War in Ukraine and Russian Goals in the Western Balkans

Válka na Ukrajině a ruské cíle na západním Balkáně

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Abstract: Russia has always had a keen interest in the Western Balkans. It was historically realised in the context of geopolitical continuities of the expansion of its territory and influence. Russia has tried to gain influence in this region for political, economic, identity and strategic reasons. However, after the start of military aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Russia opted for a confrontation in the Western Balkans where it opposes the EU and NATO expansion policies and influence of the West in this region. Key Russian leverage for spreading its influence in the region is the Serbian geopolitical design of military neutrality and the convergence of strategic interests of the two countries. Russia wants to exert a strong influence on the Western Balkans, and thus on the security of the EU. On the other hand, Serbia wants to position itself as the main actor of power in the region with simultaneous support from both Russia and the West.

Abstrakt: Rusko vždy mělo velký zájem o západní Balkán. Historicky se realizovalo v kontextu geopolitické kontinuity rozšiřování svého území a vlivu. Rusko se snažilo získat vliv v tomto regionu z politických, ekonomických, a strategických důvodů. Po zahájení vojenské agrese proti Ukrajině v roce 2014 se však Rusko rozhodlo pro konfrontaci na západním Balkáně, kde se staví proti politice rozšiřování EU a NATO a vlivu Západu v tomto regionu. Klíčovou ruskou pákou pro šíření svého vlivu v regionu je srbský geopolitický návrh vojenské neutrality a konvergence strategických zájmů obou zemí. Rusko chce mít silný vliv na západní Balkán, a tím i na bezpečnost EU. Na druhé straně se chce Srbsko postavit jako hlavní mocenský činitel v regionu se současnou podporou Ruska i Západu.

Key words: Geopolitical design; Geopolitica; Neoclassical Geopolitics; Russia; Serbia; Western Balkans.

Klíčová slova: Geopolitický design; geopolitika; neoklasická politika; Rusko; Srbsko; západní Balkán.

INTRODUCTION

Shifts in the global power structure have led to new geopolitical competitions of strategic players in different regions of the world, including the Western Balkans. In order to protect their national interests, security, and development, the countries of this region strive to connect with various regional and global actors of power that have their own interests in the Western Balkans[1], the realization of which has direct implications for both regional security and, more broadly, European security.

According to their publicly defined national strategies, all the countries of the Western Balkans are committed to join the European Union (EU). Furthermore, apart from Serbia, most of the Western Balkans countries have declared their aspirations for NATO membership. Therefore, the geopolitical design of most of these countries includes Euro-Atlantic integration, except for Serbia, which has declared military neutrality.

Russia has traditionally exercised its influence in the Balkans. However, an important change in Russia's policy in the Balkans occurred after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. The ongoing conflict with the West has led Russia to opt for a confrontation in the Western Balkans, where it opposes the EU and NATO expansion policy and influence. In other words, Russia is seeking to further destabilize the Western Balkans, a close neighbourhood of the EU, thus responding to the West's support to Ukraine.

The main leverage for realizing Russian interests in this region is exerted by Serbian geopolitical design of military neutrality and the convergence of strategic interests with Serbia. Serbian ambition is to position itself as the main power player in the Western Balkans, accepted and supported simultaneously by Russia and the West (USA, EU). Despite

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[1]   The Balkan Peninsula is an area in South-eastern Europe with various geographical and historical definitions. The borders of this region are the Adriatic Sea in the northwest, the Ionian Sea in the southwest, the Aegean Sea in the south, the Turkish Straits in the east and the Black Sea in the northeast. There is no universally accepted designation of the northern border of the peninsula. here is no generally adopted definition of the Western Balkans region and its borders. The Western Balkans is geographically part of Europe (as a central area of the Balkan Peninsula). The adjective western differentiates this region from the eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula. This region isn't considered entirely European. It is often perceived as a frontier area inside the European borders. The term Western Balkans has two meanings - geographical and geopolitical. The geographical definition of the Western Balkans is a region in South-eastern Europe that includes the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. This area is also the border between the orient religions (Orthodox Christianity and Islam) and Catholic Christianity. Geopolitical meaning of the Western Balkans is also changing. After the end of the Cold War (early 1990s), this term was used by NATO and the EU to refer to the part of the Balkan Peninsula which remained outside of both organizations. It included all seven states formed after dissolution of Yugoslavia plus Albania. Today, for the European Union, this is a political term which refers to the countries of former Yugoslavia, excluding Slovenia and adding Albania. Other international organizations, (NATO, the World Bank, OECD, United Nations) also use the term Western Balkans with this meaning. See: MIRELA, Slukan-Altić. *Croatia as a Part of the Western Balkans – Geographical Reality or Enforced Identity?* Društvena istraživanja: časopis za opća društvena pitanja [online], 2011, Vol. 20 No. 2 (112), pp.401-413, [cit.2022-12-10]. ISSN 1848-6096 (online). Available from: https://doi.org/10.5559/di.20.2.06 LIKA, Liridon. (2023) The meaning of the Western Balkans concept for the EU: genuine inclusion or polite exclusion? Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2023.2170204

the sanctions imposed by the West, the convergence of strategic interests of Russia and Serbia is still present in the region. In addition, Russia seeks to exploit both unresolved security issues in this region as well as Serbia's complex "*four pillars strategy*" in order to further its interests in the Western Balkans.

