

Dr. Aleksandar Mitić, Republic of Serbia

*Institute of International Politics and Economics
Belgrade*

REFLECTION OF THE 1999 NATO AGRESSION IN THE STRATEGIC NARRATIVES OF GLOBAL POWERS AND THE CONTEXT OF MULTIPOLARITY¹

Abstract

Over the last decades, memory politics has become an important focus of academic study, and among regional cases, a particular significance has been given to the Balkan cases due to the conflicts in the 1990s. Yet, this focus has been mainly devoted to how ex-Yugoslav societies (mis)use(d) memory politics, rather than on how they relate to great powers' geopolitical considerations and policies. In this paper, we analyze how memory politics played a role in the perceptions and actions of the world's leading geopolitical actors during the 1999 bombings, and how they interpret the event in today's strategic narratives, in the context of multipolarity. We conclude that memory politics played an important part in NATO's crafting of the 1999 aggression against Yugoslavia, but also in the perception and reception of the bombings outside of the political West, most notably in Russia and China. They also played a strong role over the last quarter of the century, strongly embedded in the rise of multipolarity. Today, the 1999 NATO aggression

¹ The paper presents findings of a study developed as part of the research project „Serbia and challenges in international relations in 2024“, financed by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia, and conducted by Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, during the year 2024.

remains a particularly defining moment in the narratives – and memory politics - of those who had been “humiliated” in 1999 – Russia and China. On the other side, the strategic narrative of the “victorious” NATO countries appears to be on the defensive, toned down, and mostly focusing on blaming Moscow’s memory politics for the Ukrainian conflict.

Keywords: *memory politics, geopolitics, multipolarity, strategic narratives, NATO, Serbia*

INTRODUCTION

Interpretations of NATO’s decision to attack the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY, Serbia and Montenegro) in 1999 logically diverged among global actors as soon as the decision was made. It was taken without the consent of the UN Security Council, where the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China would oppose, and was executed over a territory outside of the geographical scope of NATO as a “defensive alliance”, nominally focused on safeguarding and security of its members. Moscow and Beijing shared Belgrade’s view of calling it an “aggression”, while Washington, Paris and London saw it as a “humanitarian intervention” aimed at protecting the Albanian population in the southern Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohija from a potential “ethnic cleansing” by the Yugoslav/Serbian forces, amid their conflict with the Albanian armed group “Kosovo Liberation Army” (KLA) which Belgrade considered as “terrorist”.

NATO’s 78-day bombing was launched in the specific context of its 50th anniversary celebrations – and enlargement to the East with Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic - during what can be considered today as the height of the U.S. post-Cold War “unipolar moment”. The Russian Federation was dragging itself in deep economic crisis and bloody conflict in the Caucasus, its foreign policy substantially curbed by financial constraints and technological idleness. China was focusing largely on its economic rise amid liberal globalization, and on stabilizing the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom.

However, the decision to sidetrack the UN Security Council and the course of the 1999 bombings largely initiated a strategic turn in Moscow’s and Beijing’s policies towards the West in general, and the U.S.

and NATO in particular. Both capitals felt humiliated by the move, and the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade provoked an unprecedented public outcry within China. Western capitals – particularly in Europe – had felt domestic political and public pressure at various times during the bombing – but they managed to jostle them, and eventually turn the tone towards a triumphalism of sort.

Yet, the “ghost” of 1999 never went away. In Russia and China, it led to dramatic changes in understanding and policy towards the West. In the West, the “triumph” was damaged by the constant criticism of “double standards” and a sense that, in Kosovo itself, the job would not be finished until two objectives were met: the “independence of Kosovo” and Serbia’s entry into NATO, which would seal the Balkan’s geopolitical future inside the Euro-Atlantic community, devoid of traditional Russian influence. Despite Moscow’s clear warnings and Beijing’s opposition, the EU and the US masterminded Kosovo’s “unilateral declaration of independence” in 2008, and worked ever since for legalizing the decision and legitimizing an “independent Kosovo” internationally. Yet, this move coincided with Russia’s decision to actively oppose NATO’s eastward enlargement and threats from neighbouring Georgia and Ukraine, in cases in which “the Kosovo precedent” could be ambiguously interpreted. In Beijing, it coincided with the arrival in power of Xi Jinping, as a leader intent on building on China’s economic power to project global political, military and normative power, including the protection against U.S.-led containment policies and Taiwan’s potential “Kosovo”-like “unilateral declaration of independence”.

Memory politics play an important part in today’s (re)considerations and instrumentalizations of great power foreign policy. Over the last decades, memory politics has become an important focus of academic study, and among regional cases, a particular significance has been given to the Balkan cases due to the conflicts in the 1990s. Yet, this focus has been mainly devoted to how ex-Yugoslav societies (mis)use(d) memory politics, rather than on how they relate to great powers’ geopolitical considerations and policies. In this paper, we analyze how memory politics played a role in the perceptions and actions of the world’s leading geopolitical actors during the 1999 bombings, and how they interpret the event in today’s strategic narratives, in the context of multipolarity. First, we will underline the theoretical underpinning of memory politics, and the interaction with foreign policy. Then, we will take a closer look at the 1999 NATO bombings, to present key items

necessary to understand today's memory politics. We will then look at how the leading geopolitical actors have interpreted the 1999 bombings – including its 2008 aftermath – and how they embedded them in their strategic narratives. We will analyse these strategic narratives through framing analysis performed on statements and media reports from each particular geopolitical actor. We will then conclude with a comparative analysis of memory (geo)politics regarding the aftermath of the 1999 NATO attack.

