

Another Brick in the (Russian) Wall: Graffiti Propaganda in Serbia

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Abstract

This paper examines pro-Russian political graffiti in Serbia, which proliferated after 2016 as a reaction to Russian aggression in Ukraine, both following the annexation of Crimea and the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022. Since their main purpose was to emphasize Serbian-Russian friendship and support for Russia, the study explores their creation and removal as part of propaganda efforts by both Serbian and Russian regimes. Right-wing organizations and football hooligans played a significant role in their production, often acting as ventriloquists for the regime. The paper also considers the involvement of Russian refugees in Belgrade and local anti-war activists in the destruction of the graffiti. The rise and disappearance of these visual messages highlight how Serbia navigates its relationship with Russia, while simultaneously pursuing closer ties with the West and the EU and supplying arms to Ukraine.

Keywords: political graffiti; Serbia, Russian invasion in Ukraine; Aleksandar Vučić; Vladimir Putin; right-wing extremism; Serbian-Russian relations

Introduction

The significance of graffiti has been immense since ancient times, capturing attention from walls in diverse contexts – be it in ancient Rome, the Mayan acropolises, early Christian churches, medieval China, the Shakespearean era, fascist Italy, Northern Ireland, or Cuba. Across many cultures, graffiti has served as a medium for political expression, rebellion, and protest. The turbulent 20th century left its mark on walls as well, with swastikas, red stars, anti-fascist slogans, messages like “Kilroy was here” during World War II, “Stop War” during the Vietnam

War, graffiti on the western side of the Berlin Wall, “Yankee, go home” in Latin America, “Free Mandela” in South Africa, “Solidarity” in communist Poland, and even the humorous NATO-directed messages like “We are waiting for you” during the bombing of Serbia in 1999.¹

The prominent ‘graffitiologist’ Mitja Velikonja, who was among the first to undertake serious and systematic research on graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe, defines graffiti as specific two-dimensional visual expressions created with various intentions, ranging from aesthetics and culture to politics, identity, fandom, or expressions of love. These are typically produced using tools such as sprayers, felt-tip pens, various types of paint, and chalk, and are closely associated with public spaces, including walls, sidewalks, fences, bridges, underpasses, sports fields, etc.² While graffiti can convey a variety of messages, this paper focuses specifically on the political intent behind pro-Russian graffiti in Serbia in the context of Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Most graffiti with political content in Serbia today can be categorized as patriotic graffiti, aiming to defend Serbian identity, Kosovo, and the brotherhood with the Russian people, while attacking the West (primarily NATO and the EU). The dominant themes are related to Kosovo (“We won’t give up Kosovo,” “Kosovo is the heart of Serbia”), Rio Tinto³ (“Rio Tinto, get out of Serbia”), alongside anti-NATO (“Fuck NATO,” “Never NATO”) and anti-EU (“Never EU”) messages. The anti-Western graffiti hysteria dates back to the 1999 NATO bombing, when various anti-American slogans appeared on the walls across Serbia. One of the more notable and witty messages was scrawled on the wall of the American Reading Room that year: “Columbus, fuck you for being so curious.”⁴ Pro-Russian graffiti in Serbia began appearing in 2016, with the graffiti campaign intensifying after the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The most common messages included “Serbia and Russia,” “Glory to Russia,” and the letter Z, while graffiti such as “Glory to Ukraine” were rare and would quickly be crossed out or painted over.⁵ This starkly contrasts the dominant trends in Europe since the beginning of the Russian invasion, where the reaction has been strong and distinctly pro-Ukrainian, a sentiment also reflected in political graffiti.⁶

Graffiti that has emerged in Serbia since 2016 predominantly promotes pro-Russian attitudes, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine. They serve as a lens for analyzing both Russian and Serbian politics, revealing the involvement of various actors – visible ones, such as right-wing organizations, anti-war activists, including Russian and Ukrainian refugees; and invisible

¹ Pavoni, Andrea / Zaimakis, Yiannis, and Ricardo Campos (eds.). 2021. *Political graffiti in critical times. The aesthetics of street politics*. New York & Oxford: Berghahn, 3-4, 10; Velikonja, Mitja. 2020. *Post-socialist political graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe*. London & New York: Routledge, 7; Ušić, Eric. 2024. *Zidovi pamte. Vizuelna etnografija političkih grafita iz Drugog svjetskog rata i poraća u Itsri*. Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 19.

² Velikonja, *Post-socialist political graffiti*, 7, 25.

³ There is strong opposition in Serbia towards Rio Tinto mining corporation due to environmental concerns over the company’s plans to mine lithium in western Serbia, fearing pollution of land and water, as well as damage to local ecosystems.

⁴ In Serbian it is „Kolumbo, jebem ti mater radoznalu!“. Jokanović, Danilo. *Džaba ste krečili*. Beograd: Gramatik 2004, 84.

⁵ Velikonja, Mitja. 2024. *Ukrajinske vinjete*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 230-231.

⁶ More in: Pavlaković, Vjeran. *Memory politics and the muralization of war: from the dissolution of Yugoslavia to the aggression on Ukraine*. *MEMPOP*, 11 November 2024; Hána, David / Dresler, Alexandra, and Jan Šel. 2024. Political graffiti in Prague as a reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in Central Europe. *Erdkunde* 78(3), 155-174.

ones, such as the Serbian and Russian state authorities. They leave their mark on the walls, reflecting contrasting political views and experiences.

In analyzing pro-Russian graffiti in Belgrade, I draw on the key principles of ‘graffitology’ as outlined by Velikonja – contextualization, intent, and reception.⁷ My research examines the context of the graffiti creation, identifying the individuals or groups responsible, the locations and timing of their emergence/destruction, the messages they conveyed, and their reception in the media, which reveals the deliberate nature of this campaign. Beyond historically contextualizing their production, the analysis focuses on their main characteristics – messages, motifs, colors, symbols, language, and the purposes they serve.

Given that the primary aim of these graffiti is to emphasize Serbian-Russian friendship and Russia’s protection of Kosovo as part of Serbia, highlight Russian heroes whom Serbs should admire, and support the Russian side in the war against Ukraine, they serve as a valuable source for understanding Serbian-Russian relations and Serbia’s foreign policy. This paper also studies contemporary propaganda by Putin’s Russia and Aleksandar Vučić’s regime. I will argue that pro-Russian graffiti in Serbia is part of a coordinated propaganda effort by both Russian and Serbian authorities, but with different agendas. Their emergence and disappearance patterns highlight the complexity of Serbian-Russian relations and reveal the close ties between the Serbian government and right-wing organizations, whose signatures appear on most of these graffiti.

These are not crude graffiti hastily scrawled in the dead of night but rather large murals, which suggests the backing of state support.⁸ The fact that these murals required time and effort to create indicates that those responsible for painting them were unconcerned about being caught and that the murals were created with tacit approval, if not outright support, from the authorities. This especially applies to a part of Belgrade (Vračar) where a true *graffiti war* took place. A series of events has shown that these graffiti were not a result of spontaneity, but rather part of an orchestrated campaign by Serbian patriots, who often work under the direction of the state and its agencies, both domestic and Russian.

The results of the analysis of pro-Russian graffiti in Serbia, and the propaganda of the Russian and Serbian sides in the context of the war in Ukraine, further contribute to the graffiti analysis made by Vjeran Pavlaković, particularly his term “muralization of conflict.” According to Pavlaković, graffiti and murals in Serbia are not just spontaneous expressions of public discontent but a key medium for memorializing past conflicts and creating spaces for support for ongoing political struggles. In this context, pro-Russian graffiti in Serbia reflects political stances and serves as a tool of visual manipulation to affirm political views and mobilize support for Russia’s goals. As shown in Pavlaković’s research, public spaces in Serbia are filled with references to Kosovo, war criminals, and nationalist symbols. These murals, along with other graffiti, act as powerful political statements, reinforcing Serbia’s nationalist narrative and

⁷ Velikonja, *Post-socialist political graffiti*, 6-7.

