”). These lines are a fairly common refrain, used also by Riblja Corba in *SSSS*: “Znam da postoji dogovor sa nebom, ko tebe kamenom ti njega hlebom” (“I know that there is an agreement with heaven: he who hits you with a stone, you hit with bread”). This is a reference to the Serbian traditional nation-building discourse about the “heavenly people” (“nebeski narod”) and the Serbs’ special role and mission in the world.

Curiously, it was rock music, perceived as opposition music in the 1990s and associated with radio B-92, that turned out to be one of the main symbols of resistance. During the bombing, rock music concerts in the squares became commonplace, while the Brankov Bridge even became known as a “rock-and-roll bridge”. The bands that performed there can hardly be suspected of harboring any pro-Milosevic sentiment: Riblja Corba, Električni Orgazam, Bajaga i Instruktori and so on. In 1999,



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some of the “anti-war rock music” was released as a compilation album, *The Song Saved Us*, with a cover art featuring the notorious image of a red target (the symbol of the bombing). Interestingly, the song by Bora Djordjevic from this collection, *Decu ti necu oprostiti* (“I Will Not Forgive You For The Children”), was originally recorded as part of the openly anti-Milosevic 1996 album *Their Days*.

There is also music that deals with individual tragedy, for example, *Noć je vedra nad Srbijom* (“Clear Night Over Serbia”) by Grupa Models music band. The song, written in the characteristic style of the 1990s Serbian pop music, is dominated by the idea of loneliness: “I kao da smo sami mi na celom svetu ostali” (“As if we were the only ones left in the whole world”). A clear or bright night over Serbia is an allusion to the bombing. The overarching theme of the loneliness of the Serbs and Serbia is present in the songs mentioned earlier as well, in particular in *SSSS* (“Znam da su svi protiv Srbije / Nema gore tragedije nego biti iz Srbije. Danas ceo svet navija da se razbije Jugoslavija”, lit. “I know that everyone is against Serbia / There is no worse tragedy than being from Serbia. Today, the whole world is rooting for Yugoslavia to fall apart”). Djordje Balasevic’s *While The Sky Over Novi Sad Is Burning* from his political album *The Nineties* is written in the same vein and compares the bombing to devil’s candles.

A powerful musical symbol of that time is the song *Plavi slon* (“Blue Elephant”). It is imbued with the theme of feeling powerless and wanting to escape from reality: “I neću da se probudim, jer mogu da poludim, kad vidim ko sam, kad vidim gde sam” (“And I don’t want to wake up, because I might go crazy when I see who I am, when I see where I am”). The lyrical persona dreams of American cultural symbols: Madonna, Serbian NBA player Vlade Divac and Bill Clinton, “playing a peace song on a saxophone.” The juxtaposition of absurd verses describing dreams against the chorus featuring the harsh reality, all in minor key, conjures a feeling of longing and powerlessness.

It is worth noting that in Serbian rock music, despite the important role of the rock scene in 1999 itself, the bombing as a theme was not explored to any significant extent. One exception is *Open de Dor* — an album by comedy band The Kuguars, in

which the short track *I remember (Sećam Se)* mocks how Serbian society consigned the bombing into oblivion almost as soon as it was over.

Parody songs deriding Western politicians and officials, as well as the entire defense industry, have become a separate genre. Prime examples of those would be the following songs by the band Indexovo Pozorište: *Ja sam ja* (“I am me”), *Mi smo mi* (“We are us”), and *El Kondor pada* (“The Condor falls”).

However, after 1999, the bombing as a theme practically disappeared from Serbian music, becoming confined to the underground. The bombing is a fairly common subject on the Serbian metal scene: for example, in 2007, thrash metal band Space Eater released their album *Merciful Angel*, where two songs clearly allude to 1999 and the instrumental title song is even called 1999. In the same year, the thrash/black metal band Wolf’s Hunger released the album *Osveta u krvi* (“Bloody Revenge”), which also featured a song called *Merciful Angel* that was dedicated to the bombing. Interestingly, the intro to the song is Clinton’s statement on the bombing of Yugoslavia. In 2015, a thrash metal band Merciful Angel appeared in Belgrade. In 2023, Kobold music band released a song called *Merciful Angel* as part of their album, *Chaos Herd*. The song openly talks about the bombing experience:

*Playing ball in backyard with my five-year-old friend
Sirens wail once again, our game has come to an end
Parents call their children home, it’s time to say goodbye
We never thought, never believed, that this night we might die*

*Merciful Angel takes his flight
Merciful Angel spreads the blight
Merciful Angel burns the skies
Merciful Angel brings demise*

*Lights out to hide from the angel, as he sets out to his flight
Mother tapes the window’s glass, for it might break this night
Noble Anvil burns the skies, every night someone innocent dies
No one cares for our mother’s cries, no one cares for our demise*

These thrash songs, traditionally dark, emphasize the inhuman and hypocritical nature of the bombing. They once again underline how Serbian society feels about “forgiving and forgetting”, present the image of “Serbia against the world” and reveal the trauma of the 1999 events.

Remarkably, the theme of the bombing made an appearance in Russian heavy metal. For example, there is *Operation “Allied Force”* by Radio Tapok — a familiar

name to Serbian music lovers. In a classic heavy metal style, the song describes the human tragedy of the Belgrade bombing:

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>Когда орёл вновь сжимает хват цепких когтей</i> | <i>When the eagle again tightens its taloned grip</i> |
| <i>Когда отцы со слезами хоронят детей</i> | <i>When teary-eyed fathers bury their children</i> |
| <i>Когда тела вдоль подъездов уложены в ряд</i> | <i>When the bodies are stacked in rows along building entrances</i> |
| <i>Осколком в каменном сердце пылает Белград</i> | <i>Belgrade is burning like a shard in a heart of stone</i> |

For the Serbs, *Yugoslavia* by Elena Katina (one of the t.A.T.u duo) became an iconic song encompassing the Russian perception of the 1999 events. It is a kind of apology from Russia for non-interference.

| | |
|--|--|
| <i>Черноглазой девчонкой растерянной</i> | <i>A black-eyed girl, lost and confused.</i> |
| <i>Ты стоишь на другом берегу.</i> | <i>You're standing on the other shore</i> |
| <i>Но добраться до этого берега</i> | <i>But I can't reach that shore</i> |
| <i>Не могу,</i> | <i>I can't</i> |
| <i>Не могу,</i> | <i>I can't</i> |
| <i>Не могу.</i> | <i>I can't</i> |
| ... | ... |
| <i>За ночь под свинцовым градом,</i> | <i>For a night of leaden hail</i> |
| <i>За то, что меня нет рядом,</i> | <i>For not being there with you</i> |
| <i>Ты прости, сестра моя,</i> | <i>Forgive me, my sister</i> |
| <i>Югославия!</i> | <i>Yugoslavia!</i> |

Still, the theme of the bombing largely disappeared from the mainstream and was brought up mainly in the underground music. It resurfaced only in the 2010s, when a number of fairly popular rap songs were released, such as *Bombardovanje 1999* by BLP ft Zookey PL, *Nemilosrdni Anđeo* by Nesta, and *1999* by Goša sa Raskršća. The narratives in these two completely different genres (hip-hop and heavy metal) turned out to be surprisingly similar. There is no “forgive and forget” message there at all, as is evident in the *Bombardovanje 1999* chorus:

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>da li si zapamtio sirene?</i> | <i>Do you remember the sirens?</i> |
| <i>ja jesam! da li kad se setiš te</i> | <i>I do! Do you still get goosebumps when you</i> |
| <i>i dalje hvata jeza?</i> | <i>think about it?</i> |

*da li si još uvek brate besan, ja ne znam
 ali neću da zaboravim to zlo i bol!
 da li si zapamtio sirene?
 ja jesam! da li kad se setiš te
 i dalje hvata jeza?
 da li si jos uvek brate besan,
 ja ne znam ali neću da im oprostim
 to zlo i bol!*

*I don't know if you're still mad,
 But I will not forget this pain and evil!
 Do you remember the sirens?
 I do! Do you still get goosebumps
 when you think about it?
 I don't know if you're still mad,
 But I will not forgive them
 for this evil and pain!*

Lastly, it is worth highlighting an important cultural phenomenon of the bombing experience having become an aesthetic in the Serbian hip-hop scene. A striking representative of this trend is the music band *Bombe Devedesetih* ("Bombs of the Nineties"), whose songs repeatedly contain references to the bombing. The tracks recorded by the band members, in particular one of the most famous Serbian rappers Mimi Mercedez, describe the bombing as an event that shaped a generation:

*Džaba mi kerovi reže
 Ja sam uz vukove rasla
 Smešim se kada mi prete
 Plešem uz zvukove rata
 ...
 Ja se ne bojim za sebe
 Samo za druge
 Srbi ne mogu da umru od puške
 Samo od tuge*

*You can even let dogs tear me apart,
 I grew up with wolves.
 I smile when they threaten me,
 I dance to the sound of war.
 ...
 I'm not scared for myself,
 Only for others.
 Serbs don't die from bullets,
 Only of sadness.*

It is noteworthy that this segment of Serbian hip-hop emphasizes, albeit through post-ironic optics, how close it is to the patriotic folk music of the 1990s — turbo folk — which is what the song *Turbofolk me je naterao* («Turbo Folk Made Me Do It») is all about. In a broad sense, the song represents an assertion of Serbia's unique new identity. Another song by Mimi Mercedez worth mentioning is *Mira Markovic*, in which Slobodan Milosevic's wife Mirjana Markovic is portrayed as a cultural hero. This new interpretation of the Milosevic period, no matter how quaint, and the resurgence of the period-specific imagery in music indicates the rise of resentment among some of the younger Serbs.

The narratives in songs about the bombing correlate with those identified through sociological research. They contain the feeling of loneliness and moral virtue, the unwillingness to forgive and forget, the sense of inat and suffering as the fate of the Serbs — the heavenly people.

In this regard, music reveals much deeper layers of the collective unconscious than cinema, as it reflects purely emotional perception at the moment of the bombing and through the years that followed.

Western attempts to influence Serbian society through sponsoring music projects were extremely limited. The most vivid example of this was *Avala Tower* (Avalski toranj) — a song about rebuilding a telecommunication tower, which, as the lyrics go, “protects Serbs from global isolation” (“brani nas od svetske samoće”). Although it was not a bad tune, the song failed to become popular and is labeled in people’s minds as an example of “nonsense sponsored by Western foundations.”

Fiction

Fiction, primarily prose, has become another medium through which the Serbian people have been processing the trauma of the 1999 bombing. Importantly, it turned out to be the medium that was most in sync with all those feelings that the respondents expressed in in-depth interviews and so provided the most comprehensive picture thereof. The shock caused by the strikes on the Serbian capital was expressed in such books as *Nice Day to Die* (1999) by Momo Kapor, *Nigdina* (2000) by Svetlana Velmar-Jankovic, *Auction of the Wind* (2001) by Vesna Aleksic, and *Under the Dragon’s Shadow* (2001) by Djeordje Pisarev. The novels, different in terms of style and content, nevertheless have narratives and imagery in common.

For instance, it is the unexpected, stunning nature of the bombing — literally a thunderbolt across a clear sky.

This shelling, Velko, when you see it from Kalemegdan, from a balcony or on a screen, seems almost harmless and, most importantly, somehow faraway, like children’s video games. And there is something monstrous about this ostensible harmlessness and this, again, ostensible remoteness, because we are allowed to watch ourselves being destroyed, and we perceive this destruction as something faraway, as if we are looking at our own reality like it was a virtual reality... I’m convinced that our psychological integrity is thrown into question.

Nigdina, Svetlana Velmar-Jankovic

Another common motif is a feeling of betrayal, a loss of togetherness with the West, which seemed to be so close and so easy to understand, but turned out to be alien, cold, and barbaric.

I used to leave pieces of chocolate in the same place for Peter Pan, in case he suddenly appeared... How silly! Peter Pan’s evergreen costume was drawn by some chubby artists in their leather armchairs and air-conditioned offices, surrounded by clouds of smoke...



Svetlana Velmar-Jankovic (royalfamily.org)

They drew with feeling, for us children... What a lie! What a terrible lie!

I closed the window and the glass rattled again. There was another rumble somewhere far away. The Little Prince, Winnetou, Saroyan, Lucky Luke, Whitney Houston, Salinger, 101 Dalmatians, or even Cruella de Vil — none of them had anything to do with this.

Auction of the Wind, Vesna Aleksic

The stories also feature the notion of everyday life and mundane tragedy: bleary-eyed drunks watching the “fireworks” over Belgrade, street vendors selling damp books and empty cafes on Skadarlija. But at the same time, in the face of indiscriminate death, there is also a moment of deep personal freedom and acceptance of the Other. It doesn’t matter who you are, you are free to live as you feel right — that is the crux of the Serbian identity.

Alarmists give themselves over to panic.

Pensioners write angry letters to the President of the United States of America.

Believers pray to God to deliver them from evil.

Secret drinkers can finally openly go on a bender.

Veterans of the previous war boast about their exploits, and aged gunners swear that they would have done much better at shooting down planes than those currently serving.

Nice Day to Die, Momo Kapor

For Kapor, the bombing becomes “the end of history” of sorts: juxtaposing the heartless reality of 1999 against the nostalgic Yugoslav Americanophilia of his late brother and drawing parallels between 1941, 1944, 1995 and 1999, the author

searches for the spark of new life and a new world in the smoking ruins of the old one. In this respect, Serbian literature is extremely candid and occasionally graphic when it describes the tragedy of an ordinary person against the backdrop of a great tragedy unfolding. All the aforementioned authors — Kapor, Aleksic, and Velmar-Jankovic — turn to the refrain of the 20th century Serbian history, i.e. the three bombings, saying that “tragic events in Serbian history keep repeating themselves — bombings in the same month, on the same holiday. It’s gotten a bit boring.” (*Nigdina*, Svetlana Velmar-Jankovic).

The books that were written later, after the physical and emotional wounds left by the bombing closed somewhat, are slightly different. Such works include an expanded edition of Milorad Pavić’s *Biography of Belgrade* (2005, parts 9 and 10), Aleksandar Vulin’s *The Darkness* (2010), Milan Peca Nikolic’s *Cultured World* (2016), and Igor Marojevic’s *Remnants of the World* (2020). They provide larger context and describe the tragedy of 1999 as just one of the ordeals that the Serbian people had to go through in the late 20th century. For Pavić, the bombing is the final bell of the 1990s, during which “Belgrade lost that which made it worthy of love” — not specific urban sites, of course, but its own unique atmosphere. For Vulin, 1999 is only a facet of a cosmic betrayal, the collapse of ideals, loneliness, along with poverty, erosion of moral values within society and the loss of historically Serbian territories.



Momo Kapor (Igor Pavićević)

One day foreign American Italians crossed the border and got lost without their satellite suspenders and crutches somewhere in those rocks of ours, which meant so much to us and to the Albanians, and ended up in our rear.

Oh how we beat them, by their mother the frog, how we beat them, and they whined like little boys, not at all like the heroes of those films in which they painted themselves to be so strong, so powerful. And we believed those films until we felt with our fists, butts of our guns and soles of our shoes that they were weak and soft. <....>

It's a pity that I couldn't bring at least one of them home and introduce him to the neighbors. We would have a roaster, just a suckling-pig that has never once dipped its snout in the slop, I would have untied his froggy little hands and sat him down at the table and told him: eat! Eat, you frog, by your frog mother! Eat and drink rakija made from Mirabelle plums, these very ones that grow in our yard. Home-made rakija, distilled by me! Eat and drink, and look who you're fighting against, you fool.

The Darkness, Aleksandar Vulin

In Marojevic's novel, the bombing is processed through the protagonist's conversation with a psychotherapist, wherein he tries to understand how damaged Serbian society ended up being as a result of everything that happened in the 1990s. Later the protagonist finds himself in a bomb shelter with the same therapist, surrounded by its bare walls, crying children and oppressive television babble.

Now two or three channels were up and running, not only the state one, and they repeated the same labels with which the state news anchors defended themselves from the attackers and their masters. Cowardly bastards, unevenly matched opponents (I thought it was a mistake to take this as an insult, but apparently that's what it was: NATO's aerial power exceeding what FR Yugoslavia had on the ground was considered dishonorable and vile), insane imperialists, neo-Nazis, Nazi minions, worthless villains, petty criminals, Gaelic faggots, Spanish fascists, drug dealers, cowardly maniacs.

