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ARTICLE

Third Rome or Potemkin village: Analyzing the Extent of Russia's Power in Serbia, 2012–2019

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Abstract
This past decade has seen the return of Russia into the public discourse. Moscow's influence has been making a comeback across its old sphere of influence and in other parts of the world. In particular, there has been a lot of talk lately of Russian soft power spreading across the Balkan region, especially in Serbia. However, the concept of power can be rather ambiguous, and only a theoretically informed analysis based on empirical methods can lead to genuine conclusions. This article aims to apply an existing theoretical framework on power to the context of Russian influence in Serbia, in order to find out whether Moscow has any power over Belgrade and to gauge its extent.

Keywords: Southeastern Europe; post-Soviet; Balkans; foreign policy; memory politics

Introduction

The relationship between Russia and Serbia can be traced all the way back to the 12th century, when Rastko Nemanjić, a son of Serbian Grand Prince Stefan, was ordained into monasticism by Russian priests at the monastery of Saint Panteleimon to become Saint Sava, the future patron saint of all Serbs. Russia's involvement in Serbia evolved over the next few centuries, as cultural and religious ties came to be augmented by military, political, and economic cooperation. Russian-Serbian relations reached their peak under the Romanovs, when Serbia found itself in Moscow's sphere of influence as a protectorate of the Russian Orthodox emperors and empresses who came to embrace the legacy of the so-called Third Rome. Moscow played a significant role in the formation of independent Serbia, but it lost much of its influence following the events of 1917 and, with the exception of the early Tito era, following the Red Army's role in the liberation of Yugoslavia, was unable to sway Belgrade eastwards throughout much of the Soviet period. The Kremlin's attempts to restore its influence in the late 1990s by standing up to NATO in the aftermath of the Kosovo War failed due to Boris Yeltsin's disastrous rule, which had rendered much of Russia's power obsolete.

Following the departure of Slobodan Milošević, the rise to power of pro-Western figures, such as Zoran Đinđic and Nataša Mičić, initially signalled the demise of Russia's political relevance in the country. Moscow had realized that it had nothing to gain from having its military unit under NATO command in Kosovo. Hence, in July 2003 Russian peacekeepers left the country. After a number of short-term leaders, Serbia got its first long-term president since Milošević in Boris Tadić. Soon after coming to power he signed a transit agreement with NATO, and signed off on the Serbia-NATO Defence Reform Group and NATO liaison office in Belgrade. Moreover, while Serbia had declared military neutrality in February 2007, it was in September of the same year that its Partnership for Peace document was adopted. Thus, Russia had seemingly disengaged from power politics in Serbia, allowing the United States to gain ground in the security domain.

However, soon the Kosovo question again came to the fore. With most NATO and EU states pushing for the province's secession, Moscow re-emerged as Belgrade's key political partner, and cemented its position as the main defender of Serbia's territorial integrity. In this setting, even the NATO-friendly Tadić could not commit the political suicide of following the USA's dictate on Kosovo; therefore, he gradually began to turn toward Moscow. This partial turn was manifested in Tadić and his prime minister Vojislav Koštunica signing the Energy Cooperation Framework Agreement with Moscow in January 2008. As a result, Russia's energy giant Gazprom Neft acquired 51% of Serbia's faltering oil giant, Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), along with a Banatski Dvor storage facility modernization contract, in exchange for Serbia's potential inclusion in the South Stream project, as well as diplomatic support in regard to Kosovo. This was followed by Priština's proclamation of independence the following month and its subsequent recognition by the USA and many of its NATO allies. As a result, Belgrade's convergence with Moscow continued, as manifested by the structure of the new joint engineering company, South Stream AG, created in November 2009. On the one hand, Gazprom's controlling interest of 51% (with Srbijagas holding 49%) may be seen as a concession by the Serbian side. On the other, this arrangement could be considered a fair deal considering the Russian side took on much of the financial risk.

However, despite the aforementioned developments in the energy sector, Serbia was not seeking to isolate itself from the West, as manifested by the opening of their mission to NATO the following month. It was this neo-Titoist foreign policy of balancing that Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić inherited from Tadić. Serbia's new pragmatic elites, much like their Russian counterparts, had a high demand for security and economic growth and did not mind which side support came from. The Kremlin was keen to benefit from these new developments. What remains unclear is whether Moscow came to gain any power over Belgrade. And if so, what is the extent of this power, and how significant is it in relation to other major players in the region?

