

UDC 327(497.11:470)
Biblid: 0025-8555, 75(2023)
Vol. LXXV, No. 2, pp. 293–312
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2298/MEDJP2302293P>

Review article
Received 15 December 2022
Accepted 10 March 2023
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Serbia's foreign policy and relations with Russia as one of the priorities

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Abstract: Although Republic of Serbia (Serbia) does not have an adopted foreign policy strategy, there are a number of elements that are consistently applied. One of them is the insistence on prioritizing cooperation with Russia. Serbian-Russian relations have become stronger and deeper over the past 20 years, and they are unlikely to be impacted by changes in the global environment that occur after February 2022. This paper tackles the subject of continued Serbian-Russian relations and their dynamics, in addition to analyzing the development of Serbia's foreign policy and explaining how relations with Russia became a priority. The analysis of the bilateral relations between the two states is done by relying on structural realism as a theoretical framework, first of all on considering the principle of self-help as one of the key factors when determining foreign policy. The methodological framework is based on discourse analysis, content analysis, but also the use of the comparative method, induction and deduction methods.

Keywords: foreign policy of Serbia, Russia, NATO, EU, Kosovo and Metohija.

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The work is a result of the scientific research project "Serbia and Challenges in International Relations in 2023", financed by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (no. 179029), and realized by the Institute of International Politics and Economics in 2023.

Elements of the Serbia's foreign policy after 2008

The Republic of Serbia does not have an adopted strategy that explicitly refers to foreign policy. On the one hand, there is a banal explanation for this, often heard during discussions: politicians do not like restrictions! If such a strategy were to be defined and adopted, then obligations for the holders of the most important state positions (President of the Republic, Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, etc.) would be implied. However, on the other hand, in addition to this banal, there is also a rational explanation. That explanation concerns the very complex position of Serbia in international relations. Serbia's foreign policy is also determined by the "Kosovo issue". Even though the status of Kosovo and Metohija was defined by Resolution 1244 (1999) of the UN Security Council, which meant negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina on essential autonomy (these negotiations were organized in 2006 under the auspices of the UN and under the leadership of Marti Ahtisaari, the special envoy of the UN Secretary-General, in 2007, relying on the concept of "three NOs" adopted by the Contact Group, which meant: no return to the status from before 1999; no division of Kosovo; and no annexation of the territory of Kosovo to another state — meaning Albania), the representatives of Kosovo Albanians unilaterally declared independence in February 2008 with the support of the US and key Western European countries (Germany, Great Britain, and France) (Proroković 2013, 148–161). Before that, in October 2004, the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia adopted a Resolution on joining the European Union. The text of the resolution states: "full agreement on joining the European Union as the highest and indisputable political priority and on inclusion in the Partnership for Peace Program as an element of the common security structure of European countries; full agreement on further improvement of good neighborly relations and all other types of regional cooperation and regional initiatives; the obligation of the National Assembly to prioritize work on harmonizing domestic legislation with the legal *acquis* of the European Union; the necessity of drafting the National Strategy of Serbia for the accession of Serbia and Montenegro to the European Union, which will determine the current situation in Serbia in areas important for EU accession, analyze the conditions for accession set by the EU and determine the sequence and deadlines for undertaking the necessary measures and activities" (Rezolucija o pridruživanju Evropskoj uniji, 2004).

Thus, Serbia's process of EU integration began four years before the so-called "Republic of Kosovo" unilaterally declared its independence, which has been a very difficult position to hold since 2008 in terms of foreign policy practice. Taking a step back and breaking all previously established agreements with the EU could have a disastrous effect on both the economic processes in the country and the country's

political position. Besides, the fact that Serbia is *de facto* in the EU and/or NATO environment is an aggravating circumstance. An actor's foreign policy is highly influenced by its geographic position, particularly when it comes to small states.

Accepting the position of the collective West (in this context of the overwhelming majority of the EU members, since Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Slovakia, and Romania did not accept this decision of the Kosovo Albanians) on "Kosovo's independence" was out of the question for several reasons. Such a step would not only affect collective confidence and hurt the dignity of the Serbian population in the post-Yugoslav area, but would also have very concrete long-term political consequences. This would significantly worsen the country's geopolitical situation and imply acceptance of the Western narrative regarding the causes of the Yugoslav civil war (the central tenet of which is that Slobodan Milošević's aggressive hegemonic policy caused the country's disintegration and the outbreak of the civil war), thus legitimizing and legalizing (through the highly contested rulings of the Hague Tribunal, but also likely other international courts) individual punishment of Serbian politicians and officers, and collectively stigmatizing the Serbian people as a whole (Proroković 2013).

