

RUSSIAN UTILIZATION OF REFLEXIVE CONTROL: A CASE STUDY OF SERBIA

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Abstract: Russian utilization of reflexive control plays a pivotal role in advancing its foreign policy objectives. This strategic concept involves shaping an adversary's perception and decision-making processes to achieve desired outcomes without direct confrontation. The Russian government employs reflexive control across

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various domains, including intelligence, strategic communication, and diplomacy. The EU has recognized these manipulative methods and labelled them as Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI).

This paper endeavors to conduct an in-depth analysis of Kremlin's application of reflexive control to influence decision making processes in Serbia. The study closely examines how Russia successfully manipulated the information landscape to its benefit by understanding and shaping the internal dynamics of its partner and leveraging existing fault lines. By capitalizing on the internal tensions, Russia made Serbia permissive to the reflexive control manipulation and influenced the outcomes in a way that aligns with Kremlin's own foreign policy objectives. This paper analysis contributes to a better understanding of the intricate dynamics between reflexive control strategies and their impact on the national and international political landscape.

Keywords:

Reflexive control, Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), Strategic Narratives, Russia, Serbia

"In contrast to a scholarly debate, the most inventive liar wins in conflict."

Vladimir Lefebvre

Conceptual definition and doctrinal model of reflexive control

The aim of this paper is to observe the rules and tools of reflexive control (RC) in action: how it is operationalized, what results it achieves in action towards selected states, nations, and most valuable RC objective – the decision-making process of key political figures. Furthermore, we intend to elucidate how much is this international relations tool on the scientific research radar or merely passes beneath it. In other words, the aim of this paper is, metaphorically speaking, to catch RC in flagrante (to determine whether and to what extent actual decisions in Serbia are influenced by Kremlin) as it operates on a selected object according to its targeting cycle. For this reason, the case study method has been chosen, where Serbia will be analyzed as the object of projection of Russian RC activity. Security studies scholars would undoubtedly engage in prolonged discussions regarding whether RC, given its spectrum of influence, aligns more closely with *soft power* or *sharp power* methodologies. Nonetheless, in this study, our focus remains on examining the application and impact of RC on a specific strategic target—Serbia. To accommodate security theorists, it is worth noting that RC operates as a remarkably subtle means of power projection and influence, encompassing elements of various power dynamics. It can operate covertly akin to *soft power* and exhibit characteristics akin to *sharp power*. In many ways, RC resembles the elusive Himalayan Yeti—frequently discussed yet challenging to observe in action.

Vladimir Lefebvre, credited with originating the theory of reflexive control, emphasized that the development of

RC was under strict supervision and influence of the KGB, and it is evident that the application of RC itself was authorized and managed by the KGB. Thus, RC was perceived as both an intelligence instrument of influence and an intelligence operation. Today, we would likely euphemistically refer to it as *smart power*.

Lefebvre divided RC into two categories: *constructive (creative) reflexive control, in which influence on the enemy or one's own citizens was exerted to ensure they voluntarily make the decisions serving the interests of the controlling party; and destructive reflexive control, in which the method was used to destroy, paralyse, or neutralise processes and algorithms used by the enemy in its decision making* (Lefebvre, 1984b, p. 144–145 in Vasara, 2020. p. 38).

In Lefebvre's view, RC is an indirect process: "*Control over the adversary's decision-making, which ultimately means imposing a specific behavioural strategy on the adversary through reflexive interaction, is not the result of a direct process, and it cannot be achieved by using force. It can be achieved by providing the adversary with grounds for making logical decisions that have been predetermined by the other party. Transferring the grounds for decisions means linking X to a reflexion specific to Y's situation: In this way, X can start exerting control over the decision-making process. The process in which the grounds for decision-making are transferred from one party to the other is called reflexive control. All diversion (provocation, lying and deception) is the result of reflexive control.*" (Lefebvre, 1967, p. 33-34 in Vasara, 2020. p. 34). On the other side, Chausov defines reflexive control as "*the process of deliberately conveying to the opposing side of a certain aggregate*

information, which will cause that side to make a decision appropriate to that information” (Chausov, 1999, p. 12).

Considering these axioms, nothing significant has changed regarding reflexive control (RC) in modern Russian military thought. Even Russian top military commanders and operatives, maintain a high situational awareness of the fundamental goals of RC.