In order to address these issues, we begin by outlining our conceptual and theoretical understanding of power. The next section examines Moscow's foreign policy in terms of its key components, and its relation to Serbia in particular. We shall then identify the Kremlin's objectives in Serbia and delineate the outcomes desired by Russian government elites from those of their Serbian counterparts. Once the desired outcomes have been identified, we can identify the manifestations of Russian power in Serbia between 2012 and 2019, which shall be complemented by thorough analysis of our findings.

Analyzing Power: Concept and Theory

When analyzing power, many journalists and scholars find themselves lost in the power spectrum and struggle to recognize the difference between the concepts of attraction and power. Hence, it is of paramount importance to establish a systemized conceptual framework, which shall be based on Joseph Nye's work, for this author has arguably developed the most comprehensive framework on power to date. Moreover, seeing as his definitions and conceptual models vary across his works and have transformed over the years, we must synchronize them within one comprehensive framework.

First, we shall speak of power as the "ability to affect the behaviour of others to get what one wants" (Nye 2009, 160). According to Nye's framework, power implies causation, and therefore attention needs to be paid to who is involved in the power relationship and what topics are involved (i.e., the scope and domains of power). We shall refer to those involved in the power relationship as the power actor (e.g., government elites of Country A) and power target (e.g., government elites of Country B), the former looking to affect the behavior of the latter. As per Nye's (2011, 95; 2013, 1–2) power conversion framework, the power actor selects particular power resources (e.g., values, policies, military, technology, etc.) to be mobilized and power behavior (e.g., attraction, payment, threat, etc.) by which the aforementioned resources will be converted into behavioral outcomes in the power target (e.g., favorable policies toward the power actor).

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Finally, power should only be judged ex post (by the outcomes) rather than ex-ante (by the resources that can produce the outcomes) (Nye 2013, 2–3). It is therefore necessary to reiterate that power is first and foremost about obtaining the behavioral outcome from the power target, while attraction or other behaviors, combined with power resources, is but a means to obtaining it. In fact, this is rather a crucial moment. Attraction does not constitute power, and the only indicator of power is presence of the preferred outcomes (i.e., behavioral outcomes and action, not attitude).

Hence, first, we must identify the desired outcomes of the power actor. We shall then scan for their manifestations in order to assess whether the power actor has any power at all over the power target. If no manifestations of the desired outcomes can be observed to have been achieved, then it will mean that the power actor has no power over the power target. On the other hand, if manifestations of the desired outcomes can be observed, it would mean that the power actor does have power over the power target.

Russian Foreign Policy and Moscow's Desired Outcomes in Serbia

The foundation of contemporary Russia's foreign policy can, perhaps, be best explained by the power transition theory. It is clear from Putin's Crimean gambit and intervention in Syria that Russia sees 1991 as the status quo cutoff point. The USA is seen as a revisionist state that had changed the status quo by tricking Moscow into disbanding the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, and subsequently abandoning it, while embarking upon the creation of a unipolar world order, the new status quo, where Moscow's opinion is not taken into account and where the USA makes its own rules to be abided by all. Thus, Russia is simply working toward restoring its former glory, global standing, and sphere of influence, making a few adjustments to the emerging multipolar world model, aiming to be on the same footing with Washington, Brussels, and Beijing. Furthermore, as Alexander Sergunin suggests, Russia is neither a status quo nor a revisionist but rather a reformist state that wants to "play by the rules, but make them more just" (2016, 33–34). This is generally the official position of the Kremlin, and its representatives do not hesitate to denounce the USA for its aggressive and unilateral behavior in global politics. In fact, the Kremlin's narrative often finds popular support in Serbia, which has been subject to NATO's bombing as part of Yugoslavia in 1999 and subsequent de facto loss of its Kosovo province, which in turn has become a host to Bondsteel—the second largest American military base in Europe (after Rammstein in Germany). Sergei Lavrov's speech at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)conference where he spoke of "NATO aggression against Yugoslavia," and the "Kosovo tragedy" is a prime example of the official Kremlin discourse on US aggression and Serbia (Rusemb 2015b, 3).

