

An Eurasian option for the Balkans? Serbia and the Eurasian Economic Union

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This research paper will discuss relations between the Serbian decision to join the trade agreement with Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Russian soft power in Serbia. The focus will mainly be on Russian President Vladimir Putin, the former Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and the Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov. Moreover, part of the analysis will be the official statements of the former Russian ambassador in Belgrade Aleksandar Cepurin and the current Russian ambassador in Serbia Aleksandar Bocan-Harcenko. Therefore, the paper aims to analyze dominant political Russian discourses, strategic narratives, and speeches related to Serbia and find elements that could be part of soft power. I have chosen to write on this topic because recent geopolitical events (like the war between Russia and Ukraine) shape it, and it is relevant for the politics of EU enlargement and future relations in the triangle Russia-Serbia-European Union.

Hence, the work grapples with a central analytical question, such as “Why did Serbia decide to join the trade agreement with Eurasian Economic Union?”. In other words, I intend to dig into the question of how was Russian soft power contributed to and involved in this and how the Russian politicians were fostering economic integration between Serbia and the Eurasian Economic Union. The work will be divided into three parts. First, I would like to provide a short contextual framework with a conceptual and theoretical background. After that, the paper will look at the main features of the Russian soft power in Serbia in the months of negotiating economic cooperation and just before signing the agreement. In the last part of the paper, I want to present some high official Serbian statements regarding Russian

foreign policy towards Serbia, where we can see whether Russian soft power was welcome in Serbia or not. As a methodology tool, I will use the content analysis of speeches, interviews and author's texts in Serbian newspapers. I will use this qualitative method because it is appropriate for this kind of research question. The sources will be based on online articles of *Politika*, *Večernje novosti*, *RTS*, *Danas*, *Sputnik*, *N1* and *Srbija danas*. Due to the paper's length limitations, I will not deal with the broader time frame. From my perspective, 2012 was the critical year when Serbia got a new political nomenclature. It is another important question and can be the object of some future work. In this work, I will limit my analysis to 2019, when the agreement was signed.

Contextual framework

In October 2019, in Moscow, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić signed a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union countries (EAEU), led by the Russian Federation. This agreement expands the list of products from Serbia that can be exported to the EAEU duty-free territory. In addition to Russia, EAUE members are Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, with a market of 183.8 million people and a total GDP of 1.9 trillion US \$ (Komarčević 2019). The EAEU has so far signed free trade agreements with Iran, Vietnam, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Singapore, China, Ukraine, and Moldova while still negotiating similar agreements with Egypt, India and Israel. The Eurasian Economic Union was formally established in January 2015 on the idea of Russian President Vladimir Putin (N1 25.10.2019).

The negotiations have been ongoing since 2016 and intensified in early 2019. However, Serbia did not become a member of the Eurasian Economic Union by signing the agreement (*Večernje novosti* 25.10.2019). First, in January 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov were in Belgrade in the negotiating period. Then, in October, one week before the trade agreement signing, the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, was on an official visit to Serbia. These two months and two official events are the object analysis, where I would like to apply the

concept of soft power. In the empirical work, in this contextual framework, the concept of soft power will be taken as a category of practice, as a set of foreign politics pursued by Russia as an actor. Furthermore, the concept of soft power will be used to elaborate on Russian foreign policy towards Serbia (target audience). I would argue that Russian soft power implemented in the Serbian context was to achieve an objective. In my opinion, in 2019, a concrete Russian goal was to prepare the political and diplomatic background for economic integration with Serbia. This trade agreement does not have only economic impacts. In the symbolic sense, it confirms that Russia sees the Balkans and Serbia as their sphere of influence.

On the other side, Russia is for Serbian, the most crucial ally in the fighting for Kosovo. The Russian Federation does not recognize Kosovo as an independent country and always opposes Kosovo's membership in the UN and other international organizations. Likewise, Russia repeats that the NATO military action against Yugoslavia in 1999 was illegal because of the absence of approving the UN Security Council resolution. According to Russia, this aggression against a sovereign country represented a violation of international law. Still, Russia stands by UN resolution 1244, where Kosovo is part of Serbia. Thus, it is clear that after the Annexation of Crimea in 2014, Serbia did not impose economic sanctions against Russia as other countries in the EU have done. Therefore, both countries have their interests in close economic and political relations. It is essential to bear in mind that from 2012, when the Serbian Progressive Party and its President Aleksandar Vučić came to power, Russia had closer relations with Serbia. Namely, from 2012 until the end of 2019, the current Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić met Vladimir Putin seventeen times.