Remnants of the World, Igor Marojevic

The protagonist of Djeordje Pisarev novel, *Under the Dragon's Shadow*, is a conscript, who by and large encapsulates the feelings of his entire generation:

The NATO armies are attacking our Leader. They lie to us, telling us the "truth" suited only for the naive. We have all known about this for a long time, and with their lies, twisting the Serbian language, they send us either bombs or their messages. Hey, first you want to kill me and then you ask me to cooperate? My Leader is my problem. For a soldier sitting in a deadly metal monster, this is a sign that it's time to vent all his hatred and contempt for the Leader who for years has been leading us from one lost war to another.

We all agree here, but... That same soldier, who spends nights in a stuffy metal coffin or in the pouring rain, threatens the iron dragons plowing our sky. After all, we all must experience this war first-hand: you're shooting at me, so I swear to God, I'll do whatever I can to break your wings!

Under the Dragon's Shadow, Djeordje Pisarev

Despite the tragedy and pain coming through the passages above, it would be wrong to say that Serbian fiction about the bombing is imbued with a sense of finality of tragedy and hopelessness. Kapor's book ends with the promise of a new beginning: a new branch on an old oak tree (Serbia). Vesna Aleksic's protagonist exclaims: "I have to *wake up* from *this!*" Vulin's fatalistic *The Darkness*, in its brutal realism, asserts Serbianism in spite of everything, without pretense and regrets.

And this is one of the main narratives in fiction featuring the bombing — accepting yourself through disillusionment about the "cultured world", which destroyed radio towers in order to broadcast clumsy propaganda in broken Serbian and scatter bungled and meaningless leaflets from airplanes.

You can only tune in to a NATO radio station, but in addition to propaganda, they have such incompetent hosts with terrible accents and completely unbearable music that for my ear, accustomed to high-quality radio stations, it's physically painful.

Cultured World, Milan Peca Nikolic

geopolitical theory. Here's a glimpse into Seton-Watson's take on the Serbian issue: "None is more important and more pressing than the Southern Slav Question. In it are involved the future fortunes of the whole Croat and Serb race, and through them the fate of the Western half of the Balkan Peninsula — from the Gulf of Trieste to the Bulgarian frontier, from the plains of Southern Hungary to the mountains of Albania. On it depends the balance of power on the Adriatic, with all its bearings upon the international situation. <...> The triumph of the Pan-Serb idea would mean the triumph of Eastern over Western culture, and would be a fatal blow to progress and modern development throughout the Balkans."

He was also the author of a popular saying often (and incorrectly) attributed to Winston Churchill: "The Balkans produce more history than they can consume".

Among English-speaking authors, Sir Noel Malcolm (knighted in 2014) is the absolute champion when it comes to victimizing the Serbs. Having a degree in history, Sir Malcolm made a name for himself in the field of political journalism, writing for *The Spectator*, *The Daily Telegraph* and other periodicals. When he released his book *Bosnia: A Brief History* in 1994, it came as a surprise to the academic community. This work is based on the papers by historians from Alija Izetbegovic's circle, primarily Muhamed Filipovic. No research by Serbian historians was used. The main idea of the book is that the Bosnians are an older and more cultured people than the Serbs, which the "Greater Serbian hegemonists" have been trying to colonize and assimilate since as far back as Tsar Stefan Dusan's days. The book was met with fully merited criticism, which among others came from conscientious scholars in the UK and the US. Many Serbian scholars, for example, academic Slavenko Terzic, believe that Malcolm did not write the book at all, nor the essay about Kosovo that followed, and at best just edited it. We posit that at the very least he must have had co-authors, since all the referenced sources for his book are in the Balkan languages, yet Sir Malcolm has no command of Serbian (or Bosnian), let alone Albanian. His book about Kosovo, unimaginatively titled *Kosovo: a Brief History*, was published in 1998. In it, Sir Malcolm (and/or his co-authors) stays true to himself: Albanians are called the indigenous Balkan people, while the Serbian barbarians only came to the Balkans around 8th or 9th century, adopted Albanian culture and the Christian faith, and then went after them, killing and driving them from the fertile plains to the mountains. Nationalism and religious fundamentalism have never been part of Albanian mentality, and the cruelty and bitterness sometimes shown by Kosovo Albanians is due to the fact that they are forced to exist side by side with Serbs, mirroring their behavior. It is worth noting that it was because of Sir Malcolm that the Western media started referring to the Kosovo Albanians as "kosovars", while the Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija are exclusively "the Kosovo Serbs". In fact, "kosovar" is a *Serbian* ethnonym referring to *all* inhabitants of the region.

Sir Noel Malcolm became the head of the Bosnian Institute in London and the Anglo-Albanian Association, published several more books on the history of the region (no less biased), and was knighted in 2014 “for services to European History”.

The most prominent figure among those who adopted and popularized Malcolm’s approach is Tim Judah, a long-time columnist for *The Economist*. Judah built a reputation covering the fall of the Ceausescu regime in Romania, then reporting for various English-language newspapers during the 1992-1995 wars in Yugoslavia. The approach he takes in his books — *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (2000) and *Kosovo: War And Revenge* (2002) – matches Sir Noel Malcolm’s exactly.

There is another popular science bestseller on the topic, written by famous American author and member of the US Defense Policy Board Robert Kaplan — *Balkan Ghosts* (2005). Looking at different parts of the Balkans through the 20th and providing arguments — some very poignant — about the specifics of the region, the author inconspicuously reduces the conflicts of the 1990s to, again, genocide and terrorism as political tools used by the Serbs. The book has been translated into many languages, including Russian, and sold thousands of copies.

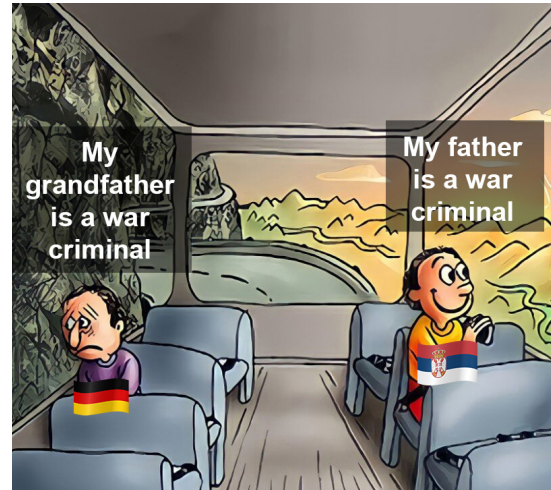
The list does not end with Robert Kaplan, of course, as there are many more academic and popular science works alleging that Serbs, as a “genocidal people”, are a priori to blame. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this approach creates a certain intellectual barrier that not everyone and not always would manage to break through. A good example of this is Noam Chomsky’s *Yugoslavia: Peace, War and Dissolution* (2018), in which the author made an honest but unsuccessful attempt to understand the causes of the “Yugoslav tragedy”. However, even Chomsky’s usual disregard for widely accepted notions does not derail him from the predictable conclusion — everyone is to blame, but the Serbs most of all. Still, it is Sir Noel Malcolm’s story that truly illustrates the triumph of the concept that “Greater Serbian hegemony” was the cause of all the wars and crises in the Balkans. Serbian-English historian Aleksa Djilas tried to challenge Sir Malcolm within the framework of British academic journals and was shunned by the English-speaking academia, no longer able to publish his research and dismissed from his tenure as a professor and, as a result, went back to Serbia with his reputation in tatters. Sir Noel Malcolm, on the other hand, was knighted, which means he can no longer be subjected to legitimate criticism, at least not in the UK. And the basis for such recognition — “for services to European History” — is an insult to the Serbs. This case can hardly be interpreted as anything other than a signal to all in doubt about who is to blame for the conflicts in the Balkans.

The external media coverage was promptly handled by the Croatian, and later the Bosnian leadership, who hired lobbyists and PR agencies in Washington, London, Brussels, and other Western capitals. The most well-known agency of this kind is the

American company Ruder Finn. The firm actively promoted Bosnian and Croatian narratives of “Serbian atrocities”, which in part led to the US public sentiment shifting against the Serbs. Later, Ruder Finn worked with the leaders of the Kosovo Albanians, also promoting narratives about the crimes committed by the Serbs there. This and similar organizations were tasked with shaping a “genocidal discourse” and making it the dominant narrative about the Yugoslav wars in the global media space. This stripped the Yugoslav conflict of its territorial and ethnic dimension and confined it solely to the legal and ethical dimension.

At the same time, Ruder Finn should not be taken as some kind of omnipotent organization that single-handedly turned public opinion against the Serbs. There were dozens of such firms, with Ruder Finn being among the most influential. Apart from them, there were also the Washington World Group, Global Enterprises Group, Jefferson Waterman International, and Burson-Marsteller. In 2023, Radio Liberty published a list of 14 companies who were lobbying in Washington on behalf of the Pristina authorities.

In the 1990s, the Yugoslavian government tried to do the same, but those efforts were in vain, largely because of the UN sanctions, and partly because of the ill-considered choice of lobbyists (for example, chairperson of the Serbian-Jewish Friendship Society Klara Mandic, whom Israel refused to deal with). The window of opportunity for Belgrade closed for good when not only lobbyists and PR agencies



Never ask a woman
Her Age



A man,
His Salary



An “anti-imperialist,”
What Serbia was doing
in Kosovo before NATO
started bombing them.



began to show interest in the Yugoslav wars, but also private military companies, such as MPRI, which together with the Croatian General Staff devised Operation Storm. In the end, according to the data, the ratio of negative media coverage of Serbs to positive was 40:1.

It is important to note that media narratives tend to stick: they sink in and are then reproduced by media outlets even without external assistance. It is extremely difficult to turn things around and break the frame of reference that took hold. That is why, twenty-five years after the Yugoslav wars ended, people across the world, especially in the online space, strongly associate Serbia and the Serbs with “war crimes”. A lot of jokes and memes have been made about this, often by the Serbs themselves. Curiously enough, it is literally presented as a national stereotype, along with *rakija* and *cevapi*!

However, this has a downside: for the average European or American, especially the younger generation, the 1999 bombing of Serbia is directly linked to the war in Bosnia and seen a kind of “retribution” on the Serbs for their crimes. This rewritten history is a product of the ongoing lobbying and PR work in the West.

An important part of it is feature films based on real events. They crystallized the image of the Serbian villain: a genocidal maniac bent on destroying civilians. This took its most grotesque form in *Behind Enemy Lines* (box office: \$91.8 million worldwide, \$18.7 million opening weekend): Sasha Ivanic, the antagonist played by Vladimir Mashkov, turned out to be so convincing that he became the prototype for the GTA IV protagonist Niko Belic. Unfortunately, *Behind Enemy Lines* is not the only film in which Serbs are dehumanized. Such box office hits as *In the Land of Blood and Honey* directed by Angelina Jolie (box office: \$1.2 million worldwide, \$18.9 thousand opening weekend), and *The Hunting Party* directed by Richard Shepard (box office: \$7.6 million worldwide, \$39 thousand opening weekend) are in the same category.

Festival films about the “genocide”, a micro industry all on its own, deserve a special mention. The most prominent director in this genre is Jasmila Zbanic, who has made four films about the “Serbian atrocities” (*Grbavica, On the Path, For Those Who Can Tell No Tales, Quo Vadis, Aida?*). These films are meant not so much for the mass audience, but rather exist to reproduce and consolidate the “genocidal discourse”, i.e. they are openly political in nature (and have the funding to match).

Global NGOs are also used as a tool alongside the media and popular culture. It too is aimed at maintaining and promoting the “genocidal people” myth. These include Remembering Srebrenica, a British NGO actively supported by the British House of Commons member Ali-



A system to demonize the Serbian people has been put in place at all levels, be it the media, public organizations, academia or popular culture. Its task is to continuously overemphasize Serbian crimes and conceal the crimes committed against the Serbs

cia Kearns, the Movement of Mothers of the Enclaves of Zepa and Srebrenica, and TRIAL International. Other organizations whose activities are worth mentioning are the Srebrenica Memorial Center in Potocari and the Post-Conflict Research Center — the organizers of the annual Srebrenica Youth School, wherein narratives of collective responsibility and collective shame are promoted. These organizations have stepped up their efforts ahead of the Srebrenica resolution being put to the vote in the UN General Assembly.

All in all, a system to demonize the Serbian people has been put in place at all levels, be it the media, public organizations, academia or popular culture. Its task is to continuously overemphasize Serbian crimes and conceal the crimes committed against the Serbs; to turn the uneven tapestry of the Yugoslav wars into a black-and-white story of the “good guys against the bad Serbs”, culminating in the bombing of Belgrade.

Internal dimension

The internal dimension of rewriting Serbian history is not so wide. Serbia, unlike the Eastern European countries, did not have an equivalent of their Institutions of National Memory, which were established after the Post-Communist “democratic transition” and became conduits for Western narratives. This is because the aftermath of the bombing and the general traumatic experience of the Yugoslav wars prevented the West from making a tool out of Serbian nationalism and “taming” it. This nationalism takes various forms yet remains anti-Western in nature, so it was decided to rely on



Humanitarian NGOs’ strategy of deliberate devaluation and selective silencing of the tragedy of the bombing has its consequences. In modern Serbia, Western-funded NGOs have a kind of monopoly on activism when it comes to human rights, the environment and historical memory. There are very few national NGOs of this kind

liberal organizations, primarily youth ones.

Such organizations include the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, the Humanitarian Law Center, Women in Black, the Center for Cultural Decontamination, the Helsinki Committee for Hu-

man Rights and so on. They have launched a number of projects related to historical memory and inter-ethnic reconciliation. Among them are some useful initiatives that are worth mentioning. One example is the *Kosovo Memory Book*, which lists the names of everyone killed in the conflict between Serbs and Albanians, or *Dostojanstvo za nestale* (“Dignity for the Missing”) — a book published in July 2024.

In addition, the Humanitarian Law Center dug into the data on the bombing casualties, compiling a list of 754 names belonging to both military personnel and civilians, which seems to be a conservative estimation. However, it was used by the Center and other organizations to accuse the Serbian authorities of influencing memory politics.

The same paper includes the death toll among the civilian Albanian population, which turned out to be nine times higher than the Serbian one — 6,901 people.

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vironment and historical memory.

There are very few national NGOs of this kind. As a result, this agenda is completely dominated by organizations that are funded from abroad (both through public and near-public/private channels, such as the



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Rockefeller Foundation), which cripples the potential for unbiased historical research.

Unfortunately, the monopolization of public discussion goes beyond issues of historical memory. Inter-ethnic reconciliation has also been completely taken over by Western-funded organizations. This is most evident in the annual “Mirëdita, Dobar Dan!” “cultural exchange” festival organized by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR). The festival boils down to Kosovo Albanians coming to Belgrade to tell the Serbs about Serbian crimes. When it's the Pristina part of the festival, representatives of Serbian liberal NGOs show up in sackcloth and ashes, talking about Serbian crimes and “the Other Serbia”. In reality, no reconciliation is happening, because the real Serbian position is not voiced. Instead, Serbia puts on a drag show, which evokes nothing but bewilderment even among Serbian LGBT activists.

No matter how ridiculous, silly or detestable it may sound, such festivals monopolize an important part of the public agenda. In addition to rewriting history under the guise of preventing the state from using memory politics to its own benefit, such actions hinder any real attempts at inter-ethnic dialogue and, worst of all, rob Kosovars and the majority of the Serbian population of their voices. Taking over the discussion on the consequences of the bombing, these organizations, in the absence of patriotic alternatives, are building a system that produces such perceptions about the 1999 events as to downplay their importance for modern Serbian history and, ultimately, to consign them to oblivion. At the same time, the “Serbian crimes” remain on the agenda. Thus, “unbiased” and “fact-driven” NGOs implicitly promote the idea that the Serbian people are collectively responsible for what happened in 1999.

The Bombing and Present-day Serbian Political Elites

In 2003, as is repeatedly stated in textbooks and various analytical materials, the countries of the former Yugoslavia and Albania were offered the European perspective. As far back as the late 1990s, at least after the adoption of the EU's Regional Approach towards south-eastern Europe in 1997, it became clear that there would be an attempt to stabilize the situation in the Balkans through instruments of European integration. That is why the West set the goal to transform, or *democratize* as they called it, all local political elites (including Serbs, Albanians, and Croats, who by that time had undergone a "democratic transit" via extreme nationalism). This plan was in sync with the EU's vision of expanding its influence on the continent, and was also meant to turn over the sad page of the early 1990s, when Brussels was helpless on both international and domestic levels in the face of the Yugoslav crisis.

