



Helsinški Committee for Human Rights in Serbia

Helsinki Committee Report  
2022/2023

# SERBIA: CAPTURED SOCIETY





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Belgrade, 2023.

**Helsinki Committee Report – SERBIA: CAPTURED SOCIETY**

Belgrade, 2023.

**publisher**

**Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia**

**for the publisher**

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CIP zapis je dostupan u elektronskom katalogu Narodne biblioteke Srbije  
ISBN 978-86-7208-231-9



Kingdom of the Netherlands

This publication is produced with the partial assistance of the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Kingdom of Netherlands.

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# PROLEGOMENA

Serbia is at a historical crossroads. Due to the confluence of historical circumstances and the tragedy of what is happening in Ukraine, the Balkans are once again themselves in the focus of the international Western community, primarily as a security issue. Hence the very intense diplomatic offensive aimed at rounding off the Balkans as part of the European sphere of interest. In this context, the Serbian-Albanian issue is also being resolved. On offer is the European agreement on the normalization of mutual relations, which, if accepted and signed, will once again turn the Western Balkans towards the European Union.

What does this mean?

It is not enough just to put pen to paper and have a roadmap that will be formulated and implemented during the next few months, but everything also depends on the state of society and its readiness to accept the necessary reform demands.

This implies the necessity of having insight into several areas that, as a rule, are bypassed or marginalized.

This certainly refers to culture, religion, the media, the stance towards the war legacy and processing it. All of this together determines a society's attitude towards the choice it faces.

Only a long-term strategy that would take into account the state of spirit and values on which society rests could provide more lasting results.

This report offers readers some insights, in the hope that they can be a platform for a broader and responsible social debate, necessary at this critical moment.

# INTRODUCTION

## **CAPTURED SOCIETY**

The region has begun once again to plunge into instability, threatening to deepen the crisis both in individual countries and in their mutual relations. Most of the successor states of former Yugoslavia are faced with some type of regression, showing the lack of a strategic potential and capacity for the real transformation of society and economic recovery, which is a serious pretext for destabilization.

Almost every Western Balkan country has an internal “crisis” potential arising primarily from the absence of a democratic tradition and the unfinished transition process. In addition, the regional context is characterized by the unsurpassed legacy of war and unquenched territorial and ethnic aspirations. Moving away from the European perspective intensifies internal and mutual frustrations. Finally, in the period of global upheaval, the Balkans has become the point where the geostrategic competition of the powerful members of the international community takes place.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has changed the geopolitical map of Europe and, due to new security challenges, the European Union (EU) has confirmed its determination to expand to the Western Balkans. To this end, the EU has finally opened accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, while in December 2022 Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted EU candidate status. Progress has also been made with respect to the liberalization of the visa regime for Kosovo. However, Serbia has remained the

lonely island whose commitment to EU membership is still questionable due to the increasing and ever deeper Russification of state institutions, the public and media sphere, as well as the cultural space.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has once again fuelled Serbia's aspirations towards the neighbouring territories (which it has never given up in anticipation of new international circumstances), which it labels the "Serbian world". Serbia has decided to side with Russia, although it has voted for the UN resolutions condemning Russian aggression and supporting the integrity of Ukraine. Avoiding to impose sanctions against Russia, namely to align its foreign policy with the EU and referring to its neutral status (or neutrality on the Russian side, as emphasized by journalist Boško Jakšić) Serbia has moved even closer to the Russian position. However, Russia's failure to achieve its war goals, that is, conquer Ukraine in a few days, is putting Serbia in an increasingly isolated position but also is exposing it to Russia's increasingly stronger pressure which is achieving its goals in the Balkans through Serbia – undermining the efforts of the European Union and the United States to integrate the Western Balkans into the Western sphere.

After Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the priority of the European Union and the United States in the Balkans is to push Russia out of this region and finally resolve the frozen conflicts in Kosovo and Bosnia. In that context, Serbia is asked to reach agreement with Pristina (the acceptance of the German-French, that is, European plan), whereby Kosovo is de facto recognized, as well as to "discipline" the Republic of Srpska and move away from Russia.

Due to its incoherent foreign policy in the current international circumstances, Serbia has found itself facing a historic choice that will determine its future. On the one hand, the Russian Ambassador to Serbia, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, has urged official Belgrade to reject the European plan for the normalization of relations with Pristina in the belief that the final status of Kosovo will be defined by the end of the war in Ukraine, when Russia scores victory. It was not the first time that Moscow officials have

linked the resolution of the Kosovo issue with the war in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the United States and the European Union – referring to Serbia’s official commitment to European integration – expect it not only to make a strategic decision, but also to impose sanctions against Russia as soon as possible.

The basic problem of Serbia is that it has opted for an ethnic state instead of a civic one, which means that the ideology of ethnic nationalism is dominant. The ideology with which the aggression against Yugoslavia started – “the liberation and unification of Serbs” – is still at work. Such a state concept excludes minorities that live on the margins of society, regardless of the existing legal framework.

Serbia’s attitude towards the wars of the nineties and the way in which it presents itself – solely as their victim – prevents it from turning to the modernization of the state, because it identifies itself with war criminals as national heroes.

The climate in which the historic decision for Serbia is being made is anti-Western and results from a decades-long media propaganda and reliance on Russian support in realizing the “Serbian world” aspirations.

The current involvement of the West in the Balkans provides a unique opportunity for the country to finally avoid that the relations with Russia determine its strategic future, which would essentially represent a historical turning point for Serbia. Politically and diplomatically, Belgrade would turn to the Western European capitals and not to Moscow for the first time.

1 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/intervju-bocan-harcenka-pokusaj-rusije-da-minira-sporazum>

## TEN LOST YEARS

Serbia has exhausted all national potentials by implementing the strategy aimed at recomposing the Balkans. Opting for such a strategy and policy 30 years ago, it lost the race against time and history, as well as the ability to rationally consider its real interests and thus seek solutions in accordance with the demands of the times.

It is clear that the changes in 2000 did not substantially affect the legacy of the regime of Slobodan Milošević. Every attempt in that direction was brutally thwarted (the assassination of Zoran Đinđić). The largest part of the political elite did not want or was not ready to take an in-depth look at the situation in Serbia. The Serbian elite did not give up nationalism as an ideology that implies pretensions towards the region. Good intentions and expectations that Serbia will change along the way turned out to be a misjudgement. A society that has not taken stock of developments and has not distanced itself from Milošević's policy has no chance to move forward.

Since the arrival of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to power (2012), Serbia has recording a gradual decline of all democratic standards and values. Although the SNS has started its mandate with an anti-corruption campaign (it has won the elections on that basis), corruption is one of the main problems in society after ten years. No progress has been made in addressing it, so that it has assumed malignant proportions. In the meantime, all standards and freedoms achieved in the previous period collapsed, the entire political elite became criminalized, the parliament, political parties and political life were rendered meaningless and all advances in dealing with the past were devalued. The relations with all neighbours were disturbed, the narrative distancing Serbia from any responsibility for the wars of the nineties was promoted, the state and society became autistic to such an extent that any feeling for a normal communication with the neighbourhood and the world was lost. As a result, there is an unprecedented outflow



of the population towards Western countries. During the last ten years, Serbia was moving toward authoritarianism, thus systematically destroying the public field and political public sphere. President Aleksandar Vučić established an autocratic system according to his own needs. Thus, state institutions are destroyed from within, the media are oppressed, the judiciary is blocked and the opposition is discredited.<sup>2</sup> This invalidated any idea of the concept of citizenship. Repression mechanisms were perfected as was the rule of one man who imposed himself as the key arbiter in all situations. He gained such a position using bribery, adulation, corruption and payment, all of which can be labelled as “voluntary slavery”, as Milan Podunavac points out.<sup>3</sup>

Since his coming to power, Aleksandar Vučić has been running a continuous election campaign, creating the impression of constant change, his enormous energy and commitment to work. Periodical government reshuffles, announcements of big investments and infrastructure projects, the opening of new production facilities, the seemingly tireless fight against corruption and organized crime, as well as frequent (early) elections also contribute to the creation of this image. Apart from having a decisive influence on the media and possessing the instruments of power, Vučić’s increasingly pronounced authoritarian tendencies were facilitated by a weak and fragmented opposition, which could not efficiently oppose harmful policies or offer a coherent and attractive alternative. At the international level, President Vučić has long had the image of a statesman, respected by world leaders (especially in Russia and China) and simultaneously supported by the EU and the West – which has contributed to the strength of his position.

The current regime has normalized crimes and criminals, falsified the past and keeps the whole region under constant tension.

2 The 2006 Constitution gives the government political and effective power, that is, the role of the executive power holder, and weakens the role of the president, who is treated as the body that expresses the unity of the Republic of Serbia.

3 <https://www.mojnovisad.com/vesti/promocija-knjige-rezimi-straha-dobrovoljno-ropstvo-bitno-obelezje-nove-deshttps://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/583857/fijasko-jugoistocne-evrope-potije-u-srbiji-id50879.html>

The repressive apparatus focuses mainly on independent journalists and investigative organizations that criticize corruption and organized crime. The part of the civil sector dealing with confrontation is completely marginalized both in media and socially.

The “normalization” of Serbian nationalism, from that of Vojislav Koštunica to that of Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, has made it impossible to gain insight into the essence of the latest radicalization. Nationalism, which was induced and directed by the elite in the 1980s, is now generated from the “base” as social radicalism, in particular.

The defeat and the absence of taking stock of all events that happened during the 1990s, not giving up the greater state project, identity crisis and frustration, have led to the revitalization of traditional conservatism. The changed international context (especially Russia’s aggression against Ukraine) has revived the expectations that it is possible to realize the Serbian aspirations, which are now offered in a new package as the “Serbian world”.

Backsliding in Serbia has been reported by many nongovernmental organizations such as *Freedom House* which, in its report titled “Nations in Transit – From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression” claims that “Serbia is the Balkan country that regressed most in implementing democratic reforms”.<sup>4</sup> According to this report, Serbia has not been considered a democratic country for three years already. Instead, it has been classified among hybrid regimes in which authoritarianism is a consequence of incomplete democratic change.<sup>5</sup>

*Freedom House* also points out that Serbia is a “parliamentary democracy with competitive multiparty elections, but in recent years the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organizations”.<sup>6</sup> The report also states that power has been transferred from the

4 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/freedom-house-balkan-izvestaj/31812312.html>

5 Ibid.

6 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2022>

government to the presidency. Thus, Vučić's move to the presidency in 2017 raised new concerns about the personalization of governance and politicization of state institutions. Vučić has remained the dominant figure in government despite the presidency's limited executive powers under the Constitution, creating a de facto presidential system.<sup>7</sup>

## **THE DISTURBED FRAMEWORK FOR THE RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**

Human rights in the Balkans cannot be perceived without the political and social context, as well as the effects of the wars of the nineties which still block the consolidation of the newly created states. The broader international context, namely the collapse of the liberal order has brought about the collapse of universal values and, as UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres points out, "human rights are under siege around the world". On the occasion of the Human Rights Day Guterres stated that "the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been a global beacon – shining a light for dignity, equality and well-being – and bringing hope to dark places."

The past two decades have been marked by the return of authoritarianism, wars and, naturally, violation of human rights as their companions. This applies not only to authoritarian regimes in Russia and China, but also to autocracies like in Hungary, whose Prime Minister is even the promoter of "illiberal democracy". Among them are also some democracies, including the world's most populous country – India. With the election of Donald Trump, America has also shown the potential for making meaningless the democratic legacy of the country leading the liberal international order in the postwar period.

Although after the "Fifth of October" the state made significant steps to promote human rights, improve standards and their

7 Ibid.

application in practice, various forms of discrimination and intolerance towards different minority groups are seen on a daily basis. Human rights have been rendered senseless because, among other things, the mechanisms (judiciary and regulatory bodies, in particular) which protect individual and collective freedoms in public space do not function any more. Negligible progress has been made in bringing the suspected perpetrators of crimes in the past to justice. The police enjoy impunity in abuse cases. Journalists, especially investigative ones, and nongovernmental organizations are attacked by government and pro-government media. Discrimination against women, Roma and other ethnic groups, LGBT persons and socially disadvantaged people is still widely spread.

The current government primarily understands the concept of human rights as the collective rights of Serbs and their right to unification. This is also indicated by the “Serbian World” project which finds its justification in the discriminatory position of Serbs in the whole region. However, in essence, ethnocentrism also denies human rights to citizens of Serbian nationality. Political, cultural and intellectual elites give priority to solving the national question, that is, the “Serbian world”, while at the same time leaving the democratization of society for the post-unification period.

In principle, human rights in Serbia are guaranteed by the Constitution, but are also regulated by laws, by-laws and the like. Serbia has adopted all necessary instruments that ensure the respect for human rights. However, their implementation is not only inadequate, but there is also no political will for it. The social atmosphere is not favourable for the integration of minorities, especially those which are territorially “compact” such as the Albanians in the Presevo Valley and the Bosniaks in Sandžak.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the concept of the state is ethnic, which makes the position of minorities even more unfavourable, regardless of the existing framework that guarantees their rights.

8 See the HOS reports on Sandžak and the Presevo Valley at:

<https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/izvestaj%20sandzak.pdf>

<https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/izvestaj%20presevo%20srb.pdf>

In addition, the state apparatus, namely the institutions have been devastated and are very weak. On one side, they are linked to organized crime and, on the other side, under the given circumstances, their offer is insufficient, especially when it comes to the social and economic security of citizens.

Balkan societies are collectivist and egalitarian and it can be said that socialism has not been an aberration, but a natural expression of their potentials. A one-party system is associated with authoritarian societies. Although there are numerous political parties, the political culture gives birth to the figures who perfectly reflect the character of those societies. It is also important to bear in mind that freedom for which everyone supposedly strives does not imply individual responsibility. This is also why responsibility is delegated to the leader.

The Progressivist government has not abandoned Milošević's project and has fully revealed its intentions by daily interference in the political life of the neighbouring countries, primarily due to the alleged endangerment of the Serbs living in them. In this way, it has not only called its European future into question, but has also forced the EU to return to the nineties and reconsider its patronizing attitude toward Serbia and meeting its demands at the expense of others in the region. This is actually the only "output" of the Progressivist government, which has additionally collectivized Serbia's responsibility, made the work of the Hague Tribunal meaningless and exposed the efforts to have Serbia accept the regional reality to mockery.

The government has also humiliated Serbian citizens, made every engagement pointless and arrogantly risen itself above everyone, turning Serbia into a neglected and incompetent state and society. Miodrag Zec, a prominent economics professor, believes that in Serbia there exists a "metastatizing political model where President Vučić has become the most important and untouchable social institution that dictates capital movement and value distribution".<sup>9</sup>

9 <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/583857/fijasko-jugoistocne-evrope>

## **A FALSE IMAGE OF ECONOMIC RECOVERY**

During the period 2013–2022, which also includes the COVID crisis, Serbia recorded an average growth rate of only 2.5 percent, while between 2001 and 2013 it was 3.8 percent, although this period also included the 2008 global financial crisis.

The Fiscal Council of Serbia most often mentions the low level of investment as the cause of insufficient economic growth, which is less than desirable – about 25 percent of GDP. Namely, total (private and state) investments in Serbia in the period 2012–2014, when fiscal consolidation started, were the lowest (18.7 percent of GDP) in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as a whole. Total investments in Serbia were about three percent of GDP lower than the CEE average which, in terms of share, were more than two percent of GDP lower than in CEE. Private investments were also lower than the CEE average, but the difference was smaller, “only” one percent of GDP.

In the middle of the last decade, Serbia’s annual investments amounted to about 750 billion dinars, instead of about 1,000 billion dinars. In fact, annual investments amounting to about two billion euros were missing.

The current government’s claims that citizens salaries increased significantly during its rule (it was announced that they should reach 700 euros at the end of 2022, which was almost achieved in January 2023). However, one should not lose sight of the fact that in the decade after 5 October 2000 the average salary increased as much as eight times – from about 45 euros in 2000 to 365 euros in 2012.

During 2022, Serbia was forced to start a new borrowing cycle both at home and abroad. In 2020, its public debt increased by about three billion euros, which relativizes a slight decline in its share of the expected GDP of about 60.3 billion euros (the final GDP will only be calculated in the middle of 2023).

Serbia has asked the IMF Mission to change the mutual arrangement. The very turn in the treatment of the IMF's role in Serbia simply means that the country is once again in a very worrisome financial situation.

## **SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH**

During the last ten years (since the political dominance of the SNS), the relationship between the current political elite, led by President Aleksandar Vučić, and the majority church in Serbia progressed from mutual criticism and elemental ignoring to multidimensional cooperation and symphonic synchronization. Over time, not only have their disagreements been overcome, but a regular and intensive communication has been established, including various forms of financial, institutional, ideological and diplomatic support, understanding and reconciliation between secular and spiritual authorities.

Under conditions of disorientation and social value disintegration (like in all other post-socialist countries), religion has assumed the key role in shaping new values. The theological modeling of public space in Serbia started after 2000 when Orthodoxy with political pretensions began to shape public, that is, social space, thus endangering the rights of others to their own identity. The secular values of civic society – democracy, civil society, pluralist discourse, secular and religious tolerance and individual human rights – are rejected. Accordingly, younger generations are conservative and markedly nationalistic. They are also confused and ideologically represent a combination of leftists and rightists.

The anti-Westernism of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) anticipates a certain concept of state and society which also presupposes their organic whole. This is also the basic link with the Russian Orthodox Church – resistance to liberal values, including human rights ideology. The main critic of human rights ideology is the Russian Orthodox Church. In the Balkans, this is the Serbian Orthodox Church. Orthodox theologians do not have an

affirmative attitude towards the contemporary concept of human rights. It is experienced as an expression of the West's liberal values and individualism. It is considered to be too individualized and absolutized and imposes itself as universal on completely different cultural, social and political milieus.

## **THE SERBIAN WORLD AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NEIGHBOURS**

The relationship with the neighbours during the past decade is characterized by a high degree of tension and implosion at all levels. The reason should certainly be sought in the decision of the current government and President Vučić to revive the project of the unification of Serbian lands, now under the name "Serbian World". Russia's support, whose infiltration into the Balkans, primarily into Serbia and the Republic of Srpska (RS), has been undisturbed for more than ten years, has contributed to such an orientation. The government enjoys the full support of the academic community, Serbian Orthodox Church, large part of the opposition, one part of the civil sector and media, as well as security services.

As a reminder, at the end of the 20th century, the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) laid the quasi-scientific ideological foundation for the concept of the Serbian world as the unification of all Serbs in one state. The real goal of Serbia (and now apparently Russia as well) is to regain its former size by revising the borders drawn at its expense in the past.

This resulted in increased intolerance and xenophobia. Living according to the ethnic and centralist principle also endangers the survival of such Serbia as desired by nationalists. Denying Serbia as a complex state provokes its further fragmentation.

The term "Serbian world" appeared for the first time in 2013, but became popular in 2019, primarily thanks to the writings and speeches of historian Aleksandar Raković. At first, the "Serbian world" laid emphasis on the cultural and linguistic unity of Serbs. However, it quickly turned out that this was the programme raised



to a political level by the former Minister of the Interior, Aleksandar Vulin, as the promoter of this idea: “The only way for the Balkans to remain stable is that all Serbs live in one state. All conflicts in the Balkans arise from the discrimination of Serbs. Where the rights of Serbs are respected there is no problem with the ‘Serbian world’”.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, President Aleksandar Vučić has started to promote himself as “the president of all Serbs”.

Although Serbia adopted pro-European orientation after the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević, while at the same time persevering with the strategy of Serb unification, it has so far successfully achieved its goals, namely the systematic integration of Serbs in the region into the cultural, spiritual, economic and information space.

Belgrade has also defined its policy towards the “Serbian lands” in official documents. The first of them, adopted by the Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, has been the Strategy of Preserving and Strengthening the Relations Between Parent Country and Diaspora and Parent Country and Serbs in the Region (2011).<sup>11</sup>

The Strategy puts Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro in the centre of Serbia’s regional policy. In fact, it represents the realization of the part of the Memorandum dealing with the prevention of the vulnerability of the Serbs living outside Serbia. It is about an action plan related to greater Serbian nationalism in new circumstances and the instructions on how to “peacefully and democratically” realize Serb unification, against the unity and integrity of the countries in which they live.

The main role in the implementation of the Strategy is played by the Serbian Orthodox Church as the only legitimate cross-border institution in the region, because it is actually the only integrative institution and the bridge between the parent country and the diaspora. The Strategy envisages logistical and other support to the

10 <https://www.standard.co.me/svijet/vulin-za-stabilnost-balkana-potrebno-je-da-srbi-zive-u-jednoj-drzavi>

11 See the document of the Ministry of Religion and Diaspora at: [http://dijaspora.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/strategija\\_mvd2011.pdf](http://dijaspora.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/strategija_mvd2011.pdf)

Serbian Orthodox Church. In practice, the action plan is confined to the relativization and denial of the war crimes and genocide committed by the armed forces and police of the Republic of Srpska and Serbia, destabilization of the governments and authorities in the neighbouring countries by strengthening the awareness of their inefficiency; insistence on the constitutionality of the Serbs in Montenegro and Kosovo; provision of support to the separatist policy of the Republic of Srpska and the like.

In the meantime, the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia was adopted (2020).<sup>12</sup> It emphasizes that Serbia's most important foreign policy priority is to preserve the Republic of Srpska. The Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space was also adopted (2019).<sup>13</sup> It was signed by the Ministers of Education of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska.

The key impetus behind this project has certainly been Russia's infiltration into the Western Balkans, namely Serbia, the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro, in particular. Its goal is to obstruct both the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the Western Balkans for as long as possible. It does not want the frozen conflicts in the Balkans to be resolved. In the current circumstances the question is how far the Russia will go in its destabilization of the Balkans.

For years now, the European Union has tolerated Serbia's behaviour in the region, allowing its aspirations to become a reality. It was only after Russia's aggression against Ukraine that it became aware of the dangers and numerous omissions when the Balkans is in question. Russia's aggression against Ukraine also raised the questions about the future of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans.

12 Sl. gl. RS 94/19. See at: <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/strategija/2019/94/2>

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

## **KOSOVO: A PREREQUISITE FOR A MODERN STATE**

The legally binding agreement on the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina is the only guarantee for the improvement of the security, economic and social position of the Serbian community in Kosovo. It also gives a chance to Kosovo to finally consolidate the state and develop democracy in full compliance with the European values, including the respect for human rights and freedoms. For both Kosovo and Serbia this agreement opens the perspective of EU membership.

The adoption of the agreement requires a change in Belgrade's attitude towards the Serbs in Kosovo. In other words, it envisages the support for the survival of Serbs not only in the north (where less than 30,000 Serbs live), but also in the enclaves south of the Ibar where Serbs form a majority, but are marginalized, isolated, left to themselves and instrumentalized for Belgrade's daily political needs.

The political monopoly in northern Kosovo belongs to the Serbian List, actually a branch of the Serbian Progressive Party. According to the leading figures in the Serb community, informal power is in the hands of controversial businessmen Milan Radoičić and Zvonko Veselinović (who are on the US sanctions list). The agreement should provide room for authentic Kosovo Serb leaders.

## **CULTURE IN THE SERVICE OF THE "SERBIAN WORLD"**

The breakup of Yugoslavia has also been reflected in the cultural policies of the newly created countries. For Serbian cultural policy, as Professor Milo Lompar points out, Yugoslavism – with which the Serbs have been identified – has always been the goal to which all self-realization elements have been subordinated. When Yugoslavia vanished, the Serbs were caught off guard and, as Lompar says, it was necessary to create an integralist cultural policy,

based on the myth of Serbian unity. The current Serbian Cultural Strategy for National and Spiritual Transformation is also based on such an understanding of cultural policy.<sup>14</sup>

What characterizes the cultural strategy is victimhood nationalism. It burdens the approach to the past and, in particular, the overcoming of its dark pages. Because the perpetrators have now become part of collective victimhood, hiding themselves behind the national memory of victims.

This is exactly what has happened in Serbia where the official culture of memory or the dominant culture of memory has essentially prevented a significant shift in understanding one's own role in the wars of the nineties. Such a concept of the culture of memory has an important role in the creation of a new national and state identity. The question of the devastating war policy effects has not yet been opened, although it is at the root of all current problems in Serbia itself. The wars of the nineties and, in particular, Srebrenica are relativized. A "fair distribution of guilt is sought". Historical revisionism is at work. It includes not only the last war, but also the Second World War. With a special focus on the Jasenovac concentration camp.

A dangerous thesis about Serbian innocence for the wars of the nineties is promoted, because it maintains and fuels the aspirations based on the expectations that the international circumstances will change one day in favour of Serbs. The second thesis, a thesis about "surrounding", suggests that Serbia is constantly threatened by an external enemy. The war of the nineties began with that thesis, because "the war was the necessity as a defence". That thesis also implies that everyone is against the Serbian people and not that Serbia is the state that provokes war.

There is still talk about the "culprits of the war", which prevents addressing the causes that led to it, namely the Serbian pre-war and war policy. So far, there has been no distancing from the

14 Milo Lompar: *Srbija kao kolonija krivice*, Bane Đorđević, *Večernje novosti*, 13 January 2013.

war policies of Slobodan Milošević, Dobrica Ćosić and all other bearers of the war programme.

Without a self-reflexive attitude towards the past, as Professor Todor Kuljić points out, there is no way out of the spiral of violence and evil. “If we don’t stand in front of the mirror and honestly admit what we have done, if we don’t find the strength to admit our guilt”, Kuljić holds that “we will always remain trapped in the limbo of denial, hatred and moral decay. Because the society based on crime simply cannot survive. You don’t build a house on a mass grave”.<sup>15</sup>

## EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS

Serbian extremist organizations with a strong foothold in Russia are an instrument for spreading Russia’s malign influence on the Balkans. Due to their ties to Russia as well as the indications that they possess weapons, these organizations pose a serious threat to the peace and security of the country and the region. At the same time, during the ten-year rule of the Serbian Progressive Party, the extremists, as the government allies, became an important political factor and the tool of pressure on political opponents and civil society organizations. During 2022, the extreme right expanded its front of action, including regrouping, unification, protests, enhanced threats and physical violence, as well as increasingly intensive contacts with Russian partners. A strong boost to the influence of the right was provided by the narrative about Russia’s victory in the war against Ukraine, spread through government-controlled media.

The pressures of the extreme right are also aimed at preventing the agreement between Serbia and Kosovo. It also opposes resolving the “Serbian question” in the Balkans, which is a prerequisite for Serbia’s democratization.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/todor-kuljic-pomirenje-u-regionu-nece-doci-iz-brisela/25386120.html>

## **MEDIA: A PREREQUISITE FOR THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF SOCIETY**

Media freedoms, freedom of speech and respect for media laws and professional standards have been continuously declining since 2012, namely since the coming of the Serbian Progressive Party to power. The media are deeply polarized and divided into a pro-regime majority and a critically oriented minority that functions under constant economic, political, legal and security pressure. The media have taken on malign dimensions and are systematically sliding into destruction. All this is – through disinformation, half-information and daily spinning – directly reflected in the electoral will of the citizens, growing nationalism, views on recent history, Russia and the West, “the other” and different.

## **THE EU – TOLERATING SERBIA’S ANTI-EUROPEAN POLICY**

During the past ten years, the EU and individual member states, especially Germany, tolerated Belgrade’s inconsistent and anti-European behaviour and sitting on two and more chairs. In part, this was also the result of numerous internal problems faced by the West (the financial crisis, Brexit, migrant crisis, COVID). It was only Russian aggression against Ukraine which led to a reversal due to Serbia’s refusal to take sides and impose sanctions against Russia. For years now, the EU treated Serbia as the central Western Balkan country without which there is no stability in the region. At the same time, it neglected Belgrade’s efforts to complete its project (“Serbian World”) by dividing Kosovo and Bosnia. It was thought that its accession to the EU would inspire the whole region to follow suit. However, during the last ten years, Serbia constantly and systematically destabilized the region and blocked its consolidation.

Bearing in mind that EU enlargement in the Western Balkans has also been put on stand-by, local leaders have continued

to pursue the ideologies of the nineties, thus calling all EU efforts to consolidate the newly created states and bring them under the EU and NATO umbrella into question. The EU's slowness in dealing with the problem and turning its head away from Vučić's manipulations, have delegitimized the EU's influence and mobilizing potential.

The European Commission's reports on Serbia during the last ten years were benevolent and did not point to the real problems such as the observance of the rule of law, corruption, organized crime, freedom of the media and constant destabilization of the region. Only the reports for 2021 and 2022 are critical of Serbia, especially with respect to the alignment of its foreign policy with the EU. Instead of making progress in its reforms Serbia is stagnating. This refers to its accession process and, in particular, progress towards meeting the political criteria.

The 2022 Report states that since the opening of the accession negotiations in January 2014, Serbia has opened 22 out of 35 chapters, including all chapters in Cluster 1, Fundamentals, and all chapters in Cluster 4, Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity. Two chapters were temporarily closed. In June 2021, Serbia adopted the revised enlargement methodology. It is emphasized that in the future pace of negotiations will especially depend on the pace of implementing the rule of law, legal reform and the normalization of Serbia's relations with Kosovo. Serbia continued to implement the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU (in force since 2013).<sup>16</sup>

According to the Report, the rate of Serbia's alignment with the European common foreign policy dropped from 64 percent to 45 percent. The Report also warns that a series of Serbia's actions and statements were contrary to the EU foreign policy positions. The largest political group in the European Parliament, the European People's Party (EPP), issued a statement warning that the "countries sided with warmongers cannot be EU candidates". For "this is a matter of the continent's security and key to containing

16 <https://www.stat.gov.rs/media/358410/serbia-report-2022-1.pdf>

Russia. No more grey zones of frozen European perspectives – they are critically dangerous for the EU. Enlargement is how we stop the recurrence of aggressive regimes in our neighbourhood. However, enlargement is a two-way process – the EU must reform itself first for a successful expansion of the bloc”.<sup>17</sup>

The Report also points to the absence of concrete progress in the negotiations on a comprehensive and legally-binding agreement between Belgrade and Pristina. It is emphasized that reaching such an agreement is “urgent and crucial”, so that Kosovo and Serbia can advance on their respective European path.<sup>18</sup> The Report emphasizes that Serbia only made “some progress” in its fight against corruption and the same applies to its fight against organized crime.<sup>19</sup> According to the European Commission’s Report on Serbia, no progress was made with respect to the freedom of expression. The Commission’s experts underline that the cases of threats and violence against journalists are worrisome and point out that the exercise of freedom of expression without interference still needs to be further strengthened in practice.<sup>20</sup>

In the chapter on the fundamental rights, a large part is devoted to the organization of Europride in Serbia, on 17 September 2022, and points out that the holding of the event was uncertain until the very last moment. In this regard, it is assessed that the behaviour of the authorities was “contradictory”.<sup>21</sup>

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has had a sobering effect on the EU with respect to taking a common position on Russia. This kind of cohesion was unimaginable before the aggression. In that sense, the EU has become more demanding towards the candidate countries, including Serbia, which is the only European country that has not imposed sanctions against Russia (apart from Belarus).

17 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/evropski-parlament-narodnjaci-rusija-srbija/32078098.html>

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.



## RELATIONS WITH THE GREAT POWERS

While the world is undergoing fundamental changes, Belgrade is trying to use its “neutralist” policy to play in the space that is not entirely covered by anyone. President Aleksandar Vučić who is, in essence, the sole bearer of foreign policy, is trying to move within the framework of the previously devised policy of relying on “four pillars” (China, Russia, the United States and the European Union) and using their different interests. Such a balancing policy is increasingly complicated and difficult, given the growing rivalry between Beijing and Washington.

At the international level, Serbia still officially emphasizes EU membership as its commitment, but also directs its political energy toward all other key actors, including specifically Russia and China. In the new international context and the conflict between illiberal and liberal concepts, President Vučić sided with the illiberal one which, in essence, corresponds to the values cherished by Serbia. In this sense, Russia is the closest to Serbia – conservative values, Orthodoxy, disregard for individual rights and advocacy, above all else, for collective (exclusively Serbian) rights, disparagement of the rule of law and arbitrating at the will of the undisputed leader, abolition of media freedoms, marginalization of the civil sector and the like.

As is stated by Janusz Bugajski, the key component of Belgrade’s approach is its two-faced diplomacy. Although Serbia claims that it strives for EU membership and closer relations with NATO, it still strives to balance among four great powers – Russia, China, the United States and the European Union. Its aim is to profit from everyone, diplomatically, economically and militarily, thus imitating Yugoslavia’s non-alignment strategy after Tito’s breakaway from Stalin in 1948. It can also disguise and help the all-Serbian project if Belgrade gets support from the key international actors.

The only step made by Vučić at the international level was the signing of the Brussels Agreement (2013). For a while, it seemed

that the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina was heading towards the normalization of their relations until the appearance of a plan for the partition of Kosovo at one moment. This blocked the mutual relations and put the dialogue on stand-by. With the arrival of the Biden Administration in the White House (2021), which ruled out any border change in the Balkans, the dialogue was brought to the fore once again, with the West's clear intention to close the unfinished business in the Balkans.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine called Serbia's neutrality into question, especially with respect to the sincerity of its commitment to EU membership. Serbia's alignment with the EU's foreign policy, namely the imposition of sanctions against Russia, is a challenge that it must respond to as soon as possible.

Serbia's relations with the United States are especially important, because the United States is perceived as the only relevant factor in the region when it comes to reaching an agreement, either on peace or the normalization of relations with Kosovo.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Russian aggression against Ukraine has also raised the question concerning the future of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans, including Serbia. Although it is surrounded by the member states of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the region is only partially integrated into the Euro-Atlantic political and security structures.

The current constellation in Europe and Serbia itself provides a unique opportunity for “Serbia to finally avoid having its relations with Russia its strategic future”.

Serbia has been at a crossroads for several decades. The choice it makes will determine its direction, that is, whether Euro-Atlantic integration is its substantive orientation. This also anticipates a profound transformation of its society and political system, as well as its political will and promotion of the EU values on which the EU is founded. The commitment to EU membership also implies persistence in the creation of a social atmosphere of plurality, tolerance and the adoption of the concept of human rights as defined by the European Declaration on Human Rights.

A self-reflexive attitude towards the past and an objective culture of memory are the only way out of the spiral of violence and evil. In the opposite, society will remain trapped in the limbo of denial, hatred and moral decay.

Vučić's cooperation with the extreme right is unsustainable if Serbia opts for the European Union. One of the reasons for the strengthening of nationalism and the extreme right is the absence of a serious alternative that is ready to publicly promote its views and thus mobilize citizens. In the long run, this would create the possibility of rallying the pro-European option around the enlightened and liberal postulates.

As long as the political culture does not change, there will be no observance of the rule of law or change in the attitude towards plurality, tolerance and human rights. This implies a liberal educational and cultural policy in a broader sense and the

preservation of a secular framework that is also guaranteed by the Serbian Constitution.

In the current circumstances, it is necessary:

- To accept the European–American plan for Kosovo, which opens a European perspective to both Serbia and Kosovo.
- To have Serbia align its foreign policy with the EU and carry out internal reforms that will bring it closer to EU membership.
- To accept the regional reality after the breakup of Yugoslavia, which also includes all internationally recognized borders, but not only formally; this creates a prerequisite for the modern state of Serbia.
- To systematically work on the building of confidence in Serbia itself (towards minorities, political opponents and the like) and towards its neighbours; this is a prerequisite for the relaxation of relations and guarantee for their normalization.
- To implement the media laws and media strategy which will guarantee professional journalism and the freedom of critical thinking as a prerequisite for pluralism on the media scene.
- To embark on the reform of the judiciary in accordance with Chapters 23 and 24.
- To abandon the rigid nationalist model of culture in order to provide room for the creation of modern culture, which is a prerequisite for the emancipation of an individual and society. It is necessary to remove nationalist patterns from the educational system, teaching and textbooks, and start to prepare textbooks and teaching aids on the basis of the enlightened values.
- To address the position of minorities in an adequate way. Namely, according to a recent research by the Helsinki Committee, their position has worsened, primarily in southern Serbia and Sandžak, due to the lack of political

will; the consequences of wars and the creation of nation states have left the lasting effects on the position of all minorities.

- To promote national (not ethnic) identities and diversity as part of the work of minority policy institutions. Active relationships among state institutions, civil society and international organizations, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, are necessary.
- To carry out decentralization and strengthen local and regional self-governments both *de facto* and *de jure* in order to increase opportunities for minorities to exercise their rights.
- To revise the Action Plan for Minority Rights, because it did not fulfil the expectations of minorities. It should be adjusted to a new reality on the ground, including necessary and extensive consultations with minorities in order to take into account their proposals and suggestions.
- To preserve the secular framework of society, that is, to have the Serbian Orthodox Church act exclusively within the scope of its competence; to appreciate the role of religion and the Church, which has an important role in transitional societies, considering the fact that it has a communicative dimension, namely it also shows a specific measure of readiness for dialogue. The basis for dialogue should include human rights and human dignity – these are important messages which are also rooted in the Biblical tradition.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**

Reforms needed to speed up EU accession anticipate significant involvement on the part of the European Commission and certain EU member states in order to promote and boost these processes. Only by changing the social and cultural patterns (long-term project) will it be possible to expect substantive changes in the society that has adopted liberal values.

This implies the following:

The European Union, the United States and NATO should be actively involved in the consolidation of the region, primarily Serbia, in order to overcome ethno-territorial and ethno-national divisions as fast as possible.

Five EU member states should recognize Kosovo's independence as soon as possible because, in the opposite, the situation will work in favour of Belgrade's position, which still has a black-mailing potential.

In view of the fact that Kosovo is both a regional and European problem, it is necessary to provide the fastest and most efficient economic and financial support to it in order to revitalize the whole region.

It is necessary to support all civic initiatives and use their potentials to overcome ethnic divisions.

It is also necessary to introduce confidence-building measures and cherish the culture of memory which will be based on objective historical findings.

A regional fund for culture should be established in order to encourage alternative cultural spaces that exist, but have a huge financial deficit; culture is the most powerful tool for the mobilization of young generations, which will have a serious engagement in overcoming the past.

The Economic Commission and the Council of Europe should seriously focus on Serbia's Cultural Strategy that creates new generations based on ethno-values.

The Serbian Orthodox Church should be included in the regional dialogue, but based on the original Christian values.

Professional media should be supported as an important tool in creating a social atmosphere for the upcoming changes.

All electronic media, which produce a toxic atmosphere, promote war criminals and negative stereotypes about the neighbours and minorities, should be punished appropriately, including taking away their national frequency licences.

# POLITICAL CULTURE



# THE VICIOUS CIRCLE OF NATIONALISM

The first multi-party elections in Serbia were held in December 1990: the last in a series of multi-party elections among all the republics of the former Yugoslavia, as well as the last multi-party elections in all of Eastern Europe. It was an indicator of everything that would happen ten years later in Serbia – the refusal of the ruling party, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), to really accept the rules of a multi-party parliamentary democracy.

At the congress held in July 1990, the League of Communists of Serbia and the Socialist Alliance of Working People of Yugoslavia united into a single Socialist Party of Serbia and elected Slobodan Milošević as president. Unlike other communist parties of Eastern Europe, the League of Communists of Serbia did not even attempt to make democratic changes. The creation of SPS was only a formal transformation of the existing party, which changed its name and adopted a new program, which it never even formally adhered to.

This should always be kept in mind when talking about the 32-year period of the multi-party system in Serbia. The reason why Serbia had pseudo-party pluralism during the ten years of SPS's rule (1990–2000) is its previous transformation into a strongly nationalist and totalitarian party. In September (23 and 24) of 1987, the 8th Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia was held, where Dragiša Pavlović, the president of the Belgrade SKS organization, was dismissed from membership in that body. That was the real introduction to the victory of the extremely nationalist wing, led by Slobodan Milošević.

Multiparty elections in Serbia were held late, which can be considered solely a result of the pressure of external events, and not a democratic transformation of the political system in Serbia. In the elections in December 1990, SPS won a convincing victory. For that party, it was final confirmation that its nationalist transformation was a successful method of staying in power, and years later it would successfully hold on to power with a strongly nationalist rhetoric. This was particularly emphasized towards the beginning of the war in the former Yugoslavia in 1991. This became the ideological foundation of the war and the idea of “protecting the Serbian people from a new genocide”.

The following facts explain the political system in Serbia after 1990:

1. The League of Communists of Serbia became an extremely nationalist party in 1987;
2. The first multi-party elections were organized in December 1990, after much hesitation and under pressure from events in Eastern Europe;
3. SPS, which never accepted or really wanted a multi-party political system, won convincingly in those elections;
4. In 1991, the war started, and SPS became the ideological leader of that war;
5. SPS used a clear narrative that only it is the bearer of state interests, and that all other parties are “traitors and mercenaries”.

Realistically, since 1991, Serbia has only had hints of a multi-party system, because through media control, falsification of election results (especially in Kosovo), and a complete monopoly over public communication, it became a specific example of a one-party dictatorship.

Only in 2000, following the victory of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) in the elections, did Serbia become an actual pluralistic political system. The media opened up, no one questioned election results, Serbia in principle wanted European

integration, so laws started being adapted to the corresponding laws in the EU.

However, Serbia faced enormous issues while trying to critically discuss the politics and results of Milošević's rule. Already within the ruling coalition DOS (1990–1993), there were efforts to prevent this debate. It was a very conscious attempt, not only to absolve the previous government of major crimes, but also an attempt to preserve significant parts of that kind of politics. The majority of Serbia has never faced the consequences of its ten-year politics. This created the basis for the return of the old regime.

The ideology of aggressive nationalism is never truly pluralistic. It always rests on the assumption: strong leader – strong party. Nationalist fervor does not recognize other political ideas, they are always a “distraction”, especially in times of war. And this is the basic misconception of nationalists in Serbia: it is impossible to really have a pluralistic political system while public life is completely dominated by nationalist ideas. The return of nationalists to power in Serbia after 2000 was therefore only a matter of time. Especially because the Democratic Party, which, while in power, interrupted a serious conversation about the character of Milošević's regime and about war crimes. In order to stay in power, it signed an agreement on “historic reconciliation” with the completely unreformed SPS. This interrupted any serious analysis of the consequences of the wars of the 1990s and Serbia's role in them. It was left to a number of NGOs and a few media outlets to keep the discussion going.

Therefore, the victory of Tomislav Nikolić, former vice president of Vojislav Šešelj's Serbian Radical Party (SRS), in the 2012 presidential elections, was not unexpected. In 2008, Nikolić founded the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), taking over a large part of Šešelj's voters. The party retained more or less the same program, as well as the same extremely aggressive rhetoric. That party has been in power since 2012. Regardless of its declarative pro-EU orientation, it was a signal that the political scene was returning to the 1990s, but adapted to new historical circumstances.

Roughly speaking, the political scene in Serbia can be divided into three ten-year phases. The first lasted from 1990 to 2000 and was characterized by aggressive nationalism and support for the war, and indifference to the human sacrifices it brought about. The second lasted from 2000 to 2012 and was characterized by an increasingly strong decline in the democratic capacity of society, the return of nationalist rhetoric and the gradual rehabilitation of political goals from the 1990s. Finally, the third, which we are living in now, represents a return to the 1990s, with the same rhetoric about the “hostile West”, the endangering Serbia’s national interests, heightened awareness and frustration over the lost war in Kosovo, and a pro-Russian dimension much more pronounced than it was during Milošević’s time.

When the current political scene of Serbia is analyzed more carefully, one can see a striking similarity to that of the 1990s. Its characteristics are:

1. The government almost completely controls most of the media, both print and electronic;
2. The rhetoric of the “treacherous parties” (opposition parties), which are to blame for a lack of “Serbian unity”, under the leadership of the government, of course, has returned;
3. The infallible “national leader” who continuously works and cares for the people has come to the fore once again;
4. The Kosovo myth has fully returned as a criterion of patriotism, and great efforts are being made to relativize the Kumanovo defeat and its consequences;
5. Very strong pro-Russian rhetoric, with a Putin cult as the main pillar of Serbia’s foreign policy;
6. The emergence of the phrase “Serbian World” as a substitute for Milošević’s “struggle for Yugoslavia”. By the way, it is a copy of the Russian term “Russian World”;
7. Highly emphasized support for pro-Serb parties in Montenegro and for Milorad Dodik in the Republika Srpska, in Bosnia and Herzegovina;

8. Almost complete control of the Serbian community in Kosovo.

It is quite clear that, if these are indeed the main characteristics of SNS politics, then not only democracy and the free expression of political will in Serbia are endangered, but there are also no real conditions for political pluralism. The international assessment is that Serbia is a “hybrid democracy”, but it seems that the situation is even worse. Serbia once again has no real political pluralism, it has *de facto* become a party state in the real sense of the word. With the exception of the period from 2000 to 2012, it went back to what it often was during its history, excluding the first and second Yugoslavia, although it should be taken into account that the second Yugoslavia was declaratively a party state. Of course, difficult questions remain as to why Serbia so easily lost its pluralistic political character, which now does not exist as it should.

We have offered an answer – as long as Serbia has nationalism,<sup>22</sup> if not as its only, then certainly as its most important political option, a real, plural political system will not be possible. Serbia faces a difficult task in dealing with the wars it fought in the 1990s and their consequences. Not a single country that emerged from the horrors of nationalist wars could develop politically without making a balance sheet of those wars. Serbia did this only partially. Its democratic future depends on this work and a critical rejection of its war goals.

22 Vjekoslav Perica: “Serbian nationalism in this region is undeniably the strongest and most extreme form of nationalism... it was and remains the greatest danger for all peoples in this region”, *Večernji list*, 18 March 2023.

**CULTURE**

# IN THE SERVICE OF A NATIONALIST IDEOLOGY

In the “2013 Report on the State of Human Rights in Serbia” issued by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, it was stated that a bad situation in the cultural sector was primarily caused by the “historical upheaval of the 1990s”, but was also contributed by “ideological (nationalist) mainstream, certainly one of the major causes of the catastrophe impacting the entire region”. With the consolidation of the power of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which took all levers of power into its hands and captured both the society and the state, this process has escalated still further. In order to make the current situation in the field of culture understandable, it is necessary to go somewhat back to the past, identify the key processes that caused the current problems, analyze the main documents dealing with culture and outline the basic patterns of the cultural policy created by the Progressist government.

## SERBIAN CULTURAL SPACE

Serbia's cultural policy was defined in the official documents that were adopted during the past years. A prominent place among them is held by the Charter on the Serbian Cultural Place, which was signed by the then Ministers of Culture of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, Vladan Vukosavljević and Natalija Trivić. The adoption of the Charter was announced in *Večernje Novosti* under the celebratory title "Cultural Charter for the Unification of Serbia and Srpska!", while the signing of the Charter was covered by the media using the appropriate titles "The Unification of Serbian Culture" and "Serbian Cultural Space – One and Indivisible".

The goal of the Charter is to treat the Serbs living outside Serbia as part of the unified ethno-cultural Serbian corpus. Here one can observe the clear echoes of the idea of the Greater Serbia project aspiring to unite all Serbs. A unified cultural space is a temporary substitute for a unified political space. The Charter says that "the borders of a cultural space cannot be confined to the borders of a political, that is, state space". Therefore, the Ministers express "a natural aspiration towards a mutually agreeable cultural and educational policy". The Charter consciously ignores the fact that the Serbs living outside Serbia are the citizens of other countries which also have the ministry of culture that defines its cultural policy and that Belgrade has no authority to define the cultural activities of the citizens of other countries.

The clear ideological agenda of the Charter is reflected in numerous articles of this document. So, for example, Article 7 reads as follows: "There is a strong tendency to impose isolated or made-up interethnic conflict events, which took place in the past or more recently, as mandatory narratives in which the Serbian side is unconditionally negatively presented through revisionist discourse and without a deeper justification". It is not difficult to interpret a slightly coded language. The essence lies in the observation of the war crimes committed by the Serbian forces during the 1990s



as isolated cases and incidents, and in the denial of the existence of an organized and carefully planned Greater Serbia project that led to wars.

The nationalist interpretation of the recent past and the abolition of the intellectual elite from its responsibility for the creation of an ideological war project is only one of the imperatives of the Charter. This is perfectly followed up with the promotion of self-isolation and parochial approach to “foreign” influences. The Charter points to the need to prevent “the danger of falling into the position of a cultural colony”, because “the experience with a generous openness to others has shown that it is necessary to take a different, sober approach to this issue”. In addition, there are an unavoidable reproduction of the narrative about endangerment, which forms the very core of resentment nationalism, and assigning culture the status of a guardian of national identity and survival. The Charter points out that the interests in the cultural identity area should not be overlooked, both for the sake of national survival and for the sake of further development”.

The ideas promoted by the Charter as an official document are not new. They have been a part of the nationalist discourse for decades and now have only obtained state coverage and justification. The idea of a single Serbian cultural space has been launched as a justification for the political and state unification of all Serbs into one state. When this idea was militarily defeated, it took a back-up position, trying to save the pledge for some future political and military unification attempt in cultural unity. In this sense, the Charter is the legacy of the ideas presented at a scientific conference titled “A Serbian Spiritual Space”, which was organized by the Academy of Sciences and Arts of the Republic of Srpska and held in Bijeljina in late October 1998.

The Charter theses were subsequently elaborated at a scientific meeting titled “Serbian Cultural Space: Organization, Problems, Values”, which was held at Matica Srpska in Novi Sad in 2019, and was opened by the then Minister of Culture, Vladan Vukosavljević. The papers were presented by the stalwarts of the

idea of greater Serbia and their like-minded peers: Matija Bećković, Vasilije Krestić, Dragoslav Bokan, Milovan Danajlić, Milo Lompar, Miloš Kovačević, Veljko Brborić, Jovan Delić, Miro Vuksanović, Gorko Đogo, Časlav Koprivica and other nationally minded intellectuals. The Charter was made official as a document on the establishment of the “Serbian world”, a modern version of “Greater Serbia” in the new, postwar circumstances.

The Charter is implemented not only in the cultural sphere, but also in the educational sphere. Since the school year 2021/2022, Serbia and the Republic of Srpska have been standardizing the curricula for primary school children from Serbia and the smaller Bosnia and Herzegovina entity. Belgrade’s Institute for the Advancement of Education and Upbringing has published “Cherishing the Culture of the Serbian People and Developing National Identity”, while the Republican Pedagogical Institute of the Republic of Srpska in Banjaluka has published “The Preservation of the National Identity and Values in the Context of Elementary Education and Upbringing”. The standardization of the curricula in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska has also been anticipated in the long-announced “Declaration on the Survival of the Serbian People”. The Declaration has never been adopted and the Charter serves as a kind of replacement document.

The standardization of the curricula, including the national group of subjects, the Serbian language, history, geography and study of nature and society, is carried out at the direct initiative of Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik with the aim of defending and protecting the national identity. This is why the manuals insist on the mandatory national identity elements such as the Cyrillic alphabet, Orthodoxy, Saint Sava, the Nemanjić dynasty, folk customs, gusle, epic, patriotism, heroic poems. The dogma that national identity is one and unique, not plural and multi-layered, dynamic and changeable is placed within the teaching contents.

## THE DEFENCE AND PROTECTION OF THE CYRILIC ALPHABET

The spirit of the “Serbian world”, which pervades the Charter, also extends to other fields such as national holiday policy and cultural legislation. Within this project the Assembly passed the Law on the Use of the Serbian Language in Public Life and the Preservation of the Cyrillic Alphabet. As it was announced, this law was passed symbolically on the Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and National Flag, the holiday adopted a few days earlier, for which 15 September was chosen – the date when the breakthrough of the Thessaloniki front began in 1915. On the same day, 15 September 2021, the Assembly of the Republic of Srpska passed an almost identical law.

The Law stipulates the expansion of the circle of the entities that are obliged to use the Cyrillic alphabet: government bodies and all business entities that operate with a majority share of public capital. The Cyrillic alphabet is now mandatory for the announcements of professional associations and public services, while cultural events must have a Cyrillic logo. The Law envisages the possibility of introducing tax reliefs for businesses that decide to use the Cyrillic alphabet in their operations, which will be subsequently specified by tax laws. The Law openly discriminates against the Latin alphabet, giving the Cyrillic alphabet a privileged position, about which the expert public, especially notable linguist Ranko Bugarski, has been warning for years.

The proponents of the new law do not hide the greater state motives for its adoption. In an interview with *Politika*, Professor Dr Sreto Tanasić, President of the Committee for the Standardization of the Serbian Language of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU), has openly emphasized: “With the adoption of the law, we have finally got a situation that the state has stated that the Serbian language with its alphabet, Cyrillic, is important and central to the preservation and protection of national and cultural identity. Together with the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Serbian

language is one of the most important factors in the situation when the Serbian people do not live in one state.” The same ideological paradigm is present in advocating a single cultural space of all Serbs wherever they live. The law was adopted after a long campaign for the protection of the Cyrillic alphabet in the media and other field actions. The *Politika* daily newspaper organized an action called “Save the Serbian language” during which the texts of nationalist linguists and intellectuals were regularly published. The action was organized under the financial patronage of the Serbian Ministry of Culture. *Večernje novosti* had a special column titled “Why the State Does not Protect the Cyrillic Alphabet” with a view to putting pressure on the Minister of Culture, so that the National Assembly finally passes the mentioned Law. The Serbian Writers Association (UKS) launched the “Language Forum” under the linguistic-hegemonistic slogan “Where our word resonates our country is also there”. The SANU Committee for the Standardization of the Serbian Language went public with the position that the language spoken by Bosniaks can only be called Bosniak, and by no means Bosnian. The Dobrica Erić Society for the Defence of Cyrillic focused on Latin inscriptions on Belgrad’s institutions, exerting pressure to have the inscriptions in Cyrillic in which they succeeded in the case of the Belgrade Cultural Centre.

The argumentation of linguists who put “patriotism” before science has shown that this is about a clear ideological programme. The media campaigns for the defence of the Cyrillic alphabet have been dominated by the views that the Cyrillic alphabet is the “Serbian spiritual vertical”, that the Serbian people – without the law on the protection of the native alphabet – will allow anyone to rummage through their past “as they please”, while the Serbian spiritual and cultural space is identified with the area dominated by Cyrillic. The defenders of the Cyrillic alphabet have persistently denied the existence of the Bosnian and Montenegrin languages, and have called for the unity of Serbian politicians and philologists “in order to preserve the unity of the Serbian people, regardless of whether they live in the same or in different countries”.

The fetishist approach to one of the two Serbian alphabets, which should be equal, shows that it is not about linguistic issues, but about the nationalist ideological matrix. Ideologists treat culture and its artifacts as the instruments of the “Serbian world”. The very language used by the defenders of the eternally endangered Serbian culture and the Serbian alphabet, phrases, syntagms and notions point to the ideological nature of their views. Their speech abounds with the phrases such as *cherishing of a victorious spirit, readiness for a continuous struggle, the struggle for the preservation of Serbian identity and sovereignty, the struggle for the survival of the endangered Serbian language, Serbian national and philological interests, national homogenization, Serbian national unity, linguistic interests of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, concern about one’s nation* and the like. Considering the language twists and turns that befit a fortress mentality, one gets an impression that linguistics is a branch of military doctrine and not the science of language. Therefore, it is not surprising that culture, language and the protection of the Cyrillic alphabet are treated as security issues in the official documents of the Republic of Serbia, namely in the Ministry of Defence’s Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia. The Strategy announces that “the measures will be taken in order to strengthen culture as a cohesive and developmental factor of society and to protect and develop the Serbian language and the Cyrillic alphabet”.

When the spirit of the law is followed, the creation of cultural contents inevitably leads to the production of kitsch. The first Cyrillic Park was opened in Bajina Bašta in May 2022. It consists of white benches in the form of open books, primers and reading books with Cyrillic inscriptions. Next to them, gardeners made a flower arrangement in the shape of the Cyrillic capital letter “Р”. In early November 2022, the Board of Directors of the Crvena Zvezda Sports Society launched the project “I am a Zvezda fan, I write in Cyrillic, I root for Zvezda, I breathe for Zvezda”. As they say, the goal of the project is to “further strengthen the unity and togetherness of all clubs, supporters and rooters with what we are: Our language is Serbian and our alphabet is Cyrillic”. On 6 November

2022, Belgrade Waterfront also joined the affirmation of the Cyrillic alphabet by marking Vuk Karadžić's birth anniversary: his catchphrase "Write as you speak, read as it is written!" was written on the Belgrade Tower with a laser.

## **CULTURAL REGRESSION STRATEGY**

One of the fundamental documents of the Progressist cultural policy is also the "Strategy for the Cultural Development of the Republic of Serbia 2020–2029", which was adopted by the Serbian Assembly in February 2020. The basic determinants of the Strategy are in perfect agreement with the spirit and the letter of the aforementioned documents. The Strategy is also committed to the "preservation and connection of the Serbian cultural space". The measure "Cherishing the Serbian language and Cyrillic alphabet and connecting the Serbian cultural space" is defined as a special goal. If the Greater Serbia project, whose planners are mostly renowned cultural figures from the SANU and UKS, had borne fruit, it would not have been necessary to connect the Serbian cultural space, because it would be within the same state.

Apart from these assignments, emphasis has been placed on the thesis that Serbs, everywhere in the world, regardless of where they live, consider Kosovo and Metohija "their spiritual cradle and sacred place of suffering", and that "this collective feeling must be respected as part of the right of every nation to cherish its tradition". In listing the dimensions of Serbian culture, which is rather arbitrary, the Kosovo identity policy is further strengthened. The mentioned dimensions include the "heroic or freedom-loving" dimension, that is, the "Kosovo covenant preserved in folk poetry and church tradition". Announcing the adoption of the Strategy, Minister Vukosavljević has defined this document as a "cultural constitution", practically the highest legal act for artists and other cultural workers which will be binding, like any constitution, on everyone dealing with culture in the area under the jurisdiction of the aforementioned act. In addition to Serbian citizens, all ethnic

Serbs throughout the world fall under the jurisdiction of the Strategy as the “bearers of Serbian cultural identity”.

The Strategy also contains the ideological guidelines for cultural production that will be institutionally supported by the Ministry of Culture. Special attention will be devoted to the works dealing with “the genocide of the Serbian people in the 20th century” as well as all other sufferings of the Serbian people. Insistence on scapegoating and auto-victimization has been the crucial part of the paradigm of resentment nationalism for decades. Therefore, it is also necessary to ensure its duration through state institutions and official cultural policy documents. Film has been chosen as the most suitable medium for promoting the resentment narrative due to its popularity with the audience and its receptivity.

In the year when the Strategy was adopted, the film “Dara of Jasenovac”, based on Nataša Drakulić’s script and directed by Predrag Antonijević, was also made. It was the result of state-sponsored cultural programming and made at the initiative of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. Jasenovac is the crucial place of sacrificial mythology, while the abuse of the victims of the Ustasha genocide has been the standard feature of the nationalist narrative since the 1980s. This film was also made from such a viewpoint. Although film critics evaluated it as “an artistically and technically weak and hardly watchable piece of propaganda”, it was still chosen as the Serbian candidate for the Oscar contrary to the rules. Negative reviews in American magazines only served as an additional reason for auto-victimization: it was interpreted as another “anti-Serb conspiracy”. The script writer received the Order of the Karađorđe Star of the Third Degree from the President, and the team is now preparing itself for the further screening of national myths; this time it is about the remake of the film “The Battle of Kosovo”.

In 2022, the film “The Tempest” directed by Miloš Radunović was finished and had its premiere in January 2023. The film fits into the mentioned martyrological paradigm and specific culture



of remembrance, as promoted by Progressist politicians and other nationalist actors of society who are not linked to the government. In the centre of this special culture of remembrance is a dogma that the Serbian people have always and everywhere suffered and that they have never committed any crime. By insisting on the suffering of Serbs both in the earlier periods of their history and during the wars of the 1990s it is attempted to hide the disastrous effects of Greater Serbia policy, which led to aggression against the neighbouring countries, countless war crimes, ethnic cleansing and genocide. The mentioned documents do not forbid artists from dealing with the dark, hidden pages of Serbian history, but they clearly show that such efforts will be met with condemnation, not with understanding and support.

In comparison with other cultural aspects, a step further was made in the field of memorialization. The Law on War Memorials actually prohibits the erection of monuments dedicated to the victims of the crimes committed by Serbian forces. Article 19 of the Law stipulates that a proposal for the construction or erection of a war memorial must contain, among other things, "the description of the event that is in compliance with the achievements of the Serbian liberation wars". For the law makers there exist only the liberation wars and the Serbian liberation army. Different contents cannot reach the public space in the form of a monument. The official explanation for the adoption of such a law clearly underlines this statement by asserting that "one of the goals of the Law on War Memorials is to take record of all memorials in order to draw the public attention to the suffering of the Serbian people throughout history". Any critical review of the past is left out, while the nationalist narrative about "us" as the "eternal victim" has been cemented. Naturally, others are always criminals, murderers, abusers and haters of the Serbian people.



## IDEOLOGICAL CONTINUITY OF CULTURAL POLICY

The basic ideas of the Progressivist cultural policy are not new. They have been present in the Serbian public for decades, only now they have taken an institutionalized form through official state documents. The most important topoi of today's cultural policy can already be found in the 1970s, in Dobrica Ćosić's tetralogy "A Time of Death". So we read about the exceptionality of the Serbian people, especially when it comes to historical suffering; permanent encirclement by enemies and the struggle for survival as the only content of life; general anti-Serb conspiracy by international actors, especially those in the West; Yugoslav unification as a fatal mistake, as a political project that only brought harm to Serbs; self-victimization of the Serbian people who are victims in all historical situations; a narrative about domestic traitors and foreign mercenaries; the stereotypes of other nations and confessions, which always pose a threat; viewing the other and the different exclusively as an enemy; determination for war and suffering as a determination for the "heavenly kingdom" within the scope of the preservation of the Kosovo covenant.

During the 1980s, these commonplaces of national ideology were elaborated in the works of Danko Popović, Vasilije Krestić, Matija Bećković, Milovan Vitezović, Milorad Ekmečić, Momo Kapor, Brana Crnčević, Veselin Đuretić and hundreds of others. The ideas and programmes brought by the nationalist intellectual circles into public life have formed the dominant state of consciousness in Serbia: the idea of all Serbs living in one state and a single Serbian spiritual space, which also includes some other countries besides Serbia; the myth about Serbs who win in war and lose in peace; the idea of creating Greater Serbia, the renewal of the Kosovo myth; narratives about the endangerment of Serbs living in the neighbouring republics; auto-victimization and the cult of the victim; revisionist narratives about the Chetniks as fighters against fascism; the myth about the uniqueness of the Serbian people and

their superiority in relation to others; the myth about Yugoslavia as a destructive creation for the interests of the Serbian people; the inward-looking tendency and provincialization of culture.

From the SANU and UKS these ideas have reached out to media, while the Slobodan Milošević regime has used them as a fuel to usurp and stay in power, incite inter-ethnic hatred and prepare for war. The toxic radiation of those pernicious and anti-civilizational ideas continues to this day and their role in shaping the worldview of new generations is the most terrible legacy of the Milošević era. These ideas exert influence not only on citizens, but also on decision makers, that is, politicians; in fact, almost all important politicians, both in power and in the opposition, have been formed on the basis of the ideas coming from the nationalist intellectual circles. At the same time, the destructive ideas originating in the cultural sphere have been dominant in shaping Serbia's cultural policy both in the past and today.

The national programme of the 1980s has been minimally updated for the new era due to the need to provide answers for the war defeat and responsibility for war crimes and genocide. The suffering of Serbs in the wars of the 1990s has been used as a fuel for a new round of scapegoating and auto-victimization, while at the same time imposing an unofficial ban on speaking truthfully about the past and the obligation to deny crimes and reject the confrontation with the past. The ten-year rule of the forces that had taken an active part in the joint criminal enterprise has led to the installation of all crucial ideologemes of the nationalist programme into the official cultural policy.

## **IN THE SERVICE OF THE NATION**

In such an ideological configuration, culture is assigned the role of the servant of national identity, which is experienced as something completely essentialist, as an unchanging given. The importance of culture is only seen in the preservation of such a static and petrified collective identity. This idea was most succinctly expressed by Slobodan Vladušić, a university professor and award-winning

writer, in his polemic about the NIN Award in the *Pečat* magazine in early 2020: “Serbian literature is a component of cultural identity just as cultural identity is a component of national identity”.

The belief that culture exists to serve the nation is widespread in our region. When nationalism became the dominant view of the world, this idea became an axiom and unquestioned dogma and, frequently, an official cultural policy. Thus, the former Serbian Minister of Culture, Vladan Vukosavljević, speaks every now and then about the “importance of culture for the preservation of the national identity of the Serbian people”, that “Kosovo and Metohija is the core of the Serbian cultural identity” and that the preservation of the cultural and national identity is the primary “task of every nation that does not want to disappear in the vortex of historical changes characteristic of modern civilization”.

Such an ideological cultural mobilization has led to logical consequences in recent years. “Velika Srbija”, the publishing house of Vojislav Šešelj has been in a prime position at the Book Fair for four years. The stand where the publishing houses E-book and Karpos had exhibited their annual production, has been assigned by the Belgrade Fair management to the publishing house of the man who was convicted of crimes against humanity. Such a decision was not surprising in view of the fact that at that time the Board of the Belgrade Fair was headed by Zoran Avramović, a member of the Serbian Progressive Party in charge of special cultural operations. In the 1990s, Avramović was a member of Šešelj’s Serbian Radical Party and is now a member of the Presidency of the Serbian Progressive Party.

At the Book Fair, the Odbrana Media Centre, a specialized institution of the Public Relations Administration of the Ministry of Defence, in charge of journalistic, information and publishing activities, regularly promotes the works by the convicted war criminals such as Nebojša Pavković, Vinko Pandurević and Vladimir Lazarević. In addition to the Book Fair, the Odbrana Media Centre also presents the books by war criminals at the Serbian Army Home in the centre of Belgrade. In April 2022, Dragoljub Ojdanić’s book “Directing a Humanitarian Disaster” was also presented there.

State institutions participate *en masse* in the denial of crimes, the glorification of criminals and the presentation of their books. Upon his release from prison, Veselin Šljivančanin was co-opted into the Main Board of the Serbian Progressive Party, published several books and has been on a book tour ever since. The presentation of his books has been organized throughout Serbia, in numerous cultural homes, libraries, cultural centres and other cultural institutions. Serbia's entire cultural infrastructure is involved in the rehabilitation of war criminals, popularization of their works and spread of a false image of the past. The works by this and other war criminals can also be found in dozens of libraries throughout Serbia. They have become a part of library holdings or, in other words, something of permanent value that should be preserved and made available to as many readers as possible.

The policy of literary awards speaks perhaps most eloquently about the prevalent understanding that culture is valuable only if it is in the service of nationalist ideology, while aesthetic criteria are pushed into the background. This new ideological eligibility emerges from the countless announcements of literary juries in which the reasons for a literary award are explained. Critics, for example, believe that the work is worthy of inclusion in the canon because it represents "a sincere cry of an individual over the collective fate of the Serbian people", or because one can hear "the hereditary tones of the Kosovo pain" in it, or if it manifests "a threat to the survival and uncertain salvation of the nation to which we unconditionally belong". Poetry books and novels have been declared valuable because they contain "archetypal layers of the Serbian national being", "the idea of the heavenly people", "the spirit of national culture", "Serbian conciliatory self-knowledge", or "the collective self of the Serbian people and their culture". According to them, what makes a writer great is his role of "the trustee of the Serbian thought", who advocates "the right of his people to survive". Therefore, he is inevitably entitled to "his direct registration in the national ear and collective memory".

## THE FOUNDATION FOR SERBIAN PEOPLE AND STATE

In addition to the Ministry of Culture, the ruling establishment has formed several other power centres that shape the cultural life in Serbia. One such institution is the Foundation for Serbian People and State which was established at President Vučić's initiative. The Foundation has been established by the Serbian Progressive Party and carries out various activities including, among other things, the organization of round tables and publishing of books and the *Napredak* magazine. Priority in its publishing activity is given to the works of party officials and intellectuals close to the ruling party. The *Napredak* magazine mostly publishes the works by the "patriotic" intelligentsia dealing mostly with the basic dogmas of the dominant ideology. One of its contributors is the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Serbia, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko.

In early July 2022, the Foundation for Serbian People and State organized a round table on the topic "The Role of Culture in the Renewal and Expansion of the National Spirit" with the participation of the Progressist cultural elite: Dejan Savić, Svetislav Božić, Aleksandar Gatalica, Zoran Avramović and Selimir Radulović. Apart from the panegyric to the president of their party and the state and calls to resistance to the Western civilization and "certain layers of the NATO pact militaristic energy", the participants also expressed the need for a critical analysis of anti-national meanings and public criticism of "the state financing of the works with an emphasized anti-national function". Those acts that "attack Serbdom" should be targeted by the future guardians of the nation. Serbdom implies the nationalist construction of national identity and the proclaimed inviolability of the proclaimed sanctities, such as the nation, the state and the mythical image of the past. In other words, there is a call for the censorship of unsuitable and unpatriotic contents. This is about the same what the "Cultural Front of Russia" has been doing since the beginning of the invasion against Ukraine. The goal is to establish total control over culture and suppress any different opinion.

The logic of totalitarian nationalist exclusivity is clear: the homogenization of the nation under the umbrella-type national identity implies the expulsion of every dissenting voice, especially the one that is critical of the ruling taboos and totems. The practice of ritual targeting of critical individuals is the basic content of public speech in the regime media under the rule of the Serbian Progressive Party. Hate and defamation campaigns are mostly reserved for the representatives of the opposition and socially engaged intellectuals, but may also include cultural workers, if necessary.

## **TOTALITARIAN LOGIC OF EXCLUSION**

The conclusions of the round table held by the Foundation for Serbian People and State are only an attempt to institutionalize the persecution of a minority opinion and the abolition of pluralism. The hunt after the so-called auto-chauvinists has been going on in the media and gatherings of “patriotic” intellectuals for years. At times, it also had on an institutional dimension. Thus, the Faculty of Political Science hosted a meeting titled “Why We Hate Ourselves – About Serbophobia and Auto-fascism”, while Letopis Matice Srpske organized a round table on the topic “Auto-chauvinism and Cosmopolitanism”. Auto-chauvinism implies every critical thought about one’s own nation and state, especially the reminder of the dark period of the 1990s, aggression, wars and crimes of the Serbian military, paramilitary and police forces. According to Zoran Avramović, auto-chauvinism is “the opposite of patriotism”, “auto-chauvinists openly advocate the adoption of all values, standards and ideas coming from the West”. Anti-Western rhetoric, increasingly present in our public discourse, fully coincides with the official Russian propaganda, only this phenomenon is called Russophobia in the Vladimir Putin regime.

The most radical action to exclude a different opinion and view of culture and art was carried out at the beginning of 2020, just before the jury announced the winner of the NIN Award for the book of the year, Saša Ilić for his book “Dog and Double Bass”.

A group of the writers close to the regime launched a boycott of the NIN Award. At first, the award itself was boycotted. Later on, the boycott turned into a hunt for the laureate in a well-coordinated action by numerous institutions where they were distributed. Thus, the Public Service, Institute for Literature and Art, Andrićgrad, Ministry of Culture, Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, Faculties of Philosophy in Novi Sad, Niš and Nikšić, Laguna Publishing Company, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and Matrica Srpska joined in a frenzy of incredible proportions. The award winner came under fire due to the thematization of the recent war time in his novel as well as his criticism of the nationalist cultural model that has been going on for a few decades. The jury and the NIN Award itself also came under attack.

The boycott eventually provoked a reaction from the establishment, which introduced the Belgrade Winner Award to rival the NIN Award. A similar scenario was repeated the following year, when the NIN Award went to Svetislav Basara's novel "Counter-endorphin". The award winners were accused of various forms of "anti-Serb activity" and "the betrayal of Serbdom", while the jury was accused of the lack of competence and revitalization of Yugoslavism. At the beginning of 2022, a campaign against the NIN Award, which threatened to become traditional, was not carried out, although nothing was changed in the meantime. Moreover, the award for the novel of the year was given to the book that is a poem, not a novel. However, the author belonged to the circle of "nationally responsible" writers, so that the principled boycotters made an exception.

## **A FALSE EUROPEAN IMAGE**

In addition to the Foundation for Serbian People and State, the ruling establishment also formed the Council for Creative Industries. It is about the body formed by Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. The official goal of the Council for Creative Industries is "to enable the even faster development of that sector, which already contributes more to the national economy than



some traditional sectors". In practice, however, it has been shown that the Council serves for the inclusion of those who do not have a nationalist ideological legitimacy and were often critical of the dominant ideological matrix in the past, but now show the readiness to cooperate with the regime, in the sphere of privileged actors. This gave the members of the Council access to the circle of the privileged and everything that goes with that status: the production of series for RTS, exhibitions, theatre directing, board positions, staffing in cultural institutions, clan-like bringing of their people to high positions and the like.

At the beginning, the Council for Creative Industries was to some extent a counterpart to the Ministry of Culture and their responsibilities often overlapped. However, over time they have been fused, especially when Minister Vladan Vukosavljević has been replaced by Maja Gojković. The Council for Creative Industries has the role of showing a different image of Serbia to the world when the ruling party needs it.

A similar role was also played by the management of the Exit Foundation within the scope of the project "European Capital of Culture" (ECC), which lasted throughout 2022 in Novi Sad. It also took part in the organization of the programmes that were not in line with the dominant ideological matrix, but were not critical of it either. It was about a series of festival events that did not leave a lasting mark. It is not necessary for the entire area of culture to be filled with nationalist contents, especially when it is about a manifestation that should present Serbia to the world in a slightly better light. A different opinion was also allowed as long as it did not rock the boat, in accordance with the instructions given by Zoran Avramović at the mentioned round table: different forms of culture are welcome; it is important that they are "not engaged and that they are not contrary to the current national feeling".

The organization of the event "European Capital of Culture" served as an excuse for the city authorities to remove a true oasis of alternative culture in the Chinatown, created by self-organized artists, citizens and art lovers – at the high-level initiative.



While the CCE showed the supposedly European image of Serbian culture, behind the scene a real Progressivist reality unfolded, in which the activists of the ruling party repainted the walls of the unvanquished city districts in the colours of the Serbian flag, while neo-Nazis destroyed the places where anti-fascists used to gather. All this was done under the protection of the ruling establishment. While the exhibitions, forums, concerts and other programmes were taking place, the city authorities tried to erect a revisionist monument to the “innocent victims of 1944/45”, including numerous members of quisling movements, that is, fascists who participated in the Novi Sad Raid.

The essential problems of the Progressist cultural model are probably most apparent in the case of the ECC and Provincial Prime Minister Igor Mirović. At the beginning of 2022, when he proudly announced the beginning of the ECC project, he (a poet in his spare time) also read his poem “Our City” in which he proclaimed Novi Sad to be “cultural Babel”. A few months later, Mirović received the Mother Angelina Despotess Award for his latest collection of poems “Light in the Lighthouse” from the Banat Cultural Centre, an institution whose work largely depends on Mirović. The award-winning book also contains the poem “Lumps of Vukovar”, in which the poet mentioned when and where it was written: “Negoslavci, November 1991”. At the time he was writing this poem, Vukovar fell and a crime was committed at Ovčara. Also, during the siege, the headquarters of the Yugoslav People’s Army and Serbian paramilitary forces as well as a camp where prisoners were tortured, raped and beaten to death were stationed. At that time, Mirović was an official of the Serbian Radical Party and something of gruesome reality revealed by the poet in his poem is accidentally also revealed to us.

However, “cultural Babel”, Serbia’s made-up image and concern about national identity, as well as other elements of the Progressist cultural policy hide the suppressed reality of the 1990s, the suffering of innocent people, the devastated country and the dark past that the official state culture condemns to oblivion. The

discrepancy between the proclaimed reality and the repressed trauma for which culture is largely responsible, represents the space where the true trauma of contemporary Serbian culture unfolds.

## **A RIGID CULTURAL MODEL**

Apart from those listed, culture in Serbia has plenty of other problems. In fact, everything that was listed as problematic in the report by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia ten years ago still has an unresolved status: from the insufficient budget earmarked for culture, through the lack of magazines, to the insufficient media support, lowering of the artistic criteria, non-transparent and frequently belated contests and absence of state support to regional cooperation, to the neglect of the role of the education system in the promotion of culture. The only thing done in the meantime was the completion of the renovation of the National Museum and the Contemporary Art Museum, which were reopened to the public.

However, in order to embark on solving numerous decades-long cultural problems, it is first necessary to resolve the basic problem – a rigid nationalist cultural model that was imposed on Serbian society as early as the 1980s and shackles all creative forces. Such a cultural model does not enable a normal cultural development. Instead, it suffocates its emancipatory and critical potentials and, in essence, poses a crucial obstacle to the democratization and pluralization of society. Regardless of constant reference to national tradition, the nationalist cultural model is a negation of the existing traditions and an obstacle to the creation of contemporary culture that will become a new tradition over time. The detailed recommendations and guidelines for overcoming a bad situation in culture have been presented in the conclusion of the two-year talks about the creation of a new cultural policy, which was initiated by the Helsinki Committee and attended by more than 60 intellectuals and activists.

One can only add one positive example of resistance to the dominant cultural model – the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, which is one of the rare institutions that have succeeded in defending its autonomy and integrity from the government attacks. The attempt of the Progressists to subjugate the Institute by appointing Zoran Avramović to head its Governing Board was met with strong resistance by this institution. The struggle for the preservation of the Institute lasted for months. Apart from the Institute employees, the domestic and foreign intellectual public also got involved. After encountering unwavering opposition, the government representatives eventually gave up their efforts to subdue this institution as well. This case has shown that it is possible to preserve one's autonomy and space for intellectual and cultural work even in a totalitarian system. The citizens of Serbia will have to fight for freedom on their own, both in the area of culture and other areas of life.

# SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

# A SYMPHONY OF SECULAR AND SPIRITUAL AUTHORITIES

Over the past ten years, marked by the political dominance of the Serbian Progressive Party, the relationship between the current political elite, led by President Aleksandar Vučić, and the majority church in Serbia has progressed from mutual criticism and elemental disregard to multidimensional cooperation and symphonic synchronization. Over time not only their differences have been overcome, but a regular and intensive communication has also been established, including various forms of financial and institutional, as well as ideological and diplomatic support, understanding and reconciliation between secular and spiritual authorities.

In May 2013, the First Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, responded to an invitation from the Archbishops to attend the May session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The meeting took place after the Serbian Government had been very sharply criticized by some Bishops due to its signing of the Brussels Agreement. In addition to expressing his understanding for the Bishops' concern for the Serbian people, the First Deputy Prime Minister pointed out the following: "I will never agree that I am a traitor, neither I nor the Government; we fight for the people and do our best for our people." At the Holy Assembly it was agreed that the state and the Church should work together in the interest of the citizens and Serbia. An "absolute

agreement” was reached on the protection of Serbian religious, cultural and historical monuments in Kosovo and Metohija. Bishop Irinej of Bačka stated that the Church and the Serbian Government agreed on the essential issues – Kosovo’s independence will not be recognized and everything has to be done, so that the Serbian people remain to live in the province.<sup>23</sup> It was also agreed that the majority church should be included in the further negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina when the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo and Metohija comes up on the agenda.<sup>24</sup>

Minister of Justice Nikola Selaković, together with his colleagues from the Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities, hosted a reception for the members of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the beginning of the May 2015 session. On this occasion, he pointed to the importance of the unity of the Serbian Orthodox Church as an extremely significant factor in the preservation of the spiritual being of the Serbian people. Emphasizing that the state of Serbia supports and will support the Serbian Orthodox Church and its unity, the Minister also stated that it is not only a matter of its will, but also of its obligation since the time of Saint Sava and Saint Simeon and that the one who failed to fulfil this obligation mostly did not go well. The Minister emphasized that “the state of Serbia has its name, its identity, its roots and its future only with the Serbian Orthodox Church.” Patriarch Irinej thanked the government for its involvement in solving the restitution problem, assistance in the provision of old-age and health insurance for the clergy and church employees, as well as assistance in the building of churches through budget programmes. The Patriarch pointed out that “like the two heads of the eagle on our coat of arms, the state and the

23 “Vučić vladikama: Nisam izdajnik”, *Kurir*, 31 May 2013, <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/817737/vucic-na-saboru-spc>

24 “Vučić razgovarao sa članovima Sabora SPC”, *Novosti*, 31 May 2013, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:436598-Vucic-razgovarao-sa-clanovima-Sabora-SPC>

Church should unite their efforts to help us preserve our soul and spiritual identity as a nation.”<sup>25</sup>

In the communiqué issued after its extraordinary session in November 2018, the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church repeated “its firm and unanimous position expressed at its regular May session that the full sovereignty and integrity of Serbia in Kosovo and Metohija cannot be questioned under any circumstances”. Headed by Patriarch Irinej, the Bishops appealed to state representatives “to pay more attention to the building of a state and national platform in whose preparation all relevant social factors should participate instead of seeking the fastest possible settlement with Pristina”. As is pointed out, for the Serbian Orthodox Church Kosovo and Metohija has never been nor can ever be only a political issue whose resolving is under exclusive monopoly of the state authorities: “The obligation of the Holy Assembly and the entire Church towards Kosovo and Metohija is greater today as the country is facing mounting international pressures to renounce Kosovo or let it have a seat in the United Nations by a direct act of recognition of Kosovo or by its tacit approval, or by any other form of Serbia’s renunciation of Kosovo, thus forever depriving Serbia of its historical right to this area of Serbian spirituality and statehood”. In the Holy Assembly’s communiqué it is stated: “It is particularly worrying that under the disguise of the alleged delimitation between Serbs and Albanians the possibility of separation from Serbia is imposed, if not of all Kosovo and Metohija then of its greatest and most important part and its recognition as a part of independent Kosovo or the so-called Greater Albania”. The Bishops warned that “the consequences of such a decision would be tragic for the survival of our people and our holy sites. In that case the majority of Serbs would be deprived of adequate protection and security, which would force them to leave their historical

25 The reception was held on 27 May 2015. “Selaković sa saradnicima priredio prijem za članove Svetog Arhijerejskog Sabora Srpske pravoslavne crkve”, Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities, 28 May 2015, <http://www.vero.gov.rs/cir/Newsview.asp?ID=394>.

homeland. In this way, all traces of Serbian presence would be obliterated. The idea of the so-called partition creates a lot of uneasiness and grave concern among our believers and does not enjoy the support of the majority of Serbian citizens in general. Since its very establishment, Serbia's statehood has been inseparably intertwined with the spiritual tradition of our Church as the crucial factor of our identity throughout history".<sup>26</sup>

The Serbian President responded to this communiqué from Helsinki by putting the following questions: "What has been left to us since 1999 and since 2009 and where are the army, the people and the territory we control? How to preserve that?" As he stated, full sovereignty means that Serbia brings the army and the police. "This is the meaning of those words. I am afraid that this is irresponsible. I do not want to gamble, but I certainly want to protect our people. However, by trying to make it clear that you do not want any compromise, I am afraid that we won't have anything on which we should reach a compromise, because irresponsible politics brought us to this situation".<sup>27</sup>

It turned out that this Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church marked a turning point in the further relations between the most powerful secular and spiritual authorities in Serbia. It is obvious that it brought about a tactical regrouping of influences and changes or, in other words, a more intensive convergence and harmonization of the initially distant positions. As we will see, it led not only to a very fast softening of criticism, but also to the mutual glorification of the fight for national interests.

At the invitation of Patriarch Irinej, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, this time together with Milorad Dodik, the Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, also attended the session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church

26 "Sabor SPC: Kosovo nije samo političko pitanje", Radio Kim, 8 November 2018., <https://www.radiokim.net/vesti/religija/sabor-spc-kosovo-nije-samo-politicko-pitanje.html>

27 "Vučić: Loše mešanje SPC u politiku", Radio Kim, 8 November 2018., <https://www.radiokim.net/vesti/politika/vucic-lose-mesanje-spc-u-politiku.html#!>



in May 2019. At the Holy Assembly, they discussed the important issues relating to the survival of the Serbian people as well as the reconciliation of the views of the state and the Church. The Church is entitled to its views, although they sometimes differ from ours. It is important that we hear them because the Church helped our people wherever they were threatened, including Kosovo, said the Serbian President. He added that the meeting lasted more than two and a half hours and that the Holy Assembly informed him about its concerns and different views on some issues.<sup>28</sup> Just before the session of the Holy Assembly, the President confirmed that there are the Bishops who seriously oppose his policy and stated that he will answer using truths and facts to all those calling for his anathematization and said bad things about him.<sup>29</sup> There is no doubt that since then they have been regularly meeting each other at such sessions.