⁸ Hopper, Philip, and Evan Renfro. 2024. *Political graffiti and global human rights: Take another look*. Lanham, Boulder, London & New York: Lexington Books, 1.

sentiments toward Kosovo, as well as its alignment with Russia amidst the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁹

The analysis of pro-Russian murals further reveals that they perfectly serve the interests of both ‘concerned parties’ – Serbia and Russia. Through these murals, Serbia caters to a large segment of nationalist and pro-Russian voters, who are often supporters of the ruling SNS party, as well as to right-wing organizations and football hooligans, who, as this research shows, are frequently aligned with the regime. Additionally, this altered urban landscape, which openly displays the allegiance of Serbia to Russia and Putin, undoubtedly serves Aleksandar Vučić in demonstrating to the EU that public sentiment in Serbia is pro-Russian. At the same time, it allows him to present himself as skillfully managing such public opinion while delivering weapons to Ukraine and voting in the UN to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In this way, Vučić continues to pursue a policy that formally aims for Serbia’s EU integration while maintaining strong ties with Russia. On the other hand, this graffiti propaganda also benefits Russia by projecting an image of widespread public support to Russia from Serbia, an EU non-member but still a European state. Moreover, it extends this propaganda further across the Western Balkans region.

Graffiti in context (2014-2024)

To understand graffiti propaganda in Serbia, it is necessary to place it in the broader context of Serbian-Russian relations. Serbia has long navigated a balance between its aspirations to join the EU and its deep-rooted ties with Russia. President Vučić has resisted (and continues to resist as of January 2025) imposing sanctions on Russia for its aggression against Ukraine, while Moscow remains Serbia’s key ally in opposing the independence of its former province, Kosovo.

Since 2014, manifestations of Serbian-Russian friendship have been omnipresent in political relations, church relations, the media, cultural cooperation, the economy and energy sector, scientific and academic collaboration, public spaces, and social media. Numerous examples of everyday Russophilia in Serbia, shaped by both Russian and Serbian propaganda, are evident. Some notable examples include the renaming of the village of Adžinci to Putinovo, the construction of the ‘Putin’s Church’ in Vojvodina, billboards featuring Vladimir Putin, “Together” billboards symbolizing both the strategic partnership of NIS and Gazprom¹⁰ and Serbian-Russian friendship, and the intertwined Serbian and Russian flags, which further visually emphasize the symbolic connection of the Serbian and Russian people. Additionally, souvenirs featuring Putin are sold in Belgrade’s main pedestrian zone, along with the appearance of the letter *Z* across Serbia, Sputnik and RT media outlets,¹¹ and new Russian monuments scattered

⁹ Pavlaković, *Memory politics*.

¹⁰ In 2008, the Serbian government and Gazprom signed an agreement to sell Serbia’s state-owned oil company NIS to Russia’s state-owned Gazprom Neft for €400 million, along with documents on constructing the South Stream gas pipeline and the Banatski Dvor gas storage facility. This deal was highly unfavorable for Serbia.

¹¹ Serbia is unique in that Russian agencies Sputnik (portal active since 2015) and RT Balkan (operating as a Serbian news portal since 2022, and television network since December 2024) are active within it despite Russian aggression in Ukraine.

throughout the Serbian capital. A significant part of this everyday Russophilia is expressed on walls across the country.¹²

In the overall Russification of Serbia, myths play a significant role, especially those that emphasize the centuries-old Serbian-Russian friendship. Throughout this centuries-long relationship, there have been periods of collaboration, patronage, and protection, as well as conflicts and confrontations. As a great power, whenever decisions about the fate of Serbia were made, Russia sought to participate in the decision-making, safeguarding its own vital interests, which have not always aligned with the interests of Serbia.¹³ To debunk the myth about Serbian-Russian friendship, it is sufficient to revisit the 20th century. Both the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and socialist Yugoslavia maintained a certain distance from the Soviet state. At the state level, the relationship between Serbia and Russia was characterized by closeness for only approximately 20 of 120 years, spanning from Serbia's independence in 1878 until the turn of the 21st century. These periods of closeness occurred during 1878-1880, 1903-1917, and 1944-1948. On the other hand, in the same period, Serbia had close ties with the United States, with only two breaks – 1945-1948 and in the 1990s.

After the end of the Cold War and during the wars of the 1990s, especially during the 1999 NATO bombing, Serbia and Russia experienced a significant rapprochement, with anti-Western narratives reaching their peak. After the fall of Milošević, a new phase of Serbia-Russia rapprochement began under President Boris Tadić, when Serbia started emphasizing the 'four pillars' of its foreign policy (EU, USA, Russia, and China) and, as Slobodan Markovich wisely observed, flirted with Russia whenever its veto was needed. The declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008 became the central issue, if not the cornerstone, of modern Serbian-Russian relations. Although Russia's support for Serbia and its refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence was publicly portrayed as an act of friendship, the fact remains that this new situation made Serbia highly dependent on Russia's goodwill regarding Kosovo's status.¹⁴

After Russia began to have increasingly anti-Western positions, Serbia's relations with the EU became even more complicated, particularly since 2014 and the annexation of Crimea. Simultaneously, Aleksandar Vučić's autocratic rule was being established, modeled significantly on Putin's governance, with ideas of a 'Serbian World' inspired by the 'Russian World.' However, despite the proclaimed emotional alignment with Russia, Vučić's economic preferences leaned more toward dollars and euros. Thus, European integration and cooperation with NATO continued.¹⁵

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Moscow's use of propaganda became pivotal in Serbia and the Balkans, and the military and political cooperation between the two countries increased.¹⁶ The year 2014 was pivotal also in Serbia due to the strengthening of Vučić's

¹² Vučetić, Radina. 2024. *Myths, monuments and military bases: Unraveling Russian soft power in Serbia. Paper presented at the 28th Annual World Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN), 16-18 May 2024.*

¹³ Jovanović, Miroslav. 2010. *Dve Rusije: O dva dominantna diskursa Rusije u srpskoj javnosti*, in *Odnosi Rusije i Srbije na početku XXI veka*, edited by Petrović, Žarko. Beograd: ISAC Fond, 11–18, 15.

¹⁴ Markovich, Slobodan G. 2023. *Serbian Democracy and Russia, 1990-2024. Historische Mitteilungen*, 34, 186, 193.

¹⁵ Radio Slobodna Evropa. 2024. *Srbija ostaje vojno neutralna, ostaje otvorena za saradnju s NATO. Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 17 December 2024.

¹⁶ Shymkevych, Kateryna. 2023. *A forgotten friendship: Serbo-Ukrainian relations and pro-Russian narratives.*

autocratic regime and commemorating the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War, when the idea began to gain prominence that Russia had sacrificed itself, or its empire, to protect Serbia in 1914. Since that year, there have been several manifestations of the 'Russo-Serbian brotherhood', including the installation of a monument to Tsar Nicholas II Romanov in the heart of Belgrade. All this was complemented by visits from Vladimir Putin to Serbia and the bestowment of an honorary doctorate upon him.

These expressions of Serbian-Russian relations and myths about long-lasting friendship represent much more than just a strategic partnership between the two countries. With such a Russified everyday life, it is not surprising that public opinion analyses show both a completely pro-Russian sentiment and, on the other hand, an anti-Western mood among the general population of Serbia. Polls show that the majority of Serbian citizens continue to consider Russia as their true ally, despite the EU being Serbia's major financial supporter and trading partner.¹⁷ According to the polls from 2023, Putin is the world leader that Serbs admire most; 95% of Serbs see Russia as a true ally (only 11% see the EU that way); 68% of Serbs believe that NATO was responsible for the war in Ukraine; and 82% opposed Serbia from imposing sanctions on Russia.¹⁸ Analyses from 2024 also indicate that pro-Russian sentiment has further increased in Serbia, while support for EU membership has fallen to 40%. Additionally, Russia is perceived as the greatest partner, while America is seen as the biggest threat.¹⁹

However, the image presented by pro-regime media differs significantly from the reality unfolding behind the scenes. The alternative picture of Vučić's foreign policy balancing act is far from Russia's expectations of Serbia as a strategic partner in the Balkans and contrasts with the strongly anti-Western and pro-Russian narrative constructed in the public sphere. Notably, while Serbia has refrained from imposing sanctions on Russia since the start of the war in Ukraine, it voted at the UN General Assembly for a resolution condemning Russia's invasion and calling for the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine. Further highlighting Serbia's drift away from Russia are *Financial Times* estimates from June 2023 that Serbia has indirectly exported ammunition worth €800 million to Ukraine through intermediary countries since the onset of the invasion.²⁰ Simultaneously with the export of weapons to Ukraine and Serbia's growing alignment with NATO and the West, pro-Russian messages on the walls have started to fade.

