

**KOSOVO'S CULTURAL HERITAGE
TREASURY AS A WAR HOSTAGE IN
BELGRADE AND UNESCO**



Art History

Keywords: Kosovo, Independence, heritage, culture, archaeology, etc.

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Abstract

Although two decades have passed since the NATO war and Kosovo's secession from Serbia (1999), and over 11 years of independence (February 17, 2008), there is still a huge array of problems and hostility between Pristina and Belgrade. One of the public and state sensitive, controversial and complicated cases, in the relationship between the two states, is precisely this file. It is about 1243 archeological and ethnological artifacts that were taken before March 24, 1999, when the first bombs hit Serbia. Ethnological collections are kept at the Ethnographic Museum, while archaeological sites in the premises of Belgrade National Museum. It is a repeated story not only in the Balkans, but whenever there are wars, invasions, colonies, divisions and unions, ups and downs of old and new empires. Kosovo's Treasury robbery looks like an old black and white film, realized with the special effects of the 20th century technologies.

Introduction

On June 28, 1989, after a heated talk of in front of 2 million Serbs, during the commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Fushë Kosova, along with the rise of Milosevic at the peak of power in Belgrade, the unstoppable demolition of Yugoslavia began. After the fall of Berlin Wall, the dissolution of Yugoslavia (created in 1918, initially as the Serbian-Croat-Slavic Kingdom) began with the declaration of independence of Croatia and Slovenia (25 June 1991). A few months later (08.09.1991) Macedonia and (01.03.1992) Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence as well. A process accompanied by bloody wars in Croatia and Bosnia In the remaining Yugoslavia, we included Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo.

The Albanians had started the first attempts to proclaim the Republic, with the 1981 demonstrations and on 2 July 1990 the Declaration of Independence was announced. But Kosovo remained the last in this process of new historical developments, because the myth of the Great Serbia continued to be held through the old nationalist thesis: "Kosovo is the cradle of Serbia". When they realized that they could no longer keep it by force, the Serbian military launched an ethnic cleansing campaign in the late 1998 and early 1999. It was an unprecedented genocide, in the post-World War II Europe, that provoked massive displacement of the Albanian population from their homes to Albania and Macedonia.

By anticipating this situation, Belgrade had begun to take measures not to lose at least the objects of Kosovo's cultural heritage over which it built its own autochthon myth in the Balkans. In 1993, Dragoslav Srejovic, the Director of the Academy of Arts and Sciences Gallery in Serbia, took the initiative "to introduce some of Kosovo's artifacts in Belgrade" through an exhibit and catalogs specially published for this occasion. The agreement for the Albanian side was signed by Gjoke Palushaj. It was initially said that the exhibition would be presented in the Serbian capital and then returned permanently in Kosovo. After selecting it, the treasury with over 1200 cultural

heritage sites began to take it from Pristina's Museum in 1997, among them, 644 archeological objects. After making a detailed and accurately recorded census, the Kosovo archaeologist Kemajli Luçi, signed to extract the artifacts from the institution. This task was entrusted to the director appointed by Serbs at the time in Pristina, Jugoslav Djordjevic. It was officially stated that the goal was to open in 1998 in Belgrade, an exhibition titled "Kosovo and Metohija's Archaeological Treasury," for which one of two publications was also realized. While the other holds the title: "Kosovo and Metohija's Archaeological Treasury from the Neolithic to the early Middle Ages."

Both of these volumes, of a qualitative publication, are evidence and proof of the clear and worldwide fact of this robbery, ferociously published in Belgrade. 644 archeological artifacts taken from Serbia are divided into: 110 objects belonging to the Neolithic and Eneolithic era; 271 objects belonging to the metals periods (bronze and iron era); 133 objects are of the Antiquity, 98 of the Medieval era and this list is closed with 31 coins belonging to the Roman period. In addition to the objects, as a major loss is considered also the documentation of this cultural legacy, of which little is spoken. According to the official Belgrade's 1996 decision, apart from the objects, were also taken all their documentation from the Kosovo Institute for the Protection of Monuments. The documentary material constitutes a remarkable research and factual heritage about Kosovo's cultural and historical heritage. Serbs claim that for the opening of this exhibition in Belgrade, were used a small part of their objects from the Museum of Pristina. Albanian media in Kosovo and Macedonia that dealt mainly with the subject, say that the Serbian museum authorities declared that for the "Archeological Treasury of Metohije and Kosovo" were used hundreds of objects from their own museum fund. The exhibition was organized as part of Pristina's Museum regular program. Albanian archaeologists are also involved in the realization of this project. The official "curator" of the archeology exhibition was the Kosovar archaeologist, Kemajl Luci. The Serbs see their legal care for this exhibition as legitimate, claiming they held in Belgrade thereafter, only a handful of heritage, which although admitted that derives from Kosovo, it belongs to their heritage!

