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Edited by

Ivan Cvejić

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ORHAN DRAGAŠ

THE END OF THE
RUSSIAN WORLD

RUSSIA, UKRAINE, BALKANS



The end of the Russian world - fact and emotion

For years, my team and I have been researching Russia's relationship with the Balkans and its motives for preserving and strengthening its influence in this part of Europe, particularly after the turbulent events of the 1990s. In addition to my personal research curiosity, as it's about the region I live in, I am also motivated by the fact that the Balkans is a global neuralgic point where the interests of great powers only sometimes coincide, but as a rule they are conflicted.

It is difficult to give a concise assessment of why Russia is interested in this region and in what ways it wants to achieve its influence, but let it be an unpopular and scientifically problematic short cut for this occasion - a negative definition. What Russia wants in the Balkans (and with the Balkans) is directly opposite to everything the West wants in the Balkans (and with the Balkans). If the Western framework offers the Balkans integration into the EU and NATO, as a proven way for economic and social progress, the Russian offer is the opposite - it discourages integration, asks everyone to "remain true to themselves" and not blend into the Western "melting pot". While Western options tend to erase borders and reduce ethnic tensions, because not so long ago they birthed bloody wars, the Russian model insists on strengthening national feelings and confronting everyone who

is not “us”. While the West is asking for strong institutions, the rule of law, free elections and public, Russia assures that all that is redundant, and that it is important to preserve one’s “Slavic soul” that leads the society and the state as dictated by the myths of brotherhood.

Since the events in the triangle Russia-Ukraine-Balkans have accelerated dramatically, there is less and less time for long-term research processes, the results of which would be presented through articles in scientific journals or at international conferences. Simply, I felt a great need to try to interpret the epochal events in real time, using the knowledge accumulated so far and the research work that has up to this point discovered and proven many legalities about Russia’s attitude towards its important priorities, specifically Ukraine and the Balkans.

Therefore, this collection of short essays, media columns published in the last year - from September 2021 to September 2022, as a thematically rounded whole dedicated exclusively to the behaviour of Russia at the moment when it decided to implement its mythical-quasi-historical concept of the “Russian world” is before you. Its aggression against Ukraine is an event that will change relations in Europe in the long term and concerns every country and every European individually. I am convinced that the Ukrainian crisis is at the same time the most important internal issue of every European country, especially those in the Balkans. I am guided by this and try to prove it in the texts in this collection. I hope readers will find it inspiring and that they will compare the dates when the columns were published and the events that followed, as they will find many projections that have come true in short term. I am convinced that this is the most important task of any author today who wants to interpret historical shifts on the European and global scene.

Columns from this collection were originally published in a number of Serbian, regional, European and world media - Blic, Politika (Belgrade), Portal Analitika, Antena M (Podgorica), Albanian Post (Tirana), Face TV, BN TV (BiH), Sloboden Pečat (Skopje), Euractiv (Brussels), Kyiv Post (Kyiv), Jerusalem Post... In their entirety, or in parts, they were published by hundreds of

media around the world, and they reached millions of readers through social networks. I see this interest as a confirmation of the accuracy of the main thread that connects all the texts, that the idea of the “Russian world” is deeply harmful and destructive not only for Ukraine and the Balkans, which are observed as “brothers” in that concept, but also for Russia itself, which persistently reinforces it, even by military force. The end of the Russian world, therefore, is not (only) an emotional expectation of the author, but a grounded and well-argued research conclusion. You will see for yourself in the texts that follow.

Dr Orhan Dragaš
Belgrade, September 2022

1.9.2021

Do you want Russian election conditions in Serbia?

While the inter-party dialogue on the conditions for holding the elections next April is coming to an end in Serbia, maybe it is time for one of our small contributions. Here are some suggestions on what the campaign and vote for the President of Serbia, the Parliament and local authorities in Belgrade should look like:

The elections are held without OSCE observers, and without domestic organisations specialised in monitoring them, because they have been declared “foreign agents”. Leaders of major opposition parties cannot physically participate in the campaign and elections, because they are either in prison or had to leave the country under pressure. All sites promoting anti-government views and politicians will be blocked, and large digital companies such as Google and Apple will be pressured to remove all political messages and advertisements criticising the government from their platforms. It will be possible to deposit an unlimited number of ballots at the polling station if you are hidden behind the state flag, and a member of the election board blocks that scene by standing between you and the security camera.

Terrible, you will say, this is out of the question, this is pure repression. Serbia is light-years away from such electoral theatre.

In fact, there are no elections under such measures.