How it started, and how it is going

Since 2016, a special part of Russian and Serbian propaganda has been related to the walls. While in politics one can speak of the intentions of Vučić's regime to balance East and West, judging by the walls and graffiti on them, there is no dilemma – nationalist and pro-Russian messages dominate Serbian walls. However, the question remains how much of a role Russian

Belgrade: Beogradski centar za bezbedonosnu politiku, 1-14, 9.

¹⁷ European Parliament. 2023. Russia and the Western Balkans: Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference. *European Parliament Briefing*, 18 August 2023, 1.

¹⁸ European Parliament, *Russia and the Western Balkans*, 2.

¹⁹ Đurđić, Milena. 2024. Mekarti: Prorusko raspoloženje u Srbiji izazov za cijeli region, brine pad održke za NATO u Crnoj Gori. *VOA*, 29 April 2024.

²⁰ Russell, Alec, and Marton Dunai. 2023. Serbia turns blind eye to its ammunition ending up in Ukraine. *The Financial Times*, 22 June 2023.

propaganda plays in creating these graffiti versus that of the Serbian authorities. It also raises the issue of whether Vučić, through right-wing organizations, is using propaganda on Serbia's walls to mobilize domestic public opinion in favor of Russia, while simultaneously 'intimidating' the West with the apparent spread of Russian influence. How these graffiti are created, and even more so how they disappear, reflects Vučić's policy of balancing between Russia and the West. This contemporary attitude toward pro-Russian graffiti also has its history.

The Russians began appearing more prominently on the walls of the former Yugoslavia at the end of World War II, as part of joint Soviet propaganda and the propaganda efforts of the new Yugoslav communist authorities. In addition to the graffiti "Long Live Comrade Tito" and "Death to Fascism – Freedom to the People," during the liberation and the establishment of the communist regime, walls were also adorned with graffiti such as "Long Live Stalin" and "Long Live the Red Army," along with the red star and the hammer and sickle.²¹ However, the period of socialist Yugoslavia, particularly after the break with the Soviet Union in 1948, led to the cessation of transmitting foreign policy messages through this medium, resulting in a long period of foreign policy discontinuity until the 1990s. The exceptions were murals dedicated to solidarity with the Non-Aligned Movement, such as those supporting Allende and Chile in the 1970s. One such mural was created during Latin America Week in November 1977, dedicated to the anti-colonial struggle and solidarity among underdeveloped countries.²² The number of graffiti with explicit foreign policy messages increased with the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the wars of the 1990s, and in Serbia, they were predominantly associated with anti-NATO and anti-Western hysteria, with the peak during the 1999 bombing.²³

The conflict with the Soviet Union in 1948 led to the removal of pro-Russian messages from walls – some were painted over, while others faded over time. However, Russia returned to Serbian walls with the renewed rapprochement between Serbia and Russia. One striking example of Russia's symbolic return is tied to the walls – a once-invisible graffiti, unnoticed for decades, suddenly reemerged into view. In 2020, one such inscription, "Verified, no mines" (*Проверено, мин нет*)²⁴ from 1944 and the days of liberation, Belgrade was renewed and protected in the city center, with the help of the Russian news agency Sputnik. In the context of the new culture of memory influenced by Russian propaganda, it is important that something that had been invisible for nearly 70 years suddenly becomes visible, serving as a reminder of the significance of the Red Army in the liberation of Belgrade.²⁵ This case of creation (1944), fading (post-1948), and reappearance (2020), serves as a poignant example of the complex nature of Serbian-Russian relations throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

²¹ Ušić, *Zidovi pamte*, 85.

²² SKC mural. *Mapiranje nesvrstanosti* (accessed: 23 December 2024).

²³ Jokanović, *Džaba ste krečili*, 84.

²⁴ The phrase "Проверено, мин нет" ("Verified, no mines") on the facades and buildings originates from Soviet military practice during World War II. Soviet military engineers would leave this message after clearing an area of mines to inform troops and civilians that the location was safe.

²⁵ Miloš, Senka. 2020. *Posle pisanja Sputnjika – Provereno nema mina u centru Beograda!*. *Sputnik*, 8 August 2020.

Figure 1: “Verified, no mines”, Belgrade, 8 August 2020



Source: RTS. 2020. Provereno, min net – natpis u centru Beograda obnovljen i zaštićen staklom. RTS, 8 August 2020.

The real *graffiti war* with a contemporary (pro)Russian agenda started with the mural dedicated to the late commander of the Russian paramilitary formation of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic, Arsen Pavlov Motorola, on 6 November 2016 in Novi Beograd. Motorola commanded a rebel battalion “Sparta”, which took part in major offensives against Ukrainian government forces at Donetsk airport, and was accused by Ukraine of war crimes.²⁶ Serbian tabloids shed light on the background of the creation of this mural immediately after Motorola’s death. The daily *Informer* states that the right-wing organizations Serbian League (*Srpska liga*) and Movement “1389” (*Pokret “1389”*) are responsible for the mural dedicated to Motorola, aiming to confirm “the unbreakable bond between the Serbian and Russian people, as well as the importance of the struggle for the freedom of Russians in Ukraine and Serbs in Serbian lands”.²⁷

Figure 2: Arsen Pavlov Motorola



Source: Šuica. Hana. Street art (accessed: 16 April 2024).

Between November 2016 and February 2017, several pro-Russian murals appeared in Belgrade and Novi Sad featuring Arsen Pavlov Motorola, Russian pilot Oleg Peshkov, who was killed on the Turkish-Syrian border, and Mikhail Tolstykh Givi, commander of the Donetsk People’s Republic ‘Somalia’ battalion and a fighter in Donbas since 2014. A mural dedicated to Givi was

²⁶ BBC. 2016. ‘Motorola’: Ukraine rebels accused Kiev over commander’s death. BBC, 17 October 2016.

²⁷ Informer. 2016. Oslikan mural komandantu Motoroli na NBG: potvrđeno neraskidivo jedinstvo Rusije i Srbije. *Informer*, 11 November 2016.

also ‘signed’ by the far-right organizations Srpska Liga and Movement “1389”. The intention was, as with the mural for Motorola, to express “admiration for the great Russian heroes of the modern era and to show that their legacy will live on even after their brutal murders committed by Ukrainian terrorists.”²⁸

The right-wing groups behind these murals cannot be viewed in isolation from the ruling SNS party, which further highlights the role of Vučić’s regime in graffiti propaganda. Miša Vacić, leader of the Movement “1389”, testified that he initiated these actions as the leader of this right-wing movement while also employed at the Office for Kosovo and Metohija under the Government of Serbia. He later publicly spoke about the state’s involvement in numerous ‘Russian’ projects in Serbia – from celebrating May 9 not as Victory Day over fascism but as the Day of the Immortal Regiment, to the construction of numerous monuments, and ensuring that “the media speaks of Russia in the most favorable terms, as a savior and protector of the free world.” He also underlined that “if Aleksandar Vučić did not want all of this to happen, it would not have happened.”²⁹ No wonder some political analysts believe that Vacić is “an extension of the government, saying what the authorities think but dare not say openly.”³⁰ This also supports Velikonja’s thesis of the ‘unholy alliance’ between street-level and official (in this case, state-sponsored) nationalism.³¹ However, the case of pro-Russian graffiti from 2016 and 2017 demonstrated that the authorities used right-wing organizations to showcase an affinity for Russia, even though Serbia never accepted the annexation of Crimea, just as Ukraine never recognized the independence of Kosovo.

Although it is evident that these graffiti were created with the unspoken approval of Aleksandar Vučić, there was opposition to them from the beginning, even though it seemed that the broader public at the time (2016 and 2017) was largely uninterested in the situation in Donetsk. Namely, a couple of days later, the mural dedicated to the ‘pro-Russian hero’ Motorola was vandalized. It was pelted with eggs, and the word “killer” appeared on it in English, Russian, and Ukrainian, which indicates that the message was directed at observers outside Serbia, primarily Russians and Ukrainians.³² The damage, however, was quickly repaired, and his mural remains intact to this day.

Just a few days after the appearance of the Motorola mural, another one featuring then newly elected President Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, with the inscription *Kosovo is Serbia* in Serbian, Russian, and English, appeared in the same part of New Belgrade where the Motorola mural was located. According to a brief report in the news, it was created with the strong belief that “the two presidents are committed to the stance that Kosovo is part of Serbia”.³³ This mural, however, was not signed, although both the timing and location point to right-wing organizations that began decorating Serbian walls with pro-Russian graffiti in 2016.

