

REPLAYING OLD TUNES

A CASE STUDY OF SERBIAN IDENTITY POLITICS UNFOLDING IN THE TRIANGLE BETWEEN BANJA LUKA, MITROVICA, AND BELGRADE. A PATHWAY TO RUSSIAN FOREIGN INFLUENCE BY EXPLOITING LOCAL DRIVERS AND TRIGGERS.

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Review paper

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Abstract: Local dynamics are crucial for uncovering Russian influence operations and understanding how Russia operates. In Serbia, pairing memory politics with state capture strategies proves to be a powerful tool for both

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local elites and Russian activities. Memory politics enables Serbian elites and nationalists to exploit historical grievances, garnering support and legitimizing their narratives, which often hinders democratic progress and social cohesion in both Serbia and its neighbouring countries. State capture facilitates this by enabling media, judiciary, and security institutions to propagate the regime's ideological agenda. This troubling dynamic extends beyond the ruling party, as large parts of the Serbian opposition also embrace nationalist narratives, thereby limiting democratic pluralism and prolonging the influence of nationalism, even in the event of potential regime changes. Serbia uses its ethnic minorities in Bosnia and Kosovo as proxies to stall state-building and exacerbate divisions, perpetuating identity-based conflicts that impede institutional stability in the region. The vulnerabilities of the Serbian nation across its borders create opportunities for exploitation by Russia, especially in the context of recent events in the Balkans and the Ukraine War. Moreover, Serbia's situation highlights similar risks in divided countries like Georgia, Moldova, and Montenegro. To effectively counter Russian foreign policy, it is crucial to understand the local causes, drivers, and potential triggers of instability.

Keywords: memory politics, state capture, Russian influence, and local drivers and triggers

Introduction: Living where the past is ever-present

The visual representation of Serbian nationalism is intense, overwhelming, and on the rise. In just one year, from the summer of 2023 to 2024, identity politics in Belgrade's public space has exploded. Driving from the airport to the city centre of Belgrade, every light post now has a Serbian flag attached. Under almost every bridge along the highway, political statements referring

to past events are expressed: "*Serbia is not a genocidal nation*", being the most common slogan. Other crossings feature graffiti such as "*Kosovo is Serbia*" or "*Kosovo is the heart of Serbia*" written in large letters. Closer to the city centre, enormous posters in Serbian colours and language read, "*We are not a genocidal nation. We remember... - Proud Serbia and Republika Srpska*". These statements very much set the scene for the content of Serbian memory politics. The past that the Serbian nation deals with continues to be the Yugoslav war and the consequences of the Serbian defeat in the 1990s. The loss of Kosovo, the relationship with the Serbian minority in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and the feeling of ill-treatment and lack of respect for Serbia by the international institutions and Western states.

How should we understand the rise of nationalistic expressions in Serbia? Are tensions growing towards a new interethnic conflict in the Balkans? Could Russia take advantage of the growing instability, showcasing NATO's lack of credibility as a crisis manager and diverting attention from the War in Ukraine (Nyemann 2024)?

Since 1999, with the end of the Kosovo conflict, the Western Balkans has been a relatively peaceful region, thanks to the help and attention of the international community, including NATO missions, OECD missions, and EU missions, which have been sustained by diplomacy and investments from individual donors and countries. The international community has tried to bring about justice, first and foremost through the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), bringing criminals to trial for the most severe crimes committed during the war. There

have also been efforts to enhance security sector reforms (SSR) and state-building processes, specifically in BiH, which has a highly complex institutional structure following the Dayton agreements, aimed at enabling different ethnic groups to coexist and participate in the country's power-sharing structures. In Kosovo, NATO has maintained the KFOR mission since 1999, alongside other initiatives, including the NATO Liaison and Advisory Team, which contributes to securing peace and security, as well as the local SSR process. This list of overlapping initiatives is the tip of the iceberg of the efforts by local and international actors to stabilize and reform the Western Balkans over the last thirty years.

Many of these accomplishments seem to be backsliding (Nikic 2023, 10-13) (Spasojevic 2021) (Foundation, Humanitarian Law Center 2023) (C.J. van Doorn 2022). Backsliding occurs in various local contexts and with diverse content; however, accelerating tendencies towards tension are now profound and widespread. When zooming in on where and how, the epicentre is the triangle of Banja Luka, Belgrade, and Mitrovica. Triggers for possible conflicts will likely occur in northern Kosovo, centred around the city of Mitrovica, where the local Serbian minority is under colossal pressure, marginalized and lacking prospects for the future and political solutions related to the status of the area. Another possible location is Banja Luka, the political centre of the Serbian entity, Republica Srpska (RS), in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). People here also lack prospects for progress and political settlements. In Banja Luka, the leader, Milorad Dodik, has close ties to Russia and no intention of supporting the BiH state. He may see advantages in triggering local conflicts (Support4Partnership 2022). The third part of this

triangle is the capital of Serbia, Belgrade. The leadership here, on the one hand, continues to enhance the ethnic divide in the Balkans and replays the old sufferings of the Serbian nation, providing room for triggers to set off.

On the other hand, the political elite in Belgrade wants to maintain control over a stable and prosperous Serbia. It has no interest in violent conflicts in Serbia or the neighbouring countries. It is a dangerous balancing act.