As this debate is still continuing, the Albanians take comfort in the detailed study publication and the treasury catalog. There is room for debate and discussions regarding the text content and interpretation of facts. The greatest importance of this edition is related to the publication of photos and many documentary records, which are the main references to the heritage up till today. The voluptuous edition was ideated and initiated by the Serbian academician Dragoslav Srebovic, with his associates from Belgrade and Pristina. Initially, the publication was simply intended as a book with an accompanying, explanatory and supportive catalog for the exhibition that was foreseen to be located at the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts Gallery. Subsequently, the exhibition was supposed to expand with the addition of archeological objects mainly made of stone and large surfaces of different mosaics. The first volume of this publication opens with a dedication to Dragoslav SrejoVIC, the Director of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences Gallery, which was also the "brain" of the operation for bringing Kosovo's treasury in Belgrade. The Serbian academic passed away in November 29, 1996, failing to see his project

come to live. It was completed by archaeologist Nikola Tasic. Branko Jokic, director of the Pirshtina Museum, before the war in Kosovo and Gojko Subotic, Director of the Serbian Academy of Art and Science Gallery, who replaced Dragoslav Srejavic after his death, wrote: “With his broad vision about the cultures of the past, the life he wanted to bring closer to his generation, Dragoslav Srejavic, a member of the Academy of Arts in Serbia, director of its gallery and scholar, introduced in this gallery some collections of material and spiritual heritage, preserved on this earth.”⁸

Throughout the text, Albanian culture heritage sites are described before the liberation of Kosovo by Serbian scholars as simply “collections of material and spiritual heritage, preserved on this earth.” In no country and in any case of both publications, no mention is made of “objects of Albanian heritage” nor the “Albanian” name. An attitude, that is not far from what has been historically held, even nowadays by the official circles of Belgrade, after 20 years of liberation and then the declaration of Kosovo's independence. The publication follows with an introduction, about the chronology of archaeological discoveries in Kosovo and a historical perspective about them. Subsequently, many authors' thoughts and studies on prehistory, the Iron Age, Bronze Age, Antiquity, Hellenization, the Roman Era and the Early Middle Ages were reflected in it. The text author of the chapter devoted to the Iron Age, is the archaeologist Kemajl Luci, while for the chapter of numismatics and the text for the epigraph is written by another Kosovo archeologist, Fatmir Peja. Both at that time were curators in the Museum of Kosovo - the former Museum of Pristina.

From about 150 authors of multifaceted publications, five are Albanian authors from Albania, three are from Kosovo. Serbian and international authors, especially Slavic and Russian, dominate. During the NATO bombing days (March 24 - June 9, 1999), the Gallery of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences was closed and Kosovo's heritage objects were relocated to be preserved at the Serbian National Museum. Kosovo has long sought the return of the Treasury ransacked by Serbia. It supports this not only in the natural right, as the owner of objects, which have been documented throughout the procedures for taking over and their removal from Kosovo and then exposure in Belgrade. The request has a clear legal basis, based on binding bilateral and international agreement treaties that resolve conflicts in this area. The strongest point in the legitimacy of the demand for the return of the heritage home, is based on the explicit prediction made in the Ahtisaari Package, which is also the framework document for Kosovo's independence.

