



# **STRATEGIC (DIS)ORIENTATION OF VUCIĆ'S SERBIA:**

## **RELUCTANTLY MOVING WEST, WILLINGLY EMBRACING THE EAST**

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## INTRODUCTION

In Serbia, there has long been a strong pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiment among the citizens, and the Serbian authorities rely on Russia and China for fulfilling part of their foreign policy, military, security, and economic interests. Over the past ten years, cooperation with these countries has significantly improved. Serbia is also the only country in the Western Balkans that has not imposed sanctions on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. All of this is happening even though the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its leader, Aleksandar Vučić, remain committed to Serbia's membership in the European Union (EU) and maintain military cooperation with Western countries. For this reason, part of the Western and domestic expert community has been warning for years that Serbia does not want to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures, but is actually a "little Russia" in the Balkans, acting as its proxy.<sup>i</sup> And, due to the intensification of cooperation with China, Serbia is viewed also as an anti-Western bastion in the region.<sup>ii</sup>

However, in recent years, strong opposing claims have emerged, suggesting that Serbia's public cooperation with Russia and China is actually masking its firm movement toward the West.<sup>iii</sup> Supporting this argument are facts such as Serbia having more developed military cooperation with the West than with the East, having exported nearly a billion dollars' worth of ammunition to Ukraine,<sup>iv</sup> which is four times more than, for example, Croatia, a NATO member,<sup>v</sup> and having a strong intention to allow a Western company to mine the strategic mineral lithium in Serbia. Consequently, Western countries should have more understanding for Aleksandar Vučić's government and should not take a harsher stance toward Serbia due to its foreign policy misalignment with the EU.

However, the situation regarding Serbia's strategic orientation is not so clear-cut and binary. To provide an assessment of Serbia's position and the direction it is moving, a much broader spectrum of factors must be included in the analysis,<sup>vi</sup> which will be done further in the text. It will analyse the nature of Aleksandar Vučić's government, its ideological foundation, the state of Serbia's EU integration and alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the

dynamics of relations with Russia and China, the reporting of pro-government media on major Western and Eastern countries, and how this shapes Serbian public opinion. Before offering a conclusion, the main arguments supporting the thesis that Serbia is strategically turning toward the West will also be examined.



## ANTI-WESTERN NATIONALISTS (BACK) IN POWER

To better understand Serbia's geopolitical orientation and more accurately assess its decisions concerning country's strategic direction, it is crucial to understand the nature of the current government, led by the Serbian Progressive Party and its leader, the current President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. Namely, the SNS was established in 2008 by Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, former high-ranking officials of the Serbian Radical Party (Srpska Radikalna Stranka), the ultra-nationalist party and the most important pro-Kremlin political actor in Serbia for two decades.<sup>vii</sup> From 1998 to 1999, during the armed conflict in Kosovo and the NATO bombing of Serbia, Vučić served as the Information Minister, during which he signed the Law on Public Information.<sup>viii</sup> The law is remembered for its draconian penalties for media and the closure of media critical to Milosevic's autocratic regime.<sup>ix</sup> Nikolić and Vučić left the SRS to form the SNS because they realised that the existing overtly nationalistic policy could not garner enough voter support and be well accepted by the Western countries. They decided to adopt a much more pragmatic approach focused on combating crime and corruption, for which they blamed the democratic authorities who governed Serbia between 2000 and 2012. Unlike the SRS, the SNS also embraced the policy of Serbia's accession to the EU. The SNS also seemed more inclined to compromise in resolving the Kosovo issue<sup>1</sup> than the previous Serbian government, as evident by the acceptance of the Brussels Agreement in 2013.<sup>x</sup> These moves were meant to signal to Western countries that the SNS was pursuing favourable policy towards the West.

However, after the early parliamentary elections in 2014, in which the SNS secured an absolute majority in the parliament, democratic reforms stagnated, and Vučić's style of governance

1 Kosovo was an integral part of Serbia, but it became the centre of ethnic and political tensions throughout the 20th century. After the violent conflict had erupted between Serbian forces and the Kosovo Albanian majority in 1998, NATO militarily intervened in 1999 forcing Serbian security apparatus and state institutions to withdraw from Kosovo and thus contributing to Kosovo's de facto independence from Serbia. However, Kosovo officially declared its independence from Serbia in 2008, which is recognized by the USA and most EU countries, but not by China and Russia. More on Kosovo War, see in Florian Bieber and Židas Daskalovski, *Understanding the war in Kosovo* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

increasingly resembled Putin's Russia. By 2017, SNS seized key levers of state power, using them for private gains and stifling critical voices and political opposition. Media was subjected to complete government control.<sup>xi</sup> Government loyalists run Serbia's six TV channels (RTS 1, RTS 2, TV Pink, Happy TV, TV B92, TV Prva), all with national coverage. There are only two television outlets in Serbia critical to Vučić's government (N1 and Nova S), but they do not enjoy nationwide coverage.<sup>xii</sup> Instead, they broadcast their programs only through one cable TV company (SBB), reaching one-third of the Serbian citizens.<sup>xiii</sup> On the foreign policy front, Serbia refused to align itself with the EU's key positions regarding Russia—such as its full-scale aggression on Ukraine and sanctions towards Russia.<sup>xiv</sup> While the EU Commission, international research institutes, and think tanks have documented Serbia's steep democracy decline in the past five years,<sup>xv</sup> the West chose not to antagonise the government in Belgrade. In effect, it chose stability over democracy.<sup>xvi</sup>

### ***Serbia in 2023 – the biggest democracy declines in the past 10 years***

According to the 2024 Freedom House report, Serbia has recorded the largest democracy decline in the past 10 years, which is also the biggest decline in democracy in 2023 among the 29 transitional countries of Europe and Asia that Freedom House has been monitoring for years. The main reasons for this historical decline are the significant irregularities and frauds before, during and after the elections at the end of 2023, the extensive control of the media space by the authorities through which Vučić's regime conducts total propaganda, as well as the increase in attacks on journalists critical of the government.<sup>xvii</sup>

At the same time, Vučić's government<sup>2</sup> has never officially rejected the policy of EU accession, knowing that it would lead to an open conflict with the West. Instead, it formally still adheres to the goal of EU membership and the values of liberal democracy, but in practice, it does the opposite and associates itself with authoritarian regimes such as those of Russia and China. Similarly, Vučić strives to create the impression that he is still very cooperative regarding Kosovo as evidenced by his acceptance of the Washington Agreement in 2021<sup>3</sup> and the EU plan for the normalization of Serbia-Kosovo relations in 2022. However, by creating controlled crises and

2 When SNS came to power in 2012, Vučić became: the first Deputy Prime Minister in charge of defence, security, and the fight against organized crime and corruption; the Minister of Defence; and the Secretary of the National Security Council. At the same time, Vučić also became president of the SNS, as Nikolić resigned from his party functions to fulfil his promise of becoming a "president for all". After the snap parliamentary elections in 2014, when SNS won the absolute majority, Vučić became prime minister until 2017, when he was elected as a President of the Republic by popular vote. For more on Vučić's misuse of security institutions for his rise to power, see: Predrag Petrović and Jelena Nikić Pejić, "Security Sector Capture in Serbia—An Early Study," (Belgrade: Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2020).

3 The Kosovo-Serbia Economic Normalization Agreements, commonly called the Washington Agreement, consist of two formal documents through which Kosovo and Serbia committed to promoting economic reconciliation between them. Avdullah Hoti, the then-Prime Minister of Kosovo, and Aleksandar Vučić, the President of Serbia, officially signed these agreements on September 4, 2020, at the White House in the presence of the then-US President, Donald Trump. However, both sides have implemented very little from the agreement, and it is almost forgotten today. "Three years since the Washington Agreement: Why was a good opportunity for normalization missed?," *Kosovo Online* (Mitrovica), September 4 2023, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/analysis/three-years-washington-agreement-why-was-good-opportunity-normalization-missed-4-9>.

incidents in Kosovo, he seeks to delay their implementation. For example, in November 2022, at the initiative of the Serbian List, which is under the control of the SNS, Serbs left the institutions of Kosovo and boycotted local elections. This later led to violent incidents in northern Kosovo between Serbs and international and Kosovar security forces.<sup>4</sup>

Dragan Šormaz, former SNS party official, who was a member of parliament and a member of several parliamentary committees as the SNS representative (foreign policy, security services oversight, EU integration), pointed out that the authorities in Serbia are not pursuing a sincere policy of EU accession and military neutrality. He also stated that Serbia has aligned itself with Russia for a considerable time due to Vučić's disdain for the West and its values. Also, Vučić's years-old narrative about Serbia's independent and neutral policy is actually Russian trickery used in Ukraine and Moldova as well to mask a seemingly deniable Russian influence.<sup>xviii</sup> Other experts are convinced Vučić's pro-EU and pro-West stances were just a maneuver designed to mask his anti-EU and anti-West activities.<sup>xix</sup>

4 The Banjska incident from September 2023 could have led to bigger armed conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. At that time, around 30 armed and uniformed Serbs from northern Kosovo set up barricades in an attempt to launch an armed uprising. A conflict soon ensued between the group and the Kosovo police, resulting in the death of one Kosovar police officer and three Serbs. Kosovo authorities claimed that this was an attempt by Serbia, backed by Russia, to destabilize the region by trying to annex North Kosovo, similar to Russia's actions in Crimea. Jamie Dettmer, "Kosovo attack: Who benefits?," *Politico* (Brussels), October 2 2023

