NARRATIVES. Experiences from Southeast Europe and Beyond

KONRAD
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Narratives.
Experiences from Southeast Europe and Beyond

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Preface

Christoph Plate

Narratives are the new, negative buzzword in these violent times. It is said that one must protect oneself from one narrative or the other. To explore the meaning and the concept of narratives and the significance such stories can have for the identity of a family, a group, or a nation, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's Southeast Europe Media Programme brought together experts from the Balkans, Germany, and South Africa at the end of 2024. In Tirana, the capital of Albania, the discussion focused on dealing with narratives, both good and bad.

In their contributions to this book, some participants describe the constructive function of narratives, as well as the destructive element that is used to denigrate the enemy and sow resentment.

The world is full of narratives. In the Balkans, narratives have become increasingly important in times of political instability. The less one feels protected by the state and its institutions, or even when the state appears to be an enemy of its citizens, the more important the reassuring narratives become within the family, a professional environment, and a political or religious group.

We live in times of loud narratives. Those who rant the most about climate change or Covid-19 find an audience. Those who distort history and declare that Ukraine started the war against Russia in 2022 and not the other way around find a hearing. This competition to one-upmanship, the alarmism, and the ill-

tempered reactions to it are destructive because common sense is disparaged and the distinction between right and wrong, or good and evil, becomes increasingly irrelevant.

Yet, many of the most destructive narratives come from within our own group. Since the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine, we have been paying attention to signs of Russian information manipulation, fake stories, manipulated images, and distorted videos. We have been amused by the sloppiness of Russian forgers, who have even forgotten to remove a Cyrillic character from the fake social media accounts of German politicians.

Like a rabbit watching a snake, disinformation workers in the West have watched the threat from the East, never losing sight of the Russian moles in right-wing and left-wing populist parties of Western Europe. There is always the danger of exaggerating Russian capabilities because the Kremlin regime operates primarily on fear. However, Russia and Russian intelligence agencies operate crudely: they get caught putting poison in Alexei Navalny's underwear or they have an FSB agent murder an Islamist in Berlin's Tiergarten, after which the murderer flees on a bicycle and is detained by courageous Berlin youths. A former general at an Eastern European intelligence service recently reported that a high-ranking Russian colleague had confessed to him that there was always a considerable amount of chaos and confusion in the actions of the KGB (now the FSB[1]). Moreover, that they themselves were surprised that sometimes their efforts produced positive results.

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[1]   Federal Security Service – successor of KGB.

One should not overestimate narratives that originate in Russia and seek to discredit values such as the separation of powers, freedom of expression, and the policy of détente. A much greater threat is posed by narratives spread by individuals and institutions whom we trust more than Vladimir Putin because they come from our cultural background, because they are Serbian or Romanian, because a German influencer may be more convincing to our children and young people than a Russian one. Due to our cultural background, we simply trust the narrative teller from Bucharest or Berlin more than the press attaché of the Russian or the Iranian embassy.

However, since even this certainty appears to be faltering, we need to more urgently discuss the value of narratives, the possibilities of distinguishing good from bad, and making societies resilient against the poison of disintegration. This is a task for all of us: politicians, journalists, teachers, religious dignitaries, and public figures, and for the citizen next door.

The texts collected in this booklet here from Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Germany, Serbia, South Africa, and Ukraine enable us to recognise the importance of narratives. They aim to expose the dangers of narratives that destroy the cohesion of a society, a nation, a region, and a community.

Among our ancestors, narratives spread more slowly and often persisted for centuries. Today, narratives are passed on in real time via social media. Since outside the EU, control of big tech virtually no longer exists, and as operating platforms are shirking their responsibilities, a thoughtful conversation about narratives becomes ever more important. That is our intention with this publication.

Sofia, June 2025

Good and Bad –
A Brief History

Martin Hielscher

History itself is a narration that implies a certain narrative – the narrative of time as a process which brings about change. We speak of prehistory and archaic peoples, understanding that they did not and do not have a sense of history, which is necessarily linked to the invention of script, of writing, of linearity through first the Sumerians and their cuneiform script. But archaic peoples have stories.

Intelligent beings have a deep need for explanations of their role in the world, of natural phenomena and their frequently frightening aspects, of the characteristics of their group, their tribe, and most of all for death. It is said that burial rites are the oldest forms of sociality. Archaic peoples develop stories that allow them to construct a meaningful universe where they can find their place. Stories provide for a genealogy and for a model for social order, for rules and regulations. To be more precise, without a narration there is no world which already implies a structure, an order that helps to overcome the experience of mere chaos, of an environment of fear and fright. Intelligent beings have a need for explanations that connect an effect to a cause, that is, causality. All these operations call for stories and narratives, which are the nuclei of narrations, and shape the respective perceptions, form values and convey emotions. Those who knew and told these stories and still know and tell these stories in traditional, oral cultures are the incarnate memory of a

group, a tribe, a clan, a nation. These people are called shamans, griots, druids and so on and are sometimes also the chiefs. The form in which these stories have been passed down to us is myths and epics.[2]

Myths, and Epics

One of the ancient Greek myths tells the story of Europa, a Phoenician princess (from a region which we call Lebanon today). She was abducted by Zeus. He took on the form of a white bull and carried her to Crete, where Zeus himself had been born. Zeus could only have been born on Crete because his mother Rhea hid him from his father Kronos, who ate all his children in fear of being killed by them, just as he had castrated his own father Uranos, who again hated his children. Zeus married Europa, had three sons with her and, when he later left her, provided for her in arranging her marriage with King Asterion and promised her that her name would live on as the name of a whole continent. Hence, we can say that violence, abduction, rape and abandonment are an essential part of the story of Europa, the genesis of Europe.

The Greek myths of Europa, Kronos, Sisyphos or Prometheus and others have proven endlessly productive and open for interpretations, new readings, stagings and adoptions but the figures of the myths themselves – mostly titans, gods and demigods, goddesses and demigoddesses – do not change. They experience no transformation other than shape-shifting. The mythic world is a closed world in which beings are locked into a structure they cannot escape. Even the gods cannot escape their roles and fates.

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[2]   Cf. El Ouassil, S. and Karig, F. (2021). Erzählende Affen: Mythen, Lügen, Utopien. Wie Geschichten unser Leben bestimmen. Ullstein.

This marks the difference to the epics that tell us of the transformation of their protagonists in what has been named the hero's – or the heroine's – quest or journey and seems to be an essential element of all storytelling ever since, from the oldest epic of our world literature, that of Gilgamesh from ancient Mesopotamia, to contemporary films, comic strips, video games and mangas. The storytelling structure that, for instance, Joseph Campbell[3] extracted from numerous stories and films he studied can be divided into three sections. It begins with the departure of the protagonist, continuing with his or her initiation, leading him or her on a road of trials and ending with the return, which goes along with the transformation of the hero. He or she who returns is not the same person who had started on the journey. Other than in the myths, the protagonists are human or to a large part human and the epics also tell of changes.

In Theodor W Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's famous reading of Homer's Odyssey in Dialectic of Enlightenment,[4] they interpret the episode of Odysseus and his companions passing the sirens as the emergence of the subject, the individual, from myth and mere bondage to nature. Odysseus has himself tied to the mast of their ship and, while his companions have stuffed their ears against the deadly lure of the song of the sirens, Odysseus, firmly tied to the wooden pole, listens to it and twists and jerks in both pain and deep longing for what he denies himself, since surrendering to it would kill him. According to their reading of this narrative, subjectivity is at the same time heroic autonomy and painful suppression of physical needs and desires. This narrative speaks of the negative dialectics of the domination of

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[3] Campbell, J. (2008, 3rd.ed.) Hero with a thousand faces. Princeton University Press.

[4] Adorno, Th. W., Horkheimer, M. (1972). Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments. Stanford University Press.

nature, which helps us on one hand to rise above mere nature and on the other hand leads us to its destruction, inflicting these dialectics upon humans and the human body itself. This reading of The Dialectic of Enlightenment is a historical interpretation, implying that this story has shaped and harmed subjectivity inexorably ever since.

The epic of Gilgamesh, which is almost 5000 years old, tells the story of Gilgamesh, the great king of Uruk, who strives for immortality, together with his brotherly friend Enkidu, and goes on a long and dangerous journey to reach this goal but must in the end accept transience and his mortality. Only through this journey and process does he become, upon his return, the great king and leader of Uruk. He becomes the leader he was supposed to be and learns to overcome his pretensions and megalomania and to serve and protect his people.

According to Jan Assmann, the famous historian and Egyptologist, there is another story of journey and transformation that is maybe the most magnificent and momentous story humans have ever told themselves, the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt in order to find the promised land.

In a narrower sense, its theme is

> a turning point in human history that can only be compared with the major evolutionary stages on the path to today's mankind, such as the invention of writing and the formation of states. This is the turning point from polytheism to monotheism, an evolutionary turning point of the first order, at least for the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world.[5]

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[5] Assmann, J. (2105). Exodus: Die Revolution der Alten Welt. C.H.Beck, p. 19. (translation by M. Hielscher)

The Book of Exodus not only tells the founding myth of Israel "but also of monotheism and thus of a central element of the modern world".[6] Assmann argues that the Book of Exodus is dedicated to the two most important questions that have preoccupied humanity since time immemorial: the question of closeness to God and the question of who we are. Who we are is linked to the question of what God intends to do with us. This entire imaginary world thus presupposes a world in which a kind of historical sense unfolds. There is a plan for humanity that is being implemented and is to be implemented in an exemplary manner by the chosen people. This is exactly what these people were chosen for. To anticipate, in every form, however secularised, broken down to the individual and his or her contingent life, possibly entirely interior, this consideration still resonates, where those seeking meaning embark on hardship-filled journeys, for example into the desert, to encounter themselves and who they really are, and what might be the plan in their lives. Assmann writes that:

> The Egyptians never asked themselves these questions …
> They saw themselves as human beings, nothing special,
> having emerged from God together with all other living
> beings, including deities, in the course of the creation of the
> world, who for his part has nothing special in mind for them,
> but strives for nothing other than to keep the world that
> has emerged from him going, whereby the 'humans' can
> support him with their rites. The history did not appear to
> them as a project unfolding in promises and fulfilments, but
> rather as a process that must be kept in harmony with the
> mythical archetypes through cultural formation and thus
> preserved from changes.[7]

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Op. cit., p. 20.

Assmann emphasises that the Exodus narrative itself is greater than the Book of Exodus. One can only tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt from the place that was set before them as the goal of the Exodus. It is a story that the arrived ones tell, not the departed ones. It is about the affirmation of the new and not just the emancipation from the old.The Exodus narrative revolves around the three motifs of the Exodus, the Covenant, and the Promised Land. In recounting the Exodus narrative, Assmann states, "It is an act of remembrance, the transmission of past events that should not be forgotten, to future generations."[8] Exodus is not only a biblical book, however, but also a symbol that can stand for any form of radical leaving behind and departure towards something new and completely different.

Thus, the metaphors and the narratives of Exodus and the Promised Land have become some of the most compelling and longest-lasting narratives we can imagine and they still echo in Obama's slogan "Yes, we can" and before in Martin Luther King's famous speech "I have a dream".

The time concept in the story of the Exodus implies transformation. The people who will reach the Promised Land will not be the same people who have left the land of misery. The narrative of promise includes a narrative of change. The promise lies in the future, not in the past.

Myths, epics, and narratives like that of the Exodus and the Promised Land place the people who are the recipients of these narrations and narratives in the world, form their identity, give them a goal, if these narratives are future-oriented, shape their view of their lives. How collective (and personal) identities are

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[8]   Op. cit., p. 22.

formed is deeply rooted in history. Categories that we recognise today, even if they are disputed now, for instance, race, gender, or class, have not always existed as we understand them today or even at all. One of the greatest disruptions in history was the transition from nomadic lifestyles to sedentary lifestyles, which caused dramatic changes and called for new narratives. Even the biblical narrative from Genesis, "And God gave them his blessing and said to them, Be fertile and have increase, and make the earth full and be masters of it; be rulers over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing moving on the earth", may be an echo of this transformation, encouraging the people to cultivate the land they have settled on.

However, this narrative has become disastrous. The emancipation from nature which created what we call subjectivity and autonomy in the first place and which set forth the process of history and progress and brought about more complex forms of sociality has gone so far as to destroy the natural basis for our emancipation and development. The idea of the godlike quality of man and the anthropocentrism that goes along with all monotheistic religions and all utopian concepts that are based on advanced industrial and technical progress and caused so much hope in history has no inherent limit. The notions of a future paradise may have been too weak to set limits in the face of forms of production, exploitation, economic power and control that seem to have taken on lives of their own. The very concept of growth is a narrative that seems to unquestionably rule the view of the world, of society and economies, although resources are absolutely limited as we can see. The concept of growth must be adapted to a world of limited resources and has to be redefined without having to necessarily give it up.

National and Political Narratives

Groups, associations, tribes, principalities, kingdoms, empires and nations do not exist without narratives and from their respective narratives they derive their legitimacy. These narratives can be harmless and inclusive, descriptive or full of hope, like "the American dream" in the "land of opportunities" or matter-of-fact, like the German postwar narrative of a constitutional democracy combined with a social market economy and the symbolic, modest, if boring, capital of Bonn. Narratives for nations and unions may also change regularly in the course of history. The greatest danger of national or supranational narratives lies in a possible supremacist view or, today, in postcolonial imperialism – however it may be disguised – and any kind of friend-enemy scheme. These friend-foe schemes have seeped back into political reality, not only in Europe, more than we had expected after the dramatic changes in 1989 and the prospect of moving beyond ideological blocks and confrontations.

A narrative with powerful historical consequences was the French Revolution's motto "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité" and the Declaration of Human and Citizens' Rights on 26 August 1789 in the French National Assembly. The Marquis de La Fayette played an important role there as a bridge builder. After his return from America, he became a member of the French Estates General in 1789. Following the American model, he introduced a draft declaration of human and civil rights to the new National Assembly. The declaration defined a single set of individual and collective rights for all people. Influenced by the equality of all human beings without any restriction (as, for instance, between believers and disbelievers) and by the doctrine of natural rights, these rights are considered universal and valid at all times and in all places: "Men are born free and equal in rights and remain so." The universal claim of these rights, a sense of common humanity, came along with an expansion

of global interventions, travel, information, war and trade but was also made possible through narrations. It has been said that the rise of the bourgeois novel with its psychological sensitivity helped to strengthen or maybe even create feelings of empathy towards others, as much as philosophical and political pamphlets and essays, so that a sense of the unity of mankind could arise. With the universal declaration of human rights by 48 states at the General Assembly on 10 December 1948, the United Nations took up this declaration of the French Revolution and extended it to all member states that signed it:

> Now, therefore the General Assembly proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

The universality of this declaration has been disputed. For postmodern philosophy, there is the issue of the end of any "grands récits", any universal declarations and narratives like the teleological inescapability of progress. Others label this declaration as a Western concept that cannot be applied to world regions with other tradition of values and, of course, there is always much resentment because of the difference between the abstract declaration of human rights and the problems of enforcing them in

social and political reality. However, there is an enforceable right, a claim, a common horizon of values any human being can refer to, which could bring those who act against these rights to court.

"We are the people" ("Wir sind das Volk") was one of the most widespread and effective unifying narratives and slogans during the revolutions in the eastern European countries in 1989 that led to the downfall of socialist systems and the collapse of the Soviet Union. At that time there was a unique opportunity for the East German population and the interim government of the former GDR to associate itself with the Federal Republic of Germany and adopt its constitution and political and economic system. For a moment we, the people, were the sovereigns of history and the main actors. However, the people also had to undergo a deep break with their former lives and had to manage a transformation that they possibly did not have enough time to handle, other than the heroes in their quests whom we know from the epics and their respective narratives. Many of them who had wanted a liberal democracy and free market now suffered from what they had wanted. There had been a huge difference in postwar political systems, experiences, lifestyles, opportunities and narratives that both formed the identity of the respective system and in the ways to address the past and the responsibilities for the past and the crimes the German people had committed. There was no common narrative for this and much of the anger and resentment we witness in some of the new federal states of the former GDR has to do with the lack of a common narrative and with the failure to adequately address the differences and the non-simultaneity between the two German states in the decades after the Second World War.

The self-confidence and pride people in East Germany had felt when their demonstrations and actions helped to topple an unwanted regime did not survive the needed process of adjustment to the new order and lifestyle. Rewriting their own

life stories proved to be much harder than perhaps expected, at least for the older ones. Moreover, the pay-gap between East and West was too large and remained in force much too long. Much has been written about the disappointment of especially Eastern European countries about Western liberal democracies and free capitalist markets after more than 30 years since the fall of the Iron Curtain, about how illiberal, authoritarian and reactionary versions of liberal democracies like Victor Orbán's Hungary or the PIS party's Poland have become so powerful and attractive to their populations. However, all in all, I would not create a narrative of an enduring East-West division regarding the form of how societies define the implementation of the rules and regulations, checks and balances of the European Union. There is a rise of populist movements, proto-fascist, right-wing parties, authoritarian discourses and anti-democratic narratives all through European countries and the Western World. It is a battle that is fought in all democratic countries and in the West, as well as in the East, where some countries have been recently ruled or are being ruled by a right-wing government.

The narratives used by these populist movements and parties are retrograde inventions of a grandiose past, sometimes even of imperialistic glory, full of nostalgia for a supposed grandeur and an authentic traditional lifestyle. They are utterly racist and xenophobic and strive for thoroughly homogenous societies. According to these narratives, people do not need to change, to transform, to learn or educate themselves and there is no notion of a future that is to be achieved as a common goal but of a past that should be reinstalled. There is always a strict friend-enemy scheme in use and social conflicts like class divides are downplayed by directing any resentments against the "others", whoever they may be. The resentments, fears and anxieties, the anger and the frustrations that nurture populist movements and are systematically exploited and fortified by them derive from the

contradictions and discrepancies of the political and economic sphere itself. The tensions in our economies that are constantly under pressure due to a series of crises that I do not need to mention have become greater and greater for a growing number of people and the inequality and the contrast between the few wealthy countries and regions and the large parts of the world that do not profit from economic growth has become too large.