This paper's main contribution is to uncover the context and content of the growing tensions in the Serbian triangle of identity politics by presenting the local drivers for conflict mobilization as a mix of memory politics and state capture. Highlighting the vulnerabilities of the Serbian nation, which extend beyond state borders, presents opportunities for exploitation by actors such as Russia.

The paper's final section will briefly address potential triggers that could undermine peaceful coexistence and spark confrontations. However, the specific Russian methods of influence in Serbia, via religious institutions, military partnerships, political parties, media cooperation, and diplomacy, both covert and overt, will not be covered. The Book chapter (Nyemann, 'Kosovo is Serbia': A case study unpacking how Russia advances (shared) Russian and Serbian interests in the Balkans by shaping perceptions on Kosovo 2024) does just that.

An important omission in this case study is the lack of comparison to the situation in Montenegro. Montenegro, a NATO member with a distinct history of relations with Serbia and Serbian minorities, as well as its ties with Russia. The Montenegro case could have underscored the key contribution that this article tries to make: that

Russian tactics of influence operations adapt differently to the local political landscapes (Filipovic 2023) (Filipović 2025). A comparative case study is beyond the scope of this paper; however, it is important to highlight. Even in the Western Balkans, one size does not fit all.

Empirical foundation

This paper builds on fieldwork interviews and observations in Pristina and Mitrovica in Kosovo in 2021 and 2022, Belgrade, Serbia and BiH in 2023 and 2024 and 2025. The fieldwork supplements the piecing together of a significant range of publications by local think tanks and international research institutes. Combining local perspectives and personal observations with regional analysis provides a solid empirical foundation for the study. Observing developments firsthand, talking to local NGOs and researchers, attending local sports events and festivals, visiting churches and monasteries, and witnessing displays of politics in the streets and on the walls of Belgrade, Pristina, Mitrovica, Gračanica, Srebrenica, and East Sarajevo have made a considerable impression.

The role of identity politics is a critical driver for radicalizing groups within the Serbian nation. The shaping and formation of collective identity in public spaces, through media, and in political statements are vital enablers for regime survival and foreign influence. The mobilization of the public by student demonstrations in Serbia over the last few years has shown that the same nationalist narratives are reproduced and subscribed to by a wider part of the opposition, ensuring a nationalist influence even after a regime change in Serbia (Martens 2025) and my own

observations of student protests, debate forums online, in real-time during large demonstrations in Belgrade 2025.

Conceptualizing Local Drivers: Memory Politics and State Capture

Assessing the vulnerabilities within Serbia and its relations with Serbian minorities in the regions of Kosovo and BiH, this paper unpacks the local drivers for Russian foreign influence and hybrid threats. To further encapsulate the vulnerabilities, two concepts appear helpful because, in conjunction, they pinpoint the main components of the backsliding of local progress that has occurred in the Serbian nation.

The first concept is **Memory Politics**². The Serbian government's policies are best understood through the lens of memory politics. The shaping and formation of a national identity rooted in the past is evident throughout the public space, in the media, and is embedded in daily political statements in Serbia. These are all critical enablers for regime survival, foreign influence, and future reenactments of former conflicts in the area by radicalized subgroups.

The second concept is **State Capture**. Serbia has been conceptualized as a case of "state capture"³ (Petrovic og

² Memory studies scholars have shown how political elites selectively articulate cultural memory in order to maintain political legitimacy. These activities have been conceptualized as memory politics and the former Yugoslav states are often seen as (Pavlaković 2020, 13) (Pape 2022)

³ "State capture is a process in which individuals and groups (business magnates, politicians, criminals and, as is often the case, all of these together) gradually and systematically rewrite the formal "rules of the game" – first in one sector and then in others – in order to pursue their own interests to the detriment of the public good. These interests may be the pursuit of material and financial gain or the accumulation of political power and command of the levers of state authority. These goals are often intertwined and mutually reinforcing

Nikic, How to unbind the State Capture In Serbia? Towards security institutions and foreign policy in the service of citizens 2024). Serbia is branded as a so-called hybrid regime, no longer meeting the requirements for democracy by Freedom House (Csaky 2020). The Serbian state appears to be on a path toward authoritarianism, with regime survival driving most political decisions and actions. Networking with foreign actors for deals and actions supporting the regime and its network of local elites is a critical vulnerability in Serbia and a pathway for Russian activities. The expansion of state capture also helps explain why Belgrade allows nationalism and ethnic grievances to grow (Kosovo Online 2024).

The concepts of state capture and memory politics, introduced in more detail below, are intertwined in practice. Together, in intensified expressions throughout the Serbian nation, they provide fertile ground for tensions, radicalized nationalism, dissatisfaction and distrust among many subgroups in the public. Together, they are producing ripe conditions for mobilization. Mobilizing more radicalized forces could require reconfiguring the Serbian nation across borders defined by the conditions of the 1990s, rather than by the Serbian people. Overcoming humiliation and reinstating national pride are drivers that divert attention from the ongoing state capture, providing the government and elite networks surrounding it in both Serbia and the Republic of Serbia (RS) latitude with the opportunity to stay in power. The ethno-nationalistic mobilization today bears no resemblance to that of the 1990s. However, replaying

since greater political power and authority makes it easier to alter or determine the rules of the game and also to redirect material and financial goods” (Petrović 2020, 12)

the old tunes both in the political rhetoric and in the growing authoritarian tendencies is a sad reminder that the causes behind the atrocities in the 90s still linger and are exploitable for different political, personal and geopolitical gains.

