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# Moscow's Public Diplomacy and Russophilia in Serbia 2012–2019

## *Abstract*

Russophilia in Serbia is hardly a new phenomenon. However, its apparent upsurge over the recent years made it a hot topic among political scientists and enthusiasts alike. This paper is going to attempt to identify a range of pro-Russian public diplomacy activities in Serbia, its agents and the actors behind them. Our main task is to determine whether Moscow is in fact the principal catalyst of the aforementioned phenomenon or if there are other major factors at play. In order to give our analysis a theoretical grounding we shall use Joseph Nye's and Nicholas Cull's conceptual framework.

## *Key words*

Russophilia, Russia, Serbia, public diplomacy, soft power, memory politics

## INTRODUCTION

Russia and Serbia in their various incarnations have a long history of amicable yet complex relations which can be traced all the way back to the High Middle Ages. However, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, following the ousting of Slobodan Milošević and departure of the Russian peacekeepers, Serbia gradually began turning west. President Boris Tadić went on to sign a number of agreements with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and it seemed as if Moscow had lost all of its influence.

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However, it was the Kosovo question that restored Russia's relevance in the political domain among Serbia's government elites, as well as its attractiveness to much of the country's population who still viewed Kosovo as *srce Srbije* ('the heart of Serbia'). As most Western states came to support Kosovo's secession Moscow made its return as Serbia's main defender, which pushed Belgrade closer towards Moscow (while not necessarily turning away from the Washington and Brussels). Thus the Serbian government elites would continue cooperation with NATO and EU, while pursuing pro-Russian rhetoric in the public domain to win over the domestic audience. Hence, in March 2011 Tadić courted Vladimir Putin in Belgrade like the guest of honour, with Serbia's Patriarch Irinej bestowing upon Mr Putin the highest award of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), St Sava Order of the First Degree, at the landmark St Sava Cathedral and tens of thousands of Serbian football fans cheering for their Russian hero at the Marakana stadium.

Being openly pro-Russian once again became a trend among the Serbia's ruling elites, soon picked up by Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić. As for the pro-Russian sentiments among the general public, hardly a new phenomenon in the Serbian society, they seemed to have soared over the next few years. Soon enough various NGOs and liberal enthusiasts of all sorts rushed to point in the direction of the Kremlin and blame 'Putin's orchestra' of public diplomacy agents for 'Putinisation' of Serbia.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Others, on the other hand, struggled to see any Russian presence in that respect<sup>5</sup> and inferred that pro-Russian attitudes in Serbia have hardly anything to do with external influence.<sup>6</sup>

How much of this Russophilia upsurge can really be attributed to a Moscow-led public diplomacy (PD) offensive? Has the Kremlin had a consistent and efficient strategy in this respect or are there other factors involved? In order to answer these questions we are going to embark upon identifying a wide range of PD agents and activities at play in Serbia between 2012 and 2019.

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<sup>1</sup> "Eyes Wide Shut", CEAS, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Jelena Milić, "Russification of Serbia". *New Eastern Europe*, Sept–Oct, 2014, pp. 94–102.

<sup>3</sup> Marta Szpala, "Russia in Serbia: soft power and hard interests", OSW, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> "Putin's Orchestra in Belgrade". RFE/RL, 18<sup>th</sup> September 2017.

<sup>5</sup> "Serbian ambassador calls for more Russian 'soft power' in the Balkans", TASS, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Siniša Atlagić, "K voprosu ob imidzhe Rossii zarubezhom". *Filosofskiy zhurnal*, 8/1, 2015, pp. 106–119.

## PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

First of all, let us outline our conceptual and theoretical base as to ensure validity of our analysis. We shall think of 'power' as the 'ability to affect the behaviour of others to get what one wants'.<sup>7</sup> According to Joseph Nye this can be done by mobilising power resources via soft power (SP) behaviours (attraction, persuasion and agenda-framing) and hard power (HP) behaviours (coercion, threats, payments and sanctions).<sup>8,9</sup> When it comes to power resources, while some of them (military resources and economic resources) are often associated with HP and others (culture, values and policies) with SP, they nevertheless can be used freely with any of the behaviours.<sup>10,11</sup>

When it comes to SP, in particular, there are two conversion models. In the direct model (classic diplomacy) the activity is aimed directly at the target state's elites. In the indirect model (public diplomacy) the activity is aimed at the public as to cultivate favourable attitudes among them, thus creating an enabling environment for the target state's elites to make a decision in favour of the power actor state (i.e. the outcome).<sup>12</sup>

PD ACTIVITY > FAVOURABLE ATTITUDES  
> BEHAVIOURAL OUTCOME

What must be noted is that power, whether soft or hard, can only be judged *ex-post* (by the outcomes).<sup>13</sup> Hence, what we are looking to gauge in our research is the causal relationship between various PD activities and favourable attitudes among the public – i.e. the attractiveness of the aforementioned activities, which is not to be mistaken for attraction (SP behaviour) or manifestation of power (behavioural outcome). PD activities can be found via

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Nye, "Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power", *ANNALS/AAPSS*, 616, 2009, p. 160.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Nye, *Future of Power*. Washington: Public Affairs, 2011, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Nye, "Soft Power". In: Cooper, Andrew, Heine, Jorge, Thakur, Rajjeev, (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Nye, *Future of Power*, op. cit., pp. 91–93.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Nye, "Soft Power". In: Cooper, Andrew, Heine, Jorge, Thakur, Rajjeev, (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Nye, *Future of Power*, op. cit., pp. 95 & 102–3.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Nye, "Soft Power". In: Cooper, Andrew, Heine, Jorge, Thakur, Rajjeev, (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, op. cit., pp. 2–3.

