



**SERBIA AT THE CROSSROADS
BETWEEN THE WEST AND THE EAST**

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I Introduction

I. 1 Context and Purpose of the Study

For the last two decades, Serbia has been engaged in the European integration process with the ultimate goal of becoming a full-fledged member of the EU. Yet, what has complicated Serbia's path and made it stand out from the rest of the region is the fact that a part of its territory declared independence from it in 2008, representing an issue which essentially hijacked Serbia's foreign policy and defined its relationships with global and regional actors. For this reason, Serbia's willingness to attempt to balance between the East and the West is a phenomenon that has accompanied its path towards the EU. What has drawn concern is that this phenomenon has become more prevalent in recent years, particularly as the number of foreign actors with whom Serbia has intensified relations has increased, while its international relations at the global scale have become more complicated.

As the coming years do not seem promising in terms of accelerating Serbia's accession process to the EU, particularly as Serbia records no progress in comprehensive rule of law reforms, many have warned that further involvement by external actors in the country will be at the expense of the EU's leverage and Serbia's accession process. In this context, the activities of **China, Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and the United Arab Emirates** have an increased importance, particularly as these countries' common denominator is their lack of emphasis on democratic institutions and rule of law standards. For this reason, this policy study tackles the question of whether, and to what extent, their values and methods of governance can spread to Serbia and thus hinder its accession process to the EU. Furthermore, this study also analyses the role of **the United States** in Serbia and its actions in response to these developments, not only as it is a country which has generally kept a significant level of interest in Serbia, but also as it has increasingly taken a role in the Belgrade-Priština dialogue and in limiting Serbia's ties with China and Russia.

The issues analysed by this study are of grave importance at the moment, as Serbia is a country characterised by elements of "state capture", as pointed out by the European Commission in 2018, and which is now also seen as a "hybrid regime", as defined by Freedom House in 2020. Such ratings represent a major setback for Serbia, showing that it is prone to further democratic backsliding. Although this study does not argue that all foreign influence is damaging *per se*,

it appears that Serbia is currently in a position in which it cannot afford to give any space to the kind of influences that could potentially further slow its EU accession process and negatively impact its existing system of governance.

Despite the urgency of the issues at stake, there is a lack of in-depth and comprehensive research to provide evidence-based analysis pointing at the nature and level of impact of the aforementioned foreign actors in Serbia. Recognising the practical and essential value of the EU integration process, the overall aim of this policy study is to support Serbia's EU perspective by encouraging the rethinking of its existing positions *vis-à-vis* these various non-EU actors. For this reason, **the purpose of this research is to analyse how the changing international environment is affecting Serbia's EU accession process by looking at the involvement of non-EU actors from the perspectives of their political, economic, and social impacts.**

I. 2 Methodology

Since this topic is complex and the research involved is comprehensive, extensive information collection was needed. For this reason, the referenced data was collected through desk research and fieldwork, relying both on **qualitative and quantitative approaches**. The desk research consisted of relevant **document analysis**, including analysis of relevant studies, country case studies, available statistical data, and relevant academic and professional literature.

Before the commencement of fieldwork, **stakeholder sampling** was conducted. This step allowed researchers to identify the most relevant stakeholders from the government, business, academia, and civil society sectors knowledgeable on the researched topic and willing to participate in the research through round tables and interviews. After the first phase of the desk research was finished, and once relevant stakeholders were mapped, field work started in order to acquire lacking or unavailable information. Stakeholders' views were collected by relying on the round table discussions and interviews for the purposes of acquiring valuable information.

In that regard, a kick-off **round table** discussion was organised, consisting of a group of relevant stakeholders from different fields (including academia, civil society organisations, and consultancy firms), and depending on their fields, they were moderated and guided by the

researchers. The purpose of this step was to acquire valuable feedback on the researched topic. In addition, useful guidelines for the continuation of research were collected from the stakeholders present at this event. To fill in the gaps, **semi-structured interviews** were conducted, which included questions aimed at revealing interviewees' knowledge on information relevant to researched issues. The questions were adjusted depending on the interviewee's field of expertise and knowledge. The main purpose of this step was to maximise the amount of available first-hand information.

For the research to be innovative, the researchers developed a **pilot model** for the measurement of political, economic, and social leverage that the observed countries have in Serbia. As the quantification of this relation is a highly complex process, the researchers opted to develop an initial set of indicators based on which they could assess the impact of foreign actors on observed topics. These measurements were cross-checked with findings from the analytical component of the research in order to obtain a broader understanding of the overall results. The final outcome resulted in a three visually appealing indexes, which are presented as part of Annex 1.

With regards to **limitations** of the study, considering the sensitivity of the analysed topic, not all relevant official documents were publicly available for analysis, particularly when it comes to business contracts, or defence and arms purchase deals. Nevertheless, the authors were able, to some extent, to overcome this hurdle by diving deep into a comprehensive desk research. The fact that the research was largely conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the ability of the authors to conduct interviews with all originally planned stakeholders. The authors, however, did manage to conduct interviews with the most relevant stakeholders, either face-to-face or online, for the purposes of addressing the gaps in the existing literature. To that extent, as the round table was organised prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, it also allowed the researchers to gather relevant information at the start of the research.

I. 3 Roadmap of the Study

This study is divided into six separate chapters. Following the introductory Chapter I, Chapter II engages in analysis of China's growing foothold in Serbia. Chapter III explores Russia's close ties to Serbia. Chapter IV analyses Turkey's approach to Serbia as a regional actor. Chapter V is divided into three parts, each being dedicated to a brief analysis of one of three

different foreign actors and their relations with Serbia, including Azerbaijan, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States of America. After the country analysis chapters, Chapter VI presents conclusions. The same chapter also presents general recommendations and country-specific recommendations for EU policy-makers regarding the foreign actors that were analysed in-depth in this policy study. Finally, an annex is presented, including indexes detailing the political, economic, and social impacts in Serbia of China, Russia, and Turkey.

II China – The Rise of the Red Dragon

When discussing and analysing Serbia in the context of geopolitics, and increasingly in terms of Serbia's EU integration process, the issue of China's growing foothold is a necessary point of reference. Although Russia has traditionally been the usual suspect for external actor involvement, China has increasingly been taking centre stage, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, as the EU considers it a systemic rival, there are fears that China, as a non-democratic country, will transfer parts of its governance and value system to Serbia, and thus harm its EU accession process.

These concerns are exacerbated by the fact that, unlike Russia, which has historical ties to the region, and Turkey, which is geographically part of the region, China is a booming economy with no apparent ties to Serbia. The following analyses how the "unexpected" influence of China grew in Serbia, particularly in the areas of politics, economics, and culture. Furthermore, Serbia's role in the Belt and Road Initiative is investigated, while it is also analysed whether and to what extent this Initiative goes beyond the pure economics.

II. 1 Political Relations with China

II. 1. 1 The Yugoslav Legacy

In the rhetoric of public officials, one frequently comes across the statement that Serbia and China have *always* had traditionally friendly and good relations. To illustrate this claim, most commonly the popularity of Yugoslav films is invoked, as many of them were translated and imported to China,¹ and continue to be used in public diplomacy as an example of traditional amicable relations and mutual familiarity. The 1972 film *Water Defends Sarajevo*, allegedly seen by hundreds of millions of Chinese,² is regularly used as a point of reference by state officials.³ Even in 2020, this film was aired on Chinese National Television as a token of

¹ Yanxi Wu, "The Influence of Yugoslav Films on China in the 20th Century", 2018, p.3 available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327885417_The_Influence_of_Yugoslav_Films_on_China_in_the_20th_Century

² Quartz, "China loves this obscure 1972 Yugoslavian movie", 2019, available at: <https://qz.com/quartz/1589664/chinas-love-for-old-yugoslav-war-movie-fuels-balkan-tourism-boom/>

³ In 2012, for example, Chinese construction workers of the Zemun-Borča bridge were introduced to the leading actor of *Water Defends Sarajevo*, Velimir Bata Stojković. Two years later, during Chinese PM Li Keqiang's first official visit to Serbia in 2014, he met with Ljubiša Samardžić, another main actor from the film. Finally, in 2016,

solidarity with Serbia during the COVID-19 crisis.⁴ Using the Yugoslav legacy, thus, is one tool that remains at the disposal of public diplomacy between the two countries. Although it is true that this film is indeed one of the most recognisable connections between these two sides, **it would be an exaggeration to argue that Sino-Serbian relations were without setbacks in the past.**

China's relationship with Serbia goes back to the era of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which recognised China in 1949. **Their ties during the Cold War, however, were uneasy and volatile, due to their roles in the complex state of international relations, ideological disagreements, and geostrategic positioning.** In fact, the start of their relations was unfavourable to their future development, as China was closely aligned with the USSR when Tito's split from Stalin took place in 1948. Only after Yugoslavia and the USSR started rebuilding their relations (after Stalin's death in 1953) **was China ready to establish formal diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia, doing so in 1955. Nevertheless, this did not change China's strong reservations towards Yugoslavia.**

In fact, just three years later, their relations hit another stumbling block, after China renewed accusations of revisionism against Yugoslavia.⁵ At this point, the ambassadors were recalled, and relations remained *de facto* frozen. Although both socialist, these countries have had different views on international relations throughout the Cold War, leaving little common ground during this period. Points of difference included an ideological disagreement on what was the true form of socialism, as well as the nature of the Non-Aligned Movement started by Yugoslavia (together with Egypt and India, the latter being a rival of China).⁶ Interestingly, these political disputes even had spillover effects on the aforementioned film industry, as China stopped importing Yugoslav films in the 1960s.⁷ Such trends followed China's general trend

during Chinese President Xi Jinping's first visit to Serbia, he met with the wife of then-deceased Velimir Bata Stojković.

See: *Balkan Insight*, "Documentary Tells Story of the 'Walter Myth'", 2012, available at:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2012/08/10/the-story-behind-the-walter-myth/>;

Večernje novosti, "Smoki i premijer ćaskali o Valteru", 2014, available at (in Serbian): <https://bit.ly/2YxafBB>;

and Global Times, "Chinese people cherish memory of Bata: Xi", 2016, available at:

<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/989328.shtml>

⁴ *Danas*, "Kinezi emitovali "Valtera" kao podršku Srbiji u borbi protiv korone", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/kinezi-emitovali-valtera-kao-podrsku-srbiji-u-borbi-protiv-korone/>

⁵ Ivan Rosandić, "Odnosi Kine i Jugoslavije od 1969. do 1971.: Od sukoba na Usuri do primanja Kine u Ujedinjene

narode", Faculty of Philosophy – Department of History, Zagreb, BA Thesis, 2013, p. 7, available at (in Croatian):

<http://darhiv.ffzg.unizg.hr/id/eprint/3961/3/Rosandic-Odnosi-Kine-i-Jugoslavije.pdf>

⁶ Vladimir Milić, "65 godina od uspostavljanja diplomatskih odnosa Srbije i Kine", Novi treći put, 2020, available

at (in Serbian): <https://novitreciput.org/65-godina-od-uspostavljanja-diplomatskih-odnosa-srbije-i-kine/>

⁷ Yanxi Wu, "The Influence of Yugoslav Films on China in the 20th Century", 2018, p.3, available at:

of self-isolation, as its relations with the USSR diminished as well in this period. . **A little-known fact is that there were protests by Chinese citizens in 1967 in front of the Yugoslav embassy, whose building in Beijing was besieged for several days during China's Cultural Revolution.**⁸

Tensions began to cool down in the late 1960s, as China began to fix its relations with the West while further distancing from the USSR. In the context of Yugoslavia, ideological criticism from China decreased, trade was renewed, and the countries re-established ambassadorial posts in 1970.⁹ Along with this process of normalisation of relations, **Yugoslavia acted as a key supporter of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) acceptance to the UN in 1971** (as part of a group of 17 countries led by Albania). With Resolution 2758 of the UN General Assembly, it was decided that the representatives of the PRC government were "the only legitimate representatives of China in the UN", which meant the expulsion of the representatives of the Chiang Kai-shek regime from the seat which they had held in the UN since 1945.¹⁰

After the death of Chairman of the Communist Party of China Mao Zedong in 1976, China started to be significantly more open to the world, including to Yugoslavia. Just a year later, in **1977, Tito made his first visit to China, followed by a return visit by Chinese PM Hua Guofeng to Yugoslavia in 1978.** These bilateral visits represented a turning point in mutual relations. From then on, China has looked to Yugoslavia as a mediator which could help it on its path out of isolation, opening to the countries of the Nonaligned Movement, and establishing cooperation with communist parties in Europe.¹¹ Although Chinese PM Zhao Ziyang visited Belgrade in 1986, the **1980s were without any specific highlights in mutual relations.** In other words, there were no ups nor downs.

The situation got complicated with the breakout of the Yugoslav Wars. **China looked unfavourably on the collapse of Yugoslavia and backed Belgrade in this period of conflict. However, it could also not afford to deteriorate its relations with the West over this issue.**

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327885417> **The Influence of Yugoslav Films on China in the 20th Century**

⁸ US CIA, "Foreign Broadcast Information Service – issues 21-25", 1967, available at: <https://bit.ly/2YwEWXf>

⁹ Ivan Rosandić, "Odnosi Kine i Jugoslavije od 1969. do 1971.: Od sukoba na Usuri do primanja Kine u Ujedinjene narode", Faculty of Philosophi – Department of History, Zagreb, BA Thesis, 2013, p. 3.

¹⁰ UN General Assembly, Resolution 2758, 1971, available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/192054?ln=en>

¹¹ Sanja Z. Arežina, "Odnos NR Kine sa Jugoslavijom i Srbijom od 1977. do 2009. godine", PhD Dissertation, Faculty of Political Science, Belgrade, 2013, p.32, available at (in Serbian): <https://fedorabg.bg.ac.rs/fedora/get/o:10306/bdef:Content/get>

For this reason, China never used its veto right on UN Security Council resolutions addressing the situation during the conflict, opting rather to abstain.¹² Although it recognised the newly-founded republics, Beijing maintained close ties to Belgrade.

The highlight of positive relations in this era was the visit of Slobodan Milošević in 1997 to China, when a *Declaration on Friendship and Cooperation between the two* was signed.

It encompassed cooperation in the fields of political, economic, scientific, technological, cultural, and educational cooperation. On the one hand, China supported the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), the return of the FRY to the international arena, and peace processes in the region. On the other hand, the FRY applauded China's role in maintaining peace and security in Asia and the world at large, and reaffirmed its position on the One China Policy, stating that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the PRC.¹³ Even in this document, the term "traditional friendship" was used to describe the bilateral relations between the two states. Considering that the two sides recognised that "Cold War thinking, hegemonism and power politics" still existed at this time, they also agreed to further strengthen consultation and cooperation in international affairs. As such, **this represents the precursor of the other strategic documents signed years later by Serbia and China.**

At that time, Milošević's visit to Beijing was particularly important to Belgrade, as it aided the regime in its attempt to start the process of undoing the international isolation it found itself in following the Yugoslav Wars.¹⁴ The visit had concrete benefits on the ground as well. Notable changes were the liberalisation of visa policy, leading to an inflow of Chinese citizens who were starting to launch small businesses across Belgrade – particularly settling in Blok 70 in New Belgrade (today considered to be the largest "Chinatown" in the Balkans).¹⁵

The efforts of the FRY to fight its international isolation were short-lived, however, as NATO began a bombing campaign against it in 1999 in response to the conflict in Kosovo. Nevertheless, **this moment did serve as a turning point in Sino-Serbian relations, especially as the former (together with Russia) refused to approve any intervention**

¹² Notable example when China was the only veto player to abstain includes the UN Security Council Resolution 757, which introduced the first major UN sanctions against the FRY.

See: UN Security Council, Resolution 757, 1992, available at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/757>

¹³ China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on Friendly and Cooperative Relations", 1997, available at:

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/t5423.shtml

¹⁴ Jens Bastian, "China Reconnects with The Balkans", ReConnecting Asia, 2018, available at:

<https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/analysis/entries/china-reconnects-balkans/>

¹⁵ Okular, "Two Decades of Chinatown in Belgrade", 2015, available at:

<https://antropoloskiokular.wordpress.com/2015/12/08/two-decades-of-chinatown-in-belgrade/>

against the latter in the UN, which is why NATO proceeded with the campaign without the official and legal approval of the UN Security Council.¹⁶ Once the campaign started, China joined Russia and Namibia, on 16 March 1999, in voting in favour of the UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate halt to NATO air strikes in Yugoslavia (the draft resolution failed on a vote of 3-12).¹⁷

China itself even suffered a blow during the campaign, as its embassy was hit on 7 May 1999 in Belgrade. Three Chinese journalists were killed in the attack and 27 were wounded.¹⁸ Although NATO and US officials apologised, claiming it was an accident, China accused the US of an intentional attack, which they described as a “barbarian act”.¹⁹ As a reaction, protests erupted in a number of Chinese cities with the approval and endorsement of China’s government.²⁰ These were no regular protests, considering their level of escalation. Protestors in Beijing, for instance, damaged the US embassy and trapped the US ambassador inside for a number of days.²¹ The protests turned so unusually violent that protesters also set ablaze the U.S. consul’s residence in Chengdu.²² Some even argue that 1999 was a turning point in US-China relations, fuelling a rise of nationalism and anti-American sentiment which fit into China’s narrative of a long history of humiliation at the hands of foreign powers.²³

All things considered, since the end of the war, **the destruction of China’s embassy in Belgrade became a key symbol that has kept close ties between Serbia and China.** In 2016, China’s President Xi Jinping even visited the site to pay homage to the victims,²⁴ while the

¹⁶ The basic points of China’s position were that NATO airstrikes were an interference in FRY internal affairs, that unilateral NATO action was operating without the authorisation of the UN, and that the Kosovo issue should be settled through peaceful negotiations. In practice, it was trying to avoid a precedent, and stand against the independence aspirations of its own regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang (as well as Taiwan).

