Helsinki bulletin
NO.120 // OCTOBER 2015

HELSINKI COMMITTEE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA
address: Kralja Milana 10,
Belgrade, Serbia
tel. +381-11-3032-408; fax. 2639-437;
e-mail: office@helsinki org.rs
http://www.helsinki.org.rs

RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER EXPANDS

FONET/AP

Serbia's political elite has always relied on Russia, and in the 1990s looked forward to its support to the wars it waged. However, Russia's assistance to Serbia turned trite after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Milošević's backing of the coup to depose Mikhail Gorbachev. Until Boris Yeltsin's withdrawal Russia had usually stood by the Contact Group's policies. The situation changed once Vladimir Putin came to power taking a different attitude towards the West. His new strategy for Russia's resuming its big-power role implied its growing presence in the Balkans. At the Munich Conference in 2007 he hinted on his strategy mostly based Russia's energy power, which was crucial to Balkan states dependent on Russia's energy supplies.

Against the background of changed international relations and its growing ambitions to become an influential actor of the

international arena, Russia started developing the instruments of public diplomacy to strengthen its soft power. However, the effects were marginal since it relied on old Soviet mechanisms that were in discord with modern times of informatics.

In 2005 Russia launched a number of project addressing global public, including campaigning for Winter Olympics in 2014 and founding of the Russia Today broadcasting news in English. Putin also established the Russian Peace Fund to promote Russia's culture and language by the model of the British Council, Goethe Institute and the like.[1]

In 2008 Dimitri Medvedev founded the Federal Agency of the Union of Independent States. The Voice of Russia, the world's oldest radio station, replaced its management in 2010 with a view of modernization. In 2010 Medvedev also founded the "Gorchakov" Fund for the Support to Public Diplomacy and the Russian Coucil for International Relations. Russia then adopted a new concept of international with the annual budget for international assistance amounting to 500 million USD.[2]

Annexation of Crimea and escalation of the Ukrainian conflict in 2014 tensed the relations between Russia and the Western hemisphere (including sanctions against Russia), which created the context wherein (dis)information were major tools. In 2014-15, aware of its mass media power, Russia is prioritizing "alternative media" and "alternative interpretations of events."

By demonstrating its latest version of "hard power" in Syria (after Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2013) – which marked its disturbing comeback – Russia also proved its understanding of the importance of "soft power" as an efficient mechanism of global influence. Here it made the biggest progress the media sphere confronting the globalization of the CNN model the West has been using to spread its influence.

Less than 24 hours after the onset of air raids in Syria, a Russian media outlet launched a web portal in five languages (Russian, English, French, German and Ukrainian) publicizing the news about the operation. Russia's Defense Ministry is doing the same at its website, including daily releases by military officials. All this is meant to contend reports by the Western media and officials suspicious about Russia's plans for the Middle East.

Though the effects of Russia's media strategy are still limited, the information available at its portals and published by other media houses are growingly quoted. Unlike in the Soviet era, Russia's strategy banks on professional reporters whose propaganda power rests on relevant news that are, however, so interpreted as to "protect national interests."

Obviously, Russia's focus on the soft power is as modern as that of the West. And no doubt that, despite all initial limitations, Russia will be occupying this sphere more and more, especially in the Balkans.

Director General of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (RISI) Leonid Reshetnikov says, "It is for sure that the Serbian regime is under the US control." Today's Russia hardly supports its allies in Balkan countries, he stresses, adding that his country should establish a steady dialogue with students, scientists, politicians, businessmen and artists in these countries.[3]

1 http://ruskarec.ru/opinion/2015/10/04/chvrst-stav-o-mekoj-sili-rusije_479425.

2 Ibid.

3 http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/563342/Putinov-analiticar-Vlast-u-Srbiji-je-pod-kontrolom-Amerike

THE EFFECTS OF RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER IN SERBIA AND THE BALKANS

As a major strategic point of Kremlin's policy for Europe, Serbia seems to be a most welcome experimental station of Russia's growing power, the more so since Russia has already positioned itself in it. Political relations between the two countries are very good – especially between the two presidents, Putin and Nikolić – testified, inter alia, by Belgrade's refusal to follow EU's policy for Ukraine (Serbia being the only candidate for EU accession not imposing sanctions on Russia); economic relations are also high on the agenda – Serbia depends on Russia's energy supplies, its oil industry is in Russian ownership, Russia is involved in infrastructural projects such as modernization of railroads, etc.[4]