various data collection techniques while their attractiveness (or attitudes) can be assessed through polls or focus groups.<sup>14</sup>

Nicholas Cull's works provide for the most comprehensive PD framework (that fits in well with that of Nye's with a few adjustments). It consists of five main components – listening; advocacy; cultural diplomacy; exchange diplomacy; and international broadcasting; and two additional components – 'PD by deed' and 'ideas-based PD'.<sup>15</sup>

### *Gauging attraction*

The existing opinion polls that deal with Serbian public opinion in relation to Russia, as well as the EU and US/NATO, can be separated into two groups. The first are bi-annual public opinion reports published by the Ministry of European Integration of the Republic of Serbia. The polls in these reports measure not only pro- and anti-European orientation of the Serbian public, but also which countries are believed to be top grant donors and which are considered to be ideal models for Serbia. The second group of opinion polls come from Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS) and Centre for Free Elections & Democracy (CESiD). They are far less frequent and are not without discrepancies, but they have nevertheless been useful for our research. 'European Union, Russia and the United States in the eyes of Serbian citizens' (aged 18-35) was a CEAS report published in February 2016. 'Euro-Atlantic Integration and Dialogue between Belgrade and Priština' was a joint effort between CEAS and CESiD and was published in November 2018. All of the above feature Serbian public opinion on Russia and its various aspects, which is very helpful for our task.

While the secondary data – opinion polls, official documents, media reports and analytical literature – certainly provided us with a good amount of contextual knowledge, it nevertheless had to be verified and complemented with some primary research data. Thus, the researcher spent 8 months in Serbia, living in Belgrade, learning Serbian and travelling across the Republic of Serbia (as well as to Moscow), making observations, attending Russian-themed and Russian-organised events and speaking to people potentially involved in Russian SP mechanisms. All of the above shall be cited as 'personal communication' and 'personal observation'.

Moreover, the researcher designed a structured questionnaire and held a series of pen and pencil interviews (PAPI) with a random sample of 30 uni-

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Nye, "Public Diplomacy & Soft Power", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 4, 2008, p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories", *ANNALS/AAPSS*, 616, 2016, pp. 32–36, 49.

versity students aged 18-35 interviewed in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš. The purpose of this poll was to examine causation between each PD agent/activity and its ability to generate attraction. All of those polled have been asked two questions in regards to every agent: *Da li ste upoznati sa \_\_\_ i njihovim aktivnostima?* (Are you familiar with \_\_\_ and their activities?) and *Da li smatrate da su interesantne za Vas?* (Do you find them appealing?) Seeing as the sample is fairly small this poll shall merely be used as a point of reference and to support other data.

### *Listening*

Let us consider the first PD component. Moscow's listening system usually works as follows. Local *Rossotrudnichestvo* branch collects and collates data in regards to cultural needs of the country (e.g. the extent of interest for the Russian language), it then passes that information onto another institution in Moscow to process this information (e.g. A.S. Pushkin Russian Language Institute), which then passes it on to another institution (e.g. Russian World) to respond to the demand. Nikita Bondarev concludes that stretching out one PD activity between three different bureaucracies renders Russia's listening system inefficient.<sup>16</sup> A member of *Rossotrudnichestvo*'s Serbian branch whose identity shall be kept anonymous has admitted the existence of some sort of a data collection mechanism which does not, however, involve any polling of the public by a Russian institution.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the Serbian branch of Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS), which was opened in Belgrade in October 2013, would seem to be the most likely institution for carrying out public opinion polls. However, 'Putin's Institute for the expansion of soft power' – as hailed by CEAS<sup>18</sup> – was shut down in 2016. None of those polled had ever heard of RISS. All in all, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that Moscow has a coherent strategy for collecting and collating data on public opinion in place in Serbia.

### *Advocacy*

In terms of advocacy, Aleksandr Chepurin – the Russian ambassador to Serbia during our period of analysis (2012 to 2019) – maintained a relative degree of public presence through meetings with members of Serbia's political elite and the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as interviews to Sputnik and Serbian

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<sup>16</sup> Nikita Bondarev, "Rossiya na Balkanah hodit kak lunatik", *Kreativnaya Diplomatiya*, 13<sup>th</sup> August 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> "Eyes Wide Shut", CEAS, 2016, p. 55.

media (RTS, TanJug, Pečat etc.) However, his engagement with general public was rather passive in contrast with his predecessor Aleksandr Konuzin who was well known and respected among both the Serbians and the Russian diaspora.<sup>19</sup> Konuzin was very pro-active, going everywhere where he was invited and even taking initiative to go places he was not invited (e.g. 2011 Belgrade Security Forum) to promote Russian and Serbian interests as he saw them. He gave lectures at universities across Serbia and engaged with both Serbian civil society and Russian diaspora, creating a network of Compatriots that involved people from all walks of life, including young professionals and intelligentsia. Chepurin, on the other hand, primarily kept his public engagement limited to high-profile events, disengaged from development of the compatriots network (only inviting a small fraction of its more convenient representatives – primarily middle-aged and elderly women of ambiguous social standing – to infrequent symbolic tea parties), ignored invitations from the Centre for Russian Studies at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, and was virtually unknown to the Serbian public until the new wave of violence in Kosovo in May 2019 when he became very vocal a couple of months before being replaced by Aleksandr Botsan-Kharchenko. However, there have also been numerous visits by top Russian officials, the likes of Sergei Lavrov, Sergei Shoigu and Valentina Matviyenko, as well as Vladimir Putin himself, during which they promoted certain ideas and policies. These visits always received wide media coverage and met with much excitement by the general public.