One of the articles of this plan states: “The Republic of Serbia must return archeological and ethnological artifacts,” - Annex V, Article 6, - “Within 120 days of the entry into force of this agreement, we will return the archaeological and ethnological which were borrowed from Kosovo’s museums for temporary exhibition in Belgrade during 1998-1999.” This article leaves no room to any other interpretation. The artifacts belong to Kosovo and must be returned home. But as always in such cases, there will always be one thousand obstacles that will postpone the implementation of this article of the Ahtisaari package. The “package” implementer left the issue

⁸ The Archaeological treasures of Kosovo and Metohija”, Typographic, Belgrade 1988, pg. 10.

of oversight and progress of the Treasury return process in the “hands” of the two countries (Serbia and Kosovo). Even the Comprehensive Status Proposal, the issue of cultural heritage - based on the world practice - saw it... through conversations between the two neighbors, Pristina and Belgrade. One of the other steps taken in resolving this issue was the appointment of Dimitris Moscopoulos, the head of Greece's Liaison Office in Kosovo, as a mediator between the two countries. But neither step has yielded the expected results. There have been other media and civil society initiatives, both national and international awareness, to resolve this issue, but so far has fallen into deaf ears.

One of the justifications of the Serb side was that of linking the return of Kosovo's heritage sites with the return of Serbs banned or expelled after the war in 1999, some of whom were expelled or claimed not to be returned from fear of threats or insecurity for their life and property. Another claim is that it has to do with Serbian heritage objects in Kosovo, mostly those related to monasteries. “The restoration of the archaeological treasury should be part of the negotiation agenda between Kosovo and Serbia, but this will not be regulated as long as the problems with the monasteries in Kosovo are not regulated,” says Irina Subotic, vice president and board member of “Europa Nostra” The Federation of Europe for Cultural Heritage and the president of the branch in Serbia. She adds that these “artifacts belong to Kosovo without any hesitation, proof of that is the written agreement and they should be returned as soon as possible in Kosovo’s Museum.” She thinks that the heritage will be part of the agenda of dialogues in Brussels after resolving disputes on the human side because “the missing ones and the arrangements for the functioning of the state are still primary.”

Serbian president Tomislav Nikolic is quoted saying “Kosovo's main goal is falsifying the history and creating a new state, a national and cultural identity that implies the total disappearance of everything that proves Serbian presence in Kosovo.” When these ideas are nurtured in this way by politics, it is understood that they are widely spread among citizens and the general public in Serbia. Nenad Tasic, a professor at the Department of Archeology at the University of Belgrade, proposed as a solution the realization of a joint project for a digital archeology center that would reflect the archaeological situation and make it perceptible to the public. “In this way we have virtual artifacts (Serbia) while Pristina would bring them back in Kosovo, because after all it is a common political heritage.” According to Stasa Babic, head of the Archeology Department at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade, “this is a situation that strongly shows that politics is involved in archeology and that archeology is also involved in politics. The value of artifacts being held in Belgrade is not that big, but it is an added value of the late prehistoric history.” And here is one of the most important reasons of debate and discussion, which is not said aloud, but which is the most curious moment of this debate. The archaeological material of the Albanian Treasury, rather than “about some more or less artifacts” in the museums of Pristina and Belgrade, has to do with the political debate about the great historical truth if: Kosovo is Albanian, or it is “The Cradle of Serbia?!”

“The hardship of restoring artifacts lies in the acceptance of this fact by the wider population,” says Marjana Toma, Executive Director of the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade. She adds: “The perception of Kosovo’s war has racist components and great hatred in it.” Hajrullah Çeku from EC MA Ndryshe, a NGO, is loud on this topic about Kosovo, says “keeping the archaeological and ethnological collection in Serbia is an illegal act and contrary to the international law in this area. Serbia as a UNESCO member simply has no right to hold artifacts belonging to another state, because the conventions of this international cultural heritage organization prohibit it.”

Nikola Tasic, a Serbian archaeologist who completed the exhibition project of Kosovo’s Heritage in Belgrade, is the author of the introductory article in the publication; “Kosovo and Metohija Archaeological Treasures.” It represents Serbia’s official position on the issue of Kosovo’s cultural heritage. What is apparent in his text, a part of which is published here, is the fact that Albania/Albanians, nor the Albanian heritage in Kosovo are mentioned. But inevitable were the references to the Illyrians and the Dardans, regardless of the context. The references he cites and considers are overwhelmingly from Slavic and Russian authors who do not see Kosovo’s legacy as part of the Albanian heritage in the Balkans. All authors and foreign travelers who passed through Kosovo in the past centuries, which are inevitable for scholars of culture, art, history and heritage in Kosovo and the Balkans seems to have been ignored or mentioned briefly. Here’s a part of this article:

“The mixture of different influences made Kosovo and Metohija an extremely important area for studying the culture that took place during a multi-millennial history. The interest in prehistoric and classical archeology, revived in the second half of the 20th century, was mainly related to Roman countries. Previous records also exist in passengers accounts that visited these areas, part of the Ottoman Empire. They naturally referred to the visible traces of the ruins of the past, the age of which made it able to determine them. The Medieval monuments are proclaimed classical and vice versa. Among these writers we should mention Ami Boue, and his book published in Paris, in 1840 (*La Turquie d’Europe*), a traveler’s account from the Russian writer A. Gilferding, of 1859 and by G. Hahn, written two years later, in which the author expresses his impressions of the trip from Belgrade to Thessaloniki. There are also travel notes by G. M Mckenzie and A. P Irby from 1868, and some subsequent works, which also contain data about Kosovo. Such data can be found, to a lesser extent, in the work of F. Kanitz, “Roman Studies of Serbia”, 1892.

In contrast to these travel notes, the earliest works dealing with archeology and epigraphic monuments in particular, date back to the late 19th century. This series was initiated by A. Evans, in 1885 and continued by A. von Domashevski, in 1890, and particularly by N. Vulic and A. Premestein, in 1903. The largest number of monuments treated in these works came from Ulpiana, which has been a research subject for a long time, by many classical researchers, both nationally and internationally. In the period between the two wars many prehistoric or classical archeology facts about the Kosovo- Metohija region, were not preserved. The work was largely of a general

nature. C. Truhelka wrote about the Dardans, N. Vulic continued to work on epigraphic monuments, but he also dealt with the Dardanians' case, just like Truhelka. Finally, there were some short travel notes from Dj. Boskovic who wrote mainly about the findings in Ulpiana (1926 - 1927). Of all the works mentioned, the most important ones are those of N. Vulic, who discussed more broadly about the interrelated problems, in his study of classical monuments in our country. The unregistered proof of prehistoric cultures remained under the shadow of Roman architectural monuments.

Between the two world wars, in the 19th century, the only worth mentioning are the stone objects excavations in Drenica, which were published D. Karapandzic in 1920, the well-known collection of articles from Janjevo, taken in 1934 for Prince Paul's Museum (now the National Museum) in Belgrade, and are now being kept at the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna. An unresolved, remaining problem is that of a megalith in the outskirts of Mitrovica, which was recorded by Dj. Boskovic and M. Grbic, in 1932. The suspicions of its classification as megalith were expressed one year later by V. Fewkes who believed that it was a great natural stone. He was the first to draw attention to the abyss of Metohija, attributing them to the Hallstate period, where this investigations were latter verified. Serious, organized and systematic research of archaeological sites began with the establishment of the Kosovo and Metohija's Museum in Pristina, in 1949 and especially with the arrival of professional archaeologists, first and foremost Emil Cerskov, who was the most prominent archaeologist in the region and then J. Glisic and others, among which some are authors of the studies in this book. With great ambition and determination, the Museum began its work in Novo Brdo (1951), followed by the Roman study of Ulpiana (from 1953 onwards), about the Neolithic places of Predionica (1955), about the multi-layered places in Gladnice near Gracanica (1956) and so on.

As soon as they set up the smallest museum and the Kosovo Office for the Protection of Monuments, they also started their archaeological activities. Among the first, Mitrovica's Museum organized excavations in Valac and Zitkovac (1955). The initial stage of excavation, over time, became a wide-ranging program: the investigation of early agriculture products (Starcevo and Vinca), the study of Neolithic settlements (Hisar, near Suhareka and Gadimlje near Gjilan), pre-Dardan and Dardan areas, cemeteries and settlements (Donja Brnjica, Belacevac, Karagac), investigations in the Bronze and Iron Age in Metohija (Rugova, or multi-layered settlements and cemeteries with and in Suhareka, Iglarevo I and II). The Illyrian cemeteries excavation project is certainly very important in the field of prehistoric archeology. Within the excavation context, objects were taken from Romaja and Prceva's cemetery, confirming the presence of a large number of tombs with rich and diverse goods: weapons, business tools, imported home objects and ceramics. With the excuse of the excavation project was given a powerful impetus to the problem of the ethnic and geographical cultural boundary between the Illyrians and the Dardans. Archaeological research of the Roman and Byzantine periods was characterized mainly by the large excavations in the 1960s and 1970s in Ulpiana near Pristina ..."⁹

⁹ The Archaeological treasures of Kosovo and Metohija", Typographic, Belgrade 1988, pg. 10.