The conceptual and theoretical background

I will tackle the issue using Joseph Nye's soft power theory and approach Alexander Wendt's social constructivist theory from an international relations perspective. Namely, the concept of soft power was coined in 1990, at the end of the Cold War. In his first article, Joseph Nye, an American political scientist and professor at Harvard Univer-

sity, discusses the contemporary global political context. He starts the observation with words that the definition of power is losing military (which is costly and less transferable today) features (Nye 1990: 154). In the center of power analysis are not resources anymore but the ability to change other states' behavior and control the political environment. Here we can find the definition of soft power: «Co-optive power is the ability of a country to structure a situation so that other countries develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own» (Nye 1990: 168).

According to Nye, this kind of power is becoming more important because the great power states are less able to use their traditional power resources to obtain their goals. In this research paper, I will try to show how the highest Russian officials using soft power techniques acted in a specific context to influence the Serbian government's behavior. The Russian President, Prime Minister, Foreign Affairs Minister, and ambassadors in Belgrade were often present in the Serbian political environment, structuring a situation in which Serbia had to define their economic preferences and interests that would simultaneously be Russia's interests.

A new face of power, soft power, or co-optive power, is different from the hard power (ordering and commanding others what to do): «This power tends to arise from such resources as cultural and ideological attraction as well as rules and institutions of international regimes» (Nye 1990: 168). The author mentions a new, less coercive way in which states could get preferable outcomes. Shaping others' preferences with the help of attractive ideas represents a different strategy for the actors. The message is that we could miss the importance of transnational ideas if we, like the realist school, focus only on the hard power (Nye 1990: 170). In my work, I will focus on the cultural attraction and ideological attraction of the past as an alluring strategy to get preferable outcomes in soft power relations.

In the text from 2004, the American professor underscores: «Soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments» (Nye 2004: 256). On the other hand, hard power is related to military and economic might and represents the ability to coerce. Finally, Nye's article from 2011 (based on a book) emphasizes the intangible resources related to soft power like insti-

tutions, values, culture, ideas and legitimacy of policies. In contrary, hard power includes tangible things like money and force. In the definition of soft power, there is as well the influence on framing the agenda and persuasion (Nye 2011: 19).

Having considered the development of the soft power concept, represented in these three articles from 1990 and the revisions from 2004 and 2011, let us now move on to a category of practice and the question of how we can use it in practice. For this purpose, I would like to answer how values, identity, history, religion, mentality and culture embedded in Russian soft power can shape political implications in Serbia and frame, in this case, specific economic agenda. I will look at the application of soft power as a category of practice, that is to say, how soft power was used in the practical sense.

There are some opinions that Russia in the 21st century is trying to re-brand the branded in an international image. For instance, Greg Simons, a senior researcher at the Uppsala Centre of Russian Studies at the Uppsala University in Sweden, thinks that Russia has many cultural brands which help understand the country and its people. This attractive culture refers to the long and rich tradition in literature, arts and music (Simons 2011: 347). Similarly, Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, Professors of International Relations at the University of London, point out that countries use narratives strategically to allure target audiences. This strategy perfectly fits the soft power concept where narratives have significant soft power (Roselle/ Miskimmon/ O’Loughlin 2014: 74-75). According to the Professors, focusing on political actors, political communication, and the formation of strategic narratives, digging into text analysis and interviews makes it possible to understand political pressures, protagonists, situations, and ultimately soft power (Roselle/ Miskimmon/ O’Loughlin 2014: 78-79). Therefore, in my work, I will use as a method, analysis of texts, interviews and speeches.

In the empirical analysis, the work will use a relational social constructivists’ theoretical approach to power in studying Russia and Serbia’s cases. The same approach was described by Valentina Feklyunina, a Lecturer in Politics at the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle University. Here is an explanation of why the relational approach is efficient in locating soft power: «By studying resources, we cannot say much about differences between diver-

gent interpretations of the same actor by different audiences and their changes over time [...] we need to examine the ways in which different audiences “read” an actor». (Feklyunina 2016: 780). In other words, it would be crucial to see how Serbia reacts on Russian soft power.

In the social constructivist theory of international relations, Alexander Wendt, an American political scientist, develops the concept of “structure of identity and interest”. A fundamental principle of this theory is that people/states act toward others based on the meaning that the objects have for them. The distribution of power depends on the intersubjective understandings and expectations, on collective meanings that shape conceptions of self and other (identities)¹. So, in the whole story, identities are a psychological reality, social construction and basis of interests (Wendt 1992: 396-398). In the last part of the paper, I want to examine how Serbian officials as an audience look at the Russian actor in soft power relations. I would argue that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s figure is crucial for Russia and Serbia’s soft-power process. The reason to believe in this lies in the fact that he is extremely popular among Serbians. Also, Vladimir Putin as an actor in soft power relations with every new visit to Serbia over and over again, develops and empowers the common Russian-Serbian identity.

