

Is Belgrade the New Casablanca? Serbia's Place in The Emerging World Order

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Abstract

In an attempt to define the international position of Serbia, this paper deals with the hypothesis that Serbia's specific mode of neutrality, mixed with a semi-vassal status in relation to the West, is similar to the position of Casablanca shown in the film of the same name from 1942. It is, therefore, about a state that is neutral, which all the actors tacitly admit while reproaching it for sitting on more than one chair and saying that it has to decide which one to sit on. Over time, all the world and regional actors have crowded into "Casablanca", but until recently, the real power was exclusively in the hands of the Americans. It is characteristic of this system that it is unstable and that it can slip into a vassal system and make Serbia an object of politics, but it is also possible that neutrality is becoming real by ending the vassal relationship due to the diminishing power of the United States and the West as a whole. Thanks to many factors, one of which is the mood of the Serbian people, the impression is that the year 2022 has turned in the direction of enabling independent Serbian foreign policy.

Key words

Casablanca, soft power, neutrality, economy, security, media, migration, control.

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In early February 2021, I submitted an essay proposal for the special edition of *Serbian Political Thought*, a journal issue dedicated to Serbia's neutrality. My proposed title was "Is Belgrade the New Casablanca? Fake it till you make it". But as it happened, I never sent the article, for two reasons. Firstly, my view of what the Casablanca metaphor meant was broader than mere political and military neutrality for Serbia. Secondly, and more importantly, I thought that not enough time had passed and events had not yet taken place that would allow me to make such a bold statement. These global events started to unfold in late February 2022. Interestingly enough, after I decided against writing the article, and had almost forgotten about it, either word got out or other people also had the same idea. On October 17th 2022, the day of the Serbian Intelligence Service, the president of Serbia, Alexander Vučić, said that Belgrade is the new "Casablanca". An army of the president's admirers immediately praised him for coming up with such a great idea. It was probably sheer coincidence — but quite an unusual one, I thought to myself. However, if by any minute chance the idea floating around in the Serbian public space actually did come from my paper proposal, I believe that I now have the obligation to clarify this concept.

Why Casablanca?

So then, what do I mean when I say that Belgrade might be the New Casablanca? Obviously, the association comes from the celebrated 1942 film where Humphrey Bogart plays what is probably his most iconic role. "Casablanca" was made in a remarkable time; it is a wartime film, and by association I seem to be writing a wartime essay. Although probably thanks to the fear of mutually assured destruction, the war we are witnessing now is not a world war, it will certainly bring about tectonic reshaping of the world order. In this environment, Belgrade, as the capital of Serbia, is one of the rare European capitals which seems to be politically neutral in a very polarized world. Serbia did condemn Russia in several UN declarations, but it never introduced sanctions against Moscow, and it is also one of the few capitals of Europe, together with Istanbul, which still has direct flights to Russian cities. Long before the hostilities in Eastern Europe, Serbia unilaterally declared itself to be a militarily neutral state through a parliament resolution in 2007. However, neutrality status usually has

to be recognized by other actors of the international community in order for it to effectively exist. Nonetheless, Serbia insisted on being neutral and thereby gave new meaning to the phrase “Fake it till you make it”. One way or another, Serbia did gain a peculiar neutrality status, and now it seems that all the major global as well as regional powers want a piece of the game in Belgrade, and all are present in Serbia in one way or the other – whether through financial capital, media, the civil sector or other means of soft power, or militarily through cooperation with the Serbian army. My hypothesis is therefore that Belgrade has become the contemporary Casablanca, just like the fictional one made in Hollywood.

Accordingly, if we speak about Belgrade (Serbia) as a neutral territory, then why do I prefer the association with Casablanca to Geneva or Stockholm, for instance, which might be more logical examples of neutrality? After all, Belgrade is in Europe like these two cities, and Casablanca is in Africa. The catch is in the nature of the peculiar, or should I say fake, neutrality that Serbia lives in. Although this peculiar neutrality is (or perhaps was) marked by Western or Brussels² domination, Serbia has still deferred from other vassals of Washington which are formally members of NATO. Another reason is that this volatile status in which Serbia lives cannot be static; it will certainly shift in one way or the other, it will either become truly neutral and independent or it will become an object and a passive tool in Western foreign policy. This fact only became more obvious after February 2022.

Just like Bogart's Casablanca, Serbia (Belgrade) is similar to unoccupied France. Perhaps by this analogy, other parts of Yugoslavia that are now proud NATO members, could be compared to western European countries occupied by Nazi Germany. The Casablanca allegory represents an unregulated neutrality, behind which lies the true system, a system whose true nature is that of vaguely disguised semi-colonial status. An illustrative example of this was the incident with the behavior of the United States ambassador, Christopher Hill, during the standoff surrounding the so-called “Europride”. But we will discuss this later in the article.

² Brussels being at the same time the center of both NATO and the EU. The European commission, the executive branch of the EU, an organization where Serbia is a candidate state, is also seated in Brussels.

The first thing to keep in mind when we talk about Belgrade as the new Casablanca is the need to answer a seemingly simple question. Which main actors are participating in the power game in Serbia's capital in one way or another? Also, how significant is their influence on Belgrade, and what is the level of influence of these actors? Finally, how do we measure that power?

Among the global players, the most noteworthy are the United States, Russia and China, as well as the European Union, within which Germany and France stand out. Another country that recently left the EU, Great Britain, also has a peculiar policy towards the Balkans, especially to Serbia. Britain's unique approach regarding Belgrade has heavily influenced the political life and history of this part of Europe. There are also regional players, such as Turkey, Hungary, and Middle Eastern countries, in particular the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, the two diehard foes Israel and Iran are both present. India deserves attention too, as a major power that is in its own way also finding its place in Serbia, similarly to Japan, a competitor of China.

Apart from the big countries, the USA, Russia and China, I will not deal individually in each segment with the role of each country, particularly the regional players and countries of a lower order of power, because their participation in certain segments is sometimes not significant enough. The components of power in which these countries compete and try to flex their influence are the economy, military cooperation and general security policy, soft power, which primarily includes the media and non-governmental organizations as well as general cultural influence, and finally the issue of migration.

Economy

As far as economic criteria are concerned, general trends should be mentioned. It is, of course, impossible to describe in detail the history of all foreign investments in such a short space, including many extremely controversial privatizations. However, we can see the efforts and areas in which different countries are interested.

