

Belgrade Graffiti & Murals: Continuation of War by other Means?

Traces of War in Yugoslavia and Ukraine in Belgrade Street Art: Reflections on Connections

Introduction

It comes as no surprise that wartime violence features prominently among themes which inspire Belgrade street artists. Belgrade is the capital city of Serbia, a country which was in turmoil since the mid-1980s. It experienced four devastating wars during the 1990s, and is inching through transition, which did not really bring about democratization, but instead resulted in a hybrid regime with growing authoritarian features.¹ Throughout these rocky four decades, this specific model of governance has nested in Serbia, accompanied by an entire cultural ecosystem, which both reflects and reproduces it.² One of its curious aspects is adoration of crude power, in the form of the celebration of vicious gangsters, wartime paramilitary and violent hooligans.³ Glorification of this nexus in various ways is visible in Serbia, and the walls of its cities are not an exception. For decades, various football hooligans and right-wing groups have utilized public spaces in Belgrade and across Serbia to convey their messages through nationalist graffiti and menacing murals, among other forms of communication. These often depict convicted war criminals from the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, such as the former Bosnian Serb Army commander Ratko Mladić, or promote aggressive rhetoric concerning the ongoing Kosovo issue.

Such public displays have intensified since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, widening the repertoire in support of Vladimir Putin and praising his aggressive military actions. As the invasion unfolded, Belgrade's graffiti landscape diverged significantly from other European capitals, which are typically covered in blue and yellow in order to declare almost unanimous support for Ukraine.⁴ Not so in Belgrade, where numerous confrontations and clashes have reached the level of a true

¹ Diana Mishkova et al., *Hybridity and hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans in a time of war and increased geopolitical tensions*, (Reengage: December 2024) <https://re-engaging.eu/hybridity-and-hybrid-regimes-in-the-western-balkans-in-a-time-of-war-and-increased-geopolitical-tensions/>;

² Eric Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia. Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999);

³ In reality, these groups overlap in organized crime networks. Kosta Nikolić, Vladimir Petrović. "Organized Crime in Serbian Politics during the Yugoslav Wars." *Journal of Political Power* 2022/15 (1): 101–22. See also Ivan Čolović, "Football, Hooligans and War". In: *The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis*, edited by Nebojša Popov and Drinka Gojković, Budapest, Hungary: Amsterdam University Press, 2000, pp. 373-396;

⁴ Vjeran Pavlaković, *Memory Politics and the Muralization of War: From the Dissolution of Yugoslavia to the Aggression on Ukraine*, <https://mempop.eu/memory-politics-and-the-muralization-of-war-from-the-dissolution-of-yugoslavia-to-the-aggression-on-ukraine/>;

graffiti war which stretches far beyond esthetic, tellingly reflecting inconsistencies of Serbian foreign politics and their implications for the confused state of its internal affairs.⁵

Namely, although formally an EU candidate country, Serbia actively maintains special connections with Russia. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić was among the rare European leaders who took part in the 2025 May Parade in Moscow. Still, his capital Belgrade is home of one of Europe's largest Russian communities, who fled its country since the beginning of the conflict. As the government desperately tries to find a balance between Russia and the West, it is catering to its pro-Russian public opinion while also strongly condemning the aggressive war and providing numerous forms of aid to Ukraine.⁶ All that provides an excellent background for schizoid graffiti battles on its street walls, which have been actively voicing political grievances ever since the disintegration of Yugoslavia began.⁷

Here, we will explore how this highly flammable *mélange* was reignited once war again hit European soil, bringing up new themes but also reinvigorating old tropes from the Yugoslav wars. Evidence was predominantly gathered in Belgrade in late 2024 and early 2025 by Vladimir Petrović and Novak Vučo. We do not profess to take a systematic approach or quantitative analysis to this subject. Our starting point was purely through exchanging anecdotes and photos until their surrealist aspect became so high that it demanded a reflection. To put some order into this chaos, we gave prevalence to murals which occur in the heaviest traffic zones of downtown Belgrade, as these locations almost by definition become contested spaces and lead to a lively graffiti tug-of-war, which we tried to follow. Most of those works still stand, although they are in a state of constant change, but some are permanently lost and can be accessed only by Google search or a Way back Machine repository. Feeling that this evidence would sooner or later be lost to memory, we aim to reflect on it before it disappears altogether.