Furthermore, a key staple of Russia's foreign policy, which has remained unchanged throughout the centuries—from the Rurik Tsars to the Romanov Emperors to the Soviet leaders to President Putin—is the realist lens of analysis. Russian foreign policy decision makers see global politics in terms of balance of power and consider Russia to be engaged in a zero-sum game, first and foremost with the US-led NATO bloc (and the EU). Hence, the NATO enlargement and its military maneuvers in Moscow's perceived sphere of influence are automatically considered an encroachment on Russia's state security. Moreover, as per Realpolitik, national interest and economic pragmatism take precedence over ideology, but that is not to say that the latter has been completely discarded; rather, it is used when it suits the Kremlin's interests. In his book *Rival Power*, Dimitar Bechev identified Moscow's overall formula for Serbia, as well as the wider region, as "pragmatism and calculation of interests + historical symbolism" (2017, 4), which is something we are going to touch upon in this article. All in all, while Moscow is "not in a position to roll-back Western influence," it has focused on projecting influence, cultivating allies, and profiting from opportunities as they arrive (Bechev 2017, 6).

In accordance with the conceptual framework, our power actor is the Russian government elites (RGE) and our power target is the Serbian government elites (SGE). It is important to note that this

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rhetoric does not necessarily suggest a narrative of the "big bad Russia manipulating helpless Balkan pawns" discourse, and the nuance identified by Bechev (2017, 5) of the dialectic nature of the relationship between Russian and Serbian leadership based on pragmatism of the former and opportunism of the latter shall be taken into account. In order to prove the existence of the RGE's power over the SGE, we must determine the former's desired outcomes in regard to the latter and identify their manifestations. Russia's foreign policy agenda is set by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence, and secret services (Khrustalyov 2015, 140). While we may never know the objectives of the latter we can certainly source the objectives of the former two from their official documents, while taking into account the more specific features of Russia's foreign policy as outlined above.

The Russian Federation's Foreign Policy Concepts (FPC), active 2012–2019, all provide an extensive list of foreign policy objectives. Moscow's top priorities across all three documents are security (national, regional, and global), becoming a center of influence in the world, and economic growth, in particular, strengthening "Russia's position in global economic relations" and, in the aftermath of post-2014 sanctions, preventing "any discrimination against Russian goods, services and investments" (Rusemb 2016). Similar wording can be found in the National Security Strategies (NSS) with particular reference to "discrimination against Russian energy providers in the foreign markets" (Kremlin 2009; RG 2015). Other objectives include promoting mutually beneficial partnerships with other countries, ensuring protection for Russian citizens and compatriots abroad, promoting Russian culture, and increasing the reach of Russian mass media in the world (Kremlin 2008; MID 2013; Rusemb 2016).

The list of objectives is followed by more detailed outlooks on various aspects of the current state of global affairs, as well as cooperation and interaction with other countries and organizations, including Belarus, China, Germany, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), BRICS, the Shanghai Treaty Organisation (SCO), the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and more. Serbia was not mentioned in the last three FPCs, in the NSSs, nor in the latest Military Doctrine (Rusemb 2015a, which suggests that it does not rank highly among Russia's foreign policy priorities. This contrasts sharply with the FPC from 2000, where Moscow pledged to "give an all-out assistance to the attainment of a just settlement of the situation in the Balkans" and specifically highlighted the "fundamental importance to preserve the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia" (FAS 2000). The FPC from 2008 only generally mentioned the need for "cooperation with the States of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe" (Kremlin 2008). The FPC from 2013 added to this that the Balkan region is of strategic importance, stressing its role as a "major transportation and infrastructure hub used for supplying gas and oil to European countries" (MID 2013). As for the latest FPC, there is no mention of any of the above (possibly due to the collapse of the South Stream project at the time) (Rusemb 2016).

Hence, the only clearly outlined, region-specific objective for our period of analysis would be to secure the Russian oil and gas supply network in the region, which makes perfect sense, considering that economic growth has been mentioned as one of Russia's top priorities in all three of the latest FPCs. Furthermore, oil and gas just happen to be lifeblood for the Russian economy, accounting for 35–50 percent of the state budget throughout our period of analysis (Gorodischeva 2019). In fact, since the beginning of Putin's rule, Russia's oil and gas companies have been pushing toward attaining leading positions in Europe. Therefore, the 2008 Energy Cooperation Framework Agreement was just another logical step in this direction. Russia is seeking to improve its economic (and political) position in Europe through oil and gas exports, and it is therefore imperative for Moscow to secure its network so as to protect its economic interests, especially in the aftermath of the post-2014 sanctions.