²⁸ E.B. 2024. Ultrasničarske organizacije oslikale mural u čast ubijenom komandantu ‘donjecke vojske’. *Blic*, 13 February 2017.

²⁹ Kurir. 2019. Miša Vacić: Srbi i Rusi isti narod!. *Kurir*, 24 September 2019.

³⁰ Miladinović, Aleksandar. 2019. Ko je Miša Vacić: ‘Srpski Julije Cezar’ ili ‘politička starleta. *BBC News na srpskom*, 18 November 2019.

³¹ Velikonja, *Post-Socialist political graffiti*, 108.

³² Vesti online. 2016. Oskrnavljen mural proruskom heroju na Novom Beogradu. *Vesti online*, 11 November 2016.

³³ Telegraf. 2016. Kosovo connects Trump and Putin: Mural appeared in New Belgrade. *Telegraf*, 7 December 2016.

Figure 3: *Kosovo is Serbia* mural with Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin



Source: The Srpska Times. 2016. Mural shows Putin, Trump, and message 'Kosovo is Serbia'. *The Srpska Times*, 5 December 2016.

It is important to emphasize the role of Kosovo in Serbian-Russian relations because Russian diplomacy began exploiting the topic of Kosovo for its purposes in 2008. After the proclamation of Kosovo's independence, Russia's veto power in the UN to block the recognition of Kosovo's independence became its main leverage in Serbia.³⁴ Consequently, Kosovo has been one of the key themes in pro-Russian graffiti, whether it is the 2016 mural of Putin and Trump, the 2021 mural of Russian volunteer Albert Andiev, or the 2023 series of graffiti "When the army returns to Kosovo".

After a few years of 'pause,' the graffiti campaign resumed shortly before Russia's aggression against Ukraine and intensified with the start of the war. Murals depicting the Russian volunteer Albert Andiev, who fought on the Serbian side in Kosovo in 1999 and lost his eye in battle, appeared in 2021 in the center of Belgrade (near Youth center – *Dom omladine*), and in various parts of Serbia – in Vranje, Odžaci, Vlasotince, Požega, and Sremska Mitrovica, after he died from covid on 14 March 2021 in Batajnica hospital.³⁵ Some of these murals included his in a way bizarre words: "I didn't lose my eye; I left it there. When all other reasons disappear, I will still have that one reason to return to Kosovo and Metohija – to go and find my eye."³⁶

Figure 4: Albert Andiev, Belgrade, 2021



Source: Wikimedia Commons. Mural Albert Andiev (accessed: 11 November 2025).

³⁴ Markovich, *Serbian democracy*, 193-196.

³⁵ During the COVID-19 pandemic, Batajnica Hospital in Belgrade, Serbia, became one of the primary facilities for treating patients with severe COVID-19 symptoms.

³⁶ Glas javnosti. 2023. Veran Srbiji do smrti! Rus Albert Andijev izgubio oko u ratu: Najteže mi je palo naređenje da se povlačimo sa Kosova i Metohije!. *Glas javnosti*, 25 March 2023.

Figure 5: Albert Andiev, Odžaci



Source: Redportal.rs. *Mural Albertu Andievu: Rus koji je ratovao uz Srbe i umro od korone* (accessed: 11 November 2025).

Andiev's murals were intended to (re)connect Serbia, Kosovo, and Russia, portraying Russia as the protector of Kosovo, which would become one of the cornerstones of Russian-Serbian relations in the 21st century. Andiev was described as someone who "came to Kosovo and Metohija as a volunteer and remained devoted to Serbia until his death, serving as a prime example of the strong bond between Serbs and Russians, especially in the most challenging times."³⁷ It is worth mentioning that he arrived in Kosovo as a Russian volunteer in April 1999, during the NATO bombing, and served as a sniper in the 549th Motorized Brigade of the Priština Corps of the Yugoslav Army under the command of General Božidar Delić. Within the brigade's zone of responsibility, Serbian forces killed more Albanian civilians than in the zones of any other brigade operating in Kosovo during 1999.³⁸ From this perspective, Andiev's mural was one in a series of murals depicting war criminals from the wars of the 1990s, whom Serbian nationalists turned into heroes.

The graffiti campaign intensified with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The entire year of 2022 was marked by support for Russia, reflected in graffiti across Serbia, the Republic of Srpska, and Kosovo. For instance, on 1 April 2022, graffiti appeared in North Mitrovica, Kosovo, supporting the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine. It featured the letter Z in the colors of the Russian flag, a tank, and the inscription "Kosovska Mitrovica. Serbs for Russians."³⁹ The letter Z, along with the phrase "Death to Ukraine," spread like wildfire across walls throughout Serbia, Serbian-populated areas of Kosovo, and the Republic of Srpska. Such messages, along with intertwined Serbian and Russian flags, filled the walls in Belgrade as well.

³⁷ Glas javnosti, *Veran Srbiji do smrti!*.

³⁸ About the crimes of this unit more in: Fond za humanitarno pravo. *Dosije: 549. motorizovana brigada Vojske Jugoslavije, Fonda za humanitarno pravo* (accessed: 19 December 2024).

³⁹ Holodomor Museum, *Graffiti with Z*.

Figure 6: Kosovska Mitrovica, 1. April 2022



Source: Holodomor Museum. 2022. [Graffiti with Z in Kosovo](#). *Holodomor Museum*, 10 November 2022.

One of the illustrative examples of the *graffiti war*, as well as Serbian-Russian relations during the war in Ukraine, and the depiction of the trinity in the relationship between Russia/Russian propaganda, far-right organizations, and Aleksandar Vučić, are the murals of Darya Dugina. Dugina, the daughter and collaborator of Russian far-right figure and ideologue Alexander Dugin, who influenced Putin, and who is highly esteemed in Russian official circles, died in a car explosion on 20 August 2022, for which the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) blamed the Ukrainian secret service. Only a few days later, murals dedicated to Darya Dugina appeared in the center of Belgrade. Right-wing organizations, specifically People’s Patrols (*Narodne patrolne*) and the Serbian Party *Zavetnici*, were behind these murals. While the first Dugina mural, painted under Branko’s Bridge, reflects the tensions and *graffiti war* between pro-Russian and anti-Russian forces in Belgrade, the second mural more vividly illustrates the ‘hidden ties’ between Serbian authorities and far-right groups.

The first mural appeared under Branko’s Bridge on the evening of 23 August 2022, featuring her name and an inscription in Russian: “The Russian death of a girl who soared into the sky with white hair and August rain.” This location was chosen for its high traffic, as Branko’s Bridge is a significant public transport hub and an essential part of the city’s infrastructure, connecting the center of Belgrade with New Belgrade. This mural was created by the far-right organization People’s Patrols, which announced on their Telegram channel that evening that they had made the mural for a ‘great friend of the Serbian people.’⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Radio Slobodna Evropa. 2022. [Desničari isertali mural darije Dugine u Beogradu](#). *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 24 August 2022.

Figure 7: Mural of Darya Dugina, 24 August 2022



Source: Danas. 2022. Ispod Brankovog mosta osvanuo mural Dariji Duginoj. *Danas*, 24 August 2022.

Figure 8: Mural of Darya Dugina, 27 August 2022



Source: Beljan, Mateja. 2022. Prekrečen mural Darije Dugine u Beogradu: Umesto njenog pogleda ostala je belina, a ispisana je i čudna poruka. *Telegraf*, 27 August 2022.

However, this mural did not remain intact for long. Just two days after it was created, the mural was defaced, with Darya’s face completely painted over in white, and all inscriptions, including her name, erased, with a message in Serbian, “Work in progress!”⁴¹ In response, on 3 September, the Zavetnici party created a new mural in the city center, accompanied by the Russian inscription “Eternal glory to our Russian sister.” The party’s leader, Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, stated that “Darya Dugina is a symbol of the fight against globalism and totalitarianism, which have brought misery to entire nations and states.”⁴²

The second Dugina’s mural was vandalized as well in October 2022, when her face was painted over again, this time with red paint.⁴³ Although these two main murals were destroyed, as of December 2024, Belgrade is filled with stencil-made graffiti of Darya Dugina signed by People’s Patrols. Serbia went so far as to become the first (and only) country in Europe to organize the

⁴¹ N1. 2022. Prefarban mural Dariji Duginoj u Beogradu. *N1*, 26 August 2022.

⁴² H.J.I., *Zavjetnici nacrtali mural*.

