

## Russian Aggression on Ukraine and its impact on the Western Balkans

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Russia's aggression against Ukraine was a specific catalyst for its presence in the Western Balkans and Serbia, in particular. Of all the European countries Serbia stands out as the only country to side with Russia, although it has voted for the UN resolutions supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

It has been a specific balancing tactic vis-à-vis the Western political community, which has since been lost. Sitting on several chairs, which Serbia skillfully practiced during the last decade, boiled down to the Russian and Chinese chairs.

Russia's expansion to the Balkans takes place at the time when the countries in this region are still unconsolidated and vulnerable and have incomplete identities, thus being susceptible to influence and pressure. Russia has started to develop the instruments of public diplomacy with a view to simultaneously strengthening the influence of its soft power. As an important strategic point towards Europe, Serbia is, in the Kremlin's view, suitable for an "experimental farm", where Russia's entire growing power can successfully manifest itself because for more it is already well positioned in Serbia.

Although it relies formally and existentially on the European Union, pro-Russian sentiment is dominant among the majority of Serbian citizens. In public and cultural life, the Russian presence is most distinctively demonstrated by the presence of the representatives of the Russian political, scientific, cultural and spiritual (church) elites in the media, including gatherings (most often devoted to geostrategic and historical topics).

The main aim of the Russian presence in the Balkans is to obstruct and directly thwart the expansion of NATO (the example of the Russian Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the European Union. Intensive infiltration into the most sensitive parts of the Balkans started after the annexation of Crimea and the imposition of Western sanctions, and reached its peak after the aggression against Ukraine.

At the same time, Russia relies on historical, cultural and religious ties, which are greatly exaggerated by propaganda and diplomacy, as well as the skillful use of soft power. Since 2005, Moscow has been actively integrating itself into the international media market. At that time, the television channel *Russia Today* was founded and became very influential. It was followed by *Sputnik* in 2014. Russia also hires numerous Western PR agencies and well-known world figures and supports both right-wing and left-wing movements and parties.

Serbian pro-government media have become, without reservation, an extended arm of the Russian penetration and

widest possible presence in the political space and life of Serbia. This especially became apparent in the days and months after the Russian aggression against Ukraine. This is one explanation why there is such a strong Russian narrative that is comparable to the Russian Federation itself.

The main link with Russia is resistance to liberal values, including human rights ideology. The main critics of human rights ideology are the Russian Orthodox Church and, in the Balkans, the Serbian Orthodox Church. Orthodox theologians and certain churches do not have an affirmative attitude towards the modern concept of human rights. It is considered a product of the West, its liberal values and individualism. As it is pointed out, it is overemphasized, individualized and absolutized and imposes itself on completely different cultural, social and political environments.

Russia systematically fuels tensions in the region, and its activities were also observed in Macedonia during the referendum on the name change, as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina where it supports Milorad Dodik in the prevention of institutionalization at the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Montenegro, it supported the failed coup and then intensified the media campaign through Serbian media and certain politicians, political parties and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). Its opportunities in Serbia are the greatest, since it has deeply infiltrated the SOC, security services, academic community, culture, influential

people, political parties, right-wing movements and non-governmental organizations, not to mention politicians.

The Russian Embassy with its agile Ambassadors actively participates in the political and social life of Serbia by promoting Russian-Serbian friendship. The former Russian Ambassador Chepurin has emphasized, among other things, that “the mission of the Russian and Serbian peoples is to be the bearers of the Orthodox civilization identity together with other Orthodox nations”.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis has been very successfully spread by Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin, who is a frequent guest in Belgrade and enjoys great respect in the academic community.<sup>2</sup> During his lectures in Belgrade, Dugin emphasized that “the center of the world is in Serbia”, and that “whoever controls Serbia controls the Balkans; who controls the Balkans controls a huge Mediterranean strategic

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<sup>1</sup> “A. Čepurin, Srbi i Srbija u očima ruskog ambasadora“, *Večernje novosti*, Belgrade, 2019, p. 134.

<sup>2</sup> On the occasion of the murder of his daughter Darya Dugina, a group of 50 Serbian intellectuals sent a letter of support to A. Dugin in which, among other things, it was written that he always spoke of Serbs in superlative terms and that he was “fascinated with their resistance to the Western power centres, claiming that the Serbs have paid such a high price because they stand as a bulwark of the Slavic and Orthodox world. Therefore, they should be counted for in the future creation of a single Eurasian integration entity. In moments when Serbs were fighting for bare survival, when they were bombed with depleted uranium and when they were ostracized from the international order, Alexander Dugin was one of those who encouraged them, raised their self-confidence and told them that the future could look very different“.

region. That is the geopolitical axiom for which Serbs have paid so dearly in their history”.<sup>3</sup>

