Russia's communication strategy and the EU: Why Moscow is winning the battle for soft power in Serbia

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Serbia is often viewed as occupying a position midway between the EU and Russia in its relations with the wider world, but what explains the attitudes of Serbian citizens toward each of these potential partners? **Jaroslaw Wisniewski** *writes that a carefully implemented communication strategy has allowed Moscow to successfully cultivate a positive image of Russia among Serbs living throughout the Balkans. He argues that unless the EU can respond with a positive vision of its own, there is a risk of attitudes shifting away from support for the EU and toward the narrative promoted by the Kremlin.*

When Russia Today started broadcasting its daily news programme in Serbian on 1 January 2015, the official message was that it was merely to add 'Russia's view on a particular situation' in a media context where 'Western media have been operating for over 20 years'.

The establishment of what became RT/Sputnik Srbija, with a relatively small staff of around 30, turned out to be a low-investment high-reward initiative. It tapped into an already existing Russian presence (outlined in a 2014 OSW analysis) through newspaper supplements such as *Ruska Reč* and *Rusija i Srbija* (in *Politika* and *Geopolitika*). And although this Russian media presence remains small, as market research by Ipsos Strategic Marketing shows, the strategy has ultimately been a significant success story for Moscow.

This success stems from the fact that the Kremlin has been able to build a positive narrative of partnership, fostering an image of Belgrade being 'listened to' and 'respected' (regardless of whether that is actually the case) by a Russian state that is cast more as a supportive 'older brother' than an independent country. This is in stark contrast to the EU's approach, which has been based on compliance: namely the principle that if Serbia wishes to join the EU's club it has to comply with all of the accession chapters.

Pro-Russian voices in Serbia often ratify this narrative by citing two key examples: Moscow's veto of the Srebrenica genocide resolution at the UN, and Russia's actions in undermining Kosovo's UNESCO bid. Put simply, the image is one of Russia showing 'respect', while the West is more intent on issuing demands and pushing for unpopular reforms. Russia is also 'winning' in this contest for influence because the West has refused to use its comparative advantage in terms of resources and soft power. This uncontested field has opened the door for the Kremlin's rhetoric to make inroads in Serbia.

An uncontested narrative

Given the relatively small scale of Russia's involvement in Serbia, why is Moscow's communication strategy having such a big impact? In many respects, the EU has only itself to blame. The EU has been unable or unwilling to go beyond the uninspiring narrative of stabilisation and potential benefits stemming from membership, and it lacks any coherent communication strategy towards the region. This void has its own negative consequences, especially at a time when the common Balkan perception of the EU, brought about by the mishandling of events such as the euro and refugee crises, is increasingly negative, or at best neutral.

Russia's success, measured in terms of its popularity in the region, is mainly a result of the fact that it remains uncontested. Specific resources adapted to an identified target group, coupled with the conscious use of historical/religious/cultural narratives, has helped Russia in extending the reach of its propaganda. Local politicians pragmatically dance to the Kremlin's tune, trying to maximise their gains and benefit from both the EU and Russia.
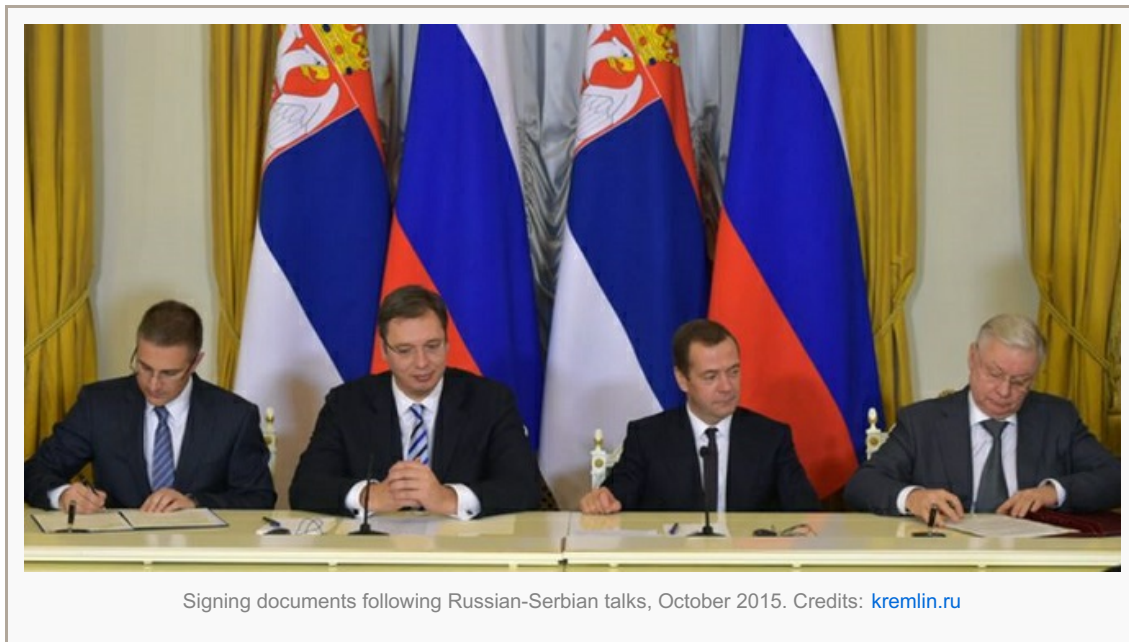
More broadly, the lack of a coherent 'EU Balkan narrative' has ensured the EU keeps losing ground. And all of these factors are creating a favourable climate for Russia. Favourable enough to make an alliance with Russia more popular among Serbian citizens (67.2% for to 18.8% against) than its entrance to the EU (50.9% for to 38.8% against).

