
BEYOND SPUTNIK AND RT:

HOW DOES RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN SERBIA REALLY WORK?

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CONTENT

Introduction	4
Serbia: A global outlier	5
The nature of Russia's soft power in Serbia	7
Why is Russia popular in Serbia?	8
The boomerang effect	10
Conclusion – Where do we stand?	13

Introduction

In 2022, as part of the public opinion survey, the Open Society Foundation (OSF) and Datapraxis collected data from 22 countries for the purpose of the report entitled “Fault Lines: Global Perspectives on a World in Crisis”. The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) had exclusive access to the said report and was able to analyse it. In autumn 2022, BCSP conducted its own public opinion survey on the Serbian citizens’ perception of the country’s major foreign and security policy issues. The “Fault Lines” survey established that Serbia is much different than any other country involved in the survey, including those that generally subscribe to the Russian narrative concerning the Russia-Ukraine war. The BCSP survey applied an even more granular approach to how Russian popularity in Serbia is manifested and how deeply it is entrenched.

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that soft power is a major element of the Russian presence in Serbia. However, the catch is that Russia’s soft power in Serbia is not operating based on the traditional definition of the term, derived from the attractiveness of a political and social model, but rather on the fact that the majority of the public in Serbia sees Russia as an alternative to the West, by which it feels betrayed, abandoned and never fully accepted. This has resulted in the enormous popularity of Russia, which is now a major impediment for Serbia joining the EU sanctions against Moscow or any overt anti-Russian policies.

Serbia: A global outlier

The “Fault lines” research established that the Serbian population tilts towards the Russian perspective of the Russia-Ukraine war, even when viewed comparatively on a worldwide scale. Choosing between “Russia”, “Ukraine”, and “the West”, when asked who they thought was mainly responsible for the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, 63% of the population of Serbia blamed the West, which is by far the highest number compared to any of the surveyed countries (see table 1).

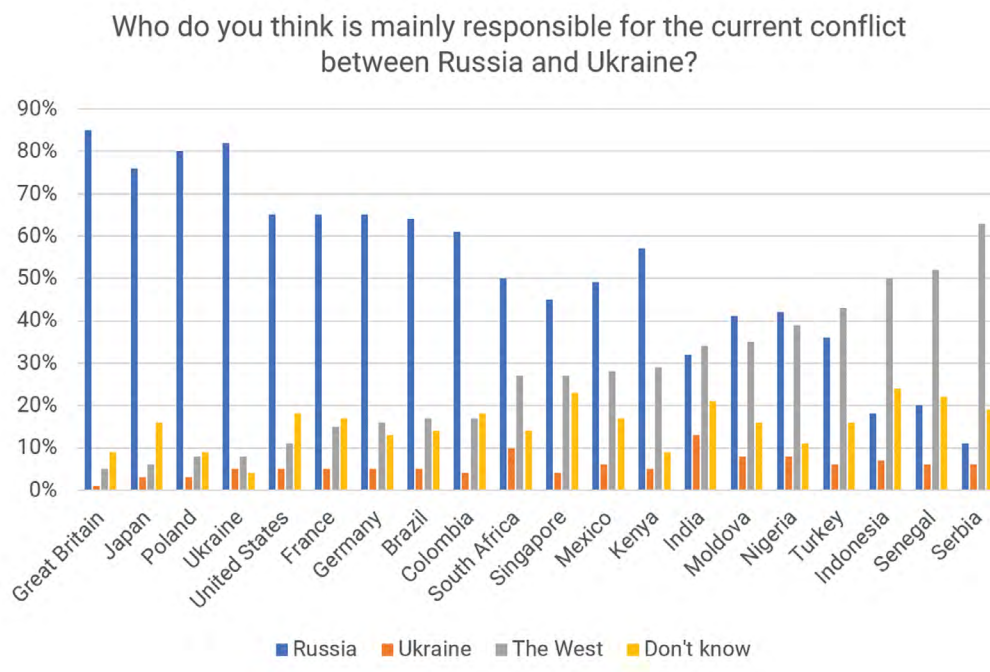


Table 1: Source: Datapraxis and Open Society Foundation, London 2022©. All rights reserved.