In line with this, Colonel General Sergei Surovikin, former Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Aerospace Forces, has articulated this understanding by saying that the aim of the Russian armed forces should be to achieve information superiority and the disorganisation and weakening of decision-making in the adversary’s government and military structures (Surovikin & Kuleshov, 2017).

Leonenko gives a new definition to reflexive control: Reflexive control consists of transmitting motives and grounds from the controlling entity to the controlled system that stimulates the desired decision. The goal of reflexive control is to prompt the enemy to make a decision unfavourable to it. *“Naturally, one must understand the way in which the enemy thinks”* (Leonenko, 1995, p. 28 in Vasara, 2020, p.44). Therefore, a key characteristic of reflexive control is the need to tailor false information to the specific target, reflecting the target's responses and reactions. (Giles, 2018).

It's crucial to highlight that RC involves blending different tools, organizations, activities, and operations. Essentially, RC represents a blend of multiple or multi-faceted state initiatives, rather than solely being focused

on disinformation, even when it possesses strategic significance and breadth. In other terms „*Instead of consisting simply of disinformation, reflexive control implies a compound program of targeting decision-making through multiple vectors, taking into account not only the adversary's logical processing of information, but also the emotional, psychological, cultural and other frameworks within which decisions are made.*” (Giles, 2018, p. 5). In other words, „...*similar to a skillful barrister cross-examining a witness, reflexive control can lead the adversary to make a series of decisions that successively discard options that would improve their position, until they are finally faced with a choice between bad and worse, either of which options would favor Russia. Consequently, application of reflexive control should be thought of as a persistent campaign waged along multiple cognitive axes.*” (Giles, 2018, p. 6).

Significantly, the phrase ‘*reflexive control*’ is today far more frequently encountered in Western writing about Russian information warfare principles than in Russian primary sources.

Timothy Thomas, writes on reflexive control as “*a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action.*” (Thomas, 2014, p. 237). Here, the particularly predictive element is that Thomas notes that the target of RC can either be *a partner or an opponent* and underscores that a key part of operationalizing RC involves the use of *specially prepared information* that triggers the RC activation cycle. The latter point is especially significant because

this model has been implemented in the case that will be examined in our study – the Serbia case study.

Adamsky concurs that reflexive control “*forces the adversary to act according to a false picture of reality in a predictable way, favorable to the initiator of the informational strike, and seemingly independent and benign to the target. The end result is a desired strategic behavior.*” (Adamsky, 2015, p. 27)

Common denominator of RC actions lies within the spectrum of cognitive warfare, where the focal point (militarily speaking: Clausewitz's center of gravity) is to attack, shape, influence, control, and overcome the adversary's process of making strategic decisions. According to the classical doctrinal model of RC, control of an opponent's decision is achieved by means of providing him with the grounds by which he is able logically to derive his own decision, but one that is predetermined by the other side.

The selected targets for RC application are typically of high value, but they are not limited solely to key individuals; they also target masses and public opinion, as confirmed by the Russian military doctrinal approach. “*The targets for influence are both mass and individual consciousness. Those ‘honored’ with individual influence are those persons whose decisions determine issues of interest to the adversary party (i.e., the President, the Prime Minister, head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, diplomatic representatives, commanders of military formations and so on). Information influence involves distorting facts or envisages imposing on the target person emotional impressions which are favorable to the influencer.*”

(Kuleshov, 2014, p.105 in Giles, 2018, p.8) Therefore, in this paper, our focus will be on actions directed towards the President of the Republic of Serbia, the Prime Minister of Serbia, and diplomatic representatives of Serbia and Russia. At its core, RC represents a spectrum, or a hybrid spectrum, of actions and endeavors. However, for the effectiveness of RC to be successful „*a key enabler of reflexive control is target audience analysis: to predict adversarial responses to specific tainted or false cognitive inputs*“ (Giles, 2018, p.8).

Reflexive control, among other elements, relies on a lack of awareness (Giles, 2018) Reid (Reid, 1987 in Vasara 2020) examined the manner and methods of RC application in the Soviet Union and from Lefebvre's works, summarizing three methods:

- Transferring a situational picture to the enemy,
- Creating goals or a doctrine for the adversary,
- Transferring the desired decision.

