

Helsinki *bulletin*



HELSINKI COMMITTEE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA
address: Kneza Miloša 4,
Belgrade, Serbia
tel/fax. +381-11-3349-170; 3349-167;
e-mail: office@helsinki.org.rs
<http://www.helsinki.org.rs>

NO.161 // MARCH 2022



Photo: Sputnik / AP

SERBIA: BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

The international order is undergoing a profound structural transformation of the global political system and overall international, and therefore regional relations. This is also reflected in the Balkans, which is a kind of competition ground for various powers (USA, EU, Russia, Turkey, China, etc.).

Just months after the collapse of the Soviet Union, former National Security Advisor of the United States Zbigniew Brzezinski issued a warning to the West: "Even though the Cold War

ended in victory for one side and defeat for the other, a decisive outcome does not guarantee smooth consequences." Brzezinski stressed that securing peace would require a "longer-range geopolitical vision", in order to achieve a more ambitious objective: "the emergence of a truly post-imperial Russia that can assume its proper place in the concert of the world's leading democratic nations."¹

¹ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/1992-09-01/cold-war-and-its-aftermath>.

Russia has been preparing for its return to the global stage for more than 20 years. During his famous and now historic speech at the Munich Security Conference (2007), Vladimir Putin announced this plan, and afterwards began to gradually implement it. At the same time, he worked on corrupting Western leaders, movements (left and right), in which he largely succeeded.

In her book on the paths of money, journalist Catherine Belton reveals how the KGB conquered Russia and then the West. She argues that what used to be the “Soviet machinery for supremacy over the West”, smuggling programs, friendly firms and trusted caretakers, became the model which Putin’s regime and its influential operations are based on. The goals have always remained the same: to undermine Western influence.² While preparing the aggression against Ukraine, Putin believed that corruption would neutralize the reaction of the West.

At the same time, the Russian president is looking for allies across Europe for a new post-Western, right-wing nationalist order, and in that sense he is trying to build an alliance with the European extreme right. His starting point is that Western Europe is trapped by modernity and post-modernity and that it is impossible for it to consolidate because its political elites do not allow this. Alexander Dugin believes that Russia must save Europe from the liberal elite that is now destroying it.

The aggression against Ukraine was prepared for a long time with the goal of reconstructing Russia’s global role from the 1990s. Russia’s imperialistic ambitions have become a priority of Putin’s politics. Ukraine takes central stage in this. However, the aggression against Ukraine will cause far-reaching geopolitical changes,

2 <https://radiosarajevo.ba/metromahala teme/catherine-belton-otkriva-putinovi-ljudi-kako-je-kgb-osvojio-rusiju-a-potom-zapad/448223>.

with economic and financial consequences for which solutions have yet to be found. Regardless of the final outcome, the war in Ukraine will fundamentally change Europe’s security framework and relations between East and West. Yuval Noah Harari, one of the world’s most prominent intellectuals, claims that what is at stake in Ukraine is the direction of human history. At the heart of the Ukraine crisis, he points out, lies a fundamental question about the nature of history and the nature of humanity: is change possible?³

The world almost unanimously condemned the aggression, while only a small number of countries sided with Russia, but with a dose of restraint, such as China.⁴

Serbian politicians and the intellectual elite misinterpret current events (as they did in 90s), they continue to wish for the downfall of the West, liberal democracies in anticipation of a new world order tailored by Russia and China. Serbia’s position, which calls for neutrality, is unsustainable given the dramatic situation. Sitting on two chairs (or more) was somewhat possible in peacetime. Serbia was relatively skillful in balancing between the powers over the years. However, in the current crisis situation, such a position is becoming increasingly unsustainable. The decision that Serbia will make (under pressure from both sides) will show where its priorities lie – a relationship with the European Union (EU) or with Russia.

3 <https://outline.com/pbz4uv>.

4 China abstained from voting on the UN General Assembly Resolution deploring Russia’s aggression against Ukraine on 2 March, 2022; only Belarus, North Korea, Syria and Eritrea were against the resolution.

RUSSIA AND THE BALKANS

The Western Balkans occupy a special place in Russian foreign policy. For Russia, the Balkans are an important region with which it shares strong cultural, religious and historical ties. In addition to having cultural and historical proximity to the Slavic peoples of the Balkans, Russia has also accused the West of destabilizing the region and violating international law, mentioning in particular NATO's intervention in early 1999. It is no coincidence that NATO's intervention and the West's rhetoric for justifying its campaign (prevention of a humanitarian disaster and genocide in Kosovo) has been cited by Moscow when it comes to its aggression against Ukraine. The basic thesis was the prevention of genocide in Donetsk and Luhansk, with the argument that Kiev was host to a Nazi and illegitimate government. Arguments about "state-building" and "non-state" peoples (Ukrainians are actually Russians) were used, similar to how official Belgrade claimed in the 1980s that only the Serbian people were state-building, while all others were non-state people.

After the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia needed an entire decade to revive its influence in the Balkans. It quickly and without much effort and almost without any financial instruments took over the strategic vacuum left behind by the international Western community (EU and US), as early as 2006 and 2008. In the meantime, Russia began to use highly sophisticated "soft power", with one of the first media campaigns being against NATO. It never forgave NATO's intervention, which was not mandated by the UN Security Council. Russia stood firmly with Serbia and imposed itself as its protector in the Security Council and the protector of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. That campaign only gained in intensity, leading to the film "Border", made with joint efforts, on the topic of NATO's intervention, in which Albanians are portrayed

exclusively as terrorists, and Serbs and Russians as tolerant fighters, who have soldiers of various ethnic origin in their ranks.

