Südosteuropa 64 (2016), no. 4, pp. 460-481

MARIJA MANDIĆ

Official Commemoration of the NATO Bombing of Serbia. A Case Study of the Fifteenth Anniversary

Abstract: This article analyses how NATO's bombing of Serbia has been officially commemorated in that country. Initially, it provides an overview of the commemorations performed between 2000 and 2013, covering both the commemorative practices and policies of leading Serbian politicians and alternative voices. The focus then turns to the fifteenth anniversary of the bombing in 2014. Just as in previous commemorations, there was no central ceremony, but, rather, a series of commemorative events held all over the country. The controversies that these aroused are then discussed, in particular those surrounding the commemoration of Radio Television Serbia's employees and the spontaneous commemorative acts that took place in Serbian schools.

Marija Mandić is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Balkan Studies of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Belgrade, and a Humboldt Postdoctoral Fellow (2016-2018) at the Institute for Slavic Studies at the Humboldt University, Berlin.

> '– How did the bombing affect you?
> – Well, after it, and particularly after I experienced a three-ton bomb dropped on Straževica Hill in Belgrade, when I thought I was going to die, I decided to marry my long-term boyfriend.' (From my conversation with Eve Ann Prentice, war correspondent for *The Times*)

Theoretical Framework: the Politics of Memory, Discourse, and Media

The connection between social groups and collective memory has been the starting point for memory research in the modern humanities ever since Maurice Halbwachs argued that every memory is carried by a specific social group, limited in space and time.[1] The politics of memory, however, is concerned with

[1] Maurice Halbwachs, La mémoire collective. Ouvrage posthume publié par Mme Jeanne Alexandre née Halbwachs, Paris 1950 [1925]; Alon Confino, Collective Memory and Cultural History. Problems of Method, *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (1997), 1386-1403, 1392.

the role politics has in shaping collective memory. It is reflected in the ways historical events are represented by politicians, talked about in government-controlled media, or transmitted through the school system.[2] The present article focuses specifically on commemoration as a form of remembrance. According to Assmann, cultural memory is memory which has periodically stabilized with the help of anniversaries and which can thus extend over a very long period. Commemoration is also an opportunity for collective re-staging: communities of memory make use of commemorations to represent themselves in the way they would like to see themselves—in the way they aspire to be.[3] Paul Connerton stresses the interrelationship:

> 'If there is such a thing as social memory, I shall argue, we are likely to find it in commemorative ceremonies; but commemorative ceremonies prove to be commemorative only in so far as they are performative; performativity cannot be thought without a concept of habit; and habit cannot be thought without a notion of bodily automatisms.'[4]

As this article analyses commemorative ceremonies and discourses, I will outline the basic theoretical assumptions I have adopted. My understanding of 'discourse' comes from Michael Foucault, who takes the rules of the formation of discourse to explain the ways in which societies and groups constitute forms of subjectivity, knowledge, social practices, institutions, and power relations, and vice versa.[5] Since critical social theory maintains that discourse and society constitute one another, it criticizes the abuses of power that are reflected, constructed and legitimized via discourse.[6] The concept of 'discursive strategy', which is also used in this article, denotes a more or less accurate plan adopted to achieve a certain political, psychological or other kind of objective.[7]

Theorizing about the social context in which a commemorative discourse has been produced brings us to a thorny question: could Serbia in the post-bombing period be described as a traumatized society? In existing academic writing, it

---

[2] Cf. Jan Assmann, Cultural Memory and Early Civilization. Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination, Cambridge 2011; Aleida Assmann, Arbeit am nationalen Gedächtnis. Eine kurze Geschichte der deutschen Bildungsidee, Frankfurt 1993; Aleida Assmann, Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, München 2006.

[3] Assmann, Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit, 230.

[4] Paul Connerton, How Societies Remember, Cambridge, New York 1989, 5.

[5] Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language, New York 1972, 38.

[6] Cf. Teun van Dijk, Critical Discourse Analysis, in: Deborah Tannen / Deborah Schiffrin / Heidi E. Hamilton, eds, Handbook of Discourse Analysis, Oxford 2001, 352-371; Norman Fairclough, Language and Power, London 1989; Norman Fairclough / Ruth Wodak, Critical Discourse Analysis, in: Teun van Dijk, ed, Discourse Studies. A Multidisciplinary Introduction, vol. 2: Discourse as Social Interaction, London 1997, 258-284.

[7] Ruth Wodak et al., The Discursive Construction of National Identity, Edinburgh 2009, 31.

is problematized whether the bombings created a collective trauma or not.[8] I argue that the NATO bombings caused a specific, though suppressed, national trauma. When using the term 'national trauma', I take its definition to be a crisis, specific event, or large-scale disaster which has a traumatic impact on the national community, and which is eventually engraved in collective memory at the official and vernacular levels.[9] According to Bernhard Giesen, triumph and trauma represent opposite poles which play a mythomotoric role in the construction of national identity. In his view, triumph and trauma symbolize eternal anthropological categories of historical experience.[10] Ernest Renan, one of the first theoreticians of nationhood, observes, moreover, that shared suffering is a stronger unifier than joy.[11] Hence this article tries to reflect on how the NATO bombing has been commemorated in Serbia: as a negative traumatizing experience or as a heroic one?

I base my analysis on material in Serbian newspapers and internet portals, using them as my sources of information. Through their use of the very effective strategy of sourcing, news stories are predisposed to present a specific version of reality: A particular voice is chosen to be the source, so that the reports go unquestioned and are accepted as fact. In this way, the news stories position the reporter and the readers with regard to the content of the report. If the sourcing is not used for reporting opposite views on an event, it is used as a tool for achieving hegemony and authority.[12] Van Dijk reminds us that access to news media is largely available to 'members of more powerful social groups and institutions, and especially their leaders (the elites) have more or less exclusive access'.[13] As, in this article, I analyse official commemorative practices that are extensively covered by the state media, the use of such media as source material does not seem too problematic. For alternative voices, I have relied on the oppositional, critically oriented media.

The sources used are thus the most circulated Serbian newspapers *Politika*, *Večernje novosti*, *Blic*, and *Danas*, as well as the online portals of *B92* and *Radio*

---

[8] Cf. Krisztina Rácz, Trauma or Entertainment? Collective Memories of the NATO Bombing in Serbia in this issue.

[9] Kendall Johnson, After the Storm. Healing After Trauma, Tragedy and Terror, Alameda/CA 2006, 48.

[10] Bernhard Giesen, Triumph and Trauma, London 2004; cf. Assmann, Der lange Schatten, 14.

[11] Ernest Renan, Lecture at Sorbonne, 11 March 1882, in: Geoff Eley / Ronald G. Suny, eds, Becoming National. A Reader, New York, Oxford 1996, 41-55.