## FROM THE “FOUR FOREIGN POLICY PILLARS” TO THE “POLICY OF DODGING”

Sitting on multiple chairs in foreign policy is something the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) inherited from previous democratic governments, which did not want to fully align Serbia with Western countries and alliances. At the end of 2007, the Serbian Parliament adopted a “Resolution on the Protection of the Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity, and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia,” which opposed Kosovo’s independence. Due to NATO’s decisive role in Kosovo’s de facto independence, Serbia declared its military neutrality. Shortly after, in 2009, then-President Boris Tadić, after visiting Beijing, formulated the so-called “Four Pillars” of foreign policy, stating that Serbia would rely on the EU, the U.S., Russia, and China to protect its interests. He emphasized that this would be the country’s fundamental foreign policy doctrine for a long time.<sup>xx</sup>

When the SNS came to power, it not only accepted this doctrine but took it a step further. In strategic documents from 2019, it is noted that Serbia’s cooperation with NATO is in its interest, while collaboration with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is a security policy commitment. This implied that Serbia cooperates with NATO because it must, but with the CSTO because it wants to. At the same time, military neutrality was negatively defined as non-alignment with military-political alliances, with NATO explicitly mentioned.<sup>xxi</sup> Serbia articulated this strategic aim amid growing geopolitical tensions between Western democracies and Eastern autocratic regimes. A further step in strengthening Serbia’s two Eastern foreign policy pillars is the “policy of dodging,” formulated by Aleksandar Vučić.<sup>xxii</sup> This policy is based in practice on evading obligations that Serbia has toward the EU and Western countries, such as imposing sanctions on Russia, while masking this with short-term concessions to specific Western actors.

### ***Hedging Strategy: Maximizing Gains in a High-Stakes, Uncertain Environment***

Vučić's policy of dogging is essentially a clumsy version of the so-called hedging strategy. Hedging strategy is the term describing state behavior in which a country takes a middle position between the two straightforward strategies of balancing and "bandwagoning."<sup>xxiii</sup> Countries resort to hedging to manage the risks associated with uncertain geopolitical environments. This policy has three elements: an insistence on not taking sides among competing powers, implementing opposing and counterbalancing measures, and employing divergent tactics and tools to achieve the goals of preserving gains while fostering a viable 'fallback' option.<sup>xxiv</sup> In practice, hedging involves a balancing act between preserving leverage and ensuring security, particularly in an uncertain environment where the outcomes of competition or conflict remain unpredictable. By sending positive signals to both sides instead of aligning with one, hedging actors want to avoid dependence on a single actor and maximize their political and economic profits.

This strategy, however, is not suitable for all countries. To be effective, three conditions must be met simultaneously: the strategic environment must be characterized by the absence of direct threats to its security, as well as a lack of radical ideological divisions and intense rivalry among major powers within the system. Such a perception is almost entirely present in Serbia's National Security Strategy of 2019. However, the war in Ukraine has significantly heightened great power rivalry and deepened the value rift between Russia and Western states, making this strategy unsustainability for Serbia.<sup>xxv</sup>

Hedging is viewed by many as contentious and even undesirable behaviour. Big powers disapprove of such behaviour. Smaller and secondary states deny they are hedging.<sup>xxvi</sup> The major drawback of this strategy is that, if executed poorly, hedging can erode trust and ultimately compromise security.<sup>xxvii</sup> It seems that Vucic's Serbia has often found itself in a situation over the past few years where no one trusts it.<sup>xxviii</sup> Serbia, according to its Constitution<sup>xxix</sup> and strategic documents,<sup>xxx</sup> is committed to European values and principles, and foreign policy, as well as the EU membership. Consequently, Serbia should have no ambiguity about its strategic direction in the current geopolitical landscape.

## THE SERBIAN WORLD – THE IDEOLOGICAL BACKBONE OF THE SNS’S ANTI-WESTERN STANCE

The insincere policy of Vučić’s regime towards Serbia’s EU integration, its autocratic drift, and the strengthening of relations with Russia and China will become clearer when we analyze the idea of the ‘Serbian World’. The Serbian world is a concept that has been present within political and culture elites as well as nationalist circles in Serbia since the mid-19th century. However, this term only started to draw attention from the domestic and regional public in 2020 when Aleksandar Vulin, the then-Minister of Defence, began using it regularly in public appearances. Thus, Vulin stated that he hopes that the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, is creating the Serbian world and that Serbs have the right to be a politically unified nation, that Vučić is the president of all Serbs, with Belgrade being the centre of their gathering. Later, he clarified that the Serbian world resolves the national question of the Serbs, prevents the creation of a Greater Albania, and safeguards against the genocide of the Serbian people. Vulin emphasised that the unification process had started thanks to Vučić, and it was unstoppable.

### ***Vulin: Unification of Serbs is the Path to Peace in the Balkans***

In an interview with Politika, Vulin spoke about the Serbian world, stating: “If we want to survive, we will very soon become a united political nation—as the first step toward unification. Serbs will eventually unite because they have never done so in history, and the time will come for that to happen. The only way for the Balkans to remain stable is for Serbs to live in one state. All conflicts in the Balkans start with the discrimination of Serbs.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

The Serbian state official’s public usage of the Serbian world has raised concerns in neighbouring countries that it could signify a revival of Greater Serbia but now with strong support from Russia. Serbian and Russian worlds are two nearly identical projects built upon the frustrations

of nationalists in Russia and Serbia due to the loss of influence and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and in the case of Serbia, the breakup of Yugoslavia. Both concepts imply the unification of the Serbs/Russians within the same cultural, media, and political space under one strong leader. Furthermore, the public promotion of this concept comes at a time of heightened political tension between the West and Russia and worsening political and ethnic relations within and between Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia. By loudly promoting the Serbian world, Russia is essentially sending a message through Belgrade that it can potentially and seemingly at a whim destabilise the situation in the Western Balkans.

At first, Western officials did not take Vulin's loud advocacy for the Serbian world seriously, as he lacked any political support from the electorate in Serbia, viewing it all as a populist performance for the people that Vulin undertakes without Vučić's approval. Vulin himself practically confirmed this in an interview, recalling what an important American diplomat told him on two occasions: " 'Alexander, you are not even a member of the SNS. You are disposable. With such views, you cannot exist.' Later, when he was leaving Serbia, he invited me to a farewell dinner and said, 'I was wrong; you have survived after all.' "<sup>xxxiii</sup> However, alongside Vulin, the idea of the Serbian world has also persisted, and the authorities have moved forward with its realization.

### **From theory to practice: the Pan-Serbian Assembly**

The fact that authorities have begun operationalizing the concept of the "Serbian World" indicates that it is not merely a propaganda or populist tool. On the initiative of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik, a "Pan-Serbian Assembly" was held under the slogan "One People, One Assembly - Serbia and Srpska," during which the two governments adopted a joint "Declaration on the Protection of National and Political Rights and the Joint Future of the Serbian People." The joint session of the governments of Serbia and Republika Srpska was attended by political representatives of Serbs from Montenegro and North Macedonia, as well as high-ranking clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church, led by the head of the Church. Shortly after the Assembly, both parliaments adopted the declaration. The Declaration states that the Serbian people constitute a single entity, that the name of the nation is immutable, and that it cannot be changed. It also asserts that the Serbian people in Montenegro must be recognized in accordance with their centuries-old presence in the country and their significant share of the current population. Finally, the document proposes that the Statehood Day of the Republic of Serbia should also be the Statehood Day of Republika Srpska, to be celebrated together as a symbol of unity.

Through the Serbian World and its derived activities, the Serbian regime is trying to expand its influence on political parties, movements, and public figures, as well as representatives of Serbian interests in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. The aim is to create a "Serbian demos"—a unified political entity loyal to Aleksandar Vučić rather than to the states in which these Serbs reside. Therefore, the Pan-Serbian Assembly is a manifestation of

Aleksandar Vulin's statement, often repeated in the context of the Serbian World, that Vučić is "the president of all Serbs." Balkan security expert Ivana Stradner concludes that the "Serbian World" and the Pan-Serbian Assembly are clear indicators that Serbia in 2024 resembles what Russia was a decade ago.<sup>xxxiii</sup>



## VUČIĆ PUTS SERBIA'S EU INTEGRATION ON ICE

Taking into account the ideology of Vučić's regime, it becomes clearer Vučić's insincere policy regarding Serbia's EU integration. Namely, Serbia has officially been a candidate for EU membership since 2012. Since then, 22 out of 35 chapters have been opened, but only two have been temporarily closed. When negotiations officially began, it was said that Serbia would be ready for membership by 2018, which was deemed realistic by experts at the time.<sup>xxxiv</sup> However, several electoral cycles followed in Serbia, and the EU integration process slowed down in 2018 when Serbia lost its status as a democratic country by all Freedom House standards.<sup>xxxv</sup> Decline has happened, because since the SNS and its leader Aleksandar Vučić came to power, instead of strengthening the rule of law and other criteria on the path to EU membership, they have consolidated their power through undemocratic means, undermining state institutions and increasingly relying on extra-institutional, corrupt, and often criminal mechanisms for managing society and the state. In recent years, with significant pre-election, election-day, and post-election irregularities that have allowed Vučić and his SNS to remain in power, Serbia has further distanced itself from EU membership. Consequently, V-Dem institute classified Serbia as an electoral autocracy.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Despite the regression, the EU opened one negotiation chapter in 2019 and the fourth cluster in 2021. However, the Serbian government did not interpret these moves as an outstretched hand or encouragement for reforms, but rather as something they deserved and were entitled to. The EU's reluctance to take a tougher stance on Serbia's backsliding in reforms has not helped Serbia return to the path of EU integration.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

More important than opening negotiation chapters is closing them, as this confirms that a candidate country has aligned its legislation with the EU's legal standards. Serbia, way back in 2016, closed two chapters (Chapter 25 - Science and Research, and Chapter 26 - Education and Culture), but this success should not be attributed to significant reform steps in these areas. Rather, it reflects the fact that these fields have very few common EU rules, giving member states broad autonomy in these matters.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Additionally, it's important to remember that Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom, and Security) are opened first and

closed last. In terms of both formal and, more importantly, substantive fulfillment of measures from these chapters, Serbia is performing very poorly.