Severing the previous relations with the EU was not only unprofitable and risky, but it was also untenable to accept the EU's position on Kosovo's status (or more precisely, of the convincing majority of the EU members, including all the key ones except Spain). It should be noted that, at the time, non-Western actors' relative interest in Serbia's position was low despite their professed support, particularly that of Russia and China, who are permanent members of the UN Security Council. Although they supported Serbia's position in the UN Security Council and other international forums, Russia and China, quite understandably, were not ready to risk or spoil their relations with Western countries to the extreme because of the Kosovo case. Support for Serbia was justified by the necessity to preserve the principles of public international law and adhere to the UN Security Council Resolution of 1999. Therefore, Serbia found itself in an "impossible environment". Cooperation with the EU and NATO countries was a "geographical necessity" (also an economic and infrastructural necessity, since the majority of investors came from the EU, the majority of Serbian exports are traditionally oriented towards the EU and neighboring countries, and loans for infrastructure development are secured through arrangements with Western banks and financial institutions), while at the same time it had to rely on the support of Russia and China regarding Kosovo. Since 2008, the collective West has been exerting constant pressure on Serbia to "recognize Kosovo" before it can join the EU. This pressure has been present in both overt and covert messages. Sometimes that pressure was stronger, sometimes weaker, sometimes those messages were more frequent and sometimes less

frequent, sometimes they were brutal and sometimes milder, but the fact is that this process has been going on for a decade and a half. The EU formalized and institutionalized this approach by adding Chapter 35 to Serbia's accession negotiations (Serbia is the first country in the history of EU integration to have the well-known Chapter 35). This Chapter is specific and contains a mechanism for monitoring the implementation of agreements reached within the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. This is determined by the EU's Negotiating Framework for conducting accession negotiations with Serbia, which states that the issue of the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo will be considered within Chapter 35 *Other issues* as a separate item that should be dealt with in the early phase of the negotiations, as well as during of the entire negotiation process, and in particularly justified cases also within other relevant chapters. This means that within Chapter 35, there will not be a discussion on topics that are the subject of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, but on the implementation of the agreements reached within the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina (Zajednička pozicija Evropske unije. Poglavlje 35: Ostala pitanja, 2015, 2–5).

Then, how is foreign policy articulated? First, in December 2007, when it became crystal clear that the negotiations under the leadership of Martti Ahtisaari were orchestrated and that his final proposal would be “conditional independence of Kosovo” (which should grow into unconditional independence over time), and when it became even more obvious that the US was leading that course with the help of Germany, Great Britain, and France, at the proposal of the then Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica, the National Assembly adopted a document called the Resolution of the National Assembly on the Protection of the Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia. Point 6 of this Resolution reads: “Due to the overall role of NATO, from the illegal bombing of Serbia without a decision of the UNSC to Annex 11 of the rejected Ahtisaari plan, in which it is determined that NATO is the “final authority” of the government in “independent Kosovo”, the National Assembly passes the decision to declare the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia in relation to the existing military alliances until the eventual calling of a referendum at which the final decision would be made on the matter” (National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia 2007a, 2). The role of Prime Minister Koštunica was deliberately highlighted, not only because of the text of the Resolution, but also because he very skilfully managed to secure almost unanimous support for this document in the parliament (220 MPs voted for, 14 against, and 3 abstained) (National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia 2007b).

The decision to maintain military neutrality was vigorously criticized in the pro-Western media, but this only meant that it had the support of the major political

parties and would not be altered even if the parliamentary majority changed. The message was clear: Serbia remains interested in EU membership, but is not interested in becoming a NATO member! Given that all Eastern European countries were required to join NATO before joining the EU, this effectively meant that Serbia continued its process of European integration but would likely never formally join the EU. *The modus vivendi* was: we are not giving up on European integration, even though it is possible that Serbia will never become a member of the EU! It was not opportune for the EU to announce something like that, and some EU members refused to establish bilateral relations with Pristina, which prevented a consensus on the “Kosovo case” from being reached (part of the members who accepted the “game of the collective West” kept their stance that Serbia should continue European integration because it is important for regional security; in this respect, Italy particularly stood out).

The second step in shaping foreign policy was President Boris Tadić’s idea of “four pillars of the foreign policy of the Republic of Serbia” from August 2009. Those four pillars are: the EU, the US, Russia, and China. President Tadić explained: “I believe that today Serbia has completed its foreign policy doctrine. At the beginning of the 21st century, the world experienced two significant changes. First, we had the unequivocal dominance of the US and the rounding of the EU economic space and the emergence of a new European currency. The second change came after the world financial crisis, when China clearly emerged as the future world economic leader. Meanwhile, before the onset of the world economic crisis and due to the rise in oil and natural gas prices, Russia renewed its economic and foreign policy potential and was a great friend in supporting Serbia in defending the integrity of our country in Kosovo and Metohija, which unequivocally led us to particularly close relations with Russia, in addition to historical friendship” (Tadić 2009).

