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SERBIA: THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND ITS EUROPEAN PATH

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not predominantly a European problem. However, within the European Union (EU), it has accelerated the harmonization of common goals and raised awareness about the need to deepen European integration, since many barriers to security integration have fallen due to Russia's aggression. Within the EU itself the narrative has also been changed, since it has become clear that if the EU wants to become a relevant geostrategic factor, it must embark on a path of deeper integration. The recently held Conference on the

Future of Europe (9 May 2022) represents the latest attempt to "deepen" the union, including numerous recommendations for internal reforms, while its enlargement has hardly been mentioned.

However, the new situation has also raised the questions about the future of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans. Although surrounded by the EU and NATO member countries, the region has been only partially integrated into the Euro-Atlantic political and security

structures. The undefined EU policy pursued during the last decade has contributed to the region's regression and turn towards other partners. Russia's penetration of the Balkans has been relatively fast and easy due to the strategic vacuum left by the West.

Russia's aggression has also led many forums to consider the future of the Western Balkans. Thus, Judy Dempsey, a senior associate at Carnegie Europe, holds that *EU membership* – or the path to it – is so valuable, especially for small countries, that many in Brussels, Paris, Berlin and elsewhere have started to perceive it as something they give and not as something they also build to the benefit of the current members. This also slows down the obvious and urgent priorities – especially in the Western Balkans – and the ability to accept the appeal of the EU political project itself, including millions of Ukrainians as well.¹

The EU has long been aware of Russia's malignant influence in the Balkans, but due to its inadequate policy and reaction, Vladimir Putin's long-standing foreign policy goal of Balkanizing Europe (hence his support for Brexit) and halting the Europeanization of the Western Balkans has been drawn nearer.

The West is aware of the vulnerability of the Western Balkan region and its vulnerability to Russian influence, especially Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. With that in mind, the US diplomacy has undertaken an offensive diplomatic initiative, which has been joined by the EU and the UK (primarily the Washington-Berlin-London axis). In addition to the United States, Germany still plays a key role in the Western Balkans. The Ukrainian crisis has imposed a new approach of the EU and Berlin, in particular, which starts from the fact that the region is also important as a security problem

and hence numerous speculations in the West that Putin might open another front just in the Balkans.

French President Emmanuel Macron has launched the idea of a "political community" that would enable democratic European states that adhere to European values to find a new scope for security, political, energy and infrastructure cooperation where people, especially young ones, can circulate.² During his recent visit to Belgrade, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, launched the idea of a "European geopolitical community" that would enable regular top-level meetings to exchange the ideas about common interests and coordination.³

The West's new policy also includes the request that the Balkan countries take sides in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and thus contribute to diplomatic and economic pressure on Russia. There followed numerous measures (sanctions for those involved in the destabilization of the region), as well as the promises of a faster integration of the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

At its recent summit, the Group of 7 (G7) has "reaffirmed its commitment to the European perspective of the six Western Balkan countries in order to ensure the security, stability and prosperity of the region. It welcomes that the Western Balkans stands united in condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine, especially in the UN General Assembly (UNGA). It commends Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia for fully aligning their foreign policies with the EU, including sanctions and

1 <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/87114>.

2 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/makron-pristupanje-zapadnog-balkana-eu-da-se-nastavi/>

3 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/misel-evropska-geopoliticka-zajednica-bi-olaksala-proces-pristupanja-eu/>

their implementation. Serbia is urged to do the same.⁴

For years the EU has tolerated Serbia's behaviour in the region, allowing its aspirations to turn into reality. It was only after Russia's aggression against Ukraine that it became aware of dangers and numerous omissions when it comes to the Balkans. Despite quite a number of reactions to Russia's malignant influence, this has not been accompanied by adequate EU policies, primarily because the EU has allowed Russia to corrupt right-wing (as well as left-wing) movements and numerous politicians, thus creating the image of the West as being decadent and incapable of solving its problems.

Contrary to his own expectations, Putin has united the West and pushed it towards a more offensive stance not only towards Russia and the war in Ukraine, but also towards the Western Balkans as Putin's potential "second front".

In all Western reactions there is special emphasis on Serbia, which is attributed a destabilizing role. It is asked to "stop any rhetoric and actions that undermine the integrity of the neighbouring countries" and endanger "regional stability and reconciliation".⁵

Despite voting for the UN resolutions condemning Russia's aggression, Serbia is the only Balkan country that has not imposed sanctions on Russia and still resists doing that. Vladimir Bilčík, European Parliament (EP) Rapporteur for Serbia, has written on Twitter that "Putin's attack on Ukraine is also a turning point for the Western Balkans and everyone should therefore understand that Serbia's choice not to join EU sanctions is the defining foreign policy

decision that has an impact on wider EU-Serbia relations".⁶

The Serbian public is the only one in Europe which is mostly on the Russian side: protests in support of Russia are organized on its streets; 80 percent of citizens support Russia (while support for the EU has declined to 35 percent, the lowest ever recorded), while the academic elite is massively signing the petitions against the imposition of sanctions on Russia. The Serbian public believes that this is the war between Russia and the West and that the West is trying to destroy Russia and Serbs. These theses are dominant in Serbian media.

