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SERBIA'S FOREIGN POLICY" EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

Russian aggression against Ukraine has accelerated geostrategic realignments, which has also inevitably led to the refocusing of the Western international community on the Western Balkans, primarily Serbia as the key destabilizing factor in the region. The changed international context has also determined the priorities which, among other things, anticipate Serbia's shift away from Russia, namely the neutralization of Russia's influence in the Balkans, and the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina.

However, a more active approach taken by the United States and the European Union towards the Western Balkans did not produce visible results even after two years. Despite all efforts, Serbia still remains the focal point of regional instability. The expectations that it will impose sanctions against Russia (as one of the preconditions set out by the West) have not been fulfilled and there are no indications that this will happen.

It has been precisely this Western policy which has encouraged Russia to radicalize the situation in the region through its exponents. This refers, first of all, to Milorad Dodik, who has additionally strained the relations not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in the region (Montenegro, Kosovo).

Serbia's cooperation with the East is increasingly intensive, so that the nationalist bloc more and more often openly supports its joining BRICS, while at the same time looking for other non-European partners as well. Serbia has signed the Friendship and Cooperation Agreement with the ASEAN countries.¹ In addition, President Vučić has signed a contract with the United Arab Emirates for the purchase of suicide drones.²

The attitude towards the neighbours has also been radicalized, especially when it comes to Kosovo. In Montenegro, Belgrade acts intensively through the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and tries to prevent the exclusion of the Democratic Front (a distinctly pro-Serbian and pro-Russian bloc) from the future government. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik systematically represents the pro-Russian interests (status quo) and, together with President Vučić, uses every opportunity to impose the interpretation of the wars of the 1990s according to which the Serbs were the main victims.

Serbia's attitude towards Ukraine is unconvincing, regardless of its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. With its support it actually "reminds" the West of the "illegal seizure of Kosovo" and raises the question of compensation for its loss (primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro).

In the meantime, Belgrade's attitude towards the Western countries was radicalized. Anti-Americanism has been present for decades and has largely been fuelled by Russia and its media in Serbia. As of recently, negative articles about Germany and, traditionally, the United Kingdom (which "supports Greater Albania") have also started to appear.

The attitude towards Russia has remained unchanged. Serbia refuses to impose sanctions against it, arguing that it has already experienced the effects of such a policy during the 1990s. Serbia also continues to depend on Russian energy products. Due to media spinning, 80 per cent of Serbian citizens support Russia, believing that the war in Ukraine was started by the West. Despite the official commitment to EU membership, the media are primarily anti-Western.

The majority of citizens (not only in Serbia) believes that EU membership is a long way off for which the unclear EU enlargement policy is largely responsible.

By its vocation, Serbia belongs to the East, that is, the authoritarian bloc, but actually depends on the West, primarily the EU, due to its real interests and affiliation. However, historically speaking, the Serbian elites have been inclined towards the West only in short intervals and the opposite side has always prevailed, because the line, which also implies the acceptance of liberal values, has never been crossed. This also refers to the current autocratic government in Serbia.

Due to very small changes in Serbia's foreign policy orientation, despite all the measures taken by the West, many actors in the West are increasingly and more frequently criticizing the US and EU policies of pandering to Serbia. During the last few months, all leading media in the world pointed to the criminogeneity of the Serbian political elite, its ties with the Russian

1 "Srbija potpisala Ugovor o prijateljstvu i saradnji sa zemljama ASEAN", *Politika*, 5 September 2023.

2 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2023/2/21/vucic-srbija-kupuje-dronove-samoubice-od-emirata>.

mafia and its destabilizing potential in the region. There have been numerous hearings in the Congress, the Senate and the Bundestag, as well as debates in the European Parliament. So far, however, the Western countries' policies towards Serbia have not been changed.

This is why understanding Serbia requires a deep insight into the essence of all decisions made by Vučić and his predecessors. Western politicians will not be able to predict Serbia's political trajectories by using the current approaches.