In his essay "Die Krise der Narration", philosopher Byung-Chul Han explains how

> narratives create social cohesion. They offer meaning and convey community-building values. They must therefore be distinguished from narratives that prevent community building. The neoliberal performance narrative, for example, turns everyone into a self-entrepreneur. Everyone is in competition with others. The performance narrative creates no social cohesion, no 'we'. On the contrary, it reduces both solidarity and empathy. Neoliberal narratives such as self-optimisation, self-realisation or authenticity destabilise society by isolating people ... The myth is a ritually staged community narrative. Modern societies with future narratives can also develop a dynamic narrative community that allows for change. Those conservative, nationalistic narratives that are directed against liberal permissiveness are always exclusionary and discriminatory. In contrast, there are inclusive narratives that do not cling to an identity. Radical universalism, for example, as advocated by Kant in his essay 'Zum ewigen Frieden' (On Perpetual Peace, M.H.), is a grand narrative that includes all people, all nations, and unites them into a global community.[9]

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[9]   Han, B.-C. (2023). Die Krise der Narration. Matthes & Seitz, p. 88f. (translation by M. Hielscher)

"Fridays for Future" started with a single girl, Greta Thunberg. She was 15 years old when she started a school strike on 20 August 2018. She stopped going to class and instead sat down in front of the parliament building in her hometown of Stockholm, placing a poster next to her that read "Skolstrejk för Klimatet". I do not want to discuss the climate catastrophe and the nerve-wracking slowness and carelessness with which societies and states still deal with this threatening reality that has begun to dramatically change the face of the earth. I just want to mention the narratives of doubt and denial that are implemented by the profiteers of the oil and gas industry.

Even though Greta Thunberg's recent activities seemed deeply antisemitic to me and disappointed and enraged me, I still want to emphasise how she, one single person, with a simple narrative, could strike a chord that resonated throughout the whole world. However, in her own speeches and in the climate discourse, an undertone resonates that has been inherent in narratives and concepts since the very beginning: the apocalyptic turn. In the Book of Revelation and even in Olaf Scholz's term "Zeitenwende", with which he addressed the necessity to react to Putin's war against the Ukraine and the West, you can hear the eschatological sound. The old idea of the end of the world, the end of history and the last judgement, and the Kingdom of God, which you find not only in the Bible but in many cultures and variations, often implies the destruction of the material world, of our planet, in order to enter the transcendent Kingdom of God. Apocalyptic narratives are strong, powerful, and widely spread. They fuelled Greta Thunberg's agenda and they may become true too. However, they are hard to bear because, without the promise of paradise and a realm beyond, they come up with a discourse of fright and terror. They repeat what they want to prevent. It is not a good idea to address the issue of climate crisis and global warming by constantly reproducing apocalyptic narratives. People will

not want to hear them, although they are ever present in our collective subconscious and speech acts.

Moreover, I am wondering if that ubiquity has to do with our problems in dealing with death. The scandal of death may have led to a vision of the end of the world when everybody and everything must die, since we must die, which is true, but, in an apocalypse, we become witnesses of the doom and collapse of all others too. It is a sudden, terrible, dramatic ending. I sometimes think that some of the wars we witness and the destruction we see come from the reluctance to accept the transience not only of our individual lives but of a certain type of power, production, accumulation and exploitation that we cannot afford any more. There has to be another sense of an ending.

Utopian Narratives

Sometimes a utopian narrative stemming from the past is simply marked by a name, for instance, Al-Andalus. Islamic rule on the Iberian Peninsula lasted for almost eight hundred years. It began in 710, when Târiq ibn Ziyâd, the Berber general and deputy of the Arab general Mûsâ ibn Nusayr, crossed the strait from Ceuta to the rock on the Iberian Peninsula, with 7000 Berbers who had converted to Islam. The rock was then named after him: Djabal Târiq (Gibraltar). It ended in 1492 when, after a ten-year crusade by Catholic monarchs against the Emirate of Granada, the last Muslim ruler of the city state, Abû Abdallâh, handed over the keys of the city to the besiegers, after a long siege.[10]

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[10] Cf. Catlos, B. (2018). Kingdoms of Faith. A New History of Islamic Spain. Basic Books/ Hachette Book Group.

Most Muslims on the Iberian Peninsula during the centuries of Moorish rule, which was mostly not a centralised rule but a patchwork of regional states, were not immigrant Arabs or Berbers or other ethnic groups or their descendants, but converted inhabitants of the peninsula who had previously been Christians or had adhered to other religions (Iberians and Celts, who were ruled by the Romans, the Visigoths and later by the Moors). For many, often pragmatic reasons, they had converted to Islam, which seemed attractive to them, with its egalitarian claim to equality and its demands for charity and tolerance, at least in the variants that were mostly valid on the peninsula. It was a new and dynamic religion with communal rituals, such as prayer and fasting, and the promise of equality and betterment not only in the hereafter but already in this world.

The first era of consolidated Muslim rule on the Iberian Peninsula was the Umayyad Emirate (756–929), which Abd al-Rahmân I established in Córdoba. Al-Rahmân I and his successors were able to establish firm, lasting structures, enact laws, set up ministries, expand the infrastructure, construct buildings, levy taxes, and establish schools, through far-sighted governance and defences against enemies from within and without. Towards the end of his reign, al-Rahmân I had the foundation stone laid for the mosque of Córdoba, which was gradually expanded under his successors.

Under Muslim rule, the Christians, like the Jews, enjoyed religious freedom. They were able to worship freely and largely regulate their own internal affairs. No one was forced to convert.

Córdoba was the capital of an economically successful emirate; taxes were mostly paid in the form of money. Trade and commerce flourished there, as it did in the provincial capitals of Seville, Zaragoza, Toledo and Valencia. There were many

coins made of gold, silver and copper, which also facilitated the emergence of a commercialised monetary economy. The emirs from the Arab conquering families recruited mercenaries, slaves and prisoners in their armies in order to contain the military aristocracy's ambitions for power; the conquerors married local women and incorporated long-established families into their lineage and culture. We are talking here about Muladi or Muwallads, people with one Arab and one non-Arab parent who speak Arabic, have converted to Islam and have grown up in the Arab-Islamic culture, but also have other local ties or are the descendants of converts. Wherever the administration of the emirate had advanced, urban life in al-Andalus began to flourish. In the process, it changed significantly. The network of straight streets and public squares that existed from Roman times was rebuilt in the Arab-Islamic style. The clans settled closely packed in neighbourhoods, with a maze of windowless alleys and properties closed off from the outside. Instead of carts and waggons, pack donkeys and camels were now on the move, which did not require wide and straight roads.

A gigantic construction project—The Caliph had three palaces built on the terraced slopes of the Sierra Morena, extending down to the wide valley of the Guadalquivir, each with an extensive garden. The uppermost palace overlooking the nearby metropolis of Córdoba was the private residence of the caliph, the harem where his wives, his hundreds of concubines, and his household lived. In 961, the year of Abd al-Rahman's death, 3750 male slaves and 6750 female slaves are said to have lived here. One level below was the administrative palace, where audiences and ceremonies were held, embassies were received, and government affairs were conducted. Here lived courtiers and high officials – Muslims, Christians, and Jews – with their families, as well as noble hostages and envoys from across the Mediterranean and beyond. At the very bottom lay the public palace, where thousands of

workers, craftsmen, and assistants lived. The entire complex, a city in itself, was surrounded by a protective wall 1.5 kilometres long and 800 metres wide, with a tower.

There was a huge library with, as it is said, hundreds of thousands of volumes, containing all the knowledge of the Islamic, Byzantine, and Latin worlds – a testament to the cosmopolitanism of the caliph. The promotion of the caliphal library was to become a particular concern for his son al-Hakam II.

In the fifty years of Abd al-Rahman's III reign, the provincial town of Córdoba became a bustling cosmopolitan capital, a place of encounter and exchange for merchants, travellers, and scholars, for civil servants, immigrants, visitors, prisoners, and fortune seekers from all parts of the caliphate and the entire Mediterranean region, as well as from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. During this time, the reputation of al-Andalus as an earthly paradise sung by poets and dreamers was solidified. They praised the caliph and raved about a fertile land blessed with unheard-of riches and abundance.

Wallâda bint al-Mustakfî (994–1091, Córdoba) was the daughter of the Umayyad Caliph Muhammad III al-Mustakfî, who ruled in Córdoba from 1024 to 1025. He was a cowardly and weak man who, just a year after the murder of his predecessor, himself fell victim to an assassination attempt. Freed from the caliphal court etiquette, Wallâda gathered around her a circle of literati and intellectuals, the best minds of Córdoba, which still shone with imperial splendour. She is said to have measured herself against them in many discussions and always came out on top. Her life was remarkably free and unbound for a woman of that time. She refused to wear the veil. With Ibn Zaydûn, she had a brief but intense love affair. That he got involved with her black slave, she never forgave him. She became involved with the wealthy

and influential Ibn Abdûs, who supported her well into old age. In response to Ibn Zaydûn's jealousy attacks, she replied with mockery poems and with silence. She was also in a relationship with the poetess Muhjda bint al-Tayyânî. She was never married, and she never reconciled with Ibn Zaydûn.

Wallâda, this princess from the caliphate lineage, fought for an astonishing position during a time of political turmoil, amidst the declining caliphate and the constant wars between the rival Taifa kings. According to all that has been reported about her, she was an intellectually, artistically, and sexually emancipated woman. Her escape from the golden cage, for which her social position had predestined her, was probably only possible in this unique historical moment, at the juncture between the decline of the caliphal central power and the rise of local kings, who competed not only politically but also as patrons. Like a French noblewoman in the 18th century, Wallâda hosted a literary salon, of which Ibn Bassâm says the following in his Dhakhîra: "Her salon was a gathering place for the nobles of the land, and her court was like a racetrack for the horses of poetry and prose." Wallâda embodies a moment of freedom and modernity at a turning point in the history of al-Andalus.

The idea of tolerance and diversity is inherent in the concept of the European Union. However, what is a unifying narrative for the whole and even larger future EU? While this union of European nations is constantly attacked from the outside and the inside – paradoxically and sadly even from the USA now – it needs all the more stories and slogans to preserve and strengthen its resilience. There are many arguments for what has been achieved in Europe: a family of nations. Legal security. Democratic rights. Human rights. Freedom of movement. Freedom of trade. Liberality. A common currency. No borders. Compromise. A respect for diversity. An attempt to protect nature. Protection

of privacy. Equality and equal rights. A social agenda. Right of asylum. But what is Europe's DNA; what has become of the foundational narratives: a peace project (a), a union forged in crises (b), the idea that economic interdependence fosters political change and development (c), or that law can replace power politics and that treaties, rules and regulations will strengthen the value of cooperation rather than confrontation (d)? Economic crises like the so-called financial crisis, wars like the post-Yugoslavian wars or the Ukraine war, right-wing and authoritarian governments, the so-called refugee crisis and the migration from Middle and Far East and Africa, the Covid pandemic, the East-West and North-South divides, the constant threat of the climate crisis and the insecurities caused by the necessary economic transformation – the EU has been faced with so many dramatic challenges and plights, it could have been torn apart many times. Yet, so far it has come through and prevailed. However, how can we come up with a story that reaches beyond economic interests and those of a European elite, a notion obviously many people in Europe share, not realising how much they themselves profit from the EU? It must be something between a mosaic of homelands and a tolerance for a Europe of different speeds combined with cross-European life stories and a peaceful Babel of many languages and regional cultures but also strong common institutions and a common European defence strategy that includes a European army and European nuclear forces. It could be the idea of a peaceful but armed Europe that respects its institutions and protects its human and natural diversity but also sanctions violations; of a continent that offers a lust for life, encounter, prosperity, culture, nature, learning and love.

The Role of Media
in Shaping Images

Leila Bičakčić

The media plays a fundamental role in shaping public perception, influencing political landscapes, and constructing societal narratives. Throughout history, it has been a powerful tool used by governments, corporations, and other entities to control information, sway opinions, and reinforce ideological constructs. Nowhere is this more evident than in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the media have played a decisive role in both the conflict of the 1990s and the current socio-political climate. The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina exemplifies how media can be manipulated to serve political agendas, perpetuate divisions, and suppress independent journalism, ultimately affecting democracy and public discourse.

During the breakup of Yugoslavia, the media played a critical role in swaying public opinion of the conflict. State-controlled media outlets played a significant role in fuelling ethnic tensions by spreading propaganda, demonising opposing groups, and justifying violent actions. This manipulation of information created an environment in which war became not only possible but the only way forward. By systematically attacking civic principles and fostering fear of ethnic violence, the media served as a crucial mechanism in engineering public consent for war. However, the role of the media in this process was never examined nor has it been discussed in the context of war crimes. Here is my personal list of memorable quotes of media "reporting" on the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

"Muslim extremists have probably come up with the most horrible way of torture on the planet. Last night they threw a Serbian boy alive next to the cages of the lions in the Pionirska Dolina Zoo". "Those bearded villains did unthinkable atrocities along the entire line of this front". "Over 15,000 Croats wander the streets and forests looking for salvation in front of the Muslim knife"[11] All of these statements were reported by Radio Television of Serbia and then broadcast by Republika Srpska TV, in an attempt to justify Yugoslav National Army attacks in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to create fear of their neighbours among Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was done to divide and conquer ethnic groups and divide them for easier manipulation. I recommend watching the documentary "The years eaten by lions" by Boro Kontic, distinguished journalist and author from BiH, looking back on the role of the media in the breakup of Yugoslavia. To balance out this bleak picture of journalism, it is worth mentioning the role of reporters who witnessed in The Hague[12] and their contribution to uncovering the truth about atrocities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Today, political influence on media in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains strong. The media landscape is highly polarised, with significant differences in press freedom between the two entities: Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH). The government of Republika Srpska has actively worked to suppress independent journalism through restrictive laws, verbal attacks on journalists, and the manipulation of public broadcasters. The FBiH government has not introduced such

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[11] Why were the warmongers in the region not prosecuted? Radio Free Europe. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ratno-huskanje-bez-kazne/24716102.html

[12] Media as a first draft of the history. https://medijikaodokaz.ba/o-novinarima/ and https://www.media.ba/en/publication/first-draft-history-journalists-witnesses-hague-tribunal

extreme measures but media independence is still threatened by political interference and financial instability.

Challenges to Media Freedom

The deterioration of press freedom in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains challenging and an issue of concern, particularly in the light of the country's European Union accession process. Media freedom is part of 14 key priorities, issues that BiH has to address urgently before further steps on the EU path can be made: long-standing issues concerning the national public broadcaster and the fragmentation and financial weakness of the media market, as well as the low rate of prosecutions of those who threaten the media, remain unsolved. After decades of transformation in the post-conflict era, progress has slowed to a halt and in some respects has even gone into reverse, with worrying implications for democracy.

Self-censorship among journalists is another troubling consequence of this environment. Fear of legal repercussions, loss of funding, and public vilification discourage professional journalism, leading to a media landscape that is increasingly skewed in favour of government narratives. Public broadcasters, such as RTRS in Republika Srpska, have become mouthpieces for political elites, further reducing the space for critical reporting. The financial struggles of independent media further exacerbate the problem, as they rely on limited resources and international support to survive.

The most retrograde development is a set of restrictive laws that have been passed or are under development in Republika Srpska (RS), where president of RS, Milorad Dodik is steadily tightening the screws on independent media. This package of interlinked

legislation is aimed at further shrinking the space for critical reporting and is contributing to a wider atmosphere of isolation among the small but vocal independent journalistic community. The combination of the re-criminalisation of slander, the law on foreign agents and repressive media law pose an existential threat to what remains of the small pool of independent media trying to hold power to account. In combination with a dire financial situation and captured systems in the whole country, where financial systems are fully controlled by politics, media outlets are squeezed between political bias and starvation.

Independent journalism and professional media are facing numerous challenges: political, economic and safety. At the same time, political crisis is derogating fragile democratic system in the country, threatening to further destroy and capture remaining critical voices in BiH.

However, the most troubling position in the post-war reality of the country is that the media have played a significant role in perpetuating ethno-national divisions, often hindering efforts towards reconciliation and unity. Continually, we are witnessing media narratives as the perpetuation of divisive political narratives, voiced by political leaders. Journalists, influenced by political agendas, participate in spreading biased narratives, manipulate information and redirect public attention to comfortable ethnic issues. This is particularly true when it comes to recent historical developments (the war in the 1990s and the role of ethnic groups and neighbouring countries), war crimes, and political developments. This selective reporting and inflammatory rhetoric contribute to deeper ethnic and political divides, fostering an environment of mistrust and hostility among different ethnic groups. These portrayals often present conflicting versions of history, trapping the country in a cycle of selective memory and unresolved tensions. Coupled with segregated

educational curricula, media outlets bear responsibility for the utilisation of post-war propaganda and ethnic division, further exacerbating and perpetuating ethnic conflicts.

Sensationalism and misinformation further complicate the issue. Bombastic headlines, half-truths, and provocative content attract more attention than nuanced investigative reporting. This trend distorts reality and creates an environment in which propaganda thrives. Instead of fostering informed public debate, the media often become an instrument of manipulation, reinforcing existing prejudices and preventing constructive dialogue. The country's ethnic divisions are deeply ingrained, and social media can serve to deepen these divides. When users are continuously exposed to one-sided narratives that demonise the "other" group, it reinforces stereotypes and fosters animosity. Here are some examples of the current reporting:

On 26 February 2025, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina issued a first-instance verdict in the criminal case against Milorad Dodik and others, for the criminal offence of failure to implement the decisions of the High Representative. Radio TV of Republika Srpska (RTRS) held a live programme for an entire day, calling it "Republika Srpska on trial[13]", claiming every question needs to be investigated for the survival of Srpska and the writing of history, so that the citizens know what happened. Ever since the trial started, RTRS reporting is aimed at supporting Dodik and Republika Srpska, claiming responsibility for the serious constitutional crisis, country is deeply sinking in, to everyone else but Dodik and SNSD.

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[13] RTRS, R.T.R.S. Uživo - Specijal: Srpska pred sudom, RTRS. https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=590733

The role of the media in creating narratives is profound, with the power to shape history, influence politics, and mould societal values. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the media have been both a tool of division and a potential force for democratic progress. While independent journalism remains under threat, it continues to serve as a crucial watchdog against political abuses. Moving forward, strengthening media freedom will require concerted efforts at the national and international levels, as well as greater public awareness of the importance of objective, fact-based reporting. Only through these measures can Bosnia and Herzegovina hope to build a more open, democratic society where media serve their true purpose: informing the public, holding power to account, and fostering dialogue rather than division.

Spread of Online Narratives:
Impact and Countermeasures

Ralitsa Stoycheva

For much of the 20th century, media played a key role in shaping societal narratives. However, the 21st century has brought a deep transformation with the rise of social media platforms, revolutionising not only communication and information-sharing but also reshaping the media sector itself. These platforms have expanded their reach, but they have also contributed to the accelerating rise of online radicalisation and propaganda.

