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Serbian Foreign Policy in the Wake of the War in Ukraine

The Four Pillars of Foreign Policy, the Kosovo Issue, and the War in Ukraine

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The War in Ukraine has placed Serbia's "Four Pillars of Foreign Policy" strategy to the test. The strategy was devised in 2009 and has presented the EU as the key pillar, with Russia, China, and the US as the other three. The EU was and is by far the most influential partner in terms of trade and investments, as well as politically since Serbia is committed to EU accession and is a candidate state. Russia is the primary source of gas, oil, and fertilizer and a key ally of Serbia in the UNSC, and supports Serbia's interests in Kosovo and BiH. China is important for its strategic investments in a few companies and investments in key infrastructure projects. The US has the lowest level of trade with Serbia, compared to the other three, however, it is an important investor, particularly in the IT sector. In terms of political ties, tensions exist because of disagreements regarding Kosovo and public perception of the US is generally negative. The War in Ukraine and rising tension between the EU and US on one side and Russia on the other, placed pressure on Serbia to reevaluate its foreign policy strategy. Serbia did join the EU and NATO in condemning Russia and supporting Ukraine on numerous occasions, but it did not impose sanctions on Russia. Internally, the left-ecological and liberal opposition advocates for sanctions, while the right-wing opposition in Serbia is against sanctions. The governing parties are as of yet against imposing sanctions on Russia, but they constantly stress that they are under a lot of pressure to join the sanctions and that they are paying a heavy price for their position. These pressures, real or perceived, coupled with tensions in Kosovo, have resulted in a drop of support for the EU in the general public. Concurrently, over 80% of the population does not support imposing sanctions on Russia.

Chronology of Events regarding the War in Ukraine, Serbia's Official Statements, and Voting Track Record regarding the War in Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine and at the time of this writing the war has been going on for almost five months. Countries aligned with the EU that have close ties with Russia, either as countries on the EU path, such as Serbia or Turkey, or those within the EU, such as Hungary, were placed in a precarious position. Serbia's government was initially restrained with its statements urging both parties to come to a peaceful agreement and cease hostilities. Leaders of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) were more explicit and emotional in their statements, such as **Ivica Dačić**, the leader of the party and President of the Parliament. He stated two days before the invasion that Serbia will not "bloody its

hands in this war amongst brothers." **Aleksandar Vučić**, the leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), was on his visit to Monaco when news reached him that Russia recognized Donetsk and Lugansk Republics. The Ukrainian ambassador in Serbia at that time, **Oleksandar Aleksandrovič**, called Serbia to condemn Russia. Vučić gave a statement to the press asking Ukrainian president Volodimir Zelensky to condemn the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999. Vučić stated that "our military policy is that we are militarily neutral, our policy is that we are on the EU path, we continue our cooperation with China and Russia, we will not abandon our traditional friends, that is the permanent policy of Serbia and it must stay that way." This statement was given on 22 February, before the hostilities started and Serbia's attitude toward the crisis in Ukraine has changed since then.

The EU and the US were largely united in the condemnation of Russia and in introducing a punishing system of sanctions against Russia. From the start, Serbia was asked to join in the condemnation and the sanctions regime. It did so gradually and partially. Firstly, the General Assembly of the UN convened on 2 March to discuss the War in Ukraine. This was an emergency session, the 11th of its kind and the first one in 40 years. The Assembly enacted a Resolution that condemned Russia, with 5 countries being against and 35 undeclared. Serbia voted for the resolution. The resolution was nonbinding and Vučić downplayed its effects, claiming that Serbia supported 4 out of the 13 points, those that do not include any sanctions. Secondly, [the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe voted on 16 March to expel Russia from the organization](#). Russia left the Council on 15 March. Serbian representatives left the assembly at the time of the vote, so they did not vote either for or against expelling Russia. Serbia voted for another Resolution on 24 March which condemned Russia for invading Ukraine and causing a humanitarian crisis. The Resolution called for an immediate ceasefire, only 5 countries were against it and 38 abstained from voting. Next, [on 7 April 2022, the UN General Assembly held a vote to expel Russia from the UN Human Rights Council](#). Serbia was among the 93 nations who voted in favor of the motion. Along with Gadhafi's Libya, Russia is the only other country that has been expelled from this institution. This move was criticized by the right-wing opposition as backstabbing an ally and going against the wishes of the electorate. It should be noted that Serbia imports the majority of its oil through the Adriatic Oil Pipeline (JANAF). The pipeline is controlled by the company of the same name and it is located in Croatia.