In our view, RC exhibits several key features that generate and shape its approach:

- Target – decision-making processes/algorithm - RC targets decision-making process and stimulates the desired but voluntary decision of target which is favorable to initiator of RC.
- Triggers of RC activation cycle – socio-political destabilization, riots, protests are excellent ecosystem to apply RC methods and technics.
- Status of targeted nations/leaders – it can be enemy, opponent, partner or ally as well. Moreover, targets can be president, prime-

- ministers, diplomatic representatives, military commanders and other high-voltage official.
- Specially prepared and structured information – utilization of exclusively prepared information to incline opponent to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of RC – although disinformation in its core, target view it as a profitable information;
 - Target operates/reacts due to false picture of reality (fabricated reality) or false cognitive input - opponent or enemy acts according to a false situational picture of reality in a predictable way.
 - Multiple vectors, axes, domains - RC is systemic campaign waged along multiple cognitive axes or through multiple vectors and various domains.
 - Plausible deniability – remarkably high ability to deny RC engagement because there is no clear tangible evidence.
 - Strategic impact – RC is strategic tool - The end-state is a desired strategic behavior controlled and pre-created by the initiator of RC.
 - Favorable operational environment - shaping and cultivating favorable information environment is key enabler in order to achieve full reflexive impact.

The distinctive feature of the RC doctrinal model is the systematic and deliberate targeting of the decision-making process of an adversary or partner/ally (as in international relations, friendships are transient while interests are eternal). Many experts may consider RC to be too vague, ambiguous, and 'non-linear' concept, yet its impact is very tangible, significant, and long-lasting. In essence, the RC aim is to exert control and influence,

based on the Soviet model of military planning, on the decision-making algorithms of the targeted object/nation/leader by providing the opponent with false information, *managed reality* (Giles, 2018) or *transferred image*.¹

Fundamentally, RC involves managing the opponent's perception, crafting a strategic image based on predetermined parameters and variables, which is imperative in its mode of operation, although it can be wrapped in diplomatic packaging with a ribbon and warm words that appeal to the ego or political mindset of the target. In its international-diplomatic nature, RC does not belong to coercive tools; rather it belongs to tools where the target makes the decision voluntarily, without any direct external interference – while their cognitive process and decision-making processes are malignantly manipulated and fabricated in the political and/or intelligence laboratory of the RC's originator. The primary drivers for RC are not the interests of the target, but the interests of the RC's originator, as the target is solely a RC object, although falsely self-considered to be an active subject. Therefore, RC is a strategic tool in Russia's arsenal of international influence tools – arguably the most efficient non-kinetic tool, but even more importantly the least detected and debunked tool.

Serbia case study – shaping favorable operational environment for reflexive control

Before utilizing the RC, Kremlin is preparing the playing field with the creation of permissive environment to

¹ Transferred image can have many forms and variations such as: Transfer of an image of the situation; transfer of an image of one's own perception of the situation; transfer of an image of one's own doctrine; transfer of one's own image of a situation to make the opponent deduce his own goal, an others (more in Reid, 1987).

ensure information superiority and domination. The goal of this effort is to create such conditions where Russia actions have higher chance of success and at the same time lower the chances of adversaries' actions. Russian theorists (Komov, 2008) emphasise the importance of creating such preconditions stressing the fact that to achieve information superiority it is essential to permanently examine enemy's response to informational impacts and dynamically influence it. Therefore, information superiority is essential for the successful performance of the reflexive control: "*At the lowest level it can be a delay in decision-making by the enemy, which can be achieved by disorganizing the command and control system of its armies (forces). At the top-level it could involve the creation of favorable common operational environment with subsequent reflexive control of enemy's military command and control bodies, armies and troops.*" (Komov, 2008 in Giles 2018, p. 8). Although Komov speaks primarily in the military domain we will present in our paper that the same concept of information superiority is applied by Russia in a strategic and political domain by analysing their strategic narratives pre-framed to achieve full reflexive control triumph in Serbia.

Narratives serve as the coherent underlying structure that integrates various political, military, and hybrid activities (RC included), explaining the reasoning behind these actions while concurrently building understanding, support, and perceptions of legitimacy within identified audiences. North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) defines narrative as: "*a spoken or written account of events and information arranged in a logical sequence to influence the behaviour of a target audience*" (NATO, 2023). Narratives can also be understood as stories and stories are "*creative demonstrations of the truth*" and "*a vehicle that carries*

us on our search for reality and our best effort to make sense of the world” (McKee, 2010). Empirical studies have repeatedly shown that communicating through stories is more effective with increased recall and comprehension and generally has a privileged status in human cognition (Dahlstrom, 2014). In that sense, people prefer to analyse complex problems through the story perspective which gives them broader context and can create emotional connections. By doing so, one creates meaning from the chaos by structuring information into narratives that make sense to them. Another, somewhat unexpected result of the story phenomena is that the audience will always choose to believe the most nefarious explanations of unexplained events (Lewis, DeFaria, 2021).

