The Russification of Serbia

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As the largest predominantly Orthodox and Slavic country in Central Europe not yet a member of the European Union, Serbia is an easy target for Russia’s soft power. The Kremlin is now counting on the “Putinisation” of this Western Balkan state to show Russian citizens that its policy towards the West has strong support in some parts of Europe.

At the end of July 2014, Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian prime minister, informed the society and members of Serbian parliament that the country was in a really difficult situation. He emphasised that it is the parliament who needs to decide whether to follow the European Union and impose new sanctions on Russia or not. Vučić mentioned on that occasion that Serbia could not survive another round of gas price increases and although membership in the EU is Serbia’s foreign policy objective, it needs to pursue its own national interests above all. What interests was he referring to? We do not know for sure. What is certain, though, is that democratisation is never mentioned as one of them. Why should the price of gas rise in Serbia as a result of its support for EU’s sanctions? Serbia already pays Gazprom more than many other European countries like Germany, France, the Netherlands, Finland, Italy and Denmark. So why is the Serbian political elite so concerned about possible Russian energy blackmail?

From myth to reality

The growing support for Russia among Serbian society is a result of two processes. One of them is the adaptation of the history of Russian-Serbian relations and how it relates today to the goals of the political elite. The official historical narrative consciously skips very important periods in Serbian history such as the interwar period, almost the entire period of Yugoslavia from the Tito-Stalin split until the
escalation of the crisis in Kosovo and the NATO bombings, and the period of the
first democratic government of Serbia of the late prime minister Zoran Đinđić.
All of these periods have one thing in common: moments of poor Russian-Serbian
relations which from 2000-2003 could not follow the dynamics of Serbia’s relations
with the West. The elite has also ignored the fact that fewer and fewer Serbs speak
Russian and that Russian culture is much less attractive for Serbs than the western
one. Knowledge of Russian was simply pushed out by knowledge of English.

Serbs who decide to leave their country in search of better economic perspectives
do not choose Russia as a destination. Public opinion is being fed with half-
truths on the large volumes of Russian-Serbian trade and the great importance of
Russian aid. A typical example is the free trade agreement signed with the Russian
Federation in August 2000, which is being largely showcased by Serbian officials
as an exclusive gesture of Russian friendship towards Serbia. Meanwhile, all the
goods produced in Serbia when the agreement was signed were excluded from it.
Not much has changed since then. Also the reasons for the NATO bombing of
Yugoslavia in 1999 have never been truly explained to the Serbian public. Instead,
it is repeated as a mantra that the only country that helped Serbia in those hard
times was the Russian Federation. However, the fact
that Russia did not oppose UN sanctions against
Serbia (Yugoslavia) in the early 1990s remains widely
unknown, or deliberately omitted.

A large wave of fabricated historical narratives
began in 2007 when the West was preparing to
recognise the new status of Kosovo. It quickly
overwhelmed the Serbian public and it is still a
dominant narrative. Russia’s firm stand then was that Kosovo is an integral part
of Serbian territory and any secession would be unlawful. Belgrade’s Kosovo policy
was based on the principle of protecting its territorial integrity and sovereignty so
it gradually intensified its relations with Moscow. Russia became a key international
ally of Serbia and both countries soon began to co-operate not only on the
international scene, but also in many other fields. This became the glorification of
the “traditional Russian-Serbian friendship”, which is currently accompanied by
the tale of a strong economic foundation.

This policy turned out to be successful, as a majority of Serbs rely on traditional
sources of information which are under the prevailing influence of the political elite.
It is no wonder why the very unfavourable oil-gas industries agreement between
Serbia and Russia, signed in 2008, did not face any backlash from Serbian society.
Through this agreement, Serbian dependence on Russia became real and it gained
a significant economic component. Until then, its nature was mostly mythical.
Russia is perceived today by the majority of Serbs as its closest ally. Serbian citizens have one of the most favourable opinions of Russia of all states. While more than 50 per cent of Serbs have a positive opinion (25 per cent describe it as “very positive”) of Russia, 82 per cent of Serbian citizens views NATO in a negative way. The United States has only a slightly better image. The EU enjoys more credit, but 43 per cent of Serbs still perceive it negatively. The conclusions of the polls are rather sad as the vast majority of aid to Serbia comes from NATO and the EU states.

