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Serbia's approach to the EU and Russia – Implications for its internal and foreign policy

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Abstract: This article examines Serbia's approach to European integration and relations with Russia and its implications for its internal and foreign policy. Serbia's policy is characterized as a "small state" foreign policy designed to maintain good relations with the EU and Russia, believing that this will help it overcome internal and international challenges. In light of the tense relations between the West and Russia, the article examines how this policy has developed over the last two decades and whether it is sustainable in changed international circumstances. It focuses on the fact that Serbia's approach toward the EU and Russia has shown continuity despite the growing polarization at the international level caused by the crisis in Ukraine in 2014. However, due to the rapid and dramatic deterioration of EU-Russia relations caused by Russia's attack on Ukraine, Serbia's current policy has become very difficult to maintain. Serbia's pragmatic policy, shaped by internal and foreign political interests and guided by a series of economic, legal, and security arguments, was put to the test. These arguments have emerged as new key trends in Serbia and can be traced through the state's response to the war in Ukraine and the EU and Russia's responses to the country's policy. Serbia found itself under pressure from both sides to choose one side over the other, which causes tension and uncertainty and put the country in a difficult position. This article shows that despite the pressure and expectations of both sides, there was no drastic change in Serbia's policy towards the EU or Russia. However, the fact is that there is

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less space for the fulfillment of the country's foreign policy priorities, which now seem mutually incompatible. Therefore, in a broader sense, this article calls into question the sustainability of Serbia's current foreign policy as a framework for preserving the strategic and national interests of the country.

Keywords: Serbia, foreign policy, national interest, European integration, the European Union, Russia, Russia-Ukraine war.

Introduction

Each country's foreign policy comprises self-serving approaches and tactics to safeguard its national and domestic interests and accomplish its objectives in international relations (Hudson 2018). To comprehend the activities and interactions of Serbia with regard to the European Union (EU) and Russia, we must know the country's foreign policy decisions and the motivations behind them. To understand where Serbia stands on this unfriendly EU-Russia relations, we must also look at its geography, officially stated foreign policy goals, national interests, domestic issues and concerns, and the current state of international relations.

Small states such as Serbia have distinct demands from larger ones, pursue various foreign policies, and struggle more than bigger states to meet successful foreign policy outcomes. They have limited opportunities for independent foreign policy formulation and implementation. Their economies are completely dependent on international cooperation, often lacking sufficient resilience, and they have small territories and populations. Depending on conditions at home and abroad, small states adopt different security methods to compensate for their size and use the appropriate techniques to protect their interests. It is common practice for smaller states to favor multilateralism to gain influence and exert restraint over larger states (Thorhallsson and Steinsson 2017). Despite their limited scope of influence and lack of power autonomy, small states frequently seek to expand their power. In these circumstances, one approach could be to enact a foreign policy that does not fully support the goals of any major state but instead attempts to act as an honest mediator. Some estimate Serbia's pragmatist strategy, which includes close integration with the EU and close cooperation with Russia, is based on the need to guarantee security and economic growth, leading to a neo-Titoist foreign policy of balancing (Reid 2021, 729). Others think Serbia is still far from obtaining such independence, despite its uncertain position between the East and the West, which may be related to Yugoslavia's nonalignment policy (Kovačević 2019, 420). However, this is more than just a one-way street. The specificities of

being a small state make the country also extremely vulnerable to the direct influence of more powerful international actors.

Given that this article is about Serbia's European integration and relations with Russia, it begins by providing an overview of the steps Serbia took to join the EU and its policy toward it. Since Serbia's foreign policy has long anticipated a clear commitment to European integration while maintaining and expanding comprehensive cooperation with Russia, the research then focuses on the country's ties with the Russian Federation. Following that, the research focuses on the fact that the war in Ukraine caused significant changes to overall international relations. This new geostrategic reality has called into question Serbia's attempt to lead a pragmatic foreign policy based on the belief that balancing its tactics and strategy with other major world powers will strengthen its geostrategic position. On the contrary, the rapid changes in the international environment brought about by the Ukraine war made it difficult to achieve primary foreign policy priorities. They placed Serbia in a highly complicated international position. Given that the EU and Russia are significant and influential actors whose actions have regional and global ramifications, the measures through which they attempt to influence Serbia's foreign policy are examined in greater depth. In light of the new international circumstances, the question of whether Serbia can still maintain its foreign policy course, which it believes is in its national interest, arises.

Following the purpose and goals of the research, a comparative analysis of Serbia's foreign policies toward the EU and Serbia's policies toward Russia is used as a methodological framework. In order to better understand this issue, a comprehensive overview of the legislative frameworks established in the country's relations with these two sides and the content of key strategic documents that define Serbia's national and foreign policy objectives directly or indirectly is given. Also considered are the official statements and agreements Serbia has made with the Russian Federation and the EU and the social and political climate in the country. To determine how the conflict in Ukraine has affected Serbia's foreign policy stance, documents from various international organizations—the EU and the UN—that address the question of Serbia's compliance are examined.

An overview of Serbia's foreign policy and approaches toward European Union integration

Serbia's approach to the EU is motivated by its geographic location and critical economic interests. Due to the recognition that any political strategy that separated

Serbia from the EU would be unsuccessful and detrimental, European integration has stood out as a primary foreign policy aim in all important Serbian national documents. Despite the country's lengthy and complicated EU accession process, it remains a top priority for its foreign policy. The dispute between Belgrade and Pristina has made Serbia's relationship with the EU more difficult because the optimization of those ties is a condition for EU membership. The EU participates in the ongoing dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, which aims to normalize relations and resolve outstanding issues. Also, since the Ukrainian crisis started in 2014, the issue of EU sanctions has been a source of tension between Serbia and the EU.