Dugin further points out that Serbia’s national interests are protected by “a strong army, neutrality and an active policy in organizing an all-Balkan defense and security system”. He believes that one should not be limited exclusively to the territory of Serbia, because one should think globally which means, at least in terms of the Balkans and then Eastern Europe, with access to Eurasia and the Middle East. A strong Serbia – strong and independent Balkans.<sup>4</sup>

Moscow has also skillfully instrumentalized Serbia’s frustration over defeat and unfulfilled aspirations in the region. It has supported its interpretation of the breakup of Yugoslavia (denying any Serbia’s responsibility). Thus, Ambassador Alexander Chepurin writes: “Like the Russians in the Russian Empire and later in the Soviet Union, the Serbs in Yugoslavia constituted a state-building nation. After the disintegration of both states, a huge number of Serbs and Russians found themselves outside their countries and are still subjected to discrimination and, occasionally, persecution”.

Russia’s penetration has also been facilitated by the fact that after 2006 and 2008 the European Union (EU) and the

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.scrhttps://standard.rs/2022/09/01/grupa-srpskih-intelektualaca-uputila-pismo-podrske-a-duginu/ibd.com/document/62897651/Aleksandar-Dugin-Srbija-Je-Centar-Sveta>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://iskra.co/srbija/aleksandar-dugin-geopolitika-je-srpska-sudbina/> .

United States (USA) disengaged themselves from the Balkans due to the financial crisis, Brexit, migrant crisis and, finally, COVID-19 pandemic. This has turned the Western Balkan region into the island of instability which is capable of permanently generating crises and wider upheavals in Europe. In its foray into the Balkans, Moscow is particularly pointing to the perniciousness of liberal reforms, that is, the Western concept of democracy in which it has been met with understanding by local authoritarian leaders who resist an organized modern state. So, Ambassador Chepurin, when it comes to Serbia, points out that “liberal reforms, that is, the policy of ‘Westernization’ from 2000 to 2010, brought about the collapse of the Serbian welfare state, deindustrialization and general decline”.<sup>5</sup>

Russian soft power is especially extensive and utterly sensitive in certain sectors of the economy – primarily in the energy sector. Its influential presence is also felt in the media through which disinformation is spread, as well as in the activities of the Church, intelligence network, ultra-right parties and nongovernmental organizations. It uses a very thoughtful narrative about a shared history and fraternal relations with the predominantly Orthodox countries, about the mystical messianic role and the like.

In an analysis of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy it is stated that the narratives used by Serbian elites and pro-

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<sup>5</sup> “A. Čepurin, “Srbija i Srbi u očima ruskog ambasadora“, *Večernje novosti*, Belgrade 2019.

government media during 2020 and 2021 show that pro-Russian and pro-Chinese narratives play a role in the enslavement of the state. By forcing such narratives, Serbian elites promote themselves to the domestic public, strengthen their control and prolong the status of a captured state.<sup>6</sup>

Although almost all Western Balkan countries have been the target of pro-Russian disinformation campaigns over the last years, it has not been recognized as a security issue at the local level. In Serbia, the explanation for this is that the Progressives government has been their main promoter through the media under its control.<sup>7</sup>

Russia's increasingly visible malignant and destabilizing presence in the Balkans has prompted the comeback of the Western international community to the Balkans, especially after Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Due to the fragility of the Western Balkan countries, their security has been once again called into question. However, this concerns not only the Balkans, but also Europe. Russia's possibilities to help Serbia militarily are extremely limited, since the latter is surrounded by NATO members. So, for example, they prevented the flight of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's plane over their territories, thus thwarting his visit to Belgrade. Nevertheless, Russia can maintain tensions in the region, as it happens now in Kosovo.

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<sup>6</sup><https://bezbednost.org/publikacija/rusija-i-kina-prijatelj-i-braca-zarobljene-drzave-analiza-narativa-u-funkciji-zarobljavanja-drzave/>

<sup>7</sup> The Helsinki Committee has been warning about this malignant influence since 2014.

Only the synergy and joint action of the United States, European Union and NATO can bring about the completion of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and permanently neutralize the destabilizing potentials of Serbia and Russia.

### **SPP: Pro-Russian Orientation is a Historical Commitment**

Pro-Russian orientation has always existed in Serbia and has had a mythical character, so to speak. However, the relationship with Russia in the second Yugoslavia was balanced. Only with the arrival of Slobodan Milošević did that relationship deepen and much was expected from Russia during Serbian war adventures. However, neither Gorbachev nor Yeltsin met Milošević's expectations. This does not mean, however, that there were no contacts with certain circles in the army and security services. Milošević's brother (Borislav) was also an important contact. He was a KGB associate even at the time when he served in the Yugoslav embassy in Moscow during the 1970s. After the end of his term, he remained there without informing anyone about it. After Milošević, Vojislav Koštunica, Boris Tadić, the military leadership and many others continued close cooperation with Russia. According to the "democratic authorities", Serbia's foreign policy relies on four pillars: Russia, China, the United States and the European Union. According to many analyses, even the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić is linked to the Russian services. It

is true that the democratic government handed over the most important energy resource, Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS), to Russia, which was previously agreed by Milošević and the army. Russia now controls the entire energy system in Serbia and it can be said that it represents a kind of “energy annexation”.