The United States became present in the Serbian economy, primarily in the metallurgical industry, soon after October 5th, 2000, the date which marked a benchmark for what we in Serbia call "the democratic changes" that ended the

era of Slobodan Milošević. In a very detailed and documented analysis, Prof. Dr. Slobodan Antonić proved that the sale of Smederevo's steel mill SARTID to the American company U.S. Steel in March 2003 for only US \$23 million, a deal brokered by the Americans and the Government of Serbia, was essentially a robbery (Антонић, 2006, pp. 40–87). In an endless series of devastating facts, two alone are sufficient for illustration: the first is the fact that the sale price of the steel plant that had previously been pushed into bankruptcy was equal to the transfer of just one Red Star football player two years before the “SARTID operation”. The second fact was that all competition was blatantly excluded from the contest, although LNM Holdings offered incomparably more favorable terms compared to those of U.S. Steel. Thus, after a series of tricks by the Minister of Economy and Privatization, the judges of the Trade Court in Belgrade, and other actors, everything came down to a direct bargain. This was “the biggest robbery of Serbian industry since the communist ‘nationalization’ in 1946” (Антонић, 2006, pp. 40–87).

An opposite example is the American company Ball Packaging Europe with its initial “greenfield” investment in a tin factory in Zemun of 50 million Euros, opened in September 2005. It invested another 80 million Euros in the expansion of production in 2011 and 2019, so that, along with some other investments, the total investment exceeded 140 million Euros³. Another American corporation (for software, management, consulting and technological services) NCR (National Cash Register), opened a large business center in Belgrade with more than 4,200 employees in October 2021.

In 2003, in the first wave of privatization, the American multinational company Philip Morris bought the Niš tobacco industry for 387 million Euros.

In general, the United States is certainly present in Serbia, not so much directly as through intermediaries. We will return to their influence in the non-governmental sector later in the article. However, the withdrawal of Amer-

³ PC Press. (2019). Ball Packaging investirao 45 miliona evra u novu proizvodnu liniju u Beogradu. URL: <https://pcpress.rs/ball-packaging-investirao-45-miliona-evra-u-novu-proizvodnu-liniju-u-beogradu/> (all links accessed 01.10.2022)

ican business has been noticeable ever since Serbia bought back the steel mill in Smederevo. Soon after, the factory was sold to the company Hesteel Serbia, backed by Chinese capital. The fact alone that the Chinese have replaced the Americans speaks volumes as to the changes in the balance of power.

In the light of the agreement that Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić signed on September 4th, 2020 in the White House in the presence of US President Donald Trump, a document concerning Kosovo and a number of other topics, Serbia received the office of the American Chamber of Commerce in Belgrade. However, no special American economic activity followed until the arrival of a large American economic delegation at the end of October 2022. This was the first delegation of its kind in more than 20 years, a visit which resulted in the promise that a more active American economic presence in Serbia would follow⁴.

American economic activity often follows political activity. The Americans became uninterested in the economy at the moment when they practically delegated the Balkan region to powers that are essentially in a vassal relationship to the US. These lower-ranking powers have had a great influence on Serbia. Germany has figured above others in this respect, especially during the years of Angela Merkel, and of course this was predominantly evident in large German investments. This pattern does not apply exclusively to Serbia, because the Germans also entered other post-Yugoslav countries with capital. What is particularly noticeable in the Serbian case is that the highest concentration of their investments is in the north of Serbia, in the autonomous province of Vojvodina and in Belgrade, on territories that were once held by the Habsburg Monarchy, which is quite indicative.

The German factor has been influencing Serbian territory for centuries. We may recall that the Germans planned to rename occupied Belgrade Prinz Eugen Stadt after World War II. Their Waffen-SS division Prinz Eugen gained the reputation of the most notorious Nazi unit in Yugoslavia (paradoxically, the

⁴ RTV. (2022). Vučić: Privredna delegacija SAD u Srbiji oposle 20 godina – pokazatelj napretka Srbije. URL: https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/vucic-privredna-delegacija-sad-u-srbiji-posle-20-godina-pokazatelj-napretka-srbije_1386547.html

historical prince Eugen von Savoyen was a Serbian ally in the fight against the Turks). Today, most Serbs consider the United States to be the main culprit of the anti-Serb policy of the 1990s. However, it was the newly unified Germany that actually directly influenced the breakup of Yugoslavia and the instigation of the civil war and practically forced American involvement in the Yugoslav crisis, although the United States did not initially have a clearly defined anti-Serb position. “Germany played a key role in encouraging Slovenia and Croatia to secede, and surreptitiously assured them of external support for their secession efforts... the effect of European and especially German intervention is that it stimulated the United States to augment its own role in the crisis... The renewed US intervention was to come later, during the conflict over Bosnia-Herzegovina” (Gibbs, 2009, pp. 104–105).

When it comes to Russia, since 2009, when the then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev visited Serbia and Serbia received a Russian loan for railways, Russia has been very present in Serbia through the Russian State Railways company. In addition, a number of Russian investment attempts have been sabotaged in one way or another, according to a number of statements⁵. Evidently, the actual volume of Russian capital falls short of the level of readiness expressed by the Russian side.

This changed in the fall of 2022, with evident political changes within the Government of Serbia that may turn out to be stimulating for new Russian investments, and this coincides with the influx of Russian capital that does not necessarily have a connection with the Russian state, but is brought by new Russian migration to Serbia. Of course, the most important Russian investment is from the time of Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica, the privatization of the Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS), which has proved to be one of the better moves of the Serbian authorities, resulting in refineries being renovated and modernized, especially the refinery in Pančevo which is one of the most modern in Europe. Gazprom stabilized the production and supply and improved the quality of oil

5 Politika. (2022). Kina pretekla Evropsku uniju po ulaganjima u Srbiji. <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/521941/Kina-pretekla-Evropsku-uniju-po-ulaganjima-u-Srbiji>

derivatives, and the entire network of NIS oil pumps was also modernized. After listening to Serbian offers for many years, Russia also bought the notorious money loser Petrohemija from Pančevo at the end of 2021.

In addition, in November 2022, the Gazprom gas power plant with a capacity of 189 megawatts, an investment of 180 million euros, was put into operation in Pančevo, the first of its kind in Serbia. The construction of these ecologically sound power plants was also announced in Kragujevac, Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš.

The biggest complaint of Russia's political opponents in Serbia is the low mineral rent, but on the other hand, for the sake of comparison, it should be pointed out that the refineries in Croatia, whose oil industry was privatized by the Hungarian MOL, have been shut down and MOL only uses the refineries in Hungary⁶. It is interesting that the critics of Serbia's energy agreement with Russia, within the framework of which a large gas storage facility was built in Banatski Dvor and then a gas pipeline through Serbia, do not mention the important fact that the amount of mineral rent, which is part of the NIS agreement, was simply overwritten from the law passed before the signing of that contract. There was never even the slightest complaint from that side of the political spectrum, for instance that the state agreed not to charge Italian Fiat a tax, and that it provided many other benefits to a number of Western investors. In any case, it can be concluded that Russia's investments in Serbia are respectable, but it is still far from holding the title of the largest investor.

That title was taken by China in 2022. China surpassed all the countries of the European Union combined, to hold second place in terms of investment. The Chinese bought several mines in the area of Bor and Majdanpek, as well as the Smederevo steel mill, and they are now building a large tire factory near Zrenjanin, etc. The Chinese seem to be competing with the Russians in some industries in Serbia, which is quite interesting. After the Russians, they also appeared in the railway construction business, and are participating in the construction of the future Belgrade–Budapest high-speed railway.

