



**UNIVERSITY OF MACEDONIA**

**FACULTY OF ECONOMIC AND REGIONAL STUDIES**

**DEPARTMENT OF BALKAN, SLAVIC AND ORIENTAL STUDIES**

**MASTER'S DEGREE IN POLITICS AND ECONOMICS OF CONTEMPORARY  
EASTERN AND SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE**

## **DISSERTATION THESIS**

**“The principle of four pillars in Serbia’s foreign policy. Analyzing Serbia’s balancing act  
- to what extent is it feasible?”- (accepted by the Departmental Meeting- Please contact  
the Graduate Secretary for confirmation)**

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**Thessaloniki, 2020**

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## **Abstract**

In order to survive and adjust to international circumstances, small states have to lead their foreign policy prudently and establish partnerships with other powers wisely. Because of their importance in world politics, but also due to their importance for Serbia's interests such as preserving Kosovo, and Serbia's aim to become part of the developed West by joining the EU, the following four powers – the EU, the US, Russia and China have been proclaimed the four pillars in Serbia's foreign policy. Even though Serbia has clearly oriented towards the EU and set EU integration as its official foreign policy goal, the lack of the EU's interest in the region and reduced interest for enlargement, due to its own internal problems, allowed Russia and China to make inroads into the region, pursuing their own interests. For the time being, Serbia's political elite has calculated that, in the absence of a clear EU membership perspective, balancing between these four actors is the most beneficial to Serbia. Besides the Kosovo question, and in order to show to the EU that it is not the only important actor to Serbia, balancing has been led by Serbia also because of gains in its economy and domestic politics. However, the question is until when Serbia will be able to lead this policy and how much it benefits Serbia's interests. Therefore, the main research question is – to what extent Serbia's balancing act is feasible? In addition, due to the democratic backsliding in Serbia's society and the lack of room for critical opinion, if different from Serbia's ruling elite's point of view, one of this research' purposes is to gather and compare the opinion of experts from Serbia's civil society and representatives of two main political parties in Serbia's Parliament on the main issues in Serbia's foreign policy.

**Key words:** Serbia, the balancing act, the Kosovo question, the EU, Russia, China, the US

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## List of abbreviations

AIPAC	American Israel Public Affairs Committee
BCBP	Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku - Belgrade Centre for Security Policy
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CARDS	Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Assistance
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CFSP	EU Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	EU Common Security and Defence Policy
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
DOS	Demokratska Opozicija Srbije - the Democratic Opposition of Serbia
DS	Demokratska Stranka - the Democratic Party
DSS	Demokratska Stranka Srbije - the Democratic Party of Serbia
EAEU	Euroasian Economic Union
EC	European Commission
EDA	European Defence Agency
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FRY	Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNP	Gross National Product
HELBROC	EU Balkan Battle Group
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
IPAP	Individual Action Plan for Partnership
IR	International Relations
IRI	International Republican Institute
KFOR	Kosovo Force
LDP	Liberalno Demokratska Partija - the Liberal Democratic Party
MEP	Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NS	Nova Srbija - the New Serbia
NSPO	NATO Support and Procurement Organisation
OBOR	One Belt One Road Initiative
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PfP	Partnership for Peace
PUPS	Partija Ujedinjenih Penzionera Srbije - the Party of United Pensioners of Serbia
RTS	Radio Television of Serbia
SAA	Stabilization and Association Agreement

SAP	Stabilization and Association Process
SCA	Security Cooperation Agreement
SFRY	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SNS	Srpska Napredna Stranka - the Serbian Progressive Party
SPO	Srpski Pokret Obnove - the Serbian Renewal Movement
SPS	Socijalistička Partija Srbije - the Socialist Party of Serbia
SREB	Silk Road Economic Belt
SRS	Srpska Radikalna Stranka - the Serbian Radical Party
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WB	Western Balkans
YU	Yugoslavia

## **1. Introduction**

Located in the Balkan region, which has often been interesting to big powers, many times, Serbia has found itself at the intersection of their interests. As a small, vulnerable country, with its sovereignty often taken into question, it has pursued many different policies in its foreign relations over time. From being part of the buffer zone between the East and the West (as part of Yugoslavia during the Cold War), through the isolationistic foreign policy during the 1990s, until opening itself toward the West after the regime change in 2000, Serbia has led quite an inconsistent foreign policy. It seems that, during all that time, Serbia could not clearly define its own priorities. Because of that, its foreign policy has often seemed ambiguous, inconsistent, without clear goals. Furthermore, the lack of a clear strategy has allowed the direction and goals of its foreign policy to be often dependent upon the will of the political elites and easy to change.

The policy of four pillars represents the policy which became Serbia's official foreign policy orientation in 2009, when Boris Tadić, the President of Serbia at that time, pronounced the EU, Russia, the US and China as the pillars of Serbia's foreign policy, aiming to achieve and maintain close relations with all of these powers at the same time, even though they have different and often opposing interests on many issues. Insisting, on principle, at having close relations with all of the four actors at the same time and keeping all of them close to itself puts Serbia in a position in which it has to balance between these actors, since developing cordial relations and cooperation with one of them often endangers and puts in risk relations with some of the others. Therefore, it is important to raise the following question: What has impacted the decision of Serbia's political elites to pursue the balancing act between the EU, the US, Russia and China? Why is Serbia trying even now to keep Russia and China close to itself even though it has declared EU membership as its main goal, putting, by seeking close cooperation with these two powers, its EU perspective into question? To answer this question, it is inevitable to see the milestones and the most important occurrences that led Serbia to pursue this policy. Namely, the year from which the analysis in this research begins is 2008. This year was chosen because it had tremendous effects on Serbia's foreign policy. Namely, that is the year Kosovo, a part of Serbia's territory, supported by the most important EU member states and the US, unilaterally declared its independence. Since that moment, it could be argued that all decisions and actions taken by Serbia's political leadership in the foreign affairs have been influenced by this event. In addition,

one more thing shapes Serbia's decisions - the goal of EU membership, for which Serbia opted after the regime change in 2000. Preserving its territorial integrity, but at the same time becoming an EU member state have been the two main goals of Serbia's foreign policy. However, the problem is that these two goals together are, to a great extent, mutually exclusive. Officially, the EU's stance towards the Serbia-Kosovo dispute is that everything depends on Serbia and Kosovo - i.e. how they agree - however, the EU insists that these two sides have to achieve an agreement on normalization of relations with which the dispute would be resolved. However, that basically demands a compromise from both sides - Serbia and Kosovo. Because of that, Serbia tries to keep powers such as Russia and China on its side in order to get the outcome that would be as much as possibly beneficial for itself. In addition, other aspects such as economic benefits and especially domestic politics have been influencing Serbia's political elites' decision to continue conducting the balancing act. However, having in mind the different interests of these four powers as well as Serbia's goal of EU integration, which presupposes harmonization of Serbia's foreign policy with the EU's, basically meaning that many aspects of cooperation with actors such as China and Russia have to be at least reduced, the question is, until when will Serbia be able to pursue this policy? Hence, the main research question and the purpose of this research are to answer the following: To what extent Serbia's balancing act between these four pillars is feasible?

In order to answer this question, the thesis has been structured in the following way:

After the introduction, in the theoretical approach, to understand the behaviour and different strategies Serbia has been pursuing, the theory of small states' foreign policy has been utilised. This theory has been chosen and seen as useful because it can explain to a great extent Serbia's behaviour and its position as a small state in between these four powers. The theory of small states' foreign policy actually explains the power relations between small states and great powers and various strategies that small states, such as Serbia, are using to extract benefits. The main concepts of small states' foreign policy (the study of small states, the problem of definition and foreign policy behaviour) were examined in order to determine Serbia as a small state with its main features (the size of its population, geographical position, economy, power).

The next chapter is dedicated to the literature on Serbia's balancing act. Even though there is much literature on Serbia's bilateral relations with each of the four pillars (the EU, the US, China



and Russia), the literature on Serbia's balancing act, which has previously mainly been dedicated to examining the balancing between Russia and the EU, is not numerous, especially since powers such as China have significantly increased their importance for Serbia recently. Hence, this research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the main aspects and features of Serbia's balancing act and, in that way, to contribute to the existing literature.

The next chapter is the methodology, explaining in detail how the research has been conducted as well as the main ideas behind the chosen research methods. For the purpose of the research on Serbia's balancing act - besides secondary research, in order to get the opinion of the representatives of the main political parties in the Serbian Parliament, as well as from experts from Serbia's civil society (research organizations, Think-Tanks, and professors from the Faculty of Political Science in Belgrade) - a survey, consisting of 10 questions about Serbia's foreign policy and its balancing act, has been created. Because of the situation in which there is no media freedom and where the opinion of experts from the civil society is very often opposed to the actions of the ruling political elite, it was interesting to see and compare the opinion of experts and the two biggest parties in the Serbian Parliament (SNS and SPS). Apart from that, in order to add value to the research, interviews with 3 experts from the field have been conducted.

In order to understand the current choices and have insight into the continuity of Serbia's foreign policy, a historical overview of Serbia's foreign policy, as well as the birth of the policy of four pillars, takes place in the 5<sup>th</sup> Chapter. What is important is to see how relations with great powers and foreign relations, in general, have been changing, depending on political elites' changes. In the same chapter, in order to become more familiarized with these four pillars, a short overview of Serbia's relations with each of them has been provided, aiming to understand the reasons for their interests for Serbia and Serbia's interests for developing stronger cooperation and bonds with them.

The 6th chapter consists of the results based on which the analysis has been conducted. The chapter is structured in accordance with the questions for which I believe are the most important elements of Serbia's balancing act and which are part of the above-mentioned survey, created in order to examine the attitudes of representatives of the main parliamentary political parties in Serbia and experts from the civil society. All of the 10 questions from the survey were grouped into several subchapters, each of them examining one element of Serbia's balancing act - the

Kosovo question and its impact on the relations with the EU, the US, Russia and China; the impact of close relations with Russia and China on Serbia's EU integration; the concept of military neutrality as another reflection of Serbia's balancing act and the influence of domestic politics on Serbia's foreign policy. In addition, before the analysis of the most important elements of Serbia's balancing act has been conducted, one (the first) subchapter has been devoted to the examination of the opinion of experts and political parties' representatives on the following question: which factors affect Serbia's foreign policy the most? Finally, in order to draw relevant conclusions, I decided to dedicate one chapter to examine the opinion of the political parties' representatives, the surveyed experts and the interviewed experts on the following question: Is balancing beneficial to Serbia, and until when will Serbia be able to conduct this policy?

In the final chapter, i.e. the conclusion, the main ideas and thoughts on the topic have been summarized, indicating the limitations of this research and providing ideas for further research.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### ***2.1. The theory of small states' foreign policy***

Serbia, as a small state, has relied itself throughout its history on great powers. And not just relied upon. On occasion, great powers have been critically significant for Serbia. For example, the first Constitution of Serbia - The Sretenje Constitution of 1835 was inspired by France and Belgium. In addition, it seems that Serbia's relations with great powers were never simple. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one part of the West perceived Serbia as an extension of Russian interests, important to remain contained under the Ottoman rule, whereas another thought it would be better to accept and convert Serbia against Russia. Furthermore, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Serbia had several very important alliances, namely the alliance with the US and France in the First World War. Later, between the two world wars, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, under the Karađorđević dynasty rule, was part of the Eastern European buffer between Germany and the Soviet Union (Vuksanović, 2018). Moreover, as part of Yugoslavia, during the Cold War, Serbia pursued its own path, distanced itself from the Soviet Union and at the same time it was flirting with the West. Nowadays, in the environment of increased interdependence, globalization, cooperation on various matters between different countries, intertwined economies and membership in many international organizations, alliances with great powers might seem unnecessary. Still, the reality seems to be quite different, at least for small states as Serbia. Now, maybe more than ever before, strong cooperation and relations with the globally most significant actors in the world such as the US and China, but also Russia and the EU, seems to be of great importance for achieving Serbia's interests, at least as they are perceived by Serbia's political elites.

For the purpose of this research, the theory of small states' foreign policy will be utilized. In order to determine Serbia as a small state, to understand its foreign policy behaviour, its relations with great powers as well as its balancing act, it is important first to understand the concept of small states, the problem of their definition, their behaviour and the strategies they use. First, we will start with the concept and the proliferation of small states and their studies in the twentieth century.

In the twentieth century, after major international events such as World War I and II, the decolonization and disintegration of the USSR and Yugoslavia, the number of small states has significantly risen (Peddi, 2016, p. 12). According to Hey, small states, nowadays, have been enjoying more international visibility than ever before. Thanks to the transnational efforts by the European Union, the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), they legally and diplomatically succeeded in asserting their influence. (Hey, 2003, p. 1). Because of the relatively peaceful, economically open international system, with an international community open to legitimate claims to self-determination, according to some authors, it can be expected that the number of small states will continue to rise (Thorhallsson, Steinsson, 2017, p. 1). Long calls this period of time in international relations “the zenith” for small states, while Matthias Maass in his article (2014) stated that material and normative changes in international system led to the spread of small states. Other authors furthermore argued that globalization and reduced external threats were essential for the proliferation of those states (Long, 2017, p. 1).

According to Thorhallsson and Steinsson, small states are today influencing world politics (Thorhallsson, Steinsson, 2017, p. 1). By joining international organizations, propagating norms, shaping global climate negotiations and influencing alliances, they have an important role (Long, 2017, p. 2). Hence, studying small states can be of considerable importance for the analysis of international relations and foreign policy (Thorhallsson, Steinsson, 2017, p. 1).

### *2.1.1. The study of small states*

Neumann and Gstöhl, in their work “Lilliputians in Gulliver’s World? Small states in international relations”, provided an analytical and chronological overview of small states’ studies development. Until well into the twentieth century, states were considered as “powers”. Whereas this name is still in use for “great powers” (and rarely for “middle powers”), “small powers” nowadays are called “small states”. This particular term emphasizes the presumed lack of power of states in a quantitative meaning. The field of small states, as a subject of a study, by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, was side-lined by the idea of a nation-state. In the period after the World War I, the attention for this field was again raised, specifically in the newly created League of Nations. However, during World War II, security studies became prominent on many scholars’

agenda, while realism emerged as a dominant theory in IR. After World War II, bipolarity and the Cold War took the main place in social sciences. The genuine school of small states studies is considered to have begun with Baker Fox (1959), with the wartime diplomacy study. After World War II, the basic question was the survival of small states in relation to big powers. In accordance with that, the alignment policy, as a means to compensate for the lack of small states' possibilities to provide and guarantee their own security, was examined. Much research on the topic of the small states was conducted with the interest in the strategies that small states choose to mitigate the effects of the structural limitations. Vital (1967), for example, examined the "disabilities" and "possibilities" of small states regarding their size and foreign policy options. In his research, he focused on non-aligned economically advanced small states, with a population of 10-15 million, and underdeveloped countries with a population of 20-30 million. Furthermore, the study of small states reached its peak in the 1970s, in parallel with the process of decolonization (Neumann, Gstöhl, 2004, p. 3, 7-9). By the 1980s, due to their flexible responses to globalization, the explanations of small states' prosperity and success were the subject of interest among scholars (Thorhallsson, 2018, p. 20). Besides globalization, the emergence of new states in Eastern and Central Europe, as well as the processes in the Balkans and Baltics after the fall of the Berlin Wall, put the question of small states again in the limelight (Neumann, Gstöhl, 2004, p. 12). The next change in the study of small states occurred with the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 when the vulnerability, needs and disadvantages of small economies in a globalized world were emphasized. According to Thorhallsson, the study of small states has never been as important as it is currently, specifically because of the rise in the number of small states and a number of small states seeking independence (Thorhallsson, 2018, p. 20, 28). The field of small states has a significant research potential, especially since small states are not simply "mini-versions" of great powers but have specific policies and behaviours which can be important and provide interesting insights (Neumann, Gstöhl, 2004, p. 12-13).

### *2.1.2. The problem of definition*

One of the biggest problems in the small states' study is defining the concept of small states (Peddi, 2006, p. 18). Even though the idea of small states as a distinct category of states is generally accepted, there is no consensus about how to define the small state and what the key characteristics and criteria that determine state size are (Maass, 2009, p. 70). Many countries have been the subject of a study, such as Luxembourg (Hey, 2002), Finland (Browning, 2006), Nepal (Vyas and Sangrula, 2014), Iceland (Thorhallsson, 2009), Trinidad and Tobago (Braveboy Wagner, 2010), Israel (Vital, 1967), Botswana (Taylor, 2014), Germany (Katzenstein, 1997; Tuschoff, 2001), Cyprus (Evagorou, 2007; Kouskouvelis, 2015b). As seen, the group of small states is very heterogeneous, with lots of different approaches trying to define the concept (Peddi, 2016, p. 20).

The “definitional battle” has been in focus since the late 1960s. Many early definitions use material indicators such as population or territory in order to classify small states. Still, they faced a problem of differences in terms of the level of wealth, state strength and other (Long, 2017, p. 5). Peddi (2016) argues that the quantitative approach, at least until the early 2000s, has been the most popular and controversial approach. According to that approach, population, territory and GNP have been the main criteria for defining small states. The advantage of this approach is that it uses criteria which are measurable. Many scholars such as Vital, Barston and Thorhallsson have implemented this approach (Peddi, 2016, p. 24). Today, the quantifiable criterion used the most is the size of the population. According to Maass, there are three advantages of the quantitative approach. First, data are generally available. Secondly, the dividing line between small and larger states can be put easily and precisely. The third - the size of a population largely correlates with other variables such as the size of the economy, military, etc. Hence, Maass argues that identifying small states by their population size is widely accepted and claimed to be a reliable method (Maass, 2009, p. 75).

**Table 1. Definitions based on quantitative criteria**

<b>Author</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Demas (1965)	A small country is one with a population five million or less and a useable area of 10,000 and 20,000.
Vital (1967)	The rough upper limits of the class of Small States are a) a population of 10-15 million in the case of economically advanced countries and b) a population of 20-30 million in the case of underdeveloped countries.
Barston (1973)	For the purpose of this discussion a Small State is defined as having a population with an upper limit of between 10 and 15 million.
Jalan (1982)	Population below five million, arable land area below 25,000 square kilometers and a GNP below US\$2bn
Edis (1991)	A widely accepted definition or at least a parameter is a country having a population of one million or less.
Payne and Sutton (1993)	The definition of a Small State in this article accepts current usage i.e. a population of one billion and below.
Streeten (1993)	We know a small country when we see it. The best simple measure is population.

Armstrong and Read (1998)	Upper limit 3.000.000
Daniel Thurer (1998)	Small States are states with fewer than ten million inhabitants.
Brunn (1999)	I define Small States as those with less than five million people in 1995.
Thorhallsson (2000)	Seven member states can be defined as smaller EU states during this period, ranging from Luxembourg with just over 400.000 inhabitants to the Netherlands with 15 million inhabitants.
Archer and Nugent (2002)	If population is to be the main indicator, then perhaps twelve million is a better break point than ten because it brings in a number of states –such as Hungary, the Czech Republic and Greece– that are likely to be identified either by themselves or from others as being small.
Bunse (2009)	Small States are those with significantly less than 40 million of inhabitants.
Panke (2012)	A state is small if it has less than average relevant capacities in a given negotiation setting.
Thorhallsson (2012)	10.000.000

Source: Peddi, 2016, p. 25

However, this approach's problem lies in the fact that a small population or geographical size does not necessarily have to mean "a small-scale political system", as mentioned by Paul Sutton. For example, Luxemburg, a small state, has a competitive democracy, a developed bureaucratic structure, and stable institutions. According to Hey, small size does not necessarily have to be translated into vulnerability, citing the example of Israel, which is a small country in terms of a territory but still one of the most active and aggressive actors in the global arena (Hey, 2003, p. 2-3). Hence, according to Schweller, nowadays, this approach might seem even obsolete because of the rise of new forms of power. Panke emphasizes the importance of financial resources and connects them with the state's influence in international negotiations. The material size approach (quantitative) is still largely used because of its benefits. However, as Tuschoff argues, sometimes it is hard to explain the similarities and differences between two states, which are both in the category of small, using only the quantitative criteria (Peddi, 2016, p. 26-28).

The perceptions's approach definitions have mostly focused on the perceptions of small states' leaders and the other countries' perceptions (Long, 2017, p. 5-6). Hey (2003) also used this approach, according to which, if people and institutions of one state perceive themselves as



small, or if people and institutions from other states perceive them so, that state will be regarded as a small one (Hey, 2003, p. 3). Robert Rothstein argues that small states are states which believe that they cannot provide safety on their own and that they have to rely on other institutions and states. Furthermore, Keohane argued that small states are the ones whose elite estimates they cannot make an impact taking action alone or in a small group (Vaicekauskaite, 2017, p. 9). Hence, states are classified as small, not according to an objective criterion, but according to their perception of their role in the international system (Hey, 2003, p. 3). However, according to Peddi, the categorization of states, according to their perceptions, can be very problematic. Questions which arise in this approach are “whose perceptions should be taken into consideration”, or “how could those perceptions be tested?” (Peddi, 2016, p. 32).

The concept of power is also important for the study of small states. According to Maass, terms such as “strength” and “power” represent different things, but they sometimes overlap. For example, when used to identify a state’s size, strength mostly refers to a state’s measurable capacity and quantifiable criteria. However, a state’s strength sometimes can be used as a synonym for a state’s power, specifically when the “relational strength” is added. According to Hanggi (1998), the usage of the concept of power to define a small state, means to go further than taking into account just physical attributes. Maass argues that introducing the concept of power means “to step from quantitative to qualitative criteria”. In Handel’s opinion (1981), what separates small states from larger ones is their lack of ability to impose their will on other states, as well as to resist imposing other states’ will. Hence, small states are usually considered to be “weak powers”. However, this way of understanding the concept of power presumes that, besides being small, small states are also lacking power and have a little relevance in the world dominated by power politics (Maass, 2009, p. 72-73). Vandenbosch similarly defines small states as states with no significant role in the world of politics, having to accept rather than make rules and norms, being rather consumers than creators of security. Vital argues that a small state is more vulnerable to pressure and has more limited political options at its disposal. Additionally, in small states, domestic politics are connected to external affairs more than in large states and powers. Handel further argues that the power of small states is largely based on external factors, such as international regimes or alliances, whereas great powers possess internal sources of power, such as geographic location, natural resources, industrial development. Thus, small states are usually satellite states of great powers or clients, although he argues that small states should

not be considered impotent and helpless. On the contrary, they can adapt themselves and take advantage of any international system. Additionally, small states can take advantage of the competition between great powers and adjust it to their own interests in order to get as many benefits as possible (Efremova, 2019, p. 103-104), which is actually the strategy Serbia pursues through its balancing act, as we will see later. Therefore, according to Handel, it could be said that small states exert considerable influence on the system (Efremova, 2019, p. 104).

As mentioned, there are many approaches to define small states. Long argues that the division between scholars goes beyond the quantitative and qualitative criteria. Resilience and agency of small states became the focus of the recent literature. What is especially important for small states' study is the concept of power, which always brings a relational aspect with it (Long, 2017, p. 6, 9). Dahl (1997) argues that a state is considered to be small when in relation to a larger and more powerful actor, it is vulnerable. Hanggi (1998) further emphasizes that small states are dependent on more powerful states. Knudsen (2002) argues that a small state is any state inferior in terms of power in relation to another state. Many scholars define a small state as a weak one in an asymmetric relationship (Peddi, 2016, p. 37). A scholar who also suggests shifting the emphasis from the category of smallness to the analysis of relationships between states is Long (2017). He argues that the relationship between states, not the size, is important, putting the concept of "asymmetric relationships" into focus. Building on the arguments of Steinmetz and Wivel, he argues that how differences in power affect and structure relationships, as well as how disparities influence the interests of all actors, should be the subject of analysis. Furthermore, while the asymmetric relationship usually presumes bilateral relationship, Long argues that asymmetry can be used to examine the relationship between more actors. According to him, the asymmetrical approach can be essential for studying relations with great powers, and seeing how small states can shape the behaviour of great powers (Long, 2017, p. 2-4, 20-21).

### *2.1.3. Small states' foreign policy behaviour*

In order to examine Serbia's foreign policy and its balancing act between four great powers, it is important to understand the foreign policy behaviour of small states, as well as to see which strategies they use to survive, achieve their interests and exert their influence. The question is, how can the behaviour of small states be explained? Having in mind their disadvantage in size or

in resources, leading to a disadvantage in power, small states have to act wisely and take into account domestic and international surroundings in order to achieve their foreign policy goals. Nowadays, small states face many challenges, starting from military threats to non-traditional security challenges, such as terrorism, environmental problems, hybrid and cyber threats, as well as economic and social problems. Smaller economic and military capacities, as well as limited diplomatic resources, make small states prone to different kinds of economic and political dependences. Furthermore, economic insecurities often shape small states' foreign policy behaviour. Additionally, a small population and a limited power capacity expose them to a high risk level (Vaicekaускаite, 2017, p. 9-10).

An open international economy is essential for small states since they are more reliant on trade than larger states. According to many studies, trade is a larger GDP component in small states than in large ones. International markets improve small states' efficiency and innovation (Thorhallsson, Steinsson, 2017, p. 5).

According to Payne, a distinct characteristic of small states is their vulnerability, which leads great powers to see the benefits of interfering with small states' domestic and foreign policies, creating in that way asymmetry in their relations. While focusing primarily on economic and financial issues, small powers actively participate in international organizations because of their ability to restrain great powers (Baba, Önsöy, 2016, p. 7).

In early research on small states, the focus was on the position of small states within the international system and their relatively limited power resources. It was widely accepted that small states seek participation in multilateral organizations to achieve their foreign policy goals and alliances in order to ensure security. Rothstein, Vital and Singer argued that small size and the lack of power influence foreign policy options and goals. However, they emphasized some important exceptions. For example, Vital (1967) emphasized that the level of development, geography, as well as internal stability and importance to great powers are the factors that influence small states' foreign policy to a great extent. Singer further (1972) claimed that by possessing "attractive power" instead of "coercive power", some small states could use and exploit that attractiveness in order to achieve their own goals. However, according to Hey, one of the problems for small states' research is that in recent political science literature, small states

have a subordinate position in relation to great powers, which are considered to be the shapers of the international system (Hey, 2003, p. 4-5).

The security factor is particularly significant for small states. Many scholars examined which strategies have been used by small states in order to survive in the international environment. Espindola (1987) argued that small developing countries might pursue three directions of action in international relations: neutrality and non-alignment, regional security arrangements, as well as Finlandization, meaning relying on great powers to protect small ones. Domingo (2014) stated that small states usually support international organizations in order to increase their influence. According to Rothstein (1968), participating in international organizations provide collective security and a way to restrain the great powers (Gunasekara, 2015, p. 213). In order to achieve greater stability and security, as well as gain more influence, small states pursue different strategies such as engaging in alliances, developing strategic hedging, staying neutral or seeking shelter (Vaicekaускаite, 2017, p. 10). According to a large amount of literature, small states, in general, tend to subordinate themselves to the dominant ones. Lake (2009) argues that small states do so in order to obtain order and enhance security and territorial integrity, protect property rights at home and abroad, as well as set and enforce standards of behaviour. They are often willing to reduce their sovereignty in exchange for benefits gained from such hierarchical relationships (Thorhallsson, Steinsson, 2017, p. 6).

Many scholars emphasize alliances as an effective means for ensuring small states' survival and prosperity (Thorhallsson, Steinsson, 2017, p. 7). According to Heinz Gartner, alliances represent a formal association of states that committed themselves to use military force against non-member states in order to protect and defend the integrity of member states. According to alignment theorists, small states' dilemma is whether to join an alliance and potentially be lured into conflicts they could otherwise avoid or to stay outside of the formal relations, in which case they face the situation of being left alone or abandoned. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in which membership in international organizations is a dominant characteristic, this dilemma goes between the dimensions of influence and autonomy. Goetschel and Baechler argued that the more influence small states gain over larger ones, the less autonomy they maintain and vice versa. Vital is rather pessimistic about the non-alignment as a strategy of small states, since even the smallest losses in foreign policy could harm to a great extent states' vital interests. However, he is not the

proponent of small states' alliances with powerful actors because, in that case, he believes they will be dominated by larger partners and will have to make concessions. In choosing the right strategy, he argues, a small country has to take into account its external environment, as well as all available material and human resources. He emphasizes the deterrence capacities of a state as crucial for a state's survival, adding that a state faced with the possibility of an attack should make that attack appear costly for the other side. Furthermore, in the post-Cold War security environment, Simon W. Duke analysed alliances and their usefulness for small states, arguing that alliances are not so important for small states in the absence of immediate external threats. Furthermore, as shown in the example of the Balkans, he argued that nowadays most threats come internally, from internal weaknesses, and that alliances are not an adequate strategy for that type of threats (Radoman, 2018, p. 87-89). On the other hand, authors like Long and Leeds argue that establishing an alliance can influence the economic cooperation between members, especially trade (Thorhallsson, Steinsson, 2017, p. 7).

Alliances usually gather partners having similar strategic interests and ideologies. They can be offensive or defensive, having the goal to attack the third side or defend its members if attacked. Members of a modern alliance such as NATO commit themselves to defend members of alliance if they are attacked. The benefits for small countries of joining such alliance are the possibility of influencing a particular foreign policy issue and advancing their international status. However, joining such alliances has its negative sides, as well. Dominant states can limit the independent political behaviour of small states or, in exchange for protection, interfere with their domestic and foreign affairs (Vaicekaускаite, 2017, p. 11).

According to the traditional alliance theory, two strategies are usually pursued when a small state is faced with a threat: balancing and bandwagoning. Balancing happens when a state chooses to align with the weaker side in order to balance against the potential aggressor, while bandwagoning refers to a situation in which a weaker state aligns with the threatening power. Walt claims that small states usually tend to join weaker powers before they become a threat. Secondly, joining the weaker party can increase their influence within the alliance due to the bigger need for assistance. Additionally, small states will choose balancing if they are faced with threat from powers of equal capabilities, while they will opt for bandwagoning if they are threatened by great powers. According to the bandwagoning school of thought, small states are

going to prefer this strategy under the following conditions: 1. the weaker the state is, it is more likely that it will opt for this strategy; 2. small states opt for bandwagoning when they are directly threatened and 3. states will choose the bandwagoning strategy in exchange for mutual benefits (Vaicekauskaite, 2017, p. 10-11). According to many authors, bandwagoning is perceived to be the most prudent survival strategy for the weakest states since it is believed that they add little to balancing alliances (Thorhallsson, Steinsson, 2017, p. 7).