Within this framework, Russia’s narratives originate from the historical and current factors of the geopolitical situation and are developed in alignment with the values and emotions of a target. Russia’s core narrative is based on the perceived Slavic and orthodox brotherhood of Russia and Serbia (mix of historical and cultural factors) and has two intertwined objectives: to show Russia as a Serbia’s traditional protector and patron and, at the same time, to undermine the morally decayed West.

Over the many years, Russia has developed strong influence among broad social structures in Serbia ranging from political figures, journalists, cultural community to universities, but probably most importantly within the Serbian Orthodox Church. Therefore, in Serbian society there is a perception that Putin’s Russia is safeguarding their interests, against the malign West intentions to harm and weaken Serbia, particularly regarding the (non) recognition of Kosovo's independence (Adamczyk, Barburska, 2023). This

narrative is consistently invoked and reiterated by Russia's senior officials on every available occasion.

In opposite to most of the European countries, Russia's media outlets have full freedom of actions in Serbia. Sputnik Srbija, Russian Press Agency TASS, RT Balkan and Russia Beyond the Headlines are just some of the Kremlin affiliated media that freely operate in Serbia and methodically influence Serbian society. Inevitably, according to the poll results, a great majority of people in Serbia (69%) agrees that the West is working to destroy their national identity, traditional values, and way of life (Svetoka, Doncheva, 2021).

The conducive environment for Russia's dissemination of disinformation, particularly through Serbia, is compounded by additional factors. The Orthodox churches of Russia and Serbia share profound similarities that extend beyond mere religious affiliation. Both institutions are deeply intertwined with their respective nations' histories, cultures, and political landscapes. Notably, they both wield considerable influence in their societies, with the Serbian Orthodox Church commanding widespread respect and the Russian Orthodox Church enjoying substantial support from the Kremlin. These churches serve as pillars of tradition and national identity, playing pivotal roles in shaping public and government opinions. Furthermore, both institutions have been known to collaborate closely with their governments, often aligning their agendas with broader political objectives.

The speeches of Putin and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Rus' have repeatedly invoked and developed Russian world (*Russkii mir*) ideology as a teaching that states a transnational Russian sphere or civilization, called Holy Russia (*Holy Rus*), which includes Russia,

Ukraine and Belarus as well as ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people throughout the world. The teaching holds that “...*this Russian world has a common political centre (Moscow), a common spiritual centre (Kyiv as the mother of all Rus), a common language (Russian), a common church (the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate), and a common patriarch (the Patriarch of Moscow), who works in symphony with a common president/national leader (Putin) to govern this Russian world, as well as upholding a common distinctive spirituality, morality, and culture*” (Public Orthodoxy, 2022). Closely intertwined, Serbian world (*Srpski svet*), akin to the concept of Russian world, encompasses more than just a religious community; it embodies a broader cultural, historical, and geopolitical identity. This Serbian term, like its Russian counterpart, refers to the collective consciousness of the Serbian people, rooted in their shared Orthodox faith, language, and traditions. Serbian world reflects a sense of solidarity and unity among Serbs worldwide, transcending national borders and encompassing diaspora communities. Just as Russian world symbolizes the cultural and spiritual unity of the Russian-speaking world, Serbian world embodies the enduring bond that connects Serbs across generations and geographic locations and serves as a source of strength and resilience, fostering a sense of belonging and shared destiny among Serbs globally.

Alike Patriarch Kirill, Patriarch Porfirije, the spiritual leader of the Serbian Orthodox Church, promotes the ideology of the Serbian world, which shares deep connections with the concept of the Russian world. Patriarch Porfirije emphasized the significance of the Orthodox faith as the *golden thread* connecting Serbian people worldwide, while highlighting *the fluidity of borders throughout history* and cautioning against the

dangers posed by *foreign flags* – ideologies and policies seeking to reshape traditional Orthodox values (Radio Free Europe, 2022).