As this chapter is devoted to an overview of Serbia's foreign policy and approaches toward EU integration prior to the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, we will start by noting that the long road toward Serbia's compliance with EU norms and standards began after the political changes in the Republic of Serbia in October 2000. During the 2003 European Council summit in Thessaloniki, Serbia was recognized as a potential candidate for EU membership, along with five other Western Balkan countries. In October 2004, the National Assembly of Serbia adopted the Resolution on Joining the European Union, which identified European integration as a key foreign policy goal (Official Gazette of RS No. 112/2004). According to the 2005 National Strategy of Serbia for EU Accession, "inclusion in European integration flows – joining and accession to the European Union – is a strategic commitment of Serbia that enjoys high political and social support" (NSS EU, 2005). Three years later, Serbia signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) and the Interim Trade and Trade-Related Issues Agreement with the EU (Official Gazette of RS[a] No. 83/2008). The visa-free regime, which enabled citizens of Serbia to travel to the EU and other Schengen countries without visas, entered into force on December 19, 2009. Even before becoming an EU candidate country, Serbia adopted the National Program for integration to show its dedication to the process of European integration; the amended version was adopted in December 2009 (NPI 2009).² In December 2009, Serbia formally applied for EU membership. The government's accompanying memorandum emphasized that this request reflects the prevailing social consensus about Serbia's orientation toward Europe and its aspirations to become a member of the Union. In 2010, the EU Council of Ministers began implementing the Transitional Agreement and unfroze the EU-Serbia SAA ratification process. In October 2011, the European Commission, among others, gave its opinion on Serbia's application to join the EU.

² NPI is a document prepared by each candidate country applying to join the EU and outlines a detailed strategy for fulfilling all criteria necessary for EU membership.

In this document, the European Commission requested that Belgrade normalize relations with Pristina in order to set a date for the beginning of membership negotiations (EC COM[2011] 666 final). In March 2012, the European Council decided to grant Serbia candidate country status after the General Affairs Council's recommendation on February 28, which reaffirmed Serbia's ongoing, credible commitment, and continued progress in putting into practice the agreements reached in the dialogue with Kosovo (EUCO 35/12 Presse 84). The European Council decided to begin accession talks with Serbia in June 2013, a few months after the EU-sponsored Brussels agreement on normalizing relations between Belgrade and Pristina was reached (Council of the EU Press Release 2013). Following the decision, the Council approved the framework for those talks in December 2013 and opted to hold the first intergovernmental conference with Serbia in January 2014. This conference, which took place on January 21, 2014, marked the beginning of the opening of talks for Serbia's EU membership (Council of the EU 5486/14, PRESSE 15 2014). In the meantime, in July 2013, the EU Council confirmed that all member states had ratified the SAA, which provided a framework for further improvement of Serbia's cooperation with the EU in many areas. Establishing a free trade zone and harmonizing legislation with EU law were the two most important obligations that Serbia undertook when it signed the agreement. Due to this agreement and the liberalization of trade with the EU, citizens of Serbia are able to buy goods at lower prices and choose from a broader range of products. At the same time, Serbian producers were enabled to sell their products in a market of close to 500 million people, which attracts foreign investors. Furthermore, this agreement gave Serbia access to much larger EU funds.

Serbia and the EU have also intensified their cooperation in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). This was in line with the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, adopted in October 2009, which stated that Serbia is ready to align its security capacities with EU standards and will conduct its foreign and security policy keeping in mind the views of the Union (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 88/2009). In 2011, Serbia and the Union concluded the Agreement with the EU on security procedures for the exchange and protection of confidential data. They also concluded the Agreement on establishing a framework for participation in civil and military operations for crisis management; this made it possible for representatives from Serbia and members of the Serbian army and police to take part in Union missions (Official Gazette of RS(a) No. 1/2012-266; Official Gazette of RS No. 1/2012-260). Serbia ratified these agreements in February 2012. A deeper partnership with the EU in regard to CFSP is also called for in the SAA, which among other things, asks for increased cooperation in this policy.

The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, adopted in 2019, stated that European integration and EU membership are Serbia's national interests and strategic orientation. It is further noted that the national interest is achieved by shaping a modern and developed society based on common European values that are part of the Serbian national identity and historical heritage, as well as by achieving internal readiness for membership in the EU and improving national security and defense through the process of European integration. This document stated, among other things, that Serbia is "firmly committed to contributing to the EU Common Foreign, Security, and Defense Policy as part of the accession process and to integrate into the concepts of that European policy." It further states that Serbia "endorses the European values and foreign policy objectives expressed in the basic documents of the European Union, as well as the main guidelines of its foreign policy actions based on those values." The document stated that Serbia would work to align its foreign policy with the goals and guiding principles of the EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy. Additionally, it declares that the Republic of Serbia's military and civilian capabilities for participating in EU missions and operations are a crucial aspect of its foreign policy, contributing to global, European, and regional security and the observance of international law. It declares its readiness to increase mutual trust and shoulder shared responsibility in addressing security challenges. Finally, it is stated that Serbia will continue to gradually align its foreign policy with the Union's positions leading up to EU membership under the SAA and the Negotiating Framework. As a result, it will align with its foreign policy at the time of membership (Official Gazette of RS No. 94/2019). With regard to actions internationally, Serbia should not support initiatives that would contradict the CFSP of the EU, or it risks undermining the progress it has made (Jović-Lazić 2020, 321). The 2021 National Security Strategy of Serbia also reflects EU membership and European integration as Serbia's strategic goal. The strategy states that Serbia must make internal preparations for EU membership, develop a modern society based on common European values that are a part of its national identity and historical heritage, and strengthen its national security and defense through European integration to realize this national interest. It is noted that Serbia "is committed to building its security on democratic standards, a cooperation policy, and a European foreign policy orientation" and that this kind of foreign policy orientation gives it a stronger position on the world stage (NSS RS 2021).