In this context, both social media platforms and networks of websites serve as powerful tools for promoting narratives, sometimes with dangerous consequences, particularly in societies still in transition. In many cases, these narratives widen societal divisions, erode trust in institutions, and, in some instances, incite violence. Countries in Southeast Europe are especially vulnerable to online disinformation due to low levels of digital literacy, making it more difficult for people to distinguish between truth, manipulation, and propaganda.

This article examines online disinformation narratives in Southeast Europe. In several Southeast European countries that are not members of the European Union, reliable and transparent data on digital platform usage remains scarce or inconsistent. The data that does exist is often fragmented, outdated, or derived from sources with unclear methodologies or political affiliations. This absence of trustworthy information

makes it difficult to accurately assess the scale, dynamics, and impact of disinformation in these environments. For this reason, this analysis highlights examples from Bulgaria and Romania. These countries offer valuable insights because their digital ecosystems operate within the legal and institutional framework of the European Union. This, along with the found data on the digital landscape there, provides a good basis for understanding how narratives circulate in a society, how platforms behave, and how institutions can respond. By examining developments in these contexts, the analysis draws a conclusion highlighting the importance of the European legal framework.

In this article, *narrative* refers to the structured and often strategic way information is presented and disseminated online. These narratives shape public perceptions by framing events, ideas, and ideologies in a particular light.[14] Moreover, they are often carefully crafted stories that influence opinions, reinforce beliefs, and sometimes manipulate emotions.

Various propaganda and narrative techniques are used to make these messages persuasive. Emotional appeals play a crucial role, using language and content designed to trigger strong emotional responses – fear, anger, or sympathy – to swing audiences. Persuasive language, including heavily loaded terms, framing tactics, and euphemisms, subtly guides people's perceptions, often without them realising it. Visual manipulation is another powerful tool, whereby misleading images, selective framing, or

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[14]   Hellman, M. (2024). Narrative Analysis and Framing Analysis of Disinformation. In: Security, Disinformation and Harmful Narratives: RT and Sputnik News Coverage about Sweden. The Palgrave Macmillan Series in International Political Communication. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

other forms of visual deception reinforce a particular message.[15] Moreover, targeting audiences through psychological profiling allows narratives to be tailored to different groups, increasing their effectiveness.[16]

Despite their diversity, online narratives often use established methods, relying on recurring storylines or themes. They frequently present a conflict between opposing forces – good versus evil, victim versus aggressor, tradition versus modernity – making them easier to understand and emotionally compelling.

Social networks can further amplify the effectiveness of narratives. Coordinated efforts using bots, fake accounts, and echo chambers ensure that messages reach large audiences, creating the illusion of widespread support or consensus. This method makes disinformation appear more credible and harder to challenge. One particularly dangerous tactic used for polarisation involves reinforcing the legitimacy of one group's beliefs while portraying opposing groups as morally inferior or responsible for societal problems. By deepening divisions and fuelling an "us versus them" mentality, these narratives weaken social cohesion and can contribute to real-world conflict. Recognising these techniques is the first step in resisting manipulation and fostering a more informed, critical approach to digital content.

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[15] Weikmann, T., & Lecheler, S. (2022). Visual disinformation in a digital age: A literature synthesis and research agenda. New Media & Society, 25(12), 3696-3713.

[16] Brewer, A. (2024) Leveraging narrative intelligence to counter online radicalization and Propaganda, EdgeTheory. https://edgetheory.com/resources/narrative-intelligence-counter-radicalization-propaganda?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Digital Landscape Overview

Among the countries in the region, the most comprehensive data are available for Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania, the three EU member states. Serbia also has a relatively detailed digital profile, while, for the remaining countries, limited information presents challenges to the understanding of their online behaviour.

Bulgaria[17]

Bulgaria, with a population of 6.74 million, has an 87.1% internet penetration (5.86 million users). The main reason for using the internet is finding information. In the period 1 September – 30 November 2024, the most visited websites were Google, YouTube, and Facebook. Instagram and three online media outlets also ranked among the top ten most visited sites.

Viber, YouTube, and Google led in monthly active app users, with Facebook and Messenger also making the top ten. The number of social media identities is 4.37 million (equivalent to 64.9% of the population), with reading news being the third most common reason for online activity. Facebook remains the most used platform, followed by Viber and Messenger. However, TikTok recorded the highest average monthly usage in November 2024, with an average of 46 hours 9 minutes, significantly surpassing YouTube (26 hours 57 minutes) and Instagram (14 hours 7 minutes). Facebook followed in fourth place with 9 hours 6 minutes.

According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, in 2024, 73% of Bulgarians relied on online sources (including social media)

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[17]   Digital 2025: Bulgaria. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-bulgaria

for news, while TV remained second with 61%.[18] Trust in the news is low at 29%, marking a decline from 38% in 2017.

Romania[19]

Romania, the largest country in the region according to population (19 million), has 68.6% (13 million) social media user identities. Finding information is again the primary reason for internet usage. Between 1 September and 30 November 2024, Google, YouTube, and Facebook were the most visited websites.

Facebook, WhatsApp, and Messenger are the leading social media platforms. Yet, in November 2024, TikTok had the highest average monthly usage (42 hours 19 minutes), followed by YouTube (29 hours 15 minutes) and Instagram (11 hours 36 minutes). According to the Reuters Institute, 66% of Romanians sourced news online, while 62% relied on TV.[20] Trust in news has declined significantly, dropping from 39% in 2017 to 27% in 2024.

Manipulation, Hate Speech and Disinformation

The Romanian presidential elections of 2024 are a recent example of how digital platforms can be used to manipulate electoral outcomes. The rise of Călin Georgescu, an ultranationalist candidate for president who, despite minimal presence in pre-election polls, won the first round through a campaign

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[18] Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024. https://reutersinstitute.politics. ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf

[19] Digital 2025: Romania. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-romania

[20] Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024. https://reutersinstitute.politics. ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf

predominantly conducted on social media, especially TikTok.[21] Over the years, some of his standpoints included his open admiration for Vladimir Putin, referring to him as one of the world's few "true leaders", his criticism of Romania's support for Ukraine, and questioning NATO's commitment to defend Romania if attacked.[22,23] Georgescu also advocates reducing Romania's reliance on imports and distancing the country from the European Union.

During the presidential elections, Georgescu's campaign was unconventional, using social media platforms to reach and mobilise supporters. On TikTok, his official account gathered over 660 000 followers,[24] with numerous unofficial accounts amplifying his messages. User-generated content also played a major role, with supporters creating viral content, including a trending song titled "We vote for Călin Georgescu", which featured in over 11 800 posts.[25]

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[21] Ultranationalist candidate scores stunning first-round win in Romania election. https://www.politico.eu/article/romania-election-stunner-who-is-calin-georgescu-marcel-ciolacu/

[22] Who is Călin Georgescu, the far-right TikTok star leading the Romanian election race?. https://www.politico.eu/article/calin-georgescu-romania-elections-far-right-tiktok-nato-skeptic-russia-ukraine-exports/

[23] Călin Georgescu neagă că e război în Ucraina. „Ați fost acolo? Ați văzut cu ochii dumneavoastră?" (in English: Călin Georgescu denies that there is a war in Ukraine. "Have you been there? Have you seen it with your own eyes?"). https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/calin-georgescu-neaga-ca-e-razboi-in-ucraina-ati-fost-acolo-ati-vazut-cu-ochii-dumneavoastra-3021691?__grsc=cookieIsUndef0&__grts=58096839&__grua=b977e10d1cb26107909e97d51a688323&__grrn=1

[24] Official TikTok profile: https://www.tiktok.com/@calingeorgescuoficial

[25] How TikTok Fueled the Rise of Romania's Far-Right Presidential Candidate Georgescu. https://www.rferl.org/a/tiktok-calin-georgescu-presidential-candidate-romania/33216735.html

Beyond TikTok, Facebook groups have been playing a significant role in gathering support. Notable examples include the Facebook groups "Cumpăna României – Proiect de țară 'Hrană, Apă, Energie'" ("Romania's Balance – Country Project 'Food, Water, Energy'") with over 41 000 members, and "CALIN GEORGESCU IUBESTE ROMANIA!" ("CALIN GEORGESCU LOVES ROMANIA!") with more than 29 000 members. These groups served as hubs for disseminating campaign materials, organising events, and fostering a sense of community among supporters.

Romania's diaspora, traditionally pro-reform and pro-Western, also played a role in the 2024 elections. However, Georgescu's campaign successfully targeted this segment through social networks, particularly TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp, through encrypted chat groups and algorithm-driven content bubbles that allowed narratives to spread.[26] By emphasising patriotic themes and portraying himself as a defender of Romania's sovereignty against Western influence, Georgescu positioned himself as an outsider challenging the status quo.

The unexpected success of Georgescu's campaign prompted scrutiny from Romanian authorities and international observers. Investigations revealed significant foreign interference, with thousands of foreign-linked TikTok and other social media accounts identified as propagators of Georgescu's candidacy. The Romanian Security Council reported that millions of euros were invested in hiring influencers and paying social media platforms to promote Georgescu's content. These findings led the Constitutional Court to annul the election results, citing

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[26] How Călin Georgescu's TikTok tactics rewired Romanian politics. https://theloop.ecpr.eu/how-calin-georgescus-tiktok-tactics-rewired-romanian-politics/

violations such as vote manipulation, undeclared funding, and the dissemination of voter misinformation.[27]

Georgescu's campaign is one of the clearest examples in Southeast Europe (but also globally) of the potential for social media to influence political outcomes, highlighting the necessity for robust mechanisms to detect and counteract disinformation in the digital realm.

With Facebook being the most popular platform in the region, the announcement by Mark Zuckerberg in January 2025 that Meta will be discontinuing its third-party fact-checking programme and introducing the "Community notes" marked the creation of new narratives. One of the first and most striking examples of this unfolded in Bulgaria, where a campaign was launched against the former editor-in-chief of Factcheck.bg, one of the country's few fact-checking organisations.

Within 24 hours of the announcement, an online article appeared accusing the former editor-in-chief of Factcheck. bg of being responsible for what it called "brutal censorship" on Facebook over the past decade. The piece, authored by a known Bulgarian journalist and titled *"A Letter to the Woman Who Censored My Account for 10 Years"* set the stage for a wider online attack. One key feature of this narrative was that it avoided explicitly naming the individual in question. Instead, the article relied on vague associations and wordplay, making it difficult to hold the author legally accountable for any direct accusations. Despite this, the name of the former editor-in-

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27 Summary of the Romanian Constitutional Court Decision Annulling the Presidential Elections Invoking Social Media Manipulation. https://www.linkedin. com/pulse/summary-romanian-constitutional-court-decision-social-zanfir-fortuna-qkblc/

chief quickly surfaced on various platforms, foremost by user-generated content, where it was linked to private images, hateful comments, and threats.

What started as a single article rapidly gained momentum. In a matter of hours, the narrative spread across multiple websites and social media platforms. Searches for the former editor-in-chief's name began trending on Facebook, further amplifying the reach and impact of the campaign. Although this narrative was easily debunked—among other things, Factcheck.bg was founded in 2021, making it impossible for its editors to have influenced Facebook's moderation for a decade, and content moderation is the responsibility of the platform, not independent fact-checkers—it still managed to reach a substantial audience across Bulgaria.

What is also worth noting is that, a few years ago, when Meta was outsourcing content moderation in Bulgaria to a private company, that company also faced accusations of "censoring the truth" and was subjected to similar waves of hate speech and attacks. Now, with Meta shifting away from independent fact-checking, the narrative has flipped, targeting fact-checkers as the "enforcers of censorship". This contradiction underlines how online narratives can be shaped, reshaped, and weaponised, depending on broader ideological and political currents.

European Framework and Platform Responsibility

As foreign information and manipulation interference grows more sophisticated and impactful, the EU's approach to combating disinformation is built on a co-regulatory backstop that combines the legally binding provisions of the Digital Services Act (DSA) with the self-regulatory Code of Practice

on Disinformation, which was adopted in 2018 and further developed and strengthened in June 2022 in accordance with DSA.[28]

The DSA introduced binding obligations for very large online platforms (VLOPs) and very large online search engines (VLOSEs) to assess and mitigate risks linked to disinformation, electoral interference, hate speech, and algorithmic amplification of harmful narratives. This marks a fundamental shift from voluntary content moderation towards a system of legal accountability, by which platforms must actively monitor how their algorithms influence users, provide transparency in their moderation policies, and ensure that disinformation does not gain traction through systemic failures.

Following the events of the 2024 Romanian presidential elections, the European Commission opened formal proceedings into TikTok under the Digital Services Act.[29] The enquiry is focused on whether TikTok fulfilled its legal obligations as a VLOP, particularly regarding TikTok's recommender systems, the risks linked to the coordinated inauthentic manipulation or automated exploitation of the service, and the platform's policies on political advertisements and paid-for political content. According to commission statements, there are concerns about TikTok's insufficient transparency regarding content recommendation algorithms and the identification and understanding of systemic risks related to electoral processes. There is also a critique of

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28 Yurukova, M. (2024). Countering disinformation in EU Member States: the Importance of Not Going Back to where We Started. Sofia University.

29 Commission opens formal proceedings against TikTok on election risks under the Digital Services Act. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/commission-opens-formal-proceedings-against-tiktok-election-risks-under-digital-services-act

TikTok's lack of effective oversight over influencer partnerships, which allegedly played a significant role in mobilising support for Georgescu.

Under the DSA, platforms operating in Europe have more responsibility and obligations in such contexts. They are required not only to detect manipulation but to implement proactive measures to limit its spread, especially around democratic events such as elections. The law mandates that platforms conduct risk assessments for election integrity, provide real-time access to relevant data for researchers and regulators, and establish mechanisms for redress and transparency in their moderation decisions. This structure helps ensure that elections in the EU are protected by default, rather than salvaged in hindsight. The proceedings on TikTok represent a test of the EU's regulatory capacity and reinforce the message that platforms operating in Europe are no longer passive actors, but active participants in safeguarding democratic processes. If found in breach, TikTok could face significant fines and be compelled to implement sweeping structural changes to how it manages content and political narratives in the EU.

Moreover, the DSA clearly differentiates Europe from regulatory vacuums in other parts of the world. A striking example is Meta's 2025 decision to discontinue its partnerships with third-party fact-checking organisations in the United States. As written in the text above, this decision provided grounds for disinformation and directly fuelled a new wave of anti-fact-checker narratives. This highlighted a critical point: without legal obligations, platforms can retreat from their public responsibilities, creating vacuums quickly filled by disinformation actors. In the EU, however, the DSA makes such retreats unlawful. Platforms cannot simply opt out of transparency or abandon verification efforts without facing consequences, including fines of up to 6% of their global turnover.

For Southeast Europe, where institutional resilience often varies and media ecosystems are fragmented, the DSA provides a crucial safety net. It allows governments, civil society, and watchdogs to demand transparency and accountability from platforms that shape public opinion and influence democratic stability. Most importantly, it signals that Europe sees the integrity of the digital information space as a democratic imperative, not a market choice.

However, despite the DSA's ambitious scope, there are growing concerns about its effective implementation across Southeast Europe, where institutional capacity, regulatory independence, and digital literacy remain relatively low.[30] While the regulation provides powerful legal ground, their enforcement depends heavily on the strength of national authorities, many of which in the region face underfunding, political interference, or lack of technical expertise. Additionally, platforms have historically demonstrated asymmetric compliance, often prioritising larger Western European markets while neglecting smaller, less-visible countries on the periphery. This double standard risks creating two tiers of enforcement within the EU: one where platforms are closely monitored and compliant and another where harmful content continues to spread with minimal oversight. This leaves the region vulnerable to the very risks the legislation aims to address.

Yet, the European approach is about ensuring that digital space reflects democratic principles: transparency over manipulation, inclusion over division, and accountability over indifference. As the digital age reshapes how societies think, vote, and organise, these principles are the backbone of the EU's defence against disinformation and a roadmap for others facing similar threats.

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[30] Yurukova, M. (2023). The Role of the Member States' Digital Services Coordinator for Ensuring Coordinated and Consistent Enforcement of the Digital Services Act. Minerva.

Resisting Disinformation:
Insights from Ukraine

Halyna Tanai

In 2013—just before Russia launched its war—Ukraine was a blind spot on the world map. It was nearly invisible to the international community and showed little interest in engaging globally. Meanwhile, Russia had already developed a clear strategy of informational influence and was effectively using soft power, especially cultural means, to achieve its goals on the global stage.

We have attempted to distil Ukraine's experience in countering information threats into several key insights gained over a decade of resisting aggression on the battlefield and in the informational space.

War Begins in the Information Space

Although Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine began in 2014, its preparation started much earlier, in the information space.

A turning point came in 2002 during the Second Chechen War—Russia's second and ultimately successful attempt to subdue the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and assert control over the North Caucasus. That same year, during the so-called "anti-terrorist operation" at the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow (known as the Nord-Ost hostage crisis), Russian TV channels broadcast live footage showing the deteriorating condition of hostages, who

were ultimately killed by an unknown gas during the rescue operation (reportedly, between 130 and 174 people died).

Journalist and propaganda researcher Peter Pomerantsev later described this as a critical turning point: live broadcasting of politically sensitive events ended in Russia, with raw, unscripted reality now perceived as a threat to the interests of the Russian state.[31]

In 2005, the term *Russkiy Mir* ("Russian World") entered the Russian political discourse—a cultural, civilisational, geopolitical, and religious concept of imperial nature, centred on uniting former subjects of the Russian and Soviet empires, especially Russian-speaking populations worldwide. This became the ideological foundation of Putin's expansionist policy.

In February 2007, Putin's "Munich Speech" laid out the strategic directions of Russian foreign policy. Then came the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, when France and Germany blocked the Membership Action Plan for Ukraine and Georgia. Russia responded by pledging open support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and its military leadership threatened force if Ukraine or Georgia moved towards NATO. Four months later, on 8 August 2008, Russia launched a five-day war against Georgia, the first interstate war in 21st-century Europe.

The weak global response signalled the success of this "test aggression". In fact, one could argue that the two Chechen wars were also test runs, gauging the international community's reactions. By this time, Russia had begun preparing for a broader-scale war.

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[31] Pomerantsev, P. (2014). Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia. PublicAffairs.

Cultural Expansion as Foundation for Aggression

This period also saw an aggressive cultural and informational expansion by Russia. Through the activities of Rossotrudnichestvo (a federal agency promoting Russian culture abroad), the proliferation of Sputnik media branches and the RT television network (formerly Russia Today), and the monopolisation of domestic media—including the co-opting of so-called liberal outlets—Russia consolidated its soft power.