During his visit to Serbia in 2019, Putin presented the Order of Saint Alexander Nevsky to the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. The Order, whose motto is “*For services and Fatherland*” is awarded to distinguished citizens of the Russian Federation for special personal services to the Fatherland (Russia), high results achieved in the performance of official duties and in strengthening the international authority of Russia and country's defence capabilities. But the Order can also be awarded to the prominent foreign political and public figures for their services in the development of multilateral cooperation with the Russian Federation and assistance in its socio-economic development.

During the award ceremony Putin stressed that during the 300-year history of the Order it was presented to many Serbian prominent people going back to the 19-century duke Milos Obrenovic and the Serbia (and later Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes) prime minister Nikola Pasic. In this regard Putin awarded Vučić “...*for a great personal contribution to multilateral cooperation with the Russian Federation...as a true supporter of the closest and warmest relations between Russia and Serbia*” (Youtube, 2019). Putin also thanked Vucic personally for his principled attitude in the time of unpredictable international political conjectures. In his words of thanks directed to Putin as “...*a Russian president and a dear friend...*” and held in Russian language, Vucic stressed that it is his personal but also Serbia honour to receive this Order but more importantly that this Order is a “*great responsibility for my future work*” (Youtube, 2019). Furthermore, Vucic emphasised that his gratitude is not in compliance with the protocol,

but deep, sincere, with great personal significance. To further elaborate this statement, Vucic explained that Putin not only uplifted Russia and protected its dignity but also protected the vital interests of the Serbian people which the Serbian people will never forget when in 2015 Russia vetoed the British resolution at the UN that would have declared the Serbs a genocidal nation. Since Putin protected not only Serbia but also “*truth and justice*”, Vucic concluded that “*we have a great responsibility for everything we will do in the future*” (Youtube, 2019).



Figure 1. Putin’s mural in Belgrade city center with the message “Brother”.

Vučić is one of the rare foreign statesmen who received the Order of Saint Alexander Nevsky. In addition to him, the holders of the order are the presidents of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko, Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and Kyrgyzstan Almazbek Atambayev. Most recently Putin awarded Vucic’s close ally and the leader of Republic of Srpska Milorad Dodik. Consequently, Serbia remains to be one of the rare European states that is not on Russia’s “*unfriendly state*” list. Moreover, Russia and Serbia never expelled diplomats despite Russia’s active engagement in recruitment of Serbian citizens for notorious Wagner group, which caused certain political frictions. Finally, despite the official condemnation of Moscow’s aggression against Ukraine, Serbia has

repeatedly refrained from joining the EU targeted restrictive measures (sanctions) targeted against Russia. Yet, this is hardly surprising in the context of Russia's systematic and long-term shaping of permissive environment in Serbia.

Dynamics of the reflexive control (RC) – Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko' diplomatic methods and mousetrap effect of RC

In order to systematically, carefully and comprehensively analyse RC, it is essential to identify the messages essential to reflexive control or the *information packets* (Vasara, 2020) used by the enemy in the process of creating the desired decision-making process in the opponent. Namely, the process of identification of said information packets used by the initiator RC is core business of RC strategic analysis. It can be said that such information packets are contaminated with toxic material that has a deceptive function, and utilized in a systematic, coordinated and determined way – meaning packets are carefully designed, filled, and integrated, and often packed in a diplomatic form.

Also, in its operationalization, according to Kazakov and Kiryushin there are two basic models of information packets: representational and non-representational. A representational information packet is a copy of a copy (pretending to be the real thing). In the context of reflexive control, such information packets are used when one wants to conceal its intentions. The information is partially false, but its sole purpose is to conceal the real information and to deceive the enemy (Kazakov, Kiryushin, 2013). A non-representational information packet, on the other hand, “...*does not*

pretend to be a copy of a real thing. Its purpose is to act as a cover for the original matter and to convey false information about a matter, action or an event“ (Vasara, 2020, p. 56).

In our case, RC's practical use in Serbia involves employing a "non-representational information packet" with the purpose of acting covertly for the original thing and to convey false information about a matter, action, and event. More concrete, Russia is presenting false information about allegedly synchronized malign intentions of West and subversive operation of political opposition in Serbia – with the key RC strategic message of prearranged plans to overthrow the legitimate government of Serbia using hooligan and violent methods at anti-government protests.

