

# “Pax Russica” in the Balkans: Serbia Between Myth and Reality

Written by Eduard Abrahamyan

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EDUARD ABRAHAMYAN, APR 30 2015

Historically, the Russian political elite held a conviction that the Balkans were a strategic pivotal field for the state economic and political interests (Jelavić, 2004). In light of this, the assertiveness of Russian hegemony in the Balkans was a recipe for success in the geopolitical rivalry with traditional contenders in Europe. In this respect, Serbia, occupying roughly the mid-part of the region, was a key pillar of Russian dominance in South-eastern Europe. Sharing ethnic and spiritual origins and faith with Russians, Serbia left a pernicious trail in Russia's history. Ironically, Serbia caused Russia's engagement to the Great War that turned into the collapse of the Russian Empire, followed by a murderous civil war (Kissinger, 2012).

The distinctive feature of Serbian contemporary history is notionally described as a 'hard choice' between West and East; whereas so far, it is a continuous struggle to restrain the pursuit of great powers to interfere or to impact Serbia. For instance, the foreign policy of Communist Yugoslavia led by Josip Broz Tito, proved to be more strained rather than friendly because of the objective of Moscow to make Yugoslavia subordinate to its will (Vucinich, Tomasevich, 1969; 166).

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the strategic pull out and final marginalisation during the Balkan war in 1990s, Russia returned to the Balkans with promising economic projects (Serra, 2015).

During the last decade, Russia's regional policy in the Balkans was based on pragmatism and provided the frames of Realpolitik. Such policies were mostly motivated by the region's energetic and transit capacities of Russia's role as a dominant energy supplier to the EU (Markovic, 2011). The recent events in Ukraine became a precursor of the radically new approach towards the Balkans through the prism of the recently declared ideology of Eurasianism that was officially adopted by Russia.

This article is focused on Serbian aspects of Russia's foreign policy and does not consider regional policy of the EU, the US and Turkey vis-a-vis Balkans. The purpose of this research is to critically examine the misconceptions and prejudices of Russia's political elite and ideological thinkers regarding Serbia. We then observe the economic, cultural and social efforts necessary to acquire substantive instruments of influence on Serbia. The third section reveals the actual preferences, self-determination and self-identification of Serbian society and the political elite, facets that are often incompatible with Russia's doctrinal sketches of Serbia.

### **The Serbian “Myth”**

The Eurasian ideology is a theoretical pivot of Russian state nationalism, pursuing, once Vladimir Putin assumed the office, to resurge the influence of the “Great Russia” in the rest of Eurasia (Leclercq, 2014). The peculiar outcome in Putin's efforts to establish a “Multipolar” world was the seizure of Crimea in March 2014 and an explicit revisionist policy in Russia since that time. This dramatic shift from Realpolitik was intended to reframe Russia's foreign policy as a “civilisational” mission, which in turn set in motion new geopolitical realities and appropriate feedback from the

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West that has, in various social and political dimensions, implications for the Balkans (Clark, Foxall, 2014).

At first glance, the Balkans have a weak relationship with ideological measurement of Eurasianism because the latter is predominantly focused on post-Soviet space in order to reintegrate under Russian leadership. In fact, the doctrine is flexible in terms of geography and affording broad room for involvement of different nations and ethnic entities with either Slav or Turkic ethno-spiritual basis. In accordance with that flexibility, Russia's policy-makers and philosophers continue calling some regions part of 'Russian World', representing a substantive element of Putin's doctrine – Eurasianism. Accordingly, the Balkans, particularly Serbia, is an inherent Western part of the 'Russian World', the geopolitics of which certainly must retain its pro-Russian character (Dugin, 1997; 456). Likewise, until recently Moscow was firmly of the opinion that Serbia, bearing deep contradictions with the West on Kosovo and its distinctive incompatibilities with the basic principles of Atlanticism, must sooner or later assume a role of provider of Russia's geopolitics in Eastern Europe. In addition, Putin's administration and political philosophers, in the aftermath of Kosovo events, perceive Serbia as a “small-scale” Russia, believing that the methodology of Yugoslavia's dissolution is a pattern that may be used in Russia (Putin, 2014).

Over the last decade Russian media, mostly controlled by officials, repeatedly described Serbia as a 'perpetual ally' for Russia, 'the closest ally' or even 'Russia's last fort-post in the Balkans' (Russian News, 2008), coupled with the groundless conviction that Russia simply rescued Serbia in 1999.