What does Russia's communication strategy in the Balkans consist of?

Russia's 'communications arsenal' is relatively standard. It has a very specific audience (the Serbian-speaking general public living in all countries of the former Yugoslavia) and a very specific aim – vying for attention and promoting Kremlin-friendly narratives in the overall regional media discourse, ultimately facilitating a positive image of Russia.

Moscow has made a conscious decision concerning the level and nature of the resources it is willing to invest in order to pursue these goals. These resources are notably smaller than in Ukraine or in other countries with high numbers of Russian-speakers. Nevertheless, they are specifically tailored to the audience, and are intent on the exploitation of symbols (history, religion and ethno-linguistic similarities).

The promoted narrative is based on a 'special relationship' between Serbia and Russia. When you travel from Belgrade's airport to the city centre, you are immediately confronted by a huge roadside banner featuring the flags of both countries on a blue sky, with the sentence 'Partnership for the Future'. This optimistic image, combined with frequent bilateral meetings and various declarations (e.g. the 2013 'strategic partnership declaration') has established an image of a reliable, long-term partner that Serbia can always count on.

Signing documents following Russian-Serbian talks, October 2015. Credits: kremlin.ru

There are several key factors contained within the strategy. First, there is the exploitation of history: this strategy builds on the popular image of a centuries-old Serbian-Russian alliance and continued support for Serbia's stance on Kosovo, which creates a narrative of 'common understanding', while ignoring less-positive episodes of Serbian-Russian history (e.g. the Stalin-Tito schism).

Second, there is a focus on the Serbian language, for instance through investments in Serbian-language news on RT or the Serbian version of Sputnik International (a radio and internet portal). This allows specific Kremlin-friendly narratives (in Serbian) to reach its audience not only in Serbia itself, but also in parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, or North Kosovo, which may be sympathetic to pro-Russian (and anti-US) news coverage. It should nevertheless be pointed out that the coverage of Serbian services of Voice of America or Radio Free Europe may well be wider, but they do not seem to have an equal impact.

Third, there is a desire to play on religion. This entails the conscious exploitation of religious links between the Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches, including through the use of funding from Russian companies present in Serbia, such as Gazprom's 'strategic support' for the renovation of the church of St. Sava in Belgrade.

Finally, there is what might be termed the 'politics of intent' and a general pragmatic use of current affairs. This includes the exploitation of current events, such as the announcement early this year of Russia's 'intention' to provide Serbia with new weaponry as a response to the announcements made by the new Croatian government (no actual weapons have been sold so far, but acts seem not to matter).

To all of these factors one can add less visible strategies stemming from the dichotomy of Serbia's foreign policy, pro-Russian political voices (such as Nenad Popović), pressure on the media (which affects mainly more liberal outlets), and various factors contributing to what Jelena Milić has put under the common umbrella of the 'Rusification of Serbia'.