Despite lengthy negotiations and the fact that European integration is mentioned in official documents as one of Serbia's vital national interests, Serbia's membership in the EU is still up in the air. At the same time, the influence of the EU in Serbia and the Western Balkans has been declining. In particular, several

crises have made the Union less attractive, and disagreements between member states have made it difficult to trust the future of the Union's enlargement process. To re-establish a credible perspective of membership of the Western Balkans in the EU, the EU Council approved a new methodology for the accession process in March 2020.³ The Republic of Serbia stayed committed to European integration by approving the new methodology in September 2020. On May 6, 2021, the EU Council approved a document that explains how the revised enlargement method will be used in negotiations with Serbia.⁴ Serbia's first intergovernmental conference on May 22, 2021, used the new methodology. On that occasion, it was noted that the chapters included in Cluster one —Fundamentals—were already open. Cluster four—green agenda and sustainable connectivity—was opened by Serbia at an intergovernmental conference on December 14, 2021 (Council of the EU Press release 2021).

In the meantime, the stagnation of the European integration process significantly reduced euro enthusiasm, allowing Russia to strengthen its influence. Russia has been particularly effective in leveraging its soft power and developing the idea that it is a critical strategic partner that takes more care of the country's needs than the EU does (Panagiotou 2020, 219). After relations between Moscow and Brussels worsened in 2014 due to the Ukraine crisis and the Crimean annexation, Serbia began to lag notably behind regarding demands for harmonizing its foreign policy with the Union's policy. Serbia has supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine, arguing that the crisis in Ukraine poses a serious threat to European security and calls into question the very foundation of such fundamental political documents such as the Helsinki Final Act, the Paris Charter for a New Europe of 1990, and the Istanbul Charter for European Security of 1999. However, annual reports from the EU Commission have become very critical of Serbia's refusal to join the EU in imposing restrictive measures on Russia.

Some believe that Serbia wants to join the EU, but only under its own conditions, and political and social elites in Serbia having different views on what is best for the

³ The main feature of the new enlargement methodology is the six thematic clusters of negotiating chapters. The new methodology retains the suspensive clause and applies the principle of reversibility if there is a significant deadlock in any area covered by the accession process. Also, countries that have made enough reforms will be allowed to join EU policies, programs, and markets, with more money and investment to encourage them.

⁴ Chapter 35, which covers Serbia's overall normalization process with Pristina, will be handled separately from the other clusters. Chapter 34 will be addressed after the negotiation process. Fundamentals; internal market; competitiveness and inclusive growth; green agenda and sustainable connectivity; resources, agriculture, cohesion, and external relations are other clusters ("Negotiation Clusters" 2021).

country prevents it from leading a coherent foreign policy (Seroka, 2010, 439–40). Serbia has come under criticism for attempting to keep a balance between its relations with the EU and Russia, leading some to claim that it is trying to have its cake and eat it too. Serbian officials, however, argue that the country is simply trying to pursue its own national interests and maintain good relations with both sides. As the EU has made the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina one of the critical preconditions for accession, this issue, besides alignment with the EU sanctions, will continue to be a significant factor in the EU-Serbia relationship. It is also a fact that as the crisis in Ukraine has worsened, the enlargement of the EU into the Western Balkans has fallen to the bottom of its priority list. The European perspectives of Serbia and other Western Balkan countries will depend not only on their ability to adapt to and harmonize with EU laws and policies but will also be determined by the EU's internal economic and institutional stability, the practical application of its new enlargement methodology, and factors that emerge from the changing international and geopolitical environment.

Overview of Serbia's relations with Russia before the outbreak of the Ukraine War

In the meantime, Serbia and Russia have developed close political and economic relations. They are based on good historical and cultural ties between Serbia and Russia, as illustrated by the majority of Serbs' favorable opinion of Russia. The majority of political parties and the Serbian Parliament's foreign policy reflect this. Over and above the ties mentioned, Serbia also has a strong economic relationship with Russia, particularly in the energy sector. Russia is a critical natural gas supplier to Serbia and has agreed to provide funding for a pipeline's construction there. At the core of Serbia's good relations with Russia is the need for Belgrade to maintain Moscow's support for its position on the status of Kosovo.

Since 2008, when Pristina proclaimed its independence, relations between Russia and Serbia became more vital. Given that most of the EU and other Western countries recognized this unilaterally declared independence, Russia had the opportunity to reassert its position as a fierce defender of the territorial integrity of Serbia. As a result of this, the Serbian government started to turn to Russia (Reid 2021, 728-9). This was also supported by the gradual strengthening of the Russian economy, which enabled it to conduct an active policy in an area beyond its immediate neighborhood. After the two countries signed a free trade agreement in 2000, Russian investments in the Serbian economy grew, particularly in the

energy sector. At the end of January 2008, Serbia and Russia signed an agreement on cooperation in the oil and gas industry, which the Serbian Parliament ratified in September of the same year (Official Gazette of RS[a] No. 83/2008). It was a framework document for the signing of several following agreements in the field of energy. Thus, in December 2008, Serbia and Russia signed a deal to sell a 51 percent stake in the oil industry of Serbia-OIS (Naftna Industrija Srbije-NIS) to Gazprom. The OIS was sold with exclusive rights to exploit natural oil and gas reserves on Serbia's territory. By signing this agreement, Russia gained a dominant position in the Serbian energy market. Serbia chose to sell the national company to Russia without holding a tender because of Belgrade's efforts to ensure Moscow's continuing political support, notably about Kosovo and expectations that it will be one of the vital transit countries on the future South Stream pipeline. Expecting future earnings from transit taxes, most political parties in Serbia supported a "more flexible approach" to the negotiations with Russia. There was worry that a possible breakdown in negotiations over the Russian purchase of the OIS could have hurt political and economic ties and cooperation between the two countries (Jović-Lazić and Lađevac 2013, 140).

