

## IN THE SHADOW OF GAS AND POLITICS: CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL CONTACTS, CONNECTIONS AND COOPERATION BETWEEN SERBIA AND RUSSIA

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When we speak today about both present and past Serbian-Russian relations, we usually give priority to politics. However, the history of mutual relations shows that other connections were equally important, such as cultural, artistic, spiritual, religious and ecclesiastical ties between these two peoples (we could also include scientific connections, but it would require too much specific detail in a general overview such as this).

It is possible to trace these connections back to the middle ages and the first contacts of the Serbian ruler Stefan Nemanja with Russian monks. One popular example that is often mentioned is the encounter of his son Rastko Nemanjić (St. Sava) with a Russian monk from Mount Athos, who helped him to hide from his father's men in the Russian monastery of St. Panteleimon and later to become a monk himself. We should also mention the almost forgotten Serbian Monk Lazarus, who designed the first clock in the Kremlin at the beginning of XV century. The first influences of South Slavs on Russian culture and literature date from the XV century. Russian material and cultural contributions to the Serbian Church and its monasteries were initiated at the beginning of the XVI century. These contributions were brought back by various Serbian monks and priests during numerous visits to Russia up until the end of the XVIII century. During the XIX century, contributions from the Russian Tsars for cultural and educational needs were most important to the Serbs under the Habsburg Empire. Equally important were mutual connections and contacts during the early 20s of the last century, when numerous Russian refugees came to the then Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, where they found sanctuary from the prosecutions in their own country. Their cultural, artistic, scientific and spiritual influence was very noticeable among the Serbian and Yugoslavian elite of the time. Finally, mutual contacts, connections and influences have remained strong to this day through the activity of famous artists such as Milorad Pavić, Konstantin Kostjukov, Nikita Mihalkov and Emir Kusturica.

The numerous contacts, influences, cooperation and spiritual exchanges between these two peoples have been varied and rich and have created a specific, recognisable space of cultural and spiritual encounter, exchange and mutual cooperation. This space is visible in both countries, though less in Russia than in Serbia it is, nevertheless, important.

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon that even significant and fruitful aspects of cultural exchange are being simplified or glorified, negated or even rejected in public discourse. Thus, this kind of treatment reduces the whole

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content to shallow black and white symbols, suitable to use in day-to-day political struggle.

For this reason we can observe a curious phenomenon: in politics and political relations, we can say that very few experts truly understand the modern politics of Russian/Serbian relations and are able to interpret it correctly. On the other hand, there are too many who “have an opinion” founded on only a basic understanding or even no real knowledge about the modern political situation, mutual relations and history. These would be experts are usually ready and willing to publicly interpret these relations and consequently promoting their opinion. Experts with essential knowledge of the economics (or, more precisely, energetics) of Serbian-Russian relations are even fewer, yet they are reluctant to express their opinion publicly. Therefore, they leave the platform free for intellectuals, “experts on everything”, who have an “opinion” on every issue, including the problem of Serbian – Russian economic and energetic cooperation. On the other hand, as far as the area of culture and spirituality is concerned, we can say that there are numerous experts with a deep understanding of cultural and spiritual exchange, mutual knowledge and affirmation. Unlike the previous group, they are not mere passive observers and users, but active participants in the above-mentioned processes. In previous decades these experts accomplished a lot in terms of establishing and maintaining contacts, in the mutual affirmation of cultural and spiritual values, but also on the broader promotion of the cultural and spiritual values of their own country abroad. Compounding the paradox, these real experts very rarely have the opportunity to speak in public about contemporary Serbian-Russian relations, or even about the problems they encounter during their work, and moreover, they cannot count on any systematic institutional support.

Another particular phenomenon characterises Serbian-Russian spiritual and cultural connections. We can quite often hear simplified statements in public, usually charged with a specific type of emotional rhetoric: that Serbian-Russian ties are no longer at on the traditional historic wavelength; that interest in the Russian language among Serbian children and their parents is dramatically declining; that additional efforts have to be made so that these two peoples can “learn more” about each other; that mutual promotion of our cultural achievements are needed etc. Consequently, the overall impression is that these mutual cultural and spiritual contacts and exchange are insufficient and not visible. Hence, additional efforts are needed to expand and deepen these ties, and moreover, to strengthen or (re)establish contact.

