Symposium. *Social Spaces and Field Boundaries in Reputation Formation – peer-reviewed*
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/13703

Sociologica. V.16 N.2 (2022)
ISSN 1971-8853
https://sociologica.unibo.it/

Tarnished Nationalism: Rehabilitating Serbia's Reputation on the World Stage

Emma E.S. Brandt* Gary Alan Fine**

Department of Sociology, Northwestern University (United States)

Submitted: October 21, 2021 – Revised version: November 23, 2021
Accepted: March 3, 2022 – Published: October 17, 2022

Abstract

Reputation management is a concern not just for individuals and organizations, but for nation states. Rehabilitating a tarnished reputation is part of the attempt by national entrepreneurs to create images that build "soft power;" a form of cultural authority. This is a concern especially for smaller nations that lack "hard power" through the dominance of their economy or military. We investigate how governmental actors and leading societal institutions attempt to rehabilitate a country's image. In doing so, we present the case of contemporary Serbia, which acquired a negative international reputation resulting from not just the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, but also from long legacies of racialization via discourses of Orientalism and "Balkanism" in Western perceptions of Southeastern Europe. Unlike its neighbor, Croatia, Serbia is not a European Union member and lacks a seacoast with which to attract tourists. As a result, it must gain positive international attention in other ways. Through the examples of promoting sports successes (in basketball and tennis), "pinkwashing" or highlighting symbolic LGBT integration (while perhaps lacking day-to-day integration), becoming a popular nightlife destination, welcoming refugees as a stop on the "Balkan route," and, most recently, deploying efforts at Covid-19 "vaccine diplomacy," we consider the challenges to Serbia's attempt to rehabilitate its difficult reputation. Not only is the country's international standing a matter of profound concern to its inhabitants — having economic, political, and symbolic impacts — but Serbia is an archetypal case to understand the perception of "problematic" nations on the world stage.

Keywords: Reputation; Serbia; nationalism; Balkans.

* emmaesbrandt@u.northwestern.edu

** g-fine@northwestern.edu

In January 2022, tennis champion Novak Djoković's failure to be permitted to enter Australia to compete in the Australian Open made international headlines for about a week. In the midst of the Omicron surge, a conflict between a major government and a sports star, over vaccination status—the same issue that was dividing countries, companies, and families everywhere—was a widespread, if brief, object of attention. In Serbia, Djoković's home country, however, the story lasted for weeks; it was discussed constantly on television, on social media, and in newspapers, not to mention cafés and parties. The Djoković-Australia conflict touched on two issues that have been perceived as crucial to Serbia's international reputation—vaccination, and more importantly, sports stardom. The reception Djoković received—or didn't receive—from the Australian government seemed, to Serbians, to speak to the perception of Serbia on the international stage.

Although it is common to treat reputational management as applying primarily to individuals and organizations, larger communities have reputations as well, and these can be consequential for politics, economics, and the opportunities of citizens. Governmental units can be known for their character as well as for their aesthetics, heroics, traumas, and brutalities. We can think of the reputations of cities such as Venice, Tokyo, Sydney, and San Francisco, as well as more problematic ones, such as Berlin, Johannesburg, Beirut, or Phnom Penh. What is true for cities is also true for states. Because of governmental authority to act for all citizens, these national reputations might be more powerful than local ones, as how states are treated results from beliefs about their character. Whatever one thinks of the motivations of President Donald Trump, his desire for fewer migrants from "shithole" countries, such as Haiti, in contrast to "more desirable" nations, such as Norway, reveals the power—in some minds, at least—of how a national reputation rubs off on the reputations, and, hence, the opportunities, of its citizens. Consequently, reputation is an important concern for leaders of nation-states that wish to participate as full and respected members of a global community. As a result, state actors and those in influential institutional domains play an important role in creating "new, bettered" identities.

