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Where is Serbia's stabilitocracy heading to? A Break from the past but without a future

Laurent Tournois

Independent Researcher, 48 chemin des Autrichiens, 06600 Antibes, France

laurent.tournois@proton.me

Abstract. Since 2012, the gradual establishment of a new type of political regime, stabilitocracy in the Balkan region and Serbia in particular has raised many questions. From Europeanization (failed attempts), active and instrumentalized memory activism, and progressivism, to the foreign policy shift compared to Yugoslavia and, broadly speaking, the contestability of the liberal peacebuilding processes at work in Serbia, this paper engages in a critical discussion about its constituents and emphasizes the limits of the current Serbian political pattern beyond dogmatism and partisan discourses, and by showing greater openness to non-Western ways of thinking.

Keywords. Stabilitocracy, progressivism, Europeanization, memory activism, centrality, decentering, Serbia

INTRODUCTION

In Western imaginative geographies, 'Balkans' hold a very special position. Still, under the yoke of the Ottoman Empire, the 19th-century Balkans were a fascinating object for Western travelers whose imagination was nurtured less by their lived experience on the spot than by other Western travelers (see for example Creagh 1876). We had to wait until the Cold War period to see the Iron Curtain setting a sharply defined geographical split into two singular tribes that were 'Us,' the civilized, and 'Them,' the exotic, often 'uncivilized' 'Others' (Buchowski 2006, p. 464-465). To some extent, the ruling elites who first succeeded in Yugoslavia and then in Serbia tried to impede cultural and economic balkanization and fought the positions and roles assigned to the Balkans in Western imaginative geography (see Hammond, 2007).

The hybrid positioning, of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) that broke off the East-West divide in 1948, determined the course of Yugoslav progress towards modernization. The political geography of the 'Third Way' between the East and West then superseded Balkan backwardness (Zimmermann 2010) until the dissolution of SFRY plunged the region once again into the throes of warfare. In 2000, the transfer of power between 'nationalists' and 'democrats' that occurred after the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime set down the bases along a neoliberal peacebuilding axis for repositioning Serbia¹ into the Euro-Atlantic integration process. The shift that occurred in 2012 with the return of the 'radicals' to

¹Although in 2000 it was the third Yugoslavia (including Serbia and Montenegro), here the unit of analysis remains Serbia alone.

power has left observers wary and unclear about the type of political regime it is. Adding to this the argument of maintaining stability between the (Western) Balkan countries as a guarantor of everyone's security and we obtain the political regime known as stabilocracy². Additionally, anyone interested in the Western Balkan region has to consider the binary opposition ('good and bad guys', 'victims and aggressors') that is still at work today as evidenced by numerous intellectual productions, public policy analyses, and foreign policy reports about Serbia in particular.

Although introduced about ten years ago, the theme of stabilocracy in the field of analysis of Serbian political regimes remains to be discussed and enriched. To do so, it is necessary to move beyond the "us vs. them-over there" posture and (to envision the consequences of) common stereotypes and their 'modern' avatars such as that of the warmongering and oppressive attitude of the Serbs which have been developed and spread into the Western public opinion to help them to figure out the situation during the ethno-nationalist conflict that followed the breakup of SFRY (see Đerić 2005). Accordingly, I first contend that the historical, political, and spatial (both geographically and symbolically) positioning of the Serbia campaign for a 'decentered' perspective to the evolution of political regimes in Serbia since 2000 to this new stabilocracy pattern. As it has been highlighted by several authors (e.g., Acharya and Buzan 2007; Mgonja and Makombe 2009; Tickner and Blaney 2013), the theme of decentering in the field of international relations calls researchers and practitioners to enrich the primary conceptual tools and analytical categories produced within the transatlantic space by thoughts, sources, and authors from the non-Western world. The aim is to expose the limits of adopting a fixed category of analysis and to challenge several dominant assumptions and postures about the implementation of a neoliberal peacebuilding process (addressed here through some of its facets, namely Europeanization, memory activism, progress, economic reforms, and foreign policy shifts) in Serbia from the 2000s onward. For instance, it may temper the sea serpent "President Aleksandar Vučić is a Russian satellite" that becomes evident during each increase in tensions within and outside the Balkans region. This is to assert that the Serbian stabilocratic regime borrows from the EU's(-NATO) 'conventional constructivism' (Checkel 2007), Russia's 'neoclassical-realism' (Romanova, 2012), while it predominantly pursues its self-interest by choosing, under stated circumstances, "the behavioral option which promises to maximize its own welfare" (Schimmelfennig 2003, p. 19). Given that it is fundamentally an international-local frame of mind, such an approach allows grasp the nuances of the current situation (in terms of social-political and foreign policy aspects) in Serbia but also prevents concepts and theories that bring us back to an "us-them-over there" framework from being recycled endlessly (Nayak and Selbin 2010). It also means that it is more than ever important to refer to sociological tools to better understand the complex and dynamic forms of social conflict (Malešević 2010) in which the war-torn Serbian society has progressively entered.