If we were to accept the impression conveyed by the media today, we might think that relations, contacts and mutual perceptions are weak and underdeveloped (in any case insufficient, considering the rich history of mutual contacts and cooperation, and the high achievements of Russian, but also Serbian culture).

However, the basis of this simplified black and white *impression* of insufficient Serbian-Russian cultural and spiritual ties, contacts, cultural interaction and cooperation is often not clear. Does it come as a consequence

of inherited traditional, emotional perception of mutual connections and contacts (personalized in Russophilia and Serbophilia - if it is even possible to speak about something like that in a Russian environment)? Is it possible that the phenomenon we are speaking about is simply a feeling of political proximity deeply rooted in the collective mentality, built during the XX century on very different and diffuse foundations (these foundations are explained in a stereotyped manner, as political ties between two states during World War I or political and ideological empathy between the ruling regimes during the Cold War). Finally, is the phenomenon that we are speaking about just a reflection of contemporary political projections about allies and enemies, about “us” and “them”, about “east” and “west”, about spiritual and religious affinity, kinship etc.

Or it is about the realistic projection of contemporary opportunities, cultural needs and future development in both cultural environments?

The above-mentioned dilemmas are even more visible considering the fact that contemporary Serbia and Russia live in the age of political, economic and cultural globalisation, the dilemma is further strengthened by the real contents and perspectives of contemporary Serbian-Russian spiritual and cultural cooperation.

Let us try to examine some of the issues and offer a few possible interpretations.

### *THE FIELD OF CULTURE*

If we want to rationalise the reality in which we live, to substantially understand it - not interpret it emotionally following the simplified discourse of daily political symbols – if we want to achieve a deeper analysis and to contextualise contemporary cultural relations and connections, perception of Russian culture in a Serbian context and vice versa, we need to consider a few facts. Firstly, it is necessary to correctly distinguish between the possible meanings of terms such as culture, cultural cooperation, exchange, perception etc. Understanding contemporary Serbian-Russian cultural relations and cooperation depends on the meaning we give to these terms.

Is this general perception of culture to be understood as *high culture* (*elite culture*) or are we referring to much broader field that includes *mass culture* as well as *elite culture*? Moreover, is this a context in which cultural contact is reduced exclusively to the perception of *elite culture*, or is it a much wider understanding of culture – defined as a network of meanings which determines a society and bringing together all its facets, such as production, growth, context, interiorisation, etc. Finally, is it only about the perception of culture in cultural institutions of so-called “high culture”, or is it about the presence of Russian culture in the Serbian media and public (and vice versa)?

It is necessary to have a clear and balanced understanding of all the terms above, to de-contextualise considerations on contemporary Serbian-Russian relations from a discourse based purely on impressions.

Furthermore, anyone following the efforts to promote Russian culture in Serbia (and vice versa) has to have seen how connections do exist, and that they are indeed not weak but, on the contrary, extremely rich in content. To the eye of the careful, keen and objective beholder, it is more than obvious that if we analyse Serbian-Russian cultural exchanges within *elite cultures*, it is difficult to find ground for dissatisfaction regarding the character and quality of such relations and cooperation, indeed it is quite the opposite.

Without a doubt, we can conclude that contemporary Russian cultural production is present and quite visible in Serbia. We can give few obvious examples leading to this conclusion. In the last few years and even decades Serbian readers have had the opportunity to become acquainted, through translations, with almost all the most important contemporary Russian writers: Victor Pelievin, Lyudmila Ulicka, Boris Akunin, Victor Erofeiev, Vladimir Sorokin etc. At the same time, Russian classics such as Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Bulghakov, Chekhov, Pushkin and others are constantly present on Serbian cultural scene with continuous reprints of their works. There are numerous translations available of other important writers such as Konstantin Leontiev, Nina Berberova, Gait Gazdanov, Sergey Dovlatov, Venedikt Jerofeiev and others. Entire series of works by distinguished Russian thinkers' from the so-called Russian "silver age" have been published: Berdyaev, Solovyev, Danilevski, Trubecki, Tihomirov, Frank, Uspenski, Visheslavchev and Fyodorov etc. On the other hand, the Serbian public has also had the opportunity to see the most important Russian achievements in cinema: Nikita Mihalkov, Aleksey Balabanov, Karen Shahnazarov, Stanislav Govoruhin and others. Moreover, Serbian audiences have had occasion to attend performances by some of the most distinguished virtuosos and conductors from the Russian musical tradition, to see the best ballet stars of the Bolshoi Theatre, to hear famous Russian choirs etc. Finally, they have had the chance to see some of the finest Russian TV series, such as "Moscow Saga" or "Favoritka", as well as number of episodes of contemporary Russian documentaries under the name of "Criminal Russia" etc.