Besides, there are pro-Russian sentiments of the majority of Serbia's citizens – that are probably most important from the standpoint of the soft power doctrine. Although oriented towards EU, formally and existentially, Serbia still vacillates about its geostrategic choice.[5] Because of the influential pro-Russian, conservative bloc – from the Serb Orthodox Church, through many non-parliamentary parties such as DSS, Third Serbia, Serb People's Party, etc., to most scientific, cultural and journalistic circles – many analysts speak of "Russianization of the Serb nation."[6]

As for Russian analysts, they argue that Serbia-Russian cooperation rests on "the once paradigm" that can hardly cope with modern challenges. This paradigm is marked by "traditional discourse" its elements being Eastern Orthodoxy, Byzantium heritage, Slavism and mutual assistance throughout history.[7]

However, Russian analysts and observers of the Balkans usually argue that "the Balkans can neither be viewed out of geopolitical context nor the final resolution of the Balkan question can be prognosticated until the ultimate change of the entire political map of the world."[8] According to Jelena Guskova, the solution of the Balkan question depends on Russia to a large extent. Russia has been passive till 2007 but is now most actively involved in the Balkan question, in the matter of Kosovo to put it precisely, she says.[9]

The West has a clear-cut objective – "it is after changing the vector of Republika Srpska and its ties with Serbia and Russia, and making it fully dependent on the West," says an official analyst, adding that the use of the term "genocide" is meant to establish a legal foundation for interventions in other strategically important areas in the world.[10]

Montenegro is also in the focus of Russian propaganda considering its probable membership of NATO by the end of 2016. This could easily chill bilateral relations, say Russian commentators. They also expect Montenegro's stronger anti-Russian rhetoric. In the matter of foreign policy Russia should not address Podgorica but the North Atlantic Alliance in Brussels, they argue.[11] Here one should also

4 In 2013 Serbia and Russia signed a strategic agreement on economic and political cooperation, and coordination of mutual relations.

5 „Divided between Europe where it belongs geographically and civilizationally, and Russia it sees emotionally as an older brother and protector, Serbia looks like Buridan's ass that would starve to death between two equally allring bunles of hay," Blic, May 24, 2015.

6 Danas, April 17, 2015.

7 Geopolitika, Septembar 2015.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Geopolitika, August 2015.

11 Darja Basova is an analyst for the Moscow State University of International Relations.

take into consideration Russia's media offensive in Montenegro and the Russian Orthodox Church's influence on the Serb Orthodox Church in Montengro and Serbia alike.

Dušan Reljić of the German Institute of International Policy and Security in Brussels takes that Moscow would not stand in the way of anyone's membership of EU but would be trying by all means to prevent Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro from joining NATO.[12]

RUSSIA'S MEDIA OFFENSIVE

Speaking of soft power in general, Russia made a U-turn in 2014 by placing the media at its priority list. Three of its traditional media houses – Russia Today, RIA News Agency and Voice of Russia – were placed under the same umbrella, the Russia Today /RT/conglomerate.[13] The audience addressed in English, Spanish and Arab totals one billion people. Some domestic reporters take that such concentration of experienced professionals is most effective.[14]

In Serbia Russia's media giant is known as Sputnik. Apart from a web portal, this RT branch has been broadcasting regularly 30-minute radio programs three times a day since the late 2014. For the time being Sputnik's newscasts under the slogan "We speak about things others are hushing up" are aired by Belgrade's RTV Studio B and several local radio stations. The plan about a TV program has not been realized yet.

According to Russian sources Russia has been trying in vain for almost ten year to buy at least one of Serbia's TV stations.[15] It is still trying in the ongoing process of media privatization in line with the latest media legislation. Though Russian investors wanted to buy the once emblematic TV B92 the station was sold to a Greek investor together with the TV Prva. Same sources say that three Russian companies had been interested in buying the popular Belgrade's Studio B which was, nevertheless, sold to a domestic buyer. The Serb authorities have been preventing Russian companies from positioning themselves at Serbia's media arena, argues Nikita Bondarov of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies.[16]

On the other hand, Russia's "mindset" is entrenched in a number of Serbia's media outlets. This especially refers to tabloids but also to high-circulation dailies such as Vecernje Novosti and Politika.[17] The Pecat weekly and the Geopolitika magazine are the most prominent mouthpieces of Russia's stances and opponents of Serbia's movement towards EU.