In regards to this issue, Senegal (52%), Indonesia (50%), Turkey (43%), Nigeria (39%), Moldova (35%) and India (34%) are behind Serbia. While the surveyed NATO, EU, and G7 countries squarely blamed Russia for the war, this view was more contested in the rest of the world (though a plurality still blamed Russia).

An interesting difference between Serbia and the developing countries emerged in popular views on how the Russia-Ukraine war might end. Although most of the developing, Non-Aligned world¹ agrees with the statement that “Russia should withdraw from all the parts of the Ukrainian territory it currently controls” (57% on average), only 12% of the population of Serbia shares this view, while 35% believe that Ukraine should give up parts of its territory that Russia currently controls (see Table 2).

¹ The Non-Aligned countries that participated in the survey: Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Senegal, Colombia, Indonesia, India, and other countries: Turkey, Brazil, Mexico, Moldova and Singapore.

Thinking about how the Russia-Ukraine conflict might be resolved, which of the following comes closest to your view?

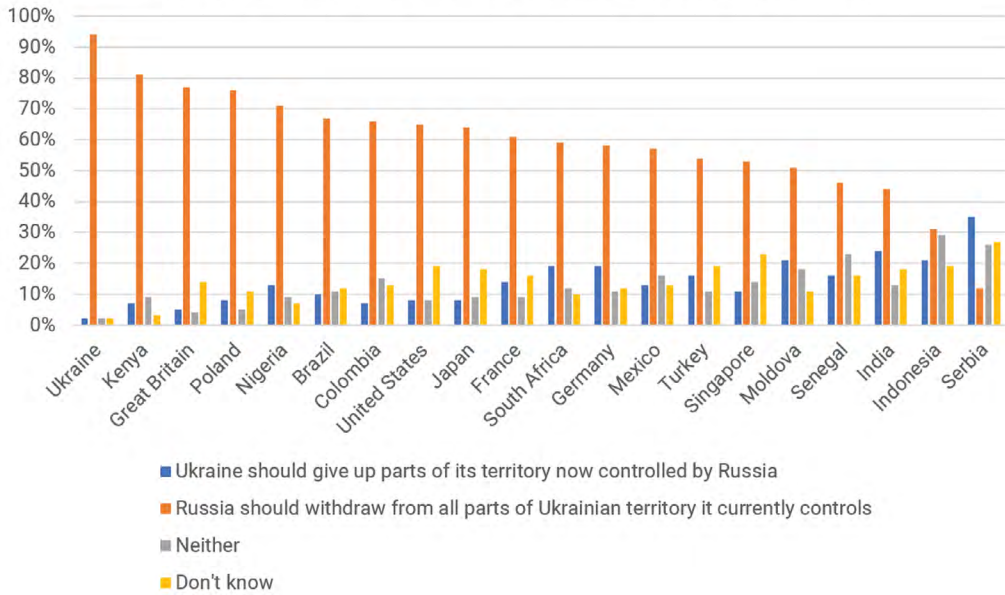


Table 2: Source: Datapraxis and Open Society Foundation, London 2022©. All rights reserved.

Sensitivity to foreign threats to the territorial integrity of states probably plays a role in shaping popular opinion about the Russia-Ukraine war in the post-colonial context. It is interesting that in Serbia, despite the experience of the 1999 Kosovo war and Kosovo’s subsequent declaration of independence, it does not. In order to further explain the nature of Russian soft power in the country and how it practically manifests itself, it is useful to look at the findings of the BCSP’s public opinion survey.