¹⁷ UN, “Security Council Rejects Demand for Cessation of Use of Force against Federal Republic of Yugoslavia”, Press Release, 1999, available at: <https://www.un.org/press/en/1999/19990326.sc6659.html>

¹⁸ Later that year, the US agreed to provide \$28 million in compensation for damage to the Chinese embassy facility and \$4.5 million to the families of the killed and injured.

Congressional Research Service, “Chinese Embassy Bombing In Belgrade: Compensation Issues”, The Library of Congress, 1999, available at: <http://congressionalresearch.com/RS20547/document.php>

¹⁹ CNN, “Chinese demand U.N. meeting after Belgrade embassy attacked”, Archives, 1999, available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150402163309/http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/europe/9905/07/kosovo.05/index.html>

²⁰ CNN, “China gives green light to embassy protests, but warns against violence”, 1999, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/asiapcf/9905/09/china.protests.02/>

²¹ *Washington Post*, “Protesters Trap U.S. Envoy in Beijing”, 1999, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/balkans/stories/china051099.htm>

²² CNN, “Chinese in Belgrade, Beijing protest NATO embassy bombing”, 1999, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/asiapcf/9905/09/china.protest.03/>

²³ Tom Fox, “Bombs Over Belgrade: an Underrated Sino-American Anniversary”, War on the Rocks, 2019, available at:

<https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/bombs-over-belgrade-an-underrated-sino-american-anniversary/>

²⁴ *China Daily*, “President Xi pays homage to Chinese killed in 1999 embassy bombing”, 2016, available at:

Chinese embassy continues to publicly pay tribute.²⁵ Such acts show that China still considers this event as a matter of relevance. To this day, the bombing of the embassy and the explanation given for it by the US are considered unacceptable.²⁶ For this reason, it is unsurprising that the bombing of the embassy is an essential part of the Sino-Serbian narrative of mutual friendship, both in times of good and bad. Citizens of Serbia are also aware of the incident, and, as they largely perceive the NATO bombing campaign as an illegitimate and illegal act, **China's role during the war is something that shapes its image even today in their eyes.**

After Serbia's overthrow of Milosevic's regime, the new government sought the continuation of relations with China. This was ensured after President Vojislav **Koštunica visited China, in 2002, where he signed a Joint Statement with his Chinese counterparts.** As with the *Declaration on Friendship earlier*, Serbia reaffirmed its support to the One China Policy. China also reaffirmed its support of the FRY's territorial integrity and stressed the importance of UN Resolution 1244. An important development was the reference to the EU in this statement, as China acknowledged the new government's decision to set EU membership as its strategic goal.²⁷

All things considered, Sino-Serbian relations have had their moments in the past decades, with some notable developments since the 1990s. Although these developments have symbolic value, particularly the 1999 bombing, they were insufficient to produce significantly closer political, economic, and people-to-people cooperation between Serbia and China at that time. In fact, if one takes a look at the official page on Serbia on the website of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it becomes perfectly clear that, **in the eyes of the Chinese, the new and more relevant era of their bilateral relationship begins in 2009.** In the section which presents a "review of bilateral political relations", no highlights prior to 2009 are pointed out (besides mentioning that diplomatic relations were established in 1955). In addition, in the section discussing important "bilateral agreements and documents", there is no mention of those signed

https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitree/2016-06/17/content_25753200.htm

²⁵ NI, "Wreaths laid at Chinese embassy old location in Belgrade in memory of 1999 war", 2020, available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a596951/Anniversary-of-three-Chinese-reporters-killed-in-NATO-1999-bombing.html>

²⁶ Nova srpska politička misao, "Kineski ambasador u Srbiji Li Mančang: Kina ne menja stav o Kosovu", 2014, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/kineski-ambasador-u-srbiji-li-mancang-kina-ne-menja-stav-o-kosovu.html?alphabet=1>

²⁷ *Glas javnosti*, "Peking za uključenje Jugoslavije u Evropu", 2002, available at (in Serbian): <http://arhiva.glas-javnosti.rs/arhiva/2002/01/10/srpski/P02010906.shtml>

before 2009, thus omitting the 1997 *Declaration on Friendship* and the 2002 *Joint Statement*.²⁸ The following parts explain why this may be so.

II. 1. 2 Road to (Comprehensive) Strategic Partnership

Serbia's political relations with China grew fast in the aftermath of Kosovo's²⁹ declaration of independence in 2008, facilitated by Serbia's efforts to mitigate growing international recognition of Kosovo. For China, Kosovo's secessionist move was unacceptable according to the long-standing policies related to its own One China Policy. In this respect, Serbia found in China, alongside Russia, a keen supporter of its cause at the UN and on the global level, which to this day remains Serbia's single most important advantage gained from cooperating with China. Therefore, the issue of Kosovo became the key driver of Sino-Serbian rapprochement at this time, and the timeline and evolution of Serbia's prioritisation in foreign policy clearly demonstrates this.

Although Serbia has regularly lacked a formally-adopted foreign policy strategy (and still lacks one),³⁰ its highest officials have, on important occasions, pointed out their prioritisation of particular foreign actors. In 2004, Former President Boris Tadić originally envisioned balanced relations with only three world powers – Brussels, Washington, and Moscow.³¹ The same policy was reaffirmed by his party colleague and Minister of Foreign Affairs Vuk Jeremić in 2007.³² After the number of countries recognising the self-declared independence of Kosovo continued to rise sharply, Serbia decided to look for new partners on the global stage which could support its cause, while at the same time keeping EU membership as its strategic goal. Although former President Tadić himself reiterated his “three pillars” prioritisation in early 2009,³³ it did not take long for changes in this policy to materialise. **The fact that China was**

²⁸ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “China's relations with Serbia”, 2020 (last updated), available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679642/sbgx_679646/

²⁹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence. For the sake of simplicity, the asterisk will not be used in the rest of the chapter.

³⁰ ISAC, p.15, available at (in Serbian):

https://www.isac-fund.org/download/Od_cetiri_stuba_spoljne_politike_do_evropskih_integracija.pdf

³¹ Boris Tadić, Presidential Inaugural Address, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, 2004, available at (in Serbian): http://www.mfa.gov.rs/Srpski/Bilteni/Srpski/b110704_s.html

³² Aleksandar Gajić and Slobodan Janković, “Četiri stuba srpske spoljne politike”, *Spoljna politika Srbije i zajednička spoljna i bezbednosna politika EU*, 2012, p.177, available at (in Serbian): <http://repozitorijum.diplomacy.bg.ac.rs/369/1/22.%20Spoljna%20politika%20Srbije.....%282012%29-176-199.pdf>

³³ RTV, “Tadić: Za Srbiju važni odnosi sa EU, Rusijom i SAD”, 2009, available at:

designated, later that year, by former President Boris Tadić, as one of the “four pillars” of Serbia’s foreign policy, along with the EU, the US, and Russia, illustrates how valuable this relationship had become to Belgrade and how quickly the geopolitical chessboard was changing.³⁴

In fact, this abrupt change of foreign policy prioritisation took place after President Tadić’s third visit to China in 2009 (the second being during the Olympic games in 2008), when **the two countries cemented their relations by signing a *Joint Statement on the establishment of a Strategic Partnership***. This type of partnership is seen as a structured framework for collaboration, which is organised in a loose and non-binding manner, aiming to enable the pursuit of shared interests and the addressing of common challenges in different areas.³⁵ This agreement represented a milestone, as it was **the very first strategic partnership agreement Serbia has signed with any country in its modern history**. Subsequent strategic partnerships were signed with Italy in 2009, France in 2011, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, and Azerbaijan in 2013, and Greece in 2019.

With this document, the two sides agreed to enrich dialogue by increasing exchanges and cooperation between their governments, legislative bodies, and political parties, continuing to strengthen cooperation in the UN and other international organisations, as well as communicating and consulting on international issues of common concern.³⁶ Furthermore, Serbia has reaffirmed its support of the One China Policy, while **China has not only reaffirmed its support of Serbia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, but has also acknowledged Serbia’s efforts to join the EU**. Although this is not the first time the two sides have made such commitments, it should be noted that at this point, relations acquired a new level of weight and importance, not only because of changes in the geopolitical context, but also because the Strategic Partnership is of special significance in China’s playbook. To understand how important this agreement was at the time it was signed, it is necessary to view it from a comparative standpoint.

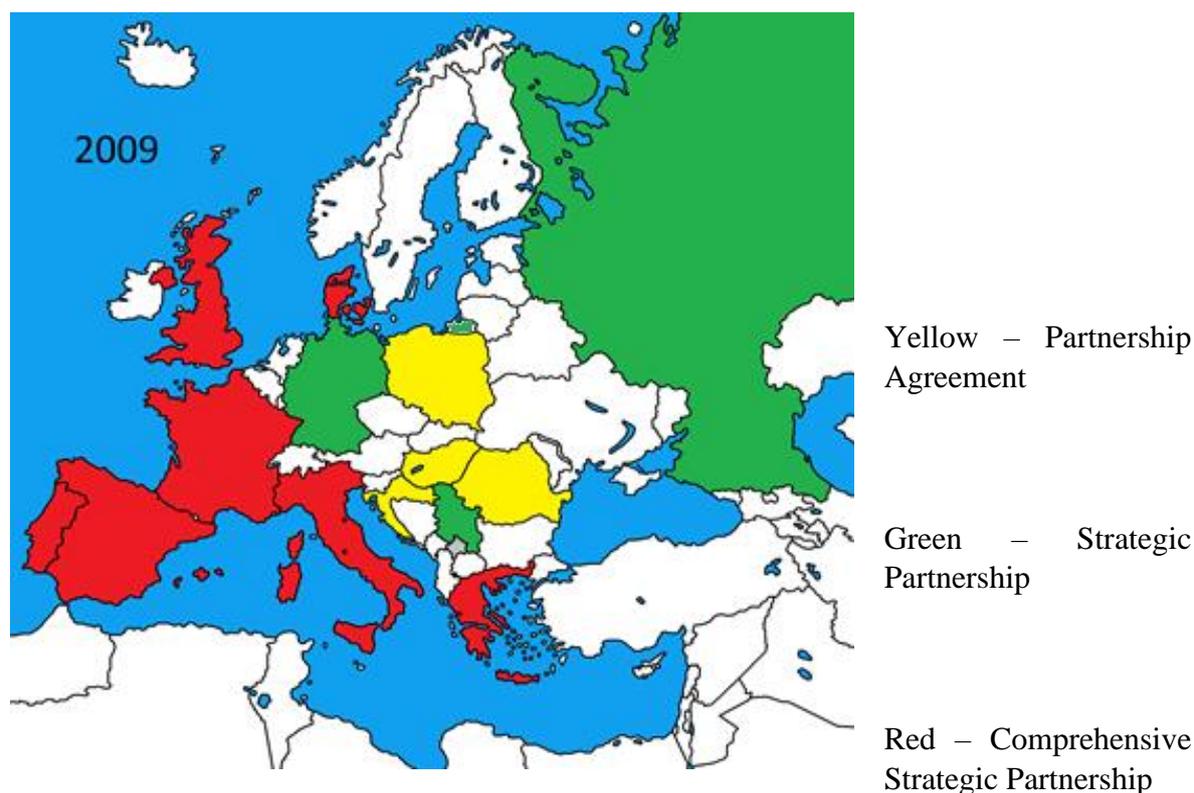
http://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/tadic:-za-srbiju-vazni-odnosi-sa-eu-rusijom-i-sad_103716.html

³⁴ Igor Novaković, “From Four Pillars of Foreign Policy to European Integration”, ISAC, 2013, available at: https://www.isac-fund.org/download/From_four_pillars_of_foreign_policy_to_european_integration.pdf

³⁵ Georg Strüver, “International Alignment between Interests and Ideology: The Case of China’s Partnership Diplomacy”, GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, 2016, p.7, available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272786284_China's_Strategic_Partnership_Diplomacy_Determinants_and_Outcomes_of_International_Alignment

³⁶ Joint statement of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Serbia on the establishment of a strategic partnership, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2009, available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/t579833.shtml

Image 1: Three Types of Chinese Partnerships in Europe, 2009³⁷



Source: authors' own illustration³⁸

Image 1 illustrates a few things happening on the European continent. Firstly, until 2009, China used to sign (comprehensive) strategic partnerships only with powerful, strategically-relevant, or economically-developed countries, such as Russia or Western European countries. In this regard, as the map shows, Serbia is an outlier. Secondly, **Serbia was the first Western Balkan country to sign a strategic partnership with China, but also the first of the whole of Central and Eastern Europe** (based on future members of the 16+1 Framework). Third, the signing of the strategic document took place four years **before the official announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative**. This shows that Serbia had managed to secure China's trust even before the latter became more assertive and strategically-oriented on the global stage. Overall,

³⁷ The classification of partnerships into three groups represents an intentional simplification, considering there have been 24 differently-named partnerships made by China. Nevertheless, there is a consensus that these can be classified in three basic groups based on their key elements.

See: Quan Li and Min Ye, "China's emerging partnership network: what, who, where, when and why", *International Trade, Politics and Development*, 2019, p.67, available at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/ITPD-05-2019-0004/full/html>

³⁸ The map in Picture 1 is based on the list of strategic partnerships compiled by Feng Zhongping and Huang Jing, "China's strategic partnership diplomacy: engaging with a changing world", *European Strategic Partnerships Observatory*, 2014, p.18, available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2459948

by managing to strike a strategic agreement with China, Serbia managed to pull an impressive feat, especially as it was a non-EU member and economically underdeveloped, putting it in a unique position at that time.

Even though new political elites came to power in Serbia in 2012, the prioritisation of foreign actors as delineated by the former regime was kept intact, while China has also shown willingness to proactively cooperate with Serbia's new political establishment. As a result, already **in 2013, the two sides signed a *Joint Statement on Deepening Bilateral Strategic Partnership***, when Serbia's President Nikolić paid an official visit to Chinese President Xi.³⁹ Not only did they agree to continue to support each other on issues of core and vital interests (essentially territorial integrity), but also to expand the scale of trade and investment, and enhance cooperation on infrastructure construction between the two countries.⁴⁰ Importantly, the document explicitly **states that “China understands Serbia's choice to join the EU”**, while adding that it appreciates Serbia's policy of good-neighbourliness and friendship, its role in the region, and its outstanding contributions to promoting regional cooperation and stability. The signing of this document has allowed China to reaffirm its commitments with new political elites in Serbia, which **shows that the newly-developed Sino-Serbian relationship was not dependent on the survival of the previous government**. In addition, the fact that this *Joint Statement* coincided with the official launch of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) gave it further importance.

Not only have bilateral relations intensified since then, but cooperation between China and Serbia also began to take place within a multilateral format as well. Following the introduction of the 16+1 Framework in 2012 (presently known as 17+1 Framework), intended to allow China to build closer relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in the context of its BRI, Serbia actively participated at the annual summits of this initiative. **A notable example of multilateral cooperation took place in 2014, when Belgrade hosted the 16+1 Summit**. This marked a special occasion for Serbia, as not only did it host such an event for the first time, but it also welcomed Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang,⁴¹ marking **the first**

³⁹ China-CEEC, “China, Serbia vow to deepen strategic partnership”, 2013, available at: http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zyxw_4/t1410347.htm

⁴⁰ Joint Statement on Deepening Bilateral Strategic Partnership, 2013, available at: <http://nl.china-embassy.org/chn/zgwjs/t1069670.htm>

⁴¹ The Chinese PM at that time was declared an honorary citizen of Belgrade. Interestingly, this decision had approval of all parties represented in the City Assembly.

See: B92, “Chinese PM declared honorary citizen of Belgrade”, 2014, available at: https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=11&dd=28&nav_id=92405

visit of a Chinese PM to Serbia in 28 years.⁴² It can be argued that this event allowed Serbia to further intensify its relations with China, particularly with the signing of a number of joint projects, which made Serbia a frontrunner as compared to the rest of the CEE . By reaffirming its willingness to work politically and economically with China, fertile ground was set for the further improvement of relations.

A historical milestone in Sino-Serbian relations was reached in 2016 with the signing of a Joint Statement on Establishing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) – the highest level of partnership a country can have with China.⁴³ This was done during a three-day long visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Serbia. **Not only was it the first official visit of President Xi to Serbia and to the Western Balkans in general, but it was the first time since the 1980s that a Chinese president visited Belgrade.** Typically, China elevates its level of partnership with a specific country once it assesses that political trust and a positive record of cooperation have been achieved.⁴⁴ As a CSP represents the agreement with the most symbolic value to China, its aim is to make cooperation between the signatories “all-dimensional, wide-ranging and multi-layered”.⁴⁵

In the case of Serbia and China, the document reiterated what was stated in the 2009 strategic partnership while encouraging further communication, cooperation, and coordination in the political, economic, and people-to-people aspects of bilateral relations. On this occasion, **Serbia reaffirmed its position that China represents a key pillar of its foreign policy, while officially endorsing China’s Belt and Road Initiative.**⁴⁶

⁴² B92, “Chinese prime minister arrives in Belgrade”, 2014, available at:

https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=12&dd=15&nav_id=92568

⁴³ Although China’s diplomacy uses many different names to label its partnerships with other countries, the academic literature typically divides these partnerships into three categories: partnerships, strategic partnerships, and comprehensive strategic partnerships. The same classification is used in this policy study.