EUROPEANIZATION AS A REORGANIZATION OF SOCIAL SPACE

During the years that immediately followed the 'post-5th October revolution', the future - development through Europeanization, (re)opening to international markets, liberal democracy - promised to the citizens of Serbia was to be 'modern', richer, and freed from the shackles of nationalism. *Rationalisation oblige*, accession to the EU was then considered an unsurpassable future, thus the modernization of Serbian society and institutions thanks to

²The term was invented by Primatarova, Deimel, and Assenova (2012) to report the changes happening in Albania under the assurance of beginning the EU accession process.

Europeanization was then likely to succeed, thus guaranteeing a so-called traditional society to have the resources (financial and cultural), allowing it to embrace a general process of 'adaptive upgrading' (Parsons 1966).

It is perhaps in its cultural form that the evolutionary and comparative process of liberal peacebuilding grounded on the concept of differentiation coined by American sociologist Talcott Parsons, which takes place according to a temporal sequence of "from [the past] to [the future]" (Parsons 1971, p. 100), has had the strongest influence on Serbian society although this phenomenon has been neglected in various studies conducted since then. In doing so, it created a difference (which the stabilitocratic regime will ratify in a different form) between the parts of the socio-political system that did not exist before, that is the nationalists (irrational and identitarian) and the Europeanists.

Since the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević, peacebuilding was correlated with memory activism which consisted in the creation of oppositional knowledge - ranging between 'radical-envisioning' and 'transformative' according to the typology developed by Coy et al. (2008). On the one hand, the democratic state apparatus decided to celebrate the distant past, and international and religious holidays while it removed everything related to the Yugoslav period (Đerić 2010). On the other hand, foreign international non-governmental organizations, local intellectuals, and non-governmental organizations worked together to produce and disseminate alternative understandings and visions of the 1990s post-Yugoslav wars and spreading a culture of guiltiness. In 2004, the President of Serbia, Boris Tadić, apologized to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, against whom a war crime was committed in the name of the Serbian people in the past war and, at the same time, he tempered his words to lower the collective guilt by saying that the crimes were not committed by the Serbian people, but by identified criminals (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2004).

Assuming that a new comprehension of the past is likely to lead to a new perception of current problems and permits considering substitute solutions for the future (Gutman 2017), this situation has inevitably stimulated counter-hegemonic civic commemorative rituals such as promoting the memory of Serbian victimhood during the 1999 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing and yearly alternative civic commemorations of crimes perpetrated against Serbs in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo (Fridman 2022). Consequently, memory activism at both the institutional and micro levels, while it produced 'new' knowledge on the 1990s and critically appraised the historical (predominantly nationalist and thus obliterating Serbia's history) narrative, unfortunately, did not offer a shared replacement narrative. At a broader level, if at least theoretically, European integration was considered a common ground, the polarization of pasts fueled abundant controversial worldviews. Moreover, one may contend that efforts to denigrate historical narratives noteworthy for the consolidation of Serbian society have led to a disconnection between citizens and the elite of Serbia (see Yefremenko 2022). As the former post-Yugoslav conflict internalized, Serbia's society found itself in 'a civil war between various memories' (Kuljić 2006) thus challenging liberal peacebuilding assignments and processes.

In a paradigmatic sense, constructivism and neoliberal institutionalism worked together to achieve (institutional) efficiency and social change (see Sterling-Folker 2000). However, (re)building a modern [Serbian] international society on a stigmatization dynamic (Zarakol 2014) did not provide the expected results. In brief, this period embodied the confrontation of two rival ideologies, that are Europeanization and nationalism, and economic and political models probably best encapsulated in what Resimić (2022) named 'the political colonization of business' (or was it rather the 'business colonization of politics'?). Neither of

them got the victory but they paved the way for the emergence of a 'new' political elite and possibly a paradigm shift.