For Moscow, its historical popularity in the Balkans represents a counterweight to the West, because it is perceived as a global power with the ambition to mediate in resolving the Balkan crisis. Russia, like Serbia, considers the Balkan borders to be temporary. Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin, one of Putin's closest advisers, is an advocate of the Orthodox Alliance. He believes that the "new geopolitical order" in the Balkans should be based on stimulating all integrationist processes along the north-south axis. This means, as he points out, that the strengthening of Belgrade-Athens-Sofia and Sofia-Athens ties should be fully supported. The entire Balkan region is a complex configuration project of the all-Slavic southern federation, consisting of Serbia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbian Bosnia. Dugin points out that within that entity, Serbs represent the Eurasian impulse, they appear as the bearers of the *heartland*. In such an order, Macedonia would be given special status in order to remove the stumbling block between all three Balkan Orthodox states.⁵

Russia's interest is to maintain the status quo in the Balkans with the basic goal of preventing or slowing down Euro-Atlantic integration of Western Balkan countries. Russia's special interest is the destabilization of Montenegro, a NATO member, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which are particularly vulnerable countries. Even though the integration of the Western Balkans poses no threat to Russia, it certainly provides an

5 There are people in Serbia who also think like Dugin. Vladimir Kršljanin, Senior Adviser at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, writes that the obligation of (us) Orthodox Slavs is "to write and implement a program of unifying all Orthodox Slavs – governmentally, economically, culturally, but also to improve our state, economic and cultural order...". Politika 6-7 January, 2022.

opportunity to demonstrate the inefficiency of the Western community, particularly of the EU.

Russia undoubtedly wants to demonstrate its cross-border influence in the Balkans as well. It has been successful in that, because through Serbia and the Republika Srpska (RS), it maintains the status quo, i.e. unconsolidated Balkans, which thus remains on the outskirts of Europe. Many analysts believe that Russia can manufacture chaos in the Balkans with relative ease. It is possible that the Balkans will serve it exclusively as a possibility of compensation for its aspirations around Ukraine. In addition, according to investigative journalists and political embassies of the West, intelligence activities of the Russian Federation in the Western Balkans have reached their peak in the last few weeks, especially since the beginning of the aggression against Ukraine. In particular, the pressure is palpable in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Montenegro, pressure is being exerted through pro-Serbian political parties, primarily the Democratic Front (DF), and the acting Speaker of the Montenegrin Parliament, who is under undemocratic and illegitimate pressure to call early presidential elections. These elections would also represent the final showdown with Milo Đukanović and his party, long-time creators of the state policy of Montenegro, who are essentially responsible for Montenegro's accession to NATO.

On the other hand, in BiH, pressure is being exerted through Milorad Dodik, who, according to sources available to the Helsinki Committee, represents an open threat at the moment, and is himself under great pressure from the Russian Federation. Belgrade and President Vučić have been having growing problems in "effective control" over Dodik, and questions have been raised regarding his loyalty to Belgrade.

Russia's penetration into the Balkans also implies the West's failure to complete its

"unfinished business", despite the fact that huge efforts and funds have been invested. The EU's enlargement policy has proved ineffective, making Balkan membership uncertain. Local leaders turned to other actors, who arrived in the Balkans with offers that opened new opportunities for corruption for Balkan elites. The EU has shown particular disinterest in North Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It preferred stabilocracy rather than reform and democratization. In the Priština-Belgrade dialogue, the European Commission agreed to change the format of the dialogue and almost allowed the division of Kosovo, which was prevented by Germany, i.e. by Angela Merkel.

Moscow has operated in the region with not much funding (primarily through lucrative investments in the field of energy in Serbia), skillfully using local leaders eager for status and international prestige. Moscow is striving to achieve an energy and economic presence, but also a military one, by selling outdated military equipment. However, the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS) described in its extensive 2016 study "Eyes Wide Shut – Strengthening of Russian Soft Power in Serbia: Goals, Instruments, and Effects" the presence and forms of Russian soft power sources in the region. The study also published a list of 109 pro-Russian media and organizations operating in this area. Among them are eight internet portals, 16 pro-Kremlin media sources and 6 Russian media sources.⁶ Sputnik, a ubiquitous Russian propaganda tool, has its center in Belgrade.

All Western Balkan countries remain committed to EU accession, including Serbia, at least declaratively.

In the context of the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, many analysts, both in the region and in the world, estimate that Moscow, in order to weaken

6 <https://www.ceas-serbia.org/sr/publikacije/studija-sirom-zatvorenih-ociju>.

the influence of the EU and NATO, will use all the EU's weak points, primarily in the Western Balkans. Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina are certainly first on this list. The blockade of Montenegrin roads, staged by the Democratic Front, against the formation of a minority government, is certainly no coincidence. During this interruption of traffic, flags of Russia and the so-called Donetsk People's Republic could be seen in the streets. It is indicative that Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov found time to talk to Milorad Dodik in the general turmoil, allegedly in relation to an agreement from December 2021. A statement from the Russian Embassy in Sarajevo said that there was an exchange of views on the implementation of that agreement.⁷

RUSSIA AND SERBIA

The Serbian political elite has always relied on Russia, and even expected its support in the war endeavors of the 1990s. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as Slobodan Milošević's support for the coup against Mikhail Gorbachev, rendered Russia's support insignificant. Russia largely supported the Contact Group's policies until Boris Yeltsin was removed from power. The situation changed with the arrival of Vladimir Putin, i.e. his U-turn in relations with the West. He defined a new Russian strategy of reclaiming its position as a superpower, meaning that Russia's presence in the Balkans would become increasingly important. At the Munich Security Conference (2007), Putin announced his strategy, relying mainly on Russia's energy power, which was crucial when it came to the Balkan countries, given their dependence on Russian energy.