Walking among Menacing Generals, A Vanishing President and Threatening Symbols

Belgrade is no stranger to extremist street art, some of which is remarkably uniform in its appearance. Take one of its most recent examples, the giant slogan "...when the army returns to Kosovo"⁸, which emerged overnight in several locations in Belgrade and in many other Serbian cities. The essence of this message, literally wrapped in the national flag (**Photo 1**) and also refreshed with anti-NATO and anti-EU symbols suggests a *revanche* - the violent resolution of the Kosovo issue through reannexing the Southern Serbian province which was lost during the NATO bombing in 1999 and later proclaimed independence in 2008. Such murals exist all over Serbia, and they follow roughly the same pattern. Their repetitive appearance, frequency and longevity in

⁵ Nevena Bogdanović et al., Graffiti War: Battle In The Streets Over Ratko Mladic Mural, November 10, 2021; <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-mladic-mural-protests/31555357.html>;

⁶ Damir Kapidžić et al, External engagement in the Western Balkans 11-32, 40-48, (Re>engage: December 2024) <https://re-engaging.eu/external-engagement-in-the-western-balkans/>;

⁷ Miloš Moskovljević, War on the Walls. User Experience and Urban Creativity, 4(1), 23 - 40., Vjeran Pavlaković. *Memoriscapes of the Homeland War*. Zagreb: YIHR, 2022;

⁸ Serbian: "...*kad se vojska na Kosovo vrati...*"

the main areas of various Serbian cities give credence to claims that at least some powerful agency within the state stands behind them—otherwise communal police would be prompted to remove them. The other Belgrade “classic” is a stencil of the wartime commander of Bosnian Serbs, General Ratko Mladić, who was convicted for genocide and other war crimes in front of the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) (**Photo 2**).

Photo 1



Photo 2



Mladić appears on the walls every now and then. The current Serbian President opened that season in 2007, when he was an opposition leader, by outrageously “renaming” the Boulevard of Zoran Đinđić to the Boulevard of Ratko Mladić (**Photo 3**).⁹ The outrage strove from the fact that Đinđić, the first democratically elected Serbian prime minister in decades, who was assassinated in March 2003 by those forces who were attempting to revert the country back into Milošević era.¹⁰ Mladić, on the other hand, went down in history as a murderer of thousands of unarmed men and boys. Yet, under such a powerful shield, it is no surprise that glorification of Mladić, including his visual representations, mushroomed during Vučić’s reign.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BlzWjUrgX-8>

¹⁰ Nikolić, K., Petrović, V. and Mandić, D. (2024). Amalgamation of special forces and organized crime in Serbia: curbing the democratic transition after the downfall of Slobodan Milošević (in print).



Photo 3: Aleksandar Vučić pasting General Mladić's name over Đinđić's (Foto: EPA/OLIVER BUNIC)

In time, this phenomenon reached such proportion that it was even brought to the attention of the United Nations Security Council. In his regular semiannual Progress Report, delivered in November 2022, Serge Brammertz, the Chief Prosecutor of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunal (IRMCT), formerly of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), included the section covering ‘genocide denial and glorification of the criminals’: “In Serbia, civil society embraces the atmosphere of denial and glorification created by political leaders: more than 150 murals of Ratko Mladić have been counted in Belgrade alone..”¹¹ His progress report from May 2024 was even more alarming: “Meanwhile, cities throughout Serbia remain covered with murals of Ratko Mladić; more than 300 have now been counted, most of them in Belgrade”.¹²

Curiously, both Mladić and Kosovo themes are related to historical personalities and events from over a quarter of century ago, indicating that these narratives simply refuse to pass in Serbia, where the feeling of injustice and desire for revanche of some kind is latently present. However, after a while, these tropes do become stale and fail to talk to the new generation, just like it would make little sense to stencil Erich Honecker in eastern parts of Germany. Therefore, Russia’s attack on Ukraine served as a precious refresher for this mode of revanchism. Public spaces became filled with "Z" symbols, Russian flags, murals of Vladimir Putin and other symbols of Russian military forces. While some Ukrainian flags and messages of support emerged, pro-Russian sentiments and themes dominated the street art scene. **Photos 4 and 5** present two examples of the insertion of the widespread “Z” letters on the corners of Ilije Garašanina and Miročka street in Belgrade and on the public building at Bulevar Kralja Aleksandra no. 17. **Photo 6** illustrates a fusion of this new factor with previous Serbian grievances, augmenting Mladic’s stencil with “Z”.

¹¹ Progress Report S/2022/866, page 48. para 57.; (17 November 2022)

¹² Progress Report S/2024/392, page 52. para 86.; (17 May 2024)

Photo 4.



Photo 5.