The nature of Russia's soft power in Serbia

The concept of soft power, introduced by the US international relations theorist Joseph Nye, implies that a country could influence others through the power of attraction, through "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority)."²

Therefore, soft power is viewed as something that is driven more by one's spontaneous ability to assert oneself as a role model than by purposeful government policies. Russia's foreign policy strategy, however, interprets the concept somewhat differently. It emphasises the state, whose actions are supposed to boost its soft power.³ In both Serbia and the wider Balkans, soft power is one of the three pillars of Russian influence - along with energy ties and the unresolved Kosovo dispute - that reinforce Serbia's political dependence on Russia and its need to seek its protection in the UN Security Council.⁴

Neither the cultural diplomacy nor the affinity of the Orthodox Churches fully explains Russia's popularity in Serbia. Its real roots lie in Serbian history and the priorities of the country's ruling elite.

2 Joseph Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 84.

3 Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), 226

4 Vuk Vuksanovic, "Why Serbia Won't Stop Playing the Russia Card Any Time Soon," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 18 October 2019, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/80188>

Why is Russia popular in Serbia?

Defying the strict definition of soft power, Russia's appeal to the Serbian public has less to do with what this country is and more with what it is not. Russia is not the West, meaning that Russian soft power capital in Serbia is largely the product of bitter memories of the 1990s, the feeling of being rejected and ostracised by the West, the frustration with Kosovo's independence, and the notion that Russia acts as a counterforce to the Western primacy.

Serbian frustration with the Western model is at the centre of the Russian allure for Serbs, who see Russia as a force that opposes - as it is often portrayed - the decadent West and its interventionist policies.⁵ The Russian narrative has a comforting effect on the Serbs because it strengthens the majority's conviction that they are not the culprit but the victim of the 1990s wars and that they are not "all alone in the World" as they often tend to feel. Russia's soft power may not reflect Russia as it is, but it does serve as a powerful antidepressant-like narrative that comforts the Serbian society by confirming its own entrenched beliefs.

The West remains a true role model for the country's silent majority, a place they want to send their children to study and where they would like to go work themselves. The West caters to Serbs' rationale, while the Kremlin and local actors who promote the Russian narrative exploit their emotions.

In the BCSP public opinion survey, one can see the result of a split in the popular mindset between rational and irrational. Namely, 55% of the Serbs do not believe there is a viable alternative to the EU membership, as opposed to 21.6% who do and 23.4% who do not have an answer to this question. However, among the minority that believes there is an alternative to EU integration, 47% see cooperation with Russia as such an alternative.

The answers to other questions posed in the survey further elucidate the reasons for Russia's allure in Serbia. When asked to rank cooperation with great powers, 39.2% considered cooperation with Russia to be very important, while 35% and 11.1% claimed the same about China and the US, respectively. When asked about Serbia's most important partner, 50.5 % felt it was Russia, as opposed to 19% who opted for China and 18.3% who thought it was the EU. When asked about the country's greatest friend, 65.8% considered Russia a friend of Serbia, while 27.5% said that Russia only looks after its own interests and not those of Serbia. In sharp contrast, only 14.2% considered the EU a friend of Serbia, while 56.3% thought the EU only cared about its interests. Russian soft power is so pronounced that 45.1% of the surveyed Serbs rather irrationally believe that Russia will be the dominant power in the 21st century, as opposed to 23.2% who think it will be China and 17.5% who opted for the US.

⁵ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 237

The Serbian population's disappointment with the economic and political transition also reinforces the Russian narrative, as the costs of the country's transition to a free market and democracy are associated with the West. Although only 8.2% of the respondents stated that Serbia needs an authoritarian regime, as opposed to 41.7% who favour democracy, as many as 30.3% of the respondents also said that while democracy is better suited for Serbia, the county needs a firm hand at this moment in time. Such results presented a decrease in popular support for the democratic form of government compared to 2021, when 44% of the Serbs favoured democracy and 23% preferred democracy with a firm hand.⁶ Amidst such a mood, the Russian political model naturally has much more sway.