The convergence of strategic interests between Russia and Serbia isn't absolute. Both sides are willing to make moves which are in the long run detrimental to the proclaimed partnership. At the moment, those differences aren't serious enough to change the nature of relationship between Moscow and Belgrade.

1   METHODOLOGY

In this paper, we have used the methodology of neoclassical geopolitics[2], in which the geopolitical design[3] is the central concept. It represents a network of organized and prioritized goals, which differ from each other based on the fact whether they correspond to the logic of ambitions, or to the logic of counter-threats, the goal of which is to oppose the ambitions of others that are contrary to our interests. In addition to defining goals and counter-goals, geopolitical design implies means (instruments of power) and ways (concepts, doctrines, and strategies) necessary for their realization with neutrality and alliance membership being examples of fundamental geopolitical designs.

In addition to the definition of relative material potential, the analysis of geopolitical factors (geographic location, resources, identity factor) also enables the identification of geopolitical dynamics of continuity, which represents "*systemic stimuli*" in relations among the actors of power and helps to explain the real causes of events.[4] In this paper, the geohistorical approach will be used to point out the technique of the "*geohistorical deductions*" to identify these "*systemic stimuli*".

However, an important principle of neoclassical geopolitics is possibilism, which is nothing but the refusal of determinism. Ultimately, it depends on the decision of the intervening variables represented by geopolitical agents (political decision makers), whose focus is on international relations.

[2]   MORGADO, Nuno. Neoclassical geopolitics: Preliminary theoretical principles and methodological guidelines. Medjunarodni problemi, [online], 2020 72(1) pp.129-157, [cit.2022-12-10]. ISSN: 2406-0690 (online), Available from: URL: http://www.doiserbia.nb.rs/issue.aspx?issueid=3651

[3]   CHAUPRADE, Aymeric. THUAL, François (eds.) *Dictionnaire de Géopolitique*. Paris: Ellipses. 1999. ISBN : 2729850775. Originaly in french – „le dispositif géopolitique". The geopolitical design is materialized in the form of diplomatic, military, and special design (special forces and intelligence services).

[4]   MORGADO, Nuno. Neoclassical geopolitics: Preliminary theoretical principles and methodological guidelines. Medjunarodni problemi, [online], 2020 72(1) pp.129-157, [cit.10.12.2022.]. ISSN: 2406-0690 (online). Available from: http://www.doiserbia.nb.rs/issue.aspx?issueid=3651,Examples of geopolitical continuities: the persistence of *the potential of conflict* in straits and other areas, the struggle for resources, the tendency to get access to the sea, etc.

2   GEOPOLITICAL DESIGN OF RUSSIA: RUSSIA AS A GLOBAL ACTOR OF POWER?

The Russian Federation is still the largest country in the world by area, and an important part of MacKinder's "*Heartland*", whose borders have never been precisely defined. Its relative potential is based on large reserves of natural resources. For decades, exports of oil, natural gas, and coal have accounted for about two-thirds of Russia's total exports.[5] Although it is not at the level of the USA or the rapidly growing China in terms of relative power, Russia is the second nuclear power in the world with 600 intercontinental missiles[6] and is a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

However, Russia is a dominantly continental country, almost a landlocked country, which makes it difficult for it to export its natural resources.[7] Hence, Russia's geopolitical imperative is to use all the opportunities for international transport connections.[8] The geopolitical dynamics of continuity that affect the behaviour of the Russian Federation in relation to other actors of power is related to achieving or maintaining access to warm seas, and thus to the world's most important maritime routes via the Black Sea and the Turkish Straits, the Baltic Sea and the Danish Straits, and the Pacific.

Russian topological features have made Russia strategically vulnerable ever since the time of the Mongol conquests. That is why it is important for Russia to maintain control over some important strategic corridors.[9] The geopolitical dynamics of continuity refer to the ambition of continuous expansion of Russian national territory and influence with the aim of ensuring the effective defence of the territory.

Geopolitical design of Russia

The Russian Federation defines the world order as multipolar and sees itself as one of the power poles of that system.[10] Heartland's theme partly overlaps with that of Euroasia, a central concept in Russian geopolitical representation today.[11] Russia seeks

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[5] MARCHAND, Pascal (ed.). Géopolitique *de la Russie. Une nouvelle puissance en Eurasie*. Paris : PUF, 2014, ISBN-10 : 2130625576. Russia ranks first in the world in natural gas reserves, in second place in coal reserves, and in fifth place in the world in oil reserves.

[6] Ibidem, MARCHAND, Pascal.pp. 124.

[7] DUMONT, Gérard-François. Russie, le défi démographique. PINOT, Anne - REVEILLARD, Christophe (eds.). *Géopolitique de la Russie. Approche pluridisciplinaire. Paris :* Edition SPM, 2019, s. 71- 88, ISBN : 978-2-37999-001-4. Global warming could contribute to greater use of the Eurasian corridors and the polar route and increase the potential of the territory of the Russian Federation.

[8] ROHMER, Jean-Christoph (ed.). *Géopolitique de la Russie.* Paris: Economica, 1999. ISBN:2717837795

[9] PAVIĆ, Radovan. *Novi NATO na osnovici dokumenata*. Politička.misao. [online], 1998, Vol.XXXV.br.1, pp.88-118 [cit.2022-12-12]. ISSN 1846-8721 (online). DOI : https://doi.org/10.20901/pm. Available from : https://hrcak.srce.hr/clanak/53434, Pavić lists five relevant European geostrategic corridors - two maritime and three land.