By changing the international political context and with its growing ambitions to become an

influential actor, Russia began to develop instruments of public diplomacy with the goal of simultaneously strengthening its soft power.

After 2012, Serbia greatly improved relations with Russia and China in various fields, from military-technical cooperation, through the energy sphere (Turkish or Balkan Stream), to attracting large investments (Železara Smederevo, Bor, Čukaru Peki). The previously dilapidated army was also strengthened. It received a significant number of imported planes, helicopters and air defense systems, and the domestic military industry was also renewed, which now supplies it regularly.

Especially intriguing is the role of the Russian humanitarian center, which has existed in Nis for several years, and about which there is not much public information. At one time, when it was founded, it was speculated that it represents the basis for a Russian security and intelligence base, as a counterweight to the US military base Bondsteel in Kosovo.⁸

Domestic officials claim that the Regional Humanitarian Center is exclusively of a humanitarian nature, for providing assistance in case of natural and other disasters, and that it does not endanger other mechanisms in any way.⁹ The regional center in Nis carried out a successful mission of providing assistance and rescuing the population during the floods that hit Obrenovac in the spring of 2014.

Russia also significantly influenced the change in the narrative regarding the events of 1999, which are no longer ambiguously labelled as an "intervention", but as NATO aggression. A

⁷ <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/500778/Dodik-i-Lavrov-razgovarali-o-Dejtonskom-sporazumu>.

⁸ The Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington assessed at the time that "Moscow's ambition is to establish a military base there."

⁹ Such is, for example, the European Civil Protection Mechanism, which Serbia will join during the accession process to the European Union.

similar change has taken place in relation to the recent past, the Hague Tribunal, people convicted of war crimes (now national heroes). A premise is being developed about being “surrounded”, which implies animosity towards Serbia, that Belgrade will not apologize for “fictional crimes”, and that the West is against Serbia because Serbs are little Russians and is therefore preventing the creation of Greater Serbia.

Russia, whose presence on the cultural and political scene is becoming more and more pronounced and influential, also has an important role in creating new identity. Russia feeds Serbian frustration and the thesis that Yugoslavia was Serbia’s delusion. In the same vain, it also feeds the premise about artificially created nations, such as, for example, Macedonians, Bosniaks, Montenegrins. At the same time, the influential pro-Russian conservative bloc strengthens Russia’s component in Serbian identity, i.e. contributes to the “Russification of the Serbian nation”, with the premise of the superiority of the Orthodox civilization, Byzantine heritage, Slavdom, mutual historical assistance.

According to Srđan Barišić,¹⁰ Orthodoxy is firmly attached to the creation of both the Serbian and Russian state, and in both cases during numerous and strong crises of the state, it played a strong integrative role in preserving the national identity. In both cases, the period of atheization of the social system marginalized and minimized the public importance of religiousness, and the disintegration of the federation at the beginning of the last decade of the 20th century was a catalyst for the process of the revitalization of religion.

Both Russia and Serbia have experienced failed transformations, taxing wanderings in search

of identity, both in the international and internal state and social frameworks. Russia is compensating for that with renewed imperialistic ambitions and revenge for the humiliating treatment it received after the Cold War. Means are irrelevant in realizing that purpose, but now it is using its soft power mechanism very successfully, especially in Serbia. Russia’s Balkan expansion is taking place at a time when countries in the region are unconsolidated, vulnerable, their identities unfinished, and therefore they are subject to influence and pressure.

Moscow and Belgrade recently signed an agreement to jointly oppose what they call “color revolutions” – mass popular uprisings against authoritarian governments, which Russia and Serbia consider to be inspired and helped by the West. In May 2021, the Russian opposition, unable to hold protests in Moscow, held a seminar in Belgrade for candidates for councilors. Immediately after that, Serbia’s Minister of Interior Aleksandar Vulin traveled to Moscow and handed over the transcripts from that seminar to Nikolai Patrushev.¹¹

Since the start of the Ukrainian crisis, there has been talk about the possibility of Russia deploying the Iskander-M tactical missile system in Serbia – deep within NATO’s combat formations concentrated on the southeastern wing of Europe. This missile system with a declared range of up to 500 kilometers, if deployed in Serbia, is capable of keeping an eye on an impressive amount of territory, “reaching” countries of the so-called Visegrád Four and the European territories of Turkey (if deployed in Southern Serbia).¹² The US military base in Kosovo, it is said, would also be in its range.

10 Srđan Barišić, “The Role of the Serbian and Russian Churches in Shaping State Policies”, *The Warp of the Serbian Identity*, Helsinki Committee, 2016.