These kinds of notions, claims and ideas are at odds with the reality and the intention to disseminate misrepresentative information about Serbia within Russia and are likely to underline Russia's attractiveness in a geopolitical context for a number of states, endorsing Putin's foreign policy vision to re-write the rules of post-Cold war order and redraw borders. The goal of such propaganda is to emphasise that Russia is its own state that offers a civilisational alternative to the West and Serbians, having this perspective of Moscow since 2014, aimed to turn Serbia into an effective fulcrum. Simultaneously, Moscow calculated that Serbia was capable of being a 'spearhead' in the enduring geopolitical confrontation with the West, perceiving the Balkans as an arena of 'civilisational' struggle (Clark, Foxall, 2014). This is conceivable if Russia consistently plays with the resentment of the Serbians, employing mostly 'frozen' ethnic issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (Talbot, 2015).

In a nutshell, Moscow merely offers Serbians to become pawns in a grand game of Russian geo-politics in the Balkans, attempting to reap the full benefits from Serbia-EU contradictions. Meanwhile, the combination of circumstances pushed Serbian leadership to play equally parts in both dimensions with the EU – demonstrating to Russia that Serbia may be a suitable platform for Russia in terms of energy-economic cooperation with the EU, or with Russia and that Serbia has alternatives in the face of emerging power like Moscow, due to the benefit of additional economic and political dividends (Konitzer, 2010). However, in the wake of the Crimea and Ukraine cases, the geo-economic and geo-political image of Eastern Europe and the Balkans started to change and in short turn will be changed beyond recognition. Moreover, it is disputable, that Putin's doctrine, in some cases, could be attractive to Serbia – quite the opposite – the essence of Eurasianism implies rivalry with the Western Atlanticism in which Serbia, in Putin's eyes, will be fairly apposite to further competition. It makes sense that Serbia's impulsive position in Europe will be used for Moscow's own benefit and finally shall be betrayed as it was during the conflict over Kosovo (Hedges, 1999).

To underpin the above-mentioned issues, it is worth noting that, for the first decades of the twentieth century, the ideological spur promoted by Serbia for secession of Christians from the Ottoman Empire was Slavism. The outcome of such ideology was the establishment of the Yugoslav Kingdom (1918-1941) – the realm of the Western Slavs. As a result, Slavism in the Balkans was acknowledged as viable, whilst many in Russia, and contemporary philosophers, amongst them Konstantin Leontiev, were advocating that Slavism, as unifying idea, is hopelessly artificial, hence can not appear to be a prerequisite for geopolitical convergence of all Slavs (Leontiev, 1886; 126). To this end, Slavism in Western Europe was designed on national egalitarianism, in contrast with Eurasianism which was structured on hierarchism. As it is argued in our juncture, Konstantin Leontiev laid the ground for the current Eurasianism doctrine, that clearly side-lines Slavism, signifying that the ideology that once united the Slavs in the Balkans has no political and ideological prospect and must be subordinate to Eurasianism (Dugin, 1997; 457).

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The final accord of Slavism belongs to Putin's efforts, initiated by the conflict with Ukraine in Donbass and Lugansk. The conflict between neighbouring nations – Slavs with the same cultural and ethnic origin – had an increasing impact on Serbia. Particularly, war in Ukraine put the Pan-Slavic coherency into a grave, inexorably marginalising Slavism idea in the Balkans and widening the gap between Russia and the Western Slavs. Henceforth, while Russian and Serbian officials speak in unison about a deep historical relationship, in the face of events in Ukraine, the majority of nationalistic movements and parties mistakenly described by Russia as embodiments of pro-Russian political dimension in Serbia. These kinds of groups and parties are unlikely to be leverage of internal destabilisation in Serbia in favour of Moscow's temporary interests.

## **The Russian Efforts**

Given the lack of capacities to achieve the political goals through the experienced 'Hard Power' in the Balkans, deploying military power or obvious coercion towards Georgia (in 2008), to some extent towards Armenia (in 2013) and in Ukraine, Russian policy-makers made a decision to set-up a favourable background through investments. Employing the broadly accepted rules of 'Soft Power', accountable to Putin energetic and financial enterprises such as Rosneft, Zarubezhneft, Gazprom, Lukoil, and Sberbank initiated a number of energetic projects and a set of privatisations, putting to use Eastern Europe's energetic, but mostly the Balkan states', economic needs. In addition, during the recent decade, major efforts were made by Putin's authorities in all spectrums of Serbian everyday life.

On the one hand, the sustainable financial investments in energetic, private property and infrastructure in Serbia and generally in the Balkans paved the way for efficient interference in internal affairs. On the other hand, using the EU's openness and competition policy in terms of economy, Putin's administration took the advantage to impose their sophisticated methods to undermine European coherency, seeking to weaken the interests of competitors (Clark, Foxall, 2014). The distinctive hallmark of Russia's 'Soft Power' goes hand in hand with disruptive corruption, which broadly exists in political institutions, cementing 'oligarchisation' of the Balkan states, particularly in Serbia, Hungary and Bulgaria (Stacey, Oliver, 2014).