Traditionally, IR scholars consider balance of power to be an adequate mechanism that leads states to join a weaker part against the strong actor, in order to equal out or balance the distribution of power in the international system. They take such a move in order to provide their own survival or because of fear that they will be usurped by a larger and stronger state. If every state behaved in this manner, the assumption is that no state would be predominant, and no large-scale war would happen. Hence, the result would be a stable international system, even though the change in balance can lead to instability, even to war. However, the term “balance of power” can be used in different meanings. Sometimes it can be used just to describe the current distribution of power, describe international politics at some particular moment, or be used as a policy prescription, a strategy that policy-makers should pursue. Scholars who are considered to be central contributors to this concept are Hans Morgenthau, Hedley Bull and Kenneth Waltz. Being a realist, Morgenthau argued that states pursue power and domination. According to him, balance of power can mitigate this behaviour, providing to some extent stability and order. Kenneth Waltz wanted to establish a “balance of power” theory, according to which every state has a goal to survive. The thing in which all states differ among themselves is their capability - some states are big, with more capabilities, whereas some have limited capabilities (Skumsrud Andersen, 2018, p. 1-2, 8, 11).

Sometimes, in order to get diplomatic, military, and administrative assistance from larger states, small states choose to join alliances with stronger states or international or regional organizations, seeking a “shelter” from them in exchange for giving a part of their sovereignty. In that way, small states fulfil their economic, political and societal needs and alleviate their vulnerabilities. By joining these alliances, small states integrate economically, receiving economic assistance when needed. Furthermore, they benefit from the access to innovations and ideas, which, in other cases, they could not ensure by themselves (Thorhallsson, Steinsson, 2017,

p. 10). Because of their size, small states are usually more vulnerable and exposed to external factors such as reliance on foreign markets and political changes abroad. Additionally, social and cultural relationships with other countries prevent small states' isolation (Vaicekaускаite, 2017, p. 13). Furthermore, according to the shelter theory, that kind of relationship has consequences for smaller states on the domestic level, referring to political, economic, and social developments. Bailes, Thayer and Thorhallsson argue that the shelter relationship considers neither complete subordination or annexation, nor equity and autonomy. That kind of relationship incorporates characteristics of both. However, the cost of entering the alliance for small states can never be higher than the benefits it gains (Bailes, Thayer, Thorhallsson, 2016, p. 6-7). However, there is a question whether small states are capable of creating and carrying out foreign policy strategy independently or they have to use strategies as balancing and bandwagoning (Knezovic, Esteves Lopes, 2018, p. 7).

In order to avoid choosing one particular policy, such as bandwagoning or balancing, as well as to avoid confronting any of the great powers, small states sometimes choose a strategy called hedging. States pursue this particular strategy when they do not want to take the side of any power because of the fear that it could lead to significant security risks. States which pursue this strategy must not be in a situation of threat by regional powers. In a nutshell, this strategy allows a small state not to be tied to one particular side. An example of using this strategy is the case of Southeast Asian countries which were under the direct influence of the US and China. As a response, they opted for strategic hedging and maintained ties with both powers, and at the same time, they were not tied to any side. Since balancing can be politically risky and provocative, with potential economic losses and limited political freedom, small states usually choose this strategy rather than balancing or bandwagoning (Vaicekaускаite, 2017, p. 11-12).

One of the strategies small states can pursue is the strategy of neutrality. According to Muller, strictly speaking, neutrality is a strategy used during the war. In that meaning, neutrality considers an armed conflict between two sovereign sides, while the third stays neutral and impartial. However, in modern times, the concept of neutrality is not used only in wartime but also in peace. In that way, neutrality can mean long term non-alignment or permanent neutrality. Long term non-alignment refers to a pledge in which one state commits itself not to ally with any side in a future conflict, while permanent neutrality refers to a declaration of neutrality of one

state oriented toward the international community. In general, both of these imply that a state will stay neutral in a potential future conflict (Müller, 2019, p. 4). Jean-Marc Rickli argued that small states can either choose the policy of neutrality and preserve their autonomy or choose to exercise their influence and become members of alliances. According to him, small states cannot choose both strategies simultaneously, differently from big powers that have resources to do so (Radoman, 2018, p. 190). During the Cold War, small states in Western Europe could join military alliance such as NATO or stay neutral. However, according to Goetschel, after the end of the Cold War, with the expansion of NATO and the EU, this type of policy has lost its importance (Vaicekauskaite, 2017, p. 12-13).

## ***2. 2. Serbia as a small state***

The context of Serbia could be described as a post-conflict, post-authoritarian, as well as a transitional one. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, seen by many as an enlarged national state, Serbia is today oriented toward the EU, as to a better, more prosperous place. However, the feeling of the “protracted time” lost during the 1990s and the need for stability and progress is much present among Serbia’s citizens. The consequences of political and economic transition such as the rise of unemployment, restructuring of the economy, weakening of the state, and the rise of the leader-cult are some of the features of Serbian society nowadays. Additionally, the dominant position of the President of Serbia - Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which came to power in 2012 - is an important feature not only of domestic politics but has repercussions on foreign policy, as well. Furthermore, sentiments such as the sense of better standards of living in most other European countries, and inequality among different parts of Serbian society, exclusion, and the sense of lagging behind other European countries, are widely spread among Serbia’s citizens, as well. Additionally, the population is divided on many issues such as tradition, Europe and family, which all affect the preferences for different political parties, and the attitudes toward other countries and people, particularly the neighbouring ones. Often those sentiments comprise confrontation, injustice, and missed opportunities (Savković, 2019).



In order to determine Serbia as a small state, we will first start with the quantitative criteria. As seen, one of the most important quantitative criteria is the size of the population. According to the Serbian Republic Bureau for Statistics, in 2019, this number was 6,945,235. The trend of depopulation has been continuing, meaning that the population increase rate is negative and amounts to -5.4‰ (RZS, 2020). According to almost all authors, this number puts Serbia in the category of small states.

Secondly, geographical position. Located in the centre of the Balkans, for a long time, the position of Serbia under the metaphor “the house in the centre of the road” has been considered to be the main reason for all wars and international problems it was faced with. However, Serbia’s geographical position could be perceived in a different, positive way. Even though Serbia does not have any exit to the sea, it has been improving transport corridors toward harbours in other countries. The advantage of Serbia’s geographical position is that most of those corridors pass through Serbia (Savković, 2017).

Next, an important determinant of Serbian foreign policy is its economy. Despite the international benchmarks - according to which basic macroeconomic indicators such as macroeconomic stability, the rise of the GDP, and apparently decreasing unemployment, have been evaluated as positive - too much dependence on FDI and borrowing increases the risk of indebtedness (Savković, 2019). For example, the Financial Times in three texts analysed the success of economic and fiscal reforms in Serbia, emphasizing that GDP has been almost uninterruptedly rising from 2014, reaching a 10-year record of 4.4% in 2018 (Danas, 2020). However, brain drain, as well as demographic decline, population ageing, clientelism, and corruption are among the phenomena that hamper Serbia’s economic progress (Savković, 2019). In addition, Serbia has started its path toward EU membership, which should allow it to exert more influence in European questions, as well as economic progress through the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital.

Another important determinant through which small states could be perceived is power. Or better to say, the lack of it. As mentioned previously, the concept of power always puts two or more countries in a relational status. On the one hand, according to the size of its territory and its population, Serbia is the largest country in the Western Balkan (hereinafter: WB) region, with a considerable number of ethnic Serbs living in other ex-Yugoslav countries. However, by joining

NATO and the EU, some of those countries surrounding Serbia have strengthened their position. Additionally, other countries from the wider region, such as Greece or Turkey, are economically and militarily more powerful than Serbia (Savković, 2017). In military terms, as a small country, Serbia is limited regarding its conventional forces. Serbia's armed forces personnel was 0.93 % of its total labour force in 2015, which is, according to the World Bank, lower than the average (0.97 %) of all small states in the world (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 36). According to the last available data from the World Bank, from 2017, the percentage of Serbia's armed forces personnel of its total labour force has increased since 2015, amounting to 0.99% (World Bank, 2020). Still, it is questionable how much military neutrality and total defence are beneficial to Serbia. In addition, according to the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCBP) report from 2020, low pay, negative selection, poor working conditions, as well as the lack of training and development are causing many personnel to quit military (Stojanović, 2020). The concept of power especially becomes interesting when Serbia is put in relation to great powers. As a small country, with unresolved questions such as the Kosovo question, which remained one of the most important in Serbia's foreign policy, good relations with great powers such as Russia, China, the EU and the US became of great importance. Perceived as inevitable for resolving the Kosovo question and advantageous for extracting economic and political benefits, Serbia as a small state, with limited resources and power, has been using these powers' presence balancing between them.

### 3. Literature review

There are not many scholarly articles on Serbia's balancing act between the EU, Russia, China and the US. There are plenty of analyses of Serbia's relations with the EU, Russia, China or the US. However, the balancing act between these four powers has not been a much present topic. Until recently, Serbia's balancing act has mainly been perceived through balancing between the EU and Russia, since Russia has been seen as Serbia's traditional anti-Western ally and the main pole to the West. Still, recently, with its increased importance for Serbia in the economic field and in domestic politics, in the context of Serbia's balancing, China has started getting more attention. The US has been present as one of the pillars. However, with the renewed interest in the region and the Serbia-Kosovo dispute, its impact on Serbia's relations with the other three powers (the EU, Russia and China) is becoming the topic of many analyses.

In the book "International position and the foreign policy of Serbia", Dragan Miljanić (2010) argues that the policy of four pillars is actually the consequence of the recognized need for cooperation with the world's current great powers. Furthermore, he claims that this policy is actually the "reflection of Serbia's need for balance in its foreign policy". The policy of four pillars, according to him, shows that Serbia possesses the potential to cooperate with the most powerful forces. In addition, by pursuing this policy, Serbia reflects the will to shape its international identity. He also argues that establishing strategic partnerships with other actors, except the EU, does not change Serbia's strategic orientation towards the EU. According to him, Serbia's interest is to have a balanced approach and not to opt and tie itself just for one ideology or region (Miljanić, 2010, p. 92-93, 113).

In the same book, Živadin Jovanović argues that it would be wrong to search for the pillars of Serbia's foreign policy outside of Serbia, mentioning that the real pillars of Serbia's foreign policy are the internal economic, political and social stability, economic power, and development potential, defence power and potential in science and technology (Živanović, 2010, p. 12-13).

In addition, in his article "Serbia's Foreign Policy beyond the Kosovo Conundrum", Marko Kovačević singles out EU membership and the Kosovo preservation as the main goals of Serbia's balancing act, emphasizing that as a small state, Serbia's potential and space to act autonomously and independently is limited by the role of international actors such as the EU,

NATO and UN in the region. Kovačević highlights the importance of great powers for small states such as Serbia, arguing that in order to resolve the problems and achieve their goals small states usually do not negotiate on their own. Usually, external support is needed, and according to him, the resolution of a problem such as the Kosovo issue is possible only with the support of international actors. Since Serbia's political elite might use the EU's reluctance to grant EU membership, Serbia can temporarily opt for the increased cooperation with other powers such as Russia, China, as well as Turkey. Hence, naming EU hesitancy to grant membership to Serbia as one of the reasons for the increased significance of China and Russia for Serbia, Kovačević correctly argues that as long as the EU - which assumed the leading role in solving the Serbia-Kosovo dispute, by launching the Brussels dialogue to achieve the normalization between these two sides - does not act more decisively and as long as the status of Kosovo is not resolved, Serbia will use the support of other actors which are active in the region, such as Russia and China, to preserve its territorial integrity and extract political and economic benefits. Even though cooperation with other powers cannot replace the EU as a strategic goal, still, he is right to say that extracting benefits from close relations with other non-Western powers can be a short-term option (Kovačević, 2018).

An important contribution to the examination of Serbia's balancing act is given by Vuk Vuksanović. The subject of his research is Serbia's balancing act between Russia and the West since 2008. However, as it became an important part of Serbia's balancing act, he includes China as another pole to the West in his analysis. His core argument is that Serbia's balancing is the consequence of the EU's reduced interest in the region since 2008 because of its own internal and external challenges, which allowed anti-Western powers such as Russia and China to increase their presence in Serbia. This perspective is important since it completes the picture of Serbia's balancing act. As mentioned in the introduction, Serbia balances to achieve its own interests - to preserve its territorial integrity and urge the EU to show more determination toward Serbia's EU integration. Still, the aspect he brings into the research is what actually allowed Serbia to balance between these powers - specific interest of each of them for an increased presence in Serbia, exploited by the Serbian political elite. He also names domestic politics as another important aspect of Serbia's balancing, correctly realizing the importance of domestic political life for choices in foreign relations. Still, besides the decreased EU presence and a vague perspective for EU membership, another reason could be added for the increased presence

of non-Western powers such as China and Russia in Serbia. Namely, the state of domestic affairs - in which there is no media freedom, but corruption is flourishing and institutions are weak - provides a fertile ground for the increased presence of powers such as Russia and China, which apparently do not take much into account the rule of law, unlike the EU and the US.

A study which comprehensively examines Serbia's foreign policy toward the EU, the US, China and Russia has been conducted by Hartwell and Sidlo (2017) in which four aspects of Serbia's cooperation with these powers have been analysed - foreign aid, trade, foreign direct investment, security, and defence. Obviously, recognizing that Serbia's tendency in courting other powers (even though it declared EU membership as its main goal) is putting the genuine will for EU integration into question, this study additionally examines what the drivers of Serbia's foreign policy are and whether Serbia will be able to commit to the EU fully. Targeting the four areas of cooperation with each of the four actors (trade, FDI, aid and security), this study came to the conclusion that each power has its own interests in Serbia, to a great extent mutually exclusive of other powers. In addition, according to this study, Serbia's balancing act is, most likely, going to be continued for a short period of time, but as a candidate state, and a state which aims to become a full EU member, Serbia will eventually have to align its policies with the EU ones.

An important aspect of Serbia's balancing act - Serbia's "special relations" with Russia and China in the context of EU integrations have been the subject of the research by Jovan Teokarević (2016). Realizing the specificity of Serbia's strategic relations through the coexistence of close relations with Russia and China on the one hand and the goal of EU membership on the other, he poses the question - until when will Serbia be able to balance between the West and the East without compromising its main goal, EU membership. Addressing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as a means for exerting influence by China and Russia in Serbia, and adequately realizing Russia's popularity in a significant part of Serbia's citizens and ruling parties as a problem for Serbia's EU integration, he provided policy recommendations for the EU in order to combat the strong influence of these powers.

There are many analyses on Serbia's foreign policy's separate questions such as the Kosovo question or bilateral relations with Russia, China, the EU and the US. However, as mentioned, there is a gap in the literature considering Serbia's balancing act between these four powers and

the lack of research incorporating the reasons and consequences of conducting such policy. To fill the gap in the existing literature, the purpose of this research is to examine all the important aspects and sources of Serbia's balancing act and combine them in one comprehensive study, contributing in that way to the literature on the topic.

#### 4. Methodology

In order to examine Serbia's balancing act, a qualitative method of research has been used, conducting primary research by creating a survey dedicated to examining the opinion of 15 experts from Serbia's civil society and representatives of the two biggest political parties in the Serbian Parliament, as well as by conducting semi-structured interviews. In addition, data and information were collected through secondary research in which research articles, books, online portals, and newspaper articles have been analysed.

In order to conduct research on Serbia's balancing act, it is important to understand the country's political situation. In June this year, parliamentary elections were held. The main regime party - the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) - obtained the absolute majority of votes, followed by another party from the previous government - the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). Still, four months were needed for the new government to be formed (Milenković, Đošić, Agencije, 2020). SNS and SPS have continued to dominate in the new government. However, it is important to note that SNS is undoubtedly the most dominant party, while SPS has significantly reduced its presence in the ruling coalition (DW, 2020). Furthermore, the elections were perceived as unfair because of the unequal representation of the opposition in the media compared to the pro-regime parties. The initial idea was to add value to my research by collecting the opinion of Serbia's political parties' representatives, belonging to the ruling coalition, as well as to the opposition, on the questions I have put in the survey regarding Serbia's foreign policy and its balancing act. The objective was to compare and contrast the opinion of political parties' representatives in the ruling coalition and the opposition. However, I did not get any answer to my survey from the parties belonging to the opposition for various reasons: for example, the Democratic Party (DS), a party which has been long seen as the main opposition party to the ruling coalition of SNS and SPS, is currently in a delicate situation. It is going through internal divisions, splitting and intra-party conflicts and problems (Ranković, 2020). In addition, it is important to see what experts from Serbia's civil society think about this topic. Especially since experts from many research organizations complain that their opinion is not being taken into account by the ruling elites. Hence, I believe that it would be interesting to compare and contrast the stance and opinion of the two main political parties in the Serbian Parliament (without representatives of the opposition) with the expert opinion of 15 researchers from prestige Serbian Think Tanks and

Professors from the Faculty of Political Science in Belgrade. For that purpose, a survey has been created, consisting of 10 open-ended questions about Serbia's foreign policy's most important issues. The survey has been sent to each of the experts and representatives of political parties via the Internet, i.e. via e-mail.

In addition, in order to get the opinion of experts who are highly specialised for Serbia's foreign policy, three semi-structured interviews have been conducted via Skype with:

1. Vuk Vuksanović, an associate at LSE IDEAS and Researcher at Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCBP)
2. Marko Savković, Executive Director at Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence
3. Igor Novaković, the Research Director of the International and Security Affairs Centre – ISAC Fund



## **5. Historical overview of Serbia's foreign policy and the birth of the policy of four pillars**

### ***5.1. Historical overview***

It could be said that Serbia's foreign affairs have been all but consistent and simple. Having in mind the recent "turbulent decades" - filled with events such as the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, regime change in 2000, the assassination of Serbia's Prime Minister, Zoran Đinđić in 2003, the dissolution of Federal Yugoslavia into two separate countries, Serbia and Montenegro in 2006, proclaimed independence by a part of its territory (Kosovo), but also the emergence of new partners in the international community - it is understandable why prudently leading its foreign policy is of great importance. One of the biggest problems regarding Serbia's foreign policy has been the absence of a clear strategy. The lack of a clear foreign policy strategy has resulted in a foreign policy in which priorities have been very often discrepant and confusing, usually prone to change together with the change of leading political elites (Velebit, 2017). In December 2019, new defence and national security strategies were adopted. In the new national security strategy, amongst other things, the preservation of territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as EU membership, are named as Serbia's main national interests. However, at the same time, cooperation and the development of relations with China, the US and Russia are noted as important for the Republic of Serbia (Nacrt nacionalne strategije bezbednosti, 2017, p. 8-9, 14).

Throughout history, great powers have had crucial importance in Serbia's foreign relations. They were particularly important in order to ensure Serbia's existence. However, its geographical position, in between the East and the West, together with the long period under the Ottoman rule, impacted Serbia in the period of its Post-Ottoman independence not to completely commit either to Europe or to Russia. Furthermore, although it has always had an important role in the region, being the largest economic and political power and the first independent one, in relation to other bigger European powers, Serbia was in general powerless. Additionally, throughout history, Serbia was mostly focused on caring for its survival. Because of the Ottoman Empire's long dominance and its late development as an independent nation, Serbia has missed many important developments, such as the scientific and technological innovations which took place in other countries in Europe. Instead of creating and enhancing important institutions and catching up with the rest of Europe, Serbia experienced a series of wars, which made ensuring alliances with

great powers as well as independence and survival of the country the main priorities of its foreign policy (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 8).

While the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) had a position of buffer between the East and the West during the Cold War, its position changed after the end of the Cold War. Strategically, it lost its significance as well as the Non-Aligned Movement, where SFRY was a leading member from the beginning of the 1960s. Furthermore, after the beginning of SFRY's violent dissolution in June 1991, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), consisting of Serbia and Montenegro, was proclaimed in April 1992. Those events, together with the new international surrounding and the sanctions imposed on FRY by the UN Security Council in May 1992, influenced FRY's foreign priorities (Simić, 1997, p. 1). What is important to note is that from 1992 to 1997, the informal centre of decision-making in FRY's foreign policy issues was in the hands of the most powerful man in the country, Slobodan Milošević, the President of Serbia. Until 1997, when Milošević was elected President of FRY, federal bodies were marginalized in foreign policy decision-making, even though they gained some importance after he was elected President of Yugoslavia, but not as much as it was provided for by the Constitution, where it was stipulated that "the Federal Government should be the main authority regarding foreign policy issues". Instead, the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs was under Milošević's control, while all foreign ministers from 1992 until 2000 were members of SPS and people who enjoyed the highest level of his confidence. Hence, it could be said that Yugoslav foreign policy at that time was personified by the President of the FRY, Slobodan Milošević. From 1992 until 2000, Yugoslav diplomacy perceived the international community and particularly the West, with mistrust. With no clear foreign policy goals and strategy and with diplomatic actions which were of short-term nature, based on mainly unrealistic evaluation of contemporary international relations, that period of time was characterized by confrontation with the main actors in the international community (Vekarić, p. 61- 62, 81- 82).

However, a major change happened in October 2000, when Milošević's regime was replaced by democratic forces. After the elections on presidential, federal and local level, held in September 2000, DOS – an opposition coalition consisting of 18 parties and movements proclaimed victory on all levels. However, Milošević's coalition recognized DOS's victory only at the local level, which led to massive protests in whole Serbia (Živić, Maksimović, 2019). The shift in power in

October 2000, provided Serbia with the possibility to start a transition to a democratic society, leaving behind the former autocratic regime. Stabilizing and improving relations with neighbours, as well as with the West and international organizations, became a priority. In this period, Serbia became a UN and Interpol member, and an OSCE mission in Serbia was established. Furthermore, relations with the EU improved, which was reflected in the fact that at the EU-Western Balkans Summit, held in Zagreb in 2000, FRY was invited by the EU to join the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). Additionally, relations with NATO started normalizing. The decision to join the Partnership for Peace Programme (PfP) was adopted in 2002. Furthermore, in 2002, an agreement with NATO was achieved, according to which NATO could use the Yugoslav airspace for its missions in Bosnia and Kosovo (Popović et al. 2011, p. 18). According to some authors, contrary to the widespread opinion, Serbia at that time lost its geostrategic importance since what previously made it important for great powers was its role in conflicts in former Yugoslavia, not its geostrategic position. It was recognized by the ruling elite that Serbia has to focus on internal, economic problems and to pursue a rational foreign policy, in accordance with its potential and limited resources (Vekarić, 2005, p. 86-87). In his expose from 2001, the Foreign Minister of FRY, Goran Svilanović, emphasized that the new goals in foreign policy were: joining EU and NATO; strengthening regional cooperation and bilateral relations with neighbours; developing balanced relations with leading global powers such as the US and Russia and developing relations with Third World countries (Đukanović, Lađevac, 2009, p. 346-347). However, behind the official foreign policy priorities, there was a disagreement between President Koštunica and Prime Minister Đinđić regarding some issues in Serbia's foreign policy, such as cooperating with the Hague Tribunal (Vekarić, 2005, p. 96). The DOS coalition formed out of 18 parties lacked consensus regarding, among others, the EU integration process (Ristić, 2009, p. 112). In 2003, Zoran Đinđić was assassinated. A new government was formed in 2004, with Vojislav Koštunica as the Prime Minister and Boris Tadić as the President of Serbia. The new minority government was supported by SPS. In this period, the reformist and pro-European direction started losing its dynamic. At the same time, Kosovo's status and the future of the federal state, involving relations between Serbia and Montenegro, became the main foreign policy priorities (Popović et al. 2011, p. 30). As the Kosovo question acquired more significance in Serbia's political life, under the lead of Vojislav Koštunica - who emphasized the importance of territorial integrity and preserving Kosovo in Serbia - fulfilling requirements for

EU membership was not considered to be a priority, even though the governments of Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica (2004-2008) did not break the cooperation with the EU. Instead of that, as mentioned, territorial integrity became the government's main focus (Ristić, 2009, p. 113).

On 21st May 2006, following Montenegro's declaration of independence, Serbia became an independent and sovereign state (Đukanović, Lađevac, 2009, p. 343). In the meantime, following the outbreak of violence in Kosovo in the spring of 2004, the UN Security Council appointed in 2005 Martti Ahtisaari, a former Finnish President as a Special Envoy for Kosovo (Simić, 2013, p. 4). Hence, in parallel to the referendum in Montenegro, during the end of 2005, the negotiations about Kosovo's future status under the auspices of the UN began. Following Montenegro's independence in 2006, Serbia needed to define its own position in the region and the world. Because of that it needed a clear foreign policy strategy (Đukanović, Lađevac, 2009, p. 343-344, 346). Even though Serbia became a member of the NATO programme - Partnership for Peace in 2006, rising tensions regarding the future status of Kosovo and US support for Kosovo secession brought about a significant development: under Prime Minister Koštunica, Serbia's Parliament adopted the Declaration on the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity in 2007, in which the policy of military neutrality was declared for the first time, basically to distance Serbia from the US and NATO. At the same time, that move was immediately perceived as a step towards Russia. Furthermore, Koštunica declared that if EU member states support Kosovo's secession, Serbia will no longer remain on its EU path (Reljić, 2009, p. 16). The course of events provided Serbia with the chance to redefine its own system of national security. Initially that took place under the new Constitution, adopted by Parliament in 2006. However, the new Constitution's adoption process reflected the discrepancies and the lack of the national consensus regarding foreign policy orientation and goals. The lack of consensus regarding Serbia's foreign and security policy was reflected in the National Security Strategy and Defence Strategy, adopted in April 2009. One explanation for the unclear guidelines and vagueness of documents was the lack of agreement among ideologically different parties that formed the government<sup>1</sup> (Popović et al. 2011, p. 33-34). One of the main issues on which the

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<sup>1</sup> The first government of Vojislav Koštunica (2004-2007) was a minority government and consisted of the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), the New Serbia (NS) and G17+, and was supported by the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), while the second one (2007-2008) consisted of DSS, DS, G17+ and NS (Talas, 2018).

government lacked consensus was the question of EU integration. The Democratic Party (DS) and G17+ insisted on the priority of EU integration, while DSS was opposed to signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement because of the EU plan to send its mission to Kosovo. A clear sign of bad relations between the two main parties in the government, DS and DSS, was the lack of DSS' support for Boris Tadić (leader of DS) during the second round of the presidential elections at the beginning of February 2008, against Tomislav Nikolić, representative of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS). Another issue on which the main parties had opposing views was the Kosovo question. Namely, following the proclamation of Kosovo's independence on 17<sup>th</sup> February 2008, Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica declared that the government does not have a united policy on the Kosovo issue, forcing Boris Tadić (who won the presidential elections in February 2008) to dismiss Parliament and to schedule early parliamentary elections for 11<sup>th</sup> May (Kojić, 2020).

## ***5.2. The birth of the policy of four pillars***

The second government of Vojislav Koštunica was in power until the parliamentary elections in May 2008, when the new government consisting of the coalition "For a European Serbia – Boris Tadić"<sup>2</sup>, SPS, the Party of United Pensioners of Serbia (PUPS) and national minority' parties was formed. The dominant party in the period from 2008-2012 was the Democratic Party under the lead of Boris Tadić who became the most influential politician in the country. Under Tadić's rule, the role of the President of Serbia, once more became bigger and more significant than what was Constitutionally prescribed (Simić, 2013, p. 5). Kosovo's unilateral declaration, supported by the most powerful EU member states, just a couple of days after Tadić's victory over Nikolić on the 2008 presidential elections (3<sup>rd</sup> February 2008), put Tadić and his pro-European coalition in a difficult position. Following the parliamentary elections held on 11 May 2008, Tadić managed to form a pro-European government, with Mirko Cvetković as Prime Minister, even though DS had to go into coalition with SPS, a former regime party. Tadić supported EU integration, arguing at the same time for the need to defend Serbia's territorial integrity (Reljić,

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<sup>2</sup> Coalition "For a European Serbia – Boris Tadić" consisted of the Democratic Party (DS), the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) and G17+ (Simić, 2013, p. 4).

2009, p. 18-19). While Tadić was the President, relations with neighbouring countries such as Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (i.e. present North Macedonia) were improved, while the crown achievement of Boris Tadić and his government was considered to be the acceptance of Serbia's application for EU membership by the European Council, in February 2012 (Simić, 2013, p. 5).

The principle of four pillars was brought as an official policy by Tadić in 2009. At the ambassador conference in Serbia, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2009, Tadić acknowledged that primary foreign policy goals were Kosovo's defence, Serbia's EU integration, as well as regional cooperation, while he marked the EU, Russia and the US as the three pillars of Serbia's foreign policy (Đukić, Lađevac, 2009, p. 348). Soon after the signing of the Agreement on Strategic Partnership with China in 2009, China became the fourth pillar of Serbia's foreign policy. According to Tadić, it was important to make China the fourth pillar and to enhance cooperation with it, since China was perceived as a power which would soon take a dominant role in the world economy and politics, and particularly because of China's stance toward the status of Kosovo (Danas, 2019). In 2009, when this policy was formulated, relations between these four powers were quite different than they are today. Tadić, who proposed this policy, justified it, underlying the importance of these four powers in the world. According to him, US domination, EU's growing importance, which had introduced a new currency, and the rise of China after the global financial crisis as a future global power, made the picture clear regarding the importance of these powers for Serbia. Additionally, Tadić argued that because of the rising prices of oil and gas, Russia had renewed its economic potential, becoming again an important actor. Russia's importance lied of course in its support to Serbia over the Kosovo question. (Glišić, 2015).

At the 2012 parliamentary elections, SNS won the largest share of votes (24.4%), followed by DS, with 22.11% of votes and SPS - 14.53% of votes. In the second round of the 2012 presidential elections, Tomislav Nikolić (SNS candidate) beat Boris Tadić (DS candidate). Soon after, Nikolić resigned as the president of SNS, leaving the position to Aleksandar Vučić. Even though it was expected that the government would again be formed by DS and SPS, Ivica Dačić, SPS's leader, decided to accept the offer by SNS and formed a government with SNS instead with DS. Tadić's Democratic Party went to opposition (Simić, 2013, p. 5). Tomislav Nikolić was a former chief deputy of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS). However, after voting for the

ratification of the Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2008, he broke with SRS (Reljić, 2009, p. 19). Many feared that the new government would dramatically change the direction of Serbia's foreign policy and return the country back to the 1990s, as the pro-European DS party became an opposition, however the policy of four pillars actually continued (Glišić, 2015).

The policy of four pillars continued to persist in Serbia's foreign policy after SNS came to power in 2012. Nowadays, it is maybe even more present than it used to be. EU integration has been emphasized as the main goal by Serbia's political elite. However, Serbia is flirting with other powers such as China, Russia and the US, trying not to ruin relations with any of them, exploiting at the same time, their often, opposed interests. What has changed since 2012 is that after early parliamentary elections in 2014, Aleksandar Vučić became Prime Minister, while in 2017 he became President of the Republic of Serbia. Under SNS, Serbia's balancing has persisted, providing a concentration of power in one man, which is reflected besides domestic issues, on foreign relations as well.