According to some Podgorica media, during the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church there erupted a polemic between Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral, one of the most respected and most influential Archbishops, and President Aleksandar Vučić regarding the allegations that the Serbian President took part in plotting a coup together with the Montenegrin President and that he is responsible that the leaders of the Democratic Front, Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, were each sentenced to five years in prison. On the other hand, the President allegedly blamed the Metropolitan for his bad relationship with the Montenegrin President. As was expected, the General Secretary of the Serbian President, Nikola Selaković, reacted quickly and harshly evaluated the media allegations as “the most brutal lies and untruths”<sup>30</sup>

28 “Vučić na Saboru SPC: Izneo sam sve svoje brige, patrijarh me je razumeo”, *Ekspres*, 14 May.2019, <https://www.ekspres.net/vesti/vucic-na-saboru-spc-izneo-sam-sve-svoje-brige-patrijarh-me-je-razumeo>.

29 “Vučić na Saboru SPC”, RTS, 13 May 2019., <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3520015/vucic-na-saboru-spc.html>

30 “Vijesti: Oštar sukob Amfilohija i Vučića na Saboru; Nikola Selaković: To su najbrutalnije laži i neistine”, *Nedeljnik*, 18 May 2019, <https://www.nedeljnik>.

The media also informed that Metropolitan Amfilohije led a kind of rebellion against the Serbian President's presence at the Holy Assembly, which was supported by Patriarch Irinej. There was also mention of a petition against his addressing the Holy Assembly and that a compromise solution was to receive the President in the Red Lounge in the Patriarchate Building, but not during the session.<sup>31</sup> On the occasion of the official communiqué written by Bishop Irinej of Bačka and issued after the session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church, several Archbishops headed by Metropolitan Amfilohije sent a letter to the Patriarch by which they distanced themselves from its contents. As stated in the letter, the group of Bishops is disappointed because the author of the communiqué, Bishop Irinej of Bačka, "tendentiously presented and overemphasized the importance of the visit of the regional political leaders, Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik".<sup>32</sup>

The lack of the Holy Assembly consensus was also evident at the ceremony of presenting President Vučić with the Church's highest decoration on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the autocephaly of the Serbian Orthodox Church at the Sava Centre in October 2019. According to media reports, protesting against the Holy Synod's decoration decision, the majority of the Serbian Bishops gathered at the main jubilee celebration did not attend the ceremonial session. At the gathering at the Sava Centre there were about fifteen Bishops, including the five-member Holy Synod, which is almost one third of the active Holy Assembly body, without the retired Bishops. The media also reported on the request for holding an extraordinary Holy Assembly meeting due to

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rs/vijesti-ostar-sukob-amfilohija-i-vucica-na-saboru-nikola-selakovic-to-sunajbrutalnije-lazi-i-neistine/

31 "Ručak na Dedinju: Vučić časti Arhijerejski sabor SPC", *AntenaM*, 27 May 2021, <https://www.antenam.net/drustvo/religija/201208-rucak-na-dedinju-vucic-casti-arhijerejski-sabor-spc>

32 "Grupa vladika ograđuje se od saopštenja Sabora SPC", *Danas*, 27 May 2019. As stated in the letter, the group of Bishops is disappointed that the author of the communiqué, Bishop Irinej of Bačka "tendentiously presented and overemphasized the importance of the visit of the regional political leaders Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik".

the worsening situation in the Serbian Orthodox Church. In addition to the Bishops' boycott, Mile Lompar, a literary historian, professor at the University of Belgrade and President of the Miloš Crnjanski Endowment, gave up the role of the main speaker at the ceremonial session, while Academician Matija Bećković refused to give a speech at the ceremony in the Žiča Monastery. Some religious authorities also expressed their opinion on the above. Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf and All Germany stated that "de jure the Order of Saint Sava can be awarded by the Holy Synod to whoever it wants, but that decoration de facto belongs to Milo Lompar and Matija Bećković". After Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral, retired Bishop Atanasije (Jevtić) also spoke publicly in the Patriarchate of Peć against the decoration of the Serbian President and stated that "a good part of the Serbian Archbishops is not satisfied with it".<sup>33</sup>

In February 2021, the Electoral Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church also passed, *inter alia*, in a polemic on the influence of "secular" institutions on the internal issue of the majority religious community or, more precisely, on the autonomous election of the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Allegedly, due to epidemiological measures, it was proposed and eventually realized that the Holy Assembly session be held in the crypt of the Saint Sava Temple and not in the Patriarchate Building as was the case until then. As the reason for relocation was not officially given, a lot of room was left for various speculations, including a suspicion about the "intention to control the entire process". In the media one could find the testimonies of unnamed Holy Assembly members such as: "That crypt is completely covered by cameras, so that the Holy Assembly session can be followed by someone who does not belong there. Everything is done in agreement with the authorities and this proposal is the result of the regime's pressure on certain Bishops."<sup>34</sup>

33 "Irinej uručio Vučiću orden Svetog Save, većina vladika bojkotovala svečanost", *Danas*, 8 October 2019, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/vucicu-orden-spc-za-borbu-za-ocuvanje-kosova-u-sastavu-srbije/>

34 "SPC rijaliti pod rediteljskom palicom SNS-a se nastavlja inicijativom da se

There is an interesting analysis in the Paris newspaper “Le Figaro”. Namely, according to it, the election of the new Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church takes place in the context of a heavy internal pressure from the top of the state. It is also stated that “given the influence of the Church, it is crucial for Aleksandar Vučić that the 46th Patriarch is obedient. The flexibility (of the new Patriarch) is of essential importance for the approach to (resolving) the Kosovo issue”. It is further reminded that Vučić “does not hide his support for the division of the territory and territorial exchange, but such an idea was rejected by the Holy Synod in 2018”. It is also stated that since the mentioned year the Serbian President has won the favour of Patriarch Irinej and many Bishops who now accept the government’s ideas. In the analysis it is also stated: “In order to ensure continued support (by the Church), Vučić has personally led the campaign by visiting the dioceses and through the controlled tabloids that have criticized ‘the traitors in the service of the Western powers’”. According to “Le Figaro”, one of their “favourite targets” is Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf and All Germany, who openly criticizes the current regime, advocates ecumenical dialogue and also enjoys support from non-believers. On the other hand, according to this newspaper, the current led by Bishop Irinej of Bačka is widely promoted. “Suspected of financial fraud and known for his regressive views on many issues, he is assisted by his student Metropolitan Porfirije of Ljubljana and Zagreb”, states “Le Figaro”.<sup>35</sup> This analysis especially gains in importance if we take into account that just the last mentioned Archbishop became the 46th head of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

At the first session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church, headed by the newly enthroned Patriarch Porfirije in May 2021, the Serbian President hosted a lunch for all Archbishops

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patrijarh bira pred kamerama”, *Luftika*, 2 February.2021., <https://luftika.rs/spc-sns-izbor-patrijarha/>

35 “Figaro: Politički izbor patrijarha SPC, Vučić lično vodio kampanju”, *AntenaM*, 18.February 2021, <https://www.antenam.net/svijet/region/189641-figaro-politicki-izbor-patrijarha-spc-vucic-licno-vodio-kampanju>

at the Club of Representatives in Dedinje. This was certainly a novelty in the ritualization of the symphony of the state and the majority church. The Serbian President repeated something similar, pretending to establish a (new) tradition a year later, when he hosted the Archbishops at Andrićev Venac during the May session. The critical public did not miss the fact that not all Bishops responded to his invitation. Namely, Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf and All Germany and Bishop Maksim of Western America were not present at the President's lunch.<sup>36</sup>

A few months later, in mid-July 2022, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić met with Patriarch Porfirije and the Serbian member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, in Belgrade. On social media, the President announced that he had informed Patriarch Porfirije, the members of the Holy Synod and the Serbian member of the Presidency of the Bosnia and Herzegovina, about the talks on Kosovo and Metohija which were held under the auspices of the European Union, the situation in the Serbian communities in the southern Serbian province as well as the economic and social situation in Serbia and its international position.<sup>37</sup>

In early November 2022, the Serbian President had a meeting with the Patriarch on which occasion he shared his "concern about the challenges and pressures faced by our people in Kosovo and Metohija and the Serbian state". On his Instagram profile, as an epilogue of the meeting, the President wrote: "We are determined to strongly and jointly defend our vital national and state interests". The behind-closed-doors meeting was also attended by the elected President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić and members of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Previously, the President also met with the Ambassadors of China and the Russian Federation to

36 "Sabor SPC se 'preselio' na Andrićev venac, Vučić arhijerejima izneo prognoze", N1, 18 May 2022, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/sabor-spc-se-preselio-na-andricev-venac-vucic-arhijerejima-izneo-prognoze/>

37 "Vučić sa patrijarhom SPC i Dodikom, među glavnim temama Kosovo i Metohija", Blic, 16 July 2022, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-sa-patrijarhom-spc-i-dodikom-medu-glavnim-temama-kosovo-i-metohija/m1dyg8s>

Serbia, whom he informed about the fulfilment of the obligations agreed upon in the Brussels dialogue, stressing that the Belgrade did everything, while Pristina did nothing and refuses to fulfil the assumed obligations.<sup>38</sup>

The close relationship between the two secular Serbian leaders and the religious leader will be monumentalized with the building of an “all-Serb shrine”, which was agreed at the meeting of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Patriarch Porfirije in early September 2021. It is also planned to build a memorial centre honouring the victims of the Jasenovac concentration camp “and all other Serb victims of the crimes committed in the territories not being controlled by the Serbian people” is planned in Donja Gradina, in the north west of Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the meeting, the mentioned creators of this idea consulted with Milorad Dodik by phone. According to the President, “a lot of money” will be invested, whereby Serbia will provide 80 per cent and the Republic of Srpska the rest.<sup>39</sup>

## THE FINANCING OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

The Law on Accounting and Auditing exempted churches and religious communities from the obligation to submit the final financial statement, so that it is not possible to have the precise details about the spending of the state money held on the accounts of religious organizations. In addition to the allotted funds received through the Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities, the Serbian Orthodox Church also receives significant funds earmarked for non-governmental organizations

38 “Vučić posle sastanka sa patrijarhom: Odlučni smo da branimo vitalne interese”, *Politika*, 5 November 2022, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/523812/Vucic-sa-patrijarhom-SPC-o-KiM>

39 “Srbija će graditi memorijalni centar za žrtve Jasenovca, ali u BiH”, *Aljazeera*, 10 September 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2021/9/10/susret-vucica-i-patrijarha-porfirija-srbija-ce-u-bih-graditi-memorijalni-centar-u-znak-sjecanja-na-zrtve-jasenovca>

through the so-called budget line 481. The majority church also receives the funds collected by the Ministry of Justice due to the postponement of criminal prosecution (the so-called principle of opportunity). For years now, when it comes to the Temple of Saint Sava, the Serbian Orthodox Church has also been receiving the funds collected through the periodical sale of obligatory fundraising stamps, which is prescribed by government decree.

The funds that are regularly paid to religious communities through the Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities are controlled, while donations, especially those from budget reserves, remain in the grey zone, namely it is not clear whether they are controlled and who controls them. Therefore, it is unclear whether they are spent as intended. The public has no insight into the income of the organizational units of the churches and religious communities, as well as the Serbian Orthodox Church.

According to Director Dragojević, all funds allocated through the Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities by contest and under special contracts for any work on the construction and renovation of religious buildings are subject to regular control and mandatory justification in accordance with the fund allocation contract. Fund spending reports, which churches and religious communities are required to submit to the Administration, are not publicly published. They are available only under the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance.

The Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities is responsible for financing old-age and disability insurance contributions for priests and church employees, which have amounted to more than two million euros on an annual basis over the last few years. And yet, in November 2018, the Serbian Orthodox Church asked the Serbian Government for one million euros “due to its difficult situation and failure to meet its legal obligations regarding old-age, disability and health insurance for the employed and related taxes”.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Blic, 22.11.2018.



According to the VOICE research, there is no record or document concerning the control of the expenditure of almost 10 million euros, allocated by the Serbian Government from the budget reserve for the Serbian Orthodox Church in December 2017 and intended for “the renovation of the Temple of Saint Sava”. The amount of 1.2 billion dinars, set aside from the current budget reserve by the Serbian Government for “the necessary work on the restoration of the Memorial Temple of Saint Sava” in December 2017, exceeds the annual budget of the Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities (1.1 billion dollars). VOICE has contacted the Prime Minister’s Office, Ministry of Finance and Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities. It has turned out that only the General Secretariat of the Government of the Republic of Serbia has competence over it and that there are no expenditure control reports relating to the mentioned funds.<sup>41</sup>

On 21 November 2018, in accordance with the decisions published in the *Official Gazette*, the Serbian Government decided to transfer 118,340,000 dinars, or about one million euros, to the budget reserve within the scope of the Ministry of Economy’s programme for attracting investments in projects of special significance. As is further stated in the Government’s decision published in the *Official Gazette*, this money was sent to “the General Secretariat of the Government in order to grant it to the Patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade”. In the end, the Serbian Government allocated one million euros for the Serbian Orthodox Church through budget line 481, earmarked for nongovernmental organizations.

According to some Belgrade media, the Administrative Office of the Patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade sent a letter to the Prime Minister on 16 November 2018 asking for the approval of one million euros due to its difficult situation and failure to meet its legal obligations regarding old-age, disability and

41 “Da li iko kontroliše donacije crkvi?”, VOICE, 10 June 2020., <https://voice.org.rs/da-li-iko-kontrolise-donacije-crkvi/>



health insurance for its employees, as well as the relevant taxes. This budget year alone, the Serbian Orthodox Church received almost 280 million dinars, or more than 2.3 million euros, through budget line 481. In the same year, the majority church in Serbia also appeared as an investor in the construction of a business-residential complex in Block 32 in Novi Beograd. The construction of the buildings will be financed by the investor, MPC inženjering, while the Serbian Orthodox Church will rent the future business building to companies. The office space will cover 5,235 sq.m. and two residential complexes will cover approximately 25,000 sq.m. As the Serbian Orthodox Church announced in April 2018, it will use the proceeds for “its needs”, including the completion of the Church of Saint Demetrius.<sup>42</sup>

In March 2019, the Serbian Government approved a grant of 1.18 billion dinars, or about 10 million euros, to the Serbian Orthodox Church for the continuation of work on the decoration of the Temple of Saint Sava in Belgrade.<sup>43</sup> As announced in the *Official Gazette*, less than two months later, at the session of the Serbian Government on 9 May 2019, it was decided to set aside 12 million dinars from the budget reserve as a grant to the Diocese of Britain and Scandinavia for the building of the Monastery of the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Serbian Centre in Vokstrop in Sweden. It was also decided to grant 18 million dinars to the Diocese of Buda for the completion of work on the Museum of the Diocese of Buda in Szentendre in Hungary.<sup>44</sup> In the same month, at the Government’s session it was decided to help the Diocese of Gornji Karlovac in Croatia with about 234,000 euros for the

42 “Vlada dala još million evra SPC ‘zbog teške situacije’”, Inšajder, 22 November 2018, <https://insajder.net/arhiva/vesti/vlada-dala-jos-milion-evra-spc-zbog-teske-situacije>

43 “Vlada odobrila 10 miliona evra za Hram Svetog Save”, Inšajder, 21 March 2019, <https://insajder.net/arhiva/vesti/vlada-odobrila-10-miliona-evra-za-hram-svetog-save>

44 “Vlada Srbije iz budžetskih rezervi izdvaja još 30 miliona dinara za Srpsku pravoslavnu crkvu”, Inšajder, 14 May 2019, <https://insajder.net/arhiva/vesti/vlada-srbije-iz-budžetskih-rezervi-izdvaja-jos-30-miliona-dinara-za-srpsku-pravoslavnu-crkvu>

building and decoration of a church in Vrginmost.<sup>45</sup> In July 2019, the Serbian Government approved a grant of 59.1 million dinars, or about 500,000 euros, for the Diocese of Zahumlje and Herzegovina for the renovation of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Mostar. The media also mention the February 2019 grant of 80 million dinars for the further reconstruction of the Hilandar Monastery, August 2019 grant of 30 million dinars for marking the 800th anniversary of autocephaly, as well as the grant of 58 million dinars for the Diocese of Žiča for finishing the construction and decoration of the Monastery of Žica and the Cathedral Church in Kraljevo.

As stated in the Decision on the Use of Funds from the Current Budget Reserve, the Serbian Government decided at its November 2020 session to allocate 230,306,000 dinars, or about two million euros, for the Serbian Orthodox Church in order to carry out the work on the plateau in front of the Temple of Saint Sava. Previously, in early July 2020, the Serbian Government first decided to pay one billion dinars, or about 8.5 million euros, for the work on the Temple of Saint Sava and then, a few days later, allocated another 200 million dinars, or 1.7 million euros, from the budget reserve for the same purpose.<sup>46</sup>

In mid-2020, President Vučić pointed out that during the previous three and a half years the state of Serbia invested 43 million euros in the construction of the Temple of Saint Sava, which was the largest amount of money for the last 50 years. During his inspection of the works in the Temple, together with Patriarch Irinej, the President said: "I am proud that we, as the state, have been able to help the most. The people have contributed, because the state is efficient and ten times stronger than in 2012, 2005, 2000, 1985 or in any other time from 1945 to the present day." He also said that the Temple of Saint Sava has more similarities with "Hagia Sophia in Constantinople", that is, Aya Sophia in Istanbul, which is no longer

45 "Vlada odlučila: još dva miliona evra za SPC", Nova, 21 November 2020, <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/vlada-odlucila-jos-2-miliona-evra-za-spc/>

46 "Vlada odlučila: još dva miliona evra za SPC", Nova, 21 November 2020, <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/vlada-odlucila-jos-2-miliona-evra-za-spc/>

a museum or a church. "In a specific and indirect way, the Temple of Saint Sava has become a new Hagia Sophia and, with the Virgin above the altar, which is an almost identical copy of the icon in Hagia Sophia, it has become a kind of new Hagia Sophia, as His Holiness Irinej has already mentioned," said Vučić.<sup>47</sup>

In August 2021, as written in the *Official Gazette*, the Serbian Government allocated 720 million dinars or about 6.1 million euros from the budget reserve for the "completion of works on the construction and decoration of the Memorial Temple of Saint Sava". About 14 million euros should be added to this amount, which was paid to the Serbian Orthodox Church for the Temple of Saint Sava four months earlier.<sup>48</sup>

The Fiscal Council has also pointed to a lack of transparency in the spending of money on the church needs. In its report it warns that, for several years now, extraordinary and unplanned grants have also been paid out of the account of the General Secretariat of the Serbian Government for the needs of the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>49</sup> Due to a large number of sources from which the state finances the activities of churches and religious communities, there is no clear and unified overview of all state grants for these needs, or a single control of these grants.

According to the BIRN's survey of public tenders, which covered the period from 2019 to 2021, local self-governments, cities and municipalities treat the allocations for churches and religious communities in very different ways. During the observed period, the record holders in terms of allocation was the city of Zaječar, which allocated more than 64 million dinars for religious building projects in the Diocese of Timok, that is, over 90 per cent of

47 "Vučić: U Hram Svetog Save država uložila 43 miliona evra", Nova, 20 August 2020, <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/vucic-u-hram-svetog-save-drzava-ulozila-43-miliona-evra/>

48 "Vlada odlučila: Još 10 miliona evra Crkvi za Hram Svetog Save", Nova, 29 August 2021, <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/vlada-odlucila-jos-sest-miliona-evra-crkvi-za-hram-svetog-save/>

49 "Finansiranje crkava kroz javne konkurse", BIRN, 26 May.2022, <https://birnsrbija.rs/finansiranje-crkava-kroz-javne-konkurse/>

the budget intended for financing civil society projects. It was followed by Koceljeva, Rekovac and Ljig, which allocated 50 per cent of the funds from the same budget (for civil society) for churches.<sup>50</sup>

Such a state of affairs leads to the conclusion that there is no sufficient transparency in the financing of churches, that there is no clear public insight into this type of spending and that both churches and religious communities and the state refuse to provide the relevant information about the way in which the funds of all Serbian citizens are spent.

The legitimization of this policy towards the majority church is derived from certain articles of the Law on Churches and Religious Communities or, more precisely, Article 11 which says that the Serbian Orthodox Church “has an exceptional historical, state-building and civilizational role in shaping, preserving and developing the identity of the Serbian people”.

## THE MAJORITY CHURCH AND POLITICAL ELITE

Despite serious tensions in the relationship between the majority church and the highest executive power bodies, a messianic attitude towards the leader of the ruling political structure has prevailed. In an interview given for a Belgrade newspaper in May 2014, Patriarch Irinej said that Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić “must raise the fallen nation”.<sup>51</sup> Already at the very beginning of 2015, the Patriarch repeated that he “must believe that he (Aleksandar Vučić) will succeed in raising Serbia from these ashes” and then emphasized: “I think he is trying. There are some indications that some results will be achieved.”<sup>52</sup>

50 “Finansiranje crkava kroz javne konkurse”, BIRN, 26 May 2022, <https://birnsrbija.rs/finansiranje-crkava-kroz-javne-konkurse/>

51 “Patrijarh: Republika Srpska da se pripoji Srbiji, Vučić da podigne posrnulu naciju!”, *Telegraf*, 13 May 2014.

52 “Patrijarh: Verujem da će Vučić podići Srbiju iz pepela”, *Blic*, 8 January 2015, <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/patrijarh-verujem-da-ce-vucic-podici-srbiju-iz-pepela/fhke5t2>

In January 2019, at the liturgy he served in Banjaluka on the occasion of the Day of the Republic of Srpska, the Serbian Patriarch said: "We hope and pray to God to give strength and power to the President of the Republic of Serbia to resist the strong winds of our times, hoping and believing in God's help and that the Lord will not abandon us".<sup>53</sup>

Just in 2019, which was marked by significant financial contributions from the budget, at the solemn session dedicated to the 800th anniversary of the autocephaly of the Serbian Orthodox Church, at the suggestion of Patriarch Irinej, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić was awarded the highest church decoration, namely the Order of Saint Sava of the First Degree. According to Patriarch Irinej, this order is awarded for his "active love of the Church, commitment to preserving the unity of the Serbian people, tireless struggle for the integrity of Serbia and the preservation of Kosovo and Metohija within its borders". Explaining his proposal for Vučić's decoration, the Patriarch stated, among other things, that the Serbian President changed the media image of Serbia and the Serbian people in the world with his "statesmanship knowledge and ability to boost the economy, building of roads and factories..." The President apologized to the Patriarch for all criticism directed at him because of him, and told the critics that they want to be "more important than God and Serbia". While speaking about the history of Serbia during the Nemanjić dynasty, the President emphasized that "the union of the eagle's two heads on the body of people – the Church and the state is a prerequisite for survival even today after 800 years and we should recognize this as individuals, institutions and the nation as a whole".<sup>54</sup>

The awarding of various types of recognition and, in this case, very popular orders by both the Serbian Orthodox Church and

53 "Da li iko kontroliše donacije crkvi?", VOICE, 10 June 2020, <https://voice.org.rs/da-li-iko-kontrolise-donacije-crkvi/>

54 "Irinej uručio Vučiću orden Svetog Save, većina vladika bojkotovala svečanost", *Danas*, 8 October 2019, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/vucicu-orden-spc-za-borbu-za-ocuvanje-kosova-u-sastavu-srbije/>

dioceses as autonomous spiritual authorities, has already become an established practice and an illustrative indicator for the evaluation of certain institutions, individuals and economic entities which are considered by the majority church to be representative and relevant for its own mission and social function. Due to a great number of politicians among the recipients of various church awards, we will mention only a few of those who have been awarded several times by the Church or stand out in a specific way.

At the proposal of the Diocese of Šumadija and Bishop Jovan, the former Serbian President, Tomislav Nikolić, and his wife Dragica, have been awarded the Order of St Sava of the First Degree.<sup>55</sup> During the consecration of the Church of the Holy Great Martyr Demetrius in Bajčeta, whose founder was the outgoing Serbian President, Tomislav Nikolić, Patriarch Irinej said that this was the first endowment built by a Serbian ruler after the Karađorđević family.<sup>56</sup> During his presidential term, Tomislav Nikolić received the Order of Saint Bishop Nikolaj for his work and care for Serbia and the Serbian people, as well as for his tireless work on the improvement of relations between the state and the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Order was given to him by Bishop Milutin of Valjevo.<sup>57</sup>

Tomislav Nikolić was also awarded the Order of Holy Emperor Constantine and the same award was given to Aleksandar Vučić and Ivica Dačić, as well as Chief of the General Staff Ljubiša Diković and Director of Srbijagas Dušan Bajatović.<sup>58</sup>

55 "Ajde što je dobila orden, već joj ga je dao Tomin pop! Novi detalji Zoraninog odliovanja!", *Espresso*, 8 September 2017, <https://www.espresso.co.rs/vesti/politika/180585/ajde-sto-je-dobila-orden-vec-joj-ga-je-dao-tomin-pop-novi-detalji-zoraninog-odlikovanja>

56 "Osveštan hram u Bajčeti", *Politika*, 27 May 2017, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/381507/Osvestan-hram-u-Bajcetini>

57 "Predsednik Nikolić primio Orden svetog vladike Nikolaja", *Predsednik Republike Srbije*, 3 May 2014, <https://www.predsednik.rs/lat/pres-centar/vesti/predsednik-nikolic-primio-orden-svetog-vladike-nikolaja>

58 "SPC dodeljuje ordenje i kriminalcima, kontroverznim biznismenima ili tabloidnim novinarima", *Medijska kutija*, 20 April 2018, <https://medijskakutija.rs/srpska-pravoslavna-crkva-dodeljuje-najvisa-odlikovanja-i-kriminalcima-osudjenicima-i->

One of the recipients of the highest church orders of the first degree is Dragan Marković Palma who was decorated by Patriarch Irinej in the Church of St John the Baptist in Končarevo near Jagodina, which was founded by him in 2016.<sup>59</sup> Six year later, in the same church the Bishop Jovan of Šumadija awarded Marković with the Order of the Holy New Martyrs of Kragujevac, the highest order of the Diocese of Šumadija.<sup>60</sup>

Decorations will also be discussed later, but it is also interesting to mention the accolades given to some media and economic actors. The awarding of Milorad Vučelić, Editor-in-Chief of *Večernje novost* and President of FK Partizan, attracted a lot of public attention. The order was personally given by Patriarch Porfirije. In the explanation it is stated that he has deserved this recognition due to, inter alia, “the affirmation of the Christian values and virtues”. According to the Patriarch, Vučelić is awarded the order because of everything he has done for the Church: “Previously – I can now say – many decades ago, when you were first the Director of Radio Television Vojvodina in Novi Sad and then the head of the national television in Belgrade, you opened the door – and now I will correct myself – you not only opened the door, but also enabled us from the Church to take absolutely every opportunity to speak about our faith on small screens as if we were speaking from the temple itself or the church altars.”<sup>61</sup> The Gramata of the Serbian Orthodox Church was also awarded to Dragan Vučićević, the owner of the tabloid *Informer*.<sup>62</sup>

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59 “Svečanost u Končarevu: Palmi Orden Svetog Save, nije hteo da se nađe na freskama crkve”, *Blic*, 11 June 2016, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/svecanost-u-koncarevu-palmi-orden-svetog-save-nije-hteo-da-se-nade-na-freskama-crkve/8t157k5>

60 “Treće priznanje za Palmu od SPC”, *Novosti*, 07 July .2022., <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1133439/trece-priznanje-palmu-spc-dragan-markovic-dobio-orden-svetih-kragujevackih-novomucenika-prvog-stepena>

61 “Najviši orden srpske crkve za Miloševićevog medijskog ratnog huškača”, *RSE*, 8 October 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/milorad-vucelic-orden-spc/31499824.html>

62 “SPC dodeljuje ordenje i kriminalcima, kontroverznim biznismenima ili tabloidnim



The Order of Saint Sava was also awarded to numerous influential businessmen being at the head of the companies like Telekom, Dunav Insurance Company and Siemens, then the Director of Elektroprivreda Srbije (EPS) and official of the Serbian Progressive Party, Milorad Grčić, as well as the officials of the Serbian Progressive Party who were the Mayors of Leskovac and Kragujevac.<sup>63</sup> Bishop Jovan of Šumadija awarded the then Vice-Premier and Minister of Construction Zorana Mihajlović with the Order of Saint Simeon the Myrrh-Flowing, which is awarded by the Serbian Orthodox Church for a special contribution to the enhancement of relations between the Church and the state.<sup>64</sup> Finance Minister Siniša Mali received the Medal of the Great Martyrs of Kragujevac of the First Degree, which was presented to him by Bishop Jovan of Šumadija with the blessing of Patriarch Irinej in the Church of the Descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles in the village of Barzilovica near Lazarevac. The previous year, as the Mayor of Belgrade, the Minister allocated the funds for the completion of an unfinished church after ten years.<sup>65</sup>

As the power of the Serbian Progressive Party was increasing, the relationship between different levels of the church and political structures was becoming increasingly more intricate, from the very top of both hierarchies, including the mutual glorification of the two-headed "Serbian eagle", to the lowest organizational units

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 novinarima", Medijska kutija, 20 April 2018, <https://medijskakutija.rs/srpska-pravoslavna-crkva-dodeljuje-najvisa-odlikovanja-i-kriminalcima-osudjenicima-i-zlocincima/>

63 According to some media, the Medal of the Holy King Milutin was awarded to Mat Company, whose real owners are Darko and Duško Šarić, otherwise accused of organized crime, drug trafficking and money laundering. Their company "deserved" the medal because they were among the greatest donors for the construction of the Church of Saint George in the Plevlja settlement of Guke. *Ibid.*

64 "Ajde što je dobila orden, već joj ga je dao Tomin pop! Novi detalji Zoraninog odlikovanja!", Espresso, 8 September 2017, <https://www.espresso.co.rs/vesti/politika/180585/ajde-sto-je-dobila-orden-vec-joj-ga-je-dao-tomin-pop-novi-detalji-zoraninog-odlikovanja>

65 "I Siniša Mali dobio orden od SPC", Politika, 29 October 2019., <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/440784/I-Sinisa-Mali-dobio-orden-od-SPC>



and local actors. Nominally, the Serbian Orthodox Church has tried to present itself as a suprapolitical and supraideological institution which, in its mission, exceeds by far the state and party boundaries. In practice, it not only looks different, but one can single out paradoxical and even somewhat caricatural and bizarre cases of the violation of its own proclaimed principles.

Just a few days after the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church sent a letter to the Bishops informing them that they are forbidden “to interfere in secular affairs” and support political parties and politicians, the appearance of the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the pre-election propaganda spot of the Serbian Progressive Party in early February 2022 provoked numerous reactions in the public. In order to avoid any confusion and divisions among the faithful people”, the letter specifically pointed out that “any participation in party competitions, giving public statements in favour of or to the detriment of some parties or candidates in election processes and outside them are impermissible”.<sup>66</sup> In the pre-election video of the ruling party, apart from Patriarch Porfirije, there appears Bishop Pahomije of Vranje, who was filmed while receiving a medal from Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. According to Professor Rodoljub Kubat, the Patriarch was expected to make a public announcement, distance himself from the spot of the Serbian Progressive Party in which there are the shots with him and ask them to remove the controversial contents. However, this did not happen.

Let us recall that a similar situation happened five years earlier. Namely, during the presidential election, candidate Vuk Jeremić used the shots from the forum in which the then Metropolitan Porfirije of Zagreb and Ljubljana also participated. The Metropolitan reacted harshly, saying that he had been abused and demanded that the videos with his image be removed, which Jeremić did.

66 “Ništa im nije sveto: Vučić ubacio Porfirija u spot SNS, a on zabranio vladikama da govore o politici”, *Direktno*, 22 February 2022, <https://direktno.rs/izbori-2022/399322/patrijarh-porfirije-spc-vladike-politika-aleksandar-vucic-sns-spot.html>

Metropolitan Porfirije then reacted very decisively and clearly: "I have an obligation to inform the public that I did not even surmise that my participation in a religious gathering, to which I was invited as a guest, could be (mis)used for political promotion in anyone's political or other campaign". Metropolitan Porfirije stated that his encounter with Jeremić was "tendentiously used at various forums in the presidential campaign" and emphasized that his approval was not sought for such a purpose, but even if it had been sought, it would not have been obtained. The then Metropolitan and the current Patriarch clearly explained: "The role of a priest is to unite and not to separate. I have never publicly supported politicians or political parties before and I have no intention of doing so in the future".

The previous Patriarch Irinej also found the ways to avoid the responsibility for his cheap political actions. Here we can cite an example from March 2019 when Patriarch Irinej's Office was allegedly unfamiliar with the contents of the letter sent by the opposition Alliance for Serbia, otherwise published in the media, in which it complained because, in his speech in Niš on the occasion of the NATO bombing anniversary, the Patriarch stated that the protests "give strength to our enemies". The Patriarch also stated that opposition politicians "cannot come to power in this way nor can they inflict harm (on the government), but they can harm their people and their state". In an open letter to the Patriarch, signed by some opposition parties supporting the months-long anti-government protests, it was stated: "Your negative public evaluation of the protests means direct interference in daily politics issues and siding openly with the authorities, which someone in your position should never do, because the Serbian Orthodox Church is not owned by the Serbian Progressive Party and you are the head of our entire Church, which is comprised of believers having divergent political views".<sup>67</sup>

67 "Savez za Srbiju: Patrijarh Irinej stao uz vlast", RSE, 25 March 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29841089.html>

It is not a novelty that the religious authorities disclose their political party preferences: immediately after the introduction of a multi-party system, there were bishops who openly supported either the government or the opposition, but there were only sporadic calls to support a particular candidate in elections, which was usually sanctioned in the church circles. Bishop Filaret of Mileševa, for example, had to publicly repent and apologize to the Bishops for supporting Slobodan Milošević in the 2000 presidential election. In 2013, Patriarch Irinej called on Kosovo Serbs to vote, but soon thereafter the Serbian Orthodox Church released the statement specifying that the Patriarch did so in his name and not in the name of the Church. The only call to vote, which was generally accepted at that time, was made by Patriarch Pavle. Namely, he called on Serbian citizens to go to the referendum in 2006 and vote for the new Constitution.

As of lately, the Bishops have been more and more often giving the statements about the current socio-political situation, but it is evident that those who defend Vučić and even compare him with Jesus Christ are not reprimanded. On the other hand, Bishop Grigorije of Düsseldorf and All Germany – who has been openly criticizing the current regime for years – is always criticized for his views. The connoisseurs of church affairs believe that the decision of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church to ban commenting on an election campaign was made precisely because of Grigorije's support for the opposition candidate.<sup>68</sup>

The members of the ruling party, at all levels, have persistently and obediently insisted on a symphonic relationship between the majority church and the state, emphasizing that any attack on the clergy and the majority church is an attack on national identity and statehood.

Turning back Bishop Teodosije of Raška and Prizren from the Jarinje administrative crossing was commented by Marko Đurić, Director of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija of the Government

68 "Porfirije mora da se izjasni oko spota SNS", *Danas*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/porfirije-mora-da-se-izjasni-oko-spota-sns/>

of the Republic of Serbia, as “an arrogant act of arbitrariness that insults the whole Serbian people and the Serbian Orthodox Church, (...) the most flagrant violation of religious freedom and slap to all Orthodox believers in Kosovo and Metohija”, but also as an expression of contempt towards Serbian culture, religion and tradition, and even “an attack on the Christian character of our southern province and European culture as a whole”<sup>69</sup>

Due to the attack on Orthodox priest Dragan Stokin during the “hooligan campaign and the so-called protest and blockade of self-proclaimed environmentalists”, the MP and Chairman of the Committee on the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region, Milimir Vujadinović, has strongly condemned this event on the website of his (ruling) party, pointing out that this lynch has laid bare “the ultimate goal, namely the collapse of the state and its institutions, especially the institution of the President of Serbia, as well as the collapse and destruction of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as the centuries-long pillar of rallying our people together in the most difficult times in their history.” While pointing to a general threat to something called the “Serbian world” by Vulin, it is emphasized again that this act is “obviously fully coordinated with the actions against the Serbian Orthodox Church, which we are witnessing in Kosovo and Metohija, Montenegro, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and now, unfortunately, on the streets of Serbia, too.” It is pointed to a dichotomy: “On the other hand, despite the bestiality of Đilas, Marinika, Brković and other storm troopers and their pressure, the Serbian Progressive Party and its President Aleksandar Vučić will remain on the side of our people and our Serbian Orthodox Church wherever they are, as well as on the side of a descent Serbia, while at the same time fully condemning such events.”<sup>70</sup>

69 “Đurić: Svaki napad na SPC je zapravo napad na hrišćanski karakter”, SNS, 14 August 2020, <https://www.sns.org.rs/lat/novosti/vesti/duric-svaki-napad-na-spc-je-zapravo-napad-na-hriscanski-karakter>

70 “Vujadinović: U huliganskom pohodu ozbiljan linč preživeo sveštenik”, SNS, 12 December 2021, <https://www.sns.org.rs/lat/novosti/saopštenja/vujadinovic-u-huliganskom-pohodu-ozbiljan-linc-preziveo-svestenik>

Rada Trajković, President of the European Movement of Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija, also pointed to the connection between church and political structures, and said that before the arrival of Patriarch Porfirije, the Serbian Orthodox Church was of great support to Serbs, but now there are doubts about this institution, which is now “more involved in politics as a branch of the Serbian Progressive Party than a place and a roof for all believers”.<sup>71</sup>

## “SERBIAN PIEDMONT”

In an interview given in May 2014, Patriarch Irinej said that the Republic of Srpska should join Serbia, because “there are many reasons for that”.<sup>72</sup> He also said that he would not be surprised if the Republic of Srpska holds a referendum on its secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina and joins Serbia: “This is the process that has already started. If Kosovo can separate itself from Serbia, why the Republic of Srpska should not separate itself from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and join Serbia? We have many more reasons for this, because with the secession of Kosovo there will be two Albanian states, while Serbia and the Republic of Srpska will be one Serbian state as it used to be for centuries”.<sup>73</sup>

At the opening of the Day of Srpska celebration in Serbia, in October 2015, Patriarch Irinej stated in Novi Sad that the Republic of Srpska is “a Serbian state created in our time”. Bishop Irinej also said that the Drina does not separate but “unites the Serbian people from both banks of the river”. He added that the Republic of Srpska and Serbia are a single entity and personify “substantial unity and joint organic affiliation with the entire Orthodox world”.<sup>74</sup>

71 “Rada Trajković: SPC se ponaša kao ogranak SNS, do Porfirija bila oslonac Srbima”, N1, 20 July 2022, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/rada-trajkovic-spc-se-ponasa-kao-ogranak-sns-do-porfirija-bila-oslonac-srbima/>

72 “Patrijarh: Republika Srpska da se pripoji Srbiji, Vučić da podigne posrnulu naciju!”, *Telegraf*, 13 May 2014.

73 “Patrijarh Irinej: RS da se pripoji Srbiji”, *Naše novine*, 16 May 2014.

74 “Patrijarh Irinej: Republika Srpska je srpska država”, *Blic*, 19 October 2015, <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/patrijarh-irinej-republika-srpska-je-srpska-drzava/ll12kfz>

In 2016, after the liturgy in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Banjaluka on 9 January, the Day of the Republic of Srpska and its Patron Saint's Day – Saint Stephen the Archdeacon and First Martyr, Patriarch Irinej said: "The Republic of Srpska, founded in God's truth, in God's justice, celebrates its birthday. A great day not only for you brothers and sisters, but also for the entire Serbian people. The Republic was founded in the blood of holy martyrs, in the bones of holy martyrs, and whatever is based on justice, on truth, on blood spilled for justice and God's name is eternal and imperishable." Reacting to this statement, Cardinal Vinko Puljić, Archbishop of Vrhbosna, sent a letter to Patriarch Irinej on behalf of all Bishops in Bosnia and Herzegovina in which he expressed his "disbelief" at the Patriarch's words: "From the shelling of Sarajevo, through killings, persecutions and looting, to Banjaluka, Prijedor, Derventa – hundreds of thousands of people were affected by horrible crimes".<sup>75</sup>

At the Belgrade Book Fair in 2017, Patriarch Irinej said: "We love our homeland, wherever Serbs live that is Serbia regardless of whether they are in Bosnia, Montenegro or at some other place. I say to my brothers in the Republic of Srpska – protect the Republic of Srpska and the one who leads its people today, that is the only way for Serbdom to survive."<sup>76</sup>

After his meeting with Patriarch Irinej in May 2019, President Aleksandar Vučić summarized their talk: "We also talked about the relations between Srpska and Serbia, about good relations as a unique primer for the Serbian ethnic area, about the Jasenovac memorial centre and, finally, about one important issue: in Serbia / we lose 104 people every day, because more people are dying than

75 "Puljić Irineju: Progoni i ubistva nisu Božja pravda", RSE, 16 February 2016, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/puljic-irineju-progoni-i-ubistva-nisu-bozja-pravda/27555698.html>

76 "Patrijarh Irinej: Gde god žive Srbi, to je Srbija, braća iz Republike Srpske da čuvaju RS i onog koji danas vodi narod Srpske", NSPM, 25 October 2017, <http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/patrijarh-irinej-gde-god-zive-srbi-to-je-srbija-braca-iz-republike-srpske-da-cuvaju-rs-i-onog-koji-danas-vodi-narod-srpske.html?alphabet=l>

being born and the situation is similar in the Serbian ethnic areas. This is something we must work on.”<sup>77</sup>

Immediately after his enthronement, Patriarch Porfirije continued very intensive cooperation with the political leadership of the Republic of Srpska. In April 2021, the Patriarch hosted an Easter reception in the Patriarchate in Belgrade for the Serbian member and Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, and the Republic of Srpska leadership, including President Željka Cvijanović and Prime Minister Radovan Višković. On that occasion, Milorad Dodik said that “they in the Republic of Srpska respect what the Serbian Orthodox Church is and what it is doing for the Serbian people, and that it represents a strong element of Serbian identity”. He also emphasized that “the Church strongly protects the Serbian people and is a strong element of Serbian identity” and that “the Church strongly protects the Serbian people and preserves their language and culture where there are no Serbian states.” According to Patriarch Porfirije, the Republic of Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina are a unique common space that has many proven good traits, but it is also the space with a lot of misunderstandings. He also stated that he cherishes special emotions towards the Republic of Srpska. “That national identity will be righteous if it is founded in the spiritual spheres”, said the Patriarch and added that “the brother Bishops from Bosnia and Herzegovina express their gratitude first of all to the institutions of the Republic of Srpska, because they understand the Church’s needs in every respect and try to help to the extent it is necessary”.<sup>78</sup>

In September 2021, at the Ceremonial Session in Banjaluka, which was held to mark the Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and National Flag, Milorad Dodik, the Serbian member of the Presidency

77 “Vučić na Saboru SPC: Izneo sam sve svoje brige, patrijarh me je razumeo”, *Ekspres*, 14 May 2019, <https://www.ekspres.net/vesti/vucic-na-saboru-spc-izneo-sam-sve-svoje-brige-patrijarh-me-je-razumeo>

78 “SPC je čuvar srpkog identiteta i jezika!”, *Informer*, 29 April 2021, <https://informer.rs/vesti/drustvo/604501/patrijarsija-spc-vaskrs>



of Bosnia and Herzegovina, said that there was never greater unity among the Republic of Srpska, Serbia and the Serbian Orthodox Church than today. He pointed to the indisputable importance of the majority church for the preservation of Serbian identity: "Our script was necessary for the preservation of identity. A stronghold for our people, the Serbian Orthodox Church, did everything it could to preserve our language, script, speech, Patron Saint's Day, identity. Had it not been for the Serbian Orthodox Church and its struggle, we would have already lost our identity during the Ottoman Empire". In his further presentation, Dodik pointed out that "the Serbian people are now proud because the Serbian Orthodox Church acts in unison and does not want anything more than others. But it does not want to be obstructed like in the Montenegro or demonized like in Croatia and that there are people trying to reproach it for something". He added that he is proud to "belong to the team of the politicians who, together with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, enabled us to have this day and chose 15 September to be marked and celebrated".<sup>79</sup>

In the same month, but this time at the National Theatre in Belgrade, at the Days of Srpska manifestation in Serbia, Patriarch Porfirije repeated the words of his predecessor that "the formation, existence and progress of the Republic of Srpska are the work of justice as well as international law and consensus, and that Christians consider something to be righteous if it is based on truth". In the presence of the officials of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, the Patriarch sent the prayers to all residents of the Republic of Srpska and reminded the audience of Patriarch Irinej "who cherished special love for the Republic of Srpska and the Serbian people wherever they are". Evoking memories, Patriarch Porfirije said: "I talked with him many times about the importance of the preservation, strengthening and prosperity of the Republic of Srpska and about its cooperation with Serbia and other neighbouring

79 "Dodik: Nikada veće jedinstvo između Republike Srpske, Srbije i Srpske pravoslavne crkve", *Argumenti*, 14 September 2021, <https://www.argumenti.rs/dodik-nikada-vece-jedinstvo-izmedju-republike-srpske-srbije-i-srpske-pravoslavne-crkve/>



countries, as well as about the cooperation of the Republic of Srpska with Russia, Greece as well as Croatia, Montenegro and all countries belonging to the Western world with which we share the Christian and general civilizational values”.<sup>80</sup>

The plans for the restoration of religious buildings were also on the agenda of Patriarch Porfirije's meeting with Milorad Dodik in June 2022, when Dodik wrote on his Twitter account: “The Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian people are one and we can preserve our identity only if we are united and rallied around the Serbian Orthodox Church.” Dodik hosted Patriarch Porfirije, Bishop Jefrem of Banjaluka, Bishop Heruvim of Osek-Polje and Baranja, Bishop Sava of Mačva and Bishop Sergije of Bihać and Petrovac at Agro Destil Laktaši where they talked about numerous challenges encountered by the Republic of Srpska and the Serbian people.<sup>81</sup>

In early October 2022, during the consecration of the foundations of the Church of Saint Nicholas the Miracle Worker in the Banjaluka settlement of Ada, which was also attended by the President of the Republic of Srpska, Željka Cvijanović, Milorad Dodik stated that in recent years, thanks to the cooperation of the Republic of Srpska authorities with the Serbian Orthodox Church, more than a thousand had been built or reconstructed for the needs of the Serbian Orthodox Church. He also pointed to good cooperation with Muslim, Catholic, Jewish and other religious communities, but “in view of the fact that Serbs in the Republic Srpska are most populous, it is logical that the Serbian Orthodox Church enjoys the greatest support”.<sup>82</sup>

80 “Politika SPC-a, gdje stadoše Pavle i Irinej, Porfirije produži: RS je djelo pravde”, *Faktor*, 23 September 2021, <https://faktor.ba/vijest/politika-spc-a-gdje-stadose-pavle-i-irinej-porfirije-produzi-rs-je-djelo-pravde/138761>

81 “Samo ujedinjeni i okupljeni oko SPC možemo sačuvati naš identitet”, B92, 19 June 2022, [https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2022&mm=06&dd=19&nav\\_category=167&nav\\_id=2173342](https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2022&mm=06&dd=19&nav_category=167&nav_id=2173342)

82 “Obnovljeno i izgrađeno više od 1.000 objekata za potrebe SPC-a”, *ATV*, 1 October 2022, <https://www.atvbl.rs/vijesti/drustvo/obnovljeno-i-izgradeno-vise-od-1000-objekata-za-potrebe-spc-a-1-10-2022>

In September 2022, at the start of the construction of the Rača-Bijeljina road section, in the presence of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, and Milorad Dodik, the Serbian member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Patriarch Porfirije said that the state borders are a “variable category”: “We all know that throughout history the state borders and areas inhabited by our people have changed. Thus, we are not sure that there will be no change in the future, bearing in mind that in history everything is relative.” Previously, Milorad Dodik welcomed the Serbian President with the following words: “Welcome to your own and among your own”.<sup>83</sup>

In October 2022, amid the election campaign for the President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, as the President of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and presidential candidate, met with Patriarch Porfirije in Belgrade. He wrote on his Instagram profile that he and Porfirije discussed the current situation in the Republic of Srpska and other important issues relating to our people.<sup>84</sup>

Milorad Dodik is perhaps the recipient of the greatest number of church decorations. In addition to the Order of Saint Sava, he is also the holder of the Order of Saint Simeon the Myrrh-Flowing and the Order of Saint King Milutin. During the visit of the Serbian member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Diocese of Timisoara and the Serbian community in that city in late August 2022, Bishop Lukijan of Buda awarded his guest with the Order of the Diocese of Timisoara “for his unwavering fight for the interests of Serbs in the Fatherland and the region”.<sup>85</sup> A little more

83 “Porfirije: Nismo sigurni da se granice u budućnosti neće mijenjati”, *Pobjeda*, 15 September 2022, <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/porfirije-nismo-sigurni-da-se-granice-u-buducnosti-nece-mijenjati>

84 “Dodik se sastao sa patrijarhom Porfirijem”, *N1*, 19 October 2022, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/dodik-se-sastao-sa-patrijarhom-porfirijem/>

85 “Orden Eparhije temišvarske Miloradu Dodiku”, *SPC*, 1 September 2022, <https://spc.rs/%d0%bc%d0%b8%d0%bb%d0%be%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%b4-%d0%b4%d0%be%d0%b4%d0%b8%d0%ba-%d0%bf%d0%be%d1%81%d0%b5%d1%82%d0%b8%d0%be-%d0%b5%d0%bf%d0%b0%d1%80-%d1%85%d0%b8%d1%98%d1%83-%d1%82%d0%b5%d0%bc%d0%b8%d1%88/>

than a month earlier, at the meeting with Patriarch Theophilus of Jerusalem, he was awarded the Medal of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Thanking for this honour, the member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina also said that the Government of the Republic of Srpska would donate 100,000 euros to the Patriarchate of Jerusalem in the coming days.<sup>86</sup> As the President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik was awarded the Medal of Saint Bishop Nikolaj, the highest decoration of the Diocese of Valjevo. In explaining the decision to present this award, Bishop Milutin of Valjevo stated that the medal was awarded for “his great effort and concern for this holy land of Srpska and the Serbian people, as well as his proven love for the Serbian Orthodox Church”.<sup>87</sup>

That the Republic of Srpska is the epicentre of the survival, preservation and affirmation of Serbian Orthodox identity is also evidenced by the fact that the traditional celebration of the Epiphany throughout the Republic of Srpska, in January 2020, was dedicated to the defence of the sacred sites of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. This year’s liturgies, processions and swimming for the Epiphany Cross passed in the sign of supporting the believers of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro after the adoption of the controversial Law on the Freedom of Religion.<sup>88</sup> However, a much more concrete concern was demonstrated a few months later when the National Assembly of the Republic of Srpska adopted the Declaration on the Protection of the Right of the Serbian Orthodox Church to Practice Religion Freely and the Right to Its Property in Montenegro, which states that “the adoption of the controversial Law on the Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities in Montenegro has put the Serbian

86 “Dodiku uručen orden Jerusalimske patrijaršije”, SPC, 20 July 2022, <https://spc.rs/27247-2/>

87 “Dodiku Orden vladike Nikolaja”, Kolubarske, 4 May 2014, <https://www.kolubarske.rs/sr/vesti/valjevo/2741/>

88 “Bogojavljenje u Republici Srpskoj”, Novosti, 19 January 2020, [https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovnarepublika\\_srpska/aktuelno.655.html:842432-Bogojavljenje-u-Banjaluci---Vrh-RS-u-litiji-podrska-SPC-u-Crnoj-Gori-Za-casni-krst-plivalo-se-sirom-RS-VIDEO](https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovnarepublika_srpska/aktuelno.655.html:842432-Bogojavljenje-u-Banjaluci---Vrh-RS-u-litiji-podrska-SPC-u-Crnoj-Gori-Za-casni-krst-plivalo-se-sirom-RS-VIDEO)

Orthodox Church in Montenegro in an unequal position relative to other religious communities". In the conclusions of the Declaration the Montenegrin authorities are called upon to stop the efforts to forcibly seize the churches, monasteries and property of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, as well as the expulsion of priests. The Montenegrin authorities are also called upon to respect the provisions of the European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, EU Charter of Human Rights, as well as the constitutionally guaranteed fundamental human and civil rights of Serbs in Montenegro.<sup>89</sup>

## **"SMALL UKRAINE"**

The Law on the Freedom of Religion in Montenegro was adopted at the end of 2019 and in 2020, despite epidemiological restrictions and numerous protests and processions of the representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its believers. The Law envisaged that the state should become the owner of all religious buildings erected until December 1918, which was considered by the Serbian Orthodox Church and its believers as a direct state encroachment on the property of a religious community.

The controversial articles of the Law were changed after the change of the government in Montenegro in September 2020, when the Democratic Party of Socialists lost the elections and the coalition led by the Democratic Front, Democrats and United Reform Action (URA) came to power. The issue of the Fundamental Agreement between the state of Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church was not even resolved during the Government of Zdravko Krivokapić, although he attended a series of meetings with the high officials of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade. His Government lost confidence in February 2022, when the URA withdrew from it in February 2022 and the new Prime Minister, Dritan Abazović, stated, in April 2022, that the signing of the

89 "Skupština Republike Srpske usvojila Deklaraciju o zaštiti prava SPC u Crnoj Gori", RSE, 25 June 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30690331.html>

Fundamental Agreement is one of the key priorities of his office. This was also opposed by some political parties that formed part of the minority Government, such as the Social Democratic Party of Raško Konjević and the Democratic Party of Socialists, which provided support to it in the Parliament.<sup>90</sup>

On 5 September 2021, the enthronement of the newly elected Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and the Littoral in the Cetinje Monastery was followed by a two-day protests by citizens who blocked the approaches to the city. On this occasion, more than 50 people were injured in clash with the police. The enthronement took place under very unusual circumstances: Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije were brought near the monastery by a Montenegrin Army helicopter< they were escorted to the monastery “under armour” with strong support from the security forces. Although there were proposals to carry out the enthronement ceremony at another place or in another temple, the Serbian Orthodox Church and official Belgrade insisted that that the ceremony should be carried out just “in Cetinje” as it was planned and announced. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić told Montenegrin Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić: “The plan was to postpone the enthronement, but I congratulate Krivokapić for showing that the state has the instruments to carry through its plans”.

According to political analyst Boško Jakšić, the events in Cetinje, the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church and thus the role of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić in those events were a “kind of gift” for Russia for which, as he points out, the door has now been reopened for its political influence in Montenegro. When the enthronement ceremony was finished, the international community expressed serious concern about the conflict and ethnic divisions in Montenegro, while Serbia and Russia sent congratulations on a job well done. According Maria Zakharova, Spokeswoman for the

90 “Temeljni ugovor: Šta znači potpisivanje sporazuma Crne Gore i Srpske pravoslavne crkve”, *Danas*, 3 August 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/bbc-news-serbian/temeljni-ugovor-sta-znaci-potpisivanje-sporazuma-crne-gore-i-srpske-pravoslavne-crkve/>

Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia considers it important to resolve the situation with respect to the canonical rights of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its believers. Russia also fully supports the statements by Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije aimed to ease tensions. Jakšić believes that the Kremlin's congratulations on Joanikije's enthronement and statements of support to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro show that official Moscow – through Belgrade and the Church – was indirectly involved in the events in Cetinje. For Andrija Nikolić from the Democratic Party of Socialists, Moscow's congratulations are the confirmation that the policies of Moscow, Belgrade and official Podgorica are on the same wavelength. The Minister of Internal Affairs, Aleksandar Vulin, stated that the events in Cetinje clearly pointed to the importance that all Serbs are united and always act as a single political nation. Montenegrin Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić denied Serbia's interference in the mentioned events: "Someone can always try, but there was no external influence. This project was carried out solely by the people from Montenegro, who wished to preserve peace and order and introduce stability. And no one helped us".<sup>91</sup>

The Fundamental Agreement between the Montenegrin Government and the Serbian Orthodox Church, namely between Montenegrin Prime Minister Dritan Abazović and Patriarch Porfirije was signed in early August 2022.<sup>92</sup> It states that Montenegro recognizes the continuity of the legal subjectivity of the Serbian Orthodox Church since 1219 and guarantees the inviolability of its

91 "Uticaj Beograda i Moskve na crnogorsku politiku u svjetlu nemira na Cetinju", RSE, 8 September 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/uticaj-srbija-rusija-crna-gora-cetinje/31450480.html>

92 The signing of the Fundamental Agreement and the visit of its head to Montenegro were not announced by the Serbian Orthodox Church, while Prime Minister Abazović denied on Sunday, 31 July, that the Agreement would be signed on 3 August, which eventually happened. After several hours of discussion, the Government of Montenegro adopted the Draft Fundamental Agreement in July 2022, which was supported by 13 Ministers, while five of them were against it. The Montenegrin Government has 20 members and in the Parliament it is given minority support by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), President Milo Đukanović's party.

property and possession over monasteries, churches, buildings and other immovable properties and spaces in its ownership. The state guarantees to the Serbian Orthodox Church that its authorities will not undertake any security measures in its buildings without the prior approval of the competent church authorities; the Church is granted public legal powers and the open possibility of introducing religious education into public educational institutions.

A new era in the relations between the state and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro is evidenced, among other things, by the fact that since February 2021, when he was elected head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Porfirije has visited Montenegro at least five times, while his predecessor, Patriarch Irinej, used to go once a year during the last years of his service.<sup>93</sup>

Since the signing of the Fundamental Agreement, cooperation between various state institutions and the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as various business entities have been intensified. So, for example, in early August 2022, the Laković Supermarket Chain and the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral jointly submitted a request to the Montenegrin Ministry of Urban Planning concerning the construction of a business-residential building in Budva. According to some media reports, business premises and apartments will be built on the land owned by the Serbian Orthodox Church. At the end of September 2022, the Montenegrin Government allocated 900,000 euros for two secondary schools, named after Saint Sava in Podgorica and Metropolitan Hajji Sava Kosanović in Nikšić. Although some ministers and one part of the non-governmental sector expressed skepticism towards the validity of licencing two schools belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church, which have not yet been opened, the Government's decision was final. Media also reported about the infrastructure investments of the Serbian Orthodox Church on state

93 An illustrative example is Patriarch Porfirije's visit to Herceg Novi in late 2022, when the following was written on one banner: "The sun of happiness is warming the proud Serbian Boka today – Welcome among the citizens of Novi, holy father Porfirije."



and municipal land. In Žabljak, the local authorities unanimously decided to give the plot of an area of 600 sq.m. free of charge for the building of cathedral church. A church will also be built beside Captain's Lake, a part of untouched nature, in the Municipality of Kolašin where Metropolitan Joanikije consecrated the foundations of the future Church of Saint Lazar of Kosovo on a state-owned plot of land.

On 4 October 2022, the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral opened a spiritual and therapeutic counselling centre in Podgorica, modelled after a similar institution in Belgrade, with a view to financing the newly opened Orthodox pastoral counselling centre, thus enabling it to organize therapeutic and counselling meetings with individuals and families. Special attention will be devoted to children with various problems. The offices of Orthodox associations like Stupovi and Tvrdoš have also been opened.

The statement that largely confirms the expressed doubts about the connection between Moscow, Belgrade and Podgorica, if not concrete then certainly symbolic and ideological, is that by Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and the Littoral, in mid-March 2022, given in the Cathedral of Christ's Resurrection in Podgorica: "Naturally, many world's power brokers looked after their interests there. As you can see there are too many lies. We must sympathize with the Orthodox people in Ukraine, we must above all pray to God for that people who have unfortunately turned against each other. And this does not seem unknown to us, since there are also many divisions and quarrels here. And Montenegro was also projected to be a small Ukraine". Analyzing the current situation in Ukraine, the Metropolitan has stated that the situation is most difficult for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, headed by Metropolitan Onufriy, the canonical church "which is in unity with the Moscow Patriarchate and all other Orthodox Churches in the world." And then, syndromically, support for Russia was backed by anti-European and anti-Western "arguments": "the long struggle of Orthodoxy with iconoclasts in many ways resembles the struggle of Orthodoxy with atheism and communism, the godless ideologies of



our times. And that struggle has been going on for over a hundred years, since the coming of that evil to us from Europe, Protestant Europe – the evil of godlessness, atheism and communism. And this struggle continues and has produced too many victims. Just imagine how many of them in Russia and, unfortunately, in our country as well. And among all Slavic peoples”.<sup>94</sup>

Ukraine’s Chargé d’affaires in Montenegro, Natalia Fialka, reacted by condemning the Metropolitan’s statements. She pointed out that “the situation is not such that Russia protects Orthodox people. Orthodox Russians are killing Orthodox Ukrainians, whom they call ‘their brothers’”. Nela Savković Vukčević, an official of the strongest opposition party in Montenegro, Democratic Party of Socialists, reacted with the following words: “Metropolitan, divisions in Montenegro have been caused by Greater Serbian politics and the Church you represent. By saying that Montenegro is projected to be a ‘small Ukraine’ and by supporting Putin, you are inviting war to our state”. Before the last statement, Metropolitan Joanikije called for peace and an end to the war, without taking sides in the conflict. Nevertheless, organizations close to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Nikšić and Podgorica organized rallies in support of Russia and Putin, who was called on at the last rally to “do the job to the end and destroy NATO”.<sup>95</sup>

In the opinion of historian Miloš Vukanović, Metropolitan Joanikije has said what the highest officials of the Church in Serbia think, and that the story about the “neutrality” of the Serbian Orthodox Church in relation to Ukraine is a cover-up for hiding ideological aims: “The Serbian Orthodox Church depends on Aleksandar Vučić’s policy and is neutral in this story to the extent to which President Vučić tells it.” In the opinion of this historian, the ideology of the Serbian Orthodox Church is, in every message,

94 “Joanikije: Crna Gora je projektovana da bude mala Ukrajina”, *Politika*, 13 March 2022, <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/501900/Joanikije-Crna-Gora-je-projektovana-da-bude-mala-Ukrajina>

95 “Crnogorska opozicija i diplomata Ukrajine osudili izjavu mitropolita Joanikija”, N1, 15 March 2022, <https://rs.n1info.com/region/crnogorska-opozicija-i-diplomata-ukrajine-osudili-izjavu-mitropolita-joanikija/>

harmonized with the Moscow Patriarchate's ideology where, essentially, we do not have a religious policy, but a paranational policy and this doctrine was used by Putin to attack Ukraine: "It is a question of the doctrine that Ukraine is an artificial nation, that it should not exist and that it is an integral part of Russia, using fabricated and semi-fantasy historical narratives". Therefore, Vukanović believes that Joanikije's parallel between Montenegro and Ukraine is extremely dangerous: "If you project Montenegro in that way, then you believe that Montenegro should not be an independent state, that the Montenegrin nation should not exist, that it is a state, cultural and historical space of another nation." Previously, the Montenegrin PEN Centre called on the international community to condemn Joanikije's statement "as an act against everything that the European Union and NATO stand for". They stated: "As Joanikije views Montenegro as a small Ukraine, a similar Russian or Serbian aggression against Montenegro might be justified by Montenegro's 'godless' aspiration to realize the right to its state, culture, language and church".<sup>96</sup>

There came a reaction from citizens, too. At the end of February 2022, a group of about a hundred citizens gathered in Nikšić, the second largest city in Montenegro, at a rally in support of the "Orthodox people of Russia". "Free citizens of Nikšić", as they call themselves, chanted to Russian President Vladimir Putin, Russia and Kosovo, carrying the banner "Serbs in Montenegro, Russians in Ukraine" and exclaiming, among other things: "Everything is Russia, only Kosovo is Serbia" and "Putin the Serb".

On 28 February 2022, the deputies of the ruling pro-Serbian and pro-Russian coalition, led by the Democratic Front, did not show their readiness to sign the Draft Resolution submitted to the Assembly by the opposition Social Democratic Party, which condemned Russia's aggression and military intervention in Ukraine. In addition, one of the leaders of the Democratic Front, Andrija

96 "Opasne paralele Crne Gore i Ukrajine", RSE, 14 March 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mitropolit-joanikije-paralele-crna-gora-ukrajina/31752731.html>

Mandić supported the position of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who said that Serbia would not impose sanctions against Russia.<sup>97</sup>

The case of the street procession held on the occasion of the Church Patron Saint Celebration in Danilovgrad on 9 October 2022, which was led by Bishop Metodije of Budimlja and Nikšić together with persons in unconventional uniforms, belonging allegedly to the “Russian Cossack Army”, is symbolic. Those present at the church ceremony in Danilovgrad also included the Russian Ambassador to Montenegro, Vladislav Maslenikov, and the Chargé d’affaires of the Serbian Embassy to Montenegro, Jelisaveta Čolanović.<sup>98</sup>

## “MOTHER RUSSIA”

The decision of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I to recognize the independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church<sup>99</sup> has caused serious upheavals among local Orthodox churches, which have already been widely divided over numerous issues. As could be expected, this decision has been most positively evaluated with joy and elation in Kyiv, while official Moscow has condemned the decision calling it “catastrophic”. The Russian Orthodox Church has decided to stop participating in the structures presided over by

97 “U Nikšiću skup podrške Putinu na Cetinju Ukrajini”, RSE, 28 February 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/nik%C5%A1i%C4%87-ukrajina-skup-podrska/31728746.html>

98 “Crna Gora u ‘temeljnom zagrljaju’ SPC-a”, RSE, 12 October 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/spc-moleban-temeljni-ugovor-crna-gora/32075360.html>

99 In addition to the decision of the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople, 9–11 October 2018, to start the process of granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, thus withdrawing the 1686 decision by which the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate. Thus, Constantinople actually started the process of returning the Ukrainian Church under its jurisdiction. By the decision of Constantinople, Ukrainian Patriarch Filaret, who was excommunicated by the Russian Orthodox Church because of becoming the head of the Kyiv Patriarchate that broke away from Moscow in the early 1990s, was rehabilitated.

the Ecumenical Patriarch, as well as to no longer praise him during its services. It has also threatened that it would take one step further by no longer recognizing him as the first among equals in the Orthodox world.<sup>100</sup>

In this conflict, the Serbian Orthodox Church was the first and only one to take sides with one of the conflicting parties, namely the Russian Orthodox Church. In the communiqué issued by the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church it is stated that the decision of the Patriarchate of Constantinople is unfounded, while “the decision on the rehabilitation of schismatic groups is unacceptable”. Therefore, as stated, the Serbian Orthodox Church will not recognize them.<sup>101</sup> As a reminder, the Russian Orthodox Church did not attend the Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete in 2016, when the issue of the Ukrainian Church’s demand for autocephaly could be discussed in order to avoid unfavourable scenarios. It has now sent a letter to all 15 local Orthodox churches with an invitation to participate in a Pan-Orthodox debate on the disputed decision of the Ecumenical Patriarch.

Seemingly an intra-church conflict became more complicated in February 2022 with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, that is, with Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine. Except Serbia, all other countries of the Western Balkans harmonized their policies of sanctions against Russia with the European Union. Consequently, Serbia is the only candidate country, besides Turkey, which did not impose sanctions on Russia because of its attack on Ukraine. The officials of the Serbian Orthodox Church called for peace and an end to the war, not officially taking sides in the conflict. According to the legal representative of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral, lawyer Dalibor Kavarić, the official position of the Church on the war in Ukraine has been announced

100 “Priznanje Ukrajinske crkve, raskol u pravoslavlju?”, RSE, 12 October 2018., <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/priznanje-ukrajinska-crkva-pravoslavlje-raskol/29540136.html>

101 “Stav SPC o crkvenoj krizi u Ukrajine posle najnovijih odluka Carigradske Patrijaršije”, Svetigora, 12 November 2018, <https://svetigora.com/stav-spc-o-crkvenoj-krizi-u-ukrajini-poste-najnovijih-odluka-carigradske-patrijarsije/>

by Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and the Littoral, who called for peace in Ukraine and an end to war destruction. The Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church has announced that his Church organizes the collection of aid that will be sent to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and Metropolitan Onufry.<sup>102</sup> Metropolitan Joanikije has said for Metropolitan Onufry of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that he is at the crucifixion and wishes him strength to “preserve the unity of his people and the canonical unity of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, in union with all holy churches of God”.<sup>103</sup>

In the Resolution on “foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union”, which was adopted by the European Parliament on 9 March 2022, European representatives express their concern about the “Orthodox Church’s attempts in the countries such as Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in one of its entities, the Republic of Srpska, to promote Russia as the protector of traditional family values and strengthen the state-church relations”. The Resolution states, among other things, that the European Parliament is upset because Hungary and Serbia are helping China and Russia in their geopolitical goals.<sup>104</sup> Responding with an official statement, the Serbian Orthodox Church dismissed the allegations of the European Parliament Resolution that it promotes Russia and raises ethnic tensions in the Western Balkan countries.<sup>105</sup>

102 Metropolitan Onufry, who is supported by Patriarch Porfirije and Metropolitan Joanikije is the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with the seat in Kyiv, which remained loyal to the Russian Orthodox Church, after the Ukrainian Orthodox Church broke away from it in January 2019.

103 “Srpska crkva prati Vučićevu neutralnost o ruskoj invaziji”, RSE, 07 March 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-spc-ukrajina-rat/31740733.html>

104 “EU rezolucijom optužio Rusiju da cilja ‘rasplamsavanje’ sukoba na Zapadnom Balkanu”, RSE, 10 March 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/evropski-parlament-rezolucija-rusija-zapadni-balkan/31746842.html>

105 “Povodom rezolucije Evropskog parlamenta”, SPC, 14 March 2022, <https://spc.rs/povodom-rezolucije-evropskog-parlam/>

On 27 April 2022, Patriarch Porfirije and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church Kirill spoke via video link and one of the main topics was the war in Ukraine. In addition to the Serbian Patriarch, Bishop Irinej of Bačka was also present during their meeting. As was stated, during their “longer brotherly meeting”, they talked about the war in Ukraine paying special attention to the humanitarian situation in Donbas. The Russian Patriarch thanked the Serbian Patriarch for his support, especially with respect to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the one under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. Patriarch Kirill said that “there is confidence that the Serbian Church is with us in this difficult time”, said Patriarch Kirill. The Russian Patriarch thanked the Serbian Church for its help for Ukrainian refugees, who arrive in the countries “which are spiritually nourished by the Serbian Patriarchate”, and also asked Patriarch Porfirije to convey to the Serbian President his gratitude for the help that the Serbian state provided for Ukrainian refugees. “We share your feelings, we pray for you and are ready to do everything we can to support the Russian Orthodox Church and faithful people in Russia and Ukraine”, said the Serbian Patriarch. The parties agreed to continue brotherly communication in different formats. The information about the meeting of the heads of the two Orthodox Churches is especially important at the time when Serbia is making enormous efforts to conduct a balanced policy and it will be interesting to see how the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is ideologically fully inclined towards the Russian Orthodox Church, will fit into that policy.<sup>106</sup>

In October 2022, the delegation of the Serbian Orthodox Church attended the “Serbian Consolation to the Russian Heart” in Russia, whose topic was “the centuries-long history of Serbian-Russian brotherhood”. Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro and the Littoral and Bishop Jovan of Slavonia led the delegation and

106 “Sastanak Porfirija i Kirila: Dva patrijarha razgovarala o ratu u Ukrajini i situaciji u Donbasu!”, Serbian Times, 6 May.2022, <https://serbiantimes.info/sastanak-porfirija-i-kirila-dva-patrijarha-razgovarala-o-ratu-u-ukrajini-i-situaciji-u-donbasu/>

also blessed and opened this festival where the documentaries of priest Nenad Ilić, “Saint Nikolai the Serb” and “Abba Justin”, were shown. In the Danilov Monastery in Moscow, the delegation of the Serbian Orthodox Church met with Volokolams Metropolitan Anthony, Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, who succeeded Metropolitician Illarion. At the liturgy with Russian Patriarch Kirill in the Moscow Kremlin Cathedral, Metropolitan Joanikije said that the Serbian clergy and people pray for the Russian Patriarch and “Holy Rus” – which includes Russia, Belarus and Ukraine – and that the Lord “enlightens those who are most responsible, softens their hearts and that a dialogue starts as early as possible, so that they talk and achieve peace brotherly and with trust”.<sup>107</sup>

The unbreakable bond between two sister churches, two brotherly nations and even two brotherly states, has been potentiated over the decades. The strong identity connection with Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church is especially emphasized in the Serbian Orthodox Church, ranging from the church calendar, through the role of the Russian Federation in the protection of Serbian interests in Kosovo and Metohija, to exceptional financial assistance in the construction of the Temple of Saint Sava. There is a whole series of structural and institutional connections, which require a special analysis. For a full decade, Patriarch Irinej has emphasized the importance of the traditional relationship with Russia, using the well-known narrative about “our greatest friend”, “how we should tie our small boat to the big ship of our great brotherly Slavic nation with which we are connected by blood and faith” and “which is sailing into the future”, and that the path to “the great and powerful Russian history and the Russian Church” was already shown by Saint Sava when he chose the path to the Russian monastery and

107 “Joanikije u Moskvi: Srpske se vladike mole za ‘Svetu Rus’ – Rusiju, Belorusiju i Ukrajinu’”, AntenaM, 20 October 2022., <https://www.antenam.net/stav/263217-joanikije-u-moskvi-srpske-se-vladike-mole-za-svetu-rus-rusiju-belorusiju-i-ukrajinu>



the Russian Church. We are grateful to God that Russia's hand has been extended to us and it is up to us just to accept it".

The recipients of the Order of Saint Sava, the highest decoration of the Serbian Orthodox Church, are Dmitry Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, Patriarch Aleksey II of Moscow and All Russia, Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister of the Russian Federation,<sup>108</sup> Yury Luzhkov, Mayor of Moscow, General Sergei Shoigu, Boris Kostenko, General Director of Spas TV in Moscow, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, as well as all the former Ambassadors of the Russian Federation to Serbia since 2004, Alexander Alekseyev, Alexander Konuzin and Alexander Chepurin. The General Director of Gazpromneft and the Deputy General Director of Gazpromneft are also on the list of those decorated (Second Degree) for their contribution to the building of the Temple of Saint Sava."<sup>109</sup>

At the traditional ceremony organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Russian House on the occasion of the Russian holiday of the Day of Family, Love and Fidelity, Patriarch Irinej awarded Eleonora Mitrofanova, Director of the Russian Centre of Science and Culture (Rossotrudnichestvo), with the Order of Saint Princess Milica for her contribution as the President of the Executive Board of UNESCO to the preservation of the Serbian sanctities in Kosovo and Metohija. "One of the reasons for the award is her contribution and what Russia is doing for the painting of our Temple of Saint Sava", said the Patriarch.<sup>110</sup> The same decoration was also given to the Director of the Russian House, Nadezhda Kushchenkova, for the promotion of cultural and spiritual relations between the Serbian and Russian people. At the solemn ceremony, the Patriarch pointed out that the Russian state

108 The recipients of the Order of Saint Sava are also Alexander Lukashenko, President of Belarus, and Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan.

109 "Tomislav Nikolić i patrijarh položili prve kamenčiće mozaika u hramu Svetog Save", Beta, 22 May 2017, <https://beta.rs/vesti/vesti-drustvo/63570-tomislav-nikolic-i-patrijarh-polozili-prve-kamencice-mozaika-u-hramu-svetog-save>

110 "Mitrofanovoj orden SPC za očuvanje srpskih svetinja a KiM", Pink, <https://pink.rs/drustvo/79347/mitrofanovoj-orden-spc-za-ocuvanje-srpskih-svetinja-na-kim>



and its Church helped Serbia whenever they could and that they never hindered it, unlike some other nations which, as he stated, we used to consider friends. "The Serbian and Russian people are spiritually, culturally and historically connected, which has been confirmed even today when Russia helps us in connection with Kosovo and Metohija, and I hope that it will help us to preserve it", said the Patriarch and reminded us that the Russian state and Church help us finish the Temple of Saint Sava.<sup>111</sup> Alexander Porfirievich Torshin, First Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council and founder of the International Foundation Saint Sava the Sanctified, was also awarded with the Order of Saint King Milutin.<sup>112</sup>

## THE PERSISTANCE IN OLD ATTITUDES

In March 2022, at the height of the world's attention turned to the war in Ukraine, a symbolically very illustrative video appeared on social media in which an Orthodox priest, in front of the monument to General Dragoljub Draža Mihailović in the village of Draževina in Dubrunska Rijeka, Bosnia and Herzegovina, invites the crowd to greet Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov exclaiming: "Three cheers for Kadyrov!"<sup>113</sup>

According to some Montenegrin media, in early August 2022, in the village of Gornje Zaostro near Berane, Bishop Metodije of Budimlja and Nikšić held a memorial service for the Chetnik leaders Pavle Đurišić and Dragoljub Draža Mihailović, as well as other "commanders". At the meeting, it was announced "the restoration of the pedestal, on which the monument to Pavle Đurišić will

111 "Odlikovanje iz ruke patrijarha Irineja: Direktorki Ruskog doma Orden carice Milice", *Kurir*, 9 July 2019, <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/3282365/odlikovanje-iz-ruke-patrijarha-irineja-direktorki-ruskog-doma-orden-carice-milice>

112 "Orden Svetog kralja Milutina za Aleksandra Porfirjeviča Toršina", *Pokret Snaga Srbije-BK*, 2 December 2014, <https://snagasrbije.com/orden-svetog-kralja-milutina-za-aleksandra-porfirjevica-torsina/>

113 "Skandal zbog pravoslavnog sveštenika u Bosni: Klicao Ramzanu Kadirovu, pljušte osude na mrežama (video)", *Mondo*, 15 March 2022, <https://mondo.rs/Info/EX-YU/a1609854/Svestenik-slavi-Kadirova-u-Bosni.html>

be erected".<sup>114</sup> The memorial service was followed by a celebration where the participants wore the Chetnik symbols and, according to social media videos, sang the songs "Turks Are Lamenting, Bulas are Wailing", "Pavle Đurišić's Patrol, Patrol"... Previously, in June, the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral marked the day of the death of the convicted war criminal Dragoljub Draža Mihailović in the Church of the Holy Trinity in Gornji Grbalj and the local priest, who has been the Gornji Grbalj parish priest for the past 13 years, said that the memorial service is held very year.<sup>115</sup>

The videos promoting the ultra-nationalist contents involving clergymen also occasionally appeared on social media. So, for example, in mid-February 2022, there appeared videos on social media where one can watch a priest singing in a larger company the song "As long as there are the church and bishops there will be Serbs and Chetniks..."<sup>116</sup> "In the middle of Mount Romanija the Chetnik flag is waving. Well, let it waving, it was brought from Serbia. It was brought by Uncle Draža and his Mountain Guard", read the lyrics of one of the songs that were allegedly sung that night in the Karno Monastery near Srebrenica.<sup>117</sup>

According to the media report, during the celebration of the Patron Saint's Day of the Church of the Intercession of the Holy Mother of God in Srebrenica, a procession was held in the streets

114 "Episkop Metodije danas slavio četničke glavešine Đurišića i Mihailovića", AntenaM, 8 August 2022, <https://www.antenam.net/drustvo/religija/254580-episkop-metodije-danas-slavio-cetnicke-glavesine-djurisica-i-mihailovica-video>

115 "SPC preko četnika demonstrira moć", *Vijesti*, 12 August 2022. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/617116/spc-preko-cetnika-demonstrira-moc>

116 It is about the Twitter account of Mlađan Đorđević, the leader of the Liberation Movement, who allegedly stayed in Bosnia and Herzegovina in mid-January to celebrate the Orthodox New Year and socialized with Luka Babić, Abbot of the Karno Monastery near Srebrenica. Mlađan Đorđević is the former advisor to President Boris Tadić, now a "humanitarian", who has founded the Our Serbia organization. and the leader of the Liberation Movement. According to the media, he has good relations with Russian businessmen, especially Alexander Babkin, who is on the EU and USA sanctions lists.

117 "Mlađan Đorđević: 'Dok je crkve i vladika, biće Srba i četnika'...", *Danas*, 13 February 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/svet/region/mladjan-djordjevic-dok-crkve-i-vladika-bice-srba-i-cetnika/>

of the town. The priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church stopped in front of the building where the premises of the Party of Democratic Action Srebrenica are located and consecrated them. As could be expected, there was a sharp reaction from the local leaders of the Party of Democratic Action (SDA): "The Municipal Committee of the SDA Srebrenica strongly condemns the action of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Srebrenica, which has today committed an act of religious attack on the official premises of the SDA Srebrenica. The consecration of the official premises of the SDA Srebrenica is the proof that the Serbian Orthodox Church has not given up its intention to do now, in peace, what they did not destroy and baptize during the war and aggression. We inform the representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church that thousands of litres of holy water cannot wash away the blood and odour of the crime committed with the blessing of the Church. We demand an immediate investigation and punishment of those responsible for this heinous crime from the competent police authorities".<sup>118</sup>

Here we could also remind ourselves of some of the numerous statements of church dignitaries which discriminate against minority religious and ethnic groups in Serbia. One of the first statements made by Patriarch Irinej only five days after his enthronement was that "... we know roughly what the philosophy and psychology of Islam are. When they are in smaller numbers, they know how to behave and be correct. When they become equal in numbers, they raise their heads and when they become preeminent and superior they exert pressure on others to move or join them."<sup>119</sup>

In 2014, in Saint Peter's Church in Novi Pazar, at the beginning of the May session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church marking the 900th birth anniversary of Stefan Nemanja (Saint Simeon), Patriarch Irinej called on the gathered Orthodox

118 "Sveštenik SPC-a u Srebrenici osvještavao prostorije SDA, usljedila reakcija", N1 BiH, 14 October 2022, <https://ba.n1info.com/vijesti/svestenik-spc-a-u-srebrenici-osvjestavao-prostorije-sda-usljedila-reakcija/>

119 *Blic*, 27 January 2010.

believers in Novi Pazar to “show Christian love for the people of a different religion with whom they live together, because they are their blood brothers”. However, during his address, he also said: “We will not enter into how and why they have become what they are, now certainly not because of hot cakes. Only their ancestors know what has made them change their religion. We have also recently heard one of the local politicians saying that he is a descendant of Saint Sava. That is true, they all are his descendants and they should know that”<sup>120</sup>

When it comes to the attitude towards the war crimes committed during the war in the former Yugoslavia, the Serbian Orthodox Church still maintains its rigid stance. On the occasion of the first-instance verdict against the Commander of the Republic of Srpska Army, Ratko Mladić, in November 2017, Patriarch Irinej said that all this “happens because the mighty powers in the world do devilish deeds and we suffer the consequences”. He also said that it is not just that “only Serbian generals are tried in The Hague, while all the others are released, that this has been going on for a long time and that there is no end at sight”.<sup>121</sup>

In September 2022, the public heard the news that the Diocese of New Gračanica and Midwestern America awarded the leader of the Serbian Radical Party, Vojislav Šešelj, with the Order of Saint Bishop Mardarije. The Order was presented by Bishop Irinej of Bačka on behalf of Bishop Longin.<sup>122</sup> As a reminder, in 2015, after his return from The Hague, the leader of the Serbian Radicals was decorated by Bishop Filaet at the Monastery of Mileševa, who said that he was doing it as a sign of gratitude for Šešelj’s defence of

120 “Patrijarh Irinej: Narodi druge vere sigurno nisu ostali to što jesu ‘od vrućih kolača’”, *Blic*, 14 May 2014, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/patrijarh-irinej-narodi-druge-vere-sigurno-nisu-postali-to-sto-jesu-od-vrucih-kolaca/qyebte4>

121 “Irinej: Silni svetski moćnici rade đavolska dela”, *Vesti*, 24 November 2017, <https://www.vesti.rs/Ratko-Mladi%C4%87/Irinej-Silni-svetski-mocnici-rade-djavolska-dela.html>

122 “SPC dodelila orden Šešelju, odlikovao ga vladika bački Irinej”, *Danas*, 11 September 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/spc-dodelila-orden-seselju-odlikovao-ga-vladika-backi-irinej/>

Serbdom: "The Managing Board of the Diocese of Mileševa awards Professor Dr Šešelj, Chetnik Voivoda, the winner of the Hague Tribunal, with the Order of the White Angel of the First Degree, a high decoration of the Diocese of Mileševa." Bishop Filaret added the following to the official explanation: "Dear friend, brother Voja, God gave you to wash away the stain from the Serbian people, as much as you could, of course it was difficult, but we followed you and congratulate you on your brave struggle, the Serbian struggle, heroic struggle".<sup>123</sup>

Soon afterwards, Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral presented Šešelj with the Order of the Golden Image of Saint Peter the Second of Lovćen, the Secret Seer. As stated in the explanation of the Charter, the order was awarded "for Kosovo's wrestling and service to the Holy Law of God's Justice in defence from the 'justice' of the Hague Tribunal, whose traces reek of inhumanity".<sup>124</sup>

The correspondence between Vojislav Šešelj and Patriarch Irinej after the removal of Bishop Filaret of Mileševa is also illustrative. Namely, after the publishing of the report on the Bishop's removal by the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Vojislav Šešelj sent a letter to the Patriarch expressing his regret for the discord in the Serbian Orthodox Church and removal of some Bishops, as well as his astonishment that the Bishop was removed because of awarding him with the Order of the White Angel and that he is ready to return it. In response to this letter, Patriarch Irinej denied that the reason for his removal was the award of the order to Vojislav Šešelj or the pressure of the American Ambassador, as was widely speculated in the media. It was about some other faults of a purely canonical-administrative nature.<sup>125</sup>

123 "SPC ponovo odlikovala Šešelja – nakon Filareta i Amfilohija, orden i od Irineja", N1, 11 September, 2022., <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/spc-odlikovala-i-vojislava-seselja-oreden-mu-urucio-vladika-irinej/>

124 Ibid.

125 "Patrijarh: Šešelj i mabasador SAD nisu razlog za smenu Filareta", *Blic*, 30 May 2015, <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/patrijarh-seselj-i-ambasador-sad-nisurazlog-za-smenu-filareta/h2ps3nf>

Patriarch Porfirije continued with intensive glorification of the image and work of Saint Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. The Patriarch led a great spiritual and cultural manifestation on the occasion of the triple anniversary of Saint Bishop Nikolaj of Ohrid and Žiça: 140 years since his birth, 65 years since his presentation to the Lord and 30 years since the transfer of his relics from Libertyville to his native Lelić. In his speech, the Patriarch pointed out that Bishop Nikolaj's life and work are still relevant today and that we can instruct the young generations to use him as a role model and guide in their lives. Pointing out that Bishop Nikolaj's value system is "cross-like love", the Patriarch advises that "when someone asks us what we think about a topic, we will not speak from ourselves, from our own mind; instead, we will speak using the language of Saint Bishop Nikolaj, we will speak with the mind of Christ".<sup>126</sup>

The same values grounded in the image and work of the main-tained Saint, Patriarch Porfirije emphasized in Budapest, in early September 2022, when he presented the Order of Saint Sava of the First Degree to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban in the presence of Bishop Irinej of Bačka and Bishop Lukijan of Buda in the seat of the Hungarian Government. The highest award was given "as a sign of gratitude for the promotion of traditional Christian values, for his selfless support to the Diocese of Buda of the Serbian Orthodox Church and for an exceptional personal contribution to the friendship between our two neighbouring nations". The Patriarch said that we all know that each individual and each community live according to their value system: "With these values they organize their private, social and cultural life, shape public morals, set priorities and standards, build relationships with other and different people; in a word, they create and cherish their authentic identity. Today, however, we are faced with the waves of new value systems that are often aggressively imposed at the global level

126 "Akademija u čast Svetog vladike Nikolaja", TV Hram, 29 June 2022. <https://www.tvhram.rs/vesti/vesti-iz-crkve/4285/akademija-cast-svetog-vladike-nikolaja-patrijarh-porfirije-vladici-nikolaju-mera-bio-hristos-njegovo-jevandjelje-foto-video>

with an aim to destroy every existing natural and civilizational order, and establish a new paradigm". In this vortex, the Patriarch continues, it is intended to destroy the identity foundations and pillars of individuals and communities and make everything relative, fragile and fluid: "On the other hand, you stand for the Christian value system that originates from the Gospel created by God. These are the values created by both the Hungarian and Serbian people, the values that have created Europe as we have known it until yesterday, Europe we have lived in until yesterday. That is why we are the same; there is no difference between us."<sup>127</sup>

As we have already mentioned what the Patriarch Porfirije said in Hungary, it is interesting to point to the extremely intense and perhaps exaggerated diplomatic behaviour of a church dignitary. This behaviour is much more striking, especially when compared to the behaviour of his predecessors. Namely, in 2022, the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church hosted the diplomatic representatives of Portugal, Azerbaijan, Germany, Spain, Slovakia, Egypt, the United States, Cyprus, Kazakhstan, Sweden, Belgium, France, as well as the Austrian Chancellor and the head of the Delegation of the European Union. During the previous year, when he just became the head of the Church – in addition to the Special Envoy of the British Prime Minister for the Western Balkans, Speaker of the Parliament of Cyprus, high-ranking officials of the Russian Federation, OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities, head of the OSCE Mission, head of the Council of Europe Mission, Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs and Montenegrin Minister of Ecology, Spatial Planning and Urbanism. He also hosted the diplomatic representatives of Ukraine, the European Union, the Netherlands, Syria, Greece, Japan, Georgia, Panama, Iran, Germany, Poland, Bulgaria, Canada, Australia, Egypt, Russia in Croatia, Belarus, Hungary, Romania, Ukraine, Slovenia, Italy, Israel, Belgium, Cyprus, Armenia, Austria and Cyprus.