BELGRADE'S POLICY TOWARDS THE REGION

Belgrade's policy towards its neighbours continues to destabilize the Western Balkans. The Serbian world is a project that is implemented within the scope of various influences in the relevant countries, primarily through the Serbian Orthodox Church and pro-Serbian political parties. Despite the Western monitoring of the regional processes, Belgrade is still viewed as a disruptive factor that makes this involvement meaningless. This especially refers to the American efforts that have always been the most effective.

President Vučić's strict attention not to cross the boundaries regarding the affection towards the United States and the European Union, so that Russia does not get upset, is also evident these days and allows him to keep a room for manipulation.

When it comes to Kosovo, there have been no significant changes despite all the US efforts. At the same time, the blame for the blockade is shifted to Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti. In Montenegro, faced with increasing pressure

from the Quint, Prime Minister Designate Miloško Spajić adheres to the requirements set by the West that the Democratic Front (DF), a pro-Serbian and pro-Russian bloc, cannot be part of the new government. Belgrade is not satisfied with the development of the situation and has tried to push the DF into it by organizing new "liturgies" (which have not succeeded) and referring to the electoral will of citizens.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine Milorad Dodik has been systematically suspending the authority of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Republic of Srpska (RS) and paving the way for its secession. The Serb lawmakers have voted for the suspension of the rulings of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which some experts interpret as a "legal secession" and the violation of the Dayton Agreement. Numerous anti-constitutional actions of the Republic of Srpska continuously reduce the state functions including the rule of law and security.

Therefore, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina has reached a critical point despite the sanctions imposed by the West not only against Dodik, but also against other officials of the Republic of Srpska.

Political radicalization in the Republic of Srpska is not free from the influences of Belgrade and Moscow. This is also confirmed by the fact that Dodik and Vučić participate, on an almost daily basis, in joint actions and events in Bosnia and Serbia and especially in those which, based on the interpretations of the wars of the nineties, consider the Serbs to be the biggest victims and that they waged the war of independence. The effort to reinterpret the wars of the nineties also includes a media offensive about Serb suffering always and everywhere, laying special emphasis on the crimes against Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia (not only in Jasenovac).

In addition, the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina declares all foreign policy actions that do not have the support of the Republic of Srpska as an act of hostility. The politics of the Republic of Srpska is subordinated to the Russian vision of global politics. Russian Ambassador Kalabukhov has particularly criticized two members of the State Presidency (Željko Komšić and Denis Bećirović) for visiting Ukraine.

Despite numerous statements issued by the Western community in support of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there has been no more comprehensive action that will stand in the way of the formation of the pro-Russian Dodik-Orban-Vučić axis which, under the given circumstances, can have an important influence on the further dynamics in the Western Balkans.

SERBIA'S POLICY TOWARDS UKRAINE AND RUSSIA

Serbia has refused to participate in all EU packages of sanctions against Russia, continuing to pursue its own interests in the region with less and less responsibility and instigate conflicts beyond its borders in order to divert attention from discontent at home, being sure that the West will not resent it.

Vučić has justified the decision not to impose sanctions against Russia by the fact that it was "the only country that did not impose sanctions against us in the nineties".

Such a stance is illustrated by the Serbian President's meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Athens, where he signed a joint declaration, and by the Prime Minister's address at the Crimean Platform Summit. As President Vučić informed the public, during the debate on

the content of the Athens Declaration, he allegedly insisted on the removal of the parts being contrary to the interests of Serbia and Russia, including the imposition of sanctions against Russia and war crimes.³ The same applies to the news that Serbia has joined the Crimean Platform, that is, the Ukrainian Government's initiative to help with the liberation and reincorporation of Crimea. The truthfulness of this information was rejected by Ivica Dačić on Pink TV. As he pointed out, the Platform "is beyond the framework that is acceptable to us".⁴ Immediately thereafter, he met with the Russian Ambassador in Belgrade and announced that he "must visit Moscow" before the end of the year.⁵

Despite Serbia's constant repetition of its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, none of its officials attended the celebration of the Independence Day of Ukraine at Trg Republike in Belgrade.