[10] MONGRENIER, Jean-Sylvestre. THOM, François (eds.). *Géopolitique de la Russie*, Paris : PUF, 2016. ISBN : 978-2-7154-1260-6

[11] Ibidem. MONGRENIER, Jean-Sylvestre. THOM, François, pp. 24.

support for the realization of its geopolitical ambitions in a strategic partnership with China, India, and Iran (SCO - Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), and in retaining or regaining influence over the states of the former Soviet Union, in the so-called "*close neighbourhood*", which is an "*area of privileged interest*" for Russia.[12] Additionally, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) present important instruments of its diplomatic design. According to the Strategy from 2021, the Russian Federation sees itself as a strategically independent actor in the multipolar system, unconstrained by any other external force. Also, it does not have to act on the whim of some alliance or use block thinking.[13]

As the main threat to its security, the Russian Federation perceives the expansion of NATO and the EU to the states of its "*area of privileged interest*". Russia is distrustful of the Western world, which it basically considers hostile. What is more, the Kremlin has been trying to strengthen the narrative about Russia being under siege by the USA and the West.[14] In this context, Russian policy refers to the American Cold War strategy of "*containment*" of Russia in the Eurasian continent.

Brauss et al. estimate that Russia will make efforts to maintain the remaining buffer zone towards NATO[15] and strengthen its geopolitical design. They also maintain that Russia would try:

> "*to prohibit Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova from joining NATO and the EU, and eventually turn them back to Moscow's orbit; to try to persuade Finland and Sweden to stay out of NATO; to alienate Turkey from the Alliance and exploit political differences between Turkey and the rest of NATO; and to seek to integrate further its CSTO and Eurasian Union allies, Belarus and Armenia*".

Russia's readiness for military action in the event of threats to its interests was demonstrated by the war in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, but also by the example of July 24, 2018, when Moscow warned that it would *"take response measures"* should Finland and Sweden become members of NATO.[16]

Despite the signed Budapest Memorandum, in 2014, Russia militarily attacked Ukraine and occupied its eastern part, and on February 24, 2022, it continued its brutal attack with the goal of quickly ousting the legally elected government representatives. With the great support of the West, Ukraine defended itself against the Russian invasion

12 Ibidem. MONGRENIER, Jean-Sylvestre. THOM, François, pp.45.

13 BUCHANAN, Elizabeth. Russia's 2021 National Security Strategy: Cool Change Forecasted for the Polar Regions. RUSI. [on-line], 2021[Cit. 2022-12-12]. Available from:: https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-2021-national-security-strategy-cool-change-forecasted-polar-regions.

14 KENDAL-TAYLOR, Andrea - EDMONDS. Jeffrey. The Evolution of the Russian threat to NATO. OLSEN, John Andreas. *Future NATO adapting to new realities*. Colchester: RUSI. Whitehall Paper 2020. s. 54-66. ISBN 13: 978-0-367-53472-1.

15 BRAUSS, Heinrich. STOICESCU, Kalev. LAWRENCE, Tony. Capability and Resolve: Deterrence, Security and Stability in the Baltic Region, ICDS [online], Tallin: ICDS 2020[Cited.2022-12-12]. ISSN 2228-2068. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339253549_Capability_and_Resolve_Deterrence_Security_and_Stability_in_the_Baltic_Region

16 OUALAALOU, David (ed.). *The Dynamics of Russia's Geopolitics Remaking the Global Order*, Cham: Springer, 2021, DOI: 978-3-030-58255-5

and launched a counter-offensive. Even before the escalation of the conflict in 2022, Ukrainians demonstrated not having any intention of being part of the Russian power project.[17]

Russian failed attempt at a *"blitzkrieg"* has led to the collapse of a part of its geopolitical design. Consequently, one of the most serious changes that have been prompted by it refers to the abandonment of Finland's and Sweden's traditional neutral position, as well as their imminent accession to NATO, which will bring about significant strategic changes to the eastern flank of the Alliance.

2   THE WESTERN BALKANS IN RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL DESIGN

Russia has always had a keen interest in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, its interest in this region was historically realized in the context of the geopolitical dynamics of the expansion of its territory with the aspiration to establish control over the Turkish Straits. This ambition was particularly pronounced during the Balkan Wars, World War I, and the moment of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. It is safe to say that during that period, Russia specifically expressed its desire to extend its influence over the countries in the Eastern Balkans (Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece).

2.1   Serbian geopolitical design as the main leverage of Russian interest in the Western Balkans

After the end of the Cold War, Russian policy in the Western Balkans was implemented in three stages.[18] The first stage lasted from 1991 to 2003, when Russia tried to manage the security processes in the region together with the USA and the most powerful countries of Western Europe. This stage ended after the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999. Russian forces withdrew from Kosovo in 2003. The second stage began in 2006 after the gas crisis with Ukraine when Russia was looking for ways to export its energy resources through Southeast Europe. This stage also represented the peak of the Russian

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[17] OSMOLOVSKA, Iuliia. Current State of Ukraine's Play within the Geopolitical Map of Europe, IRMO [online], Zagreb: IRMO 2021 [Cited. 2022-12-12]. Available from: https://irmo.hr/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/IRMO-Brief-11-2021.pdf , Recent poll data demonstrate that 62% of Ukrainians support the country's integration into the EU, while 58% support Ukraine's membership in NATO. The number of Ukrainians, who see better guarantees in Ukraine's membership in NATO has risen to 55% in 2020 (compared to 26% for neutral status and 5% for a military union with Russia and other CIS countries).

