

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University
Faculty of Social studies

Applicant

Mgr. Vladimir Đorđević, Ph.D.

Habilitation thesis

The Many Faces of the Contemporary Russian Propaganda in the Balkans: Sputnik Srbija

Reviewer

Prof. James Ker-Lindsay

Reviewer's home unit, institution

London School of Economics and Political Science

This thesis explores the role of Russian propaganda in Serbia through the Sputnik news organisation, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. This is an interesting topic with both academic and policy implications.

Overall, the thesis is a good piece of work. However, it is rather limited in scope. It explores the output of Sputnik but does little to delve into its overall impact on broader society or delve into Russia's specific aims and goals. Instead, the focus is on the nationalist fringe of society. While it would have been good to understand the broader context better, and one hopes the candidate will follow this up in future work, in this limited sense, the thesis is thorough. It contributes to our understanding of the exact focus and nature of Russia's propaganda, even if leaves open many questions about the more general socio-political impact of that propaganda.

However, I do have some comments and suggestions.

Outlining the Nature of Russian-Serbian Relations

Certain background elements need to be further developed and challenged. For instance, it required a contextual introduction. It is hard for anyone unfamiliar with the nature of the Russian-Serbian relationship to understand the significance of what is happening, both from a general historical context of Serbian-Russian relations and from a contemporary perspective of these relations under the Vucic administration. Some historical background, even a short section in the introduction, would be helpful.

However, this background information also needs to be contextualised. This isn't merely about explaining the relationship in a general sense. I think it needs to be done with a considerable degree of nuance. Serbian-Russian ties are highly complex and not easy to understand. They are certainly not as straightforward as many outside observers might like to think. The misconception is that there is some Slavic-Orthodox solidarity. This isn't the case.

As an overall point, it is essential to acknowledge that, traditionally, there has been a difference between performative pro-Russian sentiment and actual embedded pro-Russian sentiment in Serbia. By this, I mean that while some Serbs are innately pro-Russian, many aren't. Many Serbs will often say that they are far more pro-Russian than they are. Likewise, many outside observers, either through ignorance or malice, also like to present a very simplistic view of the Serbs as unreconstructed Russophiles. I think this needs to be made a little more explicit.

This is hinted at on page 46, when the author notes, 'In that respect, it may be claimed that the Serbian public opinion is not principally pro-Russian as much as anti-Western.' It is also introduced on page 49. I would bring this out more strongly at the very beginning of the thesis. Also, as the author notes on page 52, there has been a Russification of Serbian nationalism. This further suggests that this is a relatively new process.

However, we must also acknowledge that Russian support has been vital to Serbia since Kosovo declared independence in 2008. Belgrade has relied on Russia's support in the UN Security Council to prevent Kosovo from being universally recognised as a sovereign independent state. This has given Russia a degree of political leverage over Serbia. But this hasn't been warmly welcomed by Belgrade. I have spoken to senior officials close to the ruling administration complaining about the high price Serbia paid for this support. Many are deeply unhappy about Russia's influence and do not like or trust Moscow.

But there is no doubt that publicly, the Vucic administration has seen a degree of value in proclaiming a pro-Russian position - although not necessarily to the exclusion of the West. But, returning to the original point above, this is more for public consumption than a genuine statement of deeply ingrained pro-Russian sentiment across the board.

The trouble is the overall context of Serbian-Russian relations has been upended by the war in Ukraine. As pointed out in the book, Moscow has been very good at playing on this in Serbian media. But it goes further than this. I think that many Serbs have genuinely internalised a Russophile tendency that wasn't there before. This has created a situation that I believe the government has found difficult to control.

In essence, I sense that the war in Ukraine, coupled with Russian propaganda, has led to more genuine support for Russia than was the case before, and this has put the government in a difficult position - a position mainly of its own making because it didn't try to dial back its pro-Russian rhetoric (not pro-Russian sentiment) at an early stage.

As I said, it is a more complex picture than it may seem. This must be tackled and brought out more clearly. This doesn't require a massive change to the thesis. But there does need to be something on all this.

Structure of the work

I had some views on the work's structure and chapter order.

Chapter 2, looking at the structure, should be folded into the introduction. There's no need for a separate chapter to tell us what the chapters will be. Indeed, I would also be tempted to put the methodology in the introduction. It comes across as a little too much like a thesis rather than a book. A book like this, with such obvious policy implications, would be better structured to allow academics to get what they want. But it would also allow policy practitioners to get straight to the parts they need without having to read about the structure of the chapters.