Memory Politics

Memory politics is about articulating the collective past for specific political purposes. It can be achieved directly through political speeches, interviews, or via various policy initiatives. This is definitely the case in Serbia. Serbian President Alexander Vucic gives speeches and interviews to the press almost daily, connecting current initiatives and policies to an agenda, somehow dealing with the nation's unity, tradition and heritage (Hajdari 2023) (Associated Press 2023).

Despite this highly active approach from the Serbian government, memory politics in Serbia are mostly communicated more indirectly in the public space. Many expressions of memory politics are not state-driven but are endorsed and protected by the state. Exposure to memory politics is unavoidable in Serbia, whether on the street, in the media, online, or during events. The content of Serbian identity is uniform and repetitive, leaving a pretty narrow space for other expressions of the past and present. Individuals and groups not sharing this vision of Serbian identity find themselves in a constant role of opposition – not to particular political parties or initiatives but to the expression of the nation. Memory politics in Serbia, in this sense, functions as an inclusion-exclusion mechanism, begging the question: Are you loyal? Are you a patriot? Within the overall framing of the nation with almost empty slogans such as "*Kosovo is*

Serbia", "Kosovo is the heart of Serbia", or "We are not a genocidal nation. We remember... - Proud Serbia and Republika Srpska"., the public is left with a void of meaning and interpretation to add or invent. This broad framing also allows political leaders to present current policies as strategies for coping with Serbia's past, including the loss of territories, influence, and ill-treatment. Olivia Pape phrases it this way:

"All states of the former Yugoslavia are (...) textbook examples of how states can harness the past as tools for the needs of the present. Even so, the Republic of Serbia stands out, especially given its unique category as the only former Yugoslav country that views itself as having lost the wars. While Croatia and Slovenia have succeeded in both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) accession, Serbia's accession has been stymied by the reappropriation of historical memory by populist politicians and movements, which have risen and solidified themselves in the past decade. In 2022, Serbia remains frozen between conflicts, East and West, and past and present" (Pape 2022)

Since 2022, when Pape wrote her article, things have only progressed further in normalizing and spreading nationalistic rhetoric and propaganda, often in an almost unhinged manner, in public spaces. The tone has become more direct, potentially violent or at least confrontational, and the room for other expressions is shrinking.

Observations of growing nationalism can be challenging to verify. The paper will pursue this by showing

examples of paradigmatic snapshots of Serbian memory politics. The reader must, however, try to imagine these examples as ever-present articulations in the news, on daily tabloids, at sports events, driving on the highway, in popular music lyrics, and as part of street life. The nationalistic symbols are also present in the ongoing student demonstrations against the government and its exploitation of state institutions; however, at the same time, they reproduce the ideology and language of loyal Serbian citizens (Martens 2025) (Kljajic 2025).

The examples below demonstrate that Serbian society is becoming increasingly vulnerable to nationalistic mobilization and internal oppression of opposition groups.

Dealing with war criminals - The mural of Ratko Mladic

Serbia has never recognized the role of the ICTY in reconciliation processes after the Yugoslav wars. The so-called anti-Hague movement has been influential, and there has been a broad unwillingness to help the international community find and prosecute Serbian war criminals (BalkanInsight 2008). Most Serbs see the Hague Tribunal as unjust and distrust the institution's verdicts and fact-finding (Milanovic 2016). The institutions of Serbia and the majority of the media have primarily strengthened nationalist sentiment through the narrative of the ICTY as an "anti-Serbia" court. The perception among the majority goes even further, perceiving that convicted criminals are victims of injustice (Ristic 2017). One example of this is Ratko Mladić, the Bosnian Serb military chief. In June 2021 (BalkanInsight, 2008), the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals in The Hague upheld Mladic's life

sentence for the genocide of Bosniaks from Srebrenica, the persecution of Bosniaks and Croats in BiH during the war, and the terrorizing the population of Sarajevo with a campaign of shelling and sniping during the siege of the city including UN peacekeepers hostage-taking (Stojanovic, Serbian Activist Tried for Defacing Ratko Mladic Mural 2022). Simultaneously with the sentence, in Belgrade, a colossal mural to honour Mladic was created to react to the (unjust) sentence and was not removed by the public authorities.



Picture 1: Plainclothes police officers detain human rights activist Aida Corovic next to the mural depicting wartime Bosnian Serb military chief Ratko Mladic in Belgrade, November 2021. Photo: EPA-EFE/ANDREJ CUKIC.

On the contrary, in November 2021, the Serbian police banned activists from the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, a Belgrade-based NGO, from holding a public gathering to paint over the mural. As activists approached the mural, they were arrested. The Serbian Interior Ministry insisted the arrests did not take place to protect the Mladic mural but to "secure public peace and order" (Stojanovic, Serbian Activist Tried for Defacing

Ratko Mladic Mural 2022). The glorification of war criminals continues and includes crimes committed during the War in Kosovo. In December 2024, The Cultural Institute of Cuprija, a local public body in central Serbia, announced a “competition for creating a mural of General Nebojsa Pavkovic”. The Appeal Chambers of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, ICTY, in 2014 (BalkanInsight, 2014) upheld the guilty verdict convicting Pavkovic of war crimes in Kosovo (Stojanovic, Proposed Street Mural of Convicted Serbian General ‘Glorifies War Criminal 2024). The Cultural Institute has announced that the winner of the competition will have the mural located near the Square of Remembrance for the Victims of NATO Aggression in the town, commemorating people killed in the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. In 2025 Nebojsa Pavkovic was released from prison due to health conditions. As he returned to Serbia, Vucic had the following comment: *“happy that he [Pavkovic] got to see the day when he can see the free sky of his country from the free soil of his Serbia”* (Stojanovic, Serbia Welcomes Back Army General Sentenced for Kosovo War Crimes 2025)