When a nation acquires what others judge to be a difficult reputation (Fine, 2001), a desire often exists to bolster their "soft power" by improving or rehabilitating their reputation. This is particularly true for smaller, poorer nations that lack "hard power," as in their military potential or in the economies of trade. Lauren Rivera (2008) makes a compelling case that those in charge of "marketing" Croatia altered its reputation from being considered a problematic Balkan state to a European (or Adriatic) one by emphasizing its geographical amenities (notably its beaches and coastline) and those cultural features that link it to other European nations, such as its Catholicism. Croatia's subsequent acceptance in the European Union provided a marker of legitimacy. While not moving its landmass, Croatia was able to change its cognitive location, with attendant benefits for its citizens.

An approach that connects reputational work to states and, indirectly, to the character of their inhabitants suggests that the reputations of nations shape the opportunities of individual citizens. Will nations be accepted in the European Union, in NATO, or in other multi-national groups? What is the effect of this acceptance on the travel and economic opportunities of their citizens? This is the challenge that Great Britain has faced as their exit from the European Union, a consequence of Brexit, required an altered sense of what it meant to be British (or, significantly, English — and Scottish, Welsh, or Northern Irish) and what was allowed to them. The exit had implications for the reputation of the state and of its citizens.

The reputations of states are subject to change over time, as well. All is not inevitable for nations with seemingly secure reputations (such as Germany pre-WW I), and all is not lost

for nations that are burdened with troubled reputations (Germany post-WW II). The argument that we present in this account of reputational work is that that even those nations with problematic identities have resources by which they can attempt some measure of reputational repair.

These changes are often brought about through the decisions of individuals or groups within the state or with those with institutional power, supported by media publicity. It is not always the state that acts; interested parties—both inside and outside the nation—can make the case for a renewed national identity. Of course, state authorities have considerable influence in this regard. Over time, the way that government leaders alter their claims of the character of the nation evolve, evident in the changing ways that German politicians referred to their past/s (Olick, 1999). This is also evident in how American politicians explained how the attacks on 9/11 and the responses to it reflected American character (Simko, 2012). Meaning-based strategies, selected by those well-placed to be reputational entrepreneurs (Fine, 2001), permit changes in perceived reputations. This change inevitably depends on connections with and the support of "legitimate" national states, often through media representations. Not every nation can be Norway, but those with access to core Euro-American cultural preferences (including, as many read into President Trump's comments, whiteness) have advantages in this regard.

To understand how national reputations can change and how they are resistant to change, we use the Republic of Serbia as an instructive case by which to study the evolution of national reputations. Serbia is most recently associated, to those not intimately familiar with the Balkans, with the violence of the Yugoslav Wars. War crimes committed by Serbs and the remnants of the Yugoslav government during those wars, such as the thousands of Bosniak men slaughtered at Srebrenica, have remained vivid in the global imagination. In fact, NATO forces entered the wars against Serbia, bombing the country in 1999 in a military campaign that Serbians still bitterly resent. This reputational toll is just one of the elements of the post-conflict transition that rankles many Serbians and keeps Serbia from being fully embraced by its European neighbors. During the socialist Yugoslav era, many citizens prided themselves on the fact that their passports could take them almost anywhere in the world, and they saw their country as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement. Being met today with not only prejudice from many Western Europeans during study abroad and travel, but also dealing with what they define as stereotypical and negative depictions of Balkan characters in mass media such as Hollywood films (Brandt, 2020), the poor reputation of Serbia is of great concern to many of its citizens. "The majority of the world thinks of Serbia as some bloodthirsty country that kills everyone," lamented one young Serbian; "the wrong picture is sent from Serbia to the world," said another. Young people suggested displaying things as diverse as art, poetry, science, sports, nature, and the sense of humor of the people as avenues to repair their stained national reputation.