Thus, the RGE's desired outcome would then be the SGE signing agreements and allowing initiatives and enterprises which would facilitate the following objectives: securing the Serbian segment of Russia's gas and oil supply network; amassing influence in Serbia's economy, security,

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politics, foreign policy, culture and media domains greater than that of its rivals; and ensuring protection of the Russian diaspora.

Russia's Power in Serbia

Let us now search for evidence of policies and initiatives pursued by the SGE between 2012 and 2019 that have facilitated the RGE's desired outcomes.

First of all, the Strategic Partnership Declaration (SPD) between the Russian Federation and Republic of Serbia, which was signed on May 24, 2013, by Vladimir Putin and Tomislav Nikolić, created a new vision (albeit partially based on old themes) and paved the way for a new strand in Russian-Serbian relations. One of its clauses was "further development of cooperation in the energy sector for the purpose of strengthening energy security in respect of implementation of joint, large-scale projects in oil and gas industries, ensuring the stability of supply of gas, oil and other energy resources" (Kremlin 2013a). Later that year, both Putin and Nikolić acknowledged major progress since the 2008 Gazprom Neft-NIS deal, highlighting that the once unprofitable enterprise was now responsible for around 10% of the Serbian state budget (Kremlin 2013b). In the same year, Gazprom Neft increased its stake in NIS from 51% to 56.5%. By next year, 98.81% of gas consumed by Serbia was coming from Russia (Szpala 2014, 2).

Having secured support from the upper echelon of Serbian political elites, Gazprom Neft-NIS achieved near hegemony on Serbia's energy market, opening petrol stations, upgrading and maintaining energy facilities, and launching energy-related projects across the country. The following year in July, a contract on the construction of Serbia's section of the South Stream was finally signed between South Stream Serbia AG (Gazprom/Srbijagas) and Centrgaz (Gazprom). Even though the South Stream project was scrapped, soon enough Russia managed to secure the Serbian government's support once again. This time it was for their new Turk Stream project, which once again was to be dominated by Gazprom on both sides, with the client company being Gastrans (rebranded South Stream company) and the contractor being Gazstroiprom's SGK-1. The venture was agreed upon during Vladimir Putin's visit in January, when a number of documents solidifying Russia's positions in Serbia's energy sector were signed (Kremlin 2019), and the Serbian parliament approved the documents in March 2019.

Of course, Russia's penetration into Serbia's economy has not been limited to the energy sector. The aforementioned SPD (Strategic Partnership Declaration), signed by President Nikolić, also provided for cooperation in the area of bilateral trade and economic exchanges, business contacts, and encouragement of mutual investments, as well as transport, tourism, and agriculture (Kremlin 2013a). Moreover, in January 2019, in addition to all the other documents, an agreement on cooperation between the Russian Direct Investment Fund and the Development Agency of Serbia, as well as a memorandum of mutual understanding between Sberbank Serbia and Telekom Serbia, was also signed (Kremlin 2019). While Sberbank, Gazprom Neft, and Lukoil have certainly grown their roots deep into Serbia's economy during our period of analysis, another major Russian company to benefit from Russian-Serbian convergence was Russian Railways (RZD), which had received $800 million allocated to the Serbian government in early 2013. Since March 2014 RZD has been constructing, reconstructing, and modernizing Serbia's railway system. In January 2019 they received another major long-term contract from the Republic of Serbia. Around the same time, while Putin was in town, another Russian company, BOOS Lighting Group, signed a number of memorandums on cooperation (with a government ministry, the city of Belgrade, the town of Pančevo, and a department of Belgrade University) (Kremlin 2019).

However, with all of the above taken into account, during our period of analysis Moscow has only been playing second fiddle in Serbia's economy overall, with Germany, Italy, and occasionally other EU states overtaking Russia in exports, imports, and Foreign Direct Investment; furthermore, in recent years China has been appearing ahead of Russia in FDI statistics for the Republic of Serbia (MFIN 2019). Hence, while Russia does possess a certain amount of power to facilitate its economic

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presence and prevent the Serbian government from joining anti-Russian sanctions, Russia is neither the only nor is it the top player in Serbia's economy outside of the energy sector.