[12] Cf. Romylyn A. Metila, A Discourse Analysis of News Headlines. Diverse Framings for a Hostage-Taking Event, *Asian Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities* 2, no. 2 (2013), 71-78, 72; Talaat Pasha, Islamists in the Headlines. Critical Discourse Analysis of the Representation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian Newspapers, Doctoral thesis, University of Utah 2011.

[13] Teun van Dijk, News Analysis. Case Studies of International and National News in the Press. Hillsdale/NJ 1988, 5; Allan Bell, The Language of News Media, Oxford 1991.

Televizija Serbije (Radio Television of Serbia—RTS). In the media sphere, *Politika* and *Večernje novosti* support the views of the ruling establishment. *Blic* has changed over the course of time from an anti-Milošević newspaper to a tabloid, with this transformation gradually occurring from 2000 onwards. Between 2000 and 2013 *Danas* and *B92* were left-wing oriented media with critical editorial policies, especially towards the former Milošević regime and its followers. The activities of the state president, prime minister, ministers, politicians, army commanders, church leaders, and public figures were reported on, and mostly covered in some depth. Besides this, alternative and marginalized voices were also reported on in *Danas*, *Blic* and *B92*, and this allows me to sketch a fuller picture of the most important commemorative practices. However, these media are all centred on Belgrade, meaning that the picture they convey is almost entirely related to the capital, so that evidence about other cities and places in Serbia and their local commemorative practices remains somewhat scarce.

In the first section of this article, I show how commemorative discourse emerged, developed, and changed between 2000 and 2013. The second section presents a case study of the fifteenth anniversary commemorations of the NATO bombings. I argue that although a stable commemorative pattern has been established, its semantics are ambivalent. This ambivalence can be found in the absence of a central ceremony, in the marginalized positions of monuments dedicated to the victims, and in the more or less marginal coverage of the anniversaries themselves. The other key point that I make concerns those alternative voices who oppose the official policy. These come from victims' families, who hold the Serbian state responsible, and also from right-wing movements, which take a polarized view, casting NATO as the aggressor and Serbia as an innocent, heroic victim.

Official Commemoration of the NATO Bombings from 2000 to 2013

The section that follows reviews the recurrent commemorative practices carried out from the first anniversary of the NATO bombings up to the fourteenth anniversary in 2013. These include anniversary events, the commemorative policy of the leading Serbian politicians, and also alternative voices.

Official Commemoration 2000-2013: Continuity

Throughout the period, recurrent commemorative practices were carried out by the Serbian Orthodox Church, by the Yugoslav (later Serbian) Army and by groups of citizens. These will be considered in turn.

Following the first anniversary, on 24 March 2000, memorial services dedicated to all victims of the NATO bombings were conducted at noon in all Serbian Orthodox churches both in Serbia and outside its borders. Between 2000 and 2012, the central memorial service was held in St. Mark's Church in Belgrade. Exceptionally in 2013, it took place in the St. Sava Temple in Belgrade. Vojislav Koštunica, the last president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (2001-2003) and the then prime minister of Serbia (2005-2008), placed a special political significance on these church commemorations. During this period, the central church memorial service was a political event par excellence, attended by Koštunica, ministers of the Republic, politicians, Belgrade city representatives, members of the Serbian royal family, a range of citizens, and families of the victims. After Koštunica fell from power in 2008, the central church memorial service lost its political significance, and, following that, it was mainly attended simply by families of the victims and by citizens. The sermons delivered by the patriarch or bishop at the end of the services between 2000 and 2013 regularly employed a rhetoric of victimization: the whole Serbian nation was seen as a victim, while NATO was depicted as an unjust aggressor whose aim was to occupy Serbia's historical territory in order to establish its military base there.[14]

On 24 March each year, the Serbian Army and the Police also commonly commemorated the bombings, doing so in their institutions, units, and barracks all over Serbia by laying wreaths and giving speeches at the monuments or memorials dedicated to fallen soldiers, and sometimes civilians as well. A memorial dedicated to pilots and other members of the Air Forces who had been killed was built at the Army Command Centre in Zemun in 2003.[15] High ranking politicians chose this place to pay tribute to the victims; they included the Republic's minister of defence, Dragan Šutanovac (in 2008 and 2009), and the first deputy prime minister Aleksandar Vučić (in 2013). Another important memory site that was established was Straževica Hill, situated in the Rakovica municipality of Belgrade. Since the underground command centre of the Yugoslav Army had been at Straževica, that area had regularly suffered heavy bombing, receiving some of the largest ammunition (up to three tons), whose explosions could be felt throughout Belgrade. In 2004, on the fifth anniversary of the bombing, a monument called the Messenger from Straževica (*Glasnik sa Straževice*) was constructed, dedicated to the soldiers who fell while engaged in maintaining communication lines.[16] Representatives of the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička partija Srbije*) placed special political significance on this place in their particular commemorative activities.

---

[14] Cf. *Politika*, *Večernje novosti*, 24-25 March 2000-2013.

[15] Da ne snađe više nikoga, *Blic*, 25 March 2003, 3.

[16] V. Veličković, Počast poginulim zastavnicima, *Politika*, 25 March 2004, 9.

The commemorative practices of the Belgrade city authorities also fell into a stable pattern. On the first anniversary, in 2000, their representatives chose three 'memory sites'. From then on, regardless of which party was in power, the city's representatives attended the ceremonies. The sites chosen were:

1. The Why? (*Zašto?*) monument in Belgrade's Tašmajdan Park dedicated to those RTS employees, members of its technical staff, who were killed in a NATO airstrike while at work.[17]

2. The grave of a three year-old girl, Milica Rakić, who was killed in her bathroom in Belgrade's Batajnica neighbourhood on the afternoon of 17 April 1999, when shrapnel from a cluster bomb hit her in the head. Milica became a symbol for all the innocent civilian victims of the NATO bombing.

3. From 2003, the Dr. Dragiša Mišović Clinical Hospital Centre in Belgrade's Dedinje neighbourhood, where seven Guards Brigade members and three patients were killed by a bomb on 20 May 1999.

To summarize, the commemorative policy of the city authorities, led between 2001 and 2014 by the Democratic Party (*Demokratska stranka*), encompassed both military and civilian victims, but put special emphasis on civilians and particularly those whose families accused the former Milošević regime of having deliberately brought about their sacrifice.

Mainly as a result of local initiatives, monuments or memorial sites were gradually built throughout Serbia during these years. These were either monuments in city centres dedicated to fallen soldiers, policemen and civilians alike, or plaques in local army barracks dedicated to soldiers especially. Tributes were regularly paid by local city representatives, army officials, citizens and families of the victims. As already mentioned, the newspapers I have been able to consult tend to be Belgrade-centric, so that information on other Serbian cities is rather scarce; hence those local commemorative practices reported through the local media warrant special research.