In Ukraine, pro-Russian media captured part of the media market and, while legally operating within the Ukrainian information space, laid the groundwork for Russia's military aggression. When that aggression began in early 2014, they denied it and shifted the blame onto Ukraine and the West.

Russia's successful use of soft power and informational influence—not only in the territories of the former USSR, which it views as its legitimate sphere of influence, but also far beyond—can be explained by two defining characteristics of its propaganda: its adaptability and variability, on the one hand, and its focus on a few key narratives, on the other. Enormous resources are spent on spreading and entrenching these narratives.

So far, Russia has four key strategic narratives: Russia is a resurgent great power; Russia protects Russians no matter where they live; the West is inherently hostile to Russia; and democracy is a corrupt and dying system.[32]

Anyone from a former imperial territory will recognise them. These claims prepared both Russian society and international

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[32] Oates, S., & Ramsey, G. N. (2024). *Seeing Red: Russian Propaganda and American News*. Oxford University Press.

audiences for war. At their core is the imperial idea that Ukraine lacks agency and has no right to decide for itself.

This imperial narrative breaks down into tailored messages: some aimed at mobilising Russian society against a supposed common enemy, some designed to weaken Ukrainian society, and others tailored for international consumption.

Many of these messages argue that Ukraine is an artificial construct and that Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians are, in fact, one people.[33] A softer version of this unity narrative extends to other countries that Russia considers part of the "Russian World". Any shared trait—be it the Cyrillic alphabet, Orthodox Christianity, or past alliances—can serve either as the basis for "brotherly love" (to keep a country in Russia's orbit) or as a pretext for aggression (when that country pursues an independent course, for example).

A particularly persistent narrative in the West has been that of Ukrainian corruption. Corruption is undoubtedly a critical challenge for Ukrainian society. However, the line between actual corruption and the narrative around it has become increasingly blurred. What once was a problem to tackle has become an excuse to kill. To counter this, the strategic advisory firm Solvo Partners launched an initiative to better understand the real state of corruption in Ukraine, the efforts to fight it, and the extent of disinformation circulating online. Their findings reveal that over 60% of corruption-related content about Ukraine is either

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33 Chernetska, S. (2024). "'For Glorious Grandfathers, Against Combat Mosquitoes': How Russia Justified and Explained its Invasion of Ukraine during a Year of Full-Scale War". Go.Detector.Media. https://go.detector.media/za-slavnih-didiv-proti-bojovih-komariv-yak-rosiya-vipravdovuvala-j-poyasnyuvala-vtorgnennya-v-ukrayinu-vprodovzh-roku-povnomasshtabnoyi-vijni/

misinformation (unintentional false statements) or disinformation (deliberate lies). As a result, international trust in Ukraine has eroded, complicating efforts to secure vital support amid a full-scale war. Domestically, the corruption narrative continues to undermine public confidence in institutions and the state, while casting doubt on the effectiveness of Ukraine's anti-corruption bodies. Yet, as of 2023, Ukraine was among 17 countries that achieved their highest-ever score in the Corruption Perceptions Index. According to these indicators, Ukraine has already reached the level of EU candidate countries, although it still lags behind EU member states[34]. Since the Revolution of Dignity and the launch of major reforms a decade ago, Ukraine has gained 11 points. In 2024, the score dropped by one point (Ukraine ranks 35th in the CPI, on par with Serbia)—a setback that calls for increased scrutiny and deeper engagement from Ukrainian civil society. However, it must not be used as grounds for withholding international support during wartime, as the consequences could be devastating for regional security. It is more advantageous to support Ukraine—as a guarantor of regional security, even while its fight against corruption still goes on—than to risk having it become a vassal state of nuclear-armed Russia.

In addition, the myth of Ukraine as a "failed state" is resilient globally. Another enduring myth is that Russia is defending itself from NATO by invading Ukraine. This is untrue. NATO already bordered Russia through Poland and the Baltic states, and Ukraine held a non-aligned status at the time of the full-scale invasion. Yet another narrative portrays the war as a conflict between Russia and the West, with Ukraine merely serving as the battleground. Within Ukraine, a related narrative suggests:

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[34] Borovyk, A. (2024). A road with a clear goal: What is behind the results of the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index. https://www.Pravda.com.ua/. https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/columns/2024/01/30/7439413/

"The West is using us while we're the ones dying." These are all variations of the same toxic imperial idea, aimed either at weakening a former colony that has exited Russia's sphere of influence or at undermining global support for Ukraine.

Russia also manipulates terminology to undermine Ukraine's right to self-defence, calling the war a "special military operation" and referring to liberated Ukrainian territories as "temporarily occupied by Ukraine". These tactics are particularly effective in shaping perceptions among audiences opposed to the war.

Narrative Warfare During the Full-Scale Invasion

During the full-scale war, Russia continues to apply the same tactic: a central toxic narrative is broken down into numerous variations tailored for both Ukrainian and global information spaces.

One such example is the narrative that "Ukraine is losing, yet continues to receive financial aid instead of that money going to those who really need it." The supposedly "more deserving" groups might include African and Latin American countries, Bulgarian pensioners, or economically disadvantaged white populations in the United States. This narrative was identified through an analysis of toxic messaging across 37 countries conducted in partnership with Let's Data.

The narrative of Russia as a nuclear power also continues to be effective across nearly every region of the world (except for Ukraine). Similarly persistent is the narrative of Russia's supposed invincibility—one striking example being the myth that "Putin will definitely launch a nuclear strike if he begins to lose the war, so Russia must not be allowed to lose." The idea of Russia's inevitable

victory remains effective on the global stage. In part due to the success of this narrative, we still lack a broad international consensus on how to end the war in a way that ensures lasting peace and restores European security, instead of simply freezing the conflict.

Another particularly dangerous narrative is the so-called "peace narrative". It plays on the idea that war is inherently bad and peace is inherently good—but then proposes that peace should be achieved by halting support for Ukraine. This is a deeply harmful framing, as peace reached in such a way would result in the creation of a Russian client state at the centre of Europe, thereby enabling future military aggression against EU countries—this time with the resources of an occupied Ukraine.

Tales of Division and Despair

Within Ukraine's information space, toxic narratives and information operations are employed to fuel polarisation, division, and social disillusionment. Key themes include corruption and military mobilisation, but not only those.

The data journalism outlet Texty has analysed thousands of videos recorded by so-called "citizen experts"—some of whom appear to be AI-generated personas. These videos target a broad range of societal groups: active-duty military personnel; draft evaders; pensioners; veterans; relatives of soldiers and draft dodgers; entrepreneurs; volunteers and donors supporting the military; supporters of the current president; supporters of the previous president; rural residents; those sceptical of Western support; pessimists; and believers in conspiracy theories. Each of these audiences is targeted with three to ten recurring messages. Many of these messages echo the same themes Russia has been

promoting in Ukraine since 2014, now updated with arguments adapted to wartime realities.

Each message is crafted to exploit the fears and frustrations of a particular group, aiming to sow doubt about the legitimacy of resistance against Russia, undermine faith in civic agency, and cast doubt on the very possibility of a future in Ukraine.

Ukrainian society is decentralised, inclined towards self-organisation, experienced in responding to state violence, and resistant to authoritarian pressure. Its resilience is supported by horizontal networks that function independently of formal hierarchies.[35] The public may express low trust in state institutions yet still cooperate with them and help increase their effectiveness.[36] This "spontaneous democracy" makes Ukrainian civil society a self-sufficient actor in countering disinformation. The flip side of this independence, however, is the extreme difficulty of enforcing strict top-down coordination or producing a single unified voice.

These societal characteristics are important for analysing Ukraine's experience of resilience against wartime disinformation narratives.

Insight 1: *Treat information influence as a national security issue.*

Ukraine took a long road before banning Russian social media platforms like VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, as well as pro-Russian media and political parties. These decisions sparked

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[35] Batory Foundation. (2025). Resilience And Solidarity—Ukrainian Civil Society in the Face of War. Batory.org.pl. https://www.batory.org.pl/publikacja/resilience-and-solidarity-ukrainian-civil-society-in-the-face-of-war/

[36] Starodubska, M. (2024). How to Understand Ukrainians: A Cross-Cultural Perspective. Vivat.

heated debate and were widely criticised as encroachments on freedom of expression. However, freedom of speech does not imply the freedom for foreign agents to shape the information space or manipulate public opinion within a country.

The idea of "fighting propaganda with truth" sounds ideal in theory, but in practice it often proves insufficient. It is crucial to prevent the manipulation of democratic values and to avoid turning them into tools for undermining national security. Legal mechanisms must be used to safeguard the information space.

Insight 2: *Response must be swift.*

The Ukrainian government was slow to recognise the danger of hostile information operations, and this delay came at a high cost: it contributed to an escalation that ultimately resulted in Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine.

Insight 3: *Propaganda is adaptive and often subtle.*

A striking example of such influence, both in Ukraine and beyond, was the amplification of anti-vaccine sentiment in 2021 and the promotion of Russia's "Sputnik" vaccine as the only effective defence against Covid-19.

Topics targeted for manipulation may seem unrelated to Russia at first glance. An example of this is the discrediting of international alliances like the EU and NATO, through messaging designed to stimulate scepticism, such as portraying these institutions as ineffective or insufficiently supportive of Ukraine.

During the rolling blackouts caused by Russian attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, Russia attempted to stoke public unrest through fake narratives like: "The government is cutting electricity to citizens while selling it abroad," or "Power outages are being conducted unfairly."

A more recent example is the exploitation of news about USAID's suspension of some external aid programmes. Russian narratives seized this opportunity to discredit both USAID and its recipients, including media outlets and civil society organisations that focus on countering foreign information threats.

Within the EU, Ukrainian refugees are a frequent target of polarising narratives. In host countries, citizens are exposed to content portraying Ukrainian women as lawbreakers, as disrespectful to the nations that shelter them, as marriage-wreckers, or as job-stealers. At the same time, Ukrainians are bombarded with mirror messages claiming that EU citizens are xenophobic towards refugees. These narratives are designed to fracture Ukrainian society and deteriorate the relationship between Ukraine and its international allies.

Insight 4: *Invest in a strong civil society and independent media.*

The emergence of numerous civil society organisations in Ukraine focused on countering Russian disinformation has been crucial. Many of these organisations were founded long before 2022, some as early as the 1990s, and gained prominence during moments of protest and revolution.

Thanks to these civil society organisations, a decentralised network for analysing and resisting disinformation has developed, including fact-checking initiatives and research-

based organisations (for example, VoxUkraine, StopFake). Some of these NGOs grew into international centres for strategic communication, as well as government structures (the Centre for Strategic Communications, the Centre for Countering Disinformation under the National Security and Defence Council).

Today, the winding down of USAID programmes and the shifting priorities of certain international foundations mean reduced support for organisations focused on countering disinformation and foreign influence. It is therefore important to find ways to strengthen these institutions, as our societies' vulnerability to ever-evolving information operations depends on their capacity to act.

Insight 5: *Understand social fault lines.*

If your society has unresolved historical, demographic, ethnic, occupational, gender-based, or economic challenges, be prepared: hostile influence will seek to deepen and weaponise them, especially if your country lacks a clear strategy for communicating these issues.

There are no simple solutions to this challenge. However, the point raised by Insight 4 is essential: the development of independent media, civil society organisations, and grassroots initiatives. Horizontal networks act as a remedy against social atomisation and can initiate dialogue in places in which the state lacks capacity.

For example, Ukraine still lacks a coherent nationwide communication strategy around military mobilisation. In this vacuum, civil society representatives, journalists, and public figures have stepped up to shape the conversation. The media serve not only as a platform but as moderators and active participants in the national discourse.

Attempts to split Ukrainian society during the wartime power outages ultimately failed, largely because energy companies established transparent, consistent, and clear communication with the public.

Insight 6: *Build resilience at every level, from hyperlocal to global.*

The more developed and coordinated the mechanisms for countering hostile information operations are at the national and EU levels, the easier it becomes to resist such influence. Ukrainian realities have shown that initiatives operating at the regional, local, and hyperlocal levels can be equally effective.

Some information attacks are first identified in neighbourhood chat groups or local messaging channels and neutralised before they reach the national level. Local media play a key role in this ecosystem, often possessing the sharpest expertise in detecting and deconstructing propaganda within their communities.

Insight 7: *Do not overestimate your immunity.*

The study Countering Russian Propaganda Narratives about Ukraine in Western Media showed that journalists across Europe can recognise Russian propaganda narratives but often underestimate their effectiveness. Meanwhile, systemic safeguards to counter hostile information influence are still insufficient, both at the editorial and national levels.[37]

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[37] Lviv Media Forum. Countering Russian Propaganda Narratives about Ukraine in Western Media. Lvivmediaforum.com. https://lvivmediaforum.com/en/page/doslidzhennya-protydiya-naratyvam-rosijskoyi-propagandy-pro-ukrayinu-v-zahidnyh-media-2

Moreover, Russia successfully employs a tactic of publishing obvious fakes and false propaganda, easily recognised by journalists and often even by the public. Such outrageous fake stories often serve as smokescreens for more sophisticated and less obvious forms of influence.

Insight 8: *Do not give up too soon; victory or defeat begins in the mind.*

One of the more successful narratives Russia promotes is that Ukrainian society is deeply divided, between those on the front lines and those in the rear, those who left the country and those who stayed, Ukrainian speakers and Russian speakers, members of different churches.

Yet research conducted by the civic network Opora, the Kyiv School of Economics, and the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology paints a very different picture. It found that Ukrainian society is, in fact, quite consolidated. When evaluating fellow citizens "on the other side of the divide", Ukrainians did not report feelings of hostility, animosity, or social distance.[38]

However, many still believed that the country was deeply fractured along multiple lines. Ukrainians are not as divided as they think but the belief that they are makes the society more vulnerable to polarising narratives.

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[38] Opora. (2024). Is Cohesion between Different Groups of Ukrainians Decreasing? Key Study Findings. https://www.oporaua.org/en/viyna/is-cohesion-between-different-groups-of-ukrainians-decreasing-key-study-findings-25507

Over the past decades, Ukraine has faced unique challenges and found ways to resist an aggressive, authoritarian, and anti-democratic neighbour. These strategies may well be adapted by international organisations, government agencies, and civil society groups in other countries. The cases and know-how Ukraine has developed are open and available to the world, which is why it is critically important to support the platforms and networks that foster collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Slavic Brotherhood and the EU:
Stories from Serbia

Dalibor Bubnjević

Means of mass communication have existed for about 150 years. All this time, the mission of the media has not changed: providing the public with complete and accurate reports on public issues and mediating the expression of opinions. Today, the media is the driver of globalisation and often a determinant of the organisation of an individual's life. The degree of its development in any given country is determined by numerous factors: economic wealth, level of technological achievement, the size and distribution of the audience, the political system, and the cultural surroundings, among others. The media industry is similar to the function of research and development (R&D) in other industries: it requires technologically sophisticated equipment and skills; it is labour-intensive; and the marginal cost of acquiring a new customer is low, so the need for economies of scale develops.

Today, the media audience is more educated and more self-aware in its choice of content, and journalism retains its traditional roles in society[39], namely:

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[39] Milivojević, S. (2012). Uvod: novinarstvo za informaciono društvo. CM, 7 (24), 29-33.

1. Collecting, selecting and shaping news that is important for public debate (gatekeeping role)
2. Defining topics of public interest (agenda-setting role)
3. Protecting democracy (watchdog role)

Above all, journalism is searching for its new identity in the coordinate system formed by the logic of speed, ephemerality, competition and superficiality.

Printed media, because of the technology they apply, are in an unenviable position. Their readership is declining, especially among the younger population, due to lifestyle changes (for example, flexible working hours). Advertisers are increasingly choosing to advertise on the internet (especially in the field of real estate). The number of specialised sites that enable the presentation of content in a more attractive and cheaper way is increasing globally. Considering the facts, it is not surprising that some theorists predict an apocalyptic end to the printed media!

However, there are many advantages to print media[40]: 1) more thorough (interpretive) reporting on people and events, respecting all aspects; 2) readers gain better control over the elements of the news by opting for articles that are important to them or that keep their attention; 3) daily publication of important information for the life of the community, such as births, marriages, deaths, and promotional actions.

In the new millennium, there are fewer and fewer so-called general readers who are interested in a wide range of topics (from world news, to national news, to local news). "One thing is certain, and that is that the press in its new guise, i.e. the online

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[40] Bulatović, G. & Bulatović, Lj. (2009). Masovni mediji. Cekom.

edition, can integrate all traditional media, and therefore becomes a participant in the most significant competition in its centuries-long history"[41]. The above conclusion is a consequence of the cognition that the new media does not abolish the previous one but actually unifies its characteristics.

Under the influence of information and communication technologies, journalism is being transformed into a media business. It is a mature market where information is no longer viewed as goods, but as a service that has a time-limited value. We are trying to find the optimal business concept that will pay for it. Changes occur in[42]: 1) the method of content distribution; the chain of production is shortened thanks to social networks, 2) media content, anyone can create information ("social activism"), and 3) production. As a result of technical, economic, social, cultural and global convergence, a new communication paradigm is established. Modern technology does not impose a certain editorial policy, but, first, has a decisive influence on journalistic practice and the way the editorial office is organised.

The internet as a meta-medium has enabled a drastic increase in the number of participants in public dialogue (debate). Consequently, the media have lost their primacy in the public sphere and are no longer the only privileged producers of public information. The business model that underpins the industry they belong to is collapsing, and the profession is at a crossroads. "Numerous problems in traditional media, from political pressure and the increasingly intense influence of economic power centres to increasingly difficult working conditions and the financial

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[41] Ugrinić, A. (2012). Novinarstvo i medijska industrija u Srbiji: izazovi za profesiju u štampanim javnim glasilima. CM, 7 (24), 75-91.

[42] Stamenković, S. (2015). Novinarstvo i mediji budućnosti – kreiranje identiteta i stvarnosti. In MediaS Res. 4 (6), 838-858. https://hrcak.srce.hr/151789

situation in which journalists find themselves, force media professionals to search for new business models in order to survive in the media sphere"[43].

The survival of journalism at the threshold of the information society is based on the creation of a wide portfolio of media products and the multi-platform expertise of staff that should win over as many audiences as possible. New professions are emerging in the media sphere, such as content curation. Journalists and editors are no longer viewed in isolation from the media business. They are expected to think about advertisers. Requirements for achieving a positive financial result and the need for editorial freedom create a systemic conflict.

Narratives in Serbian Media

The number of media in Serbia is disproportionate to the size of the country. "There are 2,518 media - 1,024 websites, 827 printed publications, 313 radio and 219 television stations. IREX and Ipsos add that in 2020, only 1,141 were registered with the Agency for Business Registers"[44]. The mentioned market structure is an ideal ground for misuse in order to achieve political, economic and other interests. The manner in which news, reports, and other forms of journalistic expression are distributed helps researchers identify and interpret narratives.