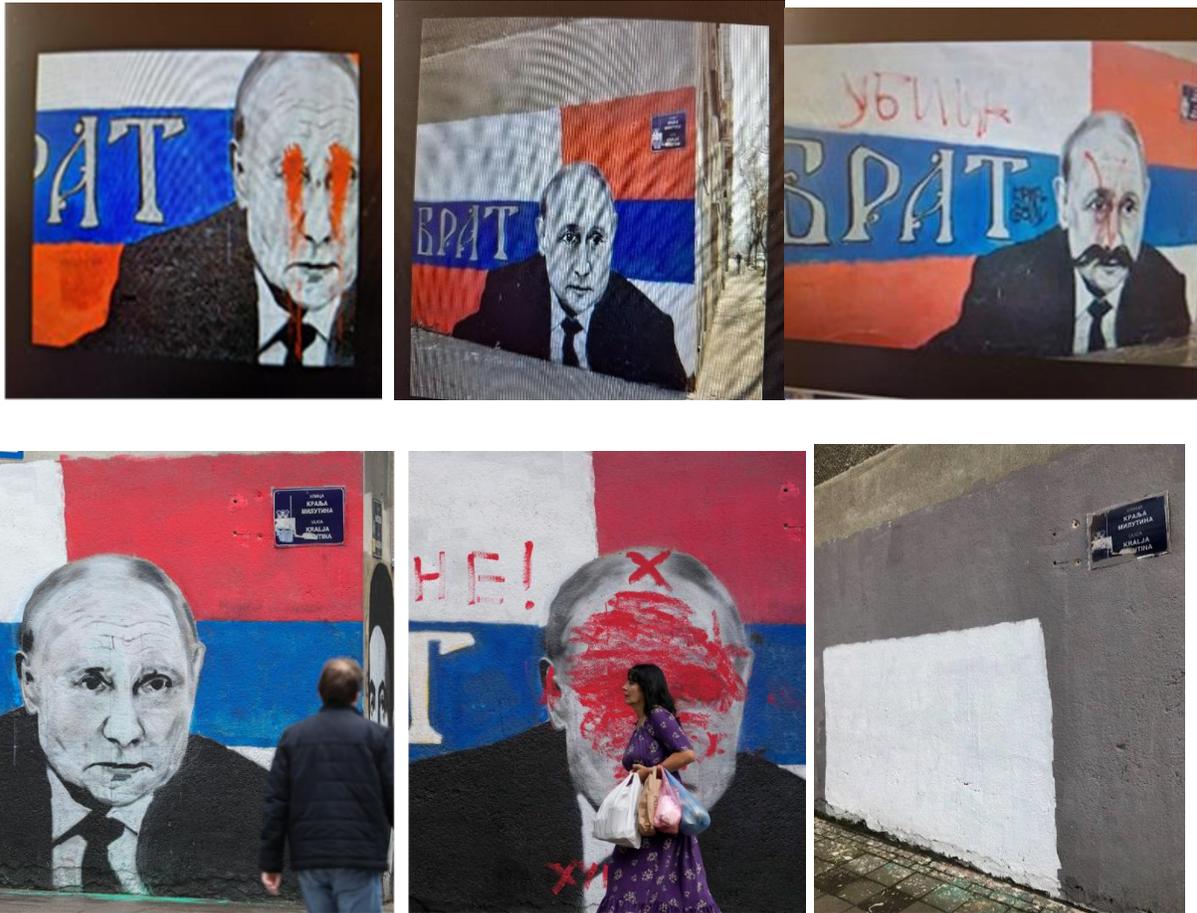
Photo 6.



It is important to observe that such interventions do not happen without resistance. Upon close inspection of **photo 5**, it becomes obvious that it initially contained the Cyrillic inscription *Heroj* (Hero), which was subsequently crossed out, depicting the lack of consensus among street artists on Mladić’s historical role. Similar ambivalence follows another unlikely “hero” who emerged from the full-scale invasion. **Photos 7-12** represent a saga of a mural of Vladimir Putin on the corner of Njegoševa and Kralja Milutina street in Belgrade. It was made in the early days of the invasion to demonstrate closeness between Russians and Serbs, explicated by the inscription “BRAT” (Brother). However, it did not take long for the dissenters to remove one letter from the caption, turning it into “RAT” (War). Interventions continued, such as adding Stalin’s moustache to Putin, or defacing the mural, which was subsequently restored. In the end, the mural was simply painted white by award-winning writer and social activist Vladimir Arsenijević from the “Krokodil” literature society with the support of the Russian community in Serbia.¹³

¹³ Interview with Vladimir Arsenijević on 19th of May 2025 made by the authors;

Photos 7-12



Even more dramatic was the fate of another contested mural in the vicinity, depicting General Mladić on the corner of Njegoševa and Alekse Nenadovića street (**Photos 13-14**). Made on a prominent place, just across the famous restaurant Lovac, the mural created an outrage. However, it was allowed to stand. In one of the clashes, a civil rights activist Aida Ćorović threw eggs on it, only to get detained.¹⁴ The mural was eventually removed, again by Vladimir Arsenijević and one of his fellow activists, who also used the opportunity to remove a nearby mural to the Serbian Second World War nationalist leader, Draža Mihailović.¹⁵

