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Russia Instrumentalizes the Western Balkans and Can Set it Ablaze at Any Time

By Thomas Brey

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Serbian media have been pursuing two goals: to support the Russian position and to portray the West, in the shape of the United States and the European Union, in a very negative light. According to this reading, NATO has forced Russia to launch a “defensive war” to oppose the allegedly aggressive Western military alliance and to save its own national identity. Russia is thus portrayed as a victim identical to the victimization of its own country

in the NATO bombing in 1999. This narrative is not only prevalent in Serbia, but can be found in a weakened form in other territories of former Yugoslavia: In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro or in northern Kosovo.

Parallelisms: Yugoslav Wars - Ukraine War

The current Russian lines of action and argumentation show striking parallels with

Serbian politics in the early 1990s during the break-up of Yugoslavia: The clientelist political system as well as the instrumentalization of the media to create homogenization around the glorified populist leader. The destruction of independent institutions such as the judiciary and the elimination of the opposition are also central pillars of the political systems in both Russia and Serbia. The claim that minorities outside their own borders need to be protected from their alleged extermination is identical on both sides. The way Russia today turns its own aggression into an alleged defense of national existence is done as if in a blueprint based on the Serbian model of the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, the denial of national existences (of Croats and Ukrainians respectively) can be found on both the Serbian and Russian sides. In the face of modest socio-economic successes, the inability of the political elites to bring prosperity to broad sections of the domestic population is to be deflected here as well as there. After all, it was Putin himself who drew an analogy between the annexation of Crimea and the secession of Kosovo from Serbia.

The destruction of independent institutions are central pillars of political systems in both Russia and Serbia.

To put it exaggeratedly, Serbia's historical positions, which are also topical again today, appear to be a kind of blueprint for Putin's actions. Above all these systemic building blocks, Russia's and Serbia's actual goal is to regain the supposed national greatness of the past. In this model of thinking, this can only happen through the revision of borders. Further congruence can be seen in the concept of "Russkiy Mir" and "Srpski Svet" as well as in the formation of a broad national populist movement. "United Russia" is just as unconditionally aligned with President Vladimir Putin in this as the "Srpski blok", which has become increasingly open in recent weeks, under the strict leadership of the all-dominant Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.

Russia's economic influence

Decades ago, Russia had already begun to secure its power in the Western Balkans economically. On the one hand, this was based on the supply of gas at favorable prices until today. In 2008, the Serbian oil industry (NIS) was sold to the Russian state-owned company Gazpromneft for 400 million euros. Even the Serbian Minister of Economy at the time, Mladen Dinkić, spoke of peanuts. The reason given for this gift was that Russia would support Serbia internationally in disputes such as the conflict with Kosovo. Until now, the Russian owner has only had to pay 3%

levies on the raw materials extracted in Serbia and not 7% as required by law.

Since 2012 the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center has existed in the city of Niš.

In Russia, the tax is 20%. Russian companies took over the petrol station network of Beopetrol (Lukoil), invested in banks and large factories. Russia is a major arms supplier to Serbia. Since 2012, the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center has existed in the city of Niš, of which it is not publicly known what it actually does. Western experts suspect that this is a spy center as a counterweight to the US base Bondsteel in nearby Kosovo. As in Serbia, Russia invested in Republika of Srpska, mainly in refineries, petrol stations and banks. In Montenegro, Russian oligarchs were able to launder their money through excessive land purchases on the Adriatic coast, which had long been paid in euros there. In addition, these shady entrepreneurs invested in large-scale industry such as the Aluminum Plant Podgorica (KAP) or the steelworks in Nikšić.

Emotional bonding

Russia has always spent a lot of money and effort to demonstrate its alleged brotherly friendship

with Serbia. For example, Moscow financed large statues such as those for Tsar Nicholas II in front of the Serbian state presidency (2014) and the Serbian national Saint Sava next to the Orthodox cathedral of the same name in Belgrade (2003), for which Putin donated gold mosaics and frescoes the size of several football pitches, created and installed by Russian artists. The monument to the medieval Serbian tsar Stefan Nemanja, which was unveiled last year in front of the old railway station in Belgrade, is also in this line. It comes from the workshop of the Russian academician Aleksandar Rukavishnikov and was financed with money whose sources remained obscure. In Banja Luka, the administrative center of Republika Srpska, Moscow is financing the new Orthodox Russian Serb Cathedral.