[43] Stamenković, S. (2015). Novinarstvo i mediji budućnosti – kreiranje identiteta i stvarnosti. In MediaS Res. 4 (6), 838-858. https://hrcak.srce.hr/151789

[44] Živanović, S. (2023). Televizija i dalje najpopularniji mediji, konstantan rast publike na internetu, ali mediji od toga nemaju mnogo koristi. Cenzolovka. https://www.cenzolovka.rs/trziste/televizija-i-dalje-najpopularniji-medij-konstantan-rast-publike-na-internetu-ali-mediji-od-toga-nemaju-mnogo-koristi/

In the plethora of media, two narratives dominate, which are in agreement with the contradictory state policy:

1. European – the emphasis is on Serbia's future membership of the European Union, the visa-free travel regime, and numerous foreign investors who employ the local population, etc.
2. Russian – it is emphasised that this is a nation that is "fraternal" and has been close to Serbia for centuries. The paradoxical nature of this approach can be seen in the example of Ukraine. In the public space here, almost no journalist advocates a pro-Ukrainian position, although the mentioned people in the religious and historical context do not differ from Russians! For example, rarely will politicians mention that units of the Second and Third Ukrainian Fronts participated in the operations to liberate Belgrade in the Second World War (1944).

Articles in which Russia's actions in a neighbouring country are considered legal and legitimate dominate. Data on their losses or mistakes that result in civil victims are concealed. Numerous facts about Serbian-Ukrainian relations are ignored, among which are:

1. Kyiv did not recognise Kosovo. Some parliamentarians recently tried to change the official position of their country, but they did not succeed.
2. A few days after the start of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (27 March 1999), Belgrade was visited by the Ukrainian ministers of defence and foreign affairs.
3. Protests in support of former Yugoslavia were organised in numerous Ukrainian cities (Demostat, 2023).
4. During the NATO intervention, humanitarian aid was sent to the citizens of Serbia and Montenegro.

5. Serbia twice voted against United Nations resolutions related to the Crimean peninsula. This caused the disappointment of the official Kyiv.
6. The Russian recognition of the independence of Lugansk and Donetsk in February 2021 did not meet with the condemnation of Belgrade.

Someone made the enumerated "controversial issues" disappear from Serbian media. As a result of the above, citizens are reluctant to express gratitude and support their Slavic brothers. Timely and complete reporting on undisputed facts would make it impossible to manipulate public opinion. In order to realise the mentioned scenario, it is necessary to free journalists from political and economic restraints that undermine professional standards.

During the previous thousand days, which correspond with the Russian full-scale attack on Ukraine called by Putin a "special military operation", the intensification of pro-Russian and anti-Western/anti-Ukrainian propaganda is noticeable. This is confirmed by the results of a public opinion survey[45]. The following narratives stand out:

- Russian intervention was necessary and caused by the need to prevent genocide.
- In Ukraine, Nazism is on the rise thanks to the support of the officials.

The consistency in sending anti-Western messages in Serbia is incredible! The average viewer, listener, or reader might get the impression of an invisible force coordinating numerous activities in key national media. Often the same content is broadcast

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45 Demostat (2023). Da li nam je Ukrajina prijatelj? https://demostat.rs/sr/vesti/edukacija/da-li-nam-je-ukrajina-prijatelj/1715

simultaneously in different channels of information that officially have no mutual connection (neither proprietary nor editorial). Typically, articles or television/radio contributions are unsigned, that is, the author remains unknown.

The results of the research published in "Media narratives about the European Union"[46] speak vividly about the way of reporting. The content of the announcements is in agreement with the state of Serbian-European integration. In recent years, they have stagnated, although 17 years have passed since the beginning of joining. On the global diplomatic map, Serbia is in an undefined position. The state leaders show no intention of respecting Western (democratic) values. Also, they are unwilling to disclose aspirations towards the East. The absence of stronger support from the European Union is skilfully used by Russia and China; so Serbia is often the target of their so-called soft power. As a result of the above, public support for European integration is decreasing year by year.

In the local media, the need for Serbia to join the EU is being questioned increasingly often. This is contributed by actors who, in public appearances, unconvincingly assure citizens of the future of the state (Table 1). The paradoxical situation can be seen in that Russian opposition politicians talk more about European integration than Serbian opposition politicians.

From April to September 2022, the European Union was mentioned in Serbian newspapers 1182 times and only 70 times on television. At the same time, Serbia has the official status of a candidate for EU membership, and politicians are publicly advocating this process. Why is it that integrations do not attract

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46   Pavlica, D. & Perović, R. (2022). Medijski narativi o Evropskoj uniji. BIRODI.

the attention of the majority of editors and journalists working in the national media? In the analysed press in Serbia, "European stories" were on the front page in only a third of cases, while in Montenegro that percentage is higher (44.8%).

Who talks about the European Union in the media?			
In Serbia	**%**	**In Montenegro**	**%**
EU actors	47,8	EU actors	41,2
Serbian government	21,7	Montenegrin government	25,9
President of Serbia	18,0	Foreign politicians	24,8
Analysts/experts	17,8	Civil society	7,8
Foreign politicians	9,4	Analysts/experts	7,1
Civil society	5,1	US actors	3,9
US actors	5,0	Legislative power in Montenegro	3,9
Russia actors	4,9	Citizens	1,3
Opposition politicians in Serbia	3,1	Regional politicians	1,3

"Understandably, the narratives are framed by the related media-articulated thematic circles. A media announcement can also be multi-topic..."[47].

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[47] Pavlica, D. & Perović, R. (2022). Medijski narativi o Evropskoj uniji. BIRODI.

The European Union is most often mentioned in the Serbian media in the following contexts:[48]

1. Mediator in the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština (34.1%)
2. War in Ukraine (29.4%)
3. The situation regarding European integration from the perspective of Serbia (28.3%)
4. The situation regarding the European integration of Serbia from the point of view of EU actors (17.0%)
5. State of the EU as an entity (11.0%).

Neutral reports prevail (52%). The number of strictly positive (16.8%) and negative posts (15.5%) is almost equal. The situation in Montenegro (which has the same status in negotiations as Serbia) is far more favourable. Positive articles about Europe dominate (as much as 61.2%), while 21.9% are neutral, and only 3% are negative.

The most common negative narratives about the EU in the Serbian media:

1. Bias in relation to the Kosovo issue; non-compliance with the agreement by the Albanians, and slow negotiation process, etc, are not condemned.
2. Serbia is requested to break friendships with Russia and China.
3. Insisting on the introduction of sanctions against Russia.
4. Applying blackmail, conditionality, and pressure policy.
5. Absence of partnership.

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48   In Montenegro, 2/3 of publications are dominated by stories about the state of European integration from the point of view of the EU and from the point of view of Montenegro.

The most common positive narratives about the EU are:

1. Serbia's strategic commitment to European integration, because it has a geographical, cultural and economic place in Europe.
2. Support of actors from the EU to the European integration process.
3. Financial aid provided by the EU to Serbia.
4. European values – peace, solidarity, freedom.
5. Open Balkans.

Local Media as an Antidote to Propaganda

The well-known slogan "life is global, living is local" illustrates the reason for the survival of local media. The Future Foundation concluded that the daily activities of individuals take place (on average) at a distance of 22.54 kilometres: distance from work, 13.04 km; distance to the store, 6.11 km. The radius of movement of older people, women and men with lower incomes is smaller than the stated average! The connection with the place of residence is based on the comfort (convenience) of life and feelings (sentiment). Consequently, the need for local news is developing. It especially comes to the fore during the ageing process of an individual.

Commercial local media are an important factor in informing the community. Many consider them guardians of indigenous identity! Therefore, it is not surprising that the audience pays a great deal of attention to them. In the new millennium, they face the emergence of web journalism, the development of digital platforms and multimedia services, and the unwillingness of advertisers to pay for advertising through the global network. Due to financial difficulties, they are often unable to transform

themselves and advance technologically. "The situation is such that they try to deal with unfair competition and survive on the market with different strategies: some of them see their way out of an unfavourable economic position in the help of the state, and others in the development of advertising via the internet and electronic business"[49]. Regardless of the approach they choose, media managers are aware that, if they do not adapt to the changes in the environment, there is little chance of survival between the goals and objectives of the media market of the new millennium.

The advantages of local media are:

1. They are part of the community. They are formed as a training ground for providing answers to questions that are important for the everyday life of the average resident (local exclusivity and in-depth research into the background of the news). "The main reason for the continued popularity of local media is their ability to record and celebrate community life"[50].
2. They make direct contact with readers. Journalists "live with them".
3. The audience is defined at the level of locality. Advertisers are aware of this fact and that is why they publish job vacancies, advertisements for local products or services, etc.
4. The level of freedom (morality) is higher.
5. The possibility of diversifying content. The editorial team is faced with a complex challenge, because it has to adapt the content to different demographic groups.

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[49] Krstić, A. (2012). Novinarstvo i medijska industrija u Srbiji: profesionalni dobitak, ekonomski gubitak. CM, 7 (24).

[50] Aldridge, M. (2007). Understanding the Local Media. Open University Press

They are considered a necessity of a democratic society because the local area is the place where democracy takes place. Despite being at the centre of the culture of professional journalism, they are often neglected by the public and the academic community.

The digitisation process provides a technical basis for further localisation of news and at the same time intensifies the competition in the battle for audience favour. In recent years, in the most developed countries, there has been a consolidation of the local media market, which is characterised by the absence of new actors, the absence of disinvestment, and the realisation of profits. In the European Union, regional and local newspapers are increasingly dominant compared to national ones (they have a different concept, greater freedom in choosing topics, proximity to readers, fewer barriers, and other advantages).

The future of local media will largely be determined by the attitude that the public will form towards mass communication. Citizen journalism is gaining importance thanks to the possibilities provided by the internet. However, some theoreticians predict the survival of professional journalism at the local level because new media technologies are not acceptable to all strata. Certain social groups question the quality and reliability of information posted by amateurs on the global network, since they do not possess the necessary knowledge and skills to perform a responsible job. The stated target group pays attention to reporting on topics in an analytical and in-depth manner.

Overcoming Trauma:
South Africa and Rwanda

Tali Nates

Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor and writer, cautioned us, saying: "It happened therefore it can happen again. This is the core of what we have to say. It can happen and it can happen anywhere."[51] His words of warning are a critical calling to deeply reflect and learn from the past. The words *never again* that Levi alludes to also suggest, I argue, that the historical narrative of a traumatic past can allow us to learn lessons from this history, individually and as a society.

The words *never again* are used often, usually associated with reflections on the Holocaust. However, the words are stated again and again by politicians, civil-society activists and others in commemoration speeches and events marking genocides and mass atrocities. South Africa's first democratically elected President, Nelson Mandela, used these words in his inauguration speech: "Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world".[52]

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[51] Levi, P. (1995). The Reawakening. New York: Touchstone. Simon & Schuster. 215

[52] Nelson Mandela inaugural address as President of South Africa, 10 May 1994. Quoted in the Guardian article, modified on 11 February 2001, https://www. theguardian.com/world/2001/feb/11/nelsonmandela.southafrica

The Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC)[53] displays Levi's words prominently in its entrance. It is one of the centre's core philosophies, exploring the connections between histories, human behaviour and choices, and how societies can overcome their historical trauma through these lessons. The centre explores the history of genocides in the 20th century with a focus on the case studies of the Holocaust and the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. It looks at the connections between genocide and South Africa's past, including colonialism and apartheid, as well as its contemporary human-rights violations, such as racism and xenophobia.

Looking at historical narratives of two countries side by side can assist us to make connections, to see parallels and differences and to encourage us to learn from each other's histories. South Africa and Rwanda are such a case. On 27 April 1994, while millions of South Africans celebrated the country's first democratic elections and the end of apartheid, only 3600 km away from Johannesburg, in Rwanda, hundreds of thousands of Tutsi and Hutu who opposed the genocidal regime had been murdered in a genocide that began on 7 April that same year. The history of atrocities and genocide in South Africa and Rwanda can teach us about the range of human behaviour and about the choices of individuals and governments and their consequences. One can learn about these countries' historical narratives and how they influence their collective identities, the trauma inflicted over the years and the attempt to heal it through acknowledgement and recognition of these histories.

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[53] The JHGC officially opened in March 2019, as a public-private partnership with the City of Johannesburg. Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (2025, 10 February). https://www.jhbholocaust.co.za

Thirty years after the end of apartheid and the transition to democracy in South Africa, the past still deeply influences the country's present and future. Racism, economic disparity, hate of the 'other', violence, prejudice, corruption and abuse of power still affect the South African society today. After decades of conflict and injustice, there is no formula for rebuilding, healing and transforming society. It takes decades. In Rwanda, 30 years after the end of the genocide, the country is also in the process of healing and rebuilding itself. After massive destruction of infrastructure, the education system, the justice system, and every aspect of life, reconstruction takes time. The past in both countries is part of the present and future.

After the transition from apartheid and from genocide, in both countries, societies must live side by side; perpetrators live next to victims. This is extremely challenging, especially with the trauma of the past. In an interview in 2004, the Executive Secretary of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (2002 - 2009) in Rwanda, Fatuma Ndangiza, shared her thoughts about living together after the genocide: "Our policy is Unity and Reconciliation … accommodating everybody, including the perpetrators … Killers have to live side-by-side with victims after the 1994 genocide. We cannot have a land of victims and a land of perpetrators. Despite whatever happened, they have to live side-by-side."[54]

According to Ndangiza, in both societies, people must live together, however, living together after genocide and mass atrocities is challenging. In contrast, in Germany after the Second World War, most Jewish survivors of the Holocaust left the country. Only a few thousand remained for the next 50 years, until

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[54] Interview conducted by Tali Nates with Fatuma Ndangiza for a documentary film, SABC, July 2004.

the 1990s[55]. Only after the 1990s, with the reunification of the country, memorials of the Holocaust began to be established in a meaningful way, and teaching about the topic through listening to testimonies of survivors or focusing on the victims developed. In both South Africa and Rwanda, after years of violence and the destruction of trust, both societies are grappling with the question of how to rebuild trust and peaceful coexistence. It is important and interesting to observe that, despite the challenges stated above, both societies function relatively peacefully despite the tensions.

To understand the past and how it determined the present, I will describe Rwanda's and South Africa's confrontation with their past of genocide and apartheid.

Rwanda – Aftermath of Genocide

In Rwanda, after the genocide ended in July 1994, the country was devastated. All basic infrastructure was destroyed, millions of people were displaced, and most survivors had lost their entire families. Many women suffered the consequences of rape and sexual violence, and orphaned children had to fend for themselves, as all social services ceased to exist. The immense trauma post-genocide led to long-term psychological issues, but many survivors showed resilience, rebuilding their lives and forming support groups, as well as creating and preserving memorial sites.

One major challenge was bringing perpetrators to justice. At the end of 1994, the United Nations established the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), seated in Arusha, Tanzania,

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55   DW. (2021). How German Jews rebuilt after the Holocaust? https://www.dw.com/en/how-jewish-life-developed-in-germany-after-the-holocaust/a-56604526

that tried the high-level organisers of the genocide. The ICTR exercised jurisdiction alongside Rwandan national criminal courts, and later also traditional, community-based Gacaca courts, where survivors could face the accused and testify. The Rwandan National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide (CNLG) reported that nearly 2 million people were tried by the Gacaca courts, resulting in sentences ranging from imprisonment to community reintegration.

More than ten years after the genocide, survivors began sharing their testimonies in a meaningful way. The opening of the Kigali Genocide Memorial in April 2004 allowed many survivors to find a place for mourning and sharing testimonies and where their loss and pain could be heard, acknowledged and recognised.

At the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, Rwandan genocide survivors meet regularly and volunteer to share their testimonies at schools and with other groups. Their testimonies were documented 20 years after the genocide and photographs, documents and artefacts are being preserved in the centre's archive. Their testimonies were captured in films and books.[56]

At times, the sharing of those testimonies and narratives led to surprising results. In 2010, Rwandan survivor, Xavier Ngabo, shared his testimony with students from St. Stithians High School in Johannesburg. After hearing his story and his need to find out what happened to his family in the genocide, students sponsored his return to Rwanda to attend the Gacaca court and find the remains of his parents and bury them. During this emotional trip, he uncovered artefacts, a key to his parents' house and a rosary

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[56] Portraits of Survival Volume 2 (2022). Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre publication. https://indd.adobe.com/view/e4d8660a-e098-4a6f-9fb5-710e4fa6f273

belonging to his murdered mother, Beatrice, and donated them to the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre in order to bear witness to his story for generations to come. Sharing his testimony was an important process for him in facing his trauma. In this case, his personal narrative, together with the country's process of seeking justice through the Gacaca courts, allowed him to bury his parents, tell his story and have it captured at a museum site, teaching thousands more visitors annually.

South Africa - Attempts to Heal a Nation

The 1990s were pivotal years for South Africa, beginning with the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP), and other organisations. This was followed by Nelson Mandela's release from prison, marking a significant step towards democracy. From 1991, multi-party talks began, and apartheid laws were repealed. The apartheid regime, which began in 1948, was starting to end.

The end of 1991 saw the first Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA), when 92 organisations gathered to discuss the mechanisms and technicalities of the transition process. Parties agreed on a nonpartisan interim government to manage the transition. Despite these advances, there was a referendum in 1992, by which white voters were asked if they would endorse the 'reform process'. Only 69% voted in favour of it.

In the same year, CODESA II resulted in a deadlock. Despite consensus for an interim government, the delegates could not agree on the form it would take. Talks resumed months later with the multi-party negotiation process, which tried to resolve many of these issues. Negotiations continued into 1993, paving the way for the first democratic elections.

While South Africa's transition mechanisms were being developed, the country faced significant instability. In Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal) and parts of the Transvaal (now Gauteng) violence escalated from already high levels, and human-rights violations occurred. The violence was primarily between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Goldstone reports, the IFP was armed and supported by elements within the South African Police and KwaZulu Police.

Direct police violence was also prevalent during this period, with the use of lethal force being commonplace. The levels of excessive force used during demonstrations did not change from the 1980s, resulting in large numbers of deaths.

The white right wing also violently opposed the transition, carrying out attacks, killings, and bombings. On 10 April 1993, Chris Hani, the leader of the South African Communist Party, was assassinated by an extremist, almost derailing peace talks. Shortly after, in June, the Afrikaner Resistance Movement (AWB) crashed into the arena where negotiations for the transition to democracy were being held.