127 "Patrijarh Porfirije uručio Viktoru Orbanu najviše odličje SPC – Orden Svetog Save prvog stepena za zasluge", *Informer*, 5 September 2022, <https://informer.rs/vesti/drustvo/732472/patrijarh-porfirije-viktor-orban-orden>



Diplomacy has especially come to the fore in resolving the decades-long dispute over the canonical status of the unrecognized Macedonian Orthodox Church.

## **THE END OF THE ORTHODOX OHRID ARCHBISHOPRIC**

The decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of 9 May 2022 to recognize the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric has resonated throughout the Orthodox world, but nowhere near so strongly as the one of 2018 when Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew recognized the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church severed all ties with the first among equals. One week after the decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church approved the canonical unity of the Serbian Orthodox Church with the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric. This was followed by the Liturgy of Reconciliation in the Temple of Saint Sava in Belgrade, the first in 55 years which the Bishops of both Churches served together, and then the joint liturgy of reconciliation in the Church of St Clement of Ohrid in Skopje at which Patriarch Porfirije announced that the Serbian Orthodox Church recognizes the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric.

As everything happened very fast and unexpectedly, the decision was met with indignation and condemnation by the conservative and nationalist part of the public, which considered the recognition of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Church as a “betrayal” and prelude to the “recognition of Kosovo”. None of the dignitaries of the Serbian Orthodox Church explained this decision in detail, but in unofficial analyses such theses are absolutely rejected, just because the entire dispute with the Ohrid Archbishopric was based on the procedural and canonical obstacles created in 1967 when it self-initiatedly proclaimed its autocephaly.



Over the last 20 years, ever since Patriarch Pavle, in 2002, and the Niš Agreement, which the Bishops of the Macedonian Church had signed and agreed to the widest possible autonomy, and then had to give it up under pressure from Skopje, there have been numerous attempts and initiatives to resolve this schism. Any idea of reconciliation implied the return of the Macedonian clergy to the mother church, leaving the issue of autocephaly for another time. According to some information, at the time of Patriarch Irinej there were also talks about some kind of agreement in which the Macedonian top leadership with the former Prime Minister Gruevski was also involved. However, according to the same information, the waiting period of several years for achieving autocephalous status was not acceptable for the Macedonian side.<sup>128</sup> Patriarch Porfirije took a different approach: autocephaly was granted, tensions were eased, while the legal and technical formalities was left to be settled in peace.

Naturally, it was heard once again about secret meetings between the highest priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church in Niš, and how it was agreed to end the schism in the manner of high ecumenical diplomacy. In the church sources both in Skopje and Belgrade it is speculated that the issue is of an ecclesiastical and political nature and connected with Russia, the West and the upcoming moves of the Serbian authorities, which are allegedly seriously counting on Patriarch Porfirije to cushion the possible reaction of the Serbian Orthodox Church if official Belgrade decides to impose sanctions against Moscow or give up Kosovo, blaming for it the Russian state policy.<sup>129</sup>

128 "Na kraju se ispostavilo da je samo trebalo lepo da zamole": Kako se MPC (sada i zvanično dobila autokefalnost", *Nedeljnik*, 5 June 2022, <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/na-kraju-se-ispostavilo-da-je-samo-trebalo-lepo-da-zamole-kako-je-mpc-sada-i-zvanicno-dobila-autokefalnost/>

129 "Dok Beograd i Skoplje liječe rane, Moskva ne priznaje Carigrad", *Aljazeera Balkans*, 21 May 2022, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2022/5/21/beograd-i-skopje-lijece-rane-moskva-ne-priznaje-carigrad>

It is certain that the end of the schism cannot only be viewed in terms of the relations between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church; some sources indicate that the political relations between Serbia and North Macedonia in the context of the Open Balkans have accelerated the settlement of the problem, but it is particularly difficult to consider it as an isolate relationship at the time when the Orthodox Church is globally burdened by the conflict between the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Moscow Patriarchate. It is interesting to note that it is expected that both Patriarchates, the Moscow Patriarchate and the Patriarchate of Constantinople, will look positively at the recognition of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. In fact, Moscow has an interest in emphasizing that only the mother church can recognize autocephaly, which was not respected in the case of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.<sup>130</sup>

On 24 May, the Serbian Orthodox Church recognized the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric. On 5 June 2022, Patriarch Porfirije presented the Tomos of Autocephaly to Archbishop Stefan of Ohrid and Macedonia. The Russian Orthodox Church also recognized the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric as autocephalous.<sup>131</sup>

During the mentioned rapid and unexpected events regarding the recognition of autocephality, the officials of the Serbian Orthodox Church did not make a statement about the status of the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric, an autonomous church within the Serbian Orthodox Church which was founded in 2002. As a reminder, this organizational structure was created on the basis of the consent of one Archbishop of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (Metropolitan Jovan Vraniškovski) to the Niš Agreement

130 "Na kraju se ispostavilo da je samo trebalo lepo da zamole": Kako se MPC (sada i zvanično dobila autokefalnost", *Nedeljnik*, 5 June 2022, <https://www.nedeljnik.rs/na-kraju-se-ispostavilo-da-je-samo-trebalo-lepo-da-zamole-kako-je-mpc-sada-i-zvanicno-dobila-autokefalnost/>

131 "Ruska pravoslavna crkva priznala autokefalnost Makedonske", *Aljazeera Balkans*, 26 August 2022, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2022/8/26/ruska-pravoslavna-crkva-priznala-autokefalnost-makedonske>

on Entrance into a Canonical Unity with the Serbian Orthodox Church, which was subsequently rejected by other Archbishops of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Founded with the expectation that it would attract a larger number of priests and believers in North Macedonia to the canonical communion, this church structure did not justify what it was formed for. The Orthodox Church Archbishopric not only failed to achieve credibility, but became an illegal, marginalized and stigmatized religious organization that consisted of a few Archbishops and an insignificant number of priests, monks and people. Archbishop Jovan was sent to prison several times, he was often apprehended and imprisoned, and the last time he came out of prison his health was so impaired that he is now in a very bad condition. Thus, the granting of autocephaly to the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric by the Serbian Orthodox Church renders meaningless the two-decade sacrifice of Archbishop Jovan and the priests and believers of the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric, who can now only join the official autocephalous church structure, whose legitimacy and legality they had consistently and devotedly challenged for years.

According to international media analysts, the move of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to recognize the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has played an important role, and since then the Macedonian Orthodox Church has intensified its efforts to finally become independent. Analysts mostly agree that the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church is Patriarch Bartholomew's victory in outwitting the Moscow Patriarchate. They also believe that it is unlikely that it will be a precedent that can be applied elsewhere in the Balkans and, according to Anargyros Anapliotis: "Unlike North Macedonia, in Montenegro the vast majority of the Orthodox population adheres to the Belgrade Patriarchate. In the foreseeable future, we cannot expect significant support for the Montenegrin Church – neither in the country nor in world Orthodoxy."<sup>132</sup>

132 "Zašto je SPC priznala Makedonsku crkvu?", Deutsche Welle, 28 May 2022, <https://www.dw.com/sr/za%C5%A1to-je-spc-priznala-makedonsku->

## EUROPRIDE

In its official communiqué, the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church welcomed the decision of the highest state authorities to cancel the EuroPride in Belgrade in September 2022 and, due to “this responsible decision” sent “sincere congratulations” to the Serbian President and the Serbian Government. In the communiqué it was pointed out that “holding this parade”, in the service of promoting LGBT ideology, which is trying to impose itself on Europe and the so-called Western world in general and, unfortunately, on our people, would not be of benefit to anyone. On the contrary, it would cause additional tensions and divisions, as well as indignation and revolt among the believers of the Serbian Orthodox Church and all other traditional churches and religious communities in Serbia. In the communiqué it is stated the following: “We believe that the LGBT issue is inappropriate, especially these days when for us Serbs, in Serbia and elsewhere in the world, there is one major topic, Kosovo and Metohija”. Naturally, even on this occasion it was not missed to mention “our state leadership headed by the Serbian President”, who is uncompromisingly and unyieldingly fighting for the preservation of our primeval southern province within Serbia, for salvation of our greatest sanctuaries, (...) and for the survival and staying of the Serbian people on their centuries-old hearths.”<sup>133</sup>

Pointing out that the ruling party ensured the holding of the Pride Parade during the past eight years, Technical Prime Minister and Prime Minister Designate Ana Brnabić<sup>134</sup> has confirmed that

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133 “SPC pozdravlja otkazivanje Europrajda”, *Politika*, 27 August 2022, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/515318/SPC-pozdravlja-otkazivanje-Europrajda>

134 In September 2019, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić gave “full support” to Belgrade’s bid to host EuroPride 2022, stressing the importance of this event “for the promotion of wider acceptance and respect for diversity and freedom”, and promising its security and success.

“Beograd Prajd kandidat za domaćina Euro Prajda 2022: Šta to može da znači za položaj LGBT ljudi u Srbiji i na Balkanu”, *BBC News na srpskom*, 14 September 2019., <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-49665309>

an exception will be made, since “this year is difficult” and “hell is waiting for us”, namely “our peace and stability... all our capacities must be focused on the prevention of any violence in so-called Kosovo, and if some go to Pride, Serbia will be more vulnerable. (...) We have clearly said that due to regional tensions and the potential intensification of tensions, we believe that Pride should not take place at this moment.”<sup>135</sup>

In the spring of 2017, the media reported that, due to the sexual orientation of the then Minister of Government Administration and Local Self-Government, the Serbian Orthodox Church was against Ana Brnabić’s candidacy for the position of Serbian Prime Minister. The majority church in Serbia gave an official denial stating that “the Serbian Orthodox Church, its Patriarch or any other official institution or person do not interfere in the election of state officials” and that “it is irresponsible to disclose embarrassing details or one’s personal temptations in the media, thus exposing people to potential danger”.<sup>136</sup> Responding to the official statement of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the future Prime Minister expressed her gratitude to the majority church for “being honest and professional enough to send to my office the same denial it sent to the public” and expressed her “deep and sincere respect for that institution”. On that occasion, Ana Brnabić said: “It would be absolutely frivolous for me to comment on such a serious situation. If I have any comment, I will definitely contact the Church”.<sup>137</sup>

Five years later, one could hear different tones in the mentioned relationship, which was very meaningfully articulated by Bishop Nikanor of Banat in August 2022: “... They were sent by

135 “‘Čeka nas pakao’” Brnabić objasnila zašto je otkazan Evro prajd”, *Srbija danas*, 28 August 2022, <https://www.sd.rs/vesti/info/ceka-nas-pakao-brnabic-objasnila-zasto-je-otkazan-evro-prajd-2022-08-28>

136 “SPC se ne protivi predlogu da Brnabić bude premijerka”, RTS, 15 May 2017, <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/2735429/spc-se-ne-protivi-predlogu-da-brnabic-bude-premijerka.html>

137 “Brnabić: Duboko poštujem SPC”, *Beta*, 17 May 2017, <https://beta.rs/politika/63152-ministarka-brnabic-povodom-glasina-duboko-postujem-spc>

those who want to destroy everything that is valuable, that is holy, that is God's. And we raise our voice against them. And I have one option and I will use it now. I will anathematize all of them. I will pass the curse on them, but not on their future generations and families, their children... in fact, they have no children, right? They do not acknowledge their children, they are not even parents, what are they? They are neither the mother nor the father. Now our child, here your child must not call you father, it must not call you mother, but the first parent, the second parent and so on. Do we want to listen to the one who has desecrated our country and whose name I cannot say, because in that case I cannot say God's name. The one who has allowed her own brother to be the father of her son. Do we want that, will we accept him there? And you know who I am talking about. She is not of our faith or origin. She is an enemy, her parents and grandparents were the enemies and butchers of the Serbian people. And she preaches to us today that she has neither the father nor the mother. She has no children and has children. Whose children, whose children are they? We all will stand up against it, me first. I am getting up at this moment, I am already up. And at this moment today, I will stand up and swear, I will swear, I will curse all those who organize and participate in something like that. I can do so much, if I had a weapon I would use it, I would use that force if I only had it, but I don't have it. And probably no one will give it to me if I ask for it now, when they hear that I will go out with a weapon. And I would go out..."<sup>138</sup>

After Bishop Nikanor of Banat cursed and threatened Pride participants, and also cursed and insulted Technical Prime Minister and Prime Minister Designate Ana Brnabić, there were strong public reactions. The representatives of the LGBT community filed a criminal complaint against him, reaction came from the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality<sup>139</sup> as well as President

138 "Vladika Nikanor o Pride parade u Beogradu", Youtube, 11 August 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70Sy0mfsVgg>

139 "Episkop Nikanor prokleo LGBT populaciju, Poverenica ga najoštrije osudila", N1, 12 August 2022, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/episkop-nikanor-prokleo-lgbt->

Aleksandar Vučić himself: “Bishop Nikanor insulted himself and insulted our Church, humiliated our Church, much more than Ana Brnabić or anyone else. When I hear someone’s aggressive tone, I always wonder what is latent behind it”.<sup>140</sup> Responding to Bishop Nikanor’s disturbing speech,<sup>141</sup> Ana Brnabić said that “she was terribly affected as a human being, but that is irrelevant at the moment”, because “we now have to fight for Serbia, we should not quarrel. At this moment, we must give full support to the Serbian President to fight (in Brussels) and ensure that we have peace”. She concluded her comment on the anathema with the following words: “As far as I am concerned, the Serbian Orthodox Church is one of the main pillars of the society and this people. I will never say a single word against the Serbian Orthodox Church, especially now.”<sup>142</sup> In her speech, the Technical Prime Minister and Prime Minister Designate mentioned the importance of remaining unit-

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populaciju-poverenica-ga-najostrije-osudila/

140 “Vučić: Episkop Nikanor je izvredao sebe i unizio našu Crkvu”, Euronewes, 12 August 2022., <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/58836/vucic-episkop-nikanor-je-izvredao-sebe-i-unizio-nasu-crkvu/vest>

141 Bishop Nikanor is widely known to the public for his harsh views. In October 2009, while arguing with bailiffs regarding different interpretations of the property rights over an apartment in Kikinda, the Bishop exclaimed: “The Supreme Court is weaker than the Serbian Orthodox Church and is also younger. Remember thatwell! And tell your protégé once and for all that he should make the sign of the cross towards this building. If you come for the third time, the town will be blocked by the students, the army and, if necessary, the police. We have more power than you!” (*Politika*, 31 October 2009) In 2016, the Higher Court in Pančevo handed down the first verdict for mobbing in the Serbian Orthodox Church, convicting Bishop Nikanor of abusing priests. He is also known to the public for his faux pas in 2014 when, according to the Vršac portal, he called the President of Serbia and the Mayor of Vršac fascists and insulted the Serbian Progressive Party at a festive lunch given in honour of the Patron Saint’s Day of the village of Miletićevo. (“Država i crkva ćute na Nikanorove kletve, Đenović kaže: test za SPC i vladu”, N1, 13 August 2022, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/drzava-i-crkva-cute-na-nikanorove-kletve-djenovic-kaze-test-za-spc-i-vladu/>)

142 “Brnabić: Užasno me ljudski pogodila izjava episkopa Nikanora, ali nikada nijednu reč protiv SPC neću reći”, Euronews, 16 August 2022, <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/59126/brnabic-uzasno-me-ljudski-pogodila-izjava-episkopa-nikanora-ali-nikada-ni-jednu-rec-protiv-spc-necu-reci/vest>



ed and that “by throwing bones” those from abroad are trying to divide us, which is precisely the crucial argument of those who share the views of those who have cursed her.

Thus, at the end of July 2022, in his address after the liturgy held in Pelagićevo, Bishop Fotije of Zvornik and Tuzla stated that the preparation of the so-called Gay Parade “violates all family values and all moral values of our Orthodox Serbian people. The preservation of the family and true moral values is something that is primary and necessary.. Criticizing the yielding to foreign influences, the Bishop continued: “As it unfortunately seems that it has been signed that there will be a gay parade for a week in September, across Serbia. And when I saw the video programme of the announced gay parades and that they will visit all cultural institutions, church institutions, monasteries, the Seminary and the Grammar School in Sremski Karlovci, what else they intend to visit?! You can imagine what that week will be like! And why that person who signed it did not think with his head, thus calling his people, ethics, morals, conscience, history and belief into question? And now the people with a totally different value system and totally different belief system – something that is not accepted in our Orthodox Serbian tradition and culture – come to us !”<sup>143</sup>

During “a prayer service for the sanctity of marriage and the family, harmony and peace in our nation”, in front of the Temple of Saint Sava in Belgrade, and addressing the “endless columns of pious people” on 11 September 2022, Patriarch Porfirije stressed the importance of “the Orthodox Christian identity and Gospel value system” in the formation of “our public morals”, our national identity which is based, as has been traditionally emphasized. on the historical and value-centred role of the Serbian Orthodox Church for all Serbs “wherever we live, regardless of state and political borders”. Here we will single out a rather long but very illustrative quote: “...we do not impose our way of life on anyone, but we also

143 “Konačno! Episkop Fotije: Ko je potpisao za gej paradu, ko potpiše nezavisno Kosovo...”, *Pravda*, 27 July 2022, <https://pravda.rs/2022/7/27/konacno-episkop-fotije-ko-je-potpisao-za-gej-paradu-ko-potpise-nezavisno-kim-video/>



do not want anyone, from any side, to come and impose their values, their view of the world, their way of life. (...) We will not let anyone tell us what we should be. The measure and criterion for us are the word of Christ, the word of God. Today, however, we are faced with the waves, tsunami and invasion of many new value systems that are imposed violently and aggressively, or with soft power and invisible work under the radar, with an aim to destroy any existing natural or civilizational order and establish a new paradigm of rules. (...) The epilogue of these ideologies of the posthumanist society is not only that we lose the idea of what is male and what is female, what is marriage, but that in the end (...) we cannot even say with certainty what a man is.”

The Patriarch did not react to Bishop Nikanor’s sermon, but being probably aware of the gravity of his words, he tried to mitigate the possible effects of such discriminatory and destructive rhetoric: “However, let me immediately stress that we are against all forms of violence, contempt, hatred, persecution and stigmatization of those who share those ideas, especially if violence is committed in the name of the Church and in the name of Christ. (...) We do not judge them, accuse them or condemn them. (...) We do not interfere in how someone organizes his life. It is not about of a personal relationship with anyone in particular. It is about the fact that we cannot accept anyone’s weaknesses, personal preferences and choices that are not in conformity with what God has established and are promoted and imposed as a new social norm and a rule. (...) We cannot allow this ideology to change the model of society in which our people have been living since time immemorial. We are already faced with the fruits of the silent engineering of that LGBT ideology. Lest someone say that we exaggerate, that we are suspicious and that I exaggerate, let me tell you – these days we found out that the lessons promoting gender ideology had been included in primary and secondary school textbooks secretly and far from the eyes of the public. Who did it? Did anyone ask you, whose children go to school, about this? Did you agree? If nobody asked you and I know he didn’t, let us ask the competent authorities to

immediately remove such lessons from all textbooks, handbooks and teaching aids in elementary and secondary schools and pre-school institutions where they are taught.”<sup>144</sup>

One could say so much about the above mentioned: “We do not impose on anyone”. This topic requires a special review and a special analysis, but here it is certainly appropriate to ask the question as to whether the Patriarch (former Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana) asked the Serbian citizens these questions and “we know that they were not asked” when the mandatory stamp duty was introduced for the construction of the Temple of Saint Sava, then about the allocation of funds for the health and social insurance of the clergy from the budget of the Republic of Serbia, the exemption of the property tax and the right to a VAT refund, the allocation of huge funds for the building of the Temple from the state budget, or for the mere introduction of religious education into the education system which, on top of everything, was done outside the law and without a public debate.

The mentioned rhetoric represents the continuation of various expressions of condemnation, outrage and dissatisfaction of church dignitaries with respect to the organization of the events pointing to the unfavourable position of the members of the LGBT population. It was the spiritual father of the current Patriarch, spokesman for the Serbian Orthodox Church and regular (current and previous) member of the Holy Synod, Bishop Irinej of Bačka, who – on the official website of the majority church said on 18 September 2009 that the “Serbian Orthodox Church and traditional churches and religious communities oppose the right to a public expression of sexual orientation or any other inclination, especially if it offends the citizens’ right to privacy and family life, their religious beliefs and the inviolability of their personal dignity”. The

144 “Desetine hiljada vernih na svenarodnom molebanu za svetinju braka i porodice, slogu i mir u našem narodu”, SPC, 11 September 2022, <https://spc.rs/tv-hram-uzivo-svenarodni-moleban-za-svetinju-braka-i-porodice-slogu-i-mir-u-nasem-narodu/>

representatives of traditional religious communities also referred to this official position in the years to follow.

For more than a decade, numerous church dignitaries, especially the loud-mouthed Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral, have qualified Pride Parades, both in Serbia and Montenegro, as “bullying propaganda”, “endangerment to public morality” and “eternal symbolism of Sodom and Gomorrah”, while members of the LGBT population have been called “the stench of Sodom” and characterized as “godless and perverted” and “the plague and pestilence of Sodom”, and that all this is a reflection of “the moral state not only of our society but also of the entire European-American civilization”. Former Patriarch Irinej demanded that the “parade of shame” would not take place because “we are tired of being humiliated and fulfilling foreign wishes”. Due to the decision to ban the Pride Parade in Belgrade, Minister of Internal Affairs Ivica Dačić was presented with an order by Bishop Filaret of Mileševa for “upholding the honour of Serbia these days”, when “some democrats” tried to shame it and wanted Serbian blood to be shed on the streets of Belgrade. Anti-European but also pro-Russian messages could also be heard: Bishop Filaret said that no one will put Serbia against Russia and noted that some keep saying: “Europe, Europe, Europe and it took away our heart – Kosovo and Metohija”, exclaiming “We want Russia, long live Russia!”.<sup>145</sup>

In addition to the mentioned permanent rhetoric, one should also be reminded of one of the church attempts to intervene in 2009,<sup>146</sup> that is, the demonstration of a strong political influence of the majority church on the secular legislative state bodies. It was about the attempt of the united front of traditional churches and religious communities, led by the majority church in Serbia, to prevent the adoption of the Draft Anti-Discrimination Law

145 “Patrijarh: Irinej: Hvala majci Rusiji”, *Kurir*, 7 October 2011.

146 In the same year, the Church demonstrated its influence on the occasion of putting the Statute of AP Vojvodina on the agenda of the Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. The Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church sent a warning letter to state institutions about the unconstitutionality of the Draft Statute of AP Vojvodina.

in the National Assembly, requesting the removal of the articles on the individual's right to a free expression of religion and belief, as well as gender equality, that is, sexual freedoms. It was also requested that the terms "sexual orientation" and "gender equality" be removed. It was also objected to the article on misdemeanor liability in the event of discrimination.

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

In early November 2021, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the reintroduction of religious education in elementary and secondary schools in the Republic of Serbia, the representatives of traditional churches and religious communities in Serbia, together with Serbian government officials and experts from Germany, Italy, Greece and Serbia, as well as religious teachers gathered at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade and sent a joint message signed by Patriarch Porfirije. In the message it was pointed out that at this gathering special attention was paid to the "current unfavourable legal provisions and solutions regulating the use of the religious education syllabus and curriculum". It was jointly appealed to all relevant national institutions to change "this status" of religious education in the school system "as soon as possible." Hope was also expressed that the irregularities would be rectified and that "this burning problem of Serbian society and education will be finally resolved".

The religious authorities propose that "religious education regains the status of a subject, that is, a mandatory elective subject, that teaching is organized at the classroom level, not at the group level, regardless of the number of registered students... that the choice between religious teaching and the teaching of an alternative subject is made at the beginning of the first grade and the beginning of the fifth grade of elementary education...; that the legal employment status of 2100 religious teachers and their permanent employment are legally regulated, that churches and religious communities are given the opportunity to supervise the

implementation of religious education...". It is interesting to note that, in contrast to most other cases, ones, the experience of the European Union (*Scholae Europaeae*) was fully used as an argument to prove the correctness, justification, that is, legality and legitimacy of the demands and proposed measures.

The periodical topic, which reactualizes the status of religious education in the education system of the Republic of Serbia, came to the public attention in mid-June 2022, when Patriarch Porfirije posted the following on his Instagram profile: "I am very disappointed with the information that the principals of a number of elementary and secondary schools in Serbia consciously discourage or even prevent students and their parents from choosing religious education. I will consult with my brothers Archbishops and representatives of other churches and religious communities about whether we should announce their names and the names of the schools that discriminate against their own students in that way. In any case, we will also send an official response to the competent state bodies." Soon there followed a meeting between the highest secular and spiritual authorities, that is, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Patriarch Porfirije and members of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In the communiqué issued after the meeting it was emphasized in one sentence that the Church representatives "have expressed their concern about the status of religious education in the Serbian school system and have asked the Serbian President for support, so that the state position on this issue is changed".<sup>147</sup>

After the publication of the Appeal for a Secular State and the Abolition of Religious Education in Schools, which was sent by the Alliance of Anti-Fascists of Serbia, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia and Civic Democratic Forum, and was signed by 200 distinguished individuals, the most important secular authority, that is, the Serbian President stated that "we have no right and

147 "Đenović: Veronauka se ne predaje sa kredom i pred tablom", VOA, 18 July 2022, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/srbija-spc-porfirije-veronauka-uvuC4%8Di%C4%87-sve%C5%A1tenici/6663064.html>

I don't think that religious education should be abolished". The President also stated that he does not think that the Church has no right to express its opinion on something and added that, on the contrary, he will always stand up for its right to take a stance: "If there was no Church we would not survive and those denying the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church do not understand its role in the present, its historical role and significance as a national institution".<sup>148</sup>

## THE SYMPHONY OF THE SAINT SAVA COVENANT

In the epistle marking the 800th anniversary of the autocephaly of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Irinej emphasized the importance of the Saint Sava covenant for the survival of the Serbian people: "For most of their history our people were not united within the same state borders, yet they did not lose their identity because they were firmly anchored in the Church. Even today, where the Church is present among the Serbian people, it provides the basis for their identity, Especially in the regions where they are threatened, the Serbian people gain strength for their survival, find a quiet harbour and solace for their everyday life in Saint Sava's Church. Without Saint Sava's Serbian Orthodox Church, we the Serbs would not exist today". In his further presentation, the Patriarch pointed out that the Serbian people's loyalty to the Saint Sava covenant enabled them not to bow down, but to stay upright: "We have survived the terror and executions by godless Serbs against their own people, their splitting into the new, so-called nations, Arnaut rebellions and crimes from the olden Turkish times up to the present, as well as various temptations at the end of the second and the beginning of the third millenium, all the while staying upright." The Patriarch pointed out that the Church

148 "Ne bismo opstali da nema crkve! Oni koji nipodaštavaju SPC ne razumeju njenu ulogu", *Informer*, 19 September 2022, <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/736054/oni-koji-nipodastavaju-spc-razumeju-njenu-ulogu>

prays that “loyalty to Saint Sava’s path enables the Serbian people to preserve their holy and covenantal province – Kosovo and Metohija, their dear Boka and proud Montenegro, as well as all other regions and countries over which the tyrants of the world have stretched their hands with an aim to seize them forcibly and unjustly “. <sup>149</sup>

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić continuously emphasizes and reminds us that the Serbian Orthodox Church has a historical role and that thanks to it the people live and survive today wherever a church exists: “Where there is no Serbian state, the Serbian people survive only thanks to the Serbian Orthodox Church”. The President also emphasized that this fact can be seen “from Krka and Krupa, from Dečani to the Mother of God of Ljeviš in Kosovo and Metohija, everywhere in Montenegro, as well as in every place in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska, including Čipuljići, his father’s village”. <sup>150</sup>

It can be concluded with the September 2021 quote from one of the most respected (judging by the official number of recognitions and meetings, and appreciation shown to him by the majority church) and certainly one of the longest-serving Serbian political leaders, Milorad Dodik: “There has never been a purer and more righteous unity between the two institutes of the Serbian states, the Republic of Srpska and Serbia and the Serbian Orthodox Church, each in its mission and its obligations.”

149 “Patrijarh Irinej: Vernost svetosavskom zavetu omogućila da preživimo”, RTS, 6 October 2019, <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/3686753/patrijarh-irinej-vernost-svetosavskom-zavetu-omogucila-da-prezivimo.html>

150 “Oni koji nipodaštavaju SPC ne razumeju njenu ulogu”, *Politika*, 19 September 2022, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/517728/Oni-koji-nipodastavaju-SPC-ne-razumeju-njenu-ulogu>

# THE EXTREME RIGHT



## RUSSIA'S INSTRUMENT

Serbian extremist organizations with a strong foothold in Russia are an instrument of spreading Russia's malignant influence in the Balkans. Their ties with Russia, as well as indications that they possess weapons, make these organizations a serious threat to peace and security in the country and in the region. At the same time, during the ten-year tenure of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), extremists, as an ally of the government in Serbia, became an important political factor and a means of exerting pressure on dissidents and civil society organizations. During 2022, the extreme right entered a new phase, which includes the regrouping and unification of right-wingers, protests, increased threats and physical violence, as well as increasingly intense contacts with Russian partners. A strong impetus to the growth of the right was provided by the narrative of Russia's victory in its invasion of Ukraine, spread through government-controlled media.

The pressures of the right have more recently been aimed at preventing an agreement between Serbia and Kosovo. They oppose closing the "Serbian question" in the Balkans, which is a prerequisite for the democratization of Serbia. However, there indications have arisen for the first time that there could be a conflict between the SNS and one section of the right-wing and pro-Russian extremists – if the government decides to sign an agreement with Kosovo.

Extremist organizations are only part of a broader front that operates from the unique platform of the “Serbian World”. They do not act in isolation, but are part of a front made up of the Serbian Orthodox Church, pro-Russian parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition parties, certain media outlets<sup>151</sup> and a part of the intellectual elite, including a large number of university professors. Extreme right-wingers hold significant positions within institutions and within the SNS. One of the most significant figures of that bloc is Aleksandar Vulin, the Director of the Security Information Agency (BIA) and a close associate of President Aleksandar Vučić, who publicly advocates the “Serbian World”.

The Directorate for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region is headed by French-Serbian citizen Arnaud Guyon, who used to be associated with the French extremist movement “The Identitarians”. This state institution allocated around RSD 4.5 million for the projects of Serbian associations in France over the last three years. However, their events, as well as activities on digital platforms, are signs of open support (some of these organizations receive assistance from the Government of Serbia) to right-wing and xenophobic individuals.<sup>152</sup>

The right wing in Serbia nurtures the ideology of Serbian nationalism, which is primarily determined by the history of violence in the wars of the 1990s. During the last ten years, an ideal environment for the growth of extremist groups has been created, since the government itself is right-wing and nationalist-oriented, so this chapter on the extreme right should be viewed in the context of the overall report, particularly the chapter on the Serbian Orthodox Church, dealing with the past, and culture.

The foundations of right-wing thought in Serbia are: the idea of ethnic homogenization, striving for the merging of national and ethnic borders, denial of anti-fascism, strengthening of

151 Primarily TV Happy, *Informer*, *Večernje Novosti*, *Pečat*. Since recently, *Russia Today Serbia* as well.

152 *Voice*, 16 February 2022, <https://voice.org.rs/desni-ekstremizam-s-prijateljskim-licem-slucaj-mreze-oko-solidarnosti-za-kosovo>

traditionalism, Christian Orthodoxy treated as a superior religion compared to other religious groups, resistance to the ideas of interculturalism, and frequent expressions of chauvinism and intolerance towards minorities. The key terms of radicalizing narratives are the victim (real or unrealistic; developing a victim narrative is necessary to legitimize past or potential future conflicts), vulnerability, and necessary defense.

The strengthening of the right is contributed to by the fact that the government consistently and directly incites tensions towards the region, demonizes its neighbors, primarily Albanians, spreads fear regarding the endangerment of Serbs in Kosovo (“that a *pogrom* is being prepared”),<sup>153</sup> thus encouraging the radicalization of society and creating an atmosphere for an agreement with Kosovo to be rejected. Arousing fear among citizens is a constant of President Vučić’s politics, which is a function of “togetherness” which, in his words, is “more necessary than ever”.<sup>154</sup> Political factors that influence the growth of the right are: a high level of corruption, ties between government and crime, devastation of institutions, prevention of dialogue in society – especially in parliament, harsh suppression of political opposition and civil society. One of the reasons for the strengthening of nationalism is the lack of a mature alternative with a clear position, which is ready to publicly advocate its positions and mobilize citizens based on these positions.

The Russian propaganda media Russia Today Balkan<sup>155</sup> launched a portal at the end of 2022 in the Serbian language, employing influential Serbian journalists and intellectuals, including Ljiljana Smajlović. Guests on the show “Relativization with Ljiljana Smajlović” have included academician Matija Bećković, writers Nenad Kecmanović and Vladimir Tabašević, lawyer Tibor

153 *Vreme*, 21 August 2022, <https://www.vreme.com/vesti/aleksandar-vucic-srbima-na-kosovu-se-sprema-pogrom-i-progon>

154 *Danas*, 18 May 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-srbiji-od-septembra-predstoji-mozda-najteze-vreme-od-1944-godine>

155 Russian’s state broadcaster RT, which has been banned from broadcasting in the EU for inciting and supporting Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, started broadcasting its content online in the Serbian language on 15 November 2022.

Varadi, writer Milena Marković, historian Mile Bjelajac, journalist Vladan Radomirović, publicist Aleksa Đilas, minister Danica Grujičić, economist Danica Popović...<sup>156</sup> *RT Balkan* columnists include writer Muharem Bazdulj, journalists Nikola Vrzić and Slobodan Reljić...<sup>157</sup>

In the extraordinary parliamentary elections of 2022, nationalist right-wing parties, most of which have ties to extremist organizations, entered parliament: Dveri, Zavetnici, the New DSS and The People's Party (Narodna stranka). If circumstances for their extreme actions is encouraged and the trend of institutional decay continues, they will radicalize their actions.

The collapse of key educational institutions, primarily schools, and the increasing influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) in education contributes to the creation of new generations of right-wingers. This facilitates right-wing parties, such as Dveri and Zavetnici, having access to young people.

## RIGHT-WING ORGANIZATIONS AS AGENTS OF RUSSIA

Russia uses Serbian ultra-right organizations to spread its malignant influence in the Balkans. According to publicly available information, primarily reports from social media, investigative journalism portals and foreign media in Serbian, primarily *Radio Free Europe*, Serbian ultra-right organizations maintain ties with Russian right-wingers and the government in the Kremlin. Due to the close ties between the Serbian and Russian right-wing and favorable circumstances for the activities of extremists in Serbia, there is concern that Belgrade could become a base for the international ultra-right, especially for those with strongly pro-Putin views.

In recent years, the Russian philosopher and Orthodox fundamentalist Aleksandr Dugin, whose texts are regularly translated into Serbian, visited Serbia on several occasions. During one

<sup>156</sup> *RT Balkan*, <https://rt.rs/tag/Ljiljana-Smajlovic>

<sup>157</sup> *RT Balkan*, <https://rt.rs/kolumne>

of them, Dugin called for the mobilization and formation of anti-globalist international brigades with “honest people from the East and the West”, stating that one should not wait for “the enemy of the world to destroy your home, kill your husband, son or daughter...”<sup>158</sup>

The Serbian and Russian extreme right have a common interest: the Russian World and the Serbian World, two projects with essentially the same goals – bringing back the territories of imperial Russia and the imagined Greater Serbia. The Russian and Serbian right overlap in the spread of Orthodoxy. One of the numerous right-wing organizations, Serbian Action, states on its website that it stands for “a battling Serbian Orthodoxy”, as well as for the preservation of “national being and racial identity”.

Russian organizations with which the Serbian extreme right wingers cooperates are: the international movement “Russian-Slavic Unification and Revival – RUSOV”, Russian-Serbian Cultural and Information Center Orlovi, Russian Imperial Movement (RIM).<sup>159</sup> This list is not final, and also includes the Wagner paramilitary formation, which has been under European Union sanctions since December 2021 due to human rights violations in armed conflicts around the world, and has been on the US blacklist since June 2017 due to its involvement in the conflicts in eastern Ukraine.

On the Serbian side, based on the analysis of public data, the People's Patrols and Serbian Action have the most developed connections. In November 2022, the leader of the People's Patrol Damjan Knežević visited the Wagner Military Technology Center in St. Petersburg. Knežević wanted to ensure the support of Wagner, in case of a possible conflict in Kosovo.<sup>160</sup>

158 *Novosti*, 19 September 2022, <https://www.novosti.rs/planeta/svet/1155308/aleksandar-dugin-prvi-tekst-nakon-cerkine-smrti>

159 An ultranationalist and racist organization designated as a global terrorist threat by the US administration in April 2020

160 RSE, 17 February 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/damjan-knezevic-srbija-desnicari/32275991.html>

In May 2021, Knežević and *Srbin info* journalist Dejan Petar Zlatanović met with the leader of the RUSOV organization Andrey Rodionov, who is participating in the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>161</sup> Ahead of the Serbian right-wing protest in Belgrade for Kosovo (12 December, 2022), Rodionov announced on the Telegram channel that “Russians will come to the aid of their Serbian brothers” when “the time really comes for the Serbs to take back their holy land of Kosovo and Metohija”.<sup>162</sup> Towards the end of 2020, Rodionov spoke for the public service *Radio Belgrade 2*, and in the same year he met with the former general of the Yugoslav Army Božidar Delić, founder of the non-governmental organization Love, Faith, Hope.<sup>163</sup>

The People’s Patrols, starting from March 2022, organized several gatherings in support of Russia. Those gatherings were welcomed by Denis Gariev, a member of the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM).<sup>164</sup> From an unknown location, in front of a billboard with a photo of war criminal Ratko Mladić, Gariev called on the citizens of Serbia to support the “restoration of Russia within its historical borders”.<sup>165</sup>

Serbian right-wingers also have ties with the Russian-Serbian Cultural and Information Center Orlovi, whose premises are located in the Wagner building in St. Petersburg. The aim of the Center is to strengthen friendly relations between Serbia and Russia.<sup>166</sup> A press release from Orlovi states that they are “dealing

161 RSE, 22 February 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zabranjen-skup-desnicara-srbija/32282955.html>

162 RSE, 14 December 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-desnicari-kosovo/32176352.html>

163 RSE 16 January 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-borci-ukrajina-rusija/32225401.html>

164 RSE, 17 February 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/damjan-knezevic-srbija-desnicari/32275991.html>

165 RSE, 17 February 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/damjan-knezevic-srbija-desnicari/32275991.html>

166 BBC, 9 December 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-63904554>

with informational confrontation with Russian liberals who went to Serbia".<sup>167</sup> The leader of this Center, Alexander Lysov, has been banned from entering Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. The Orlovi erected a monument to Alexander Nevsky in front of the gate of the church in Belgrade that carries his name.<sup>168</sup> The opening of the monument in November 2021 was attended by Belgrade's officials, some ministers, as well as the patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Porfiriје. The organization is also involved in collecting aid for Serbian families in Kosovo; they organized theater cooperation, football matches, as well as other cultural events.<sup>169</sup>

The president of the Serbian Right, Miša Vacić, who is otherwise close to the Serbian Progressive Party, also has ties with Russia. Vacić supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and as an international observer, at the invitation of Russia, he followed the referendum for the annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories to Russia.

Moldovan authorities did not allow a group of Partizan fans to enter the country, in February 2023. The President of Moldova, Maia Sandu, stated that Russia was planning to carry out a coup with the help of opposition protests and with the involvement of people with military training from countries such as Belarus, Serbia and Montenegro.<sup>170</sup>

Russian right-wing groups and the Kremlin are also spreading their influence in Serbia through children's camps. In May 2022, a youth patriotic camp was organized in the vicinity of Kruševac, which the organizer presents to the public as a sports camp.<sup>171</sup>

167 BBC, 9 December 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-63904554>

168 BBC, 9 December 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-63904554>

169 BBC, 9 December 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-63904554>

170 Danas, 13 February 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/svet/predsednica-moldavije-potvrdila-ruski-plan-uz-pomoc-vojno-obucenih-ljudi-iz-srbije-crne-gore-i-belorusije-izvesti-drzavni-udar>

171 It was revealed on the social network Telegram that these were military patriotic games, which RFE had insight into. The organizers denied this in later statements, stating that these were just sporting games, which only covered up the real character of the camp. A similar youth patriotic camp was organized

*Radio Free Europe* (RSE) used this example to detect connections between the authorities in Russia and Serbia and right-wing organizations. The event included the veterans' association Battle Brotherhood (Bojevo Bratstvo) Kruševac, the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Center, the Russian Embassy in Belgrade, the local government of Kruševac and the All-Serbian Association of Veterans Battle Brotherhood (Bojevo Bratstvo).<sup>172</sup> Financial resources for the event were provided by the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs of Serbia. Battle Brotherhood Kruševac states on its Facebook page that it advocates "the return to the holy Serbian land of Kosovo and Metohija", as well as "developing the patriotic feelings among young people towards history, customs, faith and culture".<sup>173</sup> From the analysis of the FB profile of the All-Serbian veterans' union Battle Brotherhood, it is obvious that they support Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Analyzing photos from the website of the All-Serbian Association of War Veterans Battle Brotherhood, RSE also established the connections that the president of that association, Slavoljub Ljubisavljević, has with Georgy Kleban, a member of Russia's Military Intelligence Service (GRU), who was involved in an espionage affair in Serbia in 2019.<sup>174</sup> Battle Brotherhood has a cooperation agreement with the organization of the same name in the Moscow region, in Russia, which includes "work on implementing joint activities on the patriotic education of young people." The military-patriotic education of young people in Russia has been under the auspices of the Government of Russia since 2006, which is why the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva reacted in 2014.

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 in 2018 in Zlatibor – however, due to public pressure, the then Minister of the Interior Nebojša Stefanović closed down the camp.

172 RSE, 24 May 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kamp-krusevac-veterani-srbija-rusija/31864016.html>

173 RSE, 24 May 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kamp-krusevac-veterani-srbija-rusija/31864016.html>

174 Kleban held the position of assistant military attaché at the Russian Embassy in Belgrade from 2016 to 2019. In 2019, a video appeared online showing him giving money to a retired member of the Serbian Armed Forces.



That Committee condemned this type of education and called on the Russian authorities to ban military training for children under the age of eight.<sup>175</sup>

According to the Executive Director of the Council for Strategic Policy, Nikola Lunić, the organization of such camps in war-time represents malignant war propaganda aimed at achieving the proclaimed military goals while diversifying conflict, and in the Balkans, destabilizing the region with a long-term frozen conflict, which the Kremlin is trying to maintain by feeding all forms of nationalism with the hope of a historic rematch with neighbors”.<sup>176</sup>

## SERBIAN FIGHTERS IN RUSSIAN FORMATIONS IN UKRAINE

On 5 January, 2023, a text on the conditions for joining the Russian paramilitary group Wagner was published on the *Russia Today* (RT) portal in Serbian. Under the heading “Wagner publishes advertisement for volunteers, conditions more than tempting” details are given about the conditions for participation in the war, earnings and training. However, the original piece on RT was quickly replaced with a text about a group of former prisoners who volunteered to participate in a military operation on the Russian side. At the end of the piece, it was stated that Wagner published an advertisement on social networks for the admission of new members.<sup>177</sup>

The publication of Wagner’s ad on RT caused strong diplomatic reactions, and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić criticized Wagner for the first time. Vučić’s reaction is tied to the visit of US State Department adviser Derek Chollet. In a conversation with President Vučić, Chollet expressed his concern about is trying to

175 RSE, 24 May 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kamp-krusevac-veterani-srbija-rusija/31864016.html>

176 RSE, 24 May 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kamp-krusevac-veterani-srbija-rusija/31864016.html>

177 RSE, 18 January 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/grupa-wagner-zapadni-balkan-rusija-ukrajina-rat/32229141.html>

recruit fighters in Serbia and stated that this was unacceptable. In addition to civil society organizations, representatives of the anti-war wave of emigration from Russia warned that representatives of the government are enabling Wagner's activities in Serbia and that the Director of the Security and Information Agency (BIA) of the Government of Serbia, Aleksandar Vulin, is primarily responsible for this.<sup>178</sup>

A video was also published on the *Telegram* platform that allegedly shows a group of fighters from Serbia on the Ukrainian front, who are claimed to have joined Pavle Sudoplatov's battalion. They wear masks over their faces, and in the Serbian language video they claim that they have come to "help their brothers". The information that Serbian fighters joined the Pavel Sudoplatov battalion was also reported by some Russian media outlets. The videos are also published on other social media, and one of the soldiers who appears with his face uncovered is Dejan Berić.

Serbian Defense Minister Miloš Vučević said that the security agencies of Serbia, both military and civilian, are monitoring and analyzing all the information related to the published recordings and photos of alleged fighters from Serbia who joined Russian units in the war in Ukraine.<sup>179</sup> However, there has been no official public information about the prosecution of Serbian citizens who have joined Russian military and paramilitary formations in Ukraine since the beginning of the invasion. On the basis of the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance, the Helsinki Committee has repeatedly asked judicial authorities for information on possible verdicts and court proceedings. However, we have only received information on one case, whose verdicts refers to the year 2014. The penal policy towards returnees from the Ukrainian battlefield is mild. So far, 32 guilty verdicts have been handed down based on plea agreements. In 28 cases, the court sen-

178 "Wagner and the Serbs", 25 January 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/wagner-and-the-serbs>

179 RSE, 16 January 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-borci-ukrajina-rusija/32225401.html>

tenced the defendants to a suspended prison sentence, while four people were sentenced to house arrest for six months. All verdicts refer to the period between 2015 and 2018.

## CONFLICT BETWEEN PRESIDENT VUČIĆ AND RIGHT-WINGERS?

The first indications that Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić could enter into conflict with extreme right-wing groups appeared in early 2023, when several participants of the protests organized by the People's Patrols were arrested. This is a potential reckoning only with one part of the right-wing, those who personally oppose him and demand the suspension of negotiations with Kosovo. For the first time, in a public address on the occasion of a gathering of right-wingers, the president stated that the state will not tolerate violence.

Among those arrested are the leader of the People's Patrols,<sup>180</sup> Damjan Knežević, and the journalist of the *Srbinfo* portal, Dejan Petar Zlatanović, who were sentenced to one month's detention, due to the suspicion that at the event on 15 February, they called on the citizens of Serbia to violently overthrow and replace the highest state authorities.

Knežević was arrested after saying to the people gathered: "I have no other choice, and Vučić, you can expect to see me", as well as "I swear to you, we are ready for much more than just riots", if Serbia agrees to Kosovo's entry into the United Nations. According to the High Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, Zlatanović said during his address to the crowd: "To all those who want to commit betrayal, this is ongoing even today, so whoever sees himself

180 The People's Patrols, which have ties to Russian right-wing organizations, were created in 2020 when they intercepted, threatened and attacked migrants with hoods on. They called for a "ban on the movement" of migrants outside migrant centers from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m., as well as on the movement of more than three people in a group during the day. They are not registered in the register of organizations and associations of citizens. The institutions had previously never reacted to the violent behavior of the People's Patrols.

in these words – what goes around, comes around – and whoever signs that paper will be killed.” Before the rally, a member of the People’s Patrol from Bačka Palanka, Dejan Boboček, was arrested, and a rifle with an optical sight and ammunition was found in his possession. Members of the police and BIA in Sremska Kamenica stopped the car driven by Boboček, in which the weapon was found. It is suspected that Boboček left for Belgrade to come to the protest “Stop Vučić’s Betrayal of Kosmet” in front of the Presidency, which was announced for the evening of the same day.

The most important tabloid that supports the Serbian President, the ultra-nationalist “Informer”, reported on the protest as a gathering of “false patriots”.<sup>181</sup> Several hundred right-wingers gathered, which shows that the protest did not have significant mobilization potential. Some protesters were wearing signs of Wagner and symbols of support for the Russian invasion.

The protest gathering on 15 February showed the synergy of the right: political parties, the academic community, and extremist organizations. Members of the parliamentary People’s Party led by Vuk Jeremić participated in the meeting of the People’s Patrols. As Jeremić stated, they came to the meeting “following the public invitation of Professor Milo Lompar (...), a man whose invitations the People’s Party responds to”. Professor from the Faculty of Philology Milo Lompar, one of the main ideologues of Serbian nationalism, called for the release of Zlatanović and Knežević. Lompar explained the request by interpreting their speeches as a verbal offense, ignoring the history of violence of the People’s Patrols, as well as the fact that a weapon was found with one of the organization’s members. He said that the goal of the arrest was “to prevent any resistance to the treasonous decisions that are getting closer”.<sup>182</sup> The petition for the release of Knežević and Damjanović, apart from

181 *Informer*, 16 February 2023, <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/771924/sada-sve-jasno-kurti-prizeljuje-ubistvo-vucica-siptarski-mediji-zadovoljstvom-pratili-divljanje-ispred-predsednistva>

182 *Danas*, 19 February 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/lompar-vratili-smo-se-u-vreme-jednopartijske-diktature>

Lompar, was signed by more than 50 individuals, including more than 20 university professors, 10 PhD graduates, six MPs...<sup>183</sup>

Vuk Jeremić is one of the initiators of the Proclamation for Gathering in Defense of Kosovo and Metohija, which gathered the Serbian Movement Dveri, the New DSS, the Serbian Party Zavetnici, POKS, the People's Party, as well as the following individuals: academician Matija Bećković, professor Miloš Ković, Miša Đurković, PhD, and Dragomir Anđelković.<sup>184</sup>

The next protest that the People's Patrols wanted to organize in front of the monument to Tsar Nicholas in Belgrade was banned by the Ministry of the Interior. However, a protest was held on the anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (24 February) on the steps of St. Mark's Church, one of the central buildings of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Among the main protagonists of this protest was Dejan Mirović, a professor at the University of Priština and former official of the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party.

183 *Srbin Info*, 21 February 2023, <https://srbin.info/drustvo/vanredno-peticija-javnih-licnosti-za-hitno-oslobadjanje-dejana-i-damnjana-spisak>

184 *Medija centar*, 4 October 2022, <https://mc.rs/dogadjaji/proglas-za-okupljanje-u-odbrani-kosova-i-metohije/1641>

## EXTREMISTS AT THE BARRICADES IN THE NORTH OF KOSOVO

When local Serbs, with the support of Belgrade, erected barricades to protest the arrest of former Serb member of the Kosovo police Dejan Pantić, pro-Russian extremists became active in the north of Kosovo. In December 2022, the People's Patrols called for a protest at the Jarinje border crossing between Serbia and Kosovo. On that occasion (18 December), a police cordon prevented them from approaching the crossing from the Serbian side. KFOR members were deployed on the other side of the border crossing, in the territory of Kosovo.<sup>185</sup>

Members of the ultra-right group Serbian Action were also at the barricades. Several photos from the barricades were published on the *Telegram channel* of that informal group, and one of them shows a masked man carrying the Serbian Action flag. The photos also show a man wearing a black mask with the Nazi symbol of the Celtic cross and the flag of Imperial Russia.<sup>186</sup> The symbols of the Kormilo group, whose members organized meetings with ultra-right organizations from Italy and France over the past few years, were also visible on the barricades. The videos also show members of the biker group MC Serbs, who also have close ties to the ultra-right. The members of this group wear on their jackets the Nazi symbol of the iron cross and the coat of arms from the time when Serbia was under Nazi occupation.<sup>187</sup>

Nikola Jović, who was convicted in Serbia, because in March 2015 he joined the paramilitary formation of the 7th brigade of the Donetsk People's Republic, in the east of Ukraine, appeared at the barricades at the Jarinje border crossing. Jović introduces himself

185 RSE, 19 December 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/desnicari-protesti-srbija-kosovo/32183582.html>

186 RSE, 19 December 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/desnicari-protesti-srbija-kosovo/32183582.html>

187 RSE, 19 December 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/desnicari-protesti-srbija-kosovo/32183582.html>

as a *Russia Today* correspondent.<sup>188</sup> Symbols of Russia's aggression were also worn at the Belgrade protest for Kosovo (12 December), and a video of the protest was broadcast live by Wagner on their *Telegram channel*.<sup>189</sup>

Regarding the tensions in the north of Kosovo, Miša Vacić, leader of the non-parliamentary party Serbian Right, which has close ties with President Aleksandar Vučić, also spoke out.<sup>190</sup> On the night between 11 and 12 December, he posted a photo on Twitter of a group of masked people in the center of Belgrade with a banner: "Hang in there, brothers, we'll be down there soon, so they can see again why Serbs are feared." Vacić wrote that he has people in 40 cities, and that hundreds of young people are ready to go to Kosovo immediately in case of any violence against the people at the barricades.

There is concern that the Russian intelligence service could apply the same scenario in the Balkans in providing support to the Serbian authorities, in the event of an attempt to establish full control over the north of Kosovo, as was carried out during the conquest of Crimea in 2014. According to research published on the website of the Washington think tank organization *New America*, Russia's campaign in Crimea was followed by pro-Russian separatist uprisings in Donbass, where the sleepers of the Russian intelligence service GRU (Russian "tourists") began to take control in cities and villages. Across Ukraine's war-torn southeast, the GRU was the decisive force that activated its proxy networks — Knightly Wolves (Viteški vukovi), Cossacks, and battalions of Serbs, Romanians, Belarusians, and other foreign fighters. Self-proclaimed special forces intelligence veteran Igor Girkin, who fought in Transnistria and the Balkans, known by the alias Strelkov, and his company

188 RSE, 16 December, 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sever-kosova-barikade-donbas-osudjeni-borac/32179908.html>

189 RSE, 14 December 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-desnicari-kosovo/32176352.html>

190 Vacić briefly worked in the Office for Kosovo and Metohija (2016), but he did not remain in that position for long due to public pressure.

occupied government buildings in the town of Slavyansk in the Donetsk region of Donbass at the start of the conflict. The text indicates that the GRU, with a network of paramilitary units, tried to develop a network of militias, veterans, and criminal groups.<sup>191</sup>

## **EXTREMISTS AND THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH STAND UNITED AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS**

The extreme right finds spiritual legitimacy in the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), which is the most powerful proponent of anti-liberal values. EuroPride was held in Belgrade under restrictive conditions, in a strictly limited space, with high tensions and the deployment of police cordons on the streets. What was practically a simulation of EuroPride is a consequence of the authorities giving in to the SPC alliance and extremist organizations. Some foreign participants were banned from entering Serbia after EuroPride.

Serbian right-wingers and the SPC have a racist stance regarding the LGBT community and present it as something that obstructs the consolidation of the Serbian state and endangers togetherness, which is based on ethnic and religious (Orthodox) identity and family values. The main support for their activities comes from Russia.

More than 30 right-wing associations, movements and media outlets participated in the organization of protest marches known as “clerical protests for the salvation of Serbia”, whose goal was to prevent the holding of EuroPride. They are gathered in the association United for Tradition and Family.<sup>192</sup> Bishop Nikanor stood

191 “Forward Operations: From Deir Ezzor to Donbas and Back Again” in “Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare”, November 2019. <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/decoding-wagner-group-analyzing-role-private-military-security-contractors-russian-proxy-warfare/forward-operations-from-deir-ezzor-to-donbas-and-back-again>.

192 Danas, 17 September 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/ko-su->



out in support of the processions, and cursed Prime Minister Ana Brnabić because of EuroPride.

Patriarch Porfirije presented the first degree Order of Saint Sava, the church's highest decoration, to the autocratic Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, for his "advocacy for the Christian value system" and for his "fight for Europe's soul". The Order of Saint Sava for "journalistic professionalism and affirmation of Christian values and virtues" was awarded to Milorad Vučelić, the director of Television Belgrade during the regime of Slobodan Milošević and one of the most responsible war instigators, now the editor-in-chief of the pro-Russian *Večernje novosti*.

The Serbian Orthodox Church, since the arrival of Patriarch Porfirije at its head, has been trying to exert a stronger influence on education. Mladen Šarčević, acting director of the *Official Gazette*, announced that Patriarch Porfirije could be on the commission for creating identity textbooks, whose goal is shaping the national identity of new generations. The increasing involvement of the Church in the educational system indicates anti-intellectualism, which is one of the main characteristics of fascist movements.

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organizatori-litija-za-spas-srbije/

## IDEOLOGICALLY MOTIVATED VIOLENCE AND A NEW WAVE OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Attacks by extremist organizations on individuals and associations have a broad range, from ideologically motivated verbal threats to physical attacks. The number of attacks is difficult to determine, because there are no official statistics, nor does the state react in the majority of cases.<sup>193</sup> New organizations are established and strengthened, some old ones are activated – especially neo-Nazi ones.

The strengthening of anti-Semitism is also notable. At the beginning of 2023, a meeting of the neo-Nazi organization *Zentropa* was held on the occasion of the anniversary of the death of Milan Nedić, the Prime Minister of Serbia who collaborated with the Nazis during World War Two. The police did not prohibit the holding of the rally, although by law it is illegal for those “who celebrate Nazism and anti-Semitism, spread racial hatred and celebrate collaborators of the occupiers in World War Two” to gather. The anti-Semitic organization Monarchist Club Carostavnik periodically organizes events attended by various domestic and foreign advocates of fascist ideas. At the beginning of 2023, Nazi symbols were drawn at the entrance to the Jewish cemetery in Belgrade.

In January 2023, neo-fascists demolished the Novi Sad cafe “Crni Ovan”, where anti-fascists and activists who fight for human, minority, and animal rights had been gathering for years, and injured the owner Bojan Šovljanski and one of the employees. It is the fourth and most severe attack in the last year. The attack was carried out by three young men with recognizable neo-Nazi insignia – Confederate flags, swastikas and the *Zentropa* sign. The police arrested the attackers.

193 The only statistics on attacks and pressures on activists are kept by Yucom, with its Incident Map. On the map, since the beginning of 2022, 35 attacks and pressures have been registered, both on those who deal with the protection of human rights and on those who, because of their actions, found themselves in that role and suffered the consequences.

Nevertheless, despite the Nazi character of this attack, the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad characterized the act as violent behavior and proposed that the three persons arrested be prohibited from approaching the premises, as well as "approaching, meeting or communicating with the injured parties". Radio host and anti-fascist activist Daško Milinović was attacked in 2021. Two young men first sprayed him with tear gas and then repeatedly hit him with a metal bar. The attackers were arrested, and in June 2022, the High Court in Novi Sad confirmed the verdict of the Basic Court, which sentenced the attackers to prison terms, i.e. house arrest.

In addition, between 2019 and 2021, several attacks were recorded on activists of the Youth Center CK13, the organization Roof over our Head (Krov nad glavom), as well as students Dejan Bagarić and Milan Vujić, who were seriously injured during the attack.<sup>194</sup> The two people who attacked Dejan Bagarić were given suspended sentences after they pleaded guilty, but there was no answer to the question of why the motive of the attackers was not investigated in any part of the process, and the person(s) who hired them were also never identified. The procedure in the case of the attack on Milan Vujić is at a standstill. Most of the attacks on Novi Sad activists and places where they gather have not been prosecuted.<sup>195</sup>

Events and actions of civil society organizations, such as commemorations for the victims of crimes committed by Serbian forces during the wars of the 1990s, are held in a tense atmosphere under the constant threat of right-wingers; individuals and organizations are exposed to the worst threats through social media...

According to the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, at least 200 murals of the war criminal Ratko Mladić have been painted in Serbia. Since the start of the aggression against Ukraine, Serbia has been painted with murals of Russian President Vladimir Putin and symbols of Russia's aggression, such as the letter "Z". Police and

194 Conversations held by the Helsinki Committee with activists from Novi Sad.

195 Conversations held by the Helsinki Committee with activists from Novi Sad.

extremist groups guard the murals and do not allow their removal. Due to attempts at removal, activists of human rights organizations are usually the target of attacks.

The municipal police fined the Youth Initiative for Human Rights and the Krokodil association for removing graffiti they considered war-mongering<sup>196</sup> from the building of the Institute of Chemistry, Technology and Metallurgy in Belgrade. They painted over the facade, and they were threatened with reports for “damaging the facade”. In addition, organizations have been receiving threats via social networks for days, including death threats. The threats were reported to the Prosecutor’s Office for High-Tech Crime and the police.

<sup>196</sup> *Danas*, 19 February 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/nikome-ne-smeta-tema-kosova-vec-ratnohuskacke-poruke-u-decjem-parkicu-yihr-i-udruzenje-krokodil-dobili-pretnje-zbog-krecenja-grafita>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cooperation between President Vučić and the right is unsustainable if Serbia opts for the European Union. The progress of European integration and adherence to Western liberal values are a guarantee of sustainable stability and security in the region.

Nationalism and chauvinism are induced from the top down. Instead of decontaminating the political space from fascism and nazification, politicians rely on right-wing voters of the right-wing spectrum, which further radicalizes the political playing field.

One of the reasons for the strengthening of nationalism and the extreme right is the absence of a serious alternative with a clear position, which is ready to publicly advocate its positions and mobilize citizens with them. This would carry a risk, but in the long run it would create the possibility of gathering a pro-European option based on clear enlightened and liberal postulates.

Judicial institutions and the police must start prosecuting hate crimes, based on laws related to the prevention of national, racial and religious hatred. In addition, those in power must morally and politically condemn every hate speech and attack, by pointing out its culprits and condemning the ideology behind the verbal or physical attack.

# POST-CONFLICT JUSTICE

# CULTURE OF MEMORY: THE COMPLETION OF THE PROCESS OF SELF-VICTIMIZATION

After an armed conflict or a regime change, societies may decide to address the causes and effects of the violence endured by their members. They have several approaches and their combinations at their disposal: the trials of perpetrators, establishment of the truth by investigative commissions, provision of material reparations to victims, search for missing persons and supporting families left behind, return or integration of refugees and displaced persons, removal of those responsible from security services and civic institutions, educational reform, establishment of social memory of victims, opening of archives... there are also societies that choose to keep silent about their past, either because of the still dominant power of the perpetrators of crimes or the assessment that such an approach will offer a more convenient framework for the upcoming reform processes.

The wars in the former Yugoslavia have ended with approximately 130,000 killed or missing, several million people forced to leave their homes after enduring brutal physical and mental violence, including sexual abuse, internment in camps, expulsion and deportation. According to recent research, at least 200,000 victims of war crimes and human rights violations in the context of armed conflict live in Serbia.<sup>197</sup>

197 Jelena Krstić, *Chapter: Serbia in: Dealing with the Past, Surviving the Present: Situation and Needs of Civilian War Victims in Serbia, Kosovo and North Macedonia*, Schenkel, Kathelijne ed. (Civic Initiatives, Integra, New Social Initiative, Peace Action, ICTJ and PAX, 2022).

If the choice had been possible, Serbia would have firmly decided to keep silent about the past. The first obstacle to doing this was the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), whose establishment and work disrupted its efforts to hide the crimes committed in the name of the realization of the idea of a Greater Serbia. After the overthrow of the Slobodan Milošević regime, there followed pressures and significant financial support from the international community with the aim of having Serbia independently contribute to the judicial punishment of the perpetrators. An additional obstacle to oblivion is posed by the documentation of crimes and public information about them coming from civil society as well as the demands for a more comprehensive review of Serbia's involvement in the wars. However, after the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić (2003), the openness of institutions to transitional justice measures was significantly decreased. After a peculiar restoration of the regime that led Serbia's war campaign during the 1990s (2012), the idea of dealing with the past was finally rejected.

At the same time, it was the period when the existence of a joint criminal enterprise (JCE) – aimed at the forced displacement of Albanians from Kosovo, with the participation of the highest political, military and police officials of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and Serbia – was confirmed.<sup>198</sup> The existence of the JCE – aimed at forcibly and permanently displacing the majority of non-Serbs, primarily Bosniaks and Croats, from large parts of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, through persecutions, murders, deportations and other inhuman acts by the representatives of the Bosnian Serb civilian, military and police authorities – was also confirmed.<sup>199</sup> According to the first instance verdict against Jovica Stanišić and Franko Simatović (2021), the participants in the

198 Appealing a verdict in the *Šainović et al.* case, 23 January 2014 (ICTY).

199 First-Instance Verdict in the *Radovan Karadžić* case, 24 March 2016; Appeal Judgement in the *Radovan Karadžić* case, 20 March 2019; First-Instance Verdict in the *Ratko Mladić* Case, 22 November 2017, Appeal Judgement in the *Ratko Mladić* case, 8 June 2021 (ICTY/IRMCT).



JCE included Slobodan Milošević, Radmilo Bogdanović, Radovan Stojičić Badža, Mihalj Kertes, Vojislav Šešelj and Željko Ražnatović Arkan. The fact that Arkan and Šešelj were participants in the JCE was also established in the final verdict against Radovan Karadžić (2019). The verdict against Ratko Mladić (2021) also confirms the significant role of the Yugoslav Army in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina by continuously supplying the Army of the Republic of Srpska (VRS) with soldiers, officers, weapons, ammunition, materiel and equipment.

After the withdrawal of institutions, the burden of dealing with the past was taken in large measure by a small number of civil society representatives. The unofficial programmes, which they initiate, depend on international donor support and are carried out in an apathetic social atmosphere with the conspicuous disregard for them by institutions and are constantly risking a verbal and physical attack by right-wing individuals and groups. By contrast, during the last decade, significant financial, institutional and cultural resources were invested in building an official, public and exclusive narrative about Serbia's defensive wars, the suffering of the Serbian people and the heroism of its security forces. It was first necessary to minimize and remove the court-confirmed facts about crimes and their perpetrators from the public sphere, as well as to construct a suitable narrative and weave it deeply into the social fabric.

## COURT FACTS ABOUT CRIMES

The space for learning and a dialogue about Serbia's role in the wars of the nineties has been primarily closed to the findings of international courts and domestic court trials.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) completed its mandate at the end of 2017 after which the remaining trials were taken over by the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT).<sup>200</sup> Acquittals in the cases of *Gotovina et al.* and *Haradinaj et al.* (2012) have served as an introduction to a thorough discrediting of the findings of these bodies. First of all, they have been assessed as being unfair, selective and biased, and the judgements against Radovan Karadžić (2019) and Ratko Mladić (2021) as being also the judgement against the entire Serbian people. Neither the apology to the victims,<sup>201</sup> nor the acceptance of the Court's finding of the JCE undertaken by the military, police and civilian leadership with the aim of expelling Albanians from Kosovo,<sup>202</sup> nor the return of those convicted of war crimes, Dragoljub Ojdanić (2013), Vojislav Šešelj (2014), Vladimir Lazarević, Nikola Šainović (2015) and Sreten Lukić (2021), have been used to start a public debate about the causes of the conflict and responsibility for crimes. On the contrary, the focus of public attention is placed on the perpetrators whose responsibility has been established beyond a reasonable doubt and with some kind of confession of guilt.<sup>203</sup> The members of the military

200 It is about the cases of *Radovan Karadžić*, *Ratko Mladić*, *Vojislav Šešelj*, *Stanišić* and *Simatović*; *Petar Jojić* and *Vjerica Radeta*.

201 *Đorđević* Case, Appeal Hearing, transcript, pp. 154–156, ICTY, 13 May 2013.

202 The final decision Dragoljub Ojdanić's notice of withdrawal of an appeal against the judgement of Trial Chamber III of 26 February 2009 and the Prosecutor's notice of withdrawal of his appeal against the judgement of Trial Council III of 26 February of 2009, which refers to the accused Dragoljub Ojdanić, ICTY, 31 January 2013.

203 "I will not give heroic speeches and say that I sleep peacefully and that I have a clear conscience, because someone who has been through the war cannot sleep peacefully and I have been. I am not guilty, but I feel responsible", Nikola Šainović, 2015; "General Ojdanić accepts the findings of the first instance verdict relating to his conduct, the guilty verdict and the sentencing verdict. He

have been particularly portrayed as skilled strategists and experts, resolute fighters for justice and truth who have been unjustly convicted for political reasons and without evidence. Bearing in mind that the wave of returnees to Serbia has brought back the majority of those convicted of crimes in Kosovo, a participatory social reflection on the recent past will particularly favour the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo which is running parallel to these events.

After the completion of the ICTY's work, the public sphere was open for more reactions to the verdicts given to the Bosnian Serb military and political leaders, Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, as well as the members of Serbia's State Security Service, Jovica Stanišić and Franko Simatović. Due to the assessment that the verdict was passed to the Serbian people, the public discussion about the guilt of the individuals convicted of the crimes committed in the name of concrete politics, was actually suppressed and made impossible. The attempts to distinguish the question of guilt from the question of accountability remained on the sidelines, without having enough strength to impose themselves as the starting point in the discussions and the prosecution of those responsible for the crimes committed in the past. What is striking, however, was the restraint of the highest state representatives to comment on the verdicts, which points to the dominant intention not to attach too much political importance and weight to the facts on which the verdicts were established by the Tribunal, thus enabling them to survive in the public space for a short time. A critical public review of the crimes committed by the Serbian forces in the wars of the nineties was further discouraged by the amendments to the Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia (2016) according to which the approval, denial and downplaying of war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity are prohibited only if they have been defined as such in the verdicts of domestic courts, or the International Court of Justice (ICJ).<sup>204</sup> Limiting it to the two mentioned

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also expressed his regret to all those who suffered due to the conduct of which he was not convicted", 2013.

204 Criminal Code, Article 387, ("Službeni glasnik RS", Nos. 85/2005, 88/2005

court instances significantly narrows the protection that should be enjoyed by judicial findings on crimes, since domestic court trials are insufficiently inclusive, including the disputed qualifications of crimes, while no cases of the war crimes of the 1990s have been brought before the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Thus, for example, even though the Serbian courts deal with the Srebrenica genocide cases, this crime has not been qualified as genocide in any of the cases, which actually opens the way for denial and relativization.

Apart from discrediting the findings of international courts there was an ongoing process of “numbing” domestic war crime trials. Since 2003, a number of specialized institutions have been involved in the processing of war crimes committed during the war in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>205</sup> The results of their two-decade work are about 220 accused, less than 100 convicted and more than 1,700 cases (still) in the preliminary investigation phase.<sup>206</sup> Trials are burdened by lengthy and repetitive procedures, which often end with mild perpetrator punishments. There is also the dominant focus on a small number of direct perpetrators, while at the same time avoiding the persecution of crimes sponsors and organizers, which testifies to the tendency to obscure the planned involvement of state structures in the commitment of war crimes. The factors that have decisively determined the direction of do-

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– Corr., 107/2005 – Corr., 72/2009, 111/2009, 121/2012, 104/2013, 108/2014, 94/2016 and 35/2019.

205 War Crimes Prosecutor’s Office, War Crimes Department of the Higher Court in Belgrade, War Crimes Department of the Court of Appeal in Belgrade, War Crimes Investigation Unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP), Protection Unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Service for Help and Support for Victims and Witnesses of the War Crimes Department of the Higher Court in Belgrade. There is also a special detention unit within the District Prison in Belgrade. Law on the Organization and Competence of State Authorities in War Crimes Proceedings, “Službeni glasnik RS”, Nos. 67/2003, 135/2004, 61/2005, 101/2007, 104/2009, 101/2011 – and other laws 6/2015).

206 Marina Kljaić, *Rat u bivšoj Jugoslaviji obeležen je sistematskim kršenjem humanitarnog prava*, *Danas*, 10 December 2022. <https://www.danas.rs/dijalog/licni-stavovi/rat-u-bivsoj-jugoslaviji-obeleden-je-sistematskim-kršenjem-humanitarnog-prava/>, accessed on 19 January 2023.

mestic court proceedings are the lack of political support and the keeping of court proceedings out of the public eye. Political indifference has ranged from institutional under-capacity for adequate investigations and court procedures, through open threats to prosecutors from the highest political authorities,<sup>207</sup> to the restraint of criminal justice and the complete marginalization of trials among the professional and general public.

The past ten-year period was marked by the change of the head of the War Crimes Prosecutor's Office, which first prolonged the processing of war crimes and then led to the appointment of the chief prosecutor (Snežana Stanojković) according to her political suitability and not her expertise or vision how to improve prosecution.<sup>208</sup> Namely, the programme with which the new Chief Prosecutor has run for this position favours the measures to improve the processing of crimes against Serbs, while secondary attention is devoted to what Serbia can practically do to prosecute those who are accessible to it.<sup>209</sup> One of the current consequences of such a programme are trials in absentia that fail to achieve the purpose of punishment, because those responsible for crimes remain at large, while mistrust between the involved communities and the state further deepens. The arrival of the new prosecutor has been a turning point in the work of the War Crimes Prosecutor's Office, which has abandoned a proactive approach and opted for briefly informing the public about its dealing with war crimes cases. The neglect of the important outreach component of the bodies specialized for war crimes processing has resulted in the fact that even 63 percent of Serbian citizens believe that they are not sufficiently informed about war crimes trials.<sup>210</sup> The need to

207 "Orkestar za rušenje Vučuća odavno se uštimovalo", *Politika* online, 15 February .2015. <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/319151/Orkestar-za-rusenje-Vucica-odavno-se-ustimovao>, accessed on 9 January 2023.

208 Marina Kljaić, *Izveštaj o suđenjima za ratne zločine u Srbiji tokom 2016. godine*, pp. 21–22, (Humanitarian Law Center, 2017).

209 Snežana Stanojković, *Program organizacije i unapređenja rada Tužilaštva za ratne zločine za period od 2026. do 2022. godine*, 9 June 2016.

210 "Građani uglavnom neobavešteni o ratovima devedesetih i nacionalno pristrasni",

enhance the visibility of the trials has been recognized in the relevant strategic and operational regulations; however, the official websites of courts and prosecutor's offices offer very limited information that is often excessively anonymized and incomplete. Thus, complete and timely information is not possible.

When it comes to the media space, during the past 20 years, as long as war crimes trials were held in Serbia, the public had no opportunity to hear many reports on public service media or in any other TV station which would thematize the trials, findings and events. Similarly, both the printed media and their electronic editions paid little attention to the court findings, reducing their articles to dry data that do not allow the understanding of the processes and events, or approaching them in a sensationalist and tabloid manner.<sup>211</sup> Although it has never opened up to the voices of victims, the media space has become more accessible to convicted war criminals than to the people faced with human rights violations and war crimes. Institutional passivity, underdeveloped public information programmes and media indifference have narrowed the space for learning, social dialogue and self-reflection regarding the participation in the wars and responsibility for crimes. This made it difficult to impartially observe the past events which is a prerequisite for overcoming the consequences of war and preventing future conflicts.

The slowdown of trials was also caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, so that they could not be held for several months in 2020, including multiple delays due to the absence of the participants in the proceedings caused by health problems or impossibility to travel.<sup>212</sup>

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 Danas, 22 December 2020, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/suocavanje/gradjani-uglavnom-neobavesteni-o-ratovima-devedesetih-i-nacionalno-pristrasni/>, accessed on 20 January 2023.

211 *Izveštaj o suđenjima za ratne zločine u Srbiji u 2012. godine*, p. 14 (Humanitarian Law Center, 2013)

212 Marina Kljaić, *Godišnji izveštaj o suđenjima za ratne zločine u Srbiji – 2020. godina*, pp. 10–11 (Humanitarian Law Center, 2021)

Paradoxically, it was during this period that domestic court trials were strategically directed within the scope of two consecutive national strategies<sup>213</sup> and one prosecutor's strategy<sup>214</sup> with the aim of enhancing the efficiency of war crimes proceedings. In addition, the processing of war crimes was prioritized as part of the negotiations about Serbia's accession to the European Union, since one of the findings of the screening conducted in 2013 was that it is necessary to remove the "perception of impunity for war crimes".<sup>215</sup> The subsequent recommendations for an efficient processing of war crimes are focused on adequate investigations and processing, proportionality of punishments, equal treatment of suspects regardless of their rank, improvement of support for witnesses, provision of adequate resources for institutions and protection of victims. The action plan for Chapter 23, which has been prepared for coordinating the actions of the relevant institutions towards fulfilling these recommendations, contains 27 measures to improve the position of victims during these procedures.<sup>216</sup> However, the efforts to smother the trials and hide the facts have prevailed over the regulations that have been supposed to direct the actions of the relevant institutions to which the EU's sporadic and narrowly focused attention has been suited. All this has led to a visible and probably irreversible regression in the processing of war crimes, resulting in widespread impunity and the normalization of crimes, interethnic tensions, mistrust and fears, as well as a high risk of the outbreak of new hostilities in the future.

213 "Nacionalna strategija za procesuiranje ratnih zločina za period 2016–2020", *Službeni glasnik RS*, No. 19/2016. "Nacionalna strategija za procesuiranje ratnih zločina za period 2021–2026", *Službeni glasnik RS*, No. 97/2021.

214 "Tužilačka strategija za istragu i gonjenje ratnih zločina u Republici Srbiji 2018–2023", Government of the Republic of Serbia, War Crimes Prosecutor's Office, 2018.

215 Screening Report Serbia, Chapter 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, European Commission.

216 Action Plan, Chapter 23, Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, July 2020, Negotiating Team for Chapter 23, Republic of Serbia.

## A NEW NARRATIVE ABOUT THE PAST

Along with the rejection of unsuitable judicial facts, the creation of an appropriate narrative about the past has also started, becoming the official policy of memory. Starting with the claim about the denial of justice to Serbian victims before international courts, the narrative is based on the self-victimization of the Serbian people and continuity of their suffering in the 20th century, the heroism of the Serbian army and police, and insistence on Serbia's defensive, that is, liberation endeavours. The purpose of such a narrative is to exclude the discussion about the responsibility of Serbian institutions for planning, organizing, committing and hiding war crimes from the public sphere, while at the same time relying on the thesis about the indisputable sinlessness of a victim.

### JASENOVAC

Jasenovac has become the key conceptual determinant of the official policy of memory, produced and imposed by state institutions. By continuously reminding the people of the crimes committed against Serbs during the Second World War and their clear connection with the wars of the nineties,<sup>217</sup> this symbolic signifier of the suffering of the Serbian people is purposefully interwoven into the foundations of national identity. Thus, suffering and sacrifice have become the key determinants of self-perception and relations with the people living in their surroundings. At the same time, one's own ethnic group has been positioned in the centre of

217 "It is impossible to understand the conflicts of the nineties without understanding the meaning of the word 'Jasenovac'", the speech delivered by Aleksandar Vučić, Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia, on the occasion of the Day of Remembrance of the Genocide Victims of the Jasenovac concentration camp, 2015; accessible at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lIvK8qzg-G4>, accessed on 19 February 2023; "Many Vukašins were killed, many Serbian eyes gouged out in that war, many Serbian ears and noses were cut off, but Serbian tenacity and persistence did not allow them to finish the job as they imagined. That is why they needed Storm.", a quote from the speech delivered by Aleksandar Vučić, Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia, on the occasion of marking the 21st anniversary of Operation Storm in 2016; accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkMnGLsRt1A>, accessed on 19 February 2023.



social memory and it opposes the penetration of other people's memories of their victims. Moreover, the newly established political elite, led by the perpetrators of the war regime in the 1990s, bases itself, among other things, on the claim that it has brought the freedom to remember its own victims and has ended the silence about the crimes against Serbs.<sup>218</sup>

Resistance to the intrusion of the unwanted memories was most evident in the campaign against the UN Security Council Resolution on Srebrenica (2015), with the accusations that the document aims to declare the Serbs "the only genocidal people in the history of civilization",<sup>219</sup> as well as in ignoring Bosnia and Herzegovina's candidate for Oscar 2020 "Quo Vadis, Aida", which also thematizes the genocide in Srebrenica. Similarly, the annual commemorations of Operation Storm, during which the crimes against Serbian civilians were committed, do not provide room for the discussion about the previous events when Croatian civilians were targeted. A reminder about the forcible mobilization of Serbian refugees from Croatia (and Bosnia and Herzegovina) in Serbia during 1994 and 1995 and their forcible return to the war affected regions is also missing.