Another crucially important domain of cooperation with Russia that has been agreed upon by the government of Serbia is foreign policy. The SPD set the groundwork for political coordination (bilateral, regional, and international, that is, the UN, Council of Europe, etc.) (Kremlin 2013a). The first document that was signed during Putin's visit to Serbia in January 2019 was the consultation plan between the respective Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) for Russia and Serbia during 2019–2020 (Kremlin 2019). Moreover, political cooperation between Russia and Serbia isn't limited to the MFAs, as there has been ongoing communication and cooperation between other governmental ministries, towns (e.g., town twinning), regions, parliaments, and political parties (e.g., United Russia and the Progressive Party of Serbia have had a cooperation agreement in place since 2010). More recently, Belgrade has signed a free trade agreement (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which somewhat complements the FTA with the Russian Federation that has been in place since 2000. However, after signing the FTA with EAEU, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić clearly stated that Serbia's agreements with third countries and organizations will have to be annulled upon their EU accession (*RTS* 2019). Therefore, it is clear that EU membership continues to be Serbia's top priority, with any agreements with EAEU and Russia being complementary to those with the EU and temporary in their nature. The magnitude of relations between Belgrade and Brussels is quite substantial, and there seems to be no effort shown by either Belgrade or Moscow to derail Serbia's European integration in favor of Eurasian integration.

Moving on to the security domain the picture is once again not black and white. On the one hand, the Russian Serbian Humanitarian Centre (RSHC) in Niš has been functioning since 2012, Serbia has been an observer in the Russian-led CSTO since 2013, and the SPD initiated long-term military cooperation between Moscow and Belgrade, with the subsequent Military Cooperation Agreement (MCA) providing for information and experience exchange, cooperation in military education, cartography, topography, and peacekeeping, among other things (Kremlin 2013a), and the Military Technical Cooperation Agreement (MTCA) securing Serbia as a client of Russia's military industry. On the other hand, by 2012 NATO had already set up the Serbia-NATO Defense Reform Group and liaison office in Belgrade, and Serbia had accepted NATO's codification system and adopted its Partnership for Peace (PfP) document. Hence, despite Serbia's military neutrality declaration, Russia missed almost ten years of military presence, which had been actively and efficiently filled by NATO. Russia eventually began its joint military exercises with Serbia (BARS and Slavic Brotherhood) in 2014, as well as cooperation on combatting organized crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism, but NATO has been running joint military exercises with the Serbian military since 2006. Every year NATO's military activities in the country outnumber those of Russia five-to-one.

Even since the Russian military's symbolic return to Serbia (albeit not in the same capacity as in 1990s) Moscow failed to stop NATO's influence, as manifested in Tomislav Nikolić and his then prime minister Aleksandr Vučić signing a number of agreements—in particular, the NATO Support and Procurement Organisation (NSPO) and the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP)—that have deepened Serbia's involvement with NATO and granted NATO's personnel in Serbia access to military objects, logistical support, freedom of movement, and diplomatic status. In contrast, the staff of the RSHC who have been carrying out rescue missions across the country (and the wider region) had been soliciting for some of the same privileges for years, and the Serbian government did not accommodate their pleas. Hence while Russia does have power to facilitate some security cooperation and occasional military presence in Serbia, it is still only playing second fiddle when it comes to the military domain. However, this is once again due to shortage of its own efforts, which can be explained by pragmatic, rational, short-term considerations (i.e., more military presence would be a costly and risky affair).

Moving onto the next domain, Russia has maintained its cultural presence throughout our period of analysis with Rossotrudnichestvo and other governmental agencies organizing regular events at Ruski Dom in central Belgrade, as well as at the Sava Centre and other venues. These have

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included a wide range of initiatives: arts exhibitions, concerts, statue openings (e.g., a statue of Nicholas II unveiled in October 2014), and other public events (e.g., an Immortal Regiment march, Holy Fire in Serbia, etc.). However, outside of Belgrade, Russia's cultural diplomacy efforts are rather ad hoc. Most Kremlin-directed or -funded initiatives focus mainly on history, folklore, and high culture, thus attracting predominantly the older crowds. Nevertheless, all of the aforementioned events and initiatives have generally been approved, supported, and even openly attended by a wide range of SGE representatives, such as President Vučić, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, Ivica Dačić, and Nenad Popović. Moreover, what remains Moscow's key advantage over Washington and Brussels as far as culture is concerned is the Orthodox faith. With Gazprom Neft donating substantial financial resources toward reconstructing Serbia's iconic St. Sava Cathedral, the relationship between the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches being strong as ever, and the vast majority of Serbs identifying as Orthodox Christians (*RTV* 2013), Moscow continues to be a significant cultural player in this domain.