Russia is using the story about shared identity in relations with Serbia as a soft power mechanism. The story regarding the common interests of these countries is based on a recognized common identity. Valentina Feklyunina brings out the interconnection between common interests and identities: «If we accept this claim, we can expect that actor B’s interpretation of their interests is likely to be more compatible with actor A’s interests if there is a degree of compatibility between their socially constructed identities» (Feklyunina 2016: 777). Next, where can we observe the state’s interests? Overall, Feklyunina underscores that the official discourse is where the state’s interests could be reinterpreted (Feklyunina 2016: 780). In the official statements, I will try to find out the critical elements of the collective identity narrative projected by Russia. Lastly, it would be interesting to see

¹ Alexander Wendt was influenced by Symbolic Interactionism, sociology and philosophy by Herbert Blumer, George Herbert Mead, Jürgen Habermas, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann and Anthony Giddens.

how fundamental identity discourses in Serbia relate to Russian identity narratives.

The main features of Russian soft power in Serbia

If we move on to Russian President Vladimir Putin's official visit to Belgrade in January 2019 (the time of negotiating a Serbian joining free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union), we can detect some components of Russian soft power. An example is Putin's interview with the most known and oldest Serbian newspaper *Politika*. Vladimir Putin underlines that Serbia and Russia are united by centuries-old historical, cultural and religious closeness, as well as by the brotherhood of arms in two world wars:

...the basis of good relations between Russia and Serbia are the centuries-old sincere friendship of our peoples, spiritual and cultural kinship, common pages of history, including the heroic struggle against Nazism during World War II. And in the new 21st century, we carefully guard and develop valuable traditions of trust and cooperation. Such readiness for close cooperation in politics, economy, humanitarian sphere was reflected in the bilateral Strategic Partnership Declaration, signed in May 2013² (Bilbija 2019).

Putin also spoke about Serbia and Russia's religious closeness:

Russian experts participate in the project to build St. Sava Temple in Belgrade. Thanks to sponsorship from our entrepreneurs, the main dome of this magnificent building is covered with mosaics. So, I am convinced that such effective, multifaceted cooperation fully corresponds to the fundamental interests of the people of Russia and Serbia (Bilbija 2019).

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Russian President Vladimir Putin visited St. Sava Temple. They were greeted by Serbian Patriarch Irinej with the sounds of church bells³. Presidents Vučić and Pu-

² Translation from Serbian to English by Goran Lošić.

³ Since 2007, Putin has held the *Church Order of St. Sava*, the highest decoration awarded by the Serbian Orthodox Church. He was awarded for helping Serbia with the Kosovo issue (Danas 24.03.2011).

tin were briefed on Russian academic Nikolai Aleksandrovic Muhin, under whose direction all the iconography was done. They lit candles and symbolically embedded pieces of Russian and Serbian tricolor on a mosaic with the image of Jesus Christ, on which Russian artists work, and signed an icon with his image. Between 120.000 and 130.000 people greeted the President of Russia on a plateau in front of the Temple. The gathered were carrying Serbia and Russia's flags, and Serbian and Russian songs were being played on the stage. In the end, Putin addressed the citizens in Serbian and Russian: «Thank you, thank you for your friendship» (RTS 17.01.2019).

Konstantin Kosachev, the Russian President's Special Envoy for Relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States member-states, once quoted how Vladimir Putin sees the concept of soft power and why it is highly significant for Russia:

The soft power policy suggests the promotion of one's interests and approaches by convincing and evoking sympathy for our country on the basis of its achievements not only in the material but also in the spiritual, cultural and intellectual spheres. We must admit that it is not us who form Russia's image abroad, so it is often distorted and does not reflect the real situation in this country or Russia's contribution to the world civilization, science and culture; also, the position of our country in international affairs is interpreted one-sidedly (Kosachev 2012).

In 2013 Putin repeated that "soft force" is a priority in order to make a stronger position for the Russian language. The ability to integrate into global information flows and promotion of Russia's positive image abroad is the primary goal (Putin 2013). Arguably, Putin has shown in Serbia how the soft power concept worked in practice. So, he evoked again vast sympathy for Russia on a cultural, intellectual and spiritual basis.

