

# Serbia's Z-syndrome

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„The Balkans produces more history than it can consume” – Winston Churchill.

The Balkans... Region has and always will be an arena for demonstrating conflicts and interests of the Western world, including Great Britain, Austria, Germany, and eventually the USA, and its Eastern opponent, primarily Russia, Turkey, and from now on China. Dating back to the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, the First and Second World Wars and through the last bloody events in the former Yugoslavia in the 90es of the last century the Western Balkans is deemed „litmus test” of civilizations' clashes.

Nowadays position of each of region's countries regarding the so-called Ukrainian issue as well as the support of our state in resisting Russian aggression is another additional indicator for the Balkans.

Despite the NATO and EU membership of the majority of Western Balkan countries as well as the visible prospects of the European integration for Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia has intensified significantly activities in this strategic area of its own interests, especially with the beginning of a full-scale invasion in Ukraine.

In the delineated region Russian Federation lobbies and supports pro-Russian forces from former Yugoslav republics, brings them to power, thereby creating the so-called „satellite” states both to strengthen their own positions and destabilise situation in general. Currently, Kremlin considers Balkan region as a factor of security instability, constantly heating it up and trying to divert international community attention away from war in Ukraine together with financial and

military-technical assistance provision to our state.

Eventually, the Republic of Serbia has traditionally been and still remains a reliable and stable Moscow's ally in the region.

Russian intelligence services (SVR, FSB and GRU) play the first violin in spreading its influence in the country. Due to the significant reduction in their presence in Europe after the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war begun, Serbia has become an important intelligence and subversive activities hub for such services in Southern and Eastern Europe still playing a central role in Russian intelligence operations against Balkan countries.

Russian intelligence services expansion in Serbia takes place with the consent of official Belgrade. Local special services, primarily the Security and Information Agency of Serbia (SIA), do not actually hinder Russia's intelligence activities against third countries in the region, provided that malicious activities against Belgrade itself are limited. At the same time, a high level of interdepartmental cooperation is maintained between intelligence services of both states.

Aleksandr Vulin, today's Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia and its former Minister of Internal Affairs (2020-2022) and Director of SIA (2022-2023), remains the main guarantee of the Russian-Serbian intelligence and security partnership. Main centers of Russia's presence in Serbia, including intelligence ones, are diplomatic structures: the Russian Embassy in Belgrade with Oleksandr Botsan-Kharchenko as a head of diplomatic corps and the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry Mission in the Republic of Serbia and Montenegro led by Dmitry Moskovkin. At the same time, it should be mentioned that after 2022 the majority of Russian diplomats had become personae non gratae in the region. Hence, Serbia together with Bosnia and Herzegovina provided a „safe haven” for this category of persons, including those directly related to the

Russian intelligence services. Last year Bosnian „Detector” published the list of specific names of such „Russian diplomats”.

Moreover, Russia uses humanitarian cooperation organizations both to cover the presence of intelligence services and produce humanitarian impact on the environment in general. The main ones are the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Niš under the leadership of Serbian citizen Boyan Kostych and Russian Yevgeny Filatov, as well as the Russian Center of Culture and Science in Belgrade (headed by Yevgeny Baranov). Russian employees of both structures possess diplomatic status due to bilateral agreements between Russia and Serbia.

Another important Russian partners in Serbia are the organizations of Russian diaspora, the central one of which is the „Coordinating Council of Russian Compatriots” (headed by Svetlana Ilich). With the financial support from Moscow members of community organisations conduct massive pro-Russian events, which should contribute to preserving the image of Serbia as a Russian-friendly country.

Besides, Russia considers the development of Russian-Serbian expert dialogue as a tool for promoting profitable political narratives among Serbian political and military elites. In particular, a network of public organizations was created, e.g. Serbian branches of the „Gorchakov Foundation” and the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies.

In recent years, Russia was focused on strengthening its positions of influence in the „new media” of Serbia and the Western Balkans region – YouTube, Telegram, and Facebook. Nowadays the most avid mouthpieces of Russian malicious efforts in the region are propagandist Mykhailo Zvinchuk (author of „Rybar” Telegram channel) and the Internet portal „Balkanist” close to the Kremlin. Currently, „Balkanist” is popular not only in Serbia itself, but also among the pro-Russian/pro-Serbian population of other ex-Yugoslav republics.

Right after 2022, an extensive network of Serbian-language Telegram channels was created in Serbia, aimed at spreading Russian propaganda and strengthening anti-western sentiments among the Serbian-speaking population of the region. The general network includes more than 65 Telegram channels with coverage from 10 to 100 thousand real users.

Russian federation also demonstrates high activity in Serbia in matters of implementation, including anti-Ukrainian policy. The war in Ukraine is highlighted as Russia's ideological confrontation with the encroachment of the US and its European allies. Such propaganda finds immediate support among the majority of local population, which in its turn, forms a corresponding pro-Russian electorate and delegates power to passionate followers of Moscow's policy or those who publicly demonstrate it. These include „official representatives” of the public association „DNR-Center in Serbia” (created in 2020) Serbian citizens Vuk Damnjanovic and Dejan-Yakov Damnjanovic.

In order to possibly destabilize situation Russian intelligence services provide information and propaganda for the youth. In this case, several networks of legal sports clubs are used, where young people learn the so-called „Russian” styles of hand-to-hand combat. During “rush hour”, if needed, these groups of teenagers may be transformed into a reliable combat unit.

In the conclusion, it should be emphasised that the so-called „Serbia's Z-syndrome” is a disease that tends to spread in the nearest future. Thus, with the help of Belgrade Kremlin exports actively this „virus” to other post-Yugoslav republics, in particular, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina (via the official Banja Luka). Moscow uses skilfully opportunities and influence of the Serbian side in the region – ethnic Serbs, Serbian-language media, cultural, humanitarian and educational centers/associations, the Serbian Orthodox Church.

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