Unlike many countries of Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space, where the elites who came to power as a result of "velvet" or "color" revolutions were, in fact, Western creatures, Yugoslavia had their own counter-elites that formed during the 1990s. Their consolidation took place by mid-decade. By the time of the Bulldozer Revolution, Serbia had a strong and extensive opposition, which, despite funding from abroad and some outright "foreign agents" (like the Otpor movement), was not artificially planted by external players.

The opposition formed as various social strata gradually grew more and more disillusioned with the authorities: it snowballed, first with the poverty and the crises of the 1980s, then the breakup of the country, debilitating sanctions, media contempt towards the Serbian people who had just recently been part of the big Serbian nation, an influx of Serbian refugees — in short, all the things that matter more to the ordinary people than the political elites. In a sense, the bombing of Yugoslavia briefly created a rally around the flag effect, but it was more of a formality. In October 2000, alongside young men with soft hands who read the "Western manuals" and were marching on Belgrade there were miners in sweaty overalls and abandoned refugees from the Serbian Krajina, whom Milosevic forbade from entering the capital. This strange mix, who represented the new Serbia in completely



People who represented the new Serbia in completely different ways and needed absolutely different things, pushed representatives of the national intelligentsia into power. Graduates of Western universities and NGO employees became an integral, but not a defining part of the new elites. This is the main difference between Serbia in 2000 and Georgia in 2004 or Armenia in 2018



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Importantly, all international actors, including Russia and China, supported the new Serbian elites on their European path. On the Serbian political scene, no major political force opposed European integration. With Vojislav Seselj's extradition to the Hague, the Serbian Radical Party also subscribed to the dominant narrative.

Thus, it became a binary decision: European integration, development and progress against stagnation, crisis and not joining the EU. This false dichotomy in one form or another still exists in Serbian political discourse and public perception, despite the fact that, as the example of neighboring Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia shows, EU accession is not actually followed by a dramatic improvement in living standards.

Paradoxically, in Serbia the dominating discourse about the future of the Balkans created by the European Union was reinforced by the internal political turmoil of the 2000s. Taking advantage of incessant partisan conflicts and the patchwork nature of the democratic coalition, Brussels was able to impose on Belgrade a number of extremely unpopular decisions that could have ruined any party or individual's political career, i.e. the extradition of Milosevic and the military-political leadership of Republika Srpska, and agreeing to the independence referendum for Montenegro. Responsibility for these actions was distributed among the depersonalized Serbian political circles, which benefited the West, since it allowed to leave the issue of what it would take to join the EU off the agenda.

Meanwhile the unilateral declaration of independence by Pristina on February 17, 2008 triggered a backlash that crushed the Serbian political elites of the 2000s.

In response to the US recognizing the self-proclaimed independence of Kosovo, the Serbian patriotic segment set fire to the American embassy. The US refused to work with the center-right Democratic Party of Serbia and its leader Vojislav Kostunica on principle, since they considered him personally responsible for the attack on the embassy. This paved the way for change in the form of the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) and a new political system.

Having come to power in 2012, the SPP managed to form a stable and broad political coalition, which, its patriotic stance notwithstanding, was in favor of continuing the country's European integration and negotiations on the Kosovo issue. With the SPP ruling the country in the 2010s, the political situation in the republic significantly stabilized. Serbia started seeing sustainable economic development, larger inflow of foreign investments and higher living standards. At the same time, the SPP deliberately pursued a "catch-all" party policy, which, taking into account the SPP's patriotic foundation, did not allow for a stable opposition to take shape on the "nationalist" flank, while the liberal part of the Serbian political landscape failed to reinvent itself after 2008 and continued along the path of self-marginalization.

Incidentally, similar processes were underway in Georgia at the same time. The 2008 five-day war also became a point of no return for Mikheil Saakashvili and the United National Movement. In 2012, Georgian Dream won the parliamentary elections and took



The natural course of history cannot be altered by any tricks of the NATO countries, which are not interested in the "1999 trauma" resurfacing in the public discourse, but would prefer quite the opposite — a scenario involving quiet and private self-victimization of the Serbs

power after carrying out a number of constitutional reforms. Georgian Dream, like the SPP, was not an "international project." As is the case with the SPP, Georgian Dream was primarily backed by national capital that was interested in political and economic stability. In both cases, Brussels and Washington hadn't had an issue with those ruling parties until the bigger geopolitical picture started to change dramatically.

For Aleksandar Vucic and the SPP, this time came in the spring of 2017. Now he experiences fluctuating pressure depending on the situation on the European continent.

Meanwhile, irreversible political changes have been taking place in Serbian politics. In no small measure this is because a new generation entered the public sphere — those who were children and teenagers in 1999 and were most traumatized by the bombing.

In politics, the face of this generation is Milica Djurdjevic-Stamenkovski, formerly part of the patriotic opposition and currently Minister of Family Welfare and Demography (born 1990). This generation can roughly be defined as children born from 1983 to 1990. They make up about half of the current Serbian cabinet: Irena Vujovic, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Environmental Protection (born 1983); Marko Djuric, Minister of Foreign Affairs (born 1983); Nikola Selakovic, Minister of Culture (born 1983); Tomislav Momirovic, Minister of Domestic and Foreign Trade (born 1983); Nemanja Starovic, Minister of Labor and Social Affairs (born 1982); Husein

Memich, Minister of Tourism and Youth (born 1983). As a matter of fact, most people working in Milos Vucevic's government were born in 1983. One day it will surely be referred to as the "1983 government". Notably, regardless of their political views, the Serbian political elite is united in their feelings towards the traumatic events of 1999.

An interesting case here is Minister of Foreign Affairs Marko Djuric. As a student, he both rejected Milosevic's authoritarianism and was committed to the Serbian patriotic paradigm, opposed the independence of Kosovo and Metohija and was in favor of strengthening Russian-Serbian ties, and even studied Russian. Djuric has been a member of the Serbian Progressive Party since it was founded. In 2013 he was appointed Director of the Office (Minister) for Kosovo and Metohija, then went on to become the Ambassador of Serbia to the United States. He is also a descendant of the de facto founder of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Nikola Pasic. This is his post on Meta dated March 24, 2019 and accompanied by the iconic song *We Love You, Our Homeland*: "We will always remember the civilian and military casualties of the NATO aggression against our country. We will not forget the killing, devastation, contamination, occupation and the land torn asunder, the exile — these things can never have any justification and will remain the most shameful and unjust crime for all those who committed it."

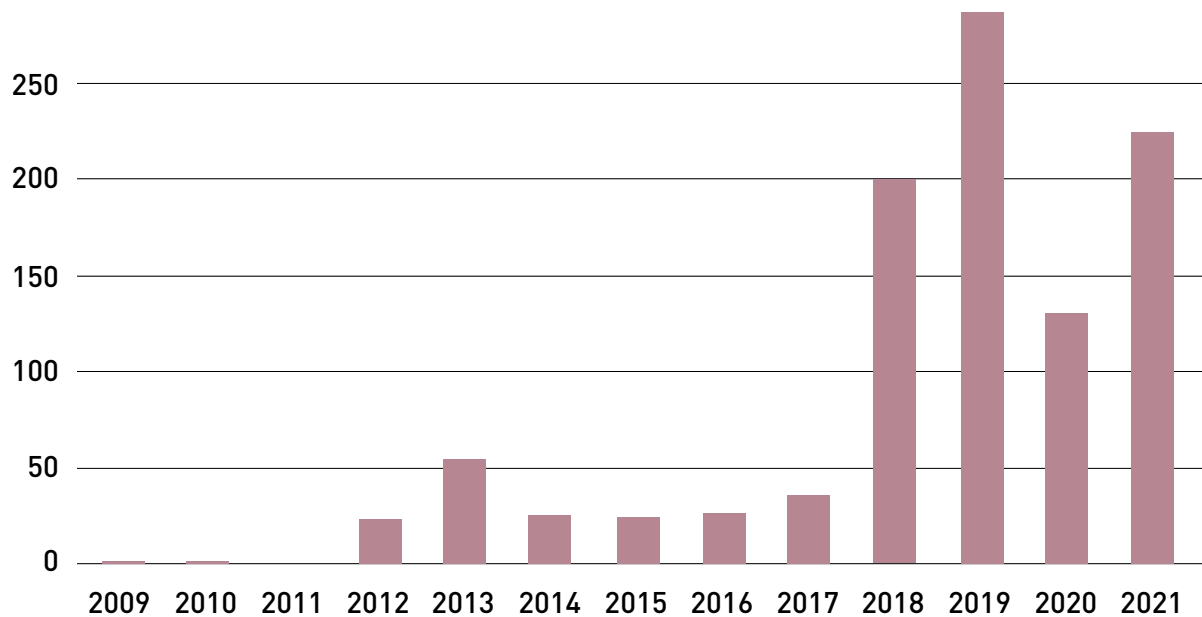
In addition to the new blood of the "trauma generation" revitalizing the political elites, there is another major trend — the homogenization of the ruling party and its transition from a classic "umbrella party" ("tent-type party" in Serbian) into a consolidated, well-functioning mechanism. It was the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that acted as the catalyst for these processes and antagonized the pro-Western wing of the SPP. In the spring of 2023, Zorana Mihajlovic, Minister of Energy and Vice-Chairperson of the SPP; Dragan Sormaz, an SPP MP and head of the Serbian delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly; Stanislava Pak, head of the press service and adviser to the President, as well as a number of lower-status party members were expelled from the party. After this "purge", the party and the government strengthened their ranks by involving young and regional politicians. The consolidation of the ruling party and the arrival of the new blood has had a noticeable effect on the political and cultural life in Serbia. One example of this is the fact that the 1999 events have been brought back into public discourse.



As the Serbian political elite welcomed a generation for whom the bombing was a formative experience, change was inevitable

It is telling that there are practically no 25-40-year-olds — the generation that has an unbending stance on the bombing — among the leadership of the so-called "pro-Western" opposition. Its core members — Dragan Djilas, Zoran Lutovac, Marinika Tepic, Nenad Canak — are significantly older. The "bombing generation" does not

Mentions of the bombing in the National Assembly session transcripts, 2009-2021



identify with Tepic and Lutovac, and the younger, post-bombing generation, that is, people who are now 20-25 years old, are not yet actively involved in politics. Some age group shifts occur only on the left flank of the opposition.

One of the center-left politicians is Stefan Jovanovic, a promising figure and Secretary General of the People's Party founded in 2017 by former Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic. Born in 1989, Jovanovic is from the same generation as Milica Stamenkovski, i.e. the "trauma generation". While Jovanovic supports Serbia's course towards European integration and its military neutrality (non-alignment), on the issue of the 1999 bombing and the status of Kosovo and Metohija he speaks from a position that is very similar to Milica Stamenkovski's and even radical patriots'. For example, Jovanovic reasons: "Starting with the NATO bombing of Serbia, which was carried out without the UN Security Council sanctioning it, then Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence and now attempts to drag Kosovo into the Council of Europe, we are witnessing attempts to replace the rule of law with precedent, when decisions are made without consensus, without the support of the majority. This is a very dangerous trend not only for Serbia, but for the whole world, to which we must respond...*"

As the Serbian political elite welcomed a generation for whom the bombing was a formative experience, change was inevitable. It is telling that the first substantial attempt to discuss the consequences of the bombing can be traced to the activities of parliamentary commissions in 2018-2021.

* <https://www.narodna.org.rs/sr-latn/vesti/narodna-stranka-stefan-jovanovic-kosovo-i-metohija-savet-evrope-srbija-suspenzija-diplomatska-akcija>

Importantly, this discussion was initiated by representatives of all major parties. There is other evidence showing that 2018-2019 was the turning point for how society perceives the 1999 NATO bombing and that the “trauma generation” (born in 1983-1990) ended up being the main driving force behind this transformation. It is also no coincidence that it was in 2018 that the first full-fledged research study on this topic was published — *The Art and Politics of Memory: the Trauma of 1999* by cultural critic Nina Mihaljinac, incidentally born in 1987.

Thus, we see that there are objective processes predetermined by nature and history: a change of political generations and elites, and the need for the generation that was most traumatized by the 1999 bombing to publicly discuss, analyze and conceptualize it. The natural course of history cannot be altered by any tricks of the NATO countries, which are not interested in the “1999 trauma” resurfacing in the public discourse, but would prefer quite the opposite — a scenario involving quiet and private self-victimization of the Serbs.

ECONOMY

Serbian Economy under International Sanctions (1991–1999)

It is crucially important to consider the array of factors that contributed to the economic downfall in the country by the late the 1990s in order to better understand how the Serbian economy went on to develop after 1999. Ever since the early 1980s, the economy of the socialist Yugoslavia had been in a perpetual crisis, with its federal government trying to find a way out of it cabinet after cabinet. Its actual collapse caused by the sanctions and the hyperinflation in the first half of the 1990s led to bankruptcy of many manufacturers. Profitability suffered a blow due to disrupted production and service chains that had been previously functioning in Yugoslavia. Increased poverty rate was the immediate cause of the population's sense of hopelessness when the bombing campaign began.

The events in the first half of the 1990s had an extremely negative impact on the population's living standards, social stratification, as well as the key demographics in

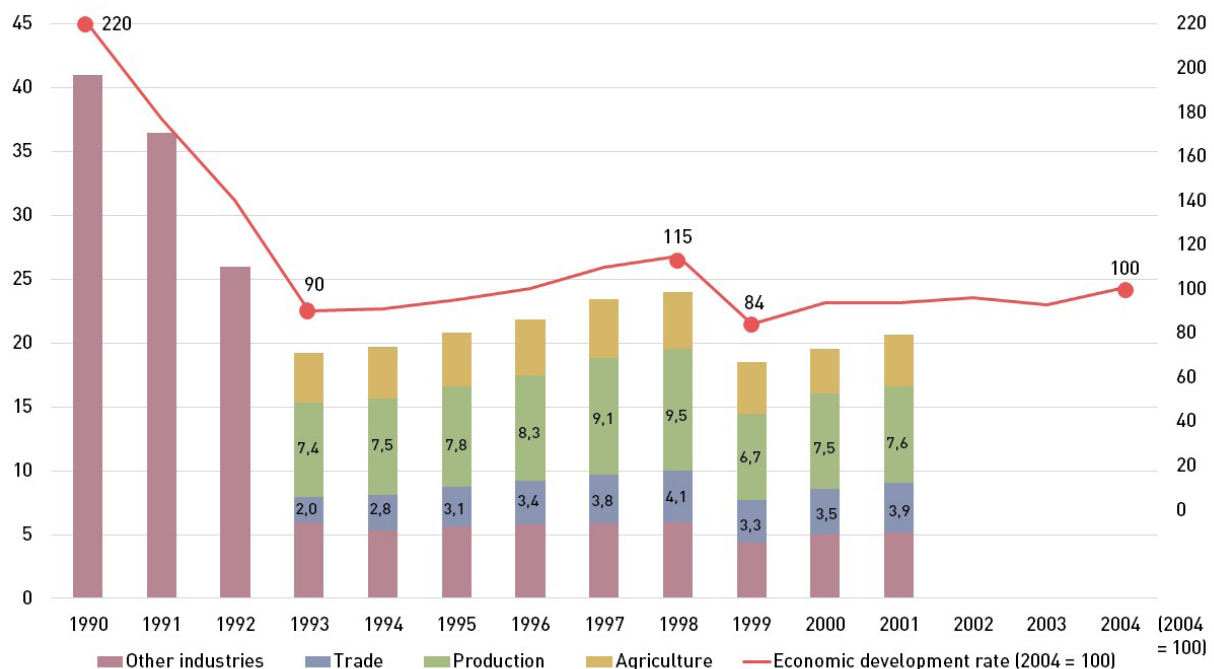


Fig.1. GDP and economic development rate by sector between 1990 and 2001 (bln YUN in 1994 prices) and industrial production index from 1990 to 2004 (on the right, 2004 = 100).

Source: compiled by the author based on the data in Republic of Serbia's Statistics Yearbook by Republican Institute for Statistics, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005.