Thus as we can see Serbia's stance on the war is clear and in step with EU and US standpoints. However, Serbia is not adhering to the sanctions regime. When it comes to Belarus, the cobelligerent and ally of Russia in the War, according to the European Council's statements from 8 April and 22 April, Serbia has aligned with the EU's sanctions regime against Belarus. Serbia also sanctioned some pro-Russian Ukrainian politicians, such as **Viktor Janukovič**, in March. It

has not imposed sanctions on Russia, however. Ambassadors of EU states, EU officials, the US ambassador in Serbia, leaders of EU states, etc., have all been calling on Serbia to align itself with the EU policy regarding Russia, that is to join the sanctions regime. Visits from the German Foreign Minister, **Annalena Baerbock** on 11 March and German Chancellor **Olaf Scholz** on 10 June also came with encouragements for Serbia to impose sanctions on Russia. Baerbock's visit did not cause that much of a reaction from the Serbian officials and Serbian press. Scholz did, but other events preceded his visit which were more important. Firstly, on 26 April **Antonio Guterres**, the Secretary General of the UN met with **Vladimir Putin** in Moscow. Among other things, Putin stated that Kosovo was a precedent set by the West in the sense that a seceding region does not need acceptance from the central government to secede. "If there is a precedent, the Donbas republics can do the same. This is what they did and we have recognized them as independent states."- Putin claimed during the meeting. **Vučić** reacted to the statement a few days later claiming that "our situation has changed for the worse after Putin's statement, not because he was trying to harm Serbia, but because he used it (*the Kosovo precedent*) to protect his national interests." This marked a turning point in media attitudes toward Russia and official reactions, at least temporarily, where this event was presented as a "stab in the back" by Russia. This also went hand in glove with the general narrative that "everyone is looking out for their own national interests and we should too". The Russian Ambassador, **Aleksandar Bocan Harčenko**, had to react and he went onto "Insajder TV", where he stated that the Russian position regarding Kosovo hasn't changed. Putin's statement was merely meant to illustrate western hypocrisy and double standards, according to the ambassador. Another important event was Kosovo's application for membership in the Council of Europe on 12 May. Its application is being supported by EU states. "Mentors of Pristina are much stronger (than us), and we are a free country that protects its sovereignty and right to make our own decisions"- Vučić asserted. He asked "Pristina's mentors", why are they even calling on Serbia to attend any talks, since no agreement has been honored by the Albanian

side, their mentors support them in disregarding agreements made and solutions are constantly being imposed on Serbia. Other Serbian officials gave even harsher statements and the press even more so. It should be noted that Serbia is dependent on Russian gas and Russian oil accounts for 60% of its imports. However, on 29 May Vučić secured a new gas deal at 400 dollars per 1000 cubic meters of gas. This is up to 10 times cheaper than the prices of Russian gas exports to the EU, as Vučić stated. Therefore, Serbia has a substantial incentive to remain friendly with Russia, and the gas deal has led to another shift in discourse to a more pro-Russian stance. Furthermore, up until 24 June, 370 companies owned by Russian citizens and 906 Russian entrepreneurs opened their accounts in Serbia and registered their businesses. Up to 10 000 Russian citizens immigrated to Serbia, mostly to Belgrade and they are mostly IT workers, whose businesses have been cut off from western markets because of the sanctions. By transferring their businesses to Serbia they can continue their operations at comparable prices to Russia, remain competitive, and maintain business links with the homeland. The capital that these companies bring and the potential employment of local Serbian citizens with these companies provide another incentive for Serbia to remain friendly with Russia. Finally, the visit of **Olaf Scholz** on 10 June aggravated tensions between Serbia and the West. Before coming to Serbia Scholz visited Pristina, where he said that “mutual recognition is the end goal of the dialogue process” between Belgrade and Pristina. During a press conference with Scholz **Vučić** said “If you think you should threaten us because we're trying to protect the UN order and reach a compromise solution, no problem. You do your job; we will do ours”. Again, other Serbian officials and the media were much less restrained with their statements. The most recent event that visibly aggravated relations with the West is the announcement of Kosovo that it will not allow the use of Serbian IDs and license plates in Kosovo, but rather a “declaration” would be issued at the border crossing, allowing a Serbian national to move through Kosovo. More problematic, however, are the license plates. Those who do not register their cars with Kosovan license plates will see their cars nationalized by 30 September,

according to Kosovan Prime Minister **Albin Kurti**. Vučić held a press conference on 29 June in reaction to these announcements, where he accused the Quint (US, UK, Germany, France, and Italy) of supporting Albanians in their effort to ethnically cleanse Serbs from Kosovo. Serbia has tried to find a compromise, but “no one wants that, they just want to expel our people” and that Serbia “has been suffering for years the lies peddled by the Albanians and the Quint”. The matter is still very fresh and ongoing, but it does seem like a watershed moment. Serbian officials and media are warning the public that an attack will be carried out by October on Serbs in Kosovo. Another important event happened on 23 June, when Moldova and Ukraine received EU candidate status, while BiH did not, and North Macedonia and Albania did not receive their dates when accession process talks should begin, because of Bulgarian blockades. This soured the mood of the Serbian public toward the EU.