Anniversaries in 2000 and 2009

The first and the tenth anniversaries held special positions in the commemorative policy. The first anniversary took place when Milošević was still in power, and it was widely observed. The first classes in every Serbian primary and secondary school were given over to reflection on the bombing. A text read to all pupils stated:

---

[17] More can be read about this in the following sections: 'RTS Employees and Victims of the Wars 1990-1999', and 'Commemorating RTS Employees in 2014'.

> 'NATO attacked our country because we were determined to defend our freedom and the right to independently determine our internal affairs. The main aim of the aggressor was to destroy our country and enslave our people.'[18]

A special book named 'Heroes of the Fatherland' (*Heroji otadžbine*) was issued by the federal government. The book contained the names of 1,002 fallen soldiers and policemen and offered short biographies. Slobodan Milošević, federal president at the time, wrote the preface. From 23 March to 11 June, the daily *Politika* devoted its covers to documentation of the NATO aggression. The daily *Večernje novosti* had the Unforgettable monument (*Nezaboravnik*) built in Tašmajdan Park, dedicated to the children who had been killed during the bombing. Organized by their trade unions, several thousand citizens gathered in Belgrade's Nikola Pašić Square to commemorate the start of the bombing, while another group of citizens gathered in Republic Square under the slogan 'The song kept us alive', and they marked the anniversary with a musical programme led by popular pop and folk singers. On this first anniversary, almost all the bombed sites were visited by the ruling politicians: they went, for instance, to the Ušće Business Centre, to Straževica Hill, to the Chinese Embassy, and to Branko's Bridge.

On the tenth anniversary, all the schools in Serbia observed a minute's silence at the beginning of the first class; later, sirens sounded at noon in all Serbian cities and people observed a minute's silence on the streets; before commencing their regular meeting, the Serbian government did likewise. The government decided on this tenth anniversary to commission the construction of the Memorial Centre in Belgrade. In the same city, a Race for Peace memorial footrace took place, with 250 participants. A right-wing memorial gathering entitled 'Serbia, remember!' was held at the Sava Convention Centre and, besides Vojislav Koštunica, those who attended included Serbian politicians, members of the Serbian Orthodox clergy, Russian politicians, and other public figures. Ivica Dačić, deputy prime minister and minister of internal affairs, opened a memorial site in his own ministry building in memory of members of the police force who had been killed during the bombing.

Leading Serbian Politicians

On 24 March 2000, Slobodan Milošević, president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, laid a wreath in commemoration of the bombing at the Monument to the Unknown Hero (*Spomenik neznanom junaku*). This is on Avala, the mountain at Belgrade's south-eastern periphery. Milošević wrote in the memorial book: 'Let those who fell defending the freedom and dignity of the people and

---

[18] Venci i sveće za sve nastradale, *Blic*, 25 March 2000, 8. All translations from Serbian newspapers are made by the author.

the state against a new fascism be honoured.'[19] After the democratic changes in Serbia in October 2000, Ivica Dačić, one of Milošević's most loyal acolytes and a subsequent successor to the leadership of the Socialist Party of Serbia, led an oppositional commemorative gathering at Republic Square on 24 March 2001, the second anniversary of the bombing. At this gathering, accusations of national betrayal were made against the newly elected democrats. Dačić legitimized the policy of the previous regime by constructing an opposition between a generalized ethnic group (Serbs) and a homogenized, criminalized group of 'others':

> 'They have tried to put all of the blame on the Serbs for the past ten years. Serbs are not war criminals, instead the criminals are the Ustasha, Islamic fundamentalists, Albanian terrorists, NATO officials.'[20]

As previously noted, Ivica Dačić and his colleagues from the Socialist Party of Serbia placed special political significance on the military memorial on Straževica Hill. From 2007 it became the place where Dačić and his party colleagues regularly paid tribute to the victims of the bombings and delivered political statements.[21] In his statements made at the commemorations, Dačić exhorted citizens not to forget the soldiers who had sacrificed their lives whilst defending their country; he claimed that NATO had only attacked Serbia in order to capture Kosovo and Metohija.[22] Dačić's policy was thus oriented towards the commemoration of the soldiers and policemen who were killed. This also holds true for Aleksandar Vučić, who was a member of the ruling regime under Milošević too. In 2013, as the first deputy prime minister, Vučić paid tribute to the victims at the monument dedicated to the members of the Air Force and Air Defence in Zemun. In his speech, he adopted a strategy of claiming heroic victimization, and stated that Serbs ought to remember those who were 'the bravest' because they defended their country against a much stronger aggressor.[23]

Zoran Đinđić, prime minister of Serbia from 2001 until his assassination in 2003,[24] took a different approach to commemorating the bombings from that of

---

[19] Herojska odbrana otadžbine, *Večernje novosti*, 24 March 2000, cover page.

[20] Ne zaboravite bombardovanje, *Blic*, 25 March 2001, 3. The Ustasha (*Ustaša*) were a fascist and ultranationalist Croatian organization, most active between 1929 and 1945. Fronting the Nazi-backed Independent State of Croatia during World War Two, the movement engaged in the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, Roma and antifascist Croats within the territory under their control. When used in Serbian nationalist discourse, the term refers to Croats in general, thus grouping them all under the banner of this fascist movement. The term 'Albanian terrorists' refers to Kosovo Albanians who were fighting for Kosovar independence.

[21] Cf. *Politika*, *Večernje novosti*, 24-25 March 2000-2013.

[22] Cf. *Politika*, *Večernje novosti*, 24-25 March 2000-2013.

[23] Obeležavanje NATO agresije: Srbija bila iznad svega, *Večernje novosti*, 24 March 2013, http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:425849-Obelezavanje-NATO-agresije-Srbija-bila-iznad-svega. All internet sources were accessed on 10 October 2016.

[24] Đinđić was one of the founders of the modern Democratic Party, becoming its president in 1994. He was at the forefront of opposition to Slobodan Milošević and his regime. He

most other Serbian politicians. During the bombings, he had fled to Montenegro, allegedly on account of his being next on the assassination list of the Milošević-controlled state security service. This move put his political career in serious jeopardy, and he was denounced as a 'traitor' and a 'NATO mercenary'.[25] In 2000, alongside other oppositional political leaders, he accused the Milošević regime of bringing about the bombings and entreated people not to mark this 'tragic day and defeat'.[26] During his time as prime minister, official commemoration of the bombings was completely marginalized: it was relegated to president Vojislav Koštunica and the Church, and was almost invisible in the media. Đinđić never gave any official statements at the 24 March ceremonies.[27]