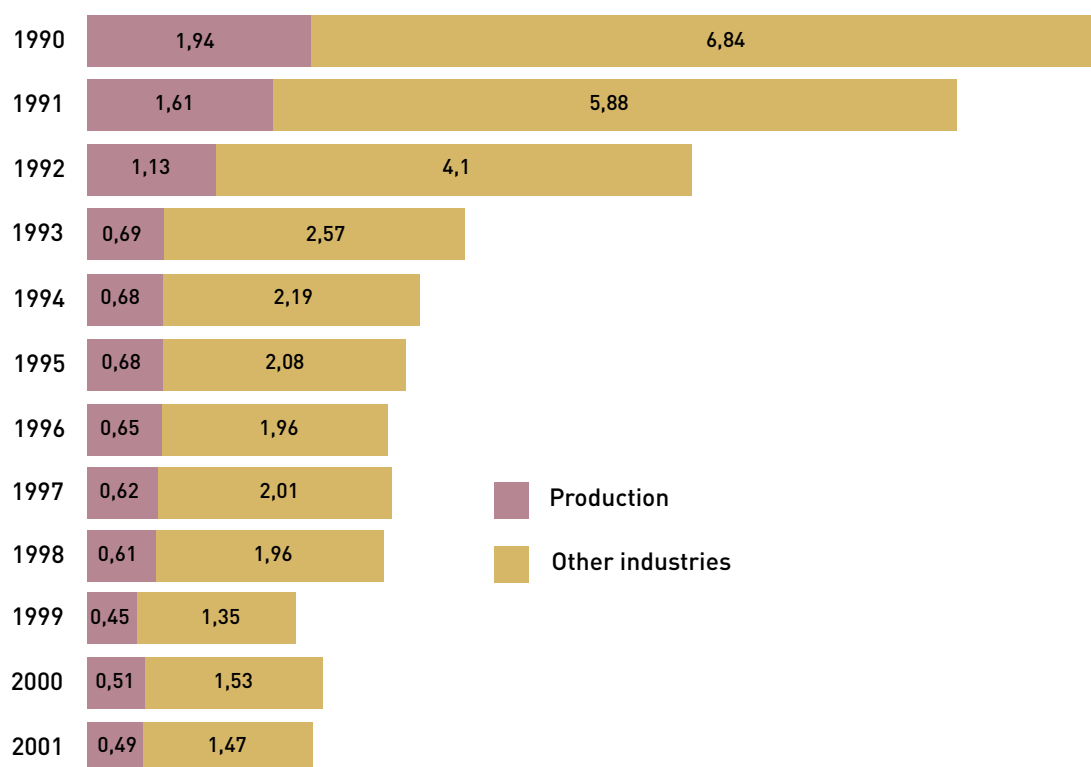


Fig.2. Investments into Serbia's main economy sectors between 1990 and 2001 (bln YUN in 1994 prices)
 Source: compiled by the authors based on the data in Republic of Serbia's Statistics Yearbook by Republican Institute for Statistics, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002.

Yugoslavia. According to various estimates, by the mid-1990s, the state budget deficit was equal to 35-45% of the gross domestic product – whereas deficit exceeding 10% of GDP is considered by economists a menacing factor of macroeconomic destabilization. In the 1990s, Serbia's economy experienced an acute investment deficit, which made restoring and sustaining operation of capital-intensive production facilities an impossible task. It is evident that amid the “investment famine” restoring capital-intensive production, which was the core of the Serbian industrial potential at the end of the 1980's, was impossible.

Based on a set of indicators, Yugoslavia was perhaps the most socially disadvantaged country in Europe in the 1990s. The domestic poverty rate grew to 30%-35%, and the cost of the consumer basket was 3 to 4 times higher than the average consumer income. The available spending behavior data is also consistent with the overall impoverishment of the population. The threat of a food crisis in the country was very real.

Unlike some other former socialist states, Serbia could not rely on foreign trade to become one of the pillars of its economic recovery and growth. According to the official data, the country's exports shrank by two thirds and imports were reduced by half in the 1990s.

This is consistent with the data indicating that over the period from 1989 to 1994, the freight turnover in the country decreased by a dramatic 85% (see Fig.4). The con-

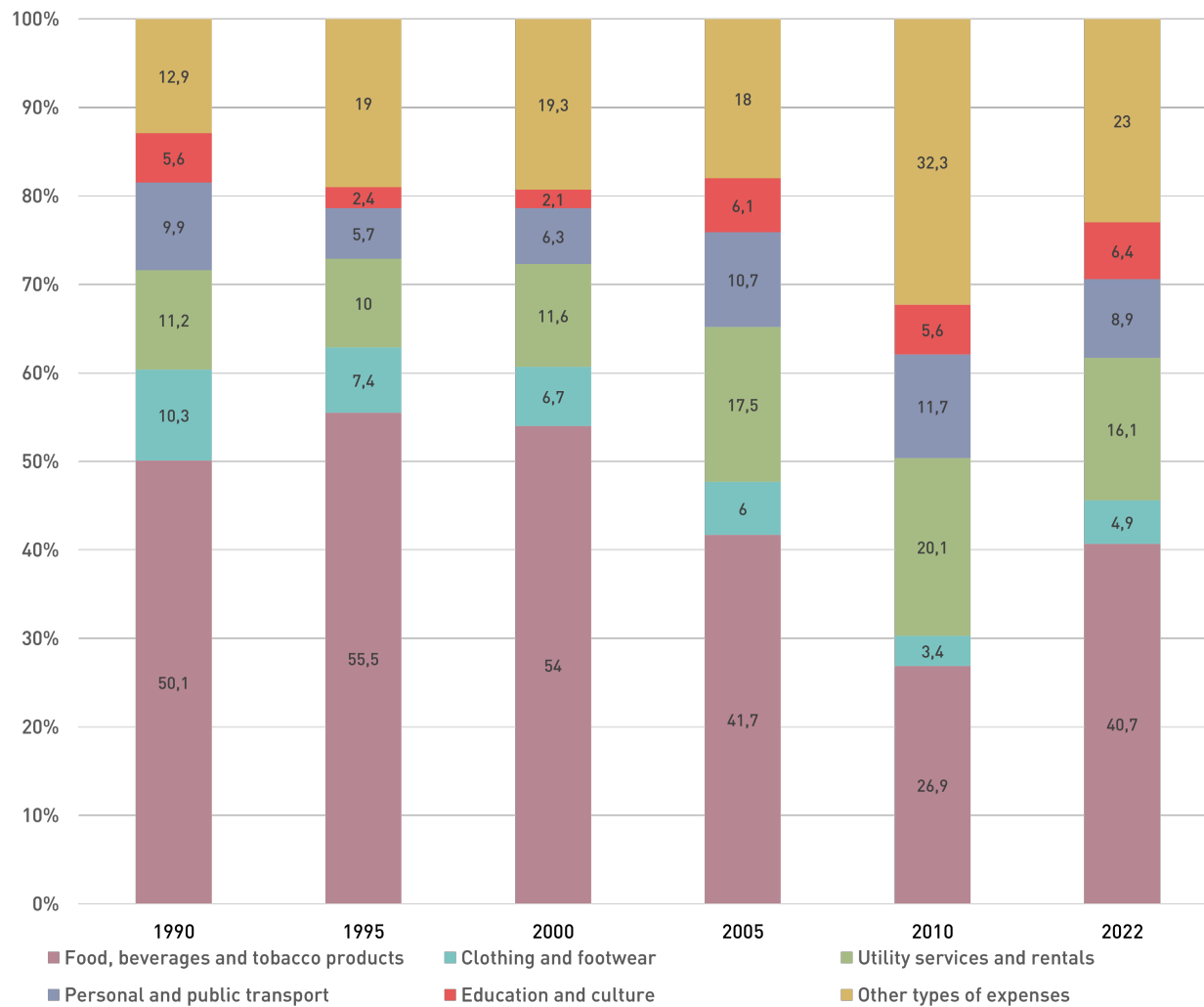


Fig.3. Consumer spending pattern in 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2022 (%)

Source: compiled by the author based on the data in Republic of Serbia's Statistics Yearbook by Republican Institute for Statistics, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2023

tributing factors included not only the overall economic decline, but also Serbia's loss of its role as an important transit hub.

While sanctions effectively caused economic damage such as bankruptcies and overall impoverishment of the population, the NATO bombing campaign destroyed the country's physical infrastructure, making its rapid recovery virtually impossible. At the same time, Brussels had already made it clear by 1999 that inclusion of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the European geopolitical project was a project in the making. Thus, while the collective West was destroying the country's infrastructure it could not but realize that this would be followed by a long period of its recovery, which would become an obstacle to Serbia's accession to the EU on objective grounds. At the same time, it has generated a constellation of myths among the Serbian social environment that the restoration takes place due to the mass buyback of bankrupt national

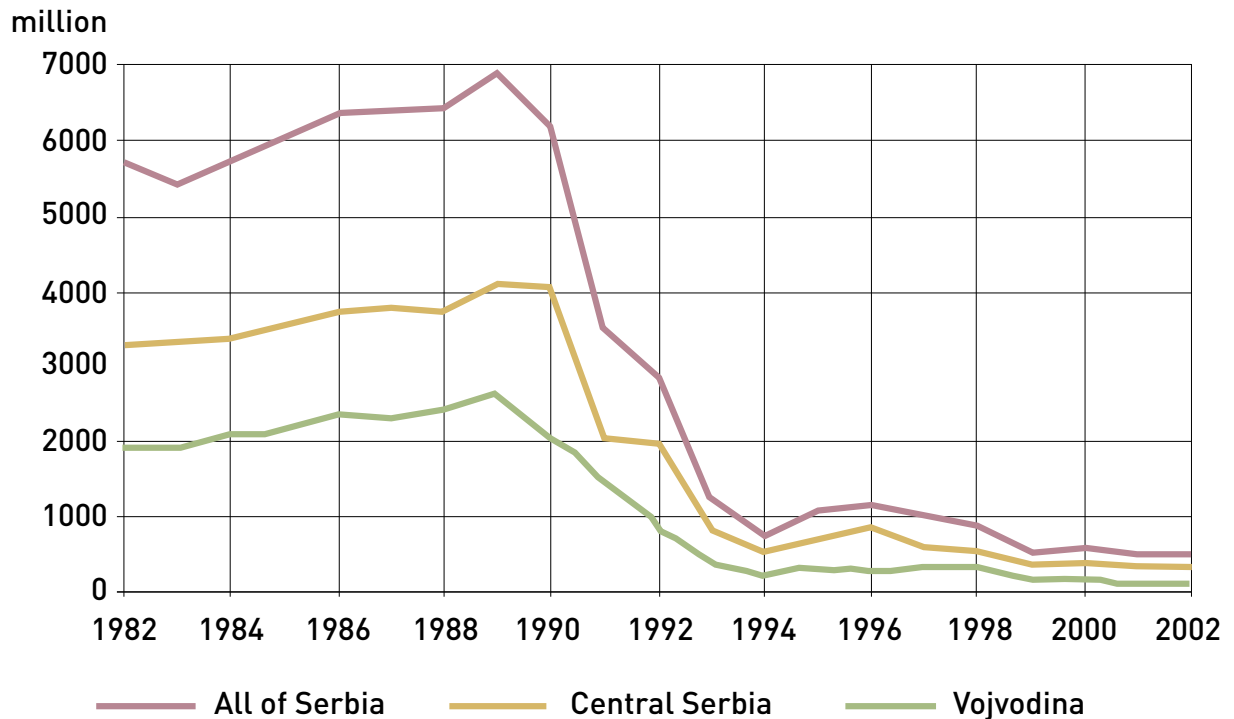


Fig.4. Freight turnover from 1982 to 2002 (million ton-km)

Source: Republic of Serbia's Statistics Yearbook by Republican Institute for Statistics, 2003

enterprises by the Western companies.

One of the NATO bombing campaign's goals was to destroy the country's critical production and transport infrastructure that could be used for military purposes. However, not all of the destroyed or damaged facilities were part of the national security infrastructure. Many of them were nonmilitary production facilities providing the population with essential goods and services such as electricity supply, petroleum fuel, pharmaceuticals, etc. Damaging factories that produced agricultural equipment and mineral fertilizers created a danger of a food crisis.

At the same time, we aren't prone to sharing a common view that in the blink of an eye country's flourishing economy was turned into ashes by an external aggressor because by 1999 Yugoslavia had been able to compensate for the losses of the beginning of the decade to a small extent. The NATO bombing significantly complicated the economic restoration, but calling them the main reason for the Yugoslavian lag in social and economic development at the turn of 1990-2000's would be an exaggeration. To a certain extent, this is supported by the data in the following table.

The table contains a list of production facilities that were fully or partially destroyed by the NATO bombing campaign. The list in the table is organized by sector of economy including military-industrial complex, oil processing, chemical industry, energy production, metals production and metal processing, machine building and others.

Table 1. A list of [some] production sites in Serbia affected by the NATO bombing campaign

| Name of Business | Location | Type of Output in 1999 | Airstrike Dates | Privatization data; market standing | Turnover in 2023, bln YUN | Employees |
|--|------------|--------------------------------------|--|---|---------------------------|------------|
| Military-industrial complex | | | | | | |
| Sloboda | Čačak | Ammunition supplies | April 4, 7 and 13 | Kompanija Sloboda is state-owned (Government and Development Fund of Serbia) | 11,2 | 1640 |
| Milan Blagojević | Lučani | Propellants, propellant powder | April 5 | Milan Blagojevic – Namenska is state-owned (Government, Development Fund of Serbia and municipality of Lučani). | 9,8 | 1525 |
| Crvena zastava (Zastava oružje) | Kragujevac | Firearms | April 8 | Crvena zastava assets were restructured, underwent privatization and some went bankrupt. Zastava oružje is state-owned (Government, Development Fund of Serbia and Kragujevac). | 4,6 | 2316 |
| Krušik | Valjevo | Shells, mines | April 15, 17, 20, 21, 23, May 9 and 17 | Krušik assets were restructured, underwent privatization and some went bankrupt. Korporacija Krušik is state-owned (Government, Pension fund and Valjevo). | 5,9 | 2393 |
| Prva iskra | Barič | Explosives | April 19, May 10 | Prva iskra assets were restructured, some went bankrupt. Prva iskra – Namenska proizvodnja is state-owned (Government and Development Fund of Serbia) | 2,6 | 162 |
| Utva | Pančevo | Light civilian and military aircraft | March 24 | Utva – Avio Industrija; state-owned (Yugoimport-SDPR) | 0,5 | 197 |
| Oil processing, petrochemical and chemical industry | | | | | | |
| Rafinerija nafte Pančevo | Pančevo | Oil products | April 4, 12 and 18 | Former state oil giant Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS) was acquired by Russia's Gazprom Neft in 2009 (51% of stock for 400 mln USD). NIS is the country's largest company in terms of net profit and tax payments. | 402,8 (NIS) | 5101 (NIS) |
| Rafinerija nafte Novi Sad | Novi Sad | Oil products | April 5, 6, 12, 15, 18, 21 and 25 | | | |
| Petrohemija | Pančevo | Organic chemicals | April 15 and 18 | NIS (as part of Gazprom Neft) took control of HIP Petrohemija in 2021 (company's capital stock went up by 150 mln euros). | 32,4 | 1243 |
| Azotara | Pančevo | Nitrogen fertilizers | April 18 | Lithuania's Arvi purchased Azotara for 13.1 mln euros in 2006. Privatization deal was terminated in 2009. HIP-Azotara went bankrupt in 2018. | 3,3 | 98 |
| Zdravlje | Leskovac | Pharmaceuticals | March 29 | Went private in 2003 (acquired by Iceland's Pharmaco Group / Actavis); in 2016-2020 was owned by Israel's Teva Pharmaceuticals, from 2021 on, by Britain's Frontier Pharma. | 3,7 | 341 |