Similarly, the Serbian state refuses to recognize that Serbia or Serbs had any responsibility in the events in Srebrenica in 1995. This is communicated in various ways - with and without the state as the messenger. One example of this is the banner pictured below, which decorated the main walking street in Belgrade during the summer of 2024. It is difficult to say who placed it there, but it perfectly fits the official understanding of the Serbian nation. Referring to the UN General Assembly's resolution commemorating the genocide in Srebrenica from May 2024, the banner explains that there was no

genocide in Srebrenica or elsewhere committed by Serbian nationals. Instead, Serbian nationals are victims themselves of genocide. However, they receive no recognition in this regard.



Picture 2: Picture from the main Waking Street in Belgrade, June 2024, by Dorthe Bach Nyemann

In May 2024, Serbian President Alexander Vucic wrapped himself in the Serbian flag at a meeting regarding the genocide in Srebrenica at the UN General Assembly in New York. Dressed this way, Vucic played the role of a knight with a cape fighting for the Serbian nation in an unfriendly and unfair world, disrespectful of the Serbian suffering. For the observer, it proves hard to misread the narrative of the victimized Serbian nation. Nor is it hard to miss the governmental endorsement and utilization of the narrative legitimizing its leadership by articulating Serbian unity as "us against the rest".

In the tight space defining the content of Serbian national identity, even a festival promoting dialogue between young people in Pristina and Belgrade, under the friendly title "Mirëdita Dobra Dan" - meaning "Hallo – Hallo" in Albanian and Serbian - is a provocation. In

June 2024, Belgrade officials cancelled the festival, which had existed for ten years, on the very day of its execution. The official explanation was the lack of safety for the participants and the Belgrade public (Oltermann 2024). To some extent, promoting the friendly coexistence between the youth in Kosovo and Serbia contradicts the “Kosovo is Serbia” slogan. Similarly, political initiatives providing solutions to long-standing issues between the two nations are easily interpreted as challenging the overall framing of the Serbian nation. Finding solutions and bridging gaps regarding Kosovo is caving in and opposing Serbia as a victim. It contradicts the official and wide-spread framing of the 90s memory.

The First All-Serbian Assembly "One Nation, one Assembly – Serbia and Srpska", June 8 2024

As mentioned earlier, the government endorses and supports public displays of Serbian nationalism and has also taken many steps publicly to strengthen ties with the Serbian minorities in all countries in the region. Most powerful, however, are the connections to the leadership of RS headed by Milorad Dodik. Dodik always appears to be present at critical events in Belgrade. He fraternizes with the more extreme right in Serbia and has close ties to Putin in Russia and Orban in Hungary (Ćerimagić 2024). Dodik is vocal in his wishes to separate RS from BiH and acts disruptively within the BiH structures (Kurtic 2024) (Bechev, Polarization Threatens to Derail Bosnia’s EU Ambitions 2024). In the summer of 2024, ties between Banja Luka and Belgrade were strengthened even further.



Picture 3: All-Serbian Assembly, 2024

An All-Serbian Assembly headed by Dodik and Vucic, but with key representatives from all parts of the region, gathered in Belgrade for the first time and adopted a declaration, underscoring the Serbian nation as a cross-border unity with rights to be protected. The Assembly met at the largest Orthodox Church in the region, the Saint Sava. Moreover, the church leaders were vital participants in the political meetings on the declaration. This underscores the important role of the Orthodox Church in supporting and legitimizing memory politics, as well as the Serbian elite's grab at the institutional level (Government 2024). The adopted declaration is lengthy and comprises numerous articles and agendas. In short, it restates that "Kosovo and Metohija" – the Serbian name for the Kosovo entity is an inalienable part of the Republic of Serbia and that the Orthodox church and institutions are the pillars of Serbian identity. It also states that RS must keep its full autonomy in the BiH. RS intends as an autonomous entity to cooperate with Serbia on a range of policy areas, even the security sector

and intelligence sharing (Declaration on the Protection of National and Political Rights and the Common Future of the Serbian People 2024). Even though the declaration only has a symbolic meaning and lacks any encouragement to take steps crossing the lines established by the Dayton Accords, it paves the way for viewpoints from more radical groups. It pushes the agenda of a nation wrongfully treated, one that needs resurrection.

The final snapshot of memory politics reveals how mobilizing the public with propaganda about the injustice of the all-Serbian nation can quickly take a more hostile turn.

When the army goes to Kosovo

After the NATO bombings in Belgrade in 1999, some of the more symbolic locations of bombardment have been left as monuments. In the governmental district of Belgrade, the former office of the Yugoslav army headquarters appears as an open wound. Next to this monument of NATO's intervention leading to the loss of Kosovo, several banners and graffiti are displayed. One says, "*When the army goes to Kosovo*".

This bold expression of hostile intent is relatively new in Serbia. In the spring of 2023, it began to appear at football games at the Red Star stadium (Geopost 2023). It was also observed at a small town inhabited by Serbian nationals in Northern Kosovo (Kika 2023).