11 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/ruski-opozicionar-o-transkriptima-smesno-je-sto-je-vulin-tek-sada-reagovao/>.

12 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/rusija-preti-rasporedjivanjem-raketnog-sistema-iskander-m-u-srbiji/>.

The deployment of these missile systems on the territory of Serbia requires the consent of Belgrade in principle, about which there has been no information so far. The Russian portal that published this information believes that it is possible for Serbia's authorities to understand the need for even stronger rapprochement with Russia. Because Moscow has already proven its ability to react quickly to crisis situations in allied countries, with the rapid deployment of CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) forces in Kazakhstan.¹³

Serbia's Ministry of Defense reacted to these articles with a statement: "Serbia does not own the Iskander-M missile system, it has not considered, nor is it considering the deployment of such a system on its territory."¹⁴

"RUSSIAN WORLD" AND "SERBIAN WORLD"

An important aspect of Serbia's identifying with (and being inspired by) Russia is the "Serbian World" project, which is, in theory, identical to the "Russian World". The "Russian World" emerged as a concept towards the end of the 20th and the start of the 21st century, when people started talking about Russians as a nation divided. After 2007, when the Russian World (Russkiy Mir) Foundation was established to "popularize the Russian language, which is a national asset of Russia and an important element of Russian and global culture, as well as to support the program of learning the Russian language abroad," the concept gained a somewhat different status. The founders of the Foundation

were the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science. From the very beginning, the Foundation was active with the Russian diaspora. The Russian Orthodox Church also joined the struggle related to the interpretation of what the "Russian World" implies. At the third assembly of the "Russian World" (November 2009), Patriarch Kirill said, among other things, that "Russia, Ukraine, Belarus make up Holy Russia." President Putin first used irredentist discourse at the official level on March 18, 2014, in a speech on the annexation of Crimea: "The Russian people have become one of the largest, if not the largest divided people in the world."¹⁵

Similar to Russia not accepting the collapse of the USSR, Serbia has not accepted its defeat in the wars of the 1990s and the loss of territory it still aspires to. It also did not accept the Western order, i.e. the framework established after 2000 – the NATO security framework (partnership and membership) and EU membership. As international circumstances have significantly changed since the 1990s, the Serbian elites have been undisturbed, so to speak, in systematically and comprehensively preparing the ground for the integration of the Serbian people by other means. Russia's penetration into the Balkans has encouraged Serbia's aspirations in the region. The current government has completely exposed this policy, which, encouraged by a very fluid international context, has made harsher moves, engaging in more direct rhetoric and more ruthless behavior both domestically, regionally and internationally.

13 <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/20220210/saveznicka-odlucnost-2022-moc-iskandera-u-30-sekundi-video-1134226772.html>.

14 <https://www.vesti.rs/NATO/Ministarstvo-odbrane-Srbija-ne-poseduje-niti-razmatra-razmestanje-sistema-Iskander-M-3.html>.

15 Alexei Miller (2015). "Konceptija 'Ruskog sveta'". In: *Druga Rusija*. Milan Subotić. Biblioteka XX vek.

“SERBIAN WORLD”

“Serbian world” appeared as a term in 2013. The geopolitical limbo which the region found itself in was ideal for Russia, which encouraged Serbia’s aspirations. Even though Serbia has toned down its “Serbian world” talk recently, as some commentators have noted¹⁶, the concept has already been developed and is functioning.

In fact, Belgrade has defined its policy towards “Serbian lands” within documents that are official Government documents. The first among them, adopted by the Assembly of Serbia, is the Strategy for Preserving and Strengthening the Relations between the Homeland and the Diaspora and the Homeland and the Serbs in the Region (2011).¹⁷

The strategy aims to “preserve and strengthen relations between the homeland and the diaspora, as well as the homeland and Serbs in the region.”¹⁸

16 Zoran Panović, Nedeljnik, 10 March, 2022.

17 http://dijaspora.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/strategija_mvd2011.pdf

18 The legal framework relevant to preserving and strengthening the homeland’s relations with the diaspora and Serbs in the region consists of many other legal acts, such as: the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, which stipulates in Article 13 that the Republic of Serbia shall protect the rights and interests of its citizens abroad and shall develop and promote relations of Serbs living abroad with the kin state; – Law on Diaspora and Serbs in the Region (“Official Gazette of RS”, No. 88/09) – the first systemic law on relations between the home country and the diaspora, as well as the home country and Serbs in the region, and as such represents the normative basis for long-term dispersion policies. The law clearly demonstrates the will to pursue a policy towards the diaspora and Serbs in the region in a much more serious, responsible and rational way, as well as: the Declaration of the Government of the Republic of Serbia proclaiming the relations between the home country and the Diaspora the relations of the greatest state and national interest (“Official Gazette of the RS”, No. 86/06); the Migration

The strategy places Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Montenegro, at the center of foreign and regional policy. It is perceived in the region as Memorandum II. Its disclosure caused sharp reactions from all neighboring countries. The strategy is the de facto realization of the part of the Memorandum on preventing the endangerment of Serbs living outside of Serbia. This is an operational document with precise instructions for activities. It is an action plan for actions of Greater Serbian nationalism under new circumstances. How to “peacefully and democratically” achieve unified Serbdom, and against the unity and integrity of the countries in which they live. The main role in the implementation of the mentioned strategy is played by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), as is the case in Russia. During the 20th century, as stated in the Strategy, the Serbian Orthodox Church was practically the only integrative institution and a bridge between the home country and the diaspora. Apart from faith, the church also preserved the national culture and language of the Republic of Serbia.