MEMORY STUDIES AND (GEO)POLITICS

“NATO’s ‘humanitarian’ intervention in Kosovo and its legitimation have been largely dependent on Holocaust memory. Streams of refugees across borders, women and children packed into trains for deportation, stories of atrocities, systematic rape, and wanton destruction all mobilized a politics of guilt in Europe and the United States associated with nonintervention in the 1930s and 1940s and the failure to intervene in the Bosnian war of 1992. The Kosovo war thus confirms the increasing power of memory culture in the late 1990s, but it also raises thorny issues about using the Holocaust as a universal trope for historical trauma” (Huysen 2003, 13). This is how German professor Andreas Huysen saw the Western (mis)interpretation of the 1999 NATO bombings. Huysen argued in the early 2000s that the “emergence of memory as a key cultural and political concern in Western societies” had been “one of the most surprising cultural and political phenomena of recent years”, and “in stark contrast to the privileging of the future so characteristic of earlier decades of twentieth-century modernity” (Huysen 2003, 11). In the West, it emerged in the wake of decolonization and new social movements in search of alternative and revisionist histories in the 1960s, followed by the focus on the Holocaust testimonies in the 1980s, and a plethora of “anniversaries” related to the Third Reich, starting with Hitler’s rise to power and the Nazi’s burning of books in 1933, and moving to the 1990s with Rwanda, Bosnia – and finally the 1999 NATO bombings related to Kosovo – where Holocaust references to “genocide” were employed by the leading policymakers and media of the post-Cold War (Huysen 2003, 13). Needless to say that, as opposed to the Holocaust, the 1990s Balkan references did not make unanimity among global actors. While it was part of the crux of the Western narrative, it was never accepted in China and was particularly opposed in

Russia. To the contrary, Russia sided with the Serbian view that World War II references should be applied to the Yugoslav conflicts insofar as they were a result of reemergence of anti-Serb Nazi-allied politics of Croatian “ustaša” and Bosnian Muslim “islamic fundamentalists”, spearheaded by the likes of Franjo Tuđman, the architect of the ethnic cleansing of Serbs from Croatia in 1991–1995 and, Alija Izetbegović, condemned to prison after World War II, and author of the „Islamic Declaration“ grounded on „Muslim brotherhood“ ideology, who led the Bosnian Muslims throughout the 1992-1995 civil war. Müller argued that the Yugoslav wars „horribly demonstrated what happens when memory wars turn into real wars“, adding that with „the end of actual fighting in the former Yugoslavia, the war over (and on) memory has even intensified further“ (Müller 2002, 17).

Such (re)interpretation raises the question of relationship between the concepts of history and memory. Yet, political actors are primarily, and fundamentally, interested in how to make moral and utilitarian arguments for the purpose of justifying and solidifying narratives for political purposes and intents, embedding them in political discourse with the aim of persuading domestic and foreign stakeholders and general publics. Klymenko and Siddi argue that „thanks to their discursive power and access to the media, political leaders are particularly well-positioned to shape collective memories and adapt them to the pursuit of foreign policy objectives“, and define „collective memory“ as the „shared memories held by a community about the past, a subjective image of the past constructed by political actors in the present based on a community’s current social and historical necessities“ (Klymenko and Siddi 2020, 2). Thus, as they argue, politicians often construct analogies with the past in order to justify foreign policy decisions in the present, using a number of mechanisms: the application of historical analogies, the construction of historical narratives, the creation of memory sites, the marginalisation and forgetting of the past, and the securitisation of historical memory (Klymenko and Siddi 2020, 3).

Mouritzen considers learning theory as an essential tool for the exploring the link between historical memory and foreign policy, arguing that statesmen sometimes „make a contemporary foreign policy decision by referring to a lesson derived from an ‘analogous’ situation in the past“ in order to repeat success or avoid a mistake (Mouritzen 2020, 11). These „lessons of the past“ are based on „dramatic geopolitical events“, and both influence actual decision and legitimize them in front of the

public (Mouritzen 2020, 12). Looking at physical commemorative sites, Subotić argues they can „provide a lasting reservoir of traumatic memories that are easily activated, mobilized around, and weaponized in the pursuit of contemporary foreign policy objectives“ (Subotić 2020, 85). Siddi argues that „selective forgetting“ is like „selective remembering“, as „dominant narratives are constructed through a selection of events that almost inevitably implies marginalising or leaving out other events that are not seen as consistent with the narrative“ (Siddi 2020, 91). Makhortych underlines that the Copenhagen School increasingly recognises historical memory as an influential factor in securitisation framework, citing the case of securitization of the conflict Ukraine from 2014, where, he argues, pro-Russian actors „instrumentalized memory to present the consequences of the existential threat (the physical destruction of Rus-sophone population) and the way out (the use of violence against their opponents)“ by representing their opponents as „successors of Nazi Germany“ (Makhortych 2020, 127). On the other side, Klymenko argues that policymakers often make use of historical narratives in order to underpin their foreign policy agenda, with narratives viewed as “personal or collective subjective cognition of the events happening around us, as a sense-making of the world, and as a mode of communication that is embedded in a particular cultural and political context“ (Klymenko 2020, 34). She analyzes how the Ukrainian policymakers’ used historical narratives to legitimize their pro-Western foreign policy by Othering Russia. Thus, in these narratives referring the Kyivan Rus from the 9th-13th century, the Cossack Hetmanate from the 17th-19th century and the Soviet Union in the 20th century – Ukraine is seen as representing European values of „Christianity“, „modernization“, „democracy“ and „partnership“, as opposed to Russian „colonialism“, „agression“, „authoritarianism“ and „backwardness“ (Klymenko 2020, 33). Thus, according to this narrative, for 21st century Ukraine, the only and logical, way forward is joining Euro-Atlantic structures – EU and NATO. Hence, memory is instrumentalized for strategic foreign policy preferences and decisions, and indeed to project power on the international stage.