Serbia has chosen the concept of strategic balancing. “The aforementioned four countries have different positions on the issue of Kosovo and Metohija, on the issue of national sovereignty in general, different interests in the region, and varying foreign policy goals. Serbia has a strategic goal of joining the European Union and maintaining its territorial integrity (Kosovo and Metohija within Serbia). It also proclaimed a policy of expanding foreign trade (both in terms of increasing the number of trading partners and in terms of increasing the volume of exports) and especially strengthening relations with China and Russia” (Gajić & Janković 2012, 175). Again, this doctrine was not formalized nor translated into a concrete document, but it began to be applied. Based on it, the door was “opened” for the institutionalization of a completely new type of relationship with Russia and China (which will be reached on a larger scale in the coming years).

By developing the concept of military neutrality and the idea of four pillars of foreign policy, it came to the point that in the Defense Strategy of the Republic of Serbia from 2019, NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) were completely equated as partners with which it is necessary to cooperate (in points 4.5 and 4.6, every mention of NATO is followed by a mention of the CSTO). The introductory part emphasizes: "The determinations expressed in the Defense Strategy express the determination of the Republic of Serbia to build and strengthen its own capabilities and capacities for defense in accordance with the decision on military neutrality, as well as to strengthen national, regional, and global security through cooperation with security and defense structures of the European Union, participation in the Partnership for Peace Program, cooperation with the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and other international security and defense entities" (Strategija odbrane Republike Srbije, 2019).

In the National Security Strategy, also adopted in 2019, the assessment is underlined: "Progress in the Republic of Serbia's accession to the European Union has a positive effect on its political, economic, and social stability. The development of partnership cooperation between the Republic of Serbia and NATO, based on the policy of military neutrality and through the "Partnership for Peace" Program, as well as an observer position in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), contributes to the stability of the Republic of Serbia. In order to further develop democracy, stability, and prosperity in the region, the improvement of relations with the United States, the Russian Federation, and the People's Republic of China, as well as with other traditional partners and significant factors in the international community, is significant for the Republic of Serbia" (Strategija nacionalne bezbednosti Republike Srbije, 2019).

This framework will be used by Aleksandar Vučić (first the Prime Minister, and then the President of the Republic of Serbia) to concretize relations with Russia and develop relations with China to unprecedented proportions. In the absence of "financial support" from the West, partially due to the consequences of the great economic crisis (2008-2009), which had a devastating effect on the Balkan economies in the period from 2010 to 2014, and partially because of the "dosed support" of Western financial institutions to the Republic of Serbia, which was constantly conditioned and reminded of "obligations regarding Kosovo", official Belgrade turned to Beijing. Contrary to the original plans (Beijing recognized Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania as key partners in Central and Eastern Europe when designing the concept of the Belt and Road and the 16+1 format), China readily accepted this possibility, and thus, in just a few years, Serbia, along with Hungary, became a "geo-economic supporter" for the expansion of Chinese influence in Southeast Europe. In the period from 2012 to 2019, Chinese companies

and banks invested in or lent Serbia about 10 billion dollars. The Chinese were involved in large projects - construction of highways, high-speed railways, energy infrastructure, and greenfield investments (the largest single investment of this type in the recent history of Serbia is that of the Chinese tire production company Linglong, in the city of Zrenjanin, worth approx. 1 billion dollars) (Zakić 2020, 45-71). Of particular importance is the fact that Chinese companies, in agreement with the Government of Serbia, took over (through the purchase of part of the ownership based on special interstate agreements) two “economic giants”: *Mining and Smelting Basin Bor* (exploitation and production of copper as a priority business and precious metals as a secondary activity; in 2018, the majority ownership of this mining and smelting basin was acquired by the company Zijin) and *Smederevo Ironworks* (the Chinese HBIS group became the owner in 2016). In order to maintain the technological process, these two companies, which had been operating at a loss for years, received subsidies from the state budget. During those years, strategic partners were sought. By 2021, these two companies became the two largest exporters, creating employment for tens of thousands of people.