[18] PANAGIOTOU, Ritsa. The Western Balkans between Russia and the European Union: perceptions, reality, and impact on enlargement, Journal of Contemporary European Studies [online].2021, 29:2, pp.219-233, [cit. 2022-12-12]. DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2020.1798218, Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2020.1798218

influence in the region when, after the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence, its alliance with Serbia was strengthened again.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 marked a turning point and the beginning of the conflict with the West. Russia not only opposed both the EU's policy in the region and NATO's expansion plans, but also began to interfere more directly in the internal politics of a number of countries, playing on anti-Western discontent. At the same time, the construction of the South Stream gas pipeline was cancelled, which further exacerbated tensions in relations with the West.

After the escalation of the war conflict in Ukraine, Russia's main interest in the Western Balkans is to further destabilize the region in order to divert attention from its failure in Ukraine. An opportunity for such activities is offered by a host of unresolved security issues in this region, but also by the geopolitical design of Serbia and the convergence of the strategic interests of two countries.

2.1.1 Serbian geopolitical design

Serbia is in the category of small countries; nonetheless, it is the largest country in the Western Balkans. In spite of being a landlocked country, Serbia is still a country through which important European transport corridors pass – namely corridors X and VII. To protect its national interests, Serbia opted for a geopolitical design of military neutrality based on the "*four pillars* strategy". Serbia defined good bilateral relations with Russia, its traditional ally, as very significant.[19] At the same time, despite the deterioration of relations with the USA after the NATO bombing in 1999, good bilateral relations with the USA are also of primary importance for Serbia. However, in the 2020 National Security Strategy, it was stated for the first time that NATO membership was not a desired goal for Serbia but, as a member of the PfP, it still participates in a number of different NATO activities and military exercises. At the same time, since 2013, Serbia has been an observer country in the CSTO and has taken part in several exercises with the members of this organization. The third pillar is represented by relations with the EU, and the fourth one includes bilateral relations with China, a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Serbia has chosen to pursue its national interests by balancing between strategic players.

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[19] Strategija nacionalne bezbednosti Republike Srbije, Narodna skupština Republike Srbije, 2020, Available from: https://mod.gov.rs/multimedia/file/staticki_sadrzaj/dokumenta/strategije/2021/Prilog1-StrategijaNacionalneBezbednostiRS-SRP.pdf

2.1.2 Preservation of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Serbia

Keeping Kosovo within its borders is of paramount importance to Serbia as it presents one of its important national interests.[20] In the preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia from 2006, Kosovo is listed as an integral part of it. In addition to not wanting to recognize the independence of Kosovo, Serbia is making diplomatic efforts to prevent its further recognition by other countries, and it is trying to convince some countries that have already recognized its independence to withdraw the recognition. Solving the issue of the final status of Kosovo is defined by Serbia as a matter of its internal security.

However, Kosovo sees the normalization of relations with Serbia in a fundamentally different way, which is shown by the fact that in 2008, it unilaterally declared its independence. Since 2008, more than 100 countries have recognised Kosovo as an independent state. Nevertheless, some countries such as Serbia, Russia, and China, as well as five EU member states, have so far not recognised Kosovo's independence. As a result, Kosovo's economic progress is being constrained and the political situation in the country remains unpredictable.

Considering the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence illegal, Serbia has brought proceedings before the International Court of Justice in the Hague. However, in the report published in 2010, the International Court of Justice concluded that the declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo had not violated general international law, UNSC Resolution 1244, or the Constitutional Framework adopted under the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK).[21] The Advisory Opinion transferred the dispute from the UN to the EU, limiting Russia's role.

The Brussels Agreement from 2013 served as motivation for Pristina and Belgrade to normalize relations, construct a modus vivendi, and open the door to EU membership. Direct talks under the auspices of the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy linked Kosovo to the EU's enlargement into the Western Balkans. However, no significant advancement in their relations has been reported so far.

One of the possible solutions to Kosovo's final status arose in 2018, when the idea of exchanging territories appeared. However, EU countries rejected the proposal arguing that the change of borders would lead to a chain reaction in the Western Balkans. This referred also to possible separatism in Serbia itself - Sandžak and Vojvodina province.

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[20] Ibidem, Strategija nacionalne bezbednosti Republike Srbije, Narodna skupština Republike Srbije, 2020, Preservation of the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia; preservation of the internal stability and integrity of the Republic of Serbia and its citizens; preservation of the existence and protection of the Serbian people wherever they live as well as national minorities and their cultural, religious, and historical identity; preservation of peace and security in the region and the world; European integration and membership of the Republic of Serbia in the EU; economic development and overall prosperity; preservation of the environment and resources of the Republic of Serbia.

[21] International Court of Justice. Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo. ICJ [online]. The Hague: 2010 [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/141

Along with such conflicting views on solving this pressing security issue in the Western Balkans, the problem of the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, the final status of Kosovo, has often been called the "Balkan Gordian knot".