The conclusion that it is hard to express dissatisfaction when we speak about the presence of elite Russian culture in Serbia is confirmed already through this simple quantitative analysis. Based on a few simple indicators (calculated on an *ad hoc* basis, for the needs of this paper) it would be easy to demonstrate that the position and perception of Russian elite culture in contemporary Serbia is in no way inferior or discriminated against when compared to other major world cultures.

For example, an analyses of the total editorial output in Serbia in 2009 shows that of 23,034 monographs published, 4,697 (20 percent) were books translated from one of the major world languages<sup>1</sup>. Among these, most were

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis was based on data from the National Library of Serbia, located on COBISS browser. Data (excluding periodicals) are not given in absolute, but relative values - because of the browser's character and because of input and presentation. Since these data cannot be selected to give comprehensive information, but only to be used as an illustration of the previous conclusions, the survey results can be used only as basic references.

originally written in English (USA, UK, and Australia, but also from other countries) – 1,741 (37 percent), while translations of the books written in other languages are much fewer: French 335 (7.1 percent), Russian 237 (5 percent), Italian 205 (4.4 percent), German 192 (4.1 percent) and Spanish 82 (1.7 percent). Books written in other languages were translated in percentages that do not exceed 1 percent, for example Japanese 30 (0.6 percent), Hungarian 29, Norwegian 23 (0.5 percent), Romanian 14, Chinese 9 (0.2 percent), etc.

Furthermore, if we analyze the programme of the Belgrade Philharmonia in 2009/2010 season, it is easy to notice that out of 26 visiting conductors, three (12 percent) are from Russia (or the ex-USSR). Out of 30 guest soloists during the same season, 7 (23 percent) are from Russia or from the area of former USSR.

At the same time, analysis of the programme of the last two Belgrade international film festivals – FEST (2009, 2010) shows that Russian cinema was not at all discriminated against nor neglected. Out of the 132 films on the programme, 85 were national productions and 47 were co-productions by two or more countries. Among the national productions, films from the USA were the most numerous, as could have been predicted though far below what might have been expected. In second place were films from France, a total 8 (9 percent), and in third place Russia - 6 films (7 percent). In other words, Russians were represented with the same number of works as the host country, Serbia (6). Then followed South Korea with 5, Italy with 4, Austria with 4, India with 4, Japan with 3, Croatia with 3, and Ukraine, Greece, Brazil, Iran, the Czech Republic, Sweden, Poland, Mexico, Albania, Armenia and Georgia all with 1 film each.

As a curiosity, it is worth mentioning that one of the readers published for the first grade of primary school in Serbia by one of the authorised publishers (Kreativni Centar) includes texts by 31 authors, 26 originally written in Serbian and 5 translated. These texts are the basis on which Serbian children form their first notions of Serbian Language and Literature. Of the above-mentioned 5 text by foreign authors, one was by the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen, while the other four were written by Russian writers: Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Suteev, Corney Chuckovski and Semion Kogan (in other words around 80 percent of all foreign language authors, or 13 percent of the total number of authors in the textbook).

Bearing this data in mind, it is a hard to defend the thesis that the presence, perception and promotion of Russian cultural values are insignificant, decreasing or marginalized in Serbia. Moreover, if we take into account that over the past 14 years, thanks to the enthusiastic work of the Paunkovic Brothers, a journal specialising in Russian literature and culture called "*Russian Almanac*" is being published regularly in Serbia. There is also the example of a small publishing house named "Logos", run by Vladimir Medenica, which has a rather impressive production of some of the most important authors and thinkers of Russian culture of the XIX and XX centuries. Numerous publicly financed institutions have an ongoing fruitful cooperation

with Russian cultural endeavours and institutions, such as Jugoslovenska kinoteka (Yugoslav Film Archive) as well as some theatres. In that context we should also mention the website Rastko (Project Rastko-Russia)<sup>2</sup> and the newly-established, luxury, magazine “Rusija danas” (Russia today).