In addition to cooperation with the EU, which is an “economic necessity”, during the first mandate of President Vučić, cooperation with China became an “economic inevitability”. This was partly because of China’s strategy, partly because of the difficulties roiling the EU, which made the Balkans receive less attention than in previous years, and partly because of Serbia’s active foreign policy. The EU and the US began to be concerned about this change in the situation in Serbia, but Western actors would not begin to pay more attention to the Chinese presence in Serbia until 2021. Up until that point, they had been solely concerned with monitoring and limiting “Russian malignant influence” (since 2014 and the first escalation of the Ukrainian crisis).

In general, Serbia’s unwritten foreign policy strategy continues to prioritize relations with China and Russia, and its cooperation with these two major countries has grown and deepened over time. This is an absolute precedent in Europe at the beginning of the 21st century. Excluding to some extent the examples of Hungary and Moldova, whose foreign policy positioning has some similarities but also significant differences with the case of Serbia, the other countries of Eastern Europe (not counting Belarus, of course) followed the “well-trodden path” – first membership in NATO, then unconditional membership in the EU with the acceptance of a common foreign and security policy, which meant first “squeezing out and limiting” Russian influence and then a sharp confrontation with Russia (since 2014 and the fight against “Russian malignant influence”), as well as carefully establishing communication with China, which has started to be restrained and prevented since Donald Trump’s election as the President of the US. However, the

other Eastern European states did not have the “Kosovo case” or a history of hostile relations with the collective West. Serbia’s position in international relations has become complex as a result, but also its foreign policy has become unique. At least on a European scale.

Relations with Russia as the Republic of Serbia’s foreign policy priority

From a historical perspective, Russian-Serbian bilateral relations were good. Both Russia’s role in organizing Serbian uprisings against the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 19th century and the help provided in the Serbian-Turkish wars of 1876-78, the two Balkan wars at the beginning of the 20th century, and in the First World War, shaped the collective consciousness and politics of memory in both nations (Terzić 2012; Terzić 2011, 95–107; Babac 2014). This was certainly influenced by the religious vertical, i.e., the closeness of the two Orthodox nations. Even in that period, there were ups and downs during the formation of bilateral communication (a particularly critical moment was the Peace of San Stefano and the subsequent events at the Berlin Congress), but from today’s perspective, the main course of those relations played out positively. Larger “turns” occurred during the existence of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, since Soviet-Yugoslav relations did not even remotely resemble the previously established Russian-Serbian ones. In the interwar period, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia remained a “bastion of anti-communism”, partly because a huge number of Russian emigrants, the White Guards, settled in Serbia. Their influence was great in various intellectual circles in Belgrade and was transmitted to both culture and politics. However, the most important reasons are first of an ideological nature and, second, the binding of the newly created Yugoslav state to alliances with France and Great Britain, because the fear of revisionism of the defeated forces in the First World War weighed on foreign policy. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was the last European country to establish relations with the Soviet Union (June 1940) (Petrović 2017). It seems absurd, but the socialist Yugoslavia, which was created after the Second World War with the help of the Soviet Union, was the first Eastern European country that “escaped” from the alliance with the USSR (June 1948) (Gibijskij 2011, 567–594). Nikita Khrushchev’s official visit to Belgrade in 1955 marked the end of the “stage of hostility” and the formal beginning of bilateral cooperation for “mutual benefit”. Josip Broz was in conflict with Stalin (and vice versa – Stalin did not trust Broz at all). Khrushchev carried out “de-Stalinization” on the internal level, and thus there

was an “implicit explanation” of who was “guilty” in the dispute between the two communist states. But the causes of the crisis in bilateral communication were much deeper and of a completely different character. Being socialist in its internal structure, Yugoslavia’s foreign policy orientation was more towards the “political West” than the “East”. It served as a kind of geopolitical instrument for “undermining the communist bloc” and its positioning in the international arena, even if informally, had to have elements of anti-Soviet activities. It was not emphasized in the foreground, it was not officially presented as a state orientation, it was not always and everywhere visible, but it “disturbed” bilateral communication between Belgrade and Moscow and contributed to a relatively low level of trust in that relationship. (Edemsky 2011, 661 – 682).

The disintegration of both “superstates” and a return to the “old Russian-Serbian framework” in the 1990s therefore represents a kind of “turning of the page”, the beginning of a new era in relations between Moscow and Belgrade. Every beginning is difficult, and all attempts to raise the level of trust were especially difficult in the conditions that existed in the 1990s, when both Russia and Serbia faced numerous internal problems, and when the world political system was unipolar, with the distinct dominance of the US in every respect.