¹⁴ Who is Aida Corovic, a Woman who threw Eggs on Ratko Mladic's Mural?, Sarajevo Times, November 11 2021. https://sarajevotimes.com/who-is-aida-corovic-a-woman-who-threw-eggs-on-ratko-mladics-mural/#google_vignette; Iva Martinovic, 'Sve bih ponovila': Aktivistkinja kažnjena zbog gađanja jajima murala Ratka Mladića, Radio Slobodna Evropa, 4. oktobar 2023. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/aida-corovic-mladic-mural-kazna/32623021.html>;

¹⁵ Interview with Vladimir Arsenijević on 19th of May 2025 made by the authors;

Photo 13. (Danas Daily)



Photo 14 (24sedam, Ivan Mitić)

Taking the World On

Given that Ratko Mladić, former commander of the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS), serves a sentence for crimes against humanity and genocide among other grave breaches of international law, he is an unlikely street hero. Yet he appears in many forms and shapes, from naïve art to realistic depictions to camp—and even printed on socks. This strange artefact is selling on the trendy Palilula Renovated Green Market¹⁶ located in the center of Belgrade. Mladić emerges

¹⁶ Used even by the Italian Embassy to promote Italian cuisine, wine culture and lifestyle in general ;

in the form of a print on a pair of black male socks, and strangely enough, next to his former Commander-in-Chief, communist leader of Yugoslavia Josip Broz Tito. (It should be noted that Trump and Putin socks were also nearby but did not fit into the frame). **(Photos 15-17)**.

15. Mural of Ratko Mladić in the Boulevard of Zoran Đinđić 35 **16.** Unknown location in Belgrade



17. Palilula Green Market

This is even more difficult to comprehend given that Mladić belongs to the generation of these street artists' grandfathers, begging the question: why would a young person invest so much energy in glorifying a person who is not even his contemporary, and is loaded with all sorts of ugly connotations?

A clue to the answer might be sought at graffiti pieces **18 and 19**. They present us with a connection that binds Putin and Mladić together through a simple phrase: FUCK NATO! In contrast to this negative message, **Photo 20** is offering a positive one, and a multilayered one at that. Initially, it aimed to say that Kosovo is the heart of Serbia, which is a popular phrase in Serbian politics because the Albanian populated province is sprinkled with medieval Serbian churches and monasteries and was the site of the battle where the medieval kingdom was taken over by the Ottomans. However, even the most hardened Serbian nationalists understand that retrieving the territory is highly unlikely, at least without powerful friends. That is where Putin comes into the picture. It is not coincidental that this graffiti is reinforced by the infamous letter Z right in the middle of the heart.

18. Unknown location on Dorćol



19. Bulevar Kralja Aleksandra 20.



This messaging requires some unpacking. What is the connection to NATO? Well, Serbian nationalists think they have been unjustly punished by the West during the 1990s, not least because of their pro-Russian stance. The NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 is perceived as the ultimate grievance.¹⁷ Consequently, the Russian attack on Ukraine is basically perceived as a belated reaction to NATO's expansion eastwards. It is even seen as the beginning of an end to Western dominance, despite the obvious failure of the "swift" offensive followed by Russia's devastating military losses. But, that is not the most important point. Rather, the connection here is an attempt to rectify history. The presumption is that, with Russia at its side and with the full backing of

¹⁷ Vladimir Petrović, "The United States and the Conception of Humanitarian Intervention in the Yugoslav Crisis"; in Vasilka Sancin, Maša Kovič Dine (eds.), *The Limits of Responsibility to Protect*, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Law, 2023, 79-97.

somebody like Putin instead of at best lukewarm support from Yeltsin, Serbia would have been in a much more favorable position throughout the 1990s. Hence, the commander of the Bosnian Serb army, which were also bombed by NATO in 1995, is a logical figure of veneration, despite the horrific crimes he committed. In fact, an attempt is at work to deny those crimes until the West declines so much that it cannot force Serbia to face them. Precisely because of the outrageous character of his crimes and his complete unacceptability in the West, General Mladić is put into this pantheon. His figure is therefore used as a sign of indifference and hostility toward the Western dominated world, which in the view of many once discarded the Serbs, who are now rejecting them in turn.

The problem is that these street artists do not express a fringe opinion. Their art eerily mirrors Serbian foreign political goals, naturally expressed in more polished ways. Veiled in an attempt to maintain a delicate balance between Russia, China, the EU and the US, Serbian international relations rests on a so-called four-pillars foreign policy.¹⁸ However, sometimes the polish wears off, and the pillars do not hold. Such was the case in July 2024, when the UN General Assembly proclaimed July 11 as the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 genocide in Srebrenica.¹⁹ The Serbian government did not accept that, and would rather deny responsibility at all costs. **Photos 21-23** present a combatant Serbian response, ranging from street art to state-printed billboards sending message that Serbs are not a genocidal people, reproduced across multiple media forms.