CONTOURS OF STABILITOCRACY IN SERBIA

From populism to progressism

After being banned on the margins of political life during the 2000s, the Serbian radical right took significant revenge in winning the 2012 presidential elections. To settle the antagonistic challenges Serbia faced, they rebranded themselves into 'progressists' under the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka/SNS*) banner in 2008 and waited for their time to come. The party is there to bear both a form of political renaissance (in the sense of an ideological recomposition) based on a populist-central positioning but also the progress necessary to "bring Serbia into the 21st century".

Faced with the difficulty of this socio-political endeavor, the Vucicevian narrative then translated the issues ('fine tune' continuing claims about Kosovo with Serbia's European ambitions) into "historical circumstances" although there is neither conflict with foreign powers nor political instability as was the case when the democrats came to power in 2000, favoring if not calling to power a charismatic political figure, political by profession, having a vision and a national project placing it above parties. Faced with the *laissez-faire* characteristic of the 2000s, the destiny of the nation is in the hands of a strong leader who is present on all fronts. Aleksandar Vučić will then draw the borders of what will be the new Serbian political map, and contrary to what his origin might suggest, he has implemented a political program quite far from radical ideals. As a matter of fact, he has found a way to legitimate himself through symbolic nation-building, mainly regarding the Kosovo issue, and to build a feeling of loyalty to win the 2012 elections. Almost immediately, he discarded any nationalist rhetoric and, subsequently, opportunistically used several celebrations (such as the Armistice Day in the First World War [*Dan primirja u Prvom svetskom ratu*]) to associate Serbia with the winning countries and legitimize its position within their ranks.

Inherent in this central positioning, we find the same rationale as during the mandates of democrats: the instrumentalization then the accentuation of the polarization of civil society and the political field between 'ancients' and 'moderns', the one which now demonizes the democrats powerless to lead Serbia on the path to modernity and divides then marginalizes the extreme right carrying nationalist/territorial and sovereigntist demands which must be contained, to reform Serbian society and lead it towards progress. In 2014, during the election campaign, he encouraged citizens to vote for the Serbian Progressive Party, because they were choosing whether Serbia would be governed by tycoons through their political henchmen or by the people (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2014). Thus, he is also populist in the sense of ruling in the name of the people (but in its local variant, that is authoritarian and neoliberal) through the desire to present itself in the eyes of foreign observers as the only one able to master any expression of popular political vitality.

However, if the 'radical reformers and progressives' benefited from a form of plebiscite renaissance in 2012, it did not hold. On the one hand, facing increasing tension between Serbia's leadership and its citizens and, on the other hand, little upgrade concerning its pro-EU orientation (in the sense of 'conditionality' and less in that of 'Europeanization'), the transformation/modernization of the Serbian society did not go as expected and the SNS faced the same legitimacy issue already faced by Serbia's ruling elites since the fall of Slobodan Milošević: it mainly comes from outside and less from the ballot box: between 2016 and 2017,

less than one-third (29.93%) of the voting public 'championed' Aleksandar Vučić and the number of ruling party's voters declined (-13.46%) (Nikolić 2017).

As a way to provoke a public reaction, in 2017, the President again pointed out that he is sure that politicians who together with the tycoons robbed the country will never return to power in Serbia (Tanjug 2017). The second phase of modernization (no more Europeanization) of Serbian society then began under the leadership of a party that embodied itself as a providential actor making it possible to resolve the 'existential crisis' into which Serbia has entered. The dominant picture was that of a local variant of modernity delineated by "the social organization and culture of specifically Western societies, which were typified as individualistic, democratic, capitalist, scientific, secular, and stable, and as dividing work from home in gender-specific ways" (Alexander 1994, p. 168). More precisely, the stabilitocratic regime has adopted the 'faith in progress', which has gradually become a political position in opposition to anyone who doubts its benefits as underlined by Ana Brnabić, nominated as Serbia's first female prime minister in 2017, in her induction speech: "The time before us will show how brave we are to move boundaries," she said. "Now is the moment to make a step forward and take our society, country, and economy into the 21st century." (Gec 2017). At that point, it is difficult to say whether the political establishment believes "in a sense of history, in an indefinite perfectibility of human nature, in a continuous improvement of the living conditions of humanity through the application of rationalism in politics" (Bastié, 2023). On the other hand, what appears is that at the heart of such progressivism lies a vision of history where "everything is in motion" and "irreversible changes" are achieved" (Scruton 2015) which establishes a form of religion aiming to replace nationalist ideology.

