

## Symposium 2023 of the SOG Scientific Advisory Board

# Russia and Southeast Europe: Perceptions and Cultural Diplomacy

**Organization: Southeast European Association (Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft / SOG)**

**Concept and moderation: Prof. Dr Christian Voß, Berlin and Dr Christian Hagemann, München**

**Hybrid event: Hamburg and online, 24 February 2022**

**Report by Matilda Bako, Berlin**

The sad anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine gathered researchers from different universities for an interdisciplinary analysis and interpretation of the resilience and vulnerability of Russian strategic communication and disinformation in Southeast Europe. Prof. Dr *Christian Voß* (Berlin) invited complimentary country experts from various fields to provide different perspectives on the topic, including culture diplomacy, literature, memory culture, and political sciences. The panel aimed to identify potentials in their own scopes of actions and discuss how Russia will be perceived by the Balkans in ten years' time. Given the proactive role of narratives and discourses in reshaping reality, the panellists examined the potential impacts of Russian strategic communication and disinformation in Southeast Europe and discussed how to further strengthen European identity in the region. The presentations highlighted the importance of cultural studies in analysing present discourses as being highly indicative of future developments.

### First Panel

The first part of the program featured two experts who respectively discussed cultural diplomacy and Russian Soviet and post-Soviet Balkan imagery. Prof. Dr *Jan Behrends* (Frankfurt/Oder), an expert in cultural diplomacy, opened his presentation by placing the case examples of the use of propaganda in Soviet and Russian cultural diplomacy within a larger, transregional context. The continuity of the Cold War in modern-day Russia was noted by means of a tweet by Sergei Lavrov that focuses on Russia's relationship with Germany. The presentation showed that Soviet propaganda aimed to push the United States and Western powers out of Central Europe, thus undermining NATO.

*Behrends* argued that the themes of Soviet propaganda have re-emerged under Putin in various regional contexts. The presentation then examined the effectiveness of propaganda in East Germany and looked at the broader context of Russian cultural diplomacy in other regions, such as Kyiv and Southeast Europe. One clear example of Russian cultural propaganda is the Pan-Slavism in Southeast Europe, in which through an anti-EU and anti-Western values approach, Russia attempts to achieve cultural hegemony and express its imperial claims, not only in the post-Soviet space but also in the Balkans. *Behrends* concluded with an examination of the imperial Russian narrative which he said needs to be addressed critically.

In her presentation, Prof. Dr *Tatjana Petzer* (Graz), Professor of Russian and South Slavonic literature, discussed the Russian Soviet and post-Soviet Balkan imagery, by reversing the perspective, hence not asking about the Russian literary soft power among the South Slavs, but vice versa. To that end, she explored the position of the Southeast Europeans in a Russian cultural and emotional mental map, focusing on the period after 1945 and the establishment of communist states in the region. The presentation revolved around the question of whether Russia's image of the Balkans corresponds to the Western "Balkanism" described by Maria Todorova, from which the West can derive its own superiority and civilizational mission.

Making reference to some pivotal historical and political moments, *Petzer* highlighted how Russia's Balkanism diverged from the Western construction of Balkanism during Tsarist Russia and how the foundations of Russia's claim to

the role of Pan-Slavism shifted from mere religious and cultural aspects to ideological and political ends after the October Revolution. The author also explored the impact of World War II and the communist upheaval in the Balkans on Russia's relationship with the region, particularly Yugoslavia. It was argued that varying perspectives and political positions shape Russia's current post-Soviet Balkanism and the Western Balkanism should not be confused with the Russian imagery of the Balkans, which largely has been shaped by the reactivation of the Slavic brotherhood myth.

### Second Panel

The presentations in the second part of the program applied a narrow focus on dealing with individual Southeast European countries and their current narratives on Russia. Dr *Melinda Harlov-Csörtán (Vác)*, an expert in memory culture and public history, explained how Viktor Orbán manages to position his country as pro-Russian despite a communicative memory that is characterised by the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the protest against Moscow. First, she offered a comprehensive analysis of how Hungarian prime ministers have communicated the events of the 1956 Revolution since the regime changed. Specifically, she deconstructed the discourses around the commemoration and narration of the events on 23 October 1956 between 1989 and 2022, exploring the different interpretations of the same events.

Overall, the presentation pointed out the problems with the Hungarian PMs' way of interpreting historic events and that messages from all parties are less about the history and more a reflection of contemporary politics. This presentation lined up with the idea that different narratives can be operationalised to unite or turn against others, such as transforming the enemy from the Soviets to inner political enemies and now to a single city: Brussels.