Despite the EU efforts to support Serbia's energy transition, it remains largely dependent on Russia, since a majority stake in its oil company has been to Gazprom.

In September 2022, Ministers Nikola Selaković and Sergey Lavrov signed the Consultation Plan between the Russian and Serbian Ministries of Foreign Affairs for the next two years during the session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. The Western countries reacted to this, while the American Ambassador in Belgrade, Christopher Hill, said: "I saw the plan, there's not much in it. The question is why

3 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/srpska-spoljna-politika-korak-napred-nazad-dva-ukrajina-jedinitamari-vucic-moze-biti-zahvalna/>

4 Ibid.

5 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/ivica-dacic-o-poseti-rusiji-moracu-da-odem-do-kraja-godine/>

Russia wanted this and obviously Russia wanted a plan to justify its war in Ukraine.”⁶

According to Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Serbia has failed to comply with the EU Council’s two decisions on the restrictive measures relating to the sanctions against Russia. This refers to the EU Council’s decision (CFSP) 2023/1517 of 20 July, which prolongs the sectoral restrictive measures for six months, until 31 January 2024, due to Russia’s actions that destabilize the situation in Ukraine. It has also failed to comply with the EU Council’s decision (CFSP) 2023/1566 of 28 July adding seven individuals and five entities to its sanctions list due to their undermining or endangering Ukraine’s territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence. Serbia is the only EU membership candidate country in the Western Balkans which has not complied with these two decisions.⁷

Although the United States and the European Union tolerate Belgrade’s behaviour in the expectation of a turnabout, this has not yet happened. The analysts close to the Serbian government, such as Vuk Velebit, argue that the Serbian-Russian relations have been spiralling downward “for several years already”.⁸ He also points out that “the official relations are not at the level they used to be” and that the Russian print media write negatively about Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Government. He points out that since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Serbia’s position has been changing and the critical assessment of Serbian-Russian

relations has started to appear not only in tabloids, but also in mainstream media.⁹

SERBIAN MEDIA AND THE THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE WEST AND THE EAST

If the media are viewed as a policy change indicator, it can be stated that there is still no change when it comes to Russia. The Report on Media Monitoring by the non-governmental organization CRTA shows that such a change has not yet happened. According to this report, a positive tone is prevalent even when Russia is mentioned in the context of the crises with which it is associated, thus outweighing the negative views. A positive tone is also noticeable when the most dominant topics and subtopics are in question – the war in Ukraine, Kosovo, energy and economy. Apart from Russia, China is also positively presented in dealing with these topics. Although it is less visible in media, China is the foreign actor that is predominantly presented in a positive light.¹⁰

Russia and the actors associated with Russia have a rather unique position in the Serbian media. This is supported by the data showing that Russia is dominant in the media as it was covered more than 16,000 times during the past 12 months. Television channels, which are still the most influential and most used medium of communication, accounted for the highest share of pro-Russian and anti-Western media reports. Consequently, the media with a larger number of mentions as well as the fact that they

6 <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/318188/Hil-Niceg-posebnog-u-sporazumu-koji-su-potpisali-Selakovic-i-Lavrov-ali-ocigledna-je-namera-Rusije.html>

7 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/srbija-se-opet-nije-uskladila-sa-novim-odlukama-saveta-eu-o-restriktivnim-merama-zbog-ukrajine/>

8 <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/balkan-srbija-rusija-sad-rat-ukrajina-rusija-spoljna-politika-tribina-libek/6975787.html>

9 Ibid.

10 <https://crt.rs/crta-monitoring-medija-prica-protiv-zapadne-strane-monitoring-stranog-uticaja-jul-2022-jun-2023/>

predominantly present Russia in a positive light, foster closeness with Russia.¹¹