However, competitiveness in suffering is most evident in relation to the Holocaust, while the ways in which it is manifested leave the impression of latent anti-Semitism. This primarily refers to the identification of the suffering of the two peoples, which leads to the perception of the position of Serbs as being significantly more difficult than that of Jews during the Second World War.<sup>220</sup> There

218 "Da svi čuju! Pročitajte ceo govor Vučića sa obeležavanja Dana sećanja na žrtve zločinačke akcije 'Oluja'", *Novosti online*, 4 August 2022, <https://www.novosti.rs/c/vesti/oluja-zlocin-bez-kazne/1142351/svi-cuju-procitajte-ceo-govor-vucica-obelezavanja-dana-secanja-zrtve-zlocinacke-akcije-oluja>, accessed on 19 February 2023.

219 "Vulin: MUP i RTS će snimiti serijal filmova 'Dosije Kosovo'", *Danas*, 15 January 2021. <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/vulin-mup-i-rt-s-ce-snimiti-serijal-filmova-dosije-kosovo/>, accessed on 19 February 2023.

220 For the thesis on Jasenovac as the most monstrous and brutal concentration and death camp in all of Europe during the Second World War see: "Kada prošlost progovori – Jasenovac, osamdeset godina kasnije", Museum of Genocide

are also frequent claims about their long brotherhood and friendship, which gloss over the role of the Serbian quisling government in the extermination of Jews during the Holocaust.<sup>221</sup>

Serbia's cultural policy is primarily responsible for overmastering the memory space within the scope of its strategy and capital projects. In this sense, the key guiding document is the Proposal for the Cultural Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (2020).<sup>222</sup> The Strategy considers the experience of genocide as an "inevitable determinant" of the Serbian national identity and, accordingly, research on the genocide of Serbs in the 20th century as the focus of memory culture. The capital projects in the area of memory culture include the Staro Sajmište Memorial Centre<sup>223</sup> and the Museum of Genocide Victims.<sup>224</sup> In addition, the projects of national importance such as the exhibitions "The Truth About Jasenovac, the Right to Unforgettness" and "Jasenovac. Death Camp. The Land of the Living", as well as feature films are abundantly financially supported. Common to all these projects is precisely the commitment to the realization of memory culture as prescribed by the Cultural Strategy: prioritizing the suffering of the Serbian people through associative connections with the word and toponym Jasenovac. The related activities were especially intensive in 2020/21.

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 Victims, 23 August 2021. <https://www.muzejgenocida.rs/2021/08/23/kada-proslost-progovori-jasenovac-osamdeset-godina-kasnije/>; accessed on 20 February 2023; "Ovaj logor je strašniji i od Aušvica i od Treblinka, jer se ovde ubijani morao suočiti s ličnom mržnjom svoga ubice" in: "Svaka naša priča počinje u Jasenovcu", *Politika*, 28 January 2019. <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/421408/Region/Svaka-nasa-prica-o-Holokaustu-pocinje-u-Jasenovcu>, accessed on 20 February 2023.

221 "Vučić: Srbi i Jevreji su oduvek imali dobre odnose", *Danas*, 2 March 2020. <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-srbi-i-jevreji-su-oduvek-imali-dobre-odnose/>, accessed on 20 February 2023.

222 The proposed Cultural Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2020–2029, Government of the Republic of Serbia, 13 February 2020, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/444288/usvojen-predlog-strategije-razvoja-kulture-do-2029-godine.php>, accessed on 15 February 2023.

223 Ibid., Mera 2.1. Realizacija planiranih i započetih kapitalnih objekata.

224 Ibid., Mera 2.1. Realizacija planiranih i započetih kapitalnih objekata.

With the amendments to the Law on Culture (2020) the Museum of Genocide Victims has become the bearer of memory culture in Serbia.<sup>225</sup> Its Director has soon been replaced by the new one (2021), who has been appointed Acting Director without competition, while the number of employees has been increased from 5 to 15. The Museum has started cooperation with cultural, educational and scientific institutions at the national and local levels. Topics of cooperation include the suffering of Serbs during the Second World War, in Kosovo and in Croatia during and after the 1990s conflicts and, to a lesser degree, the Holocaust and Samudaripen. The proclaimed goal of such an engagement of the Museum is the “enrichment and objectivization of the knowledge about the national past, laying special emphasis on the phenomenon of our people’s suffering in numerous armed conflicts during the past century”.<sup>226</sup> Similar to that, after decades of neglect, the adoption of the Law on the Staro Sajmište Memorial Centre (2020) announced a more proactive involvement of institutions in the preservation of the memory of this place of suffering during the Second World War. However, on the basis of the statements made by the representatives of the relevant institutions one can observe the tendency to give priority to the victims of Serbian nationality in perceiving the concept of the memorial centre, while at the same time covering up the role of Serbia’s quisling government in the Holocaust and switching the responsibility to the Independent State of Croatia (NDH).<sup>227</sup> The tendency to place this institution in the service of

225 Law on Culture, Article 3; *Službeni glasnik RS*, Nos. 72/2009, 13/2016, 30/2016 – Corr., 6/2020, 47/2021 i 78/2021.during

226 “Obrazovni programi Muzeja žrtava genocida u Lebanu, Vranju, Vladičinom Hanu i Surdulici”, Museum of Genocide Victims, 1 November 2021. <https://www.muzejgenocida.rs/2021/11/01/obrazovni-programi-muzeja-zrtava-genocida-u-lebanu-vranju-vladicinom-hanu-i-surdulici/>, accessed on 19 February 2023.

227 “Ovaj logor se nalazio u NDH ... ovim logorom je upravljao Gestapo, odnosno nemačka specijalna policija. Jedini Srbi koji su prošli kroz ovaj logor su bili žrtve, odnosno zatvorenici. ... Dakle, Srbi i Srbija apsolutno nikakve veze sa ovim logorom nemaju ... Naprotiv, mi smo bili samo žrtve, isto kao i Jevreji, isto kao i Romi, ovog logora.” in: Privremene stenografske beleške, 01 No. 06–2/47–20; 25th Extraordinary Session of the National Assembly of the Republic of

self-victimization is also evident in renaming the area where it is located to Obala Jasenovačkih žrtava (Bank of Jasenovac Victims) (2021), as well as the announced relocation of the Museum of Genocide Victims to the Memorial Centre.<sup>228</sup> Moreover, on the Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust Victims, on 22 April 2022, a memorial plaque dedicated to the victims of the NDH concentration and death camp system was unveiled within the camp complex, thus situating this area, together with the Staro Sajmište Memorial Centre, in the corpus of memories of the Serbian victims of the Ustasha regime in the Independent State of Croatia.<sup>229</sup>

The feature film “Dara of Jasenovac”, directed by Predrag Antonijević (2021), follows the logic of other state projects on the topic of Jasenovac, presenting itself as the first to talk about the Serbian victims. Its proclaimed goal is to “spread the truth about the suffering of the Serbs”, so that “the world sees the extent of the tragedy of our people”.<sup>230</sup> The function of the film was to communicate the new narrative with the audience that is not reached by the institutions’ programmes. This is evidenced by the decision to show the film on public service media – Radio Television of Serbia and other TV channels and not in cinemas as well as to be the Serbian candidate for an Oscar and be on the repertoire of cinemas abroad. The film was unequivocally marked as a project of national importance and received much greater financial support than previous films. It was marked by controversial processes for its election for financial support and for the Serbian candidate for

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Serbia, in the 11th composition, 18 and 21 February 2020.

228 “Vučić: Gradiće se memorijalni centar na Donjoj Gradini, potvrda i od Dodika! Biće to “svesrpsko svetilište”, Portal Buka, 10 September 2021. <https://6yka.com/bih/vucic-gradice-se-memorijalni-centar-na-donjoj-gradini-potvrda-i-od-dodika-bice-to-svesrpsko-svetiliste>, accessed on 22 March 2023.

229 “Otkrivena spomen-ploča na Obali jasenovačkih žrtava u Beogradu”, N1, 21 April 2022. <https://n1info.rs/vesti/otkrivena-spomen-ploca-na-obali-jasenovackih-zrtava-u-beogradu/>, accessed on 20 February 2023.

230 “Vučić o filmu ,Oluja’: To je još jedna od stvari na koju sam ponosan”, *Novosti* online, 16 January 2023. <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1192508/vucic-filmu-oluj-a-jos-jedna-stvari-koji-sam-ponosan/komentari/svi>, accessed on 20 February 2023.

an Oscar, while any negative critique and its dropout from the Oscar race was considered as anti-Serbism. The film was also meant to legitimize itself as a contribution to the education of young people due to the allegedly insufficient educational programmes about Jasenovac in schools.<sup>231</sup>

The intention to extend the scope of the new narrative to educational programmes in Serbian schools is also evident in the announcement concerning the introduction of national textbooks. These textbooks will offer the contents covering the fields of geography, history, Serbian language and literature, as well as music and art, which have the potential for cherishing the culture of the Serbian people and developing their national identity.<sup>232</sup> To this end, the Sector for Teaching Subjects of National Importance was established within the Institute for the Advancement of Education and Upbringing (2018) and the teacher's manual was also prepared.<sup>233</sup> The manual envisages seven key subject areas in which educational results must be achieved, including *identity*, *Serbian ethnos*, *Serbian language*, *Serbian history* and *Serbian cultural space*, as well as the *culture of memory*. According to the manual, teaching children about the culture of memory should take place within the scope of the prescribed anniversaries and events that are focused on the "suffering of Serbs during and after the Second World War, genocide of Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia – Jasenovac, Jadovno... Storm, NATO aggression..."<sup>234</sup> A repository of educational tools dedicated to the culture of memory was also offered. Its proclaimed purpose is to provide support to teachers

231 "Gimnazijalci o Jasenovcu ne znaju ništa?! Zašto obrazovni sistem od 1945. godine marginalizuje temu najvećeg srpskog stratišta", *Novosti online*, 28 February 2021. <https://www.novosti.rs/c/drustvo/vesti/969641/gimnazijalci-jasenovcu-znaju-nista-zasto-obrazovni-sistem-1945-godine-danas-marginalizuje-temu-najveceg-srpskog-stratista>, accessed on 28 February 2023.

232 *Negovanje kulture srpskog naroda i razvijanje nacionalnog identiteta – Priručnik za nastavnike u osnovnom obrazovanju i vaspitanju*, Zlatko Grušanović, publ., p. 2 (Institute for the Advancement of Education and Upbringing, Belgrade 2021).

233 Ibid.

234 Ibid.

and students in learning about “the past wars” with a focus on the genocide of Serbs and Roma in the Holocaust.<sup>235</sup> It has been announced that the first textbooks will come out in 2023.<sup>236</sup> In line with this is also the upcoming inclusion of visits to the sites of crime against the members of the Serbian people during the Second World War in student excursions.<sup>237</sup> Therefore, a deeper penetration of the new narrative about the past in primary and secondary school curricula can still be expected.

The resistance of the self-victimizing narrative about the past to its objective observation and the facts is ensured by the omission of the critical contents that can bring it into question. A vivid example is Ivo Goldštajn’s book “Jasenovac”, which deals with the topic of his research in an objective way and on the basis of credible sources. It has been withdrawn from the Republic’s book acquisition list for 2020, thus preventing it from reaching libraries.<sup>238</sup>

With its monumentality, the announced “all-Serbian sanctuary” dedicated to the Serbian victims of Jasenovac and “crimes committed in the territories which were not under the control of the Serbian people”<sup>239</sup> will exactly symbolize the magnitude of the

235 “Kultura sećanja – resursi za nastavu i učenje”, Institute for the Advancement of Education and Upbringing, 27 January 2023. <https://zuov.gov.rs/kultura-secanja-resursi-za-nastavu-i-ucenje/>, accessed on 20 February 2023.

236 “Stižu nacionalni udžbenici: U izradi učestvuje i patrijarh”, N Portal, 30 January 2023. <https://www.nportal.rs/vest/45722/vesti/drustvo/obrazovanje-osnovna-srednja-skola-nacionalni-udzbenedici>, accessed on 20 February 2023.

237 “Obilazak stratišta srpskog naroda u programu đачkih ekskurzija”, RTS portal, 7 November 2022. <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/5010573/muzej-zrtve-stratista-srbi-ekskurzije-djaci.html>, accessed on 20 February 2023.

238 The then Minister of Culture said: “Goldstein claims that, regardless of the list with the names and surnames of the victims, there were about 100,000 at Jasenovac. He will have to make a more serious effort to prove his claims if he wants this country, I repeat, to put its seal and buy this book for Serbian libraries”. See: “Hrvatska knjiga o Jasenovcu u srpskim bibliotekama – o čijem trošku?”, RTS portal, 22 August 2020. <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/4056665/jasenovac-knjiga-biblioteke.html>, accessed on 20 February 2023.

239 “Svesrpsko svetilište u Donjoj Gradini”, Serbian Diaspora Youtube Channel, 10 September 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yakSfSI6J1E>, accessed on

suffering of Serbs, while its concept will show the continuity of their suffering in the 20th century.<sup>240</sup> It is a joint memorial project by Serbia and the Republic of Srpska entity in Donja Gradina (Bosnia and Herzegovina), in which Serbia plans to cover about 80 per cent of its costs. Such a project will complete the process of self-victimization and further intensify the battle that has been going on in the post-Yugoslav area between the opposite suffering-related narratives for decades.

### THE HEROIZATION OF THE ARMY

The heroization of the army encompasses the entire hierarchical structure from soldiers doing military service, through units and brigades, to corps commanders and chiefs of the general staff. The main symbols of the army's heroism<sup>241</sup> are the events at Košare and Paštrik in the period April-June 1999. They profile the sketch of fearlessness, determined and dedicated soldiers who do not retreat before a much bigger and more powerful enemy in the country's epic defence from the enemy and NATO aggression.<sup>242</sup> The Ministry of Defence is most actively involved in the construction of a narrative about the heroic Serbian army through its Public Relations Department. Intensive work on content production began when Aleksandar Vulin was the Minister of Defence (2019). The *Ratnik* Series launched at that time already consists of 11 volumes dealing with the war in Kosovo, and was presented to the public as "the Ministry's most important publishing project" which contributes to the culture of memory in Serbia.<sup>243</sup> Among their au-

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22 February 2023.

240 "U Donjoj Gradini gradi se najveći memorijalni kompleks na Balkanu", *Politika* online, 30. novembar 2021. <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/527108/donja-gradina-memorijalni-centar-gradnja>, accessed on 22 February 2023.

241 "Ranjavanje me spasilo smrti, Ispovest komandira karaule Košare", *Odbrana* No. 229, Magazine of the Ministry of Defence of Serbia, 1 April 2015.

242 "Košare – Bitka koja je ujedinila Srbiju", *Odbrana* No. 359, Magazine of the Ministry of Defence of Serbia, 1 April 2022.

243 "Edicija 'Ratnik' je promovisana u Domu Vojske", *Odbrana* Medija Centre, 10 April 2019, [http://www.odbrana.mod.gov.rs/sadrzaj.php?id\\_sadrzaja=1824](http://www.odbrana.mod.gov.rs/sadrzaj.php?id_sadrzaja=1824),



thors and promoters are the persons convicted of war crimes such as Nebojša Pavković, who is the author of more than 50 percent of the volumes in this series and is still serving a prison sentence for war crimes in Kosovo. Since 2016, the Ministry has published a total of 22 volumes that uncritically thematize the war in Kosovo with the aim of bringing a new, constructed truth about the heroic behaviour and defence of the Serbian security forces to Serbian society. About four million dinars were allocated for the *Ratnik* Series alone from the budget of the Republic of Serbia.<sup>244</sup> At the same time, the Ministry also launched the project “War brigades decorated with the Order of National Hero in 1999”, with the plan of making films about “the most famous Serbian army units in modern history”.<sup>245</sup> The first in the series is the film “Heroic 135th Motorized Brigade” (2021), which is dedicated to the unit in whose zone of responsibility more than 1,800 civilians were killed during the war in Kosovo.<sup>246</sup>

The books in the service of heroization were promoted at international,<sup>247</sup> national and local events, with the participation of war crimes convicts and/or persons who had a prominent role in the civil or military structures during the war period. Among them are Nikola Šainović and Vladimir Lazarević, both convicted of the war crimes committed in Kosovo in 1998–1999; Vinko Pandurević, convicted of crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Srebrenica in July 1995; Božidar Delić, Commander of the 549th Motorized Brigade of the Yugoslav Army, in whose area of respon-

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accessed on 21 February 2023.

244 “Suočavanje s prošlošću – tranziciona pravda” in: *Ljudska prava u Srbiji 2019 – Pravo, praksa i međunarodni standardi ljudskih prava*, Vesna Petrović (ed.), p. 263 (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights in Serbia, 2020)..

245 “Premijera dokumentarnog filma ,Herojska 125. motorizovana brigada’”, Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, 23 September 2021. <https://www.mod.gov.rs/lat/17868/premijera-dokumentarnog-filma-herojska-125-motorizovana-brigada-17868>, accessed on 18 February 2023.

246 *Dosije 125. motorizovana brigada Vojske Jugoslavije*, p. 1 (Humanitarian Law Center, 2013).

247 The 64th International Book Fair. 2018; The 65th International Book Fair, 2022.



sibility more than 2,100 Albanian civilians were killed.<sup>248</sup> Since his release from prison in 2011, Veselin Šljivančanin, convicted of a war crime at Ovčara, has presented his books at about 30 events.<sup>249</sup>

The construction of a narrative about heroism has been supported by the active involvement of institutions and high government officials who have uniformly called for taking pride in the actions of the army and police during the armed conflicts of the 1990s.<sup>250</sup> The most active in this sense was the already mentioned Aleksandar Vulin during whose time in the office as Minister, the Ministries became the producers of propaganda about the past, moving further and further away from the reform that would lead to the removal of those responsible from the ranks of the army and police. The active participants in this process were the members of the army and police for whom there are serious indications that they bear the responsibility for the crimes committed by the units and brigades under their command.

The thesis of heroism is also becoming more present in children's literature, mainly through illustrated publications. The most impressive are the books published by the Dobrodetelj Association "Košare: The New Battle of Kosovo (Košare: novi kosovski boj)" and "Serbs Against NATO from 1991 to 1999" (Srbi protiv NATO od 1991. do 1999. godine). The books, especially the last one, depict the armed conflicts of the nineties as the Western anti-Serb conspiracy and project heroism from individuals onto the whole community,

248 "Istražiti umešanost Božidara Delića i Svetozara Andrića u ratne zločine", Humanitarian Law Center, 19 August 2022. <http://www.hlc-rdc.org/?p=38512>, accessed on 18 February 2023.

249 "Suočavanje s prošlošću – tranziciona pravda", Belgrade Centre for Human Rights in Serbia, 2021 – *Pravo, praksa i međunarodni standardi ljudskih prava*, Pokuševski Dušan (ed.), p. 256. (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights in Serbia, 2022).

250 "General Lazarević stigao iz Haga", Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, 3 December 2015. <https://www.mod.gov.rs/lat/9085/general-lazarevic-stigao-iz-haga-9085>, accessed on 19 February 2023.

thus becoming a “heroic nation”.<sup>251</sup> The first cases of entering such contents into history textbooks have also been recorded.<sup>252</sup>

The emphasis on the army serves to support the claim about Serbia’s defence from foreign aggression, aimed to seize its territory, instead of shedding light on the factors that caused the pre-war crisis and the facts about the actors and events during the war. The basis for a more objective look at the past can be found in the extensive verdict and available evidentiary materials in the ICTY *Šainović et al.* case, as well as in a large number of credible studies. However, this type of tampering with the facts happened as a rule only when it was necessary to strengthen the arguments concerning the aggression against Serbia and the suffering of Serbs. The video series titled “Kosovo Dossier” (2021) by Slađana Zarić, which was produced by the Ministry of the Internal Affairs and Radio Television Serbia, is based precisely on the testimonies in the ICTY *Haradinaj et al.* and *Limaj et al.* cases. Bias is also evident in the selection of interlocutors who are solely from the Serbian community, including mostly the members of the army and police and the families of victims, while the facts about the actions of the army and police during the war in Kosovo are not disclosed.<sup>253</sup> The intention to cause shock and emotions with the explicit scenes of violence is also evident, which further narrows the scope for a broader and critical view of the events. The proclaimed goal of the series is to show the world the truth about the Serbian people and that “they bombed us and turned us into criminals due to lies”.<sup>254</sup> The series was also launched at the time when Aleksandar

251 Milan Bojić, *Srbi protiv NATO od 1991. do 1999. godine* (Dobrodetelj Association, 2022).

252 A. Rastović, P. M. Vajagić, B. Lazarević, *Istorija za 8. razred osnovne škole* (Gerundijum)

253 Documentary feature films “Dossier Kosovo ‘98” and “Dossier Kosovo – Račak”, 2022.

254 “Serijal ‘Dosiје Kosovo’ u zajedničkoj produkciji MUP-a i RTS-a”, Government of the Republic of Serbia, 10 December 2021. <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/597385/serijal-dosije-kosovo-u-zajednickoj-produkciji-mup-a-i-rt-s-a.php>, accessed on 20 February 2023.

Vulin was the Minister of Internal Affairs and represents a rare exemption made by this Ministry.

The function of this profiling of the Serbian army and police is to discredit and reject the accusations of inhuman behavior by some of its members as well as to deny the responsibility for war crimes.

### **THE THESES ABOUT LIBERATION WARS AND DEFENCE**

The theses about liberation wars and defence are widely present in the public discourse and educational system, with their foundation in several legal acts. There is a noticeable difference in the attitude towards the wars. As for the wars in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is still claimed that Serbia did not participate in them, while the conflict in Kosovo is perceived as the country's defence against terrorism, separatism and foreign aggression. The wars of the 1990s are not explicitly characterized as liberation wars, because in that case official Serbia would either admit its participation in them or indirectly accept the ICTY's findings about its tendency to expel a large part of the Albanian population from Kosovo. However, they are still present in the broader context of the liberation wars fought by Serbia during the 20th century, which aimed to justify and legitimize Serbia's actions during the 1990s. This was done first by including certain events from the wars of the nineties in the National Programme of Commemorating the Anniversaries of the Historical Events from the Liberation Wars of Serbia (2016). In accordance with the dominant self-victimization, Operation Storm, the violence against non-Albanians in March 2004, the Battle of Košare and the NATO bombing of Serbia in March were chosen as the events to be included in the official memory of the past. It is also planned to mark certain dates together with Bosnia and Herzegovina's entity Republic of Srpska, but they do not include the events from the war of 1992–1995. Another document will substitute them, insisting on the memory culture of the genocide of the Serbian people and continuous presentation of this topic in museology, arts and journalism as “an

example of a shared responsible attitude towards the past”.<sup>255</sup> The inclusion of Operation Storm is particularly interesting, bearing in mind the insistence on Serbia’s non-participation in the war in Croatia, coupled with the characterization of the event as aggression against the so-called Republic of Serbian Krajina.<sup>256</sup> One of the reasons can be found in the profiling of Operation Storm as a continuation of the persecution of Serbs which began in the Second World War, where the link of this event with the liberation tendencies becomes clearer.

The codification of the narrative about the liberation wars continued with the adoption of the Law on War Memorials (2018), which prescribes the building, removal and care of the monuments commemorating war events and personages. First of all, the Law allows only the memorialization which is “important for cherishing the tradition of Serbia’s liberation wars”,<sup>257</sup> that is, “corresponds to historical or real facts”, does not offend state interests, is dedicated to an event that is “in accordance with the legacy of Serbia’s liberation wars” and does not “symbolizes the loss of sovereignty and territorial integrity”.<sup>258</sup>

Due to the aforementioned provisions, the Law makes it impossible to memorialize the events in which the perpetrators of crimes were Serbian forces, such as the genocide in Srebrenica, the siege of Sarajevo and terror against its citizens, as well as the shelling of Dubrovnik and Vukovar. Similarly, it is illegal to memorialize the suffering of civilian victims of mass crimes in Kosovo, whose remains have been found in mass graves in Serbia. It has also become impossible to offer a memorial with the potential critical perception of NATO bombing, or at least its connection with

255 Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space, Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia and Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Srpska, 4 March 2019.

256 State Programme of Marking the Historical Events from the Liberation Wars of Serbia, Item 30; Committee for Cherishing the Traditions of the Liberation Wars of Serbia, Government of the Republic of Serbia, 16 December 2016.

257 Law on War Memorials, Article 2, “Službeni glasnik RS”, No. 50, 29 June 2018.

258 Ibid., Articles 19 and 20.

a wider political-historical context, because it may happen that the expected ambiguity is not in compliance with “historical or real facts”. A special problem is posed by the interpretation of the facts as historical and/or real due to the absence of their conceptual definition and unclear criteria for mutual distinction. Finally, there is also the question of what to do with the monuments built before the adoption of the Law, such as the monuments to the victims of kidnapping and murder in Sjeverin and Štrpci, or a number of monuments to the members of the Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveđa and Bujanovac.

However, when it comes to the desired monuments, the Law gives them a legitimizing framework, including them in the corpus of liberation wars and allowing the events or personages to which they refer to be perceived and understood exclusively through that plane. Thus, dozens of monuments that were built in memory of the suffering of soldiers and policemen during NATO bombing, will be classified as a liberation and defensive war. This also refers to the monuments that represent a clear manipulation of historical facts, such as the *Eternal Flame* monument in the Park of Friendship at Ušće, which symbolizes Serbia’s supposedly successful defence and victory over NATO.

Finally, the Cultural Development Strategy (2020) includes heroism and freedom among the seven key dimensions of Serbian culture which make up its distinctive character.

History textbooks for the eighth grade of elementary school and the third and fourth grade of high school continue to teach students about the wars of the nineties in a biased, non-objective and superficial way. The reasons for the outbreak of wars are attributed to the secessionist aspirations of others, primary Slovenia and Croatia. No textbook discusses the participation of the Yugoslav People’s Army in the attacks against the places in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina with the aim of bringing them under the control of Serbian forces. Textbooks deal very little with the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina mentioning mostly the toponyms of crimes without their explanation and contextualization. There

are the cases of mentioning the Srebrenica massacre, but only in one textbook there is a mention that the ICTY qualified it as genocide.<sup>259</sup> The war in Kosovo is completely omitted. Instead, the focus is placed on the NATO bombing of the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The textbooks quantify the suffering of Serbs as part of the data on material damage, lost human lives and displaced persons. However, these data differ from textbook to textbook, where the number of civilian victims oscillates between 1,200 and 2,500.<sup>260</sup> There is no mention, however, that there are no state census data on human losses and that the only credible source of the data on victims is offered by nongovernmental organizations. The textbooks conspicuously omit the data on the suffering of other people and the role of Serbian units in crimes. The ICTY verdict in the *Šainović et al.* case is not mentioned in any textbook. Due to such an approach, teaching materials actively participate in both self-victimization and in the spreading of the theses about Serbia's defensive stance, imposing it on young people in the formative period of development.

259 Đureinović J, Jovanović R, *Predlog praktične politike: Ratovi 1990-ih u nastavi istorije* (Humanitarian Law Center, 2020).

260 Marijana Toma, "Ratovi 1990-tih u udžbenicima istorije u Srbiji", *Dealing with the Past* portal, 9 March 2018. <https://dwp-balkan.org/bs/ratovi-1990-tih-u-udzbencima-istorije-u-srbiji/>, accessed on 19 February 2023.

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The insistence on liberation/defensive wars connects and frames the discourses about the suffering of Serbs and the heroism of the Serbian army and police with a view to creating and disseminating a narrative that promotes Serbia's innocence regarding the wars of the nineties. This aspiration should not be viewed separately from the restored idea about the unification of all Serbs into one state, which is offered in the "Serbian world" concept. Therefore, it is necessary to carefully monitor the situations that could bring the two ideas together and aim at new territorial rearrangements in the post-Yugoslav region.

# THE MEDIA



# THE DOWNFALL OF THE MEDIA ORCHESTRATED BY THE GOVERNMENT

Since Aleksandar Vučić came to power in 2012, the level of media freedom, freedom of speech, respect for media laws and professional standards have been in a state of constant decline. The media is deeply polarized and divided into a pro-regime majority and a critically-oriented minority that functions under constant economic, political, legal and security pressures. The mechanisms that the previous government used to somewhat tame the media have during Vučić's rule taken on malignant dimensions and systematically led to the destruction of the media in the original sense of the word. This – through misinformation, incomplete information and daily spin stories – is directly reflected in the electoral will of citizens, growing nationalism, attitudes about recent history, Russia and the West, as well as everything that is “the other” and different.

On the list of *Reporters without Borders*, in 2022,<sup>261</sup> Serbia ranked 79th among a total of 180 countries in terms of media freedom, while Freedom House ranks it as “partially free”. At the same time, the most detailed review of the state of the media – the Media Sustainability Index, with which IREX<sup>262</sup> monitors developments in several areas of media activity every year – shows a con-

261 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/reporteri-bez-granica-u-2022-uhapseno-533-novinara>

262 <https://www.irex.org/resource/media-sustainability-index-msi>

tinuous decline in standards for the production of media content. Just before the rise of the Serbian Progressive Party, in 2011, the overall rating was 1.90, out of a maximum of 4.00, the subsequent year it was 1.92, then again 1.90, and in 2017 Serbia fell to 1.78, with 1.45 in 2018, where it remained in 2019, firmly the worst in Europe and recording a worse result than during the final year of Slobodan Milošević's regime. The situation is getting worse every year, and this is supported by the fact that the market conditions are not sufficient for the survival of as many as 2,508 media outlets, which is how many are currently active.

## FORMAL FRAMEWORK

After a series of complications and “acting from the shadows” in 2014, the Law on Public Information and Media was adopted, which, among other things, foresees the privatization of so-called state media. No matter how good the intention was at the start – the result showed what the *modus operandi* of the current government actually is – with the mass buyout of, first of all, local media, 75 percent of the media fell under the control of eight media companies, most of which are directly connected to the ruling structure.

These media outlets have a monopoly on the advertising market, but at the same time they also receive the lion's share of budget allocations for media content of public interest. Media critical of the government have not received advertising offers from either public or private companies for years, and are forced to obtain most of the funds necessary for their survival from international partners, within the framework of various projects.

All of this is also reflected in the editorial policy: the pro-regime media have practically been the main attack dogs of the government for 10 years and, very often, they publish what high-ranking government officials are not allowed to say, driven by political interests. This primarily refers to the waves of nationalist hysteria that occasionally engulf the public scene, as well as attacks

on political opponents. These media outlets systematically hunt down anyone who criticizes the government, they relativize war crimes, discriminate against different peoples and countries with words and facts taken out of context, and explain in simple terms what the state leadership communicates in “careful wording”.

Three years after the adoption of the Law, a working group was formed to draft the Media Strategy, an act that was supposed to pave the way for a new, improved Law on Public Information and Media. What happened, however, precisely demonstrated, for the first time, on the example of that document, how and to what extent the current government interferes in matters where it should not.

The Strategy was worked on until 27 March 2018, when it was triumphantly announced that the document was completed and that it was “now under assessment by the authorities”. Less than a month later, the “authorities” announced themselves in the form of the president’s media advisor Suzana Vasiljević: at the session of the National Convention, in front of completely uninformed representatives of the Ministry of Culture and Information and the civil sector, Vasiljević announced the formation of a new working group and the creation of a strategy from scratch. The president was not satisfied, the matter started “from square one”, and the Constitution was violated in the domain of the president’s authority. Which, it is worth highlighting, was only one in a series of similar cases, but perhaps it was the most illustrative.

When it comes to the formal framework for the work of the media, it is inevitable to mention the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) – responsible for supervising the work of television and radio stations, as well as for the allocation of frequencies with national coverage. Since 2003, when it was established, it has been an extension of the government, never independent, constantly involved in scandals. Entire volumes have been written about irregularities in the selection of REM council members, their biographies, nepotism and connections, often scandalous actions and statements, turning a blind eye to unacceptable behavior of

broadcasters, inexplicable decisions, political pressures, etc. The most recent example is the controversial allocation of national frequencies, when the president of the REM council, Olivera Zekić, said that a candidate's previous behavior will not be taken into account in the decision-making process, even though according to the law, that is one of the exact criteria.

"This is an absolutely new competition. Nobody is assessing what happened in the past 16 years. There is no such thing as what happened in the past 16 years. All candidates have the same starting position", explained Zekić.<sup>263</sup>

This meant that the scandalous role of television on the political scene, the persecution of political dissidents, vulgarity and aggression in reality programs, kitsch, junk and superstitions are not taken into account; TV ads that led to the murder of Oliver Ivanović are no longer important, nor is openly being at the service of the regime. As in other segments of the media scene, after all, neither the past, nor laws, nor basic decency are regarded.

Finally, the end of 2022 was marked by another scandal caused by REM: when it was criticized for not announcing the name of the winner of the fifth frequency with national coverage within the legal deadline (the competition was announced later, and among the candidates, TV Nova S, a member of United Media seemed to be the most serious contender), REM went on strike (!). At the beginning of 2023, the fifth frequency was still not assigned.

## HEADHUNT

It would be difficult to find a public figure who spoke or wrote critically about the regime without becoming a victim of the tabloids, TV Pink or Happy. The attack usually starts in the morning program of one of these television channels, so that it can appear on the front pages the next day, or vice versa – it starts with the front pages, and continues in news programs. Thanks to this synergy, the

<sup>263</sup> <https://www.istinomer.rs/izjava/ono-sto-se-dogadjalo-u-proteklih-16-godina-niko-ne-gleda-svi-kandidati-imaju-iste-startne-pozicije>

persecuted critic is cornered on all sides, accused without an investigation, condemned without a trial, and forced to explain and defend themselves. Accusations usually refer to the fact that a particular journalist, artist or activist received a large sum of money from foreign governments, that they are a criminal, an alcoholic, a spy, a drug addict and the like. On one occasion a group of ten public figures were accused of organizing the assassination of the president of all things (?!).

Another illustrative example involves KRIK editor Stevan Dojčinović, who was accused of collaborating with the mafia, based on a photo of him in the company of a criminal, who was his source. At the defamation trial, the editors “defended” themselves with the fact that they received the photo from the Security Intelligence Agency.

Insults, attempts at discrediting and, consequently, threats by anonymous commentators on social media platforms, are a daily occurrence – they are so frequent that many do not even comment on them anymore, but the variety, aggressiveness, and even imagination of the attacks contributed to a large extent to the deep polarization and violence in social life.

On the other hand, the treatment of Aleksandar Vučić in the pro-regime majority of the media is on the verge of idolatry – in reports from various conferences and bilateral meetings, he “dominated”, “defeated”, “destroyed” his counterparts, his statements are not checked but taken at face value and everything he says and does is reported on in an uncritical manner.

Some see the pre-election campaign of February 2014 as the beginning of the downward spiral. After the snow covered the convoy of cars near Feketić, the then Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić came to the scene and in front of TV cameras pulled several children out of the snow and carried them in his arms to the helicopter. Journalist Jasminka Kocjan later testified that, before Vučić came, members of the rescue services were ordered to stop all their activities overnight – probably so that the cameras could record a larger amount of snow, or more children. In any

case, on the front pages of the leading tabloids, the next day, a picture of the rescuer in plain clothing<sup>264</sup> appeared with the headline – “Heroes! Nole and Vučić save children from the snow”<sup>265</sup> and “Vučić pulls Albanians out of the snow!”<sup>266</sup>

It is safe to say that everything that happened afterwards is history. After the announcement of the reduction of pensions, the leading tabloid published articles like “He has balls! Serbs will not forgive him” and “The evil plan of tycoons and the Democratic Party – to drown Vučić in the floods”<sup>267</sup> during the floods, while in a long series of assassination stories, one contained a photo montage of Vučić with a noose around his neck on the front page...

The media mostly reported on Vučić’s unrealistic promises complicitly, without ever following-up on them; it relayed his insults to political dissenters, his fits of rage, tasteless self-praise, threats to pensioners that their cemeteries will be cramped, many announcements of various cataclysms as well as all the spin stories and political games... everything he wanted, and he wanted a lot. When he became the head of the state, Vučić took over the work of all institutions and became not the main, but the only news item for the media.

Interviews are particularly degrading for the profession: journalists fail to oppose him, they allow themselves to be humiliated, and are happy to ask questions about their colleagues from the so-called opposition press. These journalists are rewarded with trips with the president, spending time in exotic locations, and well-paid advisory positions. At the same time, neither the president, nor his media adviser, hesitate to publicly call out journalists by name and try to discredit them and question their honesty, integrity, and values. These attacks are then continued by tabloids,

264 <https://gradsubotica.co.rs/vucic-bez-kape-krenuo-da-spasava-decu>

265 <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/srbija/1209187/heroji-novak-dokovic-i-aleksandar-vucic-spasavali-malisane-iz-smetova>

266 <https://www.info-ks.net/vijesti/regija/40204/video-vucic-iz-smetova-izvlacio-albanskog-djecaka-iz-prizrena>

267 <http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/informer-otkrivamo-pakleni-antivladin-plan-tajkuna-i-opozicionih-politicara-vucica-udaviti-u-poplavama.html?alphabet=l>

regime analysts, and often also by MPs who deal with journalists whose views they don't like at parliamentary sessions.

AND THE PEOPLE: All this led to serious, almost graphically described threats to numerous journalists and media, and, in a huge number of cases, to self-censorship not only among journalists, but also among members of the so-called intellectual elites as well. After ten years of Vučić's rule, the problem is no longer only the media, but also those who should be speaking in the media – their number has been decreasing over time, and the circle has become so narrow, that people will often justifiably say that “the same people keep appearing”. On the other hand, institutions, representatives of the ruling coalition and pro-regime analysts instantly refuse any communication with critically-oriented media, even though laws and the Constitution guarantee equality and prohibit any form of discrimination.

As far as threats and attacks are concerned, Milan Jovanović, a journalist from the Žig info portal, suffered the most severe consequences. In 2018, his house was set on fire by order of the head of Grocka municipality due to his research on the machinations of the authorities in Grocka.<sup>268</sup> In 2021, the Court of Appeal annulled the first-instance verdict against the accused Dragoljub Simonović, returning the case for a retrial.

Meanwhile, journalists protested. Protests were held for Milan Jovanović, because of a vulgar comment of one of Vučić's closest associates, Bratislav Gašić, addressed to a female journalist,<sup>269</sup> because of threats and frequency allocation. In September 2017, after the Vranjska newspaper was shut down, a large group of journalists, media and non-governmental organizations founded the Media Freedom Group, which attracted the attention of the domestic and international public with a series of effective campaigns, but they failed to achieve anything.

<sup>268</sup> <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29654458.html>

<sup>269</sup> <https://nova.rs/vesti/hronika/mrtvi-vojnici-kriminalci-i-novinarke-koje-lako-kleknu-svi-skandal-i-i-propusti-novog-ministra-policije-bate-gasica>

Wanting to cushion the increasingly loud protests of journalists, in May 2022, the government started a series of meetings with representatives of journalist associations – each one ended with new promises and oaths about freedom of speech and the media, but nothing substantial was achieved. The goal of the creators of this event nevertheless achieved something: the Group for Freedom of the Media was broken, journalists clashed with each other, and any unified media front in the near future was rendered meaningless.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The media scene in Serbia was systematically destroyed by the state, which gradually led to the abolition of media freedom.
- There is a relatively small number of critically oriented media and they are under constant economic and political pressure with reduced survival conditions. In an economic sense, the media under the auspices of the United Media corporation are in a better position, but this also does not benefit the normalization of the situation.
- Journalists and editors are increasingly leaving their profession, getting sick and dying young, in their prime – which is tragic in itself, but also for the future of the media. Young people simply will not have anyone to teach them the things that are not taught at university, which is the essence of journalism.
- The quality of media content is constantly decreasing – the media increasingly resemble propaganda magazines, weapons in political battles and means of retaliation and spreading hatred, while looking less and less like the democratic asset that should inform, educate and entertain. According to the media monitoring carried out by the Press Council since 2015, the number of violations



of the Code of Journalists of Serbia has been constantly increasing: for example, in September 2015,<sup>270</sup> 381 cases were recorded in eight daily newspapers, in 2016 there were 530,<sup>271</sup> gradually reaching a total of 856 in 2021.<sup>272</sup> Through the media, public opinion is most directly influenced, violence and nationalism are encouraged, hatred is fueled, which is obvious at all levels of society.

- Disenfranchised, impoverished, instrumentalized and intimidated journalists and media outlets violate the right to the presumption of innocence, the right to privacy, the right to the dignity of the victim, the culture and ethics of public speech, but above all – the obligation of impartial, timely and truthful reporting. Through pressure, hyperproduction of political appearances, spin stories and various other mechanisms, the government of Aleksandar Vučić managed to improve the methods of his predecessors and not only limit the media, but practically destroy it, while maintaining the illusion that it still exists.

270 <https://savetzastampu.rs/lat/izvestaji/rezultati-rada-komisije-za-zalbe-saveta-za-stampu-u-periodu-og-1-jula-do-30-oktobra-2015-godine>

271 <https://savetzastampu.rs/lat/izvestaji/izvestaj-o-rad-u-saveta-za-stampu-za-2016-godinu>

272 <https://savetzastampu.rs/lat/izvestaji/izvestaj-o-rad-u-saveta-za-stampu-u-2021-godini>

# JUDICIARY

## **POLITICAL (AB)USE OF LAW**

The insufficient institutional and real independence of the judiciary, deficient training of judges, uneven workload of courts and judges and leaving of dissatisfied professional staff – are just some of the problems that the Judges' Association of Serbia warned about in 2022. However, this part is already the constant of the Serbian judiciary where, for years now, the changes have only been theoretical and cosmetic, because the influence of politics is increasingly taking on the proportions that will sink both (judiciary) law and justice.

According to the Judges' Association of Serbia, during the ten-year period, the government spent one million euros on judicial proceedings. It is not known, however, how much it has invested in judicial reforms and “reforms”, which have been faltering for decades when it comes to the dependence of the judiciary on politics and rulers, collapsed credibility and integrity. No matter how much the solutions have been sought and found in the constitutional and legal provisions, according to the requirements of the international community, that is, the competent EU bodies, such as the Venice Commission, their implementation and the interpretation of their paragraphs “on a case-by-case basis” are disputable just like the ancient Code of Hammurabi.

Therefore, only if and when high-level corruption cases are handled and judicially and irrevocably ended and judgements are

executed without delay – we can speak about the decisive reinforcement and “restoration” of the third pillar of power, whose foundation has systematically been eroded for a long time.

After the earlier catastrophic reelection of judges and prosecutors (without any lustration), the judiciary was exposed to pressure and, for a decade now, it has been made senseless. As for the rule of law, cultural awareness in the society is not sufficiently developed to be democratic, public and efficient. Thus, it has even happened that the highest judicial authorities join the hunts against judges and prosecutors. Thus, some judges and prosecutors do not do their job and especially shy away from the suppression of high-level corruption and organized crime.<sup>273</sup>

For decades now, the weak points of the domestic judiciary have been its insufficient expertise, efficiency and impartiality, the lack of any reaction to high-level corruption and crime cases, self-censorship, tolerance of pressure and influence peddling, opportunism of judges and prosecutors who, in order to advance their careers, make concessions and give assurance that they agree with the current government, or at least with the top tier of the judiciary, which is unquestionably on the same line with the government. Therefore, citizens are often justifiably unsatisfied, while the judiciary has not grown into the third important branch of government like in a democratic state, both internally and in practice.<sup>274</sup>

The most egregious illustrative “cases” or case files whose judicial trace has been lost in a political labyrinth of influences are, among other things, the demolition of buildings in the Savamala district in Belgrade in the dead of night; Jovanjica 1 and 2 marijuana cultivation cases; arms sales abuses by the Krušik Arms Factory in Valjevo; the unfinished trial of Serbian taycoon Miroslav Mišković...

273 “Neuspeh u borbi sa visokom korupcijom i kriminalom”, Peščanik.net, 30 March 2022.

274 “Pravosuđe sa ugrađenom politikom i istoumljem”, Peščanik.net, 21 September 2022.

## LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

The referendum on amending the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia was called in order to enable changes in the area of the judiciary (Law on Judges, Law on the Organization of Courts, Law on the High Judicial Council, Law on Public Prosecution and Law on the High Prosecutorial Council) and harmonize domestic legislation with European one in the process of Serbia's accession to the EU. The voting in mid-January 2022 was marked by a very low turnout. Only 30.65 percent of those registered in the voter list turned out.

In Belgrade the majority, 54.8 percent, voted “no” to the proposed amendments to the Constitution, while 44.36 percent supported them. To the referendum question – “Are you in favour of conforming the Act on changing the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia?” – a total of 59.71 percent of citizens who turned out for the referendum answered with “yes”, while 39.26 percent voted “no”. However, the referendum was also characterized by the fact that the minimum voter turnout was not previously determined, so that it was sufficient for the majority of those who turned out for the referendum to circle “yes”.<sup>275</sup>

After the initial objections of the Venice Commission (the Council of Europe advisory body on constitutional matters) to the proposed amendments relating to the independence of the election of judges and prosecutors, and after the revision of the text on the basis of its objections, the Commission insisted on the need to reduce the risk of the politicization of the High Judicial Council and the High Prosecutorial Council.

Therefore, it has been favourably assessed that, according to the new provisions of the amendments to the Constitution, the National Assembly of Serbia will no longer appoint judges and prosecutors. Instead, this will fall within the competence of the High Judicial Council and the High Prosecutorial Council. However,

275 “Šta je pokazao referendum o promenama Ustava Srbije”, Radio Slobodna Evropa, 17 January 2022.

in guaranteeing the independence of the judiciary and prosecution, the way in which new members are elected, the competences of the High Judicial Council and the way in which four prominent lawyers out of 11 members of the High Judicial Council and the High Prosecutorial Council are elected and their role remain disputed. The assessment who “prominent lawyers” are and what makes them “prominent”, as well as what criteria should be met and how to ensure the public election of the five-member commission that will select them, is again in the area of politics.

According to the Constitution, prominent lawyers must be trustworthy, have at least 10 years of experience and must not be members of any political party. They will apply for a public competition and the selection will be made by the relevant parliamentary committee, which will propose eight candidates for four seats in the Assembly. However, this raises a series of questions. How the lawyers who apply for a public competition can prove that they are prominent, that they are trustworthy and that they are not members of any political party? What other conditions should be prescribed in order to elect truly outstanding lawyers and trustworthy persons who will not politicize the election of judges. How to coordinate the work and decision-making of the commission in order to be confident that its decision-making will not be political or arbitrary? “Maximum transparency is crucial for everything”, said Dragana Boljević, a member of the working group dealing with the changes to the highest legal act in the area of the judiciary.<sup>276</sup>

She stated that the task of the National Assembly is to elect four prominent lawyers to the High Judicial Council. Among other things, they will, together with the President of the Supreme Court and six other judges, elect and dismiss judges and court presidents. In essence, they will form the judiciary power in Serbia. The Assembly elects prominent lawyers by a two-third majority, which is a huge majority and prescribed by the Constitution only in two other cases – to change the Constitution and remove the President

276 “Posle izbora treba početi sa radom na pravosudnim zakonima”, *Politika*, 21 March 2022.

of the Republic from office. If there is no necessary majority, the five-member commission, composed of the Presidents of the National Assembly, Constitutional and Supreme Courts, Supreme Public Prosecutor and Protector of Citizens, will decide by majority vote. Prominent lawyers must be the persons of integrity, capable of selecting honourable and professional judges, because the state and its citizens need only such judges. It is of common interest to all.<sup>277</sup>

### **THE MINISTER'S DISCRETIONARY RIGHTS, "PRESSURES" FROM NGOS AND ASSOCIATIONS**

The completion and adoption of the set of judicial laws are scheduled to take place until February 2023. In the meantime, the procedure for the adoption of the revised constitutional amendments, whose contents is unknown to the general public and, in large measure, to experts leaves doubt that there is a way to make suggestions and corrections.

"By February 2023, Serbia will obtain five new laws that regulate the position of the judiciary and will, most likely, retain the executive authority's strong influence on the judiciary and persecution. That it will be exactly like this is also shown by the way in which Minister Popović deals with the issue relating to the formation of working groups and drafting of judicial laws. While presenting five draft laws that should regulate the status of the judiciary and prosecution in the future, Justice Minister Maja Popović stated that she was exposed to pressure when it came to the formation of working groups that will draft a set of judicial laws. However, she used her discretionary right to appoint the members of these groups solely on the basis of their expertise, professionalism and integrity. The only truth is that this selection of hers, that is, the names of the working group members, was published by the

277 Ibid.

Ministry about two months after the working group members took office, under pressure from professional associations.

If there was no such pressure, the public would not even know who were chosen by the Minister. That it was the Minister's personal choice was also confirmed by the Bar Association of Serbia which, in its recent announcement, expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that the lawyers who are working group members were not delegated by the Bar Association. The Judicial Research Centre and other professional associations asked the Ministry to obtain a neutral observer status at the meetings of these working groups. Their proposal was rejected without a serious explanation."<sup>278</sup>

Justice Minister Maja Popović stated at the end of September that she was exposed to pressure when it came to the formation of working groups for drafting a set of judicial laws and that she used her discretionary right to appoint members solely on the basis of competence, professionalism and integrity.

"I was exposed to pressure from certain non-governmental organizations and associations to add their leadership representatives to the working groups, but I am proud that the working group members I had chosen produced the excellent draft laws", said Maja Popović at the meeting held on the occasion of the presentation of five draft judicial laws. She added that she did not want these groups to be a training ground for personal promotions and stated that she chose the "representatives of the Association of Judges of Serbia and the Association of Public Prosecutors and Deputy Public Prosecutors of Serbia to be the members of these groups, bearing in mind that they have the greatest number of members and that they are also the members of international organizations. These associations supported constitutional reforms, while others openly criticized them, so that it was absolutely illogical for the representatives of such associations to be working group members."

She added that there was no need to have two very large working groups that would be inefficient. Minister Popović concluded



that she did not regard her discretionary right to choose working group members as the possibility of arbitrariness, and that her goal was “to choose the persons who will make the greatest contribution to the drafting of a set of judicial laws”.<sup>279</sup>

In mid-October, during the presentation of the European Commission’s Report on Serbia, the EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, stated there is constant progress in fighting corruption, but that even stronger efforts are expected in the area of freedom of expression and media strategy implementation.

According to him, Serbia continued to carry out the European judicial reforms: “After the referendum on constitutional reforms in January, Serbia is now working on their implementation. In particular, it should adopt the legislation needed to apply the constitutional reforms in practice.”

He also added: “We recognize the progress made in fighting corruption, but expect stronger efforts when it comes to the freedom of expression and, in particular, the implementation of the media action plan.”<sup>280</sup>

## **POLITICS IN THE COURTROOM: THE HRKALOVIĆ–STEFANOVIĆ CASE**

Consequently, it is only when and if high-level corruption cases are handled and judicially and irrevocably finalized and the execution of court decisions is not delayed, it will be possible to speak about a real separation of powers and an independent judicial system. However, during 2022, Serbia’s reality not only refuted the announced fight against organized crime, but even confirmed the ties between the political, executive and judicial authorities.

279 “Ministarka pravde: Bila sam pod pritiskom NVO i udruženja”, FoNet, 27 September 2022.

280 “Varhelji predstavio Izveštaj EK: Potrebno usklađivanje sa spoljnom politikom EU”, N1, 12 October 2022.

The ties of a criminal clan with the top leadership and its representatives, as well as the destruction of the credibility and competence of the state institutions, prosecution, Ministry of the Interior and courts have been best illustrated by the “case” of a high-ranking official in the government hierarchy – the State Secretary in the Ministry of the Interior, Dijana Hrkaločić, and her immediate superior, the then Minister of Police and Defence Minister until October 2022, Nebojša Stefanović. Lawyers and analysts agree that this case started to open Pandora’s box but, regardless of the proportions of their mutual accusations, the epilogue is uncertain.

At present, it is evident that, despite serious suspicions of being involved in serious crimes, the former Minister of Police and then the head of the Defence Ministry did not lose the ministerial position until the election of the new government (October 2022). Namely, even before the former State Secretary in the Ministry of the Interior and his closest associate “decided to speak” and accused him of a series of criminal acts, including the unlawful wiretapping of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, Stefanović was already compromised.

The media have written for months that his father, who died in the meantime, was involved in arms trade; the Minister was also brought into connection with some members of criminal groups with whom he communicated via protected Sky application, as well as the unlawful demolition of buildings in Hercegovačka Street in the Savamala district by persons in balaclavas, failure of the police to respond to citizens’ calls and practical kidnapping of people in the middle of the night. Nothing happened to him when it was revealed that his doctorate was plagiarized and that his university diploma was also called into question.

After the beginning of the police-judicial proceedings against Dijana Hrkaločić and after her detention and release (the trial over influence peddling is underway; it will be discussed in more detail in continuation), she did not immediately point finger at her superior, Minister Stefanović, due to his ties with mafia groups and the wiretapping of President Vučić, as she later claimed.

So, faced with organized crime accusations by the Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime, Hrkalo $\acute$ vi $\acute$ c stated in an interview with a pro-regime tabloid that Nebojša Stefanovi $\acute$ c, while being the Minister of Police, "gained unauthorized access to the contents of the telephone conversations of Aleksandar Vu $\acute$ vi $\acute$ c and his family".<sup>281</sup> She also stated that he protected the criminal clan of Veljko Belivuk, accused of a series of murders.

The interview of the former State Secretary in the Ministry of the Interior, Dijana Hrkalo $\acute$ vi $\acute$ c, published in a tabloid in which she accused her former boss, Nebojša Stefanovi $\acute$ c, of criminal activity, ties with Veljko Belivuk and his criminal group, wiretapping of the Serbian President and the like, prompted reaction from Stefanovi $\acute$ c himself.

Hrkalo $\acute$ vi $\acute$ c reacted again, while at the same time praising President Vu $\acute$ vi $\acute$ c. Thus, the circle of allegations was again put into motion, while the real problems were put aside. And those problems are the ties of a criminal clan with the state leadership, as well as the involvement of the state and its representatives in the Jovanjica case, that is, the finding of 1.6 tons of marijuana at an organic food farm. Passing the responsibility for the ties of the authorities with criminals to others has only one requirement – the name of Aleksandar Vu $\acute$ vi $\acute$ c must not be tarnished in any way, because they both swear allegiance to him, said NIN journalist Vuk Z. Cviji $\acute$ c.

Cviji $\acute$ c especially points out: "It is terrible that one of the highest government officials, the former Minister of Police, who now holds perhaps a formally important position of the Minister of Defence and is also the Secretary of the National Security Council and head of the Bureau for Coordination of Security Services, has been accused of crime".<sup>282</sup>

The fact that both Dijana Hrkalo $\acute$ vi $\acute$ c and the first accused in the Jovanjica case, Predrag Kolu $\acute$ vija, are defended by the prominent

281 <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3956005/klupko-poceo-da-se-odmotava-dijana-hrkalovic-skroz-otvoreno-o-stefanovicu-prisluskivanju-vucica-belivukovom-klanu-jovanjici>

282 "Kadija te tuži, sudi i brani", [www.portalnovosti.com](http://www.portalnovosti.com), 9 July 2022.

member of the Serbian Progressive Party and Chairman of the Parliamentary Security Council, Vladimir Đukanović, only testifies about the degree of the collapsing of the state and the distraction of attention from the Jovanjica case. The inspector who discovered the entire case, the head of the Anti-Drug Department of the Belgrade Police, Slobodan Milenković, was summoned to the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office for a hearing after Dijana Hrkalović's claim that "the entire case was set up". Cvijić emphasizes that this is also the result of Vladimir Đukanović's pressure.

Milenković was summoned for questioning on a number of occasions, while Nenad Vučković, a member of the Gendarmerie about whom there is an information that he is linked to Veljko Belivuk's clan and was close to the people from the FK Partizan Stadium stands, and who is also mentioned to be Dijana Hrkalović's emotional partner has not yet got a call from the police. Cvijić also notes that no one called the current Minister of Police, Aleksandar Vulin, for questioning "except journalists who asked him what he was doing at Jovanjica while hoeing the garden".<sup>283</sup>

As for Jovanjica, it is evident that Dijana Hrkalović has served for the campaign against the inspector who has discovered the case. Now she has accused him, thus drawing a target on his forehead. On the other side, there is also something that is pointed out by his defence lawyer. Namely, eight months have passed since the submission of the report that he and his deputy are in a life-threatening situation and that their assassination is being planned. However, the relevant institutions in Serbia have not done anything to protect them and enable them to work normally. Those are dangerous things – says Cvijić.<sup>284</sup>

In both cases, which are important for the state, that is, its top leadership, the aforementioned Vladimir Đukanović, who is also a member of the State Prosecutorial Council and the High Judicial Council, appears as a layer, which means that he has the power to decide the fate of judges and prosecutors. Being in such a position.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

Đukanović calls out the judges and prosecutors in the Jovanjica case and those who conduct the court proceedings against Dijana Hrkalović, charged with influence peddling, that is, suspected of influencing her two colleagues to obstruct investigations and violate the law.

## **GENERAL INFLUENCE PEDDLING – CORRUPTION**

Dijana Hrkalović was arrested twice; her detention was ordered due to the risk of escaping and influencing witnesses; in March 2022, she was released to defend herself from freedom, without leaving her place of residence. She was arrested for the first time in connection with the investigation into the murder of karate fighter Vlastimir Milošević in Belgrade in 2017. In the ongoing criminal proceedings, the former State Secretary in the Ministry of the Interior is charged with two criminal offences defined as “influence peddling” over an extended period of time, although such (mis)deeds have been until recently called corruption and everything else covered by this term.

Consequently, Hrkalović is first accused of ordering a chief of police in 2018 not to take action immediately upon request from the judge in charge of the preliminary proceedings at the Higher Court in Belgrade and the relevant prosecutor. It was about the delivery of the automatic processing of Veljko Belivuk’s mobile phone. At that time, he was accused of killing the already mentioned Vlastimir Milošević in Belgrade on 30 January 2017. Simply put, according to the indictment, the former high official of the Ministry of the Interior actually interceded for evidence tampering. Hrkalović was also accused of the unauthorized wiretapping of the telephone of Darko Elez, who was extradited by Serbia to Bosnia and Herzegovina due to a series of crimes committed in that state.

Otherwise, Belivuk was one of the suspects for complicity in the murder of Vlastimir Milošević, but the Appellate Court finally

acquitted him due to the lack of evidence, the prosecutor's unclear appeal allegations and because the first-instance court did not correctly establish the facts. The trial of Veljko Belivuk – nicknamed Velja the Trouble, a member of the notorious Kavač criminal clan and the leader of the FK Partizan fan group, Marko Miljković and other defendants for a series of brutal murders, rape, the possession of weapons and drug trafficking – began on 13 June 2022 after several delays.

Belivuk and his criminal group were accused of five murders, abductions, rape, drug trafficking and the illegal possession of weapons. In the meantime, the group was charged with another two murders and these charges should to be added to the previous ones and the group should be tried at one trial. What the prosecution ignored in the investigation were the ties of Belivuk's group with numerous state institutions: investigative journalists revealed Belivuk's ties with numerous government representatives, including the Secretary-General of the Government, Novak Nedić, the former State Secretary in the Ministry of the Interiors, Dijana Hrkaloović, and a prominent member of the Gendermerie, Nenad Vučković. It was also revealed that one member of this criminal group was even a security guard at the inauguration ceremony of Aleksandar Vučić as the President of the Republic of Serbia. During the war between the two Montenegrin criminal clans, Belivuk's group sided with the "Kavač" clan and clashed with the rival "Škaljar" clan. The victims of his group are mostly the members of the rival groups.<sup>285</sup>

Belivuk and his criminal group are mentioned in this report on the state of the judiciary in Serbia precisely in the context of the entangled ties of criminal groups with government institutions, including Serbia's top political leadership.

"The 'fall' of the former State Secretary in the Ministry of the Interior, Dijana Hrkaloović, has not surprised anyone, but it has turned the Serbian media scene upside down. As part of the

285 "Posle više odlaganja danas počelo suđenje Belivukovoj grupi", Krik, 13 June 2022.

announced fight against organized crime and general preparation of media for a showdown with those who have allegedly threatened Aleksandar Vučić and his family, the girl, who had long been considered the most trusted person of the former Police Minister, Nebojša Stefanović, and his boss Vučić, has been taken into custody. She has been detained for 30 days, a standard measure aimed at preventing her from allegedly influencing witnesses. She is with influence peddling. This offense is of more recent date and has not so far achieved any spectacular results in the Serbian judicial practice. It is rather an act of corruption that is publicly associated with the most serious forms of organized crime”, the KRIK research network reported.

For a long time now, the media, which really engage in journalism, have pointed to the strange relations between Dijana Hrkaloović and the persons being directly involved in organized crime. They have explained that her career advancement is unnatural and that it started in 2014, after Vučić’s showdown with the leading people in the police and the introduction of the principle of subservience into the police in some way. In that context, her arrest resembles one of those events when the regime attempts to come to terms with the actual state of affairs without harming the rating of the first man of that regime, because his entire power lies in that detail.<sup>286</sup>

In April 2022, at the beginning of the trial before the Special Court for Organized Crime, Dijana Hrkaloović pleaded not guilty and stated that she “does not admit committing any of the crimes” mentioned in the indictment.

In the continuation of the trial in September, she also denied the mention of her name in the telephone communication between Veljko Belivuk and Nenad Vučković Vučko, a high-ranking member of the Gendermerie. To the judge’s insistence that she make a statement about the mention of “D” and “Dijana” she “denied” that it was her. The accused also mentioned that in this

286 “Grupni portret sa Dijanom Hrkaloović”, *Vreme*, 21 October 2021.

communication “Minister” and “Nebojša” were also mentioned, alluding to the then Police Minister, Nebojša Stefanović.

Ever since her defence has been taken by lawyer and SNS official Vladimir Đukanović, who is also called a “lawyer for special tasks”, she began to lay the blame on Stefanović.

## THE MYSTERY OF GENERAL AMNESIA

“If my former boss has amnesia, let him know that I don’t have it”, said Hrkaloović in June in an interview for one of the pro-regime tabloids,<sup>287</sup> announced with the headline “Megaexclusive”, whose excerpts were also published by other tabloids close to the government as well as a significant number of other media. She heavily accused her former boss, then Police Minister Nebojša Stefanović, while the public was suggested that she could be the key witness against him.

As she claims, Stefanović personally protected Veljko Belivuk’s clan, fabricated the Jovanjica case together with Police Inspector Slobodan Milenković, known as Mali Senta (Little Senta) and was behind the wiretapping of President Vučić. Dijana Hrkaloović also spoke about the ongoing trial, relations with fan leaders and many other things. As she says, 20 percent of everything written about her are complete lies and nonsense. As for 80 percent, you just need to put the name of her former boss Stefanović and that will be true. According to her, the clan of Veljko Belivuk and Marko Miljković was protected by Nebojša Stefanović himself.<sup>288</sup>

“I want the truth to be heard”, said Dijana Hrkaloović in that interview for “Objektiv”. “As I said, it was like that and not different. This is my priority and most important topic. Consequently, Nebojša Stefanović had insight into the communications of the

287 <https://objektiv.rs/vest/1161319/dijana-hrkaloovic-nebojsa-stefanovic-prisluskivao-vucica-montirao-jovanjicu-i-stitio-belivuka-video>

288 “Progovorila Hrkalovićeva, ključni svedok: Nebojša Stefanović lično štiti Velju Nevolju, namestio Jovanjicu i čitao sve Vučićeve transkripte”, [www.republika.rs](http://www.republika.rs), 18 June 2022.



President and his family, he read the transcripts of the conversations and did nothing. And what is interesting is that it did not happen two or three times, but 658 times. I don't know how this man feels no shame and whether he has face and the sense of shame. The President invented him, Nebojša Stefanović did not exist before Vučić. I don't know why he was doing that, but he was stricken by vanity complex and power", said Hrkaloović.

She added that she thinks that Stefanović was eavesdropping Vučić in collusion with foreign services.<sup>289</sup>

As things stand today and the situation has not changed for years or decades, neither Serbian citizens will learn the whole truth about the cases that occasionally shake the public nor will these cases ever get a real and fair judicial epilogue. Namely, obsolescence, overloading with new "dossiers" hidden in someone's drawers later on, short-term alert in the so-called "fight" against organized crime and their ties with the political and state elite, as well as corruption at all levels in Serbia are not just sporadic scandals, but an established system of methods of their burial.

For mysterious reasons, the Ministers, like Stefanović, retain their position, albeit without portfolio, even after a barrage of public accusations. On the other hand, those who do their job well are made redundant or even tried and punished like Police Inspector Milenković who discovered "Jovanjica".

"Everything about the former State Secretary in the Ministry of the Interior, Dijana Hrkaloović, which is spread by pro-regime tabloids, is meant to hide the obvious fact: she was selected and appointed to a post first in the Security Intelligence Agency and then in the Serbian Ministry of the Interior by Aleksandar Vučić.

She was his choice, so that the question that imposes itself here is whether he is at all capable of making reasonable and responsible decisions if he was wrong in her case. If everything they said about her is true, how could she be 'under the radar' of the man who knows everything? The one who has courageously boasted

289 "Hrkaloović tvrdi: Stefanović je prisluškivao Vučića, a on ga je napravio", nova.rs, 18 June 2022.

since coming to power and even more so before that he will make Serbia a country of honest people, crush crime and corruption, and take from the thieves and give to the poor, is now playing a strange game.”<sup>290</sup>

## **CRIME IN SERBIA – A KNOT YET TO BE UNRAVELED**

In Serbia, it is almost impossible to talk about the development of organized crime and its most serious forms, without, in most cases, connecting it with the political sphere, the top of the state government, that is, the established system of ruling the judiciary and other relevant institutions.

Organized crime is tacitly allowed, often with the support or direct influence of the authorities and people close to them. Examples of this, however, mostly remain on the level of suspicions, indications and guesses, and they are rarely fully disclosed or exposed. It is even more rare to have them proven in court, and – if there is any solid evidence and direct testimony – the crimes are covered up over time, i.e. “buried” by other cases, until the statute of limitations expires and the crimes are forgotten.

At the same time, there are almost no consequences in political circles. Dismissals or resignations of high-ranking state officials, as well as local and lower-ranking officials, despite them being greatly compromised or having connections with obvious and deep-rooted crime, never happen in Serbia, even when they were “firmly promised”.

Most likely due to a “flood” of corruption affairs, influence peddling, uncontrolled political violence against the freedom of expression, including the physical application of force mostly by highly organized groups, certain things were revealed in 2022, but only because people heard or read more about illegal activities.

290 “Grupni portret sa Dijanom Hrkalović”, *Vreme*, 21 January 2021.

Conflicts of interests between strengthened mafia groups and political circles, i.e. powerful individuals, often contributed to this, due to the growing ambitions and appetites of both sides, resulting in quite a few things leaking to the public – starting with large-scale corruption, the establishment of criminal groups of Partizan fans, mainly in charge of inflicting violence and acts of intimidation, to other symbiotic connections between tycoons and other groups that the authorities have been fostering for years. If the perpetrators of serious crimes (those who served as an extended arm of the government) were to be brought before the court, the “mafia omerta” would be violated to some extent. Regime media served to cover up this entanglement between the world of politics and crime, following the interests of powerful political figures. After such “reports”, attempts were made to uncover the background of the crimes, including political liquidations (such as the assassination of Oliver Ivanovic) and other murders.

The diverging ambitions of the puppet masters and the perpetrators resulted in “first-hand” testimonies about demolition raids at night (Savamala), the illegal construction of various buildings, the dubious business operations of foreign investors, and the “involvement” of politically eligible companies in such businesses and transactions. Seemingly “thrown under the bus”, the criminal leadership, which knows a lot, will calmly swim to the first political sanctuary that will take them.

It is clear that as long as the state sponsors corruption and other criminal enterprises and controls the majority of the media, it can hardly be expected that numerous affairs will be judicially and legally unraveled, and that the culprits, the puppet masters – above all, will be uncovered and punished.

## RAMPANT CORRUPTION

Corruption, (defined as the abuse of power for personal or group gain, regardless of whether it is in the public or private sector) and influence peddling (a crime that “consists in receiving a reward or some other benefit in exchange for mediating the execution or non-execution of an official action, where the mediation itself should be achieved through using one’s official or social position, or influence) are more rampant than any other form of criminal activity. They are in fact at the root, so much integrated in the system that they have become a model for the functioning of the state apparatus, from its lowest to its highest echelons and levels.

Serbia ranks 96th out of 180 countries and territories based on corruption research parameters, with an index of 38, recorded for the second year in a row, which is also its lowest rating so far, according to the Global Corruption Perceptions Index 2021, published by Transparency International (TI). Serbia has not recorded any progress and with its 38 points, as in the previous year, it remains at its lowest score since 2012, when comparable data became available. Serbia shares 96th place with five other countries – Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia, Lesotho and Turkey. Along with other Western Balkans countries, it is classified in the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Serbia is no longer considered to have a democratic but a hybrid regime and the government has become notorious for heavily influencing the media, harassing independent critics and holding unfair elections, the TI report states. The lack of transparency seen around major foreign investments is causing widespread concern, as reflected in the recent wave of public protests against a controversial exploration project and planned lithium mining. A nationwide movement forced the president and his ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to amend the referendum law and withdraw laws that would have made it easier for the state to expropriate land.

“The pressures of the European Union for Serbia to suppress corruption did not yield results. It is possible that the initiative of

the US, which sends direct messages and is open to sanctions, will give it a greater impetus, but that remains to be seen,” believes Nemanja Nenadić, program director of Transparency Serbia (TS). According to research by this non-governmental organization, which focuses on the fight against corruption, civil servants face this problem in their everyday lives in the sectors of health, police, inspection and employment.

Nenadić reminds that before coming to power in 2012, the Serbian Progressive Party publicly insisted on the fight against corruption (which was the main reason for its success in the elections), but what it ended up doing is mostly in the realm of passing laws that are not effectively implemented. “It is interesting that today, ten years later, the Serbian Progressive Party and its leader Aleksandar Vučić no longer speak loudly about the fight against corruption and its possible results,” says Nenadić.

The Council of Europe’s Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) called on Serbia to establish a system to prevent corruption among the highest executive officials, including the president, ministers, state secretaries, heads of cabinet, advisors, as well as members of the police, according to the report published on 5 July 2022 by GRECO in the fifth round of the assessment of central government bodies. The report makes 24 recommendations that should help Serbia build a public strategy to prevent corruption, which would explicitly include people in the highest executive positions. The report also notes the central role of the Anti-Corruption Agency and recommends strengthening the role of the Agency by expanding its scope to persons in the highest executive positions, including the President, heads of cabinet, the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, as well as advisers and police officials. In addition, it is recommended that all persons with the highest executive functions disclose ad hoc conflicts of interest, in accordance with the integrity standards and the code of conduct prescribed by the law.

It is also recommended to draw up an appropriate document on behavior for the President of the Republic of Serbia.

Such reports and warnings resulted from continuous and obvious forms of corruption in almost all segments of society, state institutions and private operations.

The largest protests in 2022 were caused by the plans of the mining corporation “Rio Tinto”, the second largest in the world, to open a lithium mine near Loznica. The company’s plans sparked significant backlash by environmental activists, local communities and a considerable part of the population due to concerns about environment deterioration and the harmful consequences of lithium exploitation. Protests against the company “Rio Tinto” and its lithium mining project in the Jadar valley continued with roadblocks, in cities throughout Serbia as well. The increasingly loud public revolt at one point threatened to have political consequences, so the government was forced to react.

Under pressure from the public, the Government of Serbia decided to terminate the cooperation with the international mining company “Rio Tinto”. All administrative acts related to “Rio Tinto”, i.e. (its subsidiary company) “Rio Sava”, all permits, decisions and resolutions were annulled. The Prime Minister of Serbia then announced: “We have fulfilled all the demands of the environmental protesters and put an end to ‘Rio Tinto’ in the Republic of Serbia”.

However, environmental protection activists remained skeptical and distrustful, claiming that “Rio Tinto” “is not giving up on the ‘Jadar’ project and the exploitation of lithium near Loznica”. In support of this, they pointed out several job ads that were posted in Serbia. On the employment site Infostud, an advertisement was published for four positions: Travel Administrator, Information Center Communication Analyst, HR Administrator/Analyst and Senior Advisor Brand and Digital Communication...

The fact that “Rio Tinto” is not done yet is also shown in the statement of President Vučić: “Let me get rid of ‘Rio Tinto’ tomorrow.” Do you want to provide the billion euros we are supposed to pay for what they signed? Or should we find a better way to solve the problem? It is important that there is a moratorium, there are no further activities of ‘Rio Tinto’. We’ll see what happens next.”

Although the operations and entry of the company “Rio Tinto” into Serbia is the latest example of widespread political corruption at the highest level, it is only one of the cases in a series of years of dismantling the system of the state’s democratic functioning. Construction projects awarded to foreign investors without a tender, overpaid infrastructure jobs obtained without a tender, the sale or destruction of public enterprises by appointing party personnel, falsification of diplomas and doctorates by the highest state officials, and dubious privatizations, favoring investors for housing construction through the illegal or legally debatable demolition of existing buildings – these are all clear indicators of the downfall of honest business, democratic and ethical values in Serbia.

In his analysis of the consequences of corruption in Serbia, professor at the Faculty of Economics in Belgrade Dejan Šoškić points out that “corruption in Serbia is an elaborate system from the bottom to the top, which is effectively destroying institutions and the rule of law. According to the calculations of the Fiscal Council, this costs us at least 1.6% of the GDP annually, but behind this percentage is an economic cancer that will comprehensively erode both the economy and society in the long term. It is a malignant tumor leading to stagnation, loss of competitiveness, and an increase in poverty and the country’s debt”.

## **ORGANIZED CRIME AND “INFLUENCE PEDDLING”**

As already mentioned, due to the increased appetite of strengthened criminal groups and their leaders and conflicts of interest with until-recently relevant political patrons, 2021 saw the arrests of high-ranking mafia bosses and (one part of) their accomplices and partners. Regardless of how her trial ends, the case of the arrested Interior Ministry State Secretary, Dijana Hrkaloović, and her claims about the connection between the former Minister of the Interior, Nebojša Stefanović, and the criminal clan of Veljko Belivuk (described in more detail in the “Judiciary” chapter, ed.),



comprehensively testifies to the undoubted “integration” of people from the criminal sphere in state affairs, and vice versa – the participation of state officials in criminal activities.

The state’s sporadic dealings with crime within its “own ranks”, such as the arrest of the former deputy head of the Service for Combating Organized Crime (SBPOK) Goran Papić, or the former state secretary of the Ministry of Interior Dijana Hrkalović, practically speak more about the dealings within the ruling party with its members who “went out of control”. Hrkalović was arrested at the end of October 2021, allegedly on suspicion of removing evidence after the murder of karatist Vlastimir Milošević in January 2017. Her activities in the Ministry of Interior were accompanied by numerous controversies, because of her unusual biography, and above all because of her connection with hooligan groups, and the notorious Veljko Belivuk, known as Velja Nevolja.

As the leader of FC Partizan hooligans, Belivuk controlled the Belgrade underground for years, and members of his hooligan group “Principi” have long been engaged as “security” in Belgrade clubs, and at the same time were in charge of drug dealing and racketeering of businesses and café owners. However, dozens of criminal reports ended up buried in drawers, or were left waiting for their statute of limitations to expire.

It was widely believed that they were under the protection of the very top of the government, and some joint photos of hooligans with Serbian politicians and ministers, hugging during a night out, further confirmed those suspicions. Currently, the criminal group of Velja Nevolja is accused of several brutal murders and mutilations of victims, including “grinding body parts with a meat grinder.” Belivuk was labeled in the media as an alleged member of the Montenegrin “Kavač” criminal clan and as the man who was planning the alleged assassination of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.

In mid-October, the trial of Veljko Belivuk, Marko Miljković and 15 members of their organized criminal gang began at the special department for organized crime of the Higher Court in Belgrade, where the accused denied guilt for seven brutal murders,



kidnappings and other crimes. Belivuk stated that they were being “framed”, that the evidence was fabricated, claiming that his hooligan group had been hired by the government to secure protests and rallies.

“If the prosecutor continues to plant evidence against us and make things up, I will be forced to tell everything we did for the state. I’ll start with Savamala, and then I’ll talk about much more serious crimes,” Belivuk said at the hearing and added: “Zvonko Veselinović, Sale (Aleksandar Stanković – known as Sale Mutavi) and I sent guys to demolish Savamala.”

Veselinović is known to the general public as a businessman who was linked to the assassination of politician Oliver Ivanović. On the other hand, Stanković was killed in 2016, in Belgrade, not far from the Central Prison, and at one time he was Belivuk’s closest associate.

The case of the illegal demolition of several buildings in Hercegovačka Street in the Savamala neighborhood of Belgrade has not been officially resolved even after six years, and several persons, who, on the night of 24–25 April 2016, masked in balaclavas, used excavators to demolish everything that was in the way of the megalomaniacal “Belgrade Waterfront” construction project, have not yet been identified.

## **CONTROVERSIES IN THE “BALKAN ESCOBAR” CASE**

In April 2022, Darko Šarić, known as the “Balkan Escobar”, was arrested in a Belgrade villa on Dedinje, having been accused back in 2010 of smuggling 5.7 tons of cocaine from South America. On this basis, after a marathon trial, Šarić was sentenced at first instance to 15 years in prison, and in October 2022, the Court of Appeal in Belgrade reduced his sentence to 14 years. He spent seven years and nine months in prison since his surrender in 2014, and at the end of 2021, his imprisonment was replaced with a milder measure – house arrest with electronic monitoring.

The re-arrest of Šarić in April 2022 was due to new criminal offenses he was charged with: association in the commission of the criminal offense of illegal production and distribution of narcotic drugs, illegal production, possession, carrying and trafficking of firearms and explosives, causing danger to the public and abuse of official position... The Ministry of Interior (MUP) announced that in addition to Šarić, five other individuals were arrested under suspicion of being members of an organized criminal group. It is stated that the arrests were part of an international campaign coordinated by Europol and Eurojust, in which the police forces of Croatia and Serbia also participated.

“What should worry us is the question why our services failed to discover and do what was done today, on time, in coordination with Europol and Eurojust. It is particularly worrying, from the data available so far, that he used mobile phones and that he is suspected of ordering murders from the building in front of which we are standing (the building of the special department for organized crime of the Higher Court in Belgrade),” said Vuk Cvijić, a journalist of the weekly NIN, emphasizing that “something like that requires serious level of logistics and support”.

Pointing out that there are doubts about the connection between the secret security service and the mafia, Cvijić says that it remains to be seen who will be arrested.

“What is interesting is that the Sky application, it seems, was hacked and not by our services, as in the case of Belivuk. “It is obvious that the initiative came from abroad, that in that application a secret communication was discovered which is proof of what he is accused of,” said Cvijić. He also emphasizes that it is possible that the Belivuk case and the Šarić case are intertwined, because, according to operational data, Belivuk was part of a larger clan that we call the Kavač clan, even though the heads of the clan are citizens of Serbia.

What happened to the case of satellite phones being brought to Darko Šarić, with which, according to Europol, he organized his criminal group and ordered the murder of one of his closest

collaborators, and all this – from within the custody unit of the Higher Court? The Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime ordered an investigation against Šarić and 11 other persons, which has yet to present any results. Who delivered phones with the Sky app to the detained Darko Šarić, through which he allegedly managed international criminal activities and ordered the murder of Milan Milović aka Cigla last year in Ecuador? The Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime says that the pre-investigation procedure is underway in order to determine how the defendant Darko Šarić came into possession of the mobile phones which, there is reasonable suspicion, he used to order the members of his organized criminal group to commit crimes?

Reacting to allegations that he communicated with Darko Šarić, accused of smuggling several tons of cocaine from South America, former Minister of Interior Nebojša Stefanović assessed that it was a “dirty and false campaign” in which, as he said, “there is not an ounce of truth”. “For the umpteenth time, I call on all our competent services and judicial bodies to determine who used this type of communication with criminals and the mafia and what the content of those conversations was. I am convinced that our competent state authorities are more than capable of doing this and that in this way they will discover the real and only truth,” added Stefanović.

For now, this investigation has yet to yield any results, and the deadline for completing the prosecution procedure is one year.

## **THE MURDER OF OLIVER IVANOVIĆ, A SLOW INVESTIGATION**

Oliver Ivanović, the leader of the Kosovo Serbs and head of the Freedom-Democracy-Justice civic initiative, was killed on 16 January 2018, in front of the party premises in North Mitrovica. Six bullets were fired at him from behind. Although the investigation into the assassination of Ivanović was then launched in Kosovo and Serbia, and despite the indications of the perpetrators of this

undoubtedly political murder, even after four years, the perpetrators of the crime have not been found, nor are there any prospects that they will be prosecuted. On the contrary, the truth is being covered up as well as the evidence against the suspects.

In February 2020, the Kosovo Special Prosecutor's Office accused a criminal group, allegedly led by Zvonko Veselinović and Milan Radoičić, of the crime, but the indictment was sent back for retrial in September, and since then the preliminary hearings have been postponed. Veselinović and Radoičić are still on the run from the Kosovo authorities, and there are six more people on the indictment whose trial is not progressing.

Boban Bogdanović, a friend of the murdered criminal Aleksandar Gligorijević Puki, a member of the Veljko Belivuk clan, told KRIK that Oliver Ivanović was killed by Ljubomir Lainović from Novi Sad, and that the order for the murder came from the controversial Kosovo businessman Zvonko Veselinović. Gligorijević told him that Ivanović was killed by Ljubomir Lainović (the son of Novi Sad mobster Branislav Lainović Dugi). The man who organized his arrival in Kosovo and prepared the logistics of Oliver Ivanović's murder is Milan Radoičić. The man who ordered Oliver's murder is Zvonko Veselinović. That's what he told me".

The Serbian Ministry of the Interior invited Boban Bogdanović, after his statement to the KRIK portal, to communicate his findings to the investigative authorities, rather than to the media. On this occasion, the Ministry of the Interior issued a statement: "The Ministry of the Interior notes with regret that Bogdanović did not present any new facts, nor did he confirm any of his allegations with material evidence or witness statements." The statement further adds that Bogdanović's claims "exclusively rely on his alleged conversations with the deceased and refer to the alleged actions of the deceased and are therefore completely unverifiable".

The controversial businessman from the north of Kosovo, Zvonko Veselinović, is still a popular business partner in Serbia. His business is flourishing, despite the fact that he is suspected of the murder of Oliver Ivanović and his name is mentioned in

connection with the demolition in Savamala. Despite a number of testimonies about his cooperation with the clan of Veljko Belivuk and being on the US blacklist, labelled as the leader of a criminal group, Veselinović still has close ties with the authorities in Belgrade. The companies of Zvonko Veselinović and Milan Radoičić continue to receive funds from the government budget, even though they are under international sanctions.

In December of last year, the US published a new list of sanctions, and Veselinović's name was on it. The explanation states that Veselinović is the leader of an organized crime group and one of the most notorious corrupt figures in Kosovo. He is also alleged to have engaged in a large-scale bribery scheme with Kosovo and Serbian security officials, which facilitated the trade of narcotics and weapons between Kosovo and Serbia.

Milan Radoičić, who had previously escaped two arrest attempts by the Kosovo police by fleeing from Kosovo, is also on the US sanctions list and on the Kosovo wanted list (while for Belgrade he is the "first on the front lines" of the Serbs in the north of Kosovo). At the same time, while engaging in politics, Radoičić is growing his businesses in Serbia in the field of construction and hotel management and earning millions in income.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- A prerequisite for a more effective fight against crime is an independent and free judiciary as the third pillar of government, devoid of political control and influence on prosecutors' offices and courts, as the bearers of judicial authority. At the same time, it is necessary to dismantle the often undisputed links between organized crime and the political establishment at all levels, from local administration to state office holders.
- That process, not only in the context of the objections and recommendations from the European Commission's report on Serbia's achievements in the process of European integration, should follow progress in the area of the rule of law and media freedom, respect the principles of the journalistic profession and codes that imply objectivity, impartiality and reporting with the utmost respect for the public interest.
- Unravelling corruption affairs and links of organized crime with holders of public and state functions involves significantly stronger engagement of prosecutors' offices and ministries, especially the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Justice, primarily in the consistent respect for and application of existing laws and regulations.
- At the same time, the legislative power must – in the broadest context of public and social interest – more actively adapt and change existing legal regulations, taking into account the remarks and suggestions of representatives of the professional public, specialized associations and the non-governmental sector, which monitor and propose the improvement of the complete context the rule of law. The legislator has the obligation

to respect the will of the representatives of all citizens in the process of amending and enacting laws, and not only to be guided by the interests of the dominant majority in the parliament.

- At the same time, this implies that state institutions are subject to strong and consistent monitoring, in which the non-governmental sector should have a special role.

**ECONOMY**



## **BIG ENERGY AND FINANCIAL PROBLEMS**

According to the estimate made by the Serbian Statistical Office, after a deceptive growth in the “post-Covid” year 2021, with a high annual growth rate of the gross domestic product of 7.4 percent, Serbia recorded a modest growth rate of its GDP of only 2.3 percent in 2022. It is lower than the rate of economic growth achieved in 2022 in Albania (3.7 percent), Bulgaria (3.9 percent), Bosnia and Herzegovina (4.1 percent), Hungary (4.1 percent), Romania (5.8 percent), Croatia (6 percent) and Slovenia (6.2 percent).