Serbia's EU integration has stagnated, not primarily due to the Kosovo issue, but because of significant setbacks in the rule of law and democracy.. According to Vladimir Medjak, expert in European law and European integrations, "the Kosovo issue is more or less settled, yet Serbia is not at all ready for membership. Meanwhile, many other problems have emerged in the areas of the rule of law, the fight against organized crime, corruption, democracy, media freedom, as well as issues related to sanctions against Russia, the situation in Banjska, and recently, the irregularities in the December 17, 2023, elections." <sup>xxxix</sup> Therefore, it's no surprise that numerous findings from both domestic and foreign research organizations unequivocally indicate that Serbia is a captured state with a hybrid or non-democratic political regime. <sup>xl</sup>

Recent studies on state capture also highlight that the key actors in this negative process are political figures, particularly the ruling political parties. They subject state institutions to their personal and party control, with the aim of unrestrained political power consolidation and illegal enrichment. Experts thus argue that the current government cannot and does not want to lead Serbia into the EU. In fact, the government is the main obstacle to Serbia's accession to the EU and largely responsible for the state in which Serbia finds itself. Adopting and implementing EU legal standards in Serbia would mean that Aleksandar Vučić's government would have to willingly accept being limited by laws and democratic procedures, which would be disastrous for them. The current government is not interested in Serbia becoming an EU member but is keen to remain in the EU integration process as long as possible. This allows the government to access EU funds without having to apply the principles of democracy and the rule of law.

## SERBIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: OUT OF STEP WITH THE EU

Since 2012, when Serbia became a candidate for EU membership, its alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has consistently been very low. Serbia had its lowest foreign policy alignment with the EU in 2017 and 2022, at 47% and 48%, respectively. By 2023, this alignment increased to 53%. Although some experts interpreted this increase as a sign that Serbia is beginning to align more closely with the EU's foreign policy, a deeper analysis shows that this is not the case. The slight increase in alignment in 2023 is largely due to the "less intense pace" of new sanctions packages against Russia introduced by the EU. More importantly, the alignment percentage is a descriptive category that reflects general trends, but the specific issues on which Serbia did not align are far more significant and indicate whether Serbia's foreign policy is fundamentally aligned with the EU.<sup>xli</sup>

In 2023, the European Union issued 136 declarations, inviting candidates and potential candidates to align with them. Serbia aligned with 72 declarations but did not align with 63. Serbia has largely aligned itself with declarations and restrictive measures related to ISIS/Al-Qaeda, terrorism, Syria, Burma/Myanmar, Guatemala, Sudan, Tunisia, and the commemoration of important international dates. These are, therefore, declarations and measures that are "neutral," and Serbia's alignment with them is not particularly problematic for its Eastern autocratic partners. Among the declarations Serbia did not align with, 25 relate to the war in Ukraine, 14 to Iran, eight to the EU's global human rights sanctions regime, three to Belarus, and two each to sanctions against Syria, frameworks for restrictive measures related to terrorist acts (mostly targeting Iran), and cyber-attacks (with Russian and Chinese hackers on the list). Serbia also did not align with two EU declarations on Moldova, which include restrictive measures against pro-Russian politicians and other individuals suspected of actions aimed at destabilizing Moldova and acting against the pro-European government. It is reasonable to conclude that Serbia did not align with these declarations due to Russia's involvement in these events in Moldova. Finally, Serbia did not align with the renewal of sanctions against autocratic Belarus on two

occasions, nor did it support the political declaration marking the third anniversary of the problematic presidential elections in that country.<sup>xlii</sup>

Therefore, the above indicates that Serbia has maintained the same pattern of alignment with the EU's CFSP, despite the increase in alignment percentage, and it is unwilling to take steps that would contradict the interests of autocratic regimes.<sup>xliii</sup> Serbia's direction is further indicated by its failure to align with the December 9 declaration marking International Human Rights Day, despite having regularly done so in the past ten years. Even if we consider only the degree of alignment between Serbia's foreign policy and the EU's, Serbia is actually at the bottom, despite the increase in alignment in 2023. Among all candidate countries (excluding Turkey), Serbia was the second-lowest in 2023 in terms of CFSP alignment. The only other candidate country with a lower alignment was Georgia, with 47%. Candidate countries from the Western Balkans have 100% alignment of their foreign policies with the EU.<sup>xliv</sup>

## DEEPENING TIES WITH EASTERN AUTOCRACIES

Simultaneously with the stagnation of Serbia's EU integration and its slide into autocracy, Vučić's regime has been strengthening relations with other autocratic states, particularly with Russia and China. These Eastern autocracies and their leaders are expected to provide an alternative model for political, economic, and security organization and governance, in contrast to Western democracies, serving as an alternative source of political legitimacy for Vučić's regime. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has complicated the further strengthening of cooperation between Serbia and Russia, which is why Vučić's regime has intensified its cooperation with Communist China, intended to serve as a substitute for Russia.<sup>xlv</sup>

### Strengthening Ties with Putin's Regime

Vučić's pro-Russian leanings should not come as a surprise. Since its inception, the SNS has actually been strengthening its relations and collaboration with Russia while officially pursuing Serbia's EU accession policy. The cooperation has deepened at the party level between SNS and United Russia but also among state institutions of two countries, including those in the security and defence sectors. SNS and United Russia signed cooperation agreements in 2010, 2016, and 2018 that went beyond symbolic gestures, clearly defining various areas of collaboration such as exchanging experiences in party and youth cooperation, organizational work, information sharing, and preparing party members for state posts.<sup>xlvi</sup> One of the stated goals of these agreements is to enhance interstate relations through improved party ties,<sup>xlvii</sup> which have been achieved through numerous intergovernmental agreements, memoranda, and protocols. In 2012, the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center was opened, and the following year, Serbia became an observer in The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).<sup>5</sup> Thus, Serbia is the

5 The CSTO is a Russia-led military alliance of seven former Soviet states that was created in 2002. Its initial declared purpose was to counter external aggression against members and to harmonize their foreign policy stances. The organization has since addressed sub-conventional challenges (cyber threats, terrorism, ethnic unrest, humanitarian emergencies, peacekeeping, etc.). It also supports arms sales, manufacturing, and military training and exercises among its members. Russia is the CSTO's dominant member, using the organization to support and enhance its influence abroad. Many experts

only Balkan state with signed security cooperation agreements, joint military exercises with Russia, and modernizing its armed forces with Russian weaponry.<sup>xlviii</sup> These agreements have been accompanied by visits from high-level officials of Serbia and Russia, including Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, Sergei Shoigu, the Minister of Defence, Nikolai Patrushev, the Secretary of the Security Council, and Sergei Lavrov, the Minister of External Affairs. During his visit to Serbia in 2019, Putin awarded the Order of Alexander Nevsky to Aleksandar Vučić for his significant personal contribution to multilateral cooperation with Russia.<sup>xlix</sup>

### ***The Key Pillars of Russian Influence in Serbia***

Today's influence of Russia in Serbia, as well as the positive attitudes of Serbian citizens towards Russia, have their roots in history, the cultural and religious closeness of the two nations (both real and imagined), and the wartime disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia (1991-1999). During this period, Russia cultivated an image of itself as the protector of Serbia against the "evil West," which was seen as seizing historical territories from Serbia.<sup>i</sup> The democratic government that replaced Slobodan Milošević's autocratic regime in 2000 did not make a radical shift towards the West; instead, it had chosen to rely on Russia (and later China) in its foreign policy regarding Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008, following NATO's military intervention in 1999. Additionally, the then-democratic authorities sold Serbia's oil industry to Russia for a fraction of its worth and signed an energy agreement for the supply of Russian gas and the construction of the South Stream pipeline. Handing over energy security to Russia was essentially the economic, political, and security price Serbia paid for Russia's foreign policy support.<sup>ii</sup>

Russia's foreign policy support for Serbia's interests focused on preventing the recognition of Kosovo's independence by UN member states and its admission into international and intergovernmental institutions.<sup>iii</sup> Russia (and China) blocked Kosovo's entry into the UN, while many UN member states did not recognize this country.<sup>iiii</sup> With the expansion of Russia's foreign policy influence, particularly in Africa, Serbia and Russia began a campaign to encourage countries that recognized Kosovo's independence to withdraw that recognition. Suriname was the first to revoke its recognition of Kosovo in 2017, just days before the visit of that country's foreign minister to Russia.<sup>lv</sup> According to the latest available data, 27 countries have withdrawn their recognition of Kosovo. Research indicates that the recognition, non-recognition, and withdrawal of recognition of Kosovo have been decisively influenced by the extent and quality of the relationships these countries have with the USA on one side and Russia on the other.<sup>lv</sup>

Another important basis of Russia's influence in Serbia is energy, as Russia supplies Serbia with gas in reliable and sufficient quantities at favourable prices. Although Serbia has made significant strides in diversifying its energy supply sources in recent years, Russia will likely remain