| Energy production | | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|---|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Termoelektrane „Nikola Tesla A“ / „Kostolac B“ / „Kolubara A“ | Obrenovac / Kostolac / Veliki Crljeni | Electricity | May 21 and 23 | State-owned (TENT division of EPS, a major energy producer in Southeastern Europe). | 513,6 (EHC) | 19595 (EHC) |
| Hidroelektrana „Bajina Bašta“ | Bajina Bašta | Electricity | May 21 | State-owned (Drinsko-Limske HE division of EPS) | | |
| Toplana | Beograd (Novi Beograd) | Electricity, heat | April 04 | State-owned (JKP Beogradske elektrane) | - | - |
| Toplana | Krusevac | Electricity, heat | April 12 | State-owned (JKP Gradska toplana Krusevac) | 1,0 | 181 |
| Metals production | | | | | | |
| RTB Bor | Bor | Copper and copper products | May 15 and 16 | In 2007-2008 was owned by Romania's Cuprom (400 mln USD); in 2008-2012 – by Austria's A-TEC (466 mln USD). In 2018, China's Zijin Mining acquired 63% of the unprofitable enterprise for 1.26 bln USD. Serbia Zijin Mining and Serbia Zijin Copper were two of the country's largest exporters in 2023. | SZM – 136,1 SZC – 129,6 | SZM – 1127 SZC – 6045 |
| Sartid 1913 | Smederevo | Steel and rolled steel | May 16 | In 2003, was acquired by U.S. Steel (23 mln USD) that returned it back to the state in 2011. China's HBIS bought control of Železara Smederevo from the state in 2016 for 46 mln euros (Hesteel Serbia). As of 2023, it is the country's third largest exporter. It was the largest exporter from 2003 till 2011. | 98,3 | 4940 |
| Machine building and metal processing | | | | | | |
| Fabrika automobila „Zastava“ | Kragujevac | Passenger cars | April 12 | Was acquired by Italy's Fiat in 2008 (joint venture's ownership capital was 300 mln euros, where Fiat controlled 67%). From 2021, it is part of Stellantis. From 2007 to 2014 stepped up car production from 19 thousand to 117 thousand (97% were exported). FAS / FCA Srbija was one of the country's largest exporters in the 2010s. It has been undergoing reorganization since 2020. | 3,0 (42,5 B 2021) | 671 (2072 B 2021) |
| IMK 14.Oktobar | Krusevac | Tractors, agricultural machinery | April 12 | Went bankrupt in 2016; acquired by Czechoslovak Group in 2017 (re-profiled to production of shell bodies and train car parts) | 2,4 | 325 |
| Fabrika akumulatora | Sombor | Accumulators | May 10, 11 and 22 | Went bankrupt in 2012; acquired by Switzerland's Batagon in 2017, owned by Czech CE Industries from 2021 (Black Horse FAS) | 0,7 | 83 |
| Cer | Čačak | Electric ovens | May 10, 11, 15 and 17 | Privatized in 2009; went bankrupt in 2023 | - | - |

| Name of Business | Location | Type of Output in 1999 | Airstrike Dates | Privatization data; market standing | Turnover in 2023, bln YUN | Employees |
|------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|--|---------------------------|-----------|
| Jastrebac | Niš | Pumps | April 07 | Went bankrupt in 2010; acquired by Serbia's Brioni Lux in 2022. Grounds (14 ha) to undergo redevelopment as part of a real estate project. | 0,0 | 4 |
| Metalac | Kuršumljija | Metalware | April 26 | Privatized in the 2000s, changed production profile. | 0,2 | 11 |
| Other industries | | | | | | |
| Duvanska industrija | Niš | Tobacco products | April 05, 17 | Acquired by Philip Morris International, U.S.A. in 2003 (518 mln euros). | 32,2 | 608 |
| Secerana "Dimitrije Tucovic" | Čukarička padina | Sugar | April 25 | Went bankrupt in 2007 | - | - |
| Drveni kombinat "Kopaonik" | Kuršumljija | Timber and wood products | April 04 | Privatized in 2004; transferred to Serbia's Simpo ŠIK in 2010. | 1,2 | 342 |
| Froteks | Užice | Cotton fabric, knitted fabric | May 29 | Went bankrupt in 2006; demolished in 2021. Grounds to undergo redevelopment as part of a real estate project. | - | - |
| Boreli | Sombor | Footwear | May 10, 11 and 22 | Went bankrupt in 2016 | - | - |
| Nova Jugoslavija | Vranje | Printed products | May 17, 19 and 22 | Privatized in 2003; went bankrupt in 2010; acquired by Serbia's Mona in 2023 (370 thousand euros) for redevelopment as part of clothing manufacturing or real estate projects. | - | - |

Source: compiled by the authors based on open source data. Data on privatization was obtained from the reports by the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Serbia (<https://privatizacija.privreda.gov.rs>), among others; data on turnover and number of employees was obtained from CompanyWall Business (<https://www.companywall.rs>).

Note: The country's top ten largest companies by turnover in 2022 and 2023 are highlighted bold in the turnover column

Direct Damage to the Serbian Economy during the Bombing of 1999

During the first phase of the NATO's campaign that lasted three weeks, NATO efforts focused on bombing the country's military infrastructure, including military airfields, barracks and communications facilities, as well as locations where FRY troops were deployed, such as Belgrade, Pristina, Prokuplje, Kuršumlija and Niš. During this period, the following transport infrastructure was destroyed: two bridges over the Danube in Novi Sad on April 1 and 3, and one more bridge on April 6. These bombings can be interpreted as part of NATO's strategic planning, as the Alliance was considering the possibility of a ground invasion through Hungary and Croatia and could have been seeking ways to prevent possible redeployment of Serbian troops to the north of the country.



Estimates of direct and indirect damage inflicted by the NATO bombing campaign vary from \$4 to \$300 billion

Since Serbia refused to surrender or accept the U.S. terms, an increase in the number of strikes on industrial facilities, civilian targets, and key government facilities followed to convey a clear and unambiguous political message. Among the targets were the presidential residence, Radio Television of Serbia, telecommunications tower on Mount Avala, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense and the General Staff of Yugoslavia. From April 12, NATO air raids targeting infrastructure facilities became more frequent, and the industrial sector remained under constant attack until early June.

Estimates of direct and indirect damage inflicted by the NATO bombing campaign vary considerably. In 2001, FRY President Kostunica issued a statement saying that the total damage from Operation Allied Force amounted to \$300 billion, however he did not disclose the details or the calculation methodology. For comparison, in April 1999, when the number of air raids was only starting to increase, the country's authorities spoke of \$100 billion worth of economic damage. In 2006, the Department of Construction of the Republic of Serbia conducted an audit of the facilities damaged by the NATO aggression and came up with an estimate of 4 to 5 billion U.S. dollars in direct damages. On the other hand, an expert study by the Cato Institute (U.S.A.) concluded that Yugoslavia's neighbors alone suffered a loss of at least \$4 billion due to the disrupted transport connections. The G17 Economic Association estimated the damage at \$40 billion, while the Belgrade Economic Institute's estimate exceeds \$50 billion. This data is consistent with the results of the EU expert calculations that set the amount required to restore Yugoslavia's damaged production and transport infrastructure between \$30 and \$50 billion.

Since industrial infrastructure was the main target of the NATO air strikes, the

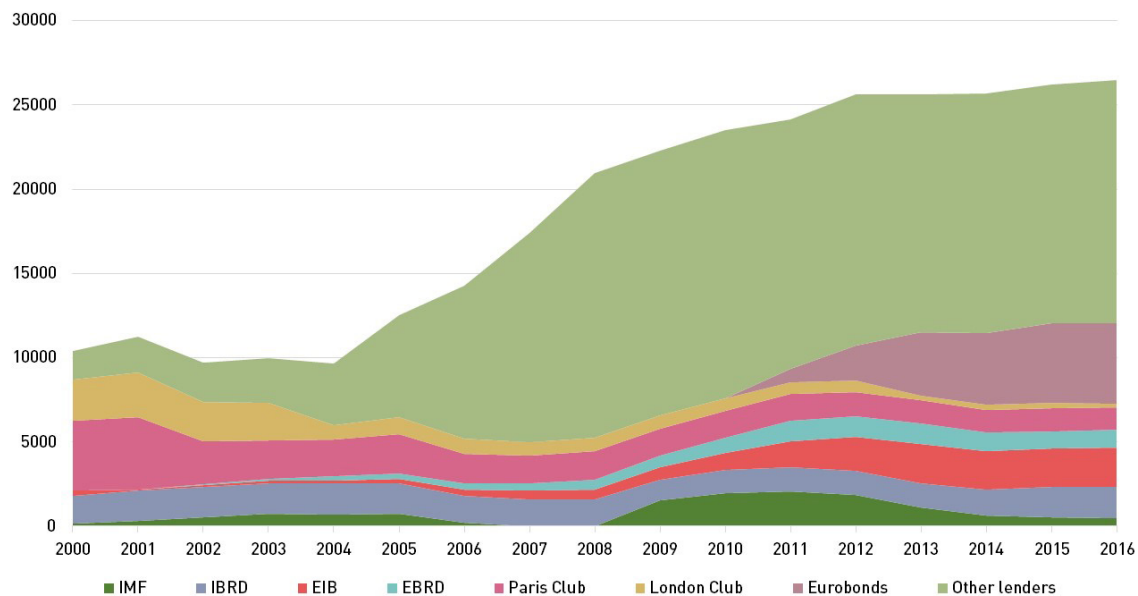


Fig.5. Serbia's external debt structure from 2000 to 2016 (mln Euros)

Source: M.M. Lobanov, *Issues in Serbia's Development: How to "Stay on Top" of the New Wave of Economic Growth? A conference report*. Moscow, Institute for Economics at Russian Academy of Sciences, 2019

country's industrial output dropped by 29% in 1999. The overall decline in industrial production over the span of nine years between 1990 and 1999 in comparable prices amounted to 62%. For comparison, agricultural production dropped by 9% due to the 1999 bombing, while retail and wholesale trade volumes shrank by 18%. Industry suffered a major blow from both the sanctions and the NATO aggression and was looking at a long period of recovery. The official data by the Republican Institute of Statistics indicate that in 1999, Serbia's GDP declined by 23%, reaching the absolute minimum of the decade, i.e. 18.5 billion Yugoslav dinars in 1994 prices. Thus, the overall economic activity volume in the republic during the year of the bombing campaign dropped by 55% compared to the year 1990. After that, the economy began gradually recovering, at a 5% to 6% growth rate in 2000 and 2001.

Only by 2008, Serbia was ready to match the prewar production rates. However, due to the effects of the Great Recession of 2007-09, Serbia's industrial output dropped to the levels of 2000-02. As a result, the country was only able to match the 1998 production in 2017, almost two decades after the bombing campaign.

Some experts maintain that the NATO bombing campaign followed by the change of political regime in 2000 was the root cause driving the state debt up, as well as the debts of the country's private businesses abroad. Many agree that the collective West, having destroyed the Yugoslav economy in 1999, used the profit-making opportunity in the early 2000s by issuing loans on terms unfavorable to Belgrade. Meanwhile, the external debt data published by the National Bank of Serbia indicates that Serbia's

debt rate remained virtually the same (albeit decreasing from time to time) between 2000 and 2004, which was followed by a sharp growth in the second half of the 2000s, which is most likely associated with the loans received within the framework of bilateral agreements.*

By destroying the country's military-industrial complex NATO sought to crush the Yugoslav army's morale and weaken the national defense capability. Multiple air attacks targeted the country's factories producing shells (Krušik), explosives (Prva iskra), propellants (Milan Blagojević), ammunition (Sloboda) and small firearms (Zastava oružje). For obvious reasons, military production data is not available in public domain, which is why we can only attempt to outline the time frame this industry took to recover. Many enterprises of the military-industrial complex went through bankruptcy and asset restructuring procedures, but in the 2010s, the state increased its share of financial support for MIC and helped it secure export deals. As a rule, the assets in question are owned by the Government, the Development Fund of the Republic of Serbia or the Pension Fund. In some cases, local authorities are included as minority shareholders. As of 2023, annual turnover of the most successful MIC enterprises (Sloboda, Milan Blagojević) was in the ballpark of impressive \$90-100 million, and the number of employees ranged from 1.5 to 2.5 thousand people (see Table 1).

Summary: the MIC plants destroyed in 1999 have been able to fully restore their activity and are now major employers (employing about 10,000 people in total) and exporters providing the country with inflow of foreign currency.

By bombing the refineries in Pančevo and Novi Sad NATO clearly intended to disrupt the supply of fuel to the Yugoslav troops. And yet, five years after the bombing campaign, they managed to bring the production of essential fuels close to the pre-crisis level in 1990. Nevertheless, the financial situation at the state-owned NIS was far from good and it is likely that Western oil companies kept their eyes on this attractive asset. However, in 2009, it was acquired by Russia's Gazprom Neft, not least because of Belgrade's political decision to strengthen ties with Russia. As part of the privatization deal, the Russian owner made a massive investment in the large-scale upgrade project for NIS. By mid-2020s, NIS has become one of the largest companies in the country in terms of net profit and tax payments to the budget, with an annual turnover of up to \$3.8 billion and more than 5,000 employees.

Another Pančevo-based company, Azotara, a fertilizer producer that uses Russian natural gas as a raw material, was also damaged by the airstrikes. Largely because of this, **the production of complex fertilizers** remained low in the 2000s. It dropped

* Contrary to a popular belief that Serbia was in “debt slavery” in the 2000s, the fact remains that comparable public debt indicators in Italy and Greece, for example, were three times higher amounting to 100% and even 110% of GDP.

to a quarter of the pre-reforms production level. After an unsuccessful privatization attempt by a Lithuanian owner in 2006-09, Azotara filed for bankruptcy in 2018. The plant has been unprofitable for many years, and the prospects of its purchase by a private investor, given the turbulence on the global gas market and the resulting raw material supply risks, are still slim.

The airstrikes damaged not only the **civilian chemical industry** in Vojvodina, but also production sites in other regions of the country. For example, Zdravlje, a pharmaceutical factory in Leskovac was sold into private ownership four years after the NATO campaign. It was owned successively by Icelandic, Israeli and British investors. It should be noted that the Serbian pharmaceutical industry has a high share of foreign capital: two other leading pharmaceutical manufacturers, Hemofarm and Galenika, are also controlled from overseas.

The country's energy infrastructure was among the NATO bombing campaign's key targets. A total of nine combined heat and power stations and 44 power substations were destroyed. Compared to other types of production that was of strategic importance for the population and the economy, electricity production rates did not decrease so much in the 1990s: in the first half of the decade it dropped by 10% to 15%, and by 1998 it bounced back to the pre-crisis level. This fact is explained by the power production workflow that did not depend on imported energy resources, but instead used locally sourced brown coal and hydropower. Serbia's power generating plants are part of the country's strategically infrastructure of direct impact on its security, so the option of going private has never been seriously considered (this excludes power plants built by private investors, such as Gazprom Neft). Built during the country's socialist phase of development, this infrastructure is now part of EPS, one of the largest energy companies in Southeastern Europe, with 20,000 employees and an annual turnover of \$4.9 billion dollars in 2023.

In May 1999, two of the country's flagship **metal production** plants were also bombed: RTB Bor and Sartid 1913 (Železara Smederevo) specializing in copper and steel products, respectively (see Fig. 6). By disrupting production at these traditionally export-oriented plants NATO sought to undermine the potential of Serbia's construction and engineering sectors for post-war recovery, as well as to suppress the state budget revenues.

Reduced **steel production** can be counted among some of the most serious consequences of the NATO bombing campaign. While in 1997-98, the Smederevo steel plant produced 800-850 thousand tons of steel (following the same level of performance in the late 1980s and early 1990s), the plant's 1999 output dropped by a whopping 83%, down to 140 thousand tons. The plant was bought out by the U.S. Steel in 2003 and later returned to the state in 2011 for a symbolic price of \$1. This is a story that is widely perceived by the Serbian society as an example the collective West's profiteering atti-



Fig.6. Production rates for different types of products from 1990 to 2005

Source: calculated and compiled by the author based on the data in Republic of Serbia's Statistics Yearbook by Republican Institute for Statistics, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005.

tude towards war-torn Serbia. In 2016, China's HBIS bought Železara Smederevo from the state for 46 million euros (Hesteel Serbia) and went on to implement a large-scale upgrade project to improve the quality of its main product, i.e. flat steel sheets.

Serbia's copper industry was going through a crisis even before the bombing campaign due to the loss of export deals that the domestic enterprises consuming copper goods were unable to make up for. Unlike the steel industry, copper production



By bombing two of the country's flagship metal production plants specializing in copper and steel products NATO sought to undermine the potential of Serbia's construction and engineering sectors for post-war recovery, as well as to suppress the state budget revenues from exports

took a long time to recover. The RTB Bor copper plant changed hands a couple of times in the late 2000s: first it was sold to a Romanian and then to an Austrian investor. Before it was finally bought out by China's Zijin

Mining in 2018 for \$1.26 billion, it had to be financed from Serbia's state budget to stay afloat. Following massive upgrade projects, the two emerging companies, Serbia Zijin Mining and Serbia Zijin Copper, became the largest exporting companies in the country. As of 2023, their combined turnover exceeded \$2.5 billion and they employed a total of over 7,000 people. It would be fair to say that China's investments in Serbia's steel and copper have helped the country's metal production industry reclaim the role it played in the Serbian economy before the reforms.