See: Georg Strüver, “International Alignment between Interests and Ideology: The Case of China’s Partnership Diplomacy”, 2016, p.12

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.14

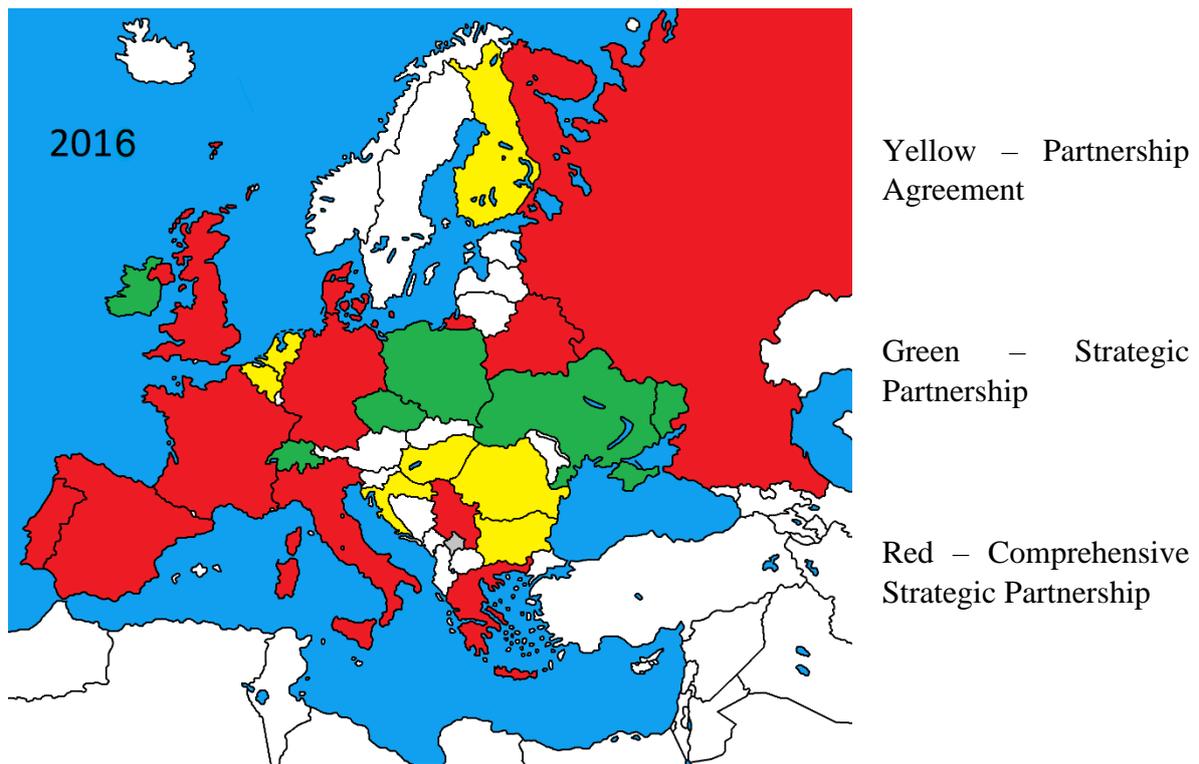
⁴⁵ Feng Zhongping and Huang Jing, “China’s strategic partnership diplomacy: engaging with a changing world”, European Strategic Partnerships Observatory, 2014, p.7, available at:

https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/181324/China%E2%80%99s%20strategic%20partnership%20diplomacy_%20engaging%20with%20a%20changing%20world%20.pdf

⁴⁶ Joint Statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Serbia on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2016, available at:

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/t1373365.shtml

Image 2: Three Types of Chinese Partnerships in Europe, 2016



Source: authors' own illustration⁴⁷

Image 2 illustrates some changes visible in China's diplomacy through 2016, when it signed the CSP with Serbia. First, the number of all types of Partnerships has significantly increased as compared to the pre-BRI period. Considering that new CSPs were signed with powerful countries such as Germany and Russia, Serbia remains an outlier, together with Belarus. Second, **although China increased its activities within the 16+1 Framework, Serbia has remained the only country from this Framework to have a CSP with China.** Third, despite the overall increase of partnerships in Europe, Serbia has remained the only Western Balkan country to have signed both Strategic Partnership and a CSP with China. Looking at the period beyond 2016, Serbia was joined by Hungary and Poland as countries with CSPs, whereas no changes took place in this regard in the Western Balkans. Considering these insights, it can be concluded that **Serbia managed to keep its "privileged" position in the eyes of China throughout the past decade.**

⁴⁷ The map in *Picture 2* is based on the list of strategic partnerships compiled by Georg Strüver, "China's Partnership Diplomacy: International Alignment Based on Interests or Ideology", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* Vol. 10, No. 1, 2017, p.64, available at: <https://academic.oup.com/cjip/article/10/1/31/2958616>

Box 1: China's Position on the Belgrade-Priština dialogue

When it comes to the Belgrade-Priština dialogue, China continues to argue in support of a mutually acceptable solution through dialogue within the framework of UN Resolution 1244.⁴⁸ Although China has publicly backed Serbia's position in this matter, it has not always backed the Resolution. In fact, China voted to abstain during the adoption of this Resolution in 1999, as it saw it as interference in internal matters. Nevertheless, China changed its track as soon as Serbia started using the Resolution to its advantage as a matter to guarantee and provide legality to its claims of territorial authority.

Although China approaches this issue as a more passive observer (at least compared to Russia, for example, which is more vocal about it), recent years have seen a more active role of China regarding this matter. For instance, in 2018, its Ambassador to Serbia Lee Manchang argued that “no deadlines should be set for resolving such a big issue”, while giving the example that it took 100 years for China to resolve the issues of Hong Kong and Macao and bring them back within its jurisdiction.⁴⁹ In this manner, **China subtly counterbalanced the US' and EU's attempts to nudge Belgrade and Pristina to promptly agree on a legally-binding and comprehensive normalisation agreement.** Another example of its more active approach took place in 2020, when China called Priština to return to the negotiating table after negotiations originally flopped.⁵⁰

It should be noted, however, that **China's increasing involvement, albeit still moderate, is welcomed by Serbian authorities, and hence, does not represent any form of forced intrusion in Serbian internal politics.** In fact, it was Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić who consulted with the Chinese ambassador on the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, by informing Ambassador Li Manchang about the risks of Pristina's move to form an army in late 2018, asking him to update authorities in Beijing on the situation in Kosovo regularly. This consultation with the ambassador represented a change in Serbia's public political discourse, especially as this is an action that the incumbent Serbian government traditionally reserved

⁴⁸ *Xinhuanet*, “China supports settlement of Kosovo issue through dialogue: envoy”, 2019: available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/11/c_138132033.htm

⁴⁹ *B92*, “Ambasador Kine o Kosmetu: Mi smo čekali 100 godina...”, 2018, available at (in Serbian): https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2018&mm=07&dd=29&nav_category=640&nav_id=1424427

⁵⁰ *CGTN*, “Chinese envoy calls for resumption of talks for political settlement of Kosovo issue”, 2020, available at: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-25/Beijing-calls-for-resumption-of-Pristina-Belgrade-talks-PYeDyhZ2yk/index.html>

for the Russian Embassy.⁵¹ **The consultation process between the Chinese Embassy and Serbia's Office for Kosovo and Metohija continues to this day,**⁵² while the Serbian President discussed the "Economic Normalisation Agreement signed in the White House in September 2020 with the Chinese ambassador."⁵³ Therefore, it appears that China is increasingly willing to lend an ear to the complaints of the Serbian establishment regarding this issue, and thus become a more influential player in this arena.

II. 1. 3 Impact of China on Serbia's Foreign Policy

Today, Serbia is seen as a country which is unwilling to compromise its relationship with China in the foreign policy arena. Yet, this was not always the case, as **in the period prior to Kosovo's declaration of independence, Serbia had a rather mixed record of alignment with the EU's declarations on China**, occasionally taking China's side or not in disputes. Namely, this alignment goes as far back in 2004, when Serbia endorsed the EU's declaration on visits of the Dalai Lama's envoys to China.⁵⁴ As the declaration had encouraging words for China, the alignment had no harm to Sino-Serbian interests whatsoever.

It appears, however, that **the first registered case of Serbia's refusal to align with declarations criticising China was in 2005**, regarding the adoption of the "anti-secession law" by the National People's Congress of China.⁵⁵ Considering that in 2005 Serbia started negotiations with the EU on the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), it was a risky move for Serbia, which must have raised some eyebrows in Brussels. Nevertheless, such positioning likely allowed Serbia to score points with China early on and ushered the path towards the closer development of relations. At that time, it was evident that the Kosovo issue

⁵¹ Philippe Le Corre and Vuk Vuksanović, "Serbia: China's Open Door to the Balkans", *The Diplomat*, 2019, available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/serbia-chinas-open-door-to-the-balkans/>

⁵² Chinese Embassy to Serbia, "Chinese Ambassador to Serbia Chen Bo Meets with the Director of the Office of Kosovo and Metosia Affairs of the Serbian Government Gyurić", 2020, available at: <http://rs.chineseembassy.org/chn/sgxx/sghd/t1803948.htm>

⁵³ *Radio Mitrovica Server*, "Vučić i Čen Bo o razgovorima u Vašingtonu i toku dijaloga u Briselu", 2020, available at: <http://radiomitrovicasever.com/2020/09/11/vucic-i-cen-bo-o-razgovorima-u-vasingtonu-i-toku-dijaloga-u-briselu/>

⁵⁴ Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on the visit of the envoys of the Dalai Lama to China, 2004, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PESC_04_107

⁵⁵ Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union concerning the adoption of the "anti-secession law" by the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2005, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PESC_05_26

was gaining momentum, which is probably why Serbia increasingly began to look for partners across the globe.

Yet, Serbia at that time did not have consistent policy towards China and was willing to make compromises with the EU. Namely, in 2006 Serbia aligned with a declaration on the releases of Mr. Yu Dongyue and Mr. Xiao Yunliang, a declaration which included both positive and negative aspects related to China. On the one hand, the Declaration welcomed the release of these aforementioned dissidents, as both individuals had been on the EU's list of prisoners of concern; on the other hand, the Declaration raised concerns regarding alleged torture in Chinese prisons, which is why it invited China to examine the practices of its prisons and to ensure that they meet international standards.⁵⁶

Although at that time, Serbia did not have any legal obligation to align with the EU, this alignment served as a test of Serbia's political and practical commitment to the strategic priority of acquiring membership. It is probably for this reason as well that Serbia chose to align with the EU's declaration in November 2008, which condemned, in the strongest terms, the execution of Mr. Wo Weihang, who was accused by China of spying for Taiwan.⁵⁷ This was, however, **the third and the last case in which Serbia criticised China (out a total of 22 identified declarations which target China from March 2004 until July 2020).**

In fact, as part of Serbia's efforts to gain stronger international support in the context of the 2008 secession of Kosovo, Serbia's foreign policy towards China was completely adjusted and solidified after the signing of the 2009 strategic partnership, in which it was stated that Serbia would continue to strengthen cooperation with China in the UN and other international organisations, as well as communicate and consult on international issues of common concern.⁵⁸ Ever since, **analysis shows that there were 16 consecutive decisions in which Serbia chose not to align with the EU's declarations on China.** Furthermore, if the November 2008 case is treated as an outlier, **the research shows that Serbia decided not to**

⁵⁶ Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on the release of Yu Dongyue and Xiao Yunliang, 2006, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PESC_06_41

⁵⁷ Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on the execution of Mr Wo Weiha in Beijing, 2008, available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/cfsp/104380.pdf

⁵⁸ Joint statement of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Serbia on the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2009.

align with a total of 19 of the EU's declarations on different occasions in the period between January 2008 and July 2020.⁵⁹

The following *Table 1 – Timeline of alignment with EU's declarations* shows the exact timeline:

		
2004	1	/
2005	/	1
2006	1	/
2007	/	/
2008	1	3
2009	/	4
2010	/	1
2011	/	/
2012	/	1
2013	/	2
2014	/	1
2015	/	/
2016	/	1
2017	/	/
2018	/	/
2019	/	3

⁵⁹ Declarations between and 2008 and 2011 were issued by the EU Presidency on behalf of the EU and in the rest of the years by the High Representative.

2020 (1 st half)	/	3
Total	3	19

Also, the following presents the declarations that Serbia chose not to align with over the past 12 years, meaning in the aftermath of Kosovo's proclamation of independence:

- **2008:** on universal suffrage in Hong Kong in January,⁶⁰ on the detention of Mr. Hu Jia and other Chinese Human Rights Defenders,⁶¹ and on the situation in Tibet,⁶² both in March;
- **2009:** on the unrest in Xinjiang in China in July,⁶³ on the executions of two Tibetans in October,⁶⁴ and on the prosecution of human rights defender Liu Xiaobo in June⁶⁵ and December;⁶⁶
- **2010:** on human rights in China in June;⁶⁷
- **2012:** on Tibetan self-immolations in December;⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on universal suffrage in Hong Kong, 2008, available at:

http://www.eu2008.si/en/News_and_Documents/CFSP_Statements/January/0124MZZhongkong.html

⁶¹ Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on the detention of Mr. Hu Jia and other Chinese Human Rights Defenders, 2008, available at:

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/d-cn20080602_13/D-CN20080602_13EN.pdf

⁶² Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the EU on the situation in Tibet, 2008, available at:

http://www.eu2008.si/en/News_and_Documents/CFSP_Statements/March/0317MZZ_Tibet.html

⁶³ Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union following developments in Xinjiang, China, 2009, available at:

https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/cfsp/109077.pdf

⁶⁴ Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union regarding the recent executions of two Tibetans, 2009, available at:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PESC_09_120

⁶⁵ Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on prosecution of Mr. Liu Xiaobo, 2009, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PESC_09_72

⁶⁶ Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on the human rights defender Liu Xiaobo, 2009, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PESC_09_137

⁶⁷ Declaration by the High Representative Catherine Ashton on behalf of the European Union on human rights in China, 2010, available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/cfsp/115142.pdf

⁶⁸ Declaration by the High Representative, Catherine Ashton, on behalf of the European Union on Tibetan self-immolations, 2012, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PESC_12_535

- **2013:** on the arrest of Dr. Xu Zhiyong and other civil society activists in China in August,⁶⁹ and on the establishment by China of an “East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone” in November;⁷⁰
- **2014:** on the treatment of human rights defenders and their relatives in China in February;⁷¹
- **2016:** on developments in the South China Sea in March;⁷²
- **2019:** on Hong Kong in August,⁷³ October,⁷⁴ and November;⁷⁵
- **2020:** on the announcement by China’s National People’s Congress spokesperson regarding Hong Kong in May,⁷⁶ and another one on Hong Kong in May,⁷⁷ and on the adoption of National Security Legislation regarding Hong Kong by China’s National People’s Congress in July.⁷⁸

The analysis of these issues shows that Serbia’s refusal to align with declarations targeting China does not only concern issues related to human rights, such as the arrest of civil society

⁶⁹ Declaration by the High Representative, Catherine Ashton, on behalf of the European Union regarding the recent arrest of Dr. Xu Zhiyong and other civil society activists in China, 2013, available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/cfsp/138625.pdf

⁷⁰ Declaration by the High Representative Catherine Ashton on behalf of the European Union on the establishment by China of an 'East China Sea Air Defence Identification Zone', 2013, available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/139752.pdf

⁷¹ Declaration by High Representative Catherine Ashton on behalf of the European Union regarding the treatment of human rights defenders and their relatives in China, 2014, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/29020/140884.pdf>

⁷² Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on Recent Developments in the South China Sea, 2016, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/11/hr-declaration-on-bealf-of-eu-recent-developments-south-china-sea/>

⁷³ Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on Hong Kong, August 2019, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/08/17/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-hong-kong/>

⁷⁴ Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on Hong Kong, October 2019, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/10/02/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-honk-kong/>

⁷⁵ Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on Hong Kong, November 2019, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/11/18/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-hong-kong/>

⁷⁶ Declaration by the High Representative, on behalf of the European Union, on the announcement by China’s National People’s Congress spokesperson regarding Hong Kong, May 2020, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/05/22/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-the-announcement-by-china-s-national-people-s-congress-spokesperson-regarding-hong-kong/>

⁷⁷ Declaration of the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on Hong Kong, May 2020, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/05/29/declaration-of-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-hong-kong/>

⁷⁸ Declaration of the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the adoption by China’s National People’s Congress of a National Security Legislation on Hong Kong, July 2020, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/07/01/declaration-of-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-the-adoption-by-china-s-national-people-s-congress-of-a-national-security-legislation-on-hong-kong/>

activists, but also geostrategic elements, such as developments in the East China Sea and South China Sea, as well as those related to territorial integrity, such as declarations focused on Tibet and Hong Kong. Looking at the recent examples, **the recent Hong Kong protests represent the latest illustration of Serbia's firm support to China** – even when these policies are directed towards those diminishing rule of law standards. In June 2020, Serbia's President Vučić sent a letter of support to China's President Xi, stating that “Serbia is against any interference with the internal affairs of a sovereign country”, while adding that it “condemns any attempts at undermining the reunification” of Hong Kong and China.⁷⁹ **What is unique with this example is that it represents a proactive and unilateral measure undertaken by Serbian authorities, unlike the comparatively passive action of not adopting EU declarations.** This view towards Hong Kong represents the long-standing stance of Serbia, also seen in 2019 when the Vice-President of the SNS and Head of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija Marko Đurić publicly stated that the protests in Hong Kong have been “hijacked by certain foreign powers”, while noting that China's response to the protests was “very moderate”.⁸⁰ In addition, this represents a perspective diametrically opposed to that of the EU.