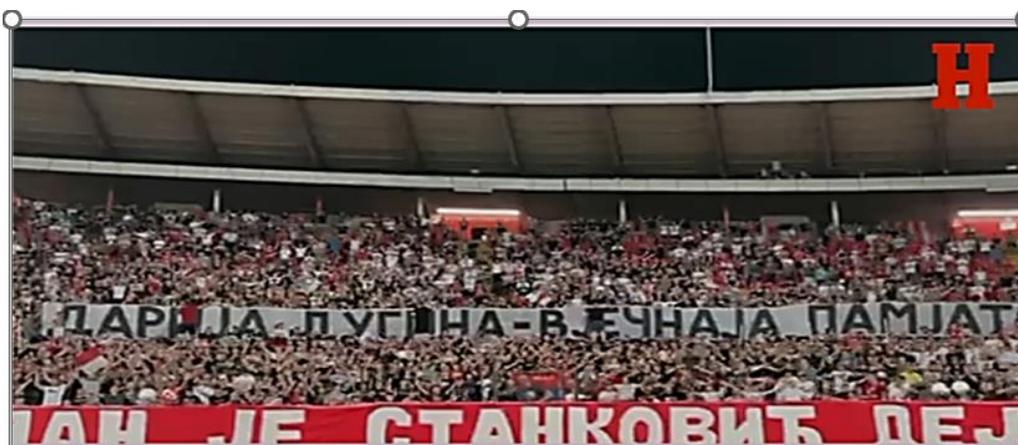
21-23: Banner ‘*The only genocide in the Balkans was against the Serbs*’ in the main pedestrian Knez Mihajlova street in Belgrade; Beam on one of the Belgrade high-rises. State-sponsored billboard, location unknown. They all have the same message: *We are not genocidal people.*



¹⁸ Vuk Velebri, Andrej Stejanov, Four Pillars Strategy & The Future Of Serbia's Foreign Policy, Dec 6, 2024. <https://pupin.org/analysis/four-pillars-strategy-the-future-of-serbia-s-foreign-policy>;

¹⁹ General Assembly Adopts Resolution on Srebrenica Genocide, Designating International Day of Reflection, Commemoration, 23.5.2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/ga12601.doc.htm>;

Taking on the United Nations resolution is politically costly. However, it is possible, especially if you are anticipating a new world order, or at least the end of the existing one. That is why contemporary Russia is so important in the Serbian imaginary. It is seen as a power both able and willing to make that change in global rules and retroactively open space for the vindication of past grievances. Otherwise, it would be difficult to understand why Red Star (Belgrade's emblematic soccer team) hooligans are so vested in defending Russian national interests. Namely, hooliganism and political extremism have been a subject of excessive research in this region.²⁰ Mind the fact that even the president himself doesn't miss the opportunity to brag that he spent his youth on the stadium as a staunch supporter of Red Star FC, who didn't avoid the dangerous physical clashes with other groups, nor the so-called "nationalistic incidents" during that time. Consider photos **24 and 25** from recent matches played by Red Star, a team well-known for "fans" who filled the ranks of Serbian paramilitary forces during the 1990s.



²⁰ Mitja Velikonja, *The Chosen Few: "Aesthetics and Ideology in Football-Fan Graffiti and Street Art, The chosen few – football fan graffiti."* (Doppel House 2021).; Ana Vladisavljević and Ivana Jeremić, "Croatian and Serbian Hooligans: Football Foes Share Love of Hate" (BIRN June 19, 2020) <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/19/croatian-and-serbian-hooligans-football-foes-share-love-of-hate/>



Photos 24. and 25. (sources: Večernje Novosti daily and FC Red Star)

Particularly noteworthy here is the fact that "Crvena Zvezda" supporters maintain brotherly ties with "Spartak" FC from Moscow, a group known as the "Orthodox Brothers." Their worldview perfectly aligns with the aforementioned "Fuck NATO" philosophy, which can be traced to an unprocessed trauma of the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 and subsequent loss of its foothold in Kosovo, which leads us back to the first image dedicated to the return of the Serbian military to Kosovo (Photo 26). In its most recent form, it also contains clear anti-EU and anti-NATO messages. It is written in Cyrillic, the script shared by Serbs and Russians. Even the font is similar, evoking the pretense of a consensus over that matter.



Photo 26.

The Graffiti War Goes On

However, this consensus is shaky and uncertain. It is unmistakably difficult to extrapolate and generalize from a limited batch of anonymous graffiti. But even in this microcosm, the extreme visual discourse does not go unchallenged. **Photos 27-29** attest to the vehement “graffiti war” between the pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian side on the streets of Belgrade.²¹

Photo 27.



Photo 28.



Photo 29.



