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Messaging Kosovo and Serbia from the EU

Abstract

      This paper evaluates the narrative landscape surrounding the Kosovo and Serbian conflict and how that landscape has transcended through time and affected the European Union ascension of each country. This paper proposes goals for the European Union narrative approach to each country and it evaluates past mistakes that the countries have made in messaging to each other. Additionally, this paper looks at the media landscape considerations for both Kosovo and Serbia. Finally, this paper proposes frames, messengers and visuals that the European Union can use to effectively message to Kosovo and Serbia in order to encourage a formalized agreement between the countries as the first step in admission to the European Union.

Introduction

      Kosovo and Serbia have long been locked into a battle of power over recognition and the way forward after decades of fighting and tension. While Serbia continues to assert the position that Kosovo belongs to Serbia, and Kosovo continues to fight against the more established country of Serbia, both countries are in their own fight for a higher rank within the world order, specifically within the European Union. Entrance to the EU has proved challenging for both countries and has continued to highlight the unresolved issues of recognition of Kosovo. The EU itself has had issues with an arc of instability on its borders.[1] The European Union is linked to the strategic narrative of bringing European states together in a cooperative project in order to create

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[1] Schumacher, T., Marchetti, A., & Demmelhuber, T. (Eds.). (2017). The Routledge Handbook on the European Neighbourhood Policy (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315691244

a collective voice.[2] That strategic narrative contributes to why the EU so strongly wants to encourage Serbia and Kosovo to make the necessary steps for EU membership. That strategic narrative also plays a role in the framing of the message to these countries in order to encourage their membership.

Serbia was granted EU candidate status in 2012 after agreements were reached over Kosovo's regional representation and by February 2018 the Commission stated that Serbia would be able to join the EU by 2025, even though that timing was extremely ambitious.[3] In July 2018, the Commission confirmed that Kosovo had fulfilled all criteria for visa liberalization and the European parliament entered into interinstitutional negotiations, which are ongoing currently.[4] Kosovo remains the only country excluded from visa liberalization in the region. Both Kosovo and Serbia's future integration into the EU remains linked to a formalized agreement between the countries and dialogues have resumed after a two-year long stalemate.[5]

Further complicating the issue, there are five EU member countries that also refuse to recognize Kosovo's independence. Those countries are Spain, Cyprus, Romania, Slovakia and Greece, none of which have any direct conflict with Kosovo and some like Greece and Slovakia have even actively supported Kosovo and maintained an official presence in Prishtina, Kosovo while Romania has been a contributor to international missions in Kosovo and worked with EU member states on issues related to Kosovo's development.[6] But, all of these non-recognizers

[2] Finding a Unified Voice?: The European Union through a Strategic Narrative Lens. (2017). In Miskimmon A., O'Loughlin B., & Roselle L. (Eds.), *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (pp. 85-109). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Retrieved May 4, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.6504652.7

[3] "The Western Balkans: Fact Sheets on the European Union: European Parliament." *Fact Sheets on the European Union | European Parliament*, www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/168/the-western-balkans.

[4] Ibid
[5] Ibid
[6] Waller, Nicholas. "Dialogue for Mutual Recognition Will Succeed When the EU Joins the US in Its Kosovo Approach." *New Europe*, 21 Apr. 2021,

share a similar reason for their positions. This reason is to not legitimize separtist and ethnic movements happening within their own countries.[7]

Understanding the current EU landscape is key to visualizing a future where both Kosovo and Serbia can work towards their respective EU memberships. In order for the EU to encourage the steps necessary for Serbia and Kosovo to earn their EU memberships, they must effectively message to both countries and help to build the mutual recognition they are calling for. That effective messaging requires deep understanding of the great divide between the countries and the ways in which they have communicated their positions to the world and battled each other through their messaging.

Goals

The overall goal of any public diplomacy campaign that wishes to reach Kosovo and Serbia for their ascent to be members of the EU is for the European Union to use systemic and identity narratives to effectively message to both Serbia and Kosovo that taking the necessary steps for EU membership will benefit their long term standing in the world order. Miskimmon, Loughlin and Roselle describe strategic narratives as representations of events and identities, they are a communicative tool through which elites can give a determined meaning to past, present and future.[8] Understanding why strategic narratives are important helps to build a broader understanding of how to message to the audiences in Kosovo and Serbia. Under the larger goal, the smaller goal of a public diplomacy campaign will be to move Kosovo and Serbia

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www.neweurope.eu/article/dialogue-for-mutual-recognition-will-succeed-when-the-eu-joins-the-us-in-its-kosovo-approach/.

[7] Turp-Balazs, Craig, et al. "Why Do Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, Spain Not Recognise Kosovo?" *Emerging Europe*, 3 Feb. 2021, emerging-europe.com/news/the-explainer-the-eus-kosovo-refuseniks/.