In 2000, along with other democratic oppositional politicians, Vojislav Koštunica condemned the policies of the Milošević governments and the Socialist Party of Serbia, holding them responsible for the NATO bombings, and he called on citizens not to commemorate them.[28] However, during his time as president of the country (2001-2004) and then prime minister (2005-2008), he did give political statements on the bombings—though only in St. Mark's Church. In 2002, Koštunica accused the former Milošević regime of bringing about the NATO attacks, and said that they could have been avoided. He also stated that Serbia needed to cooperate with the NATO countries.[29] In 2003, however, the targets of his criticism began to change, and he started criticizing the policies of NATO and the West. He pointed out that the authoritarian regime against which the intervention was allegedly directed lasted for more than a year after the bombing and it was only defeated by voting, not by bombs. Contrary to his previous statements, Koštunica said that he hoped Serbia would not join the NATO alliance.[30] In 2008, his statement was even more critical of NATO:

> 'This was the brutal demolition of our country, aimed at making Kosovo and Metohija into the first NATO state in the world […]. Serbia is a free country and the policy of the power which is enacted over Serbia is blind and short-term, like that of every other power which used to come to the Balkans.'[31]

---

advocated reforms and Serbia's integration into the European Union, and it was during his mandate that Milošević was handed over to the Hague Tribunal. It is speculated that this was one of the main reasons for his assassination. His murderers were imprisoned and sentenced, but the political background to the assassination remains unsolved to this day, cf. Miloš Vasić, Atentat na Zorana Đinđića, Beograd 2005.

[25] Cf. Tim Judah, Zoran Djindjic: Pragmatist or Opportunist?, *BBC News*, 6 March 2001, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1086035.stm.

[26] Rat se mogao izbeći, *Blic*, 24 March 2000, 2.

[27] Cf. *Večernje novosti*, 24 March 2001-2002.

[28] Rat se mogao izbeći, *Blic*, 24 March 2000, 2.

[29] M. Radetić, Zločin i tuga večni, *Večernje novosti*, 25 March 2002, 7.

[30] M. Radetić, U slavu branilaca i žrtava, *Večernje novosti*, 25 March 2003, 20-21.

[31] Vojislav Koštunica, Cilj bombardovanja pravljenje NATO države, *Danas*, 24 March 2008, 3.

In 2009, as president of the Democratic Party of Serbia (*Demokratska stranka Srbije*), Koštunica stated that

> 'the real aim of those who attacked Serbia was to geostrategically anchor Kosovo and Metohija and move further into the East. Serbia should never give up its strongest weapon—justice and truth.'[32]

Boris Tadić, during his presidency, chose the Unforgettable monument in Tašmajdan Park as the place where he would pay tribute to those who had died in the bombings: it was dedicated to child victims. Here he delivered political statements in 2005, 2006, and 2008. On 24 March 2009, he was participating at the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York, but released a statement:

> 'Today we need to remember all victims but also to learn something and make foundations for a new peaceful policy, so that Serbian policy-makers never draw the country and its citizens into such danger. We need to make policy which takes care of the lives of ordinary people.'[33]

All of his statements between 2005 and 2009 can be summarized as follows: the bombing was the result of wrong policy taken by Serbia; it resulted in many innocent victims, and it should never happen again. This attitude was (and is) common among other prominent politicians within the Democratic Party, such as Dragan Šutanovac and Dragan Đilas. According to them, Milošević's policy was hazardous and damaging; the NATO bombing claimed many innocent victims, and Serbia should in future cooperate with NATO and the NATO countries.

The commemorative records of the leading Serbian politicians in the 2000-2013 period show that all the politicians who were in power during the 1999 bombings, such as Milošević, Dačić, and Vučić, chose military sites for commemoration. In discourse, Milošević used the strategy of victimization and built his rhetoric on the opposition of Serbs as new 'Jews' (victims) and NATO forces as new 'fascists'. Dačić also constructed an opposition between Serbs, whom he saw as victims, and a unified, criminalized group of wartime enemies. In contrast, Zoran Đinđić maintained that the Milošević regime was largely to blame for the bombing, and insisted that it should not be commemorated. Koštunica changed his stance over the course of time from one that was anti-Milošević and moderately pro-Western to one of a nationalist and extreme anti-NATO orientation. Boris Tadić and his party colleagues chose monuments dedicated to civilian casualties to pay tribute to the victims of the bombings. In their statements, however, they kept up a moderate criticism of the former regime and its policies, maintaining that these had drawn the country into a disastrous

---

[32] Vojislav Koštunica, Srbija ne sme da odustane od istine i prava, *Danas*, 25 March 2009, 3.

[33] Srbija utihla uz zvuk sirena, *Blic*, 25 March 2009, http://www.blic.rs/vesti/reportaza/srbija-utihla-uz-zvuk-sirena/l21c7js.

conflict. They called for peaceful politics in the future, and made a plea for cooperation with NATO.

Alternative Voices

An examination of the media reveals overwhelmingly one-sided national coverage, the Serbian media reporting almost exclusively on Serbian commemorations and rarely mentioning how the Kosovo Albanians might commemorate the same events. The exceptions are *Danas* and *B92*, which did produce some reports on Albanian commemorative practices. Commemorative practices opposing official policy were occasionally reported too in oppositional newspapers and portals like *Blic*, *Danas* and *B92*. I can discern three main alternative voices during the 2000-2013 period. The first came from the anti-Milošević activists, who protested in 2000 during the bombing commemoration; the second came from pro-Milošević forces (both moderate and extreme right-wing political activists), who protested in 2001 and 2002, after the fall of Milošević, and then again between 2007 and 2009; the third and most persistent voice opposing the official commemorations came from the families of the RTS employees who were killed in the bombings.

Anti-Milošević vs. Pro-Milošević Activists

In 2000, the leaders of all democratic opposition parties, namely Zoran Đinđić, Vuk Drašković, and Vojislav Koštunica, blamed the policies of the Milošević regime for the NATO bombings; and they appealed to citizens not to commemorate what they saw as a tragic defeat.[34] The student-led movement against Milošević, Resistance! (*Otpor!*), marked 24 April of that year by organizing protests all over Serbia under the slogan 'Resistance to aggression'. The protests and gatherings had two simultaneous aims: to condemn the NATO aggression and to resist the aggression of Milošević and his ruling party.[35]

Interestingly enough, following the overthrow of the Milošević regime, oppositional commemorative gatherings came to be organized by Milošević's own followers. Thus, on 24 March in both 2001 and 2002, the ex-regime parties, along with 10,000 supporters, held mass protests in Republic Square. The protests were manifold: to commemorate the bombings; to protest against cooperation with the Hague Tribunal and the extradition of those accused of war crimes; and to call for extraordinary elections. These protests were held under the slogan 'Never forget, never repeat', with protesters carrying placards bearing slogans such as 'Betrayal', 'Slobo, Slobo', and 'We will not give you to them' ('them'

[34] Rat se mogao izbeći, *Blic*, 24 March 2000, 2.
[35] Otpor agresiji, *Blic*, 25 March 2000, 8.