This is line with what great powers attempt to do when attempting to shape a favourable geopolitical environment for the pursuit of their interests. Shaping involves creating a “more favourable” international environment by changing relationships, characteristics and behaviour of other actors, primarily through attraction, legitimacy and persuasion (Wolfley 2021). In line with these attributes, and in order to achieve the

objectives, a country needs to project its strategic narrative as means of political actors in international relations to “shape the opinions and behaviour of actors at home and overseas” (Miskimmon et al 2013, 248). In turn, to align the words and deeds of the strategic narrative, and thus achieve the desired shaping, a country practices statecraft – “organized actions” governments take to change the “external environment” or “policies and actions of other states” to suit their objectives (Holsti 1976, 293). Aligning the strategic narrative with the objectives of shaping and means of statecraft is key to legitimize the power status in the international arena, be it at the regional or global level (Mitić 2023a, 115). The transition towards multipolarity is marked by “uncertainty and the fight for legitimacy of states in international relations” (Mitić and Matić 2022, 251). States thus use strategic communication, framing and narratives to pursue this legitimacy. They must make sure to connect the words and the deeds, and “to close the say-do gap” as one of the key elements of successful strategic communication (Mitić 2018, 143). Yet, strategic narratives cannot function without frames and strategic framing (Mitić 2023b, 34). Frames are used to “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993, 52). Thus politicians use “framing” as a rational rhetorical strategy to “angle” arguments presented to the public (Leimbigger and Lammert 2016), as “frames” have the capacity to provoke different reactions of the public depending on the element of reality they are accentuating or hiding. Strategic framing seeks to “use message frames to create salience for certain elements of a topic by including and focusing attention on them while excluding other aspects” (Hallahan 2008, 4856). Indeed, strategic framing is pursued through strategic communication, a concept of organised persuasion, represents a “system of coordinated communication activities implemented by organisations in order to advance their missions by allowing for the understanding of target groups, finding channels and methods of communication with the public, and developing and implementing ideas and attitudes that, through these channels and methods, promote a certain type of behaviour or opinion” (Mitić 2016, 9). By looking at the concepts of memory politics and strategic narratives, we can understand that they closely relate, with memory politics as a means of statecraft being an important instrument of strategic communication aimed at promoting a strategic narrative.

NATO'S 1999 AGGRESSION: MEMORY AS TOOL OF JUSTIFICATION

The prelude to NATO's decision to bomb Yugoslavia was an early indication of the conscious decision by its leadership and proponents to create a strategic narrative which would employ memory politics as a tool. When announcing his decision to attack Belgrade, on March 19, 1999 five days ahead of the launch of the bombings, U.S. President Bill Clinton stated that "as we prepare to act we need to remember the lessons we have learned in the Balkans. We should remember the horror of the war in Bosnia, the sounds of sniper fire aimed at children, the faces of young men behind barbed wire, the despairing voices of those who thought nothing could be done" (U.S. Department of State 1999a). Using a Second World War analogy, Clinton justified the attack through a rhetorical question: "What if someone had listened to Winston Churchill and stood up to Adolf Hitler earlier? How many people's lives might have been saved? And how many American lives might have been saved?" (Ash 1999). Such a reference would not have been possible without a systematic strategic communication campaign aimed at building a narrative. Indeed, a content analysis, based on a Nexus database search and presented in the introduction of a new edition of one of the most famous studies on propaganda, "Manufacturing Consent", Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky found that, in five most prominent U.S. print media (Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, Washington Post, Newsweek, and Time), the term "genocide" in relation to "Serbs" and the conflict in Kosovo appeared 220 times during the 1998-1999 period (Herman and Chomsky 2008). Thus, in the aftermath of the bombings, former correspondent during the Yugoslav wars and future U.S. ambassador to the UN from 2013–2017, Samantha Power commented in reference to NATO's attack: "The Holocaust, American self-interest, and European stability—Clinton needed and pleaded them all. American public support was essential to what was mostly an American war" (Power 2013, 479). However, the facts on the ground during the 1999 bombings in Kosovo did not match the "expectations". One of the most striking cases involved U.S. State Department Spokesman James Rubin, Power's future colleague in the administration, and husband of her former colleague from the Balkans, CNN's Christiane Amanpour. Rubin had been a liaison officer for Hashim Thaci, the leader of the separatist Albanian "Kosovo Albanian Army" since the Rambouillet talks and had

maintained this contact throughout the bombing. When on March 30, 1999 Thaci gave a statement carried by German news agency DPA that 100,000 Albanians had been herded into Priština's football stadium and two other locations, Rubin stated that "we have very clear indicators that genocide is unfolding in Kosovo" (Synovitz, 1999). Yet, when the Agence France-Presse reporter from Priština visited the stadium, he found the claims were false, inviting difficult questions for Rubin. At the March 31, 1999 State Department press conference a journalist said that "a fact of the matter is a reporter went there this morning and said that it was empty and that there was no signs that anyone in any large numbers at all had been there for the past couple days at all, that the grass was intact and undisturbed, and it was just deserted", asking Rubin: "'How confident are you in the reports that you're getting from him and others, and how comfortable are you repeating them to us in this forum?'. Rubin responded by arguing that "Mr. Thaci has been quite clear with us that he is hearing reports – he's not saying that these things are facts" (U.S. Department of State 1999b). Whether "fake news" or "alternative facts", the debunking of this report and numerous other NATO assertions and claims provoked fissures and doubts in Western public opinion, despite the constant attempts to control the strategic narrative. In Europe, among NATO members, the strategic narrative followed the U.S. leadership. German Defense Minister Rudolph Scharping argued Serbs had committed a "genocide", "were playing football with decapitated heads, ripped fetuses from pregnant women and baked them", and "killed between 100,000 and 500,000 people" (Halimi and Rimpert, 2019). London's Daily Mail put a front page on March 29, with a picture of Albanian children in a lorry, and headlined "Flight from Genocide: Their terrified and bewildered faces evoke memories of the Holocaust"; on April 1 the Daily Mirror headlined "1939 or 1999?" and reported that "Nazi style terror came to Kosovo yesterday in a horrific echo of the wartime Holocaust"; while the same day The Sun ran the title "Nazis 1999 – Serb cruelty has chilling echoes of the Holocaust" (Hume 2000, 72). References to "gas chambers", "Schindler's List", "Auschwitz" became commonplace associations in UK, German and French media. The New York Times reported on April 4 that "Policy-makers in the United States and Europe are invoking the word to help provide a legal justification for their military campaign against Serbia. It is one based in part on concepts of humanitarian law, where no word is more evocative. At the same time, the public invocation of genocide (...) is itself helping to