On the other side, Joseph Nye thinks Russian soft power is trying to be attractive, but it fails "miserably" because Russia believes that government is the main soft power instrument. According to Nye, it is civil society. Nye argues that Putin has advised his diplomats to shift priority to the literate use of soft power and strengthen the Russian language positions because Russia has a declining power, like Britain before, and a residual soft power could help to cushion the fall. Jo-

seph Nye underlines that one country's soft power is based on three pillars: political values, foreign policies, and culture (Nye 2013). In my work, I will focus on Russian culture (which seems attractive in Serbia) and Russian foreign policies (seen as legitimate and having moral authority).

In the same interview above mentioned, Putin gave his opinion concerning Kosovo: «As early as 1999, NATO forces bombed Yugoslavia for two and a half months without UN sanction, forcibly separating the autonomous province of Kosovo. And in 2008, Washington and its allies supported the illegitimate declaration of Kosovo independence». Moreover, the Russian President offered military cooperation on the fact that NATO member states surround Serbia:

We highly appreciate the Serbian leadership's firm commitment to maintaining the country's neutrality. At the same time, we have been helping to strengthen Serbia's defense capabilities for many years: we supply weapons and military equipment, and we assist in their repair and modernization. We will continue to develop military-technical cooperation (Bilbija 2019).

This interview was more about cultural and identity closeness between Russia and Serbia, but military cooperation is presented as a support for Serbian independent politics.

Later, Vladimir Putin highlighted that Serbia has a special status for Russia:

Our country, knowing and understanding how complicated the Balkans is and the history of the region, has always considered it a space for constructive cooperation. Even today, Russia has many friends here, among which the strategic partner Serbia holds a special place.

Considering intense cooperation between Russia and Serbia and *Republika Srpska*, the Russian President mentioned the promotion of some elements of soft power like language and culture:

Cooperation with *Republika Srpska*, which is an integral part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is based on mutual benefit, ... We believe that the promotion of joint humanitarian initiatives is equally important, given the growing interest of BiH citizens in the Russian language, Russian culture, studies in Russia... (Bilbija 2019).

The idea of spreading Russian education, language, and culture abroad is not new in Russian foreign policy. Fyodor Lukyanov, a member of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, in 2013 emphasized the importance of those elements of soft power: «It is important not only to spread the Russian language and Russian culture but also broaden opportunities for people to get an education in the Russian language» (Lukyanov 2013). Yevgeny Primakov, former prime minister of Russia and former full Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, had in mind the same goals in Russian foreign policy:

The Power of ideas and images is absolutely warranted. In the modern world, ideas and images of countries affect international relations to the same extent as the power of money or the power of weapons... Now, non-ideological images of countries determine international relations... The Russian authorities have set three ambitious goals in the foreign policy area. The first is to promote Russian culture, the Russian language and the Russian education system as attractive and competitive⁴ (Primakov 2013).

After taking into consideration common war past, culture, religion, identity, and military support, Putin stressed why it is essential economic cooperation between Serbia and Russia:

We are convinced that Serbia's aspirations for European integration and Russia's membership of the Eurasian Economic Union are not obstacles to improving our diversified cooperation. It is important that Russia and Serbia intend to continue to strengthen economic and investment cooperation. The free trade agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union and Serbia should also contribute, which is now under preparation (Bilbija 2019).

Let us now move on to the Russian prime minister's speech at a press conference in Belgrade in October 2019, five days before Serbia signed a free trade agreement with Eurasian Economic Union in Moscow. Namely, Dmitry Medvedev was in Serbia on the seventy-fifth anni-

⁴ In Serbia, Primakov remained remembered as a defense witness at the trial of Slobodan Milošević in The Hague. Primakov was prime minister in 1999 when he got the information on the plane that NATO forces had begun bombing Yugoslavia. He decided to cancel his visit to the United States of America and ordered his plane to turn over and return to Moscow above the Atlantic Ocean. His demarche in 1999 is still appreciated in Serbia.

versary of Belgrade's liberation in World War II⁵. Medvedev stressed friendship and cultural relations with Serbia:

I am thrilled to spend this day among friends. This day is special; it is the seventy-fifth anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade. There are not so many countries for which we in Russia can say that they are our friends, but not just friends, but friends who evaluate history as much as we do... friendship-based pragmatism... We trust each other... there are many good projects in the cultural sphere, and 166 pages of the Miroslav Gospel are of particular importance today because it is a holy thing for Serbs⁶.