Anyhow, to break the 'glass ceiling of transformation', to strengthen the already existing disbalance of power and to reduce the tensions between the country's political establishment and its citizens, 'legitimation by action' has become the new mantra for setting a new horizon that is the realization of a neoliberal cosmopolitan dream along worldliness and higher cultural diversity axes. The latter objective was then merged into a construction frenzy (such as the controversial Belgrade Waterfront real estate project to highways, routes, shopping malls, etc.) and a consumption-oriented culture (materialized through the coming of foreign big names such as Starbucks, Simit Sarayi and LC Waikiki Turkish chains, etc.).

Regional stability means the end of neutrality

As the country became ostracized on the international scene, contemporary Serbia's geopolitical positioning and foreign policy became a topic of minor importance. Progressively, one of the main objectives assigned to the governments from democrats to stabilitocrats that succeeded Slobodan Milošević was to engage in a liberal peacebuilding process and, in particular, to normalize relations with the authorities of Kosovo.

In 2012, under a progressive posture, that is to say, breaking with the attitude of previous governments, Aleksandar Vučić declared that there was a misunderstanding with the EU and that "*Serbia is/was ready to continue the dialogue with Pristina, and that the territorial integrity of Kosovo, mentioned in the enlargement strategy of the EU, means/meant that there is/was no partition of Kosovo*" (Danas, 2012)³. In 2015, he proclaimed on the television news that "*it is only together that we can ensure the preservation of the state and national interests, as well as economic prosperity*". (Dnevnik 2015)⁴. In 2018, Ana Brnabić voiced that « *Vučić,*

³<https://www.istinomer.rs/amnezija/vucic-o-kosovu-nekad-i-sad/>

⁴<https://www.istinomer.rs/amnezija/vucic-o-kosovu-nekad-i-sad/>

with the full support of the Serbian government, is trying to find a solution to the decades-old problem to ensure long-term peace and stability in Kosovo and Metohija, primarily for Serbian citizens » (Beta 2018).

Besides their multiple-audience nature, these declarations gave substance to the Serbian government's new foreign policy doctrine for the entire Balkan region: the preservation of 'regional stability'. Actually, it has been widely agreed within academic and political analysts' circles that it is about diverting Europeanization (reduced to economic and political integration) in favor of partisan goals, that is regaining international status and legitimizing the elite's take on power. The sustainability of this political positioning rests on the capacity of the ruling elite to increase its negotiating power which is made up of 1) high fiscal state incentives to entice foreign firms, and 2) a network of international players that are Russia and, a lesser extent, China, to countervail an initially detrimental balance of power, particularly with regard to the country's territorial integrity, on account of their permanent seat on the UN Security Council. It is a clear break from the Third Way which meant a hybrid geopolitical doctrine based on non-commitment then of nonalignment principles and de facto a renunciation to its political agency which was outlined by Ponomareva as a "smart policy of balancing between two main centers - the EU-NATO and Russia" (Ponomareva 2020, p. 158).

One of the facets of the stabilitocratic regime is an action-oriented attitude that is far closer to what analysts named a 'calculated approach' than any kind of ideology which is designed as much for domestic purposes as for the play of external actors. Thus, given the mandate given to him by European authorities, it is difficult to blame Aleksandar Vučić for trying to find a solution to the Kosovo question. The latter would have taken the form of secret negotiations carried out by the presidents of the two entities – Aleksandar Vučić and Hashim Thaçi – on the division of Kosovo (?)' (Karabeg 2018). Such bilateral talks would de facto exclude Federica Mogherini, EU's high representative for foreign affairs. As reported in various media, the partition of Kosovo did not receive support from the EU and Germany (Trivić 2018) because this option could cause instability in other countries in the Balkan region, while this option seemed to satisfy Russia (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2018). Such a 'local turn' in peacebuilding (see Džuverović 2021) somewhat shows that the role and agency of local actors that were supposed to be empowered is submitted to the persistence of coercive international peacebuilding practices notably from the EU and the United States.