The Serbian leadership had high and frequently unreasonable expectations of Russia during those years because Moscow too had to implement the idea of strategic balance with regard to the US. Going through the traumatic post-Soviet experience, Russia tried to regulate its own relations with the US (and with the “Western world” as a whole) through cooperation, which inevitably reflected on official Moscow’s view of the Balkan issue (the position was defended by political means, most often with reliance on international law and the threat of using a veto in the UNSC to prevent unfavorable outcomes). A similar rhythm continued during the first presidential term of Vladimir Putin. However, the ongoing improvement in Russian-Serbian relations started in 2006. The improvement was noticeable in the military, economic, and political fields. Putin’s famous speech at the 43rd Munich Security Conference in 2007 (*Münchener Sicherheitskonferenz*) is most often cited by Western analysts as a “foreign policy turn” or a “show of ambition” for Russia to pursue a different policy (Kupiecki & Menkiszak 2020, 369–379). In other words, by reading “between the lines”, the aspiration of Russia to become a separate pole in international relations was announced. Therefore, with its activities, Russia wanted to influence the transformation of the structure of the world political system from unipolar to multipolar. Those changes in Russia’s approach were detected in relation to Serbia a few months earlier. This was once again influenced by the “Kosovo case,” as Russian support for Serbia’s position grew during the course of the discussions between Belgrade and Pristina, led by

Martti Ahtisaari, as it became clearer where the entire process was headed and how it should conclude. Finally, through diplomatic action and with the threat of a veto, during the summer of 2007, Russia prevented the US from putting the text of a new resolution on Kosovo on the agenda of the UN Security Council, which would repeal the previous Resolution 1244.

Trust in bilateral relations was growing, and over time, the prevailing opinion in Belgrade was that Serbia could rely on Russia to defend its territorial integrity. This opinion was also influenced by the attitude of the Serbian public, which was becoming extremely pro-Russian. It turned out that the “political necessity” to cooperate with Russia more closely and public pressure on political circles had more of an impact on Serbia’s foreign policy orientation than the investments made by the collective West in the media, non-governmental organizations, and political parties, which also temporarily increased mistrust between Russia and Serbia. This phenomenon of the growth of Russophilia in the Serbian public is, by all accounts, special and requires a separate analysis. In this paper, it is cited as a fact which has largely determined Serbia-Russia relations. This also affected energy, economic, and military cooperation „In May 2013, Belgrade and Moscow signed the document with pretentious name ‘Declaration of Strategic Partnership between Serbia and Russia’. The document states that strategic relations ‘include all spheres of cooperation, including politics, trade, economy, culture, technic and education’. Still, even after this, the two biggest contracts between the two countries remained those related to energy and railway infrastructure. The scope of foreign trade exchange has been fluctuating from 2.3 to 3.3 billion euros for the past six years, with the share of oil and oil derivatives in Russian exports to Serbia at 36%, gas 27%, and about 20% is import of other necessities (products and services) related to the energy sector. When it comes to Serbian exports, apples make 9%, cheese 2%, strawberries 2% (all three products are among the top ten), and the share of the other agricultural products is about 10%“ (Proroković, 2020, 202).

“The originally considered route for ‘South Stream’ stretched from Bulgaria to the north, through the territory of Romania to Hungary, but it was changed so that Serbia could ‘enter the game’, which has implications not only in the domain of energy, but also in the domain of geopolitics. In Serbia, in addition to the agreement on the strategic pipeline, the privatization of the state oil company “NIS” has been realized (with two refineries, modest but with their own sources and a huge distribution network), which through different kinds of taxes makes up 15-19% of the state budget, a figure that must be taken into account when talking about the stability of the fiscal system” (Ponomareva & Proroković 2021, 126).

“Parallel to the strategic plans in the energy sector (which were successfully implemented when on January 1, 2021, in the village of Gospođinci in the north

of the country, the so-called Balkan Stream, 402 km long, has been officially put into work; the Serbian part of the Turkish Stream has been laid down all the way from the Bulgarian to the Hungarian border; Russian gas came to Serbia and the Republic of Srpska), Russia approved a credit line to Serbia for the revitalization of the railway in the value of 800 million dollars. Due to the geographic position of the country and its infrastructure connection, this project will be reflected on the traffic systems in Montenegro, B&H, (North) Macedonia, and Bulgaria. In addition, based on a special agreement from 2009, a Russian-Serbian humanitarian centre of regional significance was established in Niš (officially opened in April 2012)” (Ponomareva & Proroković 2021, 127).

