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Whole Nations as Echo Chambers: The Sacralization of Cultural Heritage in Public Media during Bilateral Disputes in the Context of the Western Balkans' Accession to the European Union*

Abstract: The article discusses the main findings of research on the use of cultural-heritage-related bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans' EU accession process. It explores the concept of culturalized conditionality, examines how identity issues intersect with EU accession criteria, and analyses the implications for regional stability and EU enlargement. We argue that the aura of sanctity attributed to cultural heritage transcends the boundaries between old and new media, making it an ideal tool for transforming otherwise serious national media outlets into giant social-network-like echo chambers capable of locking entire nations into closed cognitive loops. Implications are discussed and further research directions outlined.

Keywords: cultural heritage, bilateral disputes, EU enlargement, Western Balkans, media narratives

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Introduction, Context and Background

In the late 20th century, multi-ethnic Yugoslavia dissolved in a devastating civil war. The newly independent states faced identity-driven challenges but nominally aspired to stability, reconciliation, and EU integration. A rich and diverse literature from history, anthropology, political science, and other humanities and social sciences is dedicated to the complex issues regarding identity politics in the Balkans (Bideleux and Jeffries 2006; Todorova 2022). The region's rich heritage in principle offers potential for development based on cultural exchange. However, achieving unity, prosperity, and upholding democratic values seems unattainable without addressing historical grievances, especially in the on-going use of shared-yet-contested heritage in political processes such as EU enlargement (Milenković 2024a, Milenković 2024b). The combination of simultaneous desires for economic growth and the rectification of historical injustices, all under the auspices of the EU, has proven almost impossible due to an insurmountable obstacle – a nationalist and populist media, as already widely acknowledged in the scholarship. (Stojarova 2021; Andersen et al. 2017; Gallagher 2012; Milenković 2013)

EU 'conditionality' involves attaching specific requirements and criteria to candidate countries' aspirations, ensuring alignment with EU standards before they become full members, and focuses on political and economic criteria, emphasising democratic institutions, human rights, the market economy, and adoption of EU legislation – *acquis communautaire* (Grabbe 2006; Anastasakis and Bechev 2003). The Western Balkans, seeking EU membership, are undergoing a tailored version of conditionality based on positive incentives for implementing reforms followed by additional requirements. The process includes structured accession negotiations divided into chapters (since 2020 grouped into clusters), covering various policy areas including rule of law and fundamental rights. The European Commission assesses each country's progress through regular reports following the progress across the area, ranging from fundamental freedoms to alignment in different fields of EU law. As candidate countries demonstrate alignment, they progress towards EU membership (Milenković 2022).

The EU has adapted conditionality to suit the unique challenges of the Western Balkans, considering their post-conflict context and complex historical issues. However, the road to EU membership remains challenging, requiring sustained commitment from both the EU and the Western Balkan countries to address various political, social, and economic issues that are either inherited from conflicts or have arisen as a reaction to conditionality demands being misinterpreted as a violation of cultural rights, interpretative sovereignty, and national dignity, which only intensify in bilateral dynamics. Even though some progress

towards membership has been made, most notably for Montenegro and Albania, and to a certain extent for Serbia, the previous decade has also been marked by the resurgence of authoritarian tendencies among ruling elites in the countries of the region (Bieber 2018). While this article discusses recurring patterns found across several cases, it does not claim that these dynamics are universal or equally strong in all contexts. Rather, they are understood as tendencies that emerge under specific political and media conditions in the Western Balkans and should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

This process is particularly challenging because it is marked by the phenomenon of “culturalized conditionality” (Milenković and Milenković 2013). Culturalized conditionality by an EU member country against one that is aspiring refers to the use of cultural or heritage-related factors as significant elements in bilateral, otherwise territorial, political and economic disputes. It involves the instrumentalization of culture, identity, tradition – heritage – to impose conditions, influence negotiations, or advance specific political agendas. These disputes often arise from historical, territorial, or ideological differences, but culturalized conditionality goes beyond traditional political or economic conditions, incorporating identity, heritage, language, religion, and general historical narratives, with each country having a distinct identity connecting it with what it perceives as historical injustice. This happened precisely as culturalized conditionality transformed into the *heritagisation of bilateral disputes* in the Western Balkans. Historical, cultural, and heritage-related elements become central to conflicts between two parties or nations by instrumentalising historical events and cultural symbols to legitimize territorial claims, assert national identities, and justify political positions. Historical grievances are deeply embedded in the narratives of these disputes, often involving subjective interpretations and differing accounts between the parties involved. (Jedlicki 1999; Zimmermann 2012.)

Heritage discourse now shapes narratives surrounding territorial disputes, sovereignty claims, and issues related to national identity in general. Past injustices are thus resurrected to instigate domestic and international support for political stances. The manipulation of historical and cultural symbols is common in regions with complex histories, such as the Western Balkans. The media and education play significant roles in the heritagisation process, reinforcing historical grievances and perpetuating hostility through biased reporting and nationalist education curricula. However, heritagisation might also serve as a basis for dialogue and understanding, among key tools in participatory politics. Acknowledging historical wrongs potentially paves the way for conflict resolution and building a shared future. (Giaccardi 2012) This heritage-for-peace paradigm has for some time drawn from monumental heritage (Kisić 2019) and is now being contextualized for intangible heritage as well. (Bräuchler 2022)

Identity-based disputes have historically played a significant role in the Western Balkans and continue to influence domestic and foreign policy, with regional consequences for stability, economic development and European integration. Deep-rooted historical, ethnic, and cultural divisions have led to long-standing conflicts and tensions in the region, fuelled by competing historical narratives, territorial claims, and questions of national identity. In the aftermath of the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, ethnonationalism and identity politics were instrumentalized to justify violence against the ethnic and religious Other. The conflicts that followed resulted in widespread atrocities, displacement, and loss of life. Even after the end of open conflicts, the scars of the past persist, and inter-ethnic tensions remain sensitive across the region. Identity-based disputes continue to influence domestic and foreign policies, affecting regional stability, economic development, and prospects for European integration. (Petrović and Wilson 2021; Geddes and Taylor 2016)

