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WHAT DO WE NEED FROM RUSSIA? SERBIAN VIEW OF RUSSIA'S ROLE IN THE BALKANS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21st CENTURY²

The symbolic opposition of Russia and the West is an important element of Serbian collective identity. Its importance was enhanced after the breakup of Yugoslavia, when Serbia returned to a geopolitical position similar to the one it had in the 19th century³ and relied to a large extent on imperial Russia. The focus in this text is on Serbia only as a country whose policy has the greatest influence on political public opinion among Serbs living in other Balkan countries formed after the breakup of Yugoslavia, primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina, i. e. Republika Srpska as its entity, and Montenegro.

The importance of Russia in Serbian political life is indicated by data from a public opinion survey in Serbia, according to which the majority of its citizens consider the Russian Federation a friendly country.⁴ A part of the pub-

lic in Serbia expressed their support for Russia in the current international circumstances by organizing mass rallies in support of the Russian Federation during the execution of a special military operation, expressing, at the same time, disagreement with the decision of the official Belgrade to vote against the interests of the Russian Federation at the United Nations General Assembly sessions.⁵ The Serbian government is the only European government that has not imposed any type of sanctions on the Russian Federation. There are several reasons for this: the Russian Federation protects the territorial integrity of Serbia in the United Nations Security Council where, together with the People's Republic of China, it insists on compliance with Resolution 1244 of the UN on Kosovo; in addition to this, the Russian Federation prevented the UN Security Council from vot-

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³ *Ковић М.* Предговор — Васиљ Поповић и његова књига Европа и српско питање // Поповић В. Европа и српско питање у периоду ослобођења 1804–1918. Београд : Catena Mundi, 2020. С. 9.

⁴ According to relevant surveys of public opinion from the middle of last year, 82% of Serbian citizens are against imposing sanctions on Russia.

When it comes to Serbia's membership in the European Union, there are 20% of "strong supporters" of this idea, 35% of "strong opponents" and the rest of the citizens are in a position between "yes" and "no". Basically, 41.8% of citizens would support Serbia's entry into the EU, and 48.3 would be against it. Serbs see NATO as the main culprit for the military conflict in Ukraine (68.7%). See: Istraživanje NSPM: Preko 82 odsto građana protiv uvođenja sankcija Rusiji. URL: <https://www.vreme.com/vesti/istrazivanje-nspm-preko-82-odsto-gradjana-protiv-uvodjenja-sankcija-rusiji/> (accessed: 08.04.2023).

⁵ In 2022, Serbia voted for the proposal of a resolution that "condemns the Russian invasion of Ukraine and calls on Moscow to immediately withdraw its forces from Ukraine," as well as for the suspension of Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. On the occasion of the Serbian vote, the Russian ambassador to Serbia stated that Russia "understands Serbia" and that "its vote is the result of the strongest pressure from the USA and the EU." See: Боцан-Харченко: Разумијемо Србију, њено гласање у УН резултат је најјачег притиска САД и ЕУ. URL: <https://www.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=466176> (accessed: 08.04.2023).

ing on a resolution (at the suggestion of Great Britain) that would have stigmatized the Serbs as perpetrators of the alleged genocide against the Muslim population in Srebrenica during the civil war of the 1990s; finally, Serbia maintains the position that during the nineties of the last century it was a victim of sanctions and that this type of pressure does not contribute to solving problems on the international level.¹ The first two stated reasons fit within the framework of the traditional idea of the majority of the Serbs about Russia as their protector.

Before we devote ourselves to this perception, which has a significant role in the formation of the Serbian collective identity, let us return, for a moment, to the question of the support that part of the Serbian public expresses for the special military operation of the Russian Federation in Ukraine. At the base of this support lies the belief that the West, which first destroyed socialist Yugoslavia and then carried out aggression against Serbia in 1999 by taking Kosovo away from it, has instrumentalized Ukraine. In addition to this, it is believed that the fate of the inhabitants of Donbass, if Russia had not protected them in this way, would have been identical to the fate of the Serbs from Croatia, which in the 1990s, with the help of the West, reduced it to the level of a statistical error in country's total population. Keeping this in mind, a significant number of the Serbs view Russia's response to the West's activities in Ukraine as compensation for the humiliation that the Serbs as a nation experienced during the 1990s.