In the economic field, the volume of Russian-Serbian trade was up to 4 billion dollars (in 2008), but fluctuations were also recorded after the global financial crisis (from 2009 to 2011) and after the introduction of EU sanctions against Russia in 2014 (Jović-Lazić & Lađevac 2018, 173-195). Despite this, it turned out that these “shocks” did not disrupt the economic exchange in the long term, so the growth of import and export indicators was quickly recorded (in 2021, about 3.6 billion dollars). It is significant that Serbia imports energy products from Russia (thereby ensuring energy security), whereby natural gas is supplied by the “Balkan Stream” pipeline that stretches through the territory of Serbia (the underground gas storage in Banatski Dvor is part of this project), while the majority owner (56% ownership) of the Serbian Oil industry is the Russian company Gazprom Neft. Serbia is not only the end-user when it comes to oil derivatives and natural gas, but also a distributor (of a regional character), which is important for the overall position. Since July 2021, Serbia has signed a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, which enables the duty-free import and export of goods from Serbia to Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. A series of objective (underdevelopment of distribution chains, non-competitiveness of Serbian producers on the big market, relative lack of interest of Russian businessmen in investing in Serbia) and subjective factors (EU pressures, impossibility of developing new projects in the conditions of the pandemic and the following energy crisis) have prevented the full utilization of this possibility, although it still has a lot of potential (to a certain extent, among the European countries west of Belarus, Serbia is the only one that has such an “exclusive right”).

As far as military cooperation, “Russia has so far helped (direct aircraft donations and armoured patrol vehicles, favourable terms of purchase or credit) by equipping the Serbian armed forces with six MiG-29 planes, 30 armoured patrol and reconnaissance vehicles (BRDM-2MS), and 30 tanks (T-72 MS). Serbia has already purchased four new Russian helicopters Mi-35M and three transport helicopters Mi-17, as well as one anti-aircraft system, Pancir S-1 (it serves to defend

against low-flying objects and, because of its tactical and technical characteristics, it is currently the best tool for defense from such attacks). Curiosity arises from the fact that Serbia, in October 2019, became the first nation in history to which Russia's powerful anti-aviation system S-400 was transferred as a result of a joint military exercise" (Proroković 2020, 203–204).

The Government of Russia decided to establish an office at the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia in 2020, emulating NATO's interactions with this organization. For Serbia, which applies the principle of self-help in an anarchic environment, the intensification of military cooperation with Russia is a solution since it is practically in NATO's surroundings, which will not arm it, and the eventual entry into NATO would have to be "paid for" by the formal acceptance of the secession of the Kosovo-Metohija Albanians. For Russia, Serbia continues to be the only nation in the "Balkan NATO sea" with which Russia may cooperate. And where securing public support for such a move would be relatively simple (there are no obstacles like those Russia encounters in other countries as a result of their formal membership in NATO or because of anti-Russian resentment in public opinion) (Ponomareva 2020, 158–179).

It is significant that the activities have been carried out with undiminished intensity since 2014, when the EU and NATO began shaping an extreme anti-Russian policy while clearly and unequivocally calling on all candidates for admission to follow them. In this context, there was no lack of pressure on Serbia. Despite this, Serbia's foreign policy continued to place a high priority on improving relations with Russia.

Serbian-Russian relations after February 2022: conditions and perspectives

Serbia's very complex position in international relations has become even more complex after February 2022. Strategic balancing between the four pillars of foreign policy is becoming more difficult and demanding, perhaps even impossible. The US and the EU are waging a completely open and extreme hybrid war against Russia. Part of the measures they use, besides continuous arming and training of the Ukrainian military forces, are also economic sanctions, limiting energy cooperation, directing the decisions of international organizations, spreading Russophobia (via media resources, placing political messages, organizing various events, etc.), and exerting permanent political pressure on Russia. The EU's foreign and security policy, which is created in cooperation with the US and Great Britain

(i.e., through NATO, and the EU then follows NATO's moves and takes steps that are in line with the designed US strategy), is becoming extremely anti-Russian without any indication of change in the foreseeable future. It is to be assumed that the current situation will last, although only half a year after the new escalation of the Ukrainian crisis, it was clear how big and deep the ramifications would be for European countries. It might be too soon to judge whether the EU is working to its detriment, but it is equally feasible that such a judgment will turn out to be accurate very soon. With the fifth package of sanctions, the EU introduced restrictions on the purchase of Russian energy products (since there is no viable logistical and economic alternative for the import of Russian oil to Serbia through the territory of the EU member states, it is no longer possible to purchase Russian oil in the EU or Serbia, except that delivered via pipelines.), without having developed a plan for the procurement of alternative energy sources. This is even more noticeable when it comes to the natural gas market.

Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, is in favor of ending the purchase of Russian energy products in the next five years and announced a plan according to which crude oil and natural gas from Russia would be completely phased out by 2027. The European Commission's proposal is less optimistic and foresees the fulfillment of this goal by 2030.