The CRTA report points to the events that have prompted the more drastic presentations of foreign actors. The positive coverage of Russia reached its peak after its annexation of four Ukrainian territories in September 2022 and the meeting between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in March 2023. Similarly, during the period from February to April 2023, China was most positively presented due to its peace initiative for Ukraine.¹² Although anti-Russian reporting increased during 2022, pro-Russian reporting strongly exceeds the more critical portrayals of Russian actors. Even after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Russia is still mostly favourably viewed.¹³

Although the media reporting on the EU and the USA is mostly neutral, negative reports are more frequent than positive ones. As for the EU, it received the most negative media coverage in October 2022, especially due to the new pressures associated with the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and alleged energy crisis in the EU, which was presented in the media as the result of sanctions against Russia. As for the United States, the most negative views were recorded in March and April 2023, in the light of the ongoing war in Ukraine and international politics in general and, to a lesser degree, with respect to the Serbian internal policy.¹⁴

Western actors are predominantly concerned about the Kosovo problem. The most watched television channels with nationwide coverage

11 <https://crt.rs/crta-monitoring-medija-prica-protiv-zapadne-strane-monitoring-stranog-uticaja-jul-2022-jun-2023/>

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 <https://crt.rs/crta-monitoring-medija-prica-protiv-zapadne-strane-monitoring-stranog-uticaja-jul-2022-jun-2023/>

present the West most negatively. For example, the negative TV coverage of the EU is almost nine times more frequent than the positive one. TV channels, online portals and daily newspapers contribute to the fostering of negative feelings and animosity towards the West.¹⁵

One of the most watched television channels, TV Pink, has allegedly reoriented itself towards the promotion of the West. However, everything has come down to the statements by its owner, Željko Mitrović, which is not observed, for example, in daily reporting.

SERBIA'S POLICY TOWARDS THE WEST

Serbia's attitude towards the West is two-faced. On the one hand, it emphasizes its commitment to European integration and, on the other hand, it lags behind in aligning its foreign and security policy with the European Union in comparison to other candidate countries from the Western Balkans. The analysis of the ISAC Fund shows that in the first half of 2023 Serbia had a compliance rate of 52 percent, while Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania fully complied with the EU. In contrast to these countries, during the mentioned period, Serbia aligned with only 34 of the EU's 65 declarations and restrictive measures.¹⁶

Igor Novaković (ISAC Fund) believes that "this position will create a problem over a long term, because it promotes a negative image of Serbia in a large number of EU member countries".¹⁷ Emmanuel Joffre, head of the EU Delegation

15 <https://crt.rs/crta-monitoring-medija-prica-protiv-zapadne-strane-monitoring-stranog-uticaja-jul-2022-jun-2023/>

16 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-eu-spoljna-politika/32544201.html>

17 Ibid.

to Serbia, said that, after Russian aggression, foreign policy became increasingly more important and that they wish to count on Serbia as a sincere partner. Therefore, it is expected from it to progressively align its foreign policy with the EU. Foreign policy alignment has been part of the negotiating network since day one and is even more important today.¹⁸

Serbia's balancing has already been met with a sharp reaction from the West. So, Thijs Reuten, a member of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament, has asked the European Commission to explain "its inexplicable policy" towards Serbia and has stated that President Vučić uses the EU as a cash machine.¹⁹

All the efforts of the EU (Miroslav Lajčák) to encourage the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue have failed. Serbia has not yet signed the Brussels and Ohrid Agreements, agreed upon in 2023, nor is it working on their implementation. These agreements would not have been possible without the presence of a US representative.