create a new model of international law that may one day be used to justify similar interventions in sovereign countries” (Lewis 1999). Indeed, “a broad spectrum of legal scholars agree that there is currently no simple, straightforward or obvious legal basis for the bombing of Serbian targets to be found in treaties, the United Nations’ charter or binding resolutions or any other written international legal code”, the New York Times wrote, quoting the Harvard Law professor Abram Chayes as saying that “the traditional view of international law would clearly prohibit what is happening” (Lewis 1999). Indeed, just as the NATO bombing was the height of the US unipolar moment, it was one of the defining moments of the Western “rules-based world order”. Washington and the political West in general saw the opportunity to interpret international law to their own liking, or, perhaps even more precisely, to mould international law in the shape of a “rules-based world order”.

Leading NATO members and UN Security Council permanent members – the U.S., the UK and France – knew all too well that the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China would have vetoed a UNSC resolution authorizing the bombings. Yet, they still launched the attack, provoking at the same time a profound humiliation for the remaining two permanent members. In Moscow, the humiliation was particularly bitter and hard-hitting, due to centuries-long association of Russia as Serbian ally. The Russian authorities lashed out at the U.S. and NATO. Yet, the public in particular perceived that Russia could no longer claim to be a “Great Power”, as it had been for centuries, such as at the outset of World War I, when Tsar Nicholas II entered the war against Germany and Austria-Hungary to help Serbia. It was now isolated and ignored by the West, which pursued its decision to attack Russia’s traditional and closest ally in Europe despite harsh opposition and a veto threat in the UNSC. Historical references to the “great power times” when Russia could come to Serbia’s help further despaired the public. Yet, Russia participated in the talks ending the bombings and in the adoption of the UNSC Resolution 1244, under which Kosovo was to remain part of Serbia. Particularly, as the bombing ended and international UN-mandated KFOR troops were to enter Kosovo, there was – both in Russia and Serbia – a sense of incredulity, excitement and hope when Russian troops from Bosnia and Herzegovina crossed throughout central Serbia to arrive to Priština ahead of the NATO contingents. This fairylike “one-night” Russian stay in Priština, and the follow-up surprise takeover of the Slatina airport, could not disperse a mixed feeling of pain

and melancholy in Moscow. Yet, it served as a wake-up call of sort and a realization that the unipolar U.S.-led, “rules-based” world order was a potential threat to core Russian national security interests.

Similar sentiments were felt in Beijing, not only because of the bypassing of the UNSC and the violation of international law by NATO, but also due to a direct attack on Chinese citizens. In the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade on May 7, 1999, three Chinese journalists were killed and 20 employees were wounded. The eruption of popular discontent has led to demonstrations against the US Embassy and Consulate, strengthening of anti-Western sentiment and national homogenization. The majority of the Chinese considered Washington’s explanations “inadequate, insincere and incredible”, and Beijing came up with four core demands for Washington: “apology,” “conclusions,” “punishment,” and “compensation” (Lampton 2014, 118). In his assessment of the Chinese reaction, Gries argued that they were in line with the “national narratives of China’s early modern victimization at the hands of imperialism” (...) and that “Tales of the ‘Century of Humiliation’ (*bainian guochi*), which began with the First Opium War and the ceding of Hong Kong to the British in 1842, powerfully shaped the way that Chinese both interpreted and reacted to the Belgrade bombing” (Gries 2001, 26).

MEMORIES OF 1999: MULTIPOLAR RECKONING

In June 2007, the Baltic Coast German resort Heilegendamm hosted the G8 summit. In attendance of U.S. George W. Bush, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, it was Russian President Vladimir Putin who was the central figure of attention. Putin had arrived to power in the aftermath of the NATO aggression in 1999, an event which had deeply marked his attitude and positioning towards the Western ever since. The June 2007 summit was held only several months after Putin’s historic speech on the other side of Germany, at Bavaria’s Munich Conference, during which he argued that the era of multipolarity had arrived, that the one-sided and illegitimate use of force in world affairs by the United States was unacceptable, meaning that no problem, including Kosovo and Metohija, could be resolved solely by NATO and the EU, but should include the role of the United Nations and the Russian Federation (Putin 2007). Putin’s Munich speech occurred several

