

A FORGOTTEN FRIENDSHIP: SERBO-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS AND PRO-RUSSIAN NARRATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

The bilateral relations between Serbia and Ukraine were established in April 1994¹ and were developing over a long period of time, covering the fields of trade, economy, investments, finance, cultural, humanitarian and scientific and technical cooperation. However, the relations between the two countries got significantly complicated with the beginning of the Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2014.

As a long-standing partner of the Russian Federation, Serbia condemned the annexation of Crimea and supported Ukraine's territorial integrity. However, Belgrade refused to call the Russian aggression a war. Since 2014 to date, the main designations in the Serbian media landscape have been "conflict" and "crisis". In 2022, a new term appeared - "special military operation".² When regards the war information, Serbian media often transmit pro-Russian narratives, thus disseminating disinformation about the war that Russia has been waging against Ukraine, even despite the fact that Ukraine has not recognised the independence of Kosovo, and, unlike the Russian Federation, does not have a representative office in Kosovo.³

The relations between Kyiv and Belgrade got complicated due to the participation of Serbian volunteers on the side of Lugansk People's Republic and Donetsk People's Republic separatists, as well as part of the "Wagner" PMC. Instead of condemning the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, the Serbian society and leadership have taken a neutral position, which brought about problems in the relations with Ukraine. At the same time, Kyiv has a clear and balanced position vis-à-vis Kosovo and Serbia's territorial integrity.

It is important to mention that the Russian propaganda has a strong bearing on the Serbo-Ukrainian relations. In the past ten years, the Kremlin has been spreading lies about the Euromaidan, Revolution of Dignity, Crimea's occupation, Ukraine's internal problems, the war, etc.⁴ It is only within the last year that the Serbian information space has seen articles attempting to deconstruct the Russian lies about Ukraine, Crimea, linguistic issues, history. Unfortunately, the majority attitude of the Serbian society towards the Russian-Ukrainian war has not changed, so the support to Vladimir Putin and Russia remains rather strong.

The Ukrainian assistance in 1999

Complications in the relations between Belgrade and Kyiv caused by the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea have made the Ukrainian assistance provided to Serbia during the 1999 NATO bombing frequently forgotten. It is only recently that the Serbian political leaders started recalling the support provided by Ukraine and forgotten by Belgrade.⁵ During the NATO air campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from March to June 1999, Ukraine officially condemned the Alliance's actions and tried to act as a mediator in the conflict. Ukraine's President from 1994 to 2005, Leonid Kuchma, Prime Minister Valeriy Pustovoitenko and other Ukrainian politicians condemned the Alliance's actions.⁶

A significant role was played by the complicated relations between Ukraine and Russia, which had a considerable influence on the official Kyiv foreign policy. Some Members of Parliament criticised Kuchma's actions, considering them as his failure to demonstrate Ukraine's support to the Western values and potentially boost its chances of the future NATO membership.⁷

It is worth highlighting that the position of Leonid Kuchma and Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada reflected a complex balance that Ukraine had often faced in its foreign policy from 1991 to 2013. Over this period, Kyiv was torn between long-standing relations with Russia and aspirations to build closer ties with the West. A very similar position is now taken by Serbia, which perceives the Russian Federation as a defender and force able to protect it. Strong analogies with Ukraine, which commenced its final break-away from Moscow with the Euromaidan and Revolution of Dignity in November 2013, are pretty obvious.

Even in such difficult foreign policy circumstances, Ukraine demonstrated its own position in relation to Belgrade's action in Kosovo and NATO's air raids against the FRY. The condemnation of the Alliance's actions was reinforced by the Ukraine government's attempt to mediate between Sloboda Milošević and the Western countries.

In the first weeks of NATO bombing, Ukraine's Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk paid an official visit to Belgrade.⁸ Tarasyuk's journey to the FRY Capital was part of Ukraine's broader diplomatic endeavours to assist in resolving the conflict between NATO and Yugoslavia. Ukraine's position could be named unique. On the one hand, it was participant of the Partnership for Peace Programme with NATO and, on the other, it had close relations with Russia, which severely opposed the NATO bombing campaign.

During his visit, Tarasyuk met Yugoslav President Milošević and other top brass officials to discuss the possible ways to end the conflict. He also conveyed the message of Ukraine's President Leonid Kuchma calling upon Milošević to accept the terms of the peace accords proposed by the international community.⁹ Both Yugoslavia and NATO responded positively to Tarasyuk's visit, seeing it as a potential step towards peaceful conflict resolution.¹⁰ However, despite the Ukrainian diplomatic efforts, the conflict continued for a few more weeks.