As a result, 'centrality' has categorically lodged Serbia in the game of the great powers and EU on the issue of territorial integrity, but with very little or no latitude, except rhetorically, the two parties then entering a 'war of words' principally to flatter the most radical wings of their respective political landscapes. During the commemoration of the 'March pogrom' on March 17, 2021, Aleksandar Vučić said that the violence against Serbs in Kosovo, like 17 years ago, could not be repeated, because Serbia would provide a 'responsible', clear, and serious response to it". He added: "Kosovo is not our burden, but our cross, and from the cross you can see the resurrection better than under it," read the map of Kosovo with the Serbian flag that was published on its official Instagram account. The former head of the Pristina negotiating team in the dialogue with Belgrade, Edita Tahiri, immediately reacted: "Vučić's Serbia has formulated new provocations against Kosovo, showing its hegemonic attitudes. Once in a dialogue in Brussels where he did the same thing, I responded by saying: He seems to be missing NATO bombings. I repeat it to him. » (Bêta 2021). It should be noted that most comments on this article, without directly paying homage to Aleksandar Vučić's statement, argue that 'Kosovo is Serbian', thus illustrating the direct link between (ethno-)territoriality and nationalism on both sides of the dialogue, and make Serbia's path to EU membership problematic (if not

incompatible), at least from the perspective of Serbian citizens. In addition, such a verbal escalation is in some ways reminiscent of the moments before the dissolution of Yugoslavia. They can only stimulate the already existing resentment within Serbian society.

Because stabilitocracy inevitably contains a certain number of registers in tension which are expressed, for example, in the incompatibility between individualist neoliberal expectations (EU accession) and 'collective awareness', especially concerning ethnicity and national sovereignty, it has also revealed the distrust of a large part of the population towards the policy pursued by Aleksandar Vučić and its government since 2012, balancing between integration into the EU and recognition of the independence of Kosovo: almost 70 percent (69.8%) said they do not support recognition of Kosovo as a condition for European Union membership. It has also received indirect not to say cynical support from the part of the population in terms of 'to whom their 'sympathy goes'. Most importantly, while the Serbian stabilitocratic regime was fundamentally results-oriented, the foreign policy conducted by the ruling elite did not bring significant outcomes. Neither the territorial integrity of Serbia is preserved as, according to a survey conducted by the Institute for European Affairs in 2022, almost half the public believes that Kosovo is lost to Serbia while just a third believe it is not⁵, nor the formation of a community of Serbian municipalities as part of an EU-brokered peace deal, was accepted by the Kosovo head of government⁶.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF STABILITOCRACY

As counterintuitive as it may seem, since the 'October 5th Revolution' which brought down the regime of Slobodan Milošević, the political economy of successive regimes at the head of Serbia, from democrats to stabilitocrats, has remained the same. It falls under the theoretical head of liberal peace that is supposed to literally 'throw' the political economies of war-ravaged societies into a pattern of global convergence towards "market liberalization", the latter being a prerequisite for receiving external economic support (Pugh 2005). The difference between stabilitocrats and democrats lies in the use of a different narrative scheme (that focuses on 'macroeconomic stability') and in the instrumentalization vs. direct application of rules.

Since he came to power in 2012 as prime minister, the dominant narrative pattern has been that of a trade-off between action and inaction, underlying which are 1) the criticism of previous governments incapable of taking Serbia on the path to modernity, 2) the absence of qualitative evaluation of actions where, as management researchers and practitioners have already pointed out a long time ago, it is a question of doing the right thing and doing it well, and 3) the definition of the scope of comparison.

As such, the most striking example concerns the impact of actions undertaken since 2012 aimed at reducing the level of poverty in Serbia. Concerning the poverty headcount ratio (the percentage of the population living on less than \$5.50 a day at 2011 international prices), the result of the actions undertaken is undeniably positive going from 25% in 2012 to 10.10% in 2020⁷. At the same time, if it is better than that of Albania (13.70% in 2020), it remains almost five times higher than that of Croatia (2.10% in 2020)⁸, more than two times higher than that of Bulgaria (4.50% in 2020) and Russia (4.10% in 2020) and without comparison with that

⁵<https://n1info.rs/english/news/poll-shows-half-of-serbians-think-kosovo-is-lost/>

⁶<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-urges-kosovo-back-peace-deal-form-serb-municipalities-2023-01-31/>

