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Articles and Statements

Relations Between Russia and Serbia

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Abstract

Relations between Russia and Serbia are closely allied with historical, spiritual, and cultural ties. Of all the great powers, Russia has had the strongest influence on Serbia. This paper will deal with the history of Serbian-Russian relations, starting with 16th century and Ivan the Terrible's interests in Balkans. Since the 18th century, the opinion has emerged that Russia is a protector of Serbia. First, the Serbian Uprising was a great opportunity for Russia's "entry" into the Balkan regions. After the October Revolution, relations tensed since the monarchy was opposed to communism. After World War II, relations improved, but only until 1948 when Tito and Stalin came into the direct conflict that lasted until Stalin's death. The second half of the 20th century was marked by better relations between these two countries.

Keywords: Russia, Serbia, Yugoslavia, Balkans, Eastern Europe.

1. Introduction

The long tradition of relations between the peoples of Russia and the Balkan Peninsula, the constant involvement of the Russian state from the end of the 17th century into a political confrontation in this region, the historically formed image of South-Eastern Europe as an arena for clashes between the interests of the great powers – all this could not but cause the natural attention of politicians and scholars to the Balkan issue in modern times. In Serbia, there has always been a very well-known myth about the historical and long friendship between Serbia and Russia. However, Russia's use of "soft power" in its interaction with Serbia has mainly contributed to this understanding of the relationship between the two countries. This myth speaks of centuries-old friendship and brotherhood between the two Orthodox countries, i.e., Serbia and Russia. What is particularly emphasized in this respect is that Russia presents itself as a protector of Serbia. However, rational and critical views, especially historical, represent more realistic views about relations between Serbia and Russia. This critical doctrine considers that one of the main goals of the Russian Federation is positioning itself in the world with special focus on the Balkans. This understanding of the relationship between the two countries has sustained for more than two centuries, almost without change.

The Yugoslav crisis, which entailed inter-ethnic clashes and civil wars in the Balkans, was the bloodiest conflict in Europe since the Second World War. The process of disintegration of the states

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of the former Yugoslavia has not yet been stopped, as evidenced by the declaration of independence by the Republic of Montenegro in 2006 and the continuing friction over the status of the Balkan regions, such as Kosovo.

2. Discussion and results

2.1. Relations during the Middle Ages

During the time of Emperor Ivan IV the Terrible (1530–1584), Russian policy began take serious interest in the East and the Balkans. However, the opinion and attitude that Russia is the protector of Serbia and the Christian peoples of the Balkans was only formed in the 18th century. This understanding belied the true intentions of the Russian empire toward that part of Europe. This myth about the intimate friendship between the two nations sought to conceal Russia's attempts to manage the Balkan countries in accordance with their imperial goals, but also to use them in their struggle with other great powers ([Russkiy Mir, 2009](#)). The Ottoman Empire did not oppose Russian aspirations because they demanded for themselves the right to protection of Muslims in Russia. In this way has been created the ideological basis that allowed Russia for centuries to pursue free expansion to the southeast and the achievement of European imperial aspirations – all under the assumption of the myth of the protection of Orthodox Christian Nations.

The first international agreement by which Russia won the right to represent "the Orthodox peoples of the Balkans" (Serbs, Bulgarians, and Greeks) was the Treaty of Kucuk-Kaynarca in 1774. Wallachia and Moldavia, although they were still parts of the Ottoman Empire, came under Russian protectorate, and Russia received the right of the passage of its merchant fleet through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits ([Treaty of Peace, 1774](#)). With this change, Russia came closer to achieving one of its goals of having access to the "warm seas." Already in 1782, Empress Catherine II created the "Greek project" whose aim was to divide the Ottoman Empire, and with that the Balkan Peninsula, between Austria and Russia. Had this plan been implemented, Russia would have gained most of Serbia under its control and had access to the Danube.

2.2. First Serbian Uprising

The First Serbian Uprising, which was in 1804, was an opportunity for a stronger penetration of Russia into the Balkans. Russia initially imposed to Serbian rebels to seek only autonomy within the Empire because Russia was on good terms with the Ottoman Empire. The strength of Russian influence in Serbia is shown in the fact that the Serbian rebels initially wanted to turn for help to Austria (as a territorially nearer Christian ally with which it had previously fought against the Ottomans), but they were under the strong influence of the Orthodox church, which was also under Russian influence, and in the end they turned to Russia. In 1806, the situation has changed significantly because Russia entered into war against the Ottoman Empire. Under Russian influence, the Serbs give up further peace negotiations with the Ottoman Empire, and the positive results that had been achieved with "Ichko's deputation" were also lost (Petar Ichko, head of the Serbian delegation at the negotiations with the Ottomans). Russia then considered that the guarantor of Russian influence in the Balkans should be Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, for strategic reasons and because of Napoleon, in 1812 Russia with the Ottoman Empire signed the Bucharest peace treaty. The eighth point of the agreement specifically referred to the Serbian rebels - Ottoman garrisons would be returned to towns, rebel forts would be destroyed, and the Serbs would be left alone to deal with the Ottomans ([Meriage, 1978](#)).