Certainly, the illustrative analysis above is centred primarily on exterior, more formal, quantitative framework of the issue in question. A more comprehensive, content-oriented analysis would, without doubt, broaden the analytical framework and opportunity for understanding and interpreting the issue as a whole. However, it would be unlikely to change the conclusions regarding the general trends in the presence and perception of Russian *high culture* in Serbia.

On the other side of the imagined line of exchange – when we discuss the presence, perception and promotion of Serbian cultural values in the Russian cultural environment, we have to conclude that Serbian culture is much less present in contemporary Russia than vice versa. However, that is only logical due to the difference in size between two countries and the sheer quantity of cultural output. Nevertheless, it is easy to conclude that in contemporary Russian culture the most distinguished works of Serbian elite culture are present and widely exposed, above all the works of the Serbian writer Milorad Pavić and film-maker Emir Kusturica.

However, the situation is very different if we analyse the promotion of Russian high culture in the Serbian media, in another words, the presentation of the production and content of Russian mass culture in Serbia’s media and Serbian mass culture, and vice versa. The average Serbian consumer of mass culture has never heard of any of today's Russian music stars, such as Filip Kirkorov, Angelika Varum, Timatie, Zemfira, Dime Bilan and others. Likewise, in earlier times they did not know anything about famous Russian music stars, like Ala Pugatchova or Josif Kobzon, or about the “bards” Visocki, Okujava, Gali; and others. Serbian youth in their time did not know anything about famous Russian rock groups and performers like *Aquarium*, *Nautilus Pompilus*, *Alice*, *DDT*, *Alexaneder Baslachov*, *Nolia*, *Grazdanskaya Oborona*, *Janka Diagilieva*, *Instrukcie po vizhivaniu* and others. If we observe from this point of view, we would have to conclude that the presence of Russian culture in Serbia is barely visible (if at all), whereas Serbian culture in Russia practically does not exist (except the “distinguished” tradition, urban legends about the famous, almost mythical tours of Serbian stars like Djordje Marijanovic, Radmila Karaklajic, *Sedmorica mladih* and others in the USSR during 60s and 70s of the XX century).

It is precisely this aspect of the everyday perception of cultural contents in the hyper-reality of the mass media, overran by popular culture and its numerous and varied subculture derivatives, that creates the *impression* of an insufficient presence of Russian culture in Serbia (in some analysis discrimination is even mentioned).

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rastko.rs/rastko-ru/>

Furthermore, this image of an insufficient presence of Russian culture in Serbia is close to or even matches the data available, even with simple *ad hoc* analysis of television programming. However, the analysis of TV as the key space of mass culture presentation and perception, that is films and TV series (telenovelas, “soap operas”) as basic forms of presentation and reception of mass culture, could be disputed as simplified approach, if we consider the growing importance of the Internet as the space for presentation and exchange of mass culture content. But such an analysis provides us with the most suitable parameters for the interpretation of the whole phenomenon, for a number of reasons. Firstly, the television programme (especially considering members of the middle-aged and older generation) is the dominant medium of mass culture contents. Secondly, if we consider the range of characteristics of television as a medium, it is possible to look at it as the most suitable mean of conveyance for certain cultural codes, as an array of semantic meanings which determine one social and cultural model.

Television programmes in particular – though we could agree with Anthony Giddens that “television is a continuous flow, but the television programme is a ‘mess’”- represents a network of meanings, which are transferred and promoted, a space for the dissemination, adoption and layering of cultural codes and patterns. And what does this space look like?