What caused this abrupt slowdown in the pace of economic growth in Serbia? Generally speaking, the “electoral doping” of the Serbian economy during two consecutive years of “early elections” at all levels (in June 2021 and April 2022) abruptly blew off” in the second half of 2022. At the same time, Serbia was hit by a severe drought (agricultural production declined by 8 percent in 2022) and the obviously great negative effects of the Russian Federation’s attack against Ukraine, as well as the accompanying energy disruptions thereafter (which were also intensified by the sanctions imposed by the “collective West” against Russia). It is about both the external effects and the effects caused by the collapse of its electric power industry due to long-unresolved problems in the management of public enterprises and their connection with Russia’s geostrategic interests (EPS and Srbijagas).

In addition, European and global inflation (as the consequence of the previous fight against the “Covid recession” – by providing uncontrolled monetary aid to the population and economy) also fuelled inflationary expectations in Serbia and paralyzed most private development plans, which also caused the decline of construction activity by 11.8 percent. Namely, after the investment growth of 15.9 percent in 2021, its rate fell to zero in 2022, although public, budgetary investments were not stopped.

## **THE ECONOMIC DECADE OF THE RULE OF ALEKSANDAR VUČIĆ AND THE SERBIAN PROGRESSIVE PARTY**

As the year 2020 marked the tenth anniversary of the rule of the coalition led by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) with the dominant leadership of its President Aleksandar Vučić, the question that imposed itself is – whether economic growth during that decade was really much faster than during the previous 12-year rule of the “post-fifth-of-October” governments of the parties comprising the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), which overthrew the Milošević regime in the autumn of 2000.

According to the data provided by Mijat Lakićević,<sup>291</sup> from 2001 until the global crisis in 2008, Serbia achieved economic progress faster than its neighbouring countries. Namely, during that period, it achieved the average economic growth of nearly 6 percent per year; the Balkan countries recorded the average growth of 5 percent, while the Central Eastern European countries (CEE countries) recorded the growth of slightly below 5.5 percent. Since 2008, this picture has changed dramatically: during the period 2008–2014, due to the global crisis, Serbia recorded a decrease in its GDP of about a half percent, while the Balkan average was – 0.2 percent. At the same time, the CEE region achieved minimal growth. During the last three years of this period (2012–2014), when the power

291 *Novi magazin*, 14 January 2017.

was assumed by the SNS in coalition with the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), the whole region began slowly to come out of the crisis and achieve growth, while Serbia, on the contrary, actually stagnates. Its growth is only 0.1 percent, which is significantly below the Balkan average (1.8 percent) and the average of the CEE countries (1.9 percent).

Not much progress was made in 2015, since Serbia recorded a 0.8 percent increase in its GDP. This increase was significantly lower than the Balkan average (2.4 percent) and the average of the CEE countries (2.7 percent). Moreover, in 2016, with its 1.8 percent growth, it was once again at the bottom of the ranking list, since both the Balkans and the CEE region recorded a 2.5 percent growth on the average. Its somewhat faster economic growth, which began in 2017, was soon cut short by the global Covid crisis.

All in all, between 2013 and 2022, that is, during the period that also included the Covid crisis, Serbia recorded the average growth rate of only 2.5 percent, while between 2001 and 2013 its average growth rate was 3.8 percent, although this period also included the 2008 global financial crisis.

At the Fiscal Council of Serbia and among our economists the opinion prevails that the reason for Serbia's insufficient economic growth lies in its low level of investment, which is significantly lower than the desired level of about 25 percent of GDP. Namely, total (private and state) investments in Serbia during the period 2012–2014, when fiscal consolidation began, were at the lower level (18.7 percent of GDP) than in all of Central Eastern Europe. In other words, total investments in Serbia were lower by about 3 percent of GDP than the CEE average. This was primarily due to a very low level of public investment, which was lower than in CEE by more than 2 percent of GDP on the average. The level of private investment was also lower than the CEE average, but the deviation was smaller, “only” one percent of GDP.

At one time, the Fiscal Council of Serbia also warned about the “unacceptably” low level of public investment. Namely, in 2016, the Fiscal Council proposed an increase in public investments from

the planned 3 per cent of GDP (or about 120 billion dinars in 2015) to 3.5 percent of GDP (140 billion). However, not even what was planned was achieved. Instead, public investments remained at the level of about 2.5 percent of GDP (100 billion dinars). What a loss for economic growth! Economist Milojko Arsić illustrated this using the following calculations: if public investments had been at the level of the CEE average during the previous 10 years, total infrastructure investments would have been greater by 4–5 billion euros. This would have enabled, for example, a complete revitalization of railway and road infrastructure. And this would have been a strong incentive to increase private investments and achieve the desired 20 percent share of GDP.

Overall, during the half of the last decade and the rule of the Progressists headed by Aleksandar Vučić, the investments in Serbia amounted to about 750 billion dinars annually and should have been about 1,000 billion dinars. In fact, the annual investments amounting to about 2 billion euros were missing.

The other “big” topic of the discussion about the economic results of the “Progressist decade” revolved around average salaries. The government continuously boasted about a high increase in average salaries and announced that they should reach 700 euros by the end of 2022 (which was almost achieved in January 2023, since the average salary was slightly above 78,000 dinars). It was proudly pointed out that this was twice as much as in 2012. It was forgotten, however, that in the decade after 5 October 2000, the average salary was raised even eight times – from about 45 euros in 2000 (if we take into account the nominal dinar–German mark and German mark–euro exchange rates; the salary was about 90 marks) to 365 euros in 2012.

This debate about the “success” of the DOS or the Progressist government continues to this day. And when Prime Minister Ana Brnabić boasts that the current government has almost doubled Serbia’s GDP, from about 33 billion euros in 2012 to slightly over 60 billion euros in 2022, she “forgets” that this is largely due to global inflation on the one hand and the fixed exchange rate of the dinar

on the other hand. In real terms, the GDP increased by one third. What has actually doubled over the past 10 years is the public debt that rose from 15 to 33 billion euros.

By the way, after 2000 and the write-off of two-thirds of the debt, as support from Europe and the United States for the post-government's fifth-of-October authorities, the public debt rose by only seven billion euros – from eight billion in 2007/2008 to 15 billion in 2012. The largest share of the public debt in GDP – more than 70 percent – was recorded in 2014, 2015 and 2016 (the largest was in 2015 – 75 percent), while the government's fiscal deficit reached its “historical maximum” in 2014 when it amounted to 260 billion dollars or about 2.2–2.3 billion euros.

## **AN ENERGY COLLAPSE ON THE EVE OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE**

If we go back to the year 2022, we must begin our story with the end of 2021 when Serbia experienced an energy collapse at the worst moment when it was almost quite certain that Russian President Vladimir Putin was preparing to invade Ukraine and when, in addition to the buildup of troops on the border, the Russian Federation caused a strong increase in the prices of crude oil exports to Europe, which was accompanied by an increase in crude oil prices on the world market.

Namely, on 12 December 2021, 136,000 consumers in Serbia were left without electricity, while power supply was interrupted in more than 2,200 substations, because six out of eight blocks in the Nikola Tesla Thermal Power Station (TENT) were disabled due to burning “muddy coal”. The blame for this collapse was urgently attributed to the General Director of the Electric Power Company of Serbia (EPS), Milorad Grčić, and not to those who appointed him to this position, although he had no adequate qualifications for it. In fact, the collapse impacted the SNS staffing system, which provided the ruling structures with profitable jobs through EPS partner companies through which money was extracted from

this public company under dubious arrangements. The mentioned collapse was just one in a series of failures that have ruined one of the most important public companies in Serbia.

This has led to the situation that one third of electricity consumption in Serbia had to be covered by very expensive interventional imports. When the Russian Federation attacked Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the problem with expensive electricity imports was immediately accompanied by the problems caused by an increase in the prices of imported natural gas and crude oil.

As published in the MAT Journal (December 2022), for the first ten months of 2022 the negative balance of energy exports and imports (compared to the same period in 2021) increased by 2,403.3 million euros. Consequently, in 2021, the negative balance in the mentioned period was valued at 1,516.9 million euros, while in 2022 the deficit amounted to 3,920.1 million euros. The mentioned external deficit of the energy sector in 2021 accounted for 28.2 per cent of Serbia's total trade deficit, while in 2022 it increased almost twice as much, that is, to 44 per cent of the total deficit.

It is interesting to note that during 2022 electricity imports increased by 153.2 percent, coal and coke imports increased by 163.4 percent and natural gas imports increased by 253.3 per cent in value terms. Finally, oil imports increased by "only" 85.7 percent in value terms.

By providing these data which illustrate the "price shock" that hit Serbia via energy sector from abroad, Ivan Nikolić, the promoter of the MAT Journal, also dispersed to a considerable extent some of the illusions about the importance of Serbia's "energy connection" (mostly via natural gas) with Russia, including Putin's alleged "benefits" given to Serbs in a cousinly manner.

It should also be noted that, with their "price policy" during 2022, the Serbian authorities constantly "mitigated" the Kremlin's inflation impact on the Serbian economy, which will later have to be paid in any way. Putin's "roux" in both our and European inflation was blurred here in various ways for some strange reasons. While some linked a sharp increase in the prices of energy products

exclusively to the sanctions of the “collective West” against Russia (“forgetting” Russia’s war in Ukraine), others exclusively emphasized the bad management of energy companies, and all others increasingly avoided energy-related topics and continued to speak about the “reintegration of Kosovo” and the omnipotence of Russian secret missiles in some new global power distribution.

Someone will say that tying to Russian energy sources was logical twenty or so years ago and that “smarter countries” than Serbia did the same. However, there are more and more data that Putin has been planning “energy blackmailing” and the possible retaliatory blockade of energy raw materials exports from Russia to the West for a long time, which is also evidenced by the sudden purchase of more than a hundred crude oil tankers in 2022 and the lease of European gas storages, so that they remain empty just before the heating season and so on. Perhaps Serbia was “collateral damage” in all this, but the result was the same.

Despite all this, at the end of the winter in 2022, the contract on the gas supply of Srbijagas with the Russian state company Gazprom was renewed in order not to damage “Russia’s positive image” as Serbia’s “eternal friend”. The main advantage of this three-year telephone contract between Putin and Vučić was the extension of the “oil formula” on the basis of which the price of 1 gas imports, whose volume is 2.2 billion cubic metres per year, was calculated. According to Vučić at that time, this means that in the coming winter period, when it is expected that the oil price will be higher than the current price of 120 dollars per barrel, 1,000 cubic metres should cost us between 310 and 408 US dollars (instead of 270 dollars per 1,000 cubic metres at present). It is interesting to note that during the winter 2022–2023, the price of oil fluctuated between 70 and 90 dollars per barrel, while the price of gas for Serbia reached 376 dollars per 1000 cubic metres, which is a favourable price, but not a spectacularly favourable price in European terms. At the beginning of 2022, Aleksandar Vučić publicly estimated that the oil formula would mean that the price for Serbia would be three and, in the winter, ten times lower than the prices



to be paid by other European countries – which is sheer nonsense. At that time, he persistently compared “the stock market price of natural gas” with our newly “contracted price” and estimated that the prices of natural gas would be “3,500 dollars or maybe even 4,000 and 5,000 dollars” for 1,000 cubic metres, thus attributing a fictitious astronomical benefit for Serbia to it. However, Vučić forgot to mention that trading in gas on stock markets is marginal in comparison with trading in gas under long-term contracts with Gazprom.

## **INFLATION AS THE FUNDAMENTAL DETERMINANT OF THE YEAR**

Global insecurity caused by the war in Ukraine and the subsequent high increase in the prices of imported energy products, coupled with a dry year, triggered inflationary expectations in Serbia after a long time. As the extraordinary general elections were announced for April (only slightly more than a year after the previous ones), the Ana Brnabić Government introduced an administrative control of the prices of energy products and certain food products at the beginning of 2022, since it was noticed that inflation was already heating up in the first months of the year.

According to the Serbian Statistical Office, in January 2022, the interannual inflation rate was already 8.2 percent, while in February it rose to 8.8 percent. Some experts believed that by the end of the second quarter the inflation rate would increase above a double-digit level, which turned out to be premature. However, in the opinion of the experts who prepare the well-known MAT Journal, the main reason for the flying start of inflation at the beginning of the year was “temporary” and caused by an abrupt increase in unprocessed food prices (in February, an interannual increase in raw food prices was even 26.3 percent), although its “base component” was reduced. That “base component” went up a little later.

In fact, the start of inflation at the beginning of the year did not yet include a strong increase in the prices of imported electricity,



or fluctuations in oil prices at a high level, higher than 100 dollars per barrel. Fortunately, towards the end of the spring, after large fluctuations, the price of one barrel dropped below 100 dollars thanks to large-scale interventions from the USD strategic reserves and (only partly) political pressures on the OPEC countries.

Due to the election process in 2020, the Serbian Government neither prepared the public for a broad anti-inflationary policy, nor did it do that after the elections, because the process of forming a new government took a long time for other, external reasons. In fact, it was waited in vain for the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

The problem lied in the fact that nobody was able to assess an increase in the prices of imported energy products which usually push the pace of inflation in Serbia. Namely, during the first two months of 2022, Serbia's euro-denominated exports increased by 28 percent (compared to the same period in the previous year), while imports increased by even 51.7 percent, which was an obvious sign that the wave of increases in imported energy prices will bring very serious problems. So, the euro-dominated trade deficit increased to 1,729.9 million euros in the first two months alone or, in other words, increased by 154.6 percent compared to January and February of the previous year. This was too much, even if one takes into account the increases in imported gas and electricity prices and the need to create state reserves due to the war on the Dnieper. Simply put, such a start of the trade deficit at the beginning of the year pointed to the conclusion that, by the end of the year, Serbia might face a huge trade deficit and the need to get into big external debts once again – this time, perhaps, with higher interest rates on the world financial market.

In the second half of 2022, inflation continued to erode the citizens' standard of living and redistribute incomes in its uncontrolled way. In September, the interannual rate of inflation already rose to 14 percent. It was especially disturbing that such a rate was not only caused by an increase in the electricity, gas and water prices, because these prices were actually government-controlled, so that they rose by only 3.8 percent at the annual level.

And such a low price increase, given the “energy crisis” that was raging around the world, and an enormous increase in the prices of energy products on the European market (triggered by Putin’s war against Ukraine and the European sanctions against the Russian Federation) later had to be covered by increased external borrowing by government (that is, by subsidizing energy companies from the government budget).

And what happened with “core inflation?”

If we look at the data presented in the October issue of the MAT Journal, already in August 2022 the semiannual rate of inflation was 13.2 percent. It was especially worrisome that the rise of “core inflation” from 7.5 in July to 7.9 percent in August was observed. This means that there appeared the consequences of the structural problems of the Serbian economy and not only the consequences of the ongoing price relations disturbances. It was also suspected that the central bank was “subsidizing” the government using certain methods of issuing money.

According to the former Governor of the National Bank of Serbia (NBS), Dejan Šoškić, this rise of “core inflation” is dangerous and points to the conclusion that the Serbian central bank is late (“at least 9 months”) with its anti-inflationary measures and raising the reference rate. The NBS raised the base interest rate only at the end of the year, even on ten occasions, so that it eventually reached the 5 percent rate.

For the sake of truth it should be noted that an upswing in inflation was expected after the “Covid crisis” (2020–2021) when all governments in the world issued enormous amounts of money without collateral and “helicoptered” them in order to help their economies and population (the Serbian Government did not lag behind them, because it had to grease the elections). In this context, it is of little consolation for Serbia that in 2022 it was somewhere in the middle of the ranking list of European countries by rate of inflation.

## **A STRONG INCREASE IN EXTERNAL BORROWING**

In 2022, Serbia was forced to start a new cycle of borrowing from abroad and at home. In mid-September, President Vučić and Finance Minister Siniša Mali went to the United Arab Emirates and signed an agreement under which Serbia should receive a loan of one billion US dollars at the interest rate of 3 per cent from UAE leader Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. This was a good news at the time when Belgrade was preparing a rebalance of the government budget for the current year as well as the budget proposal for the following year.

On that occasion, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić said in Abu Dhabi that this is “big support to our budget and finances, it is now easier to breathe”. He emphasized that “if we had to turn to the financial market, the loan would cost us 2.5 times more”, since the loan would have to be repaid at the interest rate of 7.5 percent.

Vučić also gave a brief answer to the key question concerning the new loan – why do we borrow money? According to him, this big loan is taken out “in order to repay old loans from 2010 and 2011, which were taken out at the interest rate of 7.5 per cent”, as well as some other loans taken out at the interest rates of 5 and 6 per cent (this answer was also given in connection with Serbia’s previous foreign loans). Vučić added that “we should insure our finances and if there is something somewhere which we can buy we can always buy it, while at the same time maintaining the debt level below 60 percent of GDP, that is, the Maastricht level” (he also said that when he assumed the office of President it was 79 percent of GDP). In continuation, Vučić said that he also talked about the energy crisis, oil and gas with his host “which is one of the reasons why we secured this kind of support”.

That things were not going particularly well for Serbia is simply shown by the fact that it previously tried to issue bonds amounting to over 300 million euros and coming due in 2028, but less than 7 percent was sold.

After the conclusion of the loan agreement in Abu Dabhi the 2022 government budget was rebalanced. Although it was clear that the rebalancing would be burdened by high inflation and additional expenditures due to Putin's war in Ukraine and the ongoing global energy confusion, it was not rational to expect such a high increase in the legalized deficit – from the planned 3 to 4 percent – because it was assumed that an inflationary ballooning of revenues would mostly cover a high increase in expenditures.

According to the data presented by the Fiscal Council, the budget revenues increased by 1.6 billion euros, but expenditures increased much more, even by 2.3 billion euros, so that the rebalance legalized an increase in the budget deficit from the planned 1.7 billion to 2.4 billion euros.

In this context, the Fiscal Council states that “it is almost unbelievable that the item “Expenditures on the Acquisition of Financial Assets” (for the implementation of public policies) has been increased relative to the original budget by more than 11 times (from 13 to 153 billion dollars); that the acquisition of financial assets on the budget financing account increases 35 times (from 3.8 to 132 billion dinars); that the change of Article 41 enables the government to issue a guarantee to the amount of 102 billion dollars for borrowing (previously it was 24 billion) – without clearly explaining anything to taxpayers”.

This position of the Fiscal Council has suggested the conclusion that the problems with a high increase in the losses of public enterprises operating in the energy sector, an increase in the interest payable on world loans and the worsening of all borrowing terms and conditions have provided room for an abnormal voluntaristic increase in “the accompanying costs”, which are secretly managed by the government elite.

Here we will not delve into the losses of EPS and Srbijagas, cited by the Fiscal Council as one of the most dramatic sources of a strong increase in the government expenditures in 2022. And in this case of budget rebalancing it was also not explained for what exactly the energy sector would be supported with at least 1,5

billion euros. At the same time, the Fiscal Council calculated that, if there were no losses of state-owned enterprises in the energy sector, this year's budget deficit would only amount to about 2 per cent of GDP; instead, this share was almost doubled.

At the end of this survey of Serbia's budget rebalance for 2022 it should be noted that the public debt in that year increased by about three billion euros, which relativizes a slight decrease in its share in the expected GDP of about 60.3 billion euros (the final GDP will be calculated in mid-2003).

Already at the time of the preparations for rebalancing the 2022 and 2023 budgets, it was announced that Serbia asked the mission of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to change the mutual arrangement, from a "guardianship" model (which did not imply the withdrawal of new funds) to a new stand-by arrangement that would imply new loans in the total value of 2.4 billion euros. Such an arrangement was adopted by the IMF in December 2022. This turnabout in the treatment of the IMF's role in Serbia simply means that it found itself once again in a worrisome financial situation.

## **A GENERAL VIEW OF THE WAR AND INFLATION**

As for the economic year 2022 in Serbia, we can dare to say that it was marked by inflation and the consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine, which caused an almost global imbalance on the global energy market. Serbia experienced both of these plagues and paid for them, but still managed to prevent the shortages of goods in stores and ensure a relative energy stability by borrowing heavily at home and from abroad.

Simplistically looking, a slowdown in Serbia's economic growth in 2022 could not be avoided, since it was necessary to rescue the energy sector, while at the same time taking anti-inflationary measures that always slow down the economic cycle.

The necessary anti-inflationary measures of the NBS which, at the end of the year, increased the base reference rate to 5 percent ten times in short intervals in order to slow down inflationary expectations, are probably one of the main reasons for a slowdown in Serbia's economic growth, especially after the April elections. This is probably one of the reasons why industrial production was continuously on the verge of recession during the year. In 2022, the industry recorded a modest increase of about 2 percent, although in October of the same year it was found that it grew by only 0.3 percent at the interannual level, which is closer to the impression that it has actually been stagnating for a long time.

The industry and, even more so, large parts of the citizenry suffered from high inflation last year – in October it jumped to the interannual rate of 15 per cent. And that was mainly achieved by the government's administrative intervention in price suppression (the restrictions of prices of some industrial products, approval of insufficient energy price increases when necessary, etc.). It is interesting to point to two contradictory things. First, statisticians recorded a real 3.1 percent increase in private consumption during the first three quarters. And second, this increase cannot be attributed to a certain "indexation" of pensions and salaries in accordance with the inflationary tendencies, because the Serbian Government actually stretched the main increases in pensions and salaries in the public sector, due to price increases, until the end of 2022. Naturally, investment consumption also declined – by about 2.2 per cent until the end of the third quarter. It is estimated that inflation will also continue to rise in the first quarter of 2023 (allegedly up to 16 percent) and then drop to 11–12 percent during the year.

To this short and incomplete overview of the basic economic indicators for 2022 let us add the incomplete data on foreign trade. According to them, during the first 11 months of 2022, foreign trade amounted to 62,453 billion dollars, which means that it increased by 16 percent in comparison with the same period of the previous year. Exports amounted to 26,120 billion dollars (an increase of 12

percent, compared to the same period in 2021), while imports were valued at 34,460 billion dollars (an increase of 19.1 percent). During this period, the trade deficit amounted to 10,212 billion dollars, thus increasing by 41.8 percent. These results could be included in a small group of positive economic indicators in 2022.

# HUMAN RIGHTS



# **AUTHORITARIANISM CASTING SHADOW OVER HUMAN RIGHTS<sup>292</sup>**

When it comes to respect for human rights, one of the most important indicators is certainly the collapse of democracy during larger or smaller crises: the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise in energy prices, the return of inflation in developed and developing economies, broken supply chains, Russia's criminal war in Ukraine, and climate change are all markers of that global phenomenon. With the fact that the fight against the pandemic (COVID) represented an additional excuse for excessive oversight and discriminatory restrictions. One of the essential characteristics of the ongoing global commotion is the decline of the world order that has been in place until now, and the simultaneous birth of a new world order.

The new, adverse circumstances have had a significant impact on the political elites and their stance towards human rights, which is also clear in the case of Serbia. In the global crises of recent years, human lives and security have been constantly neglected, and in such situations it is marginalized groups that suffer the most.

<sup>292</sup> The part of the Report that refers to human rights is not comprehensive, in the sense of treating all spheres and areas in society where they are not respected or are openly violated. The Helsinki Committee believes that it is now important to shift the focus to key areas and problems arising from the legacy of the 1990s (ethnic states), as well as from traditionalism, conservatism and patriarchalism, which deeply permeate society in Serbia, the victims of which are the most vulnerable social groups (minorities, women and LGBT persons).

Frustration due to the failed transition process has led to the rejection of liberalism, individualism and human rights as an ideology in Serbia. It is considered an imperialistic project of Western civilization that is essentially based in the historical and social experience of the West. As religion gained dominant space in the public and the media, the views of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) significantly influenced the perception of the concept of human rights. In fact, Christian Orthodox theologians do not have a positive attitude towards the modern concept of human rights: according to them, the concept is a product of Western liberal values and individualism. They believe that it is an overemphasized, individualized and absolutized concept, and that it imposes itself on completely different cultural, social and political environments as universal.

After the change of government (Slobodan Milošević's regime) in 2000, Serbia officially opted for membership in the EU and in that sense adopted the normative framework necessary for the respect of human rights, which includes legal regulations and the establishment of mechanisms necessary for their implementation. In addition, the civil sector also gained momentum and became a significant corrective factor and promoter of democratic values. However, all those initial results were annulled following the Serbian Progressive Party's (SNS) rise to power; in fact, it has historical and deep ties to Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. The media space is restrictive, the civil sector is marginalized, and all independent regulatory mechanisms have been made meaningless.

It is paradoxical, however, that despite the fact that the current Prime Minister Ana Brnabić is a woman and a member of the LGBT community, pride parades are held every year with a large police forces present, and society has not changed its attitude towards that community either. That community still faces great pressure and is often exposed to violence. Likewise, the position of women (even though the number of women in parliament is increasing) is in regression. Repatriarchalization is taking place successfully, as confirmed by research conducted among young people; they

strongly support conservative attitudes when it comes to the position of women, as well as the LGBT community. Ethnic distance is also at a very high level, which is contributed to by the narratives of political elites who dehumanize and belittle all minorities and all those who think critically.

Another particular issue is the catastrophic situation in the media: 91 percent of citizens believe that the media do not report objectively and professionally on topics that are of social and political importance to citizens. The right to objective and unbiased information of essential importance for society includes all issues and problems related to respect for human rights. Only those in power and privileged people realize their human rights incredibly quickly, and even receive compensation for “pain suffered”. It is common for pages of news portals on social networks to abound with comments directed against various social groups.

In recent years, the rights of freedom of movement, expression, peaceful assembly, the right to healthcare, and the rights of national minorities have been violated. Media freedom is probably the most threatened, because it is the media that maintain a toxic atmosphere that constantly raises tensions with all neighbors, as well as within society itself.

In its most recent reports, the European Commission criticized the deficiencies of the rule of law, which is why no negotiation chapter within the accession negotiations with the EU was opened during the last two years.

Regulatory bodies and institutions, such as the protector of citizens, also established following democratic changes, have now been “devastated and marginalized”. Their leaders are unrecognizable in public and have no influence. Only the ombudsman for equality functions in certain areas, such as the issues of women’s rights and vulnerable groups in general, primarily the elderly.

During the state of emergency, declared due to the COVID pandemic, from 15 March to 6 May, 2020, “numerous restrictions and derogations from human rights obligations” were in place, as demonstrated by numerous reports of human rights organizations. The

most threatened rights in 2020 were the right to healthcare, freedom of movement and freedom of the media. This was also noted by the initiative for economic and social rights A11, which recorded forced executions by execution officers and evictions from apartments, in which the state “does not provide any kind of alternative solution”.<sup>293</sup>

Serbia has not signed or ratified the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which would enable citizens of Serbia to seek protection before the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in cases when they cannot exercise their rights before domestic courts. This would certainly encourage the improvement of the entire system.

The A11 initiative requested that the authorities adopt the Optional Protocol in order to “raise the level of protection of economic and social rights”.<sup>294</sup> In the region, the Optional Protocol was ratified by Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Slovenia and North Macedonia have signed it and are awaiting its ratification.

If someone decides to seek justice through the system, they quickly give up, because the processes take too long. Proclaimed rights are difficult to realize due to a lack of political will, as well as the devastation of institutions.

293 Cf. The Helsinki Committee’s publication: <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/HB-Br155.pdf>

294 <https://www.a11initiative.org/podneta-inicijativa-za-ratifikaciju-opcionih-protokola-uz-konvenciju-o-pravima-deteta-i-pakt-o-ekonomskim-socijalnim-i-kulturnim-pravima>

## MINORITIES: ABSENCE OF AN INTEGRATIVE POLICY

The position of minorities and their integration into the broader political, economic and cultural community is one of the most important indicators of the democracy of individual societies. It is not sufficient just to see how the elections were conducted, or what their results are, but it is much more important to observe how governments treat minorities. The more minorities are protected, the higher the level of democracy in a society.

According to unofficial estimates, between one and 1.3 million members of national minorities live in Serbia, which is about 13 percent of the total population (the results of the latest census from 2022 have not yet been officially published). National minorities in Serbia are organized within 23 national councils. Only six of them are based outside of Vojvodina, which reflects the multi-ethnic character of this part of the country. According to sociologist Boško Kovačević, the functioning of national councils is not well thought out or modeled well enough within society.<sup>295</sup>

Serbia is far from the standard by which members of minorities are treated as equal citizens. There has been a trend of strengthening ethnocentric politics, strengthening the organized right-wing, racism, violence against minorities, xenophobia, developing mechanisms of indirect discrimination against minorities. The economic crisis should not be ignored either, since it always primarily affects marginalized ethnic groups, migrants and new minorities.

The multi-layered civic identity has been suppressed, and this is exactly what the Ljubljana Guidelines indicate: "To support the integration process, States should adopt policies that aim to create a society in which diversity is respected and everyone, including all members of ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religious groups, contributes to building and maintaining a common and inclusive civic

295 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-nacionalni-saveti/32089432.html>

identity. This is achieved by securing equal opportunities for all to contribute to and benefit from it”.<sup>296</sup>

During the 1990s, the Council of Europe adopted the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the signing of which became a condition for all countries in the region to be admitted to the Council of Europe. The international presence in the region, as well as the adoption of all relevant documents dealing with the issue of minorities, significantly influenced its pacification and stabilization.

Serbia's official commitment is membership in the European Union (EU), which contributed to the adoption of the Constitution that guarantees the rights of national minorities; international treaties were ratified and laws were passed regulating the status of minorities, as have numerous legal acts at the level of local governments. Thus, an extensive catalog of the rights of minority communities was established.

Unfortunately, apart from a declarative will, Serbia does not have a comprehensive strategy for the integration of minorities and is, in essence, completing the creation of an ethnic state by implementing various administrative measures.

It can be concluded that the Government of Serbia maneuvers between the integration of national minorities into political systems and their segregation. Segregational multiculturalism maintains ethnic distance, without achieving greater integration. It is a form of multiculturalism that does not build bridges or cooperation between ethno-cultural groups. Minorities agree to this position, because it still represents progress compared to the previous period.

The Cultural Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2020–2029, adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia in February 2020, shows that the national policy is oriented exclusively towards the development of a monocultural political community, which does not correspond to the multi-ethnic nature of our society. The strategy defines a “Serbian cultural core and a

296 <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/9/96883.pdf>

cultural space that includes all Serbs in the region”, which essentially coincides with the “Serbian World” project, that is, the integration of Serbs into one cultural space, until an opportunity for unification arises. The closedness of the cultural strategy towards ethno-cultural diversity leads to the segregation of all minorities.

When it comes to more numerous and territorially compact minorities such as Hungarians, Albanians and Bosniaks, the government mobilizes them through a stick and carrot approach, but in essence encourages segregation.

### THE ALBANIAN COMMUNITY

The Albanian community in the south of Serbia is one of three minority communities (Bosniaks and Hungarians) that is territorially compact and located along the border (with North Macedonia and Kosovo). All three communities, and particularly Bosniaks and Albanians, have been subjected to various administrative measures (structural discrimination) aimed at reducing their number, but also at preventing demands for territorial autonomy. When it comes to the Albanian community, its position and actual status are closely related to the status of Kosovo and the Serbian community in the north of Kosovo.

In order to reduce the number of Albanians living in the south as much as possible, the state implements the process of the so-called “passivization of residence of Albanians” working abroad, either in Western Europe or in Kosovo. Citizens who live permanently at their addresses are also under attack from “passivization”. That measure is essentially a form of administrative ethnic cleansing. By implementing “passivization” (massive and selective passivization of residence), the status of a citizen of Serbia is lost and, accordingly, all civil rights are lost – voting rights, property rights, health insurance, pensions, employment, etc. Given that citizens are not informed about “passivization”, they usually lose their right to appeal, which has a deadline of eight days.

Albanians show a desire for integration, but there is no political will for that in Belgrade. Even if there is no visible tension

among the citizens, there has been a growing distrust towards institutions – the police, the prosecution and the courts – due to systematic and continuous “passivization”, the impossibility to stop this process and reverse previous actions. Interlocutors of the Helsinki Committee (HC) in the south of Serbia believe that tensions are being caused by the central government (Belgrade), and they have a feeling of helplessness, because ministries can do whatever they want, appointing and replacing people overnight. The hate speech of some government representatives is particularly worrying.

Albanians who are temporarily working abroad do not have the opportunity to invest in these three municipalities, both because of “passivization” and an uncertain legal framework.

Albanians in the south – especially young people – feel isolated, social mobility is low, and everyday life is practically reduced to mere existence due to the impossibility of employment and the absence of social and cultural content. (see the HC’s report “Albanian Minority on Hold”).<sup>297</sup>

## **BOSNIAKS**

Escalation of Serbian nationalism is bringing back fear and uncertainty about the future among Bosniaks. The growth of Islamophobia and constant fixation on Islamic extremism, as well as Belgrade’s unwillingness to prosecute the crimes against Bosniaks carried out during 1990s and provide reparations to the victims, have contributed to Bosniaks’ mistrust and their turning away from official Belgrade. They feel betrayed and marginalized.

Sandžak is still one of the most underdeveloped regions in Serbia, with poor infrastructure, making it unattractive for foreign investors. Young people are leaving because of a high level of unemployment and a lack of prospects. In addition, the high degree of centralization (which is a problem for the whole of Serbia), as well

297 <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/doc/izvestaj%20presevo%20eng.pdf>



as the non-existence of rule of law, prevents local initiatives and significant investments of the Sandžak diaspora in the economy.

The Sandžak issue is hostage to the still unfinished issues in the Balkans, primarily with regard to borders. That is why there are various theories circulating that further stigmatize Sandžak, because it is perceived as a disputed territory that can be the root of new instabilities. Belgrade still manages to prevent significant resistance and open dissatisfaction with the status of Bosniaks and Sandžaks through its manipulations and control over local actors. (See the HC's report "Sandžak – Region of Controlled Tensions".<sup>298</sup>

### HUNGARIANS

Up until the 1990s, Hungarians were the most numerous minority in Vojvodina (around 300,000). It is now estimated that their number in Vojvodina has practically dropped to between 120,000 and 180,000.<sup>299</sup> The birth rate is very low, while emigration, and the associated social mobility, are at an extremely high level. The largest number of Hungarians lives in Vojvodina. As an administrative unit, it had the largest number of minorities and was a model of coexistence and multiculturalism. However, with the breakup of Yugoslavia and the strengthening of ethno-national priorities, it has gradually lost its importance.

All relevant decisions for the Hungarian minority are made in Belgrade or Budapest. For many issues, Novi Sad has become only a display of power, and not a space for political dialogue or protection of the public interest.

The Hungarian minority, through the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (SVM), is in a tight-knit "coalition", with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz on the one hand, and SNS on the other. Relations between Hungary and Serbia have never been better. One should bear in mind the numerous joint financial projects of Hungary and Serbia, as well as the financial aid that

298 <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/doc/izvestaj%20sandzak%20eng.pdf>

299 <https://slobodnarec.rs/2020/11/22/broj-madjara-koji-zive-u-pokrajini-dramaticno-je-smanjen/>

Hungary provides for Vojvodina Hungarians through the *Prosperitati* Foundation, established in 2015 in Vojvodina, and fully controlled by the Union of Vojvodina Hungarians. Thanks to the *Prosperitati* Foundation, several companies were launched, and larger companies were also strengthened. The president of SVM himself has good relations with both ruling parties, from which he makes significant profit.<sup>300</sup>

Several tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people in Serbia (not only Hungarians) received Hungarian citizenship, due to a simplified procedure for this. Since Hungary is a member of the European Union, this paves the way for many people to emigrate to the West, where it is much easier to get a job with Hungarian than with Serbian papers.<sup>301</sup> Regardless of the fact that the Hungarian minority is in the most favorable situation due to the aforementioned reasons, its more significant integration is lacking.

Smaller minorities are under pressure to assimilate. They are corrupted through the financial and personnel resources that their national councils receive.

## ROMA

However, the Roma population should be singled out. Even after the Decade of Roma Inclusion, they remained on the margins of society, not only in Serbia. In order for their issue to move forward, the state should engage in creating an atmosphere of “understanding of the issues of the Roma population”, which would create a social and economic basis for improving the position of the Roma. The Protector of Citizens of the Republic of Serbia Zoran Pašalić announced that the Roma are still the social group that is most marginalized and discriminated against, even though they are the most numerous minority community in Europe.<sup>302</sup>

300 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ma%C4%91arska-vojvodina-izbori-glasanje-orban/29158659.html>

301 Ibid.

302 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/romi-diskriminacija-zastitnik-gradjana->

According to the 2011 census, there were more than 148,000 Roma living in Serbia, and unofficially there were much more, even up to half a million. Statistical data on members of the Roma national minority and, related to them, Egyptians and Ashkalis, are very contradictory due to a low level of declaration in censuses, compared to the actual number of members. Certain non-governmental organizations have carried out research and believe that there are around 500,000 members of the REA (Roma, Egyptian and Ashkali) community in Serbia. In February 2022, the Government adopted the Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma and Roma Women for the period 2022–2030.

Roma women are faced with a high risk of violence in their family and in partner relationships for several reasons, while Roma children are the most vulnerable group “whose entire development goes on in poverty and informal settlements, which carries with it numerous risks”.<sup>303</sup>

There are systemic problems that Roma face every day. Regardless of the achieved results in improving the position of the Roma, the key obstacles to their integration have not been removed. Education, regular health care, combating poverty through facilitated employment – these are still issues that threaten this most numerous minority in Serbia.

## JEWS

Up until the 1990s, about 2,500 Jews lived in Serbia, there are currently about 3,000 (unofficially), even if the census registers a significantly smaller number. Despite the minimal number of Jews, anti-Semitism occurs in waves. The radicalization of society in Serbia and the open activity of numerous extreme right-wing groups (very often with fascist messages) have also led to an increase in anti-Semitism during the last few years. Thus, in 2021, unknown persons wrote anti-Semitic messages and placed anti-Semitic posters

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[srbija/31792648.html](http://srbija/31792648.html)

303 Ibid.

on several buildings in Novi Sad and Belgrade, which is why Jewish leaders filed reports with the Republic Public Prosecutor's Office and the Ministry of the Interior. Anti-Semitic literature is still available in some bookstores and online.

In January 2023, anti-Semitic graffiti and symbols appeared at the Sephardic Jewish cemetery in Belgrade, on the day when the world commemorates the millions of innocent Holocaust victims. The website of the Jewish municipality stated that "according to unofficial information, this is the work of a group of hooligans who, next to swastika drawings, write the initials of the name of their fan group UF – United force".<sup>304</sup>

The Jewish community has long been on the path of quiet assimilation, which is one of the main issues of preserving ethnic and religious affiliation within the Jewish community.

Robert Sabadoš, president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Serbia, points out that anti-Semitism does not manifest itself publicly to an alarming extent. However, as he points out, the Internet has become a gathering place for all anti-Semitic phenomena. Starting from comments, to special websites that deal with or are dedicated to anti-Semitism... It boils down to the fact that, 'if I have a problem, then someone else is to blame' – it's easiest to say that the Jews are to blame, that there is some sort of worldwide Jewish conspiracy, and that everyone is against us.<sup>305</sup>

There have been numerous negotiations with the Serbian authorities to turn the Staro Sajmište and Topovske Šupe camps into a memorial center. The Law on the Staro Sajmište Memorial Center was passed, after which certain strides were made. Construction of the Memorial Complex began in July 2022. Two more museums of the memorial center have been announced, where documents, photographs and evidence of Nazi crimes will be displayed.<sup>306</sup>

304 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/antisemitski-grafiti-jevrejsko-groblje-beograd/32246232.html>

305 <https://www.dw.com/sr/jevreji-u-srbiji-danas-kako-o%C4%8Duvati-identitet/a-52159232>

306 <https://www.dw.com/sr/jevreji-u-srbiji-danas-kako-o%C4%8Duvati->

However, in its appeal to the public, the Center for Holocaust Research and Education expressed its objections related to the very concept of a memorial center. They demanded to stop the devastation of the German pavilion of the camp at Staro Sajmište, as well as to place all locations of historical significance under the protection of the city and the state. At the same time, the request reminds that the significance of Staro Sajmište lies precisely in the fact that it was one of the local Belgrade death camps and concentration camps. Its protection, like the protection of Topovske Šupe, has always needed to be absolute... The German pavilion is an integral part of what the institute calls a “cultural asset” and should have the same valorization and protection status as other parts of the site.<sup>307</sup>

In 2016, Serbia adopted a law by which it undertook to return to the Jewish community the property of its members who have no surviving heirs. During the next 25 years, the state will provide financial support from the budget to the Federation of Jewish Communities of Serbia in the amount of EUR 950,000 per year.<sup>308</sup>

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Smaller minorities that are otherwise at risk of assimilation face continued mistrust. Some websites, traditionalist media and citizens often label small religious groups as ‘sects’, which has a strong negative connotation.

At the round table that considered the analysis of “Representation of National Minorities in Political Institutions: Recommendations for Amending Electoral Legislation” (organized by the Helsinki Committee, 2022), with the participation of all minority communities, it was concluded that it is necessary to change the electoral law in order to enable greater representation of minorities. This includes the regulation of the conditions for the registration

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identitet/a-52159232

307 [https://www.facebook.com/ciechchre/posts/](https://www.facebook.com/ciechchre/posts/pfbid0DkUQQfB2BxfsnAKTcimw1hKK3JP8LMnV62GbL4rxBPvoJvZfaRAqcn1DQs4smTZvl)

[pfbid0DkUQQfB2BxfsnAKTcimw1hKK3JP8LMnV62GbL4rxBPvoJvZfaRAqcn1DQs4smTZvl](https://www.facebook.com/ciechchre/posts/pfbid0DkUQQfB2BxfsnAKTcimw1hKK3JP8LMnV62GbL4rxBPvoJvZfaRAqcn1DQs4smTZvl)

308 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-jevreji-restitucija/28262152.html>

of minority parties, as well as the adoption of solutions that prevent intragroup competition.

## **VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IS ON AN ALARMING RISE**

Numerous studies have shown that women, as the most numerous vulnerable group, face multiple risks: in addition to gender, there is also age and ethnic discrimination. Gender inequality in the labor market appears in various forms, such as segregation when it comes to choosing one's occupation and when choosing employees. Women do not sufficiently participate in public and political life, which particularly applies to women from sensitive social groups. Women make up the majority of employees in the lowest paid activities and most often face discrimination in employment, especially those over 40 or those who have children.

However, women are exposed to all kinds of violence inside and outside the family. Serbia is one of the countries where femicide has reached worrying numbers. Among the crimes that have "found residence" in Serbia, there is also violence against women.

The interview published on 27 September 2022 in the tabloid newspaper *Informer* with Igor Milošević, a repeatedly convicted rapist, took place seven days after he was released from prison and caused fierce public reactions and large protests from citizens.

According to *Informer*, in 1992, when he was only 14 years old, Igor Milošević attacked as many as nine girls in just three days, three of whom he raped, which is why he ended up in a correctional facility. He was released in 2001, but in just one month he committed eight robberies and raped a girl. Because of this, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison, but the court granted him parole and he left the Zabela prison after less than six years, in August 2007. As expected, Milošević immediately went back to committing more robberies and raping more women. He attacked women armed with a knife, robbed them, and dragged one worker of a boutique in Maksima Gorki Street in the center of Belgrade into a

changing room and brutally raped her, holding a knife to her throat the whole time. The very next day, he entered an optician's shop in Vojvode Stepe Street in the Voždovac municipality and stole money, a gold chain and glasses at knifepoint. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison for all these crimes, and on that occasion the judge pointed out that Milošević represents a "danger to society."<sup>309</sup>

Releasing a serial rapist and giving him space in the media is another in a series of dehumanizing and misogynistic practices that we are witnessing in the public space, according to the feminist collective "Women's Solidarity" in their response to the interview with serial rapist Igor Milošević, published by Informer. This not only creates an atmosphere of paralyzing fear, but also shifts the responsibility for protection from potential violence against women, showing that they are continuously betrayed by the system. Their experience is invalidated and questioned, and the survivors most often go through secondary victimization and repeated institutional violence: "Instead of protecting them and serving justice, institutions treat women as equally guilty for the violence they experienced," stated "Women's Solidarity". The statement further notes: "Instead of spreading paralyzing fear, the media has a duty to raise the issue of women's safety and why institutions knowingly let a serial rapist go free."<sup>310</sup>

The "Women's Solidarity" collective called several associations and non-governmental organizations to a protest in front of the Informer newsroom by, stressing that "there should be no room for serial rapists in the public space, media and broadcasts, and that they belong in prison". Protesters blocked a traffic lane on Terazije in the center of Belgrade and demanded legal protection from the state.

The crowd shouted "I don't want to carry a knife and a spray bottle – I want legal protection", "Revolution", "Shut down Informer"

309 The chilling confession of a serial rapist shows that a way must be found to put him under surveillance, [www.telegraf.rs](http://www.telegraf.rs), 27 September 2022.

310 Informer publishes interview with serial rapist, reactions are pouring in: An atmosphere of paralyzing fear is being created, Danas, 28 September 2022.

and “Where are our institutions?”. One of the demands of the protest is “immediate hospitalization of the serial rapist”. The police guarded the entrance to the Informer headquarters, and the crowd threw eggs at the building. In the meantime, the actions of this tabloid have been condemned by several organizations, associations and political parties as well as journalist associations, because its published content once again harasses victims as well as all women who have suffered some form of violence.

A protest due to the interview published by Informer was also held in Novi Sad, and around 200 mostly younger people gathered in the central Freedom Square. They carried banners with the inscriptions “You are not alone”, “Guardians of the family – where are you, hypocrites”, “It’s not Informer, it’s the people”, “Her rape is not your scoop”, and the organizers said that it was “just the beginning”.

Rape is one of the biggest problems in Serbia that is constantly ignored. The participants of the protest told TVN1 that they believe that the final line in the sand was crossed by publishing the interview. The organizers presented three demands: to introduce a mandatory evaluation of potentially dangerous criminals before the end of their prison sentence, to withdraw the interview as well as all content related to it from all platforms, and to publicly apologize to all rape victims and the citizens of Serbia.<sup>311</sup>

Informer’s interview with a serial rapist is the final knockout after thirty years of destroying the media scene in Serbia. The editor-in-chief of the tabloid, Dragan J. Vučićević, could not have guessed that a mass of young girls and women would gather in front of his editorial building, twice so far, to display their anger. And to show that they can no longer endure the general madness, which is presented to them as normal every day. The anger doesn’t just come from a repeat rapist giving an interview, or Informer going about it all wrong: the protest in front of Informer – however

311 Protest in NS due to Informer’s interview: “Her rape is not your scoop.”  
s.n1info.com, 2 October 2022.



small and insignificant it may seem, although it is far from that – became a ray of light in endless darkness.<sup>312</sup>

The Press Council warned that by publishing the confession of a convicted rapist who served a prison sentence, the “Informer” newspaper violated several articles of the Serbian Journalists’ Code of Ethics and, contrary to the principle of media responsibility, humiliated the victims, disturbed the public, and intimidated its readers.<sup>313</sup>

Violence, mobbing and sexual abuse by powerful local figures were disclosed in cases that particularly resonated with the public thanks to the persistence and courage of the victims. The former president of the municipality of Brus, Milutin Jeličić Jutka, was sentenced to three months in prison in the first instance for the crime of illicit sexual activity against his co-worker, secretary Marija Lukić, according to the verdict of the court in Kruševac. Several women, including Marija Lukić, sued Jeličić for sexual harassment at work, but the proceedings were conducted only in her case.

The information about the involvement of Dragan Marković Palma, mayor of Jagodina and MP, and other high-ranking officials in the “case” of pimping out minors, girls and women in several locations in Jagodina, has not reached its judicial epilogue.

The vice-president of the Freedom and Justice Party, Marinika Tepić, disclosed to the public that there were “bunga-bunga” parties in Jagodina, which were attended by the leaders of the government, “15, 16, 17-year-old girls were brought from Belgrade”, and “it was common knowledge that after such parties those girls would stay with the government officials”. Whether the threats or a visit to Jagodina and a sort of “pardon” of President Vučić were effective or not – Palma has traditionally continued to organize trips to Paralia and to appear on television shows. The same ones in which he indirectly threatened his coalition partners, assuring on the

312 Millennial violence against women, Danas Nikola Krstić, 7 October 2022.

313 Protest in front of Informer because of interview, condemnations from journalists’ associations and non-governmental organizations, [www.rts.rs](http://www.rts.rs), 28 September 2022.

small screen that – although he knows a thing or two, “he does not speak badly of those he cooperates with”.<sup>314</sup>

Even if he does in fact know anything, he didn’t reveal it, and instead threats to witnesses ensued, while Dragan Marković Palma acts as a newly elected member of parliament in the coalition between the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS, Ivica Dačić) and United Serbia, the party in which he serves as president.

The list of sexual “predators” over the past two years also included famous people, such as Miroslav Mika Aleksić, owner and teacher of an acting school, accused of sexual abuse (the court proceedings against him are in progress) and actor and opposition politician Branislav Lečić. Actress Danijela Štajnfeld accused Lečić of alleged rape (in 2012), and the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade rejected her criminal complaint, stating in a statement that “there are no grounds for suspecting that the above-mentioned criminal offense was committed, nor any other criminal offense for which the prosecution is undertaken *ex officio*”.

The most common question (with the accompanying prejudice “why did they wait so long”) in the Serbian public is – why do victims of sexual abuse and/or rape often decide to report the assailant after a number of years? Psychotherapist Jelena Veljković reveals that silence in cases of rape is a completely “normal phenomenon” due to the large amount of shock the victim suffers. In addition to trauma, there are a number of other factors that make the victim unable to confide in relatives or the police: because almost as a rule they are in a state of shock, with paralyzed, repressed feelings. Because it was a way of dealing with trauma. Because they fear that no one will believe them. The perpetrators are often very respected members of society, come from notable families, and are popular in society. Because they blame themselves, a huge number of victims of sexual violence carry guilt, the belief that they somehow contributed to the act itself – with their behavior or their personality.<sup>315</sup> They remain silent also because they fear

314 The Palma affair – forgotten with the speed of light, Direktno.rs, 2 July 2021.

315 PSYCHOTHERAPIST EXPLAINS: Here’s why victims remain silent for so long and

the outcome if they speak up. Maybe someone gets hurt. Maybe a family member gets sick, dies, maybe I will hurt a lot of people with my confession. They might disown me. I may bring enormous shame, judgment on myself and others. And because they feel that no one will understand. They perceive their experience as taboo, as shame, horror, and a huge secret. But also because the competent authorities fail to do their job as they should.<sup>316</sup>

There are many stories of women who report violence, harassment, and abuse, only to receive ridicule, sarcastic comments, or at the very least, disinterest and a lack of initiative.

## **INADEQUATE PROTECTION OF THE POLICE AND SYSTEM INSTITUTIONS**

The research “Violence against women and girls in public space” showed that 9.2 percent of respondents experienced rape or attempted rape, which is more than 90 women in a sample of about 1,200 respondents, among whom the most numerous are women aged 40 to 49.

“A staggering 71 percent of women who experienced violence in a public space did not report the violence to the police. Only 12 percent of the respondents reported the violence, and every other woman stated that nothing was done about it,” said Kosana Becker, author of the analysis, which was carried out by the Citizens’ Association “FemPlatz”, the British Embassy and the United Nations for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Serbia (UN Women).<sup>317</sup>

Girls aged 15 to 17 are significantly more numerous among the respondents who are afraid of sexual assault and harassment,

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why they should ALWAYS be listened to, /[www.espreso.co.rs](http://www.espreso.co.rs), 19 January 2021.

316 PSYCHOTHERAPIST EXPLAINS: Here’s why victims remain silent for so long and why they should ALWAYS be listened to, /[www.espreso.co.rs](http://www.espreso.co.rs), 19 January 2021.

317 The result of research on violence against women in Serbia: In 50 percent of cases the victim is not alone, 70 percent of those present do not react, [www.telegraf.rs](http://www.telegraf.rs), 14 June 2022.

according to this study. About 43.2 percent of respondents said they were afraid of attempted rape, and 42.9 percent had a fear of sexual harassment, which is highest among girls, younger women and unmarried women, while women with disabilities are significantly more afraid than women without disabilities, said Becker. In ensuring personal safety, women primarily rely on themselves. The survey, which covered six regions in Serbia (the Belgrade region, Vojvodina, Central, Southern, Eastern and Western Serbia), showed that as many as 76.7 percent of respondents believe that they are responsible for their own safety, because they make sure to behave a certain way. Of the respondents, 32.1 percent of women estimate that they achieve personal safety by rarely going out and spending more time at home.<sup>318</sup>

When it comes to the work of institutions for the protection of women, 42.2 percent of respondents gave a score of one or two for the work of the police, on a scale of one to five, and 52.4 percent gave the same score for the work of local self-government in preventing violence against women in public spaces. Becker said that women rate the response of the police as “inadequate”, and girls aged 15 to 17 gave the lowest rating of the police in terms of their efficiency. The women who participated in this study indicated the need to increase the presence of the police in places where they feel unsafe, and according to the study, this would also contribute to an increase in violence being reported.<sup>319</sup>

## **ABUSE, MURDER AND FEMICIDE**

This year, Serbia was rocked by a series of gruesome cases of violence against women. The targets of drunken and violent husbands and partners are women of all ages, classes and education levels. The abusers did not hesitate to beat their pregnant wives, T.I. from an area near Trgovište was arrested on suspicion of strangling and punching his wife T.J., who was six months pregnant at the time.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

“As per usual, the suspect defended himself in court by stating that he did not beat the woman, or hit her in the stomach, but that he only pushed her,” says the source.<sup>320</sup> Bleak statistics show that more than 20 women were killed through domestic violence, and more than 14,500 women suffered violence inflicted by their partner. Since the beginning of this year (2022), 12 women lost their lives as a result of violence inflicted by an intimate partner.

“Violence happens everywhere, it is omnipresent and it exists both in the center of the capital and in rural areas. This is precisely why it is important to fight this problem together as individuals, not to turn a blind eye when we witness violence, but also institutionally – to continue to work on strengthening the common and coordinated response to violence,” said Zorana Mihajlović, until recently the Deputy Prime Minister and the president of the Coordinating Body for Gender Equality, on the occasion of commemorating the Day of Remembrance for Women Victims of Violence, 18 May.<sup>321</sup>

Doctor Milena Maksimović (35) from Kragujevac was the twelfth woman killed from the beginning of the year until May 2022. She suffered head trauma inflicted by her husband Vladimir (40), and died eight days later in the hospital. The gruesome crime happened in the middle of the night, while Milena was sleeping. The husband pulled out a gun, and then ran away. He was arrested the same day, after barricading himself in a car and threatening to commit suicide.<sup>322</sup>

The Zaječar police arrested a resident D. J. (49) on suspicion of brutally beating his wife K. R. (47) and inflicting her with life-threatening injuries. The attack happened three days before the report, but she did not want to report her violent husband to the

320 A WAVE OF HORRIBLE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHAKES SERBIA: Milena from Kragujevac is the 12th woman killed since the beginning of the year!, [www.kurir.rs](http://www.kurir.rs), 25 May 2022.

321 A WAVE OF HORRIBLE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHAKES SERBIA: Milena from Kragujevac is the 12th woman killed since the beginning of the year!, [www.novativ.rs](http://www.novativ.rs), 26 May 2022.

322 Ibid.

police, and two relatives brought her to the hospital. The husband beat his wife because she was “interfering in his love life”, that is, she was bothered by him having an affair with another woman. The woman was admitted to the hospital in a terrible state, she could barely walk, bent over from pain in her stomach, and it was immediately determined that her spleen had ruptured, luckily her life was saved. Acquaintances of the family say that the woman must not have reported her husband out of fear. She thought the injuries would go away, that’s why she didn’t go to the doctor. She knew that the doctors, as their duty required, would have to inform the police that she had been beaten. She wanted to avoid making her husband even more angry. She almost died because of all that – according to an acquaintance of this unfortunate victim.<sup>323</sup>

The Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Smederevo filed an indictment against two spouses from Smederevska Palanka, A. A. (33) and E. R. (34), on suspicion that they beat their daughter-in-law (17) for months, who then died on 30 December 2021. The Smederevo Prosecutor’s Office confirmed that the defendants are accused of domestic violence in co-perpetration, which resulted in the death of the injured party. The father-in-law and mother-in-law beat the minor daughter-in-law several times. They hit her with their hands and feet, metal pipes, a broom handle and other objects. The defendants are facing a prison sentence of 10 to 20 years.<sup>324</sup>

At the beginning of March this year, the FemPlatz Citizens’ Association and more than 60 partner organizations, networks and individuals demanded an immediate response and prevention of femicide in Serbia. It is the most serious form of violence against women, i.e. the murder of a woman, motivated by hatred and a sense of superiority of a man, who believes he has the right to take a woman’s life. Femicide is therefore a crime that discriminates.

323 A WAVE OF HORRIBLE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHAKES SERBIA: Milena from Kragujevac is the 12th woman killed since the beginning of the year!, [www.novativ.rs](http://www.novativ.rs), 26 May 2022.

324 Preventing femicide in Serbia – emergency reaction, [https:// ck13.org](https://ck13.org). 30 March 2022.

According to media reports, a woman was killed by a neighbor in Zaječar after several years of constant harassment, which she reported to the authorities several times. A woman from Vranje died in hospital after her husband stabbed her, and two women from Belgrade and Smederevska Palanka were killed by their sons. In the same period, the media reported on at least seven attempts of femicide and violence against women, according to the FemPlatz Citizens' Association.<sup>325</sup>

While all this is happening, the institutions responsible for preventing and fighting violence against women do not react or address the alarmed public. It is particularly worrying that in the mentioned cases, even after reporting the violence, the competent institutions did not ensure the protection and safety of these women. A large number of murders of women were not prevented due to the absence of a timely and effective reaction of the institutions of the system, from the untimely response to reports of violence, through minimizing the danger and not considering the risk of endangering the victim's safety.<sup>326</sup>

Despite the numerous recommendations of international human rights bodies and women's non-governmental organizations, there is still no publicly available statistical data on the prevalence of femicide in Serbia. On the other hand, using currently available protection mechanisms in an adequate and consistent manner would significantly improve the protection of women from violence and prevent a large number of femicides.<sup>327</sup>

The absence of effective femicide prevention, as the most extreme manifestation of violence, sends a message to women every day that their lives are less valuable. We demand from the institutions responsible for the prevention and protection of women from violence to urgently react to the latest cases of femicide, investigate and explain to the public possible omissions and the lack of effective reactions to previous reports of violence, and specify

325 Ibid.

326 Ibid.

327 Ibid.

precise steps for the prevention of further femicide. The state system needs a better understanding of the risk factors for the murder of women, and they can differ when it comes to a partner relationship, a younger or older couple, as well as when it comes to other familial relationships, most often the son-mother relationship. This knowledge could help in decision-making regarding institutional responses, as well as in the training of professionals and informing the public, including potential victims.<sup>328</sup>

How can the promotion of violence in society be limited when all media and all spaces, including the highest state levels, are full of verbal and even physical violence? The media, including social medial platforms, contribute significantly to this, along with the absence of age-appropriate systematic positive information and education. The responsibility for promoting social values, norms and rules, for their application and effects, certainly rests with the state and the institutions of the system, and in this respect the situation has not been good for a long time.<sup>329</sup>

## **MEMBERS OF LGBT COMMUNITY FACE THE GREATEST DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIAL DISTANCE**

Regardless of the progress in the field of legislation and the many years of successfully organizing pride walks in Belgrade (with police supervision), violence is one of the main problems faced by members of the LGBT community.

Discrimination against LGBT people occurs in all spheres of social life, formally or informally. Institutional discrimination (within healthcare, education, administration) is widespread, as is structural discrimination, which best reflects the social position of the LGBT population in Serbian society. The roots of structural discrimination can be found in the type of social organization,

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.



political culture, in its religious and historical heritage, and in the educational structure of the population.<sup>330</sup>

The pressure faced by the LGBT population is so great that young gay men are reluctant to get into a relationship with an outed person in order to avoid stigmatization. Even parents often lack understanding, because they kick their children out of their house, and more and more young people, who are members of the gay population, end up homeless.<sup>331</sup>

The negative perception of LGBT people is also influenced by numerous discriminatory statements by state officials, who express their personal opinion about homosexuality, imbued with prejudices and stereotypes associated with this minority group. Such statements are especially present in the media ahead of the Pride Parade. The most prominent in this regard is Ivica Dačić, who, among other things, once stated that the LGBT population is equal with other citizens, but that no one can tell him that it is normal “when it is not”. Because, “if it’s normal, why are we exceptions? Homosexuals have the same rights, but they cannot make the rules of behavior. I have no hatred towards them, I just can’t accept that it’s normal because it’s not natural. If it is a minority and an exception, then they should also take care not to offend the feelings of the majority”.<sup>332</sup>

*The Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination*, among other things, prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. However, the LGBT community is still the most exposed to discrimination. According to the United Nations Development Program’s (UNDP) report for 2017, the LGBT population is one of the most discriminated groups in Serbia. The Report states that “Citizens of Serbia have the greatest social distance in relation to LGBT

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330 Research conducted by Maja Isaković, *The issue of discrimination against the LGBT population in Serbia*, Yearbook of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, Book XLI-2 (2016).

331 “Living in violence that is a given”, NIN, 27 May 2021.

332 <https://mondo.rs/Info/Drustvo/a676582/Labris-Dacic-diskriminisao-LGBT-osobe.html>

persons, and an equal distance exists towards LGBT persons within the family”.<sup>333</sup>

The LGBT community in Serbia is still waiting to obtain its rights in legal form. In 2010, the first draft of the law on registered same-sex unions in the country was prepared. And the closest to passing that law was in 2021, when the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights initiated the procedure for the adoption of the law. However, the procedure was brought back to square one. The Serbian Orthodox Church, together with other religious communities, influenced the authorities in Serbia to withdraw the proposal of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination from parliamentary procedure in 2009. In his 2012 Easter message, the Metropolitan of Montenegro, Amfilohije Radović, opposed the idea of legalizing same-sex marriage, labeling it as a “suicidal and self-destructive urge”.<sup>334</sup>

For the majority of gay people in Serbia, parenthood is unattainable – unmarried women cannot undergo artificial insemination, surrogacy is prohibited, and it is almost impossible for those who are not married to adopt a child. However, the fact that Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić had a child with her partner Milica Đurđić caused reactions from the LGBT community in Serbia. Jovanka Todorović from the Geten Center for the Promotion of LGBT Rights said on the occasion: “It is important to congratulate the Prime Minister on the birth of a child. But this, unfortunately, is just another example in which we see that parenthood is a right that not everyone has.”<sup>335</sup>

A CeSID survey conducted on a sample of 1,060 respondents in the territory of Serbia without Kosovo in the period from 10 to 20 May 2021, shows that one in two respondents (50 percent) has a negative attitude towards the LGBTI population, and less than a fifth (18 percent) has a positive attitude, while one in three respondents is neutral on this issue. An above-average positive attitude towards

333 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-49532295>

334 [https://www.academia.edu/18120156/Duhovna\\_legitimizacija\\_ekstremne\\_desnice](https://www.academia.edu/18120156/Duhovna_legitimizacija_ekstremne_desnice)

335 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-49532295>

people of the opposite sexual orientation is expressed by persons of the female gender, with a high/higher level of education, between the ages of 18 and 39, living in urban areas.<sup>336</sup>

Compared to earlier research, conducted in 2008 and 2010, a significantly higher percentage of respondents who are ready for different levels of interaction with members of the LGBT population has been recorded. Progress ranges from 6 percent when it comes to family ties, up to 29 percent when it comes to sharing the same workspace with a person who is a member of the LGBTI community.<sup>337</sup>

The Serbian Orthodox Church and extreme right-wing groups have the most negative attitude towards the LGBT population. Historian Vladimir Veljković, who deals with religious issues, points out that “the current government and the church share, in fact, the same ideology of Serbianness, of Serbian Orthodoxy”.<sup>338</sup> The Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) Porfirije believes that LGBTQ+ ideology is unacceptable for Orthodox Christians, stressing that they “they cannot accept the imposition of new social norms that were not propagated by God”.<sup>339</sup>

On the occasion of Europride being held in Belgrade (October 2022), the Bishop Nikanor of Banat of the Serbian Orthodox Church called on people to stand up against the organization of Europride: “We will all stand up against it. I’m the first to stand up at this moment, I’m already standing. I curse all those who organize and who will participate in such a thing. I can do that much. If I had a weapon, I would use it. And I would use that force only if I had it, but I don’t. And probably no one will give it to me if I asked

336 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/istrazivanje-svega-sedam-odsto-gradjana-srbije-vidi-lgbti-osobe-kao-ugrozene>

337 Ibid.

338 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/europride-srbija-spc-rusija-lgbt/32010889.html>

339 <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/porfirije-za-nas-pravoslavne-hriscane-neprihvatljiva-je-lgbt-zajednica>

for it now, when they hear that I would go out with a weapon. And I would...<sup>340</sup>

After this scandalous statement, the Government of Serbia, starting from the political situation in the region, as it pointed out, announced that, “at this moment, there conditions are not met for the EuroPride 2022 event to go ahead safely, especially considering the fact that certain extremists groups could use and abuse this event and Serbia’s will to organize it, in order to further increase tensions and bring Serbia into instability”.<sup>341</sup>

The SPC supported the ban, stating that “holding a ‘parade’ in the service of promoting LGBT ideology would not be beneficial to anyone, but would cause additional tensions and new divisions”.<sup>342</sup>

However, this ban also has an important international dimension, as it is primarily the result of pressure from Moscow and the Russian Orthodox Church. It is certainly one of Russia’s attempts to raise tensions in the region due to the sanctions imposed on it in relation to its aggression against Ukraine. The deputy head of the Russian Orthodox Church Synod Press Department, Vakhtang Kipshidze, briefly commented on Europride in Belgrade: “Manifestations against LGBT ideology in Serbia show that worldviews are being imposed against the will of a significant number of traditional Christians. The rejection of this ideology is present in all countries Europe. The political mainstream deliberately marginalizes this (anti-LGBT) movement”.<sup>343</sup>

In addition to the “conditional approval” of the parade, a counter-event was also organized by sending extreme right-wing and radical representatives of the Orthodox Church, in order to vividly manifest anti-Western politics with their slogans. The attack on

340 <https://moravainfo.rs/burne-reakcije-na-besedu-vladike-nikanora-u-kojoj-priziva-nasilje-nad-lgbt-populacijom>

341 <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/oglasila-se-vlada-srbije-o-odrzavanju-paradi-ponosa>

342 <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/4934783/spc-pozdravila-otkazivanje-evroprajda.html>

343 <https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20220816/ruska-crkva-se-oglasila-povodom-evropajda-u-beogradu-1141165624.html>

EuroPride was obviously only the first step of the Serbian Orthodox Church towards consolidating the church's values.

There was also pressure from the USA and the EU, so the Parade was approved, but not in the way that was planned. Only a symbolic short walk in the Tašmajdan park was allowed, accompanied by the police. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken publicly requested that the pride parade be held, and as many as 145 members of the European Parliament sent a letter to Belgrade with the same request. US Ambassador Christopher Hill, one of the participants of EuroPride, which would not have been possible without his intervention, said that "it is important to be at EuroPride, because "it must be understood that we are all together, we are all brothers and sisters and we are all God's children. I was always optimistic that this event would take place".<sup>344</sup>

344 <https://standard.rs/2022/09/17/odrzana-setnja-pripadnika-evroprajda-hil-uvek-sam-bio-optimista>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since its establishment, the Helsinki Committee has been monitoring the position of minorities and according to recent research, primarily in the south of Serbia and in Sandžak, it believes that it is necessary to note the deterioration of the situation and the lack of political will to address minority issues in the right way.

For the implementation of minority policy, apart from the normative part, the most important thing is the efficient functioning of institutions (judiciary, independent bodies). Likewise, political will is extremely important, especially when one considers the legacy of the 1990s, which still burdens relations in the region, but also within Serbia. The consequences of the wars and the establishment of nation-states left lasting consequences on the position of all minorities in the region, especially those newly created by the breakup of Yugoslavia.

In order to overcome exclusively ethnic identities, it is necessary to promote national identities and diversity within the activities of minority policy institutions. An active relationship between state institutions, civil society and international organizations, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, is also necessary.

Decentralization and strengthening of local and regional self-government, both *de facto* and *de jure*, would increase the opportunities for minorities to exercise their rights. Institutions such as the general ombudsman (i.e. the protector of citizens' rights), parliamentary interpellation, parliamentary inquiry committees, oversight of the police and army, parliamentary working bodies, new electoral laws and territorial division into electoral units, laws on education and schooling, official language and languages of minorities, media and information, state symbols and many other issues are related to the position and life of minorities and the realization of their rights.

The efficiency of the work of national councils of national minorities and should be increased, and the cultural autonomy and

social and political participation of national minorities should be fully realized. A policy of social integration of all minorities should be designed and adopted:

- students and teachers should be motivated to inform themselves about the culture and history of other national minorities in order to promote an intercultural approach;
- contacts and cooperation between students and teachers of different nationalities in mixed schools should be stimulated with joint events, competitions and school activities that develop mutual cooperation and togetherness.

Laws on the prevention of domestic violence prescribe a number of mechanisms, but they have not reduced domestic violence.

The Helsinki Committee supports the initiative of non-governmental organizations to establish “Femicide Watch”, which should have all the necessary capacities to stop violence against women.

In order to solve the problem in an adequate way, a change in the social climate is also needed, where victims of violence would not be stigmatized and subsequently victimized;

Effective coordination between the police, the prosecution and the courts should be established; professional capacities in the social protection system should be strengthened.

In order to improve the position of the LGBT population in society, the existence of satisfactory legal acts and formal legal equality alone is not enough. Structural discrimination is the biggest issue, which requires deeper structural changes at the level of everyday life.

Structural changes are possible in the sphere of education, which should affirm a positive attitude towards the LGBT population and overall awareness raising towards diversity.

# ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS: UNFAIRNESS AND DISCRIMINATION

At the end of February 2002, the UN Committee for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, headquartered in Geneva, concluded its consideration of the Third Periodic Report submitted by Serbia. The representatives of the delegation of the Republic of Serbia led by Gordana Čomić, the then Minister for Human Rights and Social Dialogue, were asked numerous questions regarding its deficiencies and/or clearly perceived shortcomings, both in legislation and even more so in the implementation of systemic solutions to which the state is bound by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In addition to the State Report, the Committee particularly had in mind the Alternative Report on the situation in these fields, which was submitted by a group of non-governmental organizations. After considering the response by the Serbian delegation, the UN Committee concluded that the social and economic rights of Serbian citizens are significantly threatened, noting that the austerity measures taken by the state in response to the financial crisis after 2014 had the greatest negative impact on citizens. The country was also sent a series of recommendations requiring Serbia to invest much more in the economic and social rights of its citizens, including the right to medical treatment, education, jobs, social care and housing.

It is quite clear to Serbian citizens, who are generally unfamiliar with the work of the mentioned UN Committee, even without the report, that their economic and social rights are threatened more than ever and that the system, which should guarantee a dignified standard of living, access to health services, education, adequate housing, social care and the like, has collapsed to such an



extent that they no longer have anyone to complain to. The basic principles – equality and non-discrimination – are grossly violated at every opportunity to such an extent that the entire concept of human rights of Serbian citizens is called into question and perceived as non-existent. Instead of creating an environment in which the state will act actively and ensure that the rights of its citizens (the so-called “positive rights”), Serbian citizens are forced to knock on the doors of the institutions of the system that has failed them.

According to the analyses made by international organizations and experts, it is quite clear that the economic recovery from the global recession, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and additionally slowed down due to the Ukrainian crisis, will be difficult and will have particularly severe consequences for the countries that are economically unstable (many of which are also politically unstable). A continuous increase in food and energy prices has already seriously affected the entire Serbian population, while the most vulnerable and, as a rule, poorest groups have been brought to the brink of existence.

On the basis of their own research, the UN High Commissariat for Refugees (UNHCR), UN Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) announced at the end of January 2023 that the Government of the Republic of Serbia will receive support for empowering the national social protection framework and the policy of responding to crisis situations, as well as for increasing the budgetary resources for the protection of the most vulnerable population groups – families with children and elderly people.

According to the poverty projections for these categories, the UN agencies state that the child poverty data for 2022 will show an increase from 10.6% to 13.8%, which point to an additional 27,987 children living below the absolute poverty line. The most vulnerable are children living in large families and children in rural households and Roma settlements.<sup>345</sup>

345 [https://serbia.unfpa.org/sr/news/ugro%C5%BEena-doma%C4%87instva-u-](https://serbia.unfpa.org/sr/news/ugro%C5%BEena-doma%C4%87instva-u)

The poverty projections for elderly people show that those living in rural and remote regions have the greatest difficulty meeting their needs for food, hygiene products and medicines. The research results show that in 2022 the absolute poverty rate increased to 12.3% for the entire population. A similar trend was recorded in the case of the population over 65: the absolute poverty rate amounts to 10.3%, which is an increase compared to 2020, when it was 6.8%.

Refugees, asylum seekers, persons at risk of statelessness and internally displaced persons, those living in rural or remote regions, or with a minimum income are also extremely vulnerable and will hardly bear the burden of the crisis unless the government adopts comprehensive social policy measures and an adequate budget that will enable their protection.

Although the mentioned opinions of the UN Committees and Agencies clearly indicate that the economic and social rights in Serbia will pose a serious challenge, not only in the current year, but also in the coming years, there are many reasons that make these fears even more convincing.

## DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

Serbia is a signatory to the important binding international documents that guarantee equality between men and women and prohibit gender discrimination (the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention, United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms Discrimination Against Women, European Social Charter, European Convention on Human Rights, United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, etc.) The equality of women and men is also guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, which prohibits direct and indirect discrimination, including discrimination based on sex, gender identity, sexual orientation,

marital and family status. The equal opportunities policy implies Serbia's official determination and obligation that it will adhere to all planning documents and laws. Thus, in 2021, Serbia adopted a new Law on Gender Equality, the Law on Amending the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, the Strategy for Preventing and Combatting Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence for the Period 2021–2025 and a new National Strategy for Gender Equality for the Period 2021–2030.

However, despite the laws and policies promoting gender equality, women are still underrepresented in decision making in all spheres of social, economic and political life in Serbia. The World Bank's analysis from 2021 shows that women are still less likely than men to be engaged in paid work – with a gender gap in employment of 15 percentage points. Also, men on average earn about 11 percent more than women.<sup>346</sup>

The unemployment rate of young women in Serbia is higher than that of young men, and sexual harassment of young women in the workplace also poses a big problem. Young Roma women have three times less chance of getting a job than young Roma men, and even less than young women in the general population. Young women opt for self-employment and entrepreneurship almost twice less than their male peers.<sup>347</sup>

The employment of women older than 45 is recording a continuous decline, but this is not the case with men. Almost half a million women aged between 45 and 64 are unemployed or inactive in searching for a job. Women over 55 are twice as inactive on the labour market as men of the same age.<sup>348</sup> Although there are many women working in family businesses (run by their husbands), they

346 World Bank/WIIW (2021), SEE Jobs Gateway (database), World Bank Group/Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, Washington, DC/Vienna, <https://wiiw.ac.at/see-jobs-gateway-database-ds-5.html>

347 <https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/the-vulnerability-of-women-in-the-labour-market-in-serbia/?lang=en>

348 <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2021/Pdf/G20215671.pdf>

are mostly invisible in terms of social rights, because they are not treated as employed.

Increasing the otherwise limited supply of childcare facilities and improving the options for parental leave would be important steps in creating the conditions for an equal participation of men and women in the labour market. The responsibility for family care is given as the primary reason for the inactivity of about 7% of women on the labour market.<sup>349</sup> Fathers still do not have an equal right to parental leave. Women in Serbia spend twice as much and even more time than men on housework. This is certainly contributed by the still existing patriarchal consciousness, which implies that men work and women take care of their family. Apart from the awareness raising campaign, the state should also better regulate the other mentioned issues, as well as financial support for families with children which, according to the Serbian Government itself, could cover almost twice the population, should it be precisely channelled.<sup>350</sup>

## ROMA, THE MOST VULNERABLE GROUP

Roma, as a category that has always been vulnerable, are still not included in the necessary state intervention, both in terms of employment and education. The goals set by the employment strategy are to integrate a greater number of Roma men and women into the private and public sectors, combat the discrimination faced on the labour market and formalize the work of the Roma being currently engaged in the informal economy by integrating

349 UNECE (2021), *Childcare, Women's Employment and COVID-10 Impacts: The Case of Serbia*, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe/UN Women, Geneva, Switzerland/New York, [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Childcare\\_WE\\_Covid-19\\_%20Serbia.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Childcare_WE_Covid-19_%20Serbia.pdf)

350 Government of the Republic of Serbia (2018), *Third National Report on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction in the Republic of Serbia*, Government of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, [https://media.srbija.gov.rs/medeng/documents/third-national-report-on-social-inclusion-and-poverty-reduction2014-17\\_eng.pdf](https://media.srbija.gov.rs/medeng/documents/third-national-report-on-social-inclusion-and-poverty-reduction2014-17_eng.pdf)

individual collectors of secondary raw materials into the waste management system at the level of local self-governments. So far, however, concrete measures have not produced significant results, while after the expiration of the previous action plan (2018), the new Action Plan for the Period 2021–2023 (for the implementation of the Employment Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2021–2026) was adopted only in 2021. Roma are still on the very margins of the labour market.

The fact that the education level of this group is very low and that Roma parents are reluctant to enroll their children in schools is not a justification for this decade-long problem. Namely, although primary education is compulsory in Serbia, nothing has been done to adequately prepare children from Roma families for pre-school and primary education and prevent them from dropping out of school. Affirmative action measures for Roma students have been adopted, but their number is very small. Scholarships for Roma primary school-aged children already could eventually lead to a greater number of highly educated Roma. Greater employment opportunities with a high school diploma would also improve the position of this population.

In addition, the provision of support to other vulnerable students (such as children from poor families, children from rural regions and the like) in the early stages of education could improve their educational outcomes and increase their opportunities for integration into the labour market. The education of youth who are placed in social welfare institutions, serve a certain measure or are sentenced to juvenile prison, does not have sufficient coverage. Thus, it is necessary to come up with special interventions for them.

## THE NEGLECT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Similar measures must also be applied to persons with disabilities. Although it is estimated that they account for 10–15 percent of the population, according to the 2021 data of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, only 9 percent of persons with disabilities are employed.<sup>351</sup> The employment rate of women with disabilities is even lower. Access to education is also unsatisfactory. As for children with developmental disabilities, nothing has been done to train a greater number of teachers to work with them.

No progress has so far been made with regard to the deinstitutionalization of adults with mental health disabilities. Admittedly, the Strategy for the Deinstitutionalization and Development of Social Care Services in the Community for the Period 2022–2026 has been adopted, but the action plan is still pending. Sheltered housing for persons with disabilities, which is crucial for the deinstitutionalization process and is fully financed from the republican budget in less developed communities, is available in only a few municipalities and cities, for about 100 beneficiaries. Within the scope of a new strategy it is planned to gradually develop various additional social care services in local communities and connect them with other services such as employment, health care, education and housing, in cooperation with civil society organizations and other service providers.

The recent mapping of 145 municipalities shows that eight of them have not established social care services, while 91 have earmarked only small amounts for them – less than 454 dinars per capita per year. Among the eight municipalities that failed to

351 Government of the Republic of Serbia (2021), Status of vulnerable groups in the process of the accession of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union, Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit, Government of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, [http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Status\\_of\\_vulnerable\\_groups\\_in\\_the\\_process\\_of\\_the\\_accession\\_of\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_Serbia\\_to\\_the\\_European\\_Union-Status\\_of\\_persons\\_with\\_disabilities.pdf](http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Status_of_vulnerable_groups_in_the_process_of_the_accession_of_the_Republic_of_Serbia_to_the_European_Union-Status_of_persons_with_disabilities.pdf)

provide these services, five are among the most vulnerable and poorest municipalities. The data also show how poorly social care services in the community and money transfers are set up. Namely, about 34.6% of total expenditures (1.26 billion dinars out of 3.65 billion dinars) accounted for the City of Belgrade, thus being higher than its participation (24%) in the total Serbian population. Despite the existence of specific-purpose transfers for social care services, they have not been channelled towards about 40 municipalities, including eight without social care services and six categorized as the least developed.<sup>352</sup> In order to achieve an integrated approach, it is important to build adequate capacities in local self-governments, which should be on the frontline of providing social care services integrated into the community. However, the municipalities in Serbia still lack adequate capacities for the provision of quality social care services. The greatest number of social care services over the past years has included home care for the elderly and day care for children with developmental disabilities, while other social care services are available only in larger cities.

## PENSIONERS ON THE MARGINS

Economic and social rights are significantly denied to the employed and pensioners. Due to high social insurance contributions, employers avoid concluding employment contracts, so that the “grey economy” persists. Taking into account that the population in Serbia is getting older, solving social insurance can additionally improve the financing of old-age pensions. The ageing of the population reduces the social insurance rate, with a potentially negative impact on future pensions, which are heavily dependent on social contributions. Pensions, most of which are old-age benefits,

352 Matković, G. and M. Stranjaković (2020), Mapping social care services and material support within the mandate of local self-governments in the Republic of Serbia, Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, [http://csp.org.rs/en/assets/publications/files/Mapping\\_social\\_care\\_services\\_and\\_material\\_support\\_within\\_the\\_mandate\\_of\\_LSG\\_in\\_RS.pdf](http://csp.org.rs/en/assets/publications/files/Mapping_social_care_services_and_material_support_within_the_mandate_of_LSG_in_RS.pdf)

have the greatest role in social care. The number of members of voluntary private pension funds is very low – about 2.9 percent in 2019.<sup>353</sup> Each employee supports more than 1.6 pensioners in Serbia, which is one of the highest support percentages in Europe. In 2020, Serbia adopted the indexation of pensions according to the so-called “Swiss formula”, which links the increase in pensions to the growth rates of average wages and consumer prices. However, a big problem is posed by small pensions and the fact that about 10 percent of people older than the prescribed retirement age do not have the right to old-age, disability or family pension.<sup>354</sup> Moreover, since 2014, the number of pensioners has been declining, while the number of citizens older than 65 is increasing.

## THE UNAVAILABILITY OF HEALTH SERVICES

Serbian citizens also face unequal access to health services – those with high incomes have a wider range of health services and medicines at their disposal. At the same time, the taxes paid by these persons are too low. If we add the still widespread corruption that remains unpunished, it is clear why the population has increasingly less confidence in state institutions. The UN Committee also pointed out that, in Serbia, corruption and the practice of bribery in access to public services are widespread and that the Anti-Corruption Agency fails to adequately investigate such cases, especially those involving high-ranking officials.

Other marginalized groups such as, for example, the LGBT population, migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons,

353 National Bank of Serbia (2020), “Voluntary private pension funds”, webpage, National Bank of Serbia, Belgrade, <http://www.nbs.rs/internet/english/index.html>

354 European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research (2021), Performance of Western Balkan economies regarding the European Pillar of Social Rights: 2021 Review of Serbia, Regional Cooperation Council, <https://www.esap.online/download/docs/ESAP-Social-Rights-Pillar-Report-Serbia.pdf/77f12bfb89646e803f2b598333602def.pdf>



as well as members of certain national minorities face daily discrimination and are unable to realize the rights that Serbia should guarantee them.

Finally, it should also be mentioned that the A11 Initiative for Economic and Social Rights, with the support of the European Centre for Roma Rights (part of the ESCR–NET International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which also includes Amnesty International), has recently initiated the proceedings for an assessment of the constitutionality of the Law on Social Cards before the Constitutional Court of Serbia. Amnesty International points out that this law, which allows an extensive processing of the data of social insurance claimants and related parties, not only contravenes the data processing principles, but also affects the right to social security and the right to equality and non-discrimination due to its disproportionate effect on Roma communities and persons with disabilities<sup>355</sup>. Amnesty International points to the fact that in recent years Serbia has increasingly relied on technological achievements to monitor its citizens. In September 2021, after the objections from civil society and the Personal Data Protection Commissioner, the Government was forced to suspend the planned installation of facial recognition software and biometric surveillance in public spaces. Uncontrolled use of technological innovations allows the authorities to endlessly violate the privacy of the Serbian people and can increase discrimination against minority groups.

In the explanation of its request, the A11 Initiative has stated that this law contradicts Article 8 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms as well as Article 9 of the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which guarantees the right to social security.