The expectation of the Serbs from Russia, ever since its return to the international political scene as a world power at the beginning of this century, is that it would become a corrective in the changed international relations, thanks to which the Serbs in the Balkans would be compensated for the loss of the former common state and their sense of dignity would be restored. The instrumentalization of Ukraine by the West and Russia's decisive response, first in 2014 and then in 2022, were seen as the beginning of changes that Serbs had been waiting for almost thirty years. Such expectations of the Serbs are to a significant extent based on the Russian-Serbian political ties developed in the 19th century, in the period of the so-called the Serbian revolution, which ended Serbian slavery under the Turks, which had lasted for more than five centuries. The highlight of the Serbs' idea of Russia as their protector is related to Russia's attitude towards Serbia during the First World War. The protective attitude that Nicholas II Romanov showed towards Serbia in one of the most tragic episodes in its history² strengthened the positive image of Russia among Serbs and made him personally one of the most respected figures in Serbian history³. The leadership of the Russian Federa-

¹ In addition to sporadic calls by pro-Western politicians in Serbia, both opposition and those in power, to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation, the government has repeatedly warned that it will resist Western pressure as long as it can.

² The human sacrifices that Serbia suffered in the First World War were enormous. According to data from the peace conference held in Versailles in 1919, the Kingdom of Serbia lost 1,250,000 inhabitants in the war, which was as much as 28 percent of the population it had before the war. See: (Ne) realan broj poginulih u Prvom svetskom ratu. URL: <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/416224/Ne-realan-broj-poginulih-u-Prvom-svetskom-ratu> (accessed: 28.03.2023).

³ In the description of the role of Nicholas II Romanov in the Serbian collective memory, his next sentence stands out: "You will not blame me, gentlemen, that I am first of all a Russian and that the interests of Russia are the closest to me, but I assure you that right after that I am a Serb and that they are the closest to me the interests of the Serbian people..." See: Цар

tion since 2000, with a similar pattern, and primarily by referring to the mentioned UN resolution 1244 and defeating the proposal of the British resolution from 2015, is consolidating a stable positive image of Russia among Serbs. In this manner, former political activists of the Russian Federation, such as Yevgeny Primakov Sr. and the former representative of Russia in the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, secured a worthy place in Serbian history with their personal efforts in defense of Serbian positions.

Serbian reliance on Russia during the 19th century was certainly conditioned by the cultural, primarily religious ties between the two nations. In the Serbian struggle for freedom during the five-century Turkish occupation, the religious identification of the Serbs was so important that they relied not only on Orthodox Russia, but also on other Christian powers in the 19th century – Austria and even France. Namely, the Serbian struggle for freedom in the 19th century was waged for the restoration of Serbian statehood, which meant a return to the "Christian cultural circle". Hence, the help of any powerful Christian ally was welcome.⁴

Comparing the current geopolitical position of Serbia with that of the 19th century in the context of its expectations from the Russian Federation, several things can be observed. The first is related to its contemporary geopolitical position in the narrower sense of the word. It is geopolitically isolated from Russia by the belt of countries formed by the West, which stretches from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The West already worked on the realization of this intention with its contribution to the formation of the first joint state of the South Slavs at the beginning of the 20th century and later by supporting the leadership of communist Yugoslavia.⁵ With the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the breakup of Yugoslavia, the goal of geopolitical isolation of the Serbs in the Balkans was practically realized. Serbian resentment at the status of a "political reserve" in which the West has kept Serbs since the nineties of the last century is reinforced by the fact that in order to break the political space in which all Serbs were united, the national communities liberated by Serbia from under the Austro-Hungarian yoke – Croats and Slovenes – were instrumentalized as well as the Albanian community in the southern Serbian province – Kosovo.