⁷<https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/SRB/serbia/poverty-rate>

⁸<https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/HRV/croatia/poverty-rate>

of Belarus (1.30% in 2020). Beyond the relative ineffectiveness of the efforts undertaken by the stabilitocratic regime, Pugh (2005) puts forward the hypothesis that the failure of the neoliberal peace project results from its internal contradictions and because it ignores the socio-economic problems inherent in war-torn societies, even aggravating them in terms of the vulnerability of populations and underground economic activity. It is worth noting that estimations of the weight of the unofficial economy in the percentage of GDP in Serbia in 2018, while it is slightly lower (16%) than in Bosnia and Herzegovina (17.5%) and North Macedonia (17.9%), remains higher than Croatia (11.2%) and Slovenia (7.6%) (Mikulić 2020). Besides, it did not exhibit any significant changes: based on the Survey of Conditions for Doing Business in Serbia, it is estimated that the extent of the shadow economy in the sector of businesses and entrepreneurs for the trade in goods and the payment of wages stood at some 21.2 % of GDP in 2010 (Schneider, Krstić, Arsić and Randelović 2015) whilst it weights roughly 20% of GDP in late 2021 (Atanasijević et al. 2022).

As such, we see an alignment or socio-economic convergence with the prevailing feeling in France for example, that of a downgrading: in Aleksandar Vučić's Serbia, there is certainly a poverty reduction, but a majority of Serbs live less well than their immediate neighbors and the backwardness with the EU countries seems unrecoverable.

From a strict liberal economic standpoint, policies have gradually shifted from an almost sole focus on GDP growth to an increase in foreign direct investment (FDIs) as part of multilateral network politics which implies cooperative reciprocities between Serbia and the EU, Gulf, and Euro-Asian countries. The underlying rationale was to use such alliances to reinforce the rightfulness of the political establishment's strategy both locally and with regard to international donors.

Since the beginning of the Ukraine-Russia military conflict (2022), the ruling elite's economic policy scheme has grown at risk not only because of the excessive dependency on the domestic situation of European firms (in 2022, Western European companies accounted for 41% of the total stock of FDI in Serbia⁹) but also because keeping an economy internationally opened at whatever inflation rate may soar political disaffection (see Keohane and Nye Jr 2001) whether fuel a money-guzzling process to maintain the country's living standards. When facing such a situation, a balance should be found between political idealism and applying conservative principles at the national level and sovereign equality at the international level (see Diesen 2021), an approach that seems illusory given the almost complete loss of autonomy inherent in a stabilitocratic regime.

The other illustration of dependence on foreign 'contributions' (and its corollary the quasi absence of endogenous sources of growth), is represented by the weight of foreign remittances. According to data collected by the National Bank of Serbia (NBS), in 2023, EUR 4.99 billion worth of foreign remittances (including workers' payments, pensions, and other social benefits, as well as financial aid and gifts from abroad, addressed to physical persons in Serbia) arrived in Serbia mainly from EU countries as well as Switzerland, a modest fall from 2022 when this sum amounted to EUR 5.02 billion¹⁰.

⁹[https://www.lloydsbanktrade.com/en/market-potential/serbia/investment#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20latest%20figures,%2C%20and%20C hina%20\(8.7%25\)](https://www.lloydsbanktrade.com/en/market-potential/serbia/investment#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20latest%20figures,%2C%20and%20C hina%20(8.7%25))

¹⁰<https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/604528/NBS-na-ime-doznaka-u-Srbiju-2023-stiglo-4-99-milijardi-evra-najvise-iz-Nemacke>

It is well accepted that diaspora commitment to business activity has a strong influence on the Serbian economy by stimulating both individual consumption and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, Đukić and Bodroža (2022) have shown that remittances are an important factor that not only helps mitigate the harmful effects of (countercyclical) macroeconomics but also contributes significantly to the stability of the exchange rate, even exerting pressure on its appreciation. One can wonder what the socio-economic situation in Serbia would look like without such a high level of foreign remittances from the diaspora given that their amount exceeds that of Serbia's net FDI inflow (EUR 4.2 billion/total = EUR 4.5 billion) which weighted 6.1% of country's gross domestic product¹¹.