At every opportunity, Serbian President Vučić persistently repeats that Serbia is strategically oriented towards EU membership but, at the same time, it will not renounce its friends in the East. Western media describe Vučić as a master at avoiding clarity. In an interview for *The Financial Times* he said that, despite pressures, Serbia would not jeopardize its national interests by joining the Western sanctions on Russia over the war in Ukraine and that Belgrade would not "choose the side" despite the European Union's calls on the candidate countries to harmonize their foreign policies with Brussels.⁷

Serbia is under enormous pressure or, as President Vučić says, "it is in a much more difficult situation than it seems".⁸ It is requested to reach an agreement with Pristina, which actually implies the recognition of Kosovo, then to "discipline" the Republic of Srpska and renounce Russia, that is, to impose sanctions on it. In his interview for *Politika*, US Ambassador in Belgrade

4 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/g7-germany-2022-foreign-ministers-communique>.

5 Nova američka uloga na Balkanu, Dragan Bisenić, *Danas*, 23-25 April 1992.

6 <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/500572/Bilcik-Putinov-napad-na-Ukrajinu-je-prelomni-trenutak-za-Zapadni-Balkan>.

7 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/vucic-za-ft-srbija-nece-izabrati-stranu-necemo-vesti-sankcije-rusiji/>.

8 <https://direktno.rs/politika/414273/aleksandar-vucic-predsednistvo-srbije-spc-sabor.html>.

Christopher Hill says that there is only a wrong way or a right way and that Serbia must make a choice. He suggests that “there is only one path for Serbia and that is the West, that is the European Union”.⁹ Police Minister Aleksandar Vulin answered promptly to the Ambassador: “Do not ask Serbs to make their choice by force; you can be hurt by our choice... The arrogance of the US Ambassador reminds us that Hill was the implementer of the policy of sanctions, rape and bombing of both the Republic of Srpska and the Republic of Serbia. And he sees no problem or guilt in that. Serbia will pursue its own way and the Ambassador should control those who allow him to do that”.¹⁰

The foreign policy (of President Vučić), involving a ten-year skillful balancing between the so-called “four pillars”, has experienced a debacle. The new circumstances require a substantial shift that will determine Serbia’s future. However, Serbia resists that and tries to continue balancing but, as the West says, its room for manoeuvre is shrinking.

The current constellation in Europe and Serbia itself, provides a unique opportunity for “Serbia to finally avoid that its relations with Russia determine its strategic future”. That is why, as journalist Boško Jakšić points out, it is necessary that President Vučić, if he really opts for the EU as the future of Serbia, obtains support from the pro-European opposition (Freedom and Justice Party), thus demonstrating its statehood. This would contribute to pulling Serbia out of the Russian hug.¹¹

Bearing all this in mind, Europe and the United States must step up their military, political and

economic involvement in the region in order to prevent the further malignant influence of Russia and China. At the same time, their active relationship with the pro-European opposition and civil society is essential for strengthening support for Euro-Atlantic orientation.

THE IMPOSITION OF SANCTIONS ON RUSSIA

Serbia is the only European country that has not imposed sanctions on the Russian Federation. Support for Russia is prevalent and its aggression against Ukraine is justified as a “preventive war” for which the West is responsible. Serbian media mostly fail to report professionally about the Ukrainian war, which also contributes to that perverted perception. The President himself, who has been participating in that for ten years, is also responsible for the situation. The war in Ukraine has shed additional light on how much the Balkans, especially Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, are susceptible to the Russian influence. At the same time, Serbia’s accelerated arming (from Russia and China) further increases fear and worries in the region.

In a conversation with President Putin (6 April), Vučić informed him that Serbia was on its journey towards to the EU, but would remain militarily neutral.¹² A new conversation between the two Presidents about the gas deal is planned.¹³ There is almost no space for sitting in two chairs and, as President Vučić increasingly points out, Serbia will be constantly under great pressure. The demands to temporarily freeze the negotiations with Serbia and suspend EU financial assistance until Serbia adjusts itself to the EU position on Russia are increasingly frequent.