being the Hague Tribunal). The 2001 gathering was addressed by Ivica Dačić, then in his role as vice-president of the Socialist Party of Serbia.[36]

In the period 2007-2009, protests were held by extreme right-wing groups and their followers. The neo-Nazi group National Formation (*Nacionalni stroj*) staged a rally in the centre of Belgrade on 24 March 2007, protesting against the pro-Western policies of the Serbian government. Leaflets disseminated among people at this protest proclaimed: 'Let us show how loyal we are to Mother Serbia. Let us show that we do not forget our innocent victims.' Strongly condemning this gathering, Serbian nongovernmental organizations committed to promoting human rights demanded that it be banned.[37] In 2008, the police banned a meeting National Formation had planned in central Belgrade. The police also forbade a protest by the anti-Hague group Association Freedom (*Udruženje sloboda*) which was to take place in front of the US Embassy.[38] A rally was nevertheless held in Republic Square by extreme right-wing groups including Ours (*Naši*), *1389*, Honor (*Obraz*), The Doors (*Dveri*), Freedom (*Sloboda*), the Ravna Gora Movement (*Ravnogorski pokret*), and the Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*). Their slogans were: 'We want weapons', 'Kill, slaughter Shiptars until there are no Shiptars left', 'Kill, kill the Shiptars', 'Tadić, Ustasha' and 'We will not hand over Mladić, but Tadić instead.'[39] Some of them also gave Nazi salutes and burned the flag of the European Union. The event was attended by the Metropolitan bishop Amfilohije Radović, some Serbian academics and Russian politicians. The protesters clashed with members of the police force and also attacked journalists; many were injured and significant material damage was inflicted on property.[40]

It is noteworthy that the escalation of pro-Milošević rallies took place when the pro-Western Democratic Party, which advocated cooperation with the Hague Tribunal, was in power. This was from 2001 to 2002, under Zoran Đinđić's tenure as Serbian prime minister, and from 2007 to 2009, during the presidency of Boris Tadić. During these periods, attempts were made by Democratic Party officials to establish an alternative narrative about the bombings, in which the main responsible agents were Milošević and his regime.

---

[36] Ne zaboravite bombardovanje, *Blic*, 25 March 2001, 3.

[37] Parastos, cveće i skup lidera nacionalnog stroja, *Danas*, 24-25 March 2007, 4.

[38] Nacionalni stroj najavljuje dolazak, *Danas*, 24 March 2008, 3.

[39] *Shqip(ë)tar* is an ethnonym (endonym) used by Albanians to refer to themselves. The standard term for Albanians in South Slavic languages is *Albanci*, cf. Franke Wilmer, The Social Construction of Man, the State and War. Identity, Conflict, and Violence in Former Yugoslavia, Routledge 2004, 100. When Shiptar (*Šiptar*) is used instead in South Slavic languages, it carries derogatory and politically incorrect connotations. Its use in Serbian nationalist discourse is extremely derogatory.

[40] U sukobima posle protesta petoro povređenih, *Danas*, 25 March 2009, 3.

In contrast to this, the narrative perpetuated by pro-Milošević factions and ultra-nationalists was built around the supposed opposition between 'Serbs' as victims and generalized Serbian wartime enemies, embodied in the (derogatory) ethnic labels 'Shiptar' and 'Ustasha', NATO, the Hague Tribunal, and 'national traitors'. The enemies in this narrative belonged to a single group lumped together, in which any one could be equated with any other.

RTS Employees and Victims of the Wars 1990-99

The commemoration of the RTS employees that was organized by their families on 24 March at the Why? monument in Tašmajdan Park contrasts dramatically with both the extreme right-wing demonstrations and the state policy. NATO's bombing of the central building of RTS occurred on 23 April 1999 and was one of the most controversial strikes made during the Alliance's campaign. When a single NATO missile hit the building, sixteen employees, all technical staff, were killed, and the facility was severely damaged. NATO Headquarters justified this attack on the grounds that media is a weapon during wars and that RTS had an important role in the Serbian war and nationalist propaganda. The station, however, resumed its broadcasts twenty-four hours later from a secret location. The French government had opposed attacking the RTS building as an illegitimate war target. The raid was also criticized by Amnesty International as a war crime. According to a 2009 Amnesty International article, nobody has been held responsible for it and the victims have not been given justice.[41]

In Serbia, opinion has been divided. On one side, the state's commemorative policy tended towards condemnation of NATO for choosing a media and broadcasting building as a legitimate war target. On the other side, the families of the RTS victims held the Milošević regime responsible for the deaths. Since all journalists and editors had been evacuated in advance, the families accused the Serbian authorities of deliberately sacrificing the technical staff so as to provoke anti-NATO sentiment around the world. The families of the victims built the Why? monument which is engraved with all the victims' names. They sued the general manager of RTS, Dragoljub Milanović, in the Serbian District Court. In 2002, Milanović was sentenced to ten years imprisonment for having failed to evacuate the building. Initially he was allowed to go home for weekends and holidays but his conditions were made stricter after strong reactions from the victims' families.[42] The families were likewise dissatisfied with the

[41] Amnesty International, No Justice for the Victims of NATO Bombings, 23 April 2009, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2009/04/no-justicia-victimas-bombardeos-otan-20090423.

[42] Biljana Vasić, Sto godina samoće, *Vreme*, 6 September 2012, http://www.vreme.co.rs/cms/view.php?id=1070972.

whole judicial process since they wanted to see other Serbian officials held accountable.[43]

On each 24 March, the families and friends of the victims gathered at the Why? monument, and one or two family members gave official statements to the media in the name of all the families. In 2003, Žanka Stojanović, a mother of one of the RTS victims, stated: 'It is shame that four years after the bombing we do not know the exact number killed in the NATO aggression.'[44] In 2004, Kuzman Stoimenovski, a father of one of the victims, spoke on behalf of the families:

> 'It hurts us most when we see that our state does not even try to give us satisfaction before the law and adequately punish those who were obliged to protect employees of the RTS.'[45]

In 2007, Stojanović said: 'The murderers of our children are walking freely among us. I thus ask all of those who are responsible why is that so?'[46] In 2010, Stojanović went further:

> 'Today we mark eleven years of our pain, and fight for the moment when the state admits the truth, that it killed sixteen people. Now, the right people to address are the president of Serbia Boris Tadić, the minister of defence Dragan Šutanovac, and the special prosecutor Miljko Radisavljević. In front of them lay more than a hundred pieces of evidence, and if they don't want to return to court then they need to explain it.'[47]

In 2012, Dragan Đilas, the mayor of Belgrade and a high-ranking official within the Democratic Party, supported the families and complained that to that day they did not know who was responsible for the deaths of the RTS employees. Žanka Stojanović also claimed that the Supreme Defence Council knew that the building was to be bombed and that the Ministry of Defence was mainly to blame for the tragedy—but that the minister of defence was concealing it.[48]

In 2012, a monument dedicated to the victims of the wars and the soldiers who fell between 1990 and 1999 was erected in Belgrade's Sava Square. The monument's appearance is not particularly striking and its opening was marginalized by the media. Some of the victims' families were disappointed by the monu-

---

[43] Marija Ristić, Žrtve bombardovanja RTS-a nezadovoljne puštanjem Milanovića, *Balkan Insight*, 5 September 2012, http://www.balkaninsight.com/rs/article/zrtve-bombardovanja-rts-a-nezadovoljne-pustanjem-milanovica.