Meanwhile, **Serbia's continued unwillingness to align its foreign policy with that of the EU contradicts the commitments it made with the Union.** Namely, by signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2008, Serbia agreed to work on, through political dialogue with the EU, “an increasing convergence of positions of the parties on international issues, including the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy issues” (CFSP).⁸¹ Furthermore, after the EU started negotiations with Serbia in 2014, it is explicitly stated in the Negotiating Framework that in the period leading to accession, “Serbia will be required to *progressively align* its policies towards third countries, and its positions within international organisations with the policies and positions adopted by the EU and its Member States”.⁸² Considering that the past declarations of the EU on China were not endorsed by Serbia, one can conclude that **Serbia has prioritised strong relations with China over gradual alignment with the EU's CFSP.** In this regard, Serbia stands out from other Western

⁷⁹ Euractiv, “Serbia backs China over Hong Kong”, 2020, available at:

https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/belgrade-serbia-backs-china-over-hong-kong/

⁸⁰ Xinhuanet, “Interview: U.S. “pouring oil over fire” in Hong Kong to undermine China's reputation, says Serbian party leader”, 2019, available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/17/c_138638352.htm

⁸¹ EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Agreement, 2008, available at:

https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/serbia/key_document/saa_en.pdf

⁸² Ministerial meeting opening the Intergovernmental Conference on the Accession of Serbia to the European Union, “General EU Position”, 2014, available at:

<http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&t=PDF&gc=true&sc=false&f=AD+1+2014+INIT>

Balkan countries that generally do adhere to the EU's calls for alignment on China-related declarations.⁸³

Meanwhile, **as candidate countries are expected to cooperate with the EU in international organisations, Serbia has failed this test as well.** The most notable early example of its unwillingness in this regard took place in 2010, when it decided to join a China-led boycott of Nobel Peace Prize-winning dissident Liu Xiaobo. Although Serbia defended its position by arguing that China has been a “proven friend”, a statement which was appreciated by the Chinese embassy,⁸⁴ Serbia eventually caved to the EU's demands and sent its ombudsman for human rights to the ceremony after sharp EU criticism.⁸⁵ A more contemporary example includes **Serbia's active support to China's cause in the United Nations.** In fact, in 2020, Serbia signed onto the joint statement delivered by Belarus's representative on behalf of 46 countries at the UN Human Rights Council, supporting China's claim that the “human rights of people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang have been effectively safeguarded”, while adding that others should work on “refraining from making unfounded allegations against China”.⁸⁶ As such, **Serbia was the only country aspiring to join the EU to have signed this statement on the Uyghurs, and the only European country to have supported it (besides the authoritarian regimes of Belarus and Russia).** By doing so, Serbia also aligned itself with countries such as North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates. According to available sources, it appears that Serbia's decision on this matter has sent shockwaves in Brussels and has further undermined its already-weakened reputation.⁸⁷

This was not, however, a one-time act, as Serbia also joined another joint statement led by Belarus in 2019, during the discussion on human rights at the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, again on the issue of the Uyghurs. It spoke positively of the “results of counter-terrorism and de-radicalisation measures” in Xinjiang.⁸⁸ In the same year, the Vice-President of the SNS and Head of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija Marko Đurić went as

⁸³ Milan Igrutinović, Miloš Janjić and Strahinja Subotić, “China's Impact in the Western Balkans”, European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade), Think Initiative, 2019.

⁸⁴ *BBC*, “Serbia defends China-led boycott of Nobel ceremony”, 2010, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11957094>

⁸⁵ *Deutsche Welle*, “EU pressure on Serbia forces Nobel Peace Prize rethink”, 2010, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-pressure-on-serbia-forces-nobel-peace-prize-rethink/a-6316441>

⁸⁶ Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN Office, “Joint Statement delivered by Permanent Mission of Belarus at the 44th session of Human Rights Council”, 2020, available at: <http://www.china-un.ch/eng/hom/t1794034.htm>

⁸⁷ Željko Pantelić, “Srbija šokirala EU”, *Vjesti*, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.vijesti.me/kolumne/448651/srbija-sokirala-eu>

⁸⁸ Permanent Mission of China to the UN, “Belarus Made Joint Statement on Behalf of 54 Countries in Firm Support of China's Counter-Terrorism and Deradicalization Measures in Xinjiang”, 2019, available at: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/hyyfy/t1711896.htm>

far as to state to Chinese media that “the level of protection of minority rights in Xinjiang is something that many countries in my part of the world would envy”, while accusing the Western media of obscuring the truth in Xinjiang.⁸⁹

What aggravated the severity of the situation is the fact that Serbia’s position in question represented a stark contrast to the EU’s view of the situation in Xinjiang, as the European Parliament adopted a resolution in 2019 in which it expressed its “deepest concerns about the increasingly repressive regime that Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities are facing in China”, while calling on the Council of the EU “to adopt targeted sanctions and assets freezes, should they be deemed appropriate and effective, against the Chinese officials responsible for devising and implementing the policy of mass detention of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang”.⁹⁰ **This foreign policy positioning of Serbia is therefore in clear violation of its commitment to progressively align its positions with those of the EU regarding Foreign Common and Security Policy.**

It is expected that the EU will be less and less willing to turn a blind eye to such issues going forward, particularly as its rivalry with China continues to grow. In fact, recent warnings issued by the highest officials of the EU institutions and powerful member states give evidence to such claims, particularly as they have increased in number in the past two years. Namely, in 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron called for an “end to naivety” in EU’s relations with Beijing,⁹¹ while the **EU officially labelled China a “systemic rival” in its promotion of alternative models of governance.**⁹² Furthermore, in 2020, the EU’s High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell described China as an increasingly assertive, expansionist, and authoritarian country whose aim is to transform the international order into “a selective multilateral system with Chinese characteristics”.⁹³ In addition, a key aspect of Germany’s Presidency of the EU (in the second half of 2020) consists

⁸⁹ *Xinhuanet*, “Interview: On Xinjiang and terrorism, U.S. double standards on display”, 2019, available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/18/c_138641055.htm

⁹⁰ European Parliament, “Resolution on the situation of the Uyghurs in China”, 2019, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0110_EN.pdf

⁹¹ *Reuters*, “EU leaders call for end to 'naivety' in relations with China”, 2019, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-china/eu-leaders-call-for-end-to-naivety-in-relations-with-china-idUSKCN1R31H3>

⁹² European Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council, “EU-China – A strategic outlook”, 2019, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>

⁹³ Josep Borell, “The Sinatra Doctrine. How the EU Should Deal with the US–China Competition”, EEAS, 2020, available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/asia/84484/sinatra-doctrine-how-eu-should-deal-us%E2%80%93china-competition_en

of calls to end an overreliance on China, particularly in strategic sectors,⁹⁴ which is why it has continued to play up the concept of “European sovereignty”.⁹⁵ Finally, during her first annual State of the Union Address at the European Parliament Plenary,⁹⁶ the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, highlighted that “[t]he Western Balkans are part of Europe - and not just a stopover on the Silk Road”. Even though the Commission is often accused of using technocratic language, such a statement from the Commission President represents direct criticism of the ever-growing presence of China in the region, especially in Serbia.⁹⁷

All things considered, **Serbia’s foreign policy has served China well, especially as the former is one of the few European countries willing to unconditionally stand by the latter in the international arena. There is a notable trend of support since 2008 and 2009 which has remained fully consistent since then.** While the support provided was originally of a more passive nature, as it was largely represented by simply refraining from supporting EU declarations, this support evolved into a more active sort, with Serbia’s proactive engagement, for instance, by sending messages of support to Chinese authorities. This shows that **unless the EU puts stronger pressure on Serbia regarding alignment, Serbia is likely to continue with its policy of unilateral alignment with China’s views, even at the cost of losing its reputation in the EU, which it aims to join.**

II. 1. 4 China’s Party Diplomacy

The development of relations between Serbia and China should not only be considered from the perspective of statehood, but also from the perspective of bilateral party cooperation or “party diplomacy”. In this case, the main protagonist is the Communist Party of China (CPC). According to Freedom House, its international influence campaign is focused

⁹⁴ Sena Marić, Strahinja Subotić, and Aleksa Ilić, “The German Presidency of the Council of the EU: Leading Europe across the Rubicon”, 2020, available at:

<https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/The-German-Presidency-of-the-Council-of-the-Union.pdf>

⁹⁵ According to Germany’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas, this policy concept aims to enable Europe to act more independently and pool its resources more efficiently, especially in essential sectors such as health and medical supplies, 5G and information technologies, logistics, energy, and other sectors.

See: Federal Foreign Office, “Opening address by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at the Virtual Annual Council Meeting of the European Council for Foreign Relations”, 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3i3tYz2>

⁹⁶ State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary, 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_1655

⁹⁷ Strahinja Subotić, “Serbia – (not) just a stopover on the Silk Road?”, 2020, available at: <https://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/serbia-not-just-a-stopover-on-the-silk-road/>

around two major goals: expanding the country's influence abroad and promoting a positive image of China globally. In regard to this, Freedom House went so far as to include Serbia in a list of countries in which the CPC has exploited "weak or non-existent democratic institutions".⁹⁸ Having this in mind, the following presents how the CPC cooperates with the Serbian political establishment.

If 2008 and 2009 are taken as a starting point, it becomes clear that every Serbian Government and President, including incumbents, has demonstrated a strong willingness and desire to build closer relations with China. Yet, what has particularly stood out was the **durability of the relationship between the CPC and the currently-ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)**.⁹⁹ A notable development took place in 2014, after Vučić became PM, when he welcomed a delegation of the CPC to Serbia with the aim of "deepening interparty cooperation".¹⁰⁰

The increasingly amicable relationship between the two parties was taken to a new level after **they jointly stated that they both share "the same values and worldview"**, according to a 2017 joint press release.¹⁰¹ Considering that Serbia is currently on its path towards the EU, whose foundations are based on liberal-democratic values, it is highly concerning that such statements are made by SNS party officials, as China and its values are diametrically opposed to those of the EU.

Similarly, in a 2017 interview for a Chinese state media outlet, commending the CPC for doing well for its people, the Vice-President of the SNS and Head of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija Marko Đurić added that "a country can swiftly develop only with a strong ruling party".¹⁰² **Statements praising a party leading a country in a non-democratic manner**

⁹⁸ Freedom House, "Dropping the Democratic Façade, Nations in Transit 2020", available at:

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade#Facade>

⁹⁹ The SNS is not the only party considered to have close ties to the CPC. Others include the opposition party the People's Party of Serbia, and the long-lasting coalition partner of the SNS, the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS).

See: China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE), "Empty shell no more: China's growing footprint in Central and Eastern Europe", p.25, 2020, available at:

https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CHOICE_Empty-shell-no-more.pdf

¹⁰⁰ *Blic*, "Vučić i Stefanović sa delegacijom KP Kine", 2014, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-i-stefanovic-sa-delegacijom-kp-kine/1e9z3qz>

¹⁰¹ *NI*, "Đurić u Pekingu uručio Vučićevo pismo za Si Đinpinga", 2017, available at (in Serbian):

<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a346438/Djuric-u-Pekingu-urucio-Vucicevo-pismo-za-Si-Djinpinga.html>

¹⁰² *RTS*, "Đurić za kineski list: Druge partije treba da uče na primeru KPK", available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/2954905/djuric-za-kineski-list-druge-partije-da-uce-na-primeru-kpk.html>

further undermine Serbia’s reputation as a country aspiring to join the EU, especially as Serbia itself continues to struggle with democratic backsliding.¹⁰³

One of the most potent symbolic messages of the closeness of relations between these two parties took place in 2018, when **Chinese Ambassador Li Manchang was invited as “the guest of honour” at the event of the SNS’s 10th anniversary.** At this event, ambassador spoke as a special envoy of the CPC and argued that relations between Serbia and China were at “their best ever”.¹⁰⁴ In the same year, International Officer of the SNS (and Minister for European Integration) Jadranka Joksimović met with a CPC delegation led by the Head of the Working Group of the Central Commission for Disciplinary Inspection.¹⁰⁵ In 2019, party cooperation continued; an SNS delegation consisting of 15 officials paid a several-day study visit to China at the invitation of the Central Committee of the CPC in order to further improve inter-party cooperation.¹⁰⁶ The Chinese Delegation returned the visit to Serbia in the same year.¹⁰⁷ The key takeaway from these events was that **the parties pledged to forge ever-closer links.**

Inter-party cooperation between the SNS and the CPC reached a new level in 2020, when the new Chinese Ambassador Chen Bo (indirectly) took part in the SNS parliamentary election campaign. During the peak of the campaign, the ambassador, accompanied by the highest Serbian officials, went around Serbia to visit various works in which China was involved. Considering that each of these public events had substantial media coverage, the involvement of the Chinese ambassador effectively aided the ruling party of Serbia during the 2020 electoral campaign.¹⁰⁸

Finally, **party cooperation appears to have an impact on political rhetoric and discourse** during moments of crisis as well. During the COVID-19 pandemic and Serbia’s state of emergency, both President Vučić and PM Ana Brnabić **began to make references to the CPC**

¹⁰³ See Freedom House reports, for example.

¹⁰⁴ *Xinhuanet*, “Decade of Progressive Party creates basis for Serbia's development: Serbian president“, 2018, available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-10/22/c_137549115.htm

¹⁰⁵ *RTS*, “Joksimović sa delegacijom KP Kine o unapređenju uspešne međupartijske saradnje”, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:730612-Joksimovic-sa-delegacijom-KP-Kine-o-unapredjenju-uspesne-medjupartijske-saradnje>

¹⁰⁶ *RTV*, “Delegacija SNS u poseti Kini, produbljivanje saradnje”, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

https://rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/delegacija-sns-u-poseti-kini-produbljivanje-saradnje_1022295.html

¹⁰⁷ *NI*, “Zvaničnik KP Kine primljen na najvišem državnom nivou, SNS želi da uči od njih”, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a534579/Zvanicnik-KP-Kine-primljen-na-najvisem-drzavnom-nivou-SNS-zeli-da-uci-od-njih.html>

¹⁰⁸ *Radio Free Europe*, “Kina u izbornoj kampanji naprednjaka u Srbiji”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kina-kampanja-izbori-srbija/30665247.html>

in their public acknowledgements, unlike before where they used to refer only to the People’s Republic of China, China’s President, or the Chinese people.¹⁰⁹ Considering that China was in the media spotlight during the pandemic, it is most likely that these party references were clear to the general public as well.

II. 1. 5 COVID-19 Politics

In 2020, the rapid spread of COVID-19 caught the world unprepared. **Before the virus became a global pandemic, the Serbian government had undertaken multiple efforts to express solidarity with China**, the first country to face the crisis. Firstly, in early February 2020, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić told the Chinese ambassador that Serbia would send approximately €125,000 worth of medical and other supplies.¹¹⁰ Soon after, the President of the National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with Russia and China,¹¹¹ Former Serbian President, and Honorary Citizen of Beijing Tomislav Nikolić, personally collected €5,000 in donations intended to assist hospitals in Hubei Province.¹¹² Then, together with the Chinese embassy, the Serbian government, and the City of Belgrade, a musical concert in solidarity with China was organised.¹¹³ Finally, Serbia’s Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić visited Beijing in late February 2020 to express support to China’s efforts in the fight against virus. In his own words, he was the first foreign minister of any country in the world to do so.¹¹⁴

Soon after, in early March 2020, the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in Serbia. As the number of cases began to rise, Serbia began to reach out for foreign assistance, especially in terms of medical supplies, recognising how severe the situation was in nearby Italy. Using the opportunity provided by the passing of a European Commission regulation making it more

¹⁰⁹ *Radio Free Europe*, “Vučićeva zahvalnost”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://pescanik.net/vuciceva-zahvalnost/>

¹¹⁰ *NI*, “Serbia sending medical aid to China”, 2020, available at:

<http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a569460/Serbia-sending-medical-aid-to-China.html>

¹¹¹ This institution is not further analysed in the study, as it shows no particular signs of notable activity. Its practical irrelevance stems from the fact it was formed, in 2017, as part of an intra-party agreement between the outgoing president Nikolić and incoming president Vučić, and not based on a realistic assessment.

¹¹² *NI*, “Dok zaštitnih maski nema u Srbiji, država najavljuje da će poslati pomoć Kini”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a572875/Dok-zastitnih-maski-nema-u-Srbiji-drzava-najavljuje-da-ce-poslati-pomoc-Kini.html>

¹¹³ *Danas*, “Na Kalemegdanu održan koncert solidarnosti za Kinu”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.danas.rs/beograd/na-kalemegdanu-odrzan-koncert-solidarnosti-za-kinu/>

¹¹⁴ *NI*, “Serbia’s FM: I’m proud to be first minister to visit China in difficult time”, 2020, available at:

<http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a572733/Serbia-s-FM-in-China-despite-coronavirus-epidemic.html>

difficult to export certain medical equipment outside the EU (which was revoked a month later), Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić sent a strong message to the public during a televised emergency address to the nation on 15 March 2020, proclaiming that "European solidarity does not exist".¹¹⁵ **Adding that European solidarity was but “a fairy tale”, the Serbian president sent shock waves through Serbia as well as the international community, while consciously omitting the fact that the EU has been the largest donor to Serbia (by far since 2000), including in its total donations to the health sector, as well as in providing assistance during the catastrophic 2014 floods.**¹¹⁶ In fact, such a public condemnation of the EU and its lack of solidarity struck a heavy blow to the already-weakened public support for Serbia's EU accession process.¹¹⁷

Referring to the Chinese President as a true friend and to Chinese citizens as brothers, President **Vučić publicly claimed that in such a difficult situation China was the only country that Serbia could rely on. The president's statements appear to have had a profound impact on the public, as the content of this press conference continued to circulate on television and in social media.** This message was apparently so impactful that his statement became a popular hashtag topic, apparently being read by millions on the popular Chinese social network Sina Weibo.¹¹⁸ Chinese citizens have called upon the Serbian embassy to set up a fundraising channel as many expressed their desire via social media to donate and help Serbia fight the virus. For these purposes, the Serbian Embassy in China opened an official Sina Weibo account.¹¹⁹ Chinese Embassy to Serbia played its part by promoting viral videos of citizens from China showing support for Serbia,¹²⁰ while **the Chinese ambassador to Serbia opened an official Twitter account on 19 March - just three days after the President's speech - to promote China's aid to Serbia during the pandemic.**¹²¹

¹¹⁵ *Euractiv*, “Serbia turns to China due to ‘lack of EU solidarity’ on coronavirus”, 2020, available at:

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/serbia-turns-to-china-due-to-lack-of-eu-solidarity-on-coronavirus/>

¹¹⁶ The EU Delegation to Serbia, “EU Assistance For Flood Relief In Serbia”, 2014, available at:

<https://europa.rs/tag/eu-assistance-for-flood-relief-in-serbia/page/10/?lang=en>

¹¹⁷ Ministry of the European Integration of Serbia, “European Orientation of Serbian Citizens”, Public Opinion Poll June-July 2019, slide 5, available at:

https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/opinion_poll_july_19.pdf

¹¹⁸ *Global Times*, “Serbia Embassy signs up for Weibo upon Chinese netizens’ call”, 2020, available at:

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1182955.shtml>

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Chinese Embassy to Serbia, “Chinese students sing for Serbia and cheer for Serbia”, YouTube, 2020, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bje-YOkibRg&feature=youtu.be>

¹²¹ Chen Bo (@AmbChenBo), “I am proud to represent my country among friends”, Twitter, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://twitter.com/AmbChenBo/status/1240723270254637057>

China ended up being the first country to deliver assistance to Serbia in the struggle against COVID-19. In fact, on 16 March, just a day after President's speech, COVID-19 virus detection tests were donated by the Chinese humanitarian organisation Mammoth Foundation (full name: the Shenzhen Mammoth Public Welfare Foundation).¹²² Some sources indicate that it sent 1,000 COVID-19 tests to Serbia on that occasion, and it had previously also sent assistance to other countries such as Japan, Peru, Angola, and the Philippines.¹²³ This is to show that **such efforts were not exclusive to Serbia, representing, rather, part of a wider Chinese strategy to provide aid** to various countries afflicted by COVID-19 such as Italy and Spain.