Serbia's civilian engineering infrastructure suffered less from the NATO aggression than the military one. Nevertheless, a number of enterprises were destroyed completely or partially under the pretext that they were producing weapons or hosting military targets (IMK 14.Oktobar, Fabrika akumulatora, Jastrebac, etc.). Many of them went private, filed for bankruptcy or changed their business profile. By the mid-2010s, the volume of passenger car production in Serbia had grown to exceed that of the late 1980s, with a total of 117 thousand cars produced in 2014.

The telecommunications infrastructure was largely destroyed by the bombing campaign, effectively slowing down the development of mobile telecommunications in the country. It is believed that European investors were expecting to gain control of the promising telecommunications market after the 1999 military campaign, but this never happened under the pressure from public opinion. Moreover, in 2003, the state bought the stake back from the Italian partner. The company never went fully private during almost three decades on the market after the NATO campaign. According to the Central Register of Securities Depositories and Clearing, in 2024, 58% of its shares were owned by the state, and the remaining shares were owned by the same-name company, its employees and other private individuals. An employer of 8,500 people, Telekom Srbija is today's market leader in mobile communications (taking up about 45% of market share in 2023 under the mts brand) and landline telecommunications (75% market share), as well as broadband Internet (55% market share).

Since 2003, a cable TV and Internet services provider SBB has been active on the market. It was originally controlled by a U.S. company and then by a British firm. In 2005, Austrian Mobi 63 entered the market. In 2007, Austrian Mobilkom / A1 Telekom Austria Group began to operate in Serbia under the brand name Vip Mobile, followed

by Norwegian Telenor in 2006-18 and then by Czech PPF under the brand name Yettel.

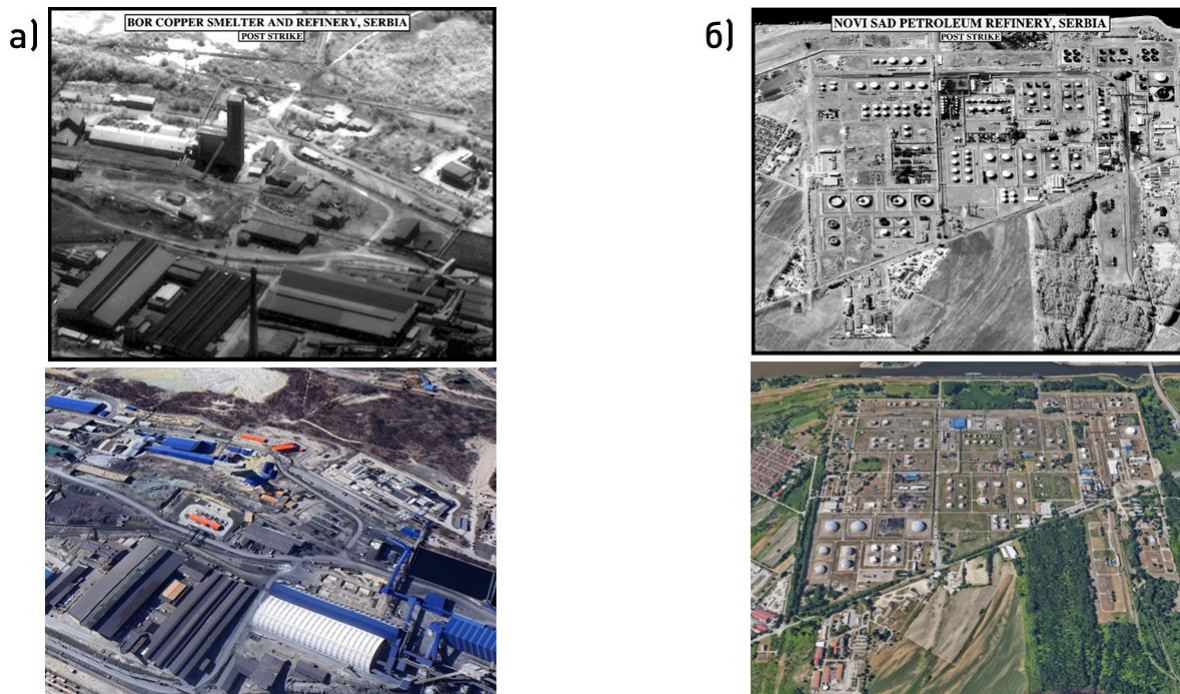
There is a widespread belief in the Serbian society that food processing, consumer goods manufacturing, cement production and wood processing facilities were not targeted by the bombing campaign because companies in NATO member states were looking to take them over. There is no reliable information either confirming or refuting this speculation. The fact remains that some of these production facilities did suffer real damage during the air raids, such as a tobacco factory in Niš, a sugar factory near Belgrade, a knitwear factory in Uzice, etc. However, with the only exception of Duvanska Industrija that was bought by the U.S. tobacco giant Philip Morris International in 2003, these facilities did not attract any major foreign investors. Many of them they went bankrupt in the early 2000s, and their production grounds were repurposed for real estate development.

In this context, it is significant that the transfer of **the consumer goods manufacturing, food processing, beverage production and construction materials production** sites into the ownership of strategic investors was not considered by the Serbian leadership a forced step taken under the external pressure. Rather, the government viewed such deals as successful implementation of its economic policy that would guarantee both the upgrade of facilities and sustainable production growth in these sectors of economy.**

Obviously, the general public in Serbia might have had a different opinion on the subject of the national assets being by bought out by companies from the collective West. In any case, by 2010, a number of foreign investors have both launched new production sites in Serbia (greenfield investment) and bought and upgraded Serbian enterprises (brownfield investment) in the some of the most attractive sectors of economy. For example, dairy industry attracted investments from France, Great Britain and Germany; sugar production – from Germany and Greece; breweries – from the Netherlands, Denmark and the U.S.A.; soft drinks production – from Great Britain and Greece; clothing and knitwear manufacturing – from Italy and Germany; cement industry – from France, Switzerland and Greece, among others.

Thus, the actual state of things in the modern Serbian economy with its modernization strategy speaks against the opinion that the country's economy is hyperdependent on foreign investments shared by some circles in the Serbian society, in particular, by the pro-European political elite, while it is also circulating in the Western information space.

** For example, the Ministry of Economy's official press release announcing the privatization of the Duvanska Industrija tobacco factory in 2003 mentions that attracting a U.S. investor signifies "the most successful privatization deal in the tobacco industry in Eastern Europe" and speaks to "great trust and confidence of major foreign companies," and that the deal "is sending a signal to potential foreign investors that Serbia is a stable market" [<https://privatizacija.privreda.gov.rs/Ministarstvo-privrede/1168/Najuspesnija-privatizacija-duvanske-industrije-u.shtml>]. Such laudatory rhetoric used in the public space to talk about successful privatization deals only a few years after the bombing campaign shows that denationalization was perceived as a win-win process rather than a neocolonial take-over.



Copper production plant in Bor and oil refinery in Novi Sad after the bombing and today.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

It is true that a considerable share of the country's production assets has been upgraded over the course of the past 25 years thanks to Western investments, and the European market is still of critical importance for Serbia's exports. At the same time, national capital is also widely represented in all sectors of economy, and its share in the country's economy structure is significantly higher than what we find in the EU member states with the comparable economies.

It is extremely difficult to say definitively what developments were a direct consequence of the 1999 NATO bombing campaign, and what developments were caused by the preceding collapse of Yugoslavia and by the sanctions. What is certain is that the bombing campaign left much the country's essential material, industrial and transport infrastructure in ruins. This, in turn, slowed down the process of European integration and decimated Serbia's chances of participating the new global economic processes associated with the rapid growth of many economies formerly dubbed as 'developing'. All these circumstances predetermined Serbia's multi-vector approach to its foreign policy in the late 2000s whenever it concerned the country's economy.

THE WORLD

The NATO bombings of Yugoslavia were the logical conclusion of Western policy in the Balkans throughout the 1990s. However, what seemed like a triumphant victory over barbarism and a “genocidal people” in 1999, triggered a chain reaction of repercussions rippling across the region, the West itself, the Global South, and the broader framework of international institutions and law.

Western Narratives about the Balkans: the Foundation for Long-term Policy

The Balkans entered Western geopolitical discourse in the 19th century, when the region’s struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire captured the imagination of European poets, writers, journalists and philosophers. The Balkan peoples — first the Greeks, and later the Slavs — were portrayed as proud, noble and connected to their roots. However, a closer contact with the Greeks left many British observers disillusioned, as they found modern Greeks nothing like the ancient heroes they expected, nor could the locals understand classical Greek. This mutual confusion is masterfully captured by Maria Todorova in her book *Imagining the Balkans*. In contrast to the Greeks, the South Slavs were seen by Western Europe as “warrior peoples,” untainted by civilization. From Lord Byron to William Gladstone, the advocates of this narrative urged Europe to help the Balkans free themselves from the Turkish rule, with little consideration for the need to civilize these peoples.

Following the Berlin Congress, the Balkans began to shift from an Oriental realm into a more European one, spawning the notion that “the Balkans are part of Europe” and inspiring various modernization projects. The logic of Europe’s “golden age” evolved into civilizational moralistic paternalism that we still witness today. The emergence of this concept was hardly surprising, as it was merely an extension of the Anglo-Saxon “white man’s burden” and the French “civilizing mission,” applied to the Balkans, a “close but different” region perceived as a “familiar stranger,” which seemed an ideal target for such a project (though it’s debatable if it actually was).

In the early 20th century, this civilizational narrative was joined by a discourse of “Balkanization,” born out of reactions to the Balkan Wars and World War I. This concept originated in the German-speaking world, as a derivative of wartime propaganda, stating that “the Serbs were slaves twice over” — as Slavs (the words ‘Slav’ and ‘slave’

are related) and as Serbs ('serf' also means slave). Yet, this idea also found support in the English-speaking world. For instance, Disraeli argued with Gladstone in the British House of Commons about the barbaric nature of the Balkan peoples. While this narrative never fully dominated, it did significantly influence Western perceptions of the Balkans. Together with the two concepts mentioned above, it painted a picture of the Balkans as sometimes romantic, sometimes backward, sometimes cruel and barbaric.

This image was not compatible with the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and even less so with socialist Yugoslavia. Despite the complexities of the country's experience for the Balkan peoples, it was a time of progressive technological and societal change. But for Western countries, this period only mattered as long as Yugoslavia existed.

Predictably, when the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) began to disintegrate in 1991, the modernization achievements were quickly dismissed, replaced by political dogmas about democratic theory. For the West, the recent history of the Balkans became just another version of an old story — a tale of peoples in need of civilization. At the same time, the way Yugoslavia's breakup unfolded revived the discourse of Balkanization. Far from losing its relevance, this discourse intensified and merged with the civilizational narrative in the form of genocide accusations against the Serbs.

This narrative took the events in the former SFRY beyond the Balkans, stripping the wars of their local context and presenting them as European or even global events. It also justified any aggression against the Serbs, now labeled a "genocidal people," placing them in the same category as the Germans and Japanese (and later, as the Hutus in Rwanda). As for the severity of the accusations, while the official political rhetoric distinguished between the reckless leadership of the Republika Srpska and the Serbs as a people, in the broader media, the entire Serbian nation was vilified.

This negative media portrayal culminated in the bombing of the Republika Srpska and later, in the largest ethnic cleansing since 1945 in Serbian Krajina. The Western image of the FRY



and the Serbs remained unchanged even after the Dayton Accords were signed. The Kosovo conflict, which escalated in 1998, was framed in the same way as Bosnia and Croatia: “a massacre in the heart of Europe,” “ethnic cleansing” and “genocide.” And while official narratives cast Milošević as the main villain, the broader political and media discourse painted the Serbs as the evil force.

In practice, these narratives faded from the EU and NATO policies by the 2000s but remained deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness. In the late 2010s, the West made attempts to normalize relations with Serbia as a separate state, engaging in respectful dialogue. However, it is important to note that the Serbia-West diplomatic relations have been distanced from the broader “Serbian question” in the region, where the 1990s narratives still hold sway. As a result, even Belgrade’s most well-reasoned arguments are unlikely to be considered in the ongoing dismantling of the Dayton Accords or the resolution of the “Kosovo question”.

The dominance of such narratives in the Western political landscape precludes any fundamentally different approach from Washington and Brussels toward their relations with Belgrade. This is largely because this combination underpins the normative and ethical justification for the 1999 bombings and is impossible to negate, as this would necessitate a reevaluation of Western actions in the Balkans throughout the 1990s.

Attempts by NATO and the EU countries to counterbalance the prevailing discourses and improve relations with the Serbs through selective appeals to shared historical memories, such as the events of World War I or Operation Halyard, do not change the fact that the significant shared history with Serbia only began for Washington, Brussels, London, Paris and Berlin in the 1990s, and Serbia continues to be viewed as a nation with a “bloody past.”

Consequences of the Bombings for the Balkan Region

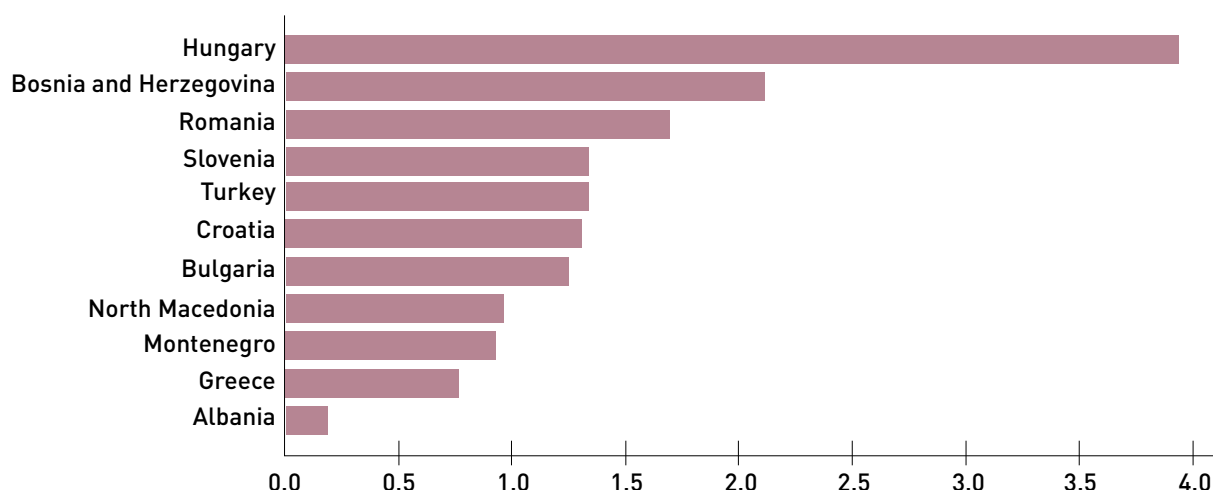
A key issue for the Balkan region, and particularly Serbia, arising from the disintegration of Yugoslavia, is its incorporation into the European and, more broadly, Euro-Atlantic geopolitical project. This perspective shaped a consensus among political elites by the mid-2000s regarding the regional development strategy. Importantly, there is no doubt that the EU considers the Balkans to be within its exclusive sphere of influence. The reluctance to quickly integrate these countries, given their size and strategic orientation, is not due to a lack of resources or means of influence but rather reflects a prevailing sentiment in Brussels that “the time has not come yet.” Equally significant is the fact that, over the past decades, the EU has established an institutional framework for the transformation of the Balkan peoples and their states. Despite the general success of this framework, it has not had a substantial effect on internal modernization; in some respects, it even contradicts it.

The bombings of 1999, as detailed in the second part of this study, physically destroyed many of the Yugoslav industrial enterprises. No doubt, production chains had already been disrupted by the country’s disintegration, economic sanctions, and the wars in Bosnia and Croatia. But while the severing of previous logistical networks was a natural process for all post-socialist countries, it was only in the Balkans that this process took on a sweeping scope. The bombings curtailed the very possibility of reconstructing inter-country cooperation based on the former industrial and economic systems and transport infrastructure. For a long time, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, not to mention other republics of the former Yugoslavia, lacked their own transnational companies for establishing extensive production chains and the resources to acquire partner enterprises in the neighboring countries. Consequently, each of the former Yugoslav countries developed its own individual sets of economic partnerships, with little integration among them.

