



Aleksandar Mitić (2024). Global Strategic Narrative Wars: The Battle for Serbia. Belgrade: Institute of International Politics and Economics, ISBN 978-86-7067-341-0, pp.316.

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The concept of strategic narrative has emerged as a leading analytical framework for understanding the changing global order.¹ Defined by Alister Miskimmon as “a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors,”² it is particularly suited to today’s uncertain international order and unruly online communications environment. Yet the concept’s scholarly elaboration has sometimes been limited by a Western-centric standpoint, focusing on how Western strategic narratives might build consensus and avert conflict,³ or on how the West might combat others’ narratives.⁴ In *Global Strategic Narrative Wars*, Aleksandar Mitić brings a different perspective, foregrounding the *battle for Serbia* because it is “not only a country at the centre of geopolitical competition but also a country through which many of the constituent themes of today’s strategic narrative wars collide.”⁵

The key point of contestation in the war of strategic narratives accompanying the ongoing transition to a multipolar world, Mitić observes, is between proponents of the West’s *rules-based order* and its challengers, primarily Russia and China. Serbia, he argues, has been one of the primary *testing grounds* both for contemporary strategic narrative wars and for the “rules-based order” itself.⁶ The country’s fate will “signpost whether an ‘independent’ foreign policy is possible in Europe and how far the world has advanced in building a multipolar order.”⁷ Mitić is not alone in this judgment — as he notes, on the eve of the 2024 BRICs summit, *Politico* described Serbia as “one of the

¹ Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin, “Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power,” *Media, War & Conflict*, 7(1) (2014): pp. 71, 80

² Alister Miskimmon et al. Introduction, in Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle (eds.) *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (2017): p.4

³Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle (2013). *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. Abingdon: Routledge. pp. x—xi

⁴Lawrence Freedman, “Networks, culture and narratives”, *Adelphi Papers*, 45(379) (2006): pp. 26; Alister Miskimmon, *Forging the World*, p. 6

⁵ Aleksandar Mitić, *Global Strategic Narrative Wars: The Battle for Serbia* (Belgrade: Institute of International Politics and Economics, 2024), p. 246

⁶ Mitić, *Global Strategic Narrative Wars*, p.7

⁷ Mitić, *Global Strategic Narrative Wars*, p.9

most important in-between places in the world today,” the future of which will “help determine which Great Power comes to dominate this century.”⁸

This focus is introduced in the first part of the book, drawing on the author’s first-hand experience. Mitić is uniquely well-positioned in this respect: educated in Canada and Serbia, he has worked in both academic and policy worlds, currently as a Research Fellow at the Institute of International Politics and Economics in Belgrade. Most importantly, he began his career in journalism, and his first day on the job (working for Agence France-Presse) was the day of the so-called “Račak massacre,” the incident that provided the immediate pretext for NATO’s 1999 Kosovo war.⁹ Reporting from Kosovo throughout the conflict, he also subsequently worked as Brussels correspondent for the Tanjug news agency, reporting from EU and NATO headquarters.

Mitić views NATO’s Kosovo media operation (urgently revamped by UK Prime Minister Tony Blair’s press secretary, Alastair Campbell, after the first serious “accident” of the bombing campaign threatened to undermine support) as “a precursor of ... today’s strategic communication campaigns.”¹⁰ Certainly, Campbell’s own later reflections on the significance of the media campaign support such a view: “facts do not always speak for themselves”, he suggested, but instead have to be used to “build arguments.”¹¹ Kosovo was also significant in terms of the substantive issues at stake: the conflict was the key foundational event in the development of today’s competing strategic narratives. For the Western powers, who promoted the war as “justified on moral grounds” despite its “dubious legality,”¹² Kosovo marked a decisive shift away from the post-1945 UN framework of formal respect for sovereignty and non-interference, towards a more flexible rules-based order. Though it sounds vaguely

⁸ Matthew Kaminski, Will America or China Win the Serbian Proxy War?, *Politico*, 6 September, (2024) www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/09/06/serbia-europe-proxy-war-00177604.