For Serbians, it was vital his comment on Kosovo: «... You know the position of Russia on Kosovo, it is absolutely based on UN resolution 1244, and what we have always said to our Serbian friends, we proceed from full support for Serbia and its sovereignty and territorial integrity. We will continue to do so...» (RTS 19.10.2019).

Dmitry Medvedev also spoke at the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia on the same day. The first part of his speech was dedicated to the common heroic past of Russians and Serbians:

... These were hard and bloody battles for the Red Army Forces units and the Yugoslav National Liberation Army. 8.000 Soviet soldiers have been killed and buried in your country. More than 4.000 were killed during the Belgrade operation alone. It is very important for us to remember their heroism in Serbia and carefully guard the graves of Soviet heroes... I congratulate the fraternal Serbian people on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade... Russia assisted Serbia in 1999 and is now helping to preserve sovereignty and territorial integrity...⁷ (RTS 19.10.2019a).

Here we can read about stressing that Serbians and Russians were brothers in arms in World War II, and should be again noted the standpoint against NATO in 1999.

Medvedev repeated Russian opinion that Serbia should join the Eurasian Economic Union:

⁵ Since 2009, Medvedev has held the *Church Order of St. Sava*. He was awarded for helping Serbia with the Kosovo issue (Politika 20.10.2009).

⁶ Translation from Serbian to English by Goran Lošić.

⁷ Translation from Serbian to English by Goran Lošić.

... I hope Serbia will sign a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union on October 25 in Moscow... In economics, there is an artificial division between east and west... I would like to express my gratitude to Serbia, which, despite its adherence to the European processes and the strong pressure, has not joined the economic sanctions against our country and we will, of course, appreciate it... (RTS 19.10.2019a).

After the economy, Dmitry Medvedev continued highlighting the cultural and historical relationship between the two countries:

Your country is our old friend; we are bound by a common history, a very close culture and, after all, the same religion. The understanding of our people is the thought that we are indeed two fraternal nations, and that is so, and always in the most difficult situations, Russia has tried to support the Serbs. It was the case during the nineteenth century, during the liberation of the Balkans from the Ottomans, many Russian volunteers gave their lives for the independence of Serbia. It was the case after 1917 when your country accepted the destinations of thousands who had to emigrate from Russia. Serbia became their second home. They, my countrymen, left a visible mark on Serbian culture. They assisted in Serbian science and created the Serbian School of Theater and Ballet. Even this building of the National Assembly we are in, is an example of friendship between Russians and Serbs, because Russian architect Nikolai Krasnov, also took part in creating this building. We were brothers in arms during the two world wars... (RTS 19.10.2019a).

A particular part of Medvedev's speech was left for the religious connection between Russia and Serbia:

The return of Miroslav's Gospel to Serbia shows the spiritual ties between Russia and Serbia. This year, the spiritual culture days of Russia are being held in Serbia, and for us, the anniversary of 800 years of the autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church and its founder, Saint Sava, who was a monk in a Russian monastery, is of great importance. Our experts will continue to assist with the construction of the temple in Belgrade. I am convinced this temple will become another symbol of our friendship... (RTS 19.10.2019a).

Now, I would like to move to another important figure in Russian politics. It is the figure of Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov. He was with Vladimir Putin in January in Belgrade and later again with Medvedev in October. In September, one month before the free

trade agreement with Serbia, Lavrov had an interview where he spoke about cooperation with Serbia:

As for trying to involve all the Balkan states in NATO, Moscow's negative attitude to these destructive efforts is well known. In this regard, we welcome Serbia's responsible and sovereign policy of maintaining military neutrality... Unfortunately, not all of its neighbors can withstand external pressure and, despite the will of most citizens, are drawn into the North Atlantic Alliance's orbit with its fictional security guarantees... Serbia is our leading partner in the Balkans...⁸ (Sputnik 13.09.2019).

Here, we cannot see clear elements of soft power, but still stressing in that period criticism of NATO and Serbian military neutrality as part of identity and the role of Serbia as the most important partner for Russia in the Balkans could be a relevant statement for our topic.

Indeed, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation was even before aware of the significance of soft power in foreign policy and Eurasian integration:

Soft power opportunities best meet Russian foreign policy tasks at present and stepping up Eurasian integration, Russia seeks to promote its interests by combining them with the interests of other states and nations... As for soft power, it is obviously one of the main components of countries' international influence. We cannot deny that Russia is well behind other countries in this respect. The Russian world is a huge resource that can help strengthen Russia's prestige globally. We should actively, purposefully, and daily work to preserve and develop it (Lavrov 2012).