The current government did not launch this pro-Russian narrative, but it has fostered it. It is a mistake to think that the main reason for the cherishing of pro-Russian sentiment in society is strictly connected with Serbia’s increasing economic and energy dependence on Russia. In fact, it is about the reluctance to further democratise Serbia.

**European integration the Serbian way**

The second process that is bringing Serbs closer to Russia is the rise of cult of personality and homogenisation of society by viewing the outside world through conspiracy theories. Both Aleksandar Vučić and Vladimir Putin owe their unquestioned authority to weak institutions, a politically dependent judiciary and
media, the privileged position of the Eastern Orthodox Church in comparison to other religions, a non-transparent financial system and the partisan subordination of the parliament, national security institutions and the oligarchs. In both countries, the cult of personality has become a significant component of the state’s political system. On the social level, the state promotes a collective identity while individualism and human freedoms are met with open contempt. Serbs gave a strong mandate to Aleksandar Vučić, to whom the separation of powers does not mean much. In Serbia, just like in Russia, autocratic leadership is widely accepted and warmly welcomed by citizens. Thus, Serbia’s “Putinisation” is on-going, despite its formal progress towards the EU which should in its essence mean the opposite process.

It is partially true that Serbia has never had a strong democratic tradition. When Slobodan Milošević was defeated in the first round of presidential elections in 2000 and backed out, the young Serbian democracy faced serious challenges which made it difficult to work properly and to put it fully on a European track. Serbia had to co-operate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, take on the secession of Montenegro and engage in the normalisation of relations with Kosovo, just to name a few. The Zoran Đinđić government tried to implement the EU’s and the US’s conditionality policies and this approach was kept to some extent even after his assassination, but with much less pressure. The new government under Vojislav Koštunica continued the politics of rapprochement with the EU, although it failed to effectively fulfil most of the EU’s conditions. The hallmark of period of rule by president Boris Tadić and his Democratic Party, who succeeded Koštunica, was the capture of high-profile war criminals Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić. But everything has its price. At the same time, the internal situation in Serbia became far from satisfying: the level of corruption among the ruling elite soared and the tempo of democratisation slowed down. This style of governance characterises Serbian politics today.

Aleksandar Vučić signed the Brussels Agreement on the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, which was a milestone in Serbia’s foreign policy coerced by the West, but it did not change Vučić’s leadership style to which the West still turns its blind eye and can be seen as a mirror image of Putin. All the critical voices against the government are currently labelled as anti-state and anti-reform. The government strategy is designed to curtail opposition, civil society and the free media. The majority of Serbs stay indifferent when it comes to their freedom. The relevant public opinion polls show that their perception of democracy is predominantly based on their social and economic position and only 30 per cent of them perceive democracy as the best system of governance.
The Putinisation of Serbia

The Kremlin’s aggressive foreign policy has resulted in an increasingly complex conflict with the West. It is now counting on the “Putinisation” of the Western Balkan states to keep low institutional and democratic standards even once these countries finally join the EU. Then they can serve as an example that joining the EU does not bring any desired outcomes like democratisation or a better living standard. Another reason why Moscow wants to keep Putin-style leadership in the Western Balkans is to show Russian citizens that its antagonistic policy towards the West has strong support in some parts of Europe.

Serbia, as the largest predominantly Orthodox and Slavic country in Central Europe which is yet to become a member of the EU and does not want to become member of NATO, in a dire economic situation with the public exposed to strong propaganda, is an easy target of Russia’s soft power. High-level meetings between Serbian and Russian officials in the last two years are unusually frequent. This is despite the fact that in the last two years Serbia has made significant formal steps towards EU integration. The same logic is applied to Russian foreign policy behind attempts to delay further integration with the West of other states in the region such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Rapprochement with the EU is presented by the Kremlin as the forced democratisation of the region and pulling it away from the “traditional Slavic-Orthodox brotherhood”, which is nothing but a self-proclaimed zone of Russian interest.

The annexation of Crimea, the war in eastern Ukraine and the activities of pro-Russian separatists unveiled how further democratisation could be dangerous to countries which are in the orbit of Russian influence. In recent months Russia has more actively interfered in Serbian internal politics. Organised or spontaneous co-ordination of Serbian and Russian interests, both those publically and behind closed doors (not necessarily state level, but also private) resulted in a specific linkage of significant groups and individuals and the creation of the so-called “Putin’s orchestra” in Serbia. Its members are placed in all strategic institutions: within the cabinets of Vučić and President Nikolić, in business, the energy sector and security agencies. There are also members in NGOs, cultural organisations, the academic community, sport and media. There is more and more evidence that some members of “Putin’s orchestra” are financed directly from Moscow.