⁶ Nacional. (2019). Hrvatske rafinerije stoje, a MOL prerađuje naftu u Mađarskoj. URL: <https://www.nacional.hr/hrvatske-rafinerije-stoje-a-mol-preradu-je-naftu-u-madarskoj/>

However, Chinese ambitions are much greater: their company Cosco became the majority owner of the Greek port of Piraeus in 2016, and their long-term goal is the Piraeus–Warsaw high-speed railway, which will connect Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland. Even more ambitious plans for the construction of a large canal have been mentioned. The plan is to build a canal starting from Thessaloniki, along the Vardar, South Morava and Velika Morava rivers to Danube. This construction would create a waterway that would connect the Mediterranean with the North and Baltic Seas on one side, and the Black Sea on the other.

In addition to large, visible Chinese investments in Serbia, there are also less visible investments: in almost all cities in Serbia there are Chinese shopping centers, often opened in the buildings of failed department stores from the time of socialism.

China, however, has its “silent competitors” from the Asian region in Serbia, above all India, which has its own investments, but they have not yet gained full momentum, as well as Japan, which is currently more recognizable in Serbia for its donations and presence through soft power rather than by investments.

It is characteristic of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia that the affairs they deal with are rather opaque. It is known that the Emirates are involved in the “Belgrade on Water” project and together with the Saudis in certain projects related to the Serbian arms industry, but information about this remains mostly hidden from the general public. Egypt, perhaps the most important Arab country, which traditionally had excellent relations with Yugoslavia, again made its presence felt in July 2022 with the three-day visit to Serbia by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. During this unusually long visit, which clearly underlined its political importance for both sides, a number of contracts were signed, and Egypt expressed its desire for greater food imports from Serbia. As for one of the richest and certainly the most developed countries in that part of the world, Israel, it evidently regards the Balkans, especially Serbia, as important. Israeli investments can be seen in shopping centers and the construction of large business buildings, similar to those the Emirates are involved in, in the same part of Belgrade next to “Belgrade on the Water”.

Israel’s arch enemy, Iran, is also present. For a brief period, Serbia had a visa-free regime with Iran, but this was abolished in October 2018 after West-

ern pressure on Serbia. The Belgrade newspaper *Danas* announced that the European Union directly influenced the decision of the Government of Serbia to re-introduce visas for Iranians, threatening otherwise that it would abolish the visa-free regime with Serbia. The USA and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also had their objections⁷.

As far as the European Union is concerned, the most significant investments come from Germany, then France. It became apparent that German investments began to decline in the last years of Angela Merkel's rule, whereas with President Emmanuel Macron's coming to power in France, investments from the latter country have grown. A 25-year concession that the French company VINCI Airports received for the Belgrade airport in 2018 is particularly noteworthy. The significant expansion and modernization of the Belgrade airport will certainly have a favorable effect on the improvement of the overall business environment in Serbia. This also shows how important this new potential "Casablanca" is becoming, especially since all this has coincided not only with increased American political interest in the Balkans after Merkel's departure, but also with the increased presence of practically all significant geopolitical players, including surrounding countries which are present with much more modest capacities. France is also interested in the construction of the Belgrade metro. With the French metro project, we can see a third country that would like to participate in the development of rail transport in Serbia. The French bank Société Générale also operated in Serbia and was present in the country for some time, until September 2019, when Société Générale Srbija was shut down. It was bought by the Hungarian OTP bank, and this in turn coincides with Victor Orbán becoming a political ally of Serbian president Vučić. The French Lafarge, which since 2021 has been operating within the Swiss multinational company Holcim, bought the cement plant in Beocin in 2002.

Great Britain's investments, on the other hand, are disproportionately small compared to the country's traditionally large ambitions in Serbia and the Balkans in general, which perhaps indicates a further geopolitical decline in the influence of the former empire. However, the influence that the British have

⁷ Danas. (2018). EU pretila da će ukinuti "beli šengen" Srbiji. URL: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/eu-pretila-da-ce-ukinuti-beli-sengen-srbiji/>

actually wielded in Serbia since the 19th century has significantly exceeded their investments, especially when compared to German investments. “When people define power as synonymous with the resources that produce it, they sometimes encounter the paradox that those best endowed with power do not always get the outcomes they want” (Nye, 2004, p. 3). Practically the only exception is the British multinational company British American Tobacco, which in 2003 bought the Vranje tobacco industry for 87 million euros.

Scandinavian countries were also present on the Serbian market, with the biggest investment being the Norwegian Telenor, which, however, withdrew from this business, as Swedish Ikea stepped in in the meantime.

Italy is traditionally present, most significantly with the establishment of a joint venture in Kragujevac, Fiat Automobili Srbija, between the Government of Serbia and the Turin-based company. The key items of the contract were kept secret for 14 years (along with other contracts on foreign investments and concessions), which turned out to have been for good reason when, at the end of November 2022, the journalists of television channel N1 came into possession of the contract⁸. It was then revealed that Serbia had spent at least 985 million euros but had received practically nothing in return. Serbia's Former Commissioner for Information of Public Importance, Rodoljub Šabić, commented on the alleged reasons for hiding the contents of the contract: “The prime minister is telling you that the corporate rules of a company that is a business partner of our company disavow the constitutionally guaranteed rights of the citizens of Serbia, the explicit provisions of the law and the decisions of the competent state authority ... This is below colonial status, it is inadmissible”. Italy, together with Greece, was also very active during the rule of Slobodan Milošević, when it participated in the privatization of Telekom Srbija, but in 2003 Serbia bought the Italian package of 29% of shares, and in 2012 the Greek package of 20%, which once again made Serbia the 100% owner of the company.

This example perfectly illustrates why the neutrality of Serbia over the past 20 years is more reminiscent of the neutrality of Casablanca on the ter-

⁸ N1 TV. (2022). N1 ekskluzivno objavljuje ugovor države sa Fijatom. URL: <https://rs.n1info.com/biznis/n1-ekskluzivno-objavljuje-ugovor-drzave-sa-fijatom/>

ritory of “unoccupied” France than the neutrality of Switzerland or Sweden in the same period.

There are also regional powers engaged in Serbia, such as Turkey, which has a notable role in the textile industry and somewhat less in road construction, and Greece, which has been present in the banking sector and telecommunications, especially during Milošević's reign. Starting from December 2002, the Greek company Veropoulos began to expand the chain of hypermarkets, while in April of the same year, the company Titan, in an equally controversial privatization, bought the cement plant in Kosjerić⁹. In addition, that factory, like the other two privatized Serbian cement plants, had a very negative impact on air quality by using inappropriate fuel in the production process. Turkey is in some ways followed by Azerbaijan, whose company AzVirt appeared in Serbia in 2012 and has built a large section of the Miloš Veliki highway (Ljig–Preljina), part of the ring road around Belgrade, the Ruma–Šabac highway, including the bridge near Šabac that connects Mačva and Srem, etc. Azerbaijan, especially after the start of the special military operation in the spring of 2022, is becoming very interesting to all of Europe, including Serbia, and the reason is simple: gas. This was proven by the visit of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to Serbia in November 2022, when a strategic partnership agreement between the two countries was signed.