Picture 4: Picture from June 2024 by Dorthe Bach Nyemann.

However, a tifo at a football match or on a wall in a territory outside of Belgrade's control differs significantly from graffiti in the middle of the governmental district. The graffiti contributes to the overall impression of the normalization of memory politics that are not just nationalistic in spirit, blameful towards external forces, and self-victimizing in their slogans, but also possess elements of hostile intent – even threatening to use military force to achieve their rightful aims. As was the situation with the mural of Ratko Mladic, the state apparently endorses and protects expressions of radical behaviour.

These developments make Serbia vulnerable to internal mobilization and external pressures that could lead it down the wrong path. Combined with the backsliding of core democratic institutions in Serbia, this could lead to a situation out of control if relevant triggers are present at the right time and place.

State capture

State capture is a deliberate act in which the political elite and private actors form networks in and around state institutions with aims such as control, influence, personal enrichment and regime survival (Petrovic og Nikic, *How to unbind the State Capture In Serbia? Towards security institutions and foreign policy in the service of citizens* 2024, 5).

A research report from June 2024, *"How to unbind the State Capture in Serbia"*, concludes that the Serbian Progressive Party led by Vucic has completed the capture of the Serbian state and that today's security institutions are operating to preserve this state of affairs (Petrovic og Nikic, *How to unbind the State Capture In Serbia? Towards security institutions and foreign policy in the service of citizens* 2024, 4). Moreover, the report claims that most citizens in Serbia are aware of this fact. A survey from 2022 underscores this, with opinion polls showing that citizens do not recognize Serbia as a democracy and lack overall trust in all types of state institutions, including the media, the army, the police and even the Serbian Orthodox Church (Petrovic og Hercigonja, *There is No Democracy in Serbia, nor is it Desirable* 2022, 6,7).

One of the reasons memory politics strongly impacts Serbia, Kosovo, and RS is that the security institutions, the media, and a range of other agents, including the Serbian Orthodox Church and local professional sports clubs, support the nationalistic narrative in their engagements with the Serbian population and nationals outside Serbia. These vital institutions and their frontline spokespersons support a single vision of Serbian

national identity and collective memory, while suppressing or marginalizing competing narratives and groups that represent them. In the snapshots of memory politics in Serbia, key representatives of this network supporting the status quo have already appeared: The police and the state of interior, unwilling to arrest war criminals and later unwilling to remove the mural honouring them. The same security services that, on the one hand, chose to close a peaceful festival by a very vocal NGO opposing the official narratives about the role of Serbia in the Balkans and then, on the other hand, chose not to remove graffiti advocating hostile actions in Kosovo.

The report by Petrovic and Nikic illustrates how state capture permeates security sector institutions, both at a structural level and in recruitment. The vital positions are not staffed on merit but by loyalty to the party and Vucic. According to Transparency International, the capture of the security sector is even more robust in RS, with high levels of corruption within the police and links to organized crime. Moreover, many laws in both Serbia and RS are tailor-made to secure deals for the elite, and the judiciary consistently functions as the shield for political patronage networks (Transparency International 2020). In a study of the status of the security sector reform in BiH, the conclusions are even worse. The report categorizes BiH as having a criminal security sector with direct ties to criminal groups. Furthermore, the appointment and deployment of lower-ranking police officers jeopardize inclusiveness of the different ethnic groups, thereby further reinforcing the ethnic divide and identity politics at the political level (Hoogenboezem, Doorn og Wellen 2022).

A state capture of the media supplements the capture of state institutions. In Serbia, opposition media exists but is under harassment, and the government has had massive success in promoting and financing pro-regime TV channels and tabloids. These channels operate as the president's full-time promoters and suppress opposing views on statecraft in the Serbian nation or its foreign relations. Media control also helps limit and label the voices and opinions of NGOs in public life (Petrovic og Nikic, *How to unbind the State Capture In Serbia? Towards security institutions and foreign policy in the service of citizens* 2024, 52). In a survey from 2022, almost 2/3 responded that they trust the three most popular pro-regime TV channels the most compared to all available media (Petrovic og Hercigonja, *There is No Democracy in Serbia, nor is it Desirable* 2022, 5).

Other media is marginalized, delegitimized and ignored. In RS the situation is even worse. A law passed in 2023 under the name “Bringing order to the public space” has criminalized defamation. The law is utilized to harass journalists, monitor reporters, and search editorial offices, computers and phones under the pretext of defamation charges. At the same time, RS adopted another law authorizing the registration of foreign influence agents along the same lines as in Russia and Georgia. This law can harm many investigative media outlets established as non-profit associations sponsored by donors. In combination, these laws threaten the freedom of the media and the freedom of association among citizens, and enhance tendencies toward self-censorship among journalists and NGOs. As mentioned earlier, trust in the judicial process related to accusations of defamation or foreign influence charges is deficient

when faced with a highly corrupt judiciary under political control (Pisarevic 2024).

State capture not only affects the daily lives of the Serbian nation. It substantially influences the conduct of the Foreign Service and is thus directly relevant to the foreign influence in the Serbian nation. The report by Petrovic and Nikic labels this as the privatization of foreign policy and diplomacy. Instrumentalizing foreign policy for regime preservation and private financial gains has made Serbia vulnerable to foreign interference and manipulation. Foreign policy decisions are made almost exclusively by President Vucic despite existing institutional frameworks for conducting Foreign Policy. One key aspect of privatizing Foreign policy is recruiting staff members to control the diplomatic network in depth. This aspect of state capture in Serbia is also highlighted in the report (Petrovic og Nikic, How to unbind the State Capture In Serbia? Towards security institutions and foreign policy in the service of citizens 2024, 63).