9 Kristofer Hil “Nema trećeg puta – Istok ili Zapad”, Politika, 22. Maj 1922.

10 <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/vulin-odgovorio-hilu-netrzite-na-silu-da-se-srbi-opredele/>

11 Boško Jakšić, “Vreme nategnute normalnosti”, Politika, 13 May 2022.

12 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/putin-vucic-cestitka-izbori/31788593.html>

13 <https://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/srbija/sledece-nedelje-razgovor-putina-i-vucica-tema-gas-2157992>

The West also perceives the Ukrainian war as the war against the Western values. Thus, it can be expected that this is its main motive for a more resolute return to the Balkans. After all, the West has established the Western democratic system in the Balkans which has not yet taken root.

The academic and cultural community, as well as the major part of the political elite in Serbia believe that, "in a symbolic and identity sense, the Ukrainian war is undoubtedly a world war in which different symbolic acts are sometimes, even as a rule, more important than those with concrete security or economic outcomes. In that sense, Serbia's determination to declare itself against Russia is also perceived. It is emphasized that "any commitment of freedom-loving Serbia is of great importance, but it also has significant consequences for the cultural self-awareness and national self-respect of the Serbs themselves, which is the most important in our case".¹⁴

Serbian nationalists, the opposition, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and security services are aware that Serbia is at the crossroads, but hope for Russia's victory. Belgrade has been the venue of the meeting of a group of Serbian intellectuals, which has consensually suggested strategic "patience", "waiting for the outcome", "hiding under the radar", "silent resistance", "various forms of obstruction", combination of "military and political neutrality", "strengthening of combat readiness" and the like. As they point out, the "Serbian world" has enough reason to adhere to the warning of the Russian imperial military intelligence officer Alexei Yedrikhin that "having Anglo-Saxons as enemies is bad, but having them as friends is even worse".¹⁵

The dilemma is confined to the following: "We will have to pay the price of opting for either

side – opting for the West would imply spiritual decay, the destruction of tradition and some change in the psychological and mentality code of our people, while opting for the East would imply a lower economic standard and living in the complete environment of an opposite civilization".¹⁶

Anti-sanctions rallies support the Russian narrative about the war in Ukraine, which essentially boils down to a "war of civilizations" and an uprising against the "Anglo-Saxon yoke", which is reportedly taking place in many countries. It has found fertile ground in a society that does not accept European values, but uses Western achievements and does not want to renounce EU support.

The Moscow-backed pro-Russian forces in Serbia have the potential that can be used by Russia to push the Balkans into chaos and war in order to justify its own aggression.

President Vučić is aware that the imposition of sanctions on Russia is a matter of time if he is really committed to Serbia's European path.

All encounters with Western partners end with the same message. So, the main message from the dinner in Brussels, hosted by Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, for the leaders of the six Western Balkan countries, is that "the European Union expects all countries in the region to support sanctions against Russia, which have been imposed by the EU" because, as they say, that is the "main element of the European path".¹⁷

Faced with the EU demand and general public support for Russia, President Vučić is trying to

14 <https://standard.rs/2022/04/08/zapad-ce-preko-srbije-pokusati-da-ponizava-rusiju/>.

15 <https://iges.ba/bs/geopolitika/dekonstrukcija-tanaskovica-kecmanovica-i-ekipe/>.

16 <https://standard.rs/2022/03/21/srbi-na-istorijskoj-raskrsnici-jesmo-li-istok-ili-zapad/>.

17 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/nema-strpljenja-u-eu-srbija-mora-da-uvede-sankcije-rusiji/>.

explain the difficult position of Serbia, emphasizing that “the situation is not simple and we must make rational decisions. Everything in the world is in absolute hysterics and it is not good to stand out. Our country is not big, but I hope that we will succeed in bringing our ship into calm waters.”¹⁸ He also points to the consequences that Serbia already suffers, because it has not imposed sanctions on Russia. He also says that seven American producers, directors and actors have refused to come to Serbia because it has not imposed sanctions. “We would live ten times better should we impose sanctions on Russia, but we will not do that.”¹⁹

All his statements – very contradictory as to which side Serbia is opting for – end with “we have endured eighty days and the price we pay is enormous and, in essence, we have no access to the capital market. I do not announce the imposition of sanctions; we will fight as long as we can to preserve our policy. And we pursue this policy not because we gain from not imposing sanctions.”²⁰ However, his April statement best reflects his fear and wariness: “For Serbia, a complete severance of ties with Moscow would be a dead end, because Russia would retaliate fiercely, considering it as a stab in the back.”²¹

Due to pressures from both sides, President Vučić has also sought support from the Serbian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Porfirije, primarily to make the citizens understand the country’s position. After his meeting with the

church dignitaries, he said that Serbia was in a much more difficult situation than it might seem and that “serious hail clouds are hovering over our country.”²²

Vučić’s efforts to keep balancing are also followed by the media under his control. The pro-Russian narrative is timidly corrected by including the critical tones about Russian aggression. However, the pro-Russian narrative is still dominant. It is noticeable, however, that all government representatives speak emphatically about Serbia’s pro-European path.