Soft power rather than 'hybrid warfare'

Much has been made of Russia's alleged use of 'hybrid warfare' in Ukraine. NATO defines the concept as a type of warfare which blends conventional and unconventional warfare alongside regular and irregular methods, as well as information and cyber warfare. Although the term is undeniably fashionable at present, it can nevertheless underplay the complexity of Russia's actions, with the basic implication often being simply that Russia is engaged in activities that the West regards as dangerous within a given territory.

Some politicians have been willing to accuse Russia of engaging in this type of warfare in the Balkans, notably Bulgaria's President, who stated in November 2015 that there were 'signs' such actions were already being undertaken by Moscow in relation to a cyber-attack on Bulgarian institutions. But it would be wrong in this case to draw a causal link between hybrid warfare and the growing visibility of Russian broadcasting: the aim of media organisations remains simply to promote the Kremlin's narrative rather than lay the foundations for a military conflict.

The success of Russian media organisations should instead be viewed as a distinct element of Russian soft power, through which Moscow can raise doubts concerning the reporting of western media sources. And here Serbia offers particularly fertile ground given the negative perceptions among Serbian society of the West's coverage of the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, where coverage by the BBC and CNN in particular was perceived to be biased.

Where is the EU?

Despite the fact that the European Commission's President, Jean-Claude Juncker, has made clear Serbia will not join the European Union before 2020, many believe that this rather vague promise of post-2020 accession should keep Belgrade on the path toward EU membership. But some local Balkan experts have characterised the EU's approach as being on 'autopilot', with too much focus on process rather than on substance.

The Berlin process, which was intended to be an expression of a 'new EU strategy' in the region, as well as a response to Russian policy in Ukraine and the Balkans, is limited to regional, business and investment-oriented cooperation. This is what the region arguably needs, but it is hardly inspiring, despite the endeavours of politicians (as can be seen, for instance, in the 'motorway for peace' label given by the Serbian PM to the projected Nis-Pristina motorway). In the end, any enlargement, whenever the EU will be ready for it, will require public support. The current level of public support sits at an average of around 50% in Serbia, which is not particularly encouraging. Furthermore, Serbian accession will require a unanimous agreement by all 28 Member States, which could prove difficult to achieve.

The 'hands-off' approach being pursued by the EU can already be seen to have had negative consequences, with a recent poll for the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Serbia suggesting that hard right nationalists can count on 17.4% of support overall, with Vojislav Seselj's Serbian Radical Party sitting in second place with 9.4% of the vote. This is potentially a massive challenge for stability in the region and may make progress towards the EU more

difficult, not to mention further complicating cooperation over the migration crisis. The EU may think that merely talking about the potential benefits of membership or access to the single market will suffice, but in reality there is a need for a more positive narrative from the EU, offering a genuine partnership (and thus mirroring the Kremlin's successful approach). The stakes are therefore high and the EU clearly cannot afford to 'lose' Serbia.

The EU however seems to be more focused on dealing with Russian propaganda in Russian-speaking countries, though limited resources and competing initiatives (such as the lack of pan-EU support for European Endowment for Democracy) may lead one to question the effectiveness of these policies. Calls to pay attention to Russian influence in the region (as was stated at the LSE's conference on Russia in the Balkans in 2015) have so far been largely ignored.

Meanwhile Russia is continuing to implement its low-investment high-reward communication strategy, further strengthening pro-Kremlin attitudes. At present, both Serbia and Montenegro are roughly divided in half when it comes to views on the Russian government, with the Munich Security Report 2016 indicating that 49% of citizens in Serbia and 50% of citizens in Montenegro approve of the current job being done by Vladimir Putin in office). The EU may one day, in the next decade, wake up to these two prospective members being more convinced of the ideas and values of Russia than they are of those of the EU.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Jarosław Wiśniewski – *LSE*
Jarosław Wiśniewski is Visiting Fellow at LSEE Research on South Eastern Europe, LSE European Institute. He holds a PhD in European Studies from King's College London and has previously worked as a consultant for the European Commission, Council of Europe, British Council as well as a number of European civil society organisations and various public and private institutions in the EU and in South East Europe: in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia among others. You can follow him on Twitter @jarwisniewski

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