The European Union, the US, Russia and China were first presented in 2009 as the four pillars of Serbia's foreign policy. Each of these pillars has a particular significance for Serbian interests. For the time being, as a small country, Serbia is balancing between them, even though the question is until when Serbian leaders are going to be able to pursue this policy. In addition, the question is until when fulfilling and pursuing Serbia's interests will be compatible with the interests of all of these four powers. EU membership has been proclaimed as the main goal in Serbia's foreign policy. However, the rise in the importance of other global actors in Serbia's political and economic life sometimes makes this goal distant and appears as not the only choice. Do these four pillars have the same weight for Serbia's national interests? What is the importance of each of these pillars for Serbia? In the next section, in order to get to know each of them, a short background of their presence and importance for Serbia is briefly explained.

In the public discourse, we can often hear politicians uttering sentences in contradiction one to the other, starting from "the EU is the most important partner for Serbia" to "European solidarity is just a fairy tale and there is only one real friend of Serbia - China". All of this makes the whole picture a bit confusing. Who is the most important partner, what does Serbia want, why is Serbia balancing between these powers? As Vuksanović pointed out, with the reduced presence of the EU in the region, because of its own internal and external problems (the global financial crisis,

the enlargement fatigue, the migrant crisis, the need for its strengthening, internal turbulences, etc.), other global powers such as Russia and China have managed to make inroads in the WB region, especially in Serbia. This has obviously been recognized by Serbia's ruling elite as an opportunity to use the interests of the above-mentioned powers in order to achieve Serbia's own interests, such as defending its territorial integrity. In addition, it seems that Serbia's political leaders often use good relations with anti-Western powers such as China and Russia as a message for the EU, showing that there are other interested partners if the EU is not, urging in that way the EU to show more interest in Serbia. The balancing act has one more important dimension – Serbia's domestic politics. It seems that good relations with powers such as Russia and China have been very often used for getting advantages in domestic politics.



### ***5.3. Four pillars in Serbia's foreign policy***

#### ***5.3.1. The European Union***

The Balkan region experienced great turmoil and violent conflicts during the 1990s, starting from Yugoslavia's dissolution through the Kosovo crisis and the bombing of Serbia. Having in mind the fact that the Balkans are considered as the periphery of Europe, it is clear what implications the region's instability can have for wider Europe. Even though the EU perceives itself as an important security actor in the region, during the war in Yugoslavia it proved to be a weak player compared to the US. The crisis in Kosovo in 1999 has also challenged EU's foreign policy and effectiveness (Bechev, 2005, p. 111). However, still wanting to be present in this area, the EU has initiated numerous military, economic and political measures. Initiating Petersberg Tasks, the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe and the Stabilization and Association Process, as well as programs such as CARDS and IPA through which it financially supported the Western Balkan countries, it has shown its interest in the region (Lopandić, 2017, p. 98). Additionally, the EU has been emphasizing the need for regional cooperation to resolve open disputes between these countries and achieve security and peace in the region. Furthermore, it has recognized itself as a soft power and a normative actor that aims to help the transformation of Balkan countries into modern democracies by transferring democratic values and enforcing the rule of law and institutions. Through the system of conditionality, by offering EU membership and all benefits which come from that, the EU expects applicant countries to fulfill certain norms in order to be able to join the Union. Actually, in that conditionality lies the power of the EU, since through fulfilling the asked requests and norms and by aligning with EU rules and standards, applicant countries would actually transform themselves into societies based on modern, democratic values, which is seen as the ultimate goal of the whole transformation process of the ruined, undeveloped and weak countries from this region.

After the regime change on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2000 and turning from anti-Western isolationist politics to a more open orientation, Serbia's relations with the EU started developing. The 5th October 2000 and the participation of the FRY at the Zagreb Summit, which gathered the Heads of States and Governments of the EU and WB countries, represented a turning point concerning Serbia's EU integration. At the Summit, the EU perspective and the status of potential EU candidates for

the countries participating in the Stabilization and Association Process was confirmed (Međak, Budimir, 2017, p. 29). Additionally, in October 2004, the Resolution on EU accession was confirmed in Serbia's Parliament, which declared EU membership as Serbia's strategic goal (Đukanovic, Lađevac, 2009, p. 348). However, problems between Serbia and Montenegro, as well as the uncooperative relations with The Hague Tribunal, affected the further pace of Serbia's EU integration. Following the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement and the visa liberalisation for Serbian citizens<sup>3</sup>, this process has continued, resulting in the candidate status in 2012 and the start of the negotiation talks in 2014 (Međak, Budimir, 2017, p. 29, 43).

So far, out of 35, Serbia has opened 18 chapters and has preliminary closed two. Among the most important ones - and the chapters on which the EU is constantly insisting - are chapters 23 and 24, concerning judiciary reform, basic human rights, fight against corruption, justice, freedom, and security. Fulfilling the criteria for closing these chapters would bring independence of the judiciary, respect for human rights as well as improve the fight against corruption (Naskovic, 2016). Furthermore, the Kosovo's question or better to say, normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia affects the pace of Serbia's EU integration: for the EU, resolving this question is important, since the EU declared that it does not want to import any kind of unresolved bilateral disputes.

Still, besides the challenges Serbia has been experiencing while aligning (or not) with EU standards, with the new external and internal challenges the EU is faced with, EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans has entered a new era. The genuine political will for enhancing the enlargement process seems to be missing on both sides, Belgrade's (expressed in the reluctant and slow implementation of reforms) as well as Brussels's side. Hence, even though EU membership is Serbia's ultimate goal, increased presence of other global powers in the region, and the lack of enthusiasm for EU integration, make us pose the question - is there an alternative?

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<sup>3</sup> 30<sup>th</sup> November 2009 (Međak, Budimir, 2017, p. 43)

### 5.3.2. *Russia*

Russia, as a global power, has three main goals in its foreign policy. The first one is engagement with the outside world in order to preserve its domestic stability, or better to say the stability of the regime since there is a belief that the West and Europe are promoting regime change in Russia's neighbourhood or in the Russian Federation itself. Hence, defending Russia, according to Bechev, starts from activities beyond its own borders. The second one is maintaining control over the post-Soviet space in a manner of protecting its corners. The third one is the preservation of its status as a global power. It is a nuclear power, a member of the UN Security Council, and possesses a large territory spreading on two continents – Europe and Asia (Bechev, 2019, p. 5-6). But what about the Balkans? What about Serbia? Even though Russia does not perceive the WB region as a sphere of its privileged interest, compared for example to Ukraine or the Southern Caucasus, it still has a geopolitical interest in the region. By using conflicts in the region as an opportunity to embrace the role of a “spoiler” against Western interests, Russia obstructs NATO integration and the spreading of the Western influence (Larsen, 2020, p. 2-3).

For Serbian people, there are not many other bilateral relationships so mythologized and stereotyped as with Russia. Misconceptions and strong beliefs, often very wrong, are extremely present in Serbia's public. Serbian officials and media, as well as Russian and even Western media, constantly mention “traditional ties”, “historical affinity”, “eternal friendship” when talking about these two countries. However, throughout the history of relations between Russia and Serbia, conflicts did happen, and while a significant part of the Serbian society nowadays would say that traditional friendship has been lasting for centuries, the pro-Russian sentiment is actually a recent phenomenon (Samorukov, 2020, p. 4). This relationship is much more nuanced than it is widely believed to be (Vuksanović, 2018).

It would not be a mistake to say that Serbs have a reason to be grateful to Russia. For example, the renewal of the Serbian statehood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century owes much to Russia and probably would not have happened without its support. However, the picture is not one-sided, and one should escape the trap of oversimplifying it. Throughout history, Serbs tried to gain Russia's support, but without losing their autonomy, while Russia on the other hand was often displeased with Serbian “disobedience”. That was the case with the Obrenović dynasty, which was often

reluctant to coordinate Serbia's foreign policy with Russia's. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Serbia, independently and as a part of Yugoslavia, allied itself with the United States and France, demonstrating that it was able to ally with the West as well. Following the Soviet liberation of Yugoslavia from Nazi occupation and the establishment of a communist government in Yugoslavia, the situation changed again. The wish of Josip Broz Tito to become independent from Moscow resulted in the conflict between him and Stalin and led to the Tito-Stalin split in 1948 (Vuksanović, 2018). Stalin's death in 1953 raised some hopes for reconciliation, however that did not happen. Despite adopting socialism, Yugoslavia remained distant from the Warsaw Pact, led by Moscow, and chose the Non-Aligned Movement instead (Samorukov, 2020, p. 5). Additionally, Russia has been wrongly perceived as a supporter of Serbia during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Milošević's support for the failed communist coup was the reason why Yeltsin and Milošević were not in good relations (Vuksanović, 2018). Because of internal problems during the 1990s, without its position in the bipolar order during the Cold War, a weakened Russia was trying to avoid confronting the West, something that, among others, was reflected in the support it gave for the introduction of sanctions against FRY in the UN (Velebit, 2019). Still, it could be argued that shared perceptions of the "hypocritical West" brought Serbian and Russian people closer and revived the myth of eternal Serbian-Russian friendship (Samorukov, 2020, p. 6).

Following the fall of the Milošević regime, in October 2000, Moscow reduced its interest in Serbia. Shortly before and after the government change in Belgrade and Milošević's fall, Russia's main interlocutor in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was the regime of Milo Đukanović in Montenegro. Hence, the development of closer ties with Belgrade during the first decade of 2000 should not be perceived as the revival of an "old alliance", but more as a product of Putin's Russian foreign policy. By supporting Serbia on issues such as Kosovo, Kremlin believes it would gain support and influence in the Balkans at the expense of Western powers, without investing many resources. In addition, supporting Serbia could be explained as Russia's effort to undermine the unipolar order, perceived by Moscow as present in the Balkans during the 1990s, and to reaffirm its position as a global power. The war in Kosovo has a special place in the Russian foreign policy since ignoring and bypassing Russia at the UN Security Council was a sign that, at least from the West's perspective, Russia had lost its status of global power (Vuksanović, 2018). In contemporary relations, the importance of Russia for Serbia lies in three

main areas: support for Serbia's territorial integrity, energy dependence on Russia, and the perception among a great number of Serbs of close Russian-Serbian relations strengthened by shared history, culture, and religion (Reljić, 2009, p. 6). Additionally, Russia has been important for Serbia's domestic politics. The idea of Slavic and Orthodox brotherhood has been very often used by politicians from both sides to enlarge their popularity among their citizens and voters (Samorukov, 2020, p. 8). Still, even though perceived as Serbia's most important non-Western partner in Serbia's public, with the emergence of China as Serbia's new and popular partner and the latest developments in the Belgrade-Priština dialogue, it seems that Russia's position has been shaken up.

### *5.3.3. The US*

Not many countries provoke such strong sentiments in Serbia as is the case with the US. It would not be an exaggeration to say that relations between these two countries, speaking from the Serbian perspective, are filled with strong emotions, in many cases, negative ones.

After the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Southeastern Europe fell under Western dominance (Ivanova Habova, 2016, p. 42). Since 1989, US policy's main goal towards the region has been to "complete the unfinished business" and "make Europe whole and free", as declared by President George H.W. Bush in a speech in Mainz in 1989. Hence, the US has actively supported the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. It imposed itself as a main external actor during the Yugoslav wars, culminating in the Dayton Agreement, which ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and later during the war in Kosovo (Vejvoda, 2017, p. 37). While the EU turned out to be diplomatically weak, the US played the main role. It has been seen as the main sponsor of the Kosovo project and Kosovo's proclaimed independence. However, the EU took the main mediating role in the conflict, backed by the US (Vejvoda, 2017, p. 37). Still, the importance of the US for the region is obvious. It can be seen whenever a crisis emerges, such as the case with the violence in the North Macedonian Parliament in 2017, when the EU proved to be less efficient and needed US support.

The main obstacle in Serbian-US relations is the question of Kosovo. Serbia's relationship with the US is intertwined with Serbia's relationship with NATO, which has been the supporter of US foreign and security policy in the region and represents an important moment for the Euro-Atlantic integration process (Vejvoda, 2017, p. 38). US support for Kosovo's independence and NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 have put these relations under a great strain. Even though relations between Serbia and the US have in general been friendly throughout history, with diplomatic relations between the Kingdom of Serbia and the United States established in 1882, and their alliance in World War I, the "anti-Americanism" - which dates from the Milošević's era, related to ideological prejudices about capitalism as well as negative sentiments towards "American imperialism" and America's role as the "world's policeman" - is still present in a large part of the Serbian public. The image of Serbia in America, on the other hand, is not much better neither. Because of Serbia's bad reputation and the image created during Milošević's era, prejudices and stereotypes about Serbia are still present among America's public (Vekarić, 2005, p. 121-122).

Even though bilateral relations started to improve after the regime change in 2000, they went through many ups and downs. Ivan Vujačić, Serbian Ambassador to the US from 2002-2009, put this relationship in four phases. In the first phase (2000-2004), the Serbian government sought to normalize relations with the US, distancing itself from the previous rhetoric from the 1990s (Vujačić, 2018). In 2001, in his expose in the Federal Parliament, FRY's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Goran Svilanović, emphasized the need for Euro-Atlantic integration (Đukanović, Lađevac, 2009, p. 346). US support for Serbia's membership in international financial organizations in that period reflected the will of the US for improving bilateral cooperation. Additionally, US President Bush abolished Serbia's status "as a country which endangers US national interests" (National emergency clause). Furthermore, economic relations improved with many foreign investments coming from the US to Serbia. This phase, according to Vujačić, is considered to be the most successful period of Serbian-US relations (Vujačić, 2018).

The next phase (2005-2008) is considered a phase of cooperation, but also a phase of cooling of relations. In this period Serbia in a relatively stable way cooperated with The Hague Tribunal and joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 2006, which enhanced military cooperation. Still, the outbreak of violence in Kosovo in 2004, together with the beginning of negotiations

regarding the Kosovo status, led to a great extent under the US influence, affected these relations (Vujačić, 2018). As mentioned, since the US was a strong supporter of Kosovo's independence, Serbia has started distancing itself and eventually, in 2007, adopted the concept of military neutrality. Furthermore, in this period, especially because of ideological sympathies for Russia by Vojislav Koštunica, Serbia started turning more to Russia, as to a supporter for its territorial integrity (Vujačić, 2018).

In the 2008-2010 period, Serbia confronted the US on Kosovo's international recognition. However, after Serbia agreed to start the dialogue with Priština under Brussels mediation, in 2011, new prospects appeared for Serbian-US relations. After 2010, the US distanced to some extent from the region, while the EU took the dominant role in resolving the Kosovo status through the Belgrade-Priština dialogue (Vujačić, 2018). The United States' reduced interest in the Western Balkans and its preoccupation with other priorities and strategic objectives, and the EU's weakened commitment to enlargement, have opened the door for other players in the region (Doehler, 2019, p. 3-4). However, it looks that the US has renewed its interest in the region, still having an indispensable role in the Western Balkans. Under Trump, the US's increased involvement in the region, specifically in the Kosovo dispute, actually revealed his desire to broker a deal between Belgrade and Priština due to elections scheduled for 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020 (Grgić, 2020).

From Serbia's point of view, the US importance for Serbia's prosperity and stability has been recognized. Marked as one of the four pillars of Serbia's foreign policy by Tadić in 2009, good relations with the most powerful actor in the world continues to be among the main priorities of Serbia's foreign policy, as it has been declared by former Serbia's Foreign Minister, Ivica Dačić, this year in his speech during the opening of an event regarding Serbia-US relations in March (Ministarstvo spoljnih poslova Republike Srbije, 2020). The new agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, signed in Washington on 4<sup>th</sup> September 2020, has especially shown how much the US became important to Serbia, potentially side-lining the EU as the main mediator of the whole process of resolving the Kosovo status.

#### 5.3.4. China

Having the second-largest economy in the world, China became one of the main actors in the international community. Searching for its place among great powers, it could be said that China has significantly influenced global politics. Starting with the entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001, it has soon transformed its economy from a “low-cost factory to the world” to a global technology leader. Parallel to that, it became the main trading and development partner for many emerging economies (World Politics Review, 2020).

By launching the One Belt One Road Initiative, perceptions of China’s foreign policy capacity have been changing, while imposing itself as an economic leader of global importance (Lagazzi, Vit, 2017, p. 2). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), previously called One Belt One Road (OBOR<sup>4</sup>) has been seen by many as China’s plan to spread its political and economic influence across the world (Tonchev, 2017, p. 3). Since the launch of the strategy, through financial arrangements, China has become one of the most important partners for countries from around the world, not only from Asia and Africa, but from Europe and Latin America, as well (Vladislavljiev, 2019). The Western Balkan countries are part of the 16+1 platform (today 17+1, with Greece), linked to the OBOR initiative, consisting of 16 Central and Eastern European countries and Beijing (Vit, Lagazzi, 2017, p. 3).

But why did the Balkans and Serbia become so important to China? Why did it decide to invest so much in the region? At first sight, the Balkan region does not seem to be so important to China. It is too far to pose a security risk, and its market is not big enough to be attractive to Chinese companies. Still, there are reasons for China’s increased presence in the region. First, China can easily use the economic dependencies it has created in the Balkan states as leverage to get political support from these countries regarding core issues such as the question of Tibet or Taiwan. For example, Serbia, as the biggest recipient of Chinese finance in the Balkans, has been China’s strong supporter on issues such as Tibet and Xinjiang<sup>5</sup>. Secondly, just like Serbia’s

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<sup>4</sup> Officially launched in 2013, by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, the initiative aims to increase China’s connectivity with Europe by building new and improving the existing overland and maritime infrastructure. The initiative consists of two networks – SREB (Silk Road Economic Belt, an overland network linking China and Europe) and the complementary 21<sup>st</sup> century Maritime Silk Road (seaborne trading network) (Barisitz, Radzyner, 2018, p. 8-9)

<sup>5</sup> Even though it has to be noted that Serbia’s support for China on these issues primarily stems from Chinese support for Serbia on the Kosovo issue.



politicians who use China in domestic politics for achieving political advantages, China's success in the Balkans has been used in China's domestic politics in order to legitimize the governing Communist Party (Šimalčík, Turcsanyi, 2019). And the third and maybe the most important reason for China's interest is that the Balkan region is seen as an entry to the European market (Vit, Lagazzi, 2017, p. 3). Balkan countries allow Chinese companies to explore the European markets, establish bases and get valuable insights that can be used later for further expansion towards Western Europe (Šimalčík, Turcsanyi, 2019).

Serbia is considered to be the country from the region with the strongest relations with China. Even though China maintained good diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia during the 1980s and the 1990s and opposed NATO bombing in 1999, its presence became stronger in the second decade of the 21st century (Mardel, 2020). From Serbia's point of view, the crucial factor in the relationship between these two countries has for a long time been the Kosovo question, i.e. Chinese support for the territorial integrity of Serbia<sup>6</sup>, since China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Furthermore, during the NATO bombing of Serbia, the Embassy of China was hit, increasing anti-Western sentiment in this country, a feature shared by a great part of Serbian citizens (Mardel, 2020). However, besides its importance for the Kosovo question, Chinese economic presence in Serbia, as well as its importance for Serbia's domestic politics made China one of Serbia's primary partners.

Under President Boris Tadić, Serbia recognized China's importance in the new world order and its potential leading role, including it in 2009 as the fourth pillar in its foreign policy. According to Liu Zuokui, from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the global shift of power has played a relevant factor in these two countries' relations. The global financial crisis from 2008 particularly influenced Belgrade's decision to strengthen relations with China in order to find alternative sources for economic assistance (Stanzel, Kratz, Szczudlik, Pavlicevic, 2016). Hence, the year 2009 could be seen as the first year of intensified cooperation between Serbia and China. Since then, mainly through economic cooperation, the rise of China's importance and its influence in Serbia can be noticed (Vladislavljev, 2019). While the share of trade between China and Serbia is currently low, investments have been vital in this partnership. A survey conducted by the Serbian Integration Office (the precursor to the Ministry of European Integration) in 2016

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<sup>6</sup> An important factor for the Chinese stance regarding the Kosovo question is its own "problem" with Taiwan and Hong Kong.

revealed that 21% of Serbia's citizens who were polled perceived China as the largest investor in Serbia (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 7). The two countries further strengthened their relationship by signing the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in 2016, which is the year when they signed a mutual visa-exemption agreement (Mardell, 2020). Serbian - Chinese relations have been presented to Serbia's public by politicians as so strong and deep that they have often been called "the friendship made of steel". What is also important to note is China's good relations with Serbia's ruling party (Serbian Progressive Party - SNS). For example, at the celebration of the Serbian Progressive Party's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2018, the only ambassador which addressed the audience was the Chinese ambassador (Vladisavljev, 2019). As mentioned, the most important source of the Chinese influence in Serbia has been the economy through investments and loans. Still, this strong economic presence can be perceived from different perspectives. Even though, on the one hand, China's increased presence in Serbia can be marked as positive because of the capital inflow and the development of infrastructure, one has also to consider its long-term consequences. Increased Chinese political influence or even a debt trap could also become the outcome of the relationship if a country is not careful enough (Vladisavljev, 2019). In addition, it seems that lately, with such a strong economic presence and popularity in Serbian society (to a great extent created by politicians and the media), China is starting to outpace Russia, perceived as Serbia's traditional non-Western ally, also challenging Serbia's EU direction, most notably perceived during the corona crisis.

**Picture 1. The New Silk Road**



Source: Vladisavljev, 2019

## **6. The balancing act of Serbia - Results and Analysis**

### ***6.1. What affects Serbia's foreign policy the most?***

To start the analysis, it was important to see what, according to experts from Serbia's civil society and representatives of the two biggest political parties in Serbia's Parliament - SNS and SPS, affects Serbia's foreign policy the most. According to 6 respondents from our survey, the Kosovo question is the factor that affects Serbia's foreign policy the most. In addition, one respondent answered that the support Serbia gets for the preservation of its territorial integrity, i.e. preservation of Kosovo within its borders, affects Serbia's foreign policy the most. A factor which also has great importance for Serbia's foreign policy, according to 6 respondents, is Serbia's domestic politics. One of the respondents answered that interest-based calculations by decision-makers and the nationalistic rhetoric are the "most important shapers" of Serbia's foreign policy. In addition, another respondent argued that "currently, the personal interests of the President and of a small group of people from the ruling party (referring to SNS) affect Serbia's foreign policy the most". Likewise, in one respondent's opinion, decision-makers, i.e. Serbia's President and the Government, have the biggest impact on Serbia's foreign policy. One of the respondents answered that, on the one hand, Serbia's "charismatic and partocratic internal political organisation" is an important factor, while on the other hand, security dynamics determined by regional and global political system affect Serbia's foreign policy. Hence, the international system is seen as a factor that has a significant impact on Serbia's foreign policy, as well. As expressed by one respondent, the current power distribution in international relations affects Serbia's foreign policy. At the same time, another one answered that Serbia's international position and incentives coming from the international level are crucial. Foreign influence, according to one respondent, represents the factor that affects Serbia's foreign policy the most. In addition, Serbia's geopolitical position, economy and relations with Republika Srpska are seen as factors that shape Serbia's foreign policy as well.

According to the SPS representative, what affects Serbia's foreign policy the most is domestic politics, while for the SNS representative, it is Serbia's strategic orientation.

Distinguishing the most important elements of Serbia's balancing act, as well as taking into account the answers of our respondents, the analysis of Serbia's balancing act is divided as

follows: the first section, and the issue which according to a significant number of our respondents affects Serbia's foreign policy the most, is the Kosovo question. As will be seen, the Kosovo question is of particular importance for analysing Serbia's balancing act and its relations with great powers. The second section is devoted to the examination of how close relations with Russia and China affect Serbia's EU integration (proclaimed as Serbia's official strategic goal). The third section is about Serbia's military neutrality and balancing between different actors in the security and defence sector, while the fourth one is dedicated to domestic politics and their impact on Serbia's foreign policy. In addition, the last chapter analyses until when pursuing the balancing act by Serbia will be possible and to what extent it is beneficial to Serbia.

## ***6.2. The Kosovo question - the main determinant of Serbia's foreign policy? To what extent the Kosovo question affects Serbia's foreign policy choices?***

In the introduction, we marked the Kosovo question as one of the reasons why Serbia pursues balancing between great powers. As it can be seen throughout history, the question of territorial integrity has been, for most of the time, an important one for Serbia. As a small state located in the complicated Balkans, Serbia's foreign policy for the biggest part of this century has been oriented toward solving the Kosovo issue and preserving its territorial integrity. In order to gain support for its stance, it has started pursuing the balancing act with great powers (Kovačević, 2018). In this section we will see how the Kosovo question has been impacting Serbia's foreign policy and shaping Serbia's relations with great powers, since it seems that there hasn't been an aspect of Serbia's foreign relations that hasn't been affected by this issue.

Kosovo has always had a special place in a great part of Serbia's population. It represents not just a territory, but has special importance as the cradle of Serbian identity as well, representing a special place full of historical memories. In addition, Kosovo is the place where Serbian statehood was born. Religion also has great importance, since Kosovo is considered the source of the Serbian Orthodoxy, with numerous monasteries founded in the early 13th century (Charnogursky, 2007).

We can see how much the Kosovo question matters and to what extent it directs Serbia's foreign policy also from our respondents' answers. Out of 15 experts, the answers are almost unanimous - 14 of them emphasize that this issue significantly affects Serbia's foreign policy. One of them answered that this question affects all the phases of Serbia's foreign policy decision-making and realization, and that "a game on two levels" is present: there is a need to satisfy the public of Serbia simultaneously with the necessity of conducting negotiations with foreign actors regarding solving Kosovo's final status. Another respondent replied that Serbia's foreign policy is all about the Kosovo question, which is well understood by Berlin and Brussels, while another one answered that the Kosovo question affects Serbia's foreign policy to a great extent by creating nationalistic rhetoric. Out of the 14 above-mentioned respondents, 3 of them directly answered that this question affects Serbia's foreign policy the most. According to one respondent, the Kosovo issue is essential for Serbia's positioning towards Russia, the US and to some extent towards China. It is the key political question in Serbia's EU integration process.

According to another respondent, the Kosovo issue is crucial for Serbia's foreign policy, being the only bigger unresolved conflict in the Balkans. The respondent added that Serbia has been politically conditioned to normalize its relations with Kosovo and sign a legal agreement to progress on its EU path. The same respondent emphasized that acknowledging Kosovo's independence is of interest to the leading EU countries such as Germany, without whose support progress in EU integration as well as EU membership would not be achievable. Only one out of 15 respondents answered that the Kosovo issue currently affects Serbia's foreign policy to a lesser extent than ten years ago. Hence, as we have seen, Kosovo undoubtedly represents a tremendously important issue for Serbia's foreign policy and, to a great extent, shapes Serbia's positioning toward great powers.

The official stance of the SNS and SPS representatives is similar, as well. Both of them agree that the Kosovo question affects Serbia's foreign policy to a great extent.

After the change of Milošević's regime in 2000, Serbia tried to enhance its relationship with the EU and NATO. However, after the assassination of Serbian liberal Premier Zoran Đinđić in 2003, nationalistic, conservative, and pro-Russian parties have been gaining strength. DSS leader, Vojislav Koštunica was President from 2000-2003 and following that Serbia's Premier (2004-2008). During that period of time, he met Putin six times. After 2005, when talks about the future status of Kosovo began and when it became clear that the most important EU countries, as well as the US would support Kosovo's independence, Serbia's stance toward the West, as mentioned, started changing. At that particular point in time, apart from Russia, Serbia did not have any other relevant political ally on its side among the international community. On the other hand, Russia used arguments during the negotiations regarding Kosovo's status in 2005 and the crisis of Serbia's relations with the EU to strengthen its relations with Serbia, as well as to reinforce its own international position. In addition, the limited cooperation with The Hague Tribunal affected Serbia's relationship with the EU, as well (Reljić, 2009, p. 11). All of that resulted in Russia's increased presence in Serbia and the deepening of Serbian-Russian bonds. Furthermore, the Kosovo issue has been one of the most "problematic" in EU membership talks. Since Serbia obtained candidate status in 2012, the EU insisted that it has to resolve the dispute with Kosovo in order to advance on its EU path. In the EU's Common position on Chapter 35, which refers to the Kosovo issue, the EU declared that Serbia's advancement in its EU

integration process would be evaluated in accordance with Serbia's engagement towards the improvement of its relations with Kosovo. Although it has stopped from asking outright for the recognition of Kosovo's independence by Serbia, the EU insists on the legally binding normalization agreement between Serbia and Kosovo. Still, so far, the EU has not specified what the normalization of relations would actually mean and what it should entail. What also makes it hard for the EU to have a unified response on this issue is that five EU member states have not recognized Kosovo's independence<sup>7</sup> (Stojić, 2018, p. 4). Therefore, the official EU approach regarding the Kosovo issue is "diversity on recognition, but unity in engagement". To show that the EU respects diversity on this issue, EU documents avoid referring to Kosovo as an independent country. On the other hand, engagement considers offering Kosovo a European perspective, as well as potential candidate status (Russell, 2019, p. 3).

What happened in 2008? Why is this year so important for Serbia? As mentioned in the introduction, the year 2008 could be perceived as a milestone in Serbia's foreign policy. After the unilaterally proclaimed independence of Kosovo in 2008, one of Serbian governments' main priorities was to stop the recognition of Kosovo's independence by other countries (Đukanović, Lađevac, 2009, p. 347). Due to its position in the UN Security Council as a permanent member, Russia became one of the most important Serbia's allies. As Vuksanović (2018) pointed out, this famous Serbian-Russian friendship and Russia's popularity in Serbia's public actually dates from the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when Russia declared that it supports Serbia's stance on the Kosovo issue and that, if necessary, it will use the veto in the UN Security Council to block Kosovo's recognition (Vuksanović, 2018). Putin opposed Washington's stance, according to which the Kosovo question is a unique case and cannot create a precedent. Washington's stance was supported by London, Paris, Rome, and Berlin. In addition, Putin has constantly criticized US policy regarding Kosovo, considering it a reflection of the US will for domination over Russia. Kosovo's proclaimed independence was a clear message for Russia – despite the diplomatic campaign that lasted more than two years, it did not persuade the US to change its policy towards Kosovo, which showed that Russian consent was not necessary for resolving important questions in Europe. Hence, the Kosovo issue showed Russia's irrelevance as a global power in that period of time. The feeling of being ignored by the US in the Western Balkan region, where it has been a significant political actor for hundreds of years, has determined

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<sup>7</sup> Romania, Slovakia, Cyprus, Greece, Spain

Russia to strengthen its position in the region and stop further NATO enlargement and the spread of US influence (Reljić, 2009, p. 11-13). Russia actually capitalized on supporting Serbia regarding the Kosovo issue, becoming an indispensable ally of Belgrade. Because of its official stance and the veto power in the UN Security Council, Russia gained significant privileges in the Serbian energy sector and substantial influence in Serbian domestic politics. Moscow controls to a great extent Belgrade's stance on Kosovo since neither Serbian leader can afford to be softer than Russia on the Kosovo issue since that would certainly lead to a loss of popularity among the voters. Serbian leaders, Vučić especially, are not big fans of such dependency. However, because of Russia's popularity among Serbian citizens, political leaders do not risk confronting Russia (Samorukov, 2019, p. 69).