In the 2009 National Security Strategy of Serbia, the importance of historically close and comprehensive ties between Serbia and Russia is stated; it is emphasized that the strategic energy partnership strengthens cooperation with regard to issues of broader national interest. It is also said that Serbia will keep working to improve bilateral relations with Russia, which, given its goal of joining the EU and its growing importance in the region, should open up new ways for the two countries to work together (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 88/2009). At the end of February 2009, Serbia and Russia signed a visa-free agreement in Moscow (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 31/2009). By promising Serbia a loan of more than \$1 billion to balance its budget, Russia demonstrated that it was willing to be its creditor. Thus, Russia gave Serbia a \$200 million state loan in April 2010, and in April 2013, Russia also agreed to a \$500 million loan to support the Serbian budget (Official Gazette of the RS, No.3/2013). Following this, Serbia and Russia signed six more bilateral agreements in different areas of cooperation. Russia's financial support was crucial after Serbia deviated from the fiscal program in February 2012 and the first IMF revision failed. The agreement on long-term natural gas deliveries from Russia signed in Moscow in October 2012 was also very important for Serbia. The agreement was supposed to guarantee supply security and lower gas prices (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 3/2013).

The opening of the regional Serbian-Russian humanitarian center in Niš in 2012 established another area of security cooperation between Russia and Serbia. The goal of establishing the center was to make it easier for the two countries to work together to help people and protect them in case of floods, fires, or other natural

disasters in Serbia or nearby countries (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 6/2012). There was a lot of debate and disagreement over the decision to open the center. According to some US and European security officials, the center has advanced communications equipment that can exceed its emergency rescue needs. If Serbia were to grant diplomatic immunity to its Russian personnel at Russia's request, the Government of Serbia would lose control over the facility and personnel, and this center would become a kind of Russian consulate. Russia could use the center as an intelligence gathering station, given its proximity to the US Bondsteel base in Kosovo (Birnbbaum 2018).

In May 2013, Russia and Serbia signed the Declaration on Strategic Partnership in Sochi. It states that both sides "rely on deep mutual feelings of friendship, the centuries-old history of relations, and the tradition of linguistic, spiritual, and cultural affinities of the fraternal peoples of the two countries". The strategic partnership, among other things, envisages military and intelligence cooperation and the harmonization of positions in international organizations (DSP of Serbia and Russia). Serbia joined the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military alliance led by Russia, as an observer the same year. To further strengthen military cooperation, Serbia and Russia signed the Agreement on Military Cooperation in November 2013, which served as the basis for all later agreements between the two armies on particular areas of cooperation (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 7/2014). In the following years, Serbia and Russia signed agreements on the mutual protection of confidential data, an agreement on military-technical cooperation, and a memorandum between the Ministry of Defense of Serbia and the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation of the Russian Federation (Official Gazette of RS No. 10/2015; Official Gazette of RS No. 4/2016). The leaders of Russia and Serbia stressed the value of enhancing and diversifying bilateral cooperation during Vladimir Putin's visit to Belgrade in October 2014. On that occasion, Serbia held its first military parade in thirty years, and the Russian president received the highest military and state honors. Some thought that the Russian president's visit showed that Russia was ready to protect its interests in the Balkans and confirmed that Serbia is in Russia's sphere of influence (Szpala 2014). The following month the first joint anti-terrorist exercise by Serbian Army ground units and Russian Army paratroopers, named "Srem 2014", was held at a military training ground near Ruma. Cooperation between the Serbian and Russian air forces resulted in a joint Russian-Serbian tactical air exercise. The First BARS-2015 (Brotherhood of Aviators of Russia and Serbia) was held in Russia in October 2015, and military exercises were held at several military airports in Serbia the following October ("Exercise BARS Completed", 2015). Since September 2015, members of the Russian Federation, Belarusian Armed Forces, and Serbian Armed

Forces have decided to convene annually for military drills known as the “Slavic Brotherhood.” Joining the EU in condemning the irregularity of Belarus’s elections and the violent suppression of post-election protests, Serbia decided not to take part in joint military exercises held in Belarus in 2020. But it again participated in the “Slavic Brotherhood 2021” exercises in Russia. To create a quicker exchange of information in the fight against terrorism and the exchange of experiences and practices in this crucial security area, an agreement between Serbia and Russia on cooperation in this area was signed in June 2020 in Belgrade (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 1/2021).

In October 2019, a new agreement was signed approving a Russian credit export to the Government of the Republic of Serbia in the amount of more than 170 million euros (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 16/2019). Serbia and the Eurasian Economic Union member states signed a free trade agreement in Moscow on October 25, 2019, which entered into force after ratification by all member states in July 2021 (Official Gazette of RS No. 3/2020). As long as Serbia joins the EU, the free trade agreement’s exit provision ensures that it may be canceled (Jović-Lazić and Lađevac 2022, 48). Given that the previous ten-year contract on the supply of Russian gas to Serbia expired in 2021, the two parties agreed to extend it for another six months, until May 2022. After that, Serbia and the Russian government’s energy provider Gazprom agreed on a new three-year gas distribution contract that again allows Serbia to purchase gas at a lower price. Although Serbia benefited financially from this agreement, Russia also benefited because it once again had the chance to use gas as a political tool to show that a country with good relations with it could purchase Russian gas at a lower price.