However, the deepened pro-Russian orientation coincides with the coming of the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) to power (2012), which systematically promotes Russophilia. In a parliamentary debate, the then President of the Republic, Tomislav Nikolić, said: “Should one day the question arise as to whether we want to be a colony of the European Union or any organizational part of the Russian Federation, I would immediately vote for the latter option”.<sup>8</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin decorated Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić with the Order of Alexander Nevsky for a great contribution to the development of cooperation between the two countries (2019). This decoration is rarely awarded to foreigners. The meetings of the two Presidents were as frequent as their telephone conversations. Even now, during the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Vučić occasionally speaks with President Putin, whereby they exchange their views on the situation in Ukraine and Kosovo. It was agreed that Serbia would be regularly supplied with gas and that a three-year contract

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/svijet/nikolic-evropa-ucjenjuje-rusija-pomaze-srbiji/070511033>.

would be signed (as agreed in May this year) On that occasion, the two Presidents confirmed their desire to strengthen a strategic partnership based on the traditionally close ties between the peoples of the two countries.<sup>9</sup>

The meeting of the Minister of Internal Affairs, Aleksandar Vulin, with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergey Lavrov, this summer came as a surprise to many. On that occasion, Vulin emphasized that he was sorry that Lavrov could not visit Serbia in June and that "by banning Minister Lavrov's official visit to Serbia all principles of international law have been violated and trampled".<sup>10</sup> Sergey Lavrov said that the dialogue between Serbia and Russia was gradually progressing at all levels despite a complex international situation. As he especially pointed out, Vučić and Putin communicate via phone, compare their views and coordinate their steps.<sup>11</sup>

Vulin also met with other officials such as Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu who, on that occasion, awarded him with a medal for his services in the promotion of defense cooperation between Serbia and Russia.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup><https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1121201/vladimir-putin-aleksandar-vucic-snabdevanje-gasom>.

<sup>10</sup><https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/314874/Vulin-u-Moskvi-Lavrovu-hvalio-prijateljstvo-Vucica-i-Putina-Rosteh-delegaciji-delio-medalje.html>.

<sup>11</sup><https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/lavrov-vucic-i-putin-se-cuju-telefonom-uporedjuju-pozicije-i-uskladjuju-korake/>.

<sup>12</sup><https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/314874/Vulin-u-Moskvi-Lavrovu-hvalio-prijateljstvo-Vucica-i-Putina-Rosteh-delegaciji-delio-medalje.html>.

Since 2012, the social patriotic movement “Immortal Regiment” has been organizing a march to honour the memory of war victims every 9 May, on the Day of Victory over Fascism in Russia, which has also spread to other countries. In 2019, it was also organized in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and eight other cities in Serbia.

It is a part of a wider process of transforming the culture of remembrance in Serbia and an attempt at historical revisionism by manipulating war victims from 1945 to 1999, and equating the victims of collaborators with those of the anti-fascist movement. That is, to relativize the crimes of the Chetnik movement during the Second World War and Serbia’s responsibility for the wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. In that pro-Russian project, the West and NATO are depicted as an aggressor and enemy in the war in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999, while the march of the “Immortal Regiment” in Niš was led by the Hague convict General Vladimir Lazarević, who led the war against the Alliance.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>[http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna\\_dokumenta/istrazivanja\\_javnog\\_mnjenja/javno\\_menjenje\\_decembar\\_18.pdf](http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/javno_menjenje_decembar_18.pdf).

## The Serbian Orthodox Church and Russophilia

For both Serbs and Russians, Orthodoxy is firmly tied to the building of the state and, in both cases, played a strong integrative role in the preservation of national identity during numerous severe state crises. The revitalization of religion took place primarily through the politicization of religion, that is, in the context of a collapsed identity (socialist) framework by reaffirming the traditional ethnic and confessional patterns in order to homogenize identity within a national framework. The sacralization of national identity was strengthening the power of political elites, while at the same time enabling religious elites to finally return in the public sphere and recover at least a part of their lost privileges.<sup>14</sup>

The strongest and deepest connection with Russia is maintained through the Russian Orthodox Church, which the recent events have proven (the processions in Montenegro in 2022 and the processions in Belgrade against the Pride Parade in Belgrade in 2022).