Disputes at the Verkhovna Rada

In March 1999, Ukraine's Parliament got involved in a fierce debate over NATO's air campaign against Yugoslavia. The campaign, launched by the Alliance to end the ongoing conflict in Kosovo, divided the international community, with some countries supporting the intervention and others strongly opposing it. Many Ukrainian politicians claimed that the campaign was violating the international law and constituted a threat against Ukraine's sovereignty. Members of Ukraine's Communist Party were particularly vociferous on this, calling upon the Government and President to suspend the country's participation in the Partnership for Peace Programme.¹¹

The communists, as well as members of other socialist political forces, claimed that Ukraine should not support NATO's campaign against Yugoslavia. The MPs claimed the campaign was illegal and it infringed the principle of non-interference with other countries' internal affairs. In the other hand, discussions run by supporters of NATO's campaign continued. They considered the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo should be put to an end, as well as the crimes committed by the Serbian military.¹²

During NATO's air campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999, Ukraine was one of the countries that provided support and assistance to refugees fleeing the conflict. As the conflict escalated and air campaigns were stepped up, many civilians were forced to leave their homes and seek refuge in the neighbouring countries.¹³

Media oblivion

Serbian media have very successfully "forgotten" about Ukraine's attempt to persuade Milošević to accept the Western peace plan and stop the bombing. Media did not cover Kyiv's condemnation of the North Atlantic Alliance's air campaign. In the Serbian media landscape, there came information owing to President Aleksandar Vučić, who refused to condemn Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. In his statement last March, he accused Ukraine's authorities of "not condemning" NATO's actions in 1999. Vučić invited Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky to take the first step by recognising NATO's action as aggression on Serbia.¹⁴ Serbian President thus incentivised a research which enabled the Ukrainian and Serbian media to discuss Ukraine's position during NATO's air raids. Vučić has not condemned the Russian aggression after that either, not has he launched the imposition of sanctions on the Kremlin.¹⁵

A long-term media oblivion has been noticed in Ukraine too. Reporters and experts who actively discussed the Alliance's campaign focused on the humanitarian crisis, refugees, NATO's actions and the consequences of the operations on civilian population. Many Ukrainian media outlets claimed that NATO's actions were breaching the international law and principle of national sovereignty. Some media commentators noticed

that the conflict could destabilise the region causing a broader conflict in the Balkans. There were separate publications dedicated to political and diplomatic efforts of international organisations to seek peaceful conflict resolution, like those of the UN and OSCE.¹⁶

The 1999 episode is not the only one simply eliminated from the news realm by Ukrainian and Serbian media. For more than three decades – from the moment Ukraine gained independence – Serbian and Ukrainian media did not cover the mutual relations between the two countries extensively. The inputs were often superficial, fragmented, fabricated under the influence of the Russian and Western narratives.¹⁷ This is why the Ukrainian and Serbian societies have created rather stable stereotypes which come in handy to Moscow. Russia's full-scale invasion on Ukraine has made Ukraine open up to Serbia again as well as Serbia open up to Ukraine.

It is impossible to shatter the myths within a year and disencumber from prejudice, but the first steps towards spreading new narratives in Ukrainian and Serbian media are being taken. The specificity of it is in Ukraine's society freeing itself from stereotypes about Serbs and Serbia faster. This is, unfortunately, contributed to by the war and the society's total cleansing from the Soviet and Russian legacy. In order to have far-reaching impact of the results, it takes adequate steps from Belgrade too. However, the incumbent Serbian government and President Vučić's authoritarian regime demonstrate the willingness to carry on with manoeuvring without concrete actions against the Russian Federation.

Crimea and Kosovo are two different situations

Ukraine's position on Kosovo is marked by its support to Serbia's territorial integrity and non-recognition of the unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo in 2008. This position is based on the support for the principles of territorial integrity and national sovereignty. That is why Ukraine sees Kosovo as integral part of Serbia and deems that any change of its status should ensue as result of both parties' agreement. This is why Ukraine abstained from voting for the UN General Assembly's recognition of the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008.¹⁸

For many consecutive years, Kyiv has not altered its policy. Although certain Ukrainian politicians are more and more often calling upon their authorities to recognise Kosovo's independence, that is not Kyiv's official position, but only private initiative of individual politicians. The most active among them are members of parliament Mykola Kniazhitsky¹⁹ and Oleksiy Honcharenko.²⁰

So, Ukraine is adhering to the consistent policy on Kosovo and to the provisions of the agreement on cooperation with Serbia in all areas – economic, trade, military and technical and diplomatic.²¹ Belgrade is trying to meet the similar obligations to Kyiv. When Russia annexed Crimea, Serbian authorities refused to recognise these unlawful actions by the Kremlin. And this is the position that Belgrade has kept from the beginning of Russian Federation's full-scale invasion on Ukraine.