days after Finnish diplomat Martti Ahtisaari, on behalf of the EU and its Western allies, presented his plan on the resolution of Kosovo's status, which would, in violation of UNSC 1244 and international law, cement Kosovo's "separation from Serbia" forced by the NATO 1999 attack. The Serbian government led by Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica refused Ahtisaari's proposal. Nevertheless, Washington, Paris and London hinted they would push for its acceptance in the UN Security Council. At the Heilegendamm summit, in direct talks, Putin warned Bush, Blair and Sarkozy he would veto any attempts to impose the proposal: "The Russian position is clear, based on the territorial integrity of states and on UN Security Council Resolution 1244, under which Kosovo is an undeniable part of Serbia (...) but, „if we come to the conclusion that in today's world the principle of the people's right to self-determination is more important than the principle of territorial integrity of states, then it must be applicable to all the regions in the world, and not only where our partners want it to apply (...) the principles of self-determination in that case must be applied also to nations of the former Yugoslavia, and to the nations living the post-Soviet space" (Mitić 2007a). With such statement, Putin not only threatened a veto, but also every attempt to treat Kosovo as a unique, "sui generis" case. Nevertheless, at the December 14, 2007 EU summit in Brussels, EU leaders agreed to mastermind "Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence" (UDI), based on a plan by Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt (Mitic 2007b). Two months later, the Kosovo Albanian leadership indeed proclaimed "a unilateral declaration of independence". Despite accusations from Serbia, Russia and China, among others, the majority of EU member countries recognized the UDI, arguing it was a "unique case" stemming from the result of the NATO bombing in 1999. Five EU members with clear concerns about a possible precedent for their own territorial integrity – Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Romania and Slovakia – refused to accept the "sui generis" argument and to recognize the UDI. Furthermore, less than two months after the UDI, at the NATO summit in Bucharest on April 4th 2008, NATO leaders agreed that Ukraine and Georgia could become NATO members, despite Moscow's harsh warnings. In the years to come, it would become clear that Russia will not accept the "sui generis" case for Kosovo, based on the Western interpretation of its "rules-based order", and neither would it accept a threat from further NATO enlargement, in Georgia, and particularly in Ukraine.

The conflict in Ukraine from 2014 on initiated or accelerated numerous processes that are still redefining the world order. Two are perhaps most noticeable. On the one hand, the homogenization of the “collective West”, united in opposing Russia through political, economic and security mechanisms (diplomatic isolation and sanctions, membership of Sweden and Finland in NATO, sending weapons to Kiev). On the other hand, the refusal of non-Western countries to adhere to the mechanisms of the US and the European Union against the Russian Federation, and the corresponding strengthening of the contours of multipolarity (the strengthening of BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and China-Russia partnership, de-dollarization).

In this context, the urgent legitimization of the NATO aggression in 1999 and the legalization of the UDI became especially important for the West.

Since the unilateral declaration in these 15 years did not bring the expected results in terms of the international legitimization of “independent Kosovo” - due to the increasingly effective process of de-recognition and the increasingly firm stance of Moscow and Beijing - the West decided for strong pressure through the “French-German” plan which was proposed in the fall of 2022 by advisers to French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Belgrade initially rejected this proposal, but after months of intense Western pressure and open threats - more precisely, ultimatums - it nevertheless accepted to consider the implementation of its points on the basis of later agreed annexes.

It is clear that the goal of this agreement is for Serbia to renounce Kosovo and Metohija, and allow “Kosovo” to float in “international waters” towards membership, recognition and other forms of legitimacy and legalization. Given that it is clear to everyone that Belgrade will never formally recognize “independent Kosovo”, non-recognition would be completely relativized by the implementation of the “French-German” plan in a practical sense. The key is that Belgrade agrees to enter into the process leading to the signing of an agreement on “normalization” or “good neighborly relations” between the Republic of Serbia and the “Republic of Kosovo”.

For the West, the benefits are more than obvious. First, the agreement would legitimize the NATO aggression of 1999, which is especially important in the context of conflicts involving other, non-Western world powers, such as the Russian Federation. Second, it would legalize the

“Kosovo” case as a “*sui generis*” – a unique case – which would have a triple effect: it would take the argument of “double standards” out of Moscow’s hands regarding respect for territorial integrity; it would strengthen transatlantic unity by giving the non-recognisers within the EU and NATO the basis that they no longer have to fear precedent, and can therefore recognize “Kosovo” without fear; finally, Serbia’s diplomatic activity aimed at de-recognition among the countries of the Global South would collapse. The third benefit for the West would be that the ties which Belgrade has with Beijing and Moscow in the UN Security Council would be diluted. From the perspective of the West, this would further reduce the “malign influence” of China and Russia in the Balkans. In turn, this would strengthen the possibility for the integration of the entire region into NATO. In the context of the increasingly intensive development of multipolarity in the world, the West would thus counter-attack the influence of rival powers in a strategically important region.

In China, the NATO bombing, left “a scar of deep mistrust” between the US and China, “whose relationship has not fully recovered” (Lampton 2014, 118). Shortly after the NATO aggression, China adopted the “New Security Concept”, which, according to Ghiselli, aimed to “improve the view towards a multipolar world order as a response to the US global dominance, especially after the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 by the US aviation brought fear to the top of the Chinese civilian and military leadership of the onset of a new era of the US unilateralism” (Ghiselli 2021, 23). Gries assessed that the Chinese, “alarmed by the Kosovo war and the US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, began to reconsider their benevolent view of the international order” (Gries 2012, 306). According to him, “in post-Belgrade China” a “Manichean, black-and-white view of China-US relations” has been developed, and the bombing of the Chinese Embassy can be viewed as a “turning point in China-US relations”, and he warned in 2001 that the resulting mutual perception of a zero-sum game can have “dangerous consequences for peace in the 21st century” (Gries 2001, 26) After the NATO aggression, China became concerned about the establishment of “coalitions of the willing” and the consequences this could have for international interference in the issues of Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang (Pang 2005, 88). Zhang Wei from the Chinese Navy warned in 1999 that “the Kosovo war and the resulting weakness of international organizations will negatively affect the security environment in Asia”, and that “future US unilateral moves in the Taiwan Strait could also be expected on the Korean Peninsula” (Ghiselli 2021, 51–52).

Today, for China, Kosovo and Metohija is a part of the Republic of Serbia and represents an example of the defence of territorial integrity in the conditions of the unipolar order and the transition to multipolarity. Beijing maintained this position during the Belgrade-Priština dialogue under the auspices of the EU, repeating it with every statement on the Kosovo issue in international forums, as well as during meetings with the Serbian officials. In the last few years, several processes in particular have strengthened China's position on the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. First, the de-recognition of Taiwan and Kosovo. Since 2017, these two processes ran in parallel, despite no evidence they were co-ordinated. According to the Serbian government, since then 28 states revoked their recognition of Kosovo (Kosovo Online 2023). In the same period, nine countries de-recognized Taiwan. Second, Beijing views the Kosovo issue also through the lenses of recent Western pressure and sanctions regarding Xinjiang and Hong Kong. There is the Western narrative saying that China does not want to recognize the independence of Kosovo "not only out of solidarity with its Serbian ally", but also "so as not to open a discussion on the secession of Taiwan and Hong Kong" (China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe 2020, 30).