It is hardly surprising that works of graffiti which pertain to actual warfare are also loaded with militancy and used as sites of contestation. What is surprising is that a certain level of ambivalence remains. Although pro-Russian graffiti prevails, there is significant pushback. **Photos 27 and 28**, generated in the Stevana Sremca street, and **Photo 29**, taken in the Bezistan passageway, reflect this. On the lower right, somebody wrote “Death to Nazism” on the Ukrainian flag, but if one takes a closer look at the text below, it appears that somebody wrote “Death to Putin.” Somebody also added “to NATO poodles” below “Death” and then “Glory to” above Putin. On the other hand, **photo 27** spiritedly transforms the letter Z into an hourglass, which reflects the early stages of the invasion when local activists aimed to erase that letter.

Over time, interventions to the existing murals became a standard trait of Belgrade street art. Consider a Belgrade downtown staircase on **photo 30**, which reads like a menu for potential logos of political allegiances, but also implies that, except for NATO, Serbia leaves its options open:

²¹ Aleksander Dragić, Belgrade’s Graffiti War: The Artistic Parallel of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict, (January 2023) <https://europrospects.eu/belgrades-graffiti-war/>;



Photo 30.

In such confusion, even the sacrosanctity of General Mladić does not go unchallenged. His bid to be a “Serbian hero” is contested heavily all over Southern Boulevard, offering interesting alternatives. Sometimes he is defaced or moderated with a huge heart, or both (**photo 31**), but occasionally a concrete counter-hero is offered: Srđan Aleksić, a Bosnian Serb soldier who died at the hands of the Serbs while he was trying to save the life of his Muslim friend (**photo 32, 33**). The vigor with which this fight is waged all the way down a very long street tells that the end of this tug-of-war over Belgrade’s walls is nowhere in sight. According to Vladimir Arsenijević, it is ‘also quite an organized battle’. His own organization focused mostly on defacing Mladic’s stenciled portrait, whereas the Youth Initiative for Human Rights was more interested in pushing for an alternative hero.

Photo 31.



Photo 32.



Photo 33.



This battle in turn allowed for an easy connection with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Right-wing football supporters and hooligan groups have long used public surfaces to promote their agendas, well before the onset of the Russian invasion in February 2022. After the full-scale invasion, these street messages shifted focus from the legacy of the Yugoslav Wars to the

Ukrainian conflict, maintaining the same signature style. It is very likely that the same or similar groups of people are behind both graffiti and mural campaigns, although it is difficult to demonstrate since those sorts of groups usually work in the shade of anonymity. It also remains to be seen if those efforts are supported by the (para)state, and to which degree.

The Ukrainian topic was in a sense unavoidable. Since the war started, Serbia became a destination of a significant Russian community that fled when the conflict erupted, mostly residing in Belgrade since Vladimir Putin announced a military draft in autumn 2022. While there are no comprehensive opinion polls, many Russians in Serbia appear to be anti-war and anti-draft, having left to escape repression and mobilization under Putin's regime. Serbia is also a home to a smaller Ukrainian community of individuals fleeing the war's horrors. Regardless, war is felt in a distinctive manner in Serbia, as a continuation of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and as a mythical awakening of the Russian giant.

Displays of Putin's power which predated 2022 were already setting the scene, and the invasion acted as a signal that the time has come for a historical revanche, including resolving Serbian territorial claims as well as by dismantling US/Western dominance in global politics. The stiff Ukrainian resistance combined with Western unity and resilience on the issue soon proved those signals wrong. The fiasco of the initial early offensive turned into a bloody stalemate that did not discourage street artists, although attrition war definitely curbed their enthusiasm.

But if such is the case, why are such messages still seen on Belgrade's walls, right on these sensitive margins of political communication? Here it would make sense to pause and consider Serbia's position in the international system, as well as its internal politics. Currently, Serbia is governed by a hybrid regime that attempts to balance between Ukraine—strongly backed by Western nations—and Russia. The government has refused to impose sanctions on Russia²² while at the same time condemning the war and supporting the UN General Assembly Resolutions to that end.²³ However, influential media outlets are flooded with pro-Russian propaganda, with channels like Russia Today and Sputnik operating freely.²⁴ However, with all its pro-Russian sentiments, Serbia even provides some military aid to the Ukrainian war effort.²⁵ Whereas some Serbian officials did visit Moscow, the fact that the First Lady of Ukraine, Olena Zelenska, visited Belgrade twice (in November 2022 and May 2024)²⁶ illustrates this complex diplomatic positioning. The government has maintained an ambivalent stance, and is keen to avoid escalating tensions given Serbia's sensitive international position—but that has proved to be challenging. For instance, President Aleksandar Vučić accepted the invitation of Vladimir Putin to attend a 2025 V-day ceremony in Moscow on 9th of May, although after a long hesitation. This move was