Serbia is undergoing a significant modernization process, driven by a multitude of foreign investments in industry and urban development projects. The transformation has dramatically improved the Serbian economy and has created jobs for many Serbian families. The investments have also freed Serbia from the singular dependencies of specific foreign donors. The projects, however, lack transparency at all levels, both in terms of the financial trail and the political deals and promises made as part of the agreements. There is growth in Chinese investments across all sectors of the Serbian economy, including production, as well as the security, surveillance, and defence industries. The United Arab

Emirates has invested multi-billion euros in the Belgrade Waterfront project, which includes 5,700 homes, eight hotels, a new railway, and deals for the construction of buildings over the next many years (Surk 2018). These deals avoid public scrutiny as well as Western regulations and safeguards. Vucic has also concluded a contract with Jared Kushner's investment firm (son-in-law of Trump) to build luxury hotels in the middle of the Belgrade government district, removing the NATO bombing site dating back to 1999. The deal sparked local outrage because of the location. The contract is not publicly available, and critics suspect it can influence Serbian foreign policy decisions now that Trump is re-elected president (Hajdari 2024).

A recent EU project on mining for lithium in Serbia diversifies Serbia's dependencies on Russia and provides Vucic with a bargaining chip within the EU. Russia has been so intimidated by the lithium deal with the EU that it has warned Serbia that a coup could be carried out in Serbia by Western powers (Nurduhan 2024). The jiggling of foreign deals and investments by Vucic may benefit Serbia's international position and the welfare of many Serbians. However, in conjunction, this privatization and capitalization of foreign policy also point to the fact that critical policy decisions aim at private enrichment, regime survival, and pleasing different external actors while securing the interests of the Serbian people. Even though the dependency on Russia in Serbia's foreign relations is shrinking, what must be apparent to the Russians is that the Serbian regime can be bought if the prize is right.

Privatizing foreign policy and the rising levels of foreign investments can and do spark criticism related to

corruption, dependency on foreign actors and lack of Serbian freedom and sovereignty. In response to growing criticism of the government's role in corruption, Vucic has attempted to redirect public attention towards foreign pressures on Serbia. Without addressing which foreign actors he has in mind, Vucic posted the following statement in December 2024 on Instagram, legitimizing his approaches:

“To those who think they are going to destroy Serbia. I just want to say that whenever they think they can hide how much they hate this country, we will reveal to you all the details of how much money has been paid these days and weeks ahead. In detail, how much money has been paid in the last four years to destroy Serbia [...] I will fight for Serbia, and I will serve only my Serbian people and all other citizens of Serbia, never foreigners, never those who want to defeat, humiliate and destroy Serbia (Kosovo Online 2024).”

Following the Serbian media's coverage in the days and weeks after this statement, no information was released about who hates Serbia, what money has been spent on what actions against Serbia, or what fight Vucic is engaged in. What could be the purpose of such a statement? To stay in power, faced with criticism from opposition groups and daily demonstrations by students in Belgrade and other cities, Vucic triggers anger and a willingness to fight back against those harming the Serbian people by activating Memory politics in the current context. The temptation to stir up conflicts for regime survival and divert attention from local

corruption and the misuse of funds is ever-present in Serbia.

In the quotation below from September 2025, Vucic is preparing the people for the November 1st demonstrations, which mark a whole year of student protests against state capture and the lack of democracy in Serbia. Vucic attributes the continuous student protests to foreign influence and labels them part of a colour revolution. Moreover, he provides space for Russian influence and exploitation of the situation in Serbia. This example highlights the links between domestic policies and Russian-Serbian cooperation. In this specific context, it serves the interests of both actors; at other times, the Maidan reference and connection could backfire on the Serbian leadership and be a gateway for Russia to connect with Serbian minorities in Northern Kosovo or RS for a more violent mobilization – just as the case was with Russians in Crimea in 2014.

According to him (Vucic), the problem is that some people thought they could change the government with violence, they thought they had money from abroad, and these are, as he says, incredible sums entering our country. “Just look at how much money they have invested in food alone,” he pointed out.....When asked to comment on the Russian SVR’s intelligence that a “Maidan” is being prepared in Serbia on November 1, President Vučić says that there is nothing new about that. “What’s not true there? It happens every day. Every day we have an attempted colour revolution... (Serbian Times 2025)

The stories of an ongoing colour revolution and terrorist attacks as part of the student protests are amplified by the state-controlled media, over and over again, repeating the narrative of foreign actors (who?) behind the student protests.

Upon observing developments within the Serbian nation, several variables appear to coincide and reinforce a trend of backsliding in democracy and stability. The capture of the state, media, security apparatus, and even foreign policy all indicate a path towards strongman leadership and authoritarian rule in both Serbia and the RS. These tendencies go hand in hand with a more hostile and vocal expression of nationalism and a political will to challenge the boundaries set by the international community at the end of the Yugoslav war.