The Serbian political equilibrium between the West and Russia has been established since Boris Tadić's ascent to power in July 2004. His strategic concept of Serbian foreign policy was shaped on 'four pillars' – EU, Russia, USA and China, it always emphasised the EU was a first among the equals, as Tadić repeatedly declared that joining the EU is a principal goal for his office (Tran, 2009). Apart from the fact that his Democratic Party was bearing a label of 'party of NATO', Boris Tadić opened a broad spectrum for Russian economic entry into Serbia. In 2004, Putin's oligarch-owned company, Lukoil, owned 79.5% of local Serbian oil supplier "Beopetrol" along with over 180 petrol stations (Pivovarenko, 2014). Following this, in December 2008, Gazprom, beyond a tender, acquired a key part of Serbian Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), opening the way for construction of the South Steam gas pipeline which dominantly supplies gas to Croatia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Pivovarenko, 2014). In short, Gazprom, signifying the embodiment of Russian foreign energy policy, swiftly turned into a monopole distributor of gas in Serbia, owning a network of terminals, depots and refinery stations. Gazprom's minor counterpart, Zarubezhneft, approximately at the same time as the Gazprom-NIS deal, privatised, again without a tender, oil plants in Modrica and Rafineria Naftne Refinery Company in Republika Srpska, the Serbian entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Thus, accompanied by significant acquisitions in Bulgaria, Montenegro, Macedonia and Croatia, Russia reached a strategically important presence in the gas and oil segments of the Balkans.

In the short run, the substantive 'trap' for Serbia was loans and the most vulnerable share – Kosovo and Metohija. During his official visit, Dmitriy Medvedev allocated to the Serbian Government a loan of 1 billion Euros, suggesting diplomatic support in the issue of Kosovo, thereby fuelling the troubled ties among Serbia and the EU on Kosovo status (Deutsche Welle, 2009). Simultaneously, Medvedev's authority hailed Serbia's strive to join the EU, treating it as Moscow's 'Trojan Horse' in the EU, and was similarly perceived by Bulgaria (Williams, Tsolova, 2014).

Russia's energy ties with the Tomislav Nikolić administration were even more extensive. Primarily, during his run for presidency, Nikolić declared 'we want Serbia as a supporter of Russia in the EU' (Bojić, 2012), just as Medvedev's administration was cordially endorsing the Serbia's aspiration to enter the EU. Interestingly, the political party that represents Nikolić – the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) was shaped by a faction of the Serbian Radical Party,

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supported by Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s. Shortly before the presidential elections, SNS signed an agreement to cooperate with Putin's United Russia Party (Edinaya Rossiya), counting on receiving the economic and financial support in the case of victory (Ivanov, Sisoiev, 2012).

The advent of the SNS party implied the adoption of the policy of 'four pillars' with slight adjustments and deepen the relationship with Russia as much as was possible in the shape of EU priorities. Consequently, the investment figures from 2012 to 2014 reached over \$3 billion, and mostly derived from the 'Strategic Partnership Declaration' signed in May 2013 between Serbia and Russia (Simić, 2014). It should be noted that since 2012, Russia was focused primarily on Serbia's infrastructure, exemplified by modernisation to acquire the Serbian state railway following the negotiations to purchase Serbian National Airlines 'JAT'. In short, Russia is planning to hold all strategic sites of Serbia in order to embrace this option on its further political coercion. Though, it is arguable that ordinary people of Serbia benefited from Russia's economic interests, specifically by the construction of the Serbian segment of the South Stream pipeline where over 2,500 people profited (Pivovarenko, 2014). In turn, bearing in mind Putin's implicit interests to use Serbia in his gamble, people plausibly may pay a cost in some situations.

It is important to underscore, that almost all elaborations of enhancing Russia's influence upon Serbia designed a special group lead by a distinguished expert on the Balkans, Leonid Reshetnikov, a former senior officer in the Russian foreign-intelligence service. Reshetnikov, is primarily director of one of the significant NGO's that defines Russia's foreign policy, namely the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies. Hence, Reshetnikov is capable of consulting in either Putin's administration, if not directly to Putin, or the heads of financial and energy enterprises, acting in the Balkans. In 2013, he instituted RISS offices in Belgrade and Sofia, consolidating the analytic-expert society mostly studied in Moscow, in order to affect Serbian and Bulgarian policy-makers (Reshetnikov, 2014). Moreover, there is an assumption that Reshetnikov initiated the forgotten Soviet method of so-called cultural diplomacy, the core aim of which is to promote the positive image of Russia's policies abroad (Markovic, 2011). Broadly using the informational facilities either in Russia or in local targeted countries, the principal goal of such policy consistently disseminates a 'false narrative', playing with the senses of ordinary people and nationalists. Strictly speaking, to influence the public opinion of political groups and citizens in order to achieve results preferable for the Russia internal situation in particular states. This propagandistic assignment towards Serbia could have a spill-over effect on the EU's interests in Eastern Europe in case it appears necessary to be justified. A case in point: political and social behaviour of Serbia and Republika Srpska in the aftermath of the EU's economic sanctions on Russia caused by the aggression vis-à-vis Ukraine. Serbian officials simply denied imposing any sanctions on Russia.