The following important actor for the Russian soft power in Serbia is a current Russian ambassador in Belgrade, Aleksandar Bocan-Harcenko. He was appointed in July 2019. Twenty-five days before the economic agreement, he underscored: «Serbia is not a “bastion of Russian influence”, but it is a major stronghold of Russia, just as Russia is important to Serbia...». In the same context, he continued to speak about economic agreement, the EU, Kosovo, and centuries of friendship between Russia and Serbia:

⁸ Translation from Serbian to English by Goran Lošić.

This is the biggest proof of Serbia's balance. The treaty will not harm Europe, and Serbia will gain a huge market, increase exports, and more opportunities... for now, there are no obstacles from the European Union... The most favorable situation for Russia is in Serbia; so many things have brought us together for centuries... Only Belgrade and Priština can resolve the Kosovo dispute, and if Belgrade seeks help, Russia is ready to help...⁹ (RTV 01.10.2019).

Finally, I think the most crucial actor for the Russian soft power in Serbia was the former ambassador in Belgrade, Aleksandar Cepurin. In the following lines, it can be explained why he was such an important figure. Cepurin was an ambassador in Belgrade from 2012 to June 2019¹⁰. In 2017, he underlined the big love between Russians and Serbians: «... Serbia holds a special place among Russia's foreign policy partners. And it is not just a matter of historical communion or cultural closeness, where our love knows no bounds...» (Cepurin 2017). Later, in 2018, Aleksandar Cepurin said that Russians and Serbs share 1000 years of common history: «the Christianity, i.e., the Orthodoxy, which came to Russia from the Greek Byzantine in the 10th century made Russians and Serbs brothers not only in blood but the religion as well» (Goll 2018).

One week before the free trade agreement was signed, he had in Belgrade a promotion of his book “O Srbiji i Srbima” (*About Serbia and Serbs*). This book describes Serbian identity and mentality and the strong relations between Russian and Serbian culture, history, religion, and identity. Here is an example from his book, how Cepurin writes about Serbian spite affirmatively:

... Courage, openness, generosity coupled with persistence and stubbornness enabled the Serbs, as well as the Russians, to preserve the presence of the spirit in even the most complex of circumstances... Most of them believe that the basis of Serbian national identity is Orthodoxy, Justice and Fraternal Relations with Russia... Practically all significant contemporary Serbs are Russophiles. Russophobia is the fate of the unsuccessful...¹¹ (Cepurin 2019).

⁹ Translation from Serbian to English by Goran Lošić.

¹⁰ In June 2019, Cepurin received the *Church Order of St. Sava* from the Serbian Patriarch Irinej for contributing to developing Serbian-Russian relations (Sputnik 27.06.2019).

¹¹ Translation from Serbian to English by Goran Lošić.

Later, he continued about Serbian identity from a Russian perspective:

... Firm, bold and long-suffering, good-natured and warm-hearted – that is how Russians experience Serbia today. Moreover, it is an honor for a Serbian to be a friend of Russia. “Westerners” love the wallet and Russophiles love the heart... Serbs are our most loyal fans. There are not many countries in the world that, like Russia and Serbia, have supported and understood one another for centuries. Serbs are genuinely looking forward to Russia’s success. Most of them love Russians and Russia. Because they understand one important thing: the stronger we are, the easier it will be for them... Serbia – a European country of heroic character – does not support, despite fierce pressure from the West, anti-Russian sanctions... (Cepurin 2019a).

In the same chapter, Cepurin equalizes Serbian and Russian mentality:

According to my observations, the Serbian mentality is close to Russian... Nowhere, like in Serbia, you will meet so many connoisseurs of weapons, especially Russian, so profound in terms of the characteristics of our planes, tanks, rockets... Among all the Balkan people, Serbs are most likely to be critical of the West, the Western model of development. It is due to centuries of history and experience. Serbs are a small but proud nation... Like the Russians, Serbs prevail over a strong ruler, a firm hand... The Orthodox faith in Serbia shapes personality on the level of feeling and instinct... Serbs helped Russians during the Mongol-Tatar invasion, and Russians helped Serbs during the Ottoman Empire... (Cepurin 2019a).

Here is one example where we can see that the former Russian ambassador in Belgrade remembers Serbs and Russians are indeed one people:

...“Little Russians” – is that offensive? There are not many nations in the world who would so faithfully and firmly guard their brotherly feelings for Russia as Serbs. And not only because our country played a decisive role in gaining Serbia independence in the 19th century. Many Serbian saints, thinkers, and writers have emphasized that Serbs and Russians form one people regardless of linguistic and ethnocultural differences. “We and Russians three hundred million” – is a well-known saying. “And without Russians,” jokes Serbs, “half truck”... in times of weak Russia, it was not easy for Serbs either; consider at least the dramatic events in Serbia at the end of the 20th century (Cepurin 2019b).