Expressions of dreams of a restored Serbian nation are becoming more acceptable. While enriching themselves, the political elite provides the narrative and public space to express nationalistic propaganda, diverting attention from the state of affairs internally. Sentiments towards Kosovo as the heart of Serbia or RS as a Serbian little brother entitled to protection and reunion may be shallow expressions for Vucic and his close counterparts. However, memory politics can mobilize the nation and turn large population groups against other ethnic groups and against local groups that do not subscribe to the same narrative. It may not have come to confrontations yet, but it is hard to regain control over events and their amplifying effects if the right triggers are present. Both Alexander Vucic and Milorad Dodik find themselves in severe hardship, facing what could be the end of their long political careers, not to mention the direct access to enormous economic gains through

corruption and exploitation within the state apparatus, as well as the judicial system. This could tempt any of them to exploit tensions in Banja Lucca, Belgrade, or Mitrovica, increasing the likelihood of triggering incidents. The misuse of this situation by Russia is possible.

What can trigger conflicts in the triangle between Banja Luka, Mitrovica and Belgrade?

It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline in detail the possible triggers for conflict in the RS, northern Kosovo, or Serbia. The paper does not intend to cover in detail the key Russian interests or capabilities to conduct foreign influence in the Western Balkans either⁴. The paper's main contribution is a better understanding of the local drivers of conflict in Serbia and among Serbian minorities. In recent years, the role of the strongman ship, the scope of state capture in many sectors of the Serbian state and the systematic utilization of memory politics have made Serbia and the broader Serbian nation more vulnerable to triggers that can set off more radical ethnic mobilization, ending in violent clashes. However, these developments in Serbia have not happened in a void.

This paper will highlight three key developments that could trigger violent clashes in the Serbian triangle.

Sparks of Conflict in Northern Kosovo

The highest probability of sparking conflict would be in northern Kosovo. Since the fall of 2022, things have

⁴ Suggested readings on this is (Nyemann, 'Kosovo is Serbia': A case study unpacking how Russia advances (shared) Russian and Serbian interests in the Balkans by shaping perceptions on Kosovo 2024) or (Vuksanovic 2024).

turned for the worse. In 2021, Albin Kurti became the prime minister of Kosovo. He leads the left-wing party Vetevendosje, whose name means "Self-determination". The party was established in 2010, aiming to limit the role of Western countries. At that time, Vetevendosje believed that the EU and the UN were protecting corrupt politicians and war criminals from facing justice. The party was also opposed to the EU's negotiations with Serbia. They were particularly against establishing an area of Serbian autonomy in Northern Kosovo after bad experiences with the same construction in BiH. Instead, Kosovo had to eliminate corruption and embark on a journey towards de facto control of its entire territory. Since 2021, with a majority in parliament, Kurti and his party have chosen to pursue many of the original objectives, including control and presence in Northern Kosovo, despite many warnings from the EU, NATO and the US.

In the past years, the clashes between the Serbian minorities and Kosovo's police and other authorities have become more and more serious. In the spring of 2023, it reached a tentative culmination with wounded NATO soldiers caught in the confrontations. Since then, the situation has escalated even further, and the donors' demands for compromise and de-escalation have been largely ignored. There are daily new initiatives by the Kosovo government, which are experienced as a provocation and intimidation of the Serbian minorities both in the northern provinces and among other enclaves scattered around Kosovo (Whats in Blue 2024). Even though tensions have grown, the presence of a more substantial KFOR posture and the involvement of the EU and other international actors have made a direct conflict involving Serbia less likely. In the local elections held in

October 2025, Serbian mayors and other political representatives were returned to office in the four northern municipalities. This development may calm some of the concerns for sparks of conflict in Northern Kosovo (European Western Balkans 2025).

Turmoil in the RS

In recent years, tendencies that can spark conflict have grown in BiH, specifically in the RS entity populated by the Serb minority and led by the pro-Russian president, Milorad Dodik. Actions deriving from Banja Luka may be the most likely place to trigger ethnic conflicts. Three key elements are enhancing the destabilization of RS. Firstly, a de facto secession from the BiH has taken place, with the decision of the Assembly in RS not to follow the rulings of the Constitutional Court of BiH and to disregard any decision made by the International community chief envoy in BiH. Russia supports both of these decisions. The end goal for Dodik seems to be a disintegration of BiH altogether (Cancar 2023). Since the beginning of the War in Ukraine, Russia has increased contact with Dodik and empowered him as the leader and spokesperson of all Serbs throughout the Balkans. This includes Montenegro, Northern Kosovo and radical nationalists in Serbia. One reason for this is that the leadership in Banja Luka is more radical in its support for Russia, its criticism of the EU and NATO, and its promotion of Serbian nationalism than that in Belgrade. It is also easier for Russia to gain momentum in RS due to the greater fragility of the Bosnian state design and lack of statehood (Lenja 2023).

In June 2024, Russia opened a diplomatic office in Banja Luka, and the Russian state-owned media outlet RT,

which projects Russian official propaganda, also opened here at the same time. In RS, they are preaching to the choir, so to speak. 94% of the Serbs in Bosnia have a favourable view of Russia, and 82 % are against NATO membership (Bechev, Between the EU and Moscow: How Russia Exploits Divisions in Bosnia 2024). Dodik has even allowed Russian proxies, such as the Night Wolves, to be present in RS, and the Wagner Group is suspected of having had a local recruiting office (Lenja 2023). Adding to what may trigger conflict are the economic troubles in which Dodik and the entire RS find themselves. Dodik needs loans for private and governmental purposes. Since 2017, the US has sanctioned Dodik and other individuals in RS, including freezing their assets and trading with specific companies. In the fall of 2024, these sanctions expanded further due to a persistent lack of compliance with US incentives to change policies on two fronts in the RS. One is linked to state capture, specifically the use of official positions to accumulate personal wealth through corrupt companies. The other is undermining public confidence in BiH state institutions and the rule of law (US Department of the Treasury 2024).