The results of our poll have shown that out of all the Russian state officials who made public appearances in Serbia in the last seven years, those of Putin were found appealing by the overwhelming majority (77%), followed by Lavrov (53%) and Shoigu (36%), with Chepurin at the very bottom with only 3%. This comes as no surprise taking into account popularity of the former three and Chepurin's distant and limited engagement with the public in spite of being based in Serbia. All in all, Russia's advocacy efforts in Serbia have been insignificant.

### *Cultural diplomacy*

Cultural diplomacy appears to be the main component of Russia's PD toolkit in Serbia, at the centre of which is the Russian Centre of Science and Culture, better known as *Ruski Dom*. Established in 1933 by White Russian emigres and taken over by Kremlin authorities after the Second World War it has been one of Belgrade's cultural venues and it remains such to this day. Run by *Rossotrudnichestvo*, it hosts art exhibitions, book presentations, film screenings, classical music and folk dance performances and other symbolic cul-

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<sup>19</sup> Personal communication, 2019.

tural events, all of which engage and attract (predominantly middle-aged and elderly) members of the Serbian public and Russian diaspora.<sup>20</sup> However, Russia's cultural diplomacy efforts are less felt outside of Belgrade. Even *Ruski Mir's* Russian Centre in Novi Sad, in spite of its prized location on the premises of the Zmaj Jovanović Gymnasium in the highest Russian-populated region in the country, only holds infrequent events and is rarely ever open.

Speaking of the key cultural themes being promoted in Serbia to cultivate pro-Russian attitudes among the public, they primarily focus on the narrative of the historical relationship between the two countries that has been based on mutual respect and reciprocity. One of the main narratives being promoted is that of Emperor Nicholas II defending Serbia in 1914. In fact, ever since being unveiled in October 2014, his statue has been a prominent place of pilgrimage for many Serbs from all over the country who come to pay respect by praying and laying flowers at the pedestal.<sup>21</sup> One can also find two icons of Emperor Nicholas and his family inside the landmark St Sava Church. Narratives based around Tsarist and Imperial Russia is an easy sell in Serbia, but Soviet Russia also has a few narratives to offer. The main one is that of the Red Army's liberation of Belgrade in 1944, which is strongly emphasised during the events dedicated to the Second World War. Another more recent historic narrative is what is collectively referred to as the 'NATO aggression', as well as Russia's desperate attempts against all odds to defend Yugoslavia in 1999, which became more relevant than ever in the run-up to the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NATO bombing.

However, as various Russian state agencies cling on to historic narratives and high culture, Russian mass culture presence has been neglected for a long time. As revealed in a 2016 poll, most of young Serbs' favourite cars, actors, singers, athletes, fashion designers, writers, films and TV series come from the EU and US, while Russia's pop culture is far less popular in Serbia.<sup>22</sup> This is most likely due to the fact that the Serbian entertainment market is dominated by American and European, as well as Balkan products (including Turkish soap operas) with Russian mass culture products having almost zero presence in the Serbian media. However, there have been recent attempts to change that. For instance, 'T-34', a Russian feature film about WW2, and 'The Balkan Line', a high-budget action film featuring popular Russian and Serbian actors presenting the other side of the story on the Yugoslav wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, made it to the Serbian cinemas in early 2019. While both state-fund-

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<sup>20</sup> Personal observation, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> „Evropska unija, Rusija i Sjedinjene Američke Države u očima građana Srbije: Predstave i preferencije građana Srbije od 19 do 35 godina“, CEAS, 2016. str. 8–10.

ed films were made primarily for the Russian market, they certainly were well suited to promote Russian historical narratives in Serbia. The latter was seen by over 50,000 people in the first five days and received much praise from the public.<sup>23 24</sup> Other Russian mass culture products introduced to Serbia over the past few years include *Maša i Medved* ('Masha and the Bear'), one of the most successful Russian PD projects worldwide, which has been shown on RTS 2 since May 2016 and the two characters can be seen on giant billboards in Novi Sad, in toy stores of Belgrade and on TV screens across Serbia. *Kuhinja* – a Russian sitcom about a restaurant – is another Russian mass culture product that made it to Serbian TV screens and is shown on the O2 channel. However, these types of examples are rare.

Other aspects of culture being transmitted from Russia to Serbia are education, and as of recently, science and technology. For instance, Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation has been engaged in a practice of sending their best students as guest lecturers to schools and universities across Serbia.<sup>25</sup> However, historical narratives remain at the core of Russia's cultural diplomacy in the country and, as pointed out by Nikita Bondarev, it is often this 'historic Russia' that works as a source of attraction among Serbians as opposed to contemporary Russia that they know very little about.<sup>26</sup>

Out of those polled 46% have heard of *Ruski Dom* and only 13% find their events appealing. Many of those who were not impressed by *Ruski Dom's* repertoire added that while they consider themselves to be pro-Russian and are aware of Russia's historic support of Serbia the events offered are not appealing to them as young people and they prefer more modern themes offered by the likes of the American and Japanese embassies. When it comes to *Ruski Centar* in Novi Sad none of those polled had ever heard of it. On the other hand, Russian mass culture projects have scored higher points with the widely advertised 'Balkan Line' at the very top, having been watched by 73% and majority of them having enjoyed the film. It seems that Russia's commercial mass culture projects have more potential as opposed to the more traditional cultural diplomacy activities promoted by *Rosstrudnichestvo*. However, such projects appear in Serbia sporadically and cannot be relied upon unless they become more systematic.