Another country traditionally interested in Serbia is Austria. Its Raiffeisen bank has been present for a long time, as has the Austrian telecom operator Mobilkom, the 100% owner of the company A1 Serbia, which has almost a quarter of the share in the Serbian mobile phone market. The Austrian company OMV once lost the battle against the Russian Gazprom in the privatization of NIS.

If we talk about classic colonial exploitation of the kind perhaps most impressively described by Frantz Fanon in his books, especially in “The Wretched of the Earth”, Serbia offers a demonstrative example. “The oppressor, in his own sphere, starts the process, a process of domination, of exploitation and of pillage, and in the other sphere the coiled, plundered creature which is the native provides fodder for the process as best he can, the process which moves unin-

⁹ Mašina. (2017). Borba ljudi i Titana. URL: <https://www.masina.rs/borba-ljudi-i-titana/>

terruptedly from the banks of the colonial territory to the palaces and the docks of the mother country” (Fanon, 2017, pp. 21–22).

The most glaring case in Serbia was the attempt to mine lithium by the Anglo-Australian Rio Tinto. The latter company invested a lot of money in the purchase of land and property in the western part of Serbia, and critics allege that it used all possible methods to achieve its goals regardless of potentially irreparable environmental damage. This case is not over yet, and a latent danger still exists. This company had tried to work in Serbia according to classic colonial patterns, where Serbia would be only a resource base. This was met with bitter resistance from the population and mass demonstrations occurred across the country. The extent of the pressure on Serbia is also indicated by the fact that even Angela Merkel’s farewell visit essentially came down to her request that Rio Tinto be allowed to mine lithium unhindered¹⁰. The exploitation of ores in Serbia has increased rapidly in recent times, endangering the environment, and the case of Rio Tinto has also shown a bizarre side. The tennis player Novak Djoković, spoke out against Rio Tinto and was subsequently banned from playing at the Australian Open at the beginning of 2022, and spent several days in a kind of detention. Australia’s Prime Minister Scott Morrison was extremely vocal against Novak’s participation in the tournament. It is interesting that one of his closest associates worked at Rio Tinto, and Morrison himself is known for publicly defending the company’s interests¹¹.

It can be concluded that there are three circles of countries economically interested in Serbia: the great powers of the US, UK and Russia, among which China is a newcomer, then the traditionally present European continental powers, and the new powers coming from the Middle East – in the first place, Turkey, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt.

¹⁰ Balkan Green Energy News. (2021). Merkel: i Nemačka zainteresovana za litijum u Srbiji. URL: <https://balkangreenenergy-news.com/rs/merkel-i-nemacka-zainteresovana-za-litijum-u-srbiji/>

¹¹ Nova.RS. (2022). Čovek koji bi da otera Novaka iz Melburna svim silama branio Rio Tinto. URL: <https://nova.rs/sport/australijan-open/covek-koji-bi-da-otera-novaka-iz-melburna-svim-silama-branio-rio-tinto/>

Soft power

In the movie “Casablanca”, everything seems to be an illusion, and the same goes for Belgrade, if we take the Serbian capital to have become the new Casablanca. Everything is a mirage, a mirage that translates into concrete power. In the film, it seems that the Germans control the French puppet government, but it becomes apparent they do not control the hearts and minds of the citizens of Casablanca. Thus, in the scene where the German officers sing the German war song, the people spontaneously respond by singing “La Marseillaise”. Something similar is happening in the attitude of Serbs towards NATO and NATO countries, i.e., towards the collective West, as it is now increasingly called.

The most characteristic is the West’s attitude towards Russia, similar in many respects to their attitude towards Serbia. Western propagandists constantly like to talk about how Russia is waging a crafty hybrid war, how aggressive it is and how it has incredible influence in Serbia. The numbers, however, say something completely different. The money that Russia has invested to win Serbs over to its side is actually minor, in fact truly miniscule, compared to the West’s investments in various means of soft power. That is why, for many, especially for Western diplomats, Russia’s popularity among Serbs is inexplicable. This is also puzzling for the Russians themselves, a pattern that has not changed in 140 years since Platon Andreevich Kulakovsky wrote from Belgrade to Ivan Sergeevich Aksakov in 1882: “We do not have a plan, our goals are not realized, not defined: this is the trouble. Austria takes with impudence and audacity, Russia is helped only by popular faith in her – a faith, I will say frankly, which we are unworthy of...” (Shemyakin, 2010, p. 5).

Let us consider these hypotheses. If Russia is so crafty and so dangerous in waging a hybrid war that it has fooled the minds of all Serbs, how is it that it has managed to experience two catastrophic defeats when it comes to soft power? In Ukraine, which is far closer to Russia and where the Russian language is widely spoken, two “Maidans” took place, the first in 2004 and the second in 2013/2014, and Russia is now using hard force where soft power failed.

On the other hand, in Serbia, although Russian investments in soft power have been minor, sometimes even counterproductive, in March 2011, Vladimir

Putin was warmly welcomed at the Red Star stadium in Belgrade¹². Where did this explosion of love by the Serbian people towards the Russians come from? Again, the explanation can be found in the West's arrogant behavior towards the Serbs, which drove the Serbs to begin supporting the Russians, knowing that this annoys the West more than anything else.

The second component stems from the historical experience in which Russians and Serbs are intertwined by a multitude of mutual connections, so many that to list them would take a much more extensive article. However, we should mention Ana Glinska, née Jakšić, daughter of the Serbian nobleman Stefan Jakšić, who was the grandmother of the first Russian emperor, Ivan IV, known as Ivan the Terrible, who was born to Ana's daughter Jelena in marriage with the Grand Duke of Moscow Vasily III. Also, even before that, during the reign of Prince Basil I the Great, the Serbian monk Lazar from Prizren constructed and installed in Moscow in 1404 the first public clock in Russia. Further, General Mihajlo Miloradović was a close friend of Emperor Peter the Great, and his great-grandson of the same name, also a general, defended Russia with nine other Serbian generals in 1812 from Napoleon's army in the Battle of Borodino (in which the Russian troops were commanded by 37 generals, more than a quarter of whom were of Serbian origin). Sava Vladislavić Raguzinski founded the Russian intelligence service and concluded an agreement in 1728 on the basis of which the border line between the Russian Empire and China was established, which is still in force today. It is particularly interesting that in 1705, Count Vladislavić bought in Constantinople and then brought to the Russian court the Ethiopian slave Ibrahim Hannibal, the great-grandfather of the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. All of this is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Russian-Serbian relations.