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Finally, the identical mission of Putin's Russia and Vučić's Serbia must be mentioned at the end, to present their societies as a counter-design to Western models. Here the values of the Christian family with the national leader as "pater familias" and a strong state, there a libertarian society in which these values are trampled underfoot by sexual permissiveness, LGBT rights, the pushing back of religion and

the dissolution of patriarchal structures.

Russian media power and Serbian reception

Serbia has a large number of explicitly Russophile portals such as Fakti, Srbin.info, Nova srpska politička misao, Srbija danas, News front, Nacionalist, in4s or Vidovdan. They have openly embraced Russian propaganda, the strengthening of relations between Russia and Serbia, and fundamental criticism of the Western world. They are media multipliers of the reporting of the Russian state medium Sputnik, which has had a large editorial office in Belgrade since 2014. Even if one may doubt editor-in-chief of Sputnik Serbia that is quoted between 200 and 300 times a day by other media - it is certain that Sputnik radiates far beyond Serbia into neighboring countries. The Sputnik matrix is clear. It does not follow classical journalism. For example, there is no separation of news and commentary. The handling of sources is superficial, careless and, above all, goal-oriented. So, it is not about exhaustive information, but about promoting and achieving political targets. The Sputnik-makers thus do not think of their work from the reader/user's point of view, but they follow a one-way street in terms of content from top to bottom (top-down communication).

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A larger content analysis shows the pillars of Sputnik's reporting: selective instead of comprehensive coverage. The yardstick is not the significance of events, but the target country "covered" in terms of content. In this way, nationalecho chambers are created. The sources for the reporting are either irrelevant to the topic covered, one-sided or wrongly weighted. One always finds a fourth-ranking politician, a clueless top politician, instrumentalized historian/lawyer/diplomat from the second row or a long-retired alumnus who says the desired thing. It shows a focus on single events instead of thematic heavyweights, which are put in the wrong context or presented without context. Central to the coverage is identification of Russian-Serbian commonalities. WE (Sputnik editors and users, respectively Russia and Serbia) against THEM (domestic opposition, neighboring countries, USA, EU). The moralization of the issues runs like a red thread through the Sputnik contributions: Russia and Serbia reinforce their role as victims. Both then feel unjustly treated by the rest of the world and eternally set back historically.

“Proof” is provided that Western democracies are doomed because they are hopelessly inferior to Russia’s system.

From this, Sputnik goals for reporting are derived, such as the explanation of Russian foreign policy worldwide, in order to create understanding and approval. The “proof” is provided that Russian weapons and military technology are far superior to the West. Another focal point is the glorification of Putin as an ideal type of state leader and role model for top Serbian politicians. Sputnik supports the positions of the Serbian elite in all disputes in South-Eastern Europe. In addition, a “proof” is provided that Western democracies are doomed because they are hopelessly inferior to Russia’s political, economic and social system. Finally, national conflicts in the region are fueled, such as Serbs against Croats, Albanians against Serbs, Montenegrins against Serbs, Serbs against Muslim Bosniaks. Every effort is made to prevent the rapprochement of ex-Yugoslav states to Euro-Atlantic structures by “proving” that close ties to Russia are more advantageous for them than to the West.

Consequences of Russian influence

The close media ties between Russia and Serbia

are complemented by political contacts. A close-knit program of visits to Moscow by top Serbian politicians, such as President Vučić, Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin or the top Bosnian Serb politician Milorad Dodik, has created a familiar human network that forms a solid basis for bilateral relations. Vulin in particular, who is considered President Vučić’s “mouthpiece”, regularly attacks Brussels and Washington with threats that Serbia could turn to Russia more than ever and break off its path to the EU.

Russian propaganda has created a virtual world that has nothing remotely to do with reality.

Among the population, Russian propaganda has created a virtual world that has nothing remotely to do with reality. Although Serbia conducts two-thirds of its foreign trade with the EU, which is responsible for three-quarters of all foreign investments, the citizens overwhelmingly see Russia and China as the greatest benefactors of their homeland in all surveys. Moscow and Beijing are the Serbia’s closest friends, while the US and the EU seek to harm and ultimately dominate Serbia. Consequently, in the latest representative survey of Serbian youth this summer, 41% said they were against EU membership (33% in favor). If Serbia had to choose, 57% would want to side with Russia, and 43% with the West. But, when

people have to make concrete decisions about their future, the perception of foreign countries looks completely different. No one would think of going to Russia or China as a guest worker. Rather, the vast majority aspires to Austria and Germany. In the recent survey of young people in Serbia, 49% has said they wanted to move abroad. 71% would like to emigrate to Europe, 10% to the US, and 6% to Russia.