Russia systematically created and carefully timed *information packet* in order to influence the situational awareness of the target - or to define it militarily to create a “common operational picture” - in order to fully attain RC advantage. The desired information effect is implemented by generating a situational picture of the event (or a potential scenario) that will produce an algorithm that exerts the desired influence on the decision-making process of the targeted officials regarding the assessed intentions and actions of the political opposition in Serbia. However, this is done in a way that targeted government officials are unaware of the RC operation methods and techniques. Whole RC operation is conducted in line with the Lefebvre theoretical model which defines that: „...the other party gains an advantage if it has information on the adversary’s situational assessment, and if it knows how the adversary uses its own doctrine to analyse the situation. In this case, it is possible to construct a solvable equation of the options available to the

decision-makers. It is particularly important to be able to influence the adversary's situational awareness, his goals or doctrine and to ensure that the adversary does not notice the influencing attempts" (Lefebvre, in Chotikul; Chotikul, 1986, p. 78).

In order to meet all the necessary parameters for the application of RC, Russian intelligence services provided the Serbian authorities with a *non-representational information packet* which has been calibrated and classified (which gives additional false significance and credibility) for the stimulated decision-making process of the Serbian state leadership. While it's evident that the researchers lack direct insight into these information, it's undeniable that the information packet closely mirrors the standard narratives dissected and elucidated in our preceding chapter, thus contributing to the creation of a favorable operational environment for reflexive control. Such *non-representational information packet* was supportive to Russian strategic narrative but at the same time highly trusted on Serbian side as well (proof of this is clear an honest thanks from President Vucic and Prime Minister Brnabic for this *information packets*). It is to be assumed that any intelligence findings were contaminated with RC material in line with the Lefebvre model to construct a solvable equation of the options available to the decision-makers or, in other words, they deliberately and precisely induced decision makers to act according to a pre-destination and pre-defined decision-making matrix.

In the current case, Russia used the *information packet* (or *simulacra*) with the primary goal of compromising the West as a disruptive and demolition factor while presenting Russia as a stabilizing and friendly factor by warning state authorities of an operational forces that want to violently overthrow legitimate and legal

Government. Regarding the aforementioned information constructs in the *simulacra*, it is evident that events in the real world – protests, dissatisfied factors, were exploited and oversized through the perspective and goals of RC. That is, in the way Makhnin sees RC “...*a comprehensive model, in which each of the information packets sent to the adversary that is based on the inputs of the real world... is analysed from reflexive perspective*“ (Makhnin in Vasara, 2020, p. 74). However, what we need to ask is what is the basic goal or core business of RC? The objective is to stimulate the target to incorporate the reflexive variations of these inputs (the information packets) into its own decision-making process. In our case, it is evident that Serbia state leadership promptly used this *simulacra* or *information packet* in their decision-making process. This is shown in the following analytical indicators:

- official statements by the Serbian state leadership, when President Aleksandar Vucic personally thanked *foreign services* for information provided to Serbian intelligence regarding possible incidents. In essence, he thanked Russian intelligence services for the *information packet*²;
- strong propaganda by state media under direct control of Government, accusing the West, especially the United States, of direct participation in the toppling of power in Serbia³;
- close operational cooperation between Serbian state officials and the Russian Embassy in Serbia – while Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic

² Next to president Vucic, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic openly said that Moscow had warned Belgrade of potential unrest. She specifically stated that she considered it necessary to thank the people from the Russian (intelligence) services who had all this data at their disposal and have shared this information with their Serbian counterparts.

³ Serbian pro-government media reported on December 25, 2023, breaking news that the Ukrainian Maidan in Serbia is directed by the US CIA and foreign services.

informed Russian Ambassador Botsan-Kharchenko about the riots, simultaneously Botsan-Kharchenko, within his strategic communication (STRATCOM), asserted that Western countries are certainly behind the instigation of and support for protests that followed the parliamentary elections in Serbia⁴.