The stakes were raised five days later when another plane arrived carrying a large amount of medical equipment, together with six epidemiologists who came to Serbia to share their experience fighting COVID-19, to offer advice on measures that produced the best results in China in preventing the spread of this virus, and to assist in monitoring the situation in Serbia.¹²⁴ **The fact that Serbia's President kissed China's flag at the airport represented a strong symbolic gesture, as such acts are atypical in standard diplomatic practice.** As part of the "red carpet" welcome, the Chinese ambassador to Serbia and medical experts took part in a national emergency press conference alongside the Serbian President. From then on, the Serbian Government has actively considered suggestions provided by the Chinese medical experts when implementing measures to tackle the virus. The most notable suggestion provided by these experts that was turned into reality was to turn one of the halls at Belgrade Fair into an improvised hospital with 3,000 beds to accommodate people infected with COVID-19. **The Chinese experts were awarded with the highest military recognitions awarded by the Ministry of Defence and the Serbian Army, and departed from Serbia after 82 days.**^{125,126}

¹²² According to the Serbian government's description, this organisation is a non-profit charitable foundation headquartered in the Chinese city of Shenzhen, and as such, is engaged in genetic engineering research for the public benefit. It is funded by one of the world's leading companies in the field of genetic engineering, BGI Group, headquartered in Shenzhen.

See: The Government of Serbia, "First assistance for Serbia from People's Republic of China", 2020, available at: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/151479/first-assistance-for-serbia-from-peoples-republic-of-china.php>

¹²³ China Development Brief, "Shenzhen Mammoth Foundation donates virus detection kits to Serbia", 2020, available at: <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/news/shenzhen-mammoth-fund-donates-virus-detection-kit-to-serbia/>

¹²⁴ The Government of Serbia, "Gratitude to China on support in fight against COVID-19", 2020, available at: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/152088/gratitude-to-china-on-support-in-fight-against-covid-19.php>

¹²⁵ Ana Brnabić (@SerbianPM), "Farewell to the people who selflessly helped us for the past 82 days and fought with us against #covid19. Thanks to the medical team of Chinese experts for their help and hard work. Your help was valuable for Serbia!", Twitter, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://twitter.com/SerbianPM/status/1270798905345814528?s=20>

¹²⁶ *Politika*, "Vojne spomen-medalje za kineske lekare", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

Planes continued to bring assistance from China throughout late March and April.¹²⁷ Interestingly, the costs of the transportation were borne by the EU, while UNDP assisted its organisation. Although Serbian decision-makers and media overwhelmingly praised this assistance from China, with PM Brnabić even stating that once the pandemic was over she would try to have a monument erected to Sino-Serbian cooperation and the two nations' "steel friendship",¹²⁸ **it is still unknown what share of Chinese assistance was donated and what was in fact paid for from the Serbian state budget (and under what terms).** This is the case because **the Serbian Government has concealed the exact amount of equipment received from China by request of Chinese Ambassador Chen Bo**, as indicated by the Serbian president.¹²⁹

In fact, there were attempts by Serbian civil society organisations to get information from Serbia's National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) on the type, amount, and value of the medical equipment Serbia received as donations during the pandemic, and from which countries it came (both official assistance and aid from private companies), as well as on what type, amount, and value of medical equipment Serbia bought with funds from the state budget, and from whom. The NHIF's reply to this request was that the **information is considered a "highly classified" state secret.**¹³⁰ The official explanation states that this will remain the case as long as the COVID-19 pandemic lasts, as according to a decision made by the Serbian government on 11 March 2020 (four days before the official start of the national emergency).

<http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/453228/Drustvo/Vojne-spomen-medalje-za-kineske-lekare>

¹²⁷ As China does not recognise Kosovo, the former has sent no aid to the latter. As such, it was the only place in the world without any Chinese assistance and where China's so-called "mask diplomacy" could not be implemented.

See: Radio Free Europe, "Kineska 'diplomacija maski' ne radi na Kosovu", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kineska-diplomatija-maski-ne-radi-na-kosovu/30637451.html>

¹²⁸ CGTN, "Support from 'natural ally' China is saving lives, says Serbian PM", 2020, available at:

<https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-29/Support-from-natural-ally-China-is-saving-lives-says-Serbian-PM-PeDtjJI7m0/index.html>

¹²⁹ RTV, "Stigla medicinska pomoć iz Kine, šest epidemiologa iz Guangdonga u Srbiji", 2020, available at (in Serbian): https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/stigla-medicinska-pomoc-iz-kine-sest-epidemiologa-iz-guangdonga-u-srbiji_1105048.html

¹³⁰ Stefan Vladisavljev (@vladisavljev_s), "In June, I submitted a request to the Republic Health Insurance Fund to obtain information on donations that Serbia received during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as on which medical devices were purchased from the budget. Today, I received the answer that this information is strictly confidential.", Twitter, available at (in Serbian):

https://twitter.com/vladisavljev_s/status/1296357731343822849?s=20

Box 2: Assistance by Chinese Companies

Besides the aid provided by the Chinese Government, Chinese companies also provided notable assistance to Serbia. The first ones provide medical equipment to Serbia were **Linglong** (a tire producer in Zrenjanin)¹³¹ and the **HBIS Group** (a owner of a steel mill in Smederevo).¹³² Other companies provided funds for one laboratory for mask production to a clinic in Belgrade and another one in Niš. The Serbian Government estimated that with these two labs, Serbia's testing capacities will be doubled.¹³³ It appears that the project was valued at over €710,000, of which approximately 80% was donated by Chinese companies, while the rest was financed by Serbia. Both of these labs were to be installed by the Chinese **BGI group**,¹³⁴ the same company that funds the Mammoth Foundation, which itself was the organisation that provided the first shipment of donations of medical equipment to Serbia. For BGI, this was the first lab it helped to build in Europe, and there have been talks with BGI about future cooperation.¹³⁵

Other companies listed as having provided donations of laboratory components include the **Mammoth Foundation, Tencent, and Zijin Bor Copper Serbia**.¹³⁶ Furthermore, the Chinese company **China Railway International (CRIC)** donated four sets of thermal imaging cameras and 200,000 medical masks. This company's workers in Serbia also supposedly collected a cash donation worth approximately €18,000.¹³⁷ Finally, the **Alibaba**

¹³¹ Chen Bo (@AmbChenBo), "Chinese companies in Serbia take care of Serbia. Linglong, which is building its tire factory in Zrenjanin, donated 300,000 medical masks, 2,000 sets of medical protective clothing and 10,000 detection tests to Serbia.", Twitter, 2020 available at (in Serbian):

<https://twitter.com/AmbChenBo/status/1242870448079151108?s=20>

¹³² Chen Bo (@AmbChenBo), "Smederevo Ironworks - a real force of steel friendship. HBIS together with Serbia in the fight against the KOVID-19 virus", Twitter, 2020 available at:

<https://twitter.com/AmbChenBo/status/1243307674944647170?s=20>

¹³³ The Government of Serbia, "Equipment for two state-of-the-art quid labs arrives from China", 2020, available at:

<https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/154310/equipment-for-two-state-of-the-art-quid-labs-arrives-from-china.php>

¹³⁴ Xinhuanet, "China's BGI helps Serbia build automated COVID-19 testing lab", 2020, available at:

http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/20/c_138993199.htm

¹³⁵ Reuters, "Chinese lab boosts Serbia's coronavirus testing capacity", 2020, available at:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-serbia-china/chinese-lab-boosts-serbias-coronavirus-testing-capacity-idUSKBN22P119>

¹³⁶ Radio Free Europe, "Otvorena prva od dve kineske laboratorije u Srbiji", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30565766.html>

¹³⁷ The Government of Serbia, "Donation of Chinese company CRIC for fight against COVID-19", 2020, available at:

<https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/154121/donation-of-chinese-company-cric-for-fight-against-covid-19.php>

Foundation and the Jack Ma Foundation sent donations of protective face masks and other medical supplies to Serbia.¹³⁸

All of these actions taken by China have certainly had some positive effects on combatting the virus in Serbia. However, the way that Serbian authorities presented this assistance to the public has had negative repercussions for the image of the EU in Serbia. **What was at stake was a clash of narratives, where the EU was presented as a *partner*, with whom adequate relations are possible based on a rational calculus, while China was portrayed as a *sibling*, upon whom Serbia could always depend.**¹³⁹ The creation, and open promotion, of this discourse in public at the very least represents an example of diplomatic frivolity displayed by Serbian authorities, especially if it is taken into account that achieving membership in the EU remains, at least declaratively, their strategic priority.

The systemic nature of this narrative building is seen in the fact that it was constantly reaffirmed and boosted by media outlets with close links to the government and an online, pro-government network of “bots” on Twitter. In fact, one research project has found that during the key moments of the pandemic, from March 9 to April 9, there were 30,000 tweets coming from accounts in Serbia with the keywords “China and Serbia” in their content. When it comes to the aforementioned “bots”, it was discovered that as much as 71.9% of the content associated with these keywords was produced by these accounts. It soon becomes clear that this promotion of China was intentional and carefully planned, especially as the common message of these tweets consisted of praise for China’s assistance (and, in general, Sino-Serbian friendship), praising the Serbian President, and praise for the steps the government took during the pandemic, all while attacking the EU for a supposed lack of assistance in Serbia’s time of need.

This bot network is well-known in Serbia, having operated for years. The official Twitter account charged with the platform’s safety (@TwitterSafety) came out publicly regarding this problem when it was updating its archive of state-backed information operations. In fact, in

¹³⁸ *Diplomacy & Commerce*, “Alibaba Foundation and Jack Ma Foundation send donation of protective face masks and other medical supplies to Serbia to help tackle the COVID-19 health emergency”, 2020, available at: <http://www.diplomacyandcommerce.rs/alibaba-foundation-and-jack-ma-foundation-send-donation-of-protective-face-masks-and-other-medical-supplies-to-serbia-to-help-tackle-the-covid-19-health-emergency/>

¹³⁹ Strahinja Subotić, “The systemic campaign against the EU’s credibility during the COVID-19 crisis”, European Policy Centre (CEP), 2020, available at: <https://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/the-systemic-campaign-against-the-eus-credibility-during-the-covid-19-crisis/>

April 2020, during the pandemic, it issued a statement that it had identified clusters of accounts engaged in inauthentic, coordinated activity which led to the removal of 8,558 accounts working to promote Serbia's ruling party and its leader near the end of 2019.¹⁴⁰ Considering the large amount of accounts mobilised for political purposes, Serbia's behaviour on Twitter put it in the class of countries such as Egypt, Honduras, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia, all countries with weak, if any, record of democratic standards.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, **never before had this bot network been used to such an extent in favour of China's image in Serbia.**

Box 3: Comparison with the EU's Assistance in the Fight Against COVID-19

Even though the EU donated €7.5 million to Serbia on 20 March (just five days after the national emergency broadcast),¹⁴² it has not received the same treatment from the Serbian government as China has. **The limited reaction by the Serbian government to the EU's donation produced a proportionally limited media spotlight as well.** Similarly limited responses were notable for when the EU authorised Serbia to use approximately €94 million of unspent funds from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) to prevent and combat the effects of COVID-19,¹⁴³ when the Centre for Disease Control in Brussels offered Serbia its expertise in fighting the virus,¹⁴⁴ when the EU activated the Civil Protection Mechanism and enabled Serbia to seek assistance from EU members,¹⁴⁵ and when it assisted in the evacuation of five Serbian citizens from Wuhan, where COVID-19 was first identified.¹⁴⁶ The latest milestone in this regard was the EU's announcement of a €3.3 billion assistance package for the Western Balkans, aimed at dealing with the health crisis, kickstarting socio-economic recovery, and supporting business and public sector

¹⁴⁰ Twitter Safety (@Twitter Safety), "Toward the end of last year, we identified clusters of accounts engaged in inauthentic coordinated activity which led to the removal of 8,558 accounts working to promote Serbia's ruling party and its leader.", Twitter, 2020, available at:

<https://twitter.com/TwitterSafety/status/1245682441865646080>

¹⁴¹ Twitter Safety (@Twitter Safety), "The accounts we have identified, investigated and removed, were part of five distinct campaigns associated with five countries: Egypt, Honduras, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Serbia.", Twitter, 2020, available at: <https://twitter.com/TwitterSafety/status/1245682433875378182>

¹⁴² The EU Delegation to Serbia, "EU Urgently Grants €7.5 million to Fight COVID-19", 2020, available at: <http://europa.rs/eu-urgently-grants-e7-5-million-to-fight-covid-19/?lang=en>

¹⁴³ NI, "Vlada: EU odobrila Srbiji prenamenu 94 miliona evra za borbu protiv pandemije", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<http://rs.n1.info.com/Vesti/a581812/Vlada-EU-odobrila-Srbiji-prenamenu-94-miliona-evra-za-borbu-protiv-pandemije.html>

¹⁴⁴ The EU Delegation to Serbia, "Ambassador Fabrizi for RTS: European Union Activated the Mechanisms to Help Western Balkans", 2020, available at:

<https://europa.rs/ambassador-fabrizi-for-rts-european-union-activated-the-mechanisms-to-help-western-balkans/?lang=en>

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ The EU Delegation to Serbia, "EU Urgently Grants €7.5 million to Fight COVID-19", 2020, available at: <http://europa.rs/eu-urgently-grants-e7-5-million-to-fight-covid-19/?lang=en>

investment.¹⁴⁷ Yet, **the EU's assistance to Serbia has gone under the radar.** What, therefore, was the result of this misrepresentation of the Union during the pandemic? A deceived public. And of consequence for Serbia's accession process? Likely, reduced support for EU membership.

All things considered, **the COVID-19 crisis has shown that cooperation with China has been used by the Serbian government at the expense of the EU's image**, thus working against the spirit of the EU accession process. The EU is already fully aware of this, meaning **it will take more time for Serbia to regain its trust.** In fact, recognising the existing “battle of narratives”, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell commented, in a session of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, how it is “funny” that, unlike the EU, China received billboards of gratitude in Serbia.¹⁴⁸ Considering that he also publicly argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light some of the EU's weaknesses in its relationship with China, which “has become gradually more assertive, expansionist and authoritarian”,¹⁴⁹ it is no shock that Serbia's behaviour during the pandemic did not please Brussels.

Furthermore, the EU's leaders stated in the Zagreb Declaration (at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in May 2020), that the fact that the EU's support during the pandemic went far beyond what any other partner provided to the region “deserves public acknowledgement”.¹⁵⁰ This statement was unusually explicit and deviates from the standard diplomatic language employed. **This is to show how serious this snub from Serbia was taken in Brussels, after it used China during the crisis to turn its back on the EU.** Although Serbia's President was displeased with this process that he has called “aid-shaming”, which he considered to be unjust,

¹⁴⁷ European Commission, “Support to the Western Balkans in tackling COVID-19 and the post-pandemic recovery”, 2020, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-support-western-balkan-regions-covid19-recovery_en.pdf

¹⁴⁸ European Western Balkans, “Borrell: It is funny how only China receives billboards of gratitude in Serbia“, 2020, available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/21/borrell-it-is-funny-how-only-china-receives-billboards-of-gratitude-in-serbia/>

¹⁴⁹ Josep Borell, “The Sinatra Doctrine. How the EU Should Deal with the US–China Competition”, EEAS, 2020, available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/asia/84484/sinatra-doctrine-how-eu-should-deal-us%E2%80%93china-competition_en

¹⁵⁰ Zagreb Declaration, 2020, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43776/zagreb-declaration-en-06052020.pdf>

he did argue in an op-ed for *U.S. News* that Serbia's overall trajectory towards the EU will not change,¹⁵¹ and later publicly acknowledged that the EU's assistance has been the largest.¹⁵²

Considering these developments, **the pandemic has become a game changer, as it has revealed China's potential to exert influence, and the EU's vulnerability, in Serbia.** Therefore, if Serbian decision-makers continue to exalt their Chinese counterparts, it is probable that China will strengthen its position in Serbia in the future, likely at the EU's expense. For this reason, it may be expected that the EU will, from now on, more openly require Serbia to show its dedication to the West rather than to the East. Furthermore, the pandemic is a game changer from Russia's perspective as well, as the assistance it provided during the pandemic was also side-lined by the Serbian authorities.¹⁵³ Although Belgrade has not issued any sort of criticism to Moscow as it did to Brussels, the very fact that the aid from Russia was received without the traditional media fanfare shows that **Serbia is sending signals that it views China as a more reliable partner than Russia.** It appears that geopolitical affairs between Serbia and the great powers are indeed a sort of zero-sum game, in which each player's gain or loss is exactly balanced by the losses or gains of the others.