[8] Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order (Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, Laura Roselle) Routledge, New York, 2013)

towards the major first step of a formalized agreement in order to continue the steps towards EU membership. The public diplomacy campaign cannot only focus on the broader goal of country membership because of the many steps that each country must take to get to that point. The EU will have a great narrative battle to win over Serbia and Kosovo in the fight to make any kind of agreement because their narratives are so ingrained in their identities as countries for hundreds of years.

Narrative Backgrounds

Serbia has continued to hold onto their narrative that Kosovo belongs to Serbia and it is destiny for it to be united again. Kosovo has evolved their narrative from that of a separatist movement to one of peace. To understand the battle of narratives between Kosovo and Serbia, we must first go back to the year 1389 and the origin of the Kosovo myth. The Kosovo myth originates from the battle of Kosovo between the Ottoman Empire and Christian forces which resulted in the defeat of the Serb-led Christian army and paved the way for the Ottoman empire to take over the Balkan Peninsula. This was viewed as sacrificing their mortal land in order to gain heavenly entrance. The defeat came to symbolize the struggle for freedom and was used in the 19th century when Serbia gained independence from the Ottoman Empire. This narrative also contributed to the Balkan wars in the 1990s. In 1989, Slobodan Milosevic gave an infamous speech on the 600th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo which demonstrated the lasting power of the Kosovo myth.[9] Within that speech, Milosevic also describes the battle as Serbia defending Europe, stating…

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[9] Knezevic, Gordana. "Analysis: Is The Power Of The Kosovo Myth Fading?" *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, Analysis: Is The Power Of The Kosovo Myth Fading?, 28 June 2017, www.rferl.org/a/balkans-without-borders-kosovo-myth-vucic-serbia/28584142.html.

"Six centuries ago, Serbia heroically defended itself in the field of Kosovo, but it also defended Europe. Serbia was at that time the bastion that defended the European culture, religion, and European society in general. Therefore today it appears not only unjust but even unhistorical and completely absurd to talk about Serbia's belonging to Europe. Serbia has been a part of Europe incessantly, now just as much as it was in the past, of course, in its own way, but in a way that in the historical sense never deprived it of dignity. In this spirit we now endeavor to build a society, rich and democratic, and thus to contribute to the prosperity of this beautiful country, this unjustly suffering country, but also to contribute to the efforts of all the progressive people of our age that they make for a better and happier world."

Today, these same ideas make it difficult for Serbia to recognize Kosovo as an independent country. The Kosovo myth has been an underlying part of Serbian narratives for centuries and has not developed through time to meet Kosovo and Kosovo Albanians in the present. To effectively engage with the Serbs on this issue, the Kosovo myth must play a role.

Kosovo Serbia War

In the 1990's, the Kosovo and Serbia tensions escalated and in 1998, ethnic Albanians were opposed to the ethnic Serbs and the Yugoslavian government in Kosovo. In 1996 the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) emerged and conducted sporadic attacks on Serbian police and politicians.[10] By 1998, this violence had escalated to an armed uprising and Serbian and Yugoslav forces attempted to reassert control over the region. This conflict led to intervention

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[10] "Kosovo Conflict." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., www.britannica.com/event/Kosovo-conflict.

from the Contact group (US, Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Russia). They demanded a cease-fire but the KLA rearmed. Eventually the UN intervened. Tensions continued even after the UN administration of Kosovo and riots continued into the 21st century.[11] Kosovo narratives during this period were that the independence of Kosovo fulfilling the will of the people. The will of the people's master narrative has continued to be used by Kosovo in its fight for recognition from Serbia and in the EU ascension process.

Kosovo Independence Narratives

Kosovo continued to use the "will of the people" narrative throughout their independence movement. This was demonstrated by Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci in his speech declaring the independence of Kosovo by the democratically elected leaders which reflected the will of the people in 2008. Further demonstrating this narrative is a quote in the New York Times that said, "Independence is a catharsis. Things won't change overnight and we cannot forget the past, but maybe I will feel safe now and my nightmares will finally go away."[12] That same New York Times article also quoted a Serbian citizen living in the Kosovo City of Mitrovica, a 70-year-old Serbian engineer Svetozar, said: "I will stay here forever. This will always be Serbia." These quotes are representative of the battle of narratives between the two countries and how the identity narratives of the countries have transcended time and ethnic groups. Kastrati represents the hope of a future in a sovereign Kosovo, whereas Svetozar represents the view of Serbia and ethnic Serbians that Kosovo belongs to Serbia. Serbia continued the narrative that Kosovo was a part of Serbia and not independent even after normalisation talks led by the UN in

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[11] Ibid

[12] Bilefsky, Dan. "Kosovo Declares Its Independence From Serbia." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 18 Feb. 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/02/18/world/europe/18kosovo.html.