For the purpose of this paper, we have analyzed the programmes available on one cable television provider in Belgrade (SBB) offering a total of 75 channels. We randomly took one regular working day for a 24-hour analysis, Thursday, March 11, 2010<sup>3</sup>. The analysis focused on the programmes broadcast on 32 TV channels which were showing films and TV series in the Serbian language (out of which 29 television channels could actually be analyzed<sup>4</sup>). The remaining 43 channels have different content – they either broadcast a mix of programmes exclusively in foreign languages (4) in German, French, Spanish and Italian – which makes them almost inaccessible to an average Serbian viewer; or they represent exclusively informative channels (4) or else their profile is mono-thematic: sport (9), music (5), travel and wildlife (3), documentary (8), children (7), fashion and jet-set(2) or advertising (1). Therefore, analyzing mass culture production in the Serbian mass media (bearing in mind films and TV series), we came to the

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<sup>3</sup> The focus of analysis was on film and TV series production exclusively, just their first broadcast during the day, and not their reruns, mostly at night and in the early morning, which is almost a rule in all television channels. Children's channels and animated films were not covered in the analysis, although they were significant, simply because information about them is rarely available (a certain number of TV channels do not have their own internet sites, while a vast amount of TV programmes does not give even basic data about programmes to be broadcast, neither on their web sites nor in the print media – original name of the film, name of the director, production country etc.). The programme scheme of music channels was impossible to analyse in real time, and in programme outlines there are no precise data about the content of broadcast music. Fashion and jet set channels were not analyzed precisely for the same reasons. However, the contents of exactly these channels (animated films, popular music, fashion and “VIP world”) represent most of the patterns for the spreading and transmission of certain cultural codes characteristic for global mass culture.

<sup>4</sup> In three mentioned cases (one is Art TV) programmes could not be analyzed at all, because no precise data about the programme scheme is available in any form, on television itself, the print media or the Internet.

following: on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2010 Serbian viewers had an opportunity to watch 47 different films (without reruns) or more or less 70 hours of films on 32 analyzed channels. Among the films that were broadcast on that date, 39 were of modern or older American productions (83 percent), four were domestic (older SFRY and newer Serbian productions), two British, one Chinese and one Italian. On the same date 102 episodes of different TV series were broadcast, which totalled (without reruns) an additional 68 hours of broadcast. Of this number 60 were made in the USA (59 percent), 14 were Latin American – Mexican, Columbian etc. (14 percent), seven British (7 percent), five domestic – SFRY/Serbia (5 percent), five Croatian -although one of these was broadcast at the same time on two or three channels (5 percent), three Italian and three Australian, two Spanish and one Turkish, one German and one Chinese. To have the overall picture about the character of the programming, we should add that remaining programme-time was filled with large amount of animated films (minimum 40 episodes – without reruns – mostly American and Asian productions), a number of different reality shows (mainly designed according to the adopted Western models and patterns, then live and recorded broadcasts of sport events (at least football 15 matches, five basketball, three hockey, ten auto mobile races, etc.) and an enormous amount of popular music videos and shows about the world of fashion and the jet-set. Consequently, in such a hyper-realistic programming framework there was no air space for Russian films or TV series.

Therefore, on March 11, 2010, out of 768 hours of broadcast programmes on 32 channels (out of 1700 hours, on 75 television channels over 24 hours) – almost 300 hours of programming were basically promoting/spreading one, more or less unified cultural code of mass culture – the American one, with sub-cultural substrates embodied in Latin-American and Asian “soap operas”.

What conclusions can be drawn from the facts above?

In the first place, when we speak about the sphere of mass culture, it is completely understandable that we cannot expect any radical change. Simply we must bear in mind that we live in the era of globalisation, in the era of Coca-Colisation (as it was colourfully defined by Reinhold Wagnleitner<sup>5</sup>), Holliwoodisation..., of total cultural space and social life. That we live in age of strong and unachievable mass storage “from the bottom up” of all kinds of information (T.H.Eriksen<sup>6</sup>), as well as hitherto unseen content of mass culture in the history of mankind. In a 24 hour period modern man is confronted with more information than people from VIII or IX century saw in their entire lifetimes. We live in an era in which “art is just a prelude to cocktail and PR” as it was superbly defined by A. Bartoshevic. In such global hyper-reality of mass media, the content of American mass culture holds absolute supremacy, and for one simple reason – we are speaking about the products of world’s largest mass culture *industry* (literally). An *Industry* that is impossible to

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<sup>5</sup> R.Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria After the Second World War*, North Carolina, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Tomas Hiland Eriksen, *Tiranija trenutka: Brzo i sporo vreme u informacionom društvu*, Beograd, 2003.

oppose in quantity by any other production of mass culture (Asian, Latin American, Chinese or Indian). Simply said, no other culture in the world, except the American industry of mass culture, has capacity to produce such a quantity of films to fill the daily schedule of a cable TV provider in Serbia with an average of 70 hours of film programme over 24 hours all through the year. At such a rhythm the yearly Russian film production would be “drained dry” in less than seven days.