Russia is popular in Serbia also because this suits the local elites. As long as the conflict over Kosovo aggravates the public, Serbian politicians feel compelled to oppose Kosovo's independence, which entails a need for Russian diplomatic protection. The survey shows that 45.4% of the Serbs prioritise Kosovo in foreign policy, perceiving it as "very important". Also, 52.3% believe Serbia should not recognise Kosovo as an independent state.

Russia is the only world power that regularly reiterates its readiness to offer Serbia guarantees that Kosovo will never gain full international recognition. This fuels Russian popularity in Serbian society and makes it extremely difficult for any Serbian government to take anti-Russian steps, as it can hardly afford to appear a less ardent supporter of Serbia's territorial integrity than the Kremlin. Serbian politicians must be considerate of Russia's position on Kosovo simply to avoid a domestic backlash for being less patriotic regarding Serbia's territory than the Russians.⁷

⁶ Srdjan Hercigonja and Predrag Petrovic, "There is no democracy in Serbia, nor is it desirable", *Belgrade Centre for Security Policy*, January 2022, p.3, <https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/There-is-No-Democracy-in-Serbia-nor-is-it-Desirable.pdf>.

⁷ Vuk Vuksanović, "Russia Remains the Trump Card of Serbian Politics," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 17 June 2020, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/82090>

The boomerang effect

Russia's popularity significantly constraints the Serbian post-2012 leadership, but it is largely a problem of their own creation. Despite the talks that RT would open its Serbian bureau back in 2015, this idea did not come to fruition⁸ until RT opened a Serbian news portal in 2022 to compensate for RT's closure in other European countries showing the limited Russian media influence. Direct Russian presence in the Serbian media landscape is limited to a moderately popular web portal, "Sputnik Serbia", and a recently launched Serbian edition of "RT" (formerly Russia Today), which is also nothing more than a website. The audience of these two media outlets is rather limited, as most of the Serbian public consumes pro-Russian narratives furnished by Serbian domestic media, especially the pro-regime tabloids. This way, the Serbian ruling coalition profits from the pro-Russian sentiment that is present mainly among its own voter base.⁹ There is also a commercial dimension, as pro-Russian discourse sells better in Serbia. As the editor-in-chief of the leading pro-government tabloid "Informer" said in 2018, "I am a businessman. Our usual daily circulation is 120,000, so we are already the highest selling tabloid in Serbia. When we added Putin calendars, we sold 250,000 copies. Had I put Catherine Ashton or Juncker [former EU officials] on the calendar, I don't think we would have sold 12."¹⁰

Capitalising on pro-Russian sentiments at home, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić uses Moscow as a convenient scarecrow in his dealings with the West. The narrative about the Russian threat and radical pro-Russian Serbs striving for power helps him deflect Western criticism for democratic backsliding in Serbia. The false impression that Vučić is about to be ousted by nationalist pro-Russian forces prods the West to tolerate the authoritarian tendencies of the Serbian regime.

Yet, Vučić's strategy of inflating Russia's popularity and influence in Serbia backfired badly after Russia invaded Ukraine earlier this year. The Serbian leadership has found itself between a rock and a hard place as it now faces growing Western pressure to join anti-Russian sanctions. However, such a step would likely undermine its domestic support.¹¹ A few days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine began, Serbian

8 Vuk Vuksanović, "Systemic pressures, party politics and foreign policy: Serbia between Russia and the West, 2008-2020" (PhD thesis, LSE, 2021), 226, <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/4323/>

9 For the results demonstrating that supporters of the Serbian ruling party tend to give a much more positive assessment of the role of Russia and China than the opposition voters, see: Nikolaos Tzifakis, Milica Delević, Marko Kmezić, Zoran Nechev, "Geopolitically irrelevant in its 'inner courtyard'? The EU amidst third actors in the Western Balkans", *Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group*, December 2021, p. 12, <https://biepag.eu/publication/geopolitically-irrelevant-in-its-inner-courtyard/>