The largest investor in Serbia is the EU and Germany as an individual country. During the past year, Serbia received the largest foreign direct investment – more than 4 billion euros. According to the National Bank of Serbia, one third of this investment made during nine months of 2022 came from the European Union. Over the past 10 years, EU companies have been the leading investors in Serbia with the share of 68 per cent.²⁰

18 <https://beta.rs/content/185356-zofre-eu-nije-bankomat-vec-najveca-mogucnost-za-srbiju>

19 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-koristi-eu-kao-bankomat-evroposlanik-strazi-od-ek-da-objasni-nerazumljivu-politiku-prema-srbiji/>

20 <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/srbija-danas/5188119/kompanije-iz-eu-najveci-investitori-u-srbiji-.html>

Serbia is the beneficiary of IPA funds and numerous other sources of finance. Thus, it received 160 million euros from the EU in order to overcome the energy crisis. According to Tanja Mišević, Minister of European Integration, Serbia is now using the third generation of the Instruments for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA 3) and that, as a candidate country, it was granted the assistance of 1.4 billion euros during the period 2021–2027.²¹

Despite all indicators that the West is helping Serbia the most, the CRTA Report on Media Monitoring shows that the Serbian media space is unfavourably inclined towards the European Union, the United States and NATO. Anti-Western rhetoric is increasingly pervading public discourse. The European Union and the United States receive more media attention, which is mostly negative. NATO is predominantly presented in a negative light.²²

HOW REALISTIC IS EU MEMBERSHIP?

It is possible to mobilize the Serbian public for EU membership and its values only by coming up with a clearer and more precise EU offer concerning enlargement policy. Until now, this policy has been fluid and lacked clear goals. The facts that Albania, North Macedonia and Montenegro have become NATO members and that the KFOR is present in Kosovo, have provided the illusion of security, which has also contributed to the EU's unconvincing enlargement policy.

However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has put enlargement back on the European agenda for

21 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/miscovic-srbija-zasedam-godina-dobija-14-milijarde-iz-ipa-3-fondova/>

22 <https://cрта.rs/cрта-monitoring-medija-prica-protiv-zapadne-strane-monitoring-stranog-uticaja-jul-2022-jun-2023/>

existential security reasons. The Athens summit, which was held in August, certainly hinted at such considerations, although concrete solutions were avoided. Many questions remain for the EU to answer in the coming months and years.

After the Athens summit, High Representative Josep Borrell stated that the EU should prepare itself for a new enlargement, implying the admission of another 10 states and that it should negotiate a time frame for their entry in order to speed up changes.²³ The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, also actualized the enlargement issue, stating that the EU should be ready for enlargement by 2030.²⁴

Amid a series of statements about the need for EU enlargement, President Macron's statement is also indicative. According to him, the EU needs to reform itself if it wants to integrate new nations and build consensus with more than 30 member countries. He has emphasized: "We'll need audacity to accept more integration in some areas and maybe even a multi-speed Europe".²⁵

President Macron has even threatened with the introduction of a visa regime in case of the failure of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

Hesitations, which reflect both the real relations and problems within the EU, are used by the anti-Western bloc which claims that "the illusion of the so-called European path is maintained by media, but objectively one cannot expect any concrete decision at the EU summits at the official level".²⁶ Journalist Siniša Ljepojević said

23 <https://www.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=524849>

24 <https://dnevnievropskiservis.rs/7-eu-i-zapadni-balkan/36-vesti/18876-gardijan-proirenje-eu-bilo-kliniki-mrtvo-a-sada-meu-glavnim-temama-za-lidere>

25 <https://n1info.ba/svijet/macron-eu-treba-da-se-reformise-ako-zeli-da-integrise-nove-nacije/>

26 <https://lat.rt.rs/srbija-i-balkan/47254-evropska-unija-eu-srbija-zapadni-balkan/>

for *Russia Today* that 20 years ago there might have been some enthusiasm in the European Union, but in the meantime the EU "has negatively transformed itself to such an extent in the process of destruction that there is no one left to make decisions".²⁷ It is noted that, as an integration, the EU is in a deep crisis and that the situation in Ukraine has called its existence into question, because officials "say all sorts of things but, in essence, they no longer know what to do".²⁸ These and similar assessments are receptive and skillfully presented in the media on a daily basis.