Serbia's reputational challenges, however, did not start with the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s; many scholars have documented the legacies of racialization that have shaped the way that Western Europe in particular has talked about the Balkans (e.g., Kuperberg, 2021; Baker, 2018). Eastern Europe has long been associated with "backwardness," and the Balkans, in particular, have been stigmatized with images of ethnic violence. Milica Bakić-Hayden (1995) describes a phenomenon of "nesting orientalisms" in which each country figures its immediate East as the end of civilization. Maria Todorova (2009) refers to the wider phenomenon as "Balkanism," a derivation of Orientalism. Indeed, the Balkans have long had a hold on the European popular imagination.; Vesna Goldsworthy describes how these stereotypes have manifested in English-language literature, from Agatha Christie's Herzoslovakia to Bram Stoker's Dracula. Goldsworthy emphasizes that even when people think they know nothing about a place like

the Balkans, they have often absorbed fictional depictions that matter in how its citizens are treated. She writes (Goldsworthy, 2013):

> in the Balkans the following elements come together: outsiders' lack of familiarity with the real places; the sheer volume of the literature; a dearth of rival, indigenous narratives with anything like the same impact; and, perhaps above all, an overwhelming imbalance of power. British and American attitudes towards the Serbs or the Croats have more tangible consequences than Serbian or Croatian attitudes towards the British or the Americans. (p. xvi)

Catherine Baker (2018) has described the region's peculiar status as post-socialist, post-conflict, and (white, European, and) post-colonial.

Other Balkan countries have taken various steps toward transcending this stereotyped depiction as backward, violent, rural, and forming part of an Orientalized "East." Some have joined the European Union, and oriented toward their Western European neighbors; some have focused on developing their tourism industries. Greece has long been a popular destination, but Slovenia and, increasingly, Croatia have become trendy places to visit in the last decade or two. However, unlike regional neighbors like Croatia (Rivera, 2008), Serbia's natural environment does not encourage a booming tourist industry that would contribute to the nation's reputation. Ideally, a local hospitality industry might create positive reputational images, allowing visitors to carry happy memories of their visits home along with souvenirs. However, Serbia lacks the Adriatic Sea coast that affords Croatia, Montenegro, and, increasingly, Albania desired vacation destination status. While Belgrade has received media attention as a nightlife center and a place to experience a gritty, Berlin-like city landscape, the tourist industry in Serbia remains underdeveloped in comparison with other Balkan nations. Further, unlike neighbors Croatia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria (and former Yugoslav member Slovenia), Serbia is not a member of the European Union. Any positive international attention it receives must be achieved through its own efforts, rather than through being a part of an international cultural collaborative. In addition, Serbia faces perhaps a greater reputational challenge than its regional neighbors in overcoming the stigma associated with the events of the Yugoslav Wars. In this essay, we point to five domains in which Serbian reputational entrepreneurs justify their position as a "legitimate, respectable" nation in the context of their distance from European organizations. Specifically, we address the role of sports, acceptance of gay and lesbian communities, nightlife and partying, migrant welcoming, and vaccine diplomacy. While each of these has provided reputational benefits, in each case, criticism, internal and external, limits the positive effects.

1 Sports and Public Regard

Sport is a topic that crosses international borders, creating publics with shared, impassioned interests. As such, one area of positive representation that is embraced and desired by many Serbian citizens is global recognition in international sport competition. National successes in basketball decorate local shopping centers and focus attention on the American-based National Basketball Association (NBA), where Serbian player Nikola Jokić won 2021's Most Valuable Player award. Meanwhile, tennis star Novak Djoković is perhaps the most widely popular figure within the country, admired for his local connections and philanthropic contributions as much as his international success on the tennis courts. Serbian souvenir shops tout lists of the

"10 Greatest Serbian Sport Successes," while the country's tourist websites emphasize the "true heroes of national sport." Serbians are proud that some outlets outside the country have highlighted the nationality of players, such as a *USA Today* piece featuring both Jokić and Djoković (List Wire, 2021), which they believe creates an improved global reputation.

This is desirable for Serbian citizens and a source of pride. However, not all is glossy. Reputation work is complex. Serbia is also visible in the context of sports for a more problematic issue: violence and racism among soccer fans, as reported on by international media. While Serbia is by no means alone in this concern—English fans have a reputation for aggression (Buford, 1992)—when attached to Serbia, the behavior of fans reinforces the perceived dangers of people (and especially men) from the Balkans.