⁴³ *Espresso*. 2022. Na Dorćolu prekrečen mural posvećen Dariji Duginoj: Još uvek nisu poznati počinioci. *Espresso*, 23 October 2022.

'Days of Darya Dugina' in December 2024, where one of the speakers (via video call) was her father, Aleksandr Dugin.⁴⁴

Figure 9: Mural of Darya Dugina, 3 September 2022



Source: Instagram. [Zavetnici](#) (accessed: 11 November 2025).

Figure 10: Mural of Darya Dugina, 5 November 2023



Source: Jakšić, Pavle. 2023. [Šta nam poručuju beogradski graffiti i murali?](#) *NI*, 5 November 2023.

Figure 11: Stencil of Darya Dugina, Belgrade, 28 December 2024



Source: Photo by author

Inseparable from the murals dedicated to Motorola, Givi, and Darya Dugina are the murals honoring the Wagner mercenary group. Shortly before the mural dedicated to Darya Dugina, a mural of Stefan Dimitrijević, an extreme Serbian right-winger who died serving in the Wagner mercenary group, also appeared in downtown Belgrade.⁴⁵ One of the last murals of this kind

⁴⁴ Trklja, Milica. 2024. [Dani Darije Dugine: Ugradila je svoj život u bolji svet](#). *Sputnik Srbija*, 6 December 2024.

⁴⁵ Mirilović, Filip. 2022. [Mural Dariji Duginoi u Beogradu: Delo Narodnih patrola](#). *Vreme*, 24 August 2022.

appeared in January 2023, when a mural dedicated to Wagner was painted on the wall under Belgrade's Branko Bridge, at the same location where a mural of Darya Dugina briefly stood in the summer of 2022. The mural features a black background with a red skull and the slogan "Reverse side of the medal, true to yourself" with the signature of the far-right organization People's Patrol.⁴⁶ However, this mural also did not last long. It was first painted over with black paint accompanied by the graffiti "No war," then restored, only to be painted over again, this time with green paint.⁴⁷ It is obvious that, despite the continuous right-wing organization of pro-Russian graffiti creation, in Serbia, opposition to such murals exists, primarily coming from Russians who have fled to Serbia from the war and Putin's regime.⁴⁸ This is evidenced by the fact that many of these murals have been destroyed or painted over with white or with colors of the Ukrainian flag during this *graffiti war*.

Graffiti War on Putin's Wall

Nowhere is the *graffiti war* more evident and intense than at the corner of Kralja Milutina and Njegoševa streets in Vračar, where a mural featuring Vladimir Putin appeared shortly after Russia's aggression against Ukraine began. Putin thus joined a kind of 'street gallery' in Njegoševa Street, featuring Serbian heroes (and war criminals) favored by nationalists, evoking the spirit of the 1990s. This gallery includes figures such as Petar Petrović Njegoš, Gavriilo Princip, World War I heroes Stepa Stepanović, Živojin Mišić, and Radomir Putnik, as well as the repeatedly painted and defaced mural of Ratko Mladić, who was convicted of war crimes and genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Hague Tribunal. Despite efforts by human rights activists (primarily the Youth Initiative for Human Rights – YIHR)⁴⁹ to have his mural removed, round-the-clock guards were organized to prevent any attempts to deface it with paint. The police have been criticized for intervening to protect the mural rather than allowing protests or actions against it. This has fueled accusations that the government indirectly supports nationalist and far-right groups.

To study political graffiti, it is important to look into the location and time of their occurrence since they are usually on the walls of the most frequented streets, but also on the government buildings, party or media headquarters, shopping malls, monuments...⁵⁰ The Belgrade municipality of Vračar is the key location for graffiti analysis due to the high concentration of political graffiti. It is important to understand why Njegoševa Street in Vračar was chosen to serve as the 'showcase' for the Serbian regime and far-right nationalist groups. As writer Vladimir Arsenijević describes it, Njegoševa is a small but exceptionally significant street for Belgrade's urban culture, stretching its length of barely one kilometer, filled with cafes, wine bars, and cozy restaurants, which in recent years has become a principal target of the ultra-right movement. Beyond being located in Belgrade's elite center, being cosmopolitan and inclusive, the

⁴⁶ N1. 2023. [Mural dedicated to Russian 'Wagner' group appears in Belgrade](#). *N1*, 15 January 2023.

⁴⁷ Danas. 2023. [Ponovo prefarban mural posvećen ruskoj paravojnoj formaciji 'Vagner' ispod Brankovog mosta](#). *Danas*, 23 January 2023.

⁴⁸ In addition to pro-Russian graffiti, Belgrade also features murals with romantic and lyrical messages in Russian, which provide a strikingly different and contrasting reflection of the values of Russian immigrants in Serbia compared to the official Russian propaganda in Belgrade and Serbia.

⁴⁹ YIHR. 2023. [Inicijativa podnela prijave za uklanjanje više od 300 murala i grafita posvećenih Ratku Mladiću](#). *YIHR*, 13 March 2023.

⁵⁰ Velikonja, *Post-socialist political graffiti*, 39.

street has long been associated with urban and alternative culture since the late 1970s.⁵¹ It has featured in rock songs and subculture movements and represents everything contrary to what Aleksandar Vučić's regime and the conservative nationalist right-wing stand for. It is no surprise then that Aleksandar Vučić's ventriloquist's dummy, Miša Vacić, made the statement in 2021, as quoted by Arsenijević, that "Vračar needs to be Serbianized."⁵² Njegoševa Street thus became the ideal address for adding the main Russian hero of today (from the perspective of Serbian nationalists) to the gallery of Serbian heroes.

For the analysis of political graffiti, key questions include: how does its meaning change over time; why, when, and how is it made and defaced, and by whom; what are the different responses to political graffiti from ordinary people and from the 'official' leadership?⁵³ In that sense, Putin's mural serves as an ideal example for analyzing Serbian-Russian relations during the Russo-Ukrainian war, as well as for examining both Russian and Serbian propaganda, and the reactions of Russian and Ukrainian refugees and local activists to this propaganda. The use of graffiti, especially featuring Putin's image, has become a part of Russian propaganda in various parts of the world, as evidenced by examples from Africa, where Russia is boosting its operations to gain influence.⁵⁴

A mural of Putin appeared on the morning of 5 March 2022 in Njegoševa Street, near the well-known "Vladislav Ribnikar" Elementary School and the prestigious Third Belgrade High School. Putin's mural emerged just over a week after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, featuring the word "Brother" (*Брат* – is the same word in both Serbian and Russian, sharing the same meaning and written identically in Cyrillic) alongside the Russian and Serbian flags. The use of Serbian and Russian flags on nearly all graffiti and billboards in Belgrade carries additional propaganda and symbolic significance, as the Serbian and Russian flags share a similar horizontal tricolor design (red, blue, white), but differ in color order and details.⁵⁵ According to eyewitnesses, the police observed the creation of the graffiti 'in relaxed conversation' with the group of hooligans painting the Putin mural, and after checking their documents, allowed them to finish their work.⁵⁶ This confirms that this type of graffiti did not emerge like most political graffiti – in a rush – but was created with the authorities' consent.

⁵¹ More in: Arsenijević, Vladimir. 2026. *Down Njegoševa Street*. Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), forthcoming.

⁵² Arsenijević, *Down Njegoševa Street*.

⁵³ Hopper and Renfro, *Political graffiti*, 3.

⁵⁴ Nwonwu, Chiagozie / Tukur, Fauziyya / Alo, Olaronke, and Maria Korenyuk. 2024. [War 'tour', football and graffiti: How Russia is trying to influence Africa](#). *BBC*, 10 September 2024.

⁵⁵ The Serbian flag features red, blue, and white stripes from top to bottom, while the Russian flag has white, blue, and red. Additionally, the blue on the Serbian flag is slightly darker than the blue on the Russian flag.

⁵⁶ Arsenijević, *Down Njegoševa Street*.

Figure 12: Mural of Vladimir Putin in Njegoševa Street, 5 March 2022



Source: N1. 2022. Mural sa likom Vladimira Putina osvanuo na Vračaru. *N1*, 5 March 2022.

Figures 13-17: Murals of Vladimir Putin in Njegoševa Street, 6 March 2022



Source: Radio Free Europe. 2022. The short, colorful life of Belgrade's Putin mural. *Radio Free Europe*, 9 December 2022.