The period of 1876-1878 marked the great Eastern crisis and Serbia's entry into the war against the Ottoman Empire. Meanwhile, Russia with the Austro-Hungarian plans sought to divide spheres of influence in the Balkans, and one of the most famous of these plans was the Budapest Convention of 1877. Russia's goal was to break up the Ottoman Empire and take Bosphorus and Dardanelles since exit to the sea was necessary because of growing agrarian exports and to preserve the Black Sea fleet ([Meriage, 1978](#)). These economic and strategic goals of Russia were shown in the ideological narrative of helping the Balkan Christians in the struggle for the liberation from the Ottomans. Some would say that Russia helped Serbia only for its own benefit, but actually, those two nations have much stronger connections.

Until 1940, there were no diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. During World War II, Soviets were trying to functionalize partisans with the purpose of their negotiations with the Western allies. Towards the end of the Second World War, more precisely

towards the end of 1944, the Red Army had greatly contributed to the victory of Yugoslav Partisans against the fascist forces (Curtis, 1992).

2.3. Serbian-Russian relations after the Second World War

Diplomatic relations between the USSR and Yugoslavia were established on June 24, 1940. It was during the time of the Cominform Resolution in 1948 that the USSR starts to have an ideological break with Yugoslavia. Stalin wanted to keep Yugoslavia under the control of the eastern bloc. The period from 1948 up until Stalin's death has been very difficult for both countries that emerged as winners after World War II (Curtis, 1992).

After Stalin's death there was the Soviet-Yugoslav reconciliation, but it was short lived since new disagreements began in 1958 and Soviet officials again tried to intervene in decisions of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. In addition, any attempt to reform Yugoslavia in the USSR was accompanied by a negative view, in the sense that they caused anxiety and suspicion in their usefulness. In particular, they harshly judged economic reform in 1965. The Soviets were opposed to all reforms in Yugoslavia because they felt that any reform as well as the democratization lead Yugoslavia "in liberalism and the West" and therefore must be prevented. The Soviet regime has, therefore, constantly looked for and encouraged dogmatists who will start "sovietisation" of Yugoslavia (Curtis, 1992). The event that caused the dissatisfaction of the Soviets, and which has also represented a milestone in the democratization of Yugoslavia, was the replacement of Aleksandar Rankovic, conservative Yugoslav vice president and controller of UDB on Brioni in 1966. In addition to causing discontent, this event meant the end of hope for the return of Yugoslavia to the Soviet "camp" after Tito. Soviet officials at that time thought that Rankovic was a better and more honest communist than those who replaced him; he did not want such a development and he was victim of the winning concepts, which led to liberalism and resulted in something like social democracy.

During the second half of the sixties, the USSR spread the idea of the need for the dissolution of Yugoslavia, that eastern European countries should ensure that they win the most important positions in Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro because these republics were always "pro-Slovenian", unlike other Yugoslav republics that were pro-Western, so it did not matter what happened to them. However, the Soviet delegates said that the disintegration of Yugoslavia was not only an internal affair, but if socialism was threatened in Yugoslavia, then Warsaw Pact troops must intervene, just as they intervened in Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

2.4. Contemporary relations

During the nineties, Russia followed the Western politics that were carried out in the Balkans and participated actively in their creation. Russia as a member of the Contact Group and the UN Security Council has supported all the resolutions related to the Balkan crisis in the nineties.

The Russian Federation is today present in Serbia in various ways, through its media like "Sputnik" and non-governmental organizations such as "Zavetnici" and "Obraz." Today, very often nationalist groups are connected with Russia in some ways. It cannot be said with certainty that Russia defends the heritage of the nineties of the 20th century, left behind the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, but it is true that Russia benevolently accepts Milosevic's political party that is still very active and is even part of the ruling coalition. Milosevic's wife still lives in Moscow. Still, the Russian Federation on the other hand is more protective towards its own position on the Balkans than towards policies set forth in the nineties.

As a result of the collapse of Yugoslavia, war broke out in 1992 between the Serbs and the Bosnians. According to the latest data, the total number of deaths was about 110,000 people, and the number of refugees more than 2.2 million people (Calic, 2012). This conflict is considered the most destructive in Europe since the Second World War. Most civilians suffered from this war. Since July 12, 1995, there was a very large scale massacre of the Bosnian Muslims. In one city alone (Srebrenica), in one day, more than 8000 Bosnians were killed (Calic, 2012). After this tragedy, many countries and international organizations called this tragedy a genocide. As of January 2007, the International Tribunal qualified actions of Serbians as "genocide crimes." In turn, in January 2009, the European Parliament proclaimed July 11, "the day of the memory of the genocide in Srebrenica"(20 years after...). It can be stressed that such a large-scale massacre within a potential

Europe state has damaged the reputation of not only Europe but also of the world's leading powers and international organizations.