A recent example of Russian use of Kosovo issue for wider destabilization of the Western Balkan region is escalation of Serbia-Kosovo dispute in summer 2022.[22] During the crisis, Russian media published articles which stated that those tensions were the fault of the West. Several Russian officials openly proclaimed their support for Serbia. For example, First Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council Committee on International Affairs Vladimir Dzhabarov said that, if necessary, Russia can offer Serbia economic and military support.[23] Russian reaction significantly helped Vučič to present outcome of conflict as a Serbian foreign policy victory and uses this event in strengthening its hold on Serbia.

Continuous Russian support in this and similar cases continue to encourage Belgrade in its conflicts with Kosovo, and consequently worsen the security in the region. Russian use of sectarian divisions in the region (another example is Moscow support to Republika Srpska strongman Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina or meddling in Montenegro internal politics) simultaneously is escalating and freezing conflicts in the Western Balkans. After the invasion of Ukraine, Russian destabilization activities are intensifying. For Moscow, this is a low risk-high reward strategy to successfully threaten not only the Western Balkans stability, but also overall European security.

Trifunović even supports the thesis that Russia seeks to preserve the status quo in Kosovo by subtly promoting Greater Albanian nationalism and extreme political viewpoints, by fostering interethnic tensions and incidents, by fostering fear among the Serbian minority in Kosovo, by supporting extreme Islamism, by obstructing Serbia's EU and NATO membership, and in other ways.[24]

2.1.3 European integration and Serbia's membership in the EU

As an important precondition for the progress of Serbia's accession negotiations with the EU, the European Commission emphasizes the resolution of the "*Balkan Gordian knot*". However, in its National Security Strategy from 2020, Serbia considers that this issue should not affect the speed of accession negotiations with the EU.

Serbia was granted the status of a candidate country in early 2012. In its December 2022 Annual Progress Review, the Stabilization and Association Council of the EU and

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22 On 31 July 2022 Serbian minority in Kosovo blocked key roads in Northern Kosovo as a reaction on Pristina's attempt to force them to replace their Serbian license plates with the Kosovo ones. Pristina sent Kosovo police forces to break blockade. During tense standoff both sides exchanged gunfire. In response Serbian president Vučić meet with Serbian General Staff to discuss potential military response to Pristina 'provocations' against Kosovo Serbs. This provoked statement from NATO KFOR forces that they would intervene if stability of Kosovo is threatened. Next day Kosovo's government agreed to postpone ban on Serbian license plates.

23 TASS. Russia can aid Serbia with energy or arms supplies, if necessary — senator. TASS [online]. Moscow: TASS 2022 [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from : https://tass.com/world/1487519

24 SOLDO, Vera. Rusija želi zapaliti Balkan. DW[online]. Mostar: DW 2023. [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://www.dw.com/hr/rusija-%C5%BEeli-zapaliti-balkan/a-64313131

Serbia [25] welcomed Serbia's overall progress in the accession negotiations but noted that progress in the rule of law, fundamental rights and the normalization of Serbia's relations with Kosovo are crucial and the pace of negotiations will depend upon them.

The Council also anticipates Serbia to demonstrate an unwavering commitment to the EU, stand up for the EU shared principles and values, communicate with the EU objectively, and actively participate in the fight against disinformation and foreign information manipulation in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. The Council also deeply regrets Serbia's backsliding in alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, particularly its non-compliance with EU sanctions against Russia and Belarus.

Serbia's progress toward the EU membership is slow. After nine years of negotiations, 22 out of 35 negotiations chapters have been opened, but only two chapters have been provisionally closed. In April 2022, support for the EU membership in Serbian population has fallen under 50% and never recovered.[26] A survey carried out by the Serbian Ministry of European Integration in December 2022 shows that significant majority of almost 65% of Serbian citizens believes that reforms needed for Serbia's accession to the EU should be implemented; but only 43% support Serbian accession to the EU.[27]

Despite this gloomy picture, the EU membership remains Serbian strategic goal. For Serbian president Vučić, this is a long-term aim, instead of current priority. At the last World Economic Forum in Davos, Vučić clearly stated his pessimism about Serbian membership in the European Union any time soon.[28]

Even after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU still perceives Vučić as indispensable for maintaining stability in the region. Belgrade's refusal to adopt sanctions against Russia or to implement the latest agreement on the normalization of relations with Kosovo so far has not resulted in strong EU condemnation of such behaviour and serious political and economic consequences for Serbia.

Such Serbian strategy of playing both sides is acceptable for Moscow. Maintaining the status quo is further undermining Western influence in the region. The possible future membership of Serbia in the EU also creates the opportunities for Russian influence on

25 European Council. EU enlargement policy, Serbia. European Council [online]. Bruxelles: European Council 2022., [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/serbia/

26 MASILOVIĆ JASTIĆ, Ivana. PRVI PUT U ISTORIJI VEĆINA GRAĐANA SRBIJE PROTIV ULASKA U EU Veliko istraživanje Ipsosa: Ključni razlog za to su PRITISCI IZ BRISELA koje trpimo zbog Rusije. Blic[online]. Beograd: Blic 2022. [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/prvi-put-u-istoriji-vecina-gradjana-srbije-protiv-ulaska-u-eu-veliko-istrazivanje/71wlnbr, The survey revealed that for the first time in history, the majority of Serbian citizens are against joining the EU (44% of participants are against Serbian EU membership while 35% are in favor, and 21% doesn't have opinion about this issue).