355 <https://edri.org/our-work/legal-challenge-the-serbian-government-attempts-to-digitise-social-security-system>

**NEIGHBORS**

# **SERBIAN WORLD AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH NEIGHBORS**

The relationship with Serbia's neighbors during the last decade has been characterized by a high degree of tension and diminishment at all levels. The reason for this is certainly the fact that the current government and President Vučić decided to revive the project of the unification of Serbian lands, now under the name "Serbian World". The support of Russia, whose infiltration into the Balkans, primarily into Serbia and the Republika Srpska (RS), has been going on uninterrupted for more than ten years, contributed to this orientation. When it comes to having such a regional policy, the government has the full support of the academic community, the Serbian Orthodox Church, a large part of the opposition, a part of the civil sector and the media, as well as the security services.

# KOSOVO: NORMALIZING RELATIONS IS A MUST

Kosovo, an unfinished issue in Europe's backyard, has become a more prominent topic following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The return of the West, primarily the USA, is to prevent a second Russian front from opening in the Balkans. The entire Balkan region, especially Kosovo, is perceived primarily as a security issue. The war in Ukraine has revealed that the issue of security comes to the fore under circumstances of geopolitical turmoil. Resolving the Kosovo issue is an essential prerequisite for the consolidation of the Balkans, while for Serbia it would mean defining its own borders as a prerequisite for building a modern state.

Serbia's attempt to resolve the Kosovo issue by violent means ended with the intervention of NATO and the expulsion of the Serbian state from Kosovo (its police, judiciary, and executive branch of government). By signing the Kumanovo Agreement, Serbia signed the capitulation, which paved the way for the definitive establishment of the state of Kosovo. Serbia boycotted Martti Ahtisaari's plan, which became part of the Kosovo constitution. Democratic authorities were not ready to ensure Kosovo's independence through negotiations. When the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power, the dialogue with Kosovo started moving forward from what had been a state of deadlock. However, the only step Vučić made was the signing of the Brussels Agreement (2013). For a short while, it seemed that the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština was going towards the normalization of relations until the secret plan (Vučić-Tači) involving the division of Kosovo was uncovered. It froze relations and the dialogue was put on standby. The format of the negotiations was changed, and the division

drew approval from President Donald Trump and his special adviser John Bolton. This plan nearly succeeded, but the intervention of Chancellor Angela Merkel prevented the project from being carried out (2019).

Even though the Serbian state was expelled from Kosovo in 1999, Serbia still perceives Kosovo as an important geopolitical space. It is believed that Albanians are not a nation-building people and that it is a mafia state that would not be sustainable without external factors, primarily NATO and the USA. Belgrade is aware that Kosovo Albanians are an important ally for the West and that the population is dynamic and oriented towards Euro-Atlantic integration, which essentially diminishes Serbian influence.

Serbia's stance towards Kosovo has not changed for more than two decades, regardless of who is (or was) in power. Until now, two options have been dominant (also evident in the 2018 internal dialogue on Kosovo): a division of Kosovo (annexing the north to Serbia) and maintaining the status quo.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić tried during the last few years to impose the idea of the division of Kosovo, which has persisted since the 90s, and unlike his predecessors, he partially succeeded in this, which was a consequence of changes on the international scene, primarily the weakening of the mobilization potential of the European Union and regressive trends in the region itself. In a speech in the National Assembly of Serbia in September 2022, he admitted that he had been in favor of a demarcation with Kosovo, but that this solution failed because it was "unrealistic". After rejecting the idea of division in the international community, Serbia opted for maintaining a frozen conflict.

Vučić has not given up on that option. He confirmed this in a speech at a session of the UN General Assembly (September 2022), insisting on Resolution 1244, the territorial integrity of Serbia, and negotiations "that could last for 100 years".

Belgrade continues to insist on the Community of Serb Municipalities (ZSO), but is essentially obstructing its establishment. Contrary to the Berlin Agreement and warnings from the

international community that the Community of Serb Municipalities cannot be a “state within a state”, Belgrade is striving for executive powers of the ZSO in which “there would be no direct authority of Belgrade, nor absolute authority of Priština”. In this way, Serbia would legalize the existing circumstances: presence in the north of Kosovo with the existence of parallel institutions, which were somewhat dismantled after the signing of the Brussels Agreement. Serbia has budgeted EUR 96 million for various activities in Kosovo for 2022.

Serbian elites perceive the north of Kosovo as part of the Serbian World, aware that they cannot and do not want the integration of Kosovo Albanians into the constitutional system of Serbia, because they are not prepared to guarantee their collective rights.

The main factors obstructing the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo and Belgrade’s acceptance of reality are the Serbian Orthodox Church and right-wing parties, with support from Russia. Over the last two years, the Church has shown that it is a strong political factor in Serbia and in the entire region (Europride held in Serbia under very restrictive conditions for its participants; fostering the narrative about Serbs as the sole victims of World War II and the wars of the 1990s; nationalist mobilization in Montenegro through clerical protests).

By utilizing vague messages or a hostile narrative towards Albanians, the authorities in Belgrade are radicalizing public opinion instead of preparing it for the acceptance of the Brussels agreements and recognizing Kosovo. It is instrumentalizing local Serbs, primarily in the north of Kosovo, who, for example, blocked the roads to the border crossings with Serbia – Jarinje and Brnjak – on 31 July, a day before the Kosovo Government’s decision on license plates in accordance with the Brussels Agreement came into force. The barricades were removed on 1 August, and the Kosovo Government postponed the implementation of the decision.

Belgrade, with its policy of “protecting the Serbs and preventing their integration into their home countries”, still believes that it can achieve wartime goals in new circumstances.

During its ten years in power, the Serbian Progressive Party has managed to radicalize Serbian public opinion regarding Kosovo. According to a research conducted by the Belgrade Center for Security Policy (2021), citizens prefer the status quo. Based on the data, the percentage of citizens who accepted reality after the NATO intervention, i.e. consider that Kosovo has been lost, ranges between a minimum of 35 percent in October 2001 and a maximum of 56 percent in November 2003. In 2021, a significantly smaller number of people in Serbia, compared to the period 10 years ago, accept reality and consider that Kosovo is lost, regardless of whether they are in favor of recognition or not.

After the failed attempt to divide Kosovo, the Priština-Belgrade dialogue continued with the mediation of the EU, but without much success until the Biden administration came to power in the US and, in particular, Russia's aggression against Ukraine (February 2022).

With the arrival of the Biden administration, which ruled out the possibility of any border changes in the Balkans, dialogue was once again put in the foreground, with the West's clear intention being to wrap up any "unfinished business" in the Balkans.

The priority of US politics in Serbia is to affirm the status of independent Kosovo as part of the dialogue with Serbia, as well as to suppress Russia's malignant influence, primarily in Serbia. This is the framework in which the US and EU strategy in the Balkans should be understood.

## **CONSTANT TENSIONS**

Every attempt by Priština to integrate the north of Kosovo into the Kosovo legal system was accompanied by sharp reactions from Belgrade, mainly by raising the combat readiness of the army and the police. In May 2019, President Vučić raised the "full combat readiness of Serbian army units" when the Kosovo police in northern Kosovo arrested 19 police officers for corruption, 11 of whom were of Serbian nationality. The level of combat readiness was also

raised in September 2021, when the deadline for re-registration of vehicles with Serbian license plates in Kosovo expired. Towards the end of August 2022, the Serbian army organized military training along the border with Kosovo, in order to “maintain a high degree of combat readiness”, as stated by the Ministry of Defense. At the beginning of November 2022, combat readiness was again raised, according to announcements, due to drones entering Serbia from Kosovo and observing the positions and facilities of the Serbian army.<sup>356</sup>

As a measure of pressure on Priština, representatives of the Serbian community left Kosovo institutions, including the police, and on 8 December, Kosovo authorities sent Kosovo police forces to the north of Kosovo, in order to prevent total chaos.

During that period, President Vučić asked KFOR to bring the Serbian army back to Kosovo, explaining that “the arrival of Serbian security forces is necessary to prevent the expulsion of the Serbian population from the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, the destruction of religious and cultural buildings and the theft of church property, seizure of state property, permanent violation of the agreements that were reached in the dialogue conducted under the auspices of the EU, and the list is long because practically all rights of Serbs are threatened and almost all agreements have been trampled on by Priština”.<sup>357</sup>

KFOR rejected Belgrade’s request because it believes, as stated in the statement of President Vučić, “that there is no need for the return of the Serbian Army to the territory of Kosovo and Metohija in reference to Resolution 1244, and that they play their role in accordance with it”. Vučić also added that this response, “the aim of which was probably to further humiliate Serbs – since they once asked authorities in Belgrade to extradite President Slobodan

356 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sta-znaaci-borbena-gotovost-kosovo-srbija/32195548.html>,

357 <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/528656/Srbija-vec-jednom-trazil-a-povratak-vojske-na-Kosovo-i-Metohiju>



Milošević on Vidovdan – was sent on Christmas Eve” and added that “this is no coincidence”.<sup>358</sup>

Tensions peaked towards the end of 2022 and threatened to turn into an armed conflict, which was prevented by the intervention of the EU, and even more by the US and NATO.

## MEDIA COVERAGE

The tensions were accompanied by media coverage that mobilized emotions on both sides. The non-governmental organization KRIK carried out an analysis of the media where some of the main points were presented.

It is pointed out that the Serbian media reduced the reporting to the fact that “armed Albanians shot at bare-handed Serbs”, that Kurti had the intention of carrying out “ethnic cleansing”, but that he ultimately “had his tail between his legs” after the Americans told him that “he has no army” and that “the Serbian Army would give him a drubbing”.<sup>359</sup> On the other hand, Kosovo media reported that Serbia was planning a coordinated attack on the north of Kosovo in cooperation with Russia, that the attackers were actually Serbs, that if Vučić attacked Kosovo, he would receive a response from NATO aviation within 48 hours, and that Serbia “has neither drivers nor tanks nor pilots”. Both of them use a series of insults for the politicians of the opposite side, such as being “fascists” or “deranged”.<sup>360</sup>

Before and after his victory in the parliamentary elections, Albin Kurti was also faced with obstruction in Kosovo, orchestrated by political-criminal structures and the intelligence underground,

358 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucic-kfor-odbio-zahtev-srbije-za-povratak-vojske-na-kosovo>

359 <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Kriza-na-Kosovu-Obostrano-propagandno-potpirivanje-vatre-1069>

360 <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Kriza-na-Kosovu-Obostrano-propagandno-potpirivanje-vatre-1069>

whose intention was to prevent his victory, as well as his announced fight against corruption.

However, Belgrade also greeted his victory with numerous insults. In addition to his tabloids, President Vučić himself was among the most prominent when it comes to insults, such as: “That little Nazi longs to be Enver Hoxha”,<sup>361</sup> “He has issues, his word means nothing, even in Priština they don’t believe him”!<sup>362</sup> “terrorist scum”,<sup>363</sup> “terrorist scum, watch yourself, be careful not to hurt any Serb, and shame on the EU”,<sup>364</sup> “Why are you calling NATO if you are so strong! You haven’t been able enter the north for twenty days!”.<sup>365</sup> Some statements also show Serbia’s military superiority, such as “it is more important for us to protect ourselves from mosquitoes than from the air force that they possess.”<sup>366</sup>

According to research by the Bureau of Social Research (BIRO-DI), SNS received the majority of their votes because people are informed through television with national frequencies. As President Vučić controls all TV stations with national frequencies, it is to be expected that he will launch an offensive to win public opinion for the European-American proposal.

361 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-o-situaciji-na-kim-namerno-provociraju-ljude-niko-se-nije-uplasio-albanaca>

362 <https://www.republika.rs/vesti/politika/406503/aleksandar-vucic-o-aljbinu-kurtiju>

363 <https://n1info.ba/regija/skandalozne-izjave-vucica-o-kurtiju-i-trajkovic>

364 <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/4062028/uzivo-vucic-predsednik-o-skandaloznom-potezu-kurtija>

365 <https://happytv.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-porucio-kurtiju-sto-zoves-nato-kad-si-tako-jak-dvadeset-dana-ne-mozes-da-udjes-na-sever/528451>

366 <https://nsuzivo.rs/novi-sad/vucic-brutalno-odgovorio-kurtiju-i-milu-vaznije-nam-je-da-se-zastitimo-od-komaraca-nego-od-vazduhoplovnih-snaga-koje-oni-poseduju-video>

## THE EUROPEAN–AMERICAN PROPOSAL

Tensions in Kosovo lasted almost continuously throughout 2022. Serbia tried in every possible way to provoke incidents that would justify its intervention, even a military intervention. This was, among other things, interpreted as Russia's attempt to open up a second front in the Balkans, in order to reduce the West's pressure on the Ukrainian front. Serbia's refusal to support EU sanctions against Russia, the appointment of Putin's devotee Aleksandar Vulin as director of the Security Information Agency (BiA), as well as a series of similar moves, not only damaged Belgrade's reputation, but also cast doubt on Belgrade's intentions when it comes to Kosovo. All this encouraged the US and the EU to become more actively involved in the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština, which during the last two years was more of a simulation than serious negotiations.

Reacting to the escalation in the north of Kosovo, France and Germany prepared a proposal that was supported by the US, but also by five EU members who did not recognize Kosovo, which gives the proposal additional weight. The proposal was ultimately presented to both sides, which need to make their stances about it known by the end of March 2023. The proposal, as it is unofficially known, is a framework for negotiations that should respect the Brussels Agreement and the unconditional formation of the Community of Serb Municipalities (ZSO) in Kosovo. This is supposed to bring back Serbs to Kosovo institutions, from which they withdrew in November 2022.

In order to demonstrate the seriousness and credibility of the new initiative, Western officials frequently visited Priština and Belgrade: First, a US delegation headed by Derek Chollet, which included a representative of the Pentagon, followed by a meeting between Vučić and the German ambassadors in the region. There was no detailed information in the media regarding those two meetings. Finally, representatives of France, Germany, the EU, the US and Italy met with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić (SNS)

and Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti (LVV), in an effort to convince them to sign an 11-point plan aimed at calming tensions and fully normalizing relations.

By not accepting the proposal, both sides would face the consequences of the EU and the US. Along with the proposal, as it is pointed out, there is also a mini Marshall Plan. Entry into the EU is possible in 2030, and until then they would receive economic aid in the form of donations, and new investments would follow. EU structures would be entered gradually, as was once announced by the Enlargement Strategy initiated by French President Macron. They could, for example, join the common European market, which allows the free flow of goods, people, capital and services.

Serbia would also receive economic aid in the form of donations and favorable loans, as well as investments in energy, which would free it from dependence on Russia and the Russian monopoly in that field.

The proposal is only a framework for the beginning of the normalization process, which would be led by the EU, but with greater commitment and engagement than in previous years, when, under the coordination of the then Commissioner Federica Mogherini, the format of the dialogue was changed, and it would also allow for a division. All this would lead to the adoption of a binding comprehensive agreement for the normalization of relations.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić launched the initiative to accept the European-American proposal, because he is probably aware that during the last 30 years, Serbia has rejected most of the solutions offered, which later always ended up costing it dearly. The economic and social stability of Serbia rests on the economic and financial assistance of the EU. One of his main reasons for doing this, however, is his personal fate.

President Vučić has taken steps leading to the acceptance of the proposal. First, he secured support in his party by threatening to resign. The SNS membership reacted strongly to this, because it is aware, as SNS Executive Board President Darko Glišić points out, that “if Vučić were to resign, it will be the end of the SNS and

the worst possible scenario for Serbia would follow”.<sup>367</sup> The tabloids under his control immediately started glorifying him, and Informer editor-in-chief Dragan Vučićević stated that “the President showed that he is more than a politician, that he is a statesman and that he does not hide anything from his people. He came out and told the people honestly what is happening, how they are threatening us, what the possible consequences are, and what is required of us”.<sup>368</sup> In order to mitigate the negative effect of the forced acceptance of the proposal, Vučić announced along the way that “gold was discovered in Žagubica, and we found another place where there is more gold than in Žagubica. It is one of the top one hundred largest gold deposits in the entire world”.<sup>369</sup> SNS MP Vladimir Đukanović believes that only “wise rulers can see in difficult moments how their people can survive, because only if we survive do we have a chance to one day try to take back what was stolen from us”.<sup>370</sup>

Even the fiercest opponents of the West, such as Milovan Drecun, point out that “we belong in the Euro-Atlantic partnership. The agreement with the West can rest on the cornerstone which is the agreement regarding Kosovo”, but at the same time he says that “this does not mean that we should stop relying on Russia”.<sup>371</sup>

The fiercest criticism and disapproval of the Proposal have come from the academic community, which almost wholeheartedly believes that it is an ultimatum. Thus, orientalist and diplomat Darko Tanasković emphasizes that it is not a Gordian knot that could be cut; similarly, the belief that some imposed and “forced” solution contrary to Serbian rights and interests could create conditions for achieving permanent stability and normality is

367 <https://www.k1info.rs/vesti/politika/12071/glisic-ako-vucic-podnese-ostavku-to-je-kraj-za-sns-i-sledi-najgori-scenario-za-srbiju/vest>

368 <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/766145/dragan-vucicevic-jutarnjem-programu>

369 Ibid.

370 Vladimir Đukanović, “Red Lines”, *Politika*, 30 January, 2023.

371 <http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/milovan-drecun-evropski-predlog-za-kosovo-samo-koncept-%E2%80%93-nije-u-pitanju-ultimatum.html>

a dangerous illusion. That's why, as he points out, rushing and creating a fixed-term situation, with pressures and threats, for a formula for regulating the status of Kosovo, some kind of designed "comprehensive legally binding agreement" based on the violation of international law, sovereignty and territorial integrity of an old historical state, is the wrong approach.<sup>372</sup>

In their appeal, a group of public figures and intellectuals (255 of them) called on the competent state authorities of the Republic of Serbia to completely and without delay reject the Western ultimatum demanding our final renunciation of Kosovo and Metohija.<sup>373</sup>

Čedomir Antić, historian and president of the National Club (which deals with the rights of Serbs in the region), is in favor of stopping the negotiations and temporarily tolerating the achieved level of Kosovo's independence, with continuous work on challenging it, which excludes armed conflict for the time being. When the opportunity comes, as he says, some new, reformed Serbian army will enter the province in a military-police operation and go out to the borders at Prokletije and Šara... Albanians will be offered the same status enjoyed by Serbs in Croatia. We will wait for decades, a century or two... we have been waiting almost half a millennium... This is not the road to defending Kosovo, but the road to national survival, Kosovo is not a country, but a covenant, and also an instrument of revival.<sup>374</sup> This is the position advocated by the majority of the academic community, the Serbian Orthodox Church and security structures.

The West is in a hurry, demonstrated by the fact that President Vučić signed the agreement with the EU to overcome energy problems. On that occasion, President Vučić said that it was a great gift and a great deal of money for something that strengthens Serbia's capacities. It is important for us, he said, "not only to cooperate

372 Interview with Darko Tanasković, "Permanent solution to the Kosovo crisis is nowhere in sight", *Politika*, 1 February, 2023.

373 <https://standard.rs/2023/01/30/ne-ultimatumu-ne-kapitulaciji>

374 Čedomir Antić, "Kosovo is Serbia", *Politika*, 13 February, 2023.

with the European Union, but also to continue our European path. Serbia depends a lot on the European Union and without it we can hardly move forward”.<sup>375</sup> However, a group of extreme nationalists (People’s Patrols) gathered in Belgrade, together with several opposition parties (among others Vuk Jeremić’s The People’s Party), and protested in front of the Presidency, threatening to kill President Vučić. He immediately addressed the public with a message: “Those who think they can bring down Serbia with lies, threats, with a few guns and connections in a foreign country, with the support they receive in cash from foreigners, justifying it with great patriotism – they cannot and will never be able to do so”.<sup>376</sup>

At the same time, another group of public figures signed an appeal, but for the acceptance of the European-American proposal for Serbia and Kosovo, considering it a reasonable solution to the Kosovo issue, as well as a guarantee for peace in the Balkans.<sup>377</sup> That group is gaining more and more space in the media in order to mobilize the public to accept the European-American plan.

## PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE

Vučić’s policy, which, by all accounts, leads to a compromise with Priština, is exposed to enormous resistance, which was especially evident in the parliamentary debate, when it reached its climax. At the special session of the National Assembly of Serbia dedicated to Kosovo, the Report of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija for the September-January 2022 period was submitted. A heated discussion ensued, lasting 11 hours. The Government’s report on negotiations with Kosovo was adopted with 154 votes of MPs in favor, and 23 against. President Aleksandar Vučić, who was in the Assembly the entire time, did not reveal the details of the

375 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/veliki-poklon-srbiji-od-eu>

376 <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/771902/aleksandar-vucic-pretnje>

377 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/potpisnici-apela-za-prihvatanje-eu-predloga-sporazuma-vucic-je-tolika-kukavica-da-nema-opasnosti-da-ne-potpise-to-sto-je-ponudjeno/>

Franco-German proposal, which he said “has de facto become a negotiating framework” and that it was accepted by all member states of the European Union, even those that did not recognize Kosovo’s independence. He emphasized that the most unfavorable point for Serbia is that it is asked “not to oppose Kosovo’s membership in the United Nations”. Regarding the reactions of the opposition, he firmly stated: “I will never accept Kosovo’s membership in the UN and I will never recognize Kosovo’s independence”.<sup>378</sup>

Deputies of the right-wing bloc – Dveri, the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), Zavetnici, and The People’s Party tried at one point to physically attack the President of Serbia, demanding that the Franco-German plan be rejected, since it cannot be “any basis for negotiations”.<sup>379</sup> This group has strong ties to Moscow, so it can be assumed that Russia has taken steps that will obstruct the acceptance of the proposal. The outburst of this group during the debate visibly upset President Vučić, who changed the tone of his speech in his address afterwards.

Pavle Grbović from the “United for Serbia” parliamentary group warned that each subsequent agreement proposal would be “more and more difficult and worse”.<sup>380</sup>

Regardless of the chaos at the National Assembly, Boško Jakšić, a commentator of the *Politika* daily, believes that “it could be concluded that Vučić is on his way to accepting a solution that would include Kosovo’s chair in the United Nations (UN)”.<sup>381</sup>

Many believe that the impression that President Vučić has “made the decision” is further confirmed by the official visit of Chief of General Staff Milan Mojsilović to the United States at the time, where he had several meetings with high-ranking officials of the Ohio National Guard, the civil authorities of this US federal

378 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kosovo-skupstina-srbija-vucic/32250447/lbl0lbi2147483647.html>

379 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kosovo-skupstina-srbija-vucic/32250447/lbl0lbi2147483647.html>

380 Ibid.

381 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/bosko-jaksic-ako-je-suditi-po-vucicevom-raspolozenju-u-skupstini-on-je-na-putu-da-prihvati-kosovo-u-un>



state, and the US Department of Defense. Dragan Šormaz, a member of the Serbian Progressive Party and president of the newly founded Euro-Atlantic Council of Serbia, emphasizes that the visit represents a deepening of the already excellent military cooperation with the US.<sup>382</sup>

Analyst Dragomir Anđelković, normally a pro-Russian member of the right-wing bloc, emphasized that Mojsilović's visit at this moment probably does not have only a military-technical character and added: "It is possible that Aleksandar Vučić is also sending a message to the Americans in this way that he is ready to improve cooperation in all areas, even in the matter of Atlantic integration, if he gets at least a somewhat acceptable arrangement on the issue of Kosovo."<sup>383</sup>

## **NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS IS NOT IN RUSSIA'S INTEREST**

Russia's interest is not the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, because the resolution of the "frozen conflict" reduces its importance and role in the Western Balkans.

Moscow is monitoring the situation and awaiting Vučić's decision; he is aware that Russia can complicate the situation considering its deep presence in Serbia. In addition, between 200,000 and 300,000 Russians came to Serbia because of the war in Ukraine. About 4,000 Russian companies were registered in Serbia in a very short period of time. It is obvious that not all of them are against Putin. In addition, parts of paramilitary organizations that supported the barricades in the north of Kosovo are also present in Serbia.

Jelica Minić, president of the European Movement in Serbia, believes that brutal Russian pressure and punishment will ensue if Serbia makes a U-turn and accepts the Franco-German plan for

382 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/da-li-srbija-najavljuje-napustanje-vojne-neutralnosti-koju-poruku-salje-odlazak-nacelnika-generalstaba-u-ameriku>

383 Ibid.

Kosovo, as this would represent a prelude to Serbia distancing itself from Russia.<sup>384</sup> Independent Russian political scientist Natalia Ishchenko says that if Vučić accepts the West's plan, Russia will certainly change its policy towards Serbia. She is convinced that in that case, Russia "will certainly interfere in the internal affairs of Serbia, and with the help of its people in Serbia, try to shake up the local political scene". If it succeeds in doing this, instability awaits Serbia, which would play into the hands of Moscow.<sup>385</sup>

Jelena Guskova, Head of the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Balkan Crisis, and a member of the Academy of the Republika Srpska, believes that Vučić is not ready to sign the American-European agreement, because it no longer leaves any room to "maneuver", considering that the whole country already knows the text of that agreement, which is humiliating for Serbia.<sup>386</sup> She believes that introducing sanctions and the interruption of money flows from the EU would be possible, but since there are no sanctions between Russia and Serbia, Moscow will support Belgrade – there is no doubt about that.<sup>387</sup>

Serbia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dacic has already hinted, for the first time, that "Belgrade could change its course and introduce sanctions against Russia, which is one of the EU's key demands for Serbia to progress in accession negotiations. It is not a matter of time or deadlines, it is a matter of our political and economic interests."<sup>388</sup> President Aleksandar Vučić stated in the National Assembly that Belgrade may have to impose sanctions on Russia, stressing that "it is not the topic at the moment, but I don't know how long we will last without imposing sanctions. We are

384 <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/ako-napravi-zaokret-slijedi-kazna-ruske-obavjestajne-grupe-premrezile-su-srbiju-15299011>

385 Ibid.

386 <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1195509/jelena-guskova-vucic-nece-potpisati-ultimatum-rusija-pomoci-srbiji-izdrzi-posledice>

387 Ibid.

388 <https://direktno.rs/politika/452410/ivica-dacic-radio-slobodna-evropa-rusija-sankcije.html>

paying the price for not introducing them, but that is a question of the political stance of our leadership”.<sup>389</sup>

In response to President Vučić’s hint that Serbia could impose sanctions on Russia, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russia understands what efforts Serbia is making to resist Western pressure to impose sanctions.<sup>390</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Serbia, as the central country of the Balkans, is a key factor when it comes to the (in)stability of the region. The main pre-requisite for gaining trust in the region is the recognition of the reality that resulted from the breakup of Yugoslavia.

The European–American plan represents a guarantee of peace and stability in the region, and in this sense, President Vučić has a huge (historical) responsibility in deciding on that offer.

The agreement on the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo is essentially a prelude to the EU membership agreement, provided that the EU is responsible for the implementation of the agreement with the necessary (and announced) economic support in the form of a mini Marshall plan.

The EU should become actively involved in monitoring the implementation of the signed agreement (if it comes to it) in order to prevent any possible manipulations. At the same time, in order to strengthen expert support where human capacities are lacking.

That is why it is necessary:

- That a legally binding agreement guarantees the improvement of the security, economic and social position of the Serbian community; to open a space for authentic Serbian leaders in Kosovo and to carry out the de-ghettoization of the enclaves; to ensure the construction of relevant institutions of culture and education, the

389 <https://direktno.rs/politika/453661/aleksandar-vucic-sankcije-rusija.html>

390 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kosovo-skupstina-srbija-vucic/32250447/lbl0lbi2147483647.html>

urbanization of enclaves, as well as to provide funds for the economic revitalization of the Serbian community.

- That territorial autonomy for minorities in the Balkans can lead to unwanted migration and neglect of citizens of minority communities who live outside autonomous entities, or units (this is also the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Therefore, it is important how the position of Serbs in Kosovo will be defined in the upcoming dialogue.
- That in previous decades, the concept of non-territorial minority autonomy has regained attention as a potentially effective means of separating ethnicity and territory, to address the need of minorities for internal self-determination, and, at the same time, to preserve the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state, thereby maintaining intact the dominant paradigm of a “national state”.
- That minorities become a political factor only when they are integrated into the political system and have their representatives in institutions, including the police and parliament. The decentralization process in Kosovo in ten municipalities with a majority Serb population should enable them to participate in public life and resolve issues at the local level.
- That the EU supports integrative policies not only in the field of economy, but also in the sectors of culture and education. Recognition of diplomas is only the first step.
- That intercultural educational content be established, common to all, in order to ensure a cohesive society.

- That ethnic homogeneity is not a guarantee of stability and prosperity, and that therefore more support should be provided to promote the values of interculturalism.
- That civil society be engaged as actively as possible in the Berlin process.
- To establish multi-ethnic universities/high schools (technical, natural and philological – departments of Albanianology, Slavic studies, English, German and French), in order to prepare new generations from all ethnic communities for regional and European labor markets.
- To introduce the Serbian and Albanian languages into the curricula in order to facilitate communication between Albanians and Serbs.
- To establish trust-building measures throughout the region in order to integrate minority communities. This means that establishing an objective narrative about the past is also a matter of security. Highlighting only one's own nation as a victim strengthens resentment against minorities.
- That the EU help the integration of the Serbian community into the Kosovo system, academic cooperation, above all between Mitrovica and the University of Priština.
- To establish cooperation between medical institutions and doctors.
- That the EU strengthen the Rico office, which is one of the main components of the Berlin process, in order to intensify the process of cooperation between the younger generations.

# MONTENEGRO: APPROACHING THE “INTERNAL ISSUE”

Belgrade has never truly accepted the departure of Montenegro, because it is seen as an “internal issue” and is given “immeasurable geopolitical importance”. It is treated as another Serbian state, a state of the same people. Montenegro and Montenegrin identity are contested. Montenegro was never accepted as an independent state, but only as a territory, that is, as another Serbian country. Montenegrinness and Montenegrin language are contested, while Montenegrin identity is seen as hybrid. Accordingly, the position of the Serbian people is being strengthened, while the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) already has the status of a state within a state.<sup>391</sup>

It is in Serbia’s interest that Montenegro be headed by a “state political leader” who will respect Serbian geopolitical interests. That is why Milo Đukanović is perceived as the main obstacle to the realization of Serbian interests. Serbia’s ultimate goal is to bring Montenegro back into the common state framework, because it is only in this way that both Serbia and Montenegro will gain geostrategic importance.<sup>392</sup> In the Serbian National Assembly, President Aleksandar Vučić said among other things: “Thanks to our negligence and inaction, Montenegro made the decision to become independent in 2006.”<sup>393</sup>

391 Dušan Proroković, *Geopolitika Srbije (The Geopolitics of Serbia)*, Official Gazette, Belgrade, 2018, p. 739–763.

392 Ibid.

393 <http://tvteuta.com/vucic-zahvaljujuci-nasem-javasluku-i-neradu-crna-gora-je-postala-nezavisna-drzava>

The attempted coup d'état in 2016, in which Moscow and Belgrade participated, accelerated the admission of Montenegro to NATO membership. It turned out that both Belgrade and Moscow are just waiting for an opportunity to realize their geostrategic interests on the Adriatic. However, the new geostrategic position of Montenegro as a member of NATO is undoubtedly one of the challenges in the future relations between Belgrade and Podgorica. And not only because Russia, through Belgrade, will do everything to "sabotage" that position of Montenegro. It also has to do with a kind of "conditioned reflex" of the Serbian political and intellectual elite, its inability to get out of the vicious circle of its own frustrations and step forward in the direction in which Montenegro has been resolutely going for years.

The intention of Great Serbian nationalism is to establish absolute and permanent rule in Montenegro, using all available means, and carry out the complete "Serbization" of that "Serbian land".

The big question that remains is how the part of Montenegrin society that is loyal to civil, independent and anti-fascist Montenegro will behave in the future. There is no doubt that Serbian nationalism, as part of the planned change in the demographic structure (the population census is planned for the end of 2023), will use various measures to encourage the emigration of that part of the population, since it is the more educated and mobile part, and in that way change the demographics of the society and achieve its hegemony.

Aleksandar Raković, a historian and one of the main promoters of the "Serbian World" has been hinting for years that "the census will show a huge increase of Serbs in Montenegro, over 40 percent for sure... When everything is compared and calculated, it is logical that the percentage of Serbs will grow to over 40 percent and that they will be the most numerous nation in Montenegro."<sup>394</sup> Kosta Čavoški, member of the Serbian Academy Of Sciences And Arts and senator of the Republika Srpska, believes that the

394 <https://www.cdm.me/politika/rakovic-srbi-ce-na-popisu-biti-vecina-crna-gora-se-vraca-u-prirodni-okvir-iz-1918/>

state orientation of Montenegro should be changed gradually and hopes that in the next census “the number of Serbs in Montenegro will increase and that people will be encouraged to declare themselves as Serbs”, that elections should then be called in which the new majority “would be significantly bigger and more powerful”, and then slowly, step by step, the longed-for return of Montenegro to the “Serbian world” would occur.<sup>395</sup>

All of this calls for deliberate resistance to these diabolical plans by sovereigntist forces. In this regard, they have a huge responsibility to ensure that Montenegrin’s turbulent situation will get back on track towards European integration.

## 2020 ELECTIONS

After the failed coup in 2016, Belgrade did not give up its intentions. The period from 2016 to 2020 is characterized by dramatic events that eventually led to the downfall of the then-ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS). The departure of the DPS is a question of government change that is certainly a desirable outcome for democracy in Montenegro. This is the result of internal dynamics – however, the external intervention of Belgrade and Moscow, through logistics and financial means, through the SPC, brought Montenegro to the dramatic circumstances it finds itself in. The opposition boycotted the parliament during that convocation.

Prior to the 2020 parliamentary elections, the Montenegrin government adopted the Law on Freedom of Religion and the Legal Status of Religious Communities, which was opposed by the Serbian Orthodox Church, Serbian parties in Montenegro, as well as Belgrade. Metropolitan Amfilohije initiated massive protest processions that gathered citizens from a broad spectrum within Montenegrin society.

Belgrade actively encouraged the division of Montenegrin society, by emphasizing the unfavorable position of Serbs, about

395 <https://radiotitograd.me/titogradske-vijesti/istorija-popisa-u-crnoj-gori-prica-o-ugrozenosti-srba-propaganda-beograda/>



which the Serbian Club wrote numerous reports, which underline that Serbian identity is under attack. That question dominates all official statements. Although the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, avoids statements that would directly indicate interference in the internal affairs of a neighboring country, on the day of the elections in Montenegro, he stated that regardless of the results, it was important that "the Serbian people have stood up and begun to protect their identity rights",<sup>396</sup> and that it is important that in the upcoming population census (2021) the number of Serbs in that country is not smaller. Belgrade's efforts were focused on the population census campaign, in order to show that the majority in the country is made up of Serbs and, on that basis, further delegitimize Montenegrin statehood.

Official Belgrade has allocated around EUR 3.5 million to Serbian organizations – the largest amount that Serbia has ever allocated as aid, which was confirmed by President Vučić. Aid was sent to organizations such as the Association of Writers, Matica Srpska, for the construction of the Serbian House, and the like.<sup>397</sup> The Government of Serbia stated that the money is intended for associations "which deal with the improvement of the economic, cultural and political cooperation of that country with Serbia and the Republika Srpska".<sup>398</sup>

Unlike Vučić, former Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin directly expresses Serbian interests in the region. Commenting on the elections in Montenegro, he said that "the government of Milo Đukanović (...) did not understand that it had initiated a process of unification of Serbs that cannot be stopped".<sup>399</sup>

The ruling party of Milo Đukanović won the most votes in the elections, but it turned out that it does not have the coalition potential to form a government. DPS rivals united three opposition

396 <https://banjaluka.net/vucic-vazno-da-se-srpski-narod-podigao>

397 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30811809.html>

398 Insaider, 21 May 2020.

399 <https://www.espreso.co.rs/svet/crna-gora/616947/evo-sta-je-vulin-rekao-za-izbore-ministar-odbrane-komentarise-stanje-u-crnoj-gori>

lists: the Democratic Front led the list *For the Future of Montenegro*, the holder of the list *Peace is our nation* was the democrat Aleksa Bečić. and the Dritan Abazović's party URA with the list *Black on White*. The Democratic Party of Socialists won 35.06 percent, or 143,548 votes, while the "*For the Future of Montenegro*" coalition won 32.55 percent (133,267). The peaceful surrender of power surprised both the then Montenegrin opposition and official Belgrade, because everyone had been expecting that Đukanović would not surrender so easily.

The election result in Montenegro represented a new incentive for the pro-Russian and nationalist opposition in Belgrade. The president of the *Oslobodenje* movement, Mladen Đorđević, asked "Belgrade to bring back the Council for Serbs in the region, which would help the Serbian people and its institutions together with the representatives of relevant ministries and the Serbian Orthodox Church".<sup>400</sup> He reminded that the constitutional legislative framework, declarations and strategies of the Serbian National Assembly dealing with this issue provide enough opportunities for active action and cooperation. He says that a large part of the Serbian public closely followed the elections in Montenegro because they are a question of "a unique political and cultural space where Serbs live".<sup>401</sup>

The biggest winner of the 2020 Montenegrin elections is the Serbian Orthodox Church, without whose role the opposition would not have won. Over the centuries, the SPC has been the main backbone of the Serbian people and a symbol of Serbian identity. This is where its strong influence comes from, and in the 2020 elections, it showed the strength to mobilize citizens, primarily due to the authority of Metropolitan Amfilohije. Even though the main theme of the Montenegrin opposition's campaign was corruption and the rule of law, the role of the church showed that the goal was to change regional relations. The SPC has always contested the

<sup>400</sup> <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/465599/kada-je-vucic-prestao-da-se-bavi-podjelama-na-srbe-i-crnogorce-narod-crne-gore-je-pobijedio-diktatora>

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

borders of the Yugoslav republics and had good relations with the wartime leaders of the rebel Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia. Metropolitan Amfilohije employed hundreds of priests. Allegedly, there are about 1,500 of them in Montenegro out of an Orthodox population of potentially 400,000, while the entire Serbian Church has about 2,200 priests and nuns in relation to the remaining 10 million. During socialist times, there were less than 100 priests in Montenegro. The ratio paints a clear picture as to why Montenegro is now in this situation.

With these election results, Montenegro has once again become a problematic point in the Balkans, which can, if the new government changes its orientation, lead to massive disturbances in the entire region. They have certainly rekindled Belgrade's expectations that the unification of Serbian territories is still possible.

## BELGRADE'S REACTIONS

Belgrade analysts and the media have ignored the achievements of Đukanović's rule – the restoration of Montenegro's independence, NATO membership and rapprochement with the EU. Đukanović doesn't bother them because of his decades-long rule, but precisely because of those accomplishments. Corruption and the absence of the rule of law are put in the foreground, and these are problems the entire region faces, especially Serbia.

President Vučić, as well as Prime Minister Ana Brnabić's cabinet, make statements about Montenegro almost every day. They have commented and followed the elections in Montenegro more than in Serbia itself, which clearly indicates their aspirations. Among the commentators, the prevailing opinion is that the church won the elections. One Belgrade newspaper had the headline "Montenegro voted and Belgrade won".<sup>402</sup> The mantra that this was the "last communist dictator" in Europe, and the like, has prevailed.

402 <https://www.danas.rs/dijalog/licni-stavovi/crna-gora-glasala-srbija-pobedila/>

The newly elected Montenegrin Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić, who was directly appointed by the Serbian Orthodox Church, and his deputy Dritan Abazović, the leader of the United Reform Action (URA) and the civic coalition “Black on White”, quickly showed that they were abandoning their European orientation, even if they continued to advocate that course. In a very short time, Montenegro found itself in a deep institutional and political crisis, which was Belgrade’s goal – to make it meaningless as an independent and sovereign state.

It is no coincidence that one of the most influential ideologues of Serbian nationalism, especially active when it comes to the Montenegrin issue, Matija Bećković, stated that the Serbian youth would carry Abazović in their arms if he came to Belgrade.<sup>403</sup> The wartime Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Vladislav Jovanović, says that Abazović is a “catalyst for the future” and a “new political phenomenon”.<sup>404</sup>

The European Union (EU) never once warned Belgrade and the SPC for interfering in the Montenegrin elections. However, the behavior of the winning coalition is a great lesson and warning, both for Montenegrin society and for the international community, and particularly for the EU.

## THE ROLE OF THE SPC AND METROPOLITAN AMFILOHIJE

Tensions in inter-state and inter-church relations between Serbia and Montenegro have been on-going with varying intensity for quite some time. The SPC (SOC) showed its dominance through a series of events. One of them was the stay of Serbian Patriarch Irinej in Montenegro and Bay of Kotor on the occasion of marking the 1500th anniversary of the Monastery of the Nativity of the

403 <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/beckovic-srpska-omladina-bi-abazovica-nosila-na-rukama/>

404 <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/jovanovic-abazovic-je-novi-politicki-fenomen-bice-na-udaru-jer-ne-sledi>

Blessed Virgin Mary (Podlastva – Grabalj), while simultaneously marking the 800th anniversary of the independence of the Serbian Orthodox Church (2019). He then pointed out that apart from the colors of the Battle of Kosovo, the Serbian Orthodox Church is the most important for the identity, historical duration and path of the Serbian people, since it has preserved their religion, language, culture and state.<sup>405</sup>

On that occasion, Patriarch Irinej mentioned the "tragic and absurd situation in Montenegro", which is no less than Kosovo and Metohija, a classic Serbian country, and that "deceitful and systematic pressures are being used to suppress the Serbian people in Montenegro, with some circles emphasizing the territorial pretensions towards Serbia"<sup>406</sup> He added that "not only has the government there recognized Kosovo and Metohija as an independent state, but it also maintains close relations with the Prishtina authorities, who were members of the terrorist army, and official Cetinje is even extending its hands towards Metohija and saying that it does not belong to Serbia but to Montenegro".<sup>407</sup> The Patriarch also expressed his belief that the President of Montenegro Milo Đukanović will withdraw the recognition of the "fake state" of Kosovo and that he will "return to true values".<sup>408</sup> In Montenegro, his address was perceived as a provocation, especially because he emphasized Bay of Kotor separately from Montenegro. Serbian Patriarch Irinej assessed that the position of the Church in Montenegro is worse than during the Ottoman occupation, and that the status of the Serbs is the same as during the notorious fascist creation of the Independent State of Croatia.<sup>409</sup>

In the last ten years, numerous Serbian politicians have sought the ethnicization of Montenegro and status for the Serbian people,

405 Ibid.

406 Ibid.

407 Ibid.

408 Ibid.

409 <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/407828/Patrijarh-Irinej-Polozaj-Srba-u-Crnoj-Gori-kao-u-doba-fasizma>

which the Albanians in Macedonia have. If they do not conquer Montenegro in its current circumstances, it cannot be excluded that they will declare entities in Montenegro itself in the north, Budva, Herceg Novi and Bay of Kotor. This negates the civic character of Montenegro and keeps the region in a permanent state of uncertainty.

Considering the biography of the leader of the “For the Future of Montenegro” coalition Zdravko Krivokapić, it is undeniable that the influence of the SPC on him being the holder of the list was crucial. Krivokapić is a professor at the Faculty of Theology in Cetinje and the founder of the non-governmental organization “We won’t give up Montenegro”, which was founded by Montenegrin intellectuals with the help of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral after the passing of the Law on Freedom of Religion and Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities.

Preparations for the subjugation of Montenegro have taken many years, and the SPC played a key role in that preparation. Metropolitan Amfilohije, as a man with great authority and influence, played a key role. Or, as Milo Lompar says, he was “driven by his strong anti-communist impulse, an opponent of the regime in Belgrade, but he also stood up for the rights of the Serbian people.”<sup>410</sup>

His views were very conservative with a great, as they say, “feeling of Serbian patriarchal culture”.<sup>411</sup> His political activity was limited to the promotion of clericalism, Greater Serbian nationalism, denial of the Montenegrin nation and the Montenegrin state, reaffirmation of Chetnicism, opposition to European integration, denial of rights of sexual minorities.

Given the clear aspirations of the Serbian Orthodox Church to influence political life in the region, it is still a significant political actor in Montenegro. The withdrawal of the law that was the reason for the clerical protests and the backbone of the election campaign was the first request of the new government, which was

410 <https://standard.rs/2020/11/03/lompar-kako-je-mitropolit-amfilohije-uvrede-prema-sebi-ucinio-nebitnim/>

411 Ibid.

implemented. On the initiative of Dritan Abazović, the fundamental agreement between Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church was signed (2022), with which the SPC took over the sacral heritage in Montenegro. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church is treated as an insignificant political or non-governmental organization and as an attack on the "cultural-religious hearth of Montenegrinness, which is in Serbianness".

## **ECONOMIC INTERESTS OF SERBIA IN MONTENEGRO**

Among other things, the ambition of the new Montenegrin government was to portray Montenegro as an economically unsustainable country, and in that sense, its return under the auspices of Serbia is natural. The first move was the shutdown of the airline company *Montenegro Airlines*, under the pretext that it was insolvent, so that a new airline company "Air Montenegro" would be formed immediately afterwards. The news is that now all flights go exclusively through Belgrade and that Montenegro no longer has independent charter flights, especially during the summer season.

Belgrade is interested in investments in the tourism, real estate, and energy sectors, especially in the Port of Bar. The largest part of Montenegrin media is owned by Serbia, which, with reason, caused concern of a part of the public and the EU. Thus, the Montenegrin media space became part of the "Serbian World" and has been strengthening the influence of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić in the region. All TV with national coverage except the public service are in Serbian hands. The most influential concern Vijesti (TV, newspaper, portal) is in the hands of United Media Group, i.e. Dragan Šolak. Nova TV Adrija is in the hands of Dragan Stojković, and Prva TV was bought by Srđan Milovanović, a figure allegedly close to Aleksandar Vučić. Of the three cable operators, two are in Serbia (Telemach and Mtel). Thus, Belgrade has secured influence in all election cycles and the presidential elections scheduled for 21 March, 2023. Thus, for example, during the

elections in Nikšić, Serbia and President Vučić directly interfered in the election process, sending party activists and funds, and conducting a media “Battle for Nikšić”. This is to be expected in the next elections as well.

In an interview with TV Vijesti, Aleksandar Vučić stated that he wants to open factories in the north of Montenegro and employ hundreds of people in larger cities, such as Bijelo Polje and Berane. He also said that he proudly gives significant funds to Serbian organizations in Montenegro for the preservation of the Serbian script and language, but that he also helped Montenegrins and that he introduced a Montenegrin minority party into the local government in Mali Idoš.<sup>412</sup>

According to data from the Central Bank of Montenegro (CBCG), between 2006 and 2021, total investments from Serbia amounted to more than EUR 600 million, which ranks it among the leading investors in Montenegro, after Russia, Switzerland and Italy. Although the majority of these investments were in real estate, there were significant investments by companies from Serbia in the tourism, telecommunications, energy, and media sectors.<sup>413</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Montenegro is going through a highly turbulent period. The elections held in 2020 did not lead to the desired changes, but the new authorities distanced Montenegro from EU membership. This trend is a consequence of both internal dynamics and, even more so, the external influences of Russia and Serbia.

The development of the situation in Montenegro during the last few years has sent a clear message to both the Montenegrin public and the international community. Clear indications of the direction in which the new government is taking Montenegro have

<sup>412</sup> <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/ekonomija/577936/ekonomski-interes-ili-dio-srpskog-sveta>

<sup>413</sup> Ibid.



been easily overlooked, and it turned out that the malignant influence of Serbia has not yet been curbed.

It is necessary to keep in mind:

That Montenegrin society, like most others in the Balkans, is a maturing society and any blow to the painstaking process of change can lead to regression.

That regression is a consequence of tolerating Serbia and its policy towards the region, in the expectation that it will thus lead it to the European path.

That the presence of Belgrade in Montenegro is becoming more and more aggressive, which clearly indicates the importance that Serbia attaches to it.

That with its policy of "unfinished wars", Serbia is essentially preventing the process of consolidation and normalization of relations in Montenegro.

That without pushing Russia out of the Balkans, stabilization of the Balkans cannot be expected. Without Russian support, Serbia remains on its own.

That the SPC is a state within a state in Montenegro, and under current circumstances, it is advocating the annulment of the Montenegrin state, of Montenegrin identity, of the recognition of Kosovo, and withdrawal from NATO.

That in addition to the necessity of separating the church from the state, it is also important to separate religion from identity. It is necessary to move towards a new conception of identity that is inclusive for everyone equally.

Montenegro's membership in NATO is the only obstacle to Serbian aspirations, but NATO's message in this regard must be clear.

# BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: THE SPOILS OF WAR THAT ARE NOT GIVEN UP

After the United States left Bosnia and Herzegovina to the care of the European Union, the latter missed an opportunity to take major steps towards a prosperous Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although the Dayton Agreement was supposed to end the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it left room for numerous doubts. The West expects Bosnians to go ahead and prioritize the civil option that will bring about change by itself. There were such attempts like the “April package” of constitutional reforms (2006) and “Butmir package” (2009), but all of them were thwarted because, in such situations, local elites co-operate with each other and block the constitution of a civil Bosnia. The government of the Republic of Srpska took a “firm” position on the potential change of the Constitution, although none of the proposals called the survival of the Republic of Srpska into question, while some Bosniak parties demanded the abolition of the entities.

Belgrade blames the Western powers, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, for the breakup of Yugoslavia, pointing out that their goal is the total “capitulation of Serbs”. All previous offers to resolve the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which have primarily come from the European Union, have met without enthusiasm, because both Belgrade and Banjaluka insist on “returning to the Republic of Srpska all the competences stolen from it” or, in other words, on the reaffirmation of the original Dayton principles”. Because, as they point out, Bosnia is only possible “as the confederation of two entities, as it has been conceived”.<sup>414</sup>

414 [http://predstavnistvorsbg.rs/predstavnistvo\\_rs/index.php/sr/aktuelnosti/](http://predstavnistvorsbg.rs/predstavnistvo_rs/index.php/sr/aktuelnosti/)

US Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina Murphy also states that the Dayton Agreement has its flaws and that the United States has been working on their elimination over the past years. However, as he points out, there is nothing – not a single word – in the Dayton Peace Agreement which requires from the leaders to steal, obstruct, refuse to compromise, use inflammatory speech or attack the very constitutional foundation of this country.<sup>415</sup>

Since there has been no consolidation of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a single and functional state, Serbia has been allowed to continue with the realization of its geopolitical interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina – the preservation of the Republic of Srpska and its annexation to Serbia. The Republic of Srpska is considered the only Serbian victory in the wars of the 1990s and is therefore treated as Serbia's foreign policy priority, which is also stated in its Security Strategy (2020). It is geopolitically important for Serbia due to its connection to the Adriatic, geopolitical pressure on Montenegro, prevention of the neo-Ottoman project, gaining possession of the other bank of the Drina and shifting of the “civilizational border” to the West, thus increasing Serbian influence.<sup>416</sup>

Achieving the goals by other means in peacetime implies accepting the Dayton Agreement as the optimal solution in the given circumstances. In the long run, according to Serbia's Strategy on Relations with the Diaspora, this implies gradual economic, cultural and information integration, as well as political integration when the circumstances are right. The former Defence Minister, Aleksandar Vulin, says: “The Drina is a border as much as we want it to be a border. This means that the more we work, the more we are connected and the more we invest in an economic sense, the less the border it will be. The Drina connects us, joins us together”.<sup>417</sup>

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prethodni-dogadjaji/3378-tribina-republika-srpska-vracanje-otetih-ustavnih-nadleznosti-srpska-ce-se-politicki-odbraniti.html

415 <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/murphy-oni-koji-nastoje-srusiti-schmidta-i-ohr-trebali-bi-pazljivije-razmotriti-posljedice/221102048>

416 Dušan Proroković, “Geopolitika Srbije”, *Službeni glasnik*, Belgrade, 2012, pp. 787–798.

417 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-dodik-sastanak-beograd/31583711.html>

## THE REVISION OF HISTORY

Serbia's geostrategic interest so defined also determines its behaviour towards Bosnia. The events of the 1990s and their interpretation as a war of liberation and the "defence of freedom, truth and the national rights of the Republic of Srpska" – remain the main obstacle to the state consolidation of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the normalization of relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

Unfortunately, the manipulation with historical facts in Serbia has already cemented the interpretation of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina which is contrary to historical truth. And all that despite the fact that the Hague Tribunal has issued the greatest number of verdicts precisely regarding the crimes committed by Serbs against Bosniaks.

Ignoring the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and all collected and documented evidence about the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina further complicates the relations in this country, especially the relations between Serbs and Bosniaks. This is dangerous and harmful in many ways not only for Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also for Serbia's democratic progress and European future.

The war of the 1990s is well documented, but its explanation and contextualization are necessary. So far, the attention has only been focused on its consequences, while the entire interpretation has been confined to the presentation of oneself as the victim. Thus, the Serbian interpretation of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is that it was a "liberation war of Serbs" and that Islamic fundamentalism is responsible for the breakup of Yugoslavia (a thesis that was part of Belgrade's propaganda even before the war).

The revision of history extends to the Second World War, so that Ognjen Bodiroga, a representative of the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), requested in the National Assembly of the Republic of Srpska entity that in the Museum of the Battle of the Sutjeska the Chetniks should be treated as partisans, that is, as one of the two

liberation movements, so that the current museum display should be changed in this sense. “We are a proud Serbian nation” and, as he points out, “thanks to us, the Serbs, the other nations got their freedom, so that all other nations have their own countries thanks to us and our stupidity. I want that to be changed”.<sup>418</sup>

## **DODIK STILL EXPECTS THE DISINTEGRATION OF BOSNIA**

The integration of the Republic of Srpska into the cultural, economic and information space has come a long way. The Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space has been signed by the Ministers of Education of the Republic of Srpska and Serbia. The goal is the unification of the education systems of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska.

The Republic of Srpska survives economically thanks to Serbia, its investments and donations. As Prime Minister Ana Brnabić points out, Serbia has invested more than one billion dollars in the Republic of Srpska since 2014 through various projects and donations. It invested 484 million euros until the first quarter of 2022 in the projects carried out by Serbia in the Republic of Srpska (without Sarajevo’s consent), including the Buk Bijela Hydroelectric Power Plant, Bijeljina-Rača road section and Trebinje Airport. In addition to the announced support projects for four municipalities, Kostajnica, Kozarska Dubica, Nevesinje and Drvar, that is, the investments worth 10–12 million euros, Serbia’s investments in the Republic of Srpska amount to 500 million euros. It has been announced that in the coming years Serbia will invest in the Foča and Paunxi Hydroelectric Power Plants operating within the Gornja Drina hydroelectric power system. This implies the investment of 787 million euros during the next several years.<sup>419</sup>

418 <https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/bosna-i-hercegovina/nsrs-zastupnik-sds-a-zatrazio-da-se-cetnici-tretiraju-kao-partizani-u-muzeju-bitke-na-sutjesci/483461>. in the Foča and Paunxi

419 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/pocela-zajednicka-sednica-vlada-srbije-i->

The increasingly insolent attacks on the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Milorad Dodik (President of the Republic of Srpska) and his allies also point to the fact that neither Belgrade nor Banjaluka have given up their intentions. The Russian aggression against Ukraine has been perceived as an opportunity to declare the independence of the Republic of Srpska (which will be immediately recognized by Russia). However, as Russia is experiencing a fiasco on the battlefield, the circumstances for going ahead with such a scenario have also changed. The consolidation of the Western international community and its return to the region to prevent the opening of a second Russian front, has thwarted Dodik's ambitions. Despite being much less present on the public scene, Dodik did not give up his provocations and, in particular, negation of the role of the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Schmidt, as an illegitimate representative.

He has not changed his position that over the past 30 years (since 1990) the pressure on the Serbs in the region and Serbia as the largest country in the Balkans has not stopped and that whatever Serbia has done is not enough and not in accordance with the Western standards. His mentioning of the standards refers primarily to Kosovo because, as he points out, the standards are changed from case to case. The West has allowed that "Kosovo declares independence from Serbia in an unconstitutional way and by one decision, while the Republic of Srpska, which was an independent state both *de facto* and *de jure* from 1992 to 1995, had to and must remain part of Bosnia and Herzegovina."<sup>420</sup>

Referring to the case of Kosovo, Dodik insists on the right of Serbs to self-determination and points out that "we should not wait for various power brokers to give us another hogwash; instead, we should once again look for a solution to the Serbian national question in the Balkans, just as it was solved by the German people in the past."<sup>421</sup>

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republike-srpske

<sup>420</sup> <https://politicki.ba/politika/milorad-dodik-sta-stranci-hoce/31652>

<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

## THE NEW STRATEGY OF THE UNITED STATES AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

The victory of John Biden in the US presidential elections has upset Belgrade due to the expected change of course towards the Balkans, bearing in mind that Biden is one of the few Western politicians who has a very good insight into the period of the 1990s. He has given very precise statements about this period, especially about the Serb aggression in Bosnia, genocide and ethnic cleansing. There have been numerous indications that, together with European Union, Biden will take a coordinated approach in addressing the Balkans, which has significantly raised the region's expectations. The war in Ukraine has only confirmed the determination of the West and, in particular, the United States to finish "unfinished business" in the Balkans.

The arrival of the new High Representative Schmidt in Bosnia and Herzegovina and his first interventions have provoked strong reactions from all sides, both locally and in some international circles. Milorad Dodik, Russia and China have been against his appointment because, as they claim, there has been no international consensus. The Russian Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Igor Kalabukhov, has stated that he does not intend to cooperate with Schmidt "because his mandate has not been endorsed by the UN Security Council".<sup>422</sup>

Schmidt's intervention in the elections in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina with a view to unblocking political life in this entity has provoked negative reactions with the argumentation that he has ignored the electoral will of the citizens by denying them their democratic rights. This has prompted the discussion about the contradictions of the Dayton Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the election campaign and pushed the important life issues of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the background. The debate on the relationship between the civil and the

422 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ruska-ambasada-bih-ne-priznaje-%C5%A1mita-za-visokog-predstavnika/31409551.html>

ethno-national principles of the organization of the state has also been based on this issue.

The process of “ethno-nationalization of society” has become dominant in all post-Yugoslav societies. This means that the whole society is treated as the “property” of the dominant “ethno-nation”. Contrary to the expectations that the post-Yugoslav societies will strive for democratization, they have mostly accepted the authoritarianism of the new political elites. Even when democratic rules are formally observed, undemocratic practice is widespread in the functioning of state and public institutions.

The discussion, however, has not led to any relevant conclusion, nor has it touched on the clericalization of society, as sociologist Ivo Komšić points out in his text. The politicization of religion and clericalization have become a serious problem that undermines the secular framework guaranteed by the Dayton Agreement. Komšić also points out that the work of the state institutions is already subordinated to the demands of faith and religious obligations. The territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, nationalized by the war, has been additionally sacralized with religious symbols and structures that have never existed in those areas. Thus, as he points out, in recent years the strategy of clericalization has served the purpose, that is, the desubjectivization of citizens and depoliticization of political institutions: citizens are deprived of any other identity and subjectivity except religious ones; their rights and freedoms are subordinated to religious obligations; secular ideology is taken away from political parties and clerico-national ideology is imposed; nations are depoliticized and turned into religious groups.<sup>423</sup>

Every year, Milorad Dodik celebrates the 9th of January, the unconstitutional Day of the Republic of Srpska, which is considered as a provocation not only for Bosnia, but also for the international community. The Day of the Republic of Srpska was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina and discriminatory by the Venice Commission. Nevertheless,

423 <https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/809672/komsic-gradjanstvo-i-klero-nacionalizam>



the celebration is still held in Banjaluka every year, but on 9 January 2023 the central celebration was held in East Sarajevo.

It was also attended by the members of radical and extremist groups: apart from Russia's Night Wolves Motorcycle Club, the Chetnik associations in Bosnia and Herzegovina were also present. Among the flags, there were also the flags of the pro-Russian separatist self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic". The Serbian delegation was led by the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dačić. The son of Serbian President Vučić was also present at the celebration. On this occasion, Dodik awarded numerous decorations and one of the recipients was Russian President Putin. Dodik explained such a decision with the following words: "Thanks to the position of Vladimir Putin and the strength of the Russian Federation, the voice and position of the Republic of Srpska are heard and respected and its position is preserved under the onslaught of international interventionism".<sup>424</sup>

The awarding of a decoration to Vladimir Putin was met with indignation by the United States and other Western countries. High Representative Schmidt stated that this will not be possible next year.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The civil potential in the region has been significantly reduced, while ethno-national strategies, which nullify everything that is civil, are at work. The secular framework must be returned to Bosnia, so that the three ethno-national communities can find a *modus vivendi* within the framework of the values incorporated into the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The dialogue must be returned to the institutions. All citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina must contribute to the creation of a new paradigm.

- In order for Bosnia to become a functional state, it is necessary to put an end to the change of borders and

424 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2023/1/9/danas-u-istocnom-sarajevu-obilježavanje-neustavnog-9-januara>

prevent the influence of both Serbia and Croatia. Serbian imperialism is particularly dangerous.

- By reaffirming the existing borders with a firm guarantee by the international community, it is possible to remove the malignant influence of all pretensions, especially Serbian ones; only then can we expect that the three nations in Bosnia turn to their own agenda.
- This also implies the establishment of a state identity because, in the opposite, there remains room for disintegration trends. First of all, it is necessary to strengthen the EUFOR in Bosnia in order to prevent conflicts for which there is a great potential.
- It is necessary for all civil forces, parties and movements in the entire territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina to unite and impose the social and class issues. The dominance of ethno-nationalist priorities conceals the essence of the problems of Bosnia and Herzegovina; it is necessary to have new coalitions that will legitimize citizens.
- It should be borne in mind that the problems and challenges facing Bosnia, the region and Europe do not have ethnic but global answers. Bosnia was synonymous with togetherness that has been broken by crime, ethnic cleansing and genocide. The future of Bosnia will not be resolved without taking into account that legacy.
- The EU *must* single out Bosnia as a *sui generis* case, given the continuous interference of the neighbouring countries. Granting Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status is only the first step.
- The EU policy must focus on the unification of the cultural space of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as on a unified educational programme, because this is the only way to create new elites that will reflect on the future of Bosnia.

# MACEDONIA: GEOSTRATEGIC COMPLEXITY AND VULNERABILITY

Serbian strategists treat the Macedonian question as the central geopolitical issue in the Balkans, because its geostrategic position is the most significant on the entire peninsula.<sup>425</sup> Milorad Ekmečić has repeatedly stressed that “whoever controls the Vardar Valley is the hegemon of the Balkans”. From a strategic point of view, Macedonia is always “together” with Kosovo, which largely explains the NATO intervention because, at the time, it was believed that Milošević was threatening the security of the entire southern wing of NATO with his policies. That is why already in December 1992, Milošević received the so-called “Christmas warning”, and in 1993, the UN Security Council made a decision on the deployment of UN troops in Macedonia, as a warning to Belgrade if it touches Kosovo.

Certain parts of Serbian elites still talk about Macedonia as an artificial communist construct; that is how Dragoslav Bokan, director and writer known for his war engagement in the 1990s, said on TV Happy, on the *Ćirilica* show (2019):

“The entire history of modern Macedonia is a sort of artificial operation, a construct of something that is not the most clearly defined, neither in a church, nor national, nor state manner. That affair with its name is only part of that story that has been going on since 1945, when practically Macedonia was totally de-Serbized and torn away from its own history, so we can say that the First Balkan War is practically inexplicable, unclear, when we look at it

425 Dušan Proroković, “Geopolitika Srbije” (*The Geopolitics of Serbia*), Official Gazette, Belgrade, 2018, p. 753–738.

from the perspective of that indigenous Macedonia in which there is nothing Serbian, nor does it have anything to do with us, it is even part of some anti-Serbian coalition from the moment it received NATO troops and let them attack us. From that perspective, the story of Macedonia is a story of an artificial construction, like Yugoslavia was, and all artificial constructions fall apart just like Yugoslavia fell apart.”<sup>426</sup>

Bearing in mind the complexity and vulnerability of North Macedonia in the geostrategic sense of the Macedonian position (Bulgaria disputes its nation and language, Greece disputes its name, and the influence of the Albanians is also growing) it is considered that Serbia must multiply its activities in Macedonia. First of all, we have in mind the great cultural influence, the strengthening of the Serbian presence on the Macedonian market, as well as investments, political pressure (due to the status of the Serbian minority, but also the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church), along with the strongest possible binding of Macedonia to Serbia, because this strengthens Serbia’s geopolitical position.<sup>427</sup>

Belgrade has been involved in many Macedonian events since the country gained its independence. During the internal turmoil, Belgrade supported the previous Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (from the VMRO-DPMNE party), who was also flirting with Moscow. In November 2018, Nikola Gruevski fled to Hungary via Albania, Montenegro and Serbia, where he was granted political asylum. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić justified himself by saying that Serbia had no legal basis to stop Gruevski because no international warrant had been issued for him.<sup>428</sup>

Belgrade has always counted on Macedonian-Albanian relations as a state of “latent conflict”. However, the Western international community, precisely because of the fragility of North Macedonia and its strategic importance, at one time stopped the

426 <https://360stepeni.mk/stoilkovik-veli-deka-ke-go-prasha-360-stepeni-kogo-da-pokani-za-slednata-svetosavska-akademija-namesto-dragoslav-bokan>

427 Ibid.

428 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-50495419>

Macedonian-Albanian conflict, concluded the “Ohrid Agreement”, and subsequently opened the possibility for its rapid inclusion into NATO (2020). North Macedonia perceives NATO membership as a guarantee of territorial integrity, which puts an end to any possible aspirations towards it. The Ukrainian war accelerated the start of negotiations with the EU, which had previously been delayed for years.

Membership in NATO has a plebiscite support of about 90 per cent of the population of North Macedonia, regardless of nationality or other affiliation. However, Russia reacted harshly, stressing that “forcefully dragging Macedonia into NATO only confirms that the ‘open door’ policy has become an instrument for gaining control over geopolitical territory.”<sup>429</sup> Russia has lost the battle in Macedonia, although it is still trying to recruit supporters in order to maximize its advantage over the West. In this sense, some people from Serbia are acting in the same direction.

Macedonia recognized Kosovo’s independence (2008), and before that, it signed an agreement on defining a common border with Kosovo. Serbia reacted harshly back then and denied hospitality to the Macedonian ambassador in Belgrade.

A crisis in relations also occurred when VMRO-DPMNE protesters stormed the Macedonian parliament building in April 2017 in an attempt to prevent the election of a representative of the minority Albanian party to head the parliament. Among the demonstrators was a member of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), and at the same time an employee of the Serbian Embassy in Skopje, Goran Živaljević. Then the relations fell to their lowest point, the staff from the embassy in Skopje was withdrawn, but quickly returned. Macedonian authorities supported Kosovo’s admission to UNESCO, to which Belgrade again reacted strongly.

Serbian strategists believe that Belgrade has the potential to influence the population, primarily economically, but also through culture, thereby geostrategically linking North Macedonia

429 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net teme/2020/4/3/sjeverna-makedonija-u-nato-u-rusija-spala-na-srbiju-i-entitet-rs>

to Serbia. At the same time, the pressure on the Macedonian state regarding the status of the Serbian community, which very actively participated in the events related to the last elections when it acted together with the Belgrade and Russian secret services, is increasing.

## **SPC AND MPC –THE MOST SERIOUS PROBLEM**

The decades-long dispute (1967) between the two countries (formerly republics within the SFRY) is the issue of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MPC), which the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) has not recognized for decades. There have been several attempts to resolve this issue, but until recently, they all ended in failure.

Many years back, the Macedonian Orthodox Church had been turning to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul for recognition of autocephaly, not the SPC, which finally (2022) recognized the Ohrid Archbishopric as canonical.

The ambition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church was to be granted autocephaly by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. On 9 May, 2022, the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Patriarchate of Constantinople made a decision to resolve the schism regarding the Macedonian Orthodox Church, recognize it under the name Ohrid Archdiocese and only within the borders of North Macedonia, deprive it of jurisdiction over dioceses in the Macedonian diaspora and direct it towards resolving its dispute in talks with the Serbian Orthodox Church. That is, the Ecumenical Patriarchate returned the dispute to the local “mother church”. To the surprise of many, the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Porfirije, recognized (24 May, 2022) the autocephaly of the Macedonian Church under the name “Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric”.

With a reconciliation liturgy in Skopje and Belgrade, “liturgical unity between the SPC and MPC” was established, which means that the conditions have been established for the two churches to

carry out joint liturgies, points out Zoran Čvorović, a professor at the Faculty of Law in Kragujevac.<sup>430</sup> Dejan Srbinovski, a journalist of the Macedonian daily newspaper *Sloboden Pečat*, points out that the very act of joint liturgical service “should be interpreted as reconciliation and readiness to reach a permanent solution”.<sup>431</sup> Andreja Bogdanovski, PhD student at the University of Buckingham (UK), says that, for now, the Serbian Orthodox Church is clear about one thing – “that it gives recognition to the Macedonian Orthodox Church for its existence”.<sup>432</sup>

Historian Aleksandar Raković believes that “after the decision on the canonical unity of the SPC and the MPC, the Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese will be integrated into the MPC, in a brotherly atmosphere, according to the agreement that will be finalized soon. In addition, archbishops and the clergy of the SPC and MPC will serve together in Serbian countries and in the Republic of Macedonia, and the Serbian and Macedonian people will share communion together in Serbian medieval monasteries and churches constructed during the Nemanjić dynasty.”<sup>433</sup>

North Macedonia has yet to discuss its name with the Greek Church, since the Greeks oppose the use of the term “Macedonian”. The Bulgarian Patriarchate also disputes their other name – “Archdiocese of Ohrid”, so the Bulgarian acceptance of the MPC is also questionable.<sup>434</sup>

The act of the Serbian Orthodox Church is only the first step in establishing long-term relations between the two churches, and it will certainly improve relations between the two countries as well. Skopje expects to get full independence. Dejan Srbinovski expects that some problems will arise because the MPC has claims

430 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-61509904>

431 Ibid.

432 Ibid.

433 <https://www.novosti.rs/c/drustvo/vesti/1122660/srbi-makedonci-zajedno-pricesce-aleksandar-rakovic-okoncanju-makedonskog-crkvenog-pitanja>

434 <https://www.novosti.rs/drustvo/vesti/1124222/mpc-jos-nema-potpunu-autokefalnost-uprkos-odobrenju-spc-makedonce-ceka-jos-jedna-runda-borbe-crkvu>

on some SPC facilities in North Macedonia, but also because believers in this country are not sure which church they belong to and are therefore divided.<sup>435</sup>

The potential demands of the Serbian Orthodox Church to establish its own “ethnic” eparchy in Macedonia, within the territory of the announced autocephalous jurisdiction of the Ohrid Archdiocese, would also set a precedent for the Eastern Orthodox Church.<sup>436</sup> In fact, in the upcoming negotiations on the final status of the autocephalous MPC-OA, the Serbian Patriarchate will receive at least one diocese for the Serbs, that is, for its believers in North Macedonia.<sup>437</sup> Two or three medieval monasteries on the land of today’s North Macedonia should receive the status of “Serbian stavropegic monasteries”, “which means that they would be exempted from the MPC-OA eparchy, on whose territory they are located”, and they would be managed directly by the Serbian patriarch.<sup>438</sup>

Sociologist of religion Slobodan Sadžakov says that the decision of the SPC can also be interpreted in the context of the fact that the SPC follows the policy of the Serbian state leadership, which is balancing between the politics of the East and the West: because “now we see efforts to turn the politics of the state of Serbia away from the influence of Russia. In a way, the Serbian Orthodox Church will also have to think about the direction it is going, whether in the direction of a close relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church or for some other type of action”.<sup>439</sup>

435 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-61509904>

436 Ibid.

437 [http://www.parlament.gov.rs/Tre%C4%87a\\_sednica\\_Odbora\\_za\\_dijasporu\\_i\\_Srbe\\_u\\_regionu\\_.40204.941.html](http://www.parlament.gov.rs/Tre%C4%87a_sednica_Odbora_za_dijasporu_i_Srbe_u_regionu_.40204.941.html)

438 Ibid.

439 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/spc-rusija-evropski-parlament/31752307.html>



## SERBIAN COMMUNITY

Notions about how the Serbian people are endangered in all neighboring countries can be found in many documents and especially in the Strategy for Preserving and Strengthening the Relations between the Homeland and the Diaspora and the Homeland and the Serbs in the Region (2011). In this sense, there are numerous reports, as well as statements by politicians, individuals from the academic community... Certainly, the most zealous in monitoring the position of the Serbian people in the neighborhood is the Progressive Club headed by historian Čedomir Antić.

In the report of the Progressive Club for 2021/2022, it is stated that Serbs are relatively satisfied with the legal solutions that define their position in North Macedonia, primarily with the fact that the constitutional changes of 2001 gave them the status of a national minority. With this, they also received the right to financial assistance from the state in implementing the national identity preservation program and marking the celebration of their national holiday (Saint Sava). Serbian language is in official use in three municipalities of northwestern Macedonia. In the last convocation of the parliament, they had two MPs in a coalition with VMRO-DPMNE. The report concludes that "Serbs in this country have been systematically disenfranchised and assimilated, with short breaks."<sup>440</sup>

The report also states that the number of Serbs is decreasing from census to census, but it is expected that with the improvement of relations between the two countries, disagreements will also disappear, especially after the status of the MPC is resolved.<sup>441</sup> According to the 2001 census, there were officially 35,939 Serbs, and in 2021, their number is 23,877.

Retired ambassador Radomir Radenković points out that the minority rights of the Serbian people in North Macedonia have stagnated in recent years, with an uncertain perspective when

<sup>440</sup> <http://www.napredniklub.org/14-izvestaj-o-politickim-pravima-srpskog-naroda/>

<sup>441</sup> Ibid.

it comes to preserving the current level and especially their further improvement. In addition to the involvement of political parties and associations of Serbs in Macedonia, the improvement of the status of the Serbian community implies a greater role of the motherland in solving the key problems it faces.<sup>442</sup>

At the third session of the Committee on the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region (2 February, 2021), it was pointed out that the problems faced by the Serbian community in countries where it is smaller, such as Macedonia, Albania, Slovenia and Romania, are more pronounced than in countries such as Montenegro, the Republika Srpska and Croatia. Ivan Stoilković, president of the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia and a member of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, pointed out: "In order to survive in Macedonia, we must survive as political Serbs," because, as he said, if Serbs rely only on non-governmental organizations, they will be left without political influence in Macedonia".<sup>443</sup>

It should be taken into account that a part of the Serbian community identifies with the Serbian World and that the expulsion of Russian diplomats (2022) was seen as an attack on themselves. Ivan Stoilković, the president of the Democratic Party of Serbs in North Macedonia, said at the time that the Serbs experienced the expulsion of Russian diplomats from North Macedonia as the expulsion of the Serbs, as a policy towards the Serbs... "it is difficult for us, because we have already felt all this ourselves". With this move, as he told Sputnik, "the political elite of the country we live in is trying to ingratiate with America and the West, but they don't see that they won't benefit from it."<sup>444</sup>

442 <https://www.antenam.net/drustvo/religija/246278-srbi-traze-eparhiju-u-makedoniji-i-da-im-porfirije-peric-upravlja-stavropigijama>

443 <https://www.antenam.net/drustvo/religija/246278-srbi-traze-eparhiju-u-makedoniji-i-da-im-porfirije-peric-upravlja-stavropigijama>

444 <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/690388/ivan-stoilkovic-makedonija-srbi-rusi-proterivanje>

## OPEN BALKAN

North Macedonia, together with Serbia and Albania, is part of the “Open Balkan” project. The Open Balkan has the support of the USA, while the EU, especially Germany, insists on the Berlin process, which has been reaffirmed once again. So far, several agreements have been signed that simplify movement between countries, but also facilitate trade, import and export of goods.

Macedonia’s accession to this initiative (2019) can also be explained by the very unfavorable circumstances in which Macedonia has been for years. Primarily, the disputing of its name and the pressure to change the name of its state, as well as the behavior of Bulgaria, which is disputing its language and identity. When it comes to Albanians, the Ohrid Agreement regulates relations that are gradually being built. The stance of the EU, which persistently postponed the opening of accession negotiations, is also important. Due to the aforementioned circumstances, Macedonia was looking for alternative answers, so the Open Balkan was a way out for it in that sense.

The signing of the Agreement on the establishment of centers of culture and information in Skopje and Belgrade (2022) is part of Belgrade’s new policy, which aims to attract North Macedonia to its side.

The fact that Macedonia was part of the former common state, as well as the improvement of political relations between Belgrade and Skopje, also influenced the perception of Macedonian citizens in relation to Serbia. As reported by the state agency MIA, almost 39 percent of the citizens of North Macedonia believe that Serbia is the first choice of friendship, with the USA is in second place with 17 percent, while the EU’s drop in that ranking is interesting, for which only 8 percent voted for this year.<sup>445</sup>

445 <https://n1info.rs/region/istrazivanje-gradjani-severne-makedonije-smatraju-srbiju-najvecim-prijateljem/>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current Western diplomatic offensive in the Western Balkans is a reaction to the Russian aggression against Ukraine and, in connection with this, to the tectonic disturbances in global relations, especially when it comes to the European security framework. In this sense, NATO membership and the beginning of North Macedonia's negotiations with the EU further strengthened the position of the Western Balkans as a Western sphere of interest and largely thwarted the aspirations of the "Serbian World".

Serbia, as the last point on which Russian interest operates, is facing a choice that should definitely consolidate the Balkans. Serbia, as the central and largest country of the Western Balkans, does not cease to be a security risk for all significantly smaller countries in the surrounding area. That is why it is necessary to oblige Serbia to respect all neighbors as equivalent and equal partners.

A change in Serbia's politics implies the renunciation of the "Serbian World" in any form and the renunciation of a policy that has for decades caused all its neighbors to be cautious towards Serbia and its intentions. In this sense, it is necessary to build trust measures in order to normalize relations and ensure the integration of the entire region within the economic and cultural sphere.

# CROATIA: CONSTANT RIVALS

The relations between Serbia and Croatia are crucial for the Western Balkans, above all when it comes to security. The brutal breakup of Yugoslavia left many open questions in the relations between the two countries, especially regarding the interpretation of the events during the war in the 1990s.

Regional relations are one of the main EU accession criteria for the states of the Western Balkans. Relations between Serbia and Croatia are certainly vital when it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bilateral relations were established in 1996, with the signing of the Agreement on Normalization of Relations between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Republic of Croatia. Another 47 bilateral agreements were signed, including: the Agreement between Serbia and Montenegro and the Republic of Croatia on the protection of the rights of the Serbian and Montenegrin minority in the Republic of Croatia and of the Croatian minority in Serbia and Montenegro, signed in 2004; the Protocol on Cooperation in the Process of European Integration between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Republic of Croatia, signed in 2009; the Agreement on Economic Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Republic of Croatia, signed in 2009; the Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure of the Republic of Serbia and the Ministry of the Sea, Transport and Infrastructure of the Republic of Croatia on cooperation to improve the efficiency of railway transport, signed in 2018.

In the second half of the nineties, and especially after 2000, relations between the two countries slowly began to improve, especially after both countries opted for EU membership. During that

period, numerous high-level visits and progress in all areas were recorded. The breakthrough in relations occurred during the term of office of Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, which then continued during the presidencies of Ivo Josipović and Boris Tadić.

However, with the change of the political administration in Serbia, policy also changed. When the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power in 2012, relations between the two countries deteriorated, and during the last few years, at the political level, they were almost cut off. Diplomatic relations barely exist anymore. Croatia's entry into the EU and NATO put an end to Belgrade's territorial aspirations, but the demonization of Croatia as a state created by Ustashe is emphasized daily in the Serbian media. It is claimed that "the more Croatia is in the European Union (Schengen and eurozone), the more pronounced its Ustasha-philias becomes, which the EU turns a blind eye to".<sup>446</sup>

The Zagreb-Belgrade axis is deteriorating while the Budapest-Belgrade axis is intensifying, which increasingly poses a problem for the EU as well, due to authoritarianism and the uncritical attitude of both capitals towards Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

However, economic and cultural cooperation have remained intact without interruptions, albeit not stretching beyond what is necessary towards what is objectively possible.

The issue of Serbian minorities in Croatia and Croats in Serbia is always relevant and instead of being a bridge for cooperation, political relations are often determined by it.

However, during 2022, on the occasion of the 15th "Serbian-Croatian relations" scientific meeting, Milorad Pupovac (Independent Democratic Serb Party – SDSS) and Tomislav Žigmanov (Democratic Alliance of Croats in Vojvodina – DSHV) signed the Declaration on the Cooperation of Serbs from Croatia and Croats from Serbia, which, among other things, states the following: "With this Declaration, we encourage the countries in which we live to, instead of renewing conflict, finally turn towards cooperation for

446 Slobodan Ikončić, *Christmas Fiasco*, Pečat, 20 January 2023.

the purpose of the prosperity of all their citizens, and thus the development of our two communities”.<sup>447</sup>

The fact that the current government has for the first time appointed a minister of human rights for Croatian nationals – Tomislav Žigmanov – is a sign that a change of attitude is in the works. Indicative of the state of relations between Croatia and Serbia is certainly the statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić that President Vučić “asked us to thaw relations with Croatia a little bit”.<sup>448</sup> Before leaving for Zagreb, Dačić said that Serbia would seek better relations in the future “without any belief that we will now change each other’s consciousness and opinions”.<sup>449</sup>

These statements were followed by the first visit of Minister Ivica Dačić to Zagreb at the invitation of the Serb National Council to their traditional Orthodox Christmas reception, where he also met with Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković. Dačić stated that reviving the constructive dialogue between Belgrade and Zagreb, on an equal basis, “is the only way to resolve the open issues that continue to burden the relations of our two countries”.<sup>450</sup> He also stated that the issues should be grouped into three categories: unresolved issues from the past, pursuing common interests and the development of economic relations”.<sup>451</sup>

The meeting between President Vučić and Croatian Prime Minister Plenković at the World Economic Forum in Davos (January 2023), as well as their statements of “hope for better relations” are more than a hint when it comes to truly thawing relations.

447 <https://p-portal.net/deklaracija-o-saradnji-srba-iz-hrvatske-i-hrvata-iz-srbije>

448 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/dacic-vucic-trazio-da-odledimo-odnose-sa-hrvatskom>

449 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/ivica-dacic-na-specijalnom-zadatku-hoce-li-srbija-i-hrvatska-popraviti-odnose-posle-bozicnog-prijema-u-zagrebu/>

450 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/dacic-poseta-hrvatska-bozic/32212364.html>

451 Interview with Ivica Dačić, *Politika*, 15 January 2023.

## THE POLITICS OF HISTORY

The dominance of right-wing nationalist waves on the political scene of both countries impacts any attempt of a critical view of their common history. Unwanted topics in the public discourse of both societies still include their common historical experience (from 1918 to 1991) and addressing their past in regards to the war (from 1991 to 1996).

The revision of history in both countries represents a serious problem in mutual relations. In preparation for the war, Belgrade mobilized the Serbian people in Jasenovac, as a symbol of the suffering of the Serbs in World War Two, but after the war it was used to defame Croatia, as well as the EU and NATO, because they accepted a “fascist creation” as a member state. There are frequent articles in the Serbian media claiming that “the control of history and the politics of genocide are weapons of war against the Serbian people, the only people who at the turning point between the 20th and 21st century dared to defend themselves against the onslaught of global fascism”.<sup>452</sup>

Aleksandar Vulin (in his capacity as Minister of Defense or Minister of the Interior) is at the forefront when it comes to associating Croatia with the Ustashe, along with President Aleksandar Vučić himself, who mentions Croatia every now and then, often unprovoked, like Ivica Dačić and Ana Brnabić.