In the same chapter, Cepurin stressed that Serbs are the only nation in the Balkans that have never made war against Russia:

The past century has not been easy for either the Russian or the Serbian people. In two world wars, Serbs and Russians fought side by side, on the right side of history, and won, despite the hardest temptations... Among other things, Serbs are the only nation in the Balkans who have never made war against Russia... Both nations are characterized by traits rooted in the Orthodox tradition: a willingness to help, a keen sense of righteousness, a solid character at the right moment, patriotism, and respect for the elderly. The similarity of the two countries confirms, in my view, the way they are perceived by Western civilization: as people that need to be “Europeanized” at all costs... We with Serbs have an excellent “file” of historical relations and many common interests in the future. Furthermore, Serbs will always remain Serbs, our friends and brothers... (Cepurin 2019b).

So, these were some examples of Russian soft power in Serbia. If we evaluate this communication as soft power, we could interpret and understand the outcomes as a consequence of a complex influence of rhetoric strategies, which are in service to respond to the strategic exigencies of a situation. It is essential to bear in mind, as an assistant professor in the International Communication Program at American University’s School of International Service, Craig Hayden has stressed that soft power as rhetoric is ultimately conditioned by history and material forms of power (Hayden 2012: 51). In this paper, I discussed the cultural aspects of Russian foreign policy. It could be seen the role of cultural power in foreign policy from a top-down perspective. We can observe similar findings regarding Russian cultural statecraft in the Eurasian space in the literature (Forsberg/ Smith 2016).

Serbian reactions to Russian soft power

In January 2019, Putin honored president Vučić with the *Russian Order of Alexander Nevsky* for the closest and warmest relations between Russia and Serbia. Serbian president Vučić responded in fluent Russian language:

... President Putin protected the vital interests of the Serbian people. Our Serbian people will never forget what he did in 2015 when, at the behest of the Russian President, Russia vetoed a British resolution on the United Nations Security Council calling for the Serbs to be declared a genocidal nation. Then, President Putin protected truth and justice... (Al Jazeera Balkans 2019).

Then he continued in the Serbian language:

It is an extraordinary honor for me today to host the President of the Russian Federation in Belgrade, Vladimir Vladimirovic, a sincere and proven friend of Serbia and its people. President Putin has always welcomed the Serbian people... Russia will donate another 5 million euros for the construction of St. Sava Temple, our sanctuary... You have great respect here in Serbia...¹² (Al Jazeera Balkans 2019a).

This ceremony and press conference were an excellent example of how the Serbian President, the most potent political actor and Serbia's representative, like the target audience, reacted positively to Russian soft power. *The Russian Order of Alexander Nevsky* and speaking in the Russian language by President Vučić reflect relational features of Russian soft power in Serbia.

The ceremony mentioned above served as an introduction to economic and trade agreements, signed that day and later that year. Again, before important economic talks, we got a confirmation of a strong, close and warm friendship between the two countries, connected with the common Orthodox religion. On the same day, one informal performance happened, which is unusual for diplomatic meetings. Namely, Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dačić sang the famous Russian song *Kalinka* at a formal lunch held by President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić on the occasion of the arrival of Russian President Vladimir Putin in Serbia (N1 19.01.2019). It was another proof of how Russia is very welcomed in Serbia.

In October 2019, during Medvedev's visit to Serbia, Vučić once again emphasized close ties with Russia:

¹² Translation from Serbian to English by Goran Lošić.

... Serbia and Russia have amicable relations... Our relations may be at the highest level in the last few decades, they are full of sincere trust and respect... We can always count on the help and support of Russia... Thank you friends, for always having time to hear us... The economic agreement that will be signed in Moscow in a few days is very important to us... I hope we can have permanent exhibitions at the Russian Museum and Hermitage in the future... Thank you for your friendship. The Serbian people know how to recognize and appreciate it... Thank you very much for your help in 1944, and thank you very much for the help you continue to give us today¹³ (RTS 19.10.2019).

Indeed, it can be argued that this speech recognizes the close cultural, economic, and historical relations between Russia and Serbia. Here we can see how in a few sentences, Vučić repeated three times that Serbia and Russia are friends and said “thank you” four times.