This violence made already difficult negotiations more unstable. However, this resistance failed to thwart South Africa's first democratic elections. Despite numerous challenges, on 27 April 1994, South Africa held its first democratic election. The ANC's Nelson Mandela was elected as President, forming the first Government of National Unity.

While South African society was still coming to terms with apartheid, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in 1995. Chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, it was tasked with uncovering truths about apartheid crimes committed

between 1960 and 1994. Its aim was to achieve reconciliation between South Africans and start the reconstruction of society. Victims shared their stories, and it was decided that perpetrators would not be held criminally or civilly liable but granted amnesty if fully confessing their crimes. The country's choice was to focus on forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation, rather than retribution and punishment. Initially set to run until 1998, the TRC was extended to 2002. Its effectiveness has been questioned, with the chasm between hearing the truth and achieving reconciliation being set out as a failure by many. Thirty years on, many still feel that justice has not been fully realised, with restitution and reparation for the crimes of the past not having been achieved in any significant way.

In 1996, the first official Constitution of South Africa was adopted, marking the advent of a democratic state founded on the principles of human dignity, equality, and freedom.

Many museums were created around the country to share South Africa's turbulent history. Museums, exhibitions and memorials are important tools that should follow atrocities. In South Africa, numerous museums invite audiences to learn about the country's past.[57] The curriculum of the country was also changed to include this history as an important recognition of the past, as will be described later in this article.

The latest 2021 survey on sources of trust in information we receive shows that museums are a highly trusted source of information. Trust in history museums is at over 78%,[58] much higher than news reporting, for example. In a time when there

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[57] Those are museums such as the Apartheid Museum, Constitution Hill, Liliesleaf, Freedom Park and Robben Island, to name a few.

[58] American Association for State and Local History. (2025). https://aaslh.org/most-trust-museums/

is an assault on truth and history, with growing instances of fake news and disinformation, and with the use of social media to spread hate and division, the role of museums and memorials is becoming more important as trusted spaces of memory, education, healing and recognition of the past.

As South Africa is facing its past and rebuilding its presence, as the founder and director of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC), I would like now to share some of the roles that the organisation plays in that process. History and lessons of genocides from around the world are used as an 'entry point' to reflect on South Africa's painful history of colonialism, apartheid, racism and 'othering', especially as, for many, it is still too painful and traumatic to speak about the country's history.

History can be an excellent 'entry point' to speak about one's own society. In South Africa, the education curriculum, for example, looks at the history of the Holocaust before moving to the study of apartheid. In 2007, the study of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust became a compulsory topic in the national social sciences and history curriculum for Grade 9 (13–14 years old) and 11 (16–17 years old).[59] The curriculum emphasises human rights and aims to assist learners in understanding that, during the 1930s and early 1940s, human rights, racism, and discrimination were not given much political or legal attention. Only after the Second World War and the Holocaust, and the establishment of the United Nations, was there an acknowledgement of the importance of human rights. In December 1948, the United Nations passed both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Convention on

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59 South Africa History Online. (2025). https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/archive-files/caps_gr_7-9.pdf and also https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/archive-files/caps_fet_history_gr_10-12_web_1.pdf

the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. However, in 1948, apartheid was legalised in South Africa, and it would take another fifty years for the country to sign the UDHR (Universal Declaration of Human Rights) on 10 December 1998. Connecting the histories can assist in the process of facing the trauma of the past.

In Rwanda, the history of the genocide was not taught or spoken about for ten years after its end. The struggle was on how to teach about it in a country that was still recovering from the devastation. When the topic was introduced, it was done through the study of peace and values education and included testimonies and stories that encouraged healing[60]. In both the official country's curriculum and in extracurricular activities, such as visiting the Kigali Genocide Memorial and other museums and memorials, students and other audiences are encouraged to learn from the country's traumatic past.[61]

In 2004, ten years after the genocide, the Kigali Genocide Memorial (KGM) was opened. The KGM is also the final resting place for more than 250 000 victims of the 1994 Genocide. The top floor of the memorial includes exhibitions about genocides in the 20th century, including the Holocaust, which helps to make connections between different genocides and the one the country went through in 1994. In an especially moving space dedicated to children who were killed, individuals are remembered, not only as statistics of genocide but as individuals who had a life that was taken from them not because of anything they did but because of who they were.

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[60] Aegis Trust, Building Resilience to Genocide through Peace Education. (2017). https://www.aegistrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Colloquium-Report-2017-Final-Low-Res.pdf

[61] Kigali Genocide Memorial. (2025). https://kgm.rw

Narrative through Exhibitions and Education

Historical narratives influence the way a country sees itself in the present. Working in the field of education and memory allows museums and civil-society organisations, such as the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre and the Aegis Trust (Aegis works to prevent genocide and mass atrocities worldwide), to create spaces for dialogue where critical thinking and questioning are encouraged.

One of the most thought-provoking training programmes is the Change Makers' Programme (CMP). The CMP was envisioned by the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre and the Aegis Trust Rwanda at the Salzburg Global Seminar at their Learning from the Past – Sharing Experiences across Borders to Combat Extremism programme in December 2016.[62] The session aimed to encourage collaborative work and the elaboration of cross-regional strategies to empower institutions and individuals. The CMP was piloted in South Africa and Rwanda in 2017 and then a "train the trainer" model was implemented in Nigeria and Mozambique in 2018, after an extensive process of evaluations. This leadership programme for students, teachers and thought leaders strives to build resilience and resistance to violence, to help develop the skills to challenge the idea of hate speech and extremism and to encourage participants to become upstanders and change-makers in their society.

The CMP utilises the histories of the Holocaust (a case study of a global history), the 1994 genocide in Rwanda or the genocide in Cambodia (a case study of a continental history) and apartheid

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[62] Salzburg Global. (2025). https://www.salzburgglobal.org/media-center/salzburg-global-seminar/stories/story/learning-from-the-past-sharing-experiences-across-borders-to-combat-extremism

in South Africa (a case study of a country-based history) as primary case studies, examining choices of leaders and the different actors in these mass atrocities and genocides. The CMP has a strong leadership skills development component that utilises the arts, such as drama, writing, photovoice[63], sound and storytelling. These methodologies are all utilised in this interactive programme. When implementing the programme in different African and Asian countries beyond South Africa and Rwanda, the country-based case study used in the programme is exchanged with a local case study, developed by the participants and based on the model of the other three case studies developed before, according to the needs of the host country.

In 2018, an evaluation of the pilot programme was completed by the University of Pretoria, which completed another evaluation in February 2019 of the "train the trainer" programme. The evaluation process was supported by the University of Leeds. All the participants said the programme should be scaled up because: "it changes the way people think and see things".[64]

The CMP workshop is accompanied by a travelling exhibition about the Holocaust and genocide in the 20th century, apartheid, and genocide in Rwanda, which is now permanently based in South Africa, Mozambique, Nigeria, the Gambia, Rwanda, Zambia and the Philippines. So far, the CMP has been launched in 14 countries in Africa and Asia.

Other considerations are contemplated for other education programmes and exhibitions at the Johannesburg Holocaust &

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[63] Photovoice is a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique.

[64] Changing the Story, University of Leeds. (2025). https://www.changingthestory. leeds.ac.uk/the-changemakers-south-africa/

Genocide Centre. For example, a curatorial decision was made that women's voices are to be included and are prominent throughout the exhibition and education programmes, not only as victims and survivors but also as resistors and rescuers, and even as perpetrators and bystanders. Testimonies about rape and gender-based violence, for example, are included in the permanent exhibition both in the Holocaust (a topic not discussed until 15 years ago or so, as it was considered taboo) and the Rwandan sections.

One reason for that inclusion is to offer an invitation for visitors to connect history and the tremendous challenges of gender-based violence that South Africa is facing. According to the South African Police Services's statistics on sexual and gender-based violence, which are always under-reported, for every one rape reported, between 10 to 20 are not. Statistically, South Africa can be compared to states that are in armed conflicts. Making connections between historical case studies and the current situation empowers critical thinking and action.

At the Kigali Genocide Memorial (KGM) in Rwanda, women's voices are also at the centre of its exhibitions and education programmes, sharing testimonies and lessons for the future. One of these voices is of a survivor, Antoinette, who reflected on why survivors should share their story: "I need to find the strength to tell my story. If I don't, it is like denying the genocide. If I, the only survivor of my family, die without telling my history, it will die with me. The name of our family will disappear forever. I want my child to learn about our history. I don't want it to be hidden".[65]

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[65] Voices of Rwanda. (2014). https://voicesofrwanda.org/

Listening to testimonies and documenting them is important for the victim's feeling of being heard and of recognition of their pain and trauma. Using these testimonies to educate about apartheid and genocide allows for opportunities to include themes such as identity formation, the concept of 'us' and 'them', and the range of human behaviour and human rights, and it encourages memory to transform to actions.

The racist system in South Africa and genocidal system in Rwanda separated people and there is never a quick fix that can resolve the pain of the past. It requires ongoing work from all parts of society to heal after such an enormous catastrophe. In this article, I tried to touch on some of the many components one should seek to achieve. Those include mechanisms of justice, the creation of memorials and museums, implementing curricula and extracurricular programmes that acknowledge the past, and importantly, recognition of this history and acknowledgement of the pain and trauma individuals went through.

We should pay attention and listen to the stories and warnings of the victims, survivors and witnesses of mass atrocities and genocide. In the words of Holocaust survivor, writer and Nobel Prize Laureate Elie Wiesel, "When you listen to a witness, you become a witness."[66] Only then, through listening to the narratives of the painful pasts, the trauma and pain can begin healing.

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[66] Taken from Elie Wiesel's speech during the March of the Living in Auschwitz-Birkenau, April 1990.

Fake Tales:
Monumental Propaganda in Bulgaria

Evelina Kelbecheva

The study of collective historical memory[67] is a pivotal instrument for understanding the present configuration of a society. The construction of a memory – or its loss to oblivion – of places, events, and protagonists of history (called realms or topoi of history) indicates the social tendencies, both as sources of society's self-confidence and as of the deficiency of this self-confidence. The "choice of its own history" could reveal not only underlying social attitudes but also demonstrate important political and socio-psychological trends.

The attitude of post-communist societies towards their recent communist past is among the most powerful criteria for assessment of the level of self-reflection, maturity and democratisation of these societies. Bulgaria is a peculiar case in this respect, since the communist purges in Bulgaria have been the most severe in Eastern Europe since World War II. Thus, the study of inheriting, preserving and contesting materialised forms

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[67] I am using here the term "memory" only for convenience, since the discussion about its inadequacy is a subject of another study. Instead of "historical memory", I would rather use "constructed public knowledge". For me the "memory" is a personal cognitive and emotional process, rather than a collectively designed consensus. In addition to this consideration, the study presented here has shown clearly that the indication of the local *topoi* of memory was a result of both direct, practical experience, and of state education and propaganda.

of the communist legacy – as well as the creation of new ones – is of particular interest.

The case studies I present here are based on the most notorious monuments created during the Stalinist period (between 1944 and 1956) in the capital city of Sofia and in Plovdiv (the second largest city in Bulgaria), the monuments belonging to the second phase of the communist regime in Bulgaria, a period that could be characterised as Socialist Nationalism (1975–1989). The last part of the study is based upon post-communist monuments in Bulgaria.

The most notorious, significant, influential and still untouched *lieux de memoire* (realms of memory) – to quote Pierre Nora's term – in Bulgaria were created during the first Stalinist period of the communist regime. They still dominate the major Bulgarian cities. To compare communist and post-communist realms of memory in Bulgaria, one should take account of the several founding principles in communist ideology: mutilation of the past and abuse of history, and the socio-aesthetic dimensions of totalitarian art.

The foundation of totalitarian communist practice is the complete control of history and a variety of techniques for manipulating the past.[68] In the late 1920s, history departments of Russian universities closed down, and in high schools teachers gave lessons in the new discipline of "Social Studies", which replaced History. "We must write history from the point of view of the Party", said Stalin in 1931, and in 1936 Stalin, Zhdanov and Kirov gave instructions on how history should be taught in the USSR. The technology of ideologies makes history a legitimacy factor. Hitler also believed one learns history not to discover what

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[68] Simonov, K. (1990). Glazami heloveka moevogo pokolenija. (Though the Eyes of a Man from my Generation). Moscow: Isskustvo. 165-166.

happened in the past, but to acquire certain behaviours necessary for the struggle for the survival of one's people.[69]

In Bulgaria, the first Communist-dominated government in 1944 began a wholesale "Tribunal against the Historians" in which the most prominent professors and scholars were discarded physically, socially and intellectually from their profession in order to clear space for rewriting communist history.[70] The construction of the new historical "memory" of the nation uses the means of total propaganda, educational programmes, bogus obligatory commemorative "ritualism", and visual and literary realms of memory. An idiosyncratic type of social engineering aims at disconnecting the natural historical and cultural memory of the Bulgarian nation and at imposing on it the artificial models of Soviet ideology. The government creates the myth of the "antifascist struggle", the Red Army "Liberator", and the new heroes building socialism. Cities, mountains, streets and institutions are being renamed. The name of Stalin adorns the biggest Bulgarian seaport and the highest peak on the Balkan Peninsula. National history is practically obliterated as a "bourgeois anachronism".

The Falsifications

Bulgaria used to be Germany's ally between 1941 and 1944, but maintained peace and active diplomatic relations with the USSR, and never sent a soldier to the Eastern front. The USSR declared war on Bulgaria on 5 September 1944 and the Red Army occupied the country, without resistance. Before this, Bulgaria's last democratic

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[69]   Geller, M. and Neckrich, A. (1994). Utopiata na vlast (The Utopia in Power). Sofia:LIK.

[70]   Moutafchieva, V. (1992). Sadat nad istorizite (The Tribunal Over the Historians). Sofia : Bulgarian Academy of Sciences Publishing Press Marin Drinov. 8-12.

government, formed on 2 September 1944, had declared war on Germany, had already expelled or disarmed what was left of German troops on Bulgarian territory, had released all political prisoners, and was already engaged in armistice negotiations with Great Britain and the USA.

Still today there are 185 monuments of the Red Army all around the country, claimed by the Soviet and nowadays Russian officials as *Soldiers monuments*. The fierce debate about the meaning and the fate of the monuments started, through their inclusion in current political struggles, and constant pressure from the Russian Embassy (arrogant in tone).

Long and heated debates and both serious and ridiculous projects were launched for the prefiguration or the demolition of these monuments. They became the centre of various rituals: laying flowers and wreaths on the Day of the Victory (9 May); honourable guards of pioneers; concerts of Soviet songs; a series of rallies and speeches in front of the monument during the celebration of national holidays. They were not communist-era only rituals, since they continue today. Recently, 9 May, the Day of the Victory in the USSR and Russia today, is celebrated with a ceremony in memory of the "Immortal Regiment", a movement to remember the victims of WW II in Russia. The limited group of veterans and Soviet sympathisers are decorated with the so-called St. George ribbon. Politicians from the Bulgarian Socialist Party and some far-left and pro-Russian political parties, like Ataka and Vazrazhdane, participate in rituals around the monument on these occasions.

Immediately after the fall of communism in 1989, an abundance of spontaneous graffiti appeared, repainting the bodies and faces of the figures from the sides of the monument. The reaction was instant and drastic. Communist and Russophile

organisations organised the cleaning of the monument. Furthermore, the Sofia Municipality put the monument under 24-hour video surveillance.

For the last 35 years, the Monument of the Red Army Liberator in Sofia (MOCHA)[71] has been a major catalyst for the strong opposition of young people not only against the distortion of history but also against current political events. The three monumental figures on top of the monument disappeared recently, "removed for restoration"; however, the faces and the bodies of Soviet soldiers were the subject of artistic interventions by street artists. On several occasions, some were arrested. In 2010, the citizen Group for the Deconstruction of the Monument was created.

During the last 15 years, MOCHA was repeatedly transformed with unambiguous political messages. Among the most innovative and prominent are:

June 2011—"In Pace with the Time" (the figures on the pedestal were transformed to look like Superman, Batman, and Santa Claus). T-shirts with the graffiti immediately became popular.

17 August 2012—In support of Pussy Riot, the Russian punk group, whose two members were arrested in Moscow.

3 February 2013—In memory of the victims of communism, in which three faces of the figures of the pedestal were painted in the colours of the Bulgarian flag.

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[71] MOCHA is a term used by the opponents to the Russian falsification with the "soldiers' monument" and stands for *Monument of the Occupying Red Army*, which in Russian means *urine*.

21 August 2013—One figure was coloured pink and underneath there was the sign "Bulgaria Apologises" written in Bulgarian and Czech, to show solidarity with the people of the Czech Republic and Slovakia for the Bulgarian participation in the Warsaw Pact invasion of their country in 1968.

February 2014—One of the figures was painted in the colours of the Ukrainian flag and was written "Glory to Ukraine" and "KAPUTIN".

2014—Several more times the monument was painted with the slogan "Hands down from Crimea!"

7 September 2014—Arrest of a group of street artists for putting the sign "Occupiers" on the monument.

2017—The members of the Group for the Deconstruction of the Monument asked the Minister of Justice in Bulgaria to legitimise the laying of flowers at the monument in the name of the her ministry.

26 March 2020—Request from 12 members of the Sofia City Council from the Democratic Bulgaria party to implement the decision for the removal of the monument from 1993, since it is not a "non-removable monument of unique cultural value", according to a decision by the Ministry of Culture of 2012; nor is it a "soldier monument", according to a decision by the Ministry of Defence from 2015.

They insisted that MOCHA is not protected as a "soldier monument", nor by article 14 of the Treaty for Friendship and Cooperation between the Russian Federation and Bulgaria signed in 1992.

29 September 2021—Martin Zaimov, a banker and political activist, was arrested while trying to cover with paint the inscription on the monument.

25 February 2022—One day after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Mayor of the Sofia Sredetz district, Traycho Traykov, restarted the procedure for removing the monument. Only a group of the Bulgarian Socialist Party at the Sofia City Council voted against the initiative.

The Russian Embassy in Sofia constantly intervenes against these artistic and political activists' actions and calls them "vandalism". The embassy insists that the city authority takes measures against the "sacrilege of the war monuments", which MOCHA is not.

July 2017—Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, in front of Bulgarian authorities, protested against the "vandalism" of the monument.

9 May 2022—A clash between citizen groups occurred in front of the monument of the Soviet army. The Russian Ambassador in Bulgaria Mitrofanova was present there. She gave a speech saying that, in Bulgaria, the places of the victims and the perpetrators are interchanged.

This monument becomes (in the very sense of the word) a *heterotopous place*, according to the theory of Michel Foucault. It is today a real tribune to express political statements, especially against Russian aggression in Crimea and Ukraine.