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consider the CSTO a Euro-Asian counterweight to NATO. Serbia and Afghanistan have enjoyed non-member observer status since 2013. Richard Weitz, *Assessing the collective security treaty organization: Capabilities and vulnerabilities* (Carlisle: US Army War College Press 2018).

the main source of gas for Serbia in the coming years, as the amount of gas Serbia can expect from new alternative sources is highly uncertain, along with the prices it would pay for that gas.<sup>lvi</sup> Therefore, it is expected that Serbia will renew its gas contract with Russia, which expires in 2025, and that this will be a crucial point of pressure and influence from Russia on the Serbian authorities before, during, and after the signing of the contract. This perspective aligns with Putin's statement from September 2024, where he emphasized Russia's significant role in supplying energy to Serbia, noting that deliveries to Serbia are timely and under very favourable conditions. He also indicated the intention to discuss with Serbia the gas supply contract that expires in 2025. Putin also highlighted the decline in trade between the two countries and stressed the need to address the causes and obstacles to this cooperation, suggesting that it is time to hold a meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee for Trade, Economic, and Scientific-Technical Cooperation between Serbia and Russia, which has not convened for two years. Additionally, the Russian president expressed his expectation to meet with the Serbian president Vučić at the BRICS summit.<sup>lvii</sup>

### ***Vučić's Debt: A Favor to Russia for Denying Genocide***

Russia has leveraged its position in the UN Security Council and its diplomatic influence to protect Vučić's interests regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina, most notably in the case of denying the genocide in Srebrenica. In 2015, Russia blocked the adoption of a resolution condemning the genocide in Srebrenica in 1995, which had been proposed by the United Kingdom and supported by the US and EU countries.<sup>lviii</sup> Russia (as well as China and North Korea) also utilized its diplomatic channels and international influence to assist Vučić in preventing the adoption of a resolution on the genocide in Srebrenica in 2024 at the UN General Assembly.<sup>lix</sup> Ultimately, the resolution was adopted with 84 votes in favour, while 19 countries voted against it, and 68 abstained. Moscow did lobby against the resolution, but not to the extent it did nine years ago, fully aware that it no longer has the same level of support.<sup>lx</sup> Russia is preoccupied with its own issues and lacks the will or desire to engage more seriously with the situation in the Balkans. Moreover, the resolution is not legally binding, even though Serbian authorities have tried to portray it as a document that would declare Serbia, and all Serbs, responsible for genocide and the entire wartime disintegration of Yugoslavia, implying that Serbia would have to pay war reparations.<sup>lxi</sup> Although Russia was unable to prevent the resolution's passage, it will certainly seek to capitalize on the diplomatic efforts it invested on Serbia's behalf. Vučić has already expressed his gratitude to Russia by awarding Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN Vasily Nebenzya, as well as deputy heads of the Russian mission, Maria Zabolotskaya and Anna Yevstigneeva, with the Order of the Serbian Flag.<sup>lxii</sup>

## **Aleksandar Vulin: The Regime's Anti-Western Operative Awarded by FSB and SVR**

It is important to note that Aleksandar Vulin is the one who is the most vocal advocate of the Serbian World idea. In the past ten years of the SNS rule, Vulin has held important state positions. He was initially the director of the Government Office for Kosovo; then, he held roles as the Minister of Labor, Defence, and Internal Affairs, and in the end of 2022, he was appointed as the director of the Security-Information Agency.<sup>6</sup> It was during his tenure in the Defence and Interior Ministry and when the military was being rearmed and reequipped<sup>7</sup> that Vulin was publicly advocating for the Serbian world. Vulin is the leader of the Movement of Socialists, a micro-political party with no significant voter support in Serbia.<sup>lxiii</sup> He has held important state positions due to his loyalty to Aleksandar Vučić and Russia. Some experts consider Vulin to be one of the most important figures of Putin's regime in Serbia, tasked with placing pro-Russian personnel in key state institutions, which he has indeed accomplished within the military, police, and counter-intelligence service.<sup>lxiv</sup> The seriousness of Vulin's messages about the Serbian world is highlighted by the fact that, following Moscow's orders, he initiated the persecution of Russian-opposition figures in Serbia as well as Russian refugees critical of Putin, which is described in the next section.<sup>lxv</sup>

Aleksandar Vulin resigned from his position as the director of the Serbian Security Intelligence Agency (BIA) at the end of 2023, stating that he did not want to be the reason for the imposition of EU and U.S. sanctions on Serbia.<sup>lxvi</sup> However, according to Daniel Serwer, his resignation does not indicate a shift in Serbia's policy of supporting Russia, but rather a defensive effort by the Serbian authorities to avoid sanctions. While Vulin did resign due to EU and U.S. pressure, the fact that it took three months instead of three days suggests real resistance from President Vučić, who shares Vulin's worldview and Serbia's ambition for political control over Serbian populations in neighbouring countries. Additionally, Russian influence has deeply penetrated the BIA.<sup>lxvii</sup> It is, therefore, unsurprising that the BIA continued to follow Vulin's directives after his departure, particularly those related to combating internal and external enemies of Serbia.<sup>lxviii</sup> Furthermore, Vulin, alongside BIA's Marko Parezanović, represented Serbia at a security forum in St. Petersburg in April 2024, before being appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister without Portfolio in the new Serbian government. He attended the forum at the personal invitation of Nikolai Patrushev, the then-Secretary of the Russian Security Council.<sup>lxix</sup>

6 Vulin resigned from the position of the BIA's director at the beginning of November 2023. Commenting on the resignation, Vučić said he looks forward to a new collaboration with Vulin and future joint successes. Vucic indeed granted Vulin the position of the Deputy Prime Minister in the newly formed Serbian Government in 2014. Slobodan Maricic, "Srbija i politika: Izabrana nova Vlada Srbije, Miloš Vučević premijer," *BBC News na Srpskom* (Beograd), 30. april 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-68927828>.

7 The Serbian Armed Forces have been equipped with modernized tanks and armored vehicles, artillery, and missile systems, as well as aircraft and helicopters. Marija Ignjatijević, ed., *Balkans Defence Monitore* (Belgrade: BCSP, 2022).



### ***Chief of Intelligence Operations Works for the Kremlin?***

There are growing concerns among experts that Russia has deeply embedded its operatives within key Serbian state institutions, particularly in the military, police and intelligence. As an important example is Marko Parezanović, the current head of operations at the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA). In 2018, Parezanović publicly claimed that the greatest threat to Serbia's security came from covert activities by individuals within NGOs, political parties, media, and unions. He made this statement at a conference organized by the ultra-nationalist group *National Vanguard*, attended by top state officials, including President Vučić. According to pro-government media, Parezanović has played a pivotal role in expanding the political influence of Vučić's regime through covert operations in neighbouring countries, particularly Montenegro.<sup>lxx</sup> Alongside Aleksandar Vulin, Parezanović represented Serbia at the International Security Forum in Saint Petersburg. He has been decorated by the presidents of Russia, Serbia, and Republika Srpska. Despite accusations of being a Russian asset, Parezanović continues to hold a key position within the BIA.<sup>lxxi</sup>

After taking on his new government roles, Vulin visited Moscow three times in four months for official meetings with top military, police, and security officials, as well as the Russian Foreign Minister and the Russian president's foreign affairs advisor. During these visits, Vulin discussed the strategic partnership between Serbia and Russia, models and mechanisms for Serbia's cooperation with BRICS, resisting Western pressure,<sup>lxxii</sup> reaffirmed that Serbia would not impose sanctions on Russia, and expressed gratitude to Russian security services for preventing a colour revolution and a coup in Serbia.<sup>lxxiii</sup> Vulin also laid a wreath at the grave of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, becoming the first Serbian and Yugoslav representative to do so. During his last visit to the Kremlin, Vulin met with President Putin himself.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

In recognition of his significant personal contribution to strengthening cooperation between BIA and Russian security intelligence services in protecting the national interests of Serbia and Russia, Vulin was awarded honours by both the FSB and SVR. The second honour, the Order of Friendship, was presented to Vulin by President Putin himself.<sup>lxxv</sup> The U.S. Department of the Treasury placed Vulin on the sanctions list in 2023, while he was serving as the director of the Serbian Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), due to corruption and involvement in drug trafficking, which facilitate Russian malign activities in the region.<sup>lxxvi</sup>

### ***Serbian Security Services: The Extended Arm of Russian Intelligence***

In December 2021, then-Interior Minister Alexander Vulin met with Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of Russia's Security Council, in Moscow, where they agreed to form a joint working group to combat color revolutions. This group focuses on preventing mass demonstrations and monitoring opposition activists, NGOs, and journalists, formalizing the already strong ties between Serbian and Russian security services. Serbian intelligence closely surveilled a seminar led by

Russian opposition leaders Andrei Pivovarov and Vladimir Kara-Murza in Belgrade, with Vulin personally delivering the surveillance materials to Patrushev, which were later used to imprison to long term sentences both leaders in Russia.<sup>lxxvii</sup> Serbian authorities have also targeted liberal Russian exiles in Serbia, such as Peter Nikitin, leader of the Russian Democratic Society (RDS), who was temporarily banned from entering Serbia, and Vladimir Volokhonsky, who was denied a residency permit, both due to their pro-democracy activism. Many other Russian exiles, critical of Putin's regime, has faced increased harassment, with members being questioned, denied residency, or citizenship. Analysts are confident that Vulin is just carrying out Vučić's decisions which are aimed at satisfying Russian interests.<sup>lxxviii</sup>