II. 1. 6 Defence and Police Cooperation

When analysts discuss the relationship between China and Serbia, they mostly focus on the increasing foreign policy cooperation, and number of economic projects, between the two. Yet, in order to grasp the full picture of relations, it is also necessary to analyse China's role in the sectors of defence and police cooperation.

In terms of cooperation with Serbia's Ministry of Defence (MoD), China's interest has been long-term, which can be seen in analysing the list of donations it has provided to this ministry. According to the 2020 Information Sheet of the MoD,¹⁵⁴ which provides a layout of donations

¹⁵¹ Aleksandar Vučić, "'Coronavirus Diplomacy' Won't Change Serbia's Path", *U.S. News*, 2020, available at: <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2020-05-07/coronavirus-diplomacy-wont-change-serbias-path>

¹⁵² Institut za evropske poslove, "Predsednik Vučić odgovara na pitanje novinarke Radio Slobodna Evropa u vezi sa istraživanjem javnog mnjenja Instituta za evropske poslove o donacijama Srbiji", Facebook, 2020, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=703717633755609>

¹⁵³ More on this in the chapter on Russia of this policy study.

¹⁵⁴ Ministry of Defence of Serbia, "Information Sheet", 2020, available at (in Serbian): http://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/file/staticki_sadrzaj/informator/2020/maj/Informator_o_radu_april_2020_lat.pdf

to the ministry by foreign countries in the period from 2007 to 2018, **China's first registered donation to the Ministry goes as far back as 2008**, when it provided equipment worth approximately €500,000. After it signed its landmark strategic partnership with Serbia in 2009, in which it was agreed that cooperation in the area of military would be expanded,¹⁵⁵ China donated another approximately €500,000 in 2010. A year later, equipment worth quadruple, amounting to a value of approximately €2 million, was provided to Serbia's Military Medical Academy (VMA). The same amount was provided in 2012 to the MoD's Military Health Department.

That year, **the political establishment changed in Serbia, and there were no donations in 2013, probably as Beijing had yet to confirm the level of commitment of Belgrade's new administration**. It did not take long for it to see that the ground in Serbia remained fertile to cooperation. Namely, as Serbia's new president **signed the 2013 *Joint Statement on Deepening the Strategic Partnership*** with China, in which China committed to expand cooperation in the area of defence,¹⁵⁶ Chinese assistance to the MoD continued from then on. In fact, in 2014, when floods struck Serbia, China donated €335,000. In 2015, the value of China's donations to the MoD was valued at approximately €1 million.

It should be highlighted that the year 2016 represented a milestone. **China provided a donation to the MoD worth €4 million, which was an eightfold increase from the first sum provided to Serbia back in 2008, and the largest sum of funds China has ever provided to it. This sudden increase is explained by the fact that Serbia and China signed their comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016**, demonstrating the highest level of partnership. Although the CSP does not explicitly mention the area of defence or military (unlike the previous two agreements, probably due to the increased sensitivity of this issue, and the increased attention being paid to it by the West), cooperation has certainly continued and intensified. In fact, in 2018, an implementation protocol for the €4 million of assistance was signed.

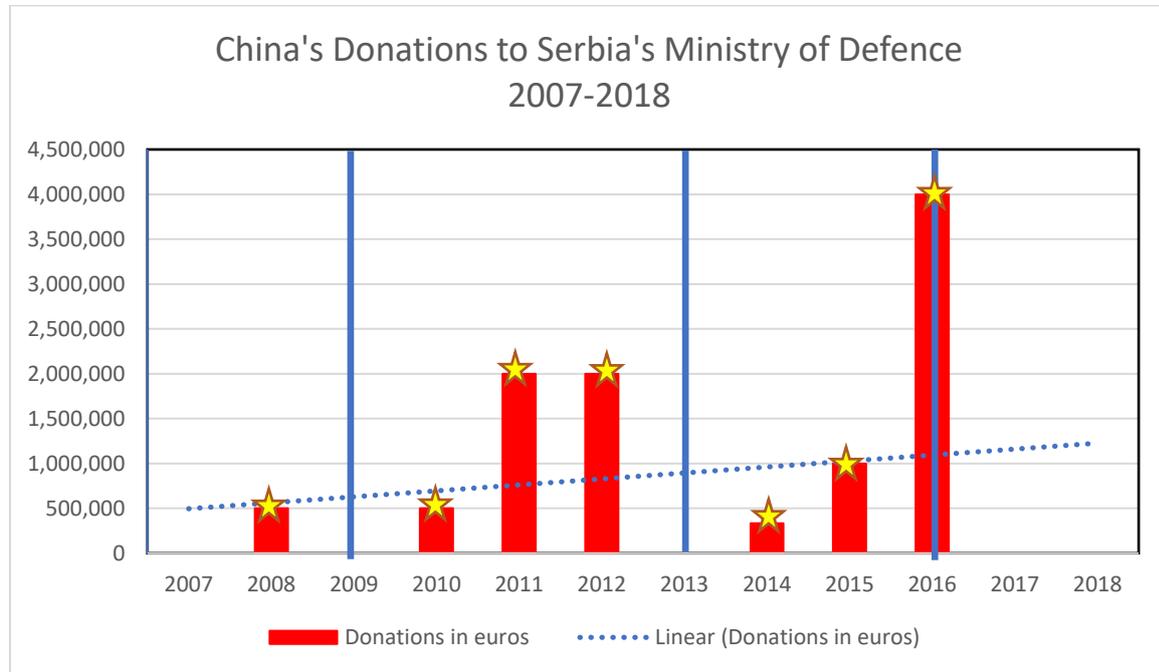
All of China's donations to the MoD, based on their values and years, are presented in the following Chart (with marked blue lines representing the 2009 Strategic Partnership, the 2013

¹⁵⁵ Joint statement of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Serbia on the establishment of a strategic partnership, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2009

¹⁵⁶ Joint Statement on Deepening Bilateral Strategic Partnership, 2013

Deepening of Strategic Partnership, and the 2016 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, accordingly).

Graph 1: China's Donations to Serbia's Ministry of Defence 2007-2018



Source: authors' own representation of the data available on the 2020 Information Sheet of Serbia's Ministry of Defence

According to the Information Sheet, **there is an upward trend in the size of China's donations to the MoD, with the total official sum provided by China reaching approximately €10 million from 2008 to 2016** (or from the 2007 to 2018 reporting period). This sum consisted of equipment such as rubber boats with outboard engines, snowmobiles, portable devices for detecting explosives and narcotics, and equipment for responding to natural disasters, among other supplies. This amount puts **China as the second largest donor to the Serbian MoD in the past decade, behind only the US**. Yet, the number may be even bigger, particularly as the data that has been released includes only donations that have been completed, and not those that have yet to be implemented.¹⁵⁷

Furthermore, some things may be intentionally not reported, as was publicly admitted by Serbian Minister of Defence to have been the case with Russian donations to the MoD, due to

¹⁵⁷ Vuk Vuksanović, "Securing the Sino-Serbian Partnership", CHOICE, 2020, available at: <https://chinaobservers.eu/securing-the-sino-serbian-partnership/>

the lack of an agreement of both parties to disclose data on the amounts of these donations.¹⁵⁸ For now, there is no reliable way to determine whether a similar pattern was applied in the case of China. Nevertheless, **as China has been providing assistance to Serbia's MoD for ten years, it is expected that this trend will continue in the future, potentially with increased amounts going forward.** In fact, going beyond the period of this information sheet, it is worth noting that **the latest donation from China to the MoD took place during the COVID-19 pandemic.** According to the MoD, the assistance in this case was valued at €755,000.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, assistance provided by China to Serbia's defence shows that **the Belt and Road Initiative is more than just economics.**

Meanwhile, considering the size and regularity of China's donations, it is no surprise that **Serbia's 2019 Strategy on National Security**, the highest strategic document in this area, explicitly **states that it is particularly important to further develop relations in defence with China, alongside Russia and the US.**¹⁶⁰ The fact that China was put beside these two powers represents an improvement China's status, particularly as it was originally put alongside India and Brazil in the 2009 Strategy on National Security,¹⁶¹ two countries which were omitted from the 2019 Strategy.

In terms of practical cooperation, other than donations, a delegation of the Office for International Military Cooperation of the Central Military Commission of the Chinese People's Liberation Army paid an official visit to the MoD in 2017, with the aim of exchanging experience in the field of international military cooperation, and to familiarise their Serbian counterparts with the way they work.¹⁶² Soon after, the Head of the Directorate for International Military Cooperation of the Defence Policy Sector of Serbia's MoD and the Defence Envoy of China signed a **plan for bilateral military cooperation between the MoD of Serbia and the Ministry of National Defence of China for 2018.**¹⁶³ In the same year, the Chief of the General

¹⁵⁸ *NI*, "Ministarstvo odbrane: Rusija najveći donator Vojske Srbije", 2019, available at (in Serbian): <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a504150/Rusija-najveci-donator-Vojske-Srbije.html>

¹⁵⁹ Ministry of Defence of Serbia, "Donation of Medical Equipment from PR China for the Military Health System", 2020, available at:

<http://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/16235/donacija-medicinske-opreme-iz-nr-kine-vojnomo-zdravstvu-16235>

¹⁶⁰ Ministry of Defence of Serbia, "Strategy of National Security of the Republic of Serbia", 2019, available at: http://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/file/staticki_sadrzaj/dokumenta/strategije/2019/Strategy%20of%20National%20Security%20od%20the%20Republic%20of%20Serbia.pdf

¹⁶¹ The Military Intelligence Agency of Serbia, "The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia", 2009, available at: <http://www.voa.mod.gov.rs/documents/national-security-strategy-of-the-republic-of-serbia.pdf>

¹⁶² Ministry of Defence of Serbia, "<http://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/11883/poseta-delegacije-narodnooslobodilacke-armije-kine-11883>

¹⁶³ Ministry of Defence of Serbia, "Visit of the delegation of the Chinese People's Liberation Army", 2017, available at: <http://www.mod.gov.rs/lat/12615/potpisan-plan-bilateralne-vojne-saradnje-sa-kinom-12615>

Staff of the Serbian Army met with the Chinese Ambassador and Chinese military representatives in Belgrade about the military-to-military cooperation between these two countries. Furthermore, Serbia's defence minister was welcomed in Beijing by his Chinese counterpart, where both concluded that Sino-Serbian military cooperation was at a higher level than it has even been, and particularly emphasised Serbia's need to learn from China about strategies of cyber-warfare.¹⁶⁴ All of these visits and meetings were important, as they have ushered the path towards Serbia's subsequent acquisition of arms from China¹⁶⁵ and closer military cooperation.

In 2019, Serbia hosted a Chinese Central Military Commission delegation for five days.¹⁶⁶

Not only was this meeting described as **“a visit of the highest level in the history of military cooperation between Serbia and China”**, but it also resulted in Serbia's invitation to a **Chinese general to attend a military exercise** in which equipment donated by China was used in Serbia.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, this meeting stood out as **one of its key topics of discussion was the organisation of the first joint military exercises between Serbia and China.**¹⁶⁸

Considering that the EU and the US already look at Serbia's military exercises with Russia with a high dose of scepticism, it may be expected that they would react in the same, or a similar, manner if Serbia's plan to organise military exercises with China would come to fruition. From Russia's standpoint, potential exercises organised between Serbia and China would mean that its unique position is losing its value.

In terms of Serbia's acquisition of arms from China, a milestone took place in 2020 as **Serbia agreed to buy the FK-3 air defence missile system from China.**¹⁶⁹ By opting for this Chinese model, Serbia chose not to purchase the S-300 Russian anti-aircraft system, which was publicly

¹⁶⁴ Ministry of Defence of Serbia, “Chinese Minister of Defence Wei Fenghe: Serbia has magnificent armed forces and people”, 2018, available at:

<http://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/12844/ministar-odbrane-kine-wei-fenghe-srbija-ima-velicanstvenu-vojsku-i-narod-12844>

¹⁶⁵ Ministry of Defence of Serbia, “Minister Vulin in Beijing: Serbian Armed Forces to catch up with the world”, 2018, available at:

<http://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/12836/ministar-vulin-u-pekingu-vojska-srbije-hvata-korak-sa-svetom-12836>

¹⁶⁶ *Radio Free Europe*, “Vučić i Vulin u Beogradu sa delegacijom Centralne vojne komisije Kine”, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30150588.html>

¹⁶⁷ Odbrana, “Početak pobjedničkog niza”, XIV (328), 2019, p.20, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.odbrana.mod.gov.rs/odbrana/328/Odbrana328-Smanjena.pdf>

¹⁶⁸ *Radio Free Europe*, “Vučić i Vulin u Beogradu sa delegacijom Centralne vojne komisije Kine”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30150588.html>

¹⁶⁹ Aleksandar Radić, “Vojska Srbije dobija kineski sistem PVO FK-3”, *Balkanska bezbednosna mreža* 2020, available at: <https://www.balkansec.net/post/vojska-srbije-dobija-kineski-sistem-pvo-fk-3>

touted by state officials for a long time.¹⁷⁰ Such a move was probably negatively received not only by the EU and the US, but also by Russia. This acquisition was accompanied by Serbia's **purchase of six CH-92A unmanned combat aerial vehicles from China** (armed drones system)¹⁷¹ at an unknown price.¹⁷² Furthermore, according to the Serbian President, Serbia made an agreement with China to cooperate with its experts on the joint development of technology, so that Serbian experts would be able to develop unmanned aerial vehicles of a similar class on their own.¹⁷³

The purchase of FK-3 and CH-92A weapons opened a new page in Sino-Serbian relations, as Serbia was the first country in Europe to strike such deals with China.¹⁷⁴ For Serbia, these recent moves have enabled it to diversify the sources from which it acquires its military equipment and thus reaffirm its pillared foreign policy. For China, selling weapons to a European country matters, as its export of military equipment has traditionally been limited to parts of Africa, such as Zimbabwe, and Asian countries, such as Pakistan.¹⁷⁵ Considering that arms sales represent a matter of significant geopolitical importance, this step has not gone unnoticed by other foreign actors with strong interests in Serbia. Having in mind that the US is, alongside the EU, quite wary of China and developments concerning its military, it warned Serbia that it should have been aware of the risk of buying weapons from Chinese companies, and that Serbia's choice of suppliers should reflect its declared goal of integration into the EU, while adding that "there are other sellers who do not depend on authoritarian regimes".¹⁷⁶ The fact that the FK-3 weapon was not on the US sanctions list, as stated by the Serbian president, was sufficient enough for Serbia to go ahead with the purchase, despite these warnings.¹⁷⁷ No explanation was found for the acquisition of the CH-92A weapons. Yet, **as the US was**

¹⁷⁰ Vojkan Kostić, "Ruski mediji razočarani odlukom Srbije da kupi FK-3", *Balkanska bezbednosna mreža* 2020, available at:

<https://www.balkansec.net/post/vest-o-kupovini-fk-3-u-glasilima-%C5%A1irom-sveta-ruski-mediji-razo%C4%8Darani>

¹⁷¹ Dylan Malyasov, "Serbia receives Chinese-made unmanned combat aerial vehicles", *Defence Blog*, 2020, <https://defence-blog.com/news/serbia-receives-chinese-made-unmanned-combat-aerial-vehicles.html>

¹⁷² *Radio Free Europe*, "U Beogradu prikazane bespilotne letelice iz Kine, cena tajna", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30705751.html>

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ *Radio Free Europe*, "Rojters: Nabavka raketa FK-3, pokazatelj produbljivanja veza Srbije i Kine", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30763813.html>

¹⁷⁵ *Radio Free Europe*, "Da li će Srbija kupiti oružje iz Kine?", 2018, available at:

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/da-li-ce-srbija-kupiti-oruzje-iz-kine/29421918.html>

¹⁷⁶ *NI*, "RFE: US warns Serbia over Chinese AA missile system purchase", 2020, available at:

<http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a628502/RFE-US-warns-Serbia-over-Chinese-AA-missile-system-purchase.html>

¹⁷⁷ *See News*, "Serbia mulls Chinese missile system purchase despite US warnings – Vucic", 2020, available at:

<https://seenews.com/news/serbia-mulls-chinese-missile-system-purchase-despite-us-warnings-vucic-709632>

successful in deterring Serbia's further arms acquisition from Russia, in late 2019, it is quite possible that that the US will increase its pressure on Serbia to discourage it from further purchase of weapons from China if the global Sino-American competition and rivalry intensify. As in the case of Russia, it seems that the US has an upper hand over the EU when it comes to issuing credible threats of potential sanctions.