In practice, the action plan boils down to: relativizing and denying war crimes and genocide committed by the Republika Srpska and Serbian armies and police, destabilizing governments and authorities in neighboring countries by raising awareness of their inefficiency; insisting on the constituency of Serbs in Montenegro, Kosovo and Croatia; supporting separatist policies in the Republika Srpska, etc.

In the meantime, the Security Strategy (2020)¹⁹ was adopted, emphasizing that the most important foreign policy priority of Serbia is the

Management Strategy (“Official Gazette of RS”, No. 59/09); the National Youth Strategy (“Official Gazette of RS”, No. 55/08); the National Security Strategy (“Official Gazette of RS”, No. 59/09).

19 https://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/file/staticki_sadržaj/dokumenta/strategije/2021/Prilog1-StrategijaNacionalneBezbednostiRS-SRP.pdf

preservation of the Republika Srpska, followed by the Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space (2019)²⁰ signed by the ministers of education of Serbia and the Republika Srpska. The Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space is similar to the Russian one from 2007, when the state foundation Russian World was established. The Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space emphasizes that the strategic starting point of Serbian cultural policy is based on the belief that, above all broader integrations, the first and unavoidable step is to strengthen cohesion within the Serbian cultural space. This is only one step away from proclaiming the unification of all Serbs, as was the case in the 1990s. It is emphasized that the cultural policy of Serbs outside their home country does not need to be harmonized with the cultural policy of those countries, but only with the policy of the homeland, or as stated in the Charter, Serbs should pursue a “mutually consistent cultural and educational policy” throughout their cultural space.²¹

The Charter attaches special importance to the position that one nation is most strongly connected by “memories of collective suffering” and suggests the conclusion that these sufferings would not have happened if the entire nation had been in their own country, and that they will stop only if the Serbian people are finally brought together.²²

The “Serbian World” project has the support of all elites, including a significant part of the civil sector. This was particularly apparent in the stance towards Kosovo, when during the so-called internal dialogue, the majority took the position that Kosovo should remain a frozen conflict in anticipation of a suitable moment for its division.

20 <https://www.kultura.gov.rs/vest/788/-povelja-o-srpskom-kulturnom-prostoru.php>

21 <https://pescanik.net/samo-kulturno/>

22 Ibid.

The current government is working on the project on all fronts. However, it should be pointed out that this is not Vučić's or Dodik's personal project, but a state project, which each new government implements according to given circumstances. Members of the Government openly advocate “unification”, and the most agile advocate is Aleksandar Vulin, Minister of Interior (previously Minister of Defense). He points out (and has repeated this on multiple occasions) that “the task of his generation of politicians” is to continue the fight for “the unification of all Serbs into a single state and political community”, which must be carried out peacefully.²³ Among other things, he defends this with the argument that “people who have repeatedly experienced genocide in every generation and always from the same perpetrators have no right to leave their children with the possibility of experiencing the extermination of their compatriots in parts of the nation where they are not protected by the state. Thanks to Vučić, Serbs have become a single political nation and the process of unification has begun, and that can no longer be stopped.”²⁴

UKRAINE CRISIS AND SERBIA

The Ukrainian crisis has rendered Serbia's policy of neutrality and its commitment to allegedly maintaining a balance between East and West meaningless. Serbian media, especially those considered close to the authorities and under their control, are unanimously defending Russia and its campaign against Ukraine, as is the majority of the public. The tabloid *Informer* also published the headline “Ukraine attacks

23 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vulin-zadatak-moje-generacije-je-nastavak-borbe-za-ujedinjenje-srba-koje-se-sprovodi-mirnim-putem/>

24 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vulin-stvaranje-srpskog-sveta-resava-nase-nacionalno-pitanje-proces-ujedinjena-je-poceo/>

Russia". There is no difference between ordinary citizens, academic elites, university professors, or Aleksandar Vučić and his political partners. The largest number of surveyed citizens of Serbia, 83 percent, believe that Russia is a friend of Serbia. According to the research, young people under the age of 30 and those over 60 believe in Serbia's friendship with Russia.²⁵

As soon as the crisis began, Vučić announced that the pressure on Serbia would be much greater than ever, with requests to impose sanctions on Russia. He says that he already had such calls and "hot lines", saying that Serbia would "withstand all pressures". He assessed that the events related to the Ukrainian crisis are completely destroying the security architecture of the world, and that they are bringing Serbia into a situation in which there are numerous challenges of a political, security and economic nature.²⁶

President Aleksandar Vučić found himself in a situation where it is almost impossible to balance, trying to explain his hesitation by the majority attitude of the public: "How do you think we can simply impose sanctions on the Russian Federation overnight, the only country that did not impose sanctions on us in the 1990s, that did not impose sanctions on the Republika Srpska," he said, adding that Russia defends Serbia's interests in the UN Security Council.²⁷