The many interstate agreements approved over the years offer a strong contractual and legal foundation for Serbia and Russia to further their bilateral ties. Russia’s presence in Serbia has grown through loans, trade, energy projects, and other agreements. Even though the EU has imposed several rounds of sanctions on Russia in response to its actions in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014, as well as the fact that it started accession negotiations with the EU the same year, Serbia has continued to maintain close ties and cooperate with Russia in many areas. Even though Serbia, as a country in the process of EU integration, has pledged to align its foreign and economic policies with those of the EU, which includes implementing EU sanctions, it has refused to do so. Furthermore, it continued to conduct military exercises with Russia, buy weapons and military equipment, and, in general, strengthen military-technical cooperation with Russia. The primary motivation for such an approach is political. Belgrade has refused to take actions that would endanger relations with Moscow, which supports Serbia’s sovereignty over Kosovo. It has used its influence in various international

organizations to prevent any resolution supporting Kosovo's independence from being passed. Furthermore, due to its reliance on Russia for energy security, Belgrade had an economic reason to be wary of actions that could hinder relations with Moscow.

Aside from sanctions, another source of tension in Serbia-Russia-EU relations even before the Ukraine war was the fact that, while Belgrade accepted the Brussels Agreement in 2013, which gave the EU a role in negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina, Moscow remained critical. It is against EU involvement and accuses Brussels of imposing its own solutions. There are opinions that Russia's attitude toward the Kosovo issue is an attempt to influence world politics, which is aimed at preventing the West from being too powerful (Davies 2021). The Western Balkans have become a front in Russia's geopolitical conflict with the West. Moscow uses political and economic challenges to increase its influence, building on long-standing ties that could jeopardize regional stability (European Parliament 2017).

Nevertheless, although there was always a political element to Russia's decades-long involvement in Serbia, it never questioned Serbia's European orientation. Even though it is clear that Serbia's process of joining the EU will change its relationship with Russia, until the Ukraine war, Belgrade's policy had been based on the belief that there is much room for bilateral cooperation with Russia to continue in many areas, even after Serbia joins the EU.

The war in Ukraine and its impact on Serbia in the context of the rapid deterioration of relations between the EU and Russia

The deterioration of relations between the EU and Russia has many repercussions for Serbia, which aspires to join the EU but also has historically close ties with Russia. The lack of mutual understanding between the EU and Russia and divergent expectations significantly impacted their foreign policy and mutual relations (Jović-Lazić and Lađevac 2021, 227). Although their relations have steadily deteriorated since the "colored revolutions" in the post-Soviet states in the early 2000s and the armed conflict in Georgia in 2008, since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, they have entered a new and very challenging phase (Jović-Lazić and Lađevac 2021, 27–51). Relations between the two sides deteriorated further due to mutual sanctions; the West sending weapons and ammunition to Ukraine, and Russia accumulating troops and armaments close to the Ukrainian border. This created enormous tension that

culminated in Russia's attack on Ukraine, bringing relations between Russia, the EU, and the West to an almost openly hostile state. The war has resulted in considerable tensions in international relations and the uncertainty that accompanied them, significantly impacting Serbia. The deterioration of relations between the EU and Russia has also affected Serbia's internal political climate. Some politicians and political parties in Serbia have used the tensions between the EU and Russia to advance their agendas, and the issue has become somewhat polarizing in the country. Before the Ukrainian war, the tension between two strong narratives of collective identity in Serbia—one about belonging to Europe and the other about brotherhood with Russia—already existed. Since the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Serbia has adopted a neutral position and sought to maintain good relations with both sides. This was Serbia's strategy for avoiding this internal identity conflict (Ejdus 2014, 348). When the war in Ukraine broke out, it became extremely difficult for Serbia to maintain a balance in its relations with both sides. This could result in increased tensions and conflict within the country, impacting Serbia's foreign policy decisions, and complicating the European integration process.

Namely, Serbia's national security strategy is based on the belief that progress toward EU membership is good for the political, economic, and social stability of the country and that strengthening its ties with the USA, Russia, China, other long-term allies, and other critical members of the international community, are necessary for the stability of the country. Furthermore, the expansion of partnership and engagement with NATO through the Partnership for Peace based on the concept of military neutrality, as well as Serbia's observer status in the CSTO, headed by Russia, are considered ways to help the country's stability (NSS RS 2021). The outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict showed that Serbia's national security strategy is unrealistic and based on many deep contradictions. In such a changed and sharply divided international environment, the EU and Russia have used their leverage to force Serbia to choose a clear foreign political orientation. Because of increased and mutually opposed external pressure and strong pro-Russian public sentiment, such a choice would have significant economic and political consequences for Serbia.

Serbia has decided to pursue a policy that will refuse to impose any sanctions on Russia while consistently supporting UN resolutions and EU declarations that support the territorial integrity of Ukraine and condemn the aggression against this country. Although Serbia voted against the UN General Assembly resolution on the militarization of Crimea in December 2020, it has repeatedly voted for resolutions against Russia in the UN Assembly since February 2022. Serbia backed the UN Assembly Resolution that demanded that Russia withdraw its troops from Ukraine in early March 2022 and respect that country's territorial integrity and

sovereignty. Serbia also cast a vote against Russia in April, when the UN General Assembly adopted the Western demand that it be excluded from the Human Rights Council because it invaded Ukraine. When the UN General Assembly voted to permit Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to address the annual gathering of world leaders in a pre-recorded video in mid-September, Serbia supported Ukraine. In October, the UN General Assembly voted against Moscow's request for a secret vote on whether to condemn Moscow's decision to annex four occupied parts of Ukraine, and Serbia voted against Russia again. The UN General Assembly resolution condemning the annexation of the four Ukrainian regions—Donetsk, Kherson, Zaporozhye, and Luhansk—was supported by Serbia.