It is a huge paradox that Serbia is a country where very few know the Russian language, while among those who speak Russian fluently, Russophobia reaches unimaginable proportions. The status of Russians and Russia among the Serbs fascinates the West, especially the Western services, which strive to find an explanation for the Serbs' fondness for Russia, instead of looking in the mir-

¹² Putin, V. (2011). Putin na Marakani. MrGlobalTelevision. YouTube. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljkmzE8KtOA>

ror and asking if they themselves have contributed to this state of affairs. This is reminiscent of the Democrats' complaints in 2016, when Hillary Clinton lost the presidential election to Donald Trump. The leaders of the Democratic Party then found justification for the defeat in "Russian hackers hired by the Kremlin", without asking themselves whether their own behavior might have contributed to the Democrats becoming so unpopular with voters.

The same thing occurred with the phenomenon of Russian soft power. Perhaps this situation has improved for Russia now compared to a few years ago. Sputnik is present in Serbia, as is an RT office and web portal, and most recently the opening of RT TV has been announced. Gazprom invested money in the installation of the beautiful mosaics in the Saint Sava temple in Belgrade, and there are more and more scholarships for students from Serbia and other Serbian lands, above all from Republika Srpska. Nevertheless, all of this is actually negligible compared to the funds invested by the West and is insufficient to explain the extent of the Serbs' affection towards Russia. It is especially paradoxical for the West that this support even increased in Serbia after the beginning of the Special Military Operation in Ukraine.

Russians have often wondered why there are fewer and fewer Russian language classes in Serbian schools. Then something unexpected happened: the special military operation caused a real "migration" of Serbs to Russian-language Telegram channels. That is why many of them, without any previous knowledge, have learned Russian by themselves purely by daily monitoring of the news through those channels, at least to the level of the most basic understanding of written text. In any case, this trend has done much more than organized Russian language learning programs would do.

Finally, it is worth recalling two concrete situations in which, already visible, Russian soft power in Serbia was additionally strengthened. In the spring of 2014, during the catastrophic floods, with the strong engagement of the Serbian-Russian humanitarian center in Niš, well-equipped Russian rescue teams arrived to Serbia incredibly quickly, saving many lives. This was in sharp contrast to behaviour of the countries of the European Union, which were literally invisible during those days. The second situation took place at the beginning of April 2020, shortly after the declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic, when, again, the EU was nowhere to be seen, while 11 transport planes with 87 Russian specialist

doctors and plenty of equipment arrived from Russia (later, China also sent a lot of aid, including hundreds of thousands of vaccine doses, and even the Emirates came with their help quickly, which all cast the EU into a deep shadow). This was followed by donations from Russia in the form of the Sputnik V vaccines, and then the production of that vaccine in Serbia. Thanks to all this, Serbia managed to project its own soft power in the surrounding countries. In fact, it was the only country in the world where people could choose between multiple vaccines namely Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca, Sinopharm, and Sputnik V. Not only Serbian citizens but anyone coming to Serbia could get a jab. As a result, more than 200 thousand people, mostly from former Yugoslav republics, but also from all over Europe, came to Serbia get vaccinated. Furthermore, Serbia donated more than 200 thousand vaccines to neighboring countries, and it even gave 100.620 Pfizer shots to Czech Republic in May of 2020.

The soft power of the United States can be divided into that which comes directly from American government agencies such as the NED – USAID (National Endowment for Democracy – United States Agency for International Development), which finances various projects including state institutions, and the so-called philanthropists who implement American liberal ideology, such as George Soros' Open Society Foundations. In the media sense, they are also present, but there it is really difficult to draw the line where the state begins and where private interests yield. Defining what the American interest is, is not determined by means of the property to whom it is registered, but on the basis of the interest that it spreads. Various foundations fund many programs and, most problematic from the security stance, a whole range of activities from environmental activists to security policies, LGBTQ+ etc.

On the other hand, there is strong media penetration coming from the US. One example is the United Media Group, whose ownership structure, according to publicly available sources, is not completely clear, but its most recognizable face, at least in the beginnings of the company's expansion into the territory of the former Yugoslavia, is certainly the retired American general David Petraeus, former commander of the occupation forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and former director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This group in Serbia has two television channels and an entire media machinery that implements and promotes American and generally Western interests. Since February 2022,

the anti-Russian campaign has been particularly visible, and as far as economic topics are concerned, anti-Chinese broadcasting. The problems of workers' human rights, the non-transparency of Chinese companies' business, and environmental problems associated with those companies in Serbia are constantly on the agenda.

Great Britain has a large influence in Serbia that is disproportionate to its modest investments. Britain grants some scholarships for education, but that is not where its strongest influence is. Britain and the US have succeeded in infiltrating the system to a large extent through a series of lobby groups, which is not seen directly, but through the consequences, because these affairs are not transparent. Among them, it is especially important to point out the so-called civil sector, which is unelected, but exerts very strong lobbying pressure, which since 2000 has influenced the creation of the social atmosphere as well as changes in laws. Grouped together in this sector is the media, the non-governmental sector, and the general cultural influence, which easily spreads across national borders – from this perspective, the whole world essentially still lives under the dominance of Anglo-Saxon cultural influence.

Along with these two countries, Germany and France are also trying to exert an influence. Germany has several foundations, each of which is linked to a political party: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, associated with the Christian Democratic Union, Hanns Seidel Stiftung, associated with the Bavarian Christian Social Union, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, affiliated with the Social Democratic Party, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, affiliated with the Left, Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, affiliated with the Free Democrats, and finally Heinrich Böll Stiftung affiliated with Greens. Interestingly, the Desiderius Erasmus Stiftung, associated with the anti-globalist and Eurosceptic Alternative for Germany, does not operate in Serbia. The Goethe Institute, an institution linked to the German state, also operates in Serbia. The British have the British Council, the French the French Cultural Center, and a number of other countries have similar institutions in Belgrade.

The West has certainly succeeded in penetrating the elite and the dominant media discourse in Serbia. Despite this, however, pro-Western discourse in Serbian society has been seriously torpedoed, and it can be said that Western soft power has sunk in Serbia. Hence the hysteria about the Russians, which

actually has nothing to do with Russians themselves, but with the fact that the West essentially lost the battle for the hearts and minds of the Serbs in 2008 by recognizing the secession of Kosovo and Metohija.

The last straw for the Serbian public is the constant aggressive insistence of Western countries on organizing LGBT parades every year in Belgrade, two of which, in 2001 and 2010, were extremely violent. Everything culminated in 2022, when American Ambassador Christopher Hill – known to Serbs for his public demonstration of support for the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) leaders during the active phase of the conflict between the security forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the KLA – insisted on holding the so-called Europride in Belgrade, for which the government of Serbia applied in 2019. Due to the changed situation in society, however, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Minister of Internal Affairs Aleksandar Vulin, as well as the court, announced that Europride would not take place, but it was held anyway. All of this was performed by the Serbian authorities in an undignified style that irresistibly resembles the behavior of the French police captain Louis Renault in the movie “Casablanca”. This deeply shook the authority of executive power and practically proved that Serbia is a colony.