Bearing all the above in mind, it is clear why none of the great Russian block-busters of recent years such as *9 rota (9 рота)*, *Stilyag (Стиляги)*, *Obitaemi Ostrov (Обитаемый остров)*, *Admiral (Адмирал)*, *Odnokalsniki (Одноклассники)* and others, or ever growing number of Russian telenovelas, which usually last a few seasons, for example *Brigada (Бригада)*, *Koldovskaya Lybov (Колдовская любовь)*, *Soldat (Солдаты)*, *Ne Rodis Lrasivoi (Не родись красивой)*, *Moja prekrasnaya nyanya (Моя прекрасная няня)*, *Schastlivie Vmeste (Счастливые вместе)*, *Tatyanin Den (Татьянин день)*, *Spalnyi Raion (Спальный район)*, *Margosha (Маргоша)*, *Sled Salamandri (След Саламандры)* and others, do not have any real possibility of breaking through on Serbian media space, in the face of competition with American, and even Latin-American telenovelas. A separate question arises if we consider the content of these films and telenovelas, which are almost exclusively made for Russian and Post-Soviet viewer (although replicating some of the patterns of their American models to a certain extent), as such they are preserving a closed cultural pattern, quite distant from Serbian mass media consumers. An example of the importance of an open cultural code can be seen in the children's animated series *Smeshtariki (Смешарики)*, written in a sufficiently universal language as to be widely accepted among the younger population in Serbia. Hence, it opens another different dimension of the problem.

In a similar context, we should examine how Serbian mass culture cannot find its place in Russian media space. However, the Serbian production is significantly smaller than the Russian, thus it is in much less advantageous position on the mass culture “market” in comparison to the offer of more developed mass culture industries. When we discuss the content of the Serbian production it is even more appropriate to say that it is closed within its own separate cultural code, which can be almost exclusively assimilated among the Serbian public, and occasionally in the ex-Yugoslavian context. This cultural code is heavily characterized by a dominant quasi-rural self-reception of Serbian mass culture and society, often “proud” of turbo-folk and quasi-rural contents (Trumpet festival in Gucha, and numerous TV series about village and rural mentality: *the Dollars are coming (Стужу долари)*, *the Village is burning and granny brushes her hair (Село гори а баба се чешља)*, *My cousin from the village (Мoj рођак са села)*, *White boat (Бела лађа)* and others) – the key “cultural export brands” of Serbia. That could be understandable if that export referred exclusively to the ex-Yugoslav area, and rarely to the Balkans as a whole – but it is hard to imagine any possibility of some wider, European or world perception of such contents.

Within the scenario above, “longing” for a greater presence of Russian culture within the space of Serbian mass culture, and vice versa, is almost passé. Of course, it is possible to argue about the good and bad sides of Globalisation and Coca-Colisation (doubtless, we would all agree about their bad sides), but we cannot stop them or reverse them. They are simply the reality in which the present generations live, and the framework in which future generations will probably live. Their rejection, refusal and condemnation will certainly not help us to understand them; it is by understanding of processes of Globalisation that we will come up with the frameworks and realistic prospects for present and future Serbian-Russian spiritual and cultural cooperation.

We should also consider the decreased/increased interest in studying the Russian language in Serbia under a similar point of view. Simply, interest in learning languages decreases, when contacts between two states and economies become weaker, and such contacts have been significantly less intense during the transition period, when compared to socialist period. Simply, when (and if) there are more Russians in Serbia and if Russians were to have an interest (economic, for tourism or personal reasons – for example, if Serbia allowed Russians to buy real estate), naturally studying Russian would become more attractive. Without such an impulse dramatic improvements can hardly be expected.

Finally, when we discuss the *high culture*, *elite culture* - it cannot be said that the situation is bad, indeed we could even say it is satisfactory. Nevertheless it would be difficult to evaluate if the whole potential of Serbian-Russian cultural exchange has already been exhausted. What is obvious, even through a simple analysis, is that the greater part of existing exchange (and the preservation of such contacts) has been carried out with little or no institutional support. It seems like the institutions, which are supposed to deal with these matters, do not show any significant interest to establish, maintain and foster cultural ties and contacts. It is a logical conclusion that this is precisely the area of Serbian-Russian relations that can be boosted to increase and deepen mutual cultural cooperation.