At the same time, Serbia chose to sign a high-level diplomatic agreement with Russia on a two-year consultation plan between their foreign ministries. The agreement was signed on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, where most Western leaders avoided top Russian officials because of the war in Ukraine. They stressed, among other things, that it is unacceptable that, when the majority of the world is fearfully monitoring Moscow's activities, Serbia signed a consultation agreement with a country that violates the UN Charter and aims to annex Ukrainian land. Although Serbia defined this document as "technical", meaning that it does not include requirements connected to security but rather bilateral and multilateral activities, European authorities have questioned this decision. It was pointed out that Serbia, as a candidate for EU membership, must defend both international law and European values and that, by signing the agreement on cooperation with Russia, Serbia sent the opposite message.

Despite harsh criticism that Serbia has once again remained outside the EU's foreign policy by refusing to impose economic sanctions and take part in international efforts to isolate Russia, the country supported EU declarations opposing Russia's attempts to divide Ukraine. Serbia also attempted to prove its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. On February 19, 2022, Serbia aligned itself with the EU High Representative's declaration on the situation in Eastern Ukraine and the Russian military build-up, in which the EU urged Russia to de-escalate by withdrawing its military forces from the area around Ukraine's borders (Council of the EU 2022a). Three days later, on February 22, 2022, Serbia joined the EU in condemning President Putin's decision to recognize the government-controlled territories of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine as autonomous entities and his following decision to station Russian soldiers in these areas (Council of the EU 2022b). Serbia also sided with the EU High Representative's statement on May 10, 2022, which denounced Russian cyberattacks against Ukraine, (Council of the EU 2022c). The country also voted for adopting a joint declaration at the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region annual

conference in May 2022, which called Russia's activities in Ukraine illegal and unjustified, pledging support for Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity (EUSAIR Ministerial Meeting Declaration 2022). The following month, on June 3, 2022, Serbia added its name to a statement from the EU High Representative about Russia's attempts to forcefully integrate parts of Ukrainian territory (Council of the EU 2022d). During the last declaration on September 28, 2022, Serbia joined the EU High Representative's declaration condemning Russia's illegitimate "referenda" in the regions of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia (Council of the EU 2022e).

Despite the alignment mentioned above with the EU political declarations since the Ukrainian war erupted in recent years, the EU has been exerting pressure on Serbia to make a more definitive decision on which side to support (Chastand 2022). Previously, the EU's approach to Serbia and the Western Balkans was more flexible and less prescriptive. However, recent developments in EU-Russia relations have resulted in a more assertive stance from the EU. The EU has made it clear that in order for Serbia to progress on its path toward EU membership, it must align its foreign policy with that of the EU and support EU sanctions on Russia. This means that Serbia would be required to implement and enforce the same economic sanctions on Russia that are currently in place by the EU. Additionally, Serbia would be expected to support the EU's position on sanctions in international forums and refrain from taking any actions that would undermine the EU's sanction regime. This has been reflected in various EU political declarations, statements, and reports. In the EU Commission's last annual report on accession negotiations, published on October 12, 2022, Serbia's foreign policy came under harsh criticism because it persisted in wanting to join the EU while retaining close ties with Russia, regardless of the situation in Ukraine. The report noted that Serbia has significantly regressed in harmonizing with EU foreign and security policy because it didn't join the EU's restrictive measures towards Russia. It also stressed that some Serbian officials' statements and actions contradict EU foreign policy positions and that some Serbian media was implementing an effective pro-Russian disinformation campaign. The report also criticizes that Serbia maintains close relations and frequent high-level contacts with Russia, including regular bilateral visits (EC SWD[2022] 338 final). EU officials warned that this policy raised questions about Serbia's strategic direction, that the EU candidate countries are not expected to stay neutral in the war between Russia and Ukraine, and that picking the wrong side in this conflict would have consequences. Although the EU cannot and does not impose legal consequences on candidate countries for non-compliance with EU CFSP measures, such a policy is usually considered questionable in Brussels. Additionally, some EU members are hesitant to move forward with Serbia's accession because of its close ties to Russia

and concern that the Kremlin will use its leverage over the country to broaden and consolidate its influence throughout the Western Balkans. Due to its ties to Russia, there have also been concerns about Serbia's ability to support the EU's foreign policy objectives and initiatives if it were to join.

The EU has also expressed concern about the influence of Russian state-funded media in Serbia. In light of the conflict in Ukraine and the ongoing hostilities between the EU and Russia, the EU sees these media as tools that Russia could use to spread false information and consolidate power in Serbia and the Western Balkans at the expense of the EU. When Russian RT television in Serbia opened in November 2022, EU representatives expressed their concerns, saying that the EU expects Serbia to take steps to fight information manipulation, such as disinformation and other types of hybrid threats. This approach of the EU towards Russian state-funded media such as RT and Sputnik is in line with EU policy. Under the accusation that they were being used to start and support military aggression against Ukraine and destabilize its neighbouring countries, the EU imposed sanctions on RT and Sputnik in March 2022 (Council of the EU Press Release 2022). Within this context, Serbia's decision to open RT television in the country could be seen as a sign of alignment with Russian foreign policy and a deviation from EU foreign policy. It could also raise concerns for the EU about Serbia's commitment to its values and principles, particularly in the areas of media freedom and the rule of law.