2012. We can again see the continuation of these narratives through statements made by former Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic in 2013 where he made Serbia's stance on not admitting that Kosovo is an independent state ahead of a trip to the mainly Serbian northern Kosovo.

The narratives regarding independence of Kosovo can be broken down to the 'Will of the people of Kosovo" and the rights of Serbia to land that they claim is a part of Serbia and will always be a part of Serbia. The longevity of the Kosovo myth throughout Serbian strategic narratives is important to note for EU messaging. We can see that the Kosovo narrative has been more effective on the world stage, as many countries, including the US and 117 other countries, have recognized Kosovo as an independent nation.

Narrative Mistakes

Many of the narrative mistakes between the two countries can be seen on the Serbian side. Serbia has not updated their narratives in order to join in the modern conversation. They have held onto their narrative that Kosovo is destined to be a part of Serbia, while the people of Kosovo have demonstrated that the "will of the people" narrative is far more effective, especially on the world stage and in gaining support from the more powerful western countries. Kosovo has evolved their narratives from a separatist movement before independence to a country that is fighting for sovereignty and an entrance to the world stage, while they are being bullied by Serbia. This narrative has played effectively and has further emphasized issues between the west and Russia, which also does not recognize Kosovo.

Narratives for Target Audiences

The target audience for a public diplomacy campaign from the EU in both Kosovo and Serbia is the government officials through the people of each country. It is ultimately up to the leaders of each country to create and execute an agreement which will spur their entrance into the EU. The relevant actors that would be subject to the identity narratives involve government officials of both countries, many of which fought leading up to Kosovo independence in 2008. As previously demonstrated in this paper, the identity narratives that the government uses are felt and used by the people of each respective country. The struggle to get Serbia to apply the messages that the EU pushes lies in how much Serbia is willing to give up in order to come to an agreement. With a formalized agreement, the EU can also better message to the five non-recognizer EU member countries. Those five countries serve as a secondary audience which will be a barrier to Kosovo EU membership after an agreement is reached with Serbia. In Serbia, the Kosovo myth narrative must be included in any public diplomacy messaging if it is to effectively reach the Serbian government officials. In Kosovo, the EU must follow the will of the people/independence narrative if it is to resonate with the Kosovo government.

Miskimmon claims that an impact of the new media ecology on foreign policy is that it has radically changed who is able to project narratives and it has allowed for more open challenges to narratives of great power in the system. [13] In Serbia, a 2020 study by the Clingendael Institute found that among the number of TV items that covered the EU, 83% of them were reported neutrally and 10% were reported positively.[14] This information is relevant when looking at where to place EU messages and how Serbians will interpret those messages when they are reached by mainstream media.

[13] Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order (Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, Laura Roselle) Routledge, New York, 2013)
[14] Lemstra, M. (2020). (Rep.). Clingendael Institute. Retrieved May 3, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26429

In Kosovo, journalists were surveyed and reported that 59% were of the view that the state run broadcaster Radio Television of Kosovo was not at all independent and 20% believed it was not independent to a certain level. In 2014 and 2015 protests rose as journalists accused the management of RTK of political bias and corruption.[15] In general, the study found that Kosovo had sufficient protections of journalists and freedom of expression but, they found intervention from individuals in politics remains the greatest barrier toward implementation of free expression and information. [16] The media landscape in both Kosovo and Serbia will play a large role in how the EU can publish and spread their messaging attempts.

If the media is heavily influenced by the government and political actors, any messaging from the EU cannot be inflammatory. The Serbian media is heavily fact based in order to avoid loud warring opinions. The Kosovo media also has issues with influence in the system but, both Kosovo and Serbia have a semi-free press, meaning it is not impossible to break through.

Framing of Issue

In order to frame the issue of EU membership in a way that each country finds the terms more favorable, the frame must include the master narratives. To date, the EU has struggled to create a unified message that directly communicates their position on the tension between Kosovo and Serbia. This has been recognized by the EU, which the EU's Council of Ministers said " To ensure our security and meet the expectations of our citizens, we must be ready to

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[15] "Http://Ljournal.ru/Wp-Content/Uploads/2017/03/a-2017-023.Pdf." *Freedom of Expression, Media and Information in Kosovo An Assessment Based on Council of Europe Indicators for Media in a Democracy*, 2018, pp. 1–57., doi:10.18411/a-2017-023.