Historian Predrag Marković, one of the officials of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), has criticized Russia the most. In his Victory Day interview, which was given in a prominent place in Sunday’s *Politika*, he says that “under the slogan of liberating some border towns, the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) and the Russian army have actually destroyed them. Vukovar here and Mariupol in Ukraine (...) and just as we have sent various paramilitary and volunteer units to Croatian and Bosnian battlefields, which has mostly turned into looting, the Russians have brought Chechens and mercenaries from the private military company Wagner Group. All this is rapidly destroying the moral prestige that the Russian army has enjoyed as the successor of the heroic Red Army. This also happened to Serbs during the wars of the 1990s.”²³

Russia is becoming increasingly more isolated and will certainly be ready to tolerate “the harmonization of Serbia’s foreign policy with that of the EU”. Apart from deep ties between Moscow and Belgrade, it is difficult to judge how much decision makers are susceptible to Moscow’s blackmail. Moscow will not so easily give up that only channel to the Balkans.

18 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/nema-strpljenja-u-eu-srbija-mora-da-uvede-sankcije-rusiji/>.

19 <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/nece-biti-hrane-pred-nama-je-najteza-zima-u-70-godina-moglo-bi-biti-i-nuklearnog-rata-ovo-je-neizdrzivo-15197527>.

20 <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/nece-biti-hrane-pred-nama-je-najteza-zima-u-70-godina-moglo-bi-biti-i-nuklearnog-rata-ovo-je-neizdrzivo-15197527>.

21 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/srbija-je-teska-tema-koju-nije-tesko-resiti-pritisak-zapada-na-nasu-zemlju-zbog-xz83pfy>.

22 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/vucic-sledi-nam-najteze-vreme-od-1944-crkva-da-pomogne-da-narod-razume/>

23 Predrag Marković, “Najtužniji Dan pobjede”, *Politika*, 8 May 2022.

MUTUAL RECOGNITION OF SERBIA AND KOSOVO

Since the 1980s, resolving the Kosovo issue has been exclusively perceived in terms of its partition. Student protests in Pristina (1981) raised the Albanian question, which had been simmering since 1968, when Kosovo Albanians gained full autonomy (confirmed later by the 1974 Constitution). Serbia has never got over it. However, for Serbian nationalists the numerical superiority of the Albanian population has posed a problem whose solution has been perceived by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA) as part of population policy, involving a reduction in the birth rate. This attempt to resolve the Kosovo issue by reducing the number of Albanians has failed. Dobrica Ćosić, a writer and national ideologue in the second half of the 20th century, has proposed: “We will either give [Albanians] the territory, which means the loss of one half of Macedonia and the consequential disintegration of Serbia, or use force like Israel. This is a painful path that inflicts enormous damage.”²⁴

After Serbia adopted a new constitution (1990), the autonomy of Kosovo and Vojvodina was revoked under the slogan “Serbia split into three parts will be whole again”. All government bodies in Kosovo were disbanded and the police was disarmed. The new state apparatus was formed with the aim to strengthen and protect Serbian interests. It efficiently incorporated Kosovo into Serbia and institutionalized Serbia’s domination. Slobodan Milošević turned Kosovo into a force base where he could tyrannize and plunder Albanians with impunity. State terror against Albanians finally provoked NATO intervention.

Numerous efforts of the international community to mediate between Belgrade and Pristina have failed. Belgrade’s approach to resolving the Kosovo issue can be followed back 30 years

and, in essence, it has not been changed. Thus, in 1996, during the efforts of the international community to mediate an agreement on education, the SASA (through its President Aleksandar Despić) offered the negotiations about a “peaceful and civilized partition and demarcation” of Kosovo and Metohija along the ethnic lines.

The project of cantonization of Kosovo was launched just before and during NATO intervention. It was elaborated by historian Dušan Bataković who was close to the Serbian Orthodox Church. Cantons would be created in predominantly Serb agrarian areas and would include the Serbian monasteries and the land they owned until 1941. In February 1999, the Serbian Orthodox Church submitted this proposal to the French Foreign Ministry, after several visits of Bishop Artemije to Washington and European capitals, in order to gain support against the proposal made by US diplomat Christopher Hill on behalf of the international community. However, the international community rejected the idea of cantonization.