In addition to a series of questions that arise on this occasion (where will the EU buy energy, at what quantities and prices, how will this affect the competitiveness of the European economy on a global scale, etc.), the first among them is certainly: how to "survive" in an anarchic international environment by 2027 or 2030? The shortage of energy sources and the rise in prices will affect the economic dynamics within the EU, which will then induce social upheavals, and social upheavals cause political breakdowns! Logically and already seen many times in European history.

Despite the obvious consequences for the EU (and, to a lesser extent, the US), Western actors maintained organized pressure on Serbia to follow their foreign and security policy, impose sanctions on Russia, and review its relations with Moscow (N1 2022). On the one hand, it should be said that by preserving its relations with Moscow, Serbia avoided imposing sanctions on Russia and joined the most important decisions of the EU. Because of that the rate of compliance of Serbia with the EU foreign policy approach is only 44%, which represents a decrease compared to the last year. On the other hand, succumbing to that pressure, the representative of Serbia three times voted against Russia in the UN General Assembly when resolutions on the situation in Ukraine were on the agenda.

First, on March 2, 2022, Serbia voted for the UN General Assembly resolution “condemning the Russian invasion”, and then on April 7 (a resolution with a similar text and an almost identical voting result was adopted again on October 13), it joined the initiative of Western countries to suspend Russia’s membership in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHCR). However, both times, massive street protests were organized in Belgrade against such decisions by state authorities (the first protests were held on March 4 and the second on April 15). In the Western media, these outbursts of discontent were portrayed as the actions of “extreme rightists” (Radio Free Europe 2022). However, the public opinion polls that followed showed a very different picture. The survey of the *New Serbian Political Thought* showed that “the number of citizens who believe that sanctions should not be imposed on Russia is growing, and 84 percent of citizens now hold this view. As many as 60 percent of citizens say that it should not be done even if the European Union threatens Serbia with sanctions, while around 19 percent of respondents say that in that case sanctions should be approved” (Nova srpska politička misao 2022). The *Demostat* survey also brings similar results: “Only a third of Serbian citizens would support Serbia’s entry into the EU, while 51 percent are against it. More than half of the citizens believe that Serbia should not align with the EU’s foreign and security policy, an important criterion for further progress in European integration, while as many as 80 percent are against the introduction of sanctions against Russia” (Vreme 2022).

The vacillation of the ruling party (Serbian Progressive Party) and its yielding to Western pressure, which was demonstrated by voting at the UN General Assembly, also affected the result of the April parliamentary elections. Its list won a smaller number of mandates than expected (120 out of 250, which does not allow them to form a government independently), while at the same time, three non-parliamentary lists with a clear anti-Western orientation, despite the high turnout, managed to “skip” the census line and acquire parliamentary status. This shows that any “gamble” with the attitude towards Russia cannot remain without reaction from the public and voters, and it puts significant pressure on the government and institutions. Soon after the galloping “gas crisis” in Europe showed that there was no alternative to cooperation with Russia, the two presidents, Russian and Serbian, without mentioning the previous vote of Serbia’s representatives in the UN General Assembly, agreed that Serbia would buy this energy product through the Balkan Stream gas pipeline in quantities that meet two-thirds of its needs in the following three years at the price set according to the so-called “oil formula”, which means that it will be from 310 to 408 dollars for 1000 cubic meters (the price of natural gas on the European market was approximately

USD 950 at the time of the agreement, at the end of May 2022, with a tendency to rise higher; in September, it briefly exceeded USD 3,000) (Spasić 2022).

Despite the fact that, in the conditions of damaged relations between the collective West and Russia, it is practically impossible to implement planned bilateral activities and improve economic and military relations, political communication remained at a high level (despite Serbia's "slip" at the UN General Assembly), which is one of the indicators that the foreign policy orientation of Serbia will not drastically and dramatically change. That is, it will not change to the detriment of relations with Russia. Formally, the narrative about the continuation of European integration and the US as an important pillar of foreign policy is still maintained, but this does not affect the practical part of continuing cooperation with Russia and China. In conditions of strong public support for cooperation with Russia, it is difficult to expect drastic and dramatic changes since this would contribute to internal destabilization and create preconditions for a long and uncertain crisis in Serbia itself. In contrast to the Western external pressure when it comes to the attitude towards Russia, there is also fierce internal pressure in Serbia. As a result, the simplest approach is to strive to retain the foreign policy position that has been steadily developed since 2007.