29 April 2022



2 June 2022



14 August 2022



5 October 2022



6 December 2022



The night before the mural's appearance, protests in support of the "Russian occupation of Ukraine" were organized in Belgrade in front of the monument to Tsar Nicholas II Romanov, which was unveiled on 16 November 2014. As reported, Serbia was the only European country to host such a protest, while the entire West strongly condemned Russia.⁵⁷ The tabloid *Telegraf* described the gathering as a protest against Serbia's policy toward the Russian Federation, specifically criticizing Serbia's support for the UN Resolution condemning Russia's attack on Ukraine and affirming the importance of respecting Ukraine's territorial integrity, considering it a betrayal of Serbian interests and friendship with Russia. On that occasion, a procession of several hundred people blocked traffic, trampled EU flags, and marched to the Russian Federation's embassy. The group People's Patrols reportedly organized the protest.⁵⁸

The Croatian government-owned news agency Hina provided more details, describing this event organized by the right-wing groups that accused Aleksandar Vučić of revealing his 'traitorous character' by voting for the UN resolution condemning Russia's attack on Ukraine. Chanting "Serbia – Russia – we don't need the (European – R.V.) Union," they declared that "Russophobia in Serbia is only a statistical error," that "every Russian is a brother to Serbs," and that "no Serb will impose sanctions on Russia or Belarus."⁵⁹

Although they were supposed to appear as opposition to Vučić, the People's Patrols are another right-wing group operating with the tacit approval of Serbian authorities while simultaneously serving Russian interests. This far-right organization, known for its hate speech against migrants, as well as its support for Serbs in Kosovo and its backing of Russia, intensified its cooperation with Russian paramilitary groups following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The People's Patrols organized numerous rallies in Belgrade in support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and their leader, Damjan Knežević, became a welcome guest in Russia. In May 2022, he visited Moscow, where he garnered the attention of prominent Russian media outlets, including the state-run RT. Knežević, along with Miša Vacić and Russian ambassador Aleksandr

⁵⁷ Koha. 2022. U Beogradu se pojavljuje mural 'brata' Putina. *Koha*, 5 March 2022.

⁵⁸ *Telegraf*. 2022. Skup podrške Rusiji u Beogradu. *Telegraf*, 4 March 2022.

⁵⁹ Hina. 2022. Desničari u Beogradu održali prosvjed podrške ruskom narodu: 'Svaki Rus Srbinu je brat'. *Hina*, 4 March 2022.

Bocan-Kharchenko, also appeared in a documentary about Kosovo “Serbia, Signs of War” (*Srbija, znaci rata*), which suggested that war is the only solution to the Kosovo issue, advocating for Serbia to reclaim Kosovo just as Russia reclaimed Crimea.⁶⁰ The Russian paramilitary group Wagner openly supports the People’s Patrols. In November 2022, representatives of the People’s Patrols visited Wagner’s military-technical center in St. Petersburg. According to the leader of the People’s Patrols, Knežević, the purpose of the visit was to secure Wagner’s support in the event of a conflict in Kosovo.⁶¹ Such a conflict indeed occurred in the fall of 2023 in Banjska, which will be discussed further in a section about the graffiti “When the army returns to Kosovo” (*Kad se vojska na Kosovo vrati*).

The creation of all these graffiti, and their inspirers and executors, reveal the role of right-wing organizations and their connection with the regime. The Serbian authorities skillfully manipulate far-right organizations to present a narrative to Western states that Russian influence in Serbia is substantial, thereby portraying Serbia as constrained in its ability to take a stronger stance against Russia. This tactic serves to balance Serbia’s relations with the West while avoiding open confrontation with Moscow. Simultaneously, this dynamic benefits Russian authorities, as the tacit support from Serbian leadership allows Russia to extend its influence not only within Serbia but also across the wider Western Balkans region. This dual strategy underscores the complex interplay of domestic and international interests in shaping Serbia’s political landscape.

Considering that almost all right-wing groups are coordinated with the authorities and operate with their tacit approval (if not outright support), it is clear that these protests, as well as the appearance of Putin’s mural, served to balance Vučić’s policy towards Russia, primarily in relation to the West. Thus, support for Russia and Putin became visible in an upscale part of Belgrade, without Vučić having to express it personally – his ventriloquists’ dummies did it on his behalf. Sociologist Jovo Bakić, author of the book *The European Far-Right in Serbia (Evropska krajnja desnica u Srbiji 1945-2018)*, also believes that Aleksandar Vučić controls the far-right in Serbia. He argues that Vučić uses this strategy to signal to the EU and the U.S. that the Serbian regime is under constant pressure from nationalist and pro-Russian right-wing groups, making its position more challenging.⁶²

A Russian lawyer and prominent peace activist, Piotr Nikitin, at that time residing in Belgrade, saw this as obvious propaganda. Since graffiti and murals strongly influence the feelings of passersby, when something (in this case, Putin) is publicly displayed on the street and left unremoved, the message it conveys is that the majority agrees with it.⁶³ However, the pro-Russian showcase with Putin’s mural did not remain untouched. The very next day after its creation, a *graffiti war* broke out, revealing that not everyone perceived Putin and Russia in the same way. A group of Russian and Ukrainian emigrants opposing Putin and Russia’s aggression in Ukraine became more directly involved. On 6 March, the word “Killer” was spray-painted in red letters on the mural. Between March and December 2022, Putin’s mural underwent a series

⁶⁰ Šljukić, Mihaela. 2022. *Otkud na Jarinju simbol Vagnera?*. *Istinomer*, 21 December 2022.

⁶¹ Insajder. 2022. *Šta stoji iza saradnje Narodnih patrola i ruskog Vagnera*. *Insajder*, 20 December 2022.

⁶² Šljukić, *Otkud na Jarinju simbol Vagnera?*.

⁶³ Arsenijević, *Down Njegoševa Street*.

of transformations. His image was painted over in various colors, splashed with red and green paint, the Ukrainian flag, the letter Z, a male genital organ, and altered with depictions such as bloodshot eyes and sunglasses. The words “Brother” (*брат*) and “War” (*пam*) alternated on the mural throughout this period.⁶⁴ Putin’s mural was painted over again in December 2022, completely removing his image. In its place, a white-and-blue flag, which has become a symbol of opposition to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, was drawn, along with the “no war” in Russian (*Нет войне*) and peace sign.⁶⁵ A significant role in the covering of Putin’s mural, alongside Russian and Ukrainian anti-war activists, was played by the Belgrade-based NGO Krokodil,⁶⁶ led by writer Vladimir Arsenijević. As a result, the association’s premises and its staff have been under constant attack by right-wing groups.

In October 2022, *Bloomberg Adria* journalists reviewed the status of Putin’s mural in Belgrade from March to autumn and concluded that the friendship between Russia and Serbia was becoming “increasingly strange.” They cited Maksim Samorukov, a fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, who stated at the time that relations with Russia were fading.⁶⁷ It is clear that the opposition to this mural was determined, and that the Russian and Ukrainian anti-war community, along with Belgrade activists, did not want to yield or send a pro-Russian image of Belgrade and Serbia amid Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Sasha Seregina, a Russian member of the informal organization “Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Serbs Together Against the War,” commented that “The portrait of a foreign statesman who is currently waging a bloody war of conquest and annexing the territories of another sovereign country represents a symbol of occupation.” She also added that the painted image of Putin is an attempt to “create the impression in the public that support for Putin’s Russia has been dominant, and this from the very first days of the war.”⁶⁸

To understand this *graffiti war*, it is crucial to consider the demographic changes in Belgrade in 2022. Namely, immediately after the onset of aggression against Ukraine, Serbia (primarily Belgrade) saw the arrival of a large number of Russian refugees (around 200,000), among whom were thousands, if not tens of thousands, of so-called Russian dissenters. They became politically active, especially in Belgrade and Novi Sad, and initiated an entire anti-war movement.⁶⁹ Thanks to them, the *graffiti war* over Putin’s mural ended in their favor. What remained was just a wall painted white. This can be interpreted as a victory for activism but also as yet another political decision. Namely, from 2023, and especially in 2024, official support for Russia, apart from the refusal to impose sanctions, became increasingly muted. Friendship with Russia was still mentioned, but the end of the *graffiti war* and the temporary victory of the white wall

⁶⁴ Radio Free Europe. 2022. [The short, colorful life of Belgrade’s Putin mural](#). *Radio Free Europe*, 9 December 2022.

⁶⁵ Radio Slobodna Evropa. 2022. [Prekrećen Putinov mural u Beogradu](#). *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 15. December 2022.