Another significant element of contemporary Russian-Serbian relations is of an identity character. Even today, a part of the political elite and a significant part of the population in Serbia have been facing a problem identifying with the international cultural environment, with the fact that, it seems, their room for maneuver is narrower than it was then. Namely, in the 19th century, Serbs tried to leave the Islamic cultural environment, which was unacceptable to them, and to return to the circle of European civilization. This return was supposed to include both of its cultural and geographical wings – the western, Romano-Germanic and the eastern, Slavic-Russian. Today, when the European idea

Николај II Романов и Срби. URL: <https://asasocijacija.com/prilog/rusi-i-srbija-car-nikolaj-2-romanov-i-srbi/> (accessed: 05.03.2023).

⁴ Поповић В. Европа и српско питање у периоду ослобођења 1804–1918. Београд: Catena Mundi, 2020. С. 28–29.

⁵ Read more about this in different editions of Natalija Narochnjicka's work *Russia and Russians in world history*. For the purposes of this text, the edition in the Serbian language from 2008 was used: Наталија Нарочњичка, *Руси и Русија у светској историји*, Српска књижевна задруга, Београд, 2008.

is reduced only to the Romano-Germanic world and its eastern, Slavic-Orthodox factor is expelled from its core, Serbia is on its way to the so-called European integration faces obstacles that could be fatal for it. Namely, by agreeing to side with that world, not only are three centuries of allied relations with Russia put on the back burner, without whose help Serbia might not even survive in the political sense, but it puts us in a position not much better than the one we had during the Turkish occupation. Unlike the Roman Catholic Slavs, the Serbs do not have such a religious connection with the Western interpretation of the European idea, and they do not, like the Greeks, even have the possibility to refer to the dignity of the cradle of European civilization. In other words, Serbs face the danger of losing their historical identity.¹

Bearing in mind all of the above, the contemporary geopolitical position of Serbia and the Serbs and their relationship to the Russian Federation, compared to the nineteenth century, indicates the following: despite not living in a single political community as in the 19th century, the Serbs still represent an unavoidable political factor in Southeast Europe. The political communities of Serbs in the Balkans – Serbia as a state and Republika Srpska as an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina – represent functional political entities. Serbia has a strong integration potential among Serbs in the Balkans. In contrast to the waver-

ing political elite and the absence of a basic consensus on the issue of relations with the West and Russia, the citizens of Serbia show political favor towards the Russian Federation despite its geopolitical isolation from it. Political socialization conditioned by historical circumstances and despite the ups and downs in the relations between Russia and the Serbs undoubtedly gave a result that speaks in favor of the fact that for Russia Serbia and the Serbs in the Balkans could be a zone of geostrategic, political and economic interest in the future – of course, if such an interest exists on the Russian side. This is precisely the question of special importance for researchers of Russian-Serbian relations and, in general, political scientists: Will Serbia and Serbs be in the focus of Russian geopolitics in its Eurasian era announced by the new foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation and according to which its view will be directed primarily towards the so-called “global south”?² If the answer to this question is affirmative, the realization of Russian interests in Serbia and the Balkans first implies the revitalization of the pro-Russian cultural and political elite that Russia lost in Serbia and the Balkans after the fall of communism and the collapse of the USSR and Yugoslavia. “Going down to the people” (and not exclusively relying on the positions of the political elite) and investing in a new pro-Russian “intellectual core” represent the “cornerstone” of this undertaking.

¹ *Копривица Ч.* Српски пут. Београд : Catena mundi, 2018. С. 383–384.

² See: *Карпович О.* Концепция долгосрочного лидерства. URL: <https://iz.ru/1493218/oleg-karpovich/kontseptciia-dolgosrochnogo-liderstva> (accessed: 04.04.2023).