The stability of the Western Balkans is interdependent with that of the broader region, and conflicts between neighbouring countries have spillover effects on overall security. Regional cooperation and diplomacy are vital for finding common ground and fostering stability. The EU's support for the region's integration offers an opportunity to address historical divisions and promote unity (Karaca 2009). Many opportunities have, however, been missed, and numerous issues remain unresolved. Dialogue and cooperation aimed at reconciliation all break up on a set of connected issues – memory, heritage, identity, and belonging. No incentives have proved sufficient, as heritage is viewed as destiny. (Détrez and Segaeert 2008; Šešić Dragičević and Rogać Mijatović 2014) This where heritage becomes *dissonant*, which refers to forms of heritage whose meanings are contested because they are claimed, interpreted, or symbolically appropriated by different groups in incompatible ways (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). Such dissonance does not arise from the material object itself (if it concerns tangible heritage, which is often contested), but from competing narratives about ownership, authenticity, and historical continuity. In the Western Balkan context, heritage becomes dissonant when cultural symbols, traditions, or historical figures are mobilized to support overlapping national claims and ICH plays an important role in such disputes (Ćuković 2017).

Much of this effect is owed to what we propose as 'consecration' through and by (public) media. In recent years, the rise of new media and social media platforms has added a new dimension to heritage and the disputes related to it. Online spaces have become battlegrounds for competing narratives, enabling the rapid dissemination of information, but also the spread of misinformation and the reinforcement of pre-existing biases. Public broadcasters with classic media like television and radio are rapidly adapting and increasingly mirroring new media, which is worrying, given that, in the Western Balkan region, they

traditionally align with official state positions on the most important issues. The misuse of media, both traditional and new, has a profound impact on shaping public perception, fuelling nationalism, and exacerbating tensions during identity-based disputes in the region (Kolstø 2009).

It is acknowledged that self-effects are more potent online than offline, with a particularly pronounced impact in social media compared to traditional media (Valkenburg 2017). We argue that cultural heritages' aura of sanctity transcends the boundaries between the old and new types of media, thus presenting an ideal tool for transforming otherwise serious, large, national media houses into giant social networks with the potential to keep entire nations locked in echo chambers (Cinelli et al. 2022). During our research, we concluded that we should pay attention precisely to this media effect, even though we are not media experts, bearing in mind that researchers in a comparative global perspective notice the same phenomenon outside Eastern Europe.

A methodological note: This article does not aim to provide a full media-effects analysis. The media excerpts used throughout the text serve as indicative illustrations rather than as a systematically sampled corpus. Our primary analytical focus lies on cultural heritage, culturalized conditionality, and heritage-based identity politics, while media materials function as contextual evidence of how heritage narratives circulate in the public sphere. The selected examples therefore demonstrate recurring patterns rather than constituting an exhaustive study, which would require a monograph. The empirical material analysed here consists primarily of mainstream media sources (namely, the online news portals of major media outlets), which are treated as central arenas of narrative production and legitimation. The aim is not to measure digital engagement or map social media networks, but to examine how heritage-related disputes are framed and rendered politically meaningful within the mainstream media contexts. Analysing mainstream press is analytically sufficient for tracing processes of discursive consecration, since it is precisely through such outlets that symbolic claims acquire visibility, authority, and normative weight before circulating more widely across digital platforms. The focus, therefore, is on framing and narrative construction rather than on quantifying audience reactions.

Selected Examples

There are important examples of instances where cultural heritage has been utilized or misused in public media narratives to advance political agendas or promote national interests during bilateral disputes. Bearing in mind the limited space available, here we present a series of illustrative examples of reporting from both sides, hoping to inspire further research about our region and beyond.

Greece vs. North Macedonia (1992-2019). After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Socialist Federal Republic of Macedonia declared independence and adopted the name Republic of Macedonia. Greece passionately opposed this name, fearing it implied a territorial claim on the northernmost region of Greece – which shares the name – and a cultural and historical claim to the legacy of Alexander the Great. Analyses within social sciences and humanities have highlighted this case as an example of the construction, invention, and appropriation of cultural heritage referred to as ‘antiquisation’, and often ridiculed it (Vangeli 2011). As early as 2005, the European Union granted candidate status to the Republic of Macedonia, a crucial step towards EU accession. However, Greece exercised its veto power, blocking the opening of accession negotiations and making the resolution of the name dispute a condition for Macedonian advancement in the EU integration process (Bantouna 2023), turning it into culturalized bilateral conditionality. International organizations and diplomats, including the United Nations, mediated in multiple rounds of negotiations held in pursuit of a compromise that would address both countries’ concerns. The dispute was settled only recently, with Macedonia agreeing to change its name to North Macedonia. (Nimetz 2020)

The issue was, however, treated as a most serious instance of national interest by both sides. For instance, the London-based Greek-Cypriot *Eleftheria*, in an article entitled ‘The Historical Truth about Macedonia’ evokes academic authority and hails historical distortions:

The epigraphical, archaeological, cartographic, numismatic, geographical and grammatical documentation of the history of Macedonia ... together with the scientific testimonies of internationally renowned historians and archaeologists, all highlight in an undeniable way Macedonia’s ethno-cultural identity is Greek. They therefore definitively and irrevocably cancel any historical distortion. (Martis 2009)

On the other side, in an article titled ‘There is No Constitutional Basis for the Assembly to Call a Referendum...’ Nova Makedonija stated:

The Assembly does not have the mandate to change the constitutional name of the state, especially since the so-called ‘historic’ change is imposed by another state, through an agreement concluded contrary to the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Macedonia, and signed by an unauthorised person. (NM 2018)

Romania vs. Serbia (2012-present). This dispute, also known as the ‘Vlach question’, revolves around the ethnic identity of the minority population in Eastern Serbia known as the Vlachs. Some Romanian intellectuals claim they speak a Romanian dialect and should be recognized as ethnic Romanians (Mandić 2023) while the Vlachs themselves have identified as a separate ethnic group and enjoyed the status of a national minority in Serbia since the end of World

War II. (Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu 2023) Romania sought to support the Vlachs' cultural and linguistic rights, and the issue still occasionally affects inter-state relations between Romania and Serbia. What is crucial here is that the dispute had implications for Serbia's EU accession aspirations. Romania's push for Vlach recognition as ethnic Romanians, coupled with minority rights concerns, sparked EU worries about Serbia's commitment to minority rights protection and safeguarding cultural diversity, casting doubt on Serbia's EU accession progress. Handling the Vlach question and broader minority rights emerged as pivotal for Serbia's EU integration journey, highlighting the importance of resolving cultural and minority disputes to uphold European values. (Malloy 2022) Both sides cemented public opinion through leading national media using identity-based arguments and rhetoric, targeting theft, seizure, appropriation, assimilation, intimidation – the disregarding of minority rights. Thus, Romania's *Cotidianul*, in an article titled 'Bucharest Warns Belgrade to Respect the Rights of the Romanian Minority', states:

An investigation by the Serbian authorities was launched after the Romanian community attended a [church] service in their native language ... According to some sources, the Orthodox Vlachs from that region donated money to the Romanian Orthodox Church. In addition, last Sunday, Romanians in Serbia had the opportunity to attend a service held in their mother tongue. Immediately after the ceremony, the Serbian authorities launched an investigation into this case, inducing fear among the Romanian citizens of Valea Timocului [the Timok Valley]. (Cotidianul 2013)

In a similar manner, Serbia's *Politika*, in an article titled 'The Vlach Question, a Problem in Relations between Serbia and Romania', states:

Romania does not recognize the Vlach national community or the Vlach language, considering it a Romanian dialect. This is what the highest representatives of the Romanian state, government and parliament have been telling their Serbian colleagues at every opportunity in recent years. And what should it be called, but discrimination and an attempt at assimilation? (Čotrić 2015)

Croatia vs. Montenegro (2015-present). The Croatia vs. Montenegro dispute in 2015 involved two distinct yet interconnected issues: the Prevlaka territorial dispute and the disagreement over the identity of the Boka Navy symbolising the Bokelji, the population of the Boka Kotorska region. This combined dispute raised questions about territorial sovereignty and regional identity, affecting bilateral relations between the two countries. The Prevlaka territorial dispute centred on the contested Prevlaka Peninsula, located on the Bay of Kotor's southern tip. Both Croatia and Montenegro claimed the territory due to its strategic significance. (Bickl 2023; Orlandić 2019) Although the Prevlaka case is most often framed in literature as a predominantly territorial dispute, rather than a

‘heritage conflict’ in the narrow sense, the media coverage we analyse shows how heritage language and identity markers were layered onto this border issue and used to mobilize public opinion. In that sense, we do not claim that all bilateral disputes in our sample are identical in nature, but that even those initially defined as territorial become saturated with heritage-inflected narratives once they enter the media arena.

In parallel, the Boka Navy controversy arose from differing interpretations of its identity. The Bokelji, with a strong regional identity, perceived the navy as symbolising their distinct cultural heritage. However, Croatia and Montenegro contested the Navy’s identity, each seeking to align it with their national identity. The dispute had implications for both countries’ EU accession processes. The unresolved territorial disagreement over Prevlaka raised concerns about regional stability and adherence to the rule of law, both critical aspects of EU accession criteria. Croatia’s insistence on resolving the Prevlaka dispute as a precondition for advancing Montenegro’s EU accession negotiations highlighted the impact of unresolved territorial issues on Western Balkan accession (Wankiewicz-Kłoczko 2024). Addressing the Prevlaka dispute became instrumental in demonstrating Montenegro’s commitment to peaceful dispute resolution and good neighbourly relations, both considered prerequisites for EU integration. The fact that the Boka Navy dispute is still open reinforces the fact that cultural heritage should be de-weaponized before it enters the reconciliation and development agenda.

Media coverage was moderate to extreme, also referring to issues of appropriation and assimilation, with Croatia’s *Večernji*, in an article subtitled ‘They want to prove that there are no Croats in Boka!’, stating:

For us Croats, Boka is an exceptional category because we, as an autochthonous people, have achieved great cultural and spiritual capital in it. This fact is strongly confirmed precisely by those who would deny it and who make considerable efforts to prove that there are no Croats in Boka but rather other peoples. There are different methodologies in such attacks, from the aggressive to the relatively subtle. The second group includes those who want to introduce national determination by regionalism through the back door and convert Croats into Bokelji. (Veljković 2022)

The Montenegrin response, given before the passions subsided and the governments of the two countries reconciled, was directed towards a discourse of a territorial approach to heritage not ethnically attributed. Thus, state television, in a feature entitled ‘The Boka Navy Belongs to All Citizens’, conveys the words of the then Prime Minister:

Because we are talking about cultural values that belong to citizens, to the whole society, and with which everyone has the right to identify ... after the can-

didacy for the UNESCO Representative List, the Boka Navy will belong to all citizens of the world, so appropriation by any party is unnecessary in this case. (RTCG 2017)

This could seem like an essentially reassuring message. However, anthropological research shows that ethnic and religious communities worldwide do not allow their heritage to be treated as shared or state-owned when they are a minority, fearing silent cynical assimilation. (Milenković 2019)

Croatia vs. Serbia (2015-present). The most recent Croatia vs. Serbia dispute started in 2015 and centred on the content of history and language textbooks in Serbia, revealing deeply rooted and diametrically opposed interpretations of historical events related to Yugoslavia's breakup and the wars of the 1990s. The conflicting narratives presented in each country's textbooks depicted opposing views on the causes, consequences, and responsibilities for the conflicts. In Croatia, historical events were often portrayed from the perspective of Croatian victimhood within Yugoslavia and the struggle for independence, while Serbian textbooks often emphasized the suffering and persecution of Serb minorities during the genocide in the Independent State of Croatia (the WWII fascist puppet state), and the 1990s war.