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<sup>23</sup> „Balkansku među za pet dana videlo više od 50.000 gledalaca“, N2, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> „Balkanska međa privukla hiljade gledalaca u Srbiji i Rusiji“, RTRS, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Personal observation, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, Yale: Yale University Press, 2017, p. 242.

### *Exchange diplomacy*

While this has never been one of Russia's strongest PD components there have been attempts to up the effort in this area. For instance, Russia's Ministry of Education and Science and *Rossotrudnichestvo* offer students from Serbian schools and universities exchange programs along with scholarships. Moreover, *Rossotrudnichestvo*, *Rosmolodezh* (Russian agency in charge of youth policy), Gorchakov Fund and other governmental agencies and organisations have done well by engaging young, socially active and politically enthusiastic Serbians in their rapidly-developing youth networks. However, in general, one must state that there is a lot of competition when it comes to exchange programmes as France's *Alliance Française*, Germany's *Goethe Institut* and Spain's *Institut Cervantes* are all fairly active in Serbia and are well known, not to mention US that has a range of programs to cultivate and nourish potential members of the pro-NATO elite. Out of those polled only 20% have heard of *Rossotrudnichestvo* and, while all of those found their programs appealing, this is a fairly low number considering that most of those polled were potentially the main target group for this type of engagement. It is fair to say that Russia's exchange diplomacy in Serbia is at a very low level and generates very little attraction.

### *International broadcasting*

Onto the international broadcasting component, Russia's main media outlet in Serbia is *Sputnik Srbija* – a radio station/online news portal/YouTube channel that has been running since February 2015. Sputnik Serbia covers a wide range of news presenting the Russian perspective to its Serbian-speaking audience, also utilising social media (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram). Nevertheless, it trails far behind the top news media the likes of *Kurir* and *Blic*, and even the CNN-affiliated N1.<sup>27</sup> Taking into account that the most popular source of information in Serbia is still television, with an average Serbian viewer spending 315 minutes per day in front of the TV set,<sup>28</sup> the absence of a TV channel makes Sputnik less competitive as it loses its potential audiences to the likes of Al Jazeera and N1. The latter is owned by the United Group which also owns Total TV – a TV platform with N1 pre-programmed as the first channel on the list – and SBB – Serbia's leading internet provider. During their recent visit to Belgrade University Sputnik's Oleg Dmitriev explained that television is not their format and RT's Managing Director Alexei Nikolov stated that RT would not be able to secure funding for a Serbian language

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<sup>27</sup> "Domains (Generated graphs)", Gemius, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> "Serbia: Television", Media Landscapes, 2019.

channel.<sup>29</sup> There have been attempts by Konstantin Malofeyev and other Russian individuals to purchase a TV station in Serbia, but they have not been facilitated by the Serbian side.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, there is a monthly newspaper supplement from *Rossiya Segodnya's* Russia Beyond (former RBTH), but it is no longer distributed by *Politika* and *Geopolitika*, and only comes out once a month with *Nedeljnik*. Taking into account that newspaper readership is facing a rapid decline in Serbia where only one out of ten people gets their information from the press,<sup>31</sup> the reach of these supplements is relatively low. While there is a Russia Beyond website in Serbian its reach is also very low.<sup>32</sup> Our opinion poll has confirmed our research findings. Out of those polled only 27% found Sputnik Serbia appealing and no one had ever heard of Russia Beyond. All of the above suggests that Russia's international broadcasting efforts in Serbia have also been miniscule.

### *PD-by-deed*

Humanitarian work of the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre (RSHC) and Russian Humanitarian Mission (RHM) in Serbia and beyond can certainly be classed as PD-by-deed. RSHC's rescue operation during the floods in May 2014 in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina involved evacuation of 2,000 people and delivery of 140 tonnes of aid<sup>33</sup> and RHM has done well to engage Serbs in Republika Srpska and Kosovo province, reinforcing the narrative of Russia as the patron of Serbs. These events always receive media coverage and generate attraction among the public. Gorchakov Fund is still providing funding and support to various grassroots initiatives – from film festivals (Balkan Creative Group's International Film Festival in Vranje) to youth conferences (Balkan Dialogue, Young Leaders Forum 2018) and other (mostly annual or one-off) events. Furthermore, *Ruski Ekspres* was another non-state agent that had generated some attraction for Russia in mid-2010s by bringing the Holy Fire from Jerusalem to Belgrade among other things. However, their website has not been updated since last year and they will not be active anytime soon due to financial difficulties.<sup>34</sup> Out of those polled 40% have heard of and approve of

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<sup>29</sup> Personal communication, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> "Serbia: Print", Media Landscapes, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> "Domains (Generated graphs)", Gemius, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Rossiysko-Serbskiy Gumanitarniy Tsentr, MCHS, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Personal communication, 2019.

the RSHC's work, while only 13% have heard of the RHM and only 7% heard of Gorchakov Fund and *Ruski Ekspres*.