Serbia has an "eye-watering racism problem that shows no sign of abating," wrote the *Guardian* in 2017, after several Black players experienced racist taunts from the crowd of fans at a game in Serbia (Ames, 2017). The piece, importantly, highlighted the role of the organized football fan groups in allowing the problem to persist. Mirko Poledica, president of the Syndicate of Professional Footballers, was quoted as admitting that those who work at Serbian clubs are often "powerless and frightened." The football fan groups, which are often politically involved and connected with organized crime, were highlighted in a recent *New York Times* article (Higgins, 2021) and a VICE documentary; (titled "Soccer's Most Violent Rivalry", VICE Sports, 2017). These groups—often considered a serious problem within the country—perpetuate Serbia's reputation for machismo, racism, and violence, rather than providing a more genteel vision of admired individual athletes.

Nevertheless, this reputation for "grittiness" can occasionally be transformed in a positive direction, as in recent reports on the success of Serbian men in the new Olympic sport of 3-on-3 basketball, as led by Dušan Bulut—"Mr. Bullutproof." Bulut and his team have grabbed global headlines for their pioneering role in a game that is unfamiliar to many sports fans. In interviews, he has focused on the elements of being Serbian that have led to their success. In a *New York Times* interview, Bulut noted how the comparatively high value of sports earnings in Serbia, in contrast to other occupations, motivated the players to push through discomfort (Keh, 2021). A *Wall Street Journal* profile (Beaton, 2021) reads:

> That's how a Serbian became the most dominant force in a sport invented in Massachusetts. The basketball culture is different. The Serbian men have become the best 3-on-3 players. The American men didn't even qualify for 3-on-3 in Tokyo. And to anybody wondering if the best NBA players could just wipe Dusan Bulut off the court, he believes many 5-on-5 players aren't physically strong enough and their skills don't always translate. "That's a fact," he says... "Mental toughness comes easily for all Serbian athletes because if you're growing up in Serbia you need to be tough," he says.

"If you're growing up in Serbia you need to be tough" is not the stuff of glossy tourist brochures, but it presents one reputational path forward for the country, as well as for its athletes.

2 Pinkwashing

It is a feature of contemporary life that reports of the sexuality of political leaders can contribute to a national reputation, but as sexuality has become more of a public matter such issues can

also speak to "the tolerance of the nation." Still, there is only so much that the private choices of a governmental official, even a leading one, can suggest about the tolerance of the ordinary citizen. Whether or not such discussions are meaningful in broad political terms, such claims for acceptance provide a means by which Serbian officials present themselves and their public as forward-looking and open-minded through a process that has been termed "pinkwashing," the promotion of symbolic LGBT acceptance to ingratiate the country with progressive Western audiences.

In 2017, Serbia made global headlines when Ana Brnabić was appointed prime minister, becoming only the second female LGBT head of state in the world. The first woman and the first openly gay person to hold the office of Prime Minister in Serbia, her appointment proved newsworthy not only within the region but worldwide. *Deutsche Welle* (Kljajic, 2021) later described the reaction in these terms:

> Serbia's image was about to change, it seemed. The Conservative Balkan nation was changing course, distancing itself from intolerance, right-wing politicians and their supporters, breaking a long tradition of close-knit relations with Russia and instead following its path to modern society and integration into the EU.

Even those who weren't so optimistic noted the significance of this appointment, especially as Brnabić continued to make headlines for being the first gay Serbian leader to march in the local pride parade and the first same-sex world leader to have a partner give birth during her term (France 24, 2021).

Serbian activists, however, were more skeptical, viewing Brnabić's appointment not only as a way for Aleksandar Vučić to consolidate his power (she was appointed Prime Minister when he had to vacate the position to become President), but as "pinkwashing," or the promotion of symbolic LGBT acceptance to impress Western audiences. Critics noted continuing incidents of violent homophobia in Serbia, where gay marriage and adoption are not legal. A month after Brnabić's partner gave birth to their son, IVF was banned for gay couples in Serbia. (This decision was subsequently changed in April 2021.) Anita Mitic, director of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, remarked: "I call it doing a botox—making things look a bit prettier but generally staying the same," adding that "I don't expect any brave or independent actions from Brnabić" (McLaughlin, 2017).