That's enough to create an idea of how a Serbian archaeologist, who was entrusted with the artifacts exhibition project of Kosovo's cultural heritage in Serbia wants to see, not only the historical chronology or other elements on this issue, that lead to the essence of the current debate between Pristina and Belgrade.

Among 634 archeology objects, part of Kosovo's heritage in Belgrade, was also a famous terracotta statue of the Neolithic Dardanian Queen, named "The Goddess on the Throne." In 2002 it was the only one returned to Kosovo, with the mediation of Kosovo's former prime-administrator Michael Steiner. The small statue was found at the mill site known as the Spinnery near Pristina, in 1956. Terracotta's green image is a well-preserved sample of the Neolithic culture (18.5 cm tall), 4 000 years B.C. It is part of Turda's culture in Kosovo, also known as Vinca culture, or Turda-Vinca culture. It represents a female deity, reflecting the cult of the great mother idol. It is preserved in Prishtina's Museum stalls. The "Goddess on the Throne" has served as an image for the creation of this institution's logo. It is considered as one of the most valuable archaeological artifacts of Kosovo, adapted as a symbol for Pristina's Municipality. The fate of Kosovo's "Goddess on the Throne" seems almost the same as another Albanian goddess: Dea of Butrint. Both of them were taken by invaders, who were forced to return them, due to their archaeological significance but also their symbolism. The return of the "Goddess on the Throne" was a small step towards the efforts of retrieving all artifacts, but also a big step for Kosovo itself and the Albanian national heritage in the whole. The Dardanian Queen returned from Belgrade, sparking a great ray of hope, for the retrieval of all other objects one day. As the "Queen" of the heritage artifacts was allowed to return, sooner or later, the way will be found also for the other "citizens" of its archaeological kingdom in Kosovo.

If the issue of Kosovo's heritage objects repatriation would only be summarized in the artifacts stolen before the war by Serbia, this would probably be a small affliction compared to the one existing in reality. The fact is that the objects registrations made in 1990 at the Museum of Kosovo, show that there were 7. 290 artifacts listed. Right after the end of the war in June 1999, there is evidence that 13 crates with ethnographic objects were stolen and sent from Pristina to Belgrade's Ethnological Museum. The inventory made to the Kosovo's Museum materials in 2000, found 2,480 cultural heritage objects missing. It is said that they are kept in Belgrade to provide them with physical protection; as not to be lost, stolen, damaged, destroyed, or robbed. How can the neighbor be worried more than you, to preserve your heritage?! The truth behind this motive is that Belgrade authorities believe that through this act they are simply trying to protect the Serbian cultural identity, which according to them is threatened by Kosovo. This thesis leads to the theories of a century ago, that "Kosovo doesn't have a historical and cultural heritage; it belongs to Serbia instead".

The Balkans is a land full of stories, wars, invasions, divisions, artifacts and heritage objects from their peoples' culture, also, with traces of history, empires and various social organizations throughout centuries. In addition to Kosovo's heritage held hostage in Belgrade, during the debate on this topic with the media, many examples and other cases, including those of

Illyrian Trebenisht Masks in Macedonia, two of which are in Sofia's Museum, and two others in Belgrade's Museum. But neither Kosovo, nor Albania; or Albanians in general, are not the only ones suffering from the thefts phenomenon and the trafficking of cultural heritage objects. Greeks-considered as the cradle of Western civilization are known as one of the greatest victims of this phenomenon. The most controversial argument in art history relates specifically to our southern neighbors in the Balkans. It is about the five great fragments of the 5th and 4th BC, from the classical Greek era, stolen from the famous Acropolis of Athens. Lord Elgin sold them for 35,000 pounds to the British government in 1801. 15 years later, the Parliament proclaimed them as an everlasting state property of Britain. The construction of the Athens Archaeological Museum restated the repatriation demand for the Hellenic heritage, not only from Great Britain but also from Germany, Denmark and other countries. The war continues...