⁹ Mark Wolfram, “Democracy and Propaganda: NATO’s War in Kosovo,” *European Journal of Communication*, 23(2) (2008): pp. 157–9

¹⁰ Mitić, *Global Strategic Narrative Wars*, p.22

¹¹ Alastair Campbell, Kosovo: Communication Lessons for NATO, the Military and the Media, speech at the Royal United Services Institute, London, 9 July(1999). Transcript available at www.balkan-conflicts-research.com/archive/transcript-of-alastair-campbell-speech-at-royal-united-services-institute-9-july-1999/.

¹² UK Foreign Affairs Committee *Fourth Report*, 138 [https://publications\(2000\).parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmfaaff/28/2813.htm#a34](https://publications(2000).parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmfaaff/28/2813.htm#a34)

legalistic, this order is better understood as “an alternative regime outside the discipline of international law ... employed by the West ... to ensure its dominance.”¹³ Kosovo set an alarming precedent — not least in establishing a new, offensive role for NATO, which had just completed its first wave of eastward enlargement (admitting Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic) less than a fortnight before it started bombing Yugoslavia.

For China, the fact that NATO bombed its Belgrade embassy in 1999, killing three journalists and wounding 20 employees, was understood as a humiliation and a challenge. In the immediate aftermath, China announced a “New Security Concept,” issuing a joint statement with Russia proposing to “push forward the establishment of a multipolar world on the basis of the principles of the United Nations Charter and existing international laws in the 21st century.”¹⁴ This is one indicator of the value of the different viewpoint that Mitić’s account offers: an event that is remembered in the West, if at all, as a relatively minor “accident” in NATO’s 1999 air campaign, is appreciated as far more significant when viewed from Serbia. On the 25th anniversary of the embassy bombing, President Xi Jinping visited Belgrade and affirmed that “the China-Serbia friendship, forged with the blood of our compatriots, will stay in the shared memory of the Chinese and Serbian peoples.”¹⁵

A direct conflict between NATO and Russia was narrowly avoided at the end of the Kosovo war, when British General Mike Jackson refused an order to prevent Russian troops from taking over Priština military airport, famously telling NATO commander General Wesley Clark, “Sir, I’m not going to start World War Three for you.”¹⁶ For President Vladimir Putin, who came to power just after the end of the war, the conflict “deeply marked his attitude and positioning towards the West.”¹⁷ Putin repeatedly warned the US and EU against promoting Kosovo’s post-war secession from Serbia, and made it clear that Russia would veto any attempt to achieve this through the UN. When Kosovo instead made a “unilateral declaration of independence” with Western support in 2008, he described it as “a terrible precedent, which will de facto

¹³ Dugard, John (2023) The choice before us: International law or a “rules-based international order?”, *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 36(2): p. 231

¹⁴ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1999, quoted p.155

¹⁵ Mitić, *Global Strategic Narrative Wars*, p.207

¹⁶ Mitić, *Global Strategic Narrative Wars*, p.27

¹⁷ Mitić, *Global Strategic Narrative Wars*, p.46

blow apart the whole system of international relations.”¹⁸ After Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine began in 2022, Western commentators noticed that “Putin keeps talking about Kosovo”¹⁹ but in fact Russia had been consistently talking about it all along, as a key component of its own strategic narrative.