For Serbia, Kosovo and Crimea are two different situations, which does not deny the validity. Until 1954, the Crimean Peninsula was not part of Ukraine or its ethnic territory. The Crimean Tatars did not want to leave Ukraine and join the Russian Federation. The Russians living on the peninsula before the annexation planned to organise a referendum on secession no sooner than in 2014.²² Moscow would occasionally stir the situation in Crimea to keep the peninsula under control and have its bases to place its Black Sea fleet. Ukraine's authorities did not recourse to repression against the Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians, although the Russian propaganda claims otherwise.

The situation in Kosovo was completely different, especially in the ethnic sphere. Belgrade's repression against the Kosovar Albanians gave rise to resistance and development of their national movement. The persecution was relentless, reaching its peak in 1997-1998. Slobodan Milošević's refusal to withdraw the members of Serbian police, military and security services as well as to sign the peace plan in Rambouillet, became the reasons for NATO's air campaign. Thus, Belgrade in fact lost control over Kosovo, where after the peace accords were signed in Kumanovo, in June 1999, the UN international administration was established. The problems between Belgrade and Priština could not be resolved in the following years, which caused the Albanians' unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence.²³ Russia, which did not recognise Kosovo's independence, constantly uses this precedent to recognise the puppet states in Abkhazia, Ossetia and L/DNR.²⁴ By doing so, the Kremlin is violating the obligation of recognising Serbia's territorial integrity.

Serbian authorities are not trying to criticise the Russian Federation for such statements, nor are they criticising the annexation of Crimea. However, as the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić said in an interview he gave to "Bloomberg": "To us, Crimea is Ukraine, Donbas is Ukraine – and it will remain so", thus making a partial disclaimer from Russia's policy.²⁵ Thus, Belgrade continues balancing between the "friendship" with Russia and desire to maintain the beneficial relations with the European Union.

The issue of Donbas

When Russia started the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, Serbia initially tried to remain neutral and did not take a firm stance on the issue. This is partly the consequence of Serbia's war experience and its aspiration to keep the good relations with both Ukraine and Russia.²⁶

As the war developed and assumed full scale in February 2022, the reality for the Serbian authority was changed. Belgrade was facing a growing pressure from the West. The main request was to condemn the aggression, take a stronger position on Russia's actions in Ukraine. Serbia reiterated that it supported Ukraine's territorial integrity, but never stopped its cooperation with the Russian Federation.²⁷

Since 2014, media have had the information about the participation of Serbian citizens in Donbas fights, on the side of the separatists supported by the Kremlin. That Serbs are fighting the Ukrainian army is proven by a range of journalist investigations. Some of them have visited Donbas several times already.²⁸

In fact, until 2022, the country's leadership had denied the participation of its citizens in the Russian-Ukrainian war. Late last year, President Aleksandar Vučić issued a communication criticising the "Wagner" PMC for recruiting Serbian combatants.²⁹ The exact number of Serbian volunteers in Donbas is not known.³⁰ There are no confirmed data on whether any Serbs have been convicted of participation in the Donbas warfare and whether they are serving their sentences.³¹

The influence of Russian propaganda

The existing problems in Serbo-Ukrainian relations are constantly used by Russia for its own interests. If Moscow had not resorted to pro-active policy of soft power before the annexation of Crimea and occupation of Ukraine's eastern regions, in 2014 it became pivotal in Serbia and the Balkans.³² As a result, in the Serbian society where Russia was popular before, the support to Russia, Putin and the military and political cooperation between the two countries has increased. Serbs see Moscow and Russian leadership as a strong defender from the US and EU's attacks and accusations. However, this has not prevented Belgrade from further developing its relations with the European Union, opening chapters on the future accession to this organisation. Russia has stepped up its propaganda in this direction, launching the narratives of the "bad" European Union via media under its control.