The President and the Prime minister of Serbia publicly accused the opposition coalition of trying to violently destabilise the state, and compared the protests in Belgrade to Maidan, a demonstration in Kyiv after which pro-Russian President Viktor Janukovych was demolished in 2014⁵: *“This is not a product of inner intelligence or insanity, but part of geopolitical circumstances to try to bring down Serbia's independence and sovereignty”* (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023). President Vucic said in an extraordinary public address on December 24th, 2023. But members of the of the *Serbia Against Violence* opposition bloc rejected the authorities' explanations and stated that the incidents at the protest were caused by hooligans sent by the government authorities. Predrag Petrovic of the Belgrade non-governmental *Centre for Security Policy* said: *“There is no evidence that Western states are organizing protests, and these claims are completely unfounded”* (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023). He interprets these messages as an attempt to criminalize

⁴ Vucic: "I informed Ambassador Botsan-Kharchenko about the riots last night in Belgrade and confirmed that we will do everything to preserve the safety of citizens and our Serbia" (Tass, 2023); Botsan-Kharchenko: "Having realized that in Belgrade its aims are unachievable in a calm and peaceful way, the opposition immediately started protests, which are encouraged and supported from the outside". "This is really so. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has mentioned this. I won't and can't go into details. It was a confidential conversation and confidential information. He has irrefutable evidence that there is incitement and support from the West." (Tass, 2023)

⁵ Euromaidan or Maidan began in November 2013 when demonstrators gathered in Kyiv's main square to protest the decision of then President Viktor Janukovych not to sign a key trade agreement with the European Union. Instead, he sought strong geopolitical and economic ties with Russia. After hundreds of demonstrators in Kyiv were killed in clashes with government forces, Janukovych and most of his government in February 2014 fled to Russia.

and delegitimize the opposition after the December 2023 election. In a preliminary report in December, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights said Serbia's elections marked serious irregularities, misappropriation of public funds, media dominance by President Aleksandar Vucic, a negative campaign and spreading fear⁶.

The comprehensive and systematic RC approach with the same matrix *Maidan 2014 – Kyiv – Belgrade – CIA* is visible through carefully calibrated and coordinated statements of Russia state officials disseminated through the Russia state media and transmitted as a media echo by all influential Serbian media. Meanwhile, via Putin's most influential propagandists on their flagship media platforms (such as Soloviev Live TV channel), identical messages were proliferated. When appearing in Soloviev Live TV channel, Ambassador Botsan-Kharchenko used identical narratives to support Russia STRATCOM of people being *encouraged* to take part in the protests which is based on the experience that was gained in the Maidan (coup in 2014) in Kyiv⁷. In the overall effort to send key messages within an integrated RC information package, other leading instruments of the state-media machine, such as Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Marija Zaharova⁸ and Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov⁹, have been involved. At

⁶ The opposition coalition has been protesting from 17 December elections, accusing the ruling SNS party of electoral theft, including by fictitious reporting of its voters from Serbia and abroad to addresses in Belgrade.

⁷ Botsan-Kharchenko told the Soloviev Live TV channel: "*People who are brought from all over Serbia constitute a considerable part of these demonstrators*". Furthermore, Botsan-Kharchenko told Russia 24 TV channel that "*I don't want to get ahead of myself in forecasts, because the West, and that's the important part, still intends to instill the opposition in Belgrade one way or another, so protests will continue. It is difficult to say for how long*" (Tass, 2023).

⁸ Zaharova assessed that *collective West* using *Maidan techniques* is trying to destabilise the situation in Serbia (Radio Slobodna Evropa (2023)).

⁹ Portparol of Kremlin Dmitry Peskov argued that "*third parties and abroad are trying to cause unrest in Belgrade*" and added that "*there is no doubt that Serbian authorities will be able to provide order and law in the country*" (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023).

the same time, coordinated media releases were recorded on social media in Russia with the same strategic narrative - *Maidan and the floral revolution* according to all CIA patterns¹⁰.

It is evident that the Ambassador Botsan-Kharchenko played a special role in the operationalization of RC and the delivery of *information packets* for state authorities of Serbia. He had a key role in diplomatic-political coordination of carefully created *information packets* by securing a credible narrative under the guise of the intelligence pattern *tell the truth to the power*. This approach aimed to provide factors influencing decision-makers in Serbia with motivation for Russia to safeguard Serbia's stability and security. Additionally, he underscored political and security sensitivities with shrewd references to the esteemed authority of the Russian intelligence system. The information packets carried significant weight and relevance, especially given the ongoing civil demonstrations. Botsan-Kharchenko's STRATCOM aimed to present Russia as safeguarding Serbia stability, security, public order and peace, countering threats to the regime's survival, likely outlined in the threat matrix within this shared intelligence information. By involving himself in the ongoing situation, Botsan-Kharchenko positioned himself as a strategic player, engaging in a blame game aimed at accusing the West of intending to overthrow the legitimate Serbia government by principles and methods of *Maidan revolution* directed by the American CIA and foreign Western services.