⁶⁶ Krokodil is a prominent Serbian cultural and literary organization that often engages in activism and public discourse, particularly in the fields of literature, human rights, and social justice. In addition to their cultural work, Krokodil has been involved in raising awareness about various political and social issues, including the war in Ukraine. The organization has used its platform to express opposition to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and has supported efforts for peace and solidarity with Ukraine.

⁶⁷ Jefferson, Rodney, and Misha Savić. 2022. [Oskrnavljen Putinov mural pokazuje slabljenje ruskog uticaja](#). *Bloomberg Adria*, 20 October 2022.

⁶⁸ Miletić, Miljana. 2022. [Sva 'lica' Putina u Beogradu](#). *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 5. October 2022.)

⁶⁹ Arsenijević, *Down Njegoševa Street*.

coincided with an increase in high-level meetings between Vučić and European leaders, as well as closer ties with NATO.

It is possible that the end of the graffiti war was also influenced by significant internal unrest, as on 3 May 2023, a horrific mass shooting occurred at “Vladislav Ribnikar” school, near the mural, when a 13-year-old boy opened fire and killed 10 people – nine pupils and a security guard. This tragedy sparked a massive wave of “Serbia Against Violence” protests, attended by tens of thousands of demonstrators, which eventually turned into opposition protests against Vučić. In such circumstances, the regime did not need additional tensions.

“When the Army Returns to Kosovo”

However, nothing demonstrates as well what lies behind all these graffiti and murals and what they truly serve for, like the graffiti “When the army returns to Kosovo...” which, not by chance, appeared simultaneously in ‘Serbian World’ – Serbia, Republic of Srpska, Kosovo, Montenegro, but also in Russia. The eruption of this graffiti started with Red Star football fans called “Delije Sever” on 26 July 2023, who unfolded a banner “When the army returns to Kosovo...” during the match with Fiorentina, and then spread like wildfire in July and August 2023 throughout the region, and then in Russia.

Figure 19: “When the army returns to Kosovo...”, Red Star stadium, 26 July 2023



Source: *Telegraf*. 2023. Koreografija Delija na meču Crvena Zvezda – Fiorentina. *Telegraf*, 26 July 2023

The symbolism of this seemingly simple graffiti, consisting of six words and three dots at the end, is crucial for understanding everything that happened in connection with it – from when and where it appeared, the message it conveyed, to the point when it stopped appearing in this form. These graffiti further confirm that the Kosovo issue is central to understanding Serbian-Russian relations, particularly in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war. In Serbian and Russian tabloids and media it was explained that the verses “When army returns to Kosovo” are from the epic folk song “The Kosovo Maiden Reaped Barley” (*Ječam žela kosovka devojka*), one of the favorite songs of the late Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral, Amfilohije, known for his strongly nationalist views, that he modified and made it popular by extreme nationalists.⁷⁰ The myth that these are not lyrics from an old folk song, but verses by Amfilohije Radović, was further highlighted by the brilliant analysis of anthropologist Ivan Čolović, who particularly pointed out that a love song in which a girl awaits the arrival of the bridegroom has

⁷⁰ Pravda. 2023. Kad se vojska na Kosovo vrati: Šta je pozadina ovih murala?. *Pravda*, 19 August 2023.

transformed into a song announcing/calling the arrival or return of the army – in this case, the Serbian army to Kosovo.⁷¹

This graffiti, which quickly began to spread across the ‘Serbian world’ and Russia ‘from Moscow to Siberia’, was further interpreted by Serbian and Russian media. Mainstream daily newspapers, such as *Blic*, defended it, quoting *Russia Today*, stating that the inscription “When the army returns to Kosovo” is “politically aligned with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244, which stipulates that up to 1,000 members of Serbian forces may return to Kosovo and Metohija.”⁷²

The spread of this graffiti in the summer of 2023, however, was not its first appearance. It first appeared at the end of January 2022 on the facade of the Institute of Chemistry, Technology and Metallurgy in (again!) Njegoševa 12, on the children’s playground, when the process of multiplying the image of Ratko Mladić across Serbia was reaching its peak. It was written in big Cyrillic letters, over the Serbian flag, with the image of Miloš Obilić.⁷³ The first graffiti already caused tensions between Serbian nationalists and activists, as well as representatives of the civil sector. Members of non-governmental organizations painted over this graffiti, but a new, even larger graffiti soon appeared, and members of the Krokodil Association became targets of nationalist attacks and vandalism of their Center.

Figure 20: “When the army returns to Kosovo...”, Slavija, 12, January 2022



Source: N1. 2003. U parku u Mitićeva rupa na Slaviji osvanuo novi nacionalistički grafit. *N1*, 18 March 2023.

⁷¹ Čolović, Ivan. 2023. Kad se vojska na Kosovo vrati. *Peščanik*, 24 February 2023.

⁷² Blic. 2023. Srpska trobojka i žuta slova od Moskve do Sibira. *Blic*, 19 August 2023.

⁷³ Arsenijević, *Down Njegoševa Street.*

Figure 21: Civic activism against nationalist graffiti, Slavija, February 2023



Source: Euronews. 2003. Građani prekrečili grafit 'Kad se vojska na Kosovo vrati'. *Euronews*, 18 February 2023.

This graffiti gained more attention when it began to appear widely in July 2023. The chain reaction of this graffiti proliferation was triggered by Red Star football fans “Delije Sever” on July 26 during a match at the Red Star Stadium, where they staged a special choreography – symbolically, after 12 minutes and 44 seconds⁷⁴ of play. They created a Serbian flag across the entire stand, featuring a tank, with the line “When the army returns to Kosovo...” displayed beneath it. As reported in the news, in the days leading up to the match, Red Star supporters had created graffiti with the same line in various locations around Belgrade.⁷⁵ The FoNet agency reported on 15 July that two graffiti with the message “When the Army Returns to Kosovo...” had appeared in central Belgrade, specifically in Pop Lukina and Sremska streets – both key junctions leading to one of the city’s main bus stations, making them visible to a large number of people who use public transport daily. The report provided very few details – that the text was written in Cyrillic using yellow paint, with the Serbian flag depicted below the text.⁷⁶ However, it omitted an important element of this graffiti – the crossed-out symbols of the EU and NATO. Nor were the three dots at the end of the graffiti mentioned, which also carried a very specific meaning. According to non-governmental organizations that labeled this graffiti as war-mongering, the three dots following “When the army returns to Kosovo...” (*Kad se vojska na Kosovo vrati...*) are actually followed by the continuation, “Every Shiptar⁷⁷, every Shiptar will pay dearly” (*svaki Šiptar, svaki Šiptar dobro će da plati*).⁷⁸

Following strong opposition from a group of non-governmental organizations and anti-war activists to this form of nationalist and war-mongering propaganda, various Serbian tabloids and Russian media responded. RT Balkan accused them of objecting because they are allegedly on the West’s payroll and reiterated, yet again, the “justification” for the graffiti, “When the army

⁷⁴ This moment was symbolically chosen as a reference to United Nations Resolution 1244 on Kosovo and Metohija, 10 June 1999.

⁷⁵ Srbija danas. 2023. Moćna poruka Delija koja je obišla svet! 'Kad se vojska na Kosovo vrati'. *Srpska trobojka i tenk (FOTO)*. *Srbija danas*, 26 July 2023.

⁷⁶ Danas. 2023. U centru Beograda oslikani grafiti sa porukom 'Kad se vojska na Kosovo vrati'. *Danas*, 15 July 2023.

⁷⁷ A derogatory term for Albanians.

⁷⁸ Medija centar. 2023. Konferencija za medije Udruženja Krokodil. *Medija centar*, 17 August 2023.

returns to Kosovo,” claiming it is supported by UN Resolution 1244. This was accompanied by a veiled threat: “You destroy one of our graffiti – we’ll create 100 more just like it.”⁷⁹

That is precisely what began to unfold. In August 2023, identical murals surfaced in Russia, as part of the same propaganda machinery. Large murals with the inscription “When the army returns to Kosovo” appeared in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Saratov, Tyumen, and Orel, as well as at various locations in Moscow, a story widely reported by almost all Russian propaganda media.⁸⁰ Parallel to these murals, billboards have appeared in several locations in Moscow with the slogan “Russians and Serbs, brothers forever”, written in Russian and Serbian, alongside flags of Serbia and the Russian Federation.⁸¹ The fact that one of these billboards appeared on the building of the Russian state media outlet Russia Today speaks volumes about Russian propaganda efforts.