The disagreement had significant implications for fostering mutual understanding and reconciliation between Croatia and Serbia and, like the preceding cases, contributed to the stalemate in EU accession talks. The differing historical interpretations perpetuated stereotypes and animosities, hindering the reconciliation process and obstructing progress towards improved bilateral relations. Acknowledging the complexities of historical narratives and promoting an inclusive and balanced approach in educational materials were highlighted as essential for advancing dialogue and cooperation by the academic community (Stojanović 2017; Pavasović Trošt 2018). History teaching is considered among the top priorities in reconciliation efforts in post-conflict societies, yet media coverage made this impossible. A conclusion every researcher of identity politics would agree with could be summarized by the following newspaper headline 'Everyone on Every Other Nation's Crime' (Petrović 2019).

The Croatian national broadcaster, in a feature entitled 'The Croatian Language is, However, Recognized in School Textbooks in Serbia' states:

The Croatian National Council in Serbia called for a response from the ombudsman regarding the controversial textbooks, which in October 2021 revealed that eighth-grade students in Serbian schools learn that the Croatian language does not exist. In the definition of the division of South Slavic languages in Serbian language textbooks, it is stated that Croats, Bosniaks and Montenegrins use the Serbian language, but refer to it as Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin. (Njikoš 2022)

The Serbian media show no hesitation in perpetuating such disputes, even when an article ostensibly aims to calm the public. Thus, *Pravda* in the article ‘Does the Croatian Language Exist? This is the response from SANU, which presents the opinion of the Committee for the Standardisation of the Serbian Language of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts:

The Committee’s stance is that the South Slavic languages are Bulgarian, Macedonian, Slovenian, and Serbian, and that alongside Serbian, in the footnote, it should be added that Croats, Bosniaks, and certain Montenegrins refer to this language as Croatian, Bosnian/Bosniak, and Montenegrin. (Pravda 2021)

Bulgaria vs. North Macedonia (2020-present). The Bulgaria vs. North Macedonia dispute centres around the status of the Macedonian language and Macedonian identity as a nation distinct from Bulgarians. The resumption of this decades-long dispute has become a significant obstacle preventing North Macedonia from opening EU accession talks. (Christidis, 2022) The dispute is rooted in historical and linguistic differences. While there were claims by Bulgarian institutions that Macedonian is a dialect of Bulgarian and that Macedonians are ethnically and linguistically connected to Bulgarians, North Macedonia asserts its distinct linguistic and ethnic identity, with Macedonian recognized as the official language of the country (Vangelov 2023). As in previous cases, the dispute has its origins in the complex historical development of the region, with varying perspectives on shared historical figures and cultural heritage. Although Bulgaria was the very first country to acknowledge the independence of the Republic of Macedonia in 1992 it has consistently declined to acknowledge the presence of a distinct ethnic Macedonian nation and a separate Macedonian language. As an EU member state, Bulgaria has wielded its veto power over the opening of accession talks for North Macedonia, demanding recognition of the Macedonian language as a Bulgarian dialect, stalling the progress of North Macedonia towards EU membership.

The Macedonian response was centred on historical falsifications. Thus Kanal5, in a feature entitled ‘SHAMEFUL: Bulgaria Sent a Memorandum to the EU with Conditions for Macedonia’, states:

The term ‘Macedonian language’, used in the 2018 Prespa Agreement, is not – for the purposes of this agreement – binding on third countries: a key principle in public international law. Although this term is also used in the reports of the 1977 Third United Nations Conference on the Standardisation of Geographical Names, the said expert conference does not have a political character and its decisions do not produce legally binding consequences regarding the recognition of the so-called called ‘Macedonian language’. In view of the above, Bulgaria insists that EU documents (both before and after EU accession) refer to the ‘official language of the Republic of North Macedonia’ or, in case of absolute necessity, to the ‘Macedonian language’ with an asterisk and explanation below

as follows: ‘according to the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia’. (Kanal 5 2020)

In a similar manner, Bulgaria’s *Mediapool*, in an article entitled ‘Sofia Imposed a Veto: Skopje to Stop the Anti-Bulgarian Campaign’ says:

Bulgaria actually says ‘no’ to the Republic of Macedonia and its citizens, Bulgaria will say ‘no’ to this language of hatred, ‘no’ to all attempts over the last 30 years to steal, falsify and manipulate Bulgarian history ... We cannot agree with this attitude towards the identity of the entire Bulgarian people. (Lalov 2020)

The patterns emerging from these materials point toward several analytical concerns explored in the next section.

Analysis – How Media Coverage Weaponizes Heritage

Before turning to the specific patterns observed across the selected bilateral disputes, it is important to clarify the analytical focus. The media materials examined in this study are illustrative rather than exhaustive; they serve to reveal recurrent mechanisms through which cultural heritage becomes sacralized, moralized, and politicized in public discourse. Our aim is not a systematic media-content analysis, but to identify the dominant logics through which heritage is transformed into a tool of identity mobilisation and diplomatic pressure. The following analysis therefore concentrates on the mechanisms that recur across cases, rather than on the empirical frequency of particular frames.