Nevertheless, although there is increasing Sino-Serbian defence cooperation and arms purchase, **there have not, at this point, been joint military exercises. Joint police exercises, however, have been organised.** Interestingly, the two sides expressed willingness to extend cooperation in the area of policing as early as the 2009 Strategic Partnership, and this was reaffirmed in the 2013 *Joint Statement on Deepening the Strategic Partnership*. The first time this concept had tangible effects was in 2018, when 180 police officers from the two countries showed their skills to Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, Interior Minister Nebojša Stefanović, Head of the Civilian Secret Service (BIA) Bratislav Gašić, Chinese Ambassador to Serbia Chen Bo, and other dignitaries.¹⁷⁸ What was unusual about this event was that it was held in the Chinese HBIS Group Serbia-owned steel plant in Smederevo.¹⁷⁹ In addition, what increased the importance of this event was the fact that it was apparently **the first time Chinese special police took part in joint training drills in Europe.**¹⁸⁰

A year later, **in 2019, the first joint patrol of Chinese and Serbian policemen was launched in downtown Belgrade.** A ceremony held on the main pedestrian street of the Serbian capital was attended by Serbian Interior Minister Nebojša Stefanović, a delegation from China's Ministry of Public Security, the Chinese Ambassador to Serbia Chen Bo, and dozens of Serbian and Chinese citizens who waved the flags of the two countries.¹⁸¹ According to Serbia's interior minister, police officers were mobilised to conduct joint patrols at several locations in the city that are considered either tourist attractions or important locations for Chinese citizens, in order to make communication easier for them. Similar joint patrols were organised in Novi Sad and Smederevo, with the whole project lasting a month in total.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ NI, "Serbia's and China's police forces in joint exercise in steel company", 2019, available at: <http://rs.n1.info.com/English/NEWS/a547840/China-and-Serbia-hold-joint-police-exercise.html>

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ *The Japan Times*, "Chinese elite police join Serbian units in first European drills as Beijing's influence spreads to Balkans", 2019, available at: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/11/29/asia-pacific/chinese-elite-police-join-serbian-units-first-european-drills-beijings-influence-spreads-balkans/>

¹⁸¹ China.org, "China, Serbia launch joint police patrols in Belgrade", 2019, available at: http://www.china.org.cn/world/2019-09/19/content_75221135.htm

¹⁸² Sanja Arežina, "Chinese and Serbian police act as ambassadors of friendship", *Shine*, 2019, available at: <https://www.shine.cn/opinion/1910183949/>

Although the introduction of joint police patrols with China was a first in the Western Balkans, similar programmes had been launched previously in EU member states. For instance, Italy was the first country to host such an experiment, with Italian police and their Chinese counterparts first appearing in Rome and Milan (and later Venice) in 2016,¹⁸³ and has continued to host Chinese police on an annual basis ever since.¹⁸⁴ Also, in 2018, and later, in 2019, Serbia's neighbour, Croatia, hosted Chinese police for a month during summer in Zagreb, Zadar, Dubrovnik, and Plitvice Lakes National Park.¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless, **although hosting foreign police patrols is not necessarily harmful to Serbia's EU accession process per se, it is problematic that this kind of cooperation was agreed upon in an untransparent manner.** Namely, when a civil society organisation from Serbia tried to acquire information on the Memorandum of Understanding between the Serbian and Chinese ministries on organising joint patrols based on the right to access information of public importance, the Serbian Ministry of Interior declined the request.¹⁸⁶

Box 4: China's Assistance to the Serbian Ministry of Interior During the COVID-19

Pandemic

The last notable example of China's willingness to extend its cooperation with the police sector in Serbia was seen in 2020, when it donated preventive technical protection equipment and medical protective equipment to the Serbian Ministry of Interior. According to Serbia's Interior Minister, the assistance was **worth €630,000**. The assistance was supposedly provided in order to help the Ministry in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸⁷

Overall, **although still modest, the level of Serbia's defence and police cooperation with China is increasing. Further police drills are expected, and as well as military joint exercises.** Donations from China are also likely to continue, particularly as cooperation

¹⁸³ Reuters, "Chinese police to patrol in Italy in two-week experiment", 2016, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-security-china-idUSKCN0XT1UG>

¹⁸⁴ Xinhuanet, "Chinese police officers join Italian police for joint patrol", 2019, available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/06/c_138533328.htm

¹⁸⁵ Xinhuanet, "2nd joint patrol between Croatian, Chinese police concludes with success", 2019, available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/14/c_138309155.htm

¹⁸⁶ SHARE Foundation, "Dopis MUP", 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.sharefoundation.info/wp-content/uploads/Dopis-MUP-od-10.6.2019..pdf>

¹⁸⁷ RTS, "Kina donirala zaštitnu opremu MUP-u Srbije", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/%D0%9A%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81/story/3174/donacije/4031260/kina-donacija-mup.html>

between the two states appears to be intensifying and expanding, considering that Serbia represents a European springboard for China in these areas.

II. 1. 7 The Digital Silk Road

According to the High Representative of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell, "technology, data, and information are now instruments of political competition".¹⁸⁸ **As China has increasingly struggled in its clash with the US and the EU over global technological dominance and the protection of its technological sectors, concerns have been raised regarding the developing cooperation between Serbia and Huawei.** In order to fully understand the context of this relationship, however, a brief global overview is needed, as this issue expands far beyond Serbia's borders.

Huawei is the largest Chinese telecommunications equipment manufacturer (alongside ZTE) and the second-largest seller of smartphones in the world.¹⁸⁹ Yet, in the West, it is increasingly seen as an untrustworthy, high-risk vendor. **The fact that Huawei's founder Ren Zhengfei was a technician for the People's Liberation Army prior to founding Huawei¹⁹⁰ first sparked concerns.** These concerns have gradually increased as the Chinese government has expanded its ability, over recent years, to "collect data for national security purposes, and has written new laws expanding the scope of intelligence-gathering operations".¹⁹¹

Although the first report warning of Huawei's cooperation with the Chinese army came out in 2005,¹⁹² this issue took a more serious turn in 2012, when the US Congressional House Intelligence Committee found that Huawei's "failure to provide further detailed information explaining how it is formally regulated, controlled, or otherwise managed by the Chinese

¹⁸⁸ Josep Borrell, "Building Global Europe", EEAS, 2020, available at:

https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/84888/building-global-europe_en

¹⁸⁹ *Business Insider*, "Huawei, the Chinese tech giant embroiled in controversy, just overtook Apple to become the second-largest smartphone maker", 2019, available at:

<https://bit.ly/35xOI6f>

¹⁹⁰ *South China Morning Post*, "Huawei founder Ren Zhengfei on why he joined China's Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army", 2019, available at:

<https://www.scmp.com/tech/big-tech/article/2182332/huawei-founder-ren-zhengfei-why-he-joined-chinas-communist-party-and>

¹⁹¹ *Financial Times*, "Is Huawei compelled by Chinese law to help with espionage", 2019, available at:

<https://www.ft.com/content/282f8ca0-3be6-11e9-b72b-2c7f526ca5d0>

¹⁹² RAND Corporation, "A New Direction for China's Defense Industry", 2005, available at:

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG334.pdf

government”, concluding that the matter was alarming .¹⁹³ In 2018, the issue reached a new level when the US passed a bill with a provision banning the federal government from purchasing equipment from Huawei (and some other Chinese vendors) due to security concerns.¹⁹⁴ In the same year, the two largest US telecommunications operators, AT&T and Verizon, dropped Huawei phones from their product lines prompted by pressure from the US government over security concerns.¹⁹⁵ **In 2019, the US Department of Commerce put Huawei on a trade blacklist that bars anyone on it from buying parts and components from US companies without the government’s approval.** The aim of this action was “to prevent American technology from being used by foreign-owned entities in ways that potentially undermine US national security or foreign policy interests”.¹⁹⁶ Consequently, a number of US firms began to back away from their business with Huawei.¹⁹⁷

The issue was brought up in Europe as well. As the EU foresees that 5G will play a central role in achieving the digital transformation of its economy and society, it has increasingly focused on cybersecurity.¹⁹⁸ **In a 2019 report by the EU Agency for Cybersecurity, nation-states are, alongside cyber-criminals and hacktivists, considered as a “5G threat agent group”.**¹⁹⁹ Recognising the potential security risks, in 2020 the EU agreed on a joint “toolbox of risk mitigating measures”, where it called on EU member states to exclude “high risk

¹⁹³ US House of Representatives, “Investigative Report on the U.S. National Security Issues Posed by Chinese Telecommunications Companies Huawei and ZTE”, The House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence 2012, p.22, available at:

[https://republicans-intelligence.house.gov/sites/intelligence.house.gov/files/documents/huawei-zte%20investigative%20report%20\(final\).pdf](https://republicans-intelligence.house.gov/sites/intelligence.house.gov/files/documents/huawei-zte%20investigative%20report%20(final).pdf)

¹⁹⁴ *The Verge*, “Trump signs bill banning government use of Huawei and ZTE tech”, 2018, available at:

<https://www.theverge.com/2018/8/13/17686310/huawei-zte-us-government-contractor-ban-trump>

¹⁹⁵ *Engadget*, “Verizon follows AT&T in dropping Huawei smartphones”, 2018, available at:

<https://engt.co/308KpE7>

¹⁹⁶ US Department of Commerce, “Department of Commerce Announces the Addition of Huawei Technologies Co. Ltd. to the Entity List”, 2019, available at:

<https://www.commerce.gov/news/press-releases/2019/05/department-commerce-announces-addition-huawei-technologies-co-ltd>

¹⁹⁷ *Vox*, “The US government’s battle with Chinese telecom giant Huawei, explained”, 2019, available at:

<https://www.vox.com/technology/2018/12/11/18134440/huawei-executive-order-entity-list-china-trump>

¹⁹⁸ According to the EU, 5G is defined in the following manner: “‘5G network’ means a set of all relevant network infrastructure elements for mobile and wireless communications technology used for connectivity and value-added services with advanced performance characteristics such as very high data rates and capacities, low latency communications, ultra-high reliability, and support for a high number of connected devices. These may include legacy networks elements based on previous generations of mobile and wireless communications technology such as 4G or 3G. 5G networks should be understood to include all relevant parts of the network.”

See: European Commission, “EU-wide coordinated risk assessment of 5G networks security”, 2019, available at:

<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/eu-wide-coordinated-risk-assessment-5g-networks-security>

¹⁹⁹ EU Agency for Cybersecurity, “ENISA threat landscape for 5G Networks”, 2019, available at:

<https://www.enisa.europa.eu/publications/enisa-threat-landscape-for-5g-networks>

suppliers” from critical and sensitive parts of their 5G networks.²⁰⁰ Although now outside of the EU, it is important to note that the **UK banned its mobile providers from buying new Huawei 5G equipment** after 31 December 2020, and they were also **obliged to remove all the Chinese firm's 5G kits from their networks** by 2027.²⁰¹

With this increasingly complicated global context in mind, Serbia’s cooperation with Huawei has been raising eyebrows in the West. Before analysing concrete projects, it is important to note that **the ground for Sino-Serbian tech cooperation was set as early as 2009, when a strategic partnership was signed, as the two sides agreed to cooperate in the areas of science and technology, with a focus on “high-tech” industry.**²⁰² This was reaffirmed in the 2013 *Joint Statement on Deepening the Strategic Partnership*.²⁰³ Furthermore, although the term “high-tech” was excluded from the subsequent 2016 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), probably due to the increased global concerns, the joint statement nevertheless kept the reference to cooperation in the areas of science and technology.²⁰⁴ **Looking deeper into this area shows that China’s tech plans are nothing new when it comes to Serbia.** In fact, Huawei has already been involved in two major projects with the Serbian government: the „safe city“ project, and the transformation of Serbia’s fixed networks, which will be presented in the following.

Serbia’s first talks with Huawei were held in 2011 on “possibilities and for the improvement of the information and telecommunication system of the Ministry of Interior through the development of solutions for increasing the general security of citizens”.²⁰⁵ The critical juncture took place in 2014, as according to an explanation from Huawei on their official website (which was subsequently removed),²⁰⁶ Serbia's public security department was

²⁰⁰ European Commission, “Cybersecurity of 5G networks - EU Toolbox of risk mitigating measures”, 2020, p.18, available at:

<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/cybersecurity-5g-networks-eu-toolbox-risk-mitigating-measures>

²⁰¹ This technology promises faster internet speeds and the capacity to support more wireless devices, which should be a boon to everything from mobile gaming to higher-quality video streams, and, even in time, technology such as driverless cars that communicate with each other.

See: *BBC*, “Huawei 5G kit must be removed from UK by 2027”, 2020, available at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53403793>

²⁰² Joint statement of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Serbia on the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2009.

²⁰³ Joint Statement on Deepening Bilateral Strategic Partnership, 2013.

²⁰⁴ Joint statement of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Serbia on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016.

²⁰⁵ SHARE Foundation, “Rešenje MUP“, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<https://resursi.sharefoundation.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Resenje-MUP-7.3.2019..pdf>

²⁰⁶ Huawei, “Huawei Safe City Solution: Safeguards Serbia”, Archive, available at:

<https://archive.li/pZ9HO#selection-11271.350-11271.391>

“inspired” by the fact that the Chinese Public Security Bureau made an arrest within three days of a Serbian citizen who was hiding in China after a “hit and run” traffic accident in Belgrade with a fatal outcome, using new technologies. That year, **in 2014, the Ministry of Interior (MoI) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Huawei regarding the Safe City project.** As Serbia’s level of cooperation with Huawei kicked into a higher gear, Serbia’s former President Nikolić visited Huawei’s Beijing Research Centre in order to discuss how Huawei could get involved in Serbia’s plans to improve its national information and communication technology. Interestingly, **although Huawei was increasingly facing inquiries from the West, Serbia’s president described it as a “role model in the area of corporate social responsibility”.**²⁰⁷

After the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was signed with China, and **a test phase of camera surveillance in Belgrade was marked as successful in 2016,** the Serbian government green-lighted a Strategic Partnership between Huawei and the MoI for the installation of eLTE technology (advanced 4G) for the Ministry and solutions that will be mobilised as part of the Safe City public security system.²⁰⁸ The aim of the Safe City project was to shorten the length of police investigations, improve arrest rates, prevent organised crime, and decrease the overall crime rate.²⁰⁹ **This se Strategic Partnership was officially signed in February 2017 between Huawei Serbia and the Serbian MoI.**²¹⁰ That year, the first announcements were made regarding the introduction of sophisticated cameras and software with the help of Huawei to better control the flow of traffic and better control the fight against organised crime.²¹¹ In 2019, the public was informed that, by the end of 2020, almost **1,000 facial recognition cameras** would be set up in 800 different locations across Belgrade. At the time of that announcement, 107 cameras were already set up at 61 locations across Belgrade, while **authorities added that the aim of the project is to have a cohesive system for all of Serbia.**²¹² **The untransparent**

²⁰⁷ Huawei, “Huawei and Serbia Strengthen Cooperation and Talent Cultivation in ICT “, 2015, available at: https://www.huawei.com/en/news/2015/09/hw_452911

²⁰⁸ Serbia’s Ministry of Interior, “Sporazum MUP i Huawei, uvođenje eLTE tehnologije”, 2017, available at (in Serbian): <https://bit.ly/2Rc7cu2>

²⁰⁹ CEAS, “Security Relations between Serbia And China – Challenges or Benefits?”, 2020, available at: <https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SECURITY-RELATIONS-BETWEEN-SERBIA-AND-CHINA.pdf>

²¹⁰ Three months later, Huawei also signed a strategic partnership with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Serbia when Serbia’s PM and President-elect Vučić met with Huawei’s Chairwoman Sun Yafang.

See: Huawei, “Serbian President-elect Aleksandar Vucic Meets with Huawei Chairwoman Sun Yafang in Beijing”, 2017, available at: <https://www.huawei.com/en/news/2017/5/sunyafang-serbia>

²¹¹ *NI*, “MUP nabavlja Huawei kamere i softvere”, 2017, available at (in Serbian):

<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a317159/Stefanovic-Huawei-kamere-i-softveri.html>

²¹² *RTS*, “Šta će i koga snimati 1.000 novih kamera po gradskim ulicama”, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

nature of this project turned it into a controversy, particularly as the government refused to release the 2014 Memorandum of Understanding with Huawei and the 2017 Strategic Partnership between Huawei and the MoI.²¹³

Based on the unwillingness of the government to openly and transparently discuss the issue of surveillance cameras, a group of concerned citizens launched a website called “Thousand Cameras” (hiljade.kamera.rs) to draw attention to potential impact of the issue of the issue. According to them, the following factors were especially problematic: there was **no public discussion on the justification and reliability of the project, there is a high possibility of endangering citizens’ privacy in this project, and the cost of the project and the exact number and location of cameras remain unknown.**²¹⁴ When they filed a request with the Ministry of the Interior for access to information of public importance (on the locations of stationary cameras, including the analysis on the basis of which they were selected, as well as details on public procurement and relevant procedures),²¹⁵ **the Ministry of Interior declined the request, explaining that all documents concerning the public procurement of the video surveillance equipment in Belgrade were protected, marked as “confidential”.**²¹⁶ To make matters worse, after calls rang out to investigate the issue further, Huawei even removed the details on this project from its official website.²¹⁷ This shows that **Huawei is complicit in the efforts of the Serbian government to keep the details of this project away from public scrutiny.**

Furthermore, the findings of Serbian civil society show that the MoI’s 2019 “Data Protection Impact Assessment on the Use of Smart Video Surveillance” was not conducted in line with the requirements of the Law on Personal Data Protection, which was reaffirmed by Serbia’s Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection. As this

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/3415215/sta-ce-i-koga-snimati-1000-novih-kamera-po-gradskim-ulicama.html>

²¹³ SHARE Foundation, “Zarobljeni službeni dokumenti – šta je sve informacija od javnog značaja”, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.sharefoundation.info/sr/zarobljeni-sluzbeni-dokumenti-sta-je-sve-informacija-od-javnog-znacaja/>

²¹⁴ Hiljade kamera, available at (in Serbian): <https://hiljade.kamera.rs/sr/pocetna/>

²¹⁵ SHARE Foundation, “Da li su poznate lokacije novih kamera za nadzor i rizici po ustavna prava građana?”, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.sharefoundation.info/sr/da-li-su-poznate-lokacije-novih-kamera-za-nadzor-i-rizici-po-ustavna-prava-gradjana/>

²¹⁶SHARE Foundation, “Rešenje MUP-a”, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<https://resursi.sharefoundation.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Resenje-MUP-7.3.2019..pdf>

²¹⁷ SHARE Foundation, “Procene uticaja obrade na zaštitu podataka o ličnosti korišćenjem sistema video nadzora Ministarstva unutrašnjih poslova“, 2019, p.6, available at (in Serbian):

https://www.sharefoundation.info/wp-content/uploads/Analiza_procene_uticaja_SHARE_Partneri-Srbija_BCBP.pdf

document **did not meet the formal or material conditions prescribed by the law**, these organisations called upon the MoI to suspend the further introduction of smart video surveillance systems.²¹⁸ Once as the MoI’s Second Data Protection Impact Assessment was conducted in 2020, this document revealed that **the project actually entailed the installation of a total of 8,100 cameras: 2,500 fixed video cameras, 3,500 mobile cameras as part of police equipment, 600 cameras on police vehicles, and 1,500 body cameras for police officers.** After analysing the second assessment, the commissioner for information of public importance and personal data protection announced that **there is no legal basis** “for the intended processing of biometric data for the purposes of unique identification of persons using a video surveillance system”.²¹⁹ For this reason, **the Commissioner went so far as to argue that “the rights of citizens will *certainly* be endangered” with the implementation of the new camera system,** and added that measures need to be taken to ensure that the risks of misuse will be minimised.