The Russian Orthodox Church is characterized by its distinctly conservative values. Together with the government, it conducts its aggressive policy vis-à-vis the neighbourhood and, as in the case of Ukraine, justifies the war of aggression against it. Patriarch Kirill, Putin's close associate, considers the war in Ukraine to be a shield against

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<sup>14</sup> Srdjan Barišić, "Uloga Srpske pravoslavne crkve u profilisanju državne politike", Potka srpskog identiteta, Helsinki Committee, Belgrade, 2016.

the West which is, in his opinion, decadent, especially because of its acceptance of homosexuality.<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis' attempt to advise Patriarch Kirill not to be a "ministrant" of the Kremlin has failed, because Patriarch Kirill has responded by justifying the war.<sup>16</sup>

During a three-day visit to Serbia in mid-November 2014, Patriarch Kirill stated that, when "a Russian comes to Serbia, he really feels at home" and that "the community of faith and culture, very close historical ties and our common blood shed for our common victories firmly bind our nations together".<sup>17</sup>

The Serbian Orthodox Church also played an important role in the mobilization of the Serbian people for the changes planned by Serbia following Tito's death. It actively supported the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is also known that the Serbian Orthodox Church never recognized the "AVNOJ borders", considering them to be communist and therefore unsustainable in the new circumstances. After 2000, it received a huge public and media space and participated in shaping a new value system where it plays a dominant role.

The theological shaping of the public space in Serbia began after 2000, when Orthodoxy with political pretensions began

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<sup>15</sup><https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/papa-franjo-je-nazvao-partijarha-kirila-putinovim-ministrantom-stigla-reakcija-ruske-pravoslavne-ckve/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Patrijarh postao najglasnija opozicija", *Danas*, 18 October 2011.

to shape the social space, thus endangering the right of others to their own identity. The secular values of civil society – democracy, civil society, pluralistic discourse, secular and religious tolerance and individual human rights – are rejected.

During the 1990s, the SOC was dominated by the ideology of saintsavaism, represented by the Obraz Fatherland Movement, Saint Justin the Philosopher and Dveri Movement. The syntagm of that ideology is – one nation with one religion in one state.

The majority of right-wing groups and intellectuals stand for the “saintsavic identity of the Serbian people”, as the support on which “all victories and hopes for the recovery of Serbia are based”. The dominant nationalist elite strongly resist the reform of the state and society under the pretext that it will destroy the Serbian identity.

The finishing work on the construction of the Temple of Saint Sava is characterized by a manifest form of intensive cooperation between Russia and Serbia, that is, between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Even the painting of the Temple was entrusted to Russia (allegedly due to the lack of funds). The project worth 30 million euros was realized by 300 people from Russia and Belarus.

In 2012, the then Russian Ambassador in Belgrade, Alexander Konuzin, was awarded the Order of Saint Sava of the First Degree. The same award was presented to his

predecessor, Ambassador Alexander Alekseyev, in 2008. Many other notable figures were also decorated: Dmitry Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Prize Winner in Literature, Yuri Lushkov, Mayor of Moscow, Sergei Shoigu, Russian Minister of Civil Defence, Emergency Situations and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters, and Army General, as well as Boris Kostensko, Managing Director of the world's largest Orthodox TV station, TV Spas in Moscow.

The Russian Orthodox Church supports the Serbian Orthodox Church's stance on Kosovo. During his meeting with the Serbian Patriarch in Moscow, Patriarch Kirill stated that the Russian Orthodox Church agreed with the stance of the Serbian Orthodox Church: "We unreservedly support the just position of the Serbian Orthodox Church on Kosovo and Metohija and will remain in dialogue with the leaderships of Russia and other countries concerning the issue of defending the stance we share with the Serbian Orthodox Church".<sup>18</sup>

On numerous occasions the Russian Orthodox Church has also expressed its concern over the Serbian people and the monasteries and churches of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo. Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations

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<sup>18</sup><https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/895527/patrijarh-irinej-trazi-pomoc-ruskog-patrijarha-za-kosovo>.

of the Moscow Patriarchate, has also expressed his hope that such a political solution will be found as will not be unilateral, but will satisfy both parties and that “the Russian Orthodox Church has always consistently supported the Serbian Orthodox Church and its interests in its entire historical canonical territory, including Kosovo”.<sup>19</sup>

The Russian Orthodox Church also takes part in Russia’s anti-NATO propaganda. The influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Serbian Orthodox Church also poses a risk to European security. The SOC is used here as a tool for destabilization and participation in the political life of certain states, which is a part of the tactics that enables the Kremlin to realize its goals in the Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia), hiding behind the mask of religion, spirituality and protection of Orthodox values.