Serbia was the only European country, along with Belarus, that did not condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine. President Vučić refrained from speaking immediately and only after

holding a session of the National Security Council (which was used to buy time in a way) and with significant pressure from the entire political West, he announced Serbia's official position on Ukraine: "In accordance with its policy and respect for international law, Serbia supports the integrity of and respect for Ukraine's borders. Regardless of all provocations, we remain consistent in advocating that peace in the region be preserved by respecting principles. Our policy must be more careful and lenient. We will be guided by our national interests when considering the need for sanctions. This includes the Russian Federation. We believe that it is not in our vital interest to impose sanctions."²⁸

Vučić also said that Serbia is a small country and that he does not want to lose the possibility of breaking off friendship, because Serbia is not making any decisions on Ukraine, and said that he could also invite the Ambassador of Ukraine to appeal to his president to clearly condemn the terrible aggression against Serbia by forces such as the United States and Great Britain.²⁹ Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić admitted that there was great pressure on Serbia to impose sanctions on Russia and that he had meetings with representatives of several countries, but also pointed out that "we will hold on as long as we can" and that "we have one country".³⁰

An important concession under pressure from Brussels and Washington was made only seven days after the start of Russia's attack on Ukraine: during the vote at the extraordinary session of the UN General Assembly, on the Resolution condemning Russia's aggression, Serbia joined

25 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-srbija-ukrajina-rusija/31723284.html>.

26 <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/vucic-pozicija-srbije-nije-laka-bit-ce-pod-velikom-pritiskom-da-uvode-sankcije-rusiji-vec-sam-imao-pozive-i-vruce-linije-foto-20220222>.

27 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-srbija-ukrajina-rusija/31723284.html>.

28 <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/3463351-rat-u-ukrajini-kriza-bombardovanje-aleksandar-vucic-predsednik-srbije-vladimir-putin>.

29 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/vucic-zbog-ukrajinske-krize-i-srbija-u-problemu-poruka-za-ambasadora/>

30 <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/681651/pritisci-srbiju-aleksandar-vucic-ukrajina-rusija-sankcije>.

the vast majority of 140 countries and voted “in favor”: “We did not dare keep silent because of history. From our side, it is very important to condemn the attempts to destroy the territorial integrity of any UN member,” Vučić said while addressing the Serbian public. He added, however, that “no sanctions are mentioned in the text”.³¹

Regarding the ongoing situation in Ukraine and the possible energy crisis, President Vučić said that there were alternatives for energy imports, but that it is a big handicap that Serbia has no sea. He stated that Serbia would also face problems if Russian gas in Europe went up to USD 2,000 per 1,000 cubic meters, but that Serbia would certainly do better than other countries, and that he hopes for more favorable prices in agreement with Russia.³²

When it comes to energy security, the United States is asking Serbia to consider alternatives to Russian gas, including renewable energy sources and liquefied natural gas. The issue of dependence on Russian energy is a problem not only for the Western Balkans, but for a large part of Europe. Gabriel Escobar claims that they are close to freeing some countries from complete dependence on Russian gas.³³

Vučić repeated several times that Serbia’s policy is military neutrality, that we remain on the European path, that we will continue our cooperation with Russia and China, and that we will not give up our traditional friends, because “this is a permanent policy of Serbia and it must remain so.”³⁴

31 Politika, 3 March, 2022.

32 <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/4713496/vucic-gas-cena-kriza.html>.

33 <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/499884/Amerika-trazi-da-Srbija-nade-zamenu-za-ruski-gas>.

34 <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/4713496/vucic-gas-cena-kriza.html>.

Vučić took a critical stance towards Western countries referring to international law: “Now the West is full of respect for international law, and when you ask them about Kosovo, they say they prevented genocide, and when you ask which genocide, they say they prevented a humanitarian catastrophe, because people were fleeing Kosovo. Which humanitarian catastrophe, when Kosovo had more inhabitants one month after the Kumanovo agreement than it did before?”³⁵

Vučić received the support of all his closest political partners. The President of the Socialist Party of Serbia Ivica Dačić assessed that Serbia must not join various condemnations and sanctions against Russia, because the countries that demand that from Serbia did not help in 1999 when Serbia was being bombed. He further explained: “Are we an energy force, so that everything depends on how we will declare ourselves? We have to look after our own interests. We have died enough for others. Let’s preserve relations with the EU and with Russia and China, because “No one will defend us if they [Russia and China] stop defending us.”³⁶

Even if he were to take up the stance of the West, President Vučić does not have much room to maneuver due to pressure from Russia. But also due to the majority’s opinion in Serbia, as well as the Serbian right wing, which supports Russia and finds Ukraine’s status as a state and a nation to be questionable. In addition, Vučić is facing elections (April 3) and has been increasingly

35 “Now the West is full of respect for international law, and when you ask them about Kosovo, they say they prevented genocide, and when you ask which genocide, they say they prevented a humanitarian catastrophe, because people were fleeing Kosovo. Which humanitarian catastrophe, when Kosovo had more inhabitants one month after the Kumanovo agreement than it did before?”

36 <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Region-i-svet/298720/Politricari-iz-Srbije-o-agresiji-na-Ukrajinu-1999.html>.

saying that he will not run for president again.³⁷ Obviously, his cowardice and inability to assess the moment make him a prisoner of fiction that is historically pulling Serbia away from the West.

