

How is Russia locally perceived on both societal and political levels in Serbia?*

Sonja Biserko, Izabela Kisic - Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia

Abstract: *This text looks into Russian influence on the public in Serbia, which reached its peak during the country's aggression against Ukraine. Such public perception is the result of the systematic Russification of the public, media and cultural space of Serbia, the main promoter of which is President Aleksandar Vučić (2012). Apart from the traditional sympathy for Russia, the main link with Russia is resistance to liberal values. The deepest connection is the Serbian orthodox Church (SPC), which promotes traditional ethnic and religious patterns that define identities solely on that affiliation.*

Introduction

Pro-Russian orientation in Serbia has always existed, having an almost mythical character. However, the relationship with Russia in the second Yugoslavia was balanced. Only with the coming to power of Slobodan Milošević (1987) did this connection deepen, with the fact that Serbian elites expected a lot from Russia in the wars of the 1990s. However, neither Gorbachev (Mikhail) nor Yeltsin (Boris) met Milošević's expectations. This does not mean that there were no ties with certain circles in the army and in the security services.

After the fall of Milošević, Vojislav Koštunica, Boris Tadić, the military leadership and many others continued nurturing close ties with Russia. Following the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, the "democratic authorities" defined Serbia's foreign policy as relying on four pillars – Russia, China, the USA and the EU. The "democratic government" handed over the most important energy resource, the Petroleum Industry of Serbia (NIS), to Russia, which had been a previous agreement made by Milošević and the army. Russia now controls the entire energy system in Serbia.

Russia relies on historical, cultural and religious ties that are greatly exaggerated by propaganda and diplomacy, with skillful use of soft power. Media in Serbia, without even attempting to hide it, become an extended arm of Russian influence and the broadest possible presence in the political and social space of Serbia; it most prominently came to the fore in the days and months following the aggression against Ukraine (February 2022).

The strongest and deepest connection with Russia is the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is very visible in current events (litanies in Montenegro in 2022, litanies in Belgrade against the Pride Parade in 2022).

* *The research for and production of this report has been conducted within the PROGRESS research framework agreement. Responsibility for the contents and for the opinions expressed, rests solely with the authors and does not constitute, nor should be construed as, an endorsement by the Netherlands Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence.*

For both Serbs and Russians, Orthodoxy was firmly tied to the establishment of the state, and in both cases, during numerous and powerful crises, it played an essential role in preserving national identity. Revitalization and politicization of religion are parallel processes, that is, in the context of a collapsed identity (socialist) framework, traditional ethnic and confessional patterns were reaffirmed in order to homogenize identity in national frameworks.

One of the main links with Russia is resistance to liberal values, including human rights. The Orthodox Church in Serbia, like the Republic of Serbia, rejects the modern concept of human rights and considers them a product of the West, its liberal values and individualism.

Russia very skillfully feeds Serbian frustration and the idea that Yugoslavia was a Serbian delusion. Likewise, it promotes the propagandist idea about artificially created nations, such as, for example, Macedonians, Bosniaks, Montenegrins. At the same time, the influential pro-Russian conservative bloc strengthens the Russian component within Serbian identity, i.e. contributes to the "Russification of the Serbian nation", with the premise of superiority of Orthodox civilization, Byzantine heritage, Slavism, and mutual historical aid.

Political perception of Russia

The deepened pro-Russian orientation coincides with the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) coming to power (2012), which has been systematically promoting Russophilia. Apart from Turkey, Serbia is the only EU candidate country that has not imposed sanctions on Russia and the only one that is flooded with symbols of Russian aggression (the letter "Z" and murals portraying Putin).

Rallies in support of the Russian invasion were organized in the capital, Belgrade. At the start of the war, those events could gather around 2,000 people, but they quickly died down, primarily because the government itself is strongly pro-Russian. Protests with Russian symbols, however, have moved to the north of Kosovo, especially since December 2022, when Serbs under the control of Belgrade set up barricades and protested against the Government in Priština.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine awakened the hopes of Serbian imperial nationalism that Russia can become a serious factor on the global political scene and that the geopolitical situation will change. The political elite is mobilizing citizens on the narrative that Russia is the main protector of Serbian interests, that it can prevent the recognition of Kosovo through its actions in the UN.