Over the years, Russia and China, as permanent members of the UN Security Council, have been used by Serbian politicians as a major asset to prevent international recognition of Kosovo. While the EU has been since 2011 the main mediator of the whole negotiation process regarding solving the Kosovo status, another actor has recently increased its significance for the Kosovo issue - the US. Former Serbia's Foreign Affairs Minister acknowledged<sup>8</sup> that the Kosovo issue will remain the most important one in the political dialogue between Serbia and the US, adding that Serbia is completely open for further conversation on the issue and that Serbia perceives the US as an important partner for achieving beneficial agreement for all sides.

While the EU has traditionally been the Belgrade-Priština dialogue mediator, with US support, it appears that recently two separate, rival negotiation processes have emerged, one under the EU's and another under the US mediation. Despite the publicly proclaimed coordination between the EU and the US, since recently, Washington has started coordinating to a lesser extent with Brussels regarding the Kosovo issue. Even though, officially, the EU is the main facilitator of the negotiation process, undoubtedly, a growing US influence over Serbia's and Kosovo's governments can be noticed (Ushkovska, 2020). As a guarantee of the preservation of Kosovo's and BiH borders, the main US interest in the region is the mutual recognition of Kosovo's independence and the consolidation of the post-Dayton organisation of the Western Balkans. However, at some point, the US, contrary to Germany, became open to considering a land swap

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<sup>8</sup> Online lecture on the topic of Serbian-American relations during the opening of the second part of the Serbian-American Leadership Academy, held on 1<sup>st</sup> July (N1, 2020).



proposal<sup>9</sup> as a solution to Kosovo's problem<sup>10</sup>. But what is the reason behind the increased recent US involvement in this dispute? Initially, it seemed that Trump Administration would continue supporting Euro-Atlantic integration of the WB without any major innovations; the latest American diplomatic initiative however departed from that assumption. By reaching the 4<sup>th</sup> of September deal between Belgrade and Priština, Washington sought to score a number of diplomatic and political points. First, being a successful broker, certainly distinguished Trump from his predecessors (Grgić, 2020). Secondly, one of the promises based on which Trump won in the 2016 elections, was that he would provide the best deals for the US in international relations. Since his success in other parts of the world was not so significant, success in Europe could improve the picture. Furthermore, convincing Serbia to recognize Kosovo in exchange for concessions by Priština would increase US influence in the region. Additionally, reaching a settlement on the Kosovo issue would improve the US's image, in contrast to the EU's inability to solve the same problem (Bechev, 2020). Therefore, achieving a settlement would provide Trump with a diplomatic success in an election year and serve as an example of the Trump administration's commitment to end long-standing disputes across the world. The role of Richard Grenell, a special US envoy for Kosovo-Serbia negotiations, has been crucial in this process. Previously supporting the EU, which was the negotiation process's main mediator, Grenell changed US policy towards the WB region and led a separate track of negotiations for months, undermining EU policy. On the other hand, because of the resentment over EU ineffectiveness and ambiguities over the last few years, leaders from Serbia and Kosovo seem to have chosen the US lead on this issue (Cicarelli, Bergmann, Lamond, 2020), which has particularly been evident during the meeting in the White House in Washington on 4<sup>th</sup> September. Since Grenell realized that, for the time being, a political agreement between Kosovo and Serbia is not achievable, the US started turning to the economic dimension, which, according to Savković, has the potential to transform "the conflict dynamics regarding the Kosovo issue" into "a shared interest"<sup>11</sup>.

Has the Washington agreement changed Serbia's relations with Russia and China? How does the Kosovo question continue to shape Serbia's relations with other powers? As one of the main

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<sup>9</sup> A proposal envisaging exchange of territories between Serbia and Kosovo, according to which Belgrade would get disputed territory in North Kosovo, and recognise Kosovo's independence, whereas Kosovo would get some parts of the Preševo Valley territory (Tcherneva, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Marko Savković, Executive Director at Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Marko Savković

sources of Russian influence in Serbia, will the Kosovo question be decisive for Serbian-Russian relations' quality? Recently, it might seem that the Serbian government has gradually started distancing from Russia. The recent protests held in Serbia during July, as a response to the governments' announced police hour in order to fight the corona virus, have revealed this tendency. Namely, in a significant part of the media (television and newspapers), Russia was directly accused of being behind these protests (Đorđević, 2020). This open distancing from Russia can be interpreted in relation to new developments in the Belgrade-Priština dialogue. Even though Russia is a necessity for Serbia to get a beneficial outcome regarding the Kosovo issue, Serbia's and Russia's interests on the Kosovo issue are actually different. That started to be evident from the end of 2018, with the emergence of the above-mentioned proposal of a land swap between Kosovo and Serbia, supported by the US and Trump. Namely, for Russia, the unresolved Kosovo dispute is actually an advantage since the Kosovo question is one of the rare remaining sources of its influence in the Balkans and Serbia as the crucial country in the Western Balkans. Russia's dissatisfaction with the land swap proposal, which would actually exclude it and decrease its importance for further negotiations, was evident during Vučić's visit to Putin in October 2018, when he went to Moscow to get Putin's support for the land swap proposal. However, he was not received as warmly as expected. This dependency on Putin regarding the Kosovo issue is not convenient for Vučić. Vučić is well aware that Putin can use the veto for any solution he negotiates that does not appeal to Putin and, in that way, be politically destroyed. In domestic politics, having in mind that Vučić's electorate is pro-Russian to a great extent, that kind of action would represent Putin as "a bigger Serb than Vučić himself"<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, since resolution of the Kosovo issue would decrease Russia's main leverage in relations with Serbia, Russia has not much of an incentive to help solve the problem. The Kosovo issue's resolution would also potentially lead Serbia to introduce sanctions to Russia, cut its free trade deal and introduce visas for Russian citizens. The conflict's final resolution would make Russia's UN veto power redundant for Serbia and in that way disregard Russia's importance in the security architecture of the region. However, Russia's will to disrupt reaching the Kosovo deal, does not necessarily mean that it would try to spoil the deal once it is concluded. Since the WB region is

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Vuk Vuksanović, an associate at LSE IDEAS and Researcher at Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCBP)

not among Russia's priorities, Kremlin eagerly takes advantage of local crises, but does not have the goal and resources to create a major change in the region (Samorukov, 2019, p. 69-70).

In addition, the growing significance of the US at the expense of Russia for Serbian leadership can be noticed. On 4<sup>th</sup> September in Washington, Kosovo's and Serbia's representatives signed two separate agreements on economic relations with the US. The White House called them "historic agreements" (Marković Khaze, Xhaferi, 2020). These economic agreements reveal several interesting occurrences. At first, according to ex-ambassador of Serbia to Russia, Jelica Kurjak, this agreement showed the extent in which Serbia's foreign policy has been personalized by Aleksandar Vučić at the expense of state institutions. According to her, the Serbian delegation in Washington did not know the document's content at all since it was not the subject of discussion in any responsible Serbia's state organ (Danas, 2020). Furthermore, Serbia's approval to diversify its energy resources by signing the deal means another pull away from Russia (KoSSev, 2020). This action did not leave Russia indifferent. After the signing of the economic agreement between Belgrade and Priština, Russian national Kommersant Daily reported that this move will have severe geopolitical consequences and weaken Serbia's dependence on Russian gas (N1, 2020). Grenell also interpreted the economic agreement as Donald Trump's diplomatic victory, arguing that the main result of this agreement is not the improved relations between Serbia and the US, but distancing Serbia from Russia and China, adding that this agreement will move the region closer to the West, while simultaneously pulling it away from Russia and China (KoSSev, 2020). A social media post by Russia's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Maria Zaharova, made clear Moscow's annoyance with the agreement. By posting Vučić's photo sitting in front of Donald Trump, alongside the photo of Sharon Stone from the movie Basic Instincts scene, she mocked Vučić, posting a comment on Facebook that "Vučić was invited to Washington just to be interrogated". Even though Zaharova later apologized and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoke with Vučić, emphasizing "sincerely close ties" between Russia and Serbia, the reaction of Vučić and other Serbian officials was furious, blaming not just Zaharova, but Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, as well (Daily Sabah, 2020). However, the crucial message of the telephone conversation between Vučić and Putin, in which Putin apologized for Zaharova's comment, was that Putin emphasized that even though Russia supports any resolution which is acceptable to Serbia, the new resolution of the conflict would have to be verified by the UN Security Council. A message to Vučić, but primarily addressed to

the West, made it clear that Russia still has influence in the Balkans and that “it will not give up for free”<sup>13</sup>. Although relations between Belgrade and Moscow are still officially cordial and deep, Russian media have also started questioning Vučić’s sincerity, sometimes describing him as “a hypocrite who is essentially a Western lackey”, pushing his country, against the will of Serbian citizens closer to the EU and NATO (Anastasijević, 2017).

In the Washington Agreement, there is a part that could affect Serbian-Chinese relations, as well. A part of economic agreements committed Serbia and Kosovo to exclude “untrusted vendors” from their 5G networks, which is understood as Trump’s action against China and its telecommunication giant Huawei (Ushkovska, 2020). However, the Agreement still has not affected the position of Chinese Huawei in Serbia, since the Centre for Digital Innovation and Development was opened in Belgrade in September this year, shortly after the Washington Agreement was signed (N1, 2020).

The Washington Agreement shows that Serbia with Vučić as President was willing to follow Donald Trump and his policy towards the WB region. According to Vuksanović, Vučić pinned all his hopes in Donald Trump regarding the Kosovo’s dispute outcome, since he believed that he had the best chances to achieve a positive outcome which he could “sell” to the public in Serbia. Furthermore, Vučić was concerned that if Biden comes to power, he would closely cooperate with Germany, pushing Belgrade to recognize Kosovo. Still, in the case of a Biden’ victory, Vuksanović argued that Vučić would play on the card of Israel (in the signed Agreement, it is envisaged that Serbia will move its Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem) and the card of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)<sup>14</sup>. According to Vuksanović, Vučić perceives Israel and Israel’s lobby organizations as a shortcut toward the White House. However, there are deeper reasons for Serbia’s attempt to develop closer relations with the US. Namely, Serbia’s foreign policy elites have always been aware that despite the negative burden from the past, Serbia will not be able to do anything without US support and that the lack of US support impedes Serbia’s regional and international perspective. Because of that, Serbia’s political elites have been trying to establish closer relations with the US for a long period of time, but without any success. Hence, signing the Washington deal does not reveal only the importance of Donald Trump for the Kosovo issue from Vučić’s perspective, but also Vučić’s will to finally bring

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Vuk Vuksanović

<sup>14</sup> America’s pro-Israel lobby (AIPAC, 2020)

Serbia closer to the US. In televised interviews after the Washington deal, Vučić emphasized the significance of his success in opening the door of the White House for Serbia after thirty years. In addition, another development made Vučić ask for US support. Namely, Vučić is “torn apart” between Russia, on which he depends because of Russia’s veto in the UN Security Council, and the EU which, even though does not have anymore the same political influence, is necessary for Vučić as a means of legitimization of his rule. However, because of the land swap proposal, relations with the EU, and Germany especially, started to deteriorate. The land swap proposal, as well as Vučić’s will to follow Donald Trump, who is not so popular in Europe, made Germany “angry” with him. Hence, in the atmosphere of reduced support from Germany, Vučić needs another political mentor from the West. As the two strongest countries in Europe, the UK and France could serve as another supporter and mentor. However, London after Brexit, can hardly devote itself seriously to the Balkans and Serbia and does not have a real interest to do so. At the same time, it is questionable whether Paris has enough strength to replace Berlin. Thus, the US comes as the best choice and relations with the US will remain crucial for Serbia.<sup>15</sup>

Still, after Biden’s victory in the US elections held on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020, the question is how US-Serbian relations will develop and whether the US will remain such an important partner to Serbia. Under Biden’s administration, it is questionable whether the Balkan region will stay high on the US list of priorities. In Savković’s opinion, the US will cooperate with the EU, leaving the place of the chief mediator in the political part of the dialogue to the EU again, especially since the EU has already appointed its representative for the Western Balkans - Miroslav Lajčak<sup>16</sup>. Still, there are opinions that despite Biden’s victory, Serbian-US relations are not going to change significantly, for several reasons. First, Vučić established contact with Biden and his administration several years ago. In addition, according to Novaković, it is hard to believe that Biden’s administration is going to renounce what has already been achieved by Trump’s administration. Novaković agrees that Biden is most likely going to strengthen cooperation with the EU on the Kosovo issue - the question is to what extent? While it is not questionable whether the US perceives Kosovo as independent, since Biden’s attitude towards Kosovo’s independence is well-known (recently, he wrote an article in which he explicitly supports Kosovo’s independence), the question is whether the new US administration will perceive the land swap

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Vuk Vuksanović

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Marko Savković

proposal as a good solution<sup>17</sup>. Hence, if Biden strengthens US cooperation with Germany and exerts more pressure on Serbia in order to achieve recognition of Kosovo's independence, as mentioned by Vuksanović<sup>18</sup>, it is questionable whether in that situation Vučić will again turn more to Serbia's non-Western "friends"- Russia and China. It remains to be seen.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Igor Novaković, the Research Director of the International and Security Affairs Centre – ISAC Fund

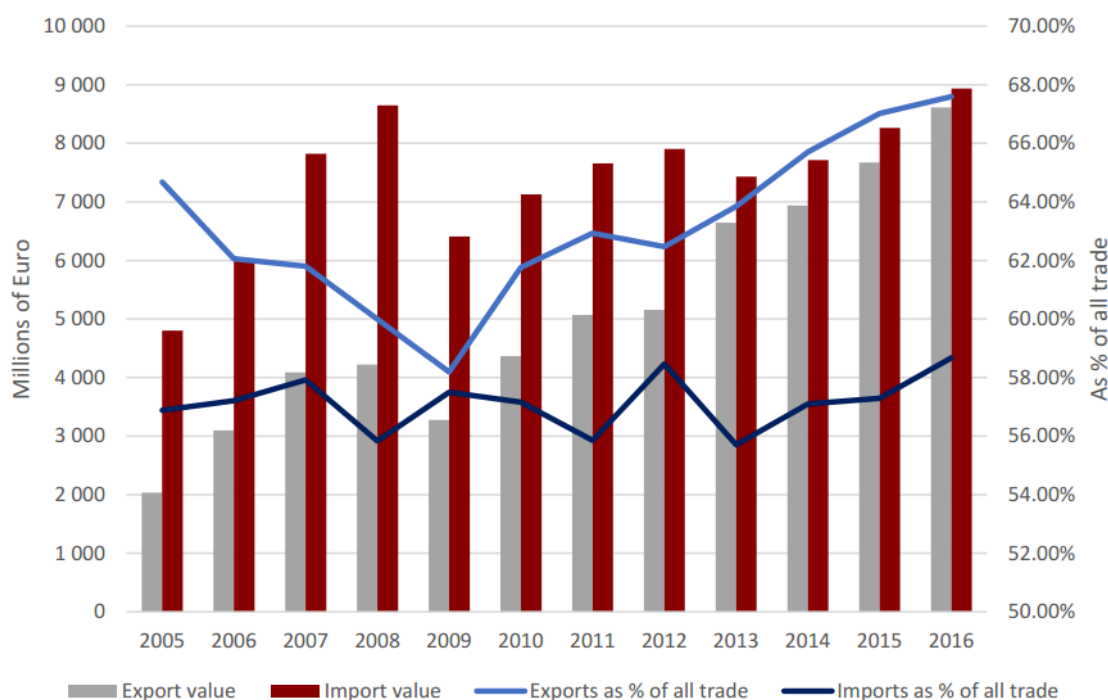
<sup>18</sup> Interview with Vuk Vuksanović

### ***6.3. EU integration as the main foreign policy goal. Are China and Russia “spoilers” to Serbia’s EU integration?***

There are many reasons why the EU, the US, Russia and China have been important to Serbia - political reasons (such as preserving Serbia’s territorial integrity), and other factors such as the economy and gains in domestic politics. According to Teokarević, Serbia’s desire to be the “liaison” between the East and the West, developing close relations with Russia and China on the one hand and having the goal of EU membership on the other, can be overambitious and can put EU integration into question. Even though all Serbian governments, starting from 2009 when the policy of four pillars was introduced by Tadić, have insisted that EU membership is not incompatible with having good relations with Russia and China, still it is highly questionable whether balancing between them would not endanger Serbia’s EU integration (Teokarević, 2016, p. 57-58).

Following the parliamentary elections in May 2008, Boris Tadić succeeded in forming a pro-European government under the DS leadership. Even though he was in a difficult situation since the most important EU member states supported Kosovo’s independence only several days after he won the presidential elections in February 2008, he succeeded in forming a pro-European government and in September 2008 got the majority in Parliament necessary for the ratification of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU - which was previously signed 28<sup>th</sup> April 2008 in Brussels (Reljić, 2009, p. 18-19). The EU has been very important to Serbia. Not only it helps the democratic transition of the country by insisting on implementing necessary reforms, but it is also Serbia’s most significant trading and investment partner (Ministartstvo spoljnih poslova Republike Srbije, 2012). Today, with a GDP per capita of 7,409 (expressed in current USD), Serbia is poorer than the poorest EU countries such as Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia. Trade relations with the EU improved due to the ongoing negotiation process, with trade volumes increasing significantly since the Stabilization and Association Agreement entered into force in 2013. Geographical proximity is also of great importance for such relations in the field of economy. Over the past 12 years, the vast majority of Serbia’s trade has been with the EU, with 60% of its exports going to the EU, while imports from the EU range between 55-59% (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 25).

**Picture 2. Serbian-EU Trade, by value and as % of all trade**



Source: Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 26

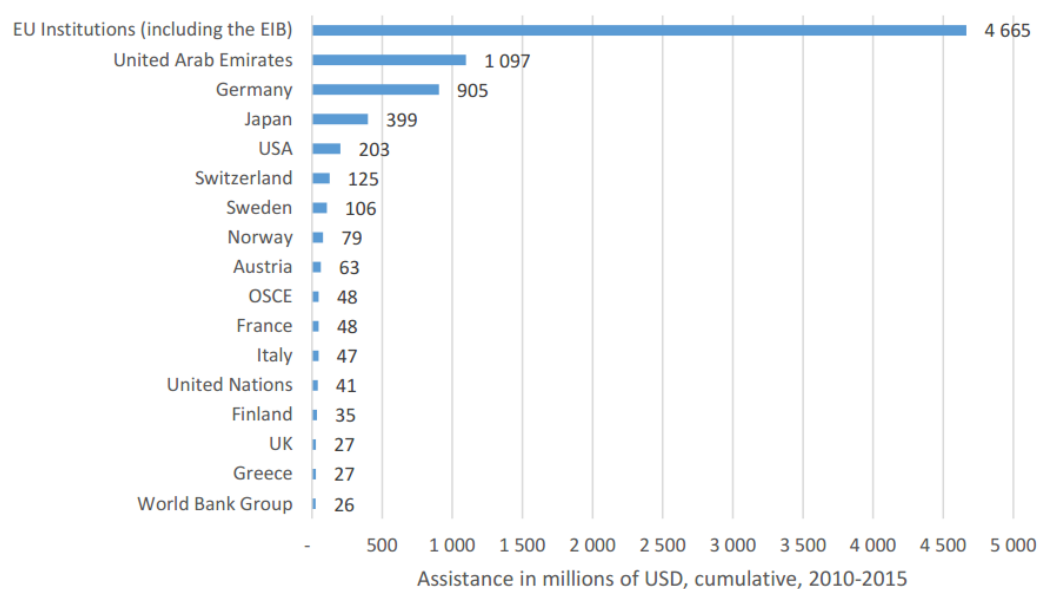
Additionally, the EU is the largest investor in the Serbian economy, with approximately 85% of all FDI in the first half of 2017. As is the case with trade, investments significantly increased due to the accession negotiations. EU firms argue that Serbia's economies of scale, low cost and skilled workforce, as well as geographic proximity are among the most important reasons for investments in Serbia, especially for the manufacturing sector (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 32).

The EU is officially the largest supplier of developmental aid to Serbia. EU's foreign aid involvement with Serbia had started with the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization (CARDS) programme from 2000-2006, the period during which the EU forwarded EUR 1.15 billion for technical assistance in the local and municipal development, economic development, as well as in justice and integrated border management. In accordance with the progress in the accession negotiations, EU funding moved from technical assistance programmes towards the objective of harmonization with the EU. Hence, the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance IPA and IPA II were designed to spread much more assistance over a larger range of activities. Still, it is important to mention the principle of



conditionality, referring to certain conditions Serbia is expected to fulfill in order to receive funds. For example, IPA's priorities were democratisation and civil society programs. After 2008, those priorities shifted to minority issues and human rights (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 19-20). However, this conditionality and other EU requirements increased the popularity of other powers such as China, which does not put transparency and complicated procedures in the first place, while doing business and providing grants to Serbia. As it is shown in the chart, in the period from 2010-2015, the EU undoubtedly was the largest donor to Serbia, with the US in the 5th place, while China and Russia were not even among the first 17 donors, even though Serbian public does not perceive foreign assistance in the same way. A public opinion poll conducted by Serbia's Ministry of European Integration in 2018 showed that 21% of the surveyed perceive Russia as a top source of financial assistance, 24% perceive the EU as the most significant source, while 17% answered that China is the main source of financial assistance to Serbia (Bechev, 2019, p. 17).

**Picture 3. Top Cumulative Donors of Official Development Aid to Serbia 2010-2015**



Source: Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 19

As a candidate country, Serbia has developed strong ties with the EU, which became one of Serbia's most important partners. However, the internal and external challenges the EU has been facing during recent years, have put the issue of enlargement aside. First of all, the question which has been directly affecting the pace of the accession is the phenomenon called

“enlargement fatigue”. Following the 2004 enlargement in which twelve new countries entered the EU, the 2008 enlargement when Bulgaria and Romania joined, and the last one in 2013 when Croatia became an EU member, the member states and their public became tired of the enlargement process. Particularly, Bulgaria’s and Romania’s access raised questions regarding the credibility of the whole process (Fraenkel, 2016, p. 1). Additionally, Jean-Claude Juncker, EC President at that time, declared in 2014 that further enlargements are not going to happen in the next five years.

Furthermore, the 2008 global financial crisis forced the EU to focus on its internal problems. In addition to the enlargement fatigue, a “financial fatigue” emerged among the public of many EU countries because of resentment over the bailing out of countries like Greece. One of the biggest challenges for the EU leaders was to justify the entrance of “another poor Balkan country”, which could be an additional financial burden. According to the Eurobarometer study from 2013, more than 60 % of the EU member states’ population were opposed to further enlargement (Fraenkel, 2016, p. 1). Additionally, the internal rebalancing and strengthening issue, prior to future enlargement, became present in the EU. The issue of widening and deepening, as well as the EU’s absorption capacity, has been affecting the debate about future enlargement (O’Brennan, 2014, p. 224). The migration crisis of 2015, which additionally challenged the EU, reduced EU’s attention for further enlargement.

Still, recognizing the danger of halting the EU enlargement process towards the WB, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, proposed in 2014 an initiative called the “Berlin Process” aiming at renewing the EU’s interest in the region. The goal of this initiative has been strengthening regional cooperation in the WB and attaching the region closer to the EU. This initiative, according to Nechev et al. succeeded in keeping the EU’s interest in the region. With the new EC Strategy for the WB from 2018, as well as with the Summit in Sofia, which occurred the same year, it seemed that the EU enlargement process of the WB had gained momentum again (Nechev, Minić, Ćerimagić, Seferaj, 2018, p. 1). However, instead of enhancing the enlargement process, 2018 highlighted deep divisions among EU member states and pointed out a significant trend in the EU, called nationalization of the enlargement process (Juzova, 2019, p. 4). The enlargement policy became increasingly dominated by member states’ national agendas, raising the question of the credibility of the EU commitment towards candidate states and the EU’s

transformative power (Hillion, 2010, p. 6). In addition, EU member states have recently increased their role at the expense of the EC (Juzova, 2019, p. 4). France's decision, in October 2019, not to consent to the opening of the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania has raised many questions regarding the region's membership perspective and the enlargement methodology. The member states' concerns have been incorporated in the New Enlargement Methodology, presented in February 2020 by EU Enlargement Commissioner, Oliver Varhelyi. The new methodology has taken into consideration some suggestions by member states, especially France, which was the most vocal opponent to starting the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania last October. Still, while many EU officials and member states have welcomed the new approach, according to some, changes were merely cosmetic ones, created only to persuade the French President to give the green light for the opening of negotiations. However, according to some authors, the problem with the EU enlargement towards the region does not lie in the methodology of negotiations but more in the approach of EU institutions and member states (Cipa, 2020). The recent Bulgarian veto on North Macedonia's enlargement process additionally raises the question of the EU's credibility and effectiveness. On the other hand, the importance of full membership for the whole WB region has been emphasized by the EU as something which does not have an alternative. In the introduction of the new methodology, the integration of the WB region into the EU has been recognized as "a geostrategic investment in a stable Europe". In the same methodology, the EU also emphasizes that it is crucial to get rid "of the malign influence of third countries". Even though it did not specify which countries that refers to, having in mind the strong presence of Russia and China, it can be easily assumed which countries are considered to have a detrimental influence on the region (Mitrović, 2020).

As Vuksanović (2018) and Kovačević (2018) underlined, the EU's reluctance and the prolonged enlargement process, combined with other internal and external challenges the EU was or is still facing, such as the global economic crisis, migration crisis, Brexit, as well as the lack of a determined approach of the EU to the region, have created "a power vacuum" which left room for the manoeuvre of other, non-Western actors, such as Russia and China and more recently Turkey. As the EU has seen its credibility undermined, the importance of other powers has risen. According to Vuksanović, the power vacuum which has been existing since 2008 when the US and the EU shifted their focus away from the WB region - because of the above-mentioned

reasons such as the Euro crisis, the migration crisis, and Brexit - has enabled Serbia to lead a balancing act in its foreign policy. Since 2008, Serbia has been using strategies of hedging and diversification among partnerships (not just Russia and China, but Turkey and the UAE as well) in order to set Western and non-Western powers against each other to extract economic and political benefits as much as possible (Vuksanović, 2018). In addition, internal structural weaknesses became more evident after the 2009 global economic crisis. Currently, the whole region is experiencing weak economic performance, very high levels of unemployment and dangerous sovereign debts. Furthermore, democratic backsliding and the lack of the rule of law in the whole WB region, as well as weak and unstable institutions, allowed actors such as China and Russia to exploit the situation and exert their influence (Zeneli, 2017).

Since the presence of China and Russia, as big non-Western powers, has been skilfully explored by domestic elites in Serbia, the question which was interesting to pose to experts and representatives of political parties was whether they think that close relations with China and Russia represent a threat to Serbia's EU integration. Answers to this question vary to a great extent. Namely, 6 respondents claim that close relations with these two powers affect Serbia's EU perspective significantly, which in the first place represents a problem in a political sense, in the context of the harmonization with the EU's CFSP (chapter 31), but also affecting issues from other chapters. For example, Chinese investments and infrastructure projects implemented using loans from China are in deep contradiction with EU environmental laws. One respondent answered that those relations are highly problematic for Serbia since they concern EU officials and can result either in EU distancing from Serbia or, on the other hand, in growing EU efforts seeking to prevent further deepening of Serbia's relations with Russia and China. In addition, one respondent thinks that close relations with Russia and China do affect Serbia's EU perspective - many times Serbia voted in the UN differently from EU member states and EU candidates on various issues, producing certain unpleasant situations – however, EU member states are well aware of Serbia's connections with these two powers. One respondent also answered that even though both of those powers are not opposed to Serbia's EU membership, relations with Russia and China affect Serbia's EU integration, at least in the economic sphere since these close relations are based on the norms which are not compatible with the EU ones. It is interesting that domestic politics are present in this issue as well, since two experts answered that Russia and China affect Serbia's EU path, but not as close as internal problems. The section

in which the impact of domestic politics on Serbia's foreign policy is explained, shows how much indeed domestic issues represent a problem for Serbia's EU integration. According to another respondent, close relations with Russia and China do not necessarily negatively affect Serbia's EU perspective. Pro-Russian and pro-Chinese propaganda spurred by the regime via mainstream media represents a more significant problem, leading to the rise of euroscepticism and, at the same time, favouritism toward China and Russia. The same respondent added that the EU's internal economic-political problems also affect Serbia's EU perspective, as well as the rise of autocracy in EU member states. Still, the respondent argues that the support for EU integration by Serbian citizens has been reduced lately due to the EU's non-reaction on the breaches of democracy and human rights, as well as because of EU support to the autocratic regime in Serbia. In addition, one surveyed answered that close relations with Russia and China have more and more impact upon Serbia's EU integration and are more and more dependent on the EU's relations with Russia and China. Likewise, one respondent thinks that close relations with Russia and China significantly affect Serbia's EU integration, or better to say, the quality of EU's relations with these two powers is significant for Serbia's EU perspective. On the other hand, one expert answered that good relations with Russia and China can only benefit Serbia and strengthen its position. Another respondent argues that this is the question which shows the EU's hypocrisy the most, adding that while the EU works on developing cooperation in the fields of economy and energy with Russia and China, at the same time, it tries to dissuade other countries from cooperating with them, by talking about the "danger" of the cooperation with Russia and China. In addition, four of the surveyed responded that good relations with China and Russia currently do not "significantly" affect Serbia's EU integration. One of them added that they do not influence Serbia's EU perspective "to a great extent", but can become relevant in further perspective, while another answered, similarly to some other experts from the survey, that domestic politics and EU policy are affecting Serbia's EU integration process, not close relations with Russia and China.

It is interesting to see how representatives of the ruling parties perceive the impact of Serbia's close relations with Russia and China. While SPS representative answered that those relations significantly affect Serbia's EU perspective, the SNS representative responded that Serbia's EU perspective is affected to "a limited extent".