The analysis of various bilateral disputes in the Balkans reveals recurring patterns in the role of the media and the impact of cultural heritage on political dynamics. In the Greece-North Macedonia dispute, media portrayal played a crucial role in shaping public opinions and fuelling nationalistic sentiments. The Greek media emphasised the historical legacy of Alexander the Great, framing the dispute as an infringement of Greek cultural heritage, while the North Macedonian media asserted its right to self-determination. The lack of historical and cultural context in media reporting contributed to misunderstandings and entrenched positions, perpetuating polarisation. The influence of new (social) media was not strong at the time, as at this stage such tools were used for cross-displaying alternative worldviews, establishing border dialogue, the empowering of minorities, spreading solidarity, and social critique rather than the more contemporary right-wing populist type of nationalistic rhetoric based on misinformation. (Fenton and Barassi 2011)

Moving to the Vlach question that was reopened in 2012, media coverage in Romania and Serbia exhibited diverse perspectives on the historical and cultural ties of the Vlach community. Nationalist narratives occasionally surfaced,

complicating the dispute and contributing to public polarization. The early days of new media platforms brought new dimensions, allowing activists to engage in discussions about the Vlach community's origin and identity and influence discourse in big national media (Huțanu 2021). The dispute ultimately settled as governments reached an agreement, leveraging Romania's EU member status.

In the Croatia-Montenegro dispute over Prevlaka and the Boka Navy, media coverage reflected competing narratives, reinforcing territorial sovereignty arguments but also evoking the issue of the origin and ethnic attribution of the Bokelji regional identity, facilitating the rapid spread of nationalistic content, perpetuating stereotypes and heightening tensions, with issues of ethnicity (Montenegrin, Croat and Serbian Catholic) resurrecting the old wounds. The media's power over cultural heritage influenced the outcome, leaving Montenegro short of one key parliamentary representative from the Croatian community, which in turn led to the fall of its multicultural government after a quarter a century (which is in itself a topic for a separate analysis on the power of cultural heritage in the media). This topic too has evolved in the era of new media.

Similarly, and almost simultaneously, the Croatia-Serbia dispute focused on history and language textbooks, revealing deeply rooted and opposed interpretations of historical events. The media framed the disagreement and differing interpretations in humanities and social sciences as a reflection of conflicted national identities, perpetuating stereotypes and hindering reconciliation. New media platforms reinforced echo chambers, spreading misinformation and exacerbating historical biases that were known to have triggered bloody conflict in the 1990s.

The Bulgaria-North Macedonia dispute centred on the Macedonian language and identity. Media coverage emphasised national narratives, with politicians exploiting the issue for political gain. New media platforms contributed to digital polarization, reinforcing historical biases and complicating efforts to find common ground.

This analysis also draws on the concept of *mediatization*, understood as the process through which political and cultural conflicts increasingly unfold according to media logics rather than purely diplomatic or legal rationalities (for mediatization see further: Hjarvard 2013). Mediatization does not imply media control over politics, but highlights how visibility, emotional resonance, simplification, and personalization shape the public articulation of disputes. In the case of heritage conflicts, this process contributes to the transformation of technical or legal disagreements into identity-charged narratives. In all cases considered, 'newmediatization' of classic media exacerbated polarization and spread of misinformation from the margins of the internet into the big national media that were supposed to rely on research-based information when addressing heritage related issues. (Aguerri et al. 2022.) Research showed that the impact of weaponizing heritage and promoting divisive narratives is particularly

noticeable in new media, especially social media platforms. New media channels have a wider reach and faster dissemination of information than traditional media, making them potent tools for spreading sensationalized or biased content related to cultural heritage, such that it could rightly be said that new media are more susceptible to promoting the weaponization of heritage, almost like arenas (Severo 2015). They achieve this by prioritizing content that generates more engagement, leading to the amplification of extreme or sensational views on heritage-related issues (and nothing is more appealing than Others trying to appropriate what is Our history, language, identity and heritage).

Social media platforms are found to create echo chambers where like-minded individuals reinforce each other's beliefs. This leads to the spread of polarizing narratives on cultural heritage, but in a way that whole nations could be considered such 'chambers', through which the diversity of perspectives on questions of tradition, identity, and heritage diminishes (or is suppressed) within nations. As new media platforms rely on user-generated content (and lack strong editorial gatekeeping and professional ethical considerations) which is mostly not fact-checked nor adherent to journalistic standards, they allow misinformation and biased content to spread rapidly. This provides exceptionally fertile ground for the creation of sensationalized or provocative content to attract attention and engagement – exactly the context from which heritage, as a trigger for conflicts, should be removed.

Across the cases analysed, traditional national broadcasters increasingly replicate the behavioural patterns of digital platforms: personalisation of narratives, emotional amplification, binary moral judgments, and rapid circulation of identity-based content. Consequently, they produce pseudo-convergence and blur the boundaries between classical journalism and networked communication. By *convergence culture*, we refer not simply to the technological integration of media platforms, but to the circulation of narratives across multiple media environments in ways that blur distinctions between institutional journalism and networked communication (Jenkins 2006). In this context, heritage-related claims move between newspapers, online portals, and social media spaces, acquiring new layers of interpretation and emotional intensity. This is how the conditions in which large media systems function as nation-scale echo chambers are created. Taken together, these patterns point to a shared communicative habit across the region: heritage becomes a highly responsive symbolic resource that enables media actors to amplify perceptions of 'threat', moral 'transgression', and identity 'erosion'. By simplifying complex historical issues into emotionally salient binaries and by repeatedly invoking heritage as a sacred and non-negotiable domain, national media systems effectively foster conditions in which identity-based conflicts appear inevitable and irresolvable. These mechanisms, rather than the individual disputes themselves, constitute the key obstacle to de-escalation and to constructive engagement within the EU accession framework.