Despite the new circumstances, after NATO intervention, Belgrade’s strategy still has two directions: to negate and undermine the international mission and to make preparations for the partition of Kosovo. Dobrica Ćosić was the main advocate of the partition, that is, the old SASA plan: “I see the partition of Kosovo and Metohija and the territorial demarcation of Serbia and Albania as the final solution for Kosmet.”²⁵ “The demarcation between Serbia and Albania”, which was advocated by Ćosić, instead of the demarcation between Serbs and Albanians, fits into his definition of wars for the “reorganization in the Balkans”. Ćosić believed that Serbia should be satisfied with “one third of Kosovo.”²⁶

25 Slavoljub Djukić, “Lovljenje vetra”, Belgrade, 2001.

26 In 1981, Ćosić wrote in his diary: “If we are not prepared to liberate Kosovo again – and we are not – then it should be divided between us and Albanians. We should take our parts and monasteries and leave

24 *Il Tempo*, 27 June 1989, according to *Borba*, 7 July 1989.

The proclamation of Kosovo's independence (2008) triggered an intensive campaign against its international recognition. However, the idea about the partition of Kosovo has survived to the present day. The only step towards the normalization was the Brussels Agreement (2013), which was signed by the Progressives' government. However, regardless of some positive steps, it was still worked on the partition of Kosovo "under the table", which would have almost succeeded had it not been for Angela Merkel's intervention. In essence, the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina already died in 2017. All efforts to revive it were unsuccessful and more or less reduced to simulation. With the indictment against Hashim Thaci in Belgrade lost its partner for the partition of Kosovo.

The current Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, who is explicitly against the partition, is therefore, inter alia, the constant target of Serbian media, which present him as a terrorist and Greater Albania advocate. In essence, the greatest advocate of Greater Albania is Belgrade, because it gives legitimacy to the Greater Serbia project. Therefore, the support for this idea was also given for the first time by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama. As this project was removed from the agenda, the implementation of the US and EU strategy for the consolidation of the region, including the existing recognized borders, is under way. Just this approach has refuted all Belgrade's arguments in favour of partition, because the partition of Kosovo has always been in the service of compensation with the Republic of Srpska. The Ukrainian crisis has contributed to the crystallization of Western policy towards Kosovo, which has thwarted Belgrade's plans. This can be concluded by President Vučić's reactions to every mention of Ukraine's integrity

theirs to Albanians. Otherwise, we will be dragged into a permanent war with Albanians, which we cannot win." Quoted from Slavoljub Djukić, "Lovljenje vetra", Belgrade, 2001.

when it comes from Western leaders. He then invokes international law and the hypocrisy of international politics. President Vučić, visibly upset by the new approach, has said that Serbia "will do its best to move towards a compromise solution".²⁷ It is known that by compromise Belgrade means only – partition.

During the recent visit of President Vučić and Prime Minister Kurti to Berlin, German Chancellor Scholz said that the recognition of Kosovo's independence was also part of a dialogue on the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo and that the "future agreement between Pristina and Belgrade will also include the recognition of Kosovo".²⁸

Kosovo's decision to apply for membership in the Council of Europe was met with great indignation by Belgrade. The same applies to the statement by Manuel Sarrazin, Germany's Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, that Kosovo has Germany's support for membership in the Council of Europe. Kosovo also intends to seek membership in the NATO Partnership for Peace in order to strengthen the country's international legal personality.²⁹

Given the support enjoyed by Kosovo, Belgrade has confined its objections to invoking international law. Vučić holds that by applying for membership in the Council of Europe Kosovo has violated various obligations, including the Washington Agreement (2020), that is, the promises given by Serbia and Kosovo to the former US President Donald Trump that Kosovo will not apply for membership in international organizations and that Serbia will not lobby for the withdrawal of Kosovo's recognition.

27 Ibid.

28 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-kurti-berlin-sastanak/31832803.html>.

29 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/2022/5/14/sarrazin-kosovo-pripada-vijecu-evrope>.

Belgrade has also been surprised by the fact that Putin has used Kosovo as an excuse to seize Donbas and Luhansk. Vučić has found justification for such an approach, saying that “they have nothing to invoke, so that they mention the Kosovo precedent”. He has added that “on one side, there is a complete Western hypocrisy on the scene, but we have realized that there are also no principles on the part of Russians; the principle only exists in Serbia”.³⁰ After the G7 stated that it insisted on the territorial integrity of Ukraine, Vučić said that he also decided “not to allow any violation of the territorial integrity of Serbia”.³¹

Being aware that Kosovo enjoys support for membership not only in the Council of Europe, but also in UNESCO and INTERPOL, during his meeting with the Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Vučić also asked for their support concerning the Kosovo issue. Namely, he said: “I have never seen or dreamed of experiencing this in my life. I have witnessed great pressures with respect to the Brussels Agreement. We are faced with an unprecedented hysteria and no one wants to hear anyone, let alone to listen to anyone. Diplomacy no longer exists. It only consists of who will convey a message more brutally. In such circumstances our task is to try to preserve our country and people. Our people living beyond our borders would hardly be able to survive without our Church. Help us to make all people understand Serbia’s position, get us together, try to be united in these times”.³²

30 <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/507225/Vucic-Ne-dam-teritorijalni-integritet-Srbije-ni-po-koju-cenu>.