25 YEARS LATER: WHO'S PLAYING MEMORY POLITICS NOW?

In the aftermath of the launch of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the US "Foreign Policy" magazine headlined "Why Putin Keeps Talking About Kosovo", arguing that "for the Kremlin, NATO's 1999 war against Serbia is the West's original sin – and a humiliating affront that Russia must avenge" (Mc Glynn 2022) It was not something new, as Western media had already been acknowledging – even if often not fully understanding – Putin's references to NATO's 1999 aggression. Ahead of the February 24 operation, at a press conference in Moscow with the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Putin underlined: "Mr. Chancellor just said that people of his generation (and I am a member of his generation) can hardly imagine any kind of war in Europe. . . . But you and I have witnessed a war in Europe, the war against Yugoslavia, which was unleashed, coincidentally, by NATO. It was a large-scale military operation that included air strikes against a European capital, Belgrade. That happened, didn't it?" (Gessen 2022). Putin made it clear the aggression was launched without approval by the

UN Security Council, and that it created a precedent with longstanding consequences. Scholz replied by repeating the Western argument that Kosovo was a “unique case”, not a precedent, and the the bombing was pursued in order to prevent a “genocide”, just as it had been argued by his fellow Social-Democrat Scharping in 1999 (Stojanović 2022). The Russian rhetoric regarding the 1999 bombings had remained the same two decades later, considering it as “NATO’s barbaric act of aggression”, “massive crime”, and pointing regularly to the use of depleted uranium and the “poisoning” of Serbia. Yet, it also used the precedent of both the 1999 bombings and their consequence – the Western-orchestrated UDI of “Kosovo” – to justify its military action in Georgia and Ukraine, confer recognition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and legitimize the referenda by Crimea, Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporozhye regions to join the Russian Federation. Furthermore, the 1999 NATO aggression is part of the Russian strategic narrative that defines the need to change the path of the offensive threadline of US unipolarity which, after Yugoslavia, continued in Iraq and Libya, combined with the eastward expansion of NATO aimed at using Georgia and Ukraine as launching pads against Russia itself. In that sense, Russia’s strategic narrative calls the wider non-Western community of nations, and particularly the Global South, to stand against the Western “rules-world order” in order to avoid the repeat of the 1999 scenario.

There is an impression that officials and media from NATO countries more often mention Russia’s reference to NATO bombings in the Ukrainian context than their own 1999 “victory”. When they do, they refer to it as a “bombing campaign”, “an intervention” following a “brutal crackdown”, “mass killings” and “other war crimes” committed by Serbs against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. They refer to it also in reports about monuments and street names celebrating “saviors” of Kosovo Albanians, such as U.S. President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Tony Blair. Yet, overall, media reports about 1999 remain largely buried, and are far below the publicity which the Western media repeats yearly on the occasion of the July 11 commemoration of the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica. When discussing the continuous tensions in Kosovo, the 1999 bombings are just used as a brief background line.

Chinese officials and media make a recurrent reference to the 1999 bombings in their statements, analyses and commentaries. Every year, the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade commemorates the bombing at the site where now sits the Chinese Cultural Center. The rhetoric about

the bombing is as strong as it was a quarter of the century ago: “The Chinese people will never forget the blood and lives paid to defend truth, fairness and justice, and NATO’s barbaric crime of bombing the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia”, Beijing media report, adding it was a “brutal missile attack” and “homicidal rampage”. U.S. and NATO moves related to the conflict in Ukraine are also put in reference to 1999. Thus, Wang Wenbin, the spokesman of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in his address regarding the 1999 bombings, underlined that “the US-led NATO should seriously reflect on its crimes and abandon its out-of-date Cold War mentality to stop stirring up conflicts, splits and chaos”, adding that “recently, NATO’s continued eastward movement into the Asia-Pacific region to provoke bloc confrontation has aroused high alert among regional countries” (Global Times 2023a). Chinese experts warn that “the US has no plan to let go of its wild ambitions”, but “should not expect China to sit still”, that “the strength gap between China and the U.S. is narrowing” and that “China is not what it used to be when the US bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999” (Global Times 2023b). Serbia has become the first European country to buy Chinese military equipment. On the occasion, Chinese media reported that “the brave resistance of China’s ironclad friend, Serbia, against NATO during its aggression against former Yugoslavia in 1999, has touched many in China” and that “the legendary achievement of the Serbian Air Force and Air Defense in shooting down a stealth fighter for the first time in human history won the respect of many Chinese people” (Hu and Fan 2023). The current tensions in Kosovo are also seen through these lenses: “it was the US and NATO that forcibly divided Serbia through bombing and despicable political tactics. This is the root of that bane” (Global Times 2023c).