Vučić reacted particularly violently after he was not allowed to visit Jasenovac, but most of his statements about Croatia were made on Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day (5 August), i.e. the anniversary of the military-police operation Storm. Operation Storm is labelled a crime and a genocide, aimed only at expelling ethnic Serbs. Most of the statements refer to the suffering of Serbs in World War Two, and a link is made with operation Storm, which qualifies as a continuation of the genocide. Vučić repeats every

452 Biljana Đorović, *Srbs are silent while Croatia just does its job*, Pečat, 25 May 2022.



now and then that "Croatia was just doing its job, as it had been doing for decades, since 1941. Nothing has changed there".<sup>453</sup>

The Croatian media often refer to Vučić's speech in Glina in 1995 when, among other things, he said: "Glina and Banija will never be Croatia, they have always been and will remain Serbian!" If the radicals win, you will live in Great Serbia! Cheers!"<sup>454</sup>

Vučić's response to that reminder only affirms the position he expressed then: "I am proud of everything I am, I cannot say everything, but what they are talking about, there is nothing controversial about it. They killed the Serbs who lived there. Let me remind you, you seem to have forgotten what happened in 1995. Serbs did not kill Croats, but Croats killed Serbs. Serbs did not expel Croats from Glina, but the other way around."<sup>455</sup>

Every Croatian-Serbian summer is tumultuous because of the anniversary of operation Storm, which is always described in Serbian media reports as a clear genocide and the biggest violation of international law on the territory of the former Yugoslavia.<sup>456</sup>

There were also conciliatory statements, such as those that the region rests on peace between the Serbian and Croatian people and that there is no more important, urgent or higher interest. That is why, as Vučić pointed out, the Republic of Serbia will make every effort to preserve peace with Croatia and the Croatian people, to invest in stability, but also in the identity of its own Serbian people.<sup>457</sup>

An important role in profiling the campaign against Croatia as a fascist creation is played by the academic community, especially historians who were also propagandists of the war. In this sense,

453 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/sve-zapaljive-izjave-predsednika-vucica-o-hrvatskoj-vi-svaki-dan-odlikujete-one-koji-su-ubijali-srbe>

454 <https://direktno.rs/politika/293246/podsecanje-vucic-srbima-u-glina-1995-ovo-nikad-nece-biti-hrvatska-zivecete-u-velikoj-srbiji-video.html>

455 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/sve-zapaljive-izjave-predsednika-vucica-o-hrvatskoj-vi-svaki-dan-odlikujete-one-koji-su-ubijali-srbe>

456 <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/oluja-zlocin-bez-kazne/1142609/cizmom-gazilivensov-plan-garancije-atak-1995-hrvatska-povredila-medjunarodno-pravo>

457 Ibid.

the historian Vasilije Krestić stands out, who even now claims that “he has no hope that relations between Serbs and Croats can improve in the near future”. “Because,” as he says, the hatred of the Croats towards the Serbs, towards that “concertation of the Orthodox faith”, came about through a long process. It is deeply rooted. Therefore, the process of clearing their mind will not and cannot be shorter, it cannot and will not happen overnight. Serbs, especially Serbian politicians, not only today but also in the future, have to understand that.<sup>458</sup>

Disputes over the past intensified after the Serbian War Crimes Prosecutor’s Office brought charges against four Croatian pilots, who are accused of having ordered the rocketing of a convoy of refugees on the Petrovac road near Bosanski Petrovac and in Svodna during the Croatian military-police operation Storm in August 1995 near Novi Grad.

The cooperation of the prosecutor’s offices of the two countries had once made significant strides and the results were visible after 2000. A draft agreement on cooperation in the prosecution of war criminals was even drawn up, which was supposed to eliminate politicization and the jurisdiction clash between the courts in Croatia and Serbia, but it was never adopted.

During the last ten years, the Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade has focused only on crimes against Serbs, which Chief Prosecutor Svetlana Stojanović highlighted as a priority in her letter of intent. Distrust among the successor states, when it comes to court trials of war criminals, rests on the fear of political abuse of criminal proceedings, especially abuse of the so-called universal jurisdiction.

The Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts adopted a document on the protection of Croatian national interests, in connection with the accession of the states in the region to the EU. In the segment that refers to Serbia, it is stated that Serbia should stop inciting hostility towards Croatia and persecuting Croatian citizens,

458 <https://www.novosti.rs/drustvo/vesti/1144753/hrvate-bole-istine-koje-sam-njima-izneo-prof-vasilije-krestic-sest-decenija-rada-polju-nacionalne-istoriografije>

while renouncing propaganda about Great Serbia. It is emphasized that a demarcation should be made on the Danube and the Croatian cadastral territory and that the Island of Šarengrad under the should be immediately returned sovereignty of Croatia. In addition, the obligations assumed through the signed agreements and arrangements, such as the protection of reciprocal rights of the Croatian minority should be respected, and Croats in Serbia should be provided with free political and cultural organization and action in the same extent to which Croatia enables the Serbian minority to do the same.<sup>459</sup>

The need to define the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Croatia was also emphasized. There is an insistence on the return of data that was taken from the archives after World War Two – the return of the archives of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), the archives of the JNA on the Ways of the Cross, the camps, the Croatian Spring, etc. Serbia is also expected to give back the documentation taken from the Vukovar hospital, as well as to “reveal all the places where Croats were executed during the aggression against Croatia, and the names of those killed”, while allowing them to be buried with dignity. It is emphasized that Serbia should recognize the Bunjevci as a Croatian ethnic identity.<sup>460</sup>

In Croatia, there were no significant reactions to this Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (HAZU) document, but Serbian tabloids and the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) did react to it. The SANU statement emphasizes that SANU members are “surprised by the primitive tone of hatred” in the HAZU document, and that they will not enter the devalued space of retorts with those who shamelessly use the term “Jasenovac myth”. “But it’s good and useful to know what they think!”<sup>461</sup>

459 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/region/hazu-objavila-dokument-o-zastiti-hrvatskih-interesa-pri-pregovorima-s-bih-crnom-gorom-i-srbijom-oko-ulaska-u-eu>

460 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/region/hazu-objavila-dokument-o-zastiti-hrvatskih-interesa-pri-pregovorima-s-bih-crnom-gorom-i-srbijom-oko-ulaska-u-eu>

461 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/sanu-primitivni-ton-mrznje-u-objavi-hrvatske-akademije-2>

## ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Economic relations between the two countries are better than their political relations, which are still burdened by numerous unresolved issues from the past. Croatia belongs to the group of 20 leading investors in Serbia, with around EUR 900 million invested in various sectors, from trade and services to the manufacturing industry. Over the last few years, positive progress has been made in terms of investment by Serbian companies in the tourism and agriculture sectors in Croatia.<sup>462</sup>

The coronavirus pandemic, which hit the Balkan region hard, slowed down growth in economic relations.

According to the data of the Serbian Business Registers Agency, in 2020, 1,039 companies that are majority-owned by Croatian companies and citizens were registered. Data from the Central registry of compulsory social insurance show that Croatian companies in Serbia employ around 10,000 workers. Serbian investments in Croatia (about ten of them) are worth around EUR 50 million. Recently, the situation has been changing for the better, so according to NBS data, direct Serbian investments in the period from 2010 to 2020 amounted to around EUR 109 million. If investments paid from accounts abroad are also included, then total Serbian investments in Croatia amounted to around EUR 350 million.<sup>463</sup>

According to data from the Serbian Chamber of Commerce, trade between Serbia and Croatia has been steadily rising since 2000, and reached its highest volume in 2008, when it exceeded USD 1 billion. During the last few years, it has been at a level between EUR 800 million and EUR 900 million. On the other hand, despite a more or less balanced trade, there is a striking imbalance in the field of investments; it seems, in fact, that the Serbian market is much more open to companies from Croatia than the Croatian market is to businesspeople from Serbia.

462 <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/lat/spoljna-politika/bilateralna-saradnja/hrvatska>

463 <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/476152/Pogledi/Asimetrija-ekonomskih-odnosa-izmedu-Srbije-i-Hrvatske>

Cross-border cooperation is not sufficiently developed, and it could stimulate economic activities, which would affect the economic development of local governments on both sides of the border. Negotiations are ongoing regarding the acceleration of the flow of goods at the Batrovci-Bajakovo border crossings and the continuation of the implementation of the initiative of the two chambers to establish control at the Šid-Tovarnik railway border crossing for goods of plant and animal origin. During the first six months of 2022, mutual foreign trade exchange was 35.4% higher compared to the same period in 2021.<sup>464</sup>

## CULTURAL COOPERATION

In recent years, in addition to the silence and memory erasure that characterizes the polarized relationship between Serbia and Croatia, an anti-nationalist discourse has emerged that reflects two forms of cultural space, which exist in parallel in the context of Serbian-Croatian cultural cooperation. The policy of labeling Serbian and Croatian media in the context of presenting cultural cooperation is multidimensional, which is a reflection of the complexity of the socio-political and cultural context.

The analysis of Brankica Drašković, assistant professor at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, indicates that the dualism between nationalism and anti-nationalism in media discourse indicates the existence, conditionally speaking, of two forms of cultural space that exist in parallel in the context of cultural cooperation between Croatia and Serbia: the spectacularized (majority) and the critical (minority). Both have their own narratives that are reflected in the media. The former is characterized by a fear of the other and an emphasis on differences, hate speech, support for revisionist ideas of politicians, silencing and forgetting the past, while the latter is characterized by acceptance of the other, emphasis on similarities and linguistic understanding, a critical

464 <https://www.ekapija.com/news/3817508/jaca-privredna-saradnja-srbije-i-hrvatske-razmena-uvecana-za-354>

confrontation with the past, resistance to mythologizing and national constructs, as well as a revision of the anti-fascist past.<sup>465</sup>

Objectively, there are no obstacles for further strengthening cultural cooperation, with mutual respect and understanding. However, cooperation on this level does not reflect the needs and potential that it objectively has. The decades-long absence of official cooperation has left profound consequences. Institutional cultural cooperation between Croatia and Serbia is developing slowly, even with the high degree of cooperation between artists (in music, literature, film), which they achieve individually or within the framework of joint projects.

The Ministers of Culture of Serbia and Croatia Vladan Vukosavljević and Nina Obuljen Koržinek met in Zagreb in 2019, when they discussed organizing conferences about Jasenovac in Belgrade, Zagreb and Jasenovac, where historians from both sides would review the facts about that camp. As a good example of cooperation, the exchange of hosting theater performances was highlighted, as well as the establishment of literary and cultural ties within the framework of the exchange of writers, and the possible exchange of selected exhibitions of contemporary art was also discussed.<sup>466</sup>

One of the topics of the meeting was the return of cultural assets from Serbia to Croatia, which has been a stumbling block in cultural cooperation for years. During the war in the 1990s, tens of thousands of items that are considered cultural assets disappeared or were taken out of Croatia, and most of them ended up in Serbia. It was established that the long-term process of returning cultural assets is nearing its end. From Serbia to Croatia from 2001 to 2018, a total of 29,885 movable cultural assets were returned to museums, churches, monasteries and archives, while the remaining

465 <https://www.readcube.com/articles/10.19090%2Fgff.2018.2.103-117>

466 <https://www.danas.rs/kultura/vukosavljevic-u-zagrebu-o-kulturnoj-saradnji-srbije-i-hrvatske>

larger units for return refer to the treasures of the Krk and Šibenik monasteries.<sup>467</sup>

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory of the University of Belgrade organized a discussion entitled “Serbian-Croatian dialogue: Can books cross the border?” Among other things, it was pointed out that the two countries are not in the same political context, because Croatia is a member of the EU, which, in the opinion of the writer Gojko Božović, prevents a greater presence of Serbian literature in it, hindering a greater diffusion of books. On the other hand, he points out, the production of feature television series works very well in the Serbia-Croatia relationship, “actors from there come here, and ours are present there, so that form of subculture also exists. And in publishing, it seems that this situation will remain until Serbia enters the European Union”.<sup>468</sup>

On behalf of the Sandorf publishing house (Croatia), Ivan Sršen warned that “nowadays, market competition is quite pronounced, all of us as private publishers struggle to show whose product is better and more necessary, instead of highlighting culture, appreciation, equality and art. At a time when the paradigm is changing, it is very difficult to compare how things used to be in Yugoslavia to how they are now”.<sup>469</sup>

It should be noted that Serbia’s budget for culture is insufficient. Last year (2022), it was 0.72 percent, while this year (2023) 0.66 percent of the total budget of the Republic of Serbia was allocated for culture. The Croatian government allocates 1.37 percent of its total budget for the same purpose.

467 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29736104.html>

468 <https://nova.rs/kultura/saradnja-srbije-i-hrvatske-na-raznim-poljima-ali-u-izdavastvu-ne>

469 Ibid.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving overall relations and cooperation in all significant areas between Croatia and Serbia is in the interest of both countries and the stability of the entire region. As the leading economies in the region, they should devote themselves to developing positive relations as neighboring countries and strengthening cooperation, which can give impetus to the entire region.

Overcoming the past is the key to establishing normal communication. That is why it is necessary to form a bilateral commission that would lead to a common narrative in a comprehensive and historically accurate way.

The media, especially those in Serbia, should stop politicizing the past and creating a toxic atmosphere that negatively affects younger generations in particular, as well as their viewpoints.

A culture of connection is necessary, bearing in mind the cultural and historical interweaving of the two nations. It can bring out the best for both societies. In this sense, cultural cooperation can most effectively contribute to the restoration of equal and mutually respectful relations.





# SERBIA AND THE GREAT POWERS

While the world is going through fundamental changes, Belgrade is attempting to use its policy of “neutrality” to manoeuvre in a space that is not covered completely by anyone. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who is essentially the sole bearer of the country’s foreign policy, is trying to move within the previously designed policy of relying on the “four pillars” (China, Russia, the USA, and the EU), taking advantage of their respective interests.

The key component of Belgrade’s approach, as Januš Bugajski claims, is two-faced diplomacy. Although it proclaims that it strives for EU membership and closer relations with NATO, Serbia is actually looking to balance the four main powers – Russia, China, the USA and the EU. Its aim is to profit from everyone – diplomatically, economically, and militarily – imitating the strategy of non-alignment of Yugoslavia after Tito’s break with Stalin in 1948. This can also disguise and help the all-Serbian project if Belgrade gets support from the main international powers.<sup>470</sup>

However, this balancing act is becoming increasingly complicated and difficult, given Russia’s isolation from Europe, as well as growing tensions between Washington and Beijing.

470 <https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/bugajski-vucic-uz-podrsku-kremlja-pokusava-da-ostvari-milosevicev-projekat>

# EUROPEAN UNION AND SERBIA: UNFINISHED INTEGRATION

## INTRODUCTION

Serbia has been on the “European path” for more than two decades and has been a candidate for membership in the European Union for more than ten years. In fact, since the beginning of this century, all governments in Belgrade have emphasized EU membership as a strategic goal regardless of their orientation and political ideology. However, despite Serbia’s close economic and social relations with the EU, it seems that even at the beginning of the third decade of this century its EU membership perspective is as uncertain as it was 10 or 20 years ago. Serbian public opinion surveys show that the European Union has never been less popular than in recent years, which is partly due to the unclear and contradictory messages regarding the relations with the European Union which are sent from the top of the government. On the other hand, even after the dramatic geopolitical changes in Europe, which took place after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the European Union still did not fundamentally change its strategy and the pace of integration of the Western Balkan region (WB).

Given below are the phases of the EU enlargement policy as well as the Serbian Government’s attitude towards the reform process, including its need for harmonization with the *acquis communautaire*. Overall, it can be stated that, after the initial enthusiasm, that is, immediately after the period 2012–2014, which was marked by the crucial change of the government in Belgrade and the European Council’s acceptance of Serbia as an official candidate, Serbia

basically “showed an intention to implement reforms” rather than actually do that. Apart from simulated and increasingly slow reforms, we witnessed the building of an authoritarian, non-democratic regime, steeped in corruption and increasingly oriented towards the relations with non-European factors, which has not so far been changed even by the shock of the war in Eastern Europe.

As for the latest phase in the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue, it seems that the leadership in Belgrade is more inclined to fulfil at least some important prerequisites for EU membership. However, it remains to be seen how this will look in practice. When it comes to the substantial political and institutional reforms aimed at adopting the European Union’s *acquis* and values, the previous experiences with the governments led by Aleksandar Vučić do not encourage optimism.

## **INSTITUTIONAL AND ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS OF SERBIA’S INTEGRATION INTO THE EU**

The institutional relations between the European Union and Serbia are based on the Stabilization and Association Agreement, which was signed in April 2008 and has partly been in force since February 2010 (Transitional Agreement) and fully since September 2013.<sup>471</sup>

On the whole, it can be stated that during the last decade Serbia’s trade and economic cooperation with the EU was intensively strengthened, which was accompanied by its financial support. In parallel with the formal process of negotiations on Serbia’s accession, a significant degree of Serbia’s integration into certain EU programmes and policies was also achieved, with the important exceptions such as a common foreign and security policy, as well as the substantive avoidance of the regime to engage towards

471 See about the Stabilization and Accession Agreement in: Vladimir Medović, *Sporazum o stabilizaciji i pridruživanju sa praksom Suda pravde EU*, SG, Belgrade 2011, 154 p.

democratization, giving up populist-nationalist demagoguery or a serious fight against institutionalized corruption and the like.

The Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) envisages the reciprocal removal of trade barriers and the establishment of a free trade zone within a period of six years. Trade liberalization enabled a rapid increase in mutual trade of about three times in the period 2009–2021 (the value of total trade increased from ten or so to about thirty billion euros). During the same period, Serbia's exports to the EU increased even four times. Serbia's exports to the EU accounts for more than 60 percent of its total exports. The coverage of imports by exports increased from about 50 percent (2009) to about 85 percent.<sup>472</sup>

In accordance with the SAA there are the following political and technical bodies in charge of cooperation between the two parties: the (ministerial) council for stabilization and accession,<sup>473</sup> the committee and several subcommittees, as well as a special parliamentary committee for cooperation between the European Parliament and the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia.<sup>474</sup>

In 2021, in the foreign investment inflow of about 4 billion euros, the EU and EFTA countries accounted for about 65 percent. Serbia also has a surplus in its services trade with the EU (the value of the total services trade is about 7.5 billion euros).

The IPA III financial support programme is envisaged for the period 2021–2027 and includes the total funds of about 14.2 billion euros for the Western Balkan region and Turkey. From the previous IPA II programme, Serbia received about 1.4 billion euros (non-refundable) during the period 2014–2020.<sup>475</sup>

472 According to the data of the Federal Statistical Office.

473 The sixth meeting of the SAA Council was held in January 2022. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2022/01/25/>. Retrieved on 4 March 2023.

474 14th meeting of the EP–NA Parliamentary Committee was held in November 2022. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/product/product-details/20221113DPU34383>. Retrieved on 4 March 2023.

475 [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en). Retrieved on 4 March 2023.

Serbia also participates in 13 specific EU programmes that include significant integration areas, such as research and student exchanges (Erasmus), scientific exchange (Horizon), cultural exchange (Creative Europe) and the like.<sup>476</sup>

## **EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY BETWEEN THE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE AND THE LANDSCAPE IN FOG: THE LOST DECADE**

Writing an essay titled *“Europe’s Next Frontiers”* in 2006, the then EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn noted that Croatia should be ready for EU accession around the end of the decade. Some of its neighbours may complete the negotiations in the coming years. All countries of the region could join the EU before 2015 if they work hard on reforms and improve their public administration and economy.<sup>477</sup>

The then Commissioner, originally from Finland, was not known for unrealistic optimism or exaggeration. Although he wrote at a time when clouds were already gathering over the prospects of further institutional progress of the European Union<sup>478</sup> and when the term “enlargement fatigue” had already come into use after the “big bang” in 2004,<sup>479</sup> Rehn only more concretely formulated the expectation that was already expressed at the highest level, that is, at the EU–Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki in June 2003. It was then concluded that all Western Balkan countries are the potential candidates for EU membership and that “the future of the Balkans lies within the European Union”.<sup>480</sup> At

476 <https://www.euzatebe.rs/en/eu-programs>. Retrieved on 4 March 2023.

477 Olli Rehn, *Europe’s Next Frontiers*, CAP, Nomos, Baden–Baden 2006, p. 87.

478 In 2005, the reforms concerning the “European Constitution” were rejected in the referendums in France and the Netherlands.

479 In May 2004, the European Union was expanded from 15 to 25 member states (which was called the “big bang”), mostly from Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia), and the Mediterranean (Cyprus and Malta).

480 [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/)

that time, the then Serbian Prime Minister, Zoran Živković, stated with excessive optimism that “Serbia could theoretically become a member of the EU in 2007”.<sup>481</sup>

Naturally, neither Rehn nor Živković could predict that the European Union would soon fall into an almost continuous “perfect storm”, that is, a series of crises, which would test the resilience of this complex European organization, successively shaken and torn between the debt and the euro crisis (2008), the conflict in eastern Europe, including the one in Ukraine (2014), the migrant crisis (2016), Brexit (2016), the COVID 19 pandemic (2021) and the latest geopolitical upheaval in eastern Europe caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

To these events one should also add the consequences of “post-enlargement digestion” (namely the famous enlargement fatigue) which, all things considered (including the adoption of the Luxembourg Agreement in 2008 as a substitute for the Treaty establishing the European Constitution), coupled with the waves of Euroscepticism and populism in some member states, has substantially changed the atmosphere and redirected the EU leaders’ attention and energy from the external agenda and completion of European architecture to the internal survival issues and search for a complicated consensus among the EU member states. During that period, the enlargement policy lost its priority status, which it had at the turn of the last and this century, namely for a time it almost disappeared from the agenda of the EU’s top institutions. When it comes to new members, the door of the EU was suddenly closed. In these circumstances, Rehn’s optimistic forecast boiled down to one: Croatia succeeded in catching the last train and become a member of the EU in 2013. For the first time, after half a century, during the last decade, the number of EU countries did not

.....  
[misc/76291.pdf](#), Retrieved on 27 February 2023.

481 “Živković: ‘Teoretski moguć prijem u EU 2007. godine’”, B92. Retrieved on 1 March 2023.



increase<sup>482</sup>. The European Union shrank both physically and economically for the first time with the exit of the United Kingdom.

Already after 2006 (parallel to the decision on the integration of Bulgaria and Romania into the EU) and, in particular, in the second decade of this century, the criteria became stricter and more complicated. In other words, the EU enlargement process was slowed down. Although the three basic “Copenhagen criteria” for EU membership were still valid in principle (a democratic political system and the rule of law, economic liberalization and the possibility of economic competition, as well as the appropriate administrative capacity in the candidate country), the 2006 European Council’s conclusions<sup>483</sup> on the “renewed consensus on enlargement” placed an emphasis on the so-called “3C”: the **consolidation** of obligations, fair and *rigorous conditionality* and better **communication** (of the process) – coupled with the requirement related to “the EU’s ability” to integrate new members.<sup>484</sup> *Rigorous conditionality* has been the key term that will exert influence on the substantive slowdown and prolongation of the EU membership negotiations of the Western Balkan countries during the second decade of the 21st century.

The “*renewed consensus*” and “*new approach*” to the EU enlargement policy, added to the EU’s conditionality process, have strengthened the role of nation states in the process itself (especially within the scope of the procedures that enable the use of the veto in various phases of the procedure). The whole process has become more rigid and more technical. “*Instead of bringing*

482 Namely, since the 1970s, the EEC has increased each decade: from 6 to 9 members (1973), from 9 to 12 members (1981, 1985), from 12 to 15 members (1993) and from 15 to 27 members (2004, 2007). In the last decade, the EU decreased for the first time – from 28 to 27 members.

483 The European Council’s conclusions of December 2006: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/92202.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/92202.pdf). Retrieved on 15 December 2020.

484 See, for example, the Council’s conclusions on enlargement, General Affairs Council Meeting, Brussels, 11 December 2012. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES\\_12\\_517](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_12_517). Retrieved on 17 December 2020.

*accession closer to the WB6 citizens, these technicalities have segmented the accession process, offering an illusion of movement while keeping membership prospects as distant as possible.*<sup>485</sup>

Although North Macedonia (2004), Montenegro (2008), Albania (2009) and Serbia (2009) submitted their applications for EU membership during the first decade of the 21st century, even the following decade was not sufficient for the concretization of the accession process of these countries, and even less so for opening the perspective of ending the negotiations. Until 2023, in the enlargement negotiations with the EU, Montenegro practically opened all chapters, but closed only three; Serbia opened 22 of 35 chapters (and two of six clusters), but closed only two chapters; North Macedonia and Albania just opened formal negotiations; Bosnia and Herzegovina was just granted the formal candidate status. None of these countries currently seem likely to become full EU members before the end of this decade.

All things considered, it can be stated that the second decade of the 21st century was a kind of lost decade when it comes to the policy of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans.

By delaying the whole process to such an extent, the political significance of the enlargement negotiations has largely been rendered meaningless, and the EU has somewhat lost that “transformational power” over the candidate states, which was evident at the end of the last century, during the period of the candidacy of Central and Eastern European countries.<sup>486</sup> This was clearly demonstrated in the case of Serbia’s accession process.

485 Florent Marciacq, “The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process Reflecting on the EU Enlargement in Times of Uncertainty”, FES, Dialogue Südosteuropa, Sarajevo 2017, p. 19. See also: V. Međak, “Institucionalne promene u EU i nove procedure u procesu proširenja”, *Spoljnopolitičke sveske*, 01/2019, pp. 19–23.

486 The EU enlargement process in the case of Central and Eastern European countries (the so-called fifth, sixth and seventh EU enlargement) – which is probably the most complex process of a country’s inclusion in an international organization (in the case of the EU it is about a quasi-con/federation of nation states) – lasted between one and slightly more than two political cycles (5–10 years).

## SERBIA AND EU ACCESSION – BETWEEN INITIAL ENTHUSIASM AND “ACCESSION FATIGUE”

When it comes to the process of Serbia's integration into the European Union, its rapprochement with the EU since the beginning of this century can be divided into three major phases:

- The first decade – “post-Milošević period” – included the gradual but rather slow process of Serbia's rapprochement with the European Union. This slowness was the result of a series of the institutional and social complications and problems faced by the then democratic government in Belgrade, unable or unwilling to react to various kinds of conditioning and pressure coming from Brussels and the wider international community.
- At the beginning of the second decade of this century, Serbia's candidacy became concrete. Since 2012, that is, after the coming of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to power and progress made in the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue, it has entered the formal phase of negotiations with the EU. This phase has also meant the continuation and acceleration of the alignment of Serbia's legal system with the EU *acquis*, namely a short-term acceleration of reforms in some sectors.
- Already in the middle of the last decade it turned out that the Belgrade regime had no serious intention to substantially reform the country in the direction of its “Europeanization”<sup>487</sup>. Instead, a populist-nationalist hybrid regime of “stabilitocracy” was developed to which the slow process of negotiations and bureaucratization in acces-

487 In a vast literature on the concept of “Europeanization” see, inter alia, U. Sedelmeier, “*Europeisation*” in E. Jones et al (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of European Union*, Oxford 2012, pp. 825–840. It is characteristic of the “spirit of the times” that in the comprehensive 1,000-page collection from 2012 there is no chapter on “enlargement”, which is mostly mentioned in the context of the “consequences” of the earlier EU enlargement rounds.

sion to the European Union was substantially suited. Thus, the enlargement negotiations became a never-ending process “a la turque” – as has long been the case with Erdogan’s Turkey.

### **THE FIRST DECADE OF THE 21ST CENTURY: INTERNAL REASONS FOR SERBIA’S LAGGING BEHIND IN THE EU INTEGRATION PROCESS**

The first institutional problem that affected the EU accession dynamics in the early phase of negotiations at the beginning of this century was the unresolved issue of relations between Serbia and Montenegro. As a form of (politically) failed federation, the FRY was first transformed into the short-lived State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (2003) and, after the referendum on the independence of Montenegro in May 2006, Serbia adopted a new constitution as an independent state. This situation directly affected the pace and efficiency of the negotiations with the European Union concerning the conclusion of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (the negotiations on the SAA have been prepared since 2003 and started in 2005).<sup>488</sup>

The political assassination of the leading Serbian reformer, Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, in March 2003, had a particularly negative impact on the entire accession process and political situation in Serbia over the long term. Although the assassination had a somewhat short-term effect, namely a temporary relaxation of the criteria for Serbia’s membership in some European organizations (e.g. accession to the Council of Europe) and the opening of Serbia’s negotiations with the EU, it had serious long-term consequences for the situation within the democratic bloc and the overall orientation of Serbian society in the 21st century.<sup>489</sup>

488 See: Tanja Mišćević, “Pregovori Srbije i Uu za zaključenje sporazuma o stabilizaciji i pridruživanju”, in: S. Samardžić, *Srbija u procesu pridruživanja Evropskoj uniji*, Službeni glasnik, Belgrade 2009, pp. 147–167.

489 Latinka Perović, *Dominantna i neželjena elita, Zoran Đinđić*, Dan Graf, Subotica 2022, 93 p.

One of the important factors of slowing down the process of negotiations between the EU and Serbia has been the issue of Serbia's cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague. The negotiations on the conclusion of the SAA were thus suspended from May 2006 to June 2007. However, it was initialed in November 2007 and signed in April 2008.<sup>490</sup> It is characteristic that the SAA envisaged a six-year transitional period for trade liberalization (i.e. the creation of a common free trade area, namely a substantive integration of the Serbian market). According to the then Serbian political leaders, this was roughly the deadline by which they should have met the requirements for EU membership (the transitional period ended on 1 January 2014)<sup>491</sup>.

Finally, the factor that has so far had a significant impact on the further process of Serbia's relations with the European Union is the unilateral proclamation of Kosovo's independence in February 2008. This decision, which has been supported by the majority of EU member states, but not all of them (five EU member states did not recognize Kosovo's independence until 2023), has made the further relations between Serbia and the EU substantially more difficult. It has also substantially contributed to the status and evolution of political relations in Serbia itself. Since 2011, the EU has been playing the role of a "mediator" or "facilitator" in the dialogue that has formally been linked to Serbia's progress towards the European Union (the so-called Chapter 35) since the beginning of its accession negotiations.

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, in addition to the conclusion of the SAA, Serbia made two important steps in its progress towards EU membership:

490 A transitional agreement, based on the SAA, had been in force since December 2009, while the SAA itself has been in force since 1 September 2013.

491 According to the statement made by Miroslav Labus, the then Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia and head of the delegation for accession negotiations with the EU, in 2006, "Srbija će biti spremna za članstvo u EU 2012. Godine", <https://www.ekapija.com/news/46806/labus-srbija-ce-biti-spremna-za-clanstvo-u-eu-vec-2012-godine>. Retrieved on 1 March 2023.

- In December 2009, the EU abolished the obligation for RS passport holders to have tourist visas, which had a very positive impact on the Serbian public.
- In the same month, on 22 December 2009, Serbia submitted a formal application for EU membership.

In October 2011, the European Commission pointed out that Serbia could substantively align its legislation with the EU membership requirements within five years. Thus, it proposed the opening of accession negotiations with Serbia, subject to progress in its dialogue with Pristina. In 2012, the previous “technical dialogue” between Belgrade and Pristina was changed into a “high-level dialogue” between the Presidents or Prime Ministers of the two parties with the mediation of Catherine Ashton, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

The European Council has approved the beginning of negotiations with Serbia in three steps, which have been directly linked to the progress of the Brussels dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. Thus, Serbia obtained the status of an “official candidate” for EU membership in March 2012.

In June 2013 (after the conclusion of the so-called “First Agreement on the Principles of Normalization of Relations Between Belgrade and Pristina” in April 2013), the European Council made the decision on the “opening of negotiations” on Serbia’s accession with a delayed effect, that is, effective as of January of the following year. Finally, in December 2013, the EU Council adopted a “negotiating framework” for the negotiations that began with the first EU-Serbia Intergovernmental Conference (in January 2014).

## THE SECOND DECADE OF THE 21ST CENTURY: THE RISE OF POPULIST STABILITOCRACY INSTEAD OF THE PROCESS OF EUROPEANIZATION

In the period between Serbia's application for EU membership (the end of 2009) and the European Council's decision on the opening of the negotiations on Serbia's accession to the EU (2013), two internal factors in Serbia had a significant and long-term impact on the pace of negotiations: in May 2012, in the presidential election, the candidate of the Serbian Progressive Party, Tomislav Nikolić, defeated the current President, Democrat Boris Tadić. At the same time, in accordance with the results of the parliamentary elections, the new Government of the Republic of Serbia was formed. It was dominated by the victorious Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which was led by Aleksandar Vučić. Over time, the rule of Aleksandar Vučić, the leader of the ruling party since 2012 and successively the "First Deputy Prime Minister", Prime Minister (2014) and President of the Republic of Serbia (since 2017), will acquire the increasingly authoritarian characteristics. At the same time, regardless of its negotiations with the EU, Serbia will turn into an "enslaved state", burdened with corruption and the obvious weakening of democracy and the rule of law, coupled with the strengthening of intolerance and, in particular, social divisions.

In the same year 2014, when the first intergovernmental conference of the EU and Serbia was held, the then candidate for the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, speaking ahead of the vote, presented his political guidelines at the European Parliament plenary session (July 2014). He stated that during his five-year mandate "there will be no enlargement of the European Union". According to him, *"As things now stand, it is unconceivable that any of the candidate countries we are now negotiating with will be able to meet all the membership criteria down to every detail by 2019"*. Pointing out that the ongoing negotiations will continue, Juncker somewhat softened his position by stating that European countries and, in particular, the Western Balkans should have a *"credible European perspective"*. This undoubtedly did not



help boost enthusiasm for reforms in the candidate and potential candidate countries in the Western Balkans. This was not changed after Juncker's later proposal (2018) to set a time-based goal (2025) as a tentative date for the "leading candidates" (Serbia and Montenegro) to become EU members. This date was tacitly rejected by the EU member states at the EU–Western Balkans Summit held in Sofia (2018).

In 2014, instead of the full integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU (as was previously announced) on the occasion of marking the Sarajevo Centennial and the beginning of the First World War, the German Chancellor launched the so-called Berlin Process, which was some kind of political track for the Western Balkan countries in a broader context, but was totally separate from the enlargement negotiations with the EU.<sup>492</sup>

During 2014, Aleksandar Vučić further consolidated his power after extraordinary parliamentary elections where his Serbian Progressive Party won 48 percent of the votes and an absolute majority in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. During this period, Vučić continued to use the mechanisms and technology of power that enabled him and his party to dominate Serbian politics and state and local authorities, as well as to control economic resources. During the period 2012–2022, parliamentary elections in Serbia were organized even five times. The practice of imposing some kind of state of emergency (such as extraordinary elections and frequent government reshuffle) was widely used at the institutional and non-institutional levels such as, for example, keeping the greatest number of officials in the state administration or directors of public companies in the status of acting director for years.

According to a sociological analysis dealing with the "industry of populism", as the explanation of Aleksandar Vučić's system of rule, it is about a specific mechanism aimed at destroying public critical thinking (through dependent media) and the integrity

492 On the Berlin Process see: <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/about-berlin-process>. Retrieved on 4 March 2023.



of state institutions with a view to preserving a form of personal rule. This includes the following elements and processes: deinstitutionalization (the lack of integrity of institutions), deideologization/politicalness (neutral or negative views on politics and/or involvement in the public), development of the cult of personal power, departization (political parties have no financial, organizational and personnel capacities and a great number of them have been registered under the Law on the Associations of Citizens), as well as encouraging the narrative of power and informality which dominates the narrative about the rule of law, namely encouraging the narrative of conflict and labelling government critics and political rivals<sup>493</sup>.

Since 2014, according to the *Freedom House* assessment, Serbia's overall democracy score has been declining each year (its total score dropped from 55 percent in 2015 to 46 percent in 2022). In 2019, Serbia was moved from the "partial democracy" to the "hybrid regimes" category.<sup>494</sup>

In that sense, according to the corruption perception index (CPI), which is reported by *Transparency International*, Serbia's CPI score dropped from 42 in 2013 to 36 in 2022 or, in other words, slipped down to 101th rank among the 180 countries in the Index, scored in terms of public sector and social corruption<sup>495</sup>.

According to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index for individual countries, Serbia dropped from 20th rank in 2014 (score 7.51) to 33rd rank (score 6.48) among the 137 countries in the Index.<sup>496</sup> In these reports it is emphasized that frequent election cycles had a negative impact on the country's reform process. Serbia is faced with "serious challenges" when it comes to the rule of law, media

493 Zoran Gavrilović, *Industrija populizma*, BIRODI, 2020, p. 60. [INDUSTRIJA-POPULIZMA-fin.pdf \(birodi.rs\)](#).

494 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2019>. Retrieved on 4 March 2023.

495 In 2013, Serbia was ranked 72nd, that is, it lost thirty or so places in ranking in ten years. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/srb>. Retrieved on 4 March 2023.

496 [bertelsman.country\\_report\\_2022\\_SRB.pdf](#). Retrieved on 4 March 2023.

freedom, participative democracy and inclusive political dialogue between the ruling parties and the opposition”.

According to the V-Dem Institute, during the period 2012–2022, Serbia was transformed from a liberal democracy into an “electoral democracy”, thus belonging to a group of 10 countries which, during the decade, showed the least favourable trend leading to the establishment of an authoritarian non-democratic regime.<sup>497</sup>

On the whole, if all these assessments and analyses are considered in terms of the three Copenhagen criteria for EU membership, it can be stated in general that during the ten-year accession negotiations Serbia actually backslid when it comes to the first – political – membership criterion. On the other hand, Serbia made some progress when it comes to the second – economic – criterion. Finally, it mostly stagnated when it comes to the criterion related to the quality, competence and ability of the public administration to adopt the entire EU acquis.

## **NEGOTIATIONS ON SERBIA'S ACCESSION TO THE EU: WILL ACHILLES OVERTAKE THE TORTOISE?**

The EU's negotiating framework for negotiations with Serbia, adopted at the first EU–Serbia Intergovernmental Conference (21 January 2014),<sup>498</sup> included the changes that the EU introduced after its experience with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This primarily referred to greater insistence on the crucial importance of respecting the rule of law, that is, Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security). Thus, in Item 24 of the Negotiating Network there is a “balance clause” which anticipates that the negotiations can be suspended in any of 35 negotiating chapters if there is no enough progress in

497 [V-dem\\_democracyreport2023\\_lowres.pdf](#). Retrieved on 5 March 2023. This group of European countries includes Poland, Hungary and Turkey.

498 <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/AD%201%202014%20INIT/EN/pdf>. Retrieved on 2 March 2023.

Chapters 23 and 24. In addition, the EU insisted on the opening of these chapters in the early phase of accession negotiations, that is, at one of the first EU–Serbia inter-governmental conferences.<sup>499</sup> Likewise, the European Commission was obliged to regularly submit special reports (twice a year) on the progress made with respect to these two chapters.

The similar procedural rules were also established by the Negotiating Framework dealing with Chapter 35, which includes the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. The Framework anticipates that the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue process “*should gradually lead to the comprehensive normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, in the form of a legally binding agreement by the end of Serbia’s accession negotiations*”. A delay in this process may prompt the EU to postpone or suspend the opening of other chapters in accession negotiations.

For its part, Serbia announced at the beginning of its negotiations with the EU that it would align its entire legislation (with the exceptions that should be agreed upon during the accession negotiations) with the *acquis communautaire* until 2018<sup>500</sup> in order to be ready for membership until 2020 at the latest. However, this turned out to be one of the many unfulfilled promises made during the rule of Aleksandar Vučić.<sup>501</sup> The enthusiasm of the authorities for aligning with the EU *acquis* quickly waned. Thus, the Government prescribed its goals within the National Programme for the Adoption of the *Acquis* (NPAA), which have never been achieved, while the realization of the programme was continuous-

499 Chapters 23 and 24 were opened at the 3rd EU–Serbia Intergovernmental Conference, 18 July 2016. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/07/18/fac-serbia-accession-conference/> Retrieved on 2 March 2023.

500 [https://www.atvbl.rs/prijem-za-diplomatedacic-srbija-spremna-za-eu-do-2018?yop\\_poll\\_tr\\_id=&yop-poll-nonce-6\\_yp57d0e1184397c=222531a886](https://www.atvbl.rs/prijem-za-diplomatedacic-srbija-spremna-za-eu-do-2018?yop_poll_tr_id=&yop-poll-nonce-6_yp57d0e1184397c=222531a886). Retrieved on 5 March 2023.

501 A. Vučić: “Our goal is to finish everything that is up to us by 2018 and then it will no longer be up to us whether we will be admitted to the EU in 2020.” See: <https://www.istinomer.rs/izjava/nisam-rekao-da-cemo-sigurno-u-eu-do-2020/>. Retrieved on 5 March 2023.

ly declining. At the end of the third quarter of 2019, the degree of the realization of the programme was 49 percent<sup>502</sup>.

During the first two years, after the beginning of the EU–Serbia accession negotiations, two or three<sup>503</sup> intergovernmental conferences (IGCs) were held every year and two chapters were opened at each of them. The first two chapters (32. Financial Control and 35. Other Issues /dialogue with Pristina/) were opened on 14 December 2015, almost two years after the formal opening of negotiations. Chapters 23 and 24 were opened on 14 June 2016. This rhythm, which could not be considered ambitious (since it implies that all 35 chapters could be opened after six to eight years after the beginning of the negotiations at the earliest) was preserved during the period 2015–2018. Already in 2019, there was a slowdown: two intergovernmental conferences were held whereby the pace of opening the chapters was reduced to only one chapter per conference. Until the adoption of a “new negotiation methodology” (in Febru

ary 2020), Serbia had opened a total of 18 chapters and had temporarily closed two at 11 intergovernmental conferences, which had been held until then. The last chapter was opened according to the old methodology in December (4. Free Movement of Capital). In 2020, not a single chapter was opened, which was a clear but belated consequence of the increasing departure of the Belgrade regime from the basic EU principles and values.

A survey of the (non-)advancement of reforms in Serbia during the accession negotiations can also be found in the official “progress reports” – written in a more subtle, bureaucratic language – which the European Commission publishes every year in the context of the EU enlargement policy.<sup>504</sup> The European

502 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/korak-napred-nazad-dva-evropske-integracije-srbije-2016-2020/>. Retrieved on 4 March 2023.

503 Only three intergovernmental conferences were held in 2017.

504 See the last report in: European Commission, *2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy ; Serbia 2022 Report*, Brussels, 12 October 2022 SWD(2022) 338 final.

Commission's reports do not reveal any progress in Serbia's readiness to fulfil all requirements for EU membership as of the period that already started in 2016. "*The level of Serbia's readiness for EU membership has virtually stagnated since 2016, with marginal variations of  $\pm 0.03$* ".<sup>505</sup> In numerical terms, this level is 3.03 on a scale of 1–5. Even after eight years of negotiations, the two most important chapters related to Cluster 1 (Fundamentals), which include judiciary and security (Chapters 23 and 24) are still at "a certain level of readiness for membership" (i.e. 2 on a scale of 1–5).

The *new methodology* within another EU enlargement strategy, which was adopted by the European Commission under the presidency of Ursula Van der Leyen in 2020, at the initiative of France, has not yet significantly accelerated the negotiations. The document on a "new methodology" has additionally redirected the accession negotiations from their final goal (full membership) to a technical methodology that can enable a phasing-in integration of the candidate countries in certain sectors. The vision of a road map for the full membership of the Western Balkan countries (including the so-called leading countries, Montenegro and Serbia), based on the case of a new methodology, has been omitted.<sup>506</sup>

As of December 2021, seven years after the opening of the first chapter, 13 intergovernmental conferences have been held and Serbia has opened 22 chapters. Chapters 14, 15, 21 and i 27, that is, Cluster 4, were opened on 14 December 2021, according to the new methodology. In 2022, no intergovernmental conference was organized nor were new chapters opened. This illustrates the new phase of "slowing down" the EU–Serbia negotiations that are still formally going on. In 2022, apart from the issue of reforms, this

505 <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/izvestaj-ek-2022.pdf>. Retrieved on 4 March 2023.

506 European Commission, *Communication, Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*, Brussels, 5 February 2020 COM(2020) 57 final, 8 p. The commentary in: Marko Milenković, "EU Enlargement Strategy 2020 – Paving the Way for Differentiated Integration?", SIOI, Bologna, [https://www.osorin.it/uploads/model\\_4/.files/54\\_item\\_2.pdf?v=1608022440](https://www.osorin.it/uploads/model_4/.files/54_item_2.pdf?v=1608022440), Retrieved on 18 December 2020.

slowdown was primarily prompted by Serbia's attitude towards the war in Ukraine, caused by the Russian aggression.

Stagnation in the implementation of reforms and accession negotiations was also reflected in the increasingly critical and negative views on Serbia in the European Parliament's resolutions in the last period, which was followed by criticism in 2022 and 2023 due to Serbia's attitude towards the war in Ukraine and sanctions against Russia.<sup>507</sup>

As for the dynamics of alignment with the *acquis*, two more issues, which are closely linked to the attitude towards the Union, have arisen in Serbia. On the one hand, the views expressed by the top officials in Belgrade and, in particular, the media under their control have become increasingly populist, nationalist and frequently openly anti-European. This trend culminated at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020.<sup>508</sup> At the same time, the attitudes of the Serbian public opinion towards the EU became more and more reserved or negative. Support for Serbia's entry into the EU, which exceeded two-thirds of positive views on it in 2008, has dropped to below 50 percent since 2022.<sup>509</sup> This trend has certainly been influenced by the long duration of enlargement negotiations. According to some surveys, the attitude towards the imposition of sanctions against Russia after its aggression in Ukraine also had a negative impact on the Serbian public opinion. According to some surveys conducted in 2022, it was the first time that the majority of Serbian citizens was against the country's entry into the EU,<sup>510</sup>

507 See the European Parliament's Resolution of 6 July 2022: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0284\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0284_EN.html). Retrieved on 5 March 2023, as well as Items 116. and 117 of the Resolution on the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0009\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0009_EN.html). Retrieved on 5 March 2023.

508 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Izvestavanje-medija-u-Srbiji-o-EU-u-2020.-Ljubav-iz-Kine-i-samari-iz-Brisela.pdf>

509 According to the official surveys of the Ministry of European Integration, the public support level was 54% (2019), 49% (2020), 54% (2021) and 43% (2022). <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/srbija-i-eu-sta-nam-zapravo-govore-istrzivanje-javnog-mnjenja/>. Retrieved on 5 March 2023.

510 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/prvi-put-u-istoriji-vecina-gradjana->

which was interpreted as the consequence of the EU's pressure on Serbia over Kosovo and the imposition of sanctions against Russia.

Although Serbia officially joined the United Nations in condemning Russia's aggression, it avoided to align with the EU statements and imposition of sanctions against Russia, as part of its obligation to align with the EU's common foreign and security policy in accordance with Chapter 31. In its 2022 report, the European Commission stated that Serbia was *backsliding* within the scope of negotiating Chapter 31.

## **CONCLUSION: TOWARDS THE COMPLETION OF THE "JOB" OF INTEGRATING SERBIA AND THE WESTERN BALKANS INTO THE EU**

In conclusion it can be said that there is still a number of requirements that should be met in order to open up the possibility for making progress and complete Serbia's accession negotiations with the EU, probably by the end of this decade. It is about the issues of internal reforms, progress in the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue, alignment of Serbia's foreign policy with the Union's common foreign and security policy (sanctions against Russia), as well as the improvement of relations with the neighbours, especially the EU members such as Croatia.

- Although Serbia fulfilled one of the important criteria set out in Chapter 23, namely building an independent judiciary, after the referendum on amending the Constitution, which was held at the beginning of 2021, this is certainly not sufficient to change the impression from the regular reports of the European Commission and analyses by numerous international NGOs about the stagnation, namely the backsliding of the process of Serbia's reforms and Europeanization. Certain personnel

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[srbije-protiv-ulaska-u-eu/](https://www.srbije-protiv-ulaska-u-eu/). Retrieved on 5 March 2023.

changes in the Serbian Government (i.e. the change of the Minister for European Integration and others)<sup>511</sup> have yet to show the extent to which they hint at a new pro-European strategy, which was also announced during the formation of the previous governments.

- The issue of progress in the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue, which was hinted at after the Brussels meeting between President A. Vučić and Prime Minister A. Kurti at the end of February 2023,<sup>512</sup> remains the key element of both internal changes in Serbia in the coming period and the adaptation of its foreign policy, which has been burdened with the issue of Kosovo’s unilaterally proclaimed independence for a very long time.
- Progress in the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue will probably facilitate Serbia’s orientation towards the alignment of its foreign policy with the EU common foreign and security policy, especially when it comes to the relations with Russia and (to a lesser degree) China.
- Finally, Serbia’s regional policy and good neighbourly cooperation, which has made progress on some issues,<sup>513</sup> should be continued and improved. This especially refers to bilateral relations between Serbia and Croatia, which have mostly stagnated or deteriorated in recent years.

On the other hand, it is obvious that one of the requirements is also the appropriate reform of the accession process, namely a broader framework of the decision-making process in the European Union. In recent years, it has been burdened not only with enlargement fatigue, but also with some kind of “nationalization”

511 <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/ovo-je-nova-vlada-srbije/>. Retrieved on 5 March 2023.

512 [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-press-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-after-high-level\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-press-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-after-high-level_en). Retrieved on 5 March 2023.

513 For example, when it comes to the attitudes towards Hungary or Albania, including specific regional initiatives such as the Open Balkans and the like.



of enlargement negotiations (as has been especially shown by the attitude of Greece and Bulgaria towards the candidacy of North Macedonia). In their visions of EU development French President Macron and German Chancellor Scholz<sup>514</sup> have linked the issue of the EU's further enlargement with the issue of its institutional reforms, which is currently not supported by a significant number of smaller and medium-sized EU member states.

For now, the proposals concerning the setting of a closer target date by which the EU membership negotiating process could be completed for at least some Western Balkan countries,<sup>515</sup> have not been supported by the majority of EU member states. Therefore, the situation concerning Serbia's accession negotiations with the Union is completely open and still uncertain. Given the past experience, we can anticipate several different scenarios for the continuation of the process during this decade:

- **Status quo** scenario: The dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina will not really progress and, as before, will be interrupted by occasional crises in Kosovo. Serbia will continue to simulate reform (one step forward one step back), which will be accompanied by the gradual opening of negotiating clusters and financial support as before (IPA III, namely IPA IV after 2027). The implementation of the new (phasing-in) methodology of accession negotiations will enable Serbia and other Western Balkan countries that are included in the negotiations to be

514 <https://www.dw.com/en/olaf-scholz-maps-out-response-to-europes-turning-point/a-62958853>. Retrieved on 5 March 2023.

515 In addition to the previously mentioned proposal of the European Commission that the negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia should be finished about 2025, we must also mention Slovenia's more recent initiative which, during its presidency of the European Union (Brdo Summit), proposed the year 2030 as the target date, but it did not receive wider support. Finally, it is also necessary to mention Enlargement Commissioner Várhelyi who indicated at the beginning of his mandate that, by its end (2024), the accession negotiations should be completed with at least one of the countries that have advanced in the negotiating process (in other words, with Montenegro or Serbia, which no longer seems realistic).

more involved in some of the EU's internal policies (for example, the internal market, transport, infrastructure and the like), coupled with an active role in the "European political community", Berlin Process and other forms of regional cooperation;

- **Optimistic scenario** – Progress in dialogue and alignment with a common foreign and security policy as well as a more radical reform policy (including a change in the character of the current government) will enable Serbia to be included in most of the EU's internal policies by the end of the decade and achieve the partial institutional membership of the EU (observation status), with a perspective of completing the negotiations and attaining full EU membership around 2030;
- **Negative scenario** – Serbia will reject the further negotiations on its dialogue with Pristina and try to implement an alternative foreign and economic policy with the support of non-European powers (China, Russia, some Arab countries, Turkey). Accession negotiations will formally be slowed down or terminated. Serbia will face a specific political marginalization in the region and in Europe. The regime's authoritarianism will become even stronger.

## ENCLOSURE: TIMELINE OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN SERBIA AND THE EU

**5 October 2000:** Democratic changes in Serbia.

**8 October 2000:** President of the FRY Vojislav Koštunica invited to the EU Summit in Biarritz (French presidency); the FRY embarks on the stabilization and accession process.

**June 2003:** Thessaloniki Summit, the European future of the Western Balkan countries confirmed on the basis of the progress made by each of them; the “regatta” principle confirmed.

**10 October 2005:** The beginning of the negotiations on the conclusion of the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the European Union and Serbia and Montenegro.

**29 April 2008:** Stabilization and Association Agreement between the European Union and Serbia was signed (Transitional Trade Agreement /TTA/ was signed along with the SAA).

**19 December 2009:** The visa-free regime with the EU for Serbian citizens entered into force.

**22 December 2009:** Serbia submitted an application for EU membership.

**12 October 2011:** Giving its opinion on Serbia’s candidacy, the European Commission recommended that Serbia be granted the status of a candidate for EU membership and that membership negotiations be opened as soon as Serbia makes progress in its dialogue with Pristina.

**1 March 2012:** The European Council made a decision to grant Serbia the status of a candidate for EU membership.

**19 April 2013:** “First Agreement on the Principles on the Normalization of Relations” was adopted as part of the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue.

**28 June 2013:** At their meeting in Brussels, European leaders decided that EU accession negotiations with Serbia should begin in January at the latest.

**1 September 2013:** The SAA came into force.

**21 January 2014:** Brussels hosted the first intergovernmental conference between Serbia and the EU.

**2014–2019:** There were 11 EU–Serbia intergovernmental conferences at which 18 negotiation chapters were opened (two were closed).

**June 2021:** At the 12th EU–Serbia intergovernmental conference a new methodology of negotiations was adopted (by clusters).

**14 December 2021:** At the 13th Intergovernmental Conference it was decided to open Cluster 4 – “Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity” (with a total of 4 chapters).

# SERBIA AND CHINA: UNEQUAL YET (STILL) CLOSE PARTNERSHIP

The war in Ukraine and its outcome (whatever it may be) will change the geopolitical map of the world and distribution of its key actors.

The unified response of the Western, Euro-Atlantic community to Russia's brutal aggression and the tightening of its ranks, is important, but is not the only characteristic of the new realignments, groupings and potential alliances aimed at strategic positioning in the new circumstances (the virtual BRICS summit in June, US President's visit to the Middle East, tripartite meeting of the leaders of Russia, Iran and Turkey, also in July...).

When it comes to that, almost all analyses point to China as the possible "winner" of the world order crisis. It did not contribute to its outbreak in any way, but will definitely try to extract the maximum (not only economic) benefit from someone else's mistakes: "The biggest geopolitical change of this century will come from China, not from Russia", said former British Prime Minister Tony Blair these days, calling it "one of the most important turning points in history".<sup>516</sup>

At the June NATO Summit in Madrid, where all members unanimously stood behind the United States, Russia was declared the "main threat" and China "the biggest challenge".<sup>517</sup>

How the Euro-Atlantic community will deal with this challenge in the future will certainly affect Serbia in some way. Namely, China has close relations with Serbia, despite being incomparably bigger and more powerful. They are even tied by two strategic

<sup>516</sup> *Politika*, 18 July 2022.

<sup>517</sup> *Danas*, 1 July 2022.

partnership agreements,<sup>518</sup> big Chinese investments in infrastructure and industry, as well as the personal friendship of President Xi and Vučić (who often calls the head of the Chinese state and party “Brother Xi”). The pressure on Serbia, due to the “malignant influence” of its Far Eastern partner (now somewhat fallen into the shadow due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine), will depend on the assessment of the harmfulness of those relations on the Balkan and European stability. That such pressures already exist was confirmed in November by the newly elected head of diplomacy, Ivica Dačić, after a meeting with the delegation of the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>519</sup>

Of course, under the assumption that Serbia does not give up its aspiration to become an EU member, which is its proclaimed geostrategic aim.

The authoritarian regime of Chinese President Xi Jinping who, as the head of state and party (CPC), has comprehensive control over social, economic and political life in the country, is an ideal model of state and society governance for Aleksandar Vučić and the increasing number of authoritarian rulers in the world. When it comes to Serbia, as shown by the latest public opinion surveys, Xi Jinping is the world leader with the highest approval rating (4.7) among the statesmen who were on the given list, slightly higher than Russian President Vladimir Putin (4.14).<sup>520</sup>

518 The first strategic agreement with China was signed by Serbian President Boris Tadić in 2009. Tadić also promoted the policy of reliance on “four pillars” (Brussels, Washington, Moscow and Beijing), which was then inherited and adopted by Aleksandar Vučić; the second strategic agreement was signed during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Belgrade in 2016, when Tomislav Nikolić was the President of Serbia.

519 “We will continue our cooperation with China despite all the pressures that are coming in an inappropriate way,” said Dacic; *Politika*, November 30, 2022

520 Research on the topic titled “Raising the Awareness of Foreign Authoritarian Influence”, based on a representative sample, was carried out by the Third New Path Organization in June 2022, *Danas*, 26 July 2022.

## THE POSITION OF CHINA IN THE CURRENT INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

China treats the global disruption caused by the war on European soil with caution and (as it seems) as a longer-term geostrategic consideration.

On the one hand, China helps Putin to overcome the impact of the drastic economic sanctions imposed by the Euro-Atlantic community with its energy and other trade arrangements with Russia (gas, crude oil, coal and grain) at a favourable price for itself. On the other hand, however, it refrains from openly supporting Putin's military adventure (and arms exports). So, for example, while refraining from directly condemning Russia's aggression against Ukrajine in the United Nations, it did not recognize the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (which has so far been done by Syria and North Korea), just as it never recognized the breakaway parts of Georgia (2008), Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty is the fundamental value postulate of the Chinese foreign policy doctrine.

As observed by the *Delo Asia* correspondent, Zorana Baković, who is one of the best connoisseurs of China, Beijing is watching the flame ignited by Russia in Ukraine and is – instead of extinguishing it – “openly using it as a geolaboratory test in order to find out how powerful America still is and whether it will dare to open two fronts at the same time, one on European soil and the other on Asian soil”.<sup>521</sup>

Even before the outbreak of the current crisis, China was largely profiled as a country looking for a proper position in the global order due to its growing economic, political and, as of more recently, military power. As a “powerhouse” country, China has not relied on its military muscles until recently. Except when it comes to its immediate surroundings and, in particular, Taiwan.

When the influential American Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi ignored this warning and “stopped by” Taiwan during her Asian

<sup>521</sup> *Delo*, 2 July 2022.

tour, Beijing retaliated with the unprecedented seven-day military manoeuvres, keeping the island “in the crosshairs” with live ammunition.

In recent years, the trademark of China’s global activity has been its “Belt and Road” mega project.<sup>522</sup> Conceived as the follower of the medieval Silk Road route, it stretches ambitiously from the Eurasian mainland to other continents – from Africa to South America. As is claimed by President Xi, his initiative will be beneficial to all involved by building a “shared future for mankind”. At the same time, he emphasizes that the “Belt and Road” Initiative is not a military-political alliance or a “Chinese club”. It is a process... “designed to improve the world development patterns, global governance and economic cooperation”.<sup>523</sup>

The Euro-Atlantic bloc does not hide its concern over the sharpened diplomatic rhetoric and military strengthening of the Far Eastern dragon as well as its concrete actions and influence in the Indo-Pacific region. As is observed by some analysts, the Chinese challenge has never been so high on the NATO agenda as it was at the Madrid summit on 30 June. In the strategic document adopted at the Alliance meeting – which was attended by two Asian countries, Japan and South Korea, for the first time – China was designated “as a systemic challenge to Euro-Atlantic security”.<sup>524</sup> As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on the same occasion, “China does not share our values and, like Russia, works on their undermining”.<sup>525</sup>

522 Serbia has been a part of this project since the establishment of the 15 Plus One Platform in 2014 as a precursor to the most ambitious “Belt and Road” project.

523 Ibid.

524 *Politika*, 1 July 2022.

525 Ibid.



## CHINA AND SERBIA

Relying on the tradition of good relations between the former Yugoslavia and China, all Serbian governments after the breakup of Yugoslavia tried to maintain the same course. When at the end of the first decade of the 21st century – due to Serbia's wavering foreign policy orientation towards the EU – Belgrade was made aware that the accession process would be slow and long, it turned already then and, in particular, in recent years towards the East (politically towards Russia and economically towards China).

Apart from the fact that the alliance with a rising global player flatters every Belgrade government, it is also based on pragmatic political reasons. Namely, together with Russia, China is the “defender” of Resolution 1244 in the United Nations Security Council. In other words, it does not recognize Kosovo (Beijing is against any separatism for internal reasons; this primarily refers to Tibet, but also to other possible movements for independence in the western part of the country with a majority Muslim population). In return, Serbia cautiously abstains from voting in the United Nations for the resolutions criticizing the violation of human rights in China (primarily when it comes to the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Province).

The common interest is also reflected in Serbia's desire to secure reliable financial injections for its poor, largely devastated economy and China's effort to invest its overabundant foreign exchange reserves as close as possible to the European market. Since the opening of the Pupin Bridge on the Danube in Belgrade at the beginning of the last decade (2014), as China's first direct investment in Serbia, this country has deeply penetrated the local economy through its investments, purchases of companies and loans. Apart from the purchase of the Smederevo Steelworks (HBIS Group), its entry into the Bor Mining and Smelting Complex and the adjacent Čukaru Peku gold mine is even more significant. In 2021, as noted by the Charge d'Affaires of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, Tien Ishu, these two companies were ranked as the first and second

largest export companies in Serbia.<sup>526</sup> (Due to a crisis on global markets and decrease in the demand for steel, the Chinese company HBIS in Smederevo had to shut down one of its two blast furnaces in the Steelworks).

Chinese investors participate in the modernization of the road corridors, Belgrade-Budapest railway, planned construction of the Belgrade Metro, sewage networks in some towns... The total value of the completed projects, those currently underway and those planned amounts to 8 billion euros, as was disclosed by Aleksandar Vučić during his meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.<sup>527</sup> Contracts with Chinese partners are mostly interstate ones, which implies that they are not transparent and, according to all indications, have a corruptive background. While the conditions under which the contracts and projects have been concluded are not publicly accessible, the media promote the role of the leading figures on both sides who have secured them.<sup>528</sup>

On top of all that, it has been announced that the two countries will sign a free trade agreement by the end of the year. The scepticism of the commentators who argue that the Serbian and Chinese economies are so unequal (to Serbia's disadvantage)<sup>529</sup> that such an agreement, as rationalized by economists, is meaningless. According to them, Serbia could benefit from its increased exports to China after solid negotiations, which means that not all Chinese demands are met. Predrag Bijelić, Professor at the Faculty of Economics in Belgrade, says that this free trade agreement can

<sup>526</sup> *Politika*, 12 June 2022.

<sup>527</sup> *Politika*, 29 October 2021.

<sup>528</sup> On the occasion of the resumption of direct flights between Beijing and Belgrade in July of this year, the Chinese Ambassador to Serbia, Chen Bo, has emphasized that this is "the result of a fast realization of an important consensus reached by President Xi Jinping and President Vučić about a continuous progress of cooperation between our two countries"; *Blic*, 17 July 2022.

<sup>529</sup> According to the official statistics for 2020, the value of trade between Serbia and China amounted to nearly 4.5 billion euros, with exports to China amounting to 82.2 million euros and imports from China to 3.5 billion euros.

be a chance for Serbia to increase its exports to China, “if we negotiate skillfully”.<sup>530</sup>

## IN A SUBORDINATE POSITION

Professor Bijelić’s warning is actually the reminder of the fact that, in an attempt to satisfy its investment “hunger”, Serbia does not demand anything from foreign investors, especially Chinese ones. This especially refers to compliance with domestic laws prescribing the environmental standards and labour rights.

Just recently, some drastic cases of arbitrariness on the part of Chinese investors and managers have upset the public. Namely, at the end of last year, journalists from some independent media have discovered the unacceptable treatment of Vietnamese workers in the Linglong Tyre Factory in Zrenjanin, which is still under construction. In addition to the inhumane working and living conditions, the workers’ passports have been taken away, which actually means that they are the victims of human trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation.<sup>531</sup> Local workers have also complained about their inhumane and humiliating treatment. Namely, while waiting for the completion of the factory and the jobs they are qualified for, they have to do hard physical work at the construction site.<sup>532</sup>

The next case involves the blasting of Starica Mountain rising above the town of Majdanpek in June of this year, when deafening explosions and collapsed earth and rock masses enraged the residents of Majdanpek. Blasting is carried out by Zijin Company from Bor, whose representatives claim to have all permits to work on this mountain ridge, which is a natural dam between Majdanpek and the mining pits, while local activists who “defend”

<sup>530</sup> *NIN*, 10 February 2022.

<sup>531</sup> <https://www.danas.rs/bbc-news-serbian-ljudska-prava-fabrika-linglong-slucaj-vijetnamskih-radnika>

<sup>532</sup> *Dnevnik TV N1*, 31 May 2022.

the mountain claim that the Chinese company operates without them, that is, illegally.

The residents of Bor and Smederevo often complain about poisonous gases and air pollution, as well as the increased incidence of respiratory diseases, but all this mostly remains without reaction: "... The citizens of Serbia feel that Chinese companies are privileged, and that their managers behave as if they are the 'owners of everything', not caring about the environment and quality of life. In the opinion of many Serbian citizens, such behaviour results from the servility of the state and granting of numerous concessions to the detriment of the population and local communities." This was stated by the author of "The Research on the Position and Perception of Workers and Investors from China", Maja Bjelos from the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy.<sup>533</sup>

## SECURITY COOPERATION

At the beginning of April, six huge Chinese Y-20 transport planes delivered the FK-3 air defence missile system, procured by Serbia for the needs of its army, at the Surčin airport. Thus, "military neutral" Belgrade increased the number of countries from which it procures modern weaponry: some of them are in the West and some are in the East (Russia in the first place). Now China is among them<sup>534</sup> and Serbia has become the first country in Europe to have this missile system.<sup>535</sup>

<sup>533</sup> Danas, 28 June 2022.

<sup>534</sup> On this occasion *Politika* wrote: "By procuring this weapon our country has finally resolved the issue of long-range air defence, which it lacked before and during NATO aggression against FR Yugoslavia in 1999. Back then (and later) the Russian S-300 system was dreamed of, but such dreams are now becoming reality in the form of FK-3...", *Politika*, 12 April 2022.

<sup>535</sup> Dr Vuksan Vuksanović from the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy holds that "for China this is another penetration in European soil". He also points out that China has been under then EU arms embargo since the Tiananmen Square massacre (1989), "so that as long as it is in force Serbia can serve as a route for China to circumvent the arms embargo", *Delo*, 11 April 2022.

The procurement contract was signed back in 2020 and, as military analyst Aleksandar Radić points out, “neither Russia nor Europe were delighted with that deal”.<sup>536</sup> According to him, Russia was dissatisfied because President Aleksandar Vučić had previously announced the procurement of a Russian missile system, but then opted for a Chinese one, which is actually a copy of the Russian S-300 system. On the other hand, the European Union was unhappy because EU candidate countries should not maintain military cooperation with China<sup>537</sup>. In any case, the missile system has now arrived and, as explained by the spokesman of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zhao Lijian, “as a part of our annual cooperation plan”. “This project does not target any third party and has nothing to do with the current situation”, he added alluding to the war in Ukraine which was already in full swing.<sup>538</sup>

Politician Nenad Čanak holds that security ties with China represent Vučić’s effort to ingratiate himself with the anti-Western forces in Serbia. According to him, it is overlooked that, through “economic and military cooperation with China”, we also import the “Chinese way of functioning”.<sup>539</sup>

Apart from the military sphere, security cooperation with Beijing also implies a years-long partnership between the police authorities and the relevant ministries of the two countries. It also relies on the ties maintained in the days of the former Yugoslavia, which gained in importance and intensity over time, especially in the context of China’s impressive breakthrough in the sphere of the advanced technologies of the future (artificial intelligence, robotics, IT technology, communications). China shares what it develops primarily for its own security needs with friendly countries.

This applies, for example, to “smart” cameras which, in addition to face identification, can also “read” the mood (coolness, anger, threat...) of the persons they are recording (such cameras are

<sup>536</sup> *Danas*, 12 April 2020.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>538</sup> *Danas*, 13 April 2022.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*

allegedly widely used in China's troubled Xinjiang province, which is populated by the Uyghur minority). Similar cameras have been installed and are still being installed on the streets of Belgrade, on the highway towards Niš and in other locations.

In the meantime, however, one of the joint projects was not realized. Namely, a few years ago, there was a lot of talk and writings in media that Chinese policemen would “soon” also start patrolling the streets of Serbian towns. This controversial idea provoked numerous doubts and questions ranging from the issue of Serbia's sovereignty, whose streets are to be patrolled by persons in foreign uniforms, to China's intention to “observe” and control the potential opponents of the regime in the territory of other countries. The formal explanation that Chinese policemen will help Serbian colleagues in incident situations among the Chinese (fights, thefts, murders, misdemeanours) as translators and providers of other services has seemed rather unconvincing..

However, according to the findings of some international non-governmental organizations, there are also Chinese “police services” in Serbia that informally, allegedly, help Chinese citizens primarily when it comes to personal documents.<sup>540</sup>

## THE FUTURE WITH MANY QUESTIONS

Serbia has proclaimed EU accession as its basic strategic commitment. However, during the accession negotiations, which have been going on for almost 10 years, it also kept other options open (colloquially, this means “sitting in two chairs” and foreign policy “based on four pillars”). This discrepancy between proclamations and actions gives rise to the reasonable doubts of the domestic and international public about the sincerity of the European commitment of the authorities in Belgrade.

The war in Ukraine has raised the question of Serbia's affiliation in an even more dramatic way: the majority of citizens supports Russia's aggression against Ukraine; Serbia is the only

<sup>540</sup> TVN1, *Dnevnik*, 3 November 2022.

European country that has not imposed sanctions on Russia, while the conservative nationalist bloc with significant representation in the new Serbian parliament (the coalition of Nada, Dveri and Za-vetnici) openly calls for the abandonment of the European path.

The current geopolitical dynamics, with plenty of uncertain outcomes and consequences, poses a challenge to many, including European countries that will try to position themselves in the future puzzle, which has already begun to be put together in accordance with their own economic, political and security interests.

The greatest unity of the global community was achieved immediately after the beginning of Putin's attack, when more than 140 countries (including Serbia) condemned Russia's aggression against sovereign Ukraine in the United Nations. For example, Turkey, which is a NATO member, has not joined it. This also refers to many other countries – from China to India, Brazil and Middle Eastern and African countries – which are otherwise significant international actors.

The Ukraine crisis has “shaken” the BRICS as well. The economic bloc of developing countries (China, India, Brazil, Russia and South Africa), which has been functioning on the global stage with varying success for 15 years, held a virtual summit on 22 June, at Chinese President Xi's initiative. China stands out in this bloc of developing countries due to its importance and global influence, as well as the aspiration to create a global alliance against the liberal democratic order, as is predicted by some analysts.<sup>541</sup> This can also be read from the message sent to the heads of the BRICS countries by the Chinese host stating that “the world should stand against the unilateral sanctions and efforts of some countries to maintain their political and economic power”.

According to some Chinese intellectuals, China should turn its attention to the huge continent to which it geographically belongs. One of them is Zhao Huasheng, Professor at Fudan University, who points out: “As it is often said, neighbours cannot split up; they will always live together, whether they like it or not. China,

<sup>541</sup> Dragan Bisenić, *Danas*, 9–10. July.

Russia and the European Union are located on the same Eurasian continent. Beijing and Moscow should do everything they can to develop their relations with the European Union in a positive way – to maintain a common economic and security space in *Greater Eurasia* and, if possible, avoid divisions and confrontations on the Eurasian continent.”<sup>542</sup>

## CHINA’S INTERNAL CHALLENGES

The assumption of the leading role in world affairs, to which China and its undisputed leader Xi Jinping are undoubtedly aspiring, is also faced with some considerable internal challenges. China’s economic growth has slowed down dramatically: its two-year unique effort to pursue zero-COVID policy, which implied the lockdown of the cities with multiple million inhabitants and industrial-commercial-banking centres (from Wuhan in early 2020 to Shanghai in the summer of 2022), has proved costly. So big that during the last weekend of November 2022, there were mass demonstrations against anti-pandemic measures in major cities from Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and others, to several university centers. The immediate cause was a fire in a building in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang province (where the Uyghur national minority lives), nine people died, because the building was locked due to Covid. The Chinese authorities have not faced such a massive discontent in more than 30 years (after the Tiananmen massacre in Beijing in 1989).

In the second quarter of this year, a fall in output was recorded for the first time after more than three decades of continuous growth.

The challenges for the country, which has been “covering up” and suppressing all problems with constant economic growth for years, are all the greater. In the first place because the absolute master of China, President Xi Jinping, was elected for the third time as the general secretary of the ruling Communist Party (CCP)

542 Ibid.



in October 2022 (despite the two-decade respected rule of a maximum of two terms at the head of the state and the party).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The emergence of China as a global power in the Western Balkans during the last decade is one of the most significant geopolitical changes in the region. In this way China has further expanded its planetary influence. In recent years, China has been extending its activities beyond the economy. It has increased its engagement in culture, academia, education, media and even a number of political parties and local authorities. The Chinese Cultural Centre has also recently been opened in Belgrade.

The geopolitical uncertainty of the Western Balkans, especially when it comes to accession to the EU, has prompted the countries in this region to look for other alternatives. The status quo creates the conditions for other actors, such as China, to infiltrate into sensitive sectors, while at the same time its loans pose a specific “trap” for all debtors.

Apart from relying on state leaders and officials, China is also increasingly focusing on nongovernmental and local actors, civil society and the like.

The Chinese presence in the Western Balkans has brought the Western political community back to the region. NATO has promptly admitted North Macedonia and Montenegro to its membership.

Serbia's foreign policy, which relies on four pillars (the United States, the European Union, Russia and China), was already adopted in the first decade of democratic changes, which is the result of its self-awareness of a unique international position that reflects not only its mentality, but also its frustration associated with the war legacy of the 1990s. During their ten years in power, the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) and President Vučić only continued to pursue the same policy and, due primarily to the international context, succeeded in securing for Serbia an enviable position on the international stage. Regardless of the

fact that Serbia is officially committed to European integration, it is not ready to adopt the liberal values imposed on the Western Balkans by the Western political community (EU, NATO). When it comes to China, Serbia is the most important Chinese hub in Europe or, more exactly, a kind of springboard for the European market. Therefore, it is not surprising that China is focused, among other things, on infrastructure projects and production facilities for strategic raw materials (steel, copper, gold).

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has additionally accelerated geostrategic changes, significant not only for Europe, but also for China itself. Many analysts agree that China is the main profiteer of this war, although it brings new challenges to it, because Russia, its important strategic partner, has been significantly weakened by its aggression against Ukraine. This autumn, China will also face an all-out domestic political challenge in the still uncertain international circumstances. Turbulences on the global political stage have also significantly affected its projects, especially the "Belt and Road" Initiative.

China is geographically too far from Serbia to remain its main economic (and political) pillar. As things stand, the global trends will also increasingly take on a regional character, which places Serbia in the European context (willingly or not).

The current dilemmas of the political elites as to whom Serbia belongs are more an expression of its unreadiness for a genuine step forward and effort towards European integration.

On the other hand, the Western political community is not sufficiently focused on the Balkan problem, because it has been under its control for decades, but without its resolution. This does not mean that local elites do not bear the greatest responsibility, but a more consistent attention to the Western Balkans would have so far yielded more significant results in Serbia itself.

The Western political community has missed the opportunity to initiate a substantive process of normalization in the region, thus creating the preconditions for its recovery. The policy of

flattering Serbia as the key actor in the Western Balkans has not yet achieved visible results, because it is still the main source of regional instability. This does not mean that each individual country does not have its own internal limitations. One reason is undoubtedly the adoption of the ethnic principle as the most important, without the introduction of other ones, thus relativizing ethnic exclusivity.

The European Union has failed because it has not seriously monitored the implementation of both the peace agreements and the EU approximation process.

Bearing in mind that the consequences of the war in Ukraine are still unfathomable, the Western Balkans, as a constant neuroalgalic point in Europe, require a serious involvement of the Western political community, thus showing that it is capable of resolving the frozen conflicts in the Balkans despite Russia's constant provocations. This also requires a more rigorous attitude towards the current regime in Serbia.

# **RUSSIA AND SERBIA: TOGETHER AGAINST LIBERAL VALUES**

Russia's aggression against Ukraine was a specific catalyst for its presence in the Western Balkans and Serbia, in particular. Of all the European countries Serbia stands out as the only country to side with Russia, although it has voted for the UN resolutions supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine. It has been a specific balancing tactics vis-à-vis the Western political community, which has since been lost. Sitting on several chairs, which Serbia skillfully practiced during the last decade, boiled down to the Russian and Chinese chairs.

Russia's expansion to the Balkans takes place at the time when the countries in this region are still unconsolidated and vulnerable and have incomplete identities, thus being susceptible to influence and pressure. Russia has started to develop the instruments of public diplomacy with a view to simultaneously strengthening the influence of its soft power. As an important strategic point towards Europe, Serbia is, in the Kremlin's view, suitable for an "experimental farm", where Russia's entire growing power can successfully manifest itself. All the more so because it is already well positioned in Serbia. Although it relies formally and existentially on the European Union, pro-Russian sentiment is dominant among the majority of Serbian citizens. In public and cultural life, the Russian presence is most distinctively demonstrated by the presence of the representatives of the Russian political, scientific, cultural and spiritual (church) elites in the media, including gatherings (most often devoted to geostrategic and historical topics).

The main aim of the Russian presence in the Balkans is to obstruct and directly thwart the expansion of NATO (the example of the Russian Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina) and

the European Union. Intensive infiltration into the most sensitive parts of the Balkans started after the annexation of Crimea and the imposition of Western sanctions, and reached its peak after the aggression against Ukraine.

At the same time, Russia relies on historical, cultural and religious ties, which are greatly exaggerated by propaganda and diplomacy, as well as the skillful use of soft power. Since 2005, Moscow has been actively integrating itself into the international media market. At that time, the television channel *Russia Today* was founded and became very influential. It was followed by *Sputnik* in 2014. Russia also hires numerous Western PR agencies and well-known world figures and supports both right-wing and left-wing movements and parties. Serbian pro-government media have become, without reservation, an extended arm of the Russian penetration and widest possible presence in the political space and life of Serbia. This especially became apparent in the days and months after the Russian aggression against Ukraine. This is one explanation why there is such a strong Russian narrative that is comparable to the Russian Federation itself.

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

Russia systematically fuels tensions in the region, and its activities were also observed in Macedonia during the referendum on the name change, as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina where it supports Milorad Dodik in the prevention of institutionalization at the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Montenegro, it supported the failed coup and then intensified the media campaign through Serbian media and certain politicians, political parties

and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). Its opportunities in Serbia are the greatest, since it has deeply infiltrated the SOC, security services, academic community, culture, influential people, political parties, right-wing movements and non-governmental organizations, not to mention politicians.

The Russian Embassy with its agile Ambassadors actively participate in the political and social life of Serbia by promoting Russian-Serbian friendship. The former Russian Ambassador Čepurin has emphasized, among other things, that “the mission of the Russian and Serbian peoples is to be the bearers of the Orthodox civilization identity together with other Orthodox nations”.<sup>543</sup>

This thesis has been very successfully spread by Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin, who is a frequent guest in Belgrade and enjoys great respect in the academic community.<sup>544</sup> During his lectures in Belgrade, Dugin emphasized that “the centre of the world is in Serbia”, and that “whoever controls Serbia controls the Balkans; who controls the Balkans controls a huge Mediterranean strategic region. That is the geopolitical axiom for which Serbs have paid so dearly in their history”.<sup>545</sup>

Dugin further points out that Serbia’s national interests are protected by “a strong army, neutrality and an active policy in organizing an all-Balkan defence and security system”. He believes

543 “A. Čepurin, Srbi i Srbija u očima ruskog ambasadora”, *Večernje novosti*, Belgrade, 2019, p. 134.

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

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

that one should not be limited exclusively to the territory of Serbia, because one should think globally which means, at least in terms of the Balkans and then Eastern Europe, with access to Eurasia and the Middle East. A strong Serbia – strong and independent Balkans.<sup>546</sup>

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

Russia's penetration has also been facilitated by the fact that after 2006 and 2008 the European Union (EU) and the United States (USA) disengaged themselves from the Balkans due to the financial crisis, Brexit, migrant crisis and, finally, COVID-19 pandemic. This has turned the Western Balkan region into the island of instability which is capable of permanently generating crises and wider upheavals in Europe. In its foray into the Balkans, Moscow is particularly pointing to the perniciousness of liberal reforms, that is, the Western concept of democracy in which it has been met with understanding by local authoritarian leaders who resist an organized modern state. So, Ambassador Chepurin, when it comes to Serbia, points out that "liberal reforms, that is, the policy of 'Westernization' from 2000 to 2010, brought about the collapse of the Serbian welfare state, deindustrialization and general decline".<sup>547</sup>

Russian soft power is especially extensive and utterly sensitive in certain sectors of the economy – primarily in the energy sector. Its influential presence is also felt in the media through which disinformation is spread, as well as in the activities of the Church,

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

547 "A. Čepurin, "Srbija i Srbi u očima ruskog ambasadora", *Večernje novosti*, Belgrade 2019.

intelligence network, ultra-right parties and nongovernmental organizations. It uses a very thoughtful narrative about a shared history and fraternal relations with the predominantly Orthodox countries, about the mystical messianic role and the like.

In an analysis of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy it is stated that the narratives used by Serbian elites and pro-government media during 2020 and 2021 show that pro-Russian and pro-Chinese narratives play a role in the enslavement of the state. By forcing such narratives, Serbian elites promote themselves to the domestic public, strengthen their control and prolong the status of a captured state.<sup>548</sup>

Although almost all Western Balkan countries have been the target of pro-Russian disinformation campaigns over the last years, it has not been recognized as a security issue at the local level. In Serbia, the explanation for this is that the Progressives government has been their main promoter through the media under its control.<sup>549</sup>

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

Only the synergy and joint action of the United States, European Union and NATO can bring about the completion of the

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

549 The Helsinki Committee has been warning about this malignant influence since 2014.



Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and permanently neutralize the destabilizing potentials of Serbia and Russia.

## **SPP: PRO-RUSSIAN ORIENTATION IS A HISTORICAL COMMITMENT**

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

However, the deepened pro-Russian orientation coincides with the coming of the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) to power (2012), which systematically promotes Russophilia. In a parliamentary debate, the then President of the Republic, Tomislav Nikolić, said: "Should one day the question arise as to whether we want to be a colony of the European Union or any organizational

part of the Russian Federation, I would immediately vote for the latter option".<sup>550</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin decorated Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić with the Order of Alexander Nevsky for a great contribution to the development of cooperation between the two countries (2019). This decoration is rarely awarded to foreigners. The meetings of the two Presidents were as frequent as their telephone conversations. Even now, during the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Vučić occasionally speaks with President Putin, whereby they exchange their views on the situation in Ukraine and Kosovo. It was agreed that Serbia would be regularly supplied with gas and that a three-year contract would be signed (as agreed in May this year) On that occasion, the two Presidents confirmed their desire to strengthen a strategic partnership based on the traditionally close ties between the peoples of the two countries.<sup>551</sup>

The meeting of the Minister of Internal Affairs, Aleksandar Vulin, with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergey Lavrov, this summer came as a surprise to many. On that occasion, Vulin emphasized that he was sorry that Lavrov could not visit Serbia in June and that "by banning Minister Lavrov's official visit to Serbia all principles of international law have been violated and trampled".<sup>552</sup> Sergey Lavrov said that the dialogue between Serbia and Russia was gradually progressing at all levels despite a complex international situation. As he especially pointed out, Vučić and Putin communicate via phone, compare their views and coordinate their steps.<sup>553</sup>

Vulin also met with other officials such as Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu who, on that occasion, awarded him with a medal

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

551 <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1121201/vladimir-putin-aleksandar-vucic-slabdevanje-gasom>

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

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

for his services in the promotion of defence cooperation between Serbia and Russia.<sup>554</sup>

Since 2012, the social patriotic movement “Immortal Regiment” has been organizing a march to honour the memory of war victims every 9 May, on the Day of Victory over Fascism in Russia, which has also spread to other countries. In 2019, it was also organized in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and eight other cities in Serbia. It is a part of a wider process of transforming the culture of remembrance in Serbia and an attempt at historical revisionism by manipulating war victims from 1945 to 1999, and equating the victims of collaborators with those of the anti-fascist movement. That is, to relativize the crimes of the Chetnik movement during the Second World War and Serbia’s responsibility for the wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. In that pro-Russian project, the West and NATO are depicted as an aggressor and enemy in the war in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999, while the march of the “Immortal Regiment” in Niš was led by the Hague convict General Vladimir Lazarević, who led the war against the Alliance.<sup>555</sup>

## THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND RUSSOPHILIA

For both Serbs and Russians, Orthodoxy is firmly tied to the building of the state and, in both cases, played a strong integrative role in the preservation of national identity during numerous severe state crises. The revitalization of religion took place primarily through the politicization of religion, that is, in the context of a collapsed identity (socialist) framework by reaffirming the traditional ethnic and confessional patterns in order to homogenize identity within a national framework. The sacralization of national identity was strengthening the power of political elites, while at

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

555 [http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna\\_dokumenta/istrazivanja\\_javnog\\_mnjenja/javno\\_menjnje\\_decembar\\_18.pdf](http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/javno_menjnje_decembar_18.pdf)

the same time enabling religious elites to finally return in the public sphere and recover at least a part of their lost privileges.<sup>556</sup>

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

The Russian Orthodox Church is characterized by its distinctly conservative values. Together with the government, it conducts its aggressive policy vis-à-vis the neighbourhood and, as in the case of Ukraine, justifies the war of aggression against it. Patriarch Kirill, Putin's close associate, considers the war in Ukraine to be a shield against the West which is, in his opinion, decadent, especially because of its acceptance of homosexuality.<sup>557</sup> Pope Francis' attempt to advise Patriarch Kirill not to be a "ministrant" of the Kremlin has failed, because Patriarch Kirill has responded by justifying the war.<sup>558</sup>

During a three-day visit to Serbia in mid-November 2014, Patriarch Kirill stated that, when "a Russian comes to Serbia, he really feels at home" and that "the community of faith and culture, very close historical ties and our common blood shed for our common victories firmly bind our nations together".<sup>559</sup>

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

556 Srđan Barišić, "Uloga Srpske pravoslavne crkve u profilisanju državne politike", Potka srpskog identiteta, Helsinki Committee, Belgrade, 2016.

