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vorsers vs. het virus



Commemoration is as old as humanity itself

What started as a childlike fascination for a monument in her garden translated into a lifelong passion. Serbian-Italian Ana Milošević travelled the world for her work in diplomacy. Yet only in Belgium did the last piece of the puzzle fall into place.

‘In 2008, I became head of the Serbian Institute for Public Diplomacy in Brussels,’ says Ana Milošević. ‘A fascinating job, but I had long dreamed of doing a PhD and research. Out of interest I attended an introductory program at KU Leuven, and everything came together. I knew I wanted to work here and put myself forward as a candidate.’

‘That doesn’t mean I consider my previous career a waste of time,’ she says. ‘On the contrary, it gives me a broader perspective and a profile somewhat different from that of the standard academic, because I have experience with fieldwork, policy makers and NGOs. All things that help with my research.’

Trauma protocol

‘Now I’m a postdoc affiliated with the Leuven Institute of Criminology (LINC) and the Leuven International and European Studies (LINES) institute. I research commemorations of terrorist attacks in Europe and how we as a society deal with such traumatic events. How important are memorials to survivors, or victims’ relatives? Do memorials or monuments help with the healing process, or do they keep the wounds open? Who or what should you take into account when erecting a monument?’

‘My research also translates into practice,’ says Milošević. ‘I make specific policy recommendations on commemorations. For example, I work with victim associations for the European Commission, and I help organise the European Remembrance Day for victims of terrorism. I find it very important that my research not only has an academic or policy value, but is also important to the people who must bear the consequences of terror.’

‘I’ve interviewed survivors of attacks and victims’ relatives in the course of my research and for an affiliated book. That’s always difficult...you never get used to it. I’ve also talked to people who escaped the genocide in Srebrenica, and I’ve visited mass graves. You have to be able to turn the page readily enough or it will haunt you forever. What helps is the idea that my research can contribute to the processing of victim

‘My work not only has academic value, it also helps people.’

suffering by pointing out to policymakers that victims want to be involved in commemorations or the creation of monuments, and that their participation is really very important.’

‘When you deal with a collective traumatic event such as an attack, natural disaster, or even a pandemic, everyone instantly thinks of immediate safety measures. Few people wonder how we will commemorate those events in the future and what their long-term mental impact will be, but that is at least as important. Current traumas have much to teach us for the future. I hope I can help to develop some kind of protocol on remembrance and trauma processing. That would be quite something.’

Monument hunter

Milošević is known in the academic environment as a ‘monument hunter’. What does that mean? ‘Everywhere in the world I look for monuments, to photograph them and to collect information about them,’ she says. ‘Sometimes I go out with colleagues, for example during free moments during a conference, but I also go out alone. I end up in the most diverse places ranging from obscure townships in South Africa to deserted areas of Iceland. I share the photos on Twitter via the hashtag #TodayinMonuments, and I post them on my website. Other researchers are free to use that data. For example, some of them will soon appear in a book by French sociologists.’ →

Monument for the victims of the Brussels attacks



The uncommon fascination with monuments began in her childhood. 'A bizarre story,' she says. 'My father is an Orthodox priest and our garden – that of the parsonage – contained a monument to fallen soldiers from the First World War. As a child, that place appealed to me more than the Barbies in my room (*laughs*). I wanted to know what that stone construction meant, what historical stories preceded it.'

'Later, I became interested in how politicians use the past for their own purposes. I grew up in 1990s Serbia, during the Yugoslav wars, and of course that had an impact. Those wars showed what atrocities you can commit by abusing the past. When I did my PhD I also researched the "collective memory of Europe" and the political processes involved.'

Yolocaust

Commemoration is as old as humanity itself. Rock paintings were made in prehistoric times, the pyramids are gigantic funerary monuments, and hundreds of wars have been commemorated with monuments. The significance of these monuments has gradually become less clear, especially in the last thirty years. According to Milošević, that's a function

of the complexity of the world. 'Life is less black and white,' she says. 'You notice that even when looking at the appearance of monuments. Compare the Lion of Waterloo with the abstract monument for the victims of the attacks in Zaventem.'

'Recent monuments often try to elicit a physical response,' says Milošević. 'A good example is the 2005 Holocaust Memorial in Berlin – a maze of concrete blocks that aims to evoke the disorientation of persecuted Jews (*see picture on page 36*). Interesting, but a regrettable consequence is that tourists don't always get the meaning. Teenagers happily pose for selfies – the "Yolocaust" phenomenon – or people take wedding photos there. It's completely inappropriate, but it's not necessarily done out of ill will.'

'I've also noticed that the meaning of ancient monuments is not static, and that they can be "reused" for their iconic value. After the terrorist attacks in Brussels, for example, you saw that the colours of the Belgian flag were projected on the Eiffel Tower or on the fountains of Trafalgar Square. And during the Corona crisis, messages of hope and solidarity with caregivers were projected onto the Great Pyramid of Giza.' ●