Publications on the Europeans forsaking their traditional values have been especially popular, as well as human rights violations and transformation of the countries joining the EU into NATO's military bases. Serbia's mass media often report on the "declining" West, its high level of crime and downfall of spirituality. On the contrary, the image of the Russian Federation is depicted as the centre of the Christian world, with the Church promoting the respect of family values and keeping the Orthodox Christian tradition.

In that context, Ukraine is considered to be a country that took sides with the EU and NATO and traded itself off for the promised membership in the European Union, etc. To attract the Serbian public opinion and gain support for its actions in Ukraine, Moscow has been steadily using several historical myths in the past nine years:

- Persecution of the Russian population in Ukraine, especially in the eastern, southern and south-western regions.
- Crimea has always been Russian, so its inclusion into the territory of the Russian Federation in 2014 was restoration of historic justice.
- Kyivan (Kievan) Rus was a stage in Russia's statehood, which is testified by the contemporary name of the state.
- Ukraine has always been part of the Russian cultural and historical setting.
- Ukrainians, Russians and Belarussians are members of the same ethnic group, which gave rise to the spreading of the tripartite nation.
- Ukraine has an illegally elected leadership who came to office by a coup d'état in February 2014.
- Persecution of national minorities, especially Jews, Russians and Hungarians.
- The government exerting repression against the Church and clergy.
- Ukraine is the poorest and most corrupt country in Europe.
- The Euromaidan and Revolution of Dignity were a coup d'état which jeopardies the life of the then President Viktor Yanukovich.

These and other myths are the basis of the Russian propaganda and misinformation in Serbia. The main tools for spreading false information are media – print, radio and television, social media, especially Facebook and Telegram. The contents are targeted for each audience, aiming at emotional response to the blatant lies and at eliciting a constant growth of negative attitudes of Serbs towards Ukrainians.

Besides frustrating the relations between the two countries in this manner, the Russian authorities are also creating Moscow's image of a peace maker and defender in the eyes of the Serb. This is why most Serbian population is supportive of the Government and President who are not ready to impose sanctions on Russia.³³

| What's wrong with sanctions?

In his statements, Aleksandar Vučić keeps saying that Belgrade's foreign policy is based on citizens' interests and "military neutrality."³⁴ Besides, the President decides takes politically and economically driven decisions. Serbia greatly depends on the Russian energy supply, especially natural gas (89% imported from Russia).³⁵ Vučić believes that imposing sanctions on Russia bears the risk of detriment to Serbia's economic interests, especially its energy sector.³⁶

Belgrade also claims that introducing sanctions against Russia would be counter-productive and possibly harmful to the efforts of conflict resolution in the region. Serbia is taking the position of constructive interaction with Russia and advocating for dialogue and diplomacy as the best vehicle to resolve the conflict. Joining the European sanctions, according to Vučić, could exacerbate the tensions and cause further instability in the region.³⁷

Conclusion

The relations between the two countries from the moment Ukraine gained its independence, in 1991, to date, can be marked as formally friendly relations. The peak of friendship and solidarity came with NATO's bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999, which has remained one of the most traumatic episodes in the Serbian contemporary history. During that episode, Ukrainian solidarity was demonstrated through Ukraine's attempts to be an impartial mediator, its condemnation of the military intervention without the mandate of the UN Security Council, as well as through provided assistance.

Today, that episode is easily forgotten in Serbia's political discourse, especially by political leaders. Besides, although the relations between the two countries continue to be formally friendly relations, they are still burdened with stereotypes prevailing in the Serbian society as a product of very stench pro-Russian narratives in the past few years, which have made Russia and its leadership very popular in Serbia. This popularity, along with the Serbian policy of balancing between the West and Russia, makes the relations between Serbia and Ukraine not hostile, but relations charged with contradictions.

The contradictions are evinced through the fact that, on the one hand, while Serbia and Ukraine are pursuing the policy of respecting each other's territorial integrity regarding the territories of Kosovo and Metohija, Crimea and Donbas, on the other hand, Serbia is still not imposing sanctions on Russia. At the same time, although Serbia is voting for the proposals based on respecting the principles of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in international institutions, Serbian officials are not that vocal in condemning Russia. Currently, it is not likely to expect a major progress in the bilateral relations, even less likely while the war in Ukraine is still ongoing. Until that happens, it is necessary to give momentum and importance to more positive aspects of Serbo-Ukrainian relations, in order to instil more atmosphere of trust and confidence in that relationship.

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