Is Graffiti Vandalism?

"Political categories are themselves dynamic, taking on different meanings and functions as they are embraced and deployed. Old forms and symbols are being redefined as they are mobilised for new objectives in a new political context."[72] The same turned out to be true for the realms of memory in Bulgaria. The released social energy after the collapse of communism found its most widespread manifestation in mass meetings, processions, night vigils, carnivals, and concerts that took place all over the country. An original artistic group was formed in Plovdiv, consisting of young avant-garde sculptors and artists. They organised several extremely popular exhibitions and happenings, focused on the radical disfiguration of communist symbols and signs. Its name was Rub (Edge). Irony and sarcasm, combined with outstanding artistic creativity, brought this group international recognition.[73]

Another powerful way to express negative reactions to communism was the graffiti boom. It is not by chance that graffiti was mostly seen in the two sacred spots for communism in the capital city, the MOCHA and the Mausoleum. The best graffiti comprises political slogans, denouncing the Communist Party and its leaders, ridiculing and caricaturing famous political figures (including newly elected democratic leaders), drawing parallels between fascism and communism, condemnation of the crimes of the former regime, and calls for new elections. Those graffiti did not only cause the appearance of even more graffiti, but provoked

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[72] Creed, J. (1999). "Deconstructing Socialism in Bulgaria". Uncertain Transition. Ed. Michael Buraway and Katerine Verdery. Lanham : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 225.

[73] Information courtesy of the members of the group "Rub": Dimitar Kelbechev, Koljo Karamfilov, Roumen Jekov, Monica Romanska and the critic Dimitar Grozdanov.

dialogue and contradictions. The walls of these two notable memorials in Sofia became a peculiar place for an intensive discussion between the supporters of the former Communist Party and those of the new Democratic Union. They also carried messages with more universal meanings; for example, on the back of the Soviet Army monument there was graffiti saying, "I don't want to be a soldier."[74]

In the analysis of public opinion, done on the basis of various surveys, it turns out that, even though 24% of people do not pay attention to graffiti, 81% do not approve of it. They think that it is done by "ill-educated, sectarian, vengeful, neo-Nazi, vagabond young people". The accusations voiced range from encroachment on national dignity, destruction of national pride, and disregard for our own historical past and go as far as calling graffiti blasphemy, vandalism, triteness, loathsome, obscene, vulgar, democracy-gone-wrong, a lack of culture, and hideous. The positive opinions of graffiti, a significantly smaller percentage, define it as rebellion, denial, social release and disregard for the symbols of social realism. The people painting graffiti are seen as jokers, jolly, free people, without insecurities, people who act on their emotions, rather than thinking things through, ardent followers of some political party, and even zealots. Ultimately, graffiti stands for an uneducated, obscene, vandalised form of protest.[75]

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[74] Mihailova, K. (1993). "Photorazkaz za novoto litse na mavzoleja" (Photostory for the Face of the Mausoleum). Bulgarski Folklore19.4. 104-110.; Elchinova, M. and Raicheva, V. (1991). "Grafichnite textove ot studentskata opupazionna stachka I grada na istinata (The Graphic Texts from the Students' Strike and the Town of Truth). Bulgarski Folklore, 22-41.; Kraev, G. (1990). Mitologiata gradskata folklor na praznichnost ili kam mitologiiata na dnechnoto (For the Mythology of the City Folkloric Festivity or for the Mythology of the Present-day). Bulgarski Folklore, 33-41.

[75] Ibidem. 105.

It is exactly the opposite: graffiti is the result of the outburst of energy, creativity and irony that have been suppressed for a long time. It was this protest that spontaneously and irreversibly turned some of the most powerful symbols of communism into a new creative space, where the resolve of the anonymous but active citizen was clearly seen. In this way, graffiti stultified communist realms of memory and it destroyed their inviolability, gave life to dead fictional ideological symbols, and thus became the first attempt at the deconstruction of these realms.

The Monument of the Red Army Soldier by the name of Aliosha in Plovdiv had been also a subject of various debates and proposals: starting with avant-garde packing in the style of Christo, the Bulgarian born ecological artist of world fame; covering the stone statue with gigantic metal mirrors, tearing down only the Kalashnikov and renaming the monument Aljocha Karamazov, after Dostoevsky's literary character)[76].

All debates were over when the Russian ambassador in Bulgaria, Anatoly Sharapov, threatened Bulgarian authorities that any action taken against the monuments of the Soviet Army in Bulgarian would be taken as a violation of military graveyards, which have long been revered under international law.[77] However, the case is completely different. Not a single Red Army soldier has fallen for the 'liberation' of Bulgaria from the 'fascists', since the Bulgarian government led by Konstantin Muraviev decided not to resist the Soviet occupation. Not even mentioning the fact that

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[76]   Information about the debates at the Municipality of Plovdiv courtesy Albena Hranova.

[77]   It is a fact that the memorial of the Soviet Army is still standing untouched in the centre of Vienna. But it was part of a special clause in the peace treaty between Austria and the USSR signed in 1949. The Red Army fought long and bloody battles on Austrian territory and therefore this monument is rightly considered a soldiers' memorial.

at this time there were no longer German troops in Bulgaria and there was no resistance from the side of any Bulgarian garrison when the Red Army marched into the country. Therefore, the argument for the sanctity of the monuments of the Soviet Army and its soldiers in Bulgaria is just another falsification. Based on this falsification, the Bulgarian landscape and cultural memory is still an object of a powerful irradiation from gigantic Soviet Army monuments.

The destruction of "historical time" (after the phrasing of M. Eliade) leads to regression towards mythological thinking with the consequence of the creation of an entirely new pantheon of mystified heroes and their materialised monumental forms.

The official monuments, sponsored lavishly by the state, are the signs of the historical memory, the ideology visualised, the power made legitimate, and the "semiosis of the socialist identity".[78] Fifty-six percent of the budget for culture was spent on monumental propaganda in the 1970s. Bulgaria is ridden with such memorials and monuments, and only some of them were dismantled after the changes, primarily in the big towns. For about 40 years, the leading artists, among them some famous and talented Bulgarian architects, sculptors, and painters, were "mobilised" and lavishly paid by the state to design and erect various memorials.

As an aesthetic phenomenon, totalitarian art remains eclectic, although most akin to the academic-classical model. It seems to be a diversion from the common path of historical and aesthetic processes. Because totalitarian art is the language of power, its discourse is the discourse of power; thereby it has neither an

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[78]   Ibidem.223.

aesthetic nor artistic nature.[79] A popular Bulgarian joke went: "Socialist realism is a eulogy for those in power done in a way easy to grasp by them." The joke is intended to send the message of the inseparable aspect of apotheosis in this art, as well as the presumption that the ruling communist elite has low culture and lacks aesthetic taste.

The examples of communist memorials and monuments in Bulgaria are a direct illustration of the above argument. The creation of the new realms of memory not only refigured and abused history; they constructed the new socialist consciousness through their uncontested powerful visual and symbolic presence at the centre of the urban landscape. Bulgaria is strewn with stone and bronze busts and statues of male and female partisans, gigantic monuments of the Soviet "Liberation" Army, museums of the revolutionary struggle against fascism (never in power in Bulgaria) and capitalism, and of the "building of socialism", which is also perceived as a struggle. To this day, in the village of Bania, in the region of Razlog, Southwestern Bulgaria, a monument of Lenin and the Bulgarian Communist leader Georgi Dimitrov in a fraternal embrace stands out. That they have never met is of no importance. The myth has been created.

In the 1970s, a new period of constructing the historical and cultural memory began, "socialist nationalism", which is based on two principles. The first, ideological, was the rediscovery of national history. Let us rephrase the notorious saying that nationalism is the last refuge of the scoundrel. The irreversible erosion of the so-called developed socialist society imposed the change of the model of realms of memory as well. The second principle, aesthetic, was an attempt to change the style of

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[79]   Ibidem. 262-263.

representation. To achieve this, the ruling elite allowed brutal modernist artists to have relative freedom, and they also revoked the tacit veto over abstract art in Bulgaria.

Liudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of the communist leader Todor Zhivkov, became the Minister of Culture and launched the ambitious and inadequate programme "1300 Years of Bulgaria".[80] In honour of the anticipated mega-celebration, the 20-metre "modern" abstract monument called "1300 Years of Bulgaria" was erected in front of the Palace of Culture in Sofia (the latter itself being another ambitious project of the Minister of Culture). This new intended realm of memory became soon a subject of ridicule in dozens of popular jokes, along with criticism of the artistic value of the monument. Furthermore, it became an epitome for the megalomaniac cultural policy of Zhivkov's daughter, popularly called "The Princess". The history of the memorial complex in Shumen, North-Eastern Bulgaria is similar, part of the same programme "1300 Years of Bulgaria". It is the biggest monument in Europe. It is an impressive and creative complex of structures, sculptures, and mosaics in the centre of region of the first Bulgarian medieval state /681–996/. Some foreign scholars interpreted, incorrectly, the erection of this monument as a deliberate provocation of the compact Turkish minority in the region, related to the so-called Regeneration Process, an attempt to denationalise the Turkish minority in Bulgaria in 1984–85.[81]

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[80] Rothschild, J. (1999). Return to Diversity. A Political History of East Central Europe Since World War II. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 215-216.

[81] Biancinni, S. (1999). "The Regenerative Process in Bulgaria", Paper delivered at the Annual Convention of the American Association for Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS), Boca Raton.

Invisible Post-Communist Monuments

There are few, at the periphery, built with private donations, modest, and socially invisible. The creation of the new realms of memory is distinctly different from the one during communism. The visual realms of memory from the communist and post-communist periods are not comparable, not by number, or theme, or style, or magnitude. They represent two types of culture, two types of self-knowledge and construction of public opinion and of cultural memory. The former is official, contrived, eclectic and lavishly state-sponsored. The latter is free, selective, creative and voluntary. The former continues to dominate on a purely physical level all bigger cities in Bulgaria, while the latter is still in the margins of Bulgarian cultural self-reflection. These differences are determined by the change of the paradigm of attitude towards the past.

The first of those post-communist monuments was a simple iron cross at the place of the most sinister concentration camp in Lovech, Northern Central Bulgaria, where during 1961–1962 around 150 prisoners were murdered without court procedures. A similar cross marks the place of execution of about 80 people, victims of the communist illegal repressions in October 1944, next to the town of Dupnitsa in Southwestern Bulgaria. New mass graves from that time appear in various sights in Bulgaria (Dobrinishte village, South-Western Bulgaria and in Gorna Oriahovitsa in Northern Central Bulgaria). They do not have monuments. Most visible is the Monument of the Victims of Communism in Bulgaria, built in the same park in front of the Palace of Culture where the monument "1300 Years of Bulgaria" was falling apart. It is a complex comprising a small chapel, granite slabs with the names of the victims engraved, and an authentic stone ritual cross. The Citizens' Association with chairman Stoyan Gruichev made the building of the monument possible. It is a

blend between traditional church architecture, the example of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington. None of the 23 people I interviewed around the monument knew its dedication. Most often, they connected it with the war monuments of the Balkan wars in 1912–1913.

The other virtually invisible monument stands at the very end of the Central Sofia cemetery, where, on 1 February 1945, the regents, the ministers and a great number of the members of the 25th National Assembly were executed, the largest massive execution of the political elite of pre-war Bulgaria as a result of the People's Tribunal. Their names are written on the sides of the columns surrounding the allegorical figure of a mourning woman. The monument was built entirely with donations, initiated and organised by Konstantin Lipovanski. It is seldom visited and then primarily by relatives of those who perished.

Paul Ricoeur proposes three approaches to the processes of memory and forgetting:

- Forgetting and the forgotten memory on a psychopathological level
- Manipulated memory and forgetting on a practical and instrumental level
- Controlled memory and forgetting on an ethical/political level

In the last category, prohibition and forgiveness are closely related to the complexity of the past: prohibition to memory and loyalty to the past and forgiveness to guilt and the process of making peace with the past.[82]

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[82]   Ricoeur, P. (2000). Le memoire, l'histoire, l'oubli. Paris: Gallimard. 83-97.

Bulgarian society has been denied an objective and fair assessment of its communist past. Even today, Bulgarian society is still subject to major historical manipulation fostered by a revival of communist nostalgia. A comparative study of communist and post-communist memorials has shown this clearly.

The conclusion is that, for the last 35 years, Bulgaria has lacked a real, coherent politics of creating visible or invisible memory, or realms of memory of the recent communist past. The issue is much larger than the issue of the bare construction of monuments to the victims of communist purges and their particularly limited "geography". The main reason for this omission is the fact that the political elites in Bulgaria have been refusing to clearly admit and acknowledge historical guilt for the crimes of the communist regime.

Back in 1996, the European People's Party proposed to the Parliamentarian Assembly of Europe (PASE) that it pass Resolution 1096 on the condemnation of communism as a whole. The issue has been postponed for over nine years now. Ironically enough, this was done on the grounds of "missing sufficient information about the crimes of communist regimes in Eastern Europe".[83] The reasons that made this possible are complex. On the one hand, this is the "la gauche caviar" attitude coming from West European leftist circles; on the other hand, this is because the Communist political terror never had its Nuremberg.

The 39th National Assembly in Bulgaria adopted an Act Declaring the Criminal Nature of the Communist Regime in

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[83] Elenska, M. (2004). "On Mimicry and Short Memory". The International Condemnation of Communism: The Bulgarian Perspective. Excerpts from the Reports presented at the Colloquium in Koprivschtitsa (Bulgaria). Sofia: Vassil Stanilov Literature Workshop.

Bulgaria only in May 2000. The representatives of the Bulgarian Socialist Party did not sign it, although this declaration did not have any legal implications, but tended to be more of a declarative nature.

For more than 35 years of freedom, Bulgarian society did not achieve any consensus towards its recent communist past based on the thorough investigation, systematisation and analysis of the crimes of the regime.[84] That is why a pseudo-nostalgic attitude is surfacing. That is why socialists continue to stubbornly be proud of the hundred-year history of their party, even though it caused the repression of democracy and of fundamental human rights and values in Bulgaria.

Due to the lack of coherent policy of the post-communist elites, Bulgarian society has been living in a paranoid asymmetry regarding its own history, and, what is even worse, regarding the current situation. Because the predominant judicial doctrine in the world is still based on the maxim – Ex iniuria ius non oritur – from injustice there is no justice.

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[84] Hristov, H. (2004). "The Crimes during the Communist Regime and the Attempts at their Investigation after 10 November 1989". Idem.47-81.

Narratives in Albania:
From Stalinism to Modern Times

Lutfi Dervishi

Narratives of Control and Unity

In the mid-20th century, Albania was one of the most isolated and controlled states in the world, under Enver Hoxha's Stalinist regime. Albania was worse than today's North Korea. Albania was the only atheist country in the world, a country where religion and private property were banned by the constitution.

The narratives of this era were meticulously constructed and ruthlessly enforced.

Hoxha's regime depended on a dual narrative. Internally, it promoted unity under the banner of communism, with workers, peasants, and intellectuals united for the proletariat revolution. Zeri Popullit' newspaper (Peoples Voice), the mouthpiece of the Communist Party, had the Marxist slogan "Workers of the world, Unite".

Externally, the regime created a paranoid tale of Albania as a fortress under siege, surrounded by imperialist enemies. In the mid-1970s, defence spending took almost 30% of the budget. Seven hundred thousand bunkers were built from the seashore to the top of the mountain! The Albanian military strategy was to confront both superpowers of the time, the Soviet Union and the United States.

This "fortress narrative" justified isolationism, mass purges, and the suppression of dissent. In Albania, it was unthinkable to talk about dissidence. You either had to conform or be killed or imprisoned. A total of 5577 men and 450 women were shot; another 10 133 men and 7367 women were imprisoned for political reasons, of whom 1065 died. Furthermore, 408 people lost their mental capacity from torture, 20 000 families were interned for political reasons, and 7022 people died in internment zones.

In this sense, textbooks, films, and even architecture, those infamous bunkers dotting the landscape, served as propaganda tools reinforcing the idea that Albania stood alone as the purest defender of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

The narratives were potent because they appealed to fear and pride. Fear of external enemies kept people submissive, while pride in being the "last bastion of communism" gave a sense of purpose, even amidst deprivation.

The portrait and the name of Enver Hoxha, "our" dictator, "our" unmistakable leader, were omnipresent from kindergarten until the mountains started appearing alongside four classics of Marxism-Leninism.

The Suppression of Religious Beliefs

Although Albania was constitutionally declared the world's first atheist state in 1967[85], religious beliefs persisted underground. Although the 1976 constitution further enshrined atheism, the

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[85] Constitution of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania (1976) and related official decrees from 1967 onward.

official push to root out religion was in full swing by 1967. These legal documents, while not exactly page-turners, illustrate the legislative basis for banning religious practices. Clerics who resisted, such as Father Zef Pllumi, faced imprisonment and torture[86]. The resilience of clandestine religious practices contributed to a counter-narrative of resistance and hope, demonstrating that even totalitarian control could not extinguish spiritual beliefs.

The state launched aggressive campaigns to eradicate religious influence, shutting down churches and mosques, banning religious ceremonies, and punishing those caught practising their faith. In 1967, Enver Hoxha's communist government launched a dramatic crackdown on all forms of religious expression. Thousands of churches and mosques were closed, demolished, or repurposed into warehouses, sports halls, or cultural centres. Public religious ceremonies were outlawed and participants at any gathering perceived as "religiously motivated" risked arrest. Clerics who resisted, such as Catholic priests in Shkodër, were imprisoned and, in some cases, tortured. This was part of Hoxha's effort to create the world's first atheist state, making religious practice a punishable offence.

Religious leaders were arrested, executed, or sent to labour camps, and religious texts were confiscated and destroyed. Yet, despite this brutal repression, many Albanians secretly preserved their faith, conducting underground ceremonies and passing down religious traditions within families.

By the late 1980s, as the regime weakened, religious beliefs resurfaced with remarkable resilience. Following the fall of

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[86] Father Zef Pllumi. (1994). Rrno vetëm për me tregue ("Live to Tell"). Botimet Françeskane.

communism, there was a dramatic revival of religious practice, illustrating how deeply ingrained spirituality remained despite decades of persecution. The return of religious freedom symbolised not just a cultural renaissance but also a testament to the Albanian people's capacity to resist and endure extreme repression.

The Role of Art and Culture

Art, music, and literature functioned as both instruments of propaganda and avenues for subtle dissent. Socialist realism dictated that all artistic expressions glorify the party and the working class. However, some artists managed to embed hidden critiques within their work, providing a veiled resistance to the regime.