Political Parties and their Foreign Policy Positions

It should be noted that statements from the three key SNS figures in the government: President **Vučić**, Prime Minister **Ana Brnabić**, and Minister of Foreign Affairs **Nikola Selaković**, were largely in tune with one another. These statements can be summarized into a few key points. Firstly, Serbia condemns Russian aggression against Ukraine and supports its territorial integrity, as Ukraine supports Serbian territorial integrity. Secondly, Serbia has suffered under sanctions and it isn't in favor of sanctions in principle and sanctions against Russia specifically, due to close relations between the two. Thirdly, the West is hypocritical and testing its muscle in forcing Serbia to align with the EU foreign policy, while members of the EU and NATO themselves do not. Statements implied Hungary and Turkey respectively, but they were rarely singled out explicitly. SNS is, however, a very diverse political entity. **Aleksandar Vulin**, the Minister of Interior, stands out for his vehemently pro-Russian statements, while conversely **Zorana Mihajlović**, the Minister of Mining and Energy, stands out for her vehemently pro-western statements. Differences also exist between some other prominent

members of the party who do not hold any government positions, like **Vladimir Đukanović** (very pro-Russian) and **Dragan Šormaz** (very pro-NATO). Though the party has a Russophile and a Europhile wing it can generally be described as pro-EU, but as a party that seeks to preserve close ties with Russia, because of: oil and gas supplies, support on the Kosovo issue, historical ties, and pro-Russian sentiments of the wider Serbian electorate. This has been changing, however. For example, while at the beginning of the conflict sanction against Russia were categorically ruled out by key leaders of SNS, by May and June this has changed. Vučić and other officials speak of a “heavy cost” that Serbia is paying for not imposing sanctions on Russia. For example, it cannot access capital markets and loans are much more expensive as Vučić said on Prva TV on 15 May. Furthermore, Vučić has stated multiple times that “an alternative for Germany cannot be found” and he and other officials, such as the Head of the Chamber of Commerce, **Marko Čadež**, emphasized Germany as the leading jobs provider in Serbia (77 000 workers employed by German companies) and leading trade partner. The general tone from May is that Serbia may be forced to impose sanctions on Russia, as the Mayor of Novi Sad **Miloš Vučević** said, “it has a knife to her throat” and is “being held hostage”.

The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), specifically the leader of the party **Ivica Dačić** and **Dušan Bajatović**, the Director of Srbija Gas, the national gas company, were more “pro-Russian” in their statements. Dačić would emphasize “Western hypocrisy” and friendly relations between Russia and Serbia, while Bajatović would usually emphasize how irreplaceable Russian gas is for Serbia and the whole of Europe. This party is widely seen as being pro-Russian. It should be noted that the War in Ukraine coincided with the Serbian parliamentary, presidential, and local elections in Belgrade. No single party advocated for sanctions against Russia during the election campaigns. However, the Freedom and Justice Party (SSP), which is the leader of the liberal United for the Victory of Serbia coalition (UZPS) and the MORAMO left-ecological coalition, have changed their views after the elections. They are now supportive of sanctions and ask the

government to fully align with EU policies regarding Russia. The right-wing opposition parties, Dveri, Zavetnici, and the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) (10+10+15 MPs out of 250 in the Serbian Parliament), are unanimous in their categorical no to sanctions against Russia. All the parties expressed their views succinctly at the “Okolo magazine” show on the public TV RTS on 24 May 2022. Right-wing opposition party representatives: **Boško Obradović** (leader of Dveri), **Miloš Jovanović** (leader of DSS), and **Dušan Proroković** (advisor to Zavetnici party) agreed that Serbia should not impose sanctions on Russia because that would mean going against its national interests and betraying a crucial ally. They reject EU grants and investments arguments as arguments of “turncoats” and that sovereignty is much more valuable. In fact, they criticize the National Security Council for stating that they will not impose sanctions “for now”. These parties would like to see an unequivocal no to sanctions against Russia, not a conditional one. **Boško Obradović** stands out among the right-wing in asking that a referendum should be held on whether sanctions should be imposed on Russia because no single party was for these sanctions before the elections and some of them now are. Therefore, voting for sanctions in parliament or by the government would be going against the democratic will of the citizens. These three parties have remained consistent in their foreign policy views since before the elections. **Vuk Jeremić**, the leader of the People’s Party is against any sanctions against Russia, on pragmatic and moral grounds, meaning that Russian support on the Kosovo issue is needed and sanctions would jeopardize that and Serbia as a country that has suffered under sanctions principally should be against sanctions.