## Deepening Cooperation Between Serbia and China

Upon coming to power, the SNS strengthened Serbia's cooperation not only with Russia but also with China, and this on a strategic level, in the areas of economy and infrastructure, as well as culture, and later in the military defence and security. This was accompanied by numerous signed agreements, declarations, and official visits. As early as 2013, during the Serbian president's visit to Beijing, Serbia and China announced a joint statement on deepening their strategic partnership, which was officially signed in 2016. In 2014, Serbia hosted the third meeting of China's initiative for cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries, known as the 16+1 initiative, one of whose goals is to strengthen the Belt and Road Initiative in this part of Europe. Economic cooperation between China and Serbia culminated in 2023 with the signing of the Free Trade Agreement. According to official data, China has invested \$5.5 billion in Serbia to date,<sup>lxxix</sup> but Serbia's debt to China has also grown to nearly \$3 billion.<sup>lxxx</sup> Since 2017, cooperation between the two countries in the military sphere has intensified, with China donating around \$75 million worth of military equipment to the Serbian Army by 2019.<sup>lxxxi</sup> China was the largest military donor to Serbia in 2023. Cooperation in technology transfer has also been improved, and Serbia has developed a domestic drone with the help of Chinese technology. Finally, Serbia recently acquired anti-aircraft missile systems and combat drones from China.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

In terms of public security, Serbia has acquired thousands of high-resolution smart cameras from China, capable of real-time facial recognition, which have been installed across cities in Serbia. Joint Serbian-Chinese police patrols have been formed in several cities in Serbia, and joint anti-terrorism exercises between the two police forces have also been conducted.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> The network of cameras across Serbian cities is used to collect large amounts of real-time data on Serbian citizens and their activities, to monitor the population and political events, following the example of China.<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

In addition to interstate cooperation, the SNS has simultaneously strengthened its ties with the Communist Party of China (CPC), which serves as a model for managing large systems such as state institutions. In fact, cooperation between the two parties is one of the driving forces behind relations between Serbia and China, and this is often openly encouraged by leading SNS

officials. For example, during the summit marking the 100th anniversary of the CPC, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić stated that the party and its leader are an inspiration, as thanks to this party, China transitioned from a developing country receiving international aid to a global superpower in just a few decades.<sup>lxxxv</sup>

### ***Towards a Shared (Anti-Western) Future***

The recent visit of the Chinese president to Serbia is particularly significant in terms of deepening cooperation between the two regimes. At the invitation of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, Chinese President and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping, made an official visit to Serbia on May 7, 2024. Although Serbian authorities are trying to present this visit as economic, it is actually political, with a strong anti-Western orientation. This is evident from the choice of the visit's date, which coincides with the 25th anniversary of NATO's bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Moreover, the visit took place just before Europe Day, and instead of celebrating this day as an EU membership candidate, Serbia celebrated its "iron friendship" with autocratic China. Former Serbian Ambassador to Washington, Ivan Vujačić, concluded that the Chinese president's visit to Serbia is a signal from the government in Belgrade to Europeans that Serbia "does not need EU funds" and that "all the conditions and demands tied to receiving funds do not concern us."<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

The strong anti-Western orientation of this visit is also evident from the fact that the two presidents signed a joint statement on deepening and elevating comprehensive strategic partnership and building a community of Serbia and China with a shared future in the New Era. China chose to build a shared future with Serbia because, in the words of Chinese President Xi Jinping, "China and Serbia enjoy political trust that is as strong as a rock... Our practical cooperation has been enhanced, coordination is close on international issues, and we have an iron-clad friendship that only grows stronger."<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić stated that "the sky is the limit" when it comes to cooperation between the two countries.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Serbia is the first country in Europe to agree to be part of China's global initiative, through which China primarily seeks to offer developing countries a political model that represents an alternative to the Western model of democracy. According to Liu Gang, president of the Xinhua Institute, the goals of this central foreign policy initiative of China are to unite developing countries, as 80% of the world's population lives in these nations, and to "shatter the Western myth of the centre and periphery" and overcome the "Western tradition of conquest and assimilation."<sup>lxxxix</sup>

In addition to the joint statement on a shared future, Serbia and China signed 29 agreements, though most of these documents do not directly relate to the economy. Instead, they broadly cement the "iron" friendship and shared future between the two countries. In fact, the largest portion of these agreements, 10 of them, pertains to the media sphere. Although the public has no access to the contents of these agreements, the fact that Vučić's regime, which is rapidly moving toward autocracy, is signing media agreements with a communist state known as the world's

largest prison for journalists, where Communist Party censorship is absolute, suggests the essence and consequences of these agreements.<sup>xc</sup> Additionally, research has shown that in Global South countries, China uses intergovernmental cooperation programs (primarily exchanges and training) to expand its intelligence network and influence while exporting its authoritarian model of governance. In Serbia, the transfer of knowledge from China on how to govern a country has been ongoing for the past 10 years. For example, a few years ago, a large delegation from the SNS (Serbian Progressive Party) visited China and underwent training on how a single party manages the state.<sup>xcii</sup> Among the 29 signed agreements are those that allow 50 scientists to travel to China, as well as opportunities for 300 young Serbian citizens to study in China.<sup>xcii</sup>

China has indeed undertaken significant economic projects in Serbia over the past 15 years, but this interest has waned as China faces a domestic economic crisis and lacks sufficient financial resources. Additionally, Serbia does not hold significant economic importance for China. Contrary to what some analysts and Serbian government representatives loudly claim, Serbia is not China's springboard to the EU. That role has been assigned to Hungary, which, as an EU member, allows China to place its factories there and avoid tariffs and other duties when exporting products to the European market. This is evidenced by China opening electric vehicle factories (BYD) and lithium battery plants (CATL) in Hungary, not Serbia. Given these developments, economic journalist Miša Brkić concludes that "economic cooperation masks and conceals the excellent political relations between two authoritarian governments."<sup>xciii</sup>

## VUČIĆ'S REGIME ANTI-WESTERN PROPAGANDA

Anti-Western narratives and messages have long been present in Serbia, but with the rise of the SNS to power and the strengthening of Serbia's two Eastern foreign policy pillars, these narratives have further intensified. The core of these narratives is pro-Russian and pro-Putin messaging, portraying Putin as a great leader who stabilized Russia and strengthened it politically, economically, and militarily. In recent years, pro-Chinese messages have also been added to the mix. The West is depicted as a global hegemon in decline, starting wars as it loses its power. These messages are disseminated through media outlets close to Aleksandar Vučić and the SNS. Pro-government television stations and newspapers not only spread pro-Russian propaganda, but their messaging was even more emotionally charged than that of Russian media.<sup>xciiv</sup> This reached extreme levels during the war in Ukraine, with absurd claims that Ukraine attacked Russia and that the West, especially the U.S. and the U.K., were responsible for the war, while Putin supposedly did everything to prevent it. For instance, the daily *Informer* whose chief editor, Dragan Vucicevic, is one of the strongest propagandists of Vucic's rule, published at the front page titles: "Americans push the whole World into chaos: Ukraine attacked Russia", "Warr horror: artillery shells randomly kindergartens, schools, hospitals." Other pro-government media had similar front pages "World on the edge of catastrophe: Ukraine attacked Russia!" (*Alo*), "Putin: Russia has done everything for peace in Ukraine" (*The Courier*), "Blood has been spilled on the Russian border" (*The Evening News*).<sup>xciv</sup>

Pro-government media took these narratives further, suggesting that Russia's military intervention wouldn't stop in Ukraine but would extend to the Balkans, where it would "liberate" its allies from Western-imposed liberal rule and correct historical injustices. The *Serbian Telegraph* published the sensational headline: "Brits in a big panic. Putin sends Army to unite Serbia and Republic of Srpska." Other media used less sensationalist language but conveyed similar messages, adopting a (quasi-)analytical tone. These reports stressed that the West's military and economic power is in steep decline, while countries in BRICS are rising, making the emergence

of a multipolar and supposedly more just world inevitable.<sup>xcvi</sup> Pro-government Serbian TV stations, including Pink and Happy, have also embraced pro-Putin and anti-Western positions. Their top-rated talk shows feature pro-Western analysts, but these analysts are typically outnumbered and routinely “defeated” in debates by pro-Putin analysts, many of whom are former military and intelligence officers, giving the appearance of a balanced discussion while reinforcing the pro-Russian narrative. Although Serbian pro-government media toned down the pro-Putin rhetoric once it became clear that the Russian invasion of Ukraine would not be swift or easy, these narratives remain a significant part of the media landscape.<sup>xcvii</sup>

In recent years, Serbia has seen a rise in pro-Chinese narratives, which became especially prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pro-government media widely reported on the European Union’s passive response in helping Serbia, while portraying China as the primary source of aid. Headlines declared the “death of European solidarity” as merely a “fairy tale on paper.” Serbian authorities seized this opportunity to highlight the “eternal steel friendship” and “brotherly relations” between Serbia and China.<sup>xcviii</sup> Research shows that the primary source of this narrative was Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who frequently expressed how Serbia “seeks Chinese love” and how the country is “infinitely grateful for everything.” Similar to pro-Russian propaganda, pro-government media in Serbia amplified an emotionally charged pro-Chinese and anti-European narrative during the pandemic.<sup>xcix</sup> This painted China as Serbia’s irreplaceable and only true ally, further legitimizing the country’s policy of “sitting on multiple chairs,” which goes against its obligations to align gradually with the EU’s foreign policy. Additionally, it negatively influenced public opinion regarding Serbia’s European path.<sup>c</sup> Unlike the cultural and spiritual affinity often cited as an explanation for the popularity of pro-Russian narratives, pro-Chinese reporting cannot be similarly justified by any historical or cultural closeness between the two nations. Instead, it reflects a political agenda.