[16] "Http://Ljournal.ru/Wp-Content/Uploads/2017/03/a-2017-023.Pdf." *Freedom of Expression, Media and Information in Kosovo An Assessment Based on Council of Europe Indicators for Media in a Democracy*, 2018, pp. 1–57., doi:10.18411/a-2017-023.

shape events."[17] Taking that, the creation of messages to Kosovo and Serbia must include their own identity narratives and the identity narrative of the EU, through the lens of increased focus on shaping events and taking a stand. In Kosovo, the issue of EU membership will not need to be reframed because the people of Kosovo want to rise in the world order and do so through the EU. But, the EU must make sure that the frame includes the will of the people's master narrative. What is meant by that is the EU will need to address the issue of a formal agreement with Serbia through the frame that better relations between the countries will serve the will of the people and help to solidify the independence that they have fought for. This frame should also be ambiguous enough that the Kosovar media will not have political issues with it and will run it on the media stations, including the state run RTK. The messenger of this frame should not be directly from the EU. The messenger should be ambassadors from western countries that are members of the EU. Kosovo has already aligned themselves with the West and Western support, making them receptive to the ideas of Western leaders. Visuals used in aiding the messages should encompass the spirit of freedom and independence that Kosovo fought so long for, which could be demonstrated through flags, wide open spaces, older ethnic Albanians in Prishtina, etc.

The Serbian frame is much more difficult. In order to frame EU membership and a formal agreement with Kosovo, the issue must be looked at through the lens of the Kosovo myth and the master narrative that Serbia has a destiny to control Kosovo. The EU should frame the issue as increased cooperation between the two countries would allow for Serbia to have more influence over the interests of Kosovo. By utilizing the narrative that Serbia wishes for control over Kosovo and framing that control through the lens of economic and political power through

[17] Finding a Unified Voice?: The European Union through a Strategic Narrative Lens. (2017). In Miskimmon A., O'Loughlin B., & Roselle L. (Eds.), *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (pp. 85-109). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Retrieved May 4, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.6504652.7

cooperation, the EU can help push Serbia towards an agreement. The messenger of the EU's message can come directly from the EU because Serbia has been actively working towards the path of EU ascension but, they also must include an additional messenger. That messenger could be military personnel that fought against Kosovo before their independence. Having the messenger originate from someone who was directly involved in the conflict would help to support the strategic advantage that Serbia wishes to have over Kosovo and on the world scale. Visuals to accompany these messages would translate the economic advantages to an agreement and the step closer to EU ascension.

Both frames can be presented in Balkan online news sources like Radio Free Europe, Balkan Insight and the Gazeta Express. These online papers all focus on the region and they are not subject to the same government or private political interference that Kosovo and Serbian media has shown to be. These sources would also be a good way to combine the frames into one message that can reach all audiences.

Our secondary target audience is the five non-recognizer countries. Instead of tackling all five, the EU should focus on the countries that have already formed relations with Kosovo. If the goal of reaching a formal agreement between Kosovo and Serbia is reached, these countries can be targeted by framing the issue from the point of view that Kosovo has been legitimized by Serbia and can no longer be identified as a separtist movement. The messenger will need to be someone within the Serbian government or political sphere in order to effectively communicate the support of Serbia. Visuals would be most effective as official photos of signing of an agreement, handshake or leaders walking side by side.

Social Media Approach

Social media use by political elites in Kosovo has been increasing, publishing videos on Youtube and Facebook and publishing images that could not find Broadcast TV space.[18] In 2014, the Foreign Minister of Kosovo Enver Hoxhaj was one of the top 25 world leaders most active on Twitter.[19] In Serbia, the most popular social media site in 2020 was Facebook.[20] Taking that information into account, Facebook would seem to be the most effective social site to utilize in EU messaging visuals and social content. By utilizing videos from the messengers for each country as well as effective visual images to accompany, the EU will be able to reach the target audience of political leaders and interact with them on the platform. That will allow the EU to bypass the traditional cascade of information and more quickly communicate without the fear of media interference.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the tensions between Kosovo and Serbia have impacted each other's ascent into the EU and rise in the world order. In order to reach the target audience of the governments of each respective country, the EU must tap into their own master narrative of unification of Europe but attempt to approach through a new narrative of shaping events. Utilizing the identity narratives of Kosovo's will of the people and Serbia's destiny to control Kosovo will be difficult. The EU cannot afford to alienate one party for the sake of the other because both are needed to come to the table for an agreement. By reframing the issue narrative of an agreement through the lens of the master narratives and including compelling visuals that demonstrate what each

[18] Gerguri, Dren. (2016). POLITICAL POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN KOSOVO. Romanian Review of Political Sciences and International Relations. 13. 95-111.
[19] Ibid
[20] "Social Media in Serbia in 2020: Instagram, Tik-Tok and Twitter on the Rise." *Represent*, 8 May 2020, representcommunications.agency/social-media-in-serbia-in-2020-instagram-tik-tok-and-twitter-on-the-rise/
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country's desired outcome is, the EU can bring Kosovo and Serbia to a better position in their

journey to EU membership.

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