31 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/trpimo-mnogo-neuvodjenjem-sankcija-rusiji-vucic-zima-koja-dolazibice-najteza-imacemo/7y34s9m>.

32 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/vucic-sledi-nam-najteze-vreme-od-1944-crkva-da-pomogne-da-narod-razume/>.

The essential problem concerning the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue is a different view on the Community of Serb Municipalities and Belgrade’s striving for its status like that of the Republic of Srpska, that is, the partition of Kosovo. At one time, the Agreement on the Principles for Resolving the Problem of the Serbian Community was adopted. The Constitutional Court of Kosovo disputed the part concerning the executive functions. The Kosovo government and the representatives of Kosovo Serbs assumed the talks on the statute, with the OSCE mediation. At the same time, however, there began incidents in the north, as an introduction to the agreement on the partition of Kosovo. Since then, neither side has submitted a proposal on how it envisions the Community of Serb Municipalities.

Under the circumstances, there is every chance that both sides prefer a frozen conflict. The narrative on both sides is toxic and does not promise the imminent normalization in communication. The negative stereotype about Albanians has been reinforced, especially after Kosovo’s application for membership in the Council of Europe. Police Minister Aleksandar Vulin even went so far as to speak of Albanians as scum in a TV show.³³ Only pressure from the United States and the European Union can lead to a comprehensive agreement that will also anticipate mutual recognition.

33 TV Pink, 20 May 2020.

“DISCIPLINING” THE REPUBLIC OF SRPSKA

In recent months, after years of the neglect of Bosnia and Herzegovina and tolerance of ethno-nationalist leaders who were systematically destroying any possibility of a functional Bosnia, the European Union and the United States have embarked on the policy of appeasing Milorad Dodik with the aim to stop his provocations and demand the return of the Republic of Srpska to state institutions. During the visit of German Chancellor Scholz to Washington, President Biden reaffirmed his readiness and commitment to finish their work on the integration of the Western Balkans into European institutions and finally realize the vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace.³⁴

Senad Lavić, Professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Sarajevo, explains the Bosnian political scene in detail and points out that the “vozhds” of ethnopolitics have taken over political organizations, public media, education systems, state institutions, narratives about God and nation, and the meaning of human life.³⁵

The Republic of Srpska is only perceived as the spoils of war that will hardly be given up by Belgrade without greater pressure. For years now, the narrative of Serbian nationalists, both in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, has been confined to the claims that Bosnia and Herzegovina is unsustainable, so that its disintegration is inevitable, that Muslims have destroyed Yugoslavia (a thesis that is increasingly used in Belgrade), that Bosnia and Herzegovina is regressive, that the Republic of Srpska has been created to prevent genocide (Ana Brnabić), that the

Bosnian Serb leaders in 1992 are not responsible for the outbreak of the war (Željka Cvijanović), that it is a mistake that Belgrade has not recognized the Republic of Srpska (Milorad Dodik) and that the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been the liberation war of Serbs (Dobrica Ćosić, a generally accepted thesis).

Milorad Dodik is the most prominent exponent of Moscow as well as the most unpredictable actor in Bosnia and Herzegovina and thus the potential generator of violent conflict. Dodik's impudence and arrogance continued, although he was sanctioned by the West. He continues his rhetoric of challenging the newly appointed High Representative Christian Schmidt, because his appointment has not been confirmed in the Security Council. This is just the echo of something that Moscow keeps repeating. Thus, after the High Representative suspended the Law on Immovable Property in the Republic of Srpska, Dodik stated that “the best sons of the Republic of Srpska did not die so that the unelected German Christian Schmidt could waste what they died for.”³⁶

Russia's behaviour towards Bosnia points to its ambition to reduce the West's influence and undermine its political projects outside the former Soviet space. It is working on this systematically in order to build a new international security architecture, which will marginalize the United States and NATO. As a central country, Bosnia offers a perfect opportunity for the destruction of the Western system in the Balkans, installed after 2000. That is why Russia has supported nationalist and antidemocratic forces in the region, especially in the Republic of Srpska, for years.

According to *Sputnik*, they in Brussels have overplayed themselves in their aspiration to remove undesirable politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina – who demonstrate independence from the EU and Washington directives – from the scene by any

34 https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/236418/americhki_predsjednik_otvorio_karte_opredijeljeni_smo_da_zavrsimo_posao_integracije_zapadnog_balkana_u_evropske_institucije.html.