One of the most important aspects of marketing is branding and one of the most recognised brands in Serbia is Gazprom. Ever since Gazprom Neft's acquisition of the controlling stake in NIS in 2008 their logo can be seen everywhere, from giant billboards in Belgrade and Novi Sad to information plaques in Emir Kusturica's ethno-village *Kustendorf*. Moreover, since 2010 Gazprom logo can be seen on all Crvena Zvezda football team merchandise. However, Gazprom Neft's biggest PD activity has been its investment into rejuvenation of St Sava Church, a widely publicised event which has contributed to Russia's image as a major donor to Serbia. This explains the fact that 60% of those polled recognised Gazprom's activities in Serbia in a positive light. Another corporate PD actor is Russian Railways (RZD), which has been developing Serbia's railway network. However, in spite of its advert displayed on the billboard opposite the iconic Hotel Moskva it is less known with only 20% of those polled recognising the brand.

Possibly the oldest PD actor in Serbia is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). It is no surprise, given that 84.6% of Serbia's population identify as Orthodox Christians.<sup>35</sup> Patriarch of Russia Alexei has the ultimate moral authority in Serbia and is able to generate attraction for Russia by juxtaposing the Orthodox Christian norms and 'traditional values', which resonate with the bulk of Serbia's conservative population – against the Western values, which are automatically less attractive as they are foreign in contrast with the former.<sup>36</sup> This is confirmed by our poll whereby all of those polled were familiar with the ROC and out of them 80% found their activities appealing. This ideological dichotomy based on cultural similarities, which places Russia and Serbia to the one side and the West to the other side of the discursive moral line, is the perfect formula which makes way for other Russian PD agents. As put by Nikola Vrzić of Sputnik Serbia and *Pečat*: 'It's not foreign meddling. We don't feel the Russian perspective is foreign... When you have a Western perspective, that's foreign meddling'.<sup>37</sup>

As for the Russian diaspora associations, most of them consist of a handful of people, generally middle-aged and elderly women of ambiguous social standing.<sup>38</sup> While they are united under the Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots and are meant to be supported by *Rosstrudnichestvo*, their

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<sup>35</sup> "U Srbiji 84,6 odsto pravoslavaca", RTS, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> "Russia's low-cost influence strategy finds success in Serbia", Washington Post, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2018.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Personal observation, 2019.

activities are generally limited to infrequent events and one or two committee meetings per year, which usually involve discussing trivial topics and drinking tea.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, as of January 2019 Russians have been officially recognised as a national minority in Serbia. However, the Russian national minority council that was formed in November 2018 has not been functioning as intended (this may be down to the fact that it is in reality dominated by Serbs who do not speak Russian, one of whom was previously a member of the Roma national minority council).<sup>40</sup> Most of the Russian diaspora associations' representatives are not visible in the Serbian society and have not made any sizeable impact in terms of generating pro-Russian atmosphere. It is therefore not surprising that none of those polled had ever heard of them.

Finally, Kremlin's policies and initiatives – from the 2014 Crimean gambit to its on-going support for Belgrade in regards to the Kosovo issue and the Srebrenica tragedy – have been another major source of pro-Russian attitudes during our period of interest. This is confirmed by our poll whereby 80% of those polled found a source of attraction in the Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Moreover, 77% of those polled have found the Russian military appealing, which can be explained by recent military technology 'gifts', joint military exercises, as well as Russia's military successes not only in the Crimean operation but also in Syria. When it comes to Russia's foreign policy and military, their attraction is so high that, according to the CEAS poll, 78% were in favour of Serbia supporting Russia's foreign policy and most of them were keen to have Russian military bases in Serbia.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, in another poll the support of Russia in international relations was considered relevant by 89% of those polled while only 67% recognised relevance of the US.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, the polls reveal that majority of Serbians have a negative opinion of NATO due to the bombing campaign of 1999.<sup>43</sup>

In fact, the 'overall impression' of Russia among the Serbian public has been generally higher than that of the EU,<sup>44</sup> with the US once again at the very bottom, and its ups and downs can be seen coinciding with various open manifestations of Moscow's policies. A significant rise can be observed

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<sup>39</sup> Personal communication, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> „Evropska unija, Rusija i Sjedinjene Američke Države u očima građana Srbije: Predstave i preferencije građana Srbije od 19 do 35 godina”, nav. delo, str. 34.

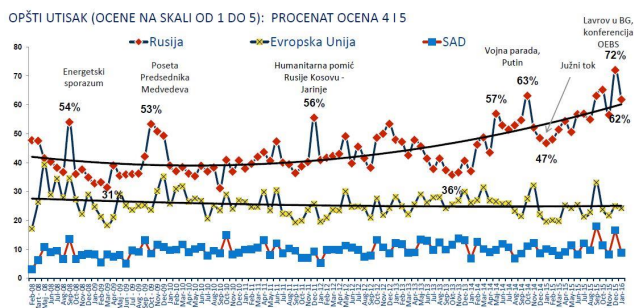
<sup>42</sup> “Public Opinion Poll: Euro-Atlantic Integration and Dialogue Between Belgrade and Pristina”, CESiD & CEAS, 2018, p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5–8.