[44] I danas i uvek – zašto, *Večernje novosti*, 25 March 2003, 20.

[45] P. Ilić, Da se nikad ne zaboravi, *Politika*, 25 March 2004, 9.

[46] Obeležena godišnjica bombardovanja NATO, *Politika*, 25 March 2007, http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/23782/Obelezena-godisnjica-bombardovanja-NATO.

[47] Jedanaest godina od početka NATO bombardovanja, *Blic*, 25 March 2010, http://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/jedanaest-godina-od-pocetka-nato-bombardovanja/mt82jyc.

[48] Tadić: NATO bombardovanje bio zločin protiv našeg naroda i države, *Blic*, 25 March 2012, http://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/tadic-nato-bombardovanje-bio-zlocin-protiv-naseg-naroda-i-drzave/m1ct984.

ment and, for this reason, did not allow Dragan Đilas, the mayor of Belgrade, or representatives of the Army and Police to pay tribute to the victims there on 24 March. They said that, having waited twelve years for this monument, they thought it looked 'humiliating' and 'shameful'.[49]

The Fifteenth Anniversary of the NATO Bombing in Serbia

In the second section of this article, I present the acts and statements of leading Serbian politicians and public figures as they marked the fifteenth anniversary of the bombings. As each anniversary has reignited controversial issues, I also discuss the polemics of the fifteenth commemoration. One of the controversies is, most certainly, related to the RTS workers. As shown above, the case of the RTS employees brings to the fore a division and latent conflict between official commemorative policy and the views of the victims' families. Another controversial issue is that the anniversary was not officially observed in Serbian schools, as it had been on the first and the tenth anniversaries, and this led some pupils to organize spontaneous commemorations. This resulted in many conflicts and accusations between those who wanted to commemorate the bombings and those who did not. A more detailed overview of the 2014 commemorations is presented in the Appendix.

Official Commemorations in 2014

Not only was the fifteenth anniversary of the NATO bombings not marked in the schools, there was no central state ceremony either. Instead, a series of commemorative events took place across the country, with only moderate media coverage. Serbia's leading politicians thus visited different memorial sites to mark the fifteen years since NATO launched its bombing campaign. For the present analysis, I will focus on five commemorative acts which were performed by Serbia's most prominent politicians and public figures, and which, therefore, convey the strongest symbolic meanings.

Serbia's president, Tomislav Nikolić, paid tribute to the civilians killed during the bombing of Varvarin, a small town in central Serbia. On a fine sunny afternoon, 30 May 1999, which was also a Church holiday, NATO forces had bombed the bridge crossing the Velika Morava river in Varvarin. Ten civilians

[49] Đilas sprečen da položi venac na spomenik žrtvama ratova od 1990. do 1999. godine, *Blic*, 25 March 2012, http://www.blic.rs/vesti/beograd/djilas-sprecen-da-polozi-venac-na-spomenik-zrtvama-ratova-od-1990-do-1999-godine/lhj3pp1.

were killed and thirty were injured, sixteen severely.[50] The Serbian president laid a wreath in front of a monument dedicated to the civilian victims and gave the following statement:

> 'Do not expect me to forget what happened during the aggression on Serbia, over seventy-eight days and nights from 24 March to 9 June. Also, I cannot forget that, on a Sunday, on 30 May 1999, during the Orthodox holiday of the Holy Trinity, at around one o'clock, NATO forces used four missiles to bomb the bridge over the Velika Morava […]. All of these years we have been counting the victims of the pursuit of political goals by those who are more powerful. If, along with the thousands of names of innocent victims who all of us mention and mourn—not just their families—we had also learnt the name of at least one executioner or of someone who gave the command and they had been punished, then it would be easier for us. Most of us neither forgive nor forget. We Serbs are a strange people, we may even forgive most of them […]. Someone would probably forgive if we heard a sincere apology for the unprincipled bombing of a bridge when people happened to be celebrating a regular Christian holiday […]. We are seeking truth at any price, for the sake of the peace of mind that is possible and for the sake of the reconciliation which we also need.'[51]

On the same day, the outgoing Serbian prime minister, Ivica Dačić, laid a wreath at a memorial site dedicated to the victims of the NATO bombings on Straževica Hill, just as he had done in previous years. Wreaths were also laid at this monument by the outgoing parliamentary speaker, Nebojša Stefanović, and family members of fallen soldiers from the 210th Signals Battalion of the Yugoslav Army. The ceremony was also attended by several ministers. After the playing of the national anthem and a minute's silence, a priest, Nenad Đuršević, held a memorial service for the military and civilian victims of NATO's bombing. On this occasion, Ivica Dačić stated:

> 'A nation which forgets its victims and its history is doomed to relive [that history]. We need to keep the memory of all those who defended our country, all of whom were innocent victims […]. This year the international community has been increasingly talking about the legal framework for the bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, but this did not exist […]. It is certain that the events that

---

[50] Since German military aircraft took part in this attack, the families of victims sued the German government. The initiative actually came from German pacifist activists who provided financial and legal support to the plaintiff. The families of victims also wanted to sue the governments of other countries that had taken part in the attack, but lacked financial resources for this. The accusations against the German government were rejected by Germany's Constitutional Court. Cf. N. E. Stanisavljević, Nemci nas razumeju, *Glas javnosti*, 7 November 2003, http://arhiva.glas-javnosti.rs/arhiva/2003/11/07/srpski/R03110601.shtml.

[51] Petnaesta godišnjica NATO bombardovanja, *Radio Television Serbia*, 24 March 2014, http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/Dru%C5%A1tvo/1555752/Petnaesta+godi%C5%A1njica+NATO+bombardovanja+.html.

> followed NATO's aggression were designed to break up the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Serbia.'[52]

He then reminded his hearers that 'more than 2,000 people were killed and more than 10,000 were injured, with material damage of several tens of billions of dollars'. Dačić added:

> 'An integral part of the future is [remembrance] of our past and drawing lessons from it. The day today serves so that we do not forget […]. Commander of the 210th Battalion, Major Željko Lukić, noted in his address that during the seventy-eight-day campaign […] NATO dropped 21,000 tons of explosives and that 1,150 aircraft fired 1,300 cruise missiles and about 2,900 bombs. Forty-one members of the Yugoslav Air Force and Air Defence died during the war.'