²² VOA, Serbia's president talks with Putin and vows he'll never impose sanctions on Russia October 20 2024

²³ UNGAR ES-11/1 <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3959039>;

²⁴ <https://rt.rs/>; <https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/>;

²⁵ [https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/12/world/europe/leaked-document-serbia-ukraine.html#:~:text=Serbia%20on%20Wednesday%20denied%20that%20it%20had%20sent,Foreign%20Ministry%20expressed%20%E2%80%9Cdeepest%20concern%E2%80%9D%20about%20the%20reports](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/12/world/europe/leaked-document-serbia-ukraine.html#:~:text=Serbia%20on%20Wednesday%20denied%20that%20it%20had%20sent,Foreign%20Ministry%20expressed%20%E2%80%9Cdeepest%20concern%E2%80%9D%20about%20the%20reports;);

²⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-69001791>; <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/123435/prva-dama-ukrajine-u-beogradu-sta-se-zna-o-poseti-olene-zelenske-srbiji/vest>;

counterbalanced by the placement of EU flags on lampposts and road signs throughout Belgrade as soon as the President returned from Moscow.

One would think that the last thing one would want when running such a precarious show is political street art. That begs for an additional question: why are the graffiti not removed? According to the law, local self-government, in this case the government of the city of Belgrade, is responsible for the maintenance and the hygiene of public surfaces. The matter is regulated by Article 8, Paragraph 2, Count 2, of the *Capital City Act*²⁷ which regulates the organization of the Communal Police who are responsible for the maintenance of the communal order in the unit of the local self-government—in this case the City of Belgrade²⁸. Misdemeanor is punishable by Article 8. of the *Public Peace and Order Act*²⁹ which regulates rude, indecent and reckless behavior and envisages money fines in the range from 10.000 to 150.000 RSD (85 to 1282 EUR) or/and 80 to 360 hours of community service for the perpetrators. In practice, these regulations usually remain unenforced and perpetrators usually do not face consequences. While there are available statistics and records to prove these claims, a simple ordinary walk through the streets of Belgrade offers valid evidence. To put it simply: it is right in front of your nose, and with reason.

In order to understand it, one needs to grasp the intricacies of Serbian internal politics. At first glance, its public opinion seems pro-Russian. Such narratives are often spread by right-wing politicians and groups, particularly football supporters who use graffiti as a means to assert dominance and convey political messages. However, given that the government maneuvers between those positions and is not ready to openly abandon its European path, not least because the EU zone and especially European Union is its biggest foreign investor³⁰. In such cognitive dissonance, significant discursive cracks open, and city walls remain a relatively harmless venue to vent frustrations. Hence, in an atmosphere shaped by the legacy of the Yugoslav wars and with loud echoes heard from the Ukrainian frontlines, certain groups are clearly using every available space to push their political agendas.

By using graffiti and murals as highly visible tools, these groups create the impression that their predominantly nationalistic and right-wing views represent the dominant mindset of society. However, it is far more likely that these views belong to a small, yet vocal, well-organized, and occasionally aggressive group of people who effectively push public sentiment and/or frustrations related to issues such as Kosovo independence, the 1999 NATO bombing campaign, the legal qualification of the Srebrenica massacre, as well as the general historic affiliation toward Russia. This group is also most likely enjoying at least some form of (para)institutional support, although that is difficult to prove. The fact that their artistic expression remains on the streets of Belgrade for quite some time attests to the ambivalence of the current Serbian government as it tries to appease both East and West, leaving more space for graffiti warfare than elsewhere in Europe.

²⁷ Zakon o glavnom gradu "Sl. Glasnik (Official Gazzete) RS" no.111/2021";

²⁸ Zakon o komunalnoj miliciji/ Communal Police Act, "Sl. Glasnik (Official Gazzete) RS" no. 49/2019;

²⁹ Zakon o javnom redu i miru, "Sl. Glasnik (Official Gazzete) RS" no. 6/2016 and 24/2018;

³⁰ <https://www.euronews.rs/biznis/biznis-vesti/153524/srbija-nekoliko-godina-lider-u-regionu-u-privlacenju-stranijih-direktnih-investicija-trend-rasta-je-dugorocan/vest>

Also, the fact that the above-named group or groups are strictly closed to outsiders and operate in a clandestine manner makes it almost impossible to prove the claims of their alleged involvement.