<sup>44</sup> „Evropska unija, Rusija i Sjedinjene Američke Države u očima građana Srbije: Predstave i preferencije građana Srbije od 19 do 35 godina”, nav. delo, str. 5.

throughout 2014, which can be explained by South Stream, Military Technical Cooperation Agreement (MTCA), Putin's visit and the Crimean gambit (as the first major jump can be seen after April 2014). The subsequent drop can once again be explained by the South Stream fiasco. The next significant jump can be observed after July 2015, which can be explained by Russia's veto of the Srebrenica genocide resolution at the UN and the next leap up to the peak of 72% is suggested to be Sergei Lavrov's visit to Belgrade for an Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe conference, at which he once again mentioned the 'NATO aggression against Yugoslavia' and the 'Kosovo tragedy'.<sup>45</sup>

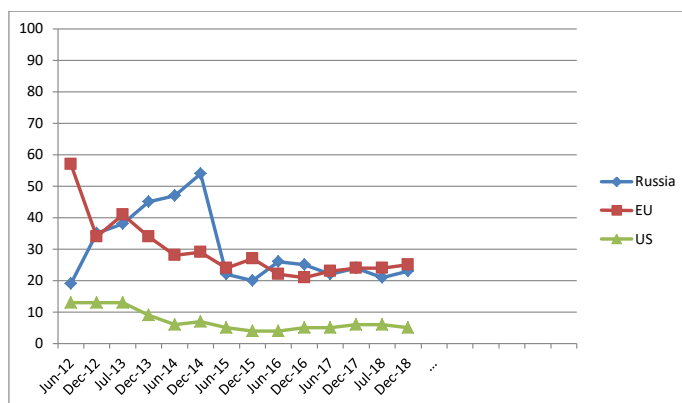
Chart 1. General impression<sup>46</sup>



A similar pattern can be observed in regards to the perception of Russia as Serbia's donor began to rise from June 2012 until it reached its peak in December 2014, rising above the EU, with the US at the very bottom. This pattern may be explained by Russia providing \$800 m state export credit for modernisation of Serbia's railway system (January 2013), \$500 m loan for balancing Serbia's economy (April 2013), Strategic Partnership Declaration (May 2013), opening of RISS (October 2013), Military Cooperation Agreement (November 2013), Putin's visit and MTCA (October 2014), as well as all of the South Stream-related euphoria. And it was in December 2014 when the South Stream project was cancelled, which may explain the subsequent drop to the same level as the EU.

<sup>45</sup> "Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's remarks at the 22<sup>nd</sup> OSCE Ministerial Council", Rusemb, 2015, p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> „Evropska unija, Rusija i Sjedinjene Američke Države u očima građana Srbije: Predstave i preferencije građana Srbije od 19 do 35 godina”, nav. delo, str. 34.

Chart 2. Top donors to Serbia<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, when it comes to governance models for Serbia, Russia also has a high appeal, generally coming in the top three alongside Switzerland and Germany, with the US at the very bottom.<sup>48</sup> However, Russia generally scores below EU and US when it comes to the standard of living and quality of life.<sup>49,50</sup> As a result, Russia also loses out to the US as a potential destination for relocation.<sup>51</sup> This can be explained by the fact that while many Serbians admire Russia and dislike the US as the chief NATO state, the economic reality, the Euro-integration process underway, geographic proximity of the EU and predominance of the English language over Russian have resulted in pragmatism over ideology. In addition to this, Russia also trails behind the EU and US when it comes to freedom of media, freedom of speech and criticism of authority,<sup>52</sup> all of which have been central themes in the recent nationwide anti-government demonstrations.

<sup>47</sup> „Evropska orijentacija građana Srbije: Ispitivanje javnog mnjenja (decembar 2019. godine)”, Ministarstvo za evropske orijentacije, 2018.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> „Evropska unija, Rusija i Sjedinjene Američke Države u očima građana Srbije: Predstave i preferencije građana Srbije od 19 do 35 godina”, nav. delo, str. 17.

<sup>50</sup> “Public Opinion Poll: Euro-Atlantic Integration and Dialogue Between Belgrade and Pristina”, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> „Evropska unija, Rusija i Sjedinjene Američke Države u očima građana Srbije: Predstave i preferencije građana Srbije od 19 do 35 godina”, nav. delo, str. 14.

<sup>52</sup> „Evropska unija, Rusija i Sjedinjene Američke Države u očima građana Srbije: Predstave i preferencije građana Srbije od 19 do 35 godina”, nav. delo, str. 21.

### *Ideas-based PD*

Speaking of brands, Vladimir Putin is the ultimate brand in Serbia – his images can be seen everywhere from newspapers in kiosks to mugs and t-shirts in souvenir shops to walls in corporate offices. As explained by Dragan Vučićević, the owner of the country's leading tabloid, *Informer*: 'Our usual daily circulation is 120,000... When I have Putin calendars, we sell 250,000... If I had put Catherine Ashton or Juncker on calendar, I don't think I would sell even 12 copies'.<sup>53</sup> This is a perfect example of what Nicholas Cull has referred to as ideas-based PD whereby 'an idea, once cut free from its point of origin, is passed along peer-to-peer networks and reproduced in the traditional media'.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, much like in cross-selling, Putin becomes associated with Russia and vice versa, and one sells the other. Politically-minded citizens create Putin memes and pass them along through social media, while business-minded citizens name their vodka after Putin and sell merchandise with his image and Russia-related imagery. It is a mixture of selfless ideology and self-serving pragmatism, and all of this is happening without any intentional input from the Russian side and is the best type of PD today.