Additionally, it was interesting to see how experts from research organizations and the Faculty of Political Science in Belgrade perceive what Serbia gets and what Serbia loses by having close relations with the EU, the US, China and Russia. A significant number, 6 of them, answered that the EU is Serbia's most important economic partner and an important source of financial assistance. One of them added that besides the economy, the EU is Serbia's most important political partner, while according to one respondent, relations with the EU are important because of Serbia's EU perspective. Additionally, in one respondent's opinion, close relations with the EU should provide orderliness of Serbia's state apparatus as well as protection of basic citizens' rights and freedom. Furthermore, according to one respondent, Serbia gets the most by having close cooperation with the EU. Even though each of the four actors (the EU, the US, Russia and China) can contribute to Serbia in many fields, neither Russia, China, nor the US can contribute to Serbia's development, as can the EU. Another one answered that close relations with the EU represent the reality, necessity and priority of Serbia. In addition, as expressed by one of the surveyed, by having good relations with the EU, the only one who is losing out is Serbia's political elite, since the EU reform process should hamper the current way of leading the country in which partocracy and clientelism are present to a great extent. Still, 2 respondents argued that if EU accession was "certain", it could be said that balancing with other powers would be bad for Serbia. However, since the prospect of EU accession is distant, it is questionable whether Serbia actually loses anything by having close relations with Russia and China. Similarly, another respondent answered in the survey that a clear prospect of EU membership would mean more financial assistance for all the segments of its society. However, since this is not the case, the current balancing act with a half-open perspective for joining the EU is the measure of Serbia's relations with these powers. As the biggest power and the most significant security partner in the region, the US is perceived as important in the first place because of Serbia's relations with the neighbouring countries. In addition, the political aspects of EU integration make the US an important partner. According to one respondent, good relations with the US will redefine Serbia's relations with Russia and China to a great extent. As expressed by another respondent, the question of relations with the US is quite complicated. The respondent argues that depending on who "sits" in Washington and what the current issue is, determines these relations significantly, adding that close relations with the US can at the same time contribute to and impede Serbia's EU integration, strengthen Serbia's position on the Kosovo issue but drag Serbia

into other global conflicts, as well. In addition, one expert answered that American support is something that Serbia has tried to revive since there are almost no questions regarding foreign affairs that can be solved without US “interference/support/opposition”. Another respondent added that close relations with the US are important for Serbia because they prevent Serbia from suffering another military attack. The US is also seen as important because of its support for reaching a solution to the Kosovo’s issue. Russia and China are perceived to be important in the first place because of the diplomatic support they provide. Russia is reported to be important also because of energy, weaponry, and economy (important trade partner). Besides the support for Serbia over the Kosovo issue, China is perceived to be significant because of investments. According to one respondent it is the alternative source of “easy money”. In addition, one respondent answered that China’s help was important because of the prompt action during the corona crisis. Interestingly, 3 respondents state that close relations with Russia and China are crucial for Serbia’s domestic politics, providing ruling elites with votes from the anti-Western part of the Serbian voting body. Still, according to one expert, it is hard for Serbia, as a small state, to balance and have bilateral relations with all of these actors in a way in which it would only have benefits. According to that expert, a compromise - in which Serbia would have to renounce a part of its national interests – is necessary. One respondent is of the opinion that, in reality, by having close relations with Russia and China, Serbia gets little benefits, regardless of the strong media propaganda in which these two countries are represented as extremely positive for Serbia. On the other hand, it can lose much, in the first place regarding Serbia’s EU integration, since Russia and lately China represent a significant political problem. From one respondent’s point of view, Serbia can get the support for democratization by having close relations with the EU and the US, while on the other, it loses the same thing if it cooperates closely with Russia and China. Hence, while some experts believe that having close relations simultaneously with all four powers is not feasible, 3 respondents claim that Serbia only benefits and does not lose anything by having good relations with all of these powers. From their point of view, it is wise for Serbia, as a subject in international relations, to develop good relations with all partners. Still, one of them notes that in the absence of a clear strategy in Serbia’s foreign policy (which would be the crown strategy from which all other important strategies such as the strategy of national security will come out), transparency and clear priorities, Serbia’s foreign policy is wrongly led and defined by the national security strategy, in which generals, military

strategists and state officials from Serbia's Ministry of Defence and Military, have the main word. According to the respondent, the stance of great powers toward the Kosovo issue also defines Serbia's foreign policy.

It is interesting to see how answers from the two biggest parliamentary parties differ. While the SPS representative answered that Serbia "gets little" and is usually losing by having close relations with these powers, the SNS representative answered that Serbia can just benefit from having good relations with all of them.

The results of the survey show that the majority of the respondents from Serbia's civil society perceive the EU as an important economic and political partner, significant for democratization of the society. The US is perceived as important because of its power, thanks to which it can affect Serbia's position regarding many questions - EU integration, the Kosovo question, relations with neighbouring countries, relations with Russia and China. Furthermore, it serves as a protection from another military attack and supports Serbia's democratization. Russia and China are seen as important, firstly because of their diplomatic support on the Kosovo issue. Russia has a significant place in Serbia's economy and energy sector, while China is seen as an important source of investment. However, the negative side of close relations with Russia and China is putting Serbia's EU perspective at risk. As we have seen, a significant part of experts perceives close relations with China and Russia as a threat to Serbia's EU integration for many reasons (lack of harmonization with EU rules in various fields, encouraging euroscepticism and favouritism of China and Russia in Serbia's mainstream media, making EU officials concerned about Serbia's true commitment to EU integration). In the next part, we will see more precisely how close relations with Russia and China affect Serbia's EU integration.

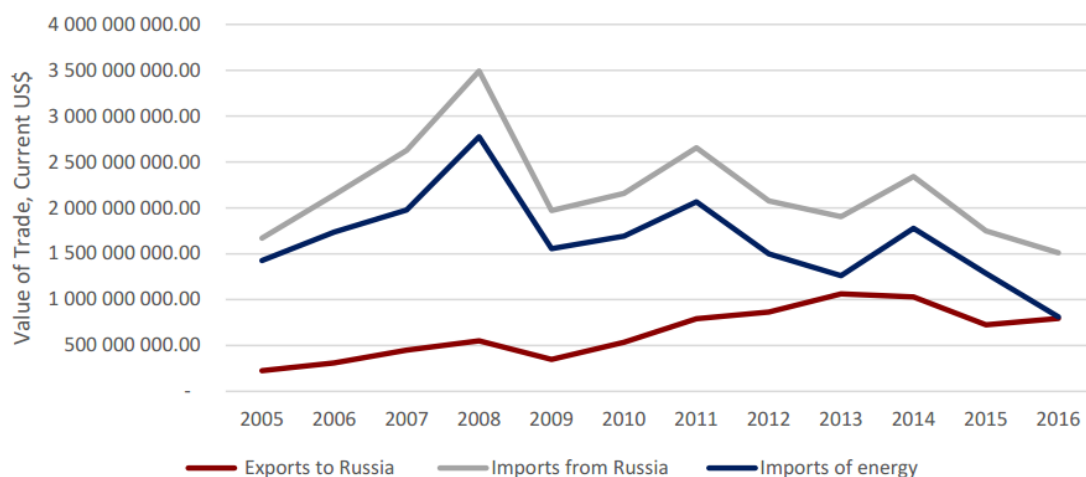
From Brussels' perspective, at least until recently, the most controversial external actor in the Balkans, particularly in Serbia, has been Russia. It has been labelled the most influential external actor, which causes many problems in the region. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has condemned Russia because of its interference and its "divide and rule" strategy used in order to gain influence over eurosceptic parts of WB societies. Additionally, in 2017, Federica Mogherini, EU High Representative at that time, expressed her belief that Moscow's goal is to loosen the connection of the WB region with the EU, as well as to show itself as an alternative to EU integration, specifically in the case of Serbia where Russia's influence has been the strongest,



going even to the extent in which Russia is referred to as a “big brother” (Ambrosetti, 2020). Many experts so far have noted that without the EU’s clear political strategy to the region, the only sides that will benefit are Russia and China (Dempsey, 2019).

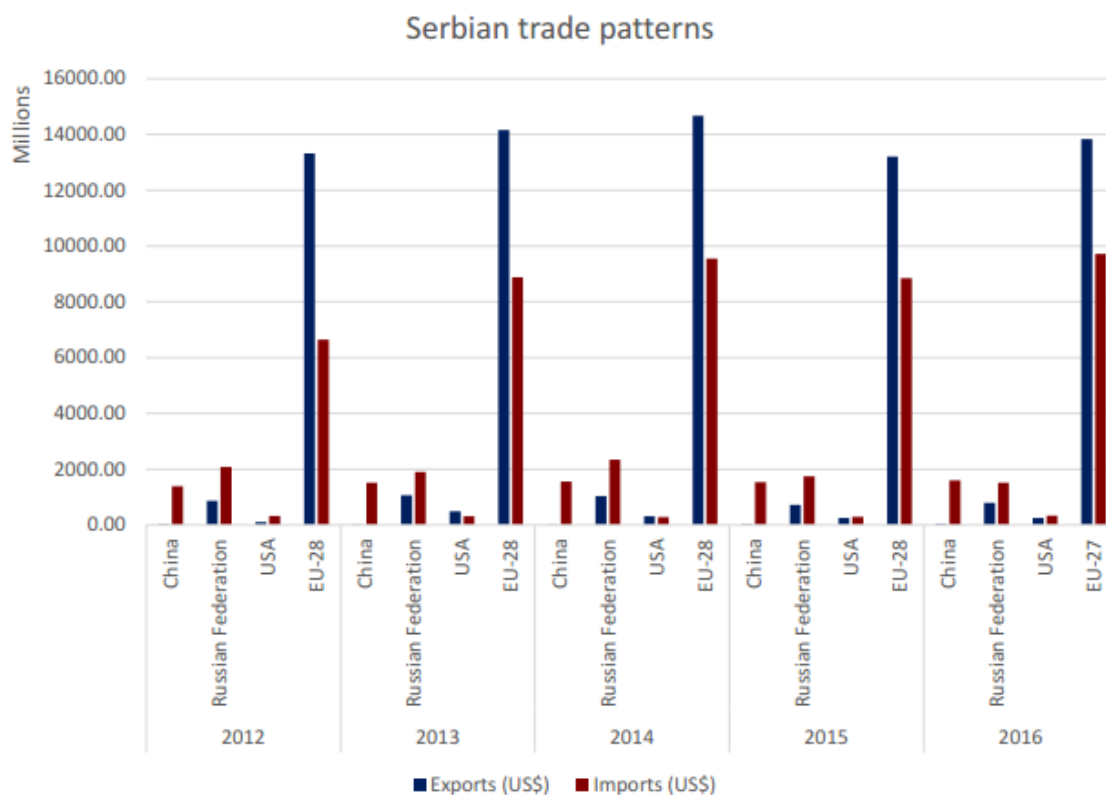
Besides Kosovo, Serbia continues keeping Russia close to itself because of the energy dependency but also because of its domestic politics, or better to say - the popularity of Russia in Serbia’s electorate. Russia’s economic presence in the Balkans and in Serbia is limited because of the current stagnation of its economy. In the second quarter of 2019, Russia had a growth rate of 0.9% (Vuksanović, 2019). Russia is not a significant market for Serbian exports or an FDI purveyor, accounting only 4.6 % of FDI in Serbia in 2015 and 3.9 % in 2016 (Bechev, 2019, p. 17-18); compared to the EU, whose investments in the period from 2010-2018 represented around 75% of the total (Avakumović, 2019). Nevertheless, Russia still enjoys considerable leverage in Serbia. One of the reasons for its leverage in the economic sphere is Russia’s strategy of investing in politically sensitive areas. While Russian companies in Central and Eastern Europe tend to concentrate in a few strategically important areas, such as energy and fuel processing, the EU member states’ investments are more diversified, covering different manufacturing sectors (Bechev, 2019, p. 18). On the other hand, because of the geography, transportation costs, the small size of the Russian economy, and the lack of Russia’s import diversification, even though being Serbia’s second-largest trading partner overall (second in imports by value, whereas it is ranked on the 3<sup>rd</sup> place in exports) Russia comprises only a small part of all Serbia’s trade (6.76 % in 2016). Still, the upward trend in Serbia’s exports to Russia has been evident since 2005 (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 28).

**Picture 4. Serbian Trade with Russia, 2005-2016**



Source: Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 28

**Picture 5. Value of Serbian Trade with China, Russia, the US and the EU, 2012-2016**



Source: Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 25

A step further, which caused concern in Brussels, was the signing of a free trade agreement with the Euroasian Economic Union in Moscow on October 25th 2019, which envisages free flow of goods and duty free between Serbia and other members of this organization. The Eurasian Economic Union consists of five countries - Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan - and since Russia is its most important actor, these concerns can be easily understood. This trade union has often been interpreted as “Putin’s Union”, serving as a means for expanding Russia’s influence over its immediate spheres of interest. Having in mind that, as an EU candidate country, Serbia has to harmonize its foreign policy with the EU’s foreign policy, at the EU Foreign Ministers Summit held in August 2019, European officials criticized Serbia, arguing that the signing of the trade agreement will move Serbia away from EU membership (Vladisavljev, 2019). According to some authors, Serbia has no economic gains from this deal, since the agreement replaces bilateral agreements that Serbia already had with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, expanding to just two new markets - Armenia and Kyrgyzstan - neither of which are specifically attractive. Hence, any significant increase in trade volume with these markets could hardly follow (Vuksanović, 2019). Maybe a more important aspect of the agreement is the message it sends. Signing this agreement and intensifying relations with the East can mean one thing: “the EU is not the only choice”. Maybe there is an alternative to EU membership. Or maybe it should serve as a reminder to the EU, not to take Serbia and the region for granted, but to act more decisively. According to Vuksanović, the deal is not about economics, but it represents “the triumph of foreign policy over economics”. Additionally, it is just a small piece of the wider pattern in which the Serbian government pits Russia against the West in order to pick the better offer. Still, it is hard to believe that Serbia will join the EAEU since that kind of action would endanger its European economic and political partnerships, which are more important. Those calculations based on interests will certainly prevent Serbia in the future from aligning itself completely with Russia and the EAEU (Vuksanović, 2019).

As we can see, compared to the EU, Russia’s influence in the economic sphere in Serbia is limited. Russia lags behind the EU in almost every sector of economic cooperation with Serbia - foreign trade, FDI, financial assistance, money transfers of labour migrants. The only sector of the economy where Russia is dominant compared to the EU is the energy sector. In contrast to many post-socialist European countries, Russia’s dominant position in Serbia’s energy sector does not date back to the Soviet era. It is based on two relatively recent agreements, with a strong

geopolitical background. The first deal was signed in January 2008, when Belgrade agreed to give over a 51% stake in the Serbian state oil and gas giant, NIS, to Russia's Gazpromneft in exchange for EUR 400 million in cash, as well as 550 million in future investment. The date of signing the deal reveals the motives behind it. Namely, the deal was signed on the eve of the second round of the presidential elections in Serbia, with the aim to help Boris Tadić to oppose accusations of being "too Western-oriented" and to help him defeat the other candidate, Tomislav Nikolić. This deal also strengthened Serbia-Russia cooperation on the Kosovo issue. The acquisition of NIS – later, the share of Gazpromneft increased to 56% - provided Russia with a dominant position in the energy sector since the company holds a monopoly on the import and distribution of oil and gas in Serbia. Another important project in this field was constructing a gas pipeline that was envisaged to bypass Ukraine and provide Russian gas to Europe by passing through the Black Sea and the Balkans. The project experienced difficulties in getting the approval of potential transit states, as well as conforming to EU energy regulations (Samorukov, 2020, p. 9-11). Because of those problems, the South Stream project failed and Russia entered into a new project called the Turkish Stream, with Turkey, Bulgaria and Serbia as partners. Even though at the end of 2019, there was news that the Serbian part of the Turkish Stream project had been completed, they turned out to be unreliable since works are still in progress, and no one actually knows when it will be finished (Madžoski, 2020). In Serbia, the project was also criticized because of its incompatibility with EU standards and the increase of Russia's dominance over the gas market. Today, almost half of Serbia's oil imports come from Russia, and it is the only foreign supplier of gas to Serbia (Samorukov, 2020, p. 9-11).

The emergence of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 directly exposed Serbia's foreign policy and put its EU integration into question. This time, Serbia's position was in direct contradiction with the EU's CFSP. The "tight rope walk" of Serbia between Russia and the EU, which has already been present in Serbia's foreign policy, was exacerbated by the emergence of the Ukraine crisis (Mirescu, 2014). This crisis actually put Serbia's choices on the test. In addition, the Kosovo question became again central to any actions taken by Serbian leadership. Namely, on the one hand, Serbia declared its goal towards EU membership which means harmonizing its foreign policy with the EU's CFSP. Since the EU introduced sanctions to Russia, it is expected from Serbia as a candidate state to do the same, showing its commitment to EU integration. On the other hand, close ties with Russia, especially important because of the Kosovo issue, prevent

Serbia from introducing sanctions. While some expected that the Ukrainian crisis will force Serbia to finally unequivocally pick one side, Serbia's balancing act continued to shape the (non)direction of its foreign policy. The Kosovo question puts Serbia in a difficult position regarding the Ukrainian crisis in one more aspect. Driven by its own experience of potentially losing part of its territory, Serbia, in principle, had an interest in supporting Ukraine and opposing Russia's annexation of Crimea; that however, would have damaged its relations with Russia, important for the Kosovo issue. Since all sides, Russia and the West, argue that Kosovo and Crimea are not the same cases, for Serbia it is more convenient to stand along with Russia's version by which Kosovo is part of the Serbian territory, opposed to the Western stance in which the West does not accept Crimea's annexation, but accepts Kosovo's independence (Janjić, 2014). Hence, Serbia's answer to the Ukrainian crisis has been to declare that in principle, it supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine (The government of the Republic of Serbia, 2014), refusing however to introduce sanctions to Russia over Crimea. In addition, Serbia was the only Balkan country that supported Russia over a UN draft resolution put by Ukraine, which condemned the human rights situation in Crimea, describing Russia as an "occupying power" (Živanović, 2018). This neutral stance on the Ukrainian crisis is particularly problematic when perceived from Chapter 31, which refers to the harmonization of Serbia's foreign and security policy with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. The problem is that Serbia will not be able to open Chapter 31 until it harmonizes its policies with the EU; until accession, harmonization has to be 100% (Popović, 2018). In 2019, Serbia had harmonized 57% of its policies with EU's CFSP (52 of 91 declarations). In 2018, this percentage amounted to 52%, while for the first half of 2019 it reached 60%. The main issue which hampers Serbia's harmonization with EU foreign policy declarations is the Kosovo issue. Still, non-compliance with the declarations regarding Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian crisis represents a problem as well<sup>19</sup> (Novaković, Albahari, Bogosavljević, 2020). The analysis shows that Serbia in general did not align with declarations referring to countries which did not recognize Kosovo (Novi Magazin, 2020). In addition, after signing the economic deal in Washington in September, under US pressure, Serbia has agreed to move its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which is also in contradiction with the EU's foreign policy. This decision could mean that Belgrade

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<sup>19</sup> Out of 11 declarations regarding the situation in Ukraine that Serbia did not align with, 9 referred to the extension or expansion of already existing restricting measures against entities or persons from Russia and Ukraine (Novaković, Albahari, Bogosavljević, 2020)

calculated that the “small inconsistency” with EU policies, which is clearly nothing new and will most probably produce nothing more than the “usual critics by the EU”, combined with the distant perspective of EU membership, is small harm compared to the advantage of having the US on its side.

In addition, a powerful way in which Russia represents a threat to Serbia’s EU integration is the cultivation of anti-EU feelings and the image of “brotherly nations” (Russia and Serbia) among Serbian citizens via media. The number of media outlets registered locally, but supported by Russian capital, is increasing, as well as the Russian-sponsored content that is regularly appearing in the local press, such as the magazine *Russia Today* (Rusija Danas), having the goal to create a positive image of Russia. A very influential means of information dissemination is the Russian news portal *Sputnik*, began operating in Serbia in 2014 in Serbian, available on radio stations and the Web. Although *Sputnik* is registered as a local organization, to find out and get any information about its working and operations, written questions have to be submitted to its headquarters in Moscow in order for the communication to be approved. Even though the Russian style journalism in Serbia legitimizes uncritical state-controlled information and “patriotic reporting” in which, for example, Serbia’s Prime Minister is portrayed as the person who “first comes to work, last leaves”, “is not taking summer vacations because of much work”, etc. *Sputnik* is treated by a lot of Serbian media as a reliable source of information, while sharing its content for free (Šajkaš, Mijović, 2016). Why is this problematic? Emphasizing Serbian-Russian friendship by itself is not something negative. Russia has been important for Serbia on several occasions, and there is nothing bad in encouraging good relations with another country. However, uncritical and, according to some authors, “malign” journalism is a big problem in every society, especially if it has a specific goal – to allow one side (in this case Russia) to exert its own influence and to consciously undermine Serbia’s relations with other partners such as the EU or the US. How does this endanger Serbia’s EU integration? Well, it is enough to go through some of *Sputnik*’s headlines to realize and notice the anti-EU narrative and sentiment. Some of the headlines such as: “Jasan signal Srbiji da zaboravi na EU - osim ako predje Rubikon” (Clear sign for Serbia to forget on the EU-unless it decides to pass the Rubikon<sup>20</sup>) or “Trenutak za potpuni obrt: Sad Srbija može da istera na čistac Ameriku i EU” (The moment for the complete

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<sup>20</sup> <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/201904071119387155-eu-srbija-clanstvo-/>

change of direction: Now Serbia can get the US and the EU quite straight<sup>21</sup>) or “Dačić: Hoćemo u EU iako više nije tako privlačna” (Dačić: we want the EU even if it is not so attractive anymore<sup>22</sup>) are just a few of many similar, with the clear anti-Western material. Even though the number of Russian media is limited, they are potent in a way that they amplify anti-Western narratives already present in the Serbian local media (Samorukov, 2017).

Why is all of this important? Russia’s strong presence - be it through the energy sector, cultural ties, or politicians’ speeches, is an important card for counterbalancing the West, and at the same time, using the mutually beneficial relations (with each country pursuing its own interests) - allows Serbia to extract as many benefits as possible. Russia obviously has its own interest in its strengthened presence in Serbia. Maybe the most important one is to exert its influence and represent itself again as a great power equal to the West. The picture is complex. Loosening Serbian ties with the West and the persistence of constant problems between Serbia and the EU and the US, such as the Kosovo issue, is quite convenient for Russia, allowing it to remain important to Serbia. At the same time, Russia’s interest in Serbia is a great tool for the Serbian government to counterbalance the West. Whenever the EU’s reluctance is perceived, Serbia “has Russia on its side” to show that there is an alternative to the EU (even though leaders in Serbia are well aware of the importance of EU membership which in reality does not have an alternative).

For a long time, Russia has been marked as the main external threat to the EU’s dominance in the Balkans. But recently, a new challenge for the West has emerged: China. While Russia has been perceived as the main spoiler and threat to Serbia’s EU integration, generally, Moscow is neither capable nor interested in providing an alternative to EU membership. It tries to obstruct Western powers in the region, but its economic limitations (currently, Russia’s economy is stagnating) leaves its leverage in Serbia mostly through the Kosovo question and energy. Not underestimating Russia’s importance for Serbia’s balancing act, China has recently started gaining importance in Serbia’s political life, threatening even to overpass Russia’s traditional place as the main non-Western ally. Even though China has been supporting Serbia on the Kosovo issue, it started to be more assertive with the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While Russia’s activities in Serbia have mostly been directed towards the disruption of

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<sup>21</sup> <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/201804221115359973-Kosovo-Srbija-EU-UN-pregovori-obrt-SAD/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/politika/201609061108030763-Dacic-Hocemo-u-EU-iako-vise-nije-tako-privlacna/>

the strategic visions of the EU and the West, under Xi Jinping, China has presented itself as a benign, rising global power. To China, small countries from the Balkans, among them Serbia, are significant because of their geographical position between Europe and wider Eurasia (Vuksanović, 2019). For Serbia, the benefits of good relations with China can be observed at two levels. At the first one, the international level, Serbia uses China as leverage against the West. The motto is clear: “keep China close to yourself to have a better position for bargaining with the West”. The pandemic is a classic example. Even though the EU donated most of the assistance during the corona crisis, its timing was poor, as it was provided later than China’s, which was exploited by the Serbian government to threaten the West - “either take me for real or I will turn to someone else - in this case to China or Russia”. The second level is the domestic level in which good relations with China allow Serbia’s political elite to advertise itself and get political points<sup>23</sup>. Still, does China represent a threat to Serbia’s EU integration?

The opinions of Serbia’s leading experts are divided. While some experts strongly believe that both Russia and China represent a serious problem for Serbia’s EU integration, some of the respondents actually think that cordial relations with these powers can be beneficial to Serbia or at least do not currently represent a problem. In addition, according to some authors, China does not represent a direct threat to EU integration, since one of the main reasons why the Balkan region is so important to China is its connectivity with Europe (Vuksanović, 2019). It is interesting to observe that China invests the most in those WB countries which are regarded as the closest to EU membership – Montenegro, Serbia and North Macedonia (Lagazzi, Vit, 2007, p. 5). Serbia is particularly important for China due to its geographic position since it represents the shortest route to the EU market (Vladislavljev, 2019). According to Vuksanović, the EU is more concerned about China’s growing influence, afraid of becoming “an appendage” of Eurasia and dominated by Chinese economic power (Vuksanović, 2019). Still, the EU is becoming very suspicious about the strengthening of Serbian-Chinese ties. In the EU-China strategic outlook from 2019, China was named “a systemic rival” of the EU (Van der Made, 2020).

It is evident that through its economic activities, China challenges the EU model of norms and rules (Makocki, 2017). Namely, as a rapidly growing power, China is making inroads in the whole Balkan region and specifically in Serbia through trade and investments (Larsen, 2020, p.

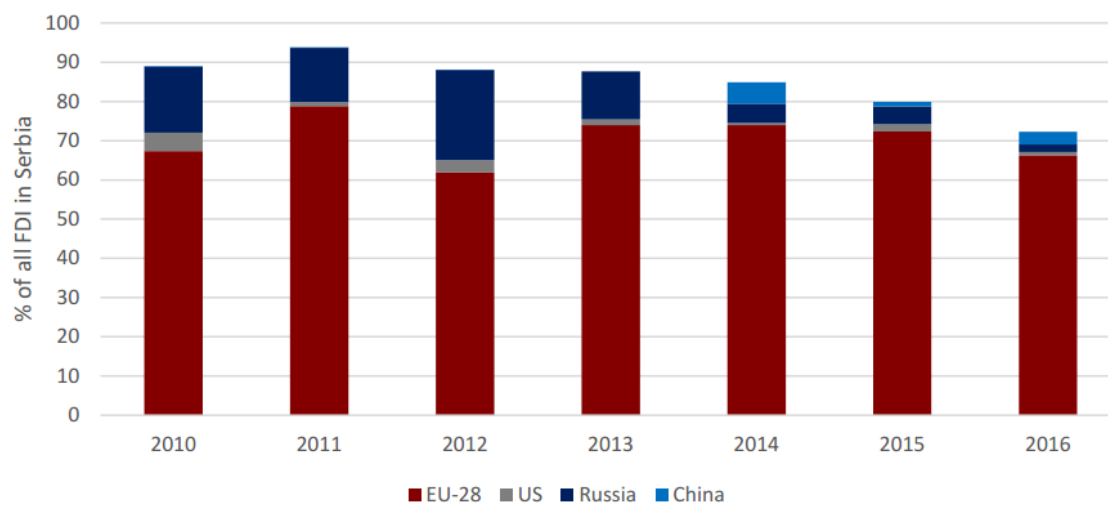
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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Vuk Vuksanović



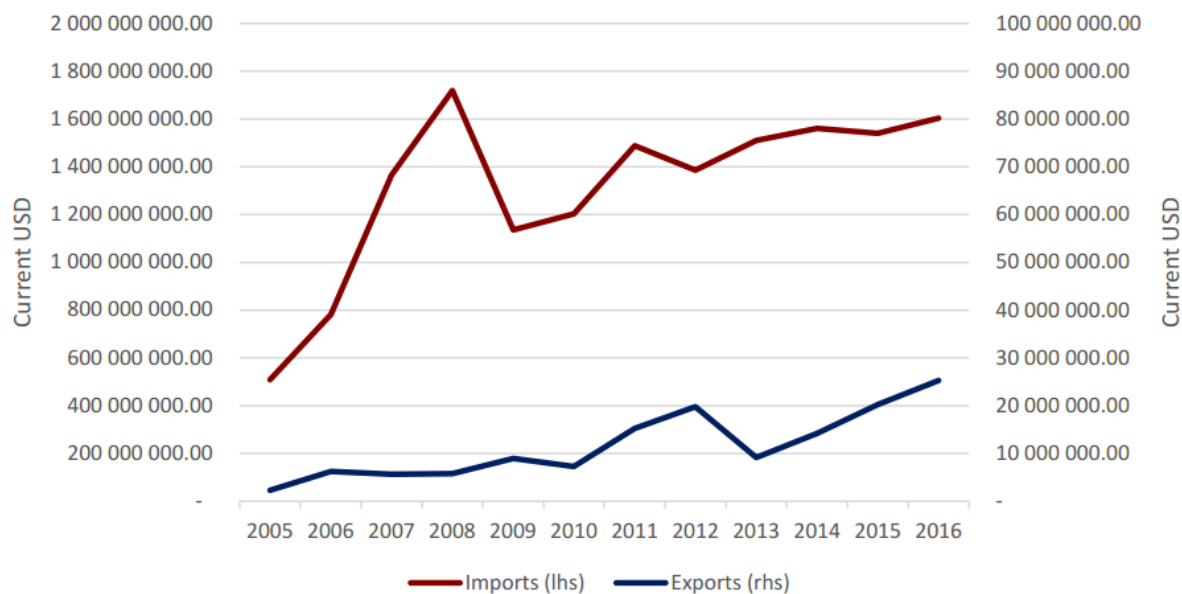
3). When China was marked as the fourth pillar of Serbia's foreign policy and when an agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation in the field of infrastructure between Serbia and China was signed, 2009 could be seen as the first year of enhanced economic cooperation between these two countries (Vladisavljev, 2019). Among all WB countries, Serbia is the largest recipient of the Chinese finance (Mardell, 2020). It is the WB country that got the most from BRI, getting EUR 5.5 billion in loans from 2017 until 2019 (Doehler, 2019, p. 2). China is trying to exert its influence in Serbia through investment more than through trade, using FDI to ensure its foothold (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 35). Still, according to the Serbian Statistical Office, trade between these two countries has been increasing. In the period January-June 2017, Serbian exports to China amounted to USD 29.4 million, while in the same period in 2018, they grew to USD 38.1 million (Harper, 2019). But compared to Italy and Germany, which alone accounted for 25.76% of all Serbian exports in 2017, the Chinese share of 0.37% is much smaller (Mardell, 2020). According to the Serbian Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications, in the period 2010-2018, the EU invested EUR 12.7 billion in Serbia, around 75% of the total investment. By 2018, China had invested EUR 504 million, representing 3% of the total investment. Professor Katarina Zakić from the Institute of International Politics and Economics in Belgrade argues that even though the EU is by far investing the most, which is natural since Serbia is a European country and trades the most with EU members, Chinese investments have started coming later to Serbia and, according to Prof. Zakić, it is normal that they still cannot catch up the EU. However, Zakić argues that the EU has good reasons to be concerned about the Chinese investment in the Balkans and particularly in Serbia since it has significantly increased during the last six years (Avakumović, 2019).