However, when it comes to mass culture the Serbian market has been dominated by US, European, and Balkan products (including Turkish soap operas). According to polls most young Serbs prefer cars, actors, singers, athletes, fashion designers, writers, films, and TV series that come from the USA and European countries (CEAS 2016, 8–10). Russian efforts in this respect have been limited to one or two films a year shown at cinemas nationwide (e.g., *The Balkan Line*, *T-34*, *Sunstroke*, etc.) and a couple of television shows (e.g., *Masha and the Bear* on RTS2 and *The Kitchen* on O2). While premieres of Russian films are always supported by the SGE and receive a lot of publicity (e.g., Tomislav Nikolić was the guest of honor at the premiere of *Sunstroke*) and the shows are being shown on national and state-friendly television channels, these examples are so infrequent and sporadic that they are simply drowned out by countless Western and Balkan products.

Furthermore, Russia has been keen to promote its education in Serbia through exchange programs organized by Rossotrudnichestvo, Rosmolodezh (Russian agency in charge of youth policy), and the Gorchakov Fund, as well as through guest lecturers from the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. In addition to this, Moscow and Belgrade have been intensifying exchanges and cooperation in the spheres of culture, education, and science, and they have been diversifying into such areas as digital technologies, innovations, and, as of 2019, space exploration, all of which have been facilitated by the Serbian government (Kremlin 2013a, 2019). Nevertheless, even though the SGE have been supporting the aforementioned initiatives formally and informally (e.g., President Vučić's daughter has attended the Russian Embassy's school), Moscow has been struggling to compete with France's Institut Français, Germany's Goethe Institut, and various US-funded initiatives. English remains the most popular language at Serbian schools (studied by 715,816 students across the country), followed by German (approximately 166,000), French (approximately 100,000), and Russian (approximately 68,000) (Krainčanić 2019).

As far as Russian mass media presence in Serbia is concerned, it is represented by *Sputnik Srbija*—a radio station, online news portal, and YouTube channel that has been running since February 2015—and Russia Beyond (formerly Russian Beyond the Headlines). Rossiya Segodnya owns both media outlets. Nevertheless, both trail far behind Serbia's top online news media, such as *Kurir*, *Blic*, and CNN-affiliated N1 (Gemius 2019). Russia Beyond also releases a monthly print supplement inside *Nedeljnik*. However, considering the rapid decline of newspaper readership in Serbia, with only one out of ten getting their information from the press (Media Landscapes 2019b), the reach of these supplements is miniscule. Nevertheless, both *Sputnik Srbija a*nd (to lesser extent) Russia Beyond have received support from both Nikolić and Vučić, as well as other SGE representatives.

Speaking of Russian mass media presence in Serbia one cannot overlook the elephant in the room: there is no Russian television channel in the Serbian language. Instead, CNN-affiliated N1 is on its way to becoming a mainstream Serbian television channel (with Al Jazeera Balkans not too far behind). Considering that an average Serbian viewer spends 315 minutes per day in front of a

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television set, and that television remains the most popular source of information in the country (Media Landscapes 2019a), the absence of RT Srpski means that Moscow is far behind in the mass media domain in Serbia. According to RT's Managing Director Alexei Nikolov (personal communication, April 22, 2019), RT will not be able to secure funding for a Serbian language channel in the foreseeable future.

Finally, when it comes to ensuring protection for the Russian citizens and compatriots in Serbia, the SGE have been keen to accommodate. As of January 2019, the Russian diaspora has been officially recognized as a national minority in Serbia. However, according to one former member (personal communication, May 29, 2019), the reality is that the Russian National Minority Council has gradually come to be dominated by ethnic Serbs who do not speak Russian, and the body does not function as intended. Furthermore, in theory most of the diaspora associations are united under the Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots and supposedly supported by Rossotrudnichestvo. In reality, however, they are merely small groups of middle-aged and elderly women with neither professional credentials nor political weight and with the level of support received from Ambassador Chepurin being from little to none. Moreover, according to one former compatriot (personal communication, May 30, 2019), their activity has been mainly limited to infrequent events and one or two committee meetings per year, which usually involve discussing trivial topics and drinking tea.