A STABILITOCRATIC REGIME CONTRIBUTES TO THE CREATION OF A PERPETUAL PRESENT

Through the instrumentalization of modernity and then progress, the Serbian stabilitocratic regime fundamentally inscribes its action in the growing gap between the two metahistorical categories which are the “field of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” (see Koselleck 1979; Mazurel 2013). This is even what would characterize the entry of contemporary Serbia into 'modernity'. As the historian Reinhart Koselleck pointed out, “During modern times, the difference between experience and expectation continues to grow, or more precisely, modern times are only understood as new times from the moment when expectations, in their impatience, have moved further and further away from all previous experiences” (Koselleck 1979, p. 323).

Under the pretext of containing nationalism, European integration, and maintaining regional stability, stabilitocracy has put the history of Serbia on hold, efforts were undertaken so that the past (from Yugoslavia to Serbia under the 'nationalist' banner) is no longer linked to the future in the mode of an example to imitate but is now seen as an anti-historical process, punctuated by unique events occurring not in but through time and characterized by the growing desire to distance the expectations of all (anti-modern) experiences already made. To be convinced, a look at the evolution of progressives' political slogans is instructive: from 'Forward Serbia' in 2008, then Serbian Progressive Party (SPS), "Let's Get Serbia Moving" [*Pokrenimo Srbiju*] coalition in 2012, till 'Serbia Must not Stop' [*Aleksandar Vučić – Srbija ne sme da stane*] in 2023 which is the name of the electoral lists led by the SPS.

However, without the collective entanglement of past and future, stabilitocracy ultimately has imposed a perpetual present, a liminal and stereotyped zone, stuck between a time which is already no longer, that of the unity and territorial integrity of Serbia, of the perpetuation of a form of autonomy (non-alignment), and a time that is not yet, that of hopes, that successive governments have sold under the label of Europeanization and/or progress, about European integration and, more fundamentally, the restoration of human dignity.

Specifically, by perpetuating a victim/aggressor posture, a certain number of collective traumas ensnared in the 1990s period have not been resolved. While the memory politics carried out in the 2000s were based on stigmatization, those carried out under the regime of stabilitocracy are under that of victimization as illustrated by the treatment of bombarded places such as the Generalštab complex and the Radio Television of Serbia [*Radio Televizija Srbije/RTS*] building. Under stabilitocratic rule, the aggressor/victim rhetoric has been reversed

¹¹<https://seenews.com/news/serbias-net-fdi-slightly-falls-to-42-blm-euro-in-2023-849077#:~:text=In%202023%2C%20Serbia's%20total%20FDI,billion%20euro%20achieved%20in%202022.>

fueling the polarization of the socio-political space. Around this presence of the past ('for the men of yesterday') two types of narratives were then structured: commemorative practices, policies, and stories of the main Serbian politicians revolving around victimhood discourses have responded to local opposition and Western voices centered on an aggressor rhetoric. It is useful to underline that these places are not part of any architectural heritage of the city and, as they have become politicized urban symbols of the 1999 NATO bombing campaign, have lost their ability to be historical actors.

The liberal peacebuilding apparatus has probably stretched to a damaging degree countries that recently got out of conflict like Serbia. As Milošević's rule ended peacefully in 2000, Serbia carried a hulking moral load (Golčevski, von Engelhardt, and Boomgaarden 2013) and had to reconstruct itself as a 'new' state. *Rationalisation oblige*, the stigmatization policies undertaken in the 2000s took away from Serbian citizens the possibility of having control over their history by making it a mark to be erased from the collective memory. Indeed, so that breaches in the personal history of individuals can become a turning point and a peaceful milestone in this history, critical events must both be 'shared' with loved ones and 'sanctioned' by institutions, which gives it a remarkable social stamp (Leclerc-Olive 1998). This was not the case during the mandates of the Democrats and is no longer the case today. Since 2012, urban change has not been 'collectively negotiated' (or collectively shared) but imposed from above as part of the stabilitocratic regime's 'neoliberal - locally reinterpreted - peacebuilding transformation process'. Hence, it precludes any collective (memory and/or identity) rebuilding because this 'space of experience', if it is composed of events that are remembered, the latter have not yet been integrated, leaving inhabitants with unanswered questions such as "*Zašto su nas bombardovali?* [Why did they bomb us?]