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Image 3: Huawei Commercial in Belgrade



*Source: Screenshot from SHARE’s YouTube documentary*²²¹

Considering that Serbia is a candidate country for EU membership, with declining levels of democracy in the past decade, **fears for the potential misuse of the surveillance technology**

²¹⁸ SHARE Foundation, “Unlawful video surveillance with face recognition in Belgrade”, 2019, available at: <https://www.sharefoundation.info/en/unlawful-video-surveillance-with-face-recognition-in-belgrade/>

²¹⁹ Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, “Opinion for the Serbian Ministry of Interior,” SHARE Foundation, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

https://www.sharefoundation.info/Documents/Mi%c5%a1ljenje_Poverenika_2_0.pdf

²²⁰ SHARE Foundation, “SHARE_TV - hiljade.kamera”, 2020, minute 6:50, YouTube, available at (in Serbian): https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=6&v=XIMldmOhYG8&feature=emb_title&ab_channel=SHAREFoundation

²²¹ Ibid, minute 7:30

are substantiated. In fact, Freedom House went so far as to argue that such surveillance technology could “strengthen authoritarian-minded leaders, contributing to repression and diminishing democratic governance and active civil society”, while adding that these technologies are prone to potential exploitation by Chinese authorities.²²²

Other than the Safe City project, Serbia has worked with Huawei on the transformation of its fixed networks. In fact, right after the CSP was signed with China in 2016, a fixed network transformation project was launched in concert with China's Huawei and Serbia's national operator Telekom Serbia, marking the start of the **first large-scale cooperation in information and communications technology** between the two countries.²²³ According to the senior vice-president of Huawei, who visited Belgrade at that time, the cost of the three-year, ALL-IP transformation project was €150 million. Although **Huawei already supplies Telekom Serbia** with various landline network segments, fixed access devices, IP/MPLS network equipment, optical transport network equipment, and platforms for payTV services,²²⁴ the aim of this project was to “modernise the existing fixed network of Telekom Serbia, thus improving its service and providing its users with a much faster network with various performance speeds, high quality video, as well as introduce smart home solutions and improve quality of living and the communication”.²²⁵ For now, **there is no publicly available information on whether the project has officially ended and what the end cost was.**

In terms of 5G, Serbia's Telecommunications Minister Rasim Ljajić publicly stated that **Serbia, in cooperation with China, wants to join the Digital Silk Road.** The previously-described construction of telecommunications infrastructure done by Telekom Serbia and Huawei is in fact seen as a project which would create a favourable technological environment for the introduction of 5G (originally planned to be done by the end of 2020).²²⁶ Although Huawei was not yet officially hired to provide the 5g equipment, the fact that the Minister made this statement after having met with Huawei's representatives is a solid indicator that Serbia eyes precisely this company for the job. If this project were to come to fruition, **it would**

²²² Freedom House “Dropping the Democratic Façade”, Nations in Transit, 2020, available at:

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade#Facade>

²²³ *China Daily*, “Huawei starts three-year fixed network transformation in Serbia”, 2016, available at:

https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/tech/2016-10/06/content_26977966.htm

²²⁴ *Serbian Monitor*, “Why does Trump want Serbia in the anti-Huawei coalition?”, 2020, available at:

<https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/why-does-trump-want-serbia-in-the-anti-huawei-coalition/>

²²⁵ *China Daily*, “Huawei starts three-year fixed network transformation in Serbia”, 2016, available at:

https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/tech/2016-10/06/content_26977966.htm

²²⁶ *B92*, “5G tehnologija za brzi internet do 2020. godine u Srbiji, a glavni partner Huawei”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): https://www.b92.net/tehnopolis/vesti.php?yyyy=2019&mm=04&nav_id=1535697

represent a next step in technological cooperation between Serbia and China and would consequently further increase the latter's leverage.

There is concern over how and whether Serbia will be able to sustain its course towards increased cooperation with Huawei for now, Serbian officials seem to be rather comfortable when it comes to this issue. Serbia's Minister for Technological Development Nenad Popović stated, for instance, that **"Huawei has arrived in Serbia to stay for a long time"**.²²⁷ Furthermore, Telecommunications Minister Ljajić argued that there is no reason for Serbia to break off cooperation with Huawei, while adding that the Serbian government is not considering any special legal measures to prevent Huawei from transferring data to Chinese authorities.²²⁸ **It is questionable whether this carefree attitude to the potential risks posed by Chinese technology will be sustainable in the future, particularly as it is expected that the EU and the US will increasingly monitor how this issue develops in Serbia.**

Box 5: The issue of 5G in the 2020 Washington Agreement

The fact that the Washington Agreement on Economic Normalisation between Belgrade and Priština contained a clause on 5G shows **how keen the US is on restricting the global market for Huawei**. The clause states that **"both parties will prohibit the use of 5G equipment supplied by untrusted vendors** in their communication networks. Where such equipment is already present, both parties commit to its removal and other mediation efforts in a timely fashion".²²⁹ Although there are no direct references to China, it is clear that this clause is directed against it, as Chinese companies are typically considered "high risk" in the West.

This clause should be read as part of the US Clean Network Initiative. As described by the US State Department, this initiative "is a comprehensive effort to address the long-term threat to data privacy, security, and human rights posed to the free world from authoritarian

²²⁷ *Reuters*, "Serbia chooses links with China to develop economy, telecoms despite U.S. warning campaign", 2020, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-china-huawei/serbia-chooses-links-with-china-to-develop-economy-telecoms-despite-u-s-warning-campaign-idUSKCN2592AN>

²²⁸ *NI*, "Serbian telecoms minister says no reason to end cooperation with Huawei", 2019, available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a485211/Serbian-telecoms-minister-says-no-reason-to-end-cooperation-with-Huawei.html>

²²⁹ *Serbian Monitor*, "Recognizing Kosovo through economic cooperation", 2020, available at: <https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/recognizing-kosovo-through-economic-cooperation/>

malign actors, such as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)".²³⁰ The key element of this effort is the so-called "5G Clean Path", which is "an end-to-end communication path that does not use any transmission, control, computing, or storage equipment from untrusted IT vendors, such as Huawei and ZTE, which are required by Chinese law to comply with directives of the CCP". Therefore, although the Serbian President defended the Washington Agreement by saying that nowhere does it state that Serbia cannot rely on Chinese equipment for its 5G network,²³¹ a simple look at who are considered "untrusted vendors" by the US provides the answer that the clause refers precisely to Huawei.

If Donald Trump secures a second term as American president, it may be expected that he will use the Washington Agreement to prevent Serbia from partnering with Huawei in building its 5G network in the near future. If the US goes so far as to request that Serbia becomes part of its Clean Network Initiative, it would be the 21st country in the world to do so, and the 14th in Europe. It would also be the second in the Western Balkans, as Albania has already joined the initiative.²³² Furthermore, it is possible that the US will extend its pressure to other projects that Serbia has engaged in with this Chinese company. If this happens, **it would be very costly for Serbia to dismantle its technological reliance on Huawei, considering the fact that this company entered the Serbian market in 2005.** In fact, ever since, it has forged strategic partnerships with the three major Serbian operators: Telekom Serbia, Telenor, and Vip.²³³ By providing accessible communication technologies and services to these companies, Huawei claims it currently serves over 80% of the nation's telecom users.²³⁴

If the US presses Serbia hard on this issue, it may provoke a harsher reaction from China and disturb Serbia's relations with it. **Although China has had no official, public reaction to the Washington Agreement, its ambassador to Serbia did meet with the Serbian**

²³⁰ US Department of State, "The Clean Network Safeguards America's Assets", 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3jqflqu>

²³¹ *Insajder*, "Vučić o sporazumu u Vašingtonu, Kosovu, ruskom izvinjenju, Kini i 5G mreži...", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/20343/>

²³² US Department of State, "The Clean Network Safeguards America's Assets", 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3jqflqu>

²³³ President of Serbia, "Predsednik Nikolić obišao kompaniju "Huawei"", 2015, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.predsednik.rs/lat/pres-centar/saopstenja/predsednik-nikolic-obisao-kompaniju-huawei>

²³⁴ Huawei, "Huawei and Serbia Strengthen Cooperation and Talent Cultivation in ICT", 2015, available at: https://www.huawei.com/en/news/2015/09/hw_452911

president upon his return from the US, whose discussion insiders describe as “livid”.²³⁵

The fact that the two sides met right after the Washington Agreement was signed shows that China has a clear understanding that this agreement is aimed against its interests. For now, it appears that **the issue of hi-tech cooperation with China will represent a significant challenge to Serbia’s ongoing balancing act between the West and the East.**

II. 2 China’s Economic Footprint in Serbia

China represents a relatively new player in the region, both in economic and political terms. However, the intensification of economic cooperation and the complexity of mutual relations between Serbia and China have been continually growing over the course of the last decade. China’s announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 was interpreted as a new framework for greater cooperation between Serbia and China, but the formalisation of economic cooperation had started even earlier. Namely, in 2009, the two countries signed an agreement on economic and technical cooperation which officially set the course of future relations and brought the first tangible bilateral projects to life. Afterward, the number of projects with China’s involvement in Serbia has been rising consistently.

II. 2. 1 Foreign Trade Relations – Trade on Both Sides but Only One is Profiting

The first attempt to build closer trade relations between Serbia and China can be traced to the 1990s, soon after the collapse of Yugoslavia. In 1995 the Government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (at that time a federation of Serbia and Montenegro) signed an agreement on trade and economic cooperation with China. Trade relations between the two countries were regulated on the “most favoured nation” principle for products originating in the territory of the other contracting party.²³⁶ Another instrument which was introduced by this agreement was the constitution of the Joint Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation, with the role of “monitoring the development of trade and economic cooperation between the two countries, considering the problems that may arise in that cooperation and proposing measures to overcome them, and the initiation of activities to expand and improve

²³⁵ *Financial Times*, “Serbia cultivates both US and China in Balkans tug of war”, 2020, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/2ec0b093-40d7-461a-a3f5-d31bf45c4b67?shareType=nongift>

²³⁶ Zakon o potvrđivanju sporazuma o trgovini i ekonomskoj saradnji između Savezne Vlade Savezne Republike Jugoslavije i Vlade Narodne Republike Kine (Agreement on trade and economic cooperation between the Federal Government of the FRY and the Government of the PR of China), Official Gazette of the SRJ - International Agreements No. 4/96.

mutual cooperation”.²³⁷ The Commission was planned to have held sessions once a year, alternately in Belgrade and Beijing. However, there are no announcements of the further relaxation of trade regulation and the possible formation of a free trade area between two countries although Commission has had ten official meetings.²³⁸

Even though Serbia and China do not have a free trade agreement, the value of trade in goods between them shows a continuous increase. In 2019, the value of trade in goods between the countries reached its historically highest level of \$3 billion (Graph 2). Apart from the general rise in mutual trade, a much stronger rise in imports from China than exports to it is noticeable. The present situation is not surprising taking into account the global competitiveness of goods from China and the absorption capacities of the Serbian economy. The barely-existent export of Serbian goods to the Chinese market is, however, not adequate for an economy of Serbia’s size. Therefore, **the trade deficit of \$2.3 billion represents a major point of concern, as, at this time, it represents one third of the total Serbian trade deficit.**²³⁹

Graph 2: Foreign trade in goods with China for the period from 2010 to 2019



**in million USD*

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, authors` representation

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Serbia, Bilateralni odnosi sa stranim državama, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/sr/index.php/spoljna-politika/bilateralni-odnosi/117-bilateralni-odnosi/11465-kina?lang=lat>

²³⁹ In 2019, the Serbian total deficit in trade in goods with foreign countries was \$7.1 billion, with exports totalling \$19.6 billion and imports \$26.7 billion. Source: The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, available at: <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/170301?languageCode=sr-Cyrl>

Going deeper into the details about trade between the two countries, **the dominance of copper in Serbian exports is instantly notable**. Namely, this non-ferrous metal comprises two thirds of total Serbian exports to China. Taking into account that 67% of the ownership of the biggest Serbian mining and smelting complex, RTB Bor, was sold to China's Zijin in 2018, this information about the importance of copper in Serbian exports is unsurprising. However, what is problematic on the side of exports is the low value and low technological advancement of the rest of the exported product groups. On the other side, apart from unclassified goods, technologically advanced products comprise a large chunk of Serbian imports from China. Therefore, it is clear that **Serbia appears to be far less competitive as compared to China in the international market**.

Table 2: *Ten largest product categories in exports and imports with China, 2019*

Product	Exports (thous. USD)	Product	Imports (thous. USD)
68 - Non-ferrous metals	269,157	99 - Unclassified goods	428,322
24 - Cork and wood	23,905	76 - Telecommunications and sound-recording and reproducing apparatus and equipment	356,474
74 - General industrial machinery and equipment, and machine parts	10,429	77 - Electrical machinery, apparatus and appliances, and electrical parts thereof	251,810
01 - Meat and meat preparations	7,721	74 - General industrial machinery and equipment, and machine parts	156,210
77 - Electrical machinery, apparatus and appliances, and electrical parts thereof	4,150	75 - Office machines and automatic data-processing machines	141,470
71 - Power-generating machinery and equipment	3,317	89 - Miscellaneous manufactured articles, not elsewhere specified	120,445
57 - Plastics in primary forms	2,801	65 - Textile yarn, fabrics, made-up	106,605

		articles, and related products
55 - Essential oils and perfume materials; toilet, polishing and cleansing preparations	2,262	69 - Manufactures of metals, not elsewhere specified 100,196
12 - Tobacco and tobacco manufactures	1,830	84 - Articles of apparel and clothing and accessories 87,167
11 - Beverages	1,785	72 - Machinery specialised for particular industries 76,639

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, authors' representation

The value of the trade in services between China and Serbia is considerably less developed than the trade in goods. Figures for 2019, the most fruitful year for the trade in services between the two countries, show a total value of only €147 million in this sector. After a sharp increase in 2015, the import of services from China has been recording consistent growth from 2016 onwards. Similarly, the value of services provided by Serbian citizens to Chinese citizens has been rising sharply since 2017. Therefore, deficits and surpluses in trade in services alternated annually between the two countries but because of their small value, they have little importance.

Graph 3: Foreign trade in services with China for the period from 2013 to 2019



**in million EUR*

Source: CEFTA Statistical Portal, authors' representation

Even though the value of trade in services between the two countries is not comparable to the trade in goods, its sharp rise in recent years along with the prospect for the continuation of this trend, give reason for a closer look at the structure of realised trade. In exports, providing services connected with the travel sector represent the most valuable area in this sector for Serbia, accounting for nearly half of all exported services. Considering the fact that the number of tourists coming from China is rising consistently, it is expected that this category will gain even greater importance in the future, assuming that disturbances to international tourism as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic do not last too long. The second category on the list of both exports and imports is construction services, with a higher value on export side than on the import side, quite surprising considering the number of infrastructure projects implemented by Chinese firms and workers in Serbia. Apart from unclassified business services as a major import category, the other sectors recorded relatively low values.

Table 3: Export and import of services by sector with China, 2019

Sector	Export (thous. EUR)	Sector	Import (thous. EUR)
Travel	32,600	Other business services	25,510
Construction services	19,670	Construction services	13,410

Transport	8,700	Telecommunications, computer, and information services	8,280
Other business services	8,090	Transportation services	7,190
Personal, cultural, and recreational services	3,730	Travel	7,030
Telecommunications, computer, and information services	1,560	Charges for the use of intellectual property	3,110
Insurance and pension services	550	Insurance and pension services	2,110
Financial services	200	Financial services	1,650
Maintenance and repair services	120	Government services	1,580
Charges for the use of intellectual property	70	Personal, cultural, and recreational services	1,190
Government services	50	Manufacturing services on physical inputs owned by others	390
Manufacturing services on physical inputs owned by others	30	Maintenance and repair services	120

Source: CEFTA Statistical Portal, authors` representation

II. 2. 2 Investments and Business Cooperation – A Steel Friendship

At about the same time the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was signed between the two countries, the first big Chinese investment in Serbia came about: the acquisition of the **Smederevo steel mill** (Zelezara Smederevo) in 2016. Namely, to the announced public call for its privatisation, China`s HBIS Group offered €46 million to the Serbian Government to purchase the property of the steel mill (land and equipment), with a verbal promise to maintain the same number of employees.^{240,241} Before the Smederevo steel mill became part of HBIS Group, it was owned by the Serbian state, as American company US Steel sold it for \$1 in 2012 after nine years of management.