Metropolitan Hilarion (ROC) supported the SOC in its fight against the discriminatory Law on the Freedom of Religion in Montenegro. He expressed his admiration for the processions and said that it was an attempt to nationalize the church property and transfer it to the noncanonical Montenegrin Orthodox Church. Speaking about the boundaries of church jurisdiction and spiritual centres, he

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<sup>19</sup>[https://www.glassrpske.com/lat/novosti/vijesti\\_dana/ruska-crkva-zabrinuta-za-sudbinu-srpskog-naroda-i-svetinja-na-kosovu/379437](https://www.glassrpske.com/lat/novosti/vijesti_dana/ruska-crkva-zabrinuta-za-sudbinu-srpskog-naroda-i-svetinja-na-kosovu/379437).

said that they never coincided with the administrative boundaries of the states.<sup>20</sup>

Metropolitan Hilarion often expressed political views, so that during one of his visits to Belgrade he warned the President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, that if he did not reverse his stance on the creation of his own schismatic church, he would end up like the former President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko.<sup>21</sup>

Journalist Andrej Nikolaidis argues that the “main channel of Russian influence in the Balkans – including the cultural one – is the Serbian Orthodox Church. But it is not the only one. The Russian network is rather wide and ramified and consists of media, corrupt politicians, analysts, NGOs and, finally, useful idiots. In the Balkans, Russian policy – including cultural one – is primarily destructive. It does not offer any new value. Instead, it regrets the so-called “better old times” when, supposedly, “order was known”.

It is authoritarian, conciliar and imperial and combines the Stalinist and nationalist elements. In its interpretation, which is easily and naturally accepted by the local nationalist and

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<sup>20</sup> Митрополит волоколамски Иларион (Алфејев): Напади на Српску Православну Цркву у Црној Гори је напад на канонско Православље, 4 August.2020, Srpska pravoslavna crkva, accessible at: [http://www.spc.rs/sr/mitropolit\\_vokolamski\\_ilarion\\_alfejev\\_napadi\\_na\\_srpsku\\_pravoslavnu\\_crkvu\\_u\\_cрној\\_gori\\_je\\_napad/](http://www.spc.rs/sr/mitropolit_vokolamski_ilarion_alfejev_napadi_na_srpsku_pravoslavnu_crkvu_u_cрној_gori_je_napad/).

<sup>21</sup> Mitropolit RPC poručio: Đukanović će proći kao Porošenko, 26 May 2020, Standard, accessible at: <https://www.standard.co.me/politika/skandalozno-mijesanje-ruske-crkve-u-unutrasnje-stvari-crne-gore-đukanovic-ce-proci-kao-porosenko/>.

clerical elites – both Orthodox and “hardcore” Catholic ones – “the West and its culture are a sum of evils and transgressions against God’s Commandments and traditional morality”.<sup>22</sup>

## Russia and NATO in the Balkans

Apart from the subjugation of Ukraine, NATO and the Western model of democracy have become Russia’s main war aims. Only a few years ago, Russia declared that the expansion of NATO in the Balkans (meaning Bosnia and Serbia) was against the Russian interests. This coincides with the radicalization of an anti-NATO campaign in Serbia, inspired by Moscow through *Sputnik* and other media present in the region. The Serbian media, especially those under Aleksandar Vučić’s control have taken over this wholeheartedly.

After the fall of Slobodan Milošević and democratic changes, Serbia opted for EU membership, which is officially still its aim. In 2003, Serbia became a member of the Council of Europe and in 2006 it entered into the Partnership for Peace with NATO. Since then, cooperation with NATO, especially the United States, United Kingdom and Norway, has been progressing and deepening. In 2016, the Serbian Parliament took the decision to increase cooperation with NATO, which was followed by the

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<sup>22</sup> <https://zurnal.info/clanak/meki-uticaj-uz-pomoc-djece-crkve-motorista-i-laznih-humanitaraca/23420>.

ratification of the *Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) between the Republic of Serbia and NATO*.

Although Russia did not explicitly oppose NATO membership, it pointed to its interests. So, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Serbia, Alexander Konuzin, said: “We will respect any decision you will make, but we count on Belgrade to respectfully approach our thinking that joining NATO will pose a threat to Russia’s security.”<sup>23</sup>

One of the Russian arguments against Serbia’s NATO membership is that it will give legitimacy to NATO’s intervention in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999, which Russia experienced as “the final humiliation” by the West. Also, one of the arguments is that the intervention was not approved by the UN Security Council. Russia then changed its military doctrine and foreign policy concept, which coincided with Putin’s coming to power.

Kosovo is the only legal argument used by Russia for the possible vetoing of Kosovo’s membership in the United Nations. Serbia, on the other hand, holds Kosovo as an argument for seeking compensation in the Republic of Srpska, arguing that it too has the right to self-determination. In Serbia there is no awareness that the Kosovo issue is being resolved without Russia, which does not show any desire to participate in it and make any gesture to have it settled in

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<sup>23</sup><https://milanmilenkovic.wordpress.com/2013/05/07/zasto-je-rusija-protiv-clanstva-srbije-u-nato/>.