Speaking of successful media projects in Serbia Russian commentators refer to the web portal "Russia beyond the Headlines" in addition to Sputnik. The portal (attracting the attention of over one-quarter of million visitors) also publicizes special supplements to Geopolitika and

12 http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/512353/Reljic-Nema-opasnosti-od-pojacanog-uticaja-Moskve-na-Balkan

13 The attempt to establish the conglomerate under its original Russian name at global scene failed; this is why it is known by its name in English, Russia Today.

14 "In my view, Russia Today is a by far better version of CNN. Its reporters are more handsome and more convincing than their CNN colleagues, and the issues they address more interesting and to the point. For, Russia minds no expense for their work," says columnist Ruža Ćirković, Danas, September 28, 2015.

15 Nedeljnik, Septembar 2015.

16 Ibid. sto. „The fact is that the opposition to Russian presence comes from the high-level despite the great number of Russophiles in Serbia," argues Bondarov.

17 Some speculate that Russian capital was invested in the shares of Serbia's oldest daily, Politika, a company registered in Moscow bought several years ago (although at the time of the transaction the word had it that the buyer was domestic businessman Miodrag Bogićević).

Nedeljnik (which has been engaging Russian authors to address some topics as of recently).

OTHER FORMS OF ACTIVISM

Serbia's pro-European orientation has never been questioned officially since 2000. In the first transition years the great majority of citizens have also supported this orientation. However, over the past years citizens' preference of the EU has been on the downward curve: according to the latest public opinion poll conducted by the governmental Office of European Integration it spiraled to some 40 percent.

Indicatively, this downward curve coincides with the period (since 2012) in which not a single Euro-skeptic or anti-European party to advocate a change in the country's strategic orientation and its closer ties with Russia is represented in the parliament. On the other hand, findings of the latest survey conducted by the Serb New Political Though show that as many as 61 percent of citizens favor alliance with Moscow.[18]

Though without parliamentary representation, such disposition of the majority of Serbia's citizens dominates the public discourse. Affinity for Moscow – the same as the affinity for EU – oscillates but rockets whenever Russia and President Putin present themselves at the international arena as "protectors" of Serbia and its alleged national interests. This happened when Russia vetoed the resolution marking the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide in the UNSC in July 2015.

Russia's presence in Serbia's public and cultural life is most visible in the attendance of Russian intellectuals at various conferences (mostly addressing geostrategic and historical topics).

Russian analysts of Serbia-Russia relationship remind that, unlike the practice of the Western countries, Russia's soft power is not "framed" by non-governmental organizations. Whether and to what extent some right-wing organizations are being financed by Russia is not so transparent that one could draw definite conclusions. In fact, apart from Sputnik, only the "Balkan Express" media center has been active over the past year: it takes the pride in having organized the premiere of the "Sunstroke" movie attended by Belgrade's frequent guest, director Nikita Mikhalkov, assisted in the transport of "The Blessed Flame" to Belgrade and initiated the visit by Jevgeniy Primakov.

Russian analysts also speak of a paradox: though the absolute majority of citizens, they say, have sympathies for Russia, Russia still "has not a single non-governmental organization to operate steadily and with a plan in Serbia." Since there is probably no need for such an organization, concludes the same author, "our crucial soft power at this point is in the undisputed authority of President Putin among citizens."

A number of political parties and movements are "on Russia's side." Serb Radical Party tops this lengthy list to be followed by Democratic Party of Serbia, Dveri, Statehood Movement, Serb People's Party, Nasi, Third Serbia, etc. The indications that most of them are being funded by Moscow are well-founded.[19] However, one cannot tell this for sure since the possible financial assistance is non-transparent.

18 Politika, August 1, 2015.

19 Predsident of Democratic Party of Serbia Sanda Rašković Ivić je, most probably bearing in mind this perception, claimed upon her return from Moscow that she got „not a single Euro or ruble for her party." Politika, August 1, 2015.

Their closeness to Russia and its stance is more than obvious. For instance, during his visit to Moscow Boško Obradović, the leader of the Serb Movement "Dveri," said, "Serbia is Russia's border to the West."[20]

HUMANITARIAN CENTER IN NIŠ

The information about the Russian humanitarian center – established in Niš years ago – is scarce. At the time it was founded some speculated that it was the embryo of Russia's intelligence base to counteract the American Bondstil base in Kosovo.[21]

Domestic officials claim that the Regional Humanitarian Center is just humanitarian in character and undermines in no way other mechanisms of assistance in natural and other disasters.[22] The Center was most efficient in helping and saving citizens in the 2014 floods affecting Obrenovac.