However, the main cause of concern is the increasing number of Russian 'cultural' institutions, spreading offices in Serbia and Republika Srpska like 'Ruskiy Mir' ('Russian World' Foundation), Serbsko-Russ Youth communities, Orthodox communities that are in fact controlled by Russia, etc. Along with cultural functions, these centres are literally suitable of provoking ethnic and religious intolerance as they have an emphasised ultra-right bias.

## **The Serbian Reality**

Apart from the fact that Serbian leadership prioritises the Europeanisation and integration with the EU and NATO, Russia's potential in Serbia may be a source of tension even when destabilisation, should it not be underestimated. In the aftermath of the Crimean annexation, the shift of Russia's policy regarding Serbia's EU aspirations rapidly became conspicuous. Political elite, led by Nikolić, came across the situation, in which the geopolitical interests between Russia and Serbia are beyond coincidence. Serbia, faced with the fateful dilemma, either pursues its adopted path to the EU and NATO, or otherwise adapts the role of a pawn in Moscow's gamble for the second time as it was in the Yugoslav wars in the end of 1990s.

Serbia is perceived by Russia as a state, the function of which is to impede further Europeanisation and inhibit NATO's proper defence fulfilment in the Balkans. The substantive basis of this consideration is a Russian-Serbian mutual Humanitarian Centre near the town of Nis, founded in 2012 for the needs of the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Russian Ministry for Emergency Situations, where Russians likely attempt to set up a Russian military object, scilicet a military base since the Ukrainian events aroused concerns in Serbia (Radić, 2014).

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Soon after Putin's visit to Belgrade in October 2014, likely to appease Moscow, the administration of Nikolić agreed to handle joint military exercises with Russian troops, the first in Serbia's modern history. Meanwhile, preparing to sign an Individual Partnership Action Plan agreement with NATO managed to edge Russia out from the issue of Serbia's political orientation. Finally, signing the agreement with NATO in January 2015, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dačić, was somewhat hasty to comment regarding Serbia's military neutrality (RT,22/03/2015), plausibly to put an end to Russia's growing coercion about the foundation of military bases. In the meantime, the boost of official relations with NATO, in terms of cooperation, opens the avenue for joining NATO once the Serbian political elite becomes conscious that there is nothing to gain from Russia.

Nevertheless, the promotion of public protests by pro-Russian or Russia-owned NGO's in Serbia appear to be basically useless and will have a short-term effect due to the fact that Serbian society, even a nationalistic segment, finally figured out that there is no prosperous and progressive future for Serbia, coupled with oligarchic and politically unreliable Russia. Still there persists a vivid sense of betrayal by Moscow when Russia benefited from Kosovo's precedent for recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia, not counting the set of betrayals regarding promised missile weaponry and Russia's approval of the Kosovo peace plan, which legitimated the decay of Serbia (Bugajski, 2004).

## Instead of conclusion

Russia acquired the scope to implicate the national and political situation in the Republika Srpska, manipulating, in order to reopen old national wounds in Serbia and directly threaten Serbia's further integration with the EU. In fact, Serbia turned a prisoner of its own assert on Kosovo, enabling room for Russia's revisionist policy. Contrary, the Western military and political institutions focused only on Kosovo, stimulating a supposition of ignorance of Serbian interests that, at the end of the day, Russia basically succeeded in enhancing its influence in the Balkans, which reflects the continuous contradictions in shaping the united stance on economic sanctions vis-à-vis Russia, because of Ukraine.

This dismantled the fact that thus far, insufficient attention was paid by the EU towards the Serbian economy and social sector. The EU could guarantee that Serbian national issues have an alternative to be satisfied through the Europeanisation. Therefore, the only receipt of success on reunification of regions, settled by native-Serbs can be a territorial, political and economic integration of Serbia with its neighbour states of Former Yugoslavia within the frameworks of the EU.

As the cessation of Montenegro in 2006 took place, the broad Serbian society gradually realised the incompatibilities of former Yugoslav ideas with today's united Europe and accepted the European integration. Meanwhile, the political equilibrium of Serbian government believes in the employment of the political relations with Russia allegedly demonstrating “alternatives” to the political circles in the West, hindering Serbia's integration into NATO.

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