A model case of the misuse of heritage in bilateral disputes

Let us now consider a model case of the misuse of heritage in a bilateral dispute (not solely regarding EU accession) involving two neighbouring countries with unresolved conflicts. In a hypothetical scenario involving the cultural heritage of country A and country B, said heritage should ideally be a source of shared history and understanding, but becomes a tool of manipulation, contributing to heightened tensions and complicating (EU accession) talks. The weaponization of heritage in media narratives reinforces nationalist narratives, impedes the resolution of bilateral disputes, and raises concerns about the region's stability and commitment (to EU integration). Such cases call for responsible media reporting, constructive dialogue, and the engagement of international organizations to address heritage issues in a balanced and respectful manner during (EU accession) negotiations. Instead, countries that share not only (EU accession) aspirations but also a complex history, marked by territorial disputes, ethnic tensions, and differing interpretations of historical events, seek to instrumentalize heritage as a political tool. This is done by transforming an element of cultural heritage into a contentious issue, as those elements of (mostly intangible) cultural heritage shared by both countries are claimed as exclusively belonging to one nation, while the other disputes such a claim.

In the next step, the media – especially classic large national media such as national broadcasters or prominent newspapers in both countries – begin to exploit heritage-related issues to assert nationalistic agendas and influence public opinion; sensationalized stories emerge, portraying cultural heritage as being at risk due to the other country's actions or claims. In such a scenario, cultural heritage becomes entangled with questions of national identity and sovereignty. Political leaders in both countries emphasize the importance of preserving their heritage as a symbol of national identity, leading to heightened emotions and perceptions of threat. This, by definition, leads to stalled negotiations – the overheated dispute over cultural heritage becomes an obstacle in the (EU accession) negotiations, with country A demanding 'recognition' or 'protection' as a precondition for advancing talks. The media coverage attracts attention from international observers (and EU institutions). The situation becomes a concern (for the EU), as the dispute delays progress in accession negotiations and creates renewed doubts concerning commitment (to EU values). The media's inflammatory reporting on heritage-related issues leads to public protests, diplomatic tensions, and increased mistrust between the two countries. The media focus on heritage thus overshadows all other substantive topics in the negotiations.

Comparative Perspective

This particular excursion into media studies by an anthropologist and a legal scholar, purposively focused on Western Balkan countries seeking EU accession, may seem to limit the generalizability of our findings to other regions, contexts, or disciplines. Both heritage disputes and scholarly analyses of them can vary significantly depending on the historical, cultural, and political dynamics of each region. Expanding the scope of research to include other regions or cases offers a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of heritagization and its impact on conflicts and reconciliation processes. Bilateral disputes involving heritage are not limited to (Eastern) Europe: they are found in various regions across the world and arise due to historical, territorial, ethnic, or religious reasons, reflecting the complex historical, social, and political dynamics between countries (or communities within a country).

To clarify the comparative logic of these cases, the following overview is structured around three recurrent types of heritage-centred disputes observable worldwide (these categories are not mutually exclusive, but they reveal patterned ways in which heritage becomes mobilized in bilateral conflicts):

- (1) disputes rooted in historical or territorial claims;
- (2) disputes centred on identity, language and “ethnogenesis”; and
- (3) disputes intensified through international recognition mechanisms, especially the UNESCO global heritage regime.

Many countries in Asia have experienced heritage-related disputes (Lixinski 2015). For instance, tensions over the ownership and preservation of cultural heritage sites have arisen between India and Pakistan, China and India (Tsering, 2011) or Cambodia and Thailand (Silverman, 2011). The Middle East has also witnessed heritage disputes linked to the preservation of historical sites and artifacts, such as the contested ownership of ancient artifacts between Iran, Iraq, Syria and the United Kingdom (Sylvester 2015) or holy places in Israel (Pasternak 2020). In Africa, too, disputes over cultural heritage involve claims over ancient artifacts, cultural practices, or historical sites: Egypt, for example, has sought the repatriation of its ancient artifacts housed in various international museums (J. Cuno 2011). Cultural heritage disputes can also be found in the Americas: for instance, disagreements between Peru, Bolivia and Chile over the ownership of cultural artifacts and historical sites. Heritage has become a particularly vulnerable target of media-driven populism, and is already being shown to align with illiberal political dynamics (Pajnik et al. 2023), even though this relationship still requires systematic scholarly analysis.

Turning historical, cultural, or natural sites into ‘elements of heritage’, often with the intention of preserving them for future generations yet rationalizing the process as being ‘in the name of our ancestors’, involves the recognition and promotion of certain sites, objects, traditions, or practices as part of a country’s cultural or historical identity (thus appropriating an element belonging to different traditions into the property of one currently more powerful in terms of heritagization). In the context of bilateral disputes, heritagization plays various roles, as such disputes often involve contested territories with historical and cultural significance. Both parties may seek to heritagize certain sites within the disputed area to bolster their claims to sovereignty or to emphasise their historical connection to the land. As a rule, bilateral disputes stem from differences in cultural identity or historical narratives, and this is where heritagization is used as a solidifying tool for identity assertion (especially when it comes to shared-while-disputed heritage elements). And, as our analytic model from the Balkans shows, such bilateral disputes negatively impact multilateral diplomatic relations, providing ammunition for the creation of regional instability, be it in Southeastern Europe, the Near East or South East Asia. By heritagizing certain aspects of their shared history, countries try to use cultural diplomacy as a means to foster goodwill and improve relations, yet also to obscure ongoing heritage appropriation. In this article, *cultural diplomacy* is understood as the strategic deployment of cultural symbols, heritage narratives, and historical claims in the conduct of interstate relations. Rather than a neutral exchange of cultural goods, cultural diplomacy operates as a political instrument through which states assert legitimacy, signal recognition, or contest symbolic authority in international arenas. In heritage disputes, cultural diplomacy often blurs into identity politics when cultural claims become embedded in broader geopolitical negotiations (more on cultural diplomacy and cultural relations see: Dragičević Šešić et al. 2019). Heritagization is there employed to seek international recognition and support for a country’s historical claims, particularly when it comes to seeking UNESCO World Heritage status for specific sites located within the disputed territory. It is, as it were, a soft method for pursuing hard aims (Meskell and Brumann 2015; Brumann 2018).