However, Belgrade was and still until some extent is also a robust center of antiwar activism. Hence, same groups which once confronted Milošević (or their ideological descendants) are now active in confronting both Vučić's authoritarianism and pro-war slogans of Serbian ultranationalists. Directly from the frontlines of the graffiti war, we interviewed Vladimir Arsenijević, prominent novelist and a head of the "Krokodil" literature society. His impression about the emergence of the graffiti was that *"Football hooligan groups gathered around the Crvena Zvezda (Red star) and Partisan FC's are definitely behind those actions, they operate openly and communicate via closed 'Telegram' groups."* He based his claims on personal encounters: *"Right-wing graffiti is drawn by very young football fans/hooligans, standardly uniformed in black tracksuits and hoods, with whom we have had several encounters. (... (We met the perpetrators when they were painting a mural of Vladimir Putin. My wife saw them first, they did it around 7 PM and without any hiding. She addressed them with the question of who gave them permission to paint on the public surface, but they ignored her after the initial shock. She called the police while leaving. Our friend happened to be there when the police patrol came and photographed the whole encounter from the other side of the street. The photos show police officers calmly talking to the perpetrators and then leaving, while they continue to draw what they started."*³¹

Regarding possible institutional support Arsenijević claims the following: *"Yes, they have institutional support because both the police and communal militia/service are either ambivalent or openly support them. Judicial institutions, on the other hand, do not punish them, but us, when we repaint their murals. This is why we often receive misdemeanor charges and financial fines, which are not enormous but are frequent. We received a total of 28 charges just for removing the inscription, 'When the army returns to Kosovo' on the wall near Slavija roundabout. Here at 'Krokodil' we also receive all sorts of most heinous threats including with rape and murder over social networks, and people who do it don't even bother to conceal their identity. The police and VTK (Cybercrime Department)³² do not react to it. VTK very kindly receives the report, but nothing happens afterwards. The premises of 'Krokodil' have been vandalized many times, and it was recorded by security cameras in good resolution, so the facial features of the perpetrator are clearly visible, but neither the police nor the Prosecutors Office react to it either."*³³

That does not mean that human rights activists are intimidated, on the contrary. Arsenijević and his group were at the forefront of removing the offending graffiti, both those glorifying Putin and Mladić. That was not an easy task. Consider the previously mentioned case of the prominent human rights activist Aida Ćorović (**photo 34**) who was physically assaulted in November 2021, then arrested while throwing eggs on a Mladić mural, and was subsequently fined although she

³¹ Interview with Vladimir Arsenijević on 19th of May 2025 made by the authors;

³² Cybercrime Department (Serbian: VTK) of the Supreme Public Prosecution Office;

³³ Interview with Vladimir Arsenijević on 19th of May 2025 made by the authors;

was the assault victim.³⁴ Yet, activists of Krokodil, Youth Initiative for Human Rights and the RUBS group (Russians, Belarusians and Serbs against the war) are determined to persevere, risks notwithstanding. Aida Ćorović refused to pay the 100.000 RSD (854 EUR) fine, so she faced a 90 day prison sentence. However, Arsenijević and a group of his associates founded a “SLAPFUND” through which they gathered more than 800.000 RSD (6.837 EUR), which they used to keep Aida (a 64 year old fragile woman) out of prison, and also for to pay for the others facing fines for similar reasons.



Photo 34: Aida Ćorović, in that time 60-year-old woman, restrained by three strong young men who turned out to be plain-clothed police officers apprehending her.

CONCLUSION

It would be pretentious to crown this somewhat arbitrary “tour” through the volatile Belgrade walls with a definitive conclusion, but we can offer some initial thoughts. The aggressive nature of these graffiti is surely an indicator of deep social unrest which has historical roots in the memory of the Yugoslav wars and is exacerbated by the ongoing war in the East. The clashes it provokes tell us that violence in public space is still well within the repertoire of Serbian politics, and in some sense, the murals and graffiti are simply a reflection of that unfortunate fact.

It is hard to predict the future of Belgrade political street art. Actually, at the moment of writing of this text, it is hard to predict the future of the country, too. As of November 2024, Serbia is undergoing an unforeseen and unprecedented wave of protests, which are targeting corruption and deficiencies in the rule of law and demanding decent governance, but are strangely silent on the geopolitical orientation of the country. However, a few Russian flags and Kosovo-related ultra-rightwing symbols have emerged at the protests—and Vladimir Arsenijević and his group of

activists who were carrying Ukrainian, Palestinian and Georgian flags were even physically assaulted (**photo 35**).³⁵



Photo 35

Yet, the change of tone and content which these protests are bringing is observable in the political graffiti repertoire, mostly in turning from the past themes toward more conventional phraseology, such as “The ruling party kills” or “Stop the tyranny.” (**photo 36 and 37**). Will such messages prevail, putting the struggle over past and present wars behind us in order to chart the path toward more constructive futures? Time will tell, and the walls will still be there to witness it.

Photo 35

Photo 36



³⁵ RSE, Predsednik KROKODIL-a napadnut zbog isticanja zastava Ukrajine i Palestine, 17.mart 2025 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vladimir-arsenijevic-krokodil-protest-napad/33350729.html>;

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