The work sets out a strong theoretical basis, exploring the academic work on propaganda, especially by analysing online propaganda. However, chapters 3 and 4 could have been merged. Having just one overarching chapter outlining the propaganda theories would be better. Alternatively, parts of Chapter 4 could have also been put in the introduction.

On page 37, the author speaks about the Serbian media scene. However, there was no discussion of that scene beforehand. It would be good to have this outlined in more detail earlier. Indeed, it might be good to swap Chapter 6 and Chapter 5. I sense it's better to understand the general media scene in Serbia before trying to understand Sputnik's place.

On a related note, I had the sense that the author treats readers as having a greater knowledge of the subject than they might have. Certainly, specialists working on Serbia may be aware of much of the material. But it makes the work rather less accessible to academics and practitioners who aren't so familiar with the country. It would be good to start with a brief overview of the main newspapers, TV channels, radio and online media and the role of government. This needn't be long. But it is good to give readers some sense of the background, even if they might know it. Perhaps the author could also provide a summary of the leading media players and their tradition leanings and affiliations.

Continuing, I felt Chapter 5 could have been better organised. The background of the Russian Sputnik channel seemed rushed. It would have been good to analyse it more deeply before analysing the Serbian channel. Also, the infotainment element of Sputnik covered under Serbia (page 41) would have been better in the Russia section to lay the foundations for understanding Sputnik more generally. On that note, a sub-heading for the Serbian channel would have been helpful. (Overall, the judicious use of subheadings throughout the book would help guide the reader more.) However, the background information on Sputnik Serbia was excellent and very enlightening.

Chapter 7, the main body of the work explaining narratives, is comprehensive. However, it is exceptionally long. This makes the work unbalanced. Is there a way to divide it? For example, analysing the broader international factors in one chapter would be good. This could then be followed by a chapter that explores how Sputnik relates its propaganda to Serbian themes, such as Kosovo, in the next chapter.

The conclusion of Chapter 9 may not fit the chapter's topic. The chapter discusses the "First Serbia" movement, but the conclusion seems to be a more general discussion of Serbian media and politics. Maybe this would be better in the thesis Conclusion.

The conclusion was a little short and underdeveloped. I would have liked a more substantial attempt to pull everything together to give a sense of Sputnik's mission and its successes and failures. There is much discussion about what it does but rather less on the precise goals and end outcomes. This should be strengthened.

General Points

I also have a few more minor points that I would raise:

The author uses "First Serbia" "prva Srbija". Might it not be better to render this as Serbia First? This would chime in well with the MAGA America First language we see and be more immediately resonant to Western readers.

It is also essential to show awareness of the biases of authors cited in the work. Often, a citation is used to make a point by an author with known prejudices. For example, on page 38, the author cites Bassuener as a source for Serbian nationalist overtones on Sputnik. Frankly, he sees Serbian nationalist overtones on anything and everything emerging from Serbia. He is not the most credible source for making a point like this. Is there anyone else? (Although I do not doubt that Sputnik is spouting Serbian nationalism!) This will go down well with people with a particular perspective on Serbia. However, it raises some methodological issues concerning the veracity of the analysis if such unbalanced sources are used.

Also, it is worth checking that every author is introduced correctly when first appearing. I had a sense that several authors were only given surnames. (But I might be wrong.)

It is generally well-written. However, it could benefit from some slight editing to clarify language and conciseness. (As a tip, I have found that using software such as Grammarly has done wonders for my writing.)

Just a minor technical point. The introduction of a book is the introduction. It is not usually chapter one. Likewise, the conclusion of a book usually doesn't have a chapter number.

The bibliography is extensive. However, as the book is being published in English, it would be helpful to translate article titles for a non-Serbian-speaking audience. The same also applies to references to articles in the main body of the thesis. Also, unless the book is being produced as an e-book with accessible links, I am unsure how useful it is to include the URLs. Most people will google the title rather than enter the URL. It would be worth clarifying this with the publisher.

As a final suggestion, the book might work better with a slightly amended title: 'Sputnik in Serbia: Contemporary Russian Propaganda in the Balkans'. This is a little more concise, punchy, and to the point.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)

What are Russia's objectives in Serbia?

How successful has Sputnik been? And how can we judge this?

What broader lessons can we learn about Russian propaganda from Moscow's activities in Serbia?

...

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled 'The Many Faces of the Contemporary Russian Propaganda in the Balkans: Sputnik Srbija' by Vladimir Djordjević **fulfils** the requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of political science

Date: 8 January 2024

Signature