27 Government of the Republic of Serbia, Ministry of European Integration. European orientation of Serbian citizens, [online]. Belgrade: Ministry of European Integration 2022. [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/opinion_poll_dec_2022.pdf

28 PREUSSEN, Wilhelmine. Serbia 'not enthusiastic' about EU membership anymore, says president. [online]. Brussels: Politico 2023. [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-vucic-davos-world-economic-forum-european-union-membership/

the process of making and implementing decisions within the Union. In such circumstances, the important goal for Russia is perseverance of its influence in Serbia. Russia has been particularly effective in media propaganda. Namely, in Serbia, it is believed that their most important economic partner is Russia, while the facts show something completely different. For instance, Russia accounts for under 5% of annual investment in Serbia, and the EU's share is between 70 and 80 percent.[29] When looking at it percentagewise, although the EU accounts for the bulk of the region's trade and foreign direct investment, Russia is strongly present in strategically important energy security.[30] Despite the statistics, Russia has been very successful in cultivating the perception that it is a crucial strategic partner that cares more about the region's interests than some other actors.[31]

2.1.4 Protection of Serbs wherever they may live

Heterogeneity of identity and the non-overlapping of ethnic identity with state borders was the cause of wars after the dissolution of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.[32] The "*Greater Serbia*" project was one of the most important causes of the wars among the states that arose from the breakup of former Yugoslavia. The war in Slovenia was followed by the wars in Croatia, then in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and finally in Kosovo. One has to emphasize that the "*Greater Serbia*" project was based on the ambition that all Serbs should live in one state, which meant changing internationally recognized state borders.

"*Just like pianism, ideas about great states are out of time and devoid of dialogue with reality*".[33] Such projects belong to the category of geopolitical dynamics of continuity because "*the once defined goal of creating a great state, associated with some period in the past, no analysis can change anymore*".[34] Additionally, access to the sea has been a constant problem in Serbian history.[35]

One cannot but be worried by the statements of the current head of the Serbian Security and Information Agency (BIA), Aleksandar Vulin, who also held both the state interior ministry and defence ministry portfolio prior to that. In 2021, he claimed: "*The task*

[29] BECHEV, Dimitar. Russia's Influence in Southeast Europe. Bear Network [online]. 2021. [Cited.2023-01-29] Available from : http://www.bearnetwork.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Dimitar-Bechev-Policy-Memo.pdf

[30] PANAGIOTOU, Ritsa. The Western Balkans between Russia and the European Union : perceptions, reality, and impact on enlargement, Journal of Contemporary European Studies [online].2021, 29:2, pp.219-233, [cit. 2022-12-12]. DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2020.1798218, Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2020.1798218

[31] KISIC, Izabela. The pro-Russian media campaign in Serbia. [online]. Sarajevo: The Atlantic Initiative 2022. [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://atlanticinitiative.org/the-pro-russian-media-campaign-in-serbia/

[32] BANAC, Ivo. *Raspad Jugoslavije.* Zagreb: Durieux, 2001. ISBN: 953-188-139-1

[33] THUAL, François. *Le Désir de Territoire,* Paris, Ellipses, 1999, ISBN : 2-7298-9988-X

[34] Ibidem, THUAL, François. pp. 115.

[35] LUTARD, Catherine. *Géopolitique de la Serbie-Monténégro.* Bruxelles : Edition Complexe. 1998. ISBN: 2-87027-647-8

of this generation of politicians is to create a Serbian world".[36] Additionally, he said that no one has the right to give up on Serbian unification or the Serbian world. Vulin also said that for the creation of the Serbian world, Serbia had to be economically prosperous, well-run, and armed to protect both itself and all Serbs, wherever they might be.

In other words, Vulin's statements can be interpreted in light of the protection of Serbs who primarily live in the countries of the Western Balkans - in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. This could imply Serbia's interfering in the internal affairs of these countries once again and could potentially lead to a re-questioning of the existing internationally recognized borders.

It is indicative that during the crisis in relations between Serbia and Kosovo at the end of 2022, the increased combat readiness of the Serbian Armed Forces was declared, and its artillery weapons were moved and directed toward the territory of Kosovo. At the same time, Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs forces were placed under the command of the Chief of the General Staff of the Republic of Serbia.

In its National Security Strategy, Serbia states that it has special relations with *Republika Srpska*, one of the entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose president Milorad Dodik often calls for its annexation by Serbia. In addition to that, Serbia's intelligence operations conducted by its agencies in North Macedonia and Montenegro provide additional evidence of Serbia's meddling in the internal affairs of other countries of the Western Balkans. In October 2016, "*the Montenegrin government pointed a finger at Russia for plotting a coup d'état in league with rogue security operatives from the neighbouring Serbia"*,[37] shows the convergence of the Serbian and Russian strategic interests in this region.