The sanctions have made Dodik turn even more towards Russia in search of money and to head expressions of Serbian nationalism, to derail attention from his economic troubles and enrichment. That said, money, investments, or oil flow from Russia to RS is surprisingly low (Bechev, Between the EU and Moscow: How Russia Exploits Divisions in Bosnia 2024, 11-12). In the same vein, Dodik has succeeded in tying Vucic and the Serbs in Northern Kosovo into a common agenda of Serbhood. It was this unity of memory politics that was expressed in the streets of Belgrade in the summer

of 2024 with the slogan “*We are not a genocidal nation. We remember ... Proud Serbia and Republika Srpska*”, and in the joint declaration from June 8 for the protection and common future for the Serbian people. It was also showcased by Vucic fighting the good fight for all Serbs against the UN resolution regarding the genocide in Srebrenica.

Since the spring of 2022, the EU and NATO have doubled their peacekeeping deployment in the EUFOR mission. As in Kosovo, considerable efforts are made to prevent local triggers, amplified by Russian activities, from escalating out of control. However, if separate issues in Mitrovica, Belgrade or Banja Luka are merged into threats perceived as relevant to the whole Serbian nation, they can become more problematic to control. Consequently, local events could trigger mobilization and spread throughout the Serbian nation. In that event, it will be challenging to put the lid on again.

Russia serves as an amplifier of escalating conflict.

Russia's view of the situation in the Western Balkans has changed significantly since the start of the War with Ukraine. Russia's initial interest in stable conditions and a regional presence through cooperation with Serbia has been replaced by a strong interest in local ethnic conflicts and tensions breaking out into the open. A violent conflict in the Balkans would force the US, NATO and the EU to shift their focus from Ukraine. It would require the West to utilize considerable diplomatic, economic, and military resources to stabilize the situation. Europe would again face refugee flows, and old disagreements about what should happen in the Balkans would resurface, resulting in division. A dream

scenario for Russia is the media overflowing with images of NATO soldiers in confrontation with a Serbian minority. If NATO and the EU cannot maintain stability in Kosovo or BiH, what successes can be pointed to? An armed conflict in the Balkans is a failure for NATO and a corresponding Russian success. It is reasonable to expect Russia to try to trigger problems in the Balkans, leaning heavily on Serbia and the Serbian minorities in RS and Kosovo (Nyemann, 'Kosovo is Serbia': A case study unpacking how Russia advances (shared) Russian and Serbian interests in the Balkans by shaping perceptions on Kosovo 2024) (Bechev, *Between the EU and Moscow: How Russia Exploits Divisions in Bosnia* 2024).

Russia's hard capabilities may be shrinking due to the War with Ukraine, resulting in less economic involvement in the region, as other players offer more favourable deals to Serbia. Softer approaches like amplifying memory politics through media and proxies portraying Serbians as victims of Western hate and humiliation, while keeping close contact with key political leaders and radical groups, are Russia's best option for foreign influence in the Balkans.

Concluding thoughts

Applying memory politics that underscore the humiliation of the Serbian nation and the lack of respect by the international community makes the Serbian nation, and specifically the outskirt areas in northern Kosovo and RS, ripe for mobilization and hostile actions against other ethnic groups. Since the invasion of Ukraine, the local expressions have intensified and become more hateful. At the same time, the Russian

interest in igniting violent conflict in the Balkans has become more evident than before.

Local drivers make the Serbian nation volatile for Russian influence as former progress backslides and state capture continues. The political leadership in Serbia play a dangerous game, allowing foreign interference and internal nationalistic propaganda to grow in return for staying in power. Tempted by the possibility of US support for radical actions by the Serbian leadership or subgroups in Banja Luka or Mitrovica, and due to the volatile situation for the political leadership in all three cities and regions, the situation in the Balkans is even riper for ethnic conflict in 2025 than it has been for decades.

The position of “voluntary victim” of foreign influence from Russia is not one that only Serbia or the RS subscribes to. We can observe the same tendencies in states like Georgia and Montenegro. In the outer circle of Western influence, a range of states are flirting with authoritarian rule, strongman ship and state capture. When building strategies for a more robust capacity to handle external influence in a more volatile European periphery, it may be necessary to distinguish between “voluntary” and ” non-voluntary” victims of foreign influence threats. There needs to be a toolbox for the EU and other European agents to counter foreign influence campaigns tailored towards states, where the regime in power is both a driver and gains advantages when allowing interference with a destabilizing purpose and effect.

Exploring local drivers and triggers in states in the intersection between the East and West creates the

situational awareness needed to build counterstrategies for influence operations in the age of great power rivalry. In the Western Balkans, the triangle of Banja Luka, Mitrovica, and Belgrade is pivotal for both the Serbian government (maintaining its position), Russia (fostering destabilization), and the West (keeping the Western Balkans on the European path).

Further comparative studies on how memory politics and state capture connect Serbia, Russia, and Montenegro would be a project that could also inform both the EU and NATO in their dealings with Russian influence on young NATO or EU countries in contested areas.

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