10 Valerie Hopkins, "In Balkans, Britain rejoins battle for influence," *Politico*, 30 March 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/balkans-bbc-britain-rejoins-battle-for-influence-russia-soft-power/>

11 Florian Bieber and Srdjan Cvijić, "Aleksandar Vučić's Pyrrhic Victory: The Serbian President's anti-Western propaganda is coming back to haunt him", *Foreign Policy*, 15 April 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/15/serbia-vucic-election-russia-pyrrhic-victory/>

President Aleksandar Vučić told the media the following: “That is why our position is so difficult. Serbia has embarked on the European path, Serbia has always supported Ukraine’s integrity, but on the other hand, some eighty-five percent of the people will always side with Russia no matter what happens. These are the facts I am faced with as the country’s President.”¹² The statement conveniently omitted that it was precisely the President’s media that enormously inflated the pro-Russian sentiment.

The BCSP’s public opinion survey shows how deeply Russian soft power is entrenched in Serbian society and how it impedes foreign policy decision-making in Serbia. Only 11.8% of the respondents believe that Russia is responsible for the war in Ukraine, as opposed to 31.6% claiming it is NATO and 29.2% thinking it is the US (see Table 3).

In your opinion who is the main culprit for the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine?

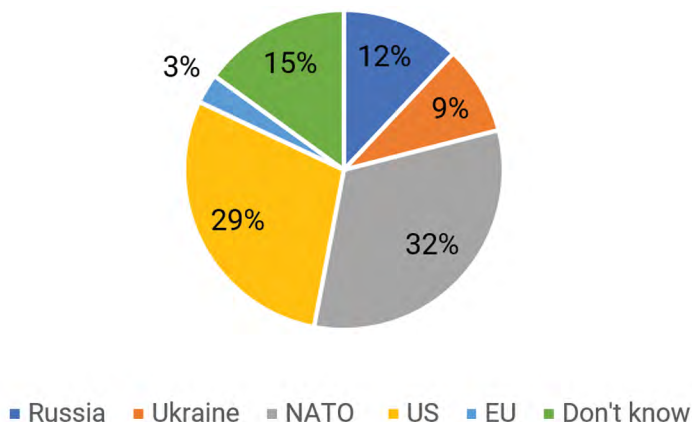


Table 3: Source: Western Balkans Security Barometer, project implemented by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy in October 2022 with the support from the National Endowment for Democracy ©. All rights reserved.

According to the same survey, most respondents oppose introducing sanctions against Russia. Among them, 44.1% are against the sanctions because Serbia experienced them in the 1990s, 24.3% consider Russia to be Serbia’s greatest friend, and 11.8% because of Serbia’s interests in Kosovo (see Table 4).

¹² TASS, “85% of Serbians will always support Russia, no matter what – says President Vučić,” 21 February 2022, <https://tass.com/world/1407763>

In your opinion should Serbia introduce sanctions to Russia?

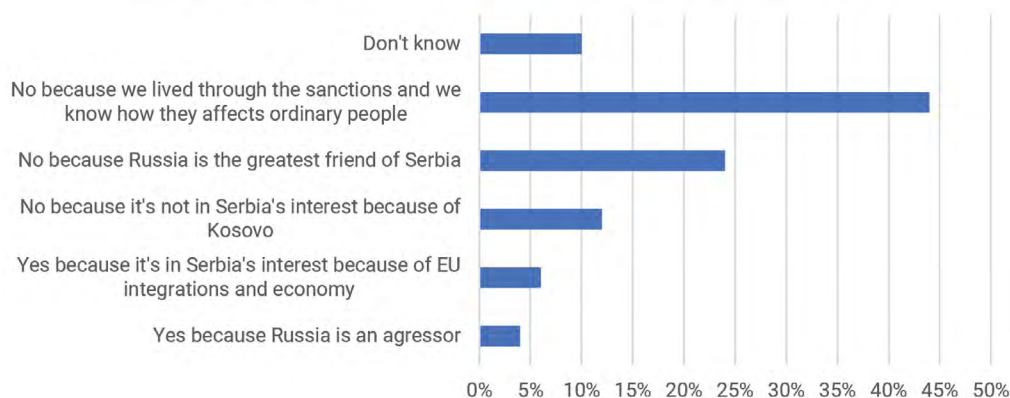


Table 4: Source: Western Balkans Security Barometer, project implemented by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy in October 2022 with the support from the National Endowment for Democracy. All rights reserved.