On July 8, 2015, the UN Security Council considered the draft resolution prepared by Great Britain on Srebrenica, recognizing the massacre as an act of genocide. Three permanent members of the Security Council (France, United Kingdom, United States) and seven non-permanent members (Chad, Chile, Jordan, Lithuania, Malaysia, New Zealand, Spain) supported the document but four (China, Angola, Nigeria and Venezuela) refrained. Voting against the resolution was the permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia, which blocked the adoption of the resolution (Baker, 2015). According to Russia, the offered resolution threatened to aggravate the situation in the Balkans. China felt voting on the draft resolution would negatively affect the unity of the members of the Council. The United States and Britain regarded the Russian veto as a denial of the facts established by the UN International Court of Justice (Baker, 2015).

Armed conflicts in the Balkans threatened the emergence of many refugees in the territory of Western European countries and the destabilization of the situation in Europe. Therefore, the security issues and stability of Eastern Europe have become extremely relevant for the international community.

Traditionally, special attention is paid in the Russian-Serbian dialogue to the maintenance of peace and stability in the Balkan region, primarily within the framework of the Kosovo settlement. Russia has consistently supported Serbia in defending its sovereignty and territorial integrity in relation to Kosovo based on international law. On February 18, 2008, Afghanistan, Taiwan, and a number of European countries were the first to recognize the independence of Kosovo. The first such decision was made by France, and then Great Britain and Italy joined it. On the same day, the independence of Kosovo was recognized in the United States. At the same time, recognition of independence of Kosova was opposed by Spain, and also Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, China, and Russia (Kosovo...).

Russia and Serbia have traditionally maintained an active political dialogue. The two countries regularly hold meetings at the highest level. On May 24, 2013, in Sochi, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Tomislav Nikolic signed the declaration on strategic partnership between Russia and Serbia. At the moment, between the two states exist a visa-free regime. The bilateral trade between Russia and Serbia turnover in 2014 amounted to \$2123.0 million dollars, whereas five years before (in 2009) it was almost half less - \$1102.7 million. Total Russian investment in the Serbian economy at the end of 2014 taking into account the investment carried out through third countries reached 3.9 billion dollars (Глаголева и др., 2015). The two countries have conducted joint military exercises. In 2016, Russia transferred to Serbia as a gift thirty T-72C tanks and thirty BRDM-2 with all arms. It is also reported that Russia intends to transfer six MiG-29 fighters in the near future (Лихоманов, 2016a). Moreover, they signed an agreement on the purchase of the Buk air defense complex for the Serbian army (Лихоманов, 2016b). Close contacts are maintained between the governments of the two countries. Inter-parliamentary cooperation is being strengthened. The authorities of Serbia, aimed at joining the EU, did not join the anti-Russian sanctions of the European Union and take a reserved position on the events in Ukraine.

Besides that, in the city of Nis there is still an active Russian humanitarian mission, which is active mostly when Serbia is threatened by a humanitarian catastrophe such as floods or wildfires. So, Russia continues to be present in Serbia in various ways.

3. Conclusion

The peoples of Russia and Serbia firmly connect values as similarity in origin and language, but there is also a direct affinity between the people. The processes taking place on the territory of the former socialist Yugoslavia are constantly attracting the attention of the Russians. And this attention increases from year to year. Today, Russia is restoring its positions in the traditionally important Balkan region. Russia was one of the most important actors to support Serbia in many political and regional developments. Besides, the essential growth of Russia in the Serbian economy is evident.

The region of Central and Southeastern Europe has always played a special role in world development. Always staying territorially and geographically part of Europe, Serbia has never in fact been part of it. As in the past, today the issue of entering Europe is connected with the complexity and unresolved "Serbian issue," which has a 200-year history.

After the end of the inter-bloc confrontation and until now, the Balkans remain one of the most unstable regions of the world. At the same time, geographically being a part of Europe, Serbia naturally aspires to enter the European Union.

In the end, we can say that, although geographically remote, connections between the Serbian and Russian nations are strong. Serbians relate to Russians with a lot respect and love, and religion is an additional element. Besides that, Vladimir Putin is the most popular politician in Serbia. Many scenarios and surveys suggest that in case of his candidacy, he would win with a convincing result. But, in practice, Russia besides offering diplomatic support, for now does not give any concrete, economic support to Serbia. Regarding future relations, it is very hard to give accurate predictions since Serbia is between a "hammer and anvil," i.e., between NATO and Russia. Both of these powers pull Serbia from one side to another.

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