On the other hand, Serbian society unmistakably recognized Hill’s actions to be essentially violent, i.e. an aspiration to impose an agenda and a set of values that are completely foreign to the population. Essentially, what caused mass dissatisfaction among the people was the obvious nature of Hill’s behavior, who from his new position in the State Department only continued his war against the Serbs. After all, as Hill’s likeminded colleague diplomat from London, Robert Cooper, writes: “War is about changing people’s minds or at least their behavior”. (Cooper, 2004, 98).

As in the 1942 film, Morocco belongs to unoccupied France, but the local policeman’s behavior can be dictated by the German officer – who in the case of the Serbian “Casablanca” is the equivalent of the American ambassador – until near the end of the film, when the Frenchman changes his behavior when the circumstances also change.

The big change of circumstances in this case was the uprising of the people in the colony. Such an uprising could be seen in the massive, defiant Orthodox rallies in Belgrade against the LGBT parade at the end of August and in Sep-

tember 2022. The Serbian Patriarch Porfirije spoke at the largest rally, which gathered around 150 000 people, where Russian as well as Serbian symbolism also dominated. It can be said that Serbian society rose up against the colonial will – just like when the entire nightclub in “Casablanca” owned by Rick Blaine (played by Humphrey Bogart) sings the “Marseillaise” in unison. Nonetheless, the very fact that Hill, like the German Major Heinrich Strasser, succeeded in holding the event, put an end to the enormous effort of the West, especially the American authorities, to somehow gain the favor of the Serbs. Hill’s excessive desire to enforce his will at any cost destroyed the hard work of several generations of American diplomats in Belgrade. “Love of power, like lust, is such a strong motive that it influences most men’s actions more than they think it should” (Russel, 2004, p. 181).

That loss is irreparable, considering that study after study of public opinion shows that support for Russia is increasing, while at the same time support for Serbia’s entry into the European Union is decreasing¹³. Over the past few years, the Americans have made many promotional videos in which they have tried to improve the profile of the Serbs in some way, showing certain Serbian historical figures in a positive light, including Serbian scientists with American citizenship, such as Nikola Tesla or Mihailo Pupin. The authors of these videos concluded almost all of them with the slogan “You are the world”, not realizing that this slogan is deeply offensive to Serbs, because it tramples on their deep-rooted self-esteem and self-awareness, which does not tolerate someone issuing such “certificates”. This especially caused indignation among the people who remember the NATO bombing well, and who do not need any videos. Instead, the only gesture from the US that would be appreciated by the Serbs would be for the US to stop supporting the secession of Kosovo and Metohija and for the entire West to stop being a colonial manager over Serbia.

Of course, it would be wrong to blame Hill as an individual, because he is only a child of the Bill Clinton administration, which completely returned to the idealistic tradition of American foreign policy conceived by Woodrow

¹³ NSPM. (2022). Istraživanje javnog mnjenja: Srbija – jesen 2022. URL: <http://www.nspm.rs/istrazivanja-javnog-mnjenja/srbija-jesen-2022.html>

Wilson. “What Wilson was proclaiming was not America’s withdrawal from the world but the universal applicability of its values, and, in time, America’s commitment to spreading them” (Kissinger, 1994, p. 45). What Henry Kissinger warned against in *Diplomacy* is also suggested by Andrew Bacevich in *The New American Militarism*: “Our own day has seen the revival of Wilsonian ambitions and Wilsonian certainty, this time, however, combined with a pronounced affinity for the sword. With the end of the Cold War, the constraints that once held American ideologues in check fell away. Meanwhile, in more than a few quarters, America’s unprecedented military ascendancy, a by-product of victory in the Cold War, raised the alluring prospect that here at last was the instrument that would enable the United States to fulfill its providential mission” (Bacevich, 2006, p. 11). Such an essentially idealistic view of the world is so blinding that it collapses in collision with reality. This is why this kind of neo-Wilsonianism resorts to military force out of frustration, and violence was precisely what the Clinton administration resorted to against the Serbs in the 1990s.

When it comes to China, its soft power is not as visible as the soft power of Western countries, or even Russia, but it is interesting that the Chinese, right on the site of their embassy in Belgrade, which was bombed by the Americans in 1999, killing three Chinese citizens, have built a huge Confucius Cultural Center, in front of which a statue of Confucius was placed. All of this has its bizarre side: Japan previously built its embassy right next to the plot of the bombed Chinese embassy, now the Chinese cultural center. The Japanese embassy architecture was built in a reduced militaristic style irresistibly resembling a fortress, almost a kind of large armored bunker. Japan tried to gain sympathy in Serbia, especially when in 2003 it gave Belgrade 93 buses for city transport and then medical equipment, but Japan’s recognition of Kosovo as an independent state left a certain stain.

As far as regional powers are concerned, Turkey is very active and its soft power is recognizable. The Turkish Agency for International Cooperation and Coordination (TIKA) has restored several monuments of Ottoman heritage throughout Serbia. In addition, Serbian television broadcasts many Turkish TV series that are very popular. In contrast, Greece is considerably less present. Surprisingly, Azerbaijan has been quite active in recent times, even managing to erect monuments to certain personalities from the country in Belgrade and

Novi Sad. Hungary, on the other hand, has significantly improved relations with Serbia, becoming in a way its local ally, and the soft power of that neighboring country is most expressed in the figure of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who is very popular in Serbia, especially because of his adherence to traditional values. Austria and Italy traditionally have respectable soft power thanks to historical reasons, and of course thanks to the large Serbian diasporas in those countries, especially in Austria.

In this sense, Saudi Arabia is not visible in Serbia, and the United Arab Emirates has a rather modest profile, recognizable practically only for the renovation of an elementary school in Novi Pazar, and Iran's performance is also modest, although this country has had its own cultural center for years, which publishes a magazine called Nur.

India is an interesting case. India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, is a devout Hindu believer, and India organized a year of yoga in 2017 which coordinated events all over the world, including in Belgrade. This can be seen as a kind of manifestation of soft power, but of a religious type, i.e. Hindu proselytism, by promoting the Hindu religion through yoga practices with the open support of the Indian state.

Military cooperation

Since 2000, the West has been very involved in the "reform" of the army in Serbia, that is, in its weakening and reduction, as well as in what is called civilian control over the army. At the same time, a number of civil sector organizations have been created which exclusively deal with security, most of which are Western-oriented and enjoy financial support from the West. Military cooperation with the United States and NATO is reflected in cooperation through the "Partnership for Peace" and a series of agreements that Serbia concluded with NATO, such as the SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement) signed in 2006, the IPAP (Individual Partnership Action Plan) from 2014, and cooperation with the Ohio National Guard, which has been ongoing for years on the basis of the SOFA agreement. There have also been symbolic donations from the US in the form of Hummer vehicles, but the most essential facet of cooperation is reflected in the

reformatting of the Serbian Army, which has been sliding slowly towards NATO standards, which mean its degradation.