Serbia's favour, as the broadest public in Serbia unfoundedly but boundlessly believes.

Although military cooperation with NATO is at a very high level, Serbia also maintains intensive military cooperation with Russia. As Defence Minister Vulin and Russian Ambassador Botsan-Kharchenko have pointed out, it is at a "historical high".<sup>24</sup>

At the end of 2013, Serbia and Russia signed an agreement on military cooperation. In accordance with this agreement, the two armies started to plan joint military exercises and the first one to be carried out was "Srem 2014" at the "Nikinci" training ground near Sremska Mitrovica. It is interesting to note that this exercise was carried out during the first days of Russian Patriarch Kirill's visit.

Commercial cooperation has been carried out for more than ten years. The purchase of Russian weapons has become dominant, while military exercises, training and Russian donations to Serbia have already become an established practice. However, the Russian request to open the office of the Russian Ministry of Defence within the Serbian Ministry of Defence did not go through.

In its analysis, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy points out that military cooperation between Serbia and Russia is often presented in a hyperbolic way by pro-government media for the purpose of self-promotion. However, the

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<sup>24</sup><https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/479325/vojna-saradnja-srbije-i-rusije-na-istorijskom-vrhuncu.php>.

inconsistencies concerning military cooperation with Russia are often not objectively conveyed to the public. Such an example is Russia's donation of six MIG-29 fighter jets to Serbia in 2017. Although this transaction was formally qualified as a donation, Belgrade still had to pay Moscow \$185 million for their repair.<sup>25</sup>

## **Serbia and the War in Ukraine**

Since the beginning of its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has intensified its diplomatic and other efforts in the Western Balkans, which the West perceives as the most vulnerable region for Russia's possible new actions. Western media and analysts have even speculated about the possibility of its opening a second front in the Balkans. There are two reasons for such Russian behaviour: to harm and compromise the EU and NATO and expand Moscow's sphere of influence in Europe.

There are numerous statements by Russian Ambassadors in the region which are also the threats to local leaders. Thus, the Russian Ambassador in Sarajevo, Igor Kalbukhov, with whom Milorad Dodik has an excellent cooperation, threatened Bosnia and Herzegovina on several occasions should it consider joining the EU. At the same time, Moscow warned the EU to stop "colonizing" the Western Balkans. Attacks on High Representative Christian Schmidt, whom

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<sup>25</sup><https://bezbednost.org/publikacija/rusija-i-kina-prijatelji-i-braca-zarobljene-drzave-analiza-narativa-u-funkciji-zarobljavanja-drzave/>.

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova called “a fraud because he does not have an international power of attorney”, have also been intensified.

Serbia’s position on Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is getting clearer. Namely, apart from voting for the UN resolution reaffirming the territorial integrity of Ukraine and condemning aggression, Serbia has sided with Russia in every respect. The expectations that Serbia would impose sanctions against Russia, at least limited ones, have been dashed. Aleksandar Vučić has expressly rejected Scholtz’s “harsh request” to impose sanctions against Russia.<sup>26</sup>

President Vučić claims that Serbia will not change its attitude towards sanctions, which it took at the beginning of Russian aggression. He said: “That is our policy and we do not think of changing our policy at the moment. I think that our hitherto policies have proved to be wise, despite all hardships we have had to endure”.<sup>27</sup> At a joint conference with Borut Pahor in Slovenia, he stated that “Serbia is obliged to adopt the European foreign policy immediately before joining the EU, but none of them have yet informed

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/509396/Solc-na-ostar-nacin-trazi-da-se-prikljucimo-sankcijama-protiv-Rusije>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2022/08/srbija-nece-razmisljati-o-uvodjenju-sankcija-rusiji-tvr-di-vucic/>.

Serbia that it is about to become its member nor does it seem that they are planning to inform us”.<sup>28</sup>

Russian Ambassador Botsan-Kharchenko publicly admonishes Vučić and claims that “Vučić will not change his stance on sanctions against Russia”. He points out that “pressures and attempts to force Belgrade to turn its back on Russia exist and will exist”, but “on the basis of Vučić’s official statements and personal contacts with him, there is reason to believe that Vučić’s approach regarding the rejection of anti-Russian measures is very stable and principled, and will remain so”.<sup>29</sup>

He holds that Serbia’s orientation towards the European Union is not questionable, but the problem is that the West has confined its demands from Belgrade on its European path to three of them: joining the imposition of anti-Russian sanctions, recognition of Kosovo’s independence and curtailment of the ties with the leadership of the Republic of Srpska”.