2.2 Serbia's key geopolitical goal

All of the listed components of Serbia's geopolitical design of military neutrality are crucial in pursuing its strategic goal - achieving the status of a leading state in the Western Balkans, and forming a sphere of influence that will be accepted by both the West and Russia. Upon coming to power in 2014, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced the attainment of this goal.[38]

Russia has been fully supporting this kind of Serbian foreign policy behaviour since it sees it as an opportunity to exert its influence on geopolitical and security dynamics not

[36] KLIX. ba, Vulin: Zadatak ove generacije političara je stvaranje "srpskog sveta", objedinit ćemo sve Srbe. KLIX.ba [online]. Sarajevo: KLIX.ba 2021. [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/regija/vulin-zadatak-ove-generacije-politicara-je-stvaranje-srpskog-sveta-objedinit-cemo-sve-srbe/210718080

[37] BECHEV, Dimitar. *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2017, ISBN 978-0-300-21913-5

[38] VUČIĆ, Aleksandar. Srbija treba postati regionalni lider. Al Jazeera Balkans [online].Beograd: Al Jazeera Balkans 2014. [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2014/4/8/vucic-srbija-treba-postati-regionalni-lider

only in the Western Balkans, but also in the EU. In order to achieve that, Russia would like to see Serbia as one of the key actors of power in the region with which it will continue to develop close ties.[39] The Balkans, in Bechev's opinion are located well outside of what Russia views as its exclusive area of geopolitical influence in the post-Soviet region. [40] In terms of politics, economy, social issues, and even just geography, the regional nations tend to favour the West. Russia views the Balkans as a weak spot in Europe's periphery where Russia can establish a foothold, gather allies, and ultimately increase its leverage over the West.[41] Development of the partnership with Serbia is important for strengthening Moscow position in the Western Balkans and attaining Russian political, economic and security-military goals in the region.[42]

In doing so, Belgrade has been exploiting the perception of some EU members about Serbia's key role in the region, which can be seen in the German policy toward Serbia. The literature mentions two motives for such German policy: preserving the stability of the region, but also emphasizing German involvement in the region of Central and Eastern Europe in order to further Berlin's interests in relation to other initiatives (primarily the Three Seas Initiative).[43] Only the continuation of Belgrade's support for Moscow after the Russian invasion of Ukraine prompted German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to send a warning about the need to change Belgrade's attitude toward Kosovo and impose sanctions on Russia.[44]

However, the result is completely opposite; this kind of EU policy only managed to strengthen the legitimacy of Vučić's government enabling him to stay in power. An additional negative consequence of such EU policy measures is a growing risk of undermining liberal governments in the region, and a long-term weakening of the Union.

In pursuing its strategic goal - achieving the status of a leading state in the Western Balkans, President Vučić wants to apply two strategies that derive from the determinants of Serbia's geopolitical design of military neutrality.

The first strategy includes encouraging regional integration, in which Belgrade would play a central role. In 2021, Serbia, along with Albania and North Macedonia, launched the Open Balkans Initiative, with the aim of enabling the free movement of people,

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[39] Акопов, Петр: Балканы — новый фронт войны с Россией. риа новости. РИА Новости [online]. Москва: РИА Новости 2022. [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://ria.ru/20220607/balkany-1793564711. html

[40] BECHEV, Dimitar. Russia's Influence in Southeast Europe. Bear Network [online]. 2021. [Cited.2023-01-29] Available from: http://www.bearnetwork.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Dimitar-Bechev-Policy-Memo.pdf

[41] Ibidem, BECHEV, Dimitar. pp. 3.

[42] Искендеров, Пётр. Россия и Балканы: вызовы и приоритеты. Международная жизнь [online]. Москва: Международная жизнь 2020. [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/27929

[43] COLBASANU, Antonia. Germany: Keeping an Eye on the Balkans. Geopolitical Futures [online]. Geopolitical Futures 2017 [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://geopoliticalfutures.com/germany-keeping-eye-balkans/

[44] DANKBAR, Christine. Bundeskanzler auf Balkanreise: Eklat in Belgrad. Berliner Zeitung [online]. Berlin: Berliner Zeitung 2022. [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/news/scholz-fordert-serbien-zu-sanktionen-gegen-russland-auf-li.235187

goods, services, and capital among its members.[45] One can conclude that Serbia would have the greatest economic benefits, whereas other countries of the region would be placed in a position of dependence on Belgrade.

The second strategy entails the already mentioned concept of the *"Serbian world"*, which employs Serbia's efforts to control the Serbian minority in the countries of the region by exerting its influence on the internal politics of the respective countries.

Strong resistance to the aforementioned Serbian policy is visible in the countries of the Western Balkans. Also, harsh criticism has been directed at the Open Balkans Initiative by some of the countries in the region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, this initiative is perceived as a facade for Serbia's regional hegemony.[46] Similar discontent with the Initiative can be observed in Montenegro and Kosovo, where it is pointed out that there is a danger that the Open Balkans Initiative could be presented as an alternative for the countries of the region to the EU membership. Additionally, criticism of these countries has also been addressed to the EU, where (due to the unclear perspective of the future membership of the countries of the region) there is some support for this Initiative, which suits Belgrade.[47]

On the one hand, Vučić is sending a message to the EU that Serbia is a key factor to reckon with in the region, and that without meeting Serbian needs, it will not be possible to achieve long-term stability of the region. On the other hand, Serbia has constantly been provoking crises in its neighbourhood which consist of escalation and de-escalation of tensions, after which Vučić presents himself as a moderate politician. In the last few years, this behaviour pattern is visible in Serbia's relations with Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo.