The Serbian government's handling of the prime minister's sexuality might be seen as "walking the line." While Brnabić's office highlighted the historic nature of her son's birth and Vučić mentioned that she was a lesbian while appointing her, he did so while playing down the significance, adding that he did not care about her private life and valued her professionalism. Brnabić herself told Vice Serbia that "I'm not a spokesperson for the L.G.B.T. community [...] I don't want to be branded as a gay minister, just as my colleagues don't want to be primarily defined as being straight" (Surk, 2017). At the same time, Brnabić has insisted that she has never faced problems in Serbia due to her sexual orientation; "I don't think Serbia is that homophobic," she has remarked, perhaps defensively, prompting vehement disagreement from the Serbian LGBT community. "Serbia remains a country in which the prime minister, despite receiving congratulations, still can't be listed as a parent of her son, cannot enroll him in kindergarten, take him on a vacation abroad, nor visit him in hospital as a member of the family," according to Labris, a lesbian human rights organization (France 24, 2017). Brnabić's historic appointment, then, has had only mixed success as a form of reputational entrepreneurship, largely because—as the "pinkwashing" critics allege—it is not backed up by dramatic or public social or political change.

3 Nightlife and Tourism

While Serbia has struggled to achieve the same kind of tourist appeal as countries such as Croatia (with its popular seacoast), or even to compete with some of its landlocked Central European neighbors such as Czechia and Hungary, it has received attention for a particular kind of tourism those neighbors have not: intense partying. In the two decades after the breakup of Yugoslavia, travel writers and bloggers began to highlight Serbia's—in particular, the capital city, Belgrade's—reputation for something unrelated to the war and political struggles: an active nightlife scene. A PRI/The World article from 2011 opined that (Ames 2011):

> Belgrade may not match the architectural glories of Prague, medieval charms of Tallinn, or Budapest's old-world elegance, but citizens of the Serbian capital believe none of their rivals will offer visitors a better chance of having a good time. "Hedonism is our best product, said Vesna Vujic, a government official."We have to find a way of marketing that."

The article described how this tourism promised not only economic benefits to the country, but the possibility of re-establishing international contacts after the war and "bringing the country back to the European mainstream."

Perhaps it is not coincidental that much of the reporting on Belgrade as a tourism destination compared it to (post-war, also post-communist) Berlin—gritty, industrial, but with a vibrant nightlife scene. These comparisons, although they can be less than flattering—one outlet mentioned the two cities' "roaring nightlife, dirt cheap prices (by Western European standards, that is) and general shabbiness" (Eror, 2017)—give tourists, especially those unfamiliar with the Balkans, some idea of what they might hope for from a party trip to Belgrade. Both national tourist websites and party promoters attempt to capitalize on this reputation by advertising the options available alongside guided nightlife experiences. These descriptions focus on the loud music (and range of musical styles to choose from), all-night and all-week opening hours, and purported physical attractiveness and fashion sense of Serbian citizens.

However, some of these descriptions verge on romanticizing the corruption with which Serbia is often less pleasantly associated. One website's description of the *splavs*, or floating party barges, remarks that (Serbia.com, 2022):

> 'splavs' became the venues where the new Serbian 'elite' was going out. Staggering amounts of money were spent in a night, while the formula for fun was 'spend as much as possible, dress as provocative as possible and sing as loud as you can.' Everyone who wanted to be someone and to be seen visited these venues.