He also holds that these “requests are the most sensitive and absolutely unacceptable for Belgrade.”<sup>30</sup> In essence, such statements feed the Serbian aspirations and expectations that Russia will enable their realization.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/61092/vucic-posle-sastanka-s-pahorom-kako-da-objasnim-narodu-ako-uvdemo-sankcije-rusiji-stavite-se-nekad-u-nase-cipele/vest>.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.rtcg.me/vijesti/region/374380/vucic-nece-promijeniti-stav-o-sankcijama-rusiji.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Despite the pressures from both sides, Belgrade still has a perception of its geostrategic relevance, which is only partially true. The geopolitical importance of Serbia has been significantly reduced by its surroundings dominated by NATO members. However, the potential for instability lies in the fact that the Russian services are functioning unhindered, not only in Serbia, but also in Bosnia and Montenegro.

Serbia has political significance for Russia, because from its territory it is possible to exert influence on the situation in the region, especially through the Serbian Orthodox Church. The recent crisis in northern Kosovo erupted and quickly died out, because no one wanted its escalation. For several months now, Belgrade has been fuelling tensions in northern Kosovo and demonizing the Kosovo Prime Minister saying that he is preparing a pogrom of Kosovo Serbs. It is obvious that Russia is fuelling the tensions that have caused the crisis.

## **Identity of Serbia**

All post-communist societies have gone or are going through an identity crisis. In that sense, as Milan Subotić points out, the politics of history is an integral part of “identity politics”, the importance of which is proportional to the crisis of self-understanding the community as well as the attempts to

resolve that crisis by formulating and imposing an essentialist collective, most frequently, national identity.<sup>31</sup>

Serbia is probably one of those countries which are faced with great obstacles in its own self-definition: on the one hand, it reckons with its socialist legacy and Yugoslavia and, on the other hand, with the war legacy of the 1990s. An important role in the creation of the new identity of Serbia is also played by Russia, whose presence on the cultural and political stage is increasingly prominent and influential.

Russia feeds Serbian frustration and the thesis that Yugoslavia was a Serbian delusion. The same goes for the thesis about artificially created nations such as, for example, Macedonians, Bosniaks and Montenegrins. At the same time, the influential pro-Russian conservative bloc strengthens the Russian component in the Serbian identity, that is, contributes to the “Russization of the Serbian nation”, with the thesis about the superiority of Orthodox civilization, Byzantine heritage, Slavism and mutual historical assistance. At one time Nikita Bondarev, a Russian expert on the Balkans, pointed out in a letter to the Serbian opposition that “the most important achievement of Aleksandar Vučić is that during his rule Russophilia in Serbia became mainstream. Today, the criticism of Russia and Vladimir Putin in Serbia is equal to political suicide”.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Milan Subotić, *Napred u prošlost*, Fabrika knjiga, 2010, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.vesti.rs/Intervju/Nikita-Bondarev-Zasto-podrzavamo-Vucica-2.html>.

In addition, Serbian nationalists have a distinctly anti-Western stance that stems, inter alia, from the understanding that the West's interest is to disintegrate the Serbian national space, that is, prevent the creation of a single Serbian nation state, which will be a strong Balkan political unit relying on Russia.

The dominant part of the academic community, apart from being illiberal, pins high hopes in Russian support when it comes to the realization of the "Serbian World" concept. As a neologism, the "Serbian World" came into use in 2013, following the example of "Russian world".

## Recent Developments

The war in Ukraine has cast a completely different light on the EU enlargement process, because the candidate countries are asked to take a concrete stance on whether they support the war in Ukraine or not. The EU has become more cautious vis-à-vis the Western Balkans and insists on the harmonization of their stance with its foreign policy.

Russia's invasion has made EU and NATO expansion an imperative. However, EU accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia have made little progress, and whilst Bosnia has now been granted candidate status, its ethnic leaders have been unable to find basic consensus. The Western Balkan countries have also been offered funding under a new €6 billion growth plan, which is conditional on implementing reforms. The EU hopes this initiative will

promote economic convergence between the EU and the Western Balkans.

Meanwhile, Belgrade has continued to play its game among the four competing powers—the U.S., EU, Russia, and China—all the while hoping for Trump's return to the White House, which it perceives would allow it to finalize the partition plan.

Western engagement in the region currently operates on two parallel levels. The first is an effort to bring Serbia closer to the West through economic and military agreements, perceived as part of Serbia's strategic integration into the Western sphere. This is best illustrated by the recent visits of Chancellor Scholz<sup>33</sup> and President Macron<sup>34</sup> to Belgrade. Serbia signed an agreement with France to replace old Russian MiG aircraft with Rafale jets. Previously, it had reached an agreement with the EU and Germany on lithium exploitation for the production of batteries for electric cars. Serbian Foreign minister Djuric signed an agreement with the US on strategic cooperation in the field of energy in Serbia<sup>35</sup>.