**Picture 6. Relative contribution of each power to Serbian FDI**



Source: Hartwel, Sidlo, 2017, p. 31.

**Picture 7. Serbian – Chinese trade by value, 2005-2016**



Source: Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 31.

China's economic presence in Serbia is not questionable. However, what is important is to make a distinction between Chinese FDI and loans. The first significant project implemented through joint cooperation is the bridge of the Chinese - Serbian friendship, called "Mihailo Pupin Bridge". It was funded from Chinese loans, while the works have been completed by a Chinese construction company. Since then, other infrastructure projects such as the construction of the Corridor 11 Highway and the Belgrade-Budapest Highway have been implemented with Chinese loans. Besides the provision of loans, China is, as mentioned, present in Serbia through FDI. An important investment was the takeover of the Smederevo Steel Plant, while in 2018, Mining and Smelting Basin (RTB Bor) was purchased by Chinese Zijin Mining. In addition, the construction of a factory for the production of tires in Zrenjanin was announced, as well as the construction of an industrial park in Borča, significantly increasing the level of Chinese investment (Vladisavljev, 2019). Chinese companies are building and providing equipment to coal-fired power plants in Serbia, as well (Mardell, 2020).

What is the problem with the Chinese model of investing in infrastructure? Namely, a Chinese bank offers credit loans to interested parties. However, Chinese companies usually implement projects, not the local ones, while the credit borrower remains the owner of the built facility. Credit is, in most cases, provided by the Chinese EXIM Bank and China Development Bank. In addition, Chinese companies are affiliates of the state-owned SINOSURE<sup>24</sup>, who provides most of the raw materials and workforce directly from China, depriving the local market of benefiting from the project (Radunović, 2020). Chinese loans are often represented by Serbia's officials as investment, even though they are clearly defined as loans in official documents. The problem is that Serbia uses those loans to pay Chinese companies for carrying out the work. As a result, Serbia's economy does not benefit much<sup>25</sup>.

Still, one should be careful when evaluating and making conclusions about the Chinese presence in Serbia. According to Savković, it is not easy to say whether the Chinese influence in Serbia could be described as "malign", as called by the West. The whole research community in Serbia is still observing and evaluating China's presence. China's advantage lies in the fact that it is a

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<sup>24</sup> China Export & Credit Insurance Corporation (SINOSURE) is an insurance company established and supported by the state with the aim to promote China's foreign economic and trade development and cooperation (Sinosure, 2020)

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Igor Novaković

big innovator and offers technologically better solutions than the ones provided by competitors (such as Russia). Still, on the other hand, too much borrowing could put Serbia in a dangerous position. In addition, the situation has become more complicated since by taking over the Steel Plant in Smederevo and the Mining and Smelting Basin Bor (RTB Bor), China has become an important employer in Serbia<sup>26</sup>. However, some fear that China's economic presence will contribute to keeping authoritarian leaders in power, leaving Serbia highly indebted with environmentally flawed projects (Surk, 2017).

It seems that China's attempts at winning Serbian citizens' hearts have been successful since an opinion poll from 2018 showed that Serbia's citizens are the most pro-China oriented among all the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Polls also show that Serbia is the least pro-EU country in the region. When China initially started expanding its economic influence in Serbia, the EU perceived it as benign and even beneficial to its own interests. In that way, China would enable Serbia to improve its infrastructure without relying on EU funds, which would help the Serbian economy grow and fulfill the economic criteria necessary for EU integration. On the other hand, Serbia is important for China as well, since, as mentioned, it is a path to the EU market. Still, this economic influence might affect Serbia's EU integration (Doehler, 2019, p. 2, 5-6). The BRI initiative brings with it new norms, often challenging EU ones. Chinese economic and infrastructure projects reflect China's preference for a state-led rather than a market-oriented model, where the politicization of investment, subsidy, and contract decisions is much present, in contrast to the EU model of transparent bidding procedures (Makocki, 2017). However, according to some authors, Chinese presence in Serbia, in strategically important segments of economy, such as infrastructure, is more than welcome and interpreted as very positive. Investments that ensured the maintenance of local giants, such as the Smederevo Steel Plant and the Mining and Smelting Basin RTB Bor, also affect perceptions of Serbian citizens and government, representing China as a friend of Serbia. Still, there is a question - will there be long-term consequences (Vladislavljev, 2019)?

Chinese economic influence is mainly expressed in the form of loans. Its investment, to a great extent, comes in the form of loans, which eventually have to be repaid by the borrowing countries. Besides economic, these loans provide China with political leverage as well. The term

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Marko Savković

debt-trap diplomacy explains this. Namely, according to many analyses, China offers funding to fiscally unsound infrastructure projects in order to put borrowing countries in a debt-trap and make them vulnerable to further Chinese influence. These debt-traps provide China with greater access to a borrowing country's market and resources, while at the same time make them dependent upon China (Doehler, 2019, p. 5, 7). There is a fear that such dependence on Chinese loans could really lead to a debt-trap phenomenon, making Serbia obliged to hand over its assets (Harper, 2019).

Another source of obstruction to Serbia's EU integration process is lowering the environmental standards, as one of our respondents answered. Namely, as part of the EU integration process, Serbia had to join the environmental compact, called the Energy Community, governed by legally binding directives under the Energy Community Treaty (ECT), to harmonize its energy policies and pollution standards with the EU ones. This treaty obliges candidate countries to stop using fossil fuels and other non-renewable energy sources in order to improve energy efficiency and the environmental situation. Hence, while the EU has clear standards, China presents itself as an investor willing to provide alternative climate agendas (Doehler, 2019, p. 10). Furthermore, Chinese financing of power plants and factories hamper Serbia's compliance with EU standards (Larsen, 2020, p. 3).

The third aspect in which Chinese investment hampers Serbia's EU integration is by perpetuating corruption, as the fight against corruption is one of the core preconditions for EU membership. The lack of transparency in bidding processes in which Chinese firms get contracts for various Serbian projects represents a significant problem. In addition, the lack of transparency poses a challenge, especially for developing countries, since they usually lack the administrative infrastructure important to ensure compliance with international rules. In that way, the public procurement process can provide exploitation of patronage networks (Doehler, 2019, p. 12-13). The Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM) gave at least USD 3.18 billion for transport and energy projects in Serbia. Still, it is not clear how much money is outstanding since the Bank of Serbia does not provide a country-by-country breakdown of external debt. In the rail sector, EXIM is funding the Serbian side of the Budapest-Belgrade railway. While according to EU procurement rules, the project was retendered on the Hungarian side, that did not happen in Serbia. Two of the three railway sections are funded by Chinese companies, while the middle

portion is being built by Russian Railways (Mardell, 2020). Furthermore, China takes advantage of difficult bureaucratic procedures for accessing IPA funds because of the enlargement deadlocks or EU concerns about transparency (Vuksanović, 2019). In addition, Chinese loans do not pose explicit conditionality as the EU funds (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 7). Furthermore, the lack of transparency is usually useful and more appealing to local political elites compared to burdensome demands by the EU. This swift financing in the form of investments or loans can serve politicians in order to promote themselves ahead of elections (Vuksanović, 2019). Moreover, Chinese projects tend to be more visible than the EU ones because of better marketing (Makocki, 2017). The main problem is that EU's ability to set standards has been impacted to a great extent by Chinese financing, since as mentioned, China does not take into account debt implications, project viability, or environmental impact, diminishing EU leverage and offering itself as another possibility (Vuksanovic, 2019). Even though the share of Chinese finance in Serbia is much smaller than the EU's, China still undermines the EU agenda. Since the normative alignment with the EU for Serbia comes inevitably with a cost, without a clear prospect for joining the EU, reforms are stagnating. Furthermore, dissatisfaction with the liberal model additionally strengthens the appeal of the Chinese economic model. Serbia's balancing between the market-oriented and the state-led model, hence, results in strengthening the populist narrative and reluctance towards market and governance reforms argued by the EU (Makocki, 2017).

In Serbia, the Chinese approach is often contrasted by locals with the EU one, where satisfaction with Beijing is often emphasized and compared to the dissatisfaction with the EU. Among many citizens, Brussels is regarded as “patronizing” and “demanding“, asking for too much but delivering too little, while Beijing is understood as deeply interested, attentive to the local conditions, and perceived to treat local governments as equal. When numbers are taken into account, it is obvious that China does not provide a competitive alternative to EU integration, and all policymakers in Serbia are well aware of that. Furthermore, it seems that China's economic involvement and footprint in Serbia does not directly and fundamentally represent a challenge to EU integration, but it still challenges the EU's normative power. While there is no attractive enough alternative to EU integration, closer relations with China could be used as an attractive “auxiliary option“, specifically when EU accession is perceived as distant (Mardell, 2020).

#### ***6.4. Military neutrality - another reflection of balancing?***

Having proclaimed military neutrality in 2007, two military powers are particularly important for Serbia's defence policy - NATO and Russia. While NATO, on the one hand, is the main security actor in Europe and often goes hand in hand with EU integration (Euro-Atlantic integration), Russia's importance lies in its support for Serbia on the Kosovo question and to some extent in the purchase of military equipment. In order to achieve its interests, among which the most important one appears to be territorial integrity, Serbia tries to balance between these two powers that have opposed interests and fight for influence in this part of the Balkans. China, primarily perceived as an economic power, has not played a significant role in Serbia's security and defence sector until recently. However, it seems that lately, it has started exerting its influence in this sphere as well. Still, the main determinant of Serbia's current defence policy is the concept of military neutrality, generally understood as balancing between NATO and Russia. However, a defined commitment to military neutrality, for the first time in any strategic document of the Republic of Serbia, can be found only in the new security and defence strategies adopted by the Serbian Parliament in December 2019. Until the emergence of the new strategies, military neutrality could be found only in the Resolution of the National Assembly on the Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia, adopted in 2007, in which the Republic of Serbia's neutral stance toward military alliances was declared. Neutrality emerged as a response to NATO's involvement in the Kosovo question. Still, even often used by politicians in the media, neither document until now did explain more precisely what exactly the concept of military neutrality in Serbia's case actually means, besides the lack of interest for NATO accession (Djokić, 2019). The parameters about military neutrality and how they affect Serbia's foreign, security and defence policy remain unclear. Media have often been comparing this concept with the military neutrality of other European states, such as Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, Ireland and Austria, but without taking into consideration their history and specificities (Novaković, 2013, p. 7). Even today, in the new national security strategy, which was necessary to be adopted in order for Serbia to fulfill some of the requirements for Chapter 31 in its EU accession negotiations, the term military neutrality is explicitly mentioned, again without clarification and any definition of it. New strategies do not define what that term means and what is set to be achieved with it (Nenadović, 2019). According

to experts from the International Institute for Security, Serbia has been leading the policy of neutrality, whose main determinant has been – not to pursue NATO membership. However, it has been argued, without international acceptance of military neutrality, without a clearly defined concept and clear projections of how defence system should look like in the future, it is not justified to talk about military neutrality (Međunarodni institut za bezbednost, 2018).

Serbia's non-aligned stance and the concept of military neutrality, as a country which is an official EU candidate, creates space for some divergence in its foreign policy (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 38), allowing Serbia to cooperate with different security actors without necessarily being a member of any alliance. However, that kind of balancing brings with it some important implications. For example, cooperation in the security field with Russia through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) concerns the EU. As a country aiming to join the EU, Serbia's affinity for Russia in the security sector has been seen as "unprecedented". Every time Serbia cooperates militarily with Russia, the West is concerned that Kremlin will take advantage of the pro-Russian sentiment in Serbian society and penetrate into NATO's sphere of influence. However, a closer look at Serbia's international security ties reveals that compared to the West, Russia lags considerably behind (Samorukov, 2020, p. 16). Hence, Serbia's defence policy allows military cooperation with NATO along with Russian cooperation, which has strengthened especially after signing a strategic partnership with Russia in 2013 (Radoman, 2016, p. 3). Joint military exercises, held several times a year, usually intending to provoke the West and cause a stir in the local and international media, are the most noticeable form of Serbia-Russia security cooperation, overshadowing joint drills with NATO countries, conducted several times more than with Russia<sup>27</sup> (Samorukov, 2020, p. 16).

Even though there is a need to differentiate bilateral relations with Washington and multilateral relations with NATO, relations between Serbia and the US have mainly been perceived through relations with NATO (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 39). During the last ten years, security cooperation between Serbia and the US has improved, with Serbia's participation in the coalition against the Islamic state, cooperation against terrorism and organized crime, as well as military cooperation with the National Guard of Ohio (Krstić, 2020). Still, NATO remains one of the main controversial actors in Serbian public, political, and military life. According to the new

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<sup>27</sup> in 2019, the ratio was 13 to 4 (Samorukov, 2020, p. 16)



national defence strategy, the importance of cooperation with NATO has been seen primarily in terms of regional security, contributing to bilateral relations with the countries of the region, which are either NATO members or candidates for membership. Also, from Serbia's perspective, maintaining the presence of KFOR, which is under NATO command, in Kosovo is of great importance (Đokić, 2019). NATO is in effect the guarantee of the Serbian minority in Kosovo, while Russia can provide only political support on that issue since it withdrew the last peacekeepers from the Balkans in 2003 (Samorukov, 2020, p. 18). Still, the NATO bombings in 1999 have generated a negative image of NATO in the minds and hearts of the Serbian public. According to the study of Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, in 2017, 64% of participants were against NATO membership, with 47% of polled Serbian citizens opposed to any form of cooperation with NATO, even if that cooperation would not consider joining NATO. Out of 30% of those who were polled and were for the cooperation with NATO, four out of five supported cooperation but with the preservation of the military neutral status (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 39). The latest survey on Serbia's citizens' attitude towards Euro-Atlantic integration<sup>28</sup> shows that two-thirds (80%) of Serbia's citizens currently do not support NATO membership, 15% would not vote, while one in every 20 citizens would support Serbia joining NATO. In addition, around 54% of the surveyed have a negative opinion about NATO, 37% neutral, 6% positive, while 3% do not know or cannot tell. Furthermore, the same research showed that only 31% of Serbia's citizens know that almost all EU countries are NATO members as well, 21% think that less than one-half of the EU member states are also NATO members, 10% of respondents believe that less than one-third of the EU member states are at the same time NATO members, 3% think that all the EU member states are also NATO members, while 35% of the surveyed responded that they do not know the answer (EWB, 2020). Despite this, links with NATO have been established and maintained since Serbia joined the Partnership for Peace Programme in 2006 and since a NATO military office was opened in Belgrade in 2010 (Radoman, 2016, p. 1). Furthermore, Serbia signed an Individual Action Plan for Partnership (IPAP) in 2015, representing the main form of cooperation with countries that do not want to become NATO members. Additionally, as mentioned, the vast majority of military exercises have actually been in partnership with NATO. In the period 2006-2016, Serbia conducted 1400 various activities with NATO (Hartwell, Sidlo,

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<sup>28</sup> Conducted by the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS) and the Centre for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), presented during the 8<sup>th</sup> Belgrade NATO week.

2017, p. 39-40). Furthermore, in 2016, Serbia ratified the NATO Support and Procurement Organization (NSPO) agreement, which provided NATO with certain tax exemptions and diplomatic immunity (Samorukov, 2020, p. 17). Furthermore, out of 21 multinational trainings in 2015, and 26 drills in 2016, just 4 were conducted with Russia (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 39- 40). In 2018, NATO drills were for the first time held on Serbia's territory, while in 2019 Serbia approved the second cycle of the IPAP for the period 2019-2021 (Samorukov, 2020, p. 18). Still, it seems that the importance of this question for Serbia's public will continue to further direct political leaders' actions. Because of that, it is unlikely that relations will be upgraded beyond technical moves and cooperation to strategy in the near future (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 39-40).

Since NATO is the foundation of collective defence in Europe and the defence relationships between Serbia and EU member states have been mostly shaped by NATO, as most EU member states are NATO members, NATO remains the main security actor in Europe. Still, as the EU started progressively framing its common defence policy, Serbia signed a Security Cooperation Agreement (SCA) with the European Defence Agency in the field of research, technology and training. Furthermore, in November 2016, Serbia signed a note of access to the Balkan Battlegroup of the European Union (HELBROC). Serbia became officially a member of the Battlegroup in 2017, participating primarily with military police and staff officers. Additionally, Serbia participates in EU peacekeeping missions in Somalia and Mali. Serbian experts also joined in 2016 the EU training mission in the Central African Republic. According to Reuters, compared with others, Serbia so far had far more trainings with the EU and members of NATO, with a total of 197 activities with NATO and 370 bilateral training missions with NATO members (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 38). Currently, Serbia is participating in 4 EU missions with 22 officers and is developing civil capacities for peace missions. However, there is not much available information about its participation in European Defence Agency's (EDA) projects, and so far, there is no official interest in joining, as a third party, the project of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) (Đokić, 2019).

Considering the importance of this question for the Serbian public, it has also been used in domestic politics. According to Serbian political leaders, the concept of military neutrality is not in inconsistency with NATO cooperation, since military neutrality allows Serbia to cooperate with many significant actors without necessarily be part of a military alliance. Still, because of

the sentiments in Serbia's public regarding this issue, the concept of "military neutrality" has many times served as a tool for gaining political support during pre-election campaigns, usually emphasizing cooperation with Russia and decreasing the importance of NATO (Radoman, 2016, p. 2). For the same reason, i.e. Russian popularity within the Serbian electorate, military cooperation with Russia gets better media coverage in Serbia than cooperation with NATO (Samorukov, 2020, p. 17). Because of negative sentiments towards NATO among Serbia's citizens, Serbia's political elite does not reveal the real state of cooperation with NATO to the public in order not to endanger their political rating (Bjeloš, Vuksanović, Šterić, 2020, p. 7).

Arms purchasing also reveals Serbia's tendency to pursue a balancing act. According to Aleksandar Radić, a military analyst, the choice of arms producers is politically motivated and a way to confirm Serbia's position in international relations. In Serbia's case, modernization of its military and the choice of equipment is not as important as to what that means for its foreign relations (Zorić, 2020). Since 2015, the pace of arms deals and defence cooperation with Russia, in general, has increased. This should not be strange since armaments used in Serbian Armed Forces are based on Russian (Soviet) platforms and equipment, so when Serbia decided to modernize its military equipment, it was expected to invest in new versions of already familiar equipment (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 40). However, this is only one side of the coin. As it is the case in other fields, another side reveals the importance of domestic politics and balancing with other partners such as NATO and China. Arms purchases from Russia have usually been publicly advertised by the Serbian political leadership, while security deals with the West usually remain unknown to the public. For example, some Serbian media reported that Russia donated several jets and a few dozen used tanks and combat vehicles to Serbia, while in August 2019, the Serbian Ministry of Defence revealed that in the period from 2014-2018, the biggest military donor to Serbia was the US and that Russian donations came with the provision that Serbia will have to invest a few hundred million EUR in order to upgrade the old equipment. In addition, arms sales from Russia are usually overhyped, aiming to produce a short-term political effect and gains for leading political parties (Samorukov, 2020, p. 17, 20). In 2019, Serbia's defence budget increased by 35 %, allowing it to invest in military modernization. In 2019, Serbia acquired most of its weapons from Russia, jets (Mig 29), helicopters (Mi-17V-5 and Mi-35M) as well as air defence systems (Pantsir-S1). However, the US threatened Serbia with sanctions because of acquiring the Russian Pantsir-S1 air defence system (Ejdus, 2020). In July this year, Vučić said

that the increase of defence budget and Serbia's intention to buy more warplanes happens because "Serbia as a militarily neutral country has to look after itself", "in that way, Serbia will be able to provide safety, stability and peace" (voanews, 2020). However, following US threat of sanctions and Tomas Zarzecki's visit (a US official in charge of the introduction of sanctions to countries that cooperate with the Russian defence system), Vučić declared that Serbia would stop purchasing weapons (Kovačević, 2019). Russia is not the only Serbian partner that concerns the US. Additionally, China has been recently threatening to substitute Russia as the Serbian main non-Western ally, not only in economics but also in the military. Besides the economy, China promotes itself as an important partner regarding arms purchasing and another pole to the West. The military and defence ties with China are still the weakest, compared to those with the EU, NATO and Russia. As mentioned, it represents an important economic factor in Serbia, while the defence cooperation, to a great extent, due to the geographical distance, until recently has not been so developed (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 41). However, this seems to have started changing. Even though Vučić in December last year declared that Serbia would stop buying weapons, Serbia purchased a new generation of medium-range, surface-to-air missiles from China as a sign of deepening Belgrade-Beijing cooperation. The purchase of the FK-3 missile defence system was part of the Jugoimport annual report, a state-run arms company, and submitted to the state Business Register Agency. According to the report, weapon purchases in 2019 included armed drones and the purchase of the FK-3 from China (Reuters, 2020). In that way, Serbia became the first European country which started using Chinese drones in its military. Responses to that were different. According to some Russian media reports, Serbia's decision to buy the Chinese system instead of the expected Russian-made S-300, surprised and disappointed Moscow. The US warned Serbia over the purchase, after which President Vučić declared, despite the report from Jugoimport, that Serbia did not buy FK-3 but is still considering it. Michael Carpenter, a former US official in the Defence Department, declared that Washington is aware of Serbia's balancing between the EU, the US, Russia and China and the belief of President Vučić in benefiting from such foreign policy for securing his regime. According to Frederik Ben Hodges, former commander of the US ground forces in Europe, the motive for such military cooperation between Serbia and China primarily lies in the Serbian political elite's attempts to show its strength to the electorate. However, the EU seems to be more concerned as Peter Stano, the EU chief spokesperson for foreign and security affairs, stated that as a candidate country, Serbia is

expected to harmonize its foreign and security policy with the EU's one (Mojsilović, 2020). At the bottom line, if Serbia continues this trend and starts using Chinese based military instead of Soviet based one, the player who will be left out of the game most likely will be Russia (McCann, 2020). Furthermore, shortly after the meeting in Washington on September 4<sup>th</sup>, the Minister of Defence at that time, Aleksandar Vulin, declared that Serbia would stop all military exercises and activities with all of its partners for a period of six months. According to Aleksandar Radić, a military analyst, the decision represents a clear sign of another distancing from Russia, which continued after the announcement that Serbia will purchase Chinese weaponry instead of Russian and culminated with the meeting in Washington. Namely, it was envisaged that Serbia, together with the Russian army would participate in military exercises in Belorussia from 10<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> September, while according to a NATO official, in that period of time NATO did not plan any military activities with Serbia (EWB, 2020). Hence, it is clear that Serbia's decision to stop all military activities with all of its partners has direct consequences mainly on cooperation and relations with Russia.

#### *6.4.1. What are the consequences and implications of the military neutrality concept for Serbia?*

Formally, permanent or perpetual neutrality refers to a state that tends to maintain a neutral position both, in peace and in time of war. However, the changed security environment in the post-Cold War context, the emergence of non-territorial security problems and greater interdependence led to the questioning of the purpose of neutrality nowadays, especially perceived through the commitment to the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) when the concept of sovereignty is more porous, security threats are present no longer only in military terms and when non-state actors have strengthened their influence (Agius, Devine, 2011, p. 266). NATO and the EU have expanded their membership as well as their tasks, where NATO became a political forum, and the EU, besides economic and political, is becoming a military alliance increasingly. All these changes provoked the traditional concept of military neutrality. As mentioned, in the absence of competition between great powers for domination, as was the case during the Cold War, other security threats such as terrorism, state failure, civil wars, climate change, and organized crime emerged. In the era of increased interdependency, it is difficult for a state to cope with these threats independently. Because of that, all European neutral states tend to become more involved in international security networks such as the EU

Common Security and Defence Policy or Partnership for Peace. Today, there are several militarily neutral states in Europe, such as Finland, Sweden, Ireland, Austria and Switzerland. Still, none of these entirely excluded itself from an international security system, whether under the UN or the EU, NATO, OSCE or something else. While military neutrality means that one state remains out of conflict, and permanent military neutrality refers to all conflicts in the future as well, according to Ejodus, the concept does not mean sticking the head in the sand and complete isolation for the country (Ejodus, 2012). Still, when talking about Serbia, as mentioned previously, until recently, there has not been much explanation about this determination of its security policy, except in the 2007 declaration. In the new defence strategy however, three changes regarding military neutrality could be seen. The first one refers to reduced enthusiasm for commitment to cooperative security under the Partnership for Peace Programme (PfP), while at the same time, the role of CSTO became a source of increased interest for Serbia, leading to balancing between NATO and CSTO. Furthermore, Belgrade has prioritized strengthening its military capacities and relying on its own forces at the expense of participation in cooperative security mechanisms. This development has led to more investment in the capacities of the Serbian army. Third, a Serbian model of “total defence” has been promoted as a new strategy, which means higher responsibilities and burden for civilians, for example through the introduction of military service (Đokić, 2019). As seen in the theoretical framework, small states often have to go into alliances with more powerful actors because of their lack of internal resources. The question is, how beneficial the concept of military neutrality is for Serbia and whether Serbia as a small country can persist on its own?

The opinions of experts are quite divided on this issue. Some of them (5), believe that this concept is not feasible, in the first place because of economic and geostrategic reasons (we should remember that Serbia is surrounded by NATO members or candidate countries). One of those respondents argues that not only the policy of neutrality in Serbia’s case has been made up, but it is also unsustainable in the current international framework. In addition, one respondent answered that the concept of military neutrality is not bad by itself, but the question is how much it is sustainable when a country is surrounded by NATO members, as Serbia is. The problem with this policy, according to one of the respondents, is that it is undefined, unclear. The lack of a clear meaning of this concept allows political elites to interpret it the way it suits them. Another respondent also argues that the policy of military neutrality in Serbia is, even though often used

in public, not properly explained. According to the respondent, the concept of military neutrality demands investing in the modernization of the defence and security system, something that overpasses the possibilities and resources of a small, poor country like Serbia. In addition, political elites in Serbia unofficially do everything to bring Serbia closer to NATO, but in public, they praise cooperation with Russia and the concept of military neutrality. On the other hand, the same author does not support NATO membership, since Serbia is not in a position to single out 2% of its GDP. Furthermore, according to that respondent, by entering NATO, Serbia would additionally become exposed to security risks and threats because of participating in NATO operations. Also, NATO membership could lead to the abolition of the Air Force or other Serbia's defence fields. Another respondent argues that this policy is in close relationship with the Kosovo question. The same author believes that this policy is anachronous and outdated. In addition, the respondent argues that leading this policy adequately demands many skills which currently the Minister of Defence (the respondent answered before the formation of the new government) does not have, referring to Aleksandar Vulin. According to the respondent, there is no need for "the war with words" which has been used in communication with neighbouring NATO member countries. In addition, relations with NATO are correct, NATO does not ask Serbia to become a member and helps different programs of the arm forces restructuring. Furthermore, from one respondent's point of view, the concept of military neutrality is another name for "we do not want to become NATO members" and avoiding discussion about NATO membership, while another respondent declared that military neutral countries do not have agreements of any kind on military cooperation with military alliances, referring to Serbia's cooperation with NATO and with CSTO. Furthermore, one of the respondents in the survey answered that as it is the case with the balancing act in general, the policy of military neutrality in Serbia's case could potentially be beneficial, but for now, it is incomplete, insufficiently thought out, and clumsily lead. On the other hand, a significant number of respondents (5 of them) believe that this policy is the only option at this moment. Most of them agree that because of the dominant negative attitude of Serbia's public towards NATO membership, it would not be realistic to change this position. One expert responded that NATO membership does not have to be necessarily bad for Serbia. Still, even though previously there were attempts by Serbian political elites to make NATO membership Serbia's foreign policy goal, such as the Defence strategy of Serbia and Montenegro and the expose of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia

and Montenegro from 2004, until today that has not materialized. In addition, one expert believes that the policy of military neutrality is justified taking into consideration identity and interests, adding that it has fifteen years of political and discursive weight and because of that certain inertia.

Representatives of SNS and SPS, expectedly, both answered that they have a positive attitude toward the military neutrality of Serbia.

There is much opacity regarding the military neutrality of Serbia. In the new national security strategy, it is stated that cooperation with CSTO, under Russian leadership, should be deepened. However, since Russia has been under EU sanctions, and since Serbia aims to become a part of the EU, this becomes confusing (Međunarodni institut za bezbednost, 2018). Furthermore, the question is, whether it is possible to remain militarily neutral because of the participation in the EU's CFSP. On the other hand, the question is whether joining NATO is necessary if Serbia wants to become part of the EU. So, the question on which everything boils down to is how beneficial the status of military neutrality for Serbia is, and how long will Serbia be in a position to balance between different partners, having in mind that it has already opted for EU integration, which by itself bears some benefits but limitations as well. If we start with geography, it is important to notice that Serbia is surrounded by NATO members or candidate states for joining the alliance (Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, North Macedonia as members and BiH as a candidate), while Russia remains geographically distant. Another dimension is economic sustainability. Some of the surveyed experts responded that Serbia as a small country is not capable of being militarily neutral due to its limited economic resources. Furthermore, relying more on its own forces (a declared goal in the new defence strategy) demands more financing and funds for the maintenance of Serbian army capacities, which would mean a significant increase in defence spending and development of defence industry. An increase in the budget for the Ministry of Defence and its maintenance on a relatively high level could mean less investment in other sectors such as research or environment protection (Đokić, 2019). Additionally, according to many experts, Serbia could really become militarily neutral only when it reaches economic, social, political and military self-sustainability, which means that as long as Serbia is dependent on foreign loans and help, it cannot lead that kind of policy (Cvejić, 2015). On the other hand, according to Ejodus, wealth is



not a prerequisite for a country to be militarily neutral. NATO members spend traditionally more than militarily neutral countries on their defence in the percentage of GDP. Moldova is an example of one of Europe's poorest countries for which a lack of economic resources was not an obstacle to remain militarily neutral (Ejdus, 2012). However, if we look at the latest data gathered by SIPRI, Serbia in 2019 increased its military spending from 1.6 % to 2.2 % of GDP, which basically means that it already spends more than 2% of its GDP, as requested by NATO (SIPRI, 2020). Still, according to Ejdus, indirect economic costs of military neutrality should be taken into account. Eastern European states could be an example of how joining NATO had some practical benefits in economic terms - improvement of investment climate, increased foreign direct investment, and increased and rapid growth of economies (Ejdus, 2012). In addition, the % of FDI in Slovenia's GDP a year before joining NATO (2003) amounted to 1.8%, while in 2007, it increased to 3.9% (Mušić, 2020).