Another article approvingly cites a specific splav as the perfect place for an "authentic Serbian night out" due to the ability to "rub shoulders with both tabloid starlets and mob bosses" (Eror, 2017). Many articles also explain Belgrade's vibrant nightlife scene as resulting from escapism. Unemployed young people, who "grew up in anarchy and chaos" (Coldwell, 2015), reacting to "the break-up of Yugoslavia, civil war, UN sanctions, hyperinflation, and high unemployment" (Belgrade at Night, 2022), created a music and clubbing scene "more varied and rich than one might expect for a city not often reported about and less often visited" (Brundin, 2009), where it is nonetheless difficult to produce music or start music spaces without connections. Additionally, a recent Associated Press (2021) news article featured the complaints of Belgrade residents about loud nightlife noise during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to

the residents, the government had failed to enforce rules to contain party noise. Stories like these further pollute the possible reputational benefits of an active party scene.

Here, again, the reputational benefits promised by something like promoting party tourism are twinned with reputational risks. In these reports, Belgrade nightlife may appear young, creative, and fun; it may also appear as corrupt, trashy, grimy, or obnoxious. The comparisons to Berlin pose a possible reputational path forward for the city. However, Germany's political and economic might in the years after WWII helped to mitigate perceptions of seediness associated with the capital, Berlin. Belgrade—and Serbia—do not have the same advantage.

4 Refugee Reception

A fourth major domain in which Serbia has received global attention is the so-called refugee crisis beginning in 2015. The steady flow of Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani refugees into Europe via the "Balkan Route" put the countries along the path—Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Hungary, among other nations—in the international spotlight. Since 2015 an estimated more than 1.5 million migrants have passed through Serbia. During 2020, there were some 7,000 migrants present in the country at any given time (UNICEF, 2022). Serbia's handling of the crisis has been both praised and critiqued. Early on, several reports cited what was considered the surprising compassion of the local populace (largely homogenous and not economically prosperous) toward the new arrivals. Both the existence and content of these stories—the fact that outsiders considered compassion surprising for Serbians—suggested the generally negative reputation of the nation. These human-interest stories portrayed Serbians helping migrants in their local communities. This was often ascribed to the region's recent experience of war with several being refugees or hosting refugees themselves just 20 years earlier (Denti, 2015; Pupavac & Pupavac, 2015). However, as with the other cases, these "feel-good" stories were not to last in the face of a less satisfying series of reports. Later, as the Serbian government barred aid organizations from helping migrants outside the camps while news media highlighted refugees sleeping in warehouses in Belgrade during winter, the reputational tide turned sharply against the country, focusing on instances of cruelty and incompetence in refugee management. Once again, reputation work had to face the obdurate reality of public policy. As much as those in public relations might desire to control the narrative, reputations depend on facts on the ground, or at least facts as reported by those with different perspectives.

The refugee crisis provides an especially evocative example in that it is a problem that implicates both the European Union and the individual nations of Western Europe, as well as other countries that migrants passed through on their route, such as Turkey. Writers for English-language publications continued to draw on tropes of Balkan backwardness and quarrelsomeness to criticize the countries for their refugee management. For example, a 2015 *Foreign Policy* essay entitled "Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Balkans" (Hopkins, 2015) wrote of conflict between Croatia and Serbia that:

> The governments in Belgrade and Zagreb have traded insults — sometimes reaching back to pre-World War I tensions — and have closed their borders to people seeking entry and to each other. Desperate asylum-seekers who want no part of the Balkan tensions, meanwhile, are on the losing end of the spat.

Meanwhile, the EU itself debated over how best to handle the flow of asylum-seekers, and a continent-wide backlash resulted in the election of right-wing populist parties across Europe

and the closure of the Balkan Route in 2016, stranding migrants in many of the Eastern European countries through which they had been transiting.

Serbia continued to be condemned for their handling of the migrants, who were now struggling to move on to their desired destinations in Western Europe. Andrea Contenta, Médécins Sans Frontières' (Doctors Without Borders) humanitarian affairs officer in Serbia, told the *Irish Times* that Serbia had become a "dumping ground" for refugees, detailing violence as they tried to journey onward (McLaughlin, 2018). President Vučić emphasized in 2020 that he did not intend to let Serbia become a "parking lot" for hundreds of thousands of migrants, striking a defiant nationalist tone. At the same time, many refugees expressed their disinclination to stay in Serbia, instead hoping for permanent residence in Italy, France, or Germany, nations that they perceived as providing greater opportunities. While positive, human-interest stories about, for instance, a small-town pastor building stoves for migrants, have persisted (Thorpe, 2020), the Serbian response to the refugee crisis has lost much of its sheen.