There are other prominent cases that illustrate how countries leverage historical and cultural narratives to advance territorial or diplomatic agendas. The South China Sea and Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands disputes involve competing territorial claims, with Japan, China and Taiwan all using historical records to assert sovereignty (Meskell 2013). Similarly, Argentina and the UK dispute the Falkland Islands/Las Islas Malvinas based on historical ties and self-determination rights (Korstanje and George 2012). The Aaland Islands, situated between Finland and Sweden, were designated as a UNESCO site, further entangling the historical dispute between those nations (Grydehøj 2010). Everglades National Park in the

USA, which shares an ecosystem with Cuba, received UNESCO status, affecting bilateral relations and conservation efforts, which shows that in future analyses of media influence on bilateral relations, we should also pay attention to the growing importance of the intertwining of cultural heritage discourse with environmental issues in social movements references (Eriksen2016).

All these comparative cases, and dozens more worldwide, demonstrate the central role of heritage-rooted identity in the public shaping of bilateral disputes (which may be economic, political, or military in nature). It is crucial to recognise that these conflicts are multifaceted, with political, historical, economic, and strategic factors at play; however, in the media – which are used predominantly to exacerbate identity-based arguments – these disputes are framed in identitarian terms. These examples demonstrate that seeking UNESCO recognition for sites in disputed areas intensifies existing tensions and adds toxic dimensions to bilateral conflicts exactly by ‘echo-chambering’ whole nations through the consecration of cultural heritage. The acknowledgment of cultural and historical significance by international bodies like UNESCO (or the Council of Europe) holds substantial implications for the political, diplomatic, and territorial dimensions of such disputes (Meskell 2018; Brumann 2021).

Conclusion: Whole Nations as Echo-chambers?

The primary aim of this study was to undertake a preliminary analysis of the instrumental use of cultural heritage in media narratives during bilateral disputes between states, with a particular focus on its impact on Western Balkan countries seeking European Union accession. Our research sought to analyse how different parties involved in heritage-based disputes employ media to advance their political agendas. Our aim is not to identify common tools such as biased reporting, propaganda, and misinformation campaigns that are used to sway public opinion and intensify tensions during territorial disputes or historical disagreements, as this is done by media and communication scholars or professionals. Rather, we aimed to detect media coverage specifically related to cultural heritage disputes in the Western Balkan region, so we examined concrete examples where cultural heritage has either been utilized or misused to advance political agendas, discussing the implications of such practices for regional stability and the EU accession process. The examples presented here should be seen as illustrations rather than comprehensive evidence, as this important and divisive topic deserves analysis in book form or longer. These cases collectively demonstrate that heritage-related disputes are significantly amplified once they enter the media arena, where they are reframed through identity-based narratives that reshape public perception and constrain diplomatic space.

Our research revealed that the culturalization of conditionality during EU accession negotiations leads to media manipulation of heritage-related issues, making it a contentious element in the otherwise technical accession process. In such contexts, the media should have a critical responsibility to report on cultural heritage issues with accuracy, sensitivity, and a commitment to promoting understanding and dialogue. In theory, responsible journalism should play an important role in mitigating conflicts and fostering an appreciation for the diverse cultural expressions present in the Balkans. This, however, is not the case: instead of balanced and informed reporting in order to de-escalate tensions and contribute to the peaceful coexistence of diverse cultural communities in the region, cultural heritage is put in the centre of otherwise political, territorial or economic disputes. It is, in other words, weaponized by the media. This pattern points to a broader dynamic in which cultural heritage acquires an aura of sacrality, enabling it to function as a powerful cognitive anchor around which media-generated echo chambers solidify.

Biased reporting, propaganda, and misinformation campaigns (standard tools for swaying public opinion in favour of one side while vilifying the other (Haigh and Haigh 2020; Sadiq and Saji 2022)), were also found to *weaponize heritage* during territorial disputes or historical disagreements in this region. The media were found to present historical events selectively and portray their own group as victims and the opposing group as ‘appropriators’ of heritage. This kind of narrative framing reinforces existing stereotypes and deepens animosities between communities, obstructing efforts towards reconciliation, stabilisation, cooperation and development, all of which are both needed and projected for this post conflict region (Andresen et al. 2017). As the selected examples show, media coverage of cultural heritage based disputes sensationalized content to evoke nationalist sentiments, prompting calls for ‘preservation’ – as if the heritage would be lost – and ‘protection’ – as if it were endangered by other nations (even if the tangible sites or intangible heritage elements were obviously not directly at risk). This emotional manipulation distracts from the actual issues at hand and hinders constructive dialogue.

The research also detected a relatively neglected phenomenon – classic media create echo chambers, reinforcing existing beliefs and biases during heritage-based disputes, as if they were new (social) media. This should be tested comparatively. Media coverage is found to misinterpret or oversimplify cultural symbols, turning them into divisive tools rather than sources of pride and understanding. Such misrepresentation of traditions further leads to fear and defensive reactions, preventing appreciation and respect for each other’s heritage, which becomes flammable in a region recovering from ethnically motivated wars. We found it especially relevant considering the reactive nature of nationalism, which typically rests when there is no visible enemy against whom the na-

tion can easily homogenize. It is relevant for an understanding of political communication worldwide (Zeitsoff 2017; 2020). Recognizing these mechanisms is essential precisely because the political consequences of such media-mediated sacralization extend far beyond cultural debates and directly affect prospects for conflict transformation and EU accession.