Many Serbian politicians also take part in this ideas-based PD model. In fact, the unique feature of Serbia's current political scene is that many politicians compete with each other in pro-Russian rhetoric and race to take a photograph with Vladimir Putin or his associates at every opportunity. However, this is done first and foremost to attract the conservative general public – bulk of the electorate. Hence, most of them rather feed off the attraction for Russia more than they generate it, but that is not to say that the latter does not occur. For instance, it can be observed that Russia scores roughly the same as the US as a destination for work and education,<sup>55</sup> which can be explained by a variety of factors such as Russian politicians always being met by the highest-ranking politicians on their visits to Serbia and Vučić's own daughter studying at the Russian Embassy's school, among other things.

However, speaking of the 'pro-Russian' political parties, only the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) can be considered a somewhat significant force since the 2016 parliamentary elections which has occasionally lobbied initiatives that would be of some benefit to Russia (e.g. joining the Collective Security Treaty Organisation). Dveri's political future and credibility among the public has been undermined by Boško Obradović's participation in the Alliance for Serbia alongside Dragan Đilas, as well as dubious reshuffling within his party.

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<sup>53</sup> "In Balkans, Britain rejoins battle for influence", Politico, 30<sup>th</sup> March 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Nicholas Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories", op. cit., p. 49.

<sup>55</sup> „Evropska unija, Rusija i Sjedinjene Američke Države u očima građana Srbije: Predstave i preferencije građana Srbije od 19 do 35 godina”, nav. delo, str. 12.

As for the ‘Russian’ parties making an allusion to association with Russia in one way or another, most of them are simply using the pro-Russian sentiment prevalent among the general public in an attempt to gain political power and do not have any real influence (one of them used to be a dating agency).

Top officials of the ruling Progressive Party of Serbia (SNS), which dominates the parliament, have generally presented themselves as more or less pro-Russian. When Nikolić was the president he was always keen to give Sputnik his endorsement and would visit every major Russian event. *Ruski Dom* has always been frequented by the likes of SNS-friendly Nenad Popović and their 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert, which took place in November 2018 in one of Belgrade’s largest venues, Sava Centre, was opened by the Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. However, when it comes to the political reality SNS generally toes the neo-Titoist line of balance between Russia and the West and seldom allows for that balance to be significantly tipped over in favour of the former.

Having highlighted the role of ROC it is necessary to mention the SOC. No visit of a Russian official to Serbia (or any Russian-organised event) goes without meeting a representative of SOC. Widely publicised symbolic moments such as Patriarch Irinej’s endorsement of the Russian president, Russia and even Gazprom<sup>56</sup> have certainly contributed to creating a favourable environment taking into account his authority and credibility among the Orthodox Christian majority. On par with its Russian counterpart SOC has been one of the most consistent pro-Russian voices in Serbia. Speaking of those with authority among the Serbian public, one has to mention Russia-friendly voices among Serbia’s celebrities – the likes of director Emir Kusturica and actor Miloš Biković – who are happily promoting themes which coincide with the Russian narratives to their audiences. They often combine the aforementioned historical themes – especially NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, which they were both affected by – with the cultural dichotomy of ‘Russia + Serbia vs the West’. Both Kusturica and Biković appeal to a wide range of age groups. With the former recently named an advisor to the President of Republika Srpska and the latter having a major following among the younger segments of the public (1 million followers on Instagram alone), they both have a lot of potential for generating more pro-Russian attitudes in Serbia for years to come.

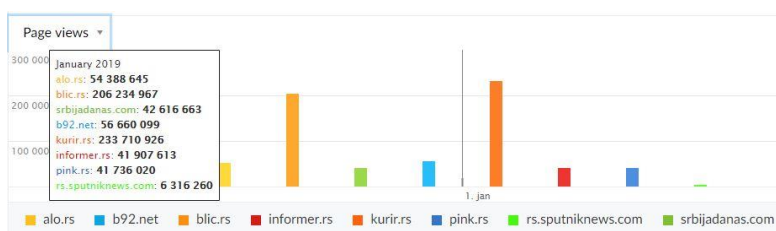
Moving on to once numerous local news portals, organisations and associations mentioned in the 2016 CEAS report (e.g. Centre for Strategic Alternatives; Facebookreporter; Resu.rs; Senica etc.), much like RISS and *Ruski Ekspres*, many of them either no longer exist or are semi-active, run on an ad-hoc basis due to the lack of financial funding. Many of these are commercial projects and survive off adverts, donations and/or enthusiasm. The most

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<sup>56</sup> Personal observation, 2019.

active are Srbin.info, Fakti, News-Front, Srpska.ru, Vostok.rs, Koreni.rs and IN4S (which is actually based in Montenegro). We have generated a chart for January 2019 showing the top five online news portals in Serbia (*Kurir*, *Blic*, *B92*, *Alo*, *Srbija Danas*) and the most popular Russian/pro-Russian websites as per CEAS report by page views (Chart 3). From this chart one can clearly see that only Pink and Informer can compete with the top news websites, the likes of *Kurir* and *Blic* (over 200 million views each), with Sputnik trailing far behind with only 6.3 million views. As for the rest of the Russian/pro-Russian news portals, they have not even made it into the top-100,<sup>57</sup> meaning that their reach is insignificant and hence so is any major potential in terms of generating pro-Russian attitudes.