35 <https://thebosniatimes.ba/69365/u-glibu-licemjerstva-lavic-kako-smo-drzavu-sveli-na-niske-grane-i-kako-smo-upustili-diletante-da-vode-igru/>.

36 “Šmit ukinuo Zakon o nepokretnoj imovini Srpske”, *Politika*, 1 April 2022.

means. Such a tendency fits completely into their persistent policy of centralizing and unitarizing the multinational state of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the basis of the majority people, that is, Bosniaks.³⁷

Serbian media suggest that, according to the West's idea, the status of Serbs and Croats in a new "democratic" Bosnia and Herzegovina should be confined to that of disenfranchised minorities – the so-called "civilian population". It is also speculated with ethnic cleansing because, as it is pointed out, the creation of unacceptable conditions for the further life of Serbs and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina will force them to leave Bosnia and Herzegovina. The intention to have Bosnia and Herzegovina join NATO is interpreted as an intention to cut off the communication with its primal partners, particularly Russia.³⁸

Despite American and British sanctions, as well as the busting of the EUFOR's presence in sensitive areas like Brčko, and the West's new approach to the region, there is still a justified fear among the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The spread of fear and panic from the "other front" in the Balkans by Sarajevo (and Kosovo) politicians, is considered by Belgrade as a "provocation meant to get Serbia to react, probably hoping that Belgrade will face accusations in the case of intervention and certain revenge from the world".³⁹

RUSSIA'S REACTION

The self-confidence of the Russian elite that it will assume the role of a global player and lay the foundation for a new international order has been recorded for more than a decade.

37 <https://informer.rs/planeta/balkan/696682/dodik-zapad-brisel>.

38 <https://informer.rs/planeta/balkan/696682/dodik-zapad-brisel>.

39 "Zapad strepi od 'drugog fronta' na Balkanu, Politika, 15 May 20022.

Sergei Karaganov, Honorary Chairman of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, and Putin's former close associate, has argued that Putin's Munich speech (2007), the Georgian war and military reform have taken place amid a global economic crisis marking the end of Western liberal globalist imperialism and announcing a new goal of Russia's foreign policy – to become again the world's leading power that can defend its sovereignty and interests.⁴⁰

Alexander Dugin, a philosopher and the main ideologue of Euroasianism as a new Russian doctrine, also plays a significant role in it. He often comes to Belgrade and gives lectures and interviews. He has assured the Serbian elite that "Russia will not leave the Balkans to the West, especially because the West is about to collapse". Given that Russia is interested in multipolarity, it will support Serbia not only in its pro-Russian orientation, but also in its neutrality and, moreover, its leading role in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. That is why, he points out, he sees Serbia as the closest European country to Russia.⁴¹

He emphasizes that the Balkans is the hub of civilizations and often connects diametrically opposite lines of geopolitical interests, not only of European countries, but also of the world's poles. For now, the NATO in the Balkans manages to strengthen its control over the countries in the region, but that is the agony of a unipolar world. Russia is returning as one of the poles of a new, multipolar architecture that has never before existed. At the same time, China is playing an increasingly important role.⁴²

40 <https://www.rt.com/russia/550271-putin-doctrine-foreign-policy/>.

41 <https://standard.rs/2021/02/25/balkan-predstavlja-jedan-od-dva-ekrana-svetske-geopolitike-drugi-je-bliski-istok-zato-je-srbiji-sudjeno-da-igra-glavnu-ulogu-u-geopolitici/>.

42 Ibid.

This has certainly influenced the orientation of President Vučić and the majority of the Serbian elite towards Russia because, by doing so, Serbia is allegedly strengthening its geopolitical position and significance. Frustration after all defeats in the 1990s, which Russia has skillfully exploited by patronizing the Serbian elite and its interpretation of the wars of the 1990s, also plays an important role in Belgrade's orientation. Moscow has also contributed to the Russification of Serbian nationalism through its media and, to a significant extent, a toxic atmosphere against the West and NATO, in particular, and their disparage.

The Ukrainian war and the fiasco of the Russian army have changed the optics, which the Serbian elite has considered as painful knowledge. This is why the decision to take the EU's side is heavily burdened by an emotional baggage, including various other ties, especially financial ones.

Moscow sees Serbia as the implementer of its influence in the Balkans, as well as the source of regional destabilization. This also applies to the Republic of Srpska and pro-Russian forces in Montenegro.

So far, Russia has not reacted negatively to Vučić's hesitation and contradictory statements. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov comments with understanding how the Balkan countries, including Serbia, are under pressure to join the West's sanctions against Russia, which cover almost all economic, cultural, humanitarian, political and other activities. He underlines that President Vučić has repeatedly stated in public that Serbia will take care of its own interests.⁴³

After a few attempts to destabilize North Macedonia and Montenegro, Moscow declared their imposition of sanctions a hostile act. Therefore,

43 https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1806841/.