The book offers a careful historical reconstruction of how Western, Russian and Chinese strategic narratives have developed, and a sober assessment of their strengths and weaknesses in competing for influence among the *global rest*. For Mitić, of course, a key point of interest is how these narrative battles play out in Serbia, which pursues a *hedging* strategy between rival power centres. Viewed from Washington or from European capitals, Serbia is sometimes seen, along with Republika Srpska in Bosnia, as a *little Russia*, partly because of historical religious and cultural affinities, and partly because of what is seen as the baleful influence of Russian media outlets such as Sputnik and Russia Today. What is inevitably overlooked from this perspective, however, is the fact that since 1999 Serbia has been reliant on Russian support for its territorial integrity — specifically in upholding UN Resolution 1244, which declared Kosovo to still be part of Serbia at the end of the war. In that context, it is virtually unthinkable for Serbia to join in with Western sanctions against Russia. China has also provided staunch diplomatic support, of course, and also important economic investment. While Western officials have been quick to deprecate “Belt-and-Road” initiatives in the region, Serbia’s biggest exporters are Chinese-owned companies, and the country’s transport infrastructure continues to be visibly improved by Chinese construction projects.

Serbian politicians continually confirm the country’s aspiration to join the EU, yet since Serbia was formally accepted as a candidate for membership in 2012, public support for joining has been the lowest ever recorded in a candidate country.²⁰ Recent opinion polling indicates that most people in Serbia do not see EU membership as a realistic prospect.²¹ Perhaps Mitić’s most important contribution is to open up a long-

¹⁸ Mitić, *Global Strategic Narrative Wars*, p.49

¹⁹ Jade McGlynn, “Why Putin Keeps Talking About Kosovo,” *Foreign Policy*, 3 March, (2022) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/03/putin-ukraine-russia-nato-kosovo/>

²⁰ Belloni, Roberto and Marco Brunazzo (2017) After “Brexit”: The Western Balkans in the European Waiting Room, *European Review of International Studies*, 4(1): p. 30

²¹ Mitić, *Global Strategic Narrative Wars*, p.233

overdue discussion of what the strategic alternatives might be to EU accession. Although no clear alternative has yet emerged, “two decades of slow progress, radical political conditioning, major setbacks, enlargement fatigue, and rising Euroscepticism, all spiced by a host of pan-European crises” have made Serbia’s so-called *European path* increasingly unattractive.²² In any case, the EU’s insistence on Serbia’s acceptance of Kosovo’s independence as a condition of accession placed an insurmountable obstacle in the way of membership from the outset. Surrounded by NATO members, and with a large US military base on what it regards as its sovereign territory (Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo), Serbia understands itself as the first victim of NATO aggression, regularly commemorating military and civilian losses from 1999. The West’s normative rules-based order narrative has very little purchase.

Global Strategic Narrative Wars was published after the 2024 US election, but too soon to take account of subsequent changes — in particular, the reworking of the West’s *rules-based order* narrative in light of President Donald Trump’s “America-first” approach. In Serbia and Republika Srpska, Trump’s second election victory was widely seen as a positive development because it signalled the possibility of better relations with Washington and a potential alternative to the coercive diplomacy of the EU. Yet while the rhetoric has changed, it is not clear what tangible benefits, if any, might follow from this for a country such as Serbia. The end of funding to USAID programmes could be seen as a helpful reduction of foreign meddling, but the Trump administration has not been shy of interfering in other states (such as Venezuela, for example). Sanctions on Serbia’s part-Russian-owned national oil industry, announced in the final days of the Biden administration, were only temporarily delayed and then eventually implemented under Trump. For those on the receiving end, it is not obvious why economic sanctions to promote the interests of US energy companies in Europe are better than sanctions in the name of upholding the *rules-based order* against Russia. Meanwhile, Mitić warns that the EU, having “lost its autonomy in relation to the US, practically destroyed relations with Russia, weakened them with China, and failed to maintain its influence on the *Global South*”, might look to the Balkans as the arena in which to *assert power*.²³ As strategic narrative wars continue, transforming and likely

²² Mitić, *Global Strategic Narrative Wars*, p.299

²³ Mitić, *Global Strategic Narrative Wars*, p.227

sharpening, Mitić provides an excellent road map to understand where current debates have come from and to chart future developments.

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