In the following presentation, Dr *Dimitar Bechev* (Oxford) explored the Russian influence in the Balkans before and after the Russian attack on Ukraine. He emphasised two significant claims regarding Russia's engagement in the Balkans. Firstly, Russia's policy towards the region has

undergone a shift over time and, secondly, local actors such as governments, businesses, and civil society have been involved in colluding with Russia. With these observations in mind, Bechev investigated the Russian influence in the Balkans against the background of three different periods, starting from the Yeltsin years to Putin's return to power.

*Bechev* noted that after 24 February 2022, there was fear and anxiety in the region due to the events echoing the wounds of wars in the 1990s. Serbia opposed annexation rhetorically but resisted joining sanctions against Russia, which hints at a cynical game Serbia is playing to maintain a balance between the West and Russia. The author claims that Russia has the power to spoil things through agencies and people in the region that are associated with pro-Russian rhetoric. In this case, Russia made use of them, took advantage and exploited cleavages to invest in propaganda in the region. It was concluded that keeping Russia out of the Balkans is not possible, despite the Balkan countries' orientation towards the West. Overall, Bechev's presentation shed light on the complex nature of Russia's involvement in the Balkans and emphasised the importance of understanding local actors' involvement in colluding with Russia.

*Tchavdar Marinov*, PhD (Berlin), presented his findings of the current controversies surrounding Macedonian history, identity, and language in Bulgaria and their parallels to the Russian propaganda and discourses towards Ukraine. Focusing mainly on discourses and Russian soft power, he sought to find similarities between Putin's nationalist discourse on Ukraine and Bulgarian mainstream theses about Macedonians. To name but a few, the similarities between the nationalist claims towards Ukraine and the Bulgarian claims about Macedonians are the ideas that the other nation is an "artificial nation" with an "artificial language" and that it did not exist historically. Also, both countries' identities are presented as being created and governed by foreign powers – the West in Ukraine and Serbia in Macedonia. Even though they share a common historical unity between their nations, a contradiction in the

political discourse holds on: “They are our Brothers but they deny human rights to our minority.”

*Marinov* stated that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has also impacted the relationship between Bulgaria and Macedonia, with national opposition in both countries being often visibly pro-Russian, and Macedonian commentators have emphasised the similarities between Bulgarian and Russian nationalist claims. The study concluded by summarising the similarities between Putin’s nationalist discourse on Ukraine and Bulgarian mainstream theses about Macedonians and their impact on the relationship between Bulgaria and Macedonia. However, it was noted that the study focused on discourses and narratives, so further studies with a political scope are needed to provide an exhaustive political analysis of the conflict.

### Discussion

One participant from the audience disagreed that the relationship of Russia with some Western Balkans countries is more of an elite-driven decision, arguing that Russia’s role goes beyond just spoiling things in the region, it rather builds on well-thought, strategic priorities and outlooks. Another participant mentioned Re-

publika Srpska and said that the now re-elected president’s public support for Putin was interpreted as a strong symbol and provocation driven by president Dodik’s own political interests.

In the view of another participant, Bulgaria holds much more strategic importance for Russia. It was argued that Russia has consistently shown its hand in Bulgaria on a couple of occasions. Even though the polls show that the biggest chunk of the Bulgarian public endorses pro-western attitudes, Bulgaria has traditionally been a country that maintains friendly relations with Russia.

### Closing remarks

Overall, the panel contributions and discussion provided valuable, transregional and diversified insights into Russian strategic communication and disinformation in Southeast Europe, focusing on the narratives and discourses of political events. In line with the symposium’s premise on the proactive role of narratives in (re)shaping reality, the findings of the presentations pointed to the need for more awareness of Russia’s opportunism and its influence in Southeast Europe so that the EU cohesion and unity are not eroded.

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## Podiumsdiskussion

# Der westliche Balkan – Aktuelle Herausforderungen im Zeichen des russischen Angriffskriegs in der Ukraine

Veranstalterin: Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft (SOG)  
München, 30. Januar 2023

### Bericht von Igor Antov, München

Die Diskussion mit *Manuel Sarrazin*, dem Sondergesandten der Bundesregierung für die Länder des westlichen Balkans und Präsidenten der SOG, widmete sich der politischen Situation in der Westbalkanregion sowie den Auswirkungen des russischen Angriffskriegs in der Ukraine auf den EU-Erweiterungsprozess. Sarrazin stellte aus einem deutsch-europäischen Blickwinkel die verschiedenen Facetten der aktuellen Herausforderungen in der Region dar. Er blickte

dabei bedauernd auf das unerfüllte EU-Thessaloniki Versprechen von 2003, zeigte sich im Hinblick auf die derzeitigen Entwicklungen in der Region allerdings optimistisch. Das Gespräch, an dem etwa 50 Personen teilnahmen, wurde von Dr. *Hansjörg Brey*, Mitglied des Präsidiums der Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft, moderiert.

Die Schaffung der Position des „Sondergesandten“, der für das gesamte Kabinett spreche,