

EYES WIDE SHUT

RUSSIAN SOFT POWER GAINING STRENGTH IN SERBIA: GOALS, INSTRUMENTS, AND EFFECTS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE CEAS STUDY

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This study analyzes the objectives, methods, and effects of Russian soft power in the Western Balkans and Serbia in order to assess whether they align with what CEAS considers to be Serbia's public interest, namely, stabilization, democratization, economic prosperity, and Euro-Atlantic integration. The goal of the study is to present to the Serbian public the various levels of international relations in which Moscow is an indispensable player in solving the most pressing global and regional problems and challenges, and on this basis to encourage a debate on whether Russia is a necessary or advantageous partner.

The Russian Federation's increased interest in the Western Balkans, including Serbia, has unfolded in parallel with Russia's response to the Euromaidan in Kiev, the war in Eastern Ukraine, and the annexation of Crimea. CEAS has already written in previous studies about other Russian activities in Serbia, primarily through the forms of hard power.

In the present research, CEAS mapped 110 organizations that promote various aspects of Serbian-Russian relations. These organizations in themselves need not be a bad thing for Serbia. Of these, 10 are organizations for Russian compatriots (meaning ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers) in Serbia; 21 citizens' associations; 6 student organizations; 16 movements that conduct political activity; 14 political parties; 8 internet portals as well as 1 internet portal of unknown ownership; 2 Russian organizations that have representative offices in Serbia; 14 pro-Russian media outlets; 10 Russian media outlets; 3 Russian foundations; and 5 cultural and educational institutions.

Some of these pro-Russian and Russian institutions turn the openness of the democratic society against it, using Serbia's relative freedoms to advocate for their reduction. Yet the subject of Russian soft power influence remains a taboo. Those who raise the topic are subject to online bullying, insults, and lies in public media that state institutions ignore or react to only with extreme reluctance. Western institutions, meanwhile, also choose to overlook the influence of Russian soft power and the complicity of Serbian high officials in undermining democratic values, in favor of purported stability and security cooperation. Thus the situation is one of "eyes wide shut," where all actors deny

the visible phenomenon of strengthening Russian influence in Serbia, and the role it plays in undermining Serbia's democratization.

Goals

Russian soft power in Serbia and the Western Balkans has multiple goals. The primary goal is the replacement of democracy with autocracy under the current Russian model. The secondary goal is to diminish support for European integration and to discredit the very concept of expansion. Russian soft power instruments are pursuing a similar goal in the EU itself by undermining its function and basic principles. In addition to weakening the EU and the transatlantic partnership, Russian soft power in Europe also aims to demonstrate to the Russian public that the modern democratic system and other components of Western soft power are not the only attractive model to which the majority of countries in the wider surroundings of the Russian are gravitating, particularly the "Slavic and Orthodox brothers who have not yet become part of a separate civilization that is a response to Western civilization."

CEAS believes that, in addition to devaluing democratic procedures and undermining support for EU integration, the specific priorities of Russian soft power in Serbia and the region are slowing down or stopping the process of normalization of relations between Belgrade and Priština, and complete relativization and obstruction of the process of transitional justice.

In regards to NATO expansion in the Balkans, particularly the question of Serbia's relations with NATO, Russian soft power seeks through furious propaganda and defamation of the proponents of this policy to prevent rational discussion of relations between Serbia and NATO. While Russia seeks to make Serbia's relations with NATO a matter of civilizational or ideological struggle, discussion should focus on the security threats and challenges that Serbia is exposed to, and the possibilities for an individual response or for entering into available functional partnerships that truly act as political-military alliances with a command structure, equipment, procedures and standards.

Methods

The first openly pro-Russian structures other than cultural centers to formally act by applying soft power were formed in Northern Kosovo immediately after its proclamation of independence in 2008, and became very active in 2012 during the demonstrations on the so-called “barricades.” There were indications already then that these structures had logistical support from the so-called Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Niš. Their number also began to rise in the rest of Serbia around 2008, and their strengthening intensified with the beginning of the process of negotiations on normalization of relations between Belgrade and Priština under the auspices of the European Union in early 2013. Their activities in Serbia increased dramatically in number in 2015 when it became clear that Serbia would begin formal negotiations with the EU and that there would be stronger cooperation with NATO within the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP).