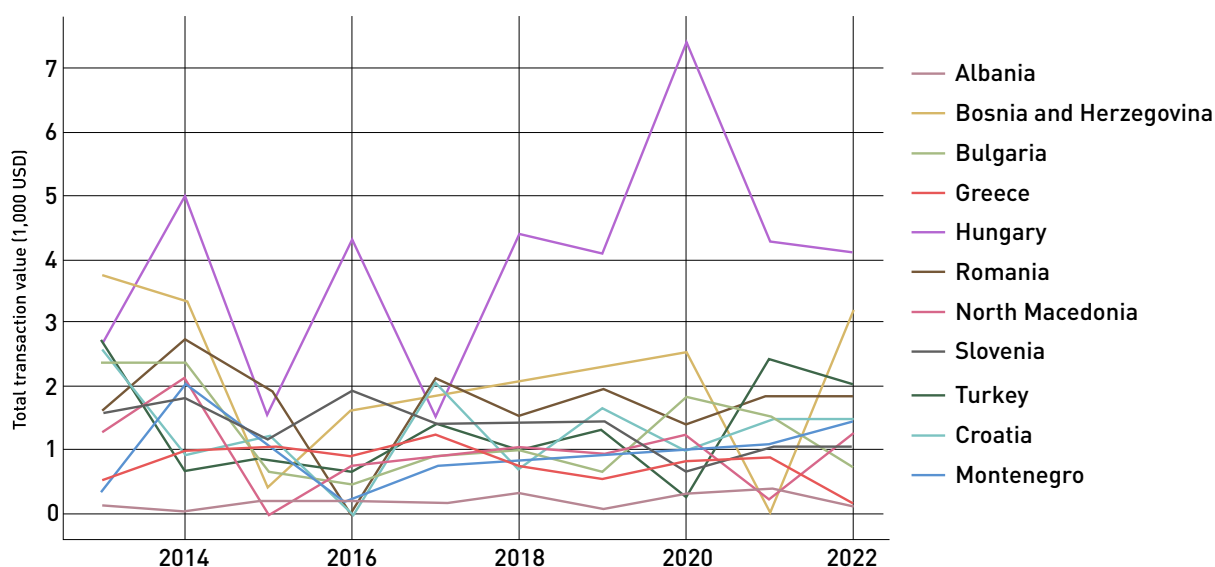
The repercussions of this are evident in the in-depth interviews we conducted. The strengthening of economic ties between Belgrade and Budapest, an unmistakable trend over the past decade, is reflected in public sentiment. The overwhelming majority of respondents identified Hungary as Serbia’s closest neighbor. This is somewhat at odds with the widely accepted view that Serbia’s geopolitical bastion in the region are Montenegro and the Orthodox nations of Greece and Romania (with Bulgaria, things are more complicated).

The military and political consequences are also apparent. The bombings dealt a severe blow to the Serbo-Montenegrin alliance. The dissolution of the FRY, which even in the late 1990s remained a significant regional military force, was followed by the sys-

Overall Volume of Trade between Serbia and the Neighboring Countries, bln \$ (2013-2023)



Dynamics of Trade between Serbia and the Neighboring Countries (2013-2023)



Source: Compiled by the authors based on the data from *Spoljna trgovina (External Trade)/ Exports and Imports Rankings/ Country of Destination-Origin Rankings, by the value of exports/imports*. Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023

tematic 'NATO-ization' of the region: Slovenia, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia all became members of the Alliance. In some respects, this mirrors the situation in the 1950s, when Yugoslavia signed the Balkan Pact with Greece and Turkey, both NATO member states, in 1954, thus gently entering the military and political orbit of the Western bloc and securing NATO's Mediterranean flank, while maintaining its neutral status. However, the Pact did not last long, as we know, due to escalating tensions between Greece and Turkey and the normalization of Soviet-Yugoslav relations. This enabled the creation of the most stable regional system from a military strategic

standpoint, comprised of two NATO member states, two neutral countries and two signatories of the Warsaw Pact. This arrangement curbed intra-regional contradictions and provided security guarantees for all.

Although this system entrenched bloc division, it created favorable conditions for conducting a multi-vector foreign policy. In today's context, such maneuvering is more difficult, which makes Serbia's recent foreign policy successes all the more valuable. But it's also important to understand that an independent, sovereign policy will inevitably be challenged by those who cannot afford such autonomy and are more inclined toward bloc loyalty.

The system of frozen conflicts that the West established during the 1990s is one of the key regional security concerns. These include Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. None of these conflicts have been fully resolved, and their "freezing" is sustained solely by Western military and political presence. The entire territory of the former Yugoslavia has become a "laboratory" for the EU's foreign policy ambitions. The Balkans hosted the EU's first mission under its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in Macedonia in 2003 (EUFOR Concordia), followed in 2004 by the launch of the EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was in the Balkans that the EU started developing the mechanism through which, twenty years later, it would train and arm brigades of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Another security challenge that emerged as a result of the bombings is the formation of "black holes" — lawless zones on the map of the Balkans. These areas include specific districts and towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which have become recruitment centers for jihadist groups in the Middle East, as well as transit points and "safe havens" for terrorists. A striking example is Ilidža, once a Serbian area in Sarajevo, although it's far from being the only "lawless zone" in the Balkans. Kosovo faces a similar issue. These "parallel societies" operate within a closed economy funded by private foundations from the Gulf countries.

A particularly grim, bloody and notorious chapter is the phenomenon of 'Narcoslavia,' or 'Gudroslavia,' a term popularized by the Serbian music group *Bombs of the nineties*. Montenegro and Kosovo have become major entry points for hard drugs, like cocaine and heroin, into Europe. The coordination of these drug flows is largely supervised by the former leadership of the Albanian "liberation armies," financed and armed by the West throughout the 1990s. The 'Narcoslavia' phenomenon has deeply influenced popular culture, permeating contemporary Serbian rap (consider songs like "Krvavi Balkan (Bloody Balkans)" by Coby or the album *Gudroslavia* by rapper Gudroslav) as well as cinema (such as *South Wind*, *Besa*, and other similar films and series).

Lastly, it's important to note that by creating a system of frozen conflicts and indirectly contributing to the rise of transnational crime, the West, whether intentionally or not, continues to stoke ethnic tensions. The persistent media focus on the topic of

Srebrenica is just one example of this. Interacting with the former Yugoslav republics, the West essentially plays out seven different historical narratives, often conflicting in substance. For example, the US embassy in Belgrade would issue a dry statement of regret (but no apology) on the anniversary of the start of the NATO bombings, calling for investigations into the cases of missing Albanians, while the embassy in Pristina hosts commemorative events that spare no effort. In 2024, for instance, not only were there ceremonies recalling “ethnic cleansing,” “horrific crimes,” and “violence that displaced and killed thousands,” but also the Museum of Atrocities was opened in Krusha*. Against this backdrop, the grants allocated by the National Endowment for Democracy and US-AID for “interethnic reconciliation” seem almost absurd.

Thus, the 1999 bombings of the FRY led to the establishment of a *full-fledged system of insecurity* in the former Yugoslavia, a system encompassing both military and political as well as societal insecurity. These efforts produced a militarily secured geopolitical space, with some countries lacking full sovereignty and statehood, having little inclination for regional economic cooperation, and plagued by historical and national contradictions. Meanwhile, a significant part of the region has turned into a breeding ground for terrorist cells and a transit hub for international crime.

Consequences for the United States

The 1999 bombings, which shaped the modern landscape of the Balkan region, also profoundly influenced the future trajectory of American foreign policy and, consequently, American society. Patrick Buchanan’s famous book *A Republic, Not an Empire* was published in September 1999, just three months after the bombings ended. In the book, the former White House communications director openly criticized Bill Clinton’s Balkan policy, particularly his decision to bomb Yugoslavia in violation of international law and without Congressional approval.

Twenty-five years later, Buchanan’s book may seem prophetic. His prediction of future terrorist attacks on the US came true. Just as he feared, the US now plays the role of a global policeman, embroiled in conflicts across Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa, and locked in a standoff with China in the Asia-Pacific region. Hundreds of billions of dollars are spent on maintaining a global military presence. Trillions have been poured into the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, claiming thousands of American lives and hundreds of thousands of Afghan and Iraqi lives. Domestically, under the banner of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), laws like the Patriot Act were passed, creating a full-fledged police state that monitors its own citizens. Since 2001, due to perpetual

* <https://xk.usembassy.gov/krusha24/>

warfare and an inflated military budget, there has never been a federal budget surplus, and the national debt has ballooned to 35 trillion US dollars.



The current division in American society, the erosion of such democratic traditions as the peaceful transfer of supreme political power in order to ensure its smooth rotation, and the tendency to vote not for a candidate but simply against, can be seen as the price the US is paying for the Yugoslavia bombings, for the moral concession it allowed itself

The current division in American society, the erosion of such democratic traditions as the peaceful transfer of supreme political power through presidential and congressional elections in order to ensure its smooth rotation, and the tendency to vote not for a candidate one supports but simply against the one demonized in the media, can be seen as the price the US is paying for the Yugoslavia bombings, for the moral concession it allowed itself. As leading American analysts have pointed out, when many in the Democratic Party refused to acknowledge the 2016 election results and sought impeachment and legal actions against the lawfully elected president, it was seen as a breakdown in the functioning of the US political system. When the same scenario played out in reverse in 2020, with roles swapped between the Democrats and Republicans, it was suggested that such a crisis would almost certainly not happen again. So it came as a surprise when the situation repeated itself in 2024. As the *Foreign Policy* editorial observed on September 9, 2024, the American public is split in two, and “there is little guarantee” that half of the population “will respect the results of the election.”*

But what does Yugoslavia have to do with all this? The bombings of Yugoslavia set all this in motion. Without a doubt, the US chose the path of interventionism during Clinton’s first term, when it sent peacekeepers to Somalia and launched airstrikes in Bosnia. But those interventions were legal, sanctioned by the UN, and not much different from the US involvement in Lebanon in the 1980s.

In Yugoslavia, however, everything was different. For the first time in its history, the US spearheaded a coalition to attack a country that posed no threat to the United States. The goal was to dismantle that country’s territorial integrity. This violation of both international law and America’s own foreign policy traditions had irreversible consequences.

America’s “endless wars,” which have eroded US power and prestige globally, started with Yugoslavia. The doctrine of the reckless use of military might, which spawned

* Agrawal Ravi. Editor’s Note. Introducing Foreign Policy’s Fall 2024 Issue. The world’s advice for US voters—and the next White House // FP. 09.09.2024. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/09/election-dear-america-letters-white-house-harris-trump/>

today's bloated American military bureaucracy, with the Pentagon failing its audits time after time, began with Yugoslavia. The rise of the Atlanticist-neoconservative foreign policy establishment, the infamous 'Uniparty' — a coalition of politicians, think tanks and NGOs who dismiss international law and champion American exceptionalism and permissiveness — started with Yugoslavia.

The current internal polarization in the US, the disregard for democratic norms in domestic political processes and the broader political crisis are entirely the doing of this same American political establishment, primarily linked to the Democratic Party. It has spent the wealth and blood of the American people on endless wars, killing hundreds of thousands, displacing millions and leaving many crippled and destitute. It was this establishment that prioritized wars over the development of infrastructure, industry and affordable healthcare. And the starting point of this policy were the 1999 bombings of Yugoslavia.

Consequences for the European Union

The 1999 NATO campaign against Yugoslavia had an equally profound, albeit indirect, negative impact on the EU.

The manner in which the military operation was conducted, the decision-making process, and the forces and resources that were used to ensure military advantage left the EU with a lasting inferiority complex in relation to the US. Old Europe despises Americans and their leaders deep inside, often viewing them as cowboys. Yet, at the same time, it harbors genuine envy for their power and confidence. Especially today, when the EU has lost the UK, and its GDP now trails behind the US by a third, whereas



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back in 1999, they were on par. While the US has embraced reindustrialization, the opposite is happening in the EU, particularly in Germany. Over the past decade, Europe's labor productivity growth has been half that of the US. That's what underpins the ongoing rhetoric about strategic autonomy promoted by Emmanuel Macron, on

the one hand. On the other hand, there is an unwavering reliance on Euro-Atlantic solidarity and the American nuclear umbrella. Add to this the looming fear that with Donald Trump's potential return to the White House, Washington might simply ask Europe to handle the multitude of problems it has created on its own.

Since 1999, no matter what really happens, China, Russia and the US have perceived the EU as a political lightweight. In reality, the situation may be quite different. The EU can lead the charge in shaping global agendas, efficiently advocating for the abandonment of fossil fuels, pushing for climate neutrality and many other crucial initiatives at all international platforms. Yet, the world continues to judge the EU based on how its member states derailed the peaceful settlement in 1999, its inability to reconcile ethnic strife on its own doorstep or contribute to ending yet another war in the Middle East, or its failure to come up with constructive proposals for the Ukrainian conflict, instead of fanning the flames.

The events of 1999 cast a long shadow over the EU's continuous efforts to reinforce, restructure and add on the institutional and legal framework underlying its Common Foreign and Security Policy. The EU has created the European External Action Service (EEAS), expanded the powers of its High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and bolstered the agenda of defense industry integration within the European Commission for the next five years, until 2029. New strategies are popping up for modernizing the EU relations with individual countries and regions, along with more overarching strategies.

The bombing of Yugoslavia reinforced the EU's belief that what matters most is not the reality on the ground, but how that reality is portrayed by the media and presented to the public. Since then, the EU and US have created a vast and sophisticated infrastructure of parallel virtual realities, public opinion manipulations, information filtering and mainstream narrative control. Over the two decades since 1999, this duality of global processes, this system of manipulating facts, intentions and predictions has become a separate source of interstate tensions, growing friction and conflict escalation.

Consequences for Russia

The NATO bombings of Yugoslavia had an immediate and profound impact on the relations between Moscow and Washington. In the long term, it prompted a reappraisal of values in Russia's domestic and foreign policy, which Moscow began to adjust, albeit slowly and stepwise, shedding its idealistic view of its G8 partners.

As American politicians, diplomats and military officials recall, Washington, together with its NATO allies, was determined to bomb Yugoslavia regardless of whether Slobodan Milošević accepted the Alliance's ultimatum or not*.

The White House was also counting on Russian President Boris Yeltsin to rant and rave for a while, but ultimately calm down and accept the inevitable, as had hap-

* John Norris. *Collision Course: NATO, Russia, and Kosovo* (foreword by Strobe Talbott). Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2005. 333 p.

pened before on more than one occasion. Bill Clinton only realized how dangerous and far-reaching NATO's actions were after a phone call with Yeltsin. He tried to convince the Russian leader of the necessity and appropriateness of the operation, playing what he thought was a winning card — accusing Milošević of being an outdated remnant of the Cold War and the last Soviet-style tyrant in Europe. But Yeltsin's reaction told Clinton just how enraged he was, and it became clear that their relationship would never be the same. What particularly stuck with Clinton was that, towards the end of their lengthy conversation, Yeltsin began referring to him in the third person**. In his subsequent public address to the world, Yeltsin delivered a powerful statement that deserves to be quoted in full***:

"I just had a conversation with Jacques Chirac, the president of France, and with Clinton. We had a very long conversation with the President of the United States. The matter we discussed was that, in a few hours, NATO forces will start bombing Kosovo, in an attack on the entire international community.

I am appealing to the whole world.

I am appealing to the people who have experienced war.

I am appealing to those who have suffered through bombings.

I am appealing to their children.

I am appealing to all politicians.

Let us persuade Clinton not to take this tragic, dramatic step, while there are still a few minutes left.

It is about European security.

This will bring war to Europe, and possibly beyond.

This is a very serious step, and taking it even without the authorization of the United Nations Security Council is deeply baffling.

I call for peaceful, political talks with Milošević.

Yes, he is a tough negotiator. Yes, we might need to talk to him one, two, three, five, ten times.

But it is worth those ten or twenty discussions if it means saving the hundreds and hundreds of people who will be killed in a few hours...

I ask you to join the outrage of all of Russia. The outrage.

We are doing everything we can on our side, of course, but we cannot do everything.

That is, we can, but our conscience will not allow it.

Let us stop Clinton from going down this path.

Let us help him not take this tragic step. A tragic step."

** Ibid.

*** Boris Yeltsin: "Let us stop Clinton from going down this path" // Gazeta.ru. 24.03.1999, 21:08:58. <https://gazeta.lenta.ru/daynews/24-03-1999/02elcin.htm>

The phrase from this address that Russia is doing everything it can, but it cannot do everything, was far from incidental. It accurately reflected the situation. Russia could do very little at that moment. Its economy was struggling to recover from the default, and its armed forces were demoralized. The country was burdened with debt. It wasn't until several years later, under President Vladimir Putin, that Moscow fully repaid its debts, including those owed by all former Soviet republics, and freed itself from foreign dependence.