In the summer of 2015 yet another "humanitarian" arrived to Serbia: Yevgeny Primakov, the grandson and namesake of the former Russian premier, opened a branch of his Russian Humanitarian Mission /RHM/ in Belgrade. He was received (and blessed) by Serb Patriarch Irinej. "With the blessing from two patriarchs – of the Serb and the Russian churches – RHM will be helping the threatened citizens in South Serbia," he said on the occasion.[23]

In the lengthy interview with Serbia's highest-circulation daily, Primakov said that RHM project was among the latest blessed by his grandfather who, he explained, "fully understood the significance of soft power, especially for a country such as Russia." "This was exactly what granddad saw as RHM role…He used to recommend regions where to start with the mission. He said, 'It is most important to operate in the Balkans, it is most important to work in Serbia.'"[24]

RHM's actual work in Serbia is still an unknown.[25] So far the organization has just once assisted the refugees from the Middle East in Preševo.

THE "EQUIDISTANCE" POLICY

Serbia's leadership has reached a consensus on the "equidistance" policy for Brussels and Moscow – implying the movement towards EU on the one hand, and good relations with Kremlin on the other. The President, the Premier and the Foreign Minister have been referring to it in the same way in all their public addresses.

However, in 2014 all of a sudden creaks appeared in Kremlin's attitude towards Serbia's leadership. Evidently, President Nikolić's keeps in touch with Russian President Putin by far more intensively than "Serbia's No. 1," Premier Vučić. The Russian media – under Putin's control – have been most critical about Vučić, actually critical without precedent so far. Though formally prompted by Moscow's grudge against the Serbian Premier's cooperation with Tony Blair, the British former prime minister, many though that the real motive for this criticism in the media was Vučić's steady communication with the US, especially Vice-President Joseph Biden.[26]

20 Večernje novosti, October 2, 2015.

21 According to the Washington Center for Strategic and International Studies, Moscow was after establishing its base there.

22 For instance, this includes the European Mechanism of Civilian Protection Serbia is supposed to join in the process of its accession to EU. .

23 Politika, July 29, 2015.

24 Ibid.

25 Danas, July 31, 2015

26 „Moscow dreads that Belgrade is taking a U-turn to the West, and what motivated this assault in the media

According to some papers quoting diplomatic sources, Biden told Vučić, during the latter visit to the States, that he was aware of "he has been getting on Russians' nerves very much."[27]

There is no telling whether or not this is true. Also, one cannot say for sure, who it is Russian commentators have in mind when claiming that "Russian presence in Serbia is being opposed from a very high level."[28]

Back in April Russia's Premier Dmitry Medvedev invited officially Serbia's Premier to Moscow. Journalists enquiring the Premier's Office about the visit's timing were told it "was not scheduled for this year."[29] Things changed in August 2015: the Office released that the Premier would pay an official visit to Moscow in October.

The EU criteria for candidate-countries are growingly perceived in Serbia as blackmailing and sealing the Balkans off. This is why many take that Russia, no matter how far away it is and without a well-planned concept of alliance, is much closer to Serbia than EU.[30]

CONCLUSION

Russia's soft power has not yet reached the level wherefrom it could dominate Western mechanisms with long tradition. Besides, Russia has not yet clearly defined its foreign policy, acting mostly by impulse from the outside rather than by its own initiatives. It is mostly focused on gaining prestige in East-West maneuvering.

One should expect Russia's soft power to grow stronger and stronger, and much better planned. In the absence of the West's presence it might found a bigger echo among citizens of Serbia.

The incumbent regime's inability to pursue with necessary reforms will be more and more playing into the hands of Russia. Serb Progressive Party /SNS/ will most probably split along this line.

European values should be promoted more and with more imagination the more so since they protect interests of each and every individual. The issue here is not about the side Serbia might take but about the necessity of political and other reforms ensuring a stable and prosperous society.

were agreements reached the Premier and the US Vice-President on American gas supplies to Serbia." Blic, February 23, 2015.

27 Danas, September 19-20, 2015.

28 Nedeljnik, September 2015.

29 Danas, June 15, 2015.

30 Pečat, December 21, 2014.