Marinika Tepić, one of the leaders of the Freedom and Justice Party (SSP) is for sanctions because Serbia must be on the side that condemns the aggression. Furthermore, Ukraine doesn’t recognize Kosovo, which obliges Serbia to support Ukraine. Marinika Tepić stated that the People’s Party didn’t want to sign a coalition statement against the War on 24 February. Furthermore, the People’s Party was the reason that SPS and the entire coalition UZPS didn’t

come out against the War more vehemently during the elections. **Dobrica Veselinović**, one of the leaders of the Don't Drown Belgrade (NDBG) movement within the left-ecological MORAMO coalition argues for joining sanctions against Russia and aligning with the EU. He also accused the current political elite of corruptive ties to Russia, which is the reason why energy diversification and more investments in renewables didn't occur. MORAMO have also changed its positions after the elections, because "the situation has changed" according to Veselinović.

In general terms, the right-wing opposition parties, which were Eurosceptic before the War, are now openly anti-EU and advocate that the accession process should be stopped, as the EU doesn't want Serbia and is being hypocritical and aggressive towards Serbia. However, they still advocate that economic ties should be maintained, but politically the EU path is no longer tenable. They advocate for a neutral foreign policy, with closer ties to China and Russia. The People's Party is not so explicitly anti-EU, but they do have more in common with the right-wing opposition than with their former coalition partners. SSP and the rest of UZPS, as well as MORAMO advocate for following the EU in regard to the War in Ukraine. They are also very supportive of EU accession and do not see Russia as a reliable (or moral) partner of Serbia. China is rarely mentioned by these two political-ideological blocks, but they do criticize China primarily for the labor and environmental policies of Chinese companies in Serbia, such as Linglong (tire company in Zrenjanin) and Zijin (mining company in Bor). In brief, the War in Ukraine has refocused the foreign policy debate on EU vs Russia, with relations with China, the US, and Turkey being second-rate topics in the media and within individual political parties.

The Four Pillars of Foreign Policy Legacy and Public Perception of Major Powers

The Four Pillars Foreign Policy is a foreign policy strategy devised in Serbia in 2009 by then President **Boris Tadić**. The premise of this policy is rather simple, Serbia will stay on its EU path,

but it will pursue strategic partnerships with the US, China, and Russia. This strategy is a reaction to the secession of Kosovo from Serbia and EU and US support of said secession. China and Russia were meant to be "backup pillars" in case the key ones, the EU and to a lesser degree, the US falter or crumble. What does this mean in practice? Regarding the EU, Serbia signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in 2008, which came into force in 2013. On November 30, 2009, Serbia received the visa-free travel regime to the EU, the so-called "white Schengen". Serbia received the candidate status in 2012 and started opening accession chapters in 2013. A lot has happened since then and the relations between Serbia and the EU were generally on an upward trajectory.

In the last six months, this has changed, due to the War in Ukraine. EU remains Serbia's most important trading partner with the value of trade reaching 30.28 billion euros by the end of 2021, which was 60% of the total value of trade of Serbia. Serbian exports to the EU have risen from 3.2 billion euros in 2009 to 11 billion in 2021. Germany is the largest individual trading partner with 13% of Serbian exports going to Germany and 13% of imports coming from Germany. As of 2021, companies from the EU and public entities comprise 68% of total foreign direct investments in Serbia (FDI). The EU is the largest emigration destination for Serbian citizens and EU businesses and Serbian businesses that are tied to the EU employ over 900 000 workers in Serbia. However, political tensions due to the War in Ukraine have led to a drop in the popularity of the EU in the public. A yearly poll conducted by the [Institute for European Affairs](#) has shown that support for EU accession in Serbia has dropped below 50% for the first time since the poll has been conducted, 13 years ago. According to the poll, 45% support EU accession, while 43% are against it and others are undeclared. This poll has been referenced multiple times by Serbian officials. According to [Ipsos](#), if a referendum on EU accession was held in late April 35% would vote for accession and 44% against. Pressure to impose sanctions on Russia, the crisis in Kosovo, and the crisis in BiH, which are both covered extensively by Serbian media and addressed by Serbian politicians, are likely the causes of this shift in opinion. The EU is presented in the media

as acting against Serbian national interest in BiH and Kosovo.

Regarding the sanctions and the War in Ukraine, a right-wing think tank, New Serbian Political Thought (NSPM), published a poll on 20 May 2022. The results show that 82% of the public is against imposing sanctions on Russia, while 49% believe that Russia is “in the right” regarding the War in Ukraine, 68.7% believe that NATO is the key actor to blame for starting the War. This opinion poll was considered controversial, as NSPM is right-wing and pro-Russian. However, Demostat, a think tank that is close to the opposition, liberal and pro-EU conducted a similar poll in late June and published it on 10 July. This poll shows that only 30% of those polled support EU accession, while 51% oppose it. This poll also shows that 80% of respondents oppose sanctions against Russia. The level of support for Russia is a product of 30 years of political processes in Serbia. However, to simplify, Russia supports Serbia in regards to Kosovo and it also supports the autonomy of Republika Srpska in BiH, which is why it is seen as an ally of Serbia and Serbs, particularly by right-wing leaning voters. This support amounts to statements, voting in the UNSC in Serbia’s favor, using veto powers in UNSC, etc. In terms of economic cooperation, Russia comprises just 3.8% of Serbian imports and 5.4% of total exports. However, Serbia is dependent on Russian gas, 60% of its oil comes from Russia and 60% of its fertilizer. In other words, Russia is a negligible trading partner when compared to the EU, but it dominates in a few crucial trade goods, without which the Serbian economy would be in great turmoil. Serbia has a strategic partnership with Russia since 2013. Serbia also has developed a partnership and trading relationship with Russia regarding military hardware imports, particularly aviation and anti-aircraft systems. This is largely the legacy of Yugoslav-Soviet military cooperation and the fact that a lot of older military personnel was trained to operate Soviet and Russian military hardware. Precise data for this kind of trade is naturally hard to come by. It should be noted that Serbia has been diversifying its military hardware purchases and is a member of the NATO partnership for peace and does regular exercises with NATO troops. For example, in late April, after the “Shield 22” military exercises,

Serbia announced that it is negotiating a purchase of 12 French-made “Rafal” multipurpose fighter planes and 12 used Rafals from another country. This purchase hasn’t yet occurred, but deals have been made and signed. Furthermore, during the same military exercise, Serbia displayed 5 BearCat armored vehicles, purchased from the US. Coupled with the purchase of the Chinese FK-3 anti-aircraft system also in late April, this shows that Serbia is trying to diversify its military imports. The US is generally seen unfavorably in Serbia, due to the role it played in the 1990s. For example, a Gallup International Poll from 2019 shows that 74% of Serbian citizens see the US as a destabilizing force in the world. The same poll shows that a majority of Serbian citizens believe that Russia and China are positive forces in the world. In terms of trade, the US is not even in the top 10 of Serbia’s trading partners and the level of exchange is the lowest, compared to the other three pillars, at just 850 million euros. In terms of FDI, US companies participate at only 2.2% of total FDI to Serbia and employ some 22 000 people, as of 2021. This can be misleading since a lot of US firms register in countries with lower taxes, such as the Netherlands, and invest from there. In fact, 15.53% of all FDI in Serbia comes from companies registered in the Netherlands. Thus we can deduce that the US is probably the weakest of the four pillars, in terms of the level of trade, public perception, and political ties. Regarding China, as we have stated above, China is generally viewed positively in Serbia and it slowly increased its presence in Serbia after 2014. The COVID-19 pandemic and China’s deliveries of Sinopharm vaccines increased China’s reputation in Serbia quickly. China is also present through investments in infrastructure and a few key investments in production. Zijin’s investments in mining in Bor, the Linglong tire factory in Smederevo, and Hestil’s acquisition of the steel mill in Smederevo are the three largest and most well-known Chinese investments. Vučić announced in early February, that Serbia and China will sign a new trade agreement by the end of the year. Still, China lags behind the EU as a trading partner and investor. The EU invested 17.5 billion euros in Serbia from 2009 to 2020, while China invested only 2.1 billion euros. However, Sino-Serbian infrastructure projects as

of the end of 2021 are worth 8 billion euros. During the War in Ukraine, China was not a point of focus for the Serbian media and politicians, with a few exceptions. Linglong company received some attention because of the labor conditions of its Vietnamese and Chinese workers. Zijin in Bor was also accused of pollution

and not adhering to Serbian environmental standards. These scandals haven't affected China's reputation in Serbia, since the focus now is on the War in Ukraine and tensions in neighboring states like BiH, Montenegro and Kosovo.

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