In November, 2015 Kosovo failed on its attempt to join UNESCO. Despite Albania's and our powerful Western allies lobbying, Serbia managed to block it. After voting there were 92 votes in favor, 50 against 29 abstentions, not being able to cross the "Rubicon" for only three more votes. Among those states that did not vote for Kosovo's acceptance in UNESCO were Poland, Japan and South Korea - who recognized Kosovo's independence. The admission to UNESCO would give voice and weight to its request to restore not only to the cultural heritage stolen by Serbia, but also to many other heritage issues. Hague's Convention of 1954 "On the Protection of Cultural Heritage, in Case of Armed Conflicts"; the 1970 Convention "On the Means of Prohibition and Prevention of Import and Export and Illegal Transferring of Ownership for the Cultural Heritage"; Nairobi's Convention in 1977 and UNIDROIT Convention in 1995, opened another perspective for Kosovo in terms of international rights, on its representation in the fields of culture, education and science in the world. One of the immediate benefits of UNESCO membership is related to the fact that in some aspects, such as the return of stolen cultural artifacts, the obligations of member states are stricter. Serbia is a member of UNESCO, therefore it lobbied strongly for Kosovo not to be part of it.

Kosovo's conflicts in this field, in relation to Serbia, started earlier. Perhaps since 2006, when Serbia included 4 monuments, located in Kosovo, (Patriarchate of Pec, St. Premtë Church, Decani and Gračanica Monastery) to UNESCO's Heritage List. Patriarchate of Peja changed the appearance, erasing its Byzantine footprints, ignoring Kosovo's law on the strict procedure, followed during intercession in cultural monuments. Between 1998- 1999, about 220 mosques were burnt, most of which were built at the time of the Ottoman Empire. The old bazaars in Peja, Gjakova and Vushtrri, were destroyed and then libraries, archives and primary schools were burnt to the ground. Tower-houses, with monumental values, were destroyed. A thorough, deep and comprehensive debate on how to deal with the past, present and the perspective of religious and cultural coexistence issues among people in the Balkans is needed. And simultaneously, where is possible, the damage caused, should be recuperated in its best, the identity restored and conditions for this insanity never to be repeated, should be created. This matter is not a problem only between Albanians and Serbians; it is also a problem between Albanians and Macedonians in Macedonia and elsewhere, among different people in the former Yugoslavia, where there were wars,

disagreements, conflicts and ethnic violence occurred. This problem is not located only in the Balkans, it is global. The theft of Kosovo's heritage by Serbians is identical to all other cases of destruction theft and robbery of Albanian cultural heritage during the wars and conquests. During World War I, one of the methods used by the Austrians to steal Albanian heritage was the objects exhibition prepared in Vienna, never to be returned back. The same story was repeated with the Italians during World War II, in 1940. All the main objects of the Albanian stall in the Naples Exhibition, held during the invasion, were not brought back in Albania.

Despite all the problems Kosovo faces in its efforts for recognition, affirmation and integration in international institutions, the reality demonstrates that there is still hope to repatriate cases of other robbed artifacts. In February 2013, 7 heritage objects, rescued and repatriated, were presented in Pristina after the attempts of selling them in an artifacts market in Land Hessen, Germany. The Kosovo Archaeological Museum enriched its inventory with cultural objects from Vinca, dating in the Middle Neolithic, 3500-4000 years BC. Among them, a model of "Goddess on the Throne," (bigger than the one restored from Belgrade) 21.5 cm tall. A German official, attending the ceremony, admitted that in the '70s Germany faced as well artifacts robberies within its territory, but also the trading by other of its archeological objects.

Kosovo's Heritage case is the vessel, where once again we can experience the bitter taste of the great sea of loss, the theft and trafficking of cultural heritage, reserved for Albanians, over centuries throughout the history. And on the other hand, one can easily understand why cultural heritage is the DNA of the national identity. A historical lesson from which we should learn more. To track and find our cultural heritage, to discover and repatriate them, and pass it on from generation to generation. The robbing of Albanian heritage, simply shows to the whole world how difficult is for a country like Serbia to build a future, as long as it will not be liberated from the complexes of the past.

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