If the EU determines that Serbia does not support its principles and implements them in its policy, the country's chances of joining the Union may diminish. The EU may choose to delay or stop the association negotiations with Serbia and may also decide to take other actions to express its disapproval. Due to harsh warnings from the West that the government can no longer play both the European and Russian cards, concerns exist that Serbia's current foreign policy may impede the country's economic development. It also could discourage EU and Western companies from investing in the country and negatively affect the country's economy and development. The EU is Serbia's most significant trade and investment partner, and EU companies have invested heavily in the country. The EU is also one of the primary sources of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Serbia, accounting for a significant share of the country's total FDI. Access to EU markets and the ability to attract EU investment are essential for Serbia's economic development and modernization.⁵ Serbia faced the first tangible consequence of its policy towards

⁵ The European Union is particularly significant for Serbia because it is the country's most outstanding commercial partner, accounting for 61.4 percent of its overall commerce. The Union is also the largest investor in Serbia, and its investments were two-thirds of the country's net foreign direct investment inflows in 2020. (EC SWD[2021] 288 final)

Russia in December 2022. Due to European sanctions against Russia, Serbia was prohibited from importing Russian oil through the Adriatic pipeline, which is the only way to deliver that raw material to the country.

In contrast to the idea that sanctions and the stoppage of European integration could change Serbia's policy, others claim that resuming the EU accession process would support reforms and serve as a crucial means of pushing Serbia to align its foreign policy with the Union's. It starts from the assumption that the Western Balkans region is necessary for ensuring European security in the EU enlargement strategy and that Serbia, due to its size, population, and location, is a crucial country in regional geopolitics (Saric and Morcos 2022). As a result, Serbia's sanctions against Russia are a contentious geopolitical issue because they involve the interests of the EU and Russia. Since the Kremlin makes decisions about foreign policy based on the balance of power in world politics and believes that Russia is in a zero-sum game with the West, they see the expansion of NATO into Russia's sphere of influence as a threat to the country's national security (Reid 2021, 730). Therefore, Serbia, which NATO bombed in 1999, remains Russia's only potential strategic ally in its opposition to the future NATO expansion. Almost all of the other Western Balkan countries decided to join. As a result, Russia supports Serbia's decision not to join any military alliances and sees this country as a critical ally in a region where the EU and NATO are the most powerful.

Considering that Serbia is traditionally seen as Russia's ally in the region, Moscow expects Belgrade to prioritize its relationship with Russia over its relationship with the EU. Therefore, concerning EU sanctions, Russia expects Serbia to take a more neutral or pro-Russian position rather than support or implement them. Russia also expects Serbia to refrain from taking any actions that would further isolate Russia on the international stage. Moscow officials have warned Belgrade, expressing their hope that Serbia will act in its best national interest and refrain from political *harakiri* by imposing sanctions on Russia (Politika 2022). This message should be interpreted with the knowledge that Russia has multiple means to influence Serbia's foreign policy decisions. These tools include cultural, religious, or historical ties and narratives that emphasize Slavic and Orthodox Christian identity. The fact that Russian state-controlled media is present in Serbia is an additional tool for influencing Serbian public opinion and the internal political climate. Russia also has strong military and security cooperation with Serbia and sells arms and military equipment to Serbia, which is an additional lever of influence in the country. Finally, the most important tools are Russian political support regarding the status of Kosovo and Serbia's reliance on Russian energy supplies, which Serbian officials also cited as the primary justifications for the country's refusal to take part in EU sanctions.

Samorukov points out that Russia has influence in the region and within Serbia due to Serbia's reliance on its veto power in the UN Security Council regarding the status of Kosovo (2019). Although Moscow emphasizes that this support is based on long-standing political, economic, and strategic ties with Belgrade, the issue of Kosovo's status can also be viewed as part of Russia's efforts to maintain its influence in the Balkans and as part of Russia's rivalry with the West, which it intends to use to establish a new framework for mutual relations (Balcer, Kaczmarek, and Stanisławski 2008, 73). Russia also has used the Kosovo issue to justify its actions in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, and Eastern Ukraine, arguing that Western countries' recognition of Kosovo's independence is similar to its recognition of these territories' independence. Russia has claimed that Kosovo's independence violated international law and that its support for the territories mentioned above was the only way to protect ethnic Russians living there (Ingimundarson 2022). Finally, there is the opinion that Russia's activities in Ukraine should be considered when assessing its position with regards to the negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia under the auspices of the EU. In this context, its actions could be seen as a kind of "hybrid warfare" whose goal is to disrupt negotiations and prevent Serbia from joining Western institutions (Davies 2021).

Considering that Serbia likewise pursues a pragmatist foreign policy, it cannot be ruled out that Belgrade would eventually start to adjust to the demands of the EU. Russia could not have surpassed the EU as Serbia's top trading partner, investor, or source of financial aid even before the war in Ukraine, which it entered without adequate political consideration and which further economically isolated and crippled it. However, whether or not the Serbian government decides to take these measures, it is essential to remember that Russian soft power in Serbia is based on closeness and shared historical, cultural, and religious ties. Because of this, the pro-Russian sentiment of the Serbian population is reflected in many pro-Russian political parties. The Russian narrative, which frequently accuses the West of acting aggressively and unilaterally in international politics, is accepted by some groups in Serbia that are pro-Russian and opposed to closer ties with the West. Therefore, there are opinions that every Serbian government must maintain cordial ties with Russia in order to maintain power (Nelaeva and Semenov 2016, 68). This dichotomy is the reason for believing that Serbia's foreign policy decisions result from a severe identity crisis (Guzina, 2022).

Overall, the deteriorating relations between the EU and Russia have negatively affected Serbia. It has found itself in a very complex situation. The country's foreign policy of balancing its relationship with both sides is seriously challenged and jeopardized. It has been shown that the actions that Serbia has undertaken to achieve foreign policy priorities are often carried out on an ad hoc basis, that the

mentioned priorities are not complementary, and that significant mutual disagreement between individual foreign policy priorities should be addressed (Lišanin 2012, 201). Serbia's foreign policy choices have become critical for its economy and further development, and it should be aware of the potential consequences of its actions.