¹⁰ The Maidan and the floral revolution that must not happen in Belgrade was the message of the leading pro-Russian Telegram channels. Also, according to the *Cyber Front for Russia* channel, the protest took place “*according to all CIA patterns*”, and Maidan was not reached because their “*special services alerted Serbia's leader to the preparation of the riots*” (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023).

Presented Russian utilization of RC demonstrates full interinstitutional synchronization and coordination between state institutions. In our case it involved cooperation and synchronization between Russia intelligence services (which created predictive-analytical alert report for Serbia state leadership), diplomatic apparatus and powerful media machinery. Russia utilized reflexive control to compel Serbia to act according to a false perception of reality in a predictable manner, favorable to the initiator of the informational strike, and appearing independent and benign to the target. The ultimate outcome is the desired strategic behavior. Consequently, the voluntary and conscious decision of the target to fall into the carefully conceived trap (and boast about it) constituted the desired strategic behavior making the RC's mousetrap a complete success.

The desired strategic behaviour of Serbia has been achieved in full – Russia has presented itself as a strategic altruistic and independent factor that supports Serbia's national security while the odious, underhanded, and aggressive West wants to overthrow Serbia's legitimate and legal government by violent and subversive means. The geopolitical outcome is unequivocally that Serbia remains firmly within Russia's geopolitical sphere. Moreover, a high level of trust has been established between the intelligence services of Russia and Serbia, resulting in the development of a comprehensive shared operational understanding of the political and security landscape in Serbia.

In our study, we have identified all key features and indicators of RC: RC targets the decision-making process with strategic impact; the RC activation cycle is cunningly applied; high-profile figures such as the President or Prime Minister are targeted; specially

prepared and structured intelligence information is utilized to incline the opponent to voluntarily make predetermined decisions desired by the initiator of RC; the target reacts based on a false picture of reality (fabricated reality); RC is waged across multiple cognitive axes or through various vectors and domains providing plausible deniability; RC is operationalized within a favorable operational environment serving as a significant enabler to achieve full RC impact.

Conclusion - Reflexive control is a highly powerful yet low-detectable manipulation tool in the international geopolitical arena

Goal of this research is to shed light on the operationalization of RC and its application in Serbia as a highly valuable target for Russia's RC strategies in Europe. Research has shown that RC, as a complex and holistic concept, acts through multiple vectors, tools, and efforts that are synchronised to attack decision-making processes. This study explains that RC is not a singular disinformation or deception effort, nor an operation of influence or distraction operation, but rather a whole-of-government approach with strategic and long-term geopolitical ambition. RC is cost-effective, very efficient, and suitable for deniability, making it a formidable force on the international stage.

The implementation of RC in Serbia involved the use of intelligence, diplomatic, and media tools. It encompassed transferring a situational picture to Serbian authorities through information packets, simulations, or specific sets of information, facilitated by Russian Federation intelligence and security reports. The picture was then delivered through diplomatic channels under the guise of genuine concern for Serbian national security. Additionally, Russia's STRATCOM bolstered

the narrative through media announcements within a pre-set favorable operational information landscape.

In Serbia, Russia executed RC with meticulous precision, particularly targeting high-ranking officials like the President and Government. Through carefully crafted disinformation, Serbian authorities were fed distorted or incomplete information, skewing their decision-making processes in favor of Russia's agenda. This not only created a political blame game but also marginalized opposition movements.

What sets RC apart is not only its efficacy but also its ability to evade detection, thanks to its complex nature and political ramifications. More importantly, leaders are reluctant to acknowledge being targeted by RC or being victims of its influence. By achieving reflexive superiority, Russia effectively manipulated situational awareness in Serbia, quelling opposition protests and consolidating its influence in Serbia.

On a doctrinal level, Russia achieved reflexive superiority and projected in Serbia its enviable RC power. Russia created a targeted and fabricated situational awareness which led to Government actions to suppress protests of opposition. Essentially and briefly, Russia achieved the mousetrap effect of RC.

Geopolitically, RC serves as a powerful instrument for outmaneuvering adversaries and bolstering national influence while maintaining plausible deniability. Therefore, RC can be regarded as a stratagem. Addressing RC necessitates heightened awareness, efforts to debunk false narratives, and building resilience against Kremlin Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI).

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