The main methods of Russian soft power in Serbia are: increasingly intensive bilateral relations at the highest level; strengthening cooperation between the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and the Russian Orthodox Church (RPC), including through propaganda spread through the media; building a new structure for a stronger influence by means of the politics of compatriots; and increasing the number of other instruments of Russian soft power, such as citizens’ associations, student organizations, and political movements.

The situation with the spreading of Russian influence through culture is very interesting. In Serbia, the protagonists of strengthening ties between Serbia and Russia mostly insist on pre-Soviet achievements of Russian culture and the cultural and spiritual achievements of the RPC. Young people in Serbia have little information about the facts of present-day Russia: its economy, demographics, position in the international community, contemporary culture, and particularly the social stratification and decadence of contemporary Moscow.

In terms of values, the publicly available program documents of the organizations analyzed in this study mostly do not explicitly advocate the division of power, the rule of

law, respect for individual and collective freedoms, human rights, and secularism. Most of them advocate stopping Serbia's European integration or are strongly Euroskeptic. They are also extremely nationalistic. Although they are often young, according to their own statements, the most numerous members of these organizations are formally predominantly conservative, although, in practice they exhibit a certain confusion and hypocrisy.

These organizations often advocate the introduction of sovereign and arbitrarily “nationally responsible” politics, Russia as Serbia’s most important political and economic partner, and returning to the public space the division of citizens into patriots and traitors. Although often anti-modernist and anti-globalist, almost all have multiple profiles on social networks created in the political West. They rarely invite to their meetings those who do not share their opinions and, in CEAS’s experience, they do not respond to invitations to participate in meetings organized civil society groups that advocate for an open society, because they do not care about the exchange of ideas in a democratic environment. The exceptions to this rule are “media duels,” which they require because they provide visibility and legitimacy, as well as sharp, sometimes verbally violent, factually incorrect confrontation on social networks.

Youth

CEAS emphasizes as particularly alarming the success that Russian soft power has had in reaching young citizens. Russian soft power seeks among youth to pervert the concepts of non-violent methods of change of authoritarian regimes, civil society, human rights, transitional justice. These and other positive democratic achievements were won slowly, painfully, and at a high price since the October 2000 changes to a few years ago.

A CEAS-IPSOS survey commissioned for this study of the perceptions and preferences of young people in Serbia regarding the US, EU, and Russia, shows that Russian soft power in concert with formally pro-EU politicians in Serbia have already achieved great confusion and damage. The younger generation, who suffer from high unemployment, have a superficial perception of the idea of the concept of human rights, the rule of law, media freedom, the importance of separation of powers, and the like. They do not

recognize the connection between a modern, democratically structured political system and long-term economic, social, and political stability, even as they clearly state preferences for the Western model over Russia's.

In the preferences of young people aged 18 to 35, "Western countries" (the EU and US) dominate in terms of their choices in the field of entertainment and culture, the choice of countries in which they would work, where they would want to be educated and receive healthcare, as well as the choice of country in which they would live (where they would move). A total of 70 percent chose the "Western" model for building Serbia (59 percent EU member states, and 11 percent the US), and 27 percent chose Russia. The general image of the EU member states and the US is also much more positive than the image of Russia. Most young people think that the standard of living in the EU and US is higher, the use of alternative energy sources is bigger, there is greater freedom of the media, and more respect for human rights.

On the other hand, however, there is an evident conflict between the rational and irrational, obviously fed by the fact that young people are poorly informed. Despite this predominantly more positive attitude to the "Western" model, young people have positive expectations from the assumed alliance with Russia. Most of them support the presence of Russian military bases in Serbia (57 percent) and support Russian foreign policy (64 percent). Most of them believe that alliance with Russia would improve employment opportunities, travel and education, inflow of foreign investment, political stability in the country and the region, and even democratization of the country and the image of Serbia in the world. According to a different April 2016 poll by CESID, 71.6 percent of respondents in Serbia think that entry into the EU and NATO is not good for Serbia, while over 55 percent of respondents say that Serbia should stick with Russia.