As exposed and analyzed in the study conducted with my colleague Gordana Đerić on the attitudes of Serbian citizens towards individual, local, national, regional, and supranational identity self-categorizations, the 'collective guilt' feeling is still strongly ingrained in the minds of the Serbs. The self-identification category, 'human being', ranked first, which may reflect the 'emotional side of war' and results from a 'dehumanization' syndrome. The long-lasting coercive processes linked to EU integration are still counterproductive as they have certainly not eased societal transformation. By focusing on the sole rational aspects of post-war, peacebuilding has completely neglected the emotional side of the conflicts. Moreover, over the past 25 years, 'doing justice' or seeking to build peace has focused mainly on the Serbian side in dealing with the horrors of the recent past. In other words, the search for modernity has replaced the restoration of deprived identity and nationality. Fundamentally, the stabilitocratic regime has not helped Serbs to recuperate their place in humanity and to be accepted as human beings, which would have contributed to reinstating a form of continuity in conceding the Serbs the same rights as to anyone else in the world (Tournois and Đerić 2021).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Contrary to what Hobbes wrote at the beginning of the 17th century, the political community, although an artificial construction, "a product of art" (Keyt 1987, p. 54), no longer binds individuals together in Serbia. In contrast, it polarizes and opposes them.

By caricaturing, we could say that after the disintegration of the 'nationalist fiction', the political body was not able to ensure the unity and continuity of the social (see Revault d'Allonnes 2016), no longer represents Serbia and the former pact appears broken.

First of all, while he was supposed to embody a break with the nationalist and retrograde 'old world', Aleksandar Vučić will be criticized for having sold the Serbs a 'new

world', Europeanized, more modern and associated with economic and social progress, while using techniques from the old world. The corollary of this transformation led the ruling party, as part of its implicit societal project, to 'denationalize' Serbian citizens from their roots, to influence the perception of survival (minimum standards) by focusing on and regularly communicating about the increase in the average salary¹² in Serbia compared to other countries in and outside the Balkan region and, ultimately, to 'buy' or even 'force' commitment to electoral participation.

Then, the category of 'progress' has taken on an immense weight in the foundations of the Serbian stabilitocratic regime, but it does not mark the full opening of the future because it is associated with a new meaning given to the concept of History: the end of repetitive history that dispenses ['bad'] examples (Mazurel 2013). One of its avatars is the development of a material culture that now fills the space formerly occupied by all the symbols considered to reflect a nationalist ideology. It was helped in this by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia (2016) who included in the 'traditionally conservative bloc' intellectual circles, universities, tycoons, the media, the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as various political parties (Democratic Party of Serbia, Dveri, Serbian People's Party) except the ruling party (SNS).

The Serbian case also encourages foreign analyses to move away from idealized assumptions that make social reality look remarkably 'simpler and better' than it truly is (Valentini 2008). In other words, it explicitly questions the validity of a constructivist posture's contention that "identities and competencies are shaped by political activities and interactions" (March and Olsen, 1998, p. 959). The public sphere has developed its own space of interpretation as exemplified by the long-lasting success of McDonald's (and nowadays Starbucks) and the rejection without concessions of the Turkish coffee shop chain Simit Sarayi (Tournois 2024).

All this to say that this broad polarization of Serbia's social, cultural, and political landscape leaves very little room for any debate and alternative vision, enclosing its evolution in a single progressive schema which has become the mantra of the government of Aleksandar Vučić. The latter will go even further by selectively abolishing the presence of the past (notably in terms of urbanization), and literally constructing a future on essentially material bases. Consequently, it is probably, more than ever, useful to remember that the French Revolution was "the model of the progressive 'blank slate' in its chemically pure sense" and that "its excesses were also the occasion of a romantic and conservative reaction" (Bastié 2023, p. 34). Questioning the essence of politics at a pivotal period for France, metaphysician Pierre Boutang¹³ wrote that "our society only has banks as cathedrals" (Boutang 1977/2016) seeing the coming of the "perfectly immoral reign of money", which would wipe out what remained and had survived the previous regimes¹⁴. To paraphrase his words, one could say of today's Serbia that it only has *pekares* [bakeries] and *kladionice* [sports betting shops] as modern cathedrals.

¹²<https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/finance-ministeraverage-salary-in-serbia-around-eur-930-by-the-year-end/>

¹³Pierre Boutang is a French novelist, poet, journalist, and philosopher who held the chair of metaphysics at the Sorbonne from 1976 to 1986.

¹⁴<https://lanef.net/2017/01/01/reprendre-le-pouvoir/>

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