President Vučić and SNS are skillful manipulators in presenting themselves as a neutral political factor on the international scene. Although it voted for all UN resolutions supporting Ukraine, Serbia has never condemned Russia's aggression with concrete actions, nor is it ever questioned in the pro-government media. The official reaction to the news published by Reuters in April 2023 that Serbia was selling weapons to Ukraine clearly demonstrates this. The Minister of Defense Miloš Vučević was the first to strongly denounce it, evaluating the article as malicious and that "someone's goal is to destabilize our country and drag it into a conflict which we do not want to

participate in".¹ Two months later, President Vučić relativized the story of arms sales: he told the Financial Times that he was not opposed to Serbia selling ammunition to intermediaries who deliver it to Ukraine. This should have led the international audience to the conclusion that it was a sign that Russia's staunch Balkan ally was turning towards the West. The President of Serbia stated in his "change of course" that he was familiar with the reports of the American government that Serbian ammunition ended up in Ukraine through intermediaries and that he does not plan on preventing this.²

The pro-government media (the vast majority of media outlets) promote the idea of "the friendship between Putin and Vučić", and that what Putin is in Moscow, Vučić is in Belgrade. Vladimir Putin awarded Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić with the Order of Alexander Nevsky for his great contribution to the development of cooperation between the two countries (2019). This recognition is rarely given to foreign citizens. Meetings between the two presidents were as frequent as their telephone conversations. Personal ties are maintained by Aleksandar Vulin (former Minister of Defense and then Minister of Interior, now the Director of the Security Information Agency of Serbia), Ivica Dačić, right-wing parties and groups that regularly go to Russia and allegedly enjoy their financial support.

Pro-Russian orientation is not limited only to the ruling political parties, but also has a strong foothold in the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition. The president of the parliamentary People's Party, Vuk Jeremić, says that his party will not abandon its policy of "protecting the integrity of Serbia even at the cost of Serbia's European path" (...) and that "Serbia should be neutral in global conflicts, we should not take sides..."³

Perception of Russia in society

Already in the first days of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Russian propaganda imposed on the Serbian public the stance that Russia is on the side of justice, and this has not changed even a year after the start of the destruction of Ukraine. Serbian citizens have been joining pro-Russian forces in Ukraine since the Crimean crisis. 58 percent of citizens support the Russian side in the war, while only 22 percent are on the side of Ukraine.⁴

The success of the pro-Russian war campaign in Serbia is not a surprise because it is only recycling a series of already widely accepted positions that justify the imperial ambitions of both Russia and Serbia: Russia / Serbia is only defending itself against injustice; the collapse of Western civilization is imminent; The West is on the verge of collapse, breakdown or ruin, both because of its weak economy and shortage of energy sources, and because of the collapse of traditional family values. The idea of the endangered "Russian people" in Ukraine is also dominant, as is the idea of the need to "protect the Serbian people" in the region because, as they claim, they are exposed to discrimination. Russia's aggression is a confirmation of the establishment of a new world order in which Russia and China will dominate as protectors of Serbian interests.

Militarism and the justification of the invasion is most present among respondents who watch private TV channels under the control of the government – Happy, Pink, B92.⁵ Pro-Russian sociologist Đorđe Vukadinović believes that public opinion reacted to the war spontaneously and instinctively, "demonstrating almost incredible and unreserved solidarity and empathy with the Russian side." According to his research, "hard Russophilia is at 25-30 percent".⁶

In the last year, the pro-European orientation of citizens has reached its lowest point since the fall of Slobodan Milošević. According to Demostat's survey from May 2023, only 33 percent of citizens are in favor of joining the EU. There are so many fierce opponents that 17 percent would not even vote in a referendum about joining the EU. As many as 42 percent of respondents believe that Serbia should maintain good relations with Russia at the cost of giving up on the EU. Almost 80 percent of respondents are against the introduction of sanctions against Russia and against the harmonization of foreign policy with the EU.⁷

Since 2012, Moscow has been fueling an anti-NATO campaign almost on a daily basis mainly on the premise that the 1999 intervention was directed against the Serbian people, not against the regime of Slobodan Milošević. 42 percent of respondents see Russia as the biggest security partner, while in the case of the European Union this number is only 11 percent.⁸

The Putin cult started to build a decade and a half ago. Putin is an honorary citizen of a number of cities and municipalities "for his merits in preserving the territorial integrity of Serbia" (preventing the independence of Kosovo in the UN). Most of the initiatives to award Putin the title of "honorary citizen" in cities and municipalities in Serbia were at the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008, mainly in those places where the strongly pro-Russian Serbian Radical Party of Vojislav Šešelj together with several other parties were in power, and which the current president was also a member of at that time.⁹

From a young age, children are exposed to the narrative that Russians are their Orthodox brothers who have historically always been closest to them. Political scientist and journalist Boris Varga told about his personal experience when he took his child to elementary school for the first time. On the wall in the school pedagogue and psychologist's office was a huge portrait of Vladimir Putin.¹⁰

Factors influencing the perception of Russia

Russia and Serbia strive to achieve their imperial projects "Russian World" and "Serbian World", the goal of which is to expand into the territories of neighboring countries. The narratives that justify the imperial ambitions of both Russia and Serbia are almost identical.