Conclusion

A nation's foreign policy, which determines how it interacts with other actors, is affected by at least three fundamental factors: its geographic position, its historical experience, and the structure of the international political system. In the past two decades, Serbia's foreign policy has been shaped using standard evaluations and calculations pertaining to the three aforementioned factors. First off, Serbia's location geographically places it largely within the EU and NATO's surroundings. Although four countries in the Western Balkan region are not members of the EU, and judging by the current situation, they will not become so even in the foreseeable future (Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and North Macedonia), NATO has persistently expanded along the southeastern geopolitical vector. Besides Serbia, the only country left outside this military alliance was Bosnia and Herzegovina. Due to the complex two-entity internal structure, the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to NATO is blocked by one entity – the Republic of Srpska. The Serbian ethnospace remains an island in the European NATO ocean. Serbia has to cooperate with the EU and NATO, it is a matter of "geographical necessity". The inevitable result of this cooperation between unequal

partners in terms of potential political, military, and economic power is that it frequently disadvantages Serbia. At certain moments, Serbia simply did not have the institutional, human, or financial resources to fully protect its interests. Therefore, the influence of the EU and NATO in Serbia is strengthened, and not the other way around. After all, this is what happened to all of the small states and even regional powers that participated in the European and Euro-Atlantic integration processes. It is also important for the political geography of the region that after 1999 the status of Kosovo remained “questionable” and after 2008 it was problematized. That is, the resolution of the UN Security Council defined that Belgrade and Pristina must agree on “substantial autonomy”, but these negotiations failed, which served as a reason for the Albanians to unilaterally declare independence. The key Western countries not only managed this process but also directed it. Although it seems a bit contradictory Serbia is condemned to close cooperation with actors who encourage secession in one part of its territory. The so-called “Republic of Kosovo” did not establish diplomatic relations with the majority of non-Western actors (among them are the most important ones: Russia, China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, the Republic of South Africa, etc.), but it did with the overwhelming majority of Western actors and Balkan states (excluding Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Romania). Therefore, “geographical necessity” could not also mean “political necessity”.

“Political necessity” was therefore determined by the remaining two criteria – historical experience and the transformation of the structure of the world political system. On the one hand, in the historical context, Western powers acted hostile towards Serbia. Russia protected Serbian interests when and as much as it could. In the Serbian foreign policy vision, relying on Russia appeared as an option in the last decade of the 20th century, and then it was further elaborated and concretized. On the other hand, the change in the balance of power in world politics and the relative and absolute decline in the military, political, and economic potential of the US and its allies have weakened their interest in the Balkans over time (they focus on more important regions and topics), and the pressure on Serbia gradually subsides. Thus, a certain room for maneuver was opened for the elaboration and concretization of Serbian-Russian relations and, no less importantly, for Serbian-Chinese relations. Establishing and upholding strong ties with Russia and China is what is meant by “political necessity.” Public opinion, which consistently puts pressure on political decision-makers, also has an impact on this outcome.

Keeping the above observation in mind, it is quite unlikely that the complete breakdown of relations between Russia and the West after February 2022 will have any impact on Serbia-Russia relations. Russia remains one of the priorities of Serbia’s foreign policy. Certainly, it is difficult to anticipate that relations with Russia

will continue to advance at the current rate given the altered geopolitical landscape and Serbia's location. This primarily refers to the implementation of initiatives to establish an office of the Ministry of Defense of Russia in Belgrade, to cooperate with the company Rosatom, and to build a nuclear power plant in Serbia in the foreseeable future. However, even without that, it is likely that the agreements made thus far and the projects begun will not be broken. Because, in addition to "geographical necessity", there is also "political necessity".

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**SPOLJNA POLITIKA SRBIJE I ODNOSI SA RUSIJOM
KAO JEDAN OD PRIORITETA**

Apstrakt: Iako Republika Srbija (Srbija) nema usvojenu spoljnopolitičku strategiju, postoji niz elemenata koji se dosledno primenjuju. Jedna od njih je insistiranje na prioritetizaciji saradnje sa Rusijom. Srpsko-ruski odnosi su postali jači i dublji u poslednjih 20 godina i malo je verovatno da će na njih uticati promene u globalnom okruženju koje se dešavaju posle februara 2022. godine. Ovaj rad se bavi kontinuiranim srpsko-ruskim odnosima i njihovom dinamikom, uz analizu razvoja spoljne politike Srbije i objašnjenje kako su odnosi sa Rusijom postali prioritet. Analiza bilateralnih odnosa dveju država vrši se oslanjanjem na strukturalni realizam kao teorijski okvir, pre svega na razmatranje principa samopomoći kao jednog od ključnih faktora pri određivanju spoljne politike. Metodološki okvir se zasniva na analizi diskursa, analizi sadržaja, ali i korišćenju komparativne metode, metode indukcije i dedukcije.

Ključne reči: spoljna politika Srbije, Rusija, NATO, EU, Kosovo i Metohija.