The main goal of “Putin’s orchestra” in Serbia is to undermine public support for European integration and delay Serbia’s rapprochement with the West. Another important actor in Serbian political landscape which has a similar aim is the Serbian Orthodox Church. It is becoming highly reliant on the Russian Orthodox Church even though it previously differed from its Russian equivalent in the field of social freedoms. Leonid Reshetnikov, head of the Serbian branch of the influential Russian
Institute for Strategic Studies was recently decorated by the Serbian Orthodox clergy for his contribution to Russian-Serbian dialogue. Reshetnikov is a propagator of the organic unity of church and state, and spokesperson of an adjusted version of Huntington’s idea that “orthodox civilisation” is the counterweight to the West. He is one of the most prominent bandmasters of this orchestra.

Unfortunately, the activities of the Putin orchestra in Serbia have brought fruit. In early August, The Office for EU Integration announced the results of its regular survey of support for EU integration. For the first time in years this support dropped down below 50 per cent. Only 46 per cent would vote yes on a referendum on EU membership of Serbia this time, which is a drop of five per cent since December 2013.

**Strengthening mutual ties**

Intensified attempts to strengthen mutual ties between Serbia and Russia were initiated by the Kremlin as soon as the Council of the European Union announced in late 2013 Serbia’s readiness to start negotiation talks with the EU. At the beginning of 2013, Serbia received from Russia a loan for 800 million US dollars for the modernisation of its railways. Later that year it received an additional $500 million loan to plug budget holes and stimulate economic growth. The turning point was a visit to Serbia by Nikolai Patrushev, who has been Secretary of the Security Council of Russia since 2008. Unfortunately, the media did not pay much attention to this significant visit. It resulted with the establishment of a number of organisations and websites in Serbia whose primary goal is to spread pro-Putin propaganda in the country. They do not have direct support from top state officials, but their existence would not be possible without the government’s invisible hand. The main hub of Russian propaganda appears to be the University of Belgrade.

In mid-November 2013, the Serbian and Russian ministers of defence signed an important military agreement. During Sergey Shoigu’s trip to Belgrade, Vučić stated that “Serbia is not going to join NATO but it is not going to join a Russian bloc either”, but since then, the dynamics of military co-operation with Russia have significantly increased. Serbia’s military sector, deeply compromised by war crimes, arms trafficking and political assassinations, needs major reforms if Serbia is willing to join the EU. The process of integration with NATO would be very helpful in this field, but Belgrade remains militarily neutral and thus does not pursue some of the security sector reforms demanded for NATO membership. The Serbian “neutral” position has been broken up by numerous military contacts with foreign partners, but gradually switched to predominantly a bilateral level with a disproportional emphasis on relations with Russia since the Ukraine crisis. Serbia was the only European state that participated in the “Dance of Tanks” military show in Moscow
in August 2014. Earlier this year, Serbia held its largest military exercise with only the presence of Russian officials. Serbia’s military trade with Russia, as announced by Serbian and Russian officials, will grow in the near future, which will surely have a negative impact on the dynamics of integration with the EU, in particular due to the new set of sectoral sanctions imposed by the EU against Russia.

In the energy sector, after the comprehensive gas and oil agreement from 2008, Serbia and Russia recently signed three deals on the construction of the South Stream pipeline. A clear lack of transparency of these agreements, as well as a poor information campaign, in particular about warnings that have been coming from the European Commission and the Secretariat of the Energy Community of the South East Europe of which Serbia is a member, raises alarm about this extremely expensive project. In the case that the South Stream is not built, Serbia will find itself in a very precarious position, which is not the case with other EU member states involved in the project. Belgrade stands to receive no compensation for the costs already connected with the South Stream construction. Furthermore, Serbia has to indemnify Russian companies that are involved in the project on Serbian territory if the project continues. The Russian Federation has already become, irreversibly, a majority owner of Serbia’s largest oil and gas company, the Petroleum Industry of Serbia (Naftna Industrija Srbije).

Despite Bulgaria’s announcement on the cancelation of construction until the EU and the EC rules on South Stream, Serbian officials recently informed the public that the construction of the first 30 kilometres of the pipeline with Russian companies will be completed by the end of the year. The good news is that the route has been changed and now heads towards Hungary, which actually means that the pipeline will connect to the existing one from Ukraine, not a hypothetic one from Bulgaria.