Kosovo is currently Russia's biggest blackmailing potential towards Serbia. By maintaining the status quo, Russia justifies its presence in the Balkans. With the start of the war in Ukraine, the USA and the EU stepped up their efforts to resolve the Kosovo issue, which would marginalize the role of Russia and its influence on the politics of Belgrade. The widely held narrative in the

weeks following the Serbia-Kosovo agreement (March 2023) was that Russia should step in and protect Serbian national interests.¹¹

The anti-European poll opinion is not only a consequence of "decades of unbelievable commitment of the ruling structures to the EU, anti-Western narrative and pro-Russian and pro-Putin propaganda" but also the fact that Serbia's path to the EU "is taking too long and that the EU itself did not have a clear plan about when and if Serbia will join the Union".¹² Citizens often cite as reasons disappointment in the political and economic transition after the fall of Milosevic, anger that the West supported Kosovo's declaration of independence... and Russia is perceived by the majority as a savior.

Conclusion

The main links between Serbia and Russia are their aversion against Western values like democracy, pluralism, human rights, tolerance, and free market principles.

The strengthening of pro-Russian orientations in Serbia is directly related to resistance to liberal values. In the spread of Russian influence in Serbia, the government plays a key role, primarily the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. Kosovo is the main point where Russia's influence is best manifested, and the bottom line for nationalistic elites is that Serbia should receive compensation in the Republika Srpska.

Russia's malign influence in the Balkans uses above all the fact that the Serbian question remains open. Russia feeds the idea of the recomposition of the Balkans and promotes an Orthodox federation in which Serbia would be the central country (Aleksandr Dugin). Consolidation of the Balkan countries within the existing internationally recognized borders is the only guarantee for lasting regional stability.

The European Union is the largest economic partner and investor in Serbia. However, despite this, the sentiment is on the Russian side both because of the historical connection, but primarily because of the highly organized and systematic propaganda of Aleksandar Vučić. The presence of Russian media in Serbia (Russia Today and Sputnik) is reflected through local media such as the public service RTS and private TV channels under the control of the government, which use the content of Russian media.

All in all, the enormous success of Russian propaganda in the last ten years, which is reflected in the positive perception of Russia in society, is not a surprise. Furthermore, Russia adeptly capitalizes on Belgrade's discontent resulting from Serbia's losses in past conflicts, while endorsing an interpretation of the 1990s wars that attributes the breakup of Yugoslavia to the West. The pro-Russian authorities and part of the opposition ensured Russia's penetration into all segments of social life.

-
- ¹ “Vučević: Srbija nije niti će prodavati oružje Ukrajini“, 12 April 2023, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/547590/Vucevic-Srbija-nije-niti-ce-prodavati-oruzje-Ukrajini>
- ² Vučić tells the Financial Times: I am not opposed to the sale of ammunition to intermediaries who deliver to Ukraine, 6 June 2023 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-oruzje-ukrajina-rat-vucic/32447005.html>
- ³ Vuk Jeremić on the one-month session and tensions from Belgrade to Kosovo <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXklSriWWag>
- ⁴ Organization Crta, "Results: Political Attitudes of Serbian Citizens - Autumn 2022", <https://crta.rs/istrazivanje-eu-rat-u-ukrajini/>
- ⁵ Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI): “Majority in Serbia blames the EU, USA, NATO and Ukraine for Russia’s aggression” <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/srbija-ukrajina-rat-rusija-sad-eu-krivci-istrazivanje-birodi/6961221.html>
- ⁶ Nedeljnik, July 2022, <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/88-odsto-protiv-ulaska-u-nato-84-protiv-uvodenja-sankcija-rusiji-tvrda-rusofilija-je-na-25-30-odsto-ali-odnos-prema-zapadu-veliko-istrazivanje-u-novom-nedeljniku/>
- ⁷ Demostat agency’s survey from May 2023: "Demostat, IIC: Public opinion of Serbian citizens - omnibus May 2023", <https://demostat.rs/upload/prezentacija.pdf>
- ⁸ Research by the Crta organization, "Research: Political attitudes of citizens - February 2023" <https://crta.rs/istrazivanje-politicki-statavovi-gradjana-februar-2023/>
- ⁹ "Appeals to strip Putin of the title of honorary citizen in Serbian municipalities", 11 October 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/putin-srbija-pocasni-gradjanin-opstine/32074117.html>
- ¹⁰ “Boris Varga: Rusija u ulozi stvaranja velikosrpske Vojvodine” <https://autonomija.info/boris-varga-rusija-u-ulozi-stvaranja-velikosrpske-vojvodine/>
- ¹¹ Analiza narativa „Rusija treba da se umeša: Reakcija anti-zapadnih medija na sporazum Srbije i Kosova“ <https://www.isac-fund.org/lat/vesti/analiza-narativa-rusija-treba-da-se-umesa-reakcija-anti-zapadnih-medija-na-sporazum-srbije-i-kosova>
- ¹² Ivana Petronijevic Terzic: Blagi rast pristalica ulaska Srbije u EU, <https://demostat.rs/sr/vesti/ekskluziva/blagi-rast-pristalica-ulaska-srbije-u-eu/1768>