Recent media monitoring research from May 2024 confirms that anti-Western, pro-Russian, and pro-Chinese narratives continue to dominate in Serbia’s most popular media outlets, which are all pro-government. This occurs despite Serbia’s supposed shift towards the West. Mainstream Western political figures and policies are consistently portrayed negatively, with the EU slightly improving its image in the media over the past few months. Even the rare positive coverage of U.S.-Serbia relations in some pro-government outlets has not led to a significant change in the overall portrayal of the U.S. Positive reporting remains focused on figures like Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and Alexander Lukashenko, while Western leaders such as Joe Biden, Emmanuel Macron, Volodymyr Zelensky, and Olaf Scholz are presented negatively.<sup>ci</sup> Serbia thus represents a unique case in Europe—a candidate country negotiating EU membership while simultaneously running an anti-EU, anti-NATO, and anti-Western media campaign.<sup>cii</sup>

## CONSEQUENCES: WIDESPREAD SUPPORT FOR RUSSIA, CHINA, AND UNDEMOCRATIC VALUES AMONG CITIZENS

The long-term exposure of Serbian citizens to unhindered propaganda from the ruling SNS, has resulted in the normalization of pro-Russian, pro-Chinese, ultra-conservative, and nationalist values, as well as the strengthening of anti-democratic, anti-European, and anti-Western attitudes. The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy's (BCSP) research shows that the majority of Serbian citizens blame NATO and the USA for the outbreak of the full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine, and no less than 80 percent of respondents are against imposing sanctions on Russia.<sup>ciii</sup> Moreover, 45 percent of citizens believe that Serbia should remain neutral in the Ukrainian conflict, while 36 percent think Serbia should take Russia's side. The constant bombardment of Serbian citizens with messages that Russia and China are becoming an unstoppable political, economic, and especially military force has led to nearly half of the citizens seeing Russia and China as the dominant power in the 21st century. At the same time, less than one-fifth of them believe it to be the USA.<sup>civ</sup>

Shortly after the SNS came to power in 2014, the support of Serbian citizens for EU membership dropped below 50 percent. From 2017 the percentage of respondents opposing EU membership started to increase, and by 2022, the percentage of both groups of citizens (supporters and opponents of EU membership) had equalized at 46 percent. The public opinion towards Serbia's membership in NATO is even more negative, with only 5 percent of respondents in favour of joining NATO, while two-thirds of them are against it. Furthermore, citizens perceive NATO and the USA to be the biggest enemies of Serbia.<sup>cv</sup> The recent public opinion poll from April 2024 has showed that support of Serbian citizens for EU membership further dropped, from 46 to 40 percent. There is also the rise of pro-Russian and anti-Western, mainly anti-USA sentiments among Serbian citizens.<sup>cvi</sup>

Public opinion polls also indicate that nearly half of the citizens support the idea of the “Serbian world” and the holding of religious rallies Save Serbia to preserve Christian, traditional, and family values, as well as public morality. In these conditions, it is no surprise that they consider ethnic minorities seeking to secede (41 percent), globalist elites (36 percent), and migrants (35 percent) as the top threats to their personal security and safety, while extreme-right groups (24 percent) and hooligans (22 percent) receive more favourable treatment.<sup>cvi</sup>

The citizens’ nationalist and anti-Western stance is evident in their opinions on Serbia’s foreign policy priorities, with the highest ranked being the protection of Serbs in the region (82 percent), the fight for Kosovo (77 percent), and strengthening cooperation with Russia (72 percent). In contrast, EU membership (41 percent) and improving ties with the USA (37 percent) are ranked lower on their list of priorities. Anti-Western attitudes of citizens are mirrored in their views towards democracy. Only 40 percent of respondents think that democracy is the form of government that suits Serbia best, while one-third are for democracy in principle but believe that the current state of affairs in the country requires a “firm hand”. The rest of the citizens are indifferent to the form of government or are openly for autocracy.<sup>cvi</sup> It is particularly concerning that most young people hold negative attitudes towards the EU and democracy, support the rule of a strong leader, and justify violence in society.<sup>cix</sup> This is why it’s not surprising that recent public opinion polls show that the people of Serbia rate non-democratic countries the highest. Russia ranks first, China second, India third, and Hungary fourth among the most favorably viewed countries. The United States and the United Kingdom continue to receive the lowest ratings.<sup>cx</sup>

The pro-Chinese propaganda promoted by the government and pro-government media in Serbia has had a significant impact. According to the polls, 75% of citizens view China as a friendly nation, and a similar percentage rates the cooperation between the two countries very positively. Moreover, nearly two-thirds of respondents believe that relations between Serbia and China will continue to improve in the future, with the same proportion supporting Chinese investments in Serbia. A particularly striking finding is that almost half of the respondents have a favorable opinion of China’s communist system, despite the fact that the vast majority (96%) have never visited the country. This demonstrates the influence of media messaging on public perceptions, despite limited direct experience with China itself.<sup>cx</sup>

Two Russian media, Sputnik Serbia and Russia Today, are present in Serbia from 2015 and 2022, respectively, but both are only internet portals. Therefore, the pro-Russian stances of Serbian citizens cannot be ascribed to Sputnik and RT but to Serbian pro-government media with national coverage. BCSP’s public opinion polls have shown a significant overlap between people who expressed pro-Russian attitudes with those who get their information from pro-government TV stations and those who fully support President Aleksandar Vučić.<sup>cxii</sup> Similarly, Chinese media outlets are also present in Serbia, particularly through internet portals. The most active is China Radio International (CRI), whose content is frequently picked up and republished by



various media outlets in Serbia.<sup>cxiii</sup> Therefore, it is difficult to attribute the long-term, extensive, and effective dissemination of pro-Russian, pro-Chinese, and anti-Western narratives solely to Russian and Chinese media operating in Serbia. Instead, the responsibility for these messages primarily lies with the highest representatives of the ruling regime and the media close to them. The alignment of local media with government messaging plays a critical role in reinforcing these narratives across the Serbian public.

### **The Limits of Total Propaganda: How Anti-Western Rhetoric Backfires on Vučić**

The limits of total propaganda become evident in the case of the attempted lithium mining project in Serbia (greater detail on lithium mining is provided in the chapter Serbia as the EU's Strategic Partner for Green Transition). The government, led by Aleksandar Vučić, has struggled to convince citizens, including their own supporters, of the benefits of allowing the Anglo-American company Rio Tinto to mine lithium in Serbia. Recent public opinion research reveals that not only is a majority of the public (55%) opposed to lithium mining, but a significant number of SNS voters oppose or are unsure about the project. Thus, ten percent of SNS voters are against the project while one-third of them are unsure about the Jadar project. Among SPS, the coalition partner of SNS, the situation is even less favorable, with nearly one-third of their supporters opposing the project and another third unsure. Only 3% of citizens would change their opinion and support the project if Germany and the EU provided guarantees.<sup>cxiv</sup> This significant resistance to the project occurs even though the ruling party and President Vučić himself have led an intense and aggressive campaign for lithium mining. Research indicates that the government's campaign for lithium mining has been ineffective, even though in terms of intensity, brutality, and resources used, it surpassed other major campaigns such as those related to Kosovo, the Brussels Agreement, and the Belgrade Waterfront project.<sup>cxv</sup>

These findings highlight that public opinion cannot be easily or quickly changed, even with total propaganda, complete media control, and the direct involvement of high-ranking officials in propaganda campaigns, including Vucic himself. This is particularly true for significant and strategic issues. The example of lithium mining demonstrates the profound impact of anti-Western propaganda that has been promoted by the government's media for over a decade. Now, it is challenging for the government to convince even its supporters that a project openly supported by Western countries is in Serbia's interest. This difficulty underscores how challenging it would be for Serbia to make a significant shift away from Russia and decisively turn towards the West, both now and in the near future.

## **SERBIA'S SHIFT TOWARDS THE WEST: KEY CASES AND COUNTERARGUMENTS**

Despite the continuous strengthening of Serbia's ties with Russia and China in foreign policy, energy, economy, defense, and security, along with frozen EU integration, in recent years there have been interpretations in the public that Serbia is actually moving towards the West and that its ties with Eastern autocracies are merely a smoke screen. These claims have become particularly frequent and strong in the past year.<sup>cxvi</sup> In this part of the paper, we will present and analyze the main cases highlighted as "evidence" that Serbia is essentially turning towards the West, while also offering the other side of the argument. This section of the paper, along with the previously presented and analyzed broader context and determinants of Serbia's strategic orientation, should provide a solid foundation for drawing conclusions.