Presidential candidate Zdravko Ponoš wrote on Twitter that “a military solution to the Ukraine crisis is unacceptable due to the suffering of the civilian population and because it represents a violation of the territorial integrity of a UN member state.”³⁸

The coalition “Moramo” (“We must”), which consists of “Do not let Belgrade d(r)own” (“Ne da(vi)mo Beograd”), Nebojša Zelenović’s “Action” (“Akcija”), and the “Environmental Uprising” (“Ekološki ustanak”), expressed solidarity with the citizens of Ukraine.³⁹ The “Freedom and Justice Party” (SSP) said that “Serbian citizens know better than anyone else in Europe all the horrors and nonsense of war”, which is why they call for peace, an end to military conflicts in Ukraine, and a return to dialogue “as the only way to permanently resolve international disputes”.⁴⁰

In the midst of the crisis ahead of the aggression against Ukraine, government media announced that Secretary of Russia’s Security Council Nikolai Patrushev was scheduled to visit Belgrade, and one of the key topics was to be the alarming warning issued by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that Kosovo, Albania, and BiH were recruiting so-called dogs of war for the Ukrainian battlefield and attacks on the Donetsk and Luhansk republics.⁴¹ However, the visit was

subsequently canceled, most likely under pressure from the West.

REACTIONS TO BELGRADE’S POSITION

Brussels has repeatedly appealed to Serbia to harmonize its foreign policy with Europe’s. However, Serbia is constantly trying to balance between the two sides. At an internal OSCE meeting on the war in Ukraine on February 24, Russia insisted on its interpretations of the invasion of Ukraine, after which representatives of Western countries left the meeting. Representatives of Serbia were among those who remained in the hall. In addition to Serbia, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and representatives of the Vatican and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly remained.⁴²

The European Union announced on February 22 (when it introduced the first package of sanctions) that it expects Serbia to comply with official Brussels’ decisions in the field of foreign and security policy – that is, to join the sanctions against Russia.⁴³ The rapporteur of the European Parliament for Serbia, Vladimír Bilčík, directly called out Serbia: “Serbia’s choice not to join EU sanctions is a defining foreign policy decision for much broader relations between the EU and Serbia.”⁴⁴

Minister of State for Europe at the German Federal Foreign Office and vice-president of the Social Democratic Party of Germany Michael Roth requested that Aleksandar Vučić make a

37 However, on March 5, it was announced that he would be the presidential candidate of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 <https://www.republika.rs/vesti/politika/342459/nikolaj-patrushev-aleksandar-vucic-sastanak>.

42 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-srbija-ukrajina-rusija/31723284.html>.

43 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-srbija-ukrajina-rusija/31723284.html>.

44 <https://www.vreme.com/kolumna/srbija-i-rat-u-ukrajini-tri-sardine-za-holivud>.

clear decision in relation to Russia's aggression against Ukraine.⁴⁵

Russia has been suspended from the Council of Europe and its bodies, the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Serbia voted against this.⁴⁶

At the plenary session dedicated to the Ukrainian crisis, the European Parliament adopted a resolution stating that "Serbia's failure to harmonize with the EU's sanctions against Russia is regrettable and hurts the country's accession process, and we reiterate that candidate states are expected not only to harmonize their legislation with the EU's *acquis*, but also its joint foreign and security policy."⁴⁷

Nine MEPs from the liberal Renew Europe group have sent a letter to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and High Representative Josep Borrell asking for a temporary freeze on negotiations with Serbia and a halt to EU financial assistance until the country aligns with the EU's position on Russia (similar views are expressed by many others). They stressed that "Serbia is free to decide in which direction it wants to go, but it cannot continue to be considered as a trustworthy interlocutor and cannot continue to benefit from pre-accession financial assistance until it has made up its mind"⁴⁸

Numerous analysts dealing with the Balkan region have also reacted to Serbia's position.

45 <https://politicki.ba/vijesti/roth-sutnja-srbije-nije-opcija-ona-mora-napraviti-jasan-izbor/21462>.

46 <https://news.err.ee/1608512747/council-of-europe-suspends-russia-s-representative-rights>.

47 <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/svijet/nacrt-rezolucije-eu-parlamenta-srbija-ugrozila-svoj-evropski-put-zbog-stava-prema-rusiji/220301050>.

48 <https://hr.n1info.com/english/news/meps-call-for-halting-talks-with-serbia-until-it-aligns-with-eu-on-russia/>

Edward Joseph believes that the conclusions made by Vučić after the session of Serbia's National Security Council represent an attempt to continue the policy of balancing: "Such a crisis does not suit President Vučić, who is trying to implement what he calls a balance between East and West. This is, in fact, a false balance and a pro-Russian and pro-Chinese approach."⁴⁹ Joseph suggests turning a blind eye to what Serbia represents today needs to stop: "Serbia is a state where democracy collapsed during the rule of Aleksandar Vučić, space for unhindered work of the media and opposition activities have been limited. Political power is based on systemic corruption, which is not just my opinion, but that of many members of the academic community in Serbia. So that is what needs to change – regardless of the upcoming elections."⁵⁰

Gennady Sisoyev, a Russian journalist living in Montenegro, believes that Vučić will be in the most difficult position, because he will have to decide – to support or condemn the Kremlin's decision. And quickly. Rejecting the Russian president's request will mean for Vučić, not only the risk of being left without favorable Russian gas and other benefits in relations with Moscow. For Vučić, that will also mean no longer being able to sit in the Russian chair, which will be quite painful for him on the eve of the upcoming elections in Serbia on April 3.⁵¹

With the appearance of Serbia's Ambassador to the United Nations during the vote on the condemnation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the subsequent address to the domestic public, he did so in part. This was done under pressure from Brussels and Washington rather than because of any sincere conviction, which apparently lies where foreign policy

49 <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/rusija-ukrajina-srbija-dzozef-reagovanje/6459848.html>.