5 Vaccine Diplomacy

A final issue that has the potential to burnish Serbia's reputation, while simultaneously causing reputational difficulties, is Serbia's attempt at vaccine diplomacy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, yet another opportunity for reputational entrepreneurship arose. While Serbia faced many of the same challenges as other nations in the first year of the pandemic, a new—and more positive—story emerged in March 2021: Serbia was having unusual success in its vaccination campaign. On March 17, a *New York Times* article (Higgins, 2021) trumpeted the country's success:

> BELGRADE — Stained for years by its brutal role in the horrific Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, Serbia is now basking in the glow of success in a good war: the battle to get its people vaccinated. Serbia has raced ahead of the far richer and usually better-organized countries in Europe to offer all adult citizens not only free inoculations but a smorgasbord of five different vaccines to choose from.

While even a celebratory article cannot escape the mandatory reference to the Yugoslav Wars in the first clause, the *New York Times* piece explicitly demarcated Serbia's vaccine campaign as a reputational opportunity, a "public relations triumph for the increasingly authoritarian government of President Aleksandar Vucic[...] burnish[ing] his own as well as his country's image" (Higgins, 2021). The feat, accomplished by accepting vaccines from Russia and China as well as those from Pfizer and Moderna, was reported in several other outlets around the same time. Serbia sat near the top of the global vaccination charts for weeks. Today this early start seems to have evaporated; currently the nation sits near the middle of global vaccination programs.

However, the vaccine surplus and the ability to select a desired vaccine did not just facilitate the speedy vaccination of many Serbians. Serbia had an excess supply of vaccines that it distributed to regional neighbors like Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. This distribution was done publicly; in some cases, Serbian leaders flew to other countries to be photographed handing over the gifts, a clear example of reputational entrepreneurship. Most dramatically, Serbia opened its borders to allow citizens of neighboring countries to travel to Serbia to be vaccinated. In response, some Serbian citizens criticized this policy, which they saw as facilitating the spread of COVID-19 in the country, as a PR move designed

only to gain positive visibility abroad, indicating once again the double-edged complexity of national reputational management. Serbia's Prime Minister Ana Brnabić told Euronews that "there is no politics in vaccination," adding that "The most beautiful image of solidarity was sent from Serbia by vaccinating citizens of other states" (Tuvić & Gigović Grubić, 2021).

This "vaccine diplomacy," as it is sometimes called, has been described as an extension of China's vaccine diplomacy in Serbia. President Vučić called President Xi personally to request that vaccines be sent and was famously (or perhaps infamously) photographed kissing the Chinese flag when Chinese medical supplies and medics arrived in Serbia in March 2020. Billboards in Belgrade thanking Xi in Serbian, funded by local media outlets, have since appeared. However, these complexities were visible primarily to those who closely follow events in the Balkans. Much of the mainstream media coverage focused primarily on Serbian citizens' ability to choose their vaccine and, more significantly, the country's generosity in opening vaccination to others in the region. The fact that this success was enabled by a concrete example of the country's signature geopolitical strategy (balancing the EU/US with Russia and, increasingly, with China) makes this a particularly striking case of reputation work in presenting Serbia as a successful state negotiating a complex globalized system.

6 The Challenge of National Reputations

In exploring how Serbia attempts to alter its reputation as a state, we presented five cases: sport success, LGBT support, nightlife tourism, refugee policy, and vaccine diplomacy. These are all domains which agents within Serbia hoped might reconstruct the country's difficult reputation and appear as a "normal," moral, progressive European nation. However, the desire of reputational entrepreneurs does not inevitably make it so. They do not operate on an empty playing field. There are other reputational actors: citizens whose actions are discrediting, media that wish for contentious stories, and rival nations that have their own agendas. Nor are positive steps always accepted, given that they must confront negative information that internal or external sources might emphasize. What becomes clear—in this case and likely in others—is that wishing for change is not sufficient, but that publicity, both positive and negative, makes change in reputation possible.