Concluding remarks

Serbia's foreign policy and position in international relations reflect the complicated and nuanced nature of the country's approach to European integration and its relationships with Russia. Russia and the EU are two crucial international players that Serbia has long worked with to maintain good relations. Serbia has had the privilege of deepening its ties with the EU and Russia over the past twenty years. On the one hand, Serbia has made significant efforts to move closer to the EU, recognizing the advantages that EU membership would bring regarding economic development and political stability. On the other hand, Serbia also tried to keep its long-standing close ties with Russia because it knew how important they were to its territorial integrity and energy security. Its government also knew that respecting its religious, cultural, and historical ties with Russia was vital to the internal political stability of the country. This long-term foreign policy orientation was established to be as resistant to tactical changes as possible. Even though the Ukraine crisis and subsequent annexation of Crimea changed the nature of EU-Russia relations, the Serbian government has sought to maintain a delicate balance between these competing priorities.

When Russia attacked Ukraine at the beginning of 2022 and a large-scale war broke out in the country, it became difficult for Serbia to hold onto its foreign policy position. This war has created tectonic shifts in relations between the EU and Russia, which has put Serbia in a problematic situation. Its foreign policy has proven to be very complex and unsustainable and has come under pressure from both the EU and Russia. Serbia's policy of strategic balancing with each of the actors leaves it in a position where it is highly unpredictable and an unreliable foreign policy actor. It has become a place where the West and Russia have practiced their confrontations and shown their influence in this part of Europe.

Given Russia's foreign policy goals and its relations with the West, it is not surprising that Moscow is making significant efforts to keep its stronghold in Serbia. Serbia is important to Russia as it is seen as a key ally in the Balkans and a buffer against the expansion of Western influence in the region. Although it is difficult for

Moscow to support Belgrade's policies on Kosovo due to Russia's geopolitical interests and ambitions, it is still crucial for Serbia.

Russia's support for Serbia's position on Kosovo could be seen as a sign of solidarity and a way to show its commitment to its allies and partners in the region and assert itself as an important player in the region. However, it can make Serbia's EU accession negotiations harder by causing tension and mistrust and giving the impression that it is too close to Russia and that relations between Belgrade and Pristina have not been normalized. This can be an additional challenge, keeping in mind that Serbia, as a candidate country, has already come under pressure from the EU to join its sanctions against Russia and more closely align its foreign policy with that of the EU. Given its geographical position and the fact that most foreign direct investments come from its members, Serbia cannot ignore the EU. As a result, even though its chances of joining the EU are currently "on the long stick", Serbia will continue to give European integration top priority in its foreign policy.

Considering Serbia's above-mentioned foreign policy goals, it is hard to figure out how to strategically position the country so it can get through the current crisis. How much longer Serbia will be able to keep this balance between Russia and the West without putting its chances of entering the EU in danger or seriously deteriorating relations with Russia is an open question. Serbia's room for maneuver in foreign policy is getting smaller, making things harder for the country. Certainty is one thing. The war in Ukraine has once again shown how Serbia's security and economic growth, as a small country, may be significantly affected and determined by the policies and geopolitical ambitions of the major international actors.

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**PRISTUP SRBIJE EU I RUSIJI
– IMPLIKACIJE NA NJENU SPOLJNU I UNUTRAŠNJU POLITIKU**

Apstrakt: Ovaj članak istražuje pristup Srbije evropskim integracijama i odnosima sa Rusijom i njihove implikacije njenu spoljnu i unutrašnju politiku. Politika Srbije je okarakterisana kao spoljna politika „male države“ koja je osmišljena da održava dobre odnose sa EU i Rusijom, verujući da će joj to pomoći da prevaziđe unutrašnje i međunarodne izazove. U svetlu napetih odnosa Rusije sa Zapadom, u članku se ispituje kako se ova politika razvijala u poslednje dve decenije i da li je održiva u promenjenim međunarodnim okolnostima. Fokusira se na činjenicu da je pristup Srbije EU i Rusiji pokazao kontinuitet uprkos rastućoj polarizaciji na međunarodnom nivou izazvanoj krizom u Ukrajini 2014. Međutim, usled brzog i dramatičnog pogoršanja odnosa EU i Rusije izazvanog ruskim napadom na Ukrajinu, njenu sadašnju politiku postalo je veoma teško održati. Pragmatična politika Srbije, oblikovana unutrašnjim i spoljnopoličkim interesima i vođena nizom ekonomskih, pravnih i bezbednosnih argumenata, stavljena je na iskušenje. Ovi argumenti su se pojavili kao novi ključni trendovi u Srbiji i mogu se pratiti kroz odgovor države na rat u Ukrajini i odgovore EU i Rusije na politiku države. Srbija se našla pod pritiskom obe strane, što izaziva napetost i neizvesnost i dovodi državu u tešku poziciju. Ovaj članak pokazuje da uprkos pritiscima i očekivanjima obe strane, nije došlo do drastične promene u politici Srbije prema EU ili Rusiji. Međutim, činjenica je da je manje prostora za ispunjavanje njenih spoljnopoličkih prioriteta, koji sada izgledaju međusobno nespojivo. Stoga, u širem smislu, ovaj članak dovodi u pitanje održivost aktuelne spoljne politike Srbije kao okvira za očuvanje strateških i nacionalnih interesa države.

Ključne reči: Srbija, spoljna politika, nacionalni interes, evropske integracije, Evropska unija, Rusija, rusko-ukrajinski rat.