The second level involves a heightened NATO presence in the region, with an increase in NATO forces and the

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<sup>33</sup><https://apnews.com/article/germany-serbia-lithium-scholz-vucic-114befbdab762c829b98616e94b99a0d>

<sup>34</sup><https://balkaninsight.com/2024/08/29/serbia-signs-deal-to-buy-french-fighter-jets-as-macron-visits-belgrade/>

<sup>35</sup><https://www.state.gov/united-states-and-serbia-sign-agreement-on-strategic-cooperation-in-energy/>

construction of new bases in Albania and Romania. Serbia is now surrounded by NATO countries, and vigilance from NATO, the CIA, and other security services has intensified. The visit of the CIA director William Burns<sup>36</sup>, along with NATO's deputy secretary general Boris Ruge<sup>37</sup>, though not publicly addressed in Serbia, clearly had a preventive focus. David Kanin, a former CIA analyst and now a professor at Johns Hopkins University, pointed out that the Burns visit was, among other things, aimed at preventing any escalation in the next 70 days, that is, until the U.S. elections.

Serbia's military cooperation with NATO is far more intensive than its cooperation with Russia, signaling its increasing alignment with the West both economically and in terms of security. Several global media outlets have analyzed President Vučić's ability to balance between various, often opposing, international actors. Some have argued that the recent agreements with Macron and Scholz represent a 'European moment' for Serbia, though skepticism remains regarding the strength of democratic and pro-European forces in the country.

The international security concerns increased after the Banjska incident<sup>38</sup>. President Vučić has lost the trust of the

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<sup>36</sup> <https://n1info.rs/english/news/former-serbian-ambassador-cia-chief-came-to-serbia-to-warn-of-consequences-for-destabilization/>

<sup>37</sup> [https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/news\\_228309.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/news_228309.htm?selectedLocale=en)

<sup>38</sup> The Banjska attack was an armed assault carried out by Serb militants against the Kosovo Police which took place in the village of Banjska, North Kosovo, on 24 September 2023

Western international community following the Banjska incident and electoral fraud in December. Mounting pressures from the West (and likely Russia) have resulted in the radicalization of his rhetoric and threats, indicating his unease

However, Russia controls the Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS), and China, through the Zijin Mining Group, owns 63 percent of RTB Bor, the country's largest mining company.<sup>39</sup> Vučić has also opened Serbia to the Arab world. The United Arab Emirates have invested millions of dollars in the Belgrade Waterfront project, which has been followed by various controversies.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup><https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rizici-balansiranje-vucic-rusija-kina-zapad/33111550.html>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

## In conclusion

In essence, Serbia does not have foreign policy nor has it so far adopted a foreign policy strategy in the Parliament. Its foreign policy is an expression of its frustrations and inability to accept the new reality. The foreign policy based on four pillars (the European Union, China, Russia and the United States) indicates that Serbia has not yet taken a stance on its future. The policy that led to the brutal disintegration of Yugoslavia is still in effect. The “Serbian World” concept is actively carried out in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Serbia’s sticking with Russia means the preservation of a clerical-totalitarian system that generates fear of the difference and preserves the status quo. The state and the Serbian Orthodox Church systematically promote and suggest such an attitude. Kosovo is only used as a bargaining counter by both Serbia and Russia. In fact, they abuse it. . Given its fundamental anti-liberal and anti-Western stance it is challenging to foresee Serbia's next steps. Opening up and advancing such a society will require substantial patience and effort.

Serbia’s security and economic interests are tied to the West. Serbia is already surrounded by EU and NATO member countries and is, as a lonely island, waiting for changes in the geostrategic relations that will enable the realization of its aspirations and the leading role in the region. If Serbia does not take a clear stance on Russia, it will suffer serious

consequences, which will affect its economic survival, foreign direct investments and economic and social progress in general.

Russian policy sabotages the progress of the Western Balkans towards the EU, trying to preserve the dysfunctionality of the Western Balkan countries. Because the Russian role in the Balkans is not significant with respect to economic involvement, with the exception of the energy sector. Russia is a mirror of the failed transformations and transitions in the Western Balkans. The alliance with Russia is based on frustration and resistance to the values on which modern Europe is based. The Serbian public, which mostly still supports both Russia and Putin, fails to understand and think about what the relations with the EU mean for Serbia and where Serbia will be if the relations with it are terminated, from visas to investments, for example.

Only so long as the Balkan countries believe in the military presence of the United States in Europe, the progress of European integration and leaning towards the West are a guarantee for the sustainable stability and security of the region. Otherwise, the Balkans still have the potential for armed conflicts, especially if the Russian malign influence continues to be present.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo need a path to NATO membership, while the pro-Western forces in Montenegro need stronger support in order to remove pro-Moscow nationalists who are promoted by the Serbian President.

The Western Balkans need clear and prompt measures and geopolitical decisions by Brussels, such as those which were once made in the case of Bulgaria and Romania (it is evident now how far-sighted and effective they were).

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