CEAS believes that the increasingly long trend of continuous decline in support for Serbia's European integration, which is itself a necessary but insufficient precondition for stabilization and democratization, is the result of a joint operation of Russian soft power and domestic supposedly pro-EU politicians. These politicians increasingly often and more sharply criticize the EU, perverting the integration process and continuously lying to citizens about the EU's mechanisms and conditions, while at the same time

speaking almost exclusively positively about Russia. This top-down pressure forms public opinion in Serbia, and CEAS believes that this combination of Russian soft power and Serbian politicians' rhetoric—even more than the objective challenges the EU and the world are facing—are driving this worrying trend.

Perfect Storm

For the last four years, a synergy of direct Russian and domestic anti-democratic and anti-EU interests has created a perfect storm in Serbia. As stated earlier, Moscow's interest in the region is to stop the processes of stabilization and democratization by disrupting EU integration and cooperation with NATO. By interrupting the integration of the region, Russia seeks to weaken and discredit the EU and NATO and to enhance the appeal of alliance with Moscow as an alternative. This strategy also has domestic benefits by demonstrating that Russia is not completely isolated in Europe and has the support of its Slovenian and/or Orthodox "brothers" in the Balkans.

At the same time, parts of the ruling structures in Serbia do not genuinely want European integration. This is partly because of their essentially authoritarian nature, and partly for fear of losing access to income from corruption and monopolies in state and public companies that are enabled by controlling the security and judicial systems. Democratic reforms required for EU integration would hinder, if not abolish, these sources of income. Some in the security services and other parts of the state and society also see the continuation of EU integration as a risk because of the continuing trials for war crimes, which may eventually extend to them.

A number of Serbian officials therefore play a double game. They tell the West and the voters they are committed to EU integration in order to garner international support and votes from citizens desiring a higher standard of living, foreign investment, and a more democratic system. At the same time, they stress that integration will have to be slowed down or sacrificed because Serbia will never impose sanctions on Russia, which these same officials represent as Serbia's key foreign policy partner. These high officials also do not refrain from roughly criticizing EU and Member State policies, persistently repeating the mantra that the EU is unfairly conditioning Serbia's accession, while

neglecting the fact that EU integration is not an obligation, but the democratically expressed will of the people.

Serbian officials thereby create and promote a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is already taking hold in public perception, about the “traditionally good Serbian-Russian relations” and their inevitability as the key pillar of a strong Serbian foreign policy for survival in a harsh global world, exclusively under the protection of Putin's Russia. CEAS is concerned because this newly created narrative is being taken for granted also among Western actors dealing with Serbia and the region.

Another pillar of this rhetoric is exaggeration of the volume of economic exchange and size of grants that Serbia supposedly receives from Russia, as well as the level of energy dependence on Russia. Meanwhile, energy efficiency and diversification have not been addressed as a priority for many years, and no other alternatives are being sought. The drop in oil prices in global markets and the effects of the sanctions imposed on Russia over the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine are considered almost not at all, either by officials or the media.

Those who attempt to raise the topic of the effects of Russian soft power in Serbia are exposed to bullying on social networks and insults in public media up to and including lies and threats. Relevant state institutions turn a blind eye to these attacks. CEAS believes this is the result of Russian soft power in Serbia.

The Western community is also to some extent partly responsible for the current situation. For the last several years, the US and the EU have been reluctant to respond to obvious undemocratic trends, preferring instead to “cure” them with short-term measures, including support for the political engineering that positions the ruling structure in the center of the ideological spectrum and presents it as the only viable alternative for Serbia. Even worse, the West has set aside its support for democratization in the rest of the region and in Serbia, focusing instead solely on maintaining stability through military cooperation and the fight against terrorism.

Thus, in the spring of 2016, in the middle of an election campaign, Serbia and the Western international community find themselves in a situation where although Serbia

is formally a candidate for membership in the EU, the parties have their eyes wide shut to the degradation of democratic processes inside the country and the role that Russian soft power is playing in this degradation.

Let us not forget that Serbia already once in its recent history chose the direction of self-deception, autocracy, nationalism, corruption, partocracy, devaluation of independent institutions, suppression of freedoms, and false re-traditionalization. The current Serbian establishment is now discrediting all the good achievements of the October 5th changes that at least put Serbia on the right track. CEAS believes that the present dangerous effects of Russian soft power in Serbia would not be of this magnitude if they were also not being enabled by the ruling structures in Serbia. This trend must urgently be stopped.

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