Lavrov says that they have also been drawn into the war by sanctions. In his opinion, these countries have been deceived because, despite the promise of fast rapprochement with the European Union, this has not happened. These countries have been drawn into the NATO and anti-Russian actions and campaigns, and then, as he says, they have patted them on the shoulder and said: "Well done guys, just continue like that". He points out that this challenges the EU's reputation and real goals of its Balkan policy. "I believe that the United States has given to the EU complete control over the Balkans."⁴⁴ It is evident that Moscow is trying to create a rift between the European Union and the United States, as well as the small Balkan countries that have many reasons to be disappointed with the EU's policy towards them during the last ten years.

In a long interview with *Politika*, Russian Ambassador in Belgrade, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, has said that "the West is exerting incredible pressure on Serbia." He has also said that they understand very well the difficult situation Serbia finds itself in and that Russia highly appreciates the principled line that Serbia maintains in not recognizing and not accepting anti-Russian sanctions. He has especially pointed out: "We do not recognize Kosovo and most actively support Belgrade in the UN Security Council." According to him, the claims of the alleged change of Russia's position have been invented with the aim of spoiling their relations and getting Serbia to join anti-Russian measures".⁴⁵

Russia's failed adventure in Ukraine may still give rise to Putin's unexpected actions in the Balkans. It is already heard in the European Union (Paris, Berlin, Rome) that Russia should be allowed an honourable exit from Ukraine.

44 https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1806841/

45 "Zapad na Srbiju vrši neverovatan pritisak", *Politika*, 9 May 2022.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The EU is in the process of adjusting its enlargement policy to the new geopolitical environment and is developing a new accession process. There are two approaches, French and German. President Macron suggests the creation of a “geopolitical community” that will join the EU, while Germany’s priority is the European Union’s enlargement policy and work on the strengthening of cooperation among the Western Balkan countries.

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has put the security issue in the foreground and made the EU’s approach to security in its eastern neighbourhood, which is characterized by restraint and strategic ambiguity, unsustainable in the new circumstances.

Serbia still hopes to gain dominance in the region as part of the Open Balkan project, which is also increasingly less certain due to opposition from Bosnia, Montenegro and Kosovo, which prefer the revival of the Berlin process under Chancellor Scholz’s supervision. In addition, the neighbours still do not trust Serbia’s intentions, which is intensively arming itself.

Accession to the European Union is the geopolitical inevitability of the whole Western Balkans given Russia’s constant attempts to destabilize it. That is why all doubts about the policy of enlargement to the Western Balkans indicate that, despite all promises, the Balkans is still on ice.

Bearing in mind a very fluid situation in the Western Balkans and numerous speculations about the possibility that Putin opens the “second front” in the Balkans, the fear of Bosnian and Kosovo citizens, in particular, is justified. Therefore, it is necessary to do the following:

- The West, primarily the EU, must offer real support, protection and a concrete perspective to the region for the future as soon as possible;
- The EU must actively monitor the implementation of all chapters, especially Chapters 23 and 24, which are required for membership;
- It is necessary to prevent any possibility of changing the borders in the Balkans; to this end, the Community of Serb Municipalities should be adjusted to the standards governing the minority issues and the Kosovo Constitution;
- The future and functionality of Bosnia and Herzegovina depend on Belgrade’s policy, which has been freely integrating the Republic of Srpska for two decades at all levels (economic, cultural, educational and informational); without Belgrade’s support the Republic of Srpska is unsustainable; in addition to combating corruption and radical nationalist policies, the European Union and the United States should integrate the educational and cultural space in order to create a Bosnian identity, apart from the particular ones; only cultural awareness and education as the fundamental backbone of society can guarantee integration and solidarity; therefore, cultural decontamination is an imperative for the recovery of both Bosnia and Herzegovina and the whole region;
- Due to its reliance on Russia, especially when it comes to Kosovo, Serbia is still not ready to make a step forward, which would permanently bind it to the EU and the region. In that

sense, it Serbia is at historical crossroads. It should be borne in mind that throughout the 20th century the Serbian elites were predominantly anti-Western oriented with respect to the basic Western values. That is why a more active EU relationship with the pro-European opposition and civil society is needed in order to strengthen support for Euro-Atlantic orientation;

- The commitment of the new parliament and government to the West will depend on President Vučić's ability to change public opinion and, naturally, the position of his party. To that end, it is necessary to work with the opposition as actively as possible in order to support the Euro-Atlantic orientation;
- The media must dedicate themselves to the deconstruction of the pro-Russian narrative and objective attitude towards the significance of Serbia's Euro-Atlantic integration.