Military cooperation with the countries of the European Union is interesting, recently and especially with France, from which Serbia has acquired both military and police helicopters, Mistral air defense systems, and the announced purchase of 12 Rafale fighter jets. This cooperation should be seen in the broader sense of strengthening the French influence and is certainly connected with the concession of the Belgrade airport to the above-mentioned French company. It is obvious that France is trying to take advantage of the sentiment in Serbia towards it from the two countries' military alliance from the time of the First World War.

Serbia's only substantial and fundamental military cooperation, however, is with Russia and, more recently, with China. Several very serious military exercises have been carried out with Russia, especially the "Slavic Brotherhood" exercise with Russia and Belarus. The extremely efficient air defense systems Pantsir S1 have been purchased from Russia, and the Serbian Army was given 30 T-72 MS tanks in a modernized version, the first with active-reactive armor in its composition, and 30 BRDM-2 MS armored vehicles. In addition, 10 MiG-29 multipurpose combat aircraft, equipped with new electronics and missiles, arrived as a gift from Russia and Belarus. With the four aircraft of this type remaining in Serbia after the NATO aggression in 1999, which were also modernized, Serbia is back with a complete squadron of 14 aircraft, which was the number it had before the 1999 NATO aggression.

Military cooperation with China is also extremely significant, especially the acquisition of the powerful FK-3 air defense systems, a modernized version of the Russian S-300. The timing of the shipment of this system, in April 2022, a little more than a month after the start of the Russian military operation, is particularly interesting. With this gesture, China in a way sent a signal to the West that it should not get any ideas about threatening Serbia now that its ally Russia is busy with other affairs. What fundamentally changes Serbia's military capability is primarily its cooperation with Russia and China, but France should not be neglected either.

To meet the needs of the Serbian Armed Forces, the acquisition of Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles Bayraktar TB2 has also been mentioned, but this de-

velopment is not yet clear. Cooperation with the Hungarian army is primarily related to problems with migrants on the Serbian-Hungarian border. There is obviously a certain cooperation with the Emirates and Saudi Arabia, although again this is quite mysterious, as well as in the construction of “Belgrade on the water”. In general, it seems that the Middle Eastern countries do not really like transparency, and it could be said that Serbia also likes discretion when it comes to cooperation with those countries. When it comes to the Emirates, the development of a joint missile has been mentioned, but it is not easy to find out from the media how far this has progressed.

Both for the military and for all other spheres of cooperation, it is characteristic that all of these forces follow each other in the new “Casablanca”. Sometimes their interests coincide and sometimes they want to sabotage each other, which of course can be seen through media attacks — according to the ownership structure of the given media, one can guess where the attacks are coming from and for what reason.

Migrations

Serbia is a central country on the path of migrants, because it had always been the shortest route from Constantinople to the center of Europe, or from Baghdad, on the ancient Baghdad-Berlin route. The biggest migrant wave took place in 2015, when at least one million migrants from Syria and other countries passed through Serbia, including terrorists who killed at least 130 people in Paris in November of that year, 90 of them in the Bataclan music hall.

At that time, Serbia was a kind of “flow boiler” for migrants, of whom there are thousands at any given time from the Middle East, from more distant Asian countries and from Africa, although this cannot be compared to the great wave of 2015. On this matter, there are different relations between Serbia and various countries. In a way, the European Union, with the help of Frontex and its other agencies wanted to make a kind of a “parking lot” out of Serbia for these people.

In its game with the European Union, and with its bitter rival Greece, Turkey sometimes uses migrants as a kind of weapon, or more precisely as a means of blackmail. By contrast, Serbia and Hungary have managed to establish good

mutual communication when it comes to the problem of migrants, even in the most difficult time of 2015.

The first massive migrant wave was actually launched from Kosovo and Metohija when, in early 2015, before the Middle Eastern refugees, about 150 000 Albanians passed through Serbia on their way to Western European countries.

There is, of course, a contract with the European Union on readmission, which is sometimes implemented and sometimes not, because the biggest question is in which country migrants were first registered in order to eventually be returned to it. There have been frequent incidents with migrants, including severe police violence, especially in Croatia and Bulgaria, but Serbia was the best organized in the crisis year of 2015 and that there was the least state repression against migrants, for which it even received praise from the European Union.

Nevertheless, there have been several sporadic incidents among the migrants themselves involving fights and the use of cold weapons. The most recent one happened in the north of Serbia, near the border with Hungary, in July and November 2022, where two serious incidents with the use of firearms resulted in injuries and one fatality.

Much attention has been drawn by the latest migrations from Ukraine and Russia after the start of the special military operation. More than 100 000 Russian citizens and around 20 000 Ukrainian citizens are officially registered in Serbia. These people have been well received in Serbia, certainly because, among other things, they share a similar culture and language, they are Orthodox Christians, and they are of a similar ethnicity, i.e., they are Slavs just like the Serbs. This is not the first time that such migrations have occurred: after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, up to 200 000 Russians passed through Serbia, many of whom continued to the West, but tens of thousands remained in Serbia. Their descendants, precisely because of that closeness, easily assimilated as Serbs, just like all the Serbs who migrated to Russia in the 18th century, where they participated in the creation of Novorussia, had by the end of the 19th century assimilated as Russians. The Russians who fled to Serbia at the beginning of the 20th century made a great contribution to the development of the Serbian state, Serbian culture, science, education, architecture, spirituality, etc. Let us mention only a few examples: the architect Nikolai Krasnov, the Byzantologist

Georgi Ostrogorski, the expert on church law Sergej Troitsky, and the cartoonist Yuri Lobachov, known in Serbia as Đorđe Lobachov.

The Russians who are now coming to Serbia know very well that there is no Russophobia or the kind of pressure that is fueled by hatred towards them in many other places in Europe. At the same time, it must be recognized that Serbia, due to the unfortunate circumstances that set these people in motion, now as well as after the Bolshevik Revolution, benefits from them, not only because of the capital, knowledge and skills they bring, even to the IT sector that was very strong in Serbia even before their arrival, but also because of the serious demographic deficit that deeply affects Serbia.

Conclusion

It could be concluded that today's Belgrade really resembles "old" Casablanca. This is, of course, not a position of neutrality and the luxury that Switzerland has long had of almost being able to ignore pressure from other countries. In Belgrade, Western pressure on the local population is manifested by imposing foreign ideas on rooted traditions, and on the government by political blackmail. Formally speaking, Belgrade is neutral, although no one fully recognizes this neutrality; on the contrary, many Western politicians have told Serbian authorities that they must choose a side, or else pay a high price if they remain on the fence.