### **Serbia's Growing Military Ties with the West Amid Eastern Alliances**

One of the key points in the narrative that Serbia is more oriented toward the West than the East is the fact that Serbia has had a long-standing, intensive cooperation with the United States and NATO through bilateral cooperation and through the Partnership for Peace and IPAP (Individual Partnership Action Plan). The intensity of cooperation between Serbia and the West is most evident in the number of activities and military exercises, which are significantly more frequent than those with partners from the East, such as Russia and China. In fact, the number of joint military events with the West has been growing year by year, and it is planned that in 2024 there will be over 100 such events, an increase of 25 percent compared to the previous year. It is also planned that Serbia and the U.S. will continue to deepen their cooperation through bilateral and multilateral exercises.<sup>cxvii</sup> NATO officials have also emphasized the importance of military cooperation with Serbia. For example, the head of the NATO Liaison Office in Belgrade, Giampiero Romano, stated that "Serbia is an important partner for us, because not only does it support our goals, but it also works with us to promote security and stability in various areas

and at different levels – political, military, and scientific.”<sup>cxviii</sup> The Military of Serbia also participate in the Multinational Forces and Observers peacekeeping mission in the Sinai Peninsula as part of the American contingent starting in 2023. This is the first international mission in which the VS are involved outside the framework of the EU or the UN.<sup>cxix</sup>

In addition, Serbia has started to procure Western military equipment, such as helicopters, missiles, and radars. Moreover, during a recent visit by French President Emmanuel Macron to Serbia, a contract was signed for the purchase of 12 Rafale fighter jets. The contract is valued at nearly 3 billion euros, making it the most expensive individual deal for the procurement of a military system and its accompanying elements in Serbia's history.<sup>cxx</sup> Experts point out that impoverished Serbia is paying more for French Rafales than wealthy Qatar, and moreover, Serbia will not receive the advanced missiles that make this aircraft truly effective, because Serbia is not a member of NATO.<sup>cxxi</sup> In fact, as with previous procurements from the West, this is another case where Vučić is buying Western weapons to secure the support of the West for his continued rule. French President Macron has ambitions to make France the leading nation in the EU, and for that reason, Vučić is fostering relations with France, just as he previously did with Germany under the leadership of Angela Merkel. According to the former Chief of the General Staff of the Serbian Army, Zdravko Ponoš, the purchase of Rafale jets, as well as arms exports, are Vučić's private arrangements and reflect his personal foreign policy, which he conducts using public resources. The primary goal is to maintain his grip on power.<sup>cxxii</sup>

Additionally, due to the war in Ukraine and the geopolitical situation Serbia finds itself in, purchasing a larger number of aircraft from Russia is very difficult. Therefore, this is about satisfying the personal interests of the regime and the lack of alternatives for acquiring planes, rather than a genuine desire to turn away from Russia. Furthermore, the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) of socialist Yugoslavia had developed military cooperation with Western companies. In fact, in the late 1980s, the JNA had planned to develop a so-called “single-engine Rafale” in cooperation with France, but the war and the breakup of Yugoslavia halted that project.<sup>cxxiii</sup> Developed military cooperation between the JNA and the West did not prevent its leadership from turning away from the West at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. Finally, France can cancel the deal as it did in 2015 with the sale of the helicopter carrier Mistral to Russia when not satisfied with the Russian activities in Ukraine.<sup>cxxiv</sup>

However, parallel to this cooperation, Serbia has also developed cooperation with Russia, despite the accelerated deterioration of relations between Western countries and Russia following the Russian annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in Ukraine in 2014. Overall, military cooperation between Serbia and the Russian Federation, in terms of joint activities, grew year by year, reaching around 90 such activities in 2021.<sup>cxxv</sup> Since 2016, Serbia has also been intensively procuring military equipment from Russia, acquiring fighter jets, transport and combat helicopters, tanks and armored vehicles, anti-tank missiles, and air defense systems. Because of this, Western countries have issued warnings and applied pressure on Serbia, resulting in

Serbia imposing a moratorium on joint military exercises on several occasions. Today, Serbia does not conduct military exercises with Russia, not because it doesn't want to, but because it is currently not possible. The fact that Serbia has maintained military contacts with Russia is evident from Russia's recent delivery of an electronic warfare system to Serbia, despite Serbia being surrounded by NATO countries and Russia waging a war against the "collective West."<sup>cxv</sup>

### **Serbia: Weapons Exports to Ukraine, but Platform for Bypassing Sanctions on Russia**

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there have been several reports claiming that Serbia agreed to supply weapons and ammunition to Ukraine, despite not imposing sanctions on Russia, which Serbian government officials have regularly denied.<sup>cxvii</sup> However, this has not been the case with the latest similar claims. In June of this year, the Financial Times published estimates that Serbia, indirectly through other countries, had exported ammunition worth 800 million euros to Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Kyiv. Vučić confirmed that the information regarding the value of the ammunition is mostly accurate, presenting the sale as a golden business opportunity, as weapons and ammunition from Serbia are cheaper than those produced in the West. Vučić also pointed out that Serbia cannot export weapons to Russia or Ukraine, but it can to third countries, and he is not concerned with what those countries do with the weapons. However, current regulations in Serbia prohibit the sale of weapons if the final destination and the ultimate buyer are unknown. Petar Bošković, the former head of the Public Relations Department at the Serbian Ministry of Defense, emphasized that "if weapons and ammunition are re-exported, the party re-exporting your weapons must request permission from you."<sup>cxviii</sup> It is evident here that Serbia prefers to turn a blind eye to where the weapons and ammunition end up, which is why it exports them through private companies.

However, alongside the initial reports that Serbia is exporting ammunition to Ukraine, investigative journalists discovered that Serbia is also being used to circumvent the sanctions imposed on Russia by Western countries and the EU, particularly for so-called dual-use goods, which can be used for both civilian and military purposes (e.g., electronic components). It was established that dozens of companies registered in Serbia have been exporting products to Russia since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Products worth over \$150 million were delivered to Russia through Serbian companies, nearly half of which (\$71 million)<sup>cxix</sup> consisted of cutting-edge technological goods listed as high-risk and subject to EU sanctions. These are dual-use goods, meaning they can be used for both civilian and military purposes, such as Intel and AMD processors, which were reaching Russia through Serbia.

Although Vučić and other Serbian state officials stated that Serbia would not be a channel for circumventing sanctions on Russia, this type of trade with Russia has not only increased, but routes and mechanisms have also been established for delivering various goods to Russia.<sup>cxx</sup> As a result, four companies and two businessmen from Serbia have been placed on the U.S. and

EU sanctions lists. The authorities in Serbia, however, have taken no action in this regard, and economists believe they will not, as doing so would effectively mean that Serbia is imposing sanctions on Russia. Moreover, economists suggest that the current government sympathizes with these companies' activities, and therefore, they are likely to find new ways to continue doing business with Russia.<sup>cxxxix</sup>

### **Serbia as the EU's Strategic Partner for Green Transition**

Another key argument used by some experts to suggest that Serbia is turning toward the West is the issue of lithium mining. In 2022, the Serbian government halted the Jadar project by the Anglo-Australian company Rio Tinto, which involved lithium extraction in Serbia, following months of protests by environmental organizations and citizens who opposed the project due to concerns that it would cause significant environmental damage to a large part of western Serbia.<sup>cxxxix</sup> However, the following year, Serbian authorities revived the idea of lithium mining, promoting the narrative that this €2.5 billion project would bring €10 billion annually to Serbia's budget and strengthen Serbia's geopolitical and strategic position, particularly in relation to the West. The lithium mining project in Serbia has received public support from the ambassadors of some of the most important Western countries. In 2024, the Constitutional Court ruled that the government decree was unconstitutional, removing legal obstacles to reviving the project. Shortly afterward, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and European Commission Vice-President for the Green Deal Maroš Šefčovič made an official visit to Serbia, during which a Memorandum of Strategic Partnership on Sustainable Raw Materials was signed between Serbia and the EU. On that occasion, Scholz stated that Germany needs lithium for batteries, which are now critical, and that this material plays a role as important as oil has played so far.

Indeed, both Germany and the entire EU urgently need so-called critical raw materials, which are essential for a successful green transition—moving from fossil fuels to electric energy. Securing reliable and safe supply chains for these critical raw materials will be a decisive factor in shaping Europe's industrial future.<sup>cxxxix</sup> Germany's economy heavily relies on the automotive industry, which is significantly lagging behind China in the transition to electric vehicles. Germany currently sources half of its lithium from Chile and a quarter from China.<sup>cxxxix</sup> The situation is no better in other EU countries. For this reason, the EU aims to diversify its supply sources and bring them closer, with Serbia being one of those potential sources. Additionally, by realizing the Jadar project, China would be prevented from mining lithium in Serbia, as it has long had such intentions. Franziska Brantner, State Secretary at the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs in Germany, clearly stated that the question is not whether lithium will be mined in Serbia, but whether it will be done by Rio Tinto and European partners or by China. Ultimately, this project would economically and strategically bind Serbia more closely to the EU, distancing it from China and Russia.<sup>cxxxix</sup>

The problem with this argument lies in the fact that Aleksandar Vučić's government is well aware of the needs, interests, weaknesses, and fears of Western countries and (tries to) manipulate them to secure room for manoeuvre, allowing for a prolonged stay in power. This is evident, among other things, from the fact that the EU tolerates a candidate country for EU membership that does not align its foreign policy with the EU and whose authorities engage in increasing levels of (pre- and post-) election fraud. The transaction here is clear—lithium for democracy—and there is nothing strategic about it. Western countries are aware of this as well. For instance, Franziska Brantner stated that any potential lithium exploitation project would not influence Serbia's EU integration process, where the central issues are the rule of law and democracy. "There will be no concessions due to lithium when it comes to the rule of law, nor in regards to Kosovo or Bosnia and Herzegovina."<sup>cxv</sup> It should be also noted that due to massive citizen protests against lithium mining, this project is still uncertain, which calls into question the strategic deal between the EU and Serbia.