### *THE SPIRITUAL AREA*

Matters of spiritual, religious and ecclesiastical relations between Serbia and Russia are interrelated, depending on complex issues of Serbian-Russian cultural cooperation and exchange.

The Spiritual ties between the Russian and Serbian people also have a long history - indeed, these were the first of important Serbian-Russian contacts. Spiritual contacts began already in middle ages, and became closer and more frequent between XVI and the end of “long” XIX century. Although during XX century spiritual connections between these two peoples and two churches passed through difficult times (mostly because of the nature of the authoritarian and atheistic regimes in both Serbia (SFRY) and Russia), contact was still intense and rich in mutual cooperation and influences. The period in between the two World Wars was probably the richest, due to a fact

that the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians was one of the main destinations for Russian refugees. The Russian Orthodox Church outside of Russia was active on the territory of the Kingdom in that period, with the approval and support of the Serbian Orthodox Church. That was a period of intense close contacts between Russian and Serbian priests, monks, spiritual leaders and believers (just by way of example, the influence of Russian monks and nuns was of immense importance for rebirth of female monasteries and nunneries within the church).

However, when we discuss present day relations, we should bear in mind firstly their complexity, and the complexity of the symbolic of mutual ties between the two Orthodox peoples and the two Orthodox sister churches. Of course, in these relations, and even more in their symbolism, tradition plays an influential role, nevertheless, tradition is not the only aspect at play in contemporary ties and relations.

The issues of spirituality and religiosity, which were pivotal questions in both countries after the breakdown of the two communist regimes, at the beginning of the 1990s, are still relevant today. The same issues do not just deal with the position of the churches within society (the Serbian Orthodox Church and Russian Orthodox Church) and their mutual relations, though mutual relations constitute one important, and maybe the key aspect of their mutual relations in an institutional sense, we should not deny the importance (within the general context of the spiritual relations between the two peoples) of the issues of religiosity, faith, pilgrimage and common self-reception in faith of the population as important parts of identity in both societies.

Naturally, there is always the risk of emotional and simplified approaches to these complex connections. Such approaches usually include the danger of evolving rather mystical interpretations, sometimes over-mystification. In that sense, notions such as belonging to the "same faith" and the "same tribe" are transformed (in one metaphysical dimension) into conclusions of uniformity of faith, religiosity and spirituality. The next step is to draw conclusions on such a simplified basis, such as the remark of Deacon Andrej Savostishki: "[Europe] is dead. Europe is material paradise and spiritual hell (...) Europe made its choice, Europe does not follow the Lord or go towards the Lord, it lives without God, and Serbia is with God(...)"<sup>7</sup> ...

In such cases it is good to mention one very colourful comparison of the two religious practices. In 1928 Zinaida Hipius wrote the following sentence (based on experience of mutual contact): "Serbian Orthodox Christianity is not exactly identical to the Russian one. Higher or lower, better or worse – that is another issue, but not the same: it is livelier, more people-oriented, and simpler and, what is the most important: it is more joyful".<sup>8</sup> Therefore, when we speak of perception of contemporary Serbian-Russian spiritual ties, we can say that they too are characterized with almost

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<sup>7</sup> "PORT ARTURSKA IKONA MAJKE BOŽIJE U SRBIJI" ([http://www.manastir-lepavina.org/novosti/index.php/weblog/detaljnije/port\\_arturska\\_ikona\\_majke\\_boije\\_u\\_srbiji/](http://www.manastir-lepavina.org/novosti/index.php/weblog/detaljnije/port_arturska_ikona_majke_boije_u_srbiji/))

<sup>8</sup> Z. N. Gippius (З.Н.Гиппиус), "Письмо о Югославии ", in: *За Свободу*, Warsaw, (А САНУ, 14386, 2541.)

identical circle of questions, dilemmas, problems and general trends which imply in the analysis of the contemporary cultural relations.