Another important question is whether joining NATO will be necessary at some point in order for Serbia to enter the EU. Formally, NATO membership was never a precondition for Serbia to join the EU. Several times when asked, EU officials would always answer that it is not necessary. Moreover, NATO's General Secretary, Jens Stoltenberg, several times declared that NATO members are in general content with the level of cooperation with Serbia and that NATO officials are well aware of the public sentiment in Serbia towards this question. Still, according to Srećko Đukić, ex-diplomat and ambassador of Serbia to Belorussia, NATO membership will emerge as a condition to join the EU after the resolution of the Kosovo question. He supported his argument by citing the claim made by Bulgarian MEP, Aleksandar Jordanov that Belgrade should be told that Serbia's integration into the EU will actually begin when Serbia applies for NATO membership. Jordanov believes that EU integration of Western Balkans can happen only if WB countries guarantee their own security. Additionally, Đukić argues that this "precondition" has already become a public secret well known to the EU, NATO members but to Moscow as well. Moreover, the reason behind this idea is, according to Đukić, the completion of the Balkans as a geopolitical whole in the context of Euro-Atlantic integrations, since all countries which surround Serbia except Bosnia and Herzegovina (which is a candidate) are NATO members. On the other hand, Dejan Miletić, president of the Centre for the Study of Globalization, believes that Serbia will formally never get that kind of request by the EU. However, having in mind that the EU still relies heavily on NATO for its protection, certain pressure on the Serbian side may

happen in the form of informal requests and suggestions, with expectations that if Serbia enters the EU, it should also enter NATO (Baković, 2019). Still, here the relationship between the EU and NATO is also important. Traditionally, the EU has always been dependent on NATO for its protection, since it has usually been seen as a soft, normative power. However, during the last couple of years, there have been some attempts to reduce the EU's reliance on NATO and to upgrade its own defence system. Additionally, with the Trump administration on the head of the US, relations between these two powers started becoming less cordial. After Trump became President in 2017, he made many statements that "the US would not pay for Europe's security", which additionally made EU officials pay more attention to EU defence integration (Basov, 2019). Hence, the question is, in the future, depending on how these relations are going to develop and whether and to what extent the EU will become less reliant on NATO protection, are these above-mentioned preconditions in the form of informal requests and suggestions going to happen, especially having in the mind the slow progress and distant perspective of Serbia's EU integration. On the other hand, there are five militarily neutral countries currently in the EU. Still, the existence of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy poses a question - to what extent military neutrality is compatible with EU membership? The concept of neutrality in these five states persists to be discussed and debated, especially with the development of the EU's CFSP. Neutrality has traditionally assumed that neutral states would refrain from joining military alliances or taking actions that would involve them in future conflicts with other states. However, since CFSP commits states to involve in military actions outside their borders, the traditional concept of neutrality has been challenged. These five countries found a way to reconcile their policies of neutrality with EU membership. For example, Sweden modified its definition of neutrality and became active in the EU's CFSP. The EU as well, on the other hand, has to be able to recognize the importance of this foreign policy determination for some of its members (Morris, White, 2011, p. 104, 106, 110). Still, no matter whether Serbia will become or not a member of NATO someday, if wants to join the EU, Serbia will nevertheless have to adjust its foreign policy to CFSP, meaning that it will have to alter its relations with Russia to a certain extent, which is an important part of Serbia's policy of military neutrality and balancing between NATO and Russia (Ejdus, 2014).

The main problem of the "military neutrality concept" in the way Serbia conducts it, is the lack of clarity of the concept. There is an impression that the basic reason for conducting this policy is

not to join NATO, even though Serbia cooperates with NATO far more than with Russia in this domain. According to many experts from the survey, this concept is unsustainable and Serbia as a small country, with limited resources, is not capable of leading this kind of policy. However, taking into account negative public sentiments towards NATO, it is hard to expect that any political elite would try to advertise joining NATO. On the other hand, cooperation with Russia has its benefits as well (arms purchasing, support on the Kosovo question). Hence, for the time being, as it is the case with other questions in Serbia's foreign and security policies, in the absence of a clear foreign policy strategy and clear EU perspective, it seems that Serbia will continue "to be stuck" in balancing between different actors.

### ***6.5. Domestic politics - how much influence do they have on Serbia's foreign policy?***

Domestic politics represent another important reason for Serbia's balancing act. First of all, what is important to note is that the main questions which dictate Serbia's foreign policy direction, such as the Kosovo question, are very important for the Serbian public. As mentioned, Kosovo has a special importance for Serbian citizens and because of that, it influences the behaviour of political leaders. Hence, in order to ensure their stay on power, political leadership and ruling parties have to be careful when deciding on foreign policy issues in order to please the electorate and not to take decisions which are to a great extent opposite to the prevailing public sentiment. Similarly to the Kosovo question, Russia's appeal to a large part of the Serbian public has also been taken into account by the ruling parties.

A study that examined public attitudes towards these four great powers, was taken by IRI in 2015. The question was, "with which of these powers having a strong relationship would be most beneficial for Serbia?" According to the results, 94% of the respondents answered Russia, 89% chose China, while 71% opted for the EU and 65% said the US (Hartwell, Sidlo, 2017, p. 13-14). In a study conducted by Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCBP) in 2017, more than two-thirds of the surveyed perceived Russia and the US as the most powerful political actors, with the highest capabilities to influence political processes in other countries, whereas the EU and China have been seen mostly as unsuccessful in that regard. Additionally, the majority of respondents expressed the belief that China and Russia have a positive influence on Serbia's foreign policy, whereas the influence of the EU and the US was mainly perceived as negative (Popović, 2017, p. 12-14). According to the latest BCBP study<sup>29</sup>, despite accusations made by Serbia's pro-government media and tabloids, accusing Russia of organizing protests in Serbia in July and attempting to overthrow Serbia's government, pro-Russian sentiments are still very strong among Serbia's citizens. Namely, 57% of the surveyed think that Serbia should coordinate its foreign policy with Russia and China, while 24% of the surveyed answered that in the security domain, Serbia should strengthen its relations with Moscow. In addition, 40% of the surveyed believe that Russia is Serbia's greatest friend, while 72% rated Russia's influence as positive (which is a rise by 11% compared to the results of the study from 2017). According to the

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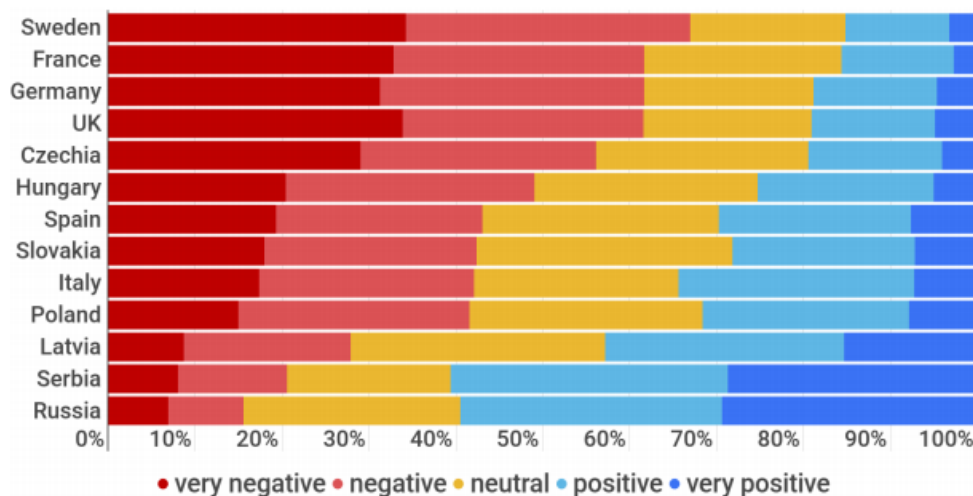
<sup>29</sup> The research was conducted in cooperation with CeSID on the representative sample of 1200 Serbian citizens during September and October this year (Bjeloš, Vuksanović, Šterić, 2020)

respondents of the survey, China is ranked in the second place as Serbia's greatest friend. In comparison to the results from the 2017 study, when 53% of the surveyed rated China's influence as positive, in the latest study, the number increased to 87% (the authors of the study argue that this increase of positive attitudes towards China is the result of a strong pro-Chinese campaign by Serbia's political elites, which was specifically evident during the COVID-19 pandemic in March and April this year). However, just 8% of the respondents think that Serbia should turn to China in the security domain, which is a sign that among Serbia's public, China still has not taken Russia's place as a military power (Bjeloš, Vuksanović, Šterić, 2020, p. 3-5). In addition, Turcsányi et al. has recently conducted a study about European public opinion on China and other three powers – the EU, Russia and the US. In general, respondents from European countries in which the survey has been conducted<sup>30</sup> mostly have a negative opinion about China, contrary to Serbian and Russian respondents, who have “very positive” and “positive” views. In addition, regarding Chinese investment, respondents from most European countries have a negative opinion, while Serbia, Russia, Poland and Latvia assess Chinese investment as positive. Additionally, among all surveyed countries, only Serbia perceives the Chinese military in a positive way (mostly because of the 1999 NATO bombing, when the Chinese Embassy was hit, creating a shared experience between China and Serbia). In addition, respondents from 11 out of 13 countries are in favour of aligning their countries with the EU, while among EU countries, the US is the second-best option. In Serbia, respondents are mainly in favour of alignment with Russia, while the US is the least favoured foreign partner to be aligned with (Turcsányi, Šimalčík, Kironská, Sedláková, et al., 2020, p. 2-3, 5).

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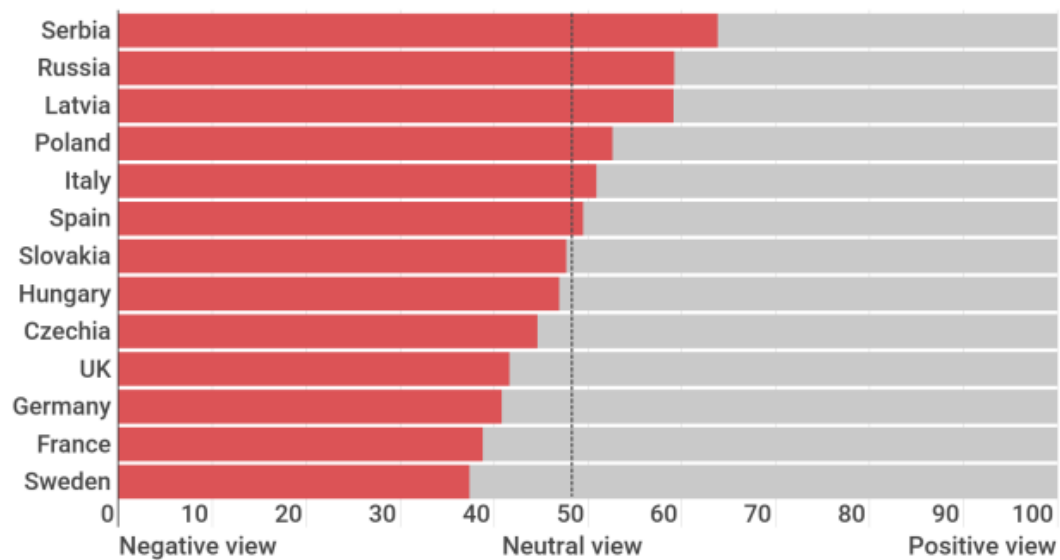
<sup>30</sup> The public from the following countries were surveyed: Sweden, France, Germany, UK, Czechia, Hungary, Spain, Slovakia, Italy, Poland, Latvia, Serbia and Russia (Turcsányi, Šimalčík, Kironská, Sedláková, et al., 2020).

**Picture 8. Feelings towards China among Europeans (% of respondents)**



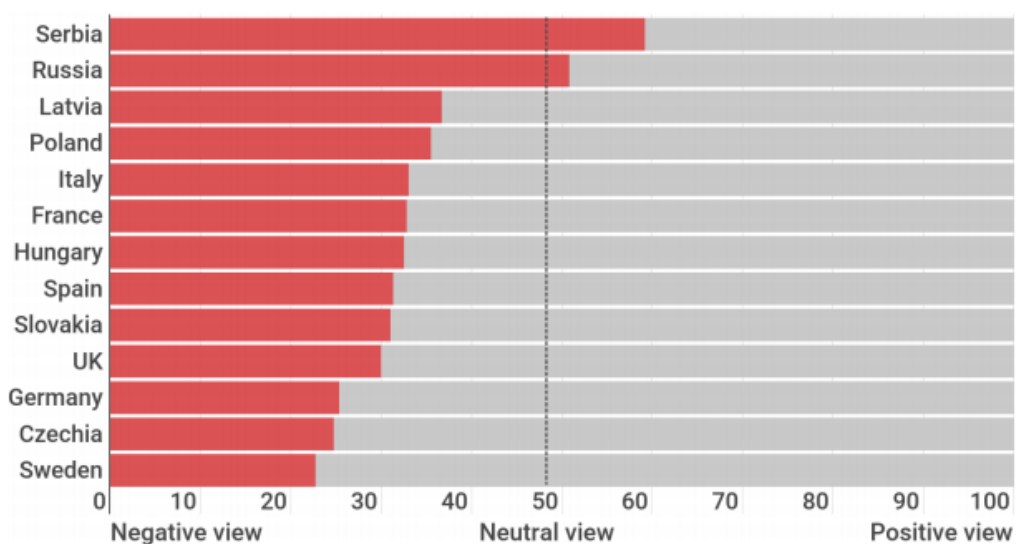
Source: Turcsányi, Šimalčík, Kironská, Sedláková, et al., 2020, p. 11

**Picture 9. Perceptions of Chinese investments among Europeans (mean values)**



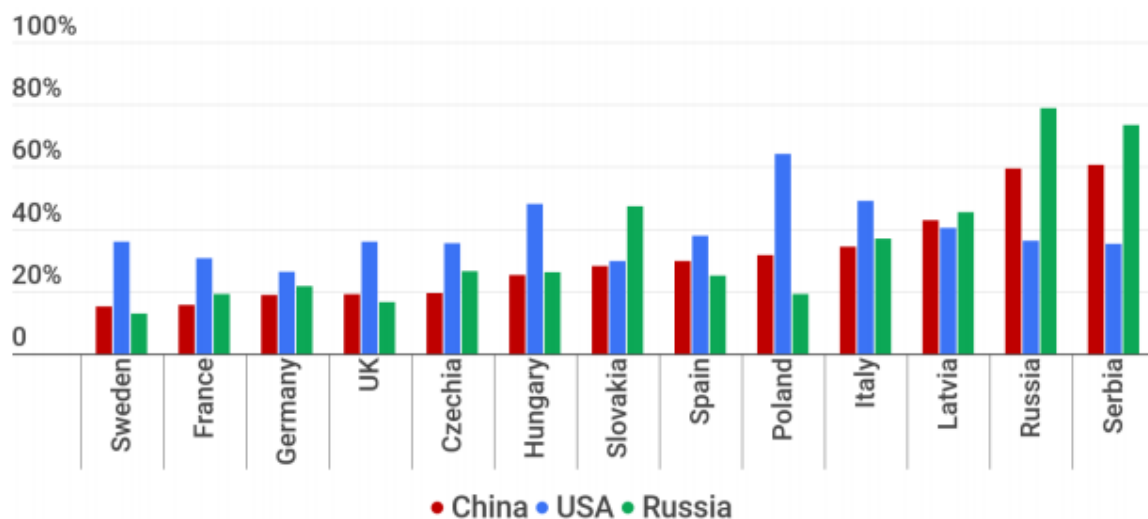
Source: Turcsányi, Šimalčík, Kironská, Sedláková, et al., 2020, p. 11

**Picture 10: Perceptions of Chinese military power among Europeans**



Source: Turcsányi, Šimalčík, Kironská, Sedláková, et al., 2020, p. 13

**Picture 11. Positive feeling toward major powers among Europeans (% of respondents)**



Source: Turcsányi, Šimalčík, Kironská, Sedláková, et al., 2020, p. 15

Political elites in Serbia have been for a long time using foreign policy to advertise themselves politically. In order to beat Koštunica at the 2008 elections, Tadić used the fact that the Stabilization and Association Agreement was signed during his Presidency. Vučić has also been

using foreign policy and good relations with great powers to gain advantages in domestic politics. Realising that the Serbian electorate and society are deeply divided into a pro-Russian, and a pro-European part, both Vučić and Tadić used balancing between Russia and the West for domestic politics, seeking to get voter support from both sides of the political spectrum. Vučić took the balancing act on a new level since his electorate is more genuinely inclined toward Russia. His visits to Russia very often have coincided with electoral cycles in Serbia. Still, even though Vučić tries to represent himself as a modern, Western-oriented player, he is ready to make a deal with everyone at the end of the day. The moment when Tomislav Nikolić retired and handed over his position of President of Serbia to Vučić in 2017 was the final moment when “the pragmatic” part of SNS prevailed over the Russophile, Nikolić’s part of SNS. As mentioned, this division of Serbian society is well understood by the ruling elites. As Vuksanović put it, “If you, as a political party, want to be competitive at the Serbian political market, you cannot exclusively argue neither for the pro-Russian nor for the pro-Western side”. The 2014 elections, when Vučić became the Prime Minister of Serbia, are a good example. On those elections, the biggest Eurosceptic, Russophile parties such as DSS and SRS did not pass the threshold for entering Parliament; at the same time, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), as the only party in Serbia which openly argued for NATO membership, did not pass the threshold for entering Parliament either. It seems that the current political leaders are well aware of that.<sup>31</sup>

Media plays an important role in creating the image of these four powers in the minds of the Serbian public. According to the study conducted by the organization CRTA in 2019 - in which the media monitoring, analysis of Serbia’s daily press (Blic, Informer, Kurir and Novosti), online portals (Blic, B92, Kurir and Telegraf) and central informative and morning TV shows on RTS1, Pink, TV Hепi and Prva were conducted - the EU has been mainly portrayed neutrally, the US and NATO have been portrayed negatively, while Russia and China have been portrayed positively. An important indicator of the current political leadership preferences and the state of media freedom is the situation in which RTS (Radio Television Serbia), as state television, did not present any negative material on China and Russia. On the contrary, negative material on the EU, the US and NATO have been present (Istinomer, 2020).

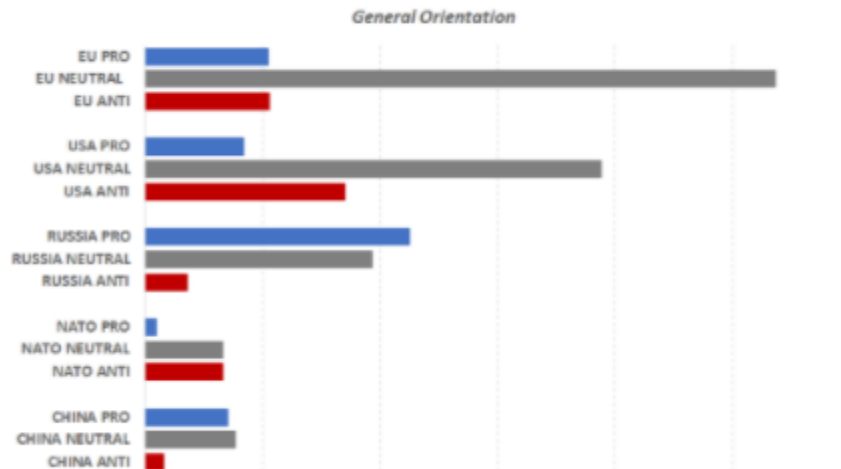
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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Vuk Vuksanović



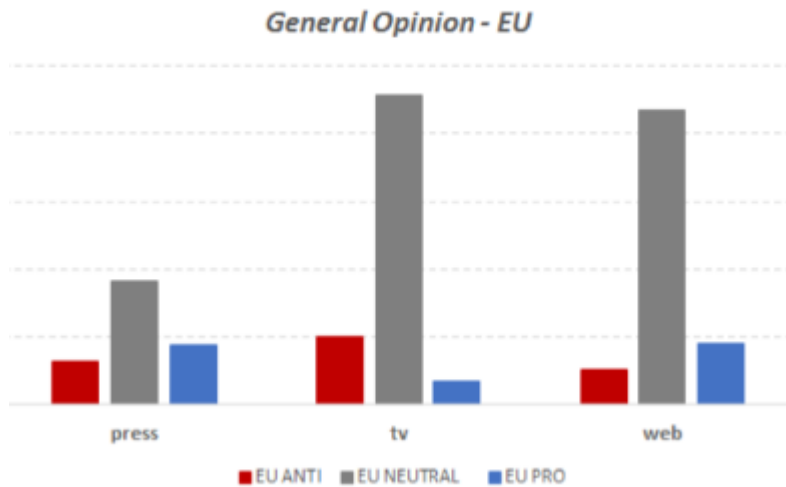
## Reporting on the EU, the US, Russia and China

Picture 12. General orientation



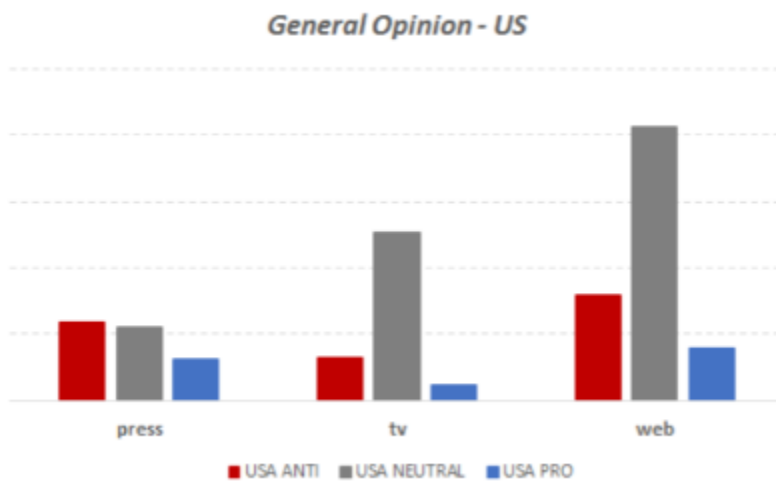
Source: Istinomer, 2020

Picture 13. General opinion-EU



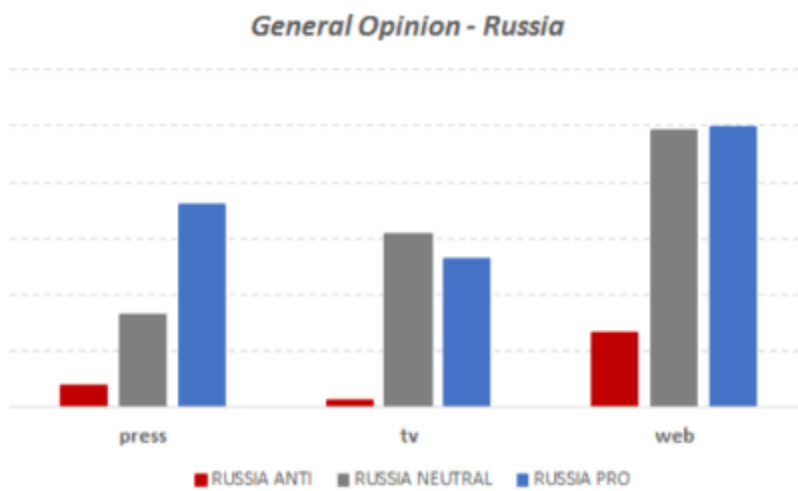
Source: Istinomer, 2020

**Picture 14. General opinion-US**



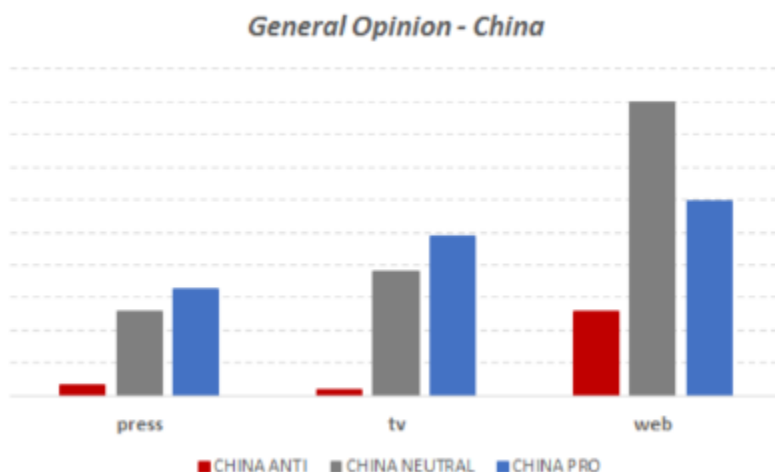
Source: Istinomer, 2020

**Picture 15. General opinion- Russia**



Source: Istinomer, 2020

**Picture 16. General opinion- China**



Source: Istinomer, 2020

Three respondents from our expert sample answered that Serbia's foreign policy is directly influenced by public sentiments. More precisely, one of our respondents answered that ruling elites in Serbia are led by public sentiments to a great extent when conducting foreign policy, very often manipulating information when their moves contradict with the voters' attitudes. The strong position of ruling elites and almost complete media control allow great flexibility in conducting foreign policy, since there are few critics in the national and mainstream media. In addition, there are no in-depth public discussions on foreign policy priorities. Another respondent answered that domestic politics mainly influences foreign policy during pre-election campaigns while prevailing nationalistic ideology is present. The fourth of our respondents also added that Serbia's daily politics unfortunately negatively affects relations with other countries, mainly with neighbours, ex-Yugoslav countries, spurring religious and national hatred, war mongering, denial of war crimes, revisionism, endangering the position of the Serbian minority, not resolving problems of open borders with ex YU countries, etc.

Domestic politics is, according to one respondent, a defining factor of Serbia's foreign policy. According to the respondent, Serbia's foreign policy is currently led by the ruling party and leading decision-makers. In addition, a great number of our respondents, i.e. six of them, agree

that Serbia's current foreign policy is "in the service of preserving ruling elites in power". One of them answered that internal actors, that is to say, ruling elites, manipulate foreign influences in order to secure their positions domestically. According to the respondent, Serbia's foreign policy is used by the current political elite to keep them in power at any cost, using statements such as "The problem of Kosovo will be solved", "The government is stable", "The opposition is Russophile and uses the question of Kosovo", etc. Furthermore, staying in power is seen by one respondent as one of the determinants of Serbia's current foreign policy in a way that the political leadership is constantly arguing that it will resolve all open questions if it stays in power, while simultaneously trying to make the opposition look bad. The same respondent also argued that current populist trends and leaders in some European countries are useful for keeping Serbia's political elite in power. Another respondent answered that domestic political calculations affect Serbia's foreign policy. As expressed by one respondent, Serbia's domestic politics is extremely anti-European, affecting in that way the proclaimed goal of EU integration. Still, one of the surveyed answered that domestic politics are affecting Serbia's foreign policy, but it could be said that Serbia's foreign policy is "well controlled" and, to a great extent, became principled regarding the Kosovo issue. Even though the majority of the respondents agreed that domestic politics influence to a great extent Serbia's foreign policy, one respondent seems to be opposed to the others, answering that the impact of domestic politics is relevant only concerning the Kosovo issue, adding that all other questions of institutional and personal nature have almost no impact on foreign policy decisions. Furthermore, according to one respondent, a country's politics – both domestic and foreign – should be harmonized and result in achieving its national interests, but the first precondition for that is the stability of the government, which should ensure foreign policy conduct. This answer could imply that Serbia's current political situation, in which the new government was formed after four months, heavily affects foreign policy. Many important issues in Serbia's foreign affairs happened while the new government has still not been formed - among the most important ones is the signing of the Washington Agreement. That gives credibility to the argument that the President of Serbia and a small number of persons close to him are conducting and leading Serbia's foreign policy alone.

The representatives of the main political parties in Serbian Parliament, SNS and SPS have a similar attitude regarding this question – "A child behaves on the street in the way his parents taught him to behave" and "The winner on the internal plan leads foreign policy".

Hence, as it has been seen, balancing in Serbia's foreign policy by ruling elites can, to a great extent, be interpreted and understood if domestic politics are taken into account. Public sentiments and interest-based calculations by ruling elites are seen by many respondents as significant for pursuing close relations with powers such as Russia, China, the EU and the US. For example, the reason why Serbian political elites have been keeping the Russian option open stems from several factors. In the first place, it is important not to alienate pro-Russian voters, which make a big part of the Serbian electorate. Furthermore, the Kosovo question is particularly important for keeping the Russian option open since the Serbian government calculated that in order to reach the settlement in which Serbia will not be perceived as a total loser among its constituents, Serbia has to provide support of great power such as Russia. Hence, as long as the Kosovo question remains unresolved and as long as Serbian ruling elites do not reach a settlement which will be acceptable to its public, Russia will stay important in Serbia's foreign policy (Vuksanović, 2018). In addition, as long as topics, such as "Russia vs. the West" or foreign power competition in Serbia are present, political leadership in Serbia can feel safe that no one is going to ask about the tough and unpleasant questions about domestic politics, such as the media freedom or state capture (Bechev, 2017).

#### *6.5.1. The rule of one man and the implications for foreign policy choices?*

In the survey, one respondent answered that leaders' ideological affinity significantly affects Serbia's foreign policy, citing the example of Serbia's strengthened ties with Hungary through deepening relations between Vučić and Orban. According to this respondent, Vučić emphasizes bilateral relations with countries that he perceives as important ones, such as Turkey, Italy, Belarus and Azerbaijan, but without taking into consideration the rule of law and the freedom of media. This makes us pose a question - do foreign policy choices in Serbia really depend on one person - its President?

The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, has taken the role of the main negotiator under the Brussels dialogue, conducts meetings with foreign diplomats, and negotiates all economic issues with partners like China, Russia, Turkey, side-lining the role of ministers in charge of these issues. While Vučić was Prime Minister, Serbia indeed had some features of a chancellor system, in which the President at that time, Tomislav Nikolić, did not have crucial political importance.

However, as Vučić became the President of Serbia, power started being transferred from Prime Minister's to the Presidential position. In addition, according to the Law on President (article 9), the President of the Republic cannot have any other public function, which contradicts the current state in which Aleksandar Vučić is leading SNS (Nenadović, 2018). Hence, it looks like his figure became prominent in Serbia's foreign policy, concentrating most of political power. Parallel to that, the state of the rule of law has constantly been criticized by civil society organisations from Serbia. The EU insists on the reforms in the field of the rule of law, arguing that the progress in Chapters 23 and 24 will dictate the pace of further integration, along with Chapter 35 (Kosovo issue), insisting that Serbia has to speed up reforms in this sector and respond to the challenges in judiciary and freedom of speech (Danas, 2018). Certainly, there are practical implications of the lack of the rule of law and democratic backsliding in Serbia for its EU membership goal. After the June parliamentary elections, the Socialist and Democratic Group in the European Parliament urged EU member states not to open new chapters with Serbia, before an acceptable level of democracy is restored, calling the new Serbian Parliament "a mockery of democracy". Tanja Fajon, S&D MEP and the chair of the EP delegation for relations with Serbia, has declared that the level of democracy has deteriorated to a large extent. According to her, the new situation in which there is no parliamentary opposition calls into question the legitimacy of the new Parliament (S&D, 2020). The fact that Serbia did not open any negotiation chapter during 2020 is a direct consequence of such a state of democracy. According to Vladimir Bilčík, European Parliament Rapporteur for Serbia, if there is no progress in the rule of law and fight against corruption, there will be no opening of new negotiation chapters (Radišić, 2020). All of that makes us pose a question - is EU integration still Serbia's priority?