**Loyalty check**

Belgrade’s indecisiveness in the Ukrainian conflict additionally highlighted its dependence on Russia. Although it backed Ukraine’s territorial integrity, it immediately issued an official statement underlining its everlasting friendship with Russia. A grotesque comparison between the annexation of Crimea and the Kosovo issue was used first by Vladimir Putin and then repeated by many Serbian officials, including foreign minister Ivica Dačić. Both of them deliberately failed to
mention the peace talks that took place over Kosovo before the NATO bombing, the drastically different position of Kosovo Albanians in Kosovo than those of Russians in Crimea, best illustrated by several mass graves of civilians, or the peace process under the auspices of the international community after the NATO bombing. All of these factors make comparisons between Kosovo and Crimea impossible. A slightly more assertive position on Ukraine’s territorial integrity “even with Crimea” was presented by Aleksandar Vučić. In fact, the way in which Crimea broke away is very dangerous for the Western Balkans because it creates space for the further disintegration of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska), Serbia (Sandžak) and Macedonia (the western part of the country), something that is rarely mentioned in Serbia.

Štefan Füle and Catherine Ashton paid a visit to Serbia soon after the new government was formed in May 2014. At the same time, Belgrade rolled out the red carpet for Sergey Naryshkin, Chairman of the State Duma, who came to Belgrade to check its loyalty. Naryshkin who is on the list of EU and American sanctions was welcomed by President Nikolić, gave a speech at the Serbian National Assembly and at the University of Belgrade. Not a single media mentioned that Naryshkin was targeted by western sanctions.

In July 2014, the Serbian prime minister visited Moscow. He came back with a mouth full of promises regarding the possible liberalisation of the Russian market for the Serbian car industry. Although it is officially denied that Serbia’s co-chairmanship in the OSCE in 2014 and 2015 was discussed during talks with Putin, it is worrying that two former Serbian ministers of foreign affairs, both members of “Putin’s orchestra”, Ivan Mrkić and Vuk Jeremić, will be in charge of this task. Russia’s priority is to put the Transnistria issue high on the agenda and to remove the Ukrainian crisis from it. Despite the cooling of relations between Russia and the West, Vladimir Putin is expected to visit Serbia in October and take part in the pomp-filled celebration of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade. If the invitation was sent by the Serbian side it does not speak well of Serbia’s willingness to comply with EU policies. If Putin invited himself – it perhaps is an even worse sign for Serbia.

**Time for reflection**

The way in which the downing of the Malaysian airliner and a set of new sanctions against Russia were interpreted by Serbian officials and the media suggests that Russia has the Serbian political elite over a barrel. A short-term and pretty far fetching injection of Russian money may be very tempting for Serbian politicians who are
struggling with poor economic conditions. It would bring effects sooner and could be more profitable for the elite than the long-term reforms demanded by the EU.

The question on how the West perceives the activity of “Putin’s orchestra” remains open. Yet, any means to counter them are unknown. The good news is that the international community recently took a more realistic view on what is going on in Serbia. One of its biggest concerns turned out to be the suppression of media freedoms and the disappearance of critical opinions towards the government. Additionally, the donors’ conference called “Rebuilding Together” held in July for Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on the floods that hit the region this year showed that the EU and the West in general is, unlike Russia, prepared and willing to help.

Despite all the weaknesses of the Serbian opposition and the silence of the civil society, the ball is in their court. It would be good for Serbia if they realise there were people in Serbia like those who were present on the EuroMaidan in Kyiv in February 2014. They should reunify once again and explain to the society the disastrous consequences of the Russification of Serbia. If Serbia continues to maintain a relatively high support for the integration with the EU, there is hope that the process of further democratisation will not be endangered.

One of the most important tasks for Serbia’s security in the coming years is a serious reflection on the diversification of energy resources and on increasing energy effectiveness. It is also crucial for Vučić to pick co-workers more carefully and exclude from his inner circle those who put economic interests with Russia before their own country. Unfortunately the drums of the Putin orchestra are getting louder and louder, this time openly presenting Russian counter-measures towards the West as a development option for Serbia, openly calling for actions that would maximise benefits for them. The EU and the genuine pro-EU forces in Serbia should immediately warn about the pitfalls of this short term and immoral path.

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