CONCLUSION

Memory politics played an important part in NATO’s crafting of the 1999 aggression against Yugoslavia, but also in the perception and reception of the bombings outside of the political West, most notably in Russia and China. At the time, there was a clear and long-term build-up in Western rhetoric about a threat of a “genocide” in Kosovo, which served as an attempt to justify the bypassing of the UN Security Council. Yet, such strategic framing was neither backed by facts, nor was it accepted in Moscow and Beijing. Rather, it was perceived as an attempt

to misuse the position of the hegemon to implement yet another own “rule” in the unipolar order. Such a perception was further strengthened after the 2008 EU-US masterminding of the UDI performed by Kosovo Albanians. The “unique case” framing, in clear violation of international law, was both a repeat of the 1999 scenario and its follow-up, but also a step too far. For Moscow and Beijing, the 1999 aggression had been both a humiliation and a wake-up call. But in 2008, the times had changed, and both capitals were now ready to confront US/NATO’s continuous military expansion – be it on Russia’s eastern borders or around the China Seas. They were also ready to challenge the RBO on various fronts – diplomatic, economic, security, normative and informational. Ever since, the decline of U.S. unipolarity, rising multipolarity, the Ukraine and Gaza conflicts, U.S. containment of China’s rise, shifts in perceptions and attitudes of the Global South towards Western powers, have all impacted on the strategic narratives of great powers. Yet, the 1999 NATO aggression remains a particularly defining moment in the narratives – and memory politics – of those who had been “humiliated” – Russia and China. On the other side, the strategic narrative of the “victorious” NATO countries appears to be on the defensive, toned down, and mostly focusing on blaming Moscow’s memory politics for the Ukrainian conflict.

We have thus seen from 1999 the full range of memory politics mechanisms outlined by Klymenko and Siddi, including historical analogies, memory sites, marginalisation of the past and securitisation of historical memory. They proved to be important contributors to strategic narratives pursued by key global geopolitical actors.

LITERATURE

Ash, Timothy Garton. 1999. “The new Adolf Hitler?” *CNN*. March 29, 1999. Accessed on March 5, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/ALL-POLITICS/time/1999/03/29/hitler.html>

China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe. 2020. *Empty Shell No More: China’s Growing Footprint in Central and Eastern Europe*. Accessed on March 11, 2024. https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CHOICE_Empty-shell-no-more.pdf

Entman, Robert. 1993. “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm”. *Journal of Communication* 43 (4): 51–58.

- Gessen, Masha. 2022. "How the Kosovo Air War Foreshadowed the Crisis in Ukraine". *New Yorker*. Accessed on March 13, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/how-the-kosovo-air-war-foreshadowed-the-crisis-in-ukraine>
- Ghiselli, Andrea. 2021. *Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Global Times. 2023a. "China urges NATO to reflect on crimes on 24th anniversary of killing Chinese journalists in Belgrade". *Global Times*. May 8. 2023. Accessed on March 13, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202305/1290359.shtml>
- Global Times. 2023b. "A note to Biden admin: Rhetoric no help to get China-US relations 'right'". *Global Times*. September 11, 2023. Accessed on March 13, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202309/1297984.shtml>
- Global Times. 2023c. "Greater selfishness is lurking behind US' seeming impartiality: Global Times editorial". *Global Times*. Accessed on March 13, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202306/1291868.shtml>
- Gries, Peter Hays. 2001. "Tears of Rage: Chinese Nationalist Reactions to the Belgrade Embassy Bombing". *The China Journal*, 46, 25–43.
- Gries, Peter Hays. 2012. „Disillusionment and Dismay: How Chinese Netizens Think and Feel about the Two Koreas”. In *China's Foreign Policy: Who makes it and how is it made*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, 299–327. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Halimi, Serge and Pierre Rimbart. 1999. "Le plus gros bobard de la fin du XXe siècle". *Le Monde diplomatique*. April 2019. <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2019/04/HALIMI/59723>
- Hallahan, Kirk. 2008. "Strategic Framing". In *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach, 4855–4860. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Herman, Edward S. and Noam Chomsky. 2008. In *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. With a new afterword by Edward S. Herman. London: The Bodley Head Random House.
- Holsti, Kalevi. 1976. "The Study of Diplomacy". In *World Politics*, eds. James N. Rosenau, Kenneth W. Thompson and Gavin Bond, 293–311. New York: Free Press.

- Hu Yuwei and Fan Wei. 2023. “Exclusive: China-Serbia military cooperation supports Serbia’s defense modernization, empowers defense capabilities: Serbian Defense Minister”. *Global Times*. October 22, 2023. Accessed on March 13, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202310/1300333.shtml>
- Hume, Mick. 2000. “Nazifying the Serbs, from Bosnia to Kosovo”. In *Degraded Capability: the Media and the Kosovo Crisis*, eds. Philip Hammond and Edward S. Herman, 70–78. London: Pluto Press.
- Huyssen, Andreas. 2003. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Klymenko, Lina and Marco Siddi. 2020. “Exploring the link between historical memory and foreign policy: an introduction”. In *Historical Memory and Foreign Policy*. eds. Lina Klymenko and Marco Siddi, 1–10. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kosovo Online. 2023. “Dačić: Nakon Surinama priznanje Kosova povuklo još 27 zemalja”. *Kosovo Online*. July 24, 2023. Accessed on March 11, 2024, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/dacic-nakon-surinama-priznanje-kosova-povuklo-jos-27-zemalja-24-7-2023>
- Lampton, David. 2014. *Following the Leader: Ruling China, From Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Leimbigler, Betsy, and Christian Lammert. 2016. “Why Health Care Reform Now? Strategic Framing and the Passage of Obamacare”. *Social Policy and Administration* 50 (4): 467–481.
- Lewis, Neil. A. 1999. “A Word Bolsters Case for Allied Intervention”. *New York Times*. April 4, 1999. Accessed on March 14, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/world/europe/040499koso-vo-legal.html>
- Makhortych, Mykola. 2020. “Historical memory and securitisation of the Russian intervention in Syria”. In *Historical Memory and Foreign Policy*. eds. Lina Klymenko and Marco Siddi 123–141. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McGlynn, Jade. 2022. “Why Putin Keeps Talking About Kosovo”. *Foreign Policy*. March 3, 2022. Accessed on March 13, 2024. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/03/putin-ukraine-russia-nato-kosovo/>