Political uncertainty was aggravated by the festering wound of separatism and terrorism in the North Caucasus fueled by Western, particularly British, intelligence services — something Moscow was well aware of.

However, that was only one side of the coin. The other side was that Moscow truly valued its relationships with the US and other Western countries. It believed that the world was united, and there could be no return to the Cold War era. Even when partners like the US and EU made mistakes, they had to be corrected, and any differences that arose needed to be resolved, not exacerbated, by seeking at least minimally acceptable compromises. That's why Russia suspended its relations with NATO in 1999, but not its member states, allowing them to normalize in February 2000 following a visit by NATO Secretary-General George Robertson and his talks with Vladimir Putin.

Russia also ensured the unanimous adoption of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1244 on June 10, 1999, for a peaceful settlement in Yugoslavia. On June 11–12, 1999, Russian peacekeepers undertook a “march to Pristina,” securing Moscow's physical presence in the peace process.

However, despite all of Moscow's concessions and restraint, it could not stop Russia and the West from drifting in opposite directions. The US, NATO and the EU effectively sabotaged the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1244. The double standards, which Moscow accused them of back then, became a defining feature of modern international relations. From 2003 onward, crises in Russia's relations with the US, NATO and the EU became alarmingly frequent and increasingly damaging. By 2022-2024, they had reached their peak.

Consequences for China

Just like for Russia, the bombing of Yugoslavia is not a relic of the past for China but a pressing present-day issue. In a statement preceding his official visit to Serbia in May 2024, Chinese leader Xi Jinping once again recalled the Yugoslavia bombings and the attack on China's Embassy in Belgrade 25 years ago, which killed three Chinese journalists. "We must never forget this," wrote the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China. "The Chinese people cherish peace, but we will never allow such a tragic history to be repeated."

Echoing the famous Russian slogan "No one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten," Xi essentially underscored that the bond between China and Serbia had been "forged in the blood of our compatriots."

At a time when NATO has artificially and unjustifiably extended its sphere of responsibility to Southeast Asia, including the South China Sea, and its subsidiary military and political alliances — AUKUS (the trilateral alliance between Australia, the UK and US in the Indo-Pacific established in September 2021), QUAD (the four-way security dialogue between Australia, India, the US and Japan in the Indo-Pacific) and JAROKUS (the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral security pact formed on August 18, 2023) — have joined in NATO's anti-China activities, the intensity of the ideological, informational, sanction-based and economic warfare by the US and its allies against China continues to grow. In this sense, the 1999 bombings of Yugoslavia represent a particular episode in the Sino-American relations as well, but for China's symbol-laden strategic culture, its relevance to today's reality grows stronger with each passing year.

Consequences for Third Countries

The 1999 bombings of Yugoslavia foreshadowed the tragedies of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. Each of these countries has its own unique case, yet all of them bear similarities to the Yugoslav scenario.



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NATO's intervention in Afghanistan, while enjoying international legitimacy, had questionable legality under international law. The subsequent occupation of Afghanistan by the US and its allies which lasted 20 years was legal, but in reality, it served the geopolitical interests of the US and American military contractors rather than combat-

ing terrorism, which became evident in August 2021. Notably, the problem of opium poppy cultivation was never resolved in the two decades of American presence in Afghanistan. After the Taliban came to power, poppy cultivation areas reduced by 95%.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a direct continuation of its 1999 interventionism. Washington's neoconservatives essentially destroyed the Iraqi state and occupied the country under a fabricated pretext. The first decree of the American occupation administration was to open up Iraq's oil sector to foreign companies. American "nation-building" policies led to the bloody sectarian conflict of 2006–2008, which reignited in 2013 with the rise of ISIS*. Only in recent years has Iraq seen a relatively stable security situation. More than a million Iraqis were killed in the conflict, and the Christian minority in Iraq shrank tenfold, from 1.5 million to 150,000.

The idea of "humanitarian intervention," compromised in 1999, was definitively discredited in 2011 when France, the US and UK decided to "protect" the Libyan people. The result was a violation of the letter and spirit of UNSC Resolution 1973, which saw the statehood of North Africa's wealthiest country destroyed, and a civil war erupted that still rages in Libya today.



The experience of Yugoslavia was also repeated in the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the Sahel region. Much like the Balkans, they were seen by Europe as a "laboratory for security policies"

Under the same pretexts, Western capitals have been pursuing the policy of "protecting" the Syrian people since 2011, costing Syria millions of refugees and hundreds of thousands of lives. As part of this "protection" plan, Washington, Paris and London spent millions of

dollars training radical Islamist militants of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), who switched to ISIS* and Al-Qaeda* at the first opportunity. While defending the Syrian people from their dictator, Western nations slapped the internationally recognized government of the Syrian Arab Republic with crippling sanctions, condemning millions of Syrians to extreme poverty. And as a final touch in this arrangement to protect the Syrian people, the US forces occupied oil fields in the country's northeast, depriving Syria of one of its main revenue sources.

The experience of Yugoslavia was also repeated in the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the Sahel region. Much like the Balkans, they were seen by Europe as a "laboratory for security policies." Just like in the Balkans, the military and civilian missions sent there did not solve security problems but pursued the narrow interests of the EU, training local armed forces to combat trans-Saharan migrants trying to reach Europe, not terrorists. However, unlike the Balkans, the Sahel states opted to switch to more effective security partners.

* terrorist organization banned in Russia

What links all these conflicts to the Yugoslavia bombings? The West's belief in its own impunity and moral righteousness, its tendency to disguise narrow interests as humanitarian narratives and its disregard for international law and human lives are the factors that ultimately shattered its moral authority.

An Anti-legal World Order Based on Inequality

The events of 1999 dealt an almost irreparable blow to the modern international legal order, leading in many ways to its dangerous and tragic transformation. The long-term consequences and damage to the international legal system are multifaceted. Some of the most obvious outcomes include:

(1) For the first time in history, NATO carried out an offensive military operation bypassing the UNSC. When establishing a new type of global security organization after World War II, the victorious powers entrusted the UNSC with the primary responsibility to maintain international peace and security, as outlined in Article 24 of the UN Charter, which granted it the exclusive authority to make binding decisions in this area. Article 25 further obligated all member states to comply with and execute the UNSC's resolutions. This framework eliminated the possibility of any legal or legitimate decision being made to conduct an unprovoked military operation against a member state of the organization. This principle is the very foundation of the global collective security system.

The global organization created by Russia, the US and UK and joined by other nations in San Francisco in 1945, guaranteed equal security for all its members from deliberate attacks by any organized group of states.

NATO's bombings of Yugoslavia shattered these guarantees, creating an extremely dangerous international precedent, drastically lowering the security threshold for all the countries of the world. Not only did the bombings pave the way for future multinational aggression against Iraq and Libya, but also facilitated the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. While Washington had every right to exit this agreement like any other, ignoring the UNSC resolution that endorsed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was entirely unacceptable. The same applies to the Minsk Agreements designed to put an end to the war in the Donbass. UNSC Resolution 2202 conferred the highest legal force on the Minsk Agreements, and both the Kiev regime and all UN member states were bound to work towards their implementation. The sabotage of the Minsk Agreements by the Western guarantor states was a clear violation of the UN Charter and international law. By bombing Yugoslavia NATO undermined the central pil-

lar of the global collective security system, guaranteed by the UNSC, which provides all member states with equal security, regardless of how weak and vulnerable they may be in comparison to an aggressor. NATO has once again divided the world into the states that are capable of defending themselves and determined to build up their military, including nuclear, capabilities to that end, and all the others who have nothing to rely on.



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In other words, by bombing Yugoslavia NATO destroyed the international legal order, safeguarded by the UNSC, and re-established the very essence of inequality — inequality in the physical security of states.

(2) NATO's bombings of Yugoslavia devalued the core principle and purpose of the United Nations, as outlined in Articles 1 and 2 of the UN Charter — the prohibition of the use of force as a tool of foreign policy (specifically, "against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations"*). Humanity had spent centuries working towards these principles and creating the necessary mechanisms and security infrastructure to uphold them, embodied in the UNSC.

The Alliance set humanity back by generations, to the epoch before World Wars I and II, and made the prospect of a third world war much more likely, as evidenced by NATO discussions in the fall of 2024 about authorizing precision strikes deep into the Russian territory.

The UN Charter permits the use of armed force only in two cases — first, in self-defense under Article 51, which was not applicable to the FRY bombings, and second, by a decision of the UNSC. Had the member states of the Alliance attempted to submit a resolution on Yugoslavia, Russia and China would have vetoed it. The 'Responsibility to Protect' concept (R2P) does not apply to the situation in Yugoslavia, as the decision to invoke it also falls under the Security Council's authority.

There are also other consequences that are less visible to the average observer, but perhaps even more serious in their substance.

(3) The Yugoslavia bombings relativized the constitutional nature of the legal

* Throughout the text, the UN Charter is referenced from: UN Charter (full text) // United Nations. <https://www.un.org/ru/about-us/un-charter/full-text>

order. In today's world, the UN Charter serves the same function as constitutions within nation states. Like national constitutions, the Charter holds supreme authority, but its scope and subject of regulation are far broader. National constitutions dictate that domestic laws, law enforcement and the behavior of national legal entities must align with their provisions. Similarly, the UN Charter establishes that all and any international agreements and state actions must comply with its principles. If they contradict the Charter's requirements, the agreements can be declared null and void (and all actions taken under them proclaimed unlawful from the moment they came into effect), and the state actions declared criminal and entailing international legal responsibility.

Paragraph 2, Article 2 of the Charter requires all UN member states to "fulfill in good faith the obligations assumed by them in accordance with the present Charter." As mentioned earlier, all Security Council decisions are binding under Article 25. The Charter's supremacy is explicitly enshrined in Article 103, which states, "In the event of a conflict between the obligations of the Members of the United Nations under the present Charter and their obligations under any other international agreement, their obligations under the present Charter shall prevail."

By flagrantly violating the UN Charter in Yugoslavia, NATO called its inherent supremacy into question. Once this precedent was created, it made all future violations easier to justify, both for NATO and everyone else, since the essence of law lies in obliging everyone to act the same in similar situations. But when violations are legitimized, it condemns all other members of the international community to lawlessness, as the rule of force is elevated to the status of law, which in turn legalizes inequality. Therefore, it's safe to say that the US, NATO and the EU, by bombing Yugoslavia, took a step toward establishing a world order based on inequality.



The 'Responsibility to Protect' concept (R2P) does not apply to the situation in Yugoslavia, as the decision to invoke it also falls under the Security Council's authority

(4) Through their actions, the US, NATO and the EU undermined not only the principle of non-use of force but also all other peremptory norms of international law, i.e. its very core, especially the principles of territorial integrity and the right of nations to self-determination. The

all-around violation of the territorial integrity principle is clear. They forcibly seized a portion of Yugoslavia's territory (which was unprecedented in the international relations of that time) and created a protectorate there. In violation of the aforementioned Resolution 1244, they pushed for the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence

and then began actively promoting its participation in their programs, international agreements and organizations as an independent state, pressuring third countries to recognize Kosovo's independence.

The issue of self-determination is more complex. First, the Venice Commission for Democracy through Law identified around 30 different forms of self-determination. Second, self-determination should not lead to violent discrimination against non-titular populations, their persecution, and so on — issues that the US, NATO and the EU blatantly ignored. Third, if one people is granted the right to establish an independent state, then the same right must be recognized for others in similar circumstances.

(5) The Yugoslavia bombings and all subsequent actions by the US, NATO and the EU produced a situation of legal uncertainty, which is fundamentally incompatible with the international legal order. Essentially, they sought to reserve for themselves the privilege of interpreting imperative norms of international law differently, in particular regarding the use of force, non-interference in internal affairs, sovereign equality of states, territorial integrity, self-determination and international cooperation.

On September 1, 2008, the European Council declared at an extraordinary meeting that despite Mikhail Saakashvili's military attempt to reintegrate South Ossetia into Georgia and the realities of the five-day war in the Transcaucasian region, conflict resolution could only be achieved by unconditionally adhering to just one principle from the interconnected set of principles stipulated in the UN Charter — the territorial integrity of Georgia.

In plain legal language, this would also mean that Brussels should have recognized Kosovo's reintegration into Serbia as well as the return of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan and of Taiwan to mainland China, and so on.

On the one hand, this highly flexible, situational interpretation of the imperative norms of international law turns the international order upside down. On the other hand, it positions the US, NATO and the EU as powers that are above the law but force everyone else to comply with it, while constantly reshuffling the legal rules for others like a deck of cards. This essentially constructs a legal order that denies equality to other nations and states.

(6) Respect for the court, the judicial system, whether within national borders or on a global level, provides society with the crucial ability to resolve conflicts and disagreements without violence, combat crime and impunity, protect legitimate interests and ensure legal certainty. In doing so, courts contribute immensely to political stability and steady socio-economic development of countries.

An objective analysis of the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for the prosecution of persons responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian

law committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia since 1991 (ICTY), established by the UNSC on May 25, 1993, under Resolution 827, raises serious doubts about its ability to meet the high standards of justice. Otherwise, Russia's UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin wouldn't have had to declare on June 4, 2008, that "Russia sees as unsatisfactory the state of affairs at the ICTY." He said, "We expect to receive a detailed report from the Tribunal on what had been done on the heels of the shocking revelations of the former Prosecutor Carla del Ponte, concerning facts that the Tribunal had concealed. We have a feeling that serious accusations, such as the massive forced removal of human organs, had simply been ignored by the Tribunal."

Over its 24 years of existence, the Tribunal handled 142 cases and prosecuted 161 individuals. Of those, 90 were convicted, 56 completed their sentences, and 20 were acquitted. 92 cases were brought against Serbs, 33 against Croats, 8 against Albanians, 7 against Bosnian Muslims, and 2 against Macedonians. The Tribunal convicted Bosnian Serb leaders such as former army commander Ratko Mladić and former President of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina Radovan Karadžić. Slobodan Milošević, the former president of Yugoslavia, died in his prison cell in The Hague before the end of his trial. Almost all Serbian military commanders were incarcerated, while most Croatian generals were either acquitted or released on parole. In percentage terms, 60% of those prosecuted were Serbs and Montenegrins, and 18% were Croats. Karadžić was sentenced to 40 years in prison, while Mladić was found guilty on 10 out of 11 charges, including war crimes, taking UN staff hostage, and the genocide of Muslims in Srebrenica, and was sentenced to life imprisonment.

The Tribunal's work can be characterized by a pronounced ethnic bias, when most responsibility for the past events was placed on Serbian political and military leaders, the use of demands for cooperation with the Tribunal by Western countries to exert political pressure on parties, politicians and countries of the region, the concealment of facts, distorted interpretations of certain events, as well as questionable legal reasoning. All of this is reflected in the testimonies of Carla Del Ponte in her book *The Hunt: Me and the War Criminals*.

The defects revealed in the Tribunal's work meant that it did virtually nothing to foster reconciliation among the peoples of Southeast Europe or to create a unified perspective on the past and present events among the world's key players. Moreover, it led to a lasting skepticism among some members of the international community toward international criminal justice, further exacerbated by the similarly biased actions of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the manipulation of justice.

(7) One of the key outcomes of the Yugoslavia bombings and the one-sided approach to justice in international judicial bodies was the introduction of the two ideas mentioned above into global politics — the "civilizational" and "Balkanization" narratives — which have since been used both separately and together. As a result, politi-

cal and socio-economic transformation programs became radicalized, and so did the mechanisms for dealing with third countries. Since the US, NATO and the EU lacked sufficient support, strength and resources to achieve their transformation goals, they resorted to exporting their own legal frameworks, national or collective laws, abroad. The trade and sanctions war they orchestrated to undermine the economies of Russia, China and other independent states has no basis in international law. They create their own rules domestically.

This mechanism is very well showcased by the use of secondary sanctions.

By coercing third countries and their companies to adhere to restrictive measures outlined in their domestic law, they effectively impose sanctions on all third countries. Essentially, they strip these countries of their basic rights as full participants in international relations, arbitrarily deciding with whom they can trade and to what extent.

This, together with all the other claims, manipulations and tricks used by the US, NATO and the EU, amounts to the imposition of a world order based on inequality, injustice and lawlessness.