Belgrade's acting mayor, Siniša Mali, laid a wreath at a memorial site dedicated to the soldiers of the Guards Brigade and patients of the Dr. Dragiša Mišović Clinical Hospital Centre. Members of the city government paid their respects and laid a wreath at the grave of three-year-old Milica Rakić and at the monument dedicated to the RTS employees in Tašmajdan Park.[53]

At St. Mark's Church in Belgrade, the Serbian Patriarch, Irinej, led a liturgy and memorial service (*parastos*) dedicated to all victims of the NATO bombings. Although no central ceremony was held, there was a definite overall strategy for the commemorations of the NATO bombings. They took place at a series of places that had witnessed suffering and at monuments to those who had fallen. A maximum number of sites was chosen, widely dispersed over the whole of Serbia. The ceremonies honoured both military and civilian victims. The president paid tribute to the civilians; the prime minister commemorated those in the armed forces; the acting mayor of Belgrade commemorated all who had died at the city hospital; and the patriarch led a paying of respects to every life the NATO bombings had claimed. This strategy shows how the whole nation, embracing soldiers and civilians alike, was held up as both 'victim' and 'hero'. The acts commemorating soldiers, however, were more numerous than those for civilians: many commemorative acts were carried out in army barracks, where professional soldiers paid tribute to their fellows (see Appendix).

Analysis of the speeches of the president and the prime minister, show a common strand: the imperative not to forget.

> 'Do not expect me to forget what happened […] Also, I cannot forget that, on a Sunday, on 30 May 1999, during the Orthodox holiday […] Most of us neither forgive nor forget.' (T. Nikolić)

---

[52] 'Nation that Forgets History Is Doomed to Repeat It', *B92*, 24 March 2014, http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=03&dd=24&nav_id=89749.

[53] Zaposleni na katedri za reziju prekinuli protest, *B92*, 24 March 2014, http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2014&mm=03&dd=24&nav_id=8276 58.

> 'A nation which forgets its victims and its history is doomed to relive [that history]. Today's [ceremony] serves so that we do not forget this.' (I. Dačić)

The statement by the president expressed a wish to have light shed on the killing of innocent civilians, and NATO's bombing was evaluated as an unjust act against humanity. Nikolić drew a distinction between forgetting and forgiving; he articulated the imperative not to forget but, at the same time, left open a possibility of forgiveness—under the condition that Serbia would receive a sincere apology from the NATO countries. This interplay between 'forget' and 'forgive' is indicative of the turn in policy of Nikolić and his acolytes from an anti-Western stance to a pro-Western one. Dačić judged the NATO bombing to be an illegal act aimed at destroying Serbia, and he presented a narrative that summarized the consequences of the NATO bombing in this light. It is precisely this narrative that came to be repeated by all of the main media outlets in Serbia.

Commemorating the RTS Employees in 2014

Members of the Belgrade government paid respects at the Why? Monument, and laid a wreath there. Andrija Mladenović, the city's representative, stated:

> 'Today we are here to commemorate the death of the RTS employees who were killed while doing their job. We should never forget what happened to us because it is a great warning for the whole world that you cannot in that way bomb a sovereign state and destroy lives and destroy its economy.'

Wreaths were also laid on behalf of RTS by the organization's acting director, General Nikola Mirkov, and editors of the RTS news teams. Mirkov stressed that the bombing of the RTS building had been a horrific crime, showing that NATO had decided to violate all international principles and attack a country without the consent of the UN Security Council, while also targeting civilians in its campaign.

Families, colleagues and friends also paid their respects. Žanka Stojanović told the media that nobody in Serbia had an answer to the question why these thousands of victims had been necessary, including those killed in the state broadcasting building. Probably, she said, the families would never get an answer. She added that she was still hoping that all those who had been responsible would be put on trial—both those who had known the building was marked as a military target and those who had bombed it. The commemoration by the RTS victims' families has thus persisted for fifteen years in raising an alternative voice to the official politics of memory.

The Case of the Ivan Sarić Secondary Technical School in Subotica in 2014

Since no instructions were given by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia, spontaneous commemorative acts were organized in some Serbian schools, but these resulted in controversies and unexpected incidents. At Ivan Sarić Secondary Technical School in Subotica, the student council asked to be allowed to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the bombings. The school's officials and its headmistress, Eržebet Ivanović, said that such an activity had not been planned by the school's authority. Shortly afterwards, an internet campaign was launched, particularly on Facebook, in which the headmistress was accused of forbidding her pupils from commemorating the anniversary. The campaign was led by Boris Malagurski, a Serbian-Canadian film director, producer, TV host, and highly influential social media activist, with right-wing sympathies, who claimed that some of the school's pupils had written to him and sought his help. On 20 March, Malagurski put a post on his Facebook page claiming that the school's headmistress had forbidden the pupils from marking the anniversary. He published Ivanović's work telephone number and implored his followers to call her and put pressure on her. In his Facebook post, Malagurski wrote: 'Eržebet Ivanović forbade children from being aware of their history.' The post accumulated almost 3,000 'likes' and was shared more than 500 times. Many people answered Malagurski's call and contacted the headmistress; in comments responding to Malagurski's post, they maintained that she had promised to allow her pupils to mark the anniversary. Some commentators tried to start a hate campaign against the headmistress, even calling on people to go to her office and spit in her face. Meanwhile, an online petition was organized, under the title 'Down with Eržebet Ivanović'; it clamoured for her resignation and was signed by 140 people. On 21 March, Malagurski put out a new post on Facebook in which he proclaimed victory:

> 'Dear friends, we succeeded. After my call to all of you to react as a community and call her in her office and protest because of her decision, the headmistress who forbade pupils from marking the fifteenth anniversary of the NATO bombings has given in and allowed the pupils to commemorate the victims of the NATO aggression and have a presentation about [the historical events].'

This post accrued more than 3,500 'likes' and was shared 162 times. Many people subsequently criticized Malagurski on the grounds of harassment and the promotion of intolerance towards the headmistress.[54] Ivan Sarić Secondary Technical School issued an official statement in which it was affirmed that the

---

[54] Zlostavljanje u tri slike, *Peščanik*, 24 March 2014, http://pescanik.net/zlostavljanje-u-tri-slike.

commemoration of the anniversary of the NATO bombings was not planned within the school programme.[55]

Conclusion

In this article,[56] I have shown how the commemorative discourse on NATO's bombing of Serbia emerged, developed and changed over the years following the attacks. I have described the recurring commemorative practices of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Yugoslav (later Serbian) Army, as well as the commemorations of civilian victims, such as child victims (the Unforgettable monument and the grave of Milica Rakić), and those honouring the RTS employees. The commemorations of the RTS employees, however, included many voices opposed to the official discourse and have thus been highly controversial. The first and tenth anniversaries held a special place in the commemorative policy, these being the only times when the commemoration were included within the school curriculum.