- Miskimmon, Alistair, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Rosselle. 2013. *Strategic Narratives: Communicative Power and the New World Order*. New York: Routledge.
- Mitić, Aleksandar. 2007a. „G-8 bez dogovora o Kosovu“. *Politika*. June 9, 2007. Accessed on March 10, 2024, <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/26880/G-8-bez-dogovora-o-Kosmetu>
- Mitić, Aleksandar. 2007b. „Švedski plan za nezavisno Kosovo“. *Politika*. December 16, 2007. Accessed on March 11, 2024, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/9243/Svedski-plan-za-nezavisno-Kosovo>
- Mitić, Aleksandar. 2016. *Integracija tehnika onlajn medija u strateške komunikacione projekte*. Doctoral dissertation. Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade.
- Mitić, Aleksandar. 2018. „The Strategic Framing of the 2015 Migrant Crisis in Serbia“. In *Migrants, Refugees and the Media: The New Reality of Open Societies*. ed. Sai-Felicia Krishna-Hensel, 121–150. New York: Routledge.
- Mitić, Aleksandar and Petar Matić. 2022. “Strateški okviri osporavanja vojne neutralnosti Srbije”. *Srpska politička misao*. Posebno izdanje, 245–266. <https://doi.org/10.22182/spm.specijal2022.9>
- Mitić, Aleksandar. 2023a. “China’s New Initiatives and the Shaping of Eurasia’s Strategic Environment”. *Eurasian Security after NATO*. eds. Dušan Proroković and Ekaterina Entina, 113–140. Belgrade: Institute of International Politics and Economics.
- Mitić, Aleksandar. 2023b. “From Globalisation ‘Friend’ to Global ‘Foe’: The Evolution of the US Strategic Narrative on China’s Rise”. *The Review of International Affairs LXXIV* (1189), 31–56. Belgrade: Institute of International Politics and Economics.
- Mouritzen, Hans. 2020. “‘Remember Iraq!’ Learning theory and the 2013 non-decision on air strikes against Syria”. In *Historical Memory and Foreign Policy*. eds. Lina Klymenko and Marco Siddi, 11–30. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Müller, Jan-Werner (ed.). 2002. *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Power, Samantha. 2013. *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. New York: Basic Books.

- Putin, Vladimir. 2007. *A speech delivered at the MSC 2007 by the President Vladimir Putin*. Accessed on March 10, 2024, https://is.muni.cz/th/xlghl/DP_Fillinger_Speeches.pdf
- Reporters Without Borders. 1999. *RSF report on NATO's media blunders in Kosovo war*. Ifex. Accessed on March 10, 2024, <https://ifex.org/rsf-report-on-natos-media-blunders-in-kosovo-war/>
- Siddi, Marco. 2020. "Silencing history: forgetting Italy's past during the refugee crisis in Europe". In *Historical Memory and Foreign Policy*, eds. Lina Klymenko and Marco Siddi, 89–106 Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stojanović, Dušan. 2022. "Explainer: Putin's Balkan narrative argument for Ukraine war". Associated Press. March 5, 2022. Accessed on March 12, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin-racial-injustice-serbia-kosovo-756fa71c7ab417115ee3521a95791ca7>
- Subotić, Jelena. 2020. „Foreign policy and physical sites of memory: competing foreign policies at the Jasenovac memorial site”. In *Historical Memory and Foreign Policy*. eds Lina Klymenko and Marco Siddi, 71–88. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Synovitz, Ron. 1999. "Yugoslavia: Belgrade Orchestrates Ethnic Cleansing". *Radio Free Europe*. April 9, 1999. Accessed on March 9, 2024. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1090963.html>
- U.S. Department of State. 1999a. *President Clinton. Excerpt from press conference released by the White House Office of the Press Secretary, Washington, DC, March 19, 1999*. Accessed on March 3, 2024. https://1997-2001.state.gov/policy_remarks/1999/990319_clinton_kosovo.html
- U.S. Department of State. 1999b. U.S. Department of State Daily Press Briefing, March 31, 1999. Accessed on March 3, 2024. <https://1997-2001.state.gov/briefings/9903/990331db.html>
- Wolfley, Kyle. 2021. *Military Statecraft and the Rise of Shaping in World Politics*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Д-р Александар Митич, Республика Сербия

*Институт международной политики и экономики
Белград*

ОТРАЖЕНИЕ АГРЕССИИ НАТО 1999 ГОДА В СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИХ НАРРАТИВАХ ГЛОБАЛЬНЫХ ДЕРЖАВ И КОНТЕКСТЕ МНОГОПОЛЯРНОСТИ

Аннотация

За последние десятилетия политика памяти стала важным направлением научных исследований, а среди региональных случаев особое значение придавалось балканским случаям из-за конфликтов 1990-х годов. Тем не менее, это внимание было в основном посвящено тому, как бывшие югославские общества (неправильно) используют политику памяти, а не тому, как они связаны с геополитическими соображениями и политикой великих держав. В этой статье мы анализируем, как политика памяти сыграла роль в восприятии и действиях ведущих мировых геополитических игроков во время взрывов 1999 года и как они интерпретируют это событие в сегодняшних стратегических нарративах в контексте многополярности. Мы приходим к выводу, что политика памяти сыграла важную роль в подготовке НАТО агрессии против Югославии в 1999 году, а также в восприятии и восприятии взрывов за пределами политического Запада, особенно в России и Китае. Они также сыграли важную роль в последней четверти века, во многом содействуя росту многополярности. Сегодня агрессия НАТО 1999 года остается особенно определяющим моментом в повествованиях – и политике памяти – тех, кто был «унижен» в 1999 году – России и Китая. С другой стороны, стратегический нарратив «победивших» стран НАТО, похоже, занимает оборонительную позицию, приглушен

и в основном сосредоточен на обвинении политики памяти Москвы в украинском конфликте.

Ключевые слова: *политика памяти, геополитика, многополярность, стратегические нарративы, НАТО, Сербия.*