Since the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, 50 thousand Russians have moved to Serbia.

The special relationship between Belgrade and Moscow has very practical consequences today: since the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine 50 thousand Russians have moved to Serbia, who would have founded about 1000 companies, the newspaper “Moscow Times” has found out. Among them is the Russian IT giant Yandex, which is said to employ 700 people in Belgrade. Real estate agents also report a rush of Russian buyers and tenants. The new Russian citizens have good reasons for moving to Serbia: they are not subjects to EU sanctions because Belgrade refuses to introduce such punitive measures against its ally, while Air Serbia maintains its connections to Russia despite all EU sanctions.

The outlook

Serbia, a candidate for EU membership, is given the instrument to maintain a policy of equidistance between West and East, despite its economic impotence, on the basis of its central geopolitical position, through its close and diverse ties with Russia. The EU does not have the political will to push Serbia to make a real decision on which side to take. In the Hungarian Prime-Minister Viktor Orbán, who maintains the closest ties with Serbia’s President Vučić, Belgrade has a powerful advocate within the EU. At present, the majority of the EU is opposed to Serbia’s accession. After the bad experiences with Greece, Bulgaria, Romania or Cyprus, they do not want to repeat mistakes. Brussels’ only interest is that there are no new military conflicts in the region. The EU is apparently also indifferent to the fact that President Vučić is increasingly showing himself to be an autocrat who systematically disregards all EU values, blocks reforms, controls institutions such as parliament or the judiciary, as well as almost all media. For many years, the EU has left it at the level of empty phrases that call for “further” reforms in mild terms. There have been no sanctions to enforce EU goals, nor are any to be expected.

At present the majority of the EU is opposed to Serbia’s accession.

According to pro-European government critics in Serbia, Russia wants to provoke armed conflicts in the Western Balkans in order to gain relief in the Ukraine war with a new trouble spot even closer to Western Europe. Potential starting points for such efforts are Kosovo, Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro. However, President Vučić knows that he must not overstep the mark because his country is economically dependent on the West. Serbia's all-dominant politician regularly succeeds in making it clear to the West, by igniting artificial crises in the region and containing them, that he is the key partner for Brussels and Washington, which cannot be replaced by anyone. This is because the EU and the US had failed to build clear political alternatives in civil society over the past decades. They had been content to support a few critical media and NGOs with comparatively very modest funding. On the other hand, there is an army of European diplomats and experts working in the region who gobble up huge amounts of funding, but achieve little in concrete terms. To the contrary, they often have to put up with downright abuse from the relevant media.

EU Strategy for the Western Balkans

A consistent and long-term Western Balkans policy of the EU is out of the question because

the interests of its members are too different. Brussels shimmies from one topic and from one day-to-day political problem to another without moving anything in principle in the direction of reform and the development of democratic structures. Serbia is taking its cue from the example of Hungary, which, after all, violates EU values on a broad front in the judiciary, media and civil society, and is in the company not only of Poland. If the EU wants to do something to save face, at least superficially, then a determined fight against the omnipresent propaganda would be necessary. In Serbia, propagandists who had already served the then Serbian president Slobodan Milošević, are once again sitting in many media positions. As in the past, they are constantly beating their credo of a corrupt West and a sustainable East. Just as the Yugoslav wars were propagandistically prepared by the media, this hate speech can easily turn into actual violence.

The EU would therefore be well advised to extinguish or at least contain this propagandistic constant fire. This cannot be done with Sunday speeches, political exhortations or half-hearted support for critical media, which in any case do not attract the attention of the wider Serbian public. An effective antidote to the state propaganda that drums non-stop at citizens and determines their thinking, is to expose it. Similar to the EU Commission's special unit

against Russian propaganda (EUvsDisinfo), something must be done to counter it in the Western Balkans. The media would have to be analyzed on a daily basis. The massive propaganda uncovered in the process, which usually contradicts even the most elementary logic, would have to be corrected. Such a project would be neither financially nor humanly costly. Despite the comparatively small amount of money involved, it would have an enormous practical effect on the population. For without the fight against Serbian propaganda, Western policy in the entire region is at a loss.

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