50 Ibid.

51 <https://www.aktuelno.me/politika/vucicu-izmicu-stolice-potez-kremlja-izvodi-predsjednika-srbije-na-cistac/>.

commentator Boško Jakšić claims: “neutrality, but on Russia’s side”.⁵²

An influential part of the Serbian elite continues to support Russia. Sixty Serbian intellectuals signed an appeal regarding the decision of official Serbia to support the resolution of the UN General Assembly condemning Russia’s intervention in Ukraine. They believe that in this way, Serbian authorities sided with NATO countries, which, according to them, is contrary to the interests of the Serbian people.⁵³ Eleven Serbian law professors came out with the proclamation “Why Russia is right”. In their analysis of whether international law protects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states at the cost of mass terror against parts of their population,

they took the position that in the case of Ukraine, international law is on Russia’s side.⁵⁴

On the occasion of growing pressure from the EU for Serbia to join the sanctions against Moscow, Russian Ambassador Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko said that Russia was calm, knowing the consistency of Belgrade, President Aleksandar Vučić, and the Government when it comes to protecting and safeguarding Serbia’s national interests. This is also a warning to Vučić that his potential decision to impose sanctions would certainly not have passed without their reaction. Serbia has firmly tied itself to Russia, every step away from it would be paid for dearly.⁵⁵

52 TV N1, 3 March, 2022.

53 <https://banjaluka.net/proglas-srpskih-intelektualaca-protiv-glasanja-srbije-u-un-povodom-krize-u-ukrajini/>

54 <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/20220311/zasto-je-rusija-u-pravu-proglas-11-srpskih-profesora-prava-1135294760.html>

55 <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1091811/nece-bit-treceg-svetskog-rata-bocan-harcenko-intervju-novosti-srbija-nam-nece-uvesti-sankcije-verujem-takav-scenario>

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The events in Ukraine will give rise to a more decisive policy of the West towards this region. Dodik's radicalization in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which threatened its disintegration, returned the United States to the region with a new strategy that includes sanctions against all those who destabilize it. The war in Ukraine and the possibility of Russia's destabilization of the Western Balkans will additionally motivate the United States and the EU, so that they do not experience another fiasco such as the one in Afghanistan.

Contrary to his expectations, Putin has united the West and strengthened the alliance, and in particular, further strengthened NATO's *raison d'être* and the unity of the EU. The EU also perceives the war in Ukraine as a war against European values. Belgrade still doesn't seem to understand that.

In the context of global instability and insecurity, many in the West have warned of the potential consequences for Serbia, which has been moving away from the West for several years and expanding its political, economic and security ties with Russia (and China). There is a growing opinion that it is time for the United States and the EU to take a good look at their lenient approach to Belgrade and point out the consequences for continuing this path, including potential sanctions.

All the countries of the Western Balkans have condemned the Russian aggression and sided with the West. Only Serbia has avoided making a precise statement, despite pressure from both the United States and the EU.

Serbia has not yet made a choice that depends on many actors in the country. Most of them are pro-Russian and there is already great dissatisfaction with the vote in the General Assembly.

The "Serbian World" project, which has been talked about in recent months, is no longer present in public discourse, which does not mean that it is still not relevant. Some Serbian elites believe that its realization is possible in the given historical circumstances. In that sense, it will depend on whether Moscow will expand the crisis, and the Western Balkans, as many warn, is one of the candidates for that.

President Vucic is faced with Serbian reality that he himself created. The broad support of the public for Russia, but also of the academic, military and political elites, on the one hand, as well as cultural, religious and historical closeness, which has been cemented in recent decades by systematic propaganda, both from Belgrade and Moscow.

Although the declaration of Serbia at the session of the UN General Assembly is a positive step, it was made under pressure that President Vučić had not faced since 2012. The pressure of the political West on Serbia has reached a boiling point, and during the last 10 days there has been public talk about the possibility of German companies withdrawing their investments from Serbia, and they are the most important foreign investors in the Western Balkans, particularly in Serbia.

Wrong choice of Serbia will be destructive for its future. Serbia must take care not to repeat 2014, when it tried to profit from the fact that sanctions were imposed on the Russian Federation. For example, Serbia is currently the European hub for Air Serbia's flights from Russia to Europe and vice versa. This has already been noted by Brussels, and Serbia is facing the possibility that the national airline will also come under some kind of EU restrictions due to these actions. This is just one example of Serbia risking a "cooling" of the EU accession process with its policy of not imposing sanctions on the Russian Federation, which could be disastrous for the country's reforms and economic stability. The announcement of the President of the Republic on the reducing the number of Air Serbia flights from Russia to Belgrade is a confirmation that the pressure will only increase.

The Ukrainian crisis has shown the unsustainability of a balanced foreign policy and Serbia's military neutrality. Russia's international isolation also indicates that Serbia should turn to its vital interests so that it does not end up in isolation as well with far-fetching consequences.

After the elections on April 3, 2022, Serbia will be faced with the fateful question – Europe or Russia, which implies the choice between democracy or autocracy, prosperity or isolation.