The analogy with Serbia from the 1990s strengthens the argument that the Serbian experience with the West is the real source of Russian soft power allure and not the attractiveness of its model. It also needs to be stressed that while 44.1% of Serbs oppose sanctions against Russia because Serbia experienced them in the 1990s, this does not prevent the Serbian government from joining the EU sanctions against other countries, including Belarus, precisely for its involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war.¹³

On a more balanced note, 45.5% of the Serbian population thinks that Serbia should stay neutral in the Russia-Ukraine war, confirming that balancing appears to be the least costly strategy for the Serbian elites as far as domestic popularity is concerned. In that same context, when asked who would be the winner of the war, 48.6% believed there would be no winners since everyone would experience some sort of loss, while 39.9% thought it would be Russia. This survey shows that, strong sympathy towards Russia notwithstanding, the Serbian public still believes that Serbia should have a balanced foreign policy and steer clear of major international conflicts.

¹³ European Western Balkans, "Serbia has aligned with EU sanctions on Belarus over the war in Ukraine," 20 May 2022, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/05/20/serbia-has-aligned-with-eu-sanctions-on-belarus-over-the-war-in-ukraine/>

Conclusion – Where do we stand?

Two recent public opinion surveys analysed for this paper show how Russian soft power has taken deep root in Serbia to predetermine Belgrade's refusal to join EU sanctions against Moscow. This situation is unlikely to change. Soft power remains one of the last remaining Russian assets in Serbia and the Balkans, making Serbia vulnerable to Russia's pressure, although Moscow currently appears to be happy with the position Belgrade has taken. That position allows Moscow to avoid another humiliating setback - this time in the Balkans, while also helping Russia project an image of a world power that still has allies in Europe.¹⁴

However, as Russia is being squeezed out from other European countries, it may consider Serbia a more convenient target for meddling. RT has for years shown little interest in the Serbian market. However, it has launched its operation now, when it is being banned across Europe. It plans to open a TV channel in Serbian by 2024,¹⁵ further amplifying the power of the pro-Russian narrative in the country.

The Serbian government could try to counter Russia's appeal using its own propaganda machinery but seems unwilling to do so.

In this setting, the EU should try to reassert itself as a major player in Serbian public opinion through a media and public diplomacy campaign aimed at strengthening democracy in Serbia. Western acquiescence for democratic transgressions by the Serbian authorities is a wind to the sails of Russian influence in the country. EU's campaign should not be based on suppressing and combating the pro-Russian narrative, as it is already too late for that. Moreover, such a strategy would be counter-productive because both Moscow and local elites would use it to accuse the EU of pursuing the policy of pressure and ultimatums. Instead, the EU should do more to promote itself as a values-based project that can bring citizens a more prosperous and orderly life. In that sort of soft power battle, Russia stands no chance of gaining the upper hand.

14 Nova.rs, "Kremlj je prilično zadovoljan Vučićem: Srpski predsednik čak i antiruske odluke usaglašava sa njima [The Kremlin is pretty satisfied with Vučić: Serbian President coordinates even the anti-Russian decision with them]," 17 November 2022, <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/%D0%BAremlj-je-prilicno-zadovoljan-sa-vucicem-vucic-cak-i-anti-ruske-odluke-usaglasava-sa-njima/>

15 The Moscow Times, "RT launches local website, broadcasting in Serbia," 15 November 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/11/15/rt-launches-local-hub-in-serbia-a79380>