Hence, it is evident that ties, contacts, overlapping and cooperation exist without doubt, and are very rich and complex, for example church connections, the wide scope of the Russian church in Belgrade (Serbia), and Serbian one in Moscow (Russia); moreover, numerous future Serbian priests and theologians attend Russian spiritual seminars and academies; Serbian believers travel on pilgrimages to Russia, but also Russian monks and believers visit Serbian shrines and holy places, such as pilgrimage tours “S, C Вятки“) (which have been organized since 2006 with the blessing of the Archbishop of Vyat and Slobodski Hrisanif<sup>10</sup>); and finally, the Russian Federation has provided material support for the reconstruction of Serbian churches and spiritual shrines in Kosovo and Metohija<sup>11</sup>.

However, when we speak of the general perception of spiritual cooperation, we must conclude that it only vaguely (or indeed not at all) participates in the hyper-reality of the mass media culture, as is the case of high culture. As a consequence, the whole area of spirituality, as well as culture itself, is left to exist on the margins of public discourse (including almost all efforts at deepening, expanding and maintaining of a high level of contact, cooperation and interconnectivity).

Lastly, it is also possible to raise the issue of institutional support to the spiritual dimension, but certainly in different manner – since the church itself as an institution covers and solves the major scope of important questions.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, one such pilgrimage and tour of sacred shrines and holy places in Russia by Backa Eparchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church should be organized in May 2010 and it should last 12 days. This tour should include the following: May 9: Moscow (visit to Trinity-Sergey Lavra. Worship of the holy remains of St. Sergey of Radoniezsh; May 10: Murom-Diveyev. Visit of the Holy. Trinity and Blagoveshensky monasteries and the temple of St. Nikolay. Arrival to Serafimo-Divievsky monastery. Worship of the holy remains of St. Serafim Sarovski and the miraculous icon of Umilenie; May 11: Diveyev-Vladimir-Moscow. Visit of the Uspen Sabor (with the particles of holy remains of St. Alexander Nevsky, the holy remains of St. Prince Andrei Bogolyubski, the miraculous icon Vladimirska, Bogolyubska, fresco by Andrei Rubliov). Monasteries of Svyato-Uspenski Kneginin, Svyato-Bogolyubov. Temple of the Shroud on Nerla etc.

(more info at: <http://www.eparhija-backa.rs/putovanja/svetinje-rusije-0>)

<sup>10</sup> Compare: „Паломничество в Сербию“

([http://www.rusk.ru/analitika/2009/12/17/palomничество\\_v\\_serbiyu/](http://www.rusk.ru/analitika/2009/12/17/palomничество_v_serbiyu/)); „Паломничество в Сербию и Черногорию“ (<http://www.svyatky.ru/vpechatleniya/vpp2/>);

<sup>11</sup> The project was defined during 2008, when, the then Russian president Vladimir Putin, expressed the will to contribute 2 million dollars and various other kinds of technical and expert help to restore and protect Serbian spiritual holy places and shrines in Kosovo – Pec Patriarchy, Gracanica monastery, Visoki Decani monastery, Bogoridica Ljeviska monastery ]. (<http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/DrupercentC5percentA1tvo/465371/Rusija+obnavlja+a+srpske+svetinje+na+Kosmetu>);[http://www.rtv.co.rs/sr\\_lat/drustvo/rusija-obnavlja-svetinje-na-kosovu\\_60096.html](http://www.rtv.co.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/rusija-obnavlja-svetinje-na-kosovu_60096.html), as well as: <http://zabelezi.com/category/Vesti/rusija-obnavlja-srpske-svetinje-na-kosmetu/>)

Finally, it is possible to draw one final general conclusion regarding cultural and spiritual (as well as scientific) Serbian-Russian ties, contacts, mutual influences and interconnectivity. Connections and contacts without any doubt do exist. They are characterized by relatively rich exchange as well as numerous and different contents. However, the reality and results of that cultural and spiritual (or scientific) exchange, cooperation and interconnectivity are, almost by rule, hardly visible in the public discourse/space of the hyper-reality of mass media culture. In that hyper-reality, dominated by products of industrialized mass culture, there is not much (if any) room for the presentation of diverse contents. Furthermore, the nature of that hyper-real space of mass media culture is such that any political issue, standpoint or gesture, as well as any implemented or even announced economic project, would overshadow any cultural, spiritual or scientific effort (regardless of its real importance and value).