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

558 Ibid.

559 "Patrijarh postao najglasnija opozicija", *Danas*, 18 October 2011.

The theological shaping of the public space in Serbia began after 2000, when Orthodoxy with political pretensions began to shape the social space, thus endangering the right of others to their own identity. The secular values of civil society – democracy, civil society, pluralistic discourse, secular and religious tolerance and individual human rights – are rejected.

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

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

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

In 2012, the then Russian Ambassador in Belgrade, Alexander Konuzin, was awarded the Order of Saint Sava of the First Degree. The same award was presented to his predecessor, Ambassador Alexander Alekseyev, in 2008. Many other notable figures were also decorated: Dmitry Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Prize Winner in Literature, Yuri Lushkov, Mayor of Moscow, Sergei Shoigu, Russian Minister of Civil Defence, Emergency Situations and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters, and Army General, as well as Boris Kostensko, Managing Director of the world's largest Orthodox TV station, TV Spas in Moscow.

The Russian Orthodox Church supports the Serbian Orthodox Church's stance on Kosovo. During his meeting with the Serbian Patriarch in Moscow, Patriarch Kirill stated that the Russian Orthodox Church agreed with the stance of the Serbian Orthodox Church: "We unreservedly support the just position of the Serbian Orthodox Church on Kosovo and Metohija and will remain in dialogue with the leaderships of Russia and other countries concerning the issue of defending the stance we share with the Serbian Orthodox Church".<sup>560</sup>

On numerous occasions the Russian Orthodox Church has also expressed its concern over the Serbian people and the monasteries and churches of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo. Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, has also expressed his hope that such a political solution will be found as will not be unilateral, but will satisfy both parties and that "the Russian Orthodox Church has always consistently supported the Serbian Orthodox Church and its interests in its entire historical canonical territory, including Kosovo".<sup>561</sup>

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

Metropolitan Hilarion (ROC) supported the SOC in its fight against the discriminatory Law on the Freedom of Religion in Montenegro. He expressed his admiration for the processions and

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

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

said that it was an attempt to nationalize the church property and transfer it to the noncanonical Montenegrin Orthodox Church. Speaking about the boundaries of church jurisdiction and spiritual centres, he said that they never coincided with the administrative boundaries of the states.<sup>562</sup>

Metropolitan Hilarion often expressed political views, so that during one of his visits to Belgrade he warned the President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, that if he did not reverse his stance on the creation of his own schismatic church, he would end up like the former President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko.<sup>563</sup>

Journalist Andrej Nikolaidis argues that the “main channel of Russian influence in the Balkans – including the cultural one – is the Serbian Orthodox Church. But it is not the only one. The Russian network is rather wide and ramified and consists of media, corrupt politicians, analysts, NGOs and, finally, useful idiots. In the Balkans, Russian policy – including cultural one – is primarily destructive. It does not offer any new value. Instead, it regrets the so-called “better old times” when, supposedly, “order was known”. It is authoritarian, conciliar and imperial and combines the Stalinist and nationalist elements. In its interpretation, which is easily and naturally accepted by the local nationalist and clerical elites – both Orthodox and “hardcore” Catholic ones – “the West and its culture are a sum of evils and transgressions against God’s Commandments and traditional morality”.<sup>564</sup>

562 Митрополит волоколамски Иларион (Алфеев): Напади на Српску Православну Цркву у Црној Гори је напад на канонско Православље, 4 August 2020, Srpska pravoslavna crkva, accessible at: [http://www.spc.rs/sr/mitropolit\\_volokolamski\\_ilarion\\_alfejev\\_napadi\\_na\\_srpskupravoslavnu\\_crkvu\\_u\\_crnoj\\_gori\\_je\\_napad\\_](http://www.spc.rs/sr/mitropolit_volokolamski_ilarion_alfejev_napadi_na_srpskupravoslavnu_crkvu_u_crnoj_gori_je_napad_)

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

564 <https://zurnal.info/clanak/mei-uticaj-uz-pomoc-djece-crkve-motorista-ilaznih-humanitaraca/23420>



## RUSSIA AND NATO IN THE BALKANS

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

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

Although Russia did not explicitly oppose NATO membership, it pointed to its interests. So, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Serbia, Alexander Konuzin, said: "We will respect any decision you will make, but we count on Belgrade to approach respectfully to our thinking that joining NATO will pose a threat to Russia's security."<sup>565</sup>

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

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



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

Although military cooperation with NATO is at a very high level, Serbia also maintains intensive military cooperation with Russia. As Defence Minister Vulin and Russian Ambassador Botsan-Kharchenko have pointed out, it is at a "historical high".<sup>566</sup>

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

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

In its analysis, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy points out that military cooperation between Serbia and Russia is often presented in a hyperbolic way by pro-government media for the purpose of self-promotion. However, the inconsistencies concerning military cooperation with Russia are often not objectively conveyed to the public. Such an example is Russia's donation of six

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

MIG-29 fighter jets to Serbia in 2017. Although this transaction was formally qualified as a donation, Belgrade still had to pay Moscow \$185 million for their repair.<sup>567</sup>

## RUSSIAN HUMANITARIAN CENTRE IN NIŠ

The Serbian-Russian Centre has been accompanied by controversies since its opening ten years ago. One of the strongest is that it represents a Russian intelligence or even military base at a sensitive location, close to the NATO base in Kosovo and Metohija. Western centres constantly suspect it of intelligence activities, especially because it seeks diplomatic status for its employees. This has not happened so far due to Western resistance.

President Vučić's attitude towards the question of the Centre's diplomatic status is confined to his weighing: "If he approves diplomatic status for Niš Russians, he will be criticized by EU supporters, but if he does not approve it – he will be criticized by Russophiles." The President states that he takes care of the interests of Serbia and that the public will be informed when there are changes concerning this Serbian-Russian-Niš issue.<sup>568</sup>

After increasingly loud demands that Serbia align itself with European foreign policy due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there was a change in the attitude towards the Centre. The relevant decision should formally be taken by the new government after its formation. However, there is still no official information about the Centre.<sup>569</sup>

The suspicions about the true function of the Centre are also fuelled by the fact that its work is not transparent. Little is

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

568 <https://www.juznevesti.com/Politika/Vucic-o-diplomatskom-statusu-za-Ruski-centar-u-Nisu-Izmedju-kritika-evrofila-i-rusofila.sr.html>

569 <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/demostat-srbija-ce-promeniti-status-srpsko-ruskog-humanitarnog-centra-u-nisu>

known about its concrete activities to the public. The Centre is located a few hundred metres from the Niš airport and at almost the same distance from the highway due to which it is even more controversial.<sup>570</sup>

General Momir Stojanović, the former Director of the Military Security Agency of Serbia, has said that the “core” of the Centre is a state-of-the-art training simulator for training firefighting units, which exists only in Moscow.<sup>571</sup> He believes that “considering its human and material capacities, it is out of question that the Centre can engage in intelligence and reconnaissance activities. According to its network and status, it is more likely that Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS) represents an intelligence post of the Russian intelligence service”.<sup>572</sup>

Dragan Šutanovac, the founder of the Council for Strategic Policy, holds that the Serbian-Russian “humanitarian centre” in Niš has not justified its existence and that, in the light of the sanctions imposed on Russia by European countries, there is no longer any doubt that it is necessary to make essential changes in order to enable the Centre to fulfil its purpose.<sup>573</sup>

Miloš Kocić, Manager of the Bulevar nekretnine Agency in Niš, has pointed to the new “activities” of the Centre during the war in Ukraine: “The Russians arrive in Niš through the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre, in groups of about ten”. They contact his flat rental agency, but also contact the Centre.<sup>574</sup>

Doubts about the Centre’s activities still remain. The European Parliament demanded from Serbia to immediately suspend all military cooperation with Russia, which is often camouflaged as

570 <https://www.juznevesti.com/Politika/Vucic-o-diplomatskom-statusu-za-Ruski-centar-u-Nisu-Izmedju-kritika-evrofila-i-rusofila.sr.html>

571 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/cime-se-bavi-rusko-srpski-humanitarni-centar-u-nisu>

572 Ibid.

573 Ibid.

574 Ibid.

a civilian activity, such as the “regional humanitarian centre” in Niš.<sup>575</sup>

One Russian portal has recently launched the news that Russia will open a military base in Serbia, which was immediately denied by President Vučić and the Russian Ambassador in Belgrade. However, the news has been relaunched in the Russian film “Serbia – Signs of War”, which predicts a new war in the Balkans and suggests sharp political divisions. The representatives of the extreme right-wing organizations in Serbia, like Miša Vacić, appear as interlocutors.

The film was launched at the time of heightened tensions in Kosovo, negotiations being held in Belgrade about the formation of a new government, as well as the warning of the President of Serbia that Serbia is the stage for a proxy war between East and West. At the same time, the film also coincides with the announcement of the new Russian foreign policy doctrine based on the “Russian World” concept.<sup>576</sup>

In one part of the film, the Russian Ambassador in Belgrade, Botsan-Kharchenko, speaks about a Russian military base in Serbia: “On the one hand, it is Serbia’s sovereign issue but, on the other hand, it is in Russia’s interest. However, the building of a military base is not currently on our agenda”.<sup>577</sup> Botsan-Kharchenko has admittedly stated that Russia does not have any request concerning the opening of a military base in Serbia, nor did the Serbian side ask for it.<sup>578</sup>

The film, as well as the Ambassador’s mention of a Russian military base also represent a kind of pressure on Serbia, especially in the light of Russia’s military failures in Ukraine.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid.

<sup>576</sup> <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/61596/alarm-zbog-ruskog-filma-zloslutno-predvidanje-sukoba-u-srbiji-novi-pritisak-iz-kremlja/vest>

<sup>577</sup> Ibid.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid.

## SERBIA AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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

There are numerous statements by Russian Ambassadors in the region which are also the threats to local leaders. Thus, the Russian Ambassador in Sarajevo, Igor Kalbukhov, with whom Milorad Dodik has an excellent cooperation, threatened Bosnia and Herzegovina on several occasions should it consider joining the EU. At the same time, Moscow warned the EU to stop "colonizing" the Western Balkans. Attacks on High Representative Christian Schmidt, whom Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova called "a fraud because he does not have an international power of attorney", have also been intensified.

Serbia's position on Russia's aggression against Ukraine is getting clearer. Namely, apart from voting for the UN resolution reaffirming the territorial integrity of Ukraine and condemning aggression, Serbia has sided with Russia in every respect. The expectations that Serbia could impose sanctions against Russia, at least limited ones, have been dashed. Aleksandar Vučić has expressly rejected Scholtz's "harsh request" to impose sanctions against Russia.<sup>579</sup>

President Vučić claims that Serbia will not change its attitude towards sanctions, which it took at the beginning of Russian aggression. He said: "That is our policy and we do not think of changing our policy at the moment. I think that our hitherto policies have

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

proved to be wise, despite all hardships we have had to endure”.<sup>580</sup> At a joint conference with Borut Pahor in Slovenia, he stated that “Serbia is obliged to adopt the European foreign policy immediately before joining the EU, but none of them have yet informed Serbia that it is about to become its member nor does it seem that they are planning to inform us”.<sup>581</sup>

Russian Ambassador Botsan-Kharchenko publicly admonishes Vučić and claims that “Vučić will not change his stance on sanctions against Russia”. He points out that “pressures and attempts to force Belgrade to turn its back on Russia exist and will exist”, but “on the basis of Vučić’s official statements and personal contacts with him, there is reason to believe that Vučić’s approach regarding the rejection of anti-Russian measures is very stable and principled, and will remain so”.<sup>582</sup>

He holds that Serbia’s orientation towards the European Union is not questionable, but the problem is that the West has confined its demands from Belgrade on its European path to three of them: joining the imposition of anti-Russian sanctions, recognition of Kosovo’s independence and curtailment of the ties with the leadership of the Republic of Srpska”. He also holds that these “requests are the most sensitive and absolutely unacceptable for Belgrade”.<sup>583</sup> In essence, such statements feed the Serbian aspirations and expectations that Russia will enable their realization.

Despite the pressures from both sides, Belgrade still has a perception of its geostrategic relevance, which is only partially true. The geopolitical importance of Serbia has been significantly reduced by its surroundings dominated by NATO members. However, the potential for instability lies in the fact that the Russian

580 <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2022/08/srbija-nece-razmisljati-o-uvodjenju-sankcija-rusiji-tvrdi-vucic>

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

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

583 Ibid.

services are functioning unhindered, not only in Serbia, but also in Bosnia and Montenegro.

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

## IDENTITY OF SERBIA

All post-communist societies have gone or are going through an identity crisis. In that sense, as Milan Subotić points out, the politics of history is an integral part of “identity politics”, the importance of which is proportional to the crisis of self-understanding the community as well as the attempts to resolve that crisis by formulating and imposing an essentialist collective, most frequently, national identity.<sup>584</sup>

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

Russia feeds Serbian frustration and the thesis that Yugoslavia was a Serbian delusion. The same goes for the thesis about artificially created nations such as, for example, Macedonians, Bosniaks and Montenegrins. At the same time, the influential pro-Russian conservative bloc strengthens the Russian component in the Serbian identity, that is, contributes to the “Russization of the Serbian

584 Milan Subotić, *Napred u prošlost*, Fabrika knjiga, 2010, p. 13.

nation”, with the thesis about the superiority of Orthodox civilization, Byzantine heritage, Slavism and mutual historical assistance. At one time Nikita Bondarev, a Russian expert on the Balkans, pointed out in a letter to the Serbian opposition that “the most important achievement of Aleksandar Vučić is that during his rule Russophilia in Serbia became mainstream. Today, the criticism of Russia and Vladimir Putin in Serbia is equal to political suicide”.<sup>585</sup>

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

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

## SERBIA’S ACTUAL INTERESTS

Evaluating Serbia’s real interests, President Vučić began to change foreign policy goals, even considering the possibility of imposing sanctions on Russia. He stated in parliament: “I am not enthusiastic, but I do not know how long we will last if we do not introduce sanctions. We are paying the price for not introducing them, but that is a question of the political stance of our leadership.”<sup>586</sup> The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Ivica Dačić, also said that Serbia will take measures that are in its best interest: “We condemn the violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine and we have voted in that vein in international forums, but whether we will impose sanctions on Russia is a different matter entirely. It is not a matter of time or any kind of deadline, it is

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

586 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-nisam-odusevljen-time-ali-ne-znam-koliko-cemo-izdrzati-da-ne-uvedemo-sankcije-rusiji>



a matter of our political and economic interests. We are exclusively guided by them when evaluating the issue of sanctions against Russia.”<sup>587</sup>

It is widely believed that this change is the result of the actions of the Russian paramilitary organization Wagner Group, which tried to recruit volunteers for the war in Ukraine by publishing an ad on their networks on numerous Russian websites offering employment in that group. This visibly upset President Vučić, so he immediately spoke out, saying: “Why are you doing this to Serbia? And why do you call anyone from Serbia from Wagner when you know that it is against our regulations?” He added: “Why would someone want to go to Ukraine or Russia? Have we not lost enough lives in all the wars of the past?”<sup>588</sup>

It has often been pointed out that Moscow does not have much confidence in Vučić, but that they keep him close because he has such broad support. Moscow has various strongholds in Serbia (Zavetnici and Dveri, which are in parliament, as well as numerous right-wing groups and opposition parties, media outlets, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), security structures), through which it can act against Vučić, if he turns towards the West and takes a tougher stance towards Russia. The President of the Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik is certainly their strongest asset, which can be seen on a daily basis, not only in Bosnia but also in Serbia.

The USA promptly reacts to Dodik’s constant threats of secession by “committing to continue to support the sovereignty, territorial integrity and multi-ethnic character of BiH, and hold responsible those who seek to undermine the institutions of BiH and the Dayton Peace Agreement”.<sup>589</sup> Moscow’s reactions are always

587 <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/4095378/ministar-spoljnih-poslova-ivica-dacic-u-intervjuu-za-euractiv-koliko-smo-blizu-ili-daleko-od-uvodjenja-sankcija-rusiji>

588 <https://www.novosti.rs/c/vesti/politika/1192477/vucic-poslao-poruku-rusima-predsednik-grupi-vagner>

589 <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/washingtonu-stigla-poruka-iz-moskve-zbog-njihove-snazne-podrske-bih/230311018>

reduced to an attempt to connect the problem of Serbia and Kosovo with BiH and draw parallels between the two.

Official Moscow also made a statement regarding the acceptance of the Franco-German plan. Historian and political analyst Anja Filimonova said on that occasion that “for Serbia, this means the final blow to the Serb national identity, which is based on the St Lazar (Kosovo) covenant, from which Serbs will never recover.”<sup>590</sup>

President Putin sent a “threatening” letter to Vučić on the occasion of Serbia’s Statehood Day: “National interests are not subject to bargaining, Belgrade understands the independent value of the Russian-Serbian strategic partnership and therefore refrains from practical measures to the detriment of our relations. Logic dictates that the opposite choice would inevitably cause irreparable damage to Serbia itself. We know the perseverance that Belgrade needs to continue working with us – of course, in the interest of its country – under the fiercest pressure from Washington and Brussels with friends who are doing their utmost to drag Serbia into their anti-Russian front. Their real goal is not to ‘stabilize’ the region, but to break the political will of Serbia’s leadership and, above all, to force it to join the regime of sanctions against Russia.”<sup>591</sup>

This behavior of official Moscow was certainly a warning that Moscow is guided only by its diplomatic, political and economic interests. However, regardless of some changes in orientation, President Vučić has not yet made a decision in relation to the European agreement. First of all, because he has not yet prepared public opinion for the agreement (he is late in doing so), and there are many reasons to maintain the status quo. The Serbian elite is already counting on changes in the White House, which is why the main tactic will be attempts to delay, although we should not lose sight of the possibility of crises and escalations like those that occurred in 2022.

590 <https://politicki.rs/analiza/filimonova-kako-je-vucic-isao-korak-po-korak-do-izdaje-kosova-srbije-i-rusije>

591 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/sta-pise-u-cestitki-koju-je-putin-uputio-vucicu-povodom-dana-drzavnosti/>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The war in Ukraine has cast a completely different light on the EU enlargement process, because the candidate countries are asked to take a concrete stance on whether they support the war in Ukraine or not. The EU has become more cautious vis-à-vis the Western Balkans and insists on the harmonization of their stance with its foreign policy.
- In essence, Serbia does not have foreign policy nor has it so far adopted a foreign policy strategy in the Parliament. Its foreign policy is an expression of its frustrations and inability to accept the new reality. The foreign policy based on four pillars (the European Union, China, Russia and the United States) indicates that Serbia has not yet taken a stance on its future. The policy that led to the brutal disintegration of Yugoslavia is still in effect. The “Serbian World” concept is actively carried out in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Serbia’s sticking with Russia means the preservation of a clerical-totalitarian system that generates fear of the different and preserves the status quo. The state and the Serbian Orthodox Church systematically promote and suggest such an attitude. Kosovo is only used as a bargaining counter by both Serbia and Russia. In fact, they abuse it.
- Serbia’s security and economic interests are tied to the West. Serbia is already surrounded by EU and NATO member countries and is, as a lonely island, waiting for changes in the geostrategic relations that will enable the realization of its aspirations and the leading role in the region. If Serbia does not take a clear stance on Russia, it will suffer serious consequences, which will affect its economic survival, foreign direct investments and economic and social progress in general.

- Russian policy sabotages the progress of the Western Balkans towards the EU, trying to preserve the dysfunctionality of the Western Balkan countries. Because the Russian role in the Balkans is not significant with respect to economic involvement, with the exception of the energy sector. Russia is a mirror of the failed transformations and transitions here. The alliance with Russia is based on frustration and resistance to the values on which modern Europe is based. The Serbian public, which mostly still supports both Russia and Putin, fails to understand and think about what the relations with the EU mean for Serbia and where Serbia will be if the relations with it are terminated, from visas to investments, for example.
- Only so long as the Balkan countries believe in the military presence of the United States in Europe, the progress of European integration and leaning towards the West are a guarantee for the sustainable stability and security of the region. Otherwise, the Balkans still have the potential for armed conflicts, especially if the Russian malign influence continues to be present.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo need a path to NATO membership, while the pro-Western forces in Montenegro need stronger support in order to remove pro-Moscow nationalists who are promoted by the Serbian President.
- The Western Balkans need clear and prompt measures and geopolitical decisions by Brussels, such as those which were once made in the case of Bulgaria and Romania (we can now see how far-sighted and effective they were).

# RELATIONS WITH THE USA

The relations between the USA and Serbia in a broader temporal context are very stable and there is continuity, regardless of occasional problems and unresolved issues, primarily those related to the 1990s, that is, the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Wars in the former Yugoslavia in the nineties, sanctions against the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), NATO's intervention in 1999, as well as the subsequent recognition and consistent support of Kosovo's independence decisively influenced relations between Serbia and the United States of America (USA), as well as their perception in public opinion in Serbia.

The USA was among the first to recognize Kosovo's independence (2008) and is considered Priština's strongest partner. Negotiations between Belgrade and Priština are being led by the European Commission, but they are also attended by American officials who, especially under the current circumstances, give weight to those negotiations (from Philip Reecker, Matthew Palmer and Richard Grenell, to Gabriel Escobar).

Donald Trump's entry into the White House changed the paradigm of those relations and in some way encouraged (with his lack of interest) a change of format in the Belgrade-Priština negotiations with the intention of negotiations including the option of dividing Kosovo. Germany rendered that plan impossible in 2019. Belgrade was "cheering" for Donald Trump, with the hope that someone like him will win the next elections.

The Washington Agreement, signed in 2019, introduced doubts regarding Serbia's orientation. Serbia got involved in a complicated geopolitical game that, in all probability, was out of its league. It was a geopolitical victory for the USA, because the "agreement", as Grenell pointed out, "distances Serbia from both Russia and

China". But it also distanced it from Germany and some other European countries.

As Duško Proroković points out, the USA attempted to use the Washington Agreement to change Serbia's foreign policy course. That is, it was aimed at distancing Belgrade from Beijing and Moscow, Serbia's two strategic partners.<sup>592</sup> This puts Serbia in an unfavorable relationship with its strategic partners, primarily with China, because the agreement is mostly directed against it. President Donald Trump was plans to completely cut off economic and political relations with China, and intends to ask other countries to do the same, including Serbia.<sup>593</sup>

A *Financial Times* commentary points to an important dimension of Washington's diplomacy, which aims to strengthen ties with a small but central country on the periphery of the EU whose economy is increasingly linked to China's economy. Additionally, Serbia is one of the key countries involved in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>594</sup>

The agreement reached in Washington in 2020, which was signed by Vučić and Hoti on separate papers, each separately (and not with the exact same text), is officially the Agreement on the Normalization of Economic Relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Seven points out of a total of seventeen deal with this field and the concretization of individual measures.

Serbia's current ambassador to the USA Marko Đurić points out that his appointment (2020) came at the right moment, because "we are on the threshold of redefining Serbian-US relations, which – despite the hostility from the recent past and the disagreements we still have today about some important issues – should be brought back on the track of an old friendship and alliance". He

592 <https://informer.rs/svet/balkan/558544/nametanje-resenja-srbima-proslost-vojna-neutranost-stit-nova-struktura-moci-svetskoj-politici-menja-politicku-realnost>

593 Ibid.

594 "Serbia cultivates both US and China in superpowers' Balkans tug of war", *Financial Times*, 11 October 2020.

added that "Serbia's interest is to improve its image and establish new channels of cooperation in America, which is not a departure from the policy of neutrality, but rather its completion."<sup>595</sup>

Thus, Vuk Drašković, president of the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) party and writer, welcomes the return of the USA, because "it is bringing back investments worth several billion dollars, striving for reconciliation, looking towards the future..." And he adds that "Washington wants to unfreeze and resolve all the frozen conflicts from the wars of the nineties".<sup>596</sup>

Many also believe that President Vučić's policy is thought out and common-sense, and that the president has anticipated global relations well, with Serbia fighting for its independence in decision-making and policy-making. Economist Zlatko Lutovac believes that "between the Belt and Road Initiative, the European investment plan and the Washington Agreement, the Serbian state chooses its own path without rejecting any other".<sup>597</sup>

## THE ARRIVAL OF CHRISTOPHER HILL

With the change of administration in Washington, the arrival of Joseph Biden at its head, and especially following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the USA have once again included the Balkans in its European focus. Many commentators in Serbia welcomed this return, because the Europeanization of the Western Balkans had been a failure.

Already during the election campaign, President Biden announced the return of the USA to the Balkans with a much more serious strategy of completing "unfinished business" in the Balkans. The implementation of that strategy coincides with Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which takes on a completely new

595 "We have united the quarreling Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija", *Politika*, 18 October 2020.

596 "The USA in Serbia", *Politika*, 29 September 2020.

597 "Serbia with itself and with global powers", *Politika*, 21 October 2020.

dimension, because the Balkans in that context is primarily treated as a security issue.

Since the beginning of Russia's aggression, Serbia has faced the difficult task of choosing which side it is on. However, although the Government and President Vučić have persistently repeated their commitment to EU membership and regional integration, Serbia continues to resist pressure to impose sanctions on Russia and to sever ties that have largely led to Russification in the public and media sphere over the past ten years. This degree of Russification, under the given circumstances, changed the course of public opinion, making it extremely anti-Western and anti-American.

The Biden administration appointed Christopher Hill as Ambassador to Belgrade (he arrived in Belgrade towards the end of March 2022) with the mission of persuading President Vučić to join the West. During the first year of his stay in Serbia, Ambassador Hill appeared in Belgrade media outlets almost every day, emphasizing that Serbia should become a member of the EU and that the US and the EU expect Serbia to join the sanctions against Russia, and that there is no reason to support an attack on a sovereign country. but that Serbia should decide its own fate and that there is no pressure,<sup>598</sup> but that Serbia must think carefully about where its interests lie and admit that they lie in the West.<sup>599</sup> That is why he often repeated that it is necessary for Belgrade to harmonize its policy with the EU. If there is a bitter pill to swallow, it is better to do it immediately.<sup>600</sup>

In the period from 2001 to 2015, the USA invested more than 728 million dollars to stimulate economic growth, strengthen the judicial system and improve administration in Serbia.<sup>601</sup> Serbia

598 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/kristofer-hil-ako-mislite-da-ce-rusija-pomoci-u-vezi-sa-kosovom-razmislite-ponovo>

599 <https://autonomija.info/hil-srbija-mora-dobro-da-pogleda-gde-su-joj-nacionalni-interesi>

600 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/kristofer-hil-ako-treba-srbija-da-proguta-gorku-pilulu>

601 <https://www.021.rs/story/BBC/327068/Politika-Srbija-i-Amerika-obelezile-140-godina-diplomatskih-odnosa.html>



has been cooperating very closely with the Ohio National Guard within the NATO partnership since 2006. In the meantime, Serbia has joined IPAP, which is a step towards NATO membership. This cooperation is not spoken about in the Serbian media.

Despite the efforts of the US embassy in Belgrade to use videos about famous Serbs (such as Nikola Tesla, Mihajlo Pupin, Borislav Pekić, Mihajlo Vujić and others) as part of the “You are the World” campaign, public opinion has not yet changed. Russia’s aggression only contributed to even greater criticism of the US, which most perceive as the main culprit of the war in Ukraine.

There have been numerous statements indicating that the USA is determined to do anything to push Russia out of the Balkans and to bind Serbia as much as possible to the West. In this sense, economic support for Serbia and the Western Balkans is also being worked on in parallel, with the aim of stopping regressive trends and turning the region towards European integration.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The return of the USA to the Balkans was welcomed by many commentators, because “the European future has been wasted and made worthless not only because of an institutional blockade, but also because the majority in the EU does not see Serbia as a member”.

The priority of the current American diplomatic offensive is to close the open regional issues, first of all, the Kosovo issue. The dynamics of achieving goals is still subject to many challenges and in that sense uncertain.

# TURKEY: A REGIONAL POWER IN THE BALKANS

After the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, Turkey was looking for greater space for the implementation of its centuries-old ambitious foreign policy. President Turgut Özal already had a vision of Turkey as a regional power perceiving the Western Balkans as an important “geostrategic gateway” to Europe. As an important NATO member, Turkey fit additionally into such a vision. In the meantime, Turkey became the epicentre of a new emerging geopolitical reality, which also shows its global ambitions.

Turkey has already grown into a relevant regional power, which it certainly is if one considers its territorial, demographic, military and economic potentials. Its global strategic aspirations for the 21st century have been defined by Ahmet Davutoğlu, the former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, in his book *Strategic Depth* (Stratejik Derinlik) published in 2000. Davutoğlu has pointed out that Turkey is positioned in the centre of the main “geocultural basins”, the West, the Middle East the Balkans and Central Asia, and therefore it should create a dynamic and proactive foreign policy in each of these geographies. As Davutoğlu points out, Turkey must first follow global and regional balances, because it has a significant strategic advantage of being also a Middle Eastern, Eastern Mediterranean and Caucasian country.<sup>602</sup> And the security of the Balkans is increasingly equated with the security parameters of Turkey’s western border.<sup>603</sup>

602 Ahmet Davutoglu, “Strategijska dubina”, *Službeni glasnik*, Belgrade, 2014, p. 295.

603 Ibid., p. 135.

However, Davutoğlu's vision of creating something similar to a neo-Ottoman space has clashed with reality, not only in the Middle East but also in the wider neighbourhood. In the meantime, even the attractiveness of EU membership faded, despite a decades-long accession process. Europe has turned to itself and is still not prepared to absorb Turkey and Muslim identity. Turkey's Nobel Prize laureate Orhan Pamuk once said that millions of Turks wholeheartedly believed in the European Union that he could not imagine Turkey without a European perspective just as he could not imagine Europe without Turkey's candidacy.<sup>604</sup>

Istanbul's economist and political commentator Attila Jeşilada believes that neo-Ottomanism is an empty dream of the Turkish political elite.<sup>605</sup> He points out that the Balkans are one of the primary goals of Turkey's expansion in two ways. First, because Turks live in an illusion that their former colonies respect them and that they can expand their business and political influences there and, second, because their economic needs are complementary.<sup>606</sup>

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan conducts a domestic and foreign policy that is based on so-called Erdoğanism as a political philosophy and leadership style. It is a kind of ideological mixture of Turkish nationalism, political Islam and anti-Westernism. This had a particular impact on foreign policy. Over the past years bilateral relations between Ankara and EU member countries have been marked by turbulence. A number of serious issues have arisen in the relations between Ankara and EU member countries. Meanwhile, Turkey has changed its role of the EU's key political actor to that of a strategic rival, largely due not only to its greater ambitions, but also due to the long-lasting obstruction of its EU membership. This does not mean, however, that numerous common interests do not exist. How these relations will further develop will also depend on the presidential elections next year. Namely, for both the United States and the EU, due to many

604 Orhan Pamuk, *Kofer mog oca*, Nova knjiga, Montenegro, 2017.

605 <https://www.dw.com/sr/turska-tra%C5%BEi-prodor-na-balkan/a-40857023>

606 Ibid.

disagreements (within NATO as well), Turkey has become a country to be treated seriously because, on the one hand, it is an important NATO member (with the largest army) and, on the other hand, because its nonliberal values are distancing it from the liberal world.

Turkey has intensified its activities in the Balkans, among other things, as an alternative to the EU. Some local leaders (Edi Rama, Aleksandar Vučić, Sulejman Ugljanin, Bakir Izetbegović) also use Turkey to counter the EU and its reluctance vis-à-vis enlargement. Politika daily journalist Boško Jakšić points out that the foundation of Ankara's policy towards the region is primarily pragmatism: economic and political interests, plus intermediary services that can contribute to the global credibility of Turkish diplomacy.<sup>607</sup>

## TURKISH AMBITIONS IN THE BALKANS

Several centuries of Turkish domination in the Balkans have left a deep imprint on the Balkan countries as well as Turkey itself due to mutual influences. In the past, the Balkans did not represent Turkey's main foreign policy interest and priority. It was only after the fall of communism that Turkey began more actively to deal with the Balkan countries, both on the political and economic plane.

The Balkans are a priority for Turkey not only from a political, economic and geographical perspective, but also as part of its historic, cultural and human ties with the region. The Balkans are Turkey's crucial link with Europe, which had an important place in the historic process that shaped the Turkish nation. This is certainly a potential for its role in regional integration and its aspiration to become an EU member.

During the brutal breakup of Yugoslavia and Serbian aggression, Turkey sided with all newly formed countries. Thus, it was among the first to recognize Macedonia, which found itself in very

607 <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/516505/Pogledi/Turska-na-Balkanu-mitovi-i-realnost>

unfavourable surroundings, practically on all sides. As the JNA forces withdrew from Macedonia, leaving it completely disarmed, Turkey offered security guarantees to it. Since the beginning of the new relations in the Balkans, Turkey has also been supporting Albania in its dispute with Greece and Serbia, and has been encouraging good relations with Macedonia as well.

Turkey's relations with Serbia were bad during its aggression against Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and reached the lowest point during NATO intervention in 1999 in which Turkey also participated. Diplomatic relations were practically severed when Turkey, as one of the first countries, recognized Kosovo's independence. Serbia then withdrew its ambassadors from all countries that recognized Kosovo. Thereafter, the mutual relations kept gradually improving until the official visit of President Abdullah Gül to Belgrade in 2009. It was the first visit of the Turkish President to Belgrade after 23 years. The trilateral meetings of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Turkey soon followed and, not long afterwards, in 2010, they signed the Declaration on Peace and Stability in the Balkans in Istanbul.

Over the past few years, Turkey's foreign policy approach towards the Balkans has gained momentum, which many experts, such as historian Darko Tanasković, the former Ambassador of Serbia to Turkey, designated as "neo-Ottomanism". Namely, he holds that neo-Ottomanism is more than an ideology; it is a philosophy of history, civilizational paradigm and world view that is characteristic of most members of the modern Turkish nation, especially its intellectual elite. Tanasković points out that neo-Ottomanism is the rationalization of the unconquered imperial nostalgia of a great historic nation that is dissatisfied with its position and role in the world... By itself, Neo-Ottomanism is neither good nor bad. It is even legitimate, so that it is recommended to avoid positive or negative value judgements and, in particular, prejudices when speaking and writing about it.<sup>608</sup>

608 Darko Tanasković, "Neoosmanizam, povratak Turske na Balkan", *Službeni glasnik*, Belgrade, 2010.

On the other hand, Milorad Ekmečić views neo-Ottomanism as a means for internal homogenization in Turkey, which will play a similar role like Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979.<sup>609</sup> Dušan Proroković believes that Atlanticism, under the guise of neo-Ottomanism, is pushing out Euroasianism, while continentalism is gaining a reliable ally in the struggle for influence in the Caucasian region. At the same time, the West has fewer problems with the strengthening of secular Turkish Islam among Balkan Mohammedans than the strengthening of some other Islamic directions. Due to its historical role and geographical proximity, Turkey imposes itself as their protector and neo-Ottomanism as a geopolitical concept that will be accepted with pleasure.<sup>610</sup>

Neo-Ottomanism was met both with support (in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and suspicion, but the role of Turkey as an important regional power without which it is impossible to resolve some issues, primarily security ones, is certainly appreciated. Many perceive neo-Ottomanism as a part of the cultural mosaic of the region rather than as a contemporary ideology. The relations with Serbia are a prerequisite for the stable and lasting results of Balkan relations. Over time, neo-Ottomanism has been suppressed and a pragmatic business relationship in cooperation with the region is becoming increasingly pronounced.

## **“CONQUERING” THE BALKANS**

According to Davutoğlu's vision, the Balkans are singled out as one of the key priorities of Turkey's foreign policy, while the countries with a majority or significant percentage of the Muslim population (Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia) as well as Serbia as the central and largest country in the Balkans are of utmost importance for it.

<sup>609</sup> Milorad Ekmečić, *Pečat*, 12 May 2011.

<sup>610</sup> Dušan Proroković, “Geopolitika Srbije”, *Službeni glasnik*, Belgrade, 2018, 208 p.

The geopolitical position of Serbia and the Balkans, as a bridge between East and West, has always been significant throughout history. For Turkey, the Balkans represent Europe's weak link, because it has failed to fully integrate them and because it has not filled the strategic vacuum left after the brutal breakup of Yugoslavia. Turkey perceives the Balkans as an important part of its European identity, which is also confirmed by its greater presence in the region, which will continue to increase. During one of his visits to the regions, President Erdoğan said: "We have a historical responsibility and obligation here. This is why we continue our visits to the Balkan countries and this is why we will continue them".<sup>611</sup>

Starting from the strategic importance of the Balkans, Turkey has also used its soft power potential, primarily using the historical and cultural heritage from the Ottoman rule in the Balkans. In the absence of the EU's clear enlargement policy in the Western Balkans, Turkey has taken advantage of that vacuum and has strengthened its position as a regional leader involved in finding compromise solutions. It has been through soft power that Turkey has managed to "soften" the negative stereotype about Turks and the Ottoman Empire, primarily in Serbia. In this sense, Turkish TV dramas have become the strongest narrative tool of popular culture, which has an unbelievable transformative power. The unexpected success of this cultural export has become a convenient tool for strengthening Turkey's foreign policy ambitions in the region. In the Balkans, Turkish TV series are viewed as domestic productions.

Turkey's foreign policy in the Balkans has two goals: economic, primarily through infrastructure investments and security. There is also a special focus on the influence of Fethullah Gülen<sup>612</sup> in the

611 <https://standard.rs/2021/08/29/erdogan-turska-ima-istorijsku-odgovornost-prema-balkanu>

612 Fethullah Gülen (75) is a Turkish preacher, former imam and writer, as well as the leader of the Hizmet movement, one of the largest Islamic civil organizations, which promotes religious values. He has not lived in Turkey since 1999, when he had to flee his native country due to the accusations of undermining the secular foundations of the state. He was previously Rejep Tayyip

region (Turkish language schools and scholarship holders). There is tremendous pressure on regional governments to extradite Gülenists and other dissidents, which is mostly against the laws of their countries. The other goal, although to a lesser extent, is the extradition of Kurds and political dissidents after the coup in 2016. Turkey realizes its goals in the Balkans within a network of institutions and platforms, such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), Yunus Emre cultural centres, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), media houses (for example, the state-owned TRT and Anadolu Agency) and scholarships for foreign students.

Turkey has also participated and still participates in all multi-lateral initiatives and processes, such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, South-East European Cooperation Process, Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe and Regional Cooperation Council. It is emphasized that Turkey's foreign policy is mostly not conducted through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but through the Directorate of Religious Affairs.

## **SERBIA: A KEY ACTOR IN THE BALKANS**

Turkey considers Serbia the key actor in the Balkans. The relations between the two countries, which are constantly on the rise, can also be perceived in that light. Significant changes in the relations between Belgrade and Ankara occurred after the 5 October 2000 changes and, in particular, after 2008, when Boris Tadić was re-elected President of the Republic of Serbia. The highest level of cooperation has been established in recent years with a view to achieving a "strategic partnership". Despite the fact that Turkey and Serbia do not have a common border, both countries consider themselves neighbours.

.....

Erdoğan's friend and advisor.



Some of Erdoğan's statements from the beginning of the process of rapprochement between the two countries have been overcome, such as the one of July 2012, when he stated that "Bosnia is actually one of 81 Turkish provinces and that his obligation as Prime Minister is to take care of Saajevo as well", while in Prizren in 2013 he said that "Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo", which provoked reactions from Belgrade and had President Tomislav Nikolić announce the suspension of trilateral summit meetings of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey.<sup>613</sup>

It is paradoxical that a nation that built a large part of its national identity on a negative stereotype of Turks has become one of Turkey's main allies in the region. Aleksandar Vučić's policy of rapprochement with Turkey made Serbia the largest recipient of Turkish investments in the region in the past year. In May 2018, during his visit to Turkey, Aleksandar Vučić said that "the relations between Serbia and Turkey are the best in modern Serbian history", and in October 2019, during Erdoğan's new visit, he said that "perhaps today they are the best in modern history".<sup>614</sup>

President Erdoğan's visit (September 2022) has been his third official visit to Serbia over the last five years. It is not accidental that this visit comes at a time when the EU and the USA are focused on the regional problems and, in particular, on the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština. On that occasion, both presidents stated that cooperation between Serbia and Turkey was never better. President Erdogan came with a story about economic prosperity and, in particular, the Open Balkan Initiative. Vladimir Ajzenhamer, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Security, holds that Turkey will certainly advocate the continuation of the Open Balkan Initiative and will insist on the inclusion of Pristina in order to relax relations.<sup>615</sup>

613 <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/turske-investicije-u-srbiji-rast-u-turbulentnim-vremenima>

614 <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/turske-investicije-u-srbiji-rast-u-turbulentnim-vremenima>

615 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/erdogan-u-poseti-srbiji-turska-ima-dva->

By this visit Erdoğan continued to strengthen his influence within the region, which was weaker in previous years due to the war in Syria, economic crisis and refugees.

At present, there are 705 active companies in Serbia, whose founders are natural and legal persons from Turkey as well as 209 entrepreneurs, Turkish citizens. Only from the beginning of 2022 until the beginning of September, the National Employment Service issued 3,535 work permits to Turkish citizens, of which 72 work permits were issued to women.<sup>616</sup>

The largest number of companies are involved in residential and nonresidential construction, nonspecialized wholesale trade, trade in textiles, catering and business and other management consultancy activities. Turkish investors employ more than 10,000 people. Turkish workers are among the most numerous in Serbia. They are mostly engaged in infrastructure projects.<sup>617</sup>

Turkey ranks among the countries that can potentially be significant investors. During the last 10 years, Turkey invested 240 million euros, which is far below the total investment of 3.6 billion euros which came to Serbia from all parts of the world, thus being quite a modest balance.<sup>618</sup> In the first quarter of 2022, according to the data of the Chamber of Commerce of Serbia, Turkish investments amounted to 13.9 billion euros. In the first half of 2022, foreign trade was valued at 1.2 billion euros, thus increasing by 51.4 per cent compared to the same period in 2021.<sup>619</sup> Turkey ranks among the top 10 foreign trade partners of Serbia with an upward tendency.

The protocols of the Serbian and Turkish governments on the amendments to the Agreement on the Mutual Abolition of Visas, agreements on the mutual encouragement and protection of

izazova-na-balkanu-a-nekoliko-je-vaznih-tema-u/r88qscl

616 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-62825247>

617 Ibid.

618 <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/13/ekonomija/4945246/srbija-turska-ekonomska-saradnja-.html>

619 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-62825247>

investments, and cooperation in the field of innovations in advanced technologies, memorandums of understanding and cooperation in the fields of forest fire suppression, media and communications, as well as in the field of electronic administration.

During Erdoğan's visit, the two countries also signed the protocol that enabled their citizens to travel only with an identity card. This will certainly exert influence on the number of tourists, which is increasing year by year. From 2008 to 2018, there was a steady increase in the number of tourists from Turkey in Serbia. In 2019, according to the data of the Tourist Organization of Serbia, there was a record number of Turkish tourists – almost 108,000 or 11 percent more compared to the previous year. After a standstill during the pandemic, Turkish tourists began to return to Serbia. Serbian tourists have been spending their holidays in Turkey for years. They especially visit Istanbul for shopping and entertainment. There are several daily flights from Belgrade to Turkey. Only since the beginning of 2022 there have been 300,000 Serbian tourists in Turkey.<sup>620</sup>

The TIKa has a very important role as a channel for Turkish investments, while Serbia is one of the TIKa's most important partners in the Balkans. Since 1992, TIKa has realized 343 projects and activities in Serbia, as was announced on the organization's Twitter account. President Erdoğan has announced that the restoration of the Bajrakli Mosque in Belgrade would soon begin through this agency. The already completed projects are in the fields of education, health, social infrastructure and protection of common cultural heritage. The rise of cooperation between the two countries in the field of security and reaching an agreement in the fields of defence, police cooperation and industry were also announced. The TIKa has built, repaired, renovated and equipped schools, hospitals and health clinics (the renovation of the intensive care unit in the Dragiša Mišović Hospital and reconstruction and equipment donation to the Gynecology and Obstetrics Department of

620 Ibid.

the Novi Pazar Hospital, realized in cooperation with the Dragica Nikolić Foundation).<sup>621</sup>

Agricultural and livestock projects are also significant, since almost 25 percent of the labour force in Serbia is employed in these sectors. About 30 projects have been realized in 28 agriculture-dominated municipalities. Donations have included seedlings and seeds, agricultural equipment, cold storages and driers for agricultural cooperatives, 300 greenhouses for 15 municipalities and bee keeping project.

As a state agency, the TIKa is especially interested in the restoration of cultural monuments such as the Ram Fortress, Mehmed Paša Sokolović's Fountain and Small Staircase in Kalemegdan Park.

## TURKISH DISSIDENTS IN SERBIA

President Erdoğan transferred his internal conflicts to foreign policy activities as well. Thus, on the occasion of the military coup in 2016 for which Turkey accused Gulen, it issued a series of demands for the extradition of his accomplices. Its request to the United States for the extradition of Fethullah Gulen was not fulfilled, which caused tensions between Ankara and Washington. Special pressure was exerted on the Balkan countries to extradite political dissidents and Gulenists. From 15 July 2016 to January 2021, Turkey submitted 16 requests to the Serbian Ministry of Justice for the extradition of its citizens from Serbia. The Serbian Ministry of Justice approved the extradition of five persons.<sup>622</sup>

The Turkish citizen of Kurdish origin, **Cevdet Ayaz**, was extradited at the request of Turkey on 25 December 2017, despite all arguments presented by his legal representatives and the decision of the United Nations Committee Against Torture, which demanded

621 <https://www.diplomacyandcommerce.rs/mr-mehmet-bayrak-director-of-tika-turkish-cooperation-and-coordination-agency-in-belgrade-development-cooperation-between-turkey-and-serbia>

622 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-turska-zahtevi-za-ekstradicije/32021092.html>

from the Serbian authorities to refrain from extraditing Ayaz to Turkey as an interim measure because of the real risk that he would be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in that country. Cevdet Ayaz will serve a 15-year prison sentence in Turkey due to his confession made under torture. As the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights has pointed out in its statement, Cevdet Ayaz's extradition is an illustration of the grossest violation of human rights and unlawful practices by Serbia's decision makers, with which Serbia has been burdened since the signing of the Convention Against Torture. It has also been pointed out the Minister of Justice has presented a series of falsehoods aiming at misleading the public. Regardless of the motives behind this tragic case, it is undeniable that the Minister of Justice and the relevant authorities deciding on this case have demonstrated that the separation of powers, rule of law and human rights of vulnerable individuals in Serbia are subordinated to the interests of authoritarian regimes such as the one in Turkey.<sup>623</sup>

**Ecevit Piroğlu**, a Kurdish politician and activist who is accused by the Turkish authorities of being a member of "armed terrorist organizations", is awaiting the final decision of the Serbian judicial authorities on his extradition. He was accused of participating in the 2013 Gezi Park protests, which was the first national street movement against Erdoğan's government. The United Nations Committee against Torture has asked Serbia not to extradite him to Turkey. This summer, Ecevit Piroğlu started a hunger strike in extradition custody in Serbia due to "all violations of legal norms and procedures in his case." The Appellate Court in Belgrade annulled the decision by which it was determined that the legal prerequisites for Ecevit Piroğlu's extradition to the Turkish judicial authorities for criminal prosecution were not met and returned the decision to the first instance court for a repeated decision-making.<sup>624</sup>

623 <http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/komitet-protiv-mucenja-i-drugih-svirepih-necovecnih-ili-ponizavajucih-kazni-ili-postupaka-oglasio-srbiju-odgovornom-zbog-ekstradicije-kurdskog-politickog-aktiviste-dzevdeta-ajaza>

624 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/apelacioni-sud-ukinuo-resenje-za-izrucenje->



rhetoric is not approved because it is the only country in the Western Balkans which firmly adheres to the Euro-Atlantic orientation and EU membership.

Turkey devotes special attention to Serbia's relations with Kosovo. Considering the very tense relations between Kosovo and Serbia, Turkey offers to get involved, while the possibility of an Erdoğan-Kurti-Vučić meeting is not ruled out. Allegedly, Erdoğan is waiting to see the results of the negotiations in Brussels. This was also conveyed to President Vučić<sup>626</sup>.

Turkey is also lobbying for the recognition of Kosovo's independence and, in that sense, it is associated with the efforts of the United States, which has more influence than Turkey, even in one part of the Muslim world. Darko Tanasković believes that "Turkey can exert influence on three or four countries" and that Greece, under the US influence, could be the first of the five EU countries to recognize Kosovo".<sup>627</sup>

During his last visit to Tirana, in his address to the Albanian Parliament, President Erdoğan also dedicated two sentences to "Kosovo", emphasizing that Turkey recognized Kosovo's independence as the second country in the world, right after the United States. On that occasion, Darko Tanasković warned that "the foreign policy of this important and strong country, especially under Erdoğan's ambitious baton, is moving in the same neo-imperial strategic direction, restoring its power on a regional and global level ('great Turkey again!'), while its tactics is variable and multidirectional, depending on a conjunctural assessment".<sup>628</sup>

In this sense, it should be recalled that Erdoğan also said that the Dayton Agreement should be revised because it became clear

626 <https://www.slobodna-warned-that-therdoganov-savjetnik-za-balkan-otkrio-turska-bi-mogla-da-se-ukljuchi-u-dijalog-beograda-i-pristine.html>

627 <https://standard.rs/2021/07/25/d-tanaskovic-turska-povodom-kosova-moze-uticati-samo-na-tri-cetiri-drzave>

628 <https://standard.rs/2022/01/30/d-tanaskovic-erdoganova-spoljna-politika-ili-jedan-pravac-vise-smerova>



that during the past period it failed to provide a solution for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

At present, according to the official data of the Ministry of Trade and Industry, 725 Turkish companies with the capital of at least 1.2 billion euros operate on the Kosovo market. After Germany and Switzerland, Turkey is Kosovo's biggest trading partner and one of the three countries with the largest direct investment presence in Kosovo. According to the Kosovo-Turkish Chamber of Commerce, Ankara's official investments in Kosovo from 2009 to 2019 amounted to 450 million euros. The energy sector accounts for 31 percent of all investments, which is followed by the financial and transport sectors. In the pre-pandemic year 2019, Turkish exports to Kosovo amounted to 431 million euros, while Kosovo exports amounted to only eight million euros.<sup>629</sup>

In the meantime, the relations between Kosovo and Turkey seriously deteriorated, as is evidenced by two cases showing a worsening trend. Namely, Kosovo handed over six Turkish citizens to Turkey (29 March 2018), accused by Ankara as being the members of Fethullah Gulen's network. The entire action of deportation of six alleged members of Gulen's movement was shrouded in secrecy and confusion. Due to the reactions that followed in Kosovo, the Kosovo Prime Minister ousted the minister and the head of the intelligence service because they never informed him about this action.

## **SANDŽAK: A BRIDGE BETWEEN SERBIA AND TURKEY?**

Sandžak is getting poorer and isolated from the main social and economic flows. Many people in Sandžak say that "it has never been worse" and that they no longer expect anything from Belgrade because it has forsaken all their expectations. Bosniaks from Sandžak are increasingly distant and ghettoized and what

629 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/economy/2021/9/28/izmedju-statistike-i-percepcije-investicije-i-trgovinska-razmjena-turske-i-balkana>



Belgrade says and does is becoming increasingly less important to them. Citizens have begun to distance themselves and self-organize, while politicians follow the line of least resistance.

The basic reason for the stagnation of economic life in Sandžak is the lack of infrastructure, which is why there are almost no investments. The state is building the Novi Pazar-Sjenica highway near Tutin with a Turkish loan repaid by Serbia. The most is expected from the Belgrade-South Adriatic highway, which should be continued up to the Miloš Veliki highway and Montenegro via Pešter. Although it has been announced for a long time, its construction has not yet started.

Turkey is a very present actor in Sandžak. Local political officials often (ab)use it in mutual conflicts. The popularity of Turkey and its President is best evidenced by the welcoming scenes during Erdoğan's visit to Novi Pazar in 2017. All three political leaders, who are otherwise often in conflict, went to Ankara to support Erdoğan after the coup in 2016.

Due to a large Bosniak diaspora in Turkey, the Turkish Consulate was opened in Novi Pazar on 1 September 2021. The Consular area covers the territory of the municipalities of Novi Pazar, Sjenica, Tutin, Prijepolje, Nova Varoš and Priboj. On that occasion, Foreign Minister Melvüt Çavuşoğlu stated: "Our brothers in Sandžak and Turkish citizens originating from Sandžak are a solid link between our countries. This Consulate covers a large area, from Pirot to Užice, and I hope that after its opening the investments of our companies in this region will increase, which we encourage, and that it will improve our relations and cooperation".<sup>630</sup>

Regardless of the orientation towards Turkey, its attempt to form a Turkish minority in Sandžak a few years ago failed. Turkey's tendency to treat Bosniaks as a Turkish minority is met with a strong opposition, both in Sandžak and in Sarajevo. The association of Turks in Serbia was formed in Novi Pazar in 2015. It called on citizens to register in order to form the Turkish national minority.

630 <https://rtvnp.rs/2021/09/01/cavusoglu-turska-nikada-nec-zaboraviti-podskunaroda-sandzaka-novi-pazar-u-srcu/111365>

Although the invitation was allegedly addressed only to citizens of Turkish origin, Bosniaks perceived it as a provocation aimed at the implosion of Bosniak identity. In order to form a national minority, it is necessary to have 300 registered citizens and there are not so many.<sup>631</sup>

Despite the huge popularity of Turkey and President Erdoğan in Sandžak, investments in this region are minimal and certainly do not match the expectations of the local population. All three political parties in Sandžak have good relations with Ankara. However, President Erdoğan did not even succeed in mediating the reconciliation of the two Islamic communities in Sandžak. Unlike the Party of Democratic Action (PDA) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), Moamer Zukorlić was more critical of Turkey and closer to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

In 2021, a delegation of hafizes came to Sandžak and will stay in it for five years. They will be distributed in all towns in Sandžak in mosques and will be at the service of all believers. They will teach believers the Koran and lead Namaz prayers in mosques.<sup>632</sup>

Bosniaks are also connected to Turkey by a large diaspora. It is estimated that up to five million Bosniaks live in Turkey and most of them originate from Sandžak. Novi Pazar residents say that there is no family in the city which does not have relatives in Turkey. However, according to young director Rifat Rifatović, it is a myth that that Sandžak people have a privileged position when it comes to Turkish capital. "There are no institutional reactions, but only a flair for business – whoever offers something he gets it".<sup>633</sup> The residents of Novi Pazar are convinced that Turkish investments in Serbia end up everywhere except with them and that the local economy survives because the diaspora sends money. However, when it comes to donations, the European Union is the most

631 <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2015/8/14/poziv-koji-je-uznemirio-sandzak>

632 [https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/balkan/reis-nasufovi%C4%87-dolazak-hafiza-iz-turske-u-sand%C5%BEak-istorijsWHEN\\_IT\\_COMES\\_TRO\\_DOEWIFN\\_INVEARMki-danza-na%C5%A1u-zajednicu-/2180836](https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/balkan/reis-nasufovi%C4%87-dolazak-hafiza-iz-turske-u-sand%C5%BEak-istorijsWHEN_IT_COMES_TRO_DOEWIFN_INVEARMki-danza-na%C5%A1u-zajednicu-/2180836)

633 <https://www.dw.com/sr/maja-turska-kao-majka-rusija/a-35890521>

generous vis-à-vis this city. The Turkish Agency for Development and Coordination (TIKA), founded five years ago, takes only the second place.

Sandžak was in a particularly difficult situation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Turkey sent 16 tons of medical equipment to Serbia, that is, everything that doctors needed in their fight against the coronavirus. The aid was intended for Novi Pazar and Tutin, as well as Sjenica.<sup>634</sup>

During Erdoğan's visit (September 2022), he also met with a Sandžak delegation in Belgrade. During the meeting, it was pointed to the importance of the reconstruction of the Novi Pazar-Tutin highway, construction of the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway and connection of Bosniaks in Serbia and Bosnia. When it comes to foreign investment, two projects can open a perspective for Sandžak

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After the end of the Cold War, Turkey was provided room for an independent formulation of its state interests. During the last three decades, it became a relevant regional power, so that its role in the Balkans is indispensable when it comes to the stability of the region and its economic development.

Turkey's potentials in the Balkans are limited in comparison with those of the West, especially the EU (Germany and France), both because of Kosovo and its attitude towards Russia, which President Erdoğan also uses for the purpose of the presidential elections the outcome of which is very uncertain. The relations with the Balkans will largely depend on the outcome of the 2023 elections. The Turkish government is also preoccupied with its troublesome neighbours in the Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean and Caucasus.

Turkey skillfully calibrates its penetration of the Balkans, especially the countries with the majority Muslim population,

634 <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/322817/Objavljeni-preliminarni-rezultati-izbora-za-NacionalneDVO P-savete.html>

relative to its bilateral ties with Belgrade as well as the West and Russia.

Apart from Serbia's objective interest of the state in maintaining constructive and successful relations with Turkey, Belgrade also relies on Turkey as a partner it can rely on in the event of a new economic crisis due to the consequences of the war in Ukraine.

Turkey's rivalry with the European Union and United States in the Balkans is certainly in collision with the Balkan countries' Euro-Atlantic agenda. That is why the EU and the USA should be aware that the Balkans are exposed to many influences that can make the Euro-Atlantic agenda meaningless, as it is already the case with Serbia. The Euro-Atlantic perspective of the Western Balkans must be tangible and convincing. In addition, it would be desirable that the EU and the USA strengthen their partnership with Turkey (like the one in the 1990s) in order to preserve and strengthen the European future of the region.

Turkey's ambition to gain more influence in the Balkans is legitimate. However, if its influence is used for blackmailing Europe, it can have a negative connotation, bearing in mind the fragility of the Balkan countries. The EU's unclear and insufficiently engaged policy towards the Balkans provides room for Turkey and its potential to stabilize or destabilize the region.



# APPENDIX

## SERB WORLD

After the attempt to recentralize Yugoslavia failed, Serbia's elites switched to the concept of uniting all Serbs and Serbian ethnic territories. The rearrangement of borders, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, could not be carried out through voluntary resettlement. For this reason, drastic measures of intimidation, expulsion and mass killing of Muslims/Bosniaks were applied in order to "liberate" the projected Serb ethnic territories and thus have them join Serbia. Even after more than 30 years, this project has not been abandoned. The war effort helped establish Serb territory in Bosnia, which was later confirmed in Dayton in 1995.

The propaganda for war preparations already clearly indicated the goals set therein, which was accompanied by extensive activities of all the elites, especially intellectuals, who were in essence the architects behind the renewed Serbian project involving the unification of all Serbs and Serb territories. What ensued after Dayton was politics using different means aimed at the integration of Serbian lands with Serbia. This undertaking has come a long way because the international community has been tolerant towards the behavior of Serbian leadership in the Republika Srpska.

Russia's infiltration into the Balkans – after the Western international community (the United States of America and the European Union) had largely disengaged from the Balkans – greatly encouraged Serbian nationalists to intensify activities towards the

unification of all Serbs, which in the meantime got a new name: “Serb World”, following the example of “Russian World”. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has displayed similarities in both methodology and argumentation used by both Moscow and Belgrade.

## IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT AFTER DAYTON

Shortly before the outbreak of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serb participants in the Congress of Intellectuals in Sarajevo on 30 March 1992 passed a Declaration urging “the justest possible division and delimitation in order to eliminate the causes of hatred and killing”, and calling for the “unity of Serbs” which requires “that all Serb authorities, where they exist, and all Serb states, where they have already been established, the Serb church and Serb intellectuals should formulate and lay down minimum Serb national interests which at this historic moment are not at all in dispute and which must never anywhere be backed down from”.<sup>635</sup>

Later during the war, at the Second Congress of Serb Intellectuals in Belgrade (1994), Serb intellectuals unanimously approved the creation of a Serb ethnic state and the unification of all Serbs. Academician Milorad Ekmečić said at the time that following the collapse of Yugoslavia “through no fault of our own, it is now subordinated to the unification of the Serb people in its national state, at least until we have all of us licked our wounds clean”.<sup>636</sup>

Serbian elites can be satisfied with what they achieved with the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even though Bosnian Serbs were not satisfied with the Dayton Accords, they had no means of challenging them. They considered that parts of the Serb ethnic space had unjustly been lost. (In Dayton, 20 percent of the occupied territory was assigned to the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.) One should not overlook a statement made at the time

<sup>635</sup> *Borba*, 30 March, 1992.

<sup>636</sup> *Srpsko pitanje danas* (The Serb Question Today): *Second Congress of Serbian Intellectuals*, Belgrade, 1994.



because it still remains valid as far as Serbia's policy towards the Republika Srpska is concerned. Vojislav Koštunica, then president of the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), said:

I don't believe that the Dayton Accords, such as they are, will lead to further war and instability. But I am sure that in the wake of Milošević's defeat in 1991 and Milošević's peace in 1995, the position of Serbs has never been worse in the two centuries since they began creating their state.<sup>637</sup>

Koštunica pointed out that from his room in Dayton, the Serbian President sent Bosnian Serbs a message "congratulating them on the Republika Srpska and wishing them peace and cooperation with the Muslim-Croat Federation. Now, mind you, not cooperation with the FRY, which means that he wrote them off once again and confirmed by his congratulatory message that they were going to live in another state" for "if the RS was recognized formally in Geneva, the border between the RS and the FRY was recognized in Dayton".<sup>638</sup> As it later turned out, Koštunica was to announce Serbia's real policy towards the Republika Srpska. He said that the "moment has come to consider strengthening ties between the Republika Srpska and the FRY, which ought to be strengthened in all fields".<sup>639</sup>

Vojislav Šešelj, president of the Serbian Radical Party, also denounced the Dayton Accords as a "Serb defeat which is the result of the disastrous national policy of the Serbian President supported by the official policy of the USA in particular". Naturally it was Šešelj who aired the view which today predominates in the policy on "Serb lands", namely that the "Serb people will never be able to accept as final the results of this hysterically anti-Serb policy of Milošević and the international community, so a future democratic and nationally-minded government will surely know how to

637 *Večernje novosti*, 22 November, 1995.

638 *Večernje novost*, 22 November, 1995.

639 *Ibid.*

realize the aspirations of our people to enjoy a united and strong Serb state".<sup>640</sup>

Vuk Drašković, on the other hand, was more realistic in his assessments. He said that "had the war not been brought to a halt through big power efforts, the whole of the Republika Srpska would have fallen within weeks". All the same, Drašković continued to regard Serbia as a big power in the Balkans because "Serbia occupies such a geopolitical position as to constitute a bridge between Europe and Asia and between the West and Russia".<sup>641</sup>

Dissatisfaction with the Dayton Accords was also expressed by the entire opposition to Milošević, above all over the loss of certain parts of "Serb territories". Serb strategists have acknowledged in their calculations the international circumstances that were to frustrate the creation of an integral state of the Serb people for a long time to come. Therefore, in their view, the Dayton Accords were a reality to be reckoned with while retaining the same long-term goals. The union of Serbia, Montenegro, and the Republika Srpska was to be put off for a more propitious moment, that is, until the international constellation has changed, because "there is nothing that stands in the way of unequivocally projecting such an objective as a strategic national interest".<sup>642</sup>

The round table "Geopolitical reality of the Serbs", held in Novi Sad on 29–31 January 1997 discussed the changes in the overall global geopolitical situation, which, as president of the Institute Executive Board Milivoj Reljin said in his inaugural address, imposed on the Serbian people as a whole "essentially different conditions in which it will have to realize its state and national objectives and interests". Among the chief conclusions was the view that from the standpoint of Serb interests, "the Republika Srpska is

640 Ibid.

641 *Naša borba*, 11 December 1995.

642 Slobodan Samardžić, "Evropska unija, raspad Jugoslavije i srpski nacionalni interesi" ("The European Union, Break-up of Yugoslavia and Serb National Interests"), *Geopolitička stvarnost Srba* (Geopolitical Reality of the Serb Nation), Institute of Geopolitical Studies, Belgrade, 1997, p.130.

the only bright spot in the process of breaking up the SFRY", at the same time pointing out that "Annex 7 of the Dayton Accords, that is, the Agreement on Refugees and Displaced Persons" poses the main threat to the survival of the Republika Srpska.<sup>643</sup> It was also pointed out that from the point of view of Serbian national interests, "that agreement is a double-edged sword because its implementation destroys the cohesive power of the RS and strengthens the hand of those forces which are 'drowning' the Republika Srpska in the integral state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and, worse still, subordinate the interests of the Serb people to the interests of the Muslims."<sup>644</sup>

According to Rajko Gnjacko, the "Muslim policy" could be countered, among other things, with "the return of Serb refugees to the RS and promotion of population policy measures".<sup>645</sup> However, the optimism of the participants regarding the survival and overall progress of the Republika Srpska, particularly in a socioeconomic sense, was based on the belief that at that moment, the Republika Srpska and the Serb people inhabiting it, would be needed for quite some time by a Europe furthering its own interests. Of primary importance in this regard is the role the Republika Srpska plays in preventing the penetration of Islamic fundamentalism into the heart of Europe. In other words, the Republika Srpska is made to play the part of the former Military Frontier. "When the reasons for its existence are no longer there, our enemies, Croats and Catholicism, will destroy the Republika Srpska and push the boundaries of Catholicism further east, should an opportunity arise".<sup>646</sup>

With similar objectives in mind, the Academy of Sciences and Arts of the Republika Srpska held a symposium in Bijeljina (29–30 October, 1998) entitled *The Serb Spiritual Space*. The symposium

643 Rajko Gnjacko, "Geopolitičke perspektive opstanka Republike Srpske" ("Geopolitical Prospects for the Survival of the Republika Srpska"), *Geopolitička stvarnost Srba* (Geopolitical Reality of the Serb Nation), Institute of Geopolitical Studies, Belgrade, 1997, p. 580.

644 Ibid. p. 580.

645 Ibid. p. 580

646 Ibid.

was attended by the academicians from the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts who wrote the Memorandum. In his keynote report, Milorad Ekmečić defined the notion of the Serb spiritual space as follows:

The Serb spiritual space is the totality of cultural activities tending to come to fruition in a well-regulated state of the time, in all the provinces in which the Serb people and the ethnic groups as its offshoots have lived and still live, in all the forms in which they have manifested themselves.<sup>647</sup>

Philosopher Ljubomir Tadić told the participants that “our deepest spiritual and political interest commands us that we must never give up Kninska Krajina, Lika, Banija, Kordun, parts of Slavonia, Srem and Baranja in which Serb people have lived for centuries, nor the towns which have fallen under Croat and Muslim power: Grahovo, Glamoč, Drvar and Petrovac”.<sup>648</sup> The object of such gatherings is to let the national ideologues pronounce on future territories and to gradually translate their ethnic engineering into state frontiers.

This is best summed up in the statement of Dobrica Ćosić that the “Serb people is coalescing in a living space which it can cover civilizationally and culturally and develop economically”; he also defines this process as “a territorial-ethnic rearrangement, perhaps, of a state-political consolidation of the Balkan space”.<sup>649</sup> National ideologues have basically resigned themselves to the fact that the Serb state boils down to Serbia, the Republika Srpska, and Montenegro. Nonetheless, ambitions remain alive to incorporate certain “Serb territories”, particularly those affording an outlet to the Adriatic Sea.

The importance of the role of Serb academicians and intellectuals in the implementation and defense of the Serbian national program is clear from the number of academicians, lawyers and

647 Milorad Ekmečić, “Srpski duhovni prostor” (“The Serb Spiritual Space”), Academy of Sciences and Arts of the Republika Srpska, Srpsko Sarajevo, 1997.

648 Ibid.

649 Ibid.

historians who have appeared before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague as witnesses for Milošević. They include Mihajlo Marković, Čeda Popov, Kosta Mihajlović, Ratko Marković, Smilja Avramov, Slavenko Terzić and many others. This shows that even Serbia's military defeat in the implementation of the Memorandum objectives has not forced the authors of the Memorandum to resign publicly; on the contrary, they continue to defend their stance from the same positions.

As was formulated at the Fruška Gora Round Table (1997) to prevent a greater return of refugees to the Republika Srpska by all possible means, this has been achieved in practice. The year 1997 was declared the year of return to Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the majority of refugees did not return to their former places of residence but to the entities where their ethnic community dominated. Such an essentially unsuccessful return further cemented ethnic divisions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The international community has accepted the ethnic principle as the key principle for resolving the Bosnian issue. Not only was it incorporated into the Dayton Agreement, but also later through its implementation. Among other things, Annex 7, which was essentially never implemented as intended, stipulates the following:

All refugees and displaced persons have the right freely to return to their homes of origin. They shall have the right to have restored to them property of which they were deprived in the course of hostilities since 1991 and to be compensated for any property that cannot be restored to them. The early return of refugees and displaced persons is an important objective of the settlement of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Parties confirm that they will accept the return of such persons who have left their territory, including those who have been accorded temporary protection by third countries. The Parties shall ensure that refugees and displaced persons are permitted to return in safety, without risk of harassment, intimidation, persecution, or discrimination,

particularly on account of their ethnic origin, religious belief, or political opinion.<sup>650</sup>

## **BELGRADE'S ACTIONS UNDER NEW INTERNATIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES**

After the fall of Slobodan Milošević, Serbia adopted a pro-European orientation. It signed the Association Agreement in 2008, and received candidate status in 2012. Between 2000 and 2012, a legal framework was established and laws and strategies defining Serbia as a European-oriented country were adopted. In parallel with this, however, Serbia persisted in its strategy of uniting Serb people. It skillfully took advantage of the geostrategic vacuum and for several years managed to successfully achieve its goals in relation to the systematic integration of Serbs in the region into the cultural, spiritual, economic and information space.

“Serb World” first appeared as a term in 2013. The constant recycling of the same project under different names is just an attempt to divert attention from a process that has been running smoothly all these years. The international community paid no attention to Belgrade’s attempt to challenge the Western order in the Balkans. With its policy of favoring Belgrade, it expected to keep Serbia on the Euro-Atlantic track. Unfortunately, the “Serb World” as a concept has the support of certain international circles (sovereigntists, authoritarians), even within the European Union.

The geopolitical limbo in which the region found itself after the disengagement of both the United States and the European Union (who turned to their own problems) was ideal for Russia. According to *Samarukov*, researcher at Carnegie Moscow Center, this does not mean either complete stabilization or complete destabilization, but something in between. Russia is trying to obstruct both the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the Western Balkans for as long as possible. It does not want

<sup>650</sup> Cf. [https://propisi.ks.gov.ba/sites/propisi.ks.gov.ba/files/opci\\_okvirni\\_sporazum\\_z\\_a\\_mir\\_u\\_bosni\\_i\\_hercegovini.pdf](https://propisi.ks.gov.ba/sites/propisi.ks.gov.ba/files/opci_okvirni_sporazum_z_a_mir_u_bosni_i_hercegovini.pdf) (accessed on 24 June, 2022)

the frozen conflicts in the Balkans to be resolved, because they are what keep the Western Balkans away from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union, but it also does not want these conflicts to become active, because it too has lines that it doesn't want crossed.<sup>651</sup>

It is precisely this undefined status of the Western Balkans, as well as the increasingly distant option of joining the European Union, that plays a significant role in encouraging Serb aspirations. Belgrade also defined its policy towards "Serb lands" through documents that are official Government documents. The first important document adopted by the Serbian Parliament 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).<sup>652</sup>

**The Strategy aims to "preserve and strengthen the relationship between the homeland and the diaspora, as well as between the homeland and the Serbs in the region.** It should serve as a key document that will determine the direction of preserving and strengthening relations between the homeland and the diaspora, as well as between the homeland and the Serbs in the region". The legal framework relevant to the preservation and strengthening of the relationship between the homeland and the diaspora and Serbs in the region is also made up of other acts such as: the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, which in Article 13 establishes that the Republic of Serbia shall protect the rights and interests of its citizens in abroad and develop and promote relations of Serbs living abroad with the kin state; and the Law on Diaspora

651 Maxim Samorukov, *Moscow has opted for a low-cost, opportunistic approach in the Western Balkans that shifts most of the burden to local actors*, available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/74612> (3 November, 2017). Also, cf.: *How Russia is slowly encircling Europe*, available at: <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/how-russia-is-slowly-encircling-europe-32596> (3 December, 2019).

652 Document of the Ministry of Religion and Diaspora: [http://dijaspora.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/strategija\\_mvd2011.pdf](http://dijaspora.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/strategija_mvd2011.pdf) (accessed on 9 February, 2022).

and Serbs in the Region, which represents the first systemic law on relations between the home country and the diaspora, as well as the home country and Serbs in the region,<sup>653</sup> and as such represents a normative base for conducting a long-term policy towards the diaspora. The law clearly demonstrates the will to conduct policy towards the diaspora and Serbs in the region in a much more serious, responsible and rational manner. The same follows from other documents: Declaration on the Proclamation of the Relationship Between the Homeland and the Diaspora as a Relationship of the Greatest State and National Interest,<sup>654</sup> the Migration Management Strategy,<sup>655</sup> the National Youth Strategy,<sup>656</sup> the National Security Strategy.<sup>657</sup>

The strategy gives priority to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro by placing them at the center of its foreign and regional policy. Bearing in mind the centuries-old unbreakable historical and civilizational ties between the two states and peoples, as pointed out, it is important to provide the Serbian people with equality and fair representation in state institutions, state administration and local self-government.

This Strategy was perceived in the region as Memorandum II. Its disclosure caused great public uproar in all neighboring countries. It *de facto* represents the implementation of part of the Memorandum on preventing threats to Serbs living outside of Serbia. It is an operational document with precise instructions for activities. It is an action plan for the action of Greater Serbian nationalism under new conditions, and involves instructions on how to achieve a united Serbia “through peaceful and democratic means”, against the unity and integrity of the countries in which they live.

As the only legitimate cross-border institution in the region, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) plays a key role in the

653 Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 88/09.

654 Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 86/06.

655 Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 59/09.

656 Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 55/08.

657 Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 59/09.



implementation of the mentioned strategy. During the 20th century, as stated in the Strategy, it was practically the only integrative institution and bridge between the home country and the diaspora. In addition to religion, the Church also preserved the national culture and language of the Republic of Serbia. The strategy envisages logistical and any other support for the Serbian Orthodox Church in order to carry out its religious mission, but also for its cultural and educational role in the diaspora, which it *de facto* has. In practice, the action plan boils down to: relativizing and denying war crimes and genocide committed by the armies and police of the Republika Srpska and Serbia; destabilizing governments and authorities in neighboring countries by raising awareness of their inefficiency; insisting on the constitutionality of Serbs in Montenegro, Kosovo and Croatia; supporting separatist politics in the Republika Srpska, etc.

In the meantime, the **National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (2020)**<sup>658</sup> was adopted, in which it is emphasized that the most important foreign policy priority of Serbia is the preservation of the Republika Srpska; as was the **Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space (2019)**,<sup>659</sup> which was signed by the Ministers of Education of the Republic of Serbia and the Republika Srpska. This charter is similar to the Russian one from 2007, when the state fund Russian World was established.<sup>660</sup> The Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space points out that the strategic starting point of Serbian cultural policy is based on the belief that, prior to any broader integrations, the first and inevitable step is to strengthen cohesion within the Serbian cultural space. This is just a step away from proclaiming the unification of all Serbs, as was the case in the 1990s.

658 Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia 94/19. See also: <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/strategija/2019/94/2> (accessed on 24 June, 2022)

659 Cf.: <https://www.kultura.gov.rs/vest/788/-povelja-o-srpskom-kulturnom-prostoru.php> (accessed on 9 February, 2022)

660 Cf.: [https://rtv.rs/sk/drustvo/na-filoskom-fakultetu-otvoren-fond-ruski-svet\\_153919.html](https://rtv.rs/sk/drustvo/na-filoskom-fakultetu-otvoren-fond-ruski-svet_153919.html) (accessed on 9 February 2022)

The essence of the Charter boils down to the fact that the cultural policy of Serbs outside their home country need not be harmonized with the cultural policy of those countries, but only with the policy of the mother country, i.e., as it is written in the Charter, Serbs in their entire cultural area should lead a “mutually harmonious cultural-educational policy”. Particular emphasis is placed on the view that a nation is most tightly bound by “memories of collective suffering” and that this, more than anything else, is what holds together all Serbs, who are extremely rich in suffering.

**The Cultural Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2020–2029**<sup>661</sup> also fits into the project of the Serb World. The Strategy, among other things, is primarily “committed to the protection and nurturing of national culture”, that is, “the Strategy, given that the Republic of Serbia represents the mother country of the Serbian people living in the region and in different parts of the world, is committed to preserving and connecting the Serbian cultural space, that is, the protection of cultural heritage and the promotion of cultural creativity of all bearers of Serbian cultural identity, regardless of where they live”. The main goal is the measure “cultivating the Serbian language and Cyrillic alphabet and connecting the Serbian cultural space, which is of great importance for the preservation of the cultural identity of the Republic of Serbia and Serb people, and which is dedicated to achieving the priority of encouraging the role of culture in the development of society, especially bearing in mind the key role culture in creating, shaping and passing on social and cultural values and the importance of preserving, presenting and interpreting cultural identity.”

This is a set of measures that round off Belgrade’s policy when it comes to the Serbian cultural space, that is, the “Serb World”. This “Serb World” project has the support of all elites, including a significant part of the civil sector. This was especially evident in relation to Kosovo during the so-called internal dialogue, when the majority took the position that Kosovo should remain a frozen

661 Cf.: <https://www.kultura.gov.rs/extfile/sr/3993/strategija-razvoja-kulture--od-2020---do-2029-godine.pdf> (accessed on 24 June, 2022)

conflict in anticipation of a suitable moment for its division. The current government is working on the project on all fronts.

However, it should be emphasized that this is not a personal project of *Vučić* or *Dodik*, but a state project that each new government implements in accordance with the given circumstances. Members of the government openly advocate “unification”, and the most agile advocate is *Aleksandar Vulin*, the Minister of Internal Affairs (before that, Minister of Defense). He points out (he repeated this on several occasions) that “the task of my generation of politicians” is to continue the struggle for “the unification of all Serbs into a single state and political community”, which must be carried out peacefully.<sup>662</sup> Among other things, he defends this with the position that “a people who have experienced repeated genocide in every generation and always by the same perpetrators has no right to leave their children with any opportunity to experience the extermination of their compatriots in parts of the nation where the state does not protect them. Thanks to *Vučić*, Serbs have become a unified political nation and the process of unification has begun, and it will no longer be possible to stop”.<sup>663</sup>

## “DISCIPLINING” THE REPUBLIKA SRPSKA

After many years of neglecting Bosnia and Herzegovina and tolerating ethno-nationalist leaders who systematically destroyed the possibility of its functionality, the European Union and the United States have been engaged in the policy of taming Milorad Dodik in recent months. The goal was to stop his provocations and

662 Cf.: *Vulin: The task of my generation is continuing the fight of uniting Serbs, which is being carried out peacefully*, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vulin-zadatak-moje-generacije-je-nastavak-borbe-za-ujedinjenje-srba-koje-se-sprovodi-mirnim-putem/> (18 September, 2020)

663 Cf.: *Vulin: Establishing Serb World solves our national question, unification process has begun*, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vulin-stvaranje-srpskog-sveta-resava-nase-nacionalno-pitanje-proces-ujedinjenja-je-poceo/> (1 May, 2021).

to have the Republika Srpska officials return to state institutions. During German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to Washington, US President Joe Biden reaffirmed the commitment to completing the work of integrating the Western Balkans into the European institutions and to finally realize a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace.<sup>664</sup>

It was only after Russia's aggression against Ukraine that the European Union became aware of the dangers and numerous omissions when it comes to the Balkans. Although there were a lot of reactions to Russia's malignant influence, it was not accompanied by adequate European policies, primarily because it allowed within itself the possibility of Russia corrupting the right-wing (but also left-wing) movements as well as numerous politicians. This created an image of the West as decadent and incapable of solving its own problems.

For years, the European Union tolerated Serbia's behavior in the region and allowed its aspirations to become a reality. The Republika Srpska is perceived as the only spoils of war that Belgrade will have a hard time giving up without much pressure. The narrative of Serb nationalists, both in Serbia and in the Republika Srpska, has been reduced for years to the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina is unsustainable and that its disintegration is imminent, that the Muslims overthrew Yugoslavia (a thesis that is increasingly used in Belgrade), that Bosnia and Herzegovina is regressive, that the Republika Srpska was created to prevent genocide (Ana Brnabić), that there was no responsibility of the Bosnian Serb leaders in 1992 for the war's outbreak (Željka Cvijanović), that it was a mistake that Belgrade did not recognize the Republika Srpska (Milorad Dodik) and that the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was a war of liberation of Serbs (Dobrica Ćosić, a generally accepted stance).

664 Cf.: [https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/236418/americki\\_predsjednik\\_otvorio\\_karte\\_opredijeljeni\\_smo\\_da\\_zavrsimo\\_posao\\_integracije\\_zapadnog\\_balkana\\_u\\_evropske\\_institucije.html](https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/236418/americki_predsjednik_otvorio_karte_opredijeljeni_smo_da_zavrsimo_posao_integracije_zapadnog_balkana_u_evropske_institucije.html) (8 February, 2022)

Milorad Dodik is the most prominent exponent of Moscow, but also the most unpredictable factor in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this sense, he is also a potential generator of violent conflict. Dodik's insolence and arrogance continued even after the West sanctioned him. He has persisted with his rhetoric of challenging the legitimacy of the newly appointed High Representative Christian Schmidt, because he was not confirmed by the Security Council. It's just an echo of what Moscow keeps repeating. Thus, after the High Representative annulled the Law on Immovable Property of the Republika Srpska, Dodik declared "that the Republika Srpska's finest sons did not die so that the unelected German Christian Schmidt could barter with what they gave everything for".<sup>665</sup>

Russia's behavior towards Bosnia indicates its ambition to reduce Western influence and undermine Western political projects outside the former Soviet space. It is working on this systematically in order to establish a new international security architecture, which would marginalize the United States of America and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Bosnia as a central country is the perfect opportunity to overthrow the Western system in the Balkans, set up after 2000. For this reason, Russia has for years been supporting nationalist and anti-democratic forces in the region, especially in the Republika Srpska.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has also raised questions about the future of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans. Although it is surrounded by member states of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the region is only partially integrated into the Euro-Atlantic political and security structures. The European Union's undefined policy during the last decade has contributed to the regression of the region and its turning towards other partners.

Serbia is the only country in Europe that has shown solidarity with Russia. Because of this, it is under enormous pressure, or

665 "Schmidt suspends RS entity Law on Immovable Property", *Politika*, 13 April, 2022. <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/11/region/4775517/kristijan-smit-ohr-ponistenje-rs-zakon.html>

as President Vučić says, “in a much more difficult situation than it appears”. Serbia is required to reach an agreement with Priština which would practically recognize Kosovo, followed by a “disciplining” of the Republika Srpska and renunciation of Russia, i.e. the introduction of sanctions against it. Christopher Hill, US Ambassador in Belgrade, stated in an interview for *Politika* that there is only a wrong or a right path and that Serbia must make a choice. He suggests that “there is only one way, and that is the West, that is the European Union”.<sup>666</sup>

The current circumstances in Europe, but also in Serbia, is a unique opportunity for “Serbia to finally avoid its relations with Russia determining its strategic future”.<sup>667</sup> That is why if President Vučić really chooses the European Union as the future of Serbia it would remove Serbia from Russia’s embrace.

666 Christopher Hill’s interview with Jelena Stevanović, “Christopher Hill: No third path – East or West”, *Politika*, 22. May, 2022, p.1 and 7.

667 Boško Jakšić, “Vreme nategnute normalnosti” (“A Time of Strained Normality”), *Politika*, 13 May, 2022.