According to the above-mentioned BCBP study, Serbia's public opinion on this issue is as follows: only 9% of the surveyed think that EU integration is the main priority of Serbia's foreign policy. In addition, just one-fifth of the respondents think that Serbia should harmonize its foreign policy with the EU. Furthermore, the majority - 51% of the respondents does not support Serbia's EU integration, while 46% would support Serbia joining the EU. According to the results of the study, the number of citizens who do not support Serbia's EU integration increased from 2017, when only 35% of the respondents were against EU membership. In addition, 58% of the respondents believe that Serbia will never become an EU member, while

two-thirds of the respondents are indifferent towards the future of the EU and would not feel sorry if the EU fell apart because of its internal problems. Almost half of Serbian citizens believe that the EU will not accept Serbia as its member (Bjeloš, Vuksanović, Šterić, 2020, p. 5-6). Clearly, the EU's reluctance and enlargement fatigue because of its own internal problems have produced among Serbia's citizens the feeling that enlargement is distant and uncertainty whether it will ever happen, reducing in that way enthusiasm and support for EU integration. On the other hand, a strong pro-Chinese and pro-Russian campaign in Serbian media at the EU's expense, has additionally reduced enthusiasm for EU integration among Serbia's citizens.

Taking into consideration such political situation in Serbia in which most of the political power is concentrated in one man, affecting the rule of law and weakening state institutions, it was interesting to see whether experts from Serbia's civil society and representatives of political parties think that EU accession is still Serbia's primary goal. Even though a significant number of experts from our survey (7) responded that EU integration is formally Serbia's goal, they argue that the slow pace of reforms implementation in crucial areas such as the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, and the media freedom, necessary for advancing on the EU path, is in direct contradiction to that. One expert even argues that EU integration is not Serbia's goal anymore. On the other hand, the EU's reduced will towards enlargement (which is currently not perceived as the EU's priority) is also seen as a problem by some of the experts from the survey (4), amplifying the feeling of a distant EU perspective. The EU's inability to act unanimously, but at the same time demanding unanimity in voting in the enlargement policy, allowing one country to slow down the whole enlargement process, as it is the case with the Bulgarian veto on North Macedonia's accession negotiations, represents a serious obstacle to the EU integration process. The Bulgarian veto sends a message to the whole Western Balkan region that regardless of success in reform implementation, EU membership is not certain, reducing in that way enthusiasm for EU integration on the other hand. In addition, constant balancing with other powers such as Russia, China and the US, emphasizing cooperation with them at the expense of the cooperation with the EU, additionally puts Serbia's EU orientation into question. Furthermore, according to Novaković, it seems that Serbia's current political elite is not completely interested in EU integration. That comes from several reasons: in the first place, the political path towards EU membership is not clear. Also, Serbia's political elite is aware that EU membership undoubtedly presupposes Kosovo's independence, since some EU member states

might insist on that. In his opinion, as long as Serbia's political elite does not get support from citizens for that, Serbia will be far from EU integration. Even though there is a certain will for EU accession, that is far from the focus which Serbia had in 2007, 2008 or 2012. Maybe one of the most important problems is that many young people, educated and specialised for the EU integration process, left the system<sup>32</sup>.

It is interesting to see how the answers of the SNS and SPS representatives differ. Namely, according to the SPS representative, EU integration has never been Serbia's priority, while the SNS representative replied that EU integration is the goal of Serbia's foreign policy.

Leaders' ideological affinity can be important in foreign policy, as mentioned before. The concentration of power in one man, neglecting institutions, lack of the freedom of media, as well as state capture, unfortunately represent the current situation in Serbia's domestic affairs. Maybe the tendency of Serbia's political elites to achieve good relations with China and Russia as countries that are perceived to be opposed to democratic Western order and their usually positive media coverage could be interpreted in that way (ideological affinity, since both countries have autocratic political strongmen). It is also correct to notice that a significant part of the Serbian public is still, as a consequence of the 1990s, NATO bombing, wars and Milošević's isolationistic politics in which the West is described as an enemy, reserved towards the West. Also, the cult of strong leader, persisting in the Serbian society from the old days, and was most evident during Tito's rule, is present in a great part of Serbia's public even today. Still, taking into account the latest developments, gradual distancing from Russia and turning to the most powerful Western player, the US, it could be noticed that something else, more than all previously mentioned, dictates the moves of the current political elites. To put it simply, interests are the most important thing that affects current political leadership decisions. From that stems the large part of Serbia's balancing act - to get the most from the partner who offers the most, while keeping the optimal relations with other powers. For a long time, Russia has been one of the most important powers for Serbia because of Kosovo. Still, with the Belgrade-Priština dialogue progressing, without any significant role played by Russia in it, its importance has started decreasing. The EU, whose membership has been declared as the main goal, without tangible and clear prospects of providing membership to Serbia, loses its credibility. On the other

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Igor Novaković



hand, the US emerged as a partner of great importance. So, we came to the conclusion that interests are one of the most important reasons behind the balancing act. But the question which imposes itself is - whose interests dictate the choices in Serbia's foreign policy?

#### *6.5.2. Coronavirus, brother Si and Serbia's foreign policy*

Another recent development has revealed the impact of domestic interests and politics on Serbia's foreign policy. It is about the recent phenomenon – coronavirus. Unlike other Balkan countries, in which China's "mask diplomacy"<sup>33</sup> did not achieve a major success, in Serbia it was quite the opposite. However, the reasons for such a success have nothing to do with China but more with Belgrade's foreign policy (Vuksanović, 2020). On March 15th, the President of Serbia announced the introduction of a state of emergency in order to limit the coronavirus's spread. In one of his announcements, Vučić stated that he had asked the Chinese President Xi Jinping for help and expected a positive response because the Chinese President is not just "a friend of Serbian people", but also "a brother of Serbia". While this discourse of Serbia's foreign policy is not new, still, it is a step forward from "friendly" to "brotherly relations" between these two leaders and countries. The "special relationship" was put on display already at the beginning of the crisis, before the outbreak in Serbia. Namely, Vučić sent a letter of support to the Chinese President in which he called President Xi "a dear" and "a great friend" of Serbia. Additionally, Vučić declared that he would visit Wuhan, if necessary, to express his support. Even though Vučić did not go to Wuhan, eventually, Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dačić visited Beijing in February (Vladisavljev, 2020). In addition, on 21st March, Vučić welcomed an aircraft with the Chinese medical aid at the Belgrade airport, kissing the Chinese flag (Vuksanović, 2020). But the question is - why friendship with China became so beneficial to Vučić and his ruling elite?

The most evident reason for using China is domestic political gains for Vučić and SNS, since deepening Serbian-Chinese relations represents good marketing. Unlike EU financing, Chinese financing can be timed to occur simultaneously with the local political and electoral cycles which

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<sup>33</sup> A policy in which China became a donor and paid supplier of medical equipment in countries impacted by the coronavirus (Vuksanović, 2020).

allows Vučić and his party to promote themselves as the ones who enabled Chinese capital influx (Vuksanović, 2020). In addition, Vučić, in that way, represents himself as “a person who succeeded in tying one small country as Serbia with a global power such as China”.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, as one of the respondents answered, the good relations that Vučić is establishing with China could help the regime to secure its protection. Another sign of the Serbian gratitude towards China and its President emerged in the form of billboards with the message “Thank you brother Si” across Belgrade. In addition, the banner on which “Chinese and Serbs - brothers forever” was written was set up in a park between Serbia’s presidential palace and Parliament in Belgrade. The proliferation of pro-Chinese billboards and banners in Belgrade at first glance served to create enthusiasm for China in Serbia. However, a closer look at the robust PR campaign in pro-regime media revealed something more. In the messages spread via social networks, Serbia’s government’s response to the corona crisis was praised. Also, the aid Serbia received from China was emphasized, while the EU’s aid was more or less ignored. On the basis of the above-mentioned developments, it can be concluded that the campaign was primarily intended to praise the government’s response to the crisis, using China as a powerful tool to increase the popularity in a sensitive period just before the elections (Ruge, Popescu, 2020).

Another question imposed itself - did coronavirus change the course of Serbia’s foreign policy, taking into account Vučić’s critics on behalf of the EU, or that just served him to collect political gains among the nationalistic electorate and as a tactic to urge the EU to provide more aid? In the same press conference in which Vučić declared that “the only country which can help Serbia is China, he criticized the EU’s approach towards Serbia and the EU-wide ban on the export of medical goods. In his address, Vučić declared that “European solidarity does not exist” (Vladislavlj, 2020). The lack of solidarity among the EU countries at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis response during the first weeks, the closure of borders, and the slower reaction (unlike Chinese) negatively affected the EU’s image. Even though the decision to ban the export of medical supplies to the region was subsequently withdrawn, it generated an impression of abandonment. In addition, the EU did not include WB countries in its own crisis recovery package (Cameron, Leigh, 2020). Still, after Vučić’s speech in which he criticized the EU, calling the European solidarity “a fairy tale”, the EU provided EUR 93 million of aid to Serbia. Could this action of Serbian political leadership be interpreted again as playing external powers

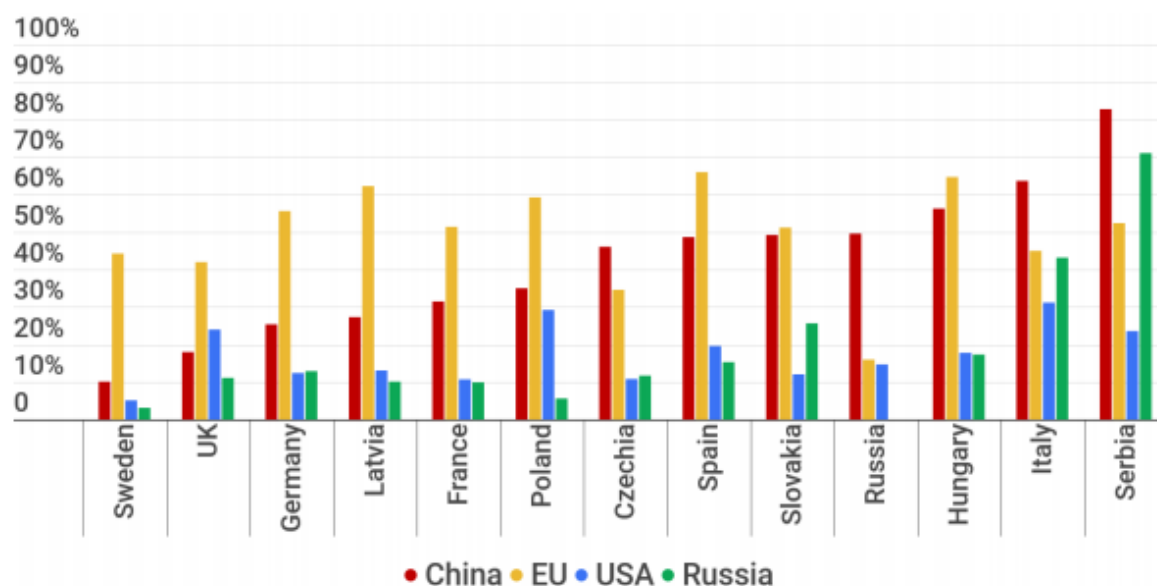
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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Vuk Vuksanović

against each other in order to extract all possible economic and political benefits from all sides (Vuksanović, 2020)?

These narratives used by politicians clearly had some consequences regarding public opinion in Serbia on these powers. Even though the EU is by far the greatest donor to Serbia, providing through pre-accession funds more than EUR 3.6 billion in grants during the last 18 years and 70% of all investments to Serbia are from the EU, according to the recent poll, the vast majority of Serbia's citizens still believe that China and Russia are two countries which invest the most (Muzergues, 2020). In addition, the survey conducted by Turcsányi et al. this year, shows how Serbia's citizens view the help which came from the EU, the US, Russia and China during COVID-19 crisis.

**Picture 17. How much did the following countries/entities help your country during the COVID-19 pandemic? (% of respondents thinking the country/entity helped)**

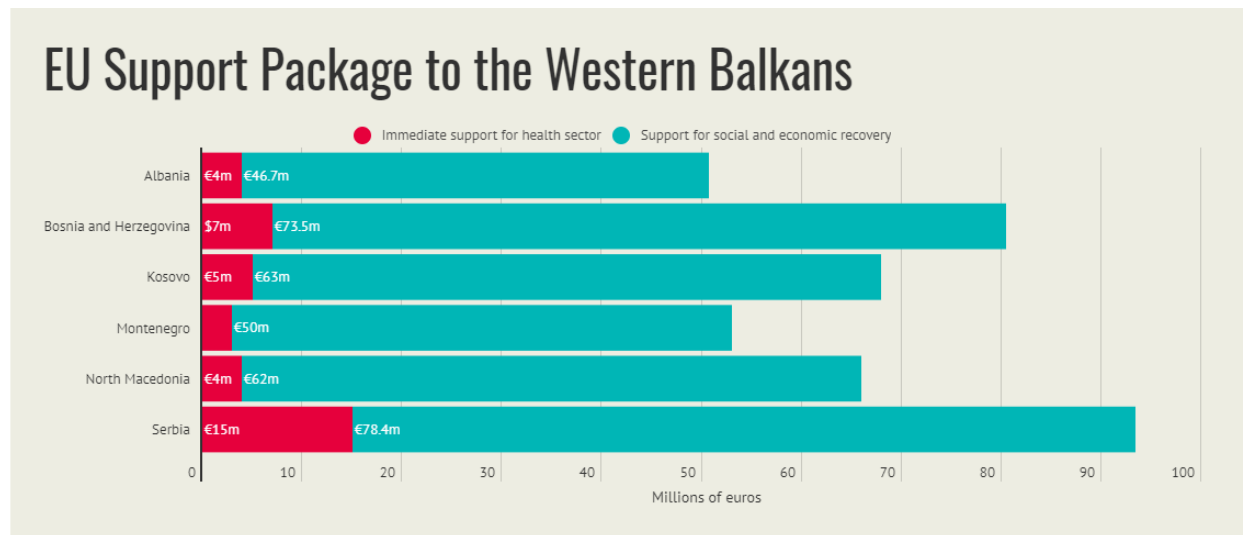


Source: Turcsányi, Šimalčík, Kironská, Sedláková, et al., 2020, p. 23

As a response to the coronavirus crisis, the EU provided Serbia with EUR 93 million, 15 million of immediate support for the health sector and EUR 78.4 million for economic recovery (Shehaj, 2020). Additionally, the EU provided EUR 455 million in grants and loans for a regional economic recovery package, as a support for the private sector. Moreover, the European

Investment Bank will provide EUR 1.7 million in loans for the region's economic recovery (Ruge, Popescu, 2020).

**Picture 18. EU Support Package to the Western Balkans**



Source: Shehaj, 2020

In comparison to the aid from the EU, the aid coming from China was loudly praised. However, neither the exact content nor quantity of medical supplies from China was made public at any point (Ruge, Popescu, 2020). It is not known what the exact number of medical equipment donated by China and Chinese companies is and what has been purchased by Serbia. While in other countries from the WB region, the amount of medical equipment donated and purchased from China was publicly revealed, during the press conference attended by the Chinese Ambassador to Serbia, Vučić said that he is not in a position to reveal that information (Vladislavljev, 2020). The lack of information regarding financial aid coming from Russia is not a novel thing, since in the period from 2000 to 2018, no financial aid to Serbia was publicly registered (Ruge, Popescu, 2020).

Additionally, this outbreak serves as another example of Serbia's distancing from Russia. Even though Russia has sent medical aid to Serbia as China did, the help from China was presented by the media much more than the Russian. Is China taking Russia's place? If China after the outbreak of coronavirus took a more significant place in Serbia's foreign relations and became an even more important partner than it used to be, evidently overshadowing Russia, the question is

– why did that happen? Why did the Serbian government calculate that “friendship made of steel” with China is of utmost importance and deserved to be more promoted in public via media than other partners? We have seen through a couple of examples how Russia’s importance for Serbia, mainly evident in the energy sector and for the Kosovo question, with the continuing of the Belgrade-Priština dialogue under the US leadership, has gradually started declining, while “brotherly relations” with China are shown to be more and more important for Serbia, at the expense of other partners such as the EU. Maybe the right word here is “shown”. I used this word on purpose, because clearly, without neglecting Chinese economic presence in Serbia, it is well known who donates the most and who is the most important partner for Serbia (referring to the EU), even though the situation became more complicated with renewed attention of the US. Still, Serbian officials clearly emphasized China at the expense of other partners during the pandemic. In order to answer this question, as always, it is important to take into account domestic politics. As mentioned, elections in Serbia were scheduled for 21<sup>st</sup> June. Vučić announced the introduction of the state of emergency on 15<sup>th</sup> March. Since a large part of his electorate is anti-Western oriented, playing on the anti-Western card and using nationalistic rhetoric is always a good tool for getting the support of the electorate. Hence, good relations with China as a non-Western power, economically significant, supporting Serbia on the Kosovo issue, and behaving differently from the EU, which is always demanding painful decisions from Serbia, is a great way for SNS to achieve political gains and attract votes. In addition, China has gradually started replacing Russia because Serbia’s political leadership realized that the West perceives China more seriously than Russia, as currently the only country which has the potential to impose itself as a rival to the US<sup>35</sup>. Furthermore, the different interests of Serbia and Russia regarding the Kosovo question also affect these relations. Hence, because of Russia and Serbia’s different perspective regarding the Kosovo issue, Vučić has calculated that China represents a better and more credible partner. It is also important to bear in mind that even though China, with its way of doing business, affects procedures, transparency, and environmental standards in Serbia, it still wants to see Serbia as part of the EU because of its own interests – the EU market (Kulačin, 2020). Hence, if the Kosovo status is resolved, China’s importance, unlike Russian, will not be much reduced for Serbia, since besides the support for the Kosovo question, China is heavily present in Serbia’s economy.

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Vuk Vuksanović

***6.6. The balancing act - until when is it possible to lead this kind of policy and is it currently the best solution for Serbia?***

To finalize the analysis and reach a conclusion, it was important to see what experts and political representatives think about the sustainability of this policy and to what extent it is feasible – i.e. until when will Serbia be able to lead this policy and how much is it beneficial for Serbia?

According to the results, most of the respondents believe that this policy directly depends on the Kosovo issue and Serbia's EU perspective, arguing that as long as the Kosovo question is not resolved and the EU perspective becomes more tangible, Serbia will continue to balance between the EU, the US, Russia and China. Out of 15 respondents, 5 of them explicitly argue that this kind of policy is not beneficial to Serbia. On the contrary, it can put Serbia's interests, such as EU integration, into question. In one respondent's opinion, by leading this policy, in the era of realism and geopolitical competing of big powers, Serbia risks becoming an object, not a subject in international relations. Besides, by balancing between these four actors, Serbia risks losing the support of politically and economically powerful states or experiencing sanctions and international isolation again, as well as suspension of its EU integration process. Because of that, balancing is, in the long run, a bad strategy. Another respondent thinks that more predictable surroundings for small states would be more beneficial than conducting balancing, which is more complicated. However, leading this policy will depend on the Kosovo issue, i.e. Belgrade-Priština relations and Serbia's EU perspective. According to one respondent, Serbia will lead this policy as long as it does not have to make a clear choice. This could happen with opening or closing chapter 31 or finalizing the normalization process with Kosovo. In this respondent's opinion, the balancing act is beneficial only to political elites and their stay in power. Still, in the long run, it is not in Serbia's interest since it hampers Serbia's EU membership perspective. Another respondent answered that as long as there is no unique trans-Atlantic approach to this region, Serbia will be in a position to conduct the balancing act, which is, according to the respondent, absolutely wrong. Besides, the respondent answered that the balancing act is the result of deception that leading the foreign policy in a similar way to Yugoslavian non-alignment is possible. Likewise, one respondent argues that Serbia will conduct this policy as long as the EU does not send a stronger message, and as long as the EU goes through a crisis of internal redefining. According to another respondent, balancing is not a good solution for Serbia.

However, it could only be speculated until when Serbia will lead it. In addition, 3 respondents think that Serbia will not be able to lead this policy much longer. According to one of them, the new EU methodology, which demands explicit public performances of key political leaders, reduces possibilities for balancing, in the way it is present nowadays. In addition, one of them argues that “the maneuvering space” for leading such kind of policy is getting smaller. Balancing policy has always been directly related to the Kosovo issue. Hence, if Serbia reaches the point of achieving the normalization agreement, which opens the possibility for Kosovo to get the chair in the UN (with which Serbia would be consent), Moscow can only keep its influence if it starts a direct confrontation with Belgrade. Similarly, another respondent answered that Serbia would lead the balancing act as long as the Kosovo question is not resolved. Interestingly, according to 2 respondents, balancing policy, in general, is not a bad solution. However, the way Serbia conducts it is problematic. One of them argues that while balancing is not inherently wrong, the problem with Serbia’s balancing act is that it has been lead more tactically than strategically. Still, even in a suboptimal shape, the way it currently is, it can last for a long time, irrespective of success and results. On the other hand, 3 respondents think that Serbia’s balancing act is a good solution. One of them argues that this policy could be led in the long run, which would benefit Serbia the most. However, that decision depends on the foreign policy orientation of the current ruling elite. In addition, another respondent answered that the policy of four pillars is a good solution, which should be pursued as long as it is possible. Still, if the moment comes for Serbia to choose the side, it should opt for cooperation with Brussels and Washington. The third of them thinks that, for the time being, there is no possibility for eliminating the balancing act from Serbia’s foreign policy, adding that if it is conducted properly, it could be a good solution.

While the SPS representative thinks that Serbia will not be able to conduct this policy much longer, the SNS representative answered that balancing does not exist in an official discourse since 2012. This is interesting because even though lately, representatives of the ruling elite do not have a problem to declare that Serbia is balancing between the EU, the US, Russia and China<sup>36</sup> explicitly (while formally keeping EU integration as an official goal), until recently it seemed that they were more reluctant to declare such thing, constantly emphasizing EU

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<sup>36</sup> In June this year, Vučić declared that Belgrade would keep balancing between the West, China and Russia, while it pursues EU membership and a settlement with Kosovo (Vasović, 2020)

membership as Serbia's official goal<sup>37</sup>. Maybe this shows us a significant, already observed trend in Serbia's foreign policy – the reduced importance of EU integration and pursuing a high level of cooperation with other actors such as the US, Russia and China.

As seen, the opinion of experts from Serbia's civil society is not unique on this question. However, most of them believe that Serbia's balancing act in the way it is conducted, at the bottom line, is not a good solution in the long run. Igor Novaković and Vuk Vuksanović share this opinion. According to Novaković, balancing is conducted primarily because of domestic politics – taking into account Serbia's public opinion and interest of the ruling elite. In his opinion, leading this policy is not in Serbia's citizens' interest. As a small state with limited resources, Serbia is not advisable to conduct this kind of “big policy”, which demands clear policies, educated staff and enough resources. In his opinion, small states, such as Serbia, should aim to tighten their position to other, more powerful partners from their neighbourhood, for various reasons (security, capacities). As a country that is already in EU's and NATO's yard, things are pretty clear for Serbia. In addition, Serbia does not have an exit to the sea, which would provide it with an alternative source of supply. Furthermore, the largest part of Serbia's trade is conducted with the EU and the region. Therefore, that is the direction in which Serbia should seek answers to its foreign policy challenges. Cooperation with other regional powers is highly desirable, but as long as it does not endanger Serbia's primary interests. According to Novaković, Serbia is a post-conflict society that has not succeeded in creating a new identity after the violent disintegration of former Yugoslavia.<sup>38</sup> Even though the balancing act brought some benefits, in the first place to Aleksandar Vučić – in the form of the “silent approval” of his rule or “fast cash” from China, still according to Vuksanović, that is not a strategically conceived policy, but more an opportunistic way of foreign policy leading, which could be led only until the situation permits.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> In 2016, in his speech on the East-West Institute in New York, Vučić declared that Serbia is not balancing, emphasizing Serbia's EU orientation simultaneously with maintaining close ties with Russia (N1, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Igor Novaković

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Vuk Vuksanović



## 7. Conclusion

Analysing Serbia's foreign policy since 2008, several issues could be observed: in the first place, the importance of the Kosovo question and its impact on almost all foreign policy decisions; secondly, Serbia's goal of EU integration and the third – the significance of having close relations with non-Western actors such as China and Russia. In addition, the recently improved relations with the US (which are now questionable because of Biden's victory in the latest US elections) strengthened the importance of this pillar in Serbia's foreign policy. Since 2009, when Tadić introduced the policy of four pillars, Serbia has been balancing between these four actors (the EU, the US, China and Russia). One of the main reasons for pursuing such policy is preserving Kosovo within Serbia, or at least extracting the most possible beneficial outcome. The second reason is urging the EU to become more decisive regarding the enlargement issue by cooperating stronger with Russia, China and the US, showing that the EU is not necessarily the only potential option and direction for Serbia. Another reason for balancing is obtaining maximum economic and political benefits from each of these four actors. Besides the above-mentioned, each of these actors has a particular significance for Serbia. For instance, the EU is Serbia's most significant political and economic partner, which can help Serbia transform itself into a democratic society where the basic elements of a developed society such as the rule of law, media freedom and respect for basic human rights would be ensured. Russia is important because of energy, arms purchasing and economy. China is also seen as important because of the economy, i.e. investment in infrastructure. As still being the most powerful actor in the world, good relations with the US have always been desirable. However, by analysing Serbia's balancing act, one thing particularly became evident – Serbia's domestic politics and the impact of the ruling elites' interests on foreign policy choices. Actually, by analysing Serbia's foreign policy, the extent to which the decision-making process is defined by interests of Serbia's ruling party (SNS) and its leader, Aleksandar Vučić, became clear. Domestic political points are primarily obtained by maintaining close cooperation with non-Western partners, such as Russia and China. Indeed, Russia's and China's importance for Serbia on the Kosovo issue is significant, and there are practical benefits from cooperation with them. However, it seems that many aspects of cooperation with these two actors have been politicised, i.e. exploited by Serbia's ruling elites for their own benefits. We do not have to think much – most of the Chinese

investments in infrastructure or, better to say, loans with poor environmental standards and shady procedures in doing business do not actually make much of a positive impact on Serbia's economy. Not to mention Serbia's official goal – EU integration. It is true that not everything depends on Serbia. Serbia is not the only one “to blame” for its stalemate in the EU integration process. Obviously, the EU currently does not perceive enlargement as a priority. Obviously, it is facing its own internal problems. The EU's foreign policy has always been problematic due to the lack of a unique response on many issues. However, it is clearly stated many times by EU officials – if there is no progress in vital areas such as the rule of law, independent judiciary and media freedom, there will be no progress in the accession process. Unfortunately, Serbia's society is currently far from delivering the requested reforms. The concentration of power in a small number of people at the expense of state institutions, and the slow pace of reform implementation, especially in crucial areas, make the prospect of EU membership unattainable, at least for the time being.

Due to exactly such state of Serbia's society, one of the purposes of this research was to compare and contrast the opinion of experts from Serbia's civil society and main political parties in Parliament, i.e. Serbia's current ruling elite. It has been seen from the analysis that on many issues in Serbia's foreign policy, if not opposed, they have a different opinion. For example, many experts think that by having close relations with Russia and China, Serbia's EU integration is seriously endangered. On the other hand, the representative of the most dominant party - SNS responded that by closely cooperating with Russia and China, Serbia's EU perspective is affected to a limited extent, arguing that Serbia can only benefit from close relations with each of the four pillars. In addition, both pro-regime parties support Serbia's military neutrality, while a significant number of experts are against such a concept, arguing that, taking into account Serbia's limited resources and strategic orientation, that policy is not sustainable. However, many experts are also of the opinion that, for the time being, taking into account public sentiments, it would not be realistic to expect the change of such policy. In general, civil society's biggest criticism on the account of Serbia's ruling elite, could be observed in the section of domestic politics and their influence on Serbia's foreign policy. It is stated by many experts that Serbia's ruling elite takes advantage of the balancing act to fulfill their own interests and to obtain political gains, usually at the expense of Serbia's citizens.

The purpose of this research was to answer the question - to what extent Serbia's balancing act is feasible? As a small, vulnerable country with limited resources, Serbia has recognized the need to become part of a more powerful actor in international relations - the EU. However, the lack of the EU's interest due to its own internal problems and democratic backsliding in Serbia's society allowed other non-Western actors such as Russia and China to make inroads into Serbia. Because of the unresolved Kosovo issue, Serbia sees close relations with Russia and China as a necessity. The distant EU membership additionally opens the possibility for Serbia to conduct the balancing act. But the question is until when will Serbia be able to balance between the four pillars and to what extent that policy actually benefits Serbia. There are some benefits in the short run, but, as mentioned by Vuksanović - mainly for the political elite (points in domestic politics, the increase of Vučić's popularity). But the problem is that Serbia's political leaders clearly want to be in equally good relations with each of these pillars at the same time and not reject benefits coming from close relations with any of them. However, in practice, for Serbia, this policy is not sustainable and feasible in the long run. One of the most obvious reasons is the opposed interests of these four actors, which for the time being seem to tolerate Serbia's balancing. Clearly, Serbia's balancing is feasible to a certain extent for the time being, but only because of the international circumstances that have enabled Serbia to exploit each of these actors' presence. However, it is hard to expect that Serbia will be able to keep balancing in the long run, since in Serbia's case, this kind of policy is opportunistic, as Vuksanović mentioned, not strategically founded. Balancing, the way Serbia conducts it, makes Serbia's foreign policy appear to be without clear goals and orientation. Additionally, leading this kind of policy is not in accordance with its goal of EU integration. As a country that has already chosen its path and oriented toward the EU, emphasizing close relations with actors which (in)directly obstruct its EU integration, puts Serbia's EU perspective into question. However, since EU membership, for the time being, appears as very distant and unreachable, Serbia does not want to renounce any benefits that come out from close relations with other pillars. Therefore, as long as the Kosovo question is not resolved and EU membership does not appear as tangible and reachable, Serbia will keep balancing and using every benefit from close relations with other powers in the meantime.

This research aimed at providing a comprehensive analysis of Serbia's balancing act and its sustainability. Since opposition parties have not been incorporated, including the opinion of

parties from Serbia's whole political spectrum would add value to further research of Serbia's balancing act. In addition, it would be interesting to analyse Serbia's balancing act again in a couple of years time, since, as have seen on the Russian example where China started replacing it, there are no "eternal friendships" between two countries and subjects in IR, but everything depends on interests. It would be interesting to see whether some new actor would emerge as important for Serbia and whether these four pillars would remain equally significant as they are currently.

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