In the same month, on the occasion of the liberation anniversary of Belgrade and the occasion of 180 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and Serbia, Ivica Dačić remembered: «History does not forget the long-developed and spiritually close relationships that have always implied a willingness to help one another in times of difficulty»¹⁴ (ATV 03.10.2019).

Now, I would like to present some public opinion results in Serbia. According to a 2018 summer survey of 1000 respondents, 46,5% of Serbian citizens support Serbia's joining the EU. Conversely, 60,8% support Serbia's alliance with Russia (Nova srpska politička misao 04.08.2018). Moreover, the Institute for European Affairs, in collaboration with Ninamedia, conducted a public opinion survey on citizens' attitudes towards Russia in March 2019. The survey was conducted on a representative sample of 1206 respondents. 87% of the Serbian citizens believe that Russia is a friend of Serbia. On the other hand, it is interesting that 90% of respondents have never been to Russia (Radio Slobodna Evropa 26.09.2019). According to the January 2019 survey, Russian President Vladimir Putin is the world leader whom Serbian citizens most trusted. He received 57% of the vote,

¹³ Translation from Serbian to English by Goran Lošić.

¹⁴ Translation from Serbian to English by Goran Lošić.

followed by Chinese President Xi Jinping with 36%, German Chancellor Angela Merkel with 30% and US President Donald Trump with 23% of the vote. Multiple answers were possible (Večernje novosti 03.01.2019). These results show that Serbia accepts the Russian soft power narrative as the target audience.

Conclusion

I focused on practical soft power applications, adapting the concept of soft power to a qualitative research design. As I discussed above, soft power is a relational phenomenon where constructed identity shapes interests (variable in time, not fixed). On this basis, I was trying to show how the political structure was shaped by soft power, where soft power is about preserving interests in shared identities. It may be that Serbia still sees Russia as a “big brother” or “mother Russia”. Russian soft power in Serbia perhaps did not directly influence the Serbian decision to join the trade agreement with Eurasian Economic Union. But, it probably creates a fertile ground for making such a political decision.

Nevertheless, making a suitable atmosphere for a trade agreement had so much influence; indirectly, Serbia, as a target audience, has accepted all Russian soft power. A possible reason for this is that Russia has been using national narratives for political utility in discourses and behaviors. Consequently, we could see an identification between the agent actor – Russia and the target audience – Serbia. Russia obtained desired outcomes by demonstrating soft power in communication exchange (socio-linguistic construct).

In fact, Russian soft power in Serbia, its public diplomacy, interaction power and pragmatic linguistics can be seen as a process, a continuity, in a competitive geopolitical system. In a specific context, in 2019, this soft power was dynamic, intensified and intentional. The stories concerning common history, culture and religion were compelling for the economy as a specific issue area. Additionally, the analysis and findings tell that Serbian rulers and most citizens accept Serbian-Russian collective identity. Russia understands well Serbian political interests, as well the issues, and creates its soft

power on this basis. So, “we like those who are similar to us”, reckons Serbia. Thus, the Serbian target audience broadly welcomes the identity narrative conducted by high Russian state authority. I want to conclude now with a few remarks about Russian soft power in Serbia. It is enormous because Serbian political leaders accept this collective identity narrative. Furthermore, collective identity is discursively constructed, and its key elements (Orthodox Christianity, strong bonds of brotherhood, shared spirituality, common Slavic past and origins) are projected by the most important Russian political leaders.

Summing up, Russia structured a political situation, framing the agenda in which Serbia, as an EU member candidate, defined its economic interests as consistent with Russian geostrategic interests. Russia still uses traditional power as well and helps Serbia with military resources. In my opinion, Serbia decided to join a trade agreement with Eurasian Economic Union indirectly because of the frequent discursive and communication acting of Russian high officials. Indeed, it is relevant that in the same year, only in the period of ten months, the Russian President, Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister visited Belgrade.

I am inclined to believe that the Serbian government in foreign policy makes a clear distinction between Russian friends and EU partners. In spite of that, it appears that possible Serbian membership in the EU should significantly change relations between Russia and Serbia. Namely, war in Europe has added a new dimension to the enlargement process. Meanwhile, Belgrade’s continuing relationships with Moscow has irritated the EU. However, the pressure on the Serbian government to introduce sanctions on Russia, harmonization with the EU foreign policy, further eventual debates on NATO membership, as a potential symbolic betrayal of Russian-Serbian unity, could even reinforce Russian soft power in Serbia, in a new changing multipolar world of fierce divisions and tensions. The question is whether Serbia can hold a neutral position, join the EU, or even decide to have closer relations with China and Russia.

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