It is safe to say that all these steps are directed towards the continuation of the foreign policy of balancing between the East and the West. In addition, this policy entails attainment of several goals: the continuation of receiving financial assistance from the EU while also receiving support (especially economic) from China and Russia, and obtaining the confirmation of the requested status of Serbia from the leading Western countries (the USA, Germany). By achieving these goals, Aleksandar Vučić wants to ensure all the requirements necessary for maintaining a non-liberal concept of governance in Serbia. At the same time, Russia is perceived as Serbia's constant and indispensable partner.[48]

45 SD-Srbija danas. Saveznistvo bez barijera: "Otvoreni Balkan" - ideja prosperiteta i bolje budućnosti Srbije, Albanije i Severne Makedonije. SD [online]. Beograd: SD 2022. [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://www.sd.rs/vesti/info/saveznistvo-bez-barijera-otvoreni-balkan-ideja-prosperiteta-i-bolje-buducnosti-srbije-albanije-i-2022-03-23

46 TRT Balkan. „Otvoreni Balkan" se može pokazati kao loša ideja. TRT Balkan [online]. Beograd: TRT Balkan 2021. [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://bhsc.trtbalkan.com/opinion/otvoreni-balkan-se-moze-pokazati-kao-losa-ideja-9260827

47 Analitika. Projekat Otvoreni Balkan jedan je od najopasnijih oblika stvaranja haosa. Analitika [online]. Podgorica: Analitika 2022. [Cited.2023-01-29], Available from: https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/gjenero-projekat-otvoreni-balkan-jedan-je-od-najopasnijih-oblika-stvaranja-haosa

48 JOVIĆ-LAZIĆ, Ana. LAĐEVAC, Ivona. Odnosi Srbije i Rusije – uticaj na međunarodni položaj naše zemlje. KOSTIĆ, Ana (eds.). Srbija i svet u 2017. godini. [online] Beograd: Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, 2018, s. 173-196. [Cited.2023-01-29], ISBN 978-86-7067-250-5. Available from: http://repozitorijum.diplomacy.bg.ac.rs/278/1/Srbija%20i%20Svet%20u%202017-174-197.pdf

A factor that cannot be overlooked when considering this issue is Aleksandar Vučić's effort to remain in power in Serbia. Since assuming power, Vučić has taken control over the public administration (and especially over the security sector), and the media sector in Serbia, which was accompanied by the growth in nationalism and anti--Western sentiment in Serbia leaving Serbian opposition weak and fragmented. What is more, Serbia has been intensively developing economic and security relations with both Russia and China since 2014.The incentive for such cooperation is not only connected with economic benefits and energy security issues, but also with the legitimization of his authoritarian style of government in the eyes of the Serbian public through association with politicians of an authoritarian orientation (Vladimir Putin, XI Jinping).

Despite such an orientation, the EU has so far tried to develop cooperation with Vučić in the hope that Serbia will gradually make progress toward democracy. Because of its stalled enlargement process in the Western Balkans, the EU prefers maintenance of stability in the region. Vučić is in Bruxelles perceived as a key factor for maintaining stability in the region. The EU is expecting Belgrade to maintain stability in the region through fulfilment of three tasks: normalization of relations with Kosovo by the implementation of the Brussels Agreement signed in 2013 (this is the EU highest priority in the region); neutralization of the Republika Srpska separatist tendencies; moderation of Serbian national politics through marginalization of extreme right political parties.

CONCLUSION

Russia has defined the world order as multipolar and sees itself as one of the power poles of that system. The central geopolitical concept of Russia is Eurasianism, which partially overlaps with the idea of the "Heartland". One of the key components of Russia's geopolitical design are the states of the former Soviet Union, which Russia considers to be its "area of privileged interest", and which also includes Ukraine, among others.

However, the Western Balkans does not belong to the category of areas of privileged Russian interest although Russia is traditionally present in this region for economic, political, strategic or identity reasons. After the attack on Ukraine in 2014, Russia opted for a confrontation in the Western Balkans where it opposes the EU and NATO expansion policy and influence. Moreover, Russia seeks to take advantage of unresolved security issues and further destabilize the region.

All the countries of the Western Balkans, except Serbia, have expressed their aspirations of joining the Euro-Atlantic integration. To satisfy its national interests, Serbia relies on the "four pillars strategy", a geopolitical design that implies good relations simultaneously with Russia as its strategic partner, as well as the USA, China and the EU. Serbia's ambition is to position itself as the main actor of power in the Western Balkans with simultaneous approval by the West and Russia.

Not only that the Serbian ambition to achieve its national interests defined in the National Security Strategy of Serbia does not stabilize the Western Balkans, but it further destabilizes it. One of its most important national interests relates to the protection of Serbs wherever they may live. It is conceptualized under the name "Serbian world" and

represents an identity project that implies Serbia's interference in the internal affairs of other countries of the Western Balkans, which increases the potential for interstate conflict in the region.

The main leverage of Russian influence in the Western Balkans is represented by Serbian geopolitical design of military neutrality and convergence of the strategic interests of the two countries. The convergence of Russian and Serbian interests in the Western Balkans leaves a wide space for Russian actions in the region that could also impact EU security. Serbia needs Russia's support to protect its defined national interests, which is why, despite strong pressures from the EU and the USA, Serbia remains the only European country that has not imposed sanctions on Russia. This is a fact that can be exploited by Moscow in the context of the war in Ukraine and the confrontation with the West to additionally complicate the security situation in the region and, consequently, further destabilize the Western Balkans, as well as the EU.

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