One of the most famous figures of this era was the writer Ismail Kadare, who masterfully employed allegory and historical fiction to critique the oppressive system. His novel *The Palace of Dreams*87 (1981) is a striking example of how literature could mask political subversion under layers of metaphor. The book, which examines an all-powerful bureaucracy controlling the subconscious thoughts of its citizens, was widely interpreted as a veiled critique of Hoxha's totalitarianism. Although initially tolerated, it was later banned, and Kadare himself faced increasing scrutiny. His ability to navigate the restrictions of censorship while subtly challenging the regime earned him international recognition. Other artists and writers used folklore, mythology, and historical allegories to communicate resistance, knowing that direct criticism would lead to imprisonment or worse.

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[87]   Kadare, I. (1981). The Palace of Dreams. Penguin Books.

Another notable instance is Dritëro Agolli's *The Rise and Fall of Comrade Zylo* (1973)[88], a satirical novel that lampoons the bloated bureaucracy and hypocrisy of the socialist system. Though packaged in officially sanctioned rhetoric, the book's biting humour and absurd scenarios offered a thinly veiled critique of the very regime it was meant to uphold.

Despite the regime's strict controls, artistic expression remained a battleground where subversion found creative refuge. Painters, musicians, and poets occasionally, especially during the late 1980s, inserted coded messages of dissent into their work, relying on the audience's ability to decipher hidden meanings. Even in controlled performances, traditional music and poetry could carry subtexts of resistance, reinforcing the idea that cultural heritage was not entirely coopted by the state.

However, while narratives during the decades of communism seemed to "unify", indeed they suffocated. By the 1980s, cracks began to appear. The death of Hoxha in 1985 and the economic collapse of the late 1980s exposed the hollowness of the regime's narrative. As Albania entered its final years under communist rule, the differences between Hoxha's brutal totalitarianism and his successor Ramiz Alia's softer approach became apparent. While Alia maintained the official rhetoric of isolation and self-reliance, he cautiously introduced limited reforms, attempting to ease economic hardships through controlled engagement with Western countries. Albania cautiously introduced limited market-oriented reforms, allowing small-scale private businesses and marginally lifting travel restrictions. According to Elez Biberaj's *Albania in Transition: The Rocky Road to Democracy*, these measured policies were designed

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88   Agolli, D. (1973). Shkëlqimi dhe rënia e shokut zylo: Roman. Naim Frashëri.

to alleviate economic hardships without completely abandoning the communist framework.[89] However, the half-measures could not stem growing public disillusionment, ultimately accelerating the unravelling of the regime. However, these reforms were too little, too late. The younger generation, having grown up with severe shortages and an awareness of the outside world through clandestine radio broadcasts of RAI (Public Broadcaster of Italy) increasingly rejected the state's narrative.

Unlike the swift uprisings in Eastern European nations, Albania was the last country in the region to overthrow its communist regime. It was not until 1991 that mass protests, economic collapse, and international pressure forced the regime to allow multiparty elections. By then, the fortress had crumbled from within. People realised they were not living in a fortress but in an open prison.

Post-Communist Transition: Chaos and Aspiration

The fall of communism in Albania in 1991 dramatically transformed the narrative landscape, shifting from a regime of strict control to a period marked by chaos and newfound freedom. For the first time in decades, Albanians could tell their own stories. But which story would prevail? Initially, the collapse led to a vacuum of authority, allowing diverse narratives to emerge. For many, the dominant narrative became one of escape. Escape from the past. Even former political prisoners during the first two decades of transition did not like to talk about their suffering but instead they opted to "look forward" for the sake of the future of the country.

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[89] Biberaj, E. (1998). Albania in transition: The Rocky Road to democracy. Routledge.

The collapse of communism was not framed as liberation but as an opportunity to flee. The mass exodus of Albanians in the early 1990s, particularly during the Vlora and Durrës ship crisis, thousands of Albanians crammed onto dangerously overcrowded vessels, hoping to reach foreign shores and a better future. This mass exodus became a stark emblem of Albania's turbulent transition, highlighting a society torn between newfound freedom and the haunting uncertainties of post-communist life.

The fall of communism in 1991 brought not only political freedom but also narrative chaos. Suddenly, the tightly controlled storyline unravelled, and a cacophony of voices filled the void. One in particular with devastating effect was the misunderstanding of capitalism. "All can get rich instantly".

This culminated in the 1997 pyramid-scheme crisis, a perfect example of how narratives can manipulate public opinion with devastating consequences. Pyramid schemes lure people in with the illusion of effortless wealth, often backed by glowing success stories and promises of ludicrous returns on investment. These schemes survive only as long as new participants keep pouring in their cash. Once that flow falters, the house of cards collapses spectacularly. Albania's 1997 crisis is a stark reminder of this: countless citizens lost their life savings, sparking public outrage that veered the country towards chaos and a near civil war.

The Dream of European Integration

Amidst the chaos, a hopeful narrative emerged: Albania's integration into Europe. This narrative framed EU membership as the ultimate goal, symbolising modernisation and progress.

One of the dominant themes in Albania's modern narrative landscape is the "European Albania" narrative: This remains the official story promoted by the government and opposition alike. The new target date by the government of the day is 2030- Albania member of the EU. This narrative portrays Albania as a country on the path to EU integration, modernising its economy and society. While this narrative has inspired progress, it has also faced scepticism, as many feel the promises of Europe remain distant and unfulfilled.

For many Albanians, European integration represents not just an economic or political aspiration but a transformative project that validates their national identity and historical trajectory. The idea of "returning to Europe" resonates deeply, as Albania perceives itself as part of the continent's cultural and historical fabric. However, the prolonged accession process has led to growing frustration. The EU's cautious approach towards enlargement, coupled with internal challenges, such as Brexit and increasing Euroscepticism within member states, has made Albania's path more unpredictable. This dynamic has fuelled debates about whether the EU is genuinely committed to expansion or merely stringing along candidate countries with empty promises.

Moreover, the narrative of European integration has been instrumentalised by Albanian political elites to consolidate power, justify reforms, and, at times, divert attention from pressing domestic issues. While successive governments have pushed for progress in meeting EU requirements, critics argue that reforms often remain superficial, driven more by external expectations than genuine internal transformation. Corruption, weak institutions, and the slow pace of judicial reforms continue to hinder Albania's European ambitions, raising questions about whether EU accession alone can serve as a panacea for the country's challenges. Yet,

despite these obstacles, the dream persists, woven into Albania's political discourse and collective consciousness.

Diaspora Narratives

The Albanian diaspora plays a significant role in shaping modern narratives, particularly through social media. On one hand, they highlight success stories, presenting the Albanian identity as one of resilience and ambition. For instance, Albanian influencers abroad often share glamorous posts of luxurious lifestyles or thriving careers online, complete with patriotic hashtags like #ProudAlbanian. Meanwhile, those at home juggling economic challenges and everyday frustrations find such success stories both uplifting and strangely out of touch, highlighting the disconnection. The diaspora has long been a crucial economic and cultural bridge between Albania and the world, with remittances playing a vital role in sustaining families and communities back home. However, the influence of the diaspora extends beyond financial contributions. Through digital platforms, Albanian emigrants project narratives of personal success, professional achievements, and social mobility, reinforcing an image of prosperity and opportunity that often contrasts with the struggles faced by those who remain in the country.

Social media amplifies these narratives, offering a stage where members of the diaspora celebrate their integration into foreign societies while maintaining strong connections with their homeland. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become arenas for promoting Albanian identity abroad, showcasing cultural pride through music, cuisine, and history. Many prominent Albanians living abroad have leveraged these platforms to highlight their journeys from humble beginnings to international recognition, inspiring a sense of national pride. However, this narrative of

success is not always representative of the broader diaspora experience. Many Albanians abroad face significant hardships, including discrimination, economic instability, and cultural alienation. These struggles are often left out of the dominant discourse, creating an idealised image of migration that does not always reflect reality. A number of studies address the challenges Albanians face abroad, particularly in neighbouring countries like Greece and Italy. For instance, Carolin Fischer's *Albanian Diasporas and the Culture of Migration* (Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 2020) explores how discrimination, precarious work, and social isolation often complicate the realities of migration[90]. Similarly, reports from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) highlight how these struggles are frequently overshadowed by more idealised notions of life outside Albania.

This disconnection can sometimes deepen generational and ideological divides. Younger Albanians in the diaspora, often raised in Western countries, may view their ancestral homeland through a nostalgic or romanticised lens, while those in Albania may feel increasingly disillusioned with their country's economic and political stagnation. This divergence in perspectives can lead to tensions in discussions about national identity, governance, and the future of Albania. Additionally, some members of the diaspora become vocal critics of Albania's leadership and socio-political conditions, engaging in activism and advocacy from abroad. With high internet penetration and widespread use of social media, diaspora communities can quickly broadcast their views, share grievances, and mobilise. Online petitions and diaspora-led Facebook groups have spurred public debate on issues such as voting rights for expatriates, anti-corruption efforts, and

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[90]   Fischer, C. (2020) Albanian Diasporas and the Culture of Migration.

environmental protection in Albania. These campaigns frequently spark discussions within Albanian media and can add pressure on political leaders to respond.

Their critiques, while often valid, can be met with scepticism by those living in Albania, who may view them as detached from the everyday struggles of the population. There is a sense that, while the diaspora emigrants' intentions might be noble, they lack the hard-earned frustrations that come with living under an inefficient system day in and day out.

Despite these complexities, the Albanian diaspora remains an essential part of the national fabric. Their contributions to business, education, and cultural diplomacy continue to shape Albania's international reputation. Whether through economic investments, political engagement, or social influence, the diaspora plays a crucial role in shaping the evolving narrative of what it means to be Albanian in the 21st century.

Competing Narratives in the Digital Age

Fast forward to today. Albania, like much of the world, faces an overwhelming proliferation of narratives thanks to the internet, social media, and now AI. This has democratised storytelling but also unleashed new dangers.

Populist narratives in Albania often spin a tale that external actors—like the EU or philanthropists such as George Soros—are plotting the country's downfall. A common message is that Soros's "Open Society" agenda supposedly manipulates domestic politics for sinister ends, while the EU is depicted as on the brink of collapse and untrustworthy. By placing blame on these external forces, populists sidestep deeper internal challenges, drumming

up fears that foreign meddling, rather than homegrown mismanagement, is at the root of Albania's problems.

These narratives thrive on frustration and appeal to a sense of victimhood, echoing the fortress mentality of the Hoxha era but with a modern twist. In these populist or conspiracy-laden narratives, the Albanian people or the nation as a whole are cast as the main victims. Just as the Hoxha regime portrayed Albania as besieged by external threats, modern conspiratorial rhetoric depicts outside influences (such as foreign governments, NGOs, or global elites) as conspiring to undermine the country's sovereignty and well-being.

During the communist era, relentless propaganda painted Albania as an isolated fortress besieged by hostile external forces, instilling a deep-seated mistrust of the outside world. This siege mentality endures in today's climate, making people more prone to embrace conspiracy theories or populist rhetoric that blame hidden foreign interests for domestic troubles.

Social media has fundamentally changed how narratives are created and consumed in Albania. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become the battleground for competing narratives. While this digital revolution has democratised storytelling, it has also unleashed disinformation. False narratives, whether about elections, vaccines, or even the cost of living, spread like wildfire. Without proper regulation, these narratives sow division and mistrust.

One striking example is the rise of conspiracy theories, such as those surrounding the recent decision of the government of Tirana to offer to Italy the possibility of dealing with the influx of migrants from Africa in Albanian territory. According to local media coverage by Balkan Insight (2023) and Euronews Albania (2023), the Albanian government's offer to host migrant

processing for Italy has generated a surge in conspiracy theories on social media. Critics argue that foreign powers are using Albania as a convenient "dumping ground" for migrants, fuelling fears that national sovereignty and social stability are being jeopardised by hidden international agendas.

These narratives often exploit economic and social insecurities, turning vulnerable groups into scapegoats. The viral nature of misinformation means that, even when debunked, falsehoods leave a lasting impact. Repeated exposure to misleading content reinforces false beliefs, creating echo chambers where alternative perspectives are dismissed.

The political landscape has been significantly affected by this digital shift. Political parties and interest groups use social media not only as a campaigning tool but also to manipulate public perception. In the absence of rigorous fact-checking mechanisms, fabricated stories are weaponised to discredit opponents. A single manipulated post (a case of misinformation about the 2019 earthquake) can alter public discourse within hours, shaping opinions in ways that traditional media struggle to counter. According to a 2020 analysis by Albania Fact-Check, one manipulated Facebook post falsely warning of a catastrophic aftershock following the 2019 earthquake accumulated over 50 000 interactions, likes, shares, and comments, in less than 24 hours. This rapid spread of misinformation significantly swayed public discourse, demonstrating the powerful impact social media can have on shaping opinions in real time.

Moreover, social media amplifies the power of influencers and unverified sources over traditional journalism. Many individuals now consume news through bite-sized videos or memes, reducing complex issues to emotionally charged soundbites. While this accessibility can foster civic engagement, it also erodes critical

thinking. The decline of investigative journalism in favour of algorithm-driven content means that sensationalism often wins over substance.

Another troubling aspect is the role of foreign actors in spreading disinformation. Several organisations and media outlets have documented these activities. For example, the NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence has published studies highlighting foreign influence operations and troll farms targeting the Western Balkans, while the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) has reported on foreign-based fake accounts amplifying divisive narratives in Albania. Additionally, Meta's Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB) reports occasionally flag clusters of fraudulent profiles originating from abroad, underscoring the ongoing efforts to undermine Albania's social cohesion through disinformation. Whether pushing anti-European sentiment or exacerbating political tensions, these digital manipulations exploit existing divisions. A lack of digital literacy exacerbates this issue, as many users struggle to distinguish credible sources from clickbait-driven propaganda. Exact figures on Albania's digital literacy vary, but multiple assessments suggest it remains relatively low compared to EU averages. For instance, data cited by Eurostat and national agencies like INSTAT (Albania's Institute of Statistics) indicate that, while most Albanians own a smartphone, many have limited skills beyond basic social media usage. This skills gap is particularly pronounced outside urban centres, where weaker infrastructure and less formal computer education further hinder digital competence.)

Ultimately, the impact of social media in Albania is a double-edged sword. It has empowered individuals to share their stories and engage in public debate; yet it has also become a tool for manipulation. As digital platforms continue to evolve, the need for critical media literacy, regulatory frameworks, and ethical journalism has never been greater.

Learning from the Past, Confronting the Future

What can we learn from Albania's narrative history?

First, that narratives are never neutral. Whether under Stalinist control or in the free-for-all of the digital age, every narrative serves a purpose: to unite, divide, inspire, or manipulate. Understanding this reality allows us to approach media and public discourse with greater scepticism and awareness.

Second, the resilience of a society depends on its ability to critically engage with narratives. During the Hoxha era, the state monopolised storytelling, leaving no room for alternative voices. Today, the challenge is the opposite: a flood of voices, with few mechanisms to discern truth from fiction. Without fostering critical thinking and media literacy, societies risk being overwhelmed by misinformation, making them vulnerable to manipulation and division.

Moreover, narratives shape national identity and collective memory. The way history is told influences how a country perceives itself and its place in the world. Competing historical narratives about Albania's past, whether in relation to communism, foreign relations, or economic reforms, demonstrate the power of storytelling in defining political and social realities. This is why fostering diverse yet responsible narratives is essential for a healthy democracy.

Lastly, we must recognise the power of narratives to shape public opinion and policy. Narratives of European integration, for example, have driven real progress in Albania's legal and institutional reforms. Conversely, narratives of division have stalled that progress, eroding trust in institutions and each other.

Building a Better Narrative

The evolving narratives surrounding Albania, its European aspirations, its diaspora's influence, and its internal struggles highlight the complex interplay of history, identity, and modernity. Building a better narrative requires not only acknowledging these realities but also actively shaping a discourse that is constructive, inclusive, and forward-looking.

A central challenge in crafting a more cohesive national narrative is balancing optimism with realism. The dream of European integration, for instance, must go beyond political rhetoric and translate into substantive, citizen-driven reforms that improve governance, economic opportunities, and institutional transparency. Albania's path to the EU should not be framed solely as a means of external validation but as an opportunity to strengthen democracy, modernise institutions, and foster long-term economic growth. A better narrative would emphasise internal progress as a goal in itself, rather than as a prerequisite for EU membership.

Similarly, the role of the Albanian diaspora should be approached from a more nuanced perspective. While success stories of Albanians abroad inspire national pride, they should not overshadow the challenges faced both by emigrants and those who remain in the country. Bridging the gap between the diaspora and the homeland requires fostering meaningful engagement beyond remittances and occasional visits. Initiatives that encourage knowledge transfer, investment, and mentorship from successful Albanians abroad can create sustainable impact, rather than perpetuating a narrative that migration is the only pathway to success.

Furthermore, a better narrative for Albania must also reckon with its internal contradictions. Political divisions, corruption, and economic disparities have long been obstacles to national progress. A country cannot build a strong external reputation while struggling with deep-rooted governance issues at home. Transparency, accountability, and the strengthening of democratic institutions should be at the core of Albania's national story. Instead of relying on grand political promises, the focus should shift to tangible improvements in the quality of life of ordinary citizens, better education, improved healthcare, job opportunities, and a fair legal system.

The role of the media in shaping Albania's narrative is also crucial. In an era in which disinformation and sensationalism dominate the public sphere, responsible journalism must play a central role in providing accurate, balanced, and critical perspectives. A free and independent press is essential not only for holding those in power accountable but also for crafting narratives that are reflective of reality rather than driven by political or economic interests.

Ultimately, building a better narrative for Albania requires the active participation of its citizens. Rather than waiting for external actors, whether the EU, the diaspora, or foreign investors, to define the country's future, Albanians must take ownership of their own story. This means fostering a culture of civic engagement, demanding accountability from leaders, and working collectively towards sustainable progress.

A more constructive Albanian narrative does not ignore the country's challenges; rather, it confronts them head-on while highlighting the resilience, creativity, and potential of its people. By shifting the discourse from one of passive expectation to active transformation, Albania can craft a future that is not only aspirational but achievable.

About
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About the KAS Media Programme South East Europe

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is an independent, non-profit German political foundation that aims to strengthen democratic forces around the world. KAS runs media programmes in Africa, Asia and South East Europe.

Based in Sofia, the KAS Media Programme South East Europe brings together stakeholders in the media industry from Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Moldova, Romania and Serbia. Editors-in-chief, publishers, and media law experts have discussions across borders about business models, the credibility crisis or AI in newsrooms. Additionally, KAS runs a media scholar programme and works on strategic communication.