Furthermore, it was confirmed that large-scale national media play a significant role in shaping narratives around cultural heritage, influencing public perceptions, and exacerbating conflicts through the prioritisation of emotionally charged stories, the simplification of complex issues and the amplification of identity-based conflicts; the same strategies have also been detected by media and communication scholars in new (social, digital) media practice (Pietrobruno 2013; Lu et al. 2019). The selective presentation of cultural heritage aligns with political agendas, neglecting historical context and perpetuating biases. This type of instrumentalization of heritage deepens hostilities and hinders reconciliation. The whole approach emphasizing cultural heritage as a key marker of identity fuels tensions, leading to competition among cultural groups for recognition, a process long ago detected and explained away in anthropology and critical heritage studies (Santamarina 2023) that is now producing novel research questions (Pietrobruno 2014).

The comparative examples demonstrate that heritage-based disputes in bilateral relations are a global phenomenon, sensitive and complex, requiring careful consideration, responsible reporting, and diplomatic efforts to find solutions that respect the cultural significance and heritage of all parties involved. Addressing heritage disputes requires a commitment to dialogue, mutual understanding, and cooperation – all of which are counter-indicated by the consecration of a media-created, inflammatory topic. International bodies, cultural organizations, and civil society should play crucial roles in facilitating discussions and promoting the preservation and appreciation of shared cultural heritage for the benefit of future generations. We found that toxicity arises as a direct consequence of the transformation of identity, culture, and heritage into political objectives, which are perceived as natural, and especially sacred (thus non-negotiable), perpetuating conflicts and making them insoluble. Our research reveals that the media play a pivotal role in creating this ‘consecration effect’ on a global scale, and we hope that this phenomenon will be further investigated comparatively.

This broader context requires scholarly analysis and a response to the global phenomenon of the heritagization of bilateral conditionality, so a comparative glimpse was also offered pointing to this widespread phenomenon (of neglecting the power of heritage instrumentalization to ruin even best development plans). The implications and consequences of media practices analysed in this article on regional stability and the EU enlargement process are found to be counter-indicative, demonstrating that culturalized and heritage-related disputes between

countries in the Balkans indeed have far-reaching consequences for their aspirations for European integration. Resolving these disputes through responsible diplomacy and constructive dialogue is essential for promoting regional stability and cooperation within the EU framework. Given the evidence presented, the removal of shared or contested heritage from bilateral conditionality emerges not as a political preference but as an analytical necessity: without such decoupling, the EU risks perpetuating instability rather than facilitating reconciliation. This is not a matter of political preference but a structural requirement for preventing the instrumentalization of identity in candidate-member relations, which repeatedly undermines both regional stability and the credibility of EU enlargement.

In each of the selected cases, we observed that collective (especially ethnic and religious) identity, which was deliberately excluded from the discussions during the European Union's establishment, became a prominent factor during the culturalization of the enlargement framework through bilateral conditionality. Not surprisingly, collective identity, represented by cultural heritage – especially intangible aspects like language, rituals, and beliefs – assumed a role contrary to the intended purpose envisioned by the international community within the framework of identity management for regional reconciliation and development. This has inspired us to seek a novel approach in order to advise policymakers and implementing bodies on how to de-escalate the weaponisation of heritage while assuring states parties that their dominant identities would be protected, preserving them from appropriation or prohibition by perceived 'malevolent globalizing forces', as alleged in numerous nationalist conspiracy narratives concerning the EU (Cinelli et al 2022; Stano 2020).

So far, a model for inclusive and joint ICH safeguarding was developed, an alternative approach that fosters joint nominations and focuses on shared heritage (Milenković 2024a, Milenković 2024b).

Future research should therefore examine these mechanisms systematically across regions and media ecosystems, in order to better understand how heritage becomes entangled with contemporary forms of populism, identity mobilisation and geopolitical contestation.

Author Declaration

We confirm that the submitted article is the result of the authors' original and independent academic work, based on our own intellectual effort, analysis, and interpretation.

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used an AI tool (OpenAI) to assist with editing in order to improve grammar and readability.

The authors have reviewed and revised all outputs generated by these tools and assume full responsibility for the final content of the work.

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Cele nacije kao sobe odjeka – sakralizacija kulturnog nasleđa u javnim medijima tokom bilateralnih sporova u kontekstu pristupanja Zapadnog Balkana Evropskoj Uniji

U članku se razmatraju glavni nalazi istraživanja upotrebe bilateralnih sporova povezanih sa kulturnim nasleđem u procesu pristupanja Zapadnog Balkana Evropskoj uniji. Istražuje se koncept kulturalizovane uslovljenosti, ispituje kako se pitanja identiteta presecaju sa kriterijumima za pristupanje EU i analiziraju njihove implikacije po regionalnu stabilnost i proces proširenja. Tvrdimo da aura svetosti koja se pripisuje kulturnom nasleđu prevazilazi granice između starih i novih medija, čineći ga idealnim alatom za transformisanje inače ozbiljnih nacionalnih medijskih kuća u velike sobe odjeka nalik društvenim mrežama, sposobne da čitave nacije zaključaju u zatvorene kognitivne petlje. Razmatraju se implikacije i ukazuju budući pravci istraživanja.

Ključne reči: kulturno nasleđe, politika identiteta, bilateralni sporovi, proširenje EU, Zapadni Balkan, medijski narativi, sakralizacija, populizam, novi mediji, sobe odjeka

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