It seems that Serbia, especially during the reign of Aleksandar Vučić, has begun to resemble a kind of joint-stock company. I have already written¹⁴ that, roughly estimated, it can be said that the West and the East have approximately equal influence, with Russia and China on the one hand and the Anglo-American coalition and the European Union on the other, which for the sake of argument we could say amounts to 40% each. The third pole, the Arab factor, and the Emirates above all (the good relationship between Vučić and the President of the Emirates Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan), but also Saudi Arabia, holds around 20% of the "shares". My hypothesis is that the change in the composition

¹⁴ Gajić, S. (2022). *Сербия — акционерное общество, и контрольный пакет в нём держат арабы*. REGNUM. URL: <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3740332.html>

of the Government of Serbia with the departure of the three ministers generally considered as most pro-Western, cannot be explained only by political struggle, but also by the nature and dynamics of “Casablanca”.

It is an interesting coincidence that Serbian foreign policy changed radically during the summer of 2022, at the moment when Saudi Arabia and the Emirates that support it rejected the American request to increase oil production in order to bring down its price and punish Russia. On the contrary, they decide to reduce production. Thus, for the first time since 1945 and the conclusion of a strategic alliance between the US and the desert kingdoms, including the decision to sell oil for dollars and US security guarantees, Saudi Arabia turned a deaf ear to the demand to respect the most important lever of American geopolitical power. With this lever, the US has not only controlled the Middle Eastern monarchies – which in turn bought huge quantities of expensive American weapons, primarily to protect against potential rivals in the neighborhood – but also the entire world oil market. The US counted on the low price of oil to financially exhaust Russia, as explained by George Friedman at an international conference in Belgrade¹⁵.

Nevertheless, three months after the humiliating rejection of Washington's request, American President Biden threatened “consequences”¹⁶. The reason why even this did not yield any results is quite simple: the moment America stops being a broker of peace, things change. After the military intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia somehow became a “deal maker” in the Middle East. Who can guarantee security to the Shias from the Sunnis, i.e. Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (aka the Shia rainbow) from the Gulf monarchies and the Gulf monarchies from the majority Shia countries? Who guarantees Turkey security from the Shia rainbow and the Shia rainbow from Turkey? And, of course, who guarantees Israel security from all Muslim countries or Iran from Israel? No one! But Russia certainly comes closest, as it has good relations with all of these countries. And this is where the model of governing the Middle East by Henry Kissinger – undoubtedly a great master of the game and a skilled manipulator –

¹⁵ Friedman, G. (2014). CIRSD Conference on WWI: Opening remarks by Mr. George Friedman, Stratfor. YouTube. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFdrs3D59Yg>

¹⁶ Al Jazeera. (2022). Biden vows ‘consequences’ for Saudi Arabia after oil output cuts. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/12/biden-vows-consequences-for-saudi-arabia-after-oil-output-cuts>

based on keeping all countries in insecurity, constant fear and instability, is actually collapsing. The Russian model is the opposite and does not build stability out of mutual fear, but on the basis of mutual trust, if not in each other than on everyone's trust in Russia, which will negotiate with each actor and maintain the stability of the Middle East.

Precisely this, along with the fact that the Russians have fulfilled all their obligations, as well as the promises made to the Gulf monarchies, resulted in the monarchies disobeying the United States during the futile visit of President Joe Biden in July 2022 to Saudi Arabia – practically voiding the agreement between President Franklin Roosevelt and King Ibn Saud. The latter was a strategic agreement made in February 1945, concluded on an American warship cruiser USS Quincy in the Great Bitter Lake in the Suez Canal, when Roosevelt was returning from Yalta where he had met with Joseph Stalin and Winston Churchill.

Even the *Wall Street Journal*, a paper traditionally close to American big capital, realizes that things turned sour by asking why the Arabs (calling them by inertia “allies”) have lost confidence in the United States¹⁷. True, the specific reason is the loss of trust regarding Ukraine, but the actions of the Arab capitals clearly show that this is increasingly becoming the general attitude of the Arab world.

After this tectonic change, where is Serbia located as the new Casablanca? It is an integral part of future world geopolitical unraveling for the simple reason that the control package of 20% “shares” of the Gulf monarchies still made Serbia more pro-Western until recently, but that has changed. In fact, it has changed drastically, because in the old order of things, the most toxic influence was precisely the influence of the owners of that package of “actions”: they financed the advisory “services” to Serbia of Tony Blair, the main architect of NATO aggression in 1999¹⁸. Now, however, just before the formation of the Government of Serbia, Mohamed Bin Zayed al-Nahyan visited Belgrade and from there proceeded to Moscow for talks with Vladimir Putin. This, in itself, almost without needing any comment, yields the appropriate conclusions.

¹⁷ Wall Street Journal. (2022). Why Arab Allies Don't Trust the U.S. on Ukraine. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/arab-allies-dont-trust-the-us-ukraine-middle-east-resolve-russia-ukraine-arms-sales-saudi-arabia-uae-united-arab-emirates-libya-egypt-iraq-iran-nuclear-deal-jcpoa-2015-israel-11649446410>

¹⁸ Vreme. (2018). Ko plaća Tonija Blera. URL: <https://www.vreme.com/vreme/ko-placa-tonija-blera/>

Because of the change in the Middle East, it now seems to have simply gone the other way. The Gulf monarchies have decided on a future in greater Eurasia and will no longer be tied to the shaken Anglo-American world, which is rather lost with its values, reminiscent of decadent Late Antiquity, and in any case completely foreign to the Arab world.

This fact is extremely important and gives some hope for a real Hollywood happy ending like the one in the movie “Casablanca”. Even the corrupt French police captain Louis Renault, who in this case could represent the Serbian government (or more precisely the Serbian president) that is there to trade and balance between interests, decided to side with the forces of good as soon as the circumstances changed. Until then, he had long supported the main bully, German Major Heinrich Strasser, who in the case of Serbia is the political West, primarily embodied in the United States. Circumstances are known to be prone to change – in a fictional movie as well as in the real world.

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Белград – новая «Касабланка»? Место Сербии в формирующемся мировом порядке

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Аннотация: Определяя место Сербии в формирующемся мировом порядке, автор предлагает гипотезу о том, что специфический характер нейтралитета Сербии, связанный с «полуассальным» статусом по отношению к Западу, аналогичен положению Касабланки, изображенной в одноименном художественном фильме 1942 г. Речь идет о нейтральном статусе государства, который признается всеми международными акторами, которые критикуют «двойную игру», призывая определить «союзников». Если ранее единственным влиятельным игроком были Соединённые Штаты Америки, сейчас интересы всех глобальных и региональных акторов пересеклись в «Касабланке». Ситуация нестабильности может разрешиться двумя способами: Сербия либо превратится в ассальную территорию и станет объектом политики, либо сохранит реальный нейтралитет, и вследствие уменьшения роли США и Запада в целом, сможет разорвать ассальные отношения. Благодаря многим факто-

рам, в том числе общественным настроениям, 2022 год стал переломным для становлении независимой сербской внешней политики.

Ключевые слова: Сербия, Касабланка, мягкая сила, нейтралитет, экономика, безопасность, СМИ, миграция, контроль

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