NATO's bombing of Serbia has, of course, had ambivalent semantics in Serbian commemorative discourses. On the one hand, there have been the leading Serbian politicians who were in power during the bombing, people like Milošević, Dačić, and Vučić. These have employed a strategy of victimization, oscillating between the semantics of innocent, passive victimhood (equating Serbs with the Jews during Second World War) and honouring the heroic fallen (Serbs as fighters defending their country). On the other hand, some have attempted to establish an alternative narrative. In this differing perspective, held especially by oppositional, anti-Milošević politicians and movements, the bombing has been evaluated as a defeat and a tragedy. The clearest examples of this alternative stance is represented by Zoran Đinđić, who tried to marginalize commemorations of the bombings during his time in power, and the families of the RTS victims, who have blamed the Serbian state and its officials for the civilian deaths just as much as they condemn NATO.

Although it is easier, and more common, to remember victories rather than defeats, a defeat, as Assmann reminds us, need not necessarily destroy the positive self-image a collective has about itself.[57] However, I also detect some ambivalence in the marginalization of official commemorations and monuments dedicated to the victims. Although the highest ranking politicians have taken

---

[55] Škola nije zabranila pomen žrtvama NATOa, website of the City of Subotica, Grad Subotica, 23 March 2014, http://www.gradsubotica.co.rs/skola-nije-zabranila-pomen-zrtvama-natoa.

[56] The current article is a result of the project 'Language, folklore, migrations in the Balkans' (no. 178010) funded by the Ministry of Science of the Republic of Serbia and the kind support provided by a Humboldt Research Fellowship for postdoctoral researchers 2016-2018 at the Institute for Slavic Studies of the Humboldt University in Berlin.

[57] Assmann, Der lange Schatten, 217-234.

part in each commemoration, the ceremonies have never ranked as the main news stories of the day, even on the occasion of the tenth anniversary. The reason for this ambivalence is to be found in Serbia's attempts to make progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Interestingly enough, the commemorative discourses on the bombings have never made use of the popular discourse on the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, which is portrayed as a heroic defeat for the Serbian Kingdom at the hands of the Ottomans, and which has a crucial mythomotoric role in the construction of Serbian national identity. The official commemoration has also been dissociated from the 1999 Serbian-Albanian conflict. Kosovo has only been mentioned in the official commemorative discourse in terms of NATO pretensions over the territory.

My case study of the fifteenth anniversary of the bombings showed that, just as in previous years, commemorations were held at a series of places of suffering and at monuments around Serbia. The main strategy employed by the politicians was to project an image of heroic victimization. The anti-NATO sentiment, which had once been so extreme, had decreased in intensity, especially among the politicians who had been in power or close to the ruling regime during the bombings. Instead, their discourse revolved around a topos of 'forgive but do not forget'. It is worth noting that the sixteenth anniversary (outside the parameters of this research) more or less repeated the commemorative acts and discourses from the previous year. This implies that a stable commemorative pattern has been established. The controversy which occurred on the fifteenth anniversary at the Ivan Sarić Secondary Technical School in Subotica, however, brings us to a dilemma: should the bombings be officially commemorated in Serbian schools or not? And, if yes, in what way? These are very important questions, in my opinion, because if a collective does not pay attention to its memories then there is a danger that, one day, they may reverberate uncontrollably or be used as sources for manipulation.

Appendix: Commemorative Acts for the Fifteenth Anniversary of the Bombings[58]

1) In Novi Sad, the mayor, Miloš Vučević, along with the dead soldiers' families and delegations from the Novi Sad garrison and the Federation of Associations of Second World War Soldiers (*Savez udruženja boraca narodnooslobodilačkog rata*), laid wreaths at a memorial site in the Jugovićevo army barracks. Vučević stated that the NATO bombings had been one of the most tragic events in the history of Serbia and of Novi Sad.

[58] 15 godina od NATO bombardovanja, *Radio Television Serbia*, 24 March 2014, http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/1555752/petnaesta-godisnjica-nato-bombardovanja-.html; 15 godina od NATO bombardovanja, *B92*, 24 March 2014, http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2014&mm=03&dd=24&nav_id=827205.

2) Representatives of Belgrade's Obrenovac municipality laid wreaths at a memorial site dedicated to those killed during the bombings.

3) In Jagodina, the fifteenth anniversary was marked by the laying of wreaths at a memorial site in the police station dedicated to eight policemen who were killed and at a monument dedicated to Goran Ostojić, a lieutenant-colonel in the Yugoslav Army and a member of the 63rd Parachute Brigade.

4) In Smederevo, representatives of the local authorities, the Army, the Police, the victims' families, soldiers' associations, civil organizations and political parties laid wreaths at a monument dedicated to people from the city who had been killed during the bombing.

5) At Niš, the laying of wreaths at a memorial site in the University Square commemorated the fifty-six people who were killed and over 200 who were injured during the bombing of the city.

6) Wreaths were laid at a memorial site in the Rasina army barracks in Kruševac. This was done by local politicians, members of the army, and the families of dead soldiers. Soldiers from the Kruševac garrison symbolically planted fifteen Japanese cherry saplings at the Car Lazar army barracks in memory of casualties from the NATO action.

7) By the laying of a wreath at a memorial site in Vranje, tribute was paid to the soldiers, policemen and citizens of Vranje (and its environs) who were killed.

8) A remembrance day dedicated to those killed in the bombings was held at a memorial site known as The Heroes of the Thirty-Seventh Motorized Brigade (*Herojima* 37. *motorizovane brigade*) in Raška. The head of the main headquarters of the Serbian Army, General Ljubiša Diković, laid a wreath, stating that 'the army fought bravely for its people' and that 'the people aligned with the army'.

9) Aleksandar Vulin, a minister without portfolio in charge of matters concerning Kosovo and Metohija, requested that the United Nations publish a report on the consequences of the NATO bombing campaign.

10) Representatives of the local authorities in Kosovska Mitrovica and Zvečan in northern Kosovo, along with representatives of the Serbian-Russian Society (*Društvo srpsko-ruskog prijateljstva*) laid wreaths at the Monument of Truth (*Spomenik istine*), located beside the main bridge over the river Ibar, and in the main square in Kosovska Mitrovica. The president of the provisional municipality of Kosovska Mitrovica, Aleksandar Spirić, said that the consequences of the NATO bombing remained present to this day. Other officials stressed that it was a day to remember and that it could and should not ever be forgotten.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Marija Mandić Institute for Balkan Studies, SASA, Belgrade,
Knez Mihailova 35/IV, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia. E-mail: marija.mandic@bi.sanu.ac.rs