The pro-European bloc also doubts that Serbia will become part of the EU in the near future. Some, like journalist Boško Jakšić, believe that this is so because Serbia like this does not deserve to be in the European Union and that the story about EU enlargement is meaningless if there are no reforms, while the government does nothing to prepare Serbia for the moment of its joining the EU.²⁹ Others believe that "the European Union must not shy away from this part of Europe, because this will create a huge space for numerous other problems, especially security ones".³⁰

THE CRITICISM OF WESTERN POLICY TOWARDS SERBIA

Although it is declaratively committed to EU membership, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine Serbia has not shown a readiness to impose sanctions on Russia and recognize the independence of Kosovo, which are the two main priorities for the West.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/jaksic-ovakva-srbija-ne-zasluzuje-da-bude-u-evropskoj-uniji/>

30 Ibid.

The manipulative behaviour of President Vučić is increasingly irritating the Western public and politicians and there are more and more calls for changing the policy towards Serbia. One of the first articles to deal with the criminal nature of the Serbian regime appeared in *The New York Times*. It was followed by *Deutsche Welle*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Guardian* and CNN. All texts pointed to the authoritarianism of the Belgrade regime, criminogeneity of the Serbian political elite as well as its destabilizing potential in the region. CNN was the most precise in its criticism, emphasizing that “The West’s ‘see no evil’ approach to Serbia’s Vučić risks destabilizing the Balkans”.³¹

The United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs has expressed serious concern regarding the situation in the Balkans. One after the other, the members of the Committee have presented various problems. They have expressed concern over the growing ethnic tensions and instability, Russian malign influence, Chinese influence, non-fulfilment of the Serbia-Kosovo agreement, non-implementation of judicial decisions, secessionist movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, endemic corruption and weak economies. The withdrawal of Serbs from Kosovo institutions and their boycott of local elections (despite Belgrade’s promise to the United States that they would participate), as well as the conflict of Serbs with KFOR are only some issues that have been raised. The anti-Dayton behaviour of Milorad Dodik has also been criticized and it has been pointed to the need for the imposition of EU sanctions against Dodik and the strengthening of the EUFOR forces.

Thereafter, 56 high parliamentarians from Europe and the United States Congress and Senate signed the letter demanding the change of a “soft policy” towards Serbia with respect to Kosovo. They want a dramatic change in the current

approach towards Serbia. It is also stated that Kosovo is a sovereign and functional democracy and that this fact should be a basis for the future common policy in the current crisis. It has been emphasized that Serbia’s attempts to interfere with the democratic elections in Kosovo should be criticized as foreign interference and certain measures should be applied if they continue to do this... The diplomacy of deterrence should be applied if the crisis is to be resolved.³²

So far, however, there has been no indication that the policy is changing along those lines. Edward Joseph, a professor at the Johns Hopkins University and connoisseur of the situation in the Balkans, told CNN that the “see no evil” approach to Vučić’s regime may be starting to crack. “The question here is: Who in the Biden Administration still believes that Vučić is this partner.”³³ He has pointed to the sanctioning of Aleksandar Vulin, Director of Serbia’s Security Information Agency, as an evidence that the Biden Administration “is no longer captive to fear and illusion about Vučić”.³⁴

The US policy starts from the fact that Serbia is the central country in the Western Balkans and that its goals, primarily the stabilization of the Balkans, can be achieved only with it. It also starts from the fact that Vučić has no alternative in the country, and hence the expectation that they can attract Serbia to Euro-Atlantic integration by working with him. That policy has been carried out for more than a decade. Apart from the United States, this approach has also been supported by the EU, especially Germany which has invested the most in Serbia.