Conclusion

It is clear from our analysis that the RGE do posess a certain amount of power over the SGE, and they have been able to capitalize on it to some extent, certainly when it comes to the energy sector. At present almost all of Serbia's gas comes from Russia, approximately 15% of Serbia's budget comes from Gazprom Neft-NIS (*Interfax* 2018), and Russia has secured Serbia's participation in the Turk Stream. Hence, Russia's objective of securing its gas supply network has been achieved in the short term. However, outside of the energy sector Russia tends to play second, third, or even fourth fiddle. This may cause Moscow problems in the long term.

The EU and its member states continue to be the top players in most sectors of Serbia's economy, with China coming to play a more significant role in recent years. Beijing's presence in Serbia has been increasing, and it extends beyond the economic domain, as manifested by the aid received amid the COVID-19 pandemic and "Thank you, Brother Xi" billboards, which only a year ago were welcoming Vladimir Putin. When it comes to the foreign policy domain, EU membership still remains the top priority and most sought-after goal for the current ruling elites in Belgrade. Serbia's European integration is happening at a faster rate than Eurasian integration. After all, much like Russian government elites, their Serbian counterparts are driven first and foremost by economic pragmatism. They do not view Russia through a binary ally-enemy prism, but rather as an economic partner that is more or less attractive depending on the situation (Timofejev 2016, 44). With the Kosovo question out of the way, the only major leverage that Moscow would have over Belgrade would be Serbia's reliance on Russian gas. However, as the Ukrainian scenario has shown, even that strategy may be made obsolete. In an extreme (yet not impossible) case scenario where Serbia, Bulgaria, and Turkey completely shut Russia out, Serbia could bring in gas from Azerbaijan via the remaining pipelines, not to mention opting for liquefied natural gas, which is increasingly becoming more affordable.

Most important of all, Russia is still losing in the security domain to the US/NATO bloc. The symbolic gestures and pro-Russian exhortations many Serbian politicians overindulge in mean very little when the reality is that the SGE have signed a number of agreements with NATO over the past few years granting the alliance's personnel access to military bases, diplomatic status, and freedom of movement in Serbia. All of the above have been denied to the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Niš. The aforementioned agreements certainly grant more powers to NATO in the security domain than the SPD and the Military Cooperation Agreement give to Russia. Serbia's

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official military neutrality is purely symbolic, as it is getting closer to NATO but not to the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). The latter is hardly necessary, seeing as Serbia already has arrangements with respect to Russian military equipment, facilitated by agreements such as the MTCA, and is currently not under any threat of a military attack. As long as the US and NATO military presence in Serbia dwarfs that of Russia and the CSTO, Moscow's security objectives shall never be fully achieved.

Furthermore, while promotion of cultural themes and narratives focusing on history and religion may work for the time being, they are not as appealing to the younger generation, who do not remember the NATO bombing campaign of 1999, and who rather enjoy Western mass culture products that continue to significantly outnumber the Russian alternatives in Serbia. In addition to this, N1 shall continue to gain ground in the absence of a Russian television channel in Serbia, which means that without the capacity for agenda-setting, Russia shall remain powerless in the mass media domain. Moreover, if Russia wants to compete with the USA and the EU, it needs internal victories (e.g., economic growth, increase in living standards, etc.) to make itself attractive in more concrete terms (Atlagić 2015, 117). As for the Russian diaspora, without any input from the new ambassador, they will continue to play a purely decorative role and have no capacity for any significant impact.

Finally, it can be affirmed that the SGE have been fairly accommodating across all domains, which indicates that the RGE do have some power over the SGE. At the same time, the RGE have been unable to amass more influence due to the lack of their own effort. There may well be hidden factors, such as the SGE's blocking of the RGE's efforts behind the scenes or the ulterior motives of Russia's secret services. However, we can only assess the current situation based on the existing evidence. Considering that Russia's current foreign policy is driven primarily by pragmatism and considerations of short-term gain, it is unlikely that they will intensify their efforts anytime soon. Hence, it is likely that Russia will soon become less relevant. At the same time, considering that Serbia's current politics is similarly driven by pragmatism and opportunism, there is no guarantee that the SGE will continue to accommodate their perfidious Russian counterparts. With Washington, Brussels, and Beijing in the picture, the balance of power will not be getting tipped in Moscow's favor for the foreseeable future.

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