Ideally, we would wish to know whether these strategies had any meaningful effects on the Serbian national identity, but these effects take time and are currently impacted by the COVID pandemic. If the strategies are meaningful, we may find Serbia integrated into the European Union or other international bodies, although the timeline for these changes is lengthy. In the absence of the pandemic, perhaps we will find a notable increase in tourism—an economic market measurable in several ways—particularly in comparison with other Balkan states, such as Croatia and Albania. However, the changes in travel brought about by the pandemic likely affects destinations that lack desired beachfronts more than those on the Mediterranean. The U.S. News and World Report (2021) list of the 78 "best countries" lists Serbia in 2021 as 76th, ahead of Iraq, but behind Belarus and Saudi Arabia. (In 2017, Serbia was ranked 80th, the lowest ranked nation on the list; it was not listed in 2016). Perhaps making it onto the list is something of an advance, although much reputation work is evidently needed. According to the Democracy Index, compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2020) Serbia is considered a "flawed democracy" and the national rating has slightly declined from 2006 (6.62) to 2020 (6.22) (ratings go from 0-10). This places Serbia between Croatia and Bosnia in its Democracy rating. While we should be properly skeptical of such lists, they suggest that significant changes are hard to come by without major structural reforms, changes in collective memory, or the

increased prominence of entertainment industries. Still, there are some indications that Serbia has become somewhat—slowly—more integrated into global domains: in sport, travel, and politics, even though criticism and contention remains.

While these data are valuable in determining if nations can alter their image, they are tangential to our fundamental argument, which focuses on national strategies more than the effects of these strategies. Considering effects demands an examination of how external players (such as the EU, popular magazines, or travel websites) respond to how the Serbians—and their government—present themselves. We have focused on internal strategies of reputation work, leaving external reputational work as a topic for subsequent consideration.

While it is surely true that a tarnished reputation is not eternal, the question is how nations can make a case for reputational change and at what speed. Perhaps dramatic change is required (the Czech Republic's Velvet Revolution; the establishment of multi-racial democracy in South Africa), the presence of a charismatic leader matters (Poland; Myanmar, for a while), or sustained economic development is essential (Ireland; Vietnam). Change, while hard to manage and capable of being lost (Russia; the Arab Spring), is possible. However, the point that we emphasize is that the changes must be brought about (or prevented) by actors who see the establishment of a revised and renewed national identity as central to their agenda and the agenda of their polity. Reputation must be treated as being in the interest of those whom they represent.

While the examination of reputations has focused on the creation of local identities, the case of Serbia—and other nations desiring positive change in their global positioning—reminds us that national reputations have consequences. If they are not as amenable to change as those of persons and organizations are, they can be desired and demanded. The case of Serbia, however much its reputation has changed in fact, recognizes that how we consider nation states involves a dynamic process of meaning construction in a judgmental world.

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Emma E.S. Brandt – Department of Sociology, Northwestern University (United States)
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7316-7528
emmaesbrandt@u.northwestern.edu; https://sociology.northwestern.edu/people/graduate-students/profiles/emma-brandt.html
Emma E.S. Brandt is a PhD candidate at Northwestern University (United States); her dissertation is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Serbia, supported by a Fulbright Grant. Her research explores how Serbian youth navigate a media landscape characterized by high levels of institutional distrust, conspiracy theory, and challenges to press freedom.

Gary Alan Fine – Department of Sociology, Northwestern University (United States)
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2431-1562
g-fine@northwestern.edu; https://sociology.northwestern.edu/people/faculty/core/gary-alan-fine.html
Gary Alan Fine is James E. Johnson Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University (United States). He examines political reputations and collective memories, and is the author of *Difficult Reputations: Collective Memories of the Evil, Inept, and Controversial* (University of Chicago Press, 2001). He is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture in Charlottesville, Virginia (United States).