31 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/zapad-zlo-vucic-balkan-cnn/>

32 <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/pismo-zaostravanje-politke-zapada-prema-srbiji-menendez-rot/7214653.html>

33 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/cnn-zapad-zmuri-dok-vucic-destabilizuje-balkan/>

34 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/cnn-zapad-zmuri-dok-vucic-destabilizuje-balkan/>

The United States have imposed sanctions against Aleksandar Vulin, head of Serbia's intelligence service (BIA), on whose removal they have insisted and with whom they have not cooperated so far. President Vučić keeps postponing this decision and there is a speculation that he will be replaced by Miloš Djurić, the current Ambassador of Serbia in Washington, who is loyal to Vučić like Vulin.³⁵ The statement by Defence Minister Miloš Vučević that North Macedonia and Montenegro "have made a mistake by recognizing Kosovo, that it will backfire on them and that they have opened Pandora's box",³⁶ has

caused stormy reactions in the region. On this occasion, however, the US Ambassador said that he does not see Vučević's statement as an attempt to destabilize the region and that he does not think that he wanted to be understood that way.³⁷

Ambassador Hill consistently repeats the American position that everyone should impose the sanctions against Russia, especially the countries aspiring to join the EU. The problem is that Serbia has so far not shown that it really wants it.

35 <https://direktno.rs/politika/487761/marko-djuric-aleksandar-vulin-bia.html>

36 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucevic-crna-gora-makedonija-priznanje-kosova/32555915.html>

37 <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/hil-ne-vidim-izjavu-vucevica-kao-pokusaj-destabilizacije-regiona-nemuslim-da-je-htio-da-ga-tako-razumiju>

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The current government has not convincingly shown its orientation towards Euro-Atlantic integration despite the EU and US efforts and full political and financial support.

President Vučić points out that the EU is the largest investor in Serbia, but he does not promote liberal values on which the European Union is based, including primarily liberal democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

Serbia does not carry out the reforms that will bring it closer to the European Union, especially when it comes to Chapters 22 and 24. Contrary to the West's expectations, Belgrade keeps accusing it of pressure and blackmailing.

So far, the government has not changed the media's anti-Western policy, which requires the provision of support for independent media as well as their more serious involvement concerning the European agenda.

From this perspective, Serbia is trying to compensate the loss of Kosovo with the Republic of Srpska, Montenegro and the division of Kosovo with its current policy on the international level.

Due to the strengthening of "authoritarian" repression and propaganda, Serbian citizens have been marginalized as a collective political force in Serbian politics. An atomized society is unable to overcome the power of Vučić's authoritarian state.

Bearing in mind a complex situation in the world, it is necessary to stabilize the Western Balkans as fast as possible in order to prevent new conflicts. This is why it is necessary to remotivate the public in the Western Balkans to wish to join the EU by making the enlargement policy more certain and concrete.

It is necessary to strengthen the civil sector in order to break the political blockade and open up room for an alternative that will be ready to distance itself from the previous disastrous policies, especially those related to greater state aspirations.

Despite Serbia's importance as the central state in the Western Balkans, the West's attitude towards Belgrade must be changed and balanced. It is necessary to consolidate the neighbouring countries by pursuing a much more robust Western policy in order to prevent Serbia's interference with the internal affairs of those countries, primarily through the Serbian Orthodox Church and pro-Serbian and pro-Russian political parties.

Serbia is a defeated country, but its greater state ideology is not. Precisely thanks to the policy of flattery, this ideology has survived and is now awaiting the moment to be realized. It is perceived in the West as irrational (which it is). However, it is still surviving in Serbia's political life. This is why the West should publicly condemn all such policies and abolish the ethnic principle as the key factor in resolving regional problems. Nationalism and chauvinism have been imposed from above, just like the mantra that the Balkan peoples cannot leave together.

The decontamination of Serbia can only be carried out within the scope of changing media, educational and cultural policies. The verdicts of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) should be used as a framework for the introduction of the rule of law and the starting point for a dialogue about the past and the prevention of impunity.

As for its credibility in Serbia, the West must reach for the strategies and policies that penetrate to the core of the society that has been devastated by war policies, populism, corruption and crime.