It is true that this “electoral conditions proposal” has nothing to do with Serbia; it is quite shocking to ask for something like this in 2021. However, it has everything to do with Russia and it is only a brief description of the conditions under which parliamentary elections were held, and Putin’s United Russia won convincingly. However, our small “prank” with the transplantation of Russian election conditions into Serbian politics is not an unsavoury joke. It is quite logical because a number of fierce fighters for fair electoral conditions in Serbia at the same time stand for as much Russia in Serbia as possible, consider that country a role model, and consider its president a leader and a protector of small nations. In any case, they consider Russia a model according to which the Serbian political shirt should be sown.

The entire right wing of the Serbian opposition scene, if there are centrists and leftists in it at all, inherits the values of the new Russia, that of Putin. In the vocabulary of socialist self-government, they are followers, both “ideologically and action-wise”, of the ruling Russian party and its undisputed leader, with one small difference. They would transplant everything that exists in Russia, but not their electoral conditions, because under those conditions, not only would they not be able to succeed in the elections, but they would be prevented from participating, one way or another. Many of them have already been put into practice and are quite effective.

How is it possible then, that negotiations on electoral conditions in Serbia are full of fans of Putin and United Russia, except for a small part? Where did the idea that everything Russian is welcome in Serbia come from, except for the key matter because of which Russia and its leader are where they are and why their fans from Serbia admire them?

A good part of the opposition in Serbia reckons that it will grow on the wings of a truly widespread pro-Russian sentiment among voters. They proudly present themselves as the only authentic representatives of the new Russian project in Serbia, sometimes getting into fierce quarrels over who is true to the

fate and who has the right to legitimise in that way. They gladly travel to Russia and meet with politicians from the establishment and return to Serbia sharing photos, like some licenses showing that they are the authorised importers of those political goods.

But at the same time, they are looking for electoral conditions that rule in Europe, for themselves and Serbia. Regardless of whether they participate in meetings with EU parliamentarians, or out of hostility towards “foreign interference”, they participate in another, domestic negotiating dialogue; they are equally angry with the EU because it did not put enough pressure on Aleksandar Vučić and forced him to give in to opposition demands. And those demands are really trivial when compared to the Russian political reality, which they would gladly apply in Serbia.

United Russia is a political and state-building role model to, for example, Dveri, which signed a cooperation agreement with them in 2016, or the Serbian Party Zavetnici, which has a similar agreement with the Russians from 2017, at one time, on behalf of DSS (Democratic Party of Serbia), Sanda Rašković-Ivić, today a member of Vuk Jeremić’s People’s Party, signed a cooperation agreement with United Russia. The ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) also has a party agreement with United Russia, not one, but two. The first was signed by Tomislav Nikolić, as an opposition leader in 2010, and the second by Marko Đurić eight years later.

However, in all those years, SNS did not transfer Russian recipe into the state policy of Serbia, it preserved party cooperation as its “private” matter, and it conducts state affairs according to the European model, not the Russian one, including the openness for members of the European Parliament to participate in the negotiations on electoral conditions. This is probably one of the most important reasons why pro-Russian politicians in Serbia often complain about Vučić to Russian authorities, saying that he is not their sincere partner and that he is turned to the West and that Moscow should deny him support.

They would certainly do it differently if they just had the chance. Only to achieve electoral victory under the full-blooded European electoral conditions, which they are eagerly asking for, and

then they would apply everything from the agenda imported from the east which is close to their hearts, including the conditions of the electoral theatre from the beginning of the text.

11.10.2021

Two sides of Russian legalism on Kosovo

Russia will accept any agreement on Kosovo that suits Serbia. The decision must be confirmed by the UN Security Council. Depending on whether you put the conjunction “and” or the conjunction “but” between these two sentences, you will be able to interpret Moscow’s position on the Kosovo issue and negotiations, which have been going on for a decade, somewhat more clearly. And for a full interpretation, it will be necessary to distinguish whether this is one position of Russia, or maybe two.

It is possible that we unnecessarily complicate the meaning of the Russian position on Kosovo, because it has been communicated long enough and at first glance it seems quite clear. But something that today seems like a pure and “principled” position (Russian officials always emphasise this) may sometimes manifest itself in the future as a rather complicated attitude, and even as a major obstacle to successful business.

As a guest at the ceremonial marking of the 60th anniversary of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade, Sergey Lavrov repeated Russia’s position (or two positions) on what the future agreement regarding Kosovo should look like. It is an obligatory part of every high-level Russian-Serbian meeting, and it would be a