Figure 22: “When the army returns to Kosovo”, Moscow, 18 August 2023



© Foto : Ustupljeno/ RT Balkan

Source: Sputnik Srbija. 2023. Širom Rusije osvanuli graffiti ‘Kad se vojska na Kosovo vrati’. *Sputnik Srbija*, 18 August 2023.

Figure 23: “Russians and Serbs, brothers forever”, Moscow, 19 August 2023



RT Балкан

Source: Iskra. 2023. Širom Moskve osvanuli veliki plakati ‘Srbi i Rusi braća zauvek!’. *Iskra*, 19 August 2023.

⁷⁹ RT Balkan. 2023. Ko se plaši murala ‘Kad se vojska na Kosovo vrati’: Prekrečiti tek kad se vojska vrati na Kosovo. *RT Balkan*, 15 August 2023.

⁸⁰ Sputnik Srbija. 2023. Širom Rusije osvanuli graffiti ‘Kad se vojska na Kosovo vrati’. *Sputnik Srbija*, 18 August 2023.

⁸¹ Cvetković, Ljudimila. 2023. ‘Navijački potpis’ na grafitima u Rusiji kojima se Kosovu preti vojskom Srbije. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 22. August 2023.

The message of this action is crystal clear: Russia supports Serbia in its aspiration or intent to regain control of Kosovo, even if it necessitates the use of military force, mirroring Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. This was not a case of mere propaganda, but more of a program or a plan that was quickly put into action. On 24 September 2023, around 80 armed Serbian men entered Kosovo and barricaded themselves in a Serbian Orthodox monastery in the village of Banjska in Northern Kosovo, in an area predominantly inhabited by ethnic Serbs. A shootout followed, leaving three gunmen and a Kosovar police officer dead, while the attackers fled to Serbia, abandoning weapons and explosives. Milan Radoičić, a former Kosovo Serb politician who admitted involvement, is among the accused, but extradition of the suspects is unlikely due to Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence.⁸² Radoičić explained that he did it to "encourage the people in resistance to the regime of Albin Kurti."⁸³ This return of the army to Kosovo was announced by the graffiti.

However, the announcement of the events in Banjska through the graffiti "When the army returns to Kosovo" left many unanswered questions, the most significant being: who organized the Serbian attack in Banjska? Was it an operation devised jointly by Belgrade and Moscow, or solely by Belgrade, or by Moscow? This remains one of the key questions upon which the stability of Kosovo and the region continues to depend. What is particularly notable is that the wave of graffiti spreading across the region abruptly stopped after this (for Serbs) unsuccessful action in Banjska. As a delayed reaction, or perhaps a continuation of this campaign, an event in Moscow stood out, where a large number of billboards across the city paid tribute to those killed in Banjska, with Russian organizations "expressing solidarity with their Serbian brothers and declaring that they mourn together with Serbia."⁸⁴

The site of the *graffiti war* in Njegoševa Street, where graffiti of Putin, Ratko Mladić, and "When the army returns to Kosovo" were drawn and crossed out, has been painted over in white, left that way by anti-war activists led by Krokodil. This retreat of pro-Russian and nationalist graffiti artists may have coincided with the failure of the action in Banjska and the resignation of Security Information Agency's (BIA) head, the most pro-Russian member of the regime, Aleksandar Vulin.⁸⁵ With the withdrawal of the most pro-Russian figure from the regime's ranks as head of BIA, it seems that both right-wing groups and hooligans tasked with creating graffiti have fallen silent in Njegoševa Street. However, spray cans have continued their work, spreading the same nationalist and pro-Russian messages, this time shifted to the outskirts of Belgrade, where the strongest bastions of Aleksandar Vučić's regime are located. Whether they will return to Njegoševa Street and the city center or fade into the outskirts of Belgrade remains to be seen when Aleksandar Vučić and Serbian politics finally decide whether to turn toward the East (Russia and China) or the West.

⁸² Reuters. 2024. [Kosovo indicts 45 on terrorism charges over 2023 attack](#). *Reuters*, 11 September 2024.

⁸³ N1. 2023. [Milan Radoičić priznao da je organizaovao grupu u Banjskoj i preuzeo svu odgovornost](#). *N1*, 29. September 2023.)

⁸⁴ RT Balkan. 2023. [Moskva odala počast ubijenima u Banjskoj: 'Jedna boja, jedna vera, jedna krv'](#). *RT Balkan*, 27 August 2023.

⁸⁵ J.P.P. 2023. [Na čelu BIA ni godinu dana: Šta je prethodilo Vulinovoj ostavci](#). *N1*, 3 November 2023.

Conclusion

The analysis of pro-Russian graffiti and their appearance demonstrates how pro-Russian and nationalist messages have become deeply entwined with Serbia's political landscape and international positioning. Once a symbol of subversion, political graffiti in Serbia has transformed into a visible expression of state ideology, serving both domestic and foreign political objectives. With the strengthening of both Putin's and Vučić's power, especially with the expansion of the 'Russian World' and the annexation of Crimea, followed by the aggression in Ukraine, graffiti became part of the propaganda of both the Serbian and Russian governments. From 2016, when the spread of pro-Russian graffiti began, until 2023, when their spread in major locations noticeably slowed down, Serbia has gone from an extremely pro-Russian stance and the daily display of Russophilia to a relative restraint, which followed the country's foreign policy.

The analysis of media reporting and the appearance and disappearance of pro-Russian graffiti shows the first cracks in Serbia's relationship with Russia in the autumn of 2022. However, from 2023 onward, a shift is evident. The visible reduction of pro-Russian graffiti in central Belgrade aligns with a broader transformation in Serbia's foreign policy. In this context, the meeting between Vučić and Zelensky on 22 August 2023, was particularly important, where the Serbian president confirmed that Serbia would continue to support Ukraine's territorial integrity. At that time, Serbia also became one of the signatories of the Athens Declaration, which expressed support for Ukraine and its president, Volodymyr Zelensky, while emphasizing the importance of completing the vision for the European Union, which would include the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova.⁸⁶ In 2024, when there were fewer pro-Russian graffiti in the center of Belgrade, there was an increase in political cooperation between Vučić and Western politicians. From July 2024, Vučić held meetings with Olaf Scholz, Emmanuel Macron, Ursula von der Leyen, William Burns (director of the CIA), and Boris Ruge (NATO Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs and Security Policy).

Nonetheless, the pro-Russian option has not disappeared. On 2 May 2024, a new government was voted into the National Assembly of Serbia, which included Aleksandar Vulin and Nikola Popović, who strongly support closer ties with Russia and have been sanctioned by the United States. Another openly pro-Russian politician, Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, also joined the government. She was the commissioner for one of the murals dedicated to Daria Dugina. She became the Minister for Family Welfare and Demography, although the list she was on did not pass the electoral threshold, receiving only 2,76% of the vote.⁸⁷

Perhaps the West no longer tolerates this kind of 'sitting on two chairs' approach, as on 10 January 2025, the U.S. imposed sanctions on Serbia's Russian-owned oil industry, NIS. This news was not met with strong anti-Western rhetoric in the media, which might have been expected. Increasingly, a sense of reservation toward Russia is felt, especially when it comes from the military leadership. At the beginning of 2025, in the New Year's issue of the strongly pro-

⁸⁶ N1. 2023. *Šta Srbiji znači deklaracija iz Atine io ko čega su se složili Vučić i Zelenski*. N1, 23 August 2023.

⁸⁷ Istinomer. 2024. Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski. *Istinomer*, 7 May 2024.

Russian and nationalist *Novosti*, the Serbian Chief of Staff, Milan Mojsilović, spoke about cooperation with NATO and the procurement of French “Rafales,” as well as the termination of certain military agreements with the Russian Federation.⁸⁸

However, it is impossible to draw any serious conclusions due to the lack of primary sources. As Slobodan Markovich pointed out in his paper on Serbian democracy and Russia, without them, many contexts can be overlooked or misinterpreted. For this reason, while waiting to see whether Serbia will continue to ‘sit on two chairs’, potentially falling off both, or decide on one, one should keep a careful eye on the walls, especially those on Njegoševa Street in Vračar. Many things have been announced from there.

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⁸⁸ Babović, Milan. 2025. Sposobni smo da zaštitimo Srbe na Kosovu. *Novosti*, 1 January 2025.

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