Chart 3. Online news portals by page views in January 2019 <sup>58</sup>



As for Serbia's mainstream media, its role in the PD mechanism is merely that of the messenger – presenting Russia-related narratives to the audience. Serbian public discourse on Russia is generally dominated by *kategoričnost* (categorical thinking) and *pojednostavljanje* (simplification) and is manipulated by various parts of the elite with two ideologically opposing camps being the pro-Russian, to whom Russia is *zaštitnica* (defender), *stariji brat* (big brother) and *spas* (salvation), as per traditional Slavophile/Orthodox discourse, and anti-Russian, to whom Russia is *izvorište svih zla* (source of all evil), as per Western MSM discourse.<sup>59</sup> The discourse promoted by either side generally lacks rationality and is rather dominated by emotion – *primitivno neumestno rusofiljstvo* (primitive out-of-place Russophilia) or *primitivna arogantna ruso-*

<sup>57</sup> “Domains (Generated graphs)”, Gemius, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Jovanović, Miroslav, „Dve Rusije: o dva dominantna diskursa Rusije u srpskoj javnosti”. In: ISAC, *Treći izveštaj projekta praćenja rusko-srpskih odnosa*, ISAC, Belgrade, 2016, pp. 3 & 35–6.

*fobija* (primitive arrogant Russophobia).<sup>60</sup> While both sides are generally given voice in the media to argue their point of view on prime time talk shows, when it comes to news on the most popular TV channels such as RTS/RTV, Prva, Pink and O2, they have no interest in promoting Russia any more than the EU or US, and with N1 becoming more mainstream and American and European shows dominating over trace Russian media content, fairly soon the balance will start tipping in the pro-Western direction in the absence of a Russian TV station.

## CONCLUSION

All in all, Russia's PD mechanism in Serbia consists of various Moscow-directed and independent agents. There are indeed a number of Russian state institutions involved in the process, but their input has been rather low and their output even lower. There is no coherent Listening procedure in place. The Advocacy component went into a nearly-dormant state under Chepurin and had to mainly rely on occasional visits of officials from Moscow. Russia's Cultural diplomacy has been relying on the same old historical themes without offering anything new for the younger generations and Exchange diplomacy has also been fairly unremarkable. The absence of a Russian Serbian language TV channel is going to continue keeping Russia far behind its competitors in terms of the International broadcasting component.

PD-by-deed and ideas-based PD agents have proven to be more efficient than their traditional counterparts. Apart from RSHC and RHM, most of them are commercial and non-governmental (albeit often with ties to Kremlin), with ROC and Gazprom Neft-NIS being the most consistent. Utilisation of Russia-friendly personalities, the likes of Kusturica and Biković, and import of mass culture products such as 'The Balkan Line' and 'Masha and the Bear' have been the most innovative strand of Russia's PD. However, unless there is a constant flow of Russian mass culture products onto the Serbian entertainment market, which is currently dominated by American, European and Balkan products, Moscow will not be able to cultivate future generations of Serbians in the pro-Russian direction. Historical and religious narratives may work for the time being, but the emerging post-1999 generations may no longer be as recipient to the themes of 'NATO aggression' and 'Orthodox brotherhood'. After all, there are several nations which combine their Orthodox Christian traditions with pro-Western attitudes and NATO membership.

Moreover, Putin's foreign policy and military gifts, as well as his own persona, may have generated additional affinity among the Serbian public in the

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37–39.

recent years. Nevertheless, Putin is not going to live forever and Russia needs 'internal victories' (e.g. economic growth, increase in standard of living etc.) to make itself attractive in more concrete terms.<sup>61</sup>

All in all, Russian PD efforts in Serbia had reached their peak in 2016, but have since decreased as many of the organisations mentioned in the CEAS report have either been shut down (e.g. RISS) or become inactive/semi-active (*Ruski Ekspres*) due to lack of funding. Most important of all, the main themes and narratives relied upon are those of the past and there will be no progress in this area until Moscow finally decides to drop the old *matryoshkas* and *bala-laikas* approach for technological breakthroughs and other modern themes, as well as progress in more concrete domains as mentioned above. Taking into account the fact that Russia's current foreign policy is driven primarily by pragmatism and considerations of short-term gain it is unlikely that they will either reform or intensify their PD efforts anytime soon. Hence, while Russophilia is still widespread in Serbia in 2019, this may not be the case in 2039.

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## JAVNA DIPLOMATIJA MOSKVE I RUSOFILSTVO U SRBIJI 2012–2019.

### *Apstrakt*

Rusofilstvo u Srbiji nije nova pojava. Ipak, njegov prividan porast posljednjih godina postao je „vruća tema“ i među politolozima i među entuzijastima. U ovom radu autor nastoji da identifikuje niz proruskih aktivnosti javne diplomatije u Srbiji i njene glavne aktere. Glavni zadatak je da se utvrdi da li je Moskva zapravo glavni katalizator spomenutog fenomena ili postoje i drugi važni faktori. Da bismo svojoj analizi dali teorijsko utemeljenje poslužiće mo se konceptualnim okvirom Džozefa Naja i Nikolasa Kala.

### *Ključne reči*

Rusofilstvo, Rusija, Srbija, javna diplomatija, meka sila, politike pamćenja.