Finally, the strategic separation of Serbia from Russia and China would involve a greater number of concrete projects in the energy sector. For example, Serbia signed a Strategic Cooperation Agreement in the field of energy with the USA at the end of September 2024. However, according to Jeffrey Pyatt, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Energy, that document is "a blank canvas that can be painted as desired."<sup>cxvii</sup> On the other hand, in May of the same year, Serbia signed two energy agreements with China worth €2.7 billion.<sup>cxviii</sup> Serbia has made significant progress in diversifying its gas supply sources, but it remains a major question whether alternative sources can provide sufficient quantities of this energy resource at acceptable prices for Serbia. As a result, Serbia will certainly continue to rely heavily on Russia for energy supply in the coming years.<sup>cxix</sup>

## SUPPORT FROM RUSSIA AND CHINA DESPITE THE ALLEGED WESTERN TURN OF THE SERBIAN GOVERNMENT

Despite frequent revelations that Serbia is strategically turning toward the West, Russia and China continue to provide consistent support to Aleksandar Vučić's government. For example, consider the recent series of peaceful civil protests against lithium mining in Serbia, Russia accused Western countries of attempting to destabilize Serbia through these protests, executing a so-called color revolution and (violently) overthrowing the legitimately elected government.<sup>cxl</sup> Russian security and intelligence services allegedly informed Serbia in advance about preparations for mass unrest and attempts of government overthrow, for which Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin thanked Russia during a visit to the Kremlin,<sup>cxli</sup> and Vučić in his numerous public addresses.<sup>cxlii</sup> This raises the question of why Russia would support Vučić's regime if it is turning more decisively toward the West, while at the same time a large number of pro-Russian oriented citizens, political parties, and groups are participating in and supporting the current anti-lithium protests in Serbia.

China has also recently engaged in narratives about destabilizing Serbia through the actions of American authorities via non-governmental organizations in Serbia. In early August, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a report accusing the National Endowment for Democracy of being a CIA front organization that serves to destabilize countries that wish to pursue sovereign policies and advocate for a multipolar world, such as Iran and Serbia.<sup>cxliii</sup> Chinese media in Serbian, as well as Russian<sup>cxliv</sup> and Serbian media, conveyed this report with additional interpretations about the harmful actions of the West.<sup>cxlv</sup> Until now, China had not interfered in Serbia's internal affairs or openly attacked civil society and its donors. Like Russia, it is worth questioning why China supports Aleksandar Vučić's government if he is turning Serbia towards the West, particularly when, in the case of the Jadar project, a Western company, rather than a Chinese one, is given the right to exploit the strategic resource of lithium.

## **CONCLUSION: VUCIC'S DRIFT TO THE WEST TRANSACTIONAL AND UNCERTAIN**

Vucic's government has taken several steps toward greater cooperation with Western countries in recent years. This is primarily reflected in continuous military cooperation, which is also increasing, including joint military exercises and the purchase of Western weapons, such as the approximately €3 billion purchase of French Rafale jets. Additionally, Serbia has exported ammunition worth nearly €1 billion to Ukraine through third countries, despite refusing to impose sanctions on Russia. Finally, Vučić's government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the EU on strategic partnership in the field of critical raw materials, aimed at reducing the EU member states' dependence on China for critical minerals supply.

However, these facts are not sufficient to conclude that Vučić's regime is strategically aligning and firmly binding Serbia to the West, as a range of other important determinants of foreign policy orientation point to the contrary. First, while the Serbian Progressive Party is publicly committed to EU membership, in practice it implements policies contrary to the principles and values of democracy and the rule of law, resulting in Serbia experiencing the largest democratic decline in the past 10 years by 2023. As a result, the V-Dem Institute classified Serbia as an "electoral autocracy," and countries with such political systems cannot become EU members. Serbia's negative stance toward EU integration is also evident from its consistently high level of misalignment with the EU's CFSP. Among all EU membership candidates (except Turkey), Serbia ranks second in terms of misalignment and is the only Western Balkan country that has not aligned its foreign policy with the EU.

Although it is officially committed to EU membership and has improved cooperation with some Western countries, the Serbian Progressive Party has, since coming to power, expanded and strengthened its ties with Eastern autocratic states, namely Russia and China, in areas such as politics, energy, infrastructure, defence, and security. This has occurred despite the intensifying rivalry between these countries and Western nations over the past decade. Amid Serbia's supposed pivot towards



the West, Aleksandar Vučić's government has signed 29 agreements with China, most of which are political rather than economic. Among these are 10 agreements related to media. For years, Vučić has appointed Aleksandar Vulin, the leader of a minor political party, to significant state positions, despite him being an important instrument of Russian influence in Serbia. Due to his role in enhancing cooperation between Serbian and Russian security structures, Vulin was recently awarded honours from the Russian FSB and SVR, based on a decision by President Putin.

The positive stance of the government towards autocratic regimes and negative attitude towards Western democratic states is also evident in the media sphere. The authorities in Serbia, through media outlets close to them (which make up about 85% of the media space), have been running a strong pro-Russian, pro-Chinese, and anti-Western campaign for years. On the one hand, this campaign highlights the advantages of Russia and China, as well as their presidents, while on the other hand, it emphasizes the weaknesses, inconsistencies, and hypocrisy of the West. As a result, public opinion in Serbia is conservative and nationalistic, viewing Western countries as enemies and Russia and China as friends. Consequently, support for Serbia's membership in the EU today stands at only 40%.

Serbia cannot strengthen its ties with the West as long as it continues to sink into autocracy, develops intergovernmental and party relations with autocratic regimes, does not align its foreign policy with the EU, and conducts strong anti-Western propaganda through its media. The cases of ammunition deliveries to Ukraine, the purchase of French Rafale jets, and lithium mining are situational and transactional in nature and do not reflect a clear commitment by Serbia to strategically align with the West. In the changed geopolitical circumstances after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Vučić's government is trying to reduce Western pressure due to its autocratic drift and refusal to impose sanctions on Russia by offering certain Western countries what is important to them at the moment. This is not a matter of national foreign policy and Serbia's strategic shift, but rather a series of specific private transactions of Vučić's regime: 'ammunition for Ukraine in exchange for sanctions,' 'Rafales and lithium for democracy,' and so on. Because if it weren't about Vučić's government hedging its bets, they wouldn't be simultaneously building a shared future with Communist China or running an anti-Western media campaign. As emphasized in Serbia's strategic documents, Serbia cooperates with the West out of necessity, but with the East out of desire. Everything in between is the application of Vučić's policy of dodging, the clumsy version of strategic hedging that more resembles the game of shell tricks.

Serbia is committed, according to its Constitution and strategic documents, to European values and principles, to conducting European foreign policy, and to the membership (of all regional states) in the EU. In the context of sharp opposition between the EU, USA, and other Western states against Eastern autocracies, there is no rational reason for Vučić's regime to pursue a hedging policy. Of course, a rational reason could be the preservation of power, but that contradicts the Constitution, and strategic documents, and works against the long-term interests of Serbia and its citizens.

A swift and strong shift of Serbia towards the West is difficult to achieve at this moment because, during the past 12 years of Vučić rule, anti-Western sentiment among Serbian citizens has spread and strengthened, something even they cannot overcome despite their complete control over the media in Serbia. This is best illustrated by the case of lithium, where, even after two months of an intensive campaign in favour of mining this resource, the government cannot convince even its own voters that it is beneficial for Serbia to enter into a strategic relationship with the EU and Western countries in the field of critical minerals. Even if there were a change of government in Serbia, pro-Russian and anti-Western public opinion would be an important determinant of the foreign policy orientation of the new authorities, which would hinder or slow down a decisive shift towards the West. As long as pro-Russian, pro-Chinese, and anti-Western messages dominate pro-government media, both Russia and China will maintain a high tolerance for any “Western deviations” by Vučić’s regime.

A strategic shift of Serbia towards the West would therefore first involve stopping the anti-Western, pro-Russian, and pro-Chinese propaganda. Then, it would require unfreezing Serbia’s EU integration, i.e., implementing reforms that would lead to the creation of stable institutions capable of ensuring the rule of law, democracy, and a market economy. This also means that Serbia needs to align its foreign policy with the EU’s CFSDP, impose sanctions on Russia, completely cut off channels used to bypass sanctions from Serbia to Russia, and end cooperation with autocratic states that harm democracy in Serbia. There is also no space for the implementation of the Serbian World concept, and war-mongering regional policy.

Western countries, on the other hand, need to stop nurturing transactional relations with Vučić’s regime, as this directly sustains and strengthens the undemocratic government in Serbia, which simultaneously runs an anti-Western campaign and fosters relations with autocratic states. If Vučić’s regime is unwilling to fulfil the obligations arising from EU integration, the EU and Western countries should take a firmer stance toward the Serbian authorities. This should involve withholding funds from the Western Balkans Development Plan dedicated to Serbia and imposing sanctions on regime representatives and those who sustain it. Vučić’s regime aims to keep Serbia in the EU integration process to access funds from accession programs, thereby strengthening its power, but without ever becoming an EU member or meeting the rule of law and democracy criteria. The current regime in Serbia continues to improve relations with autocratic regimes, and since May of this year, it has even committed to building a shared future with Communist China as an alternative to EU membership. Therefore, the EU and other Western countries must find ways to prevent autocratic states from becoming an alternative and a spoiler to EU integration of Serbia. Without economic and political support from the EU and Western countries, sanctions against regime leaders, and the possibility of strategic alternatives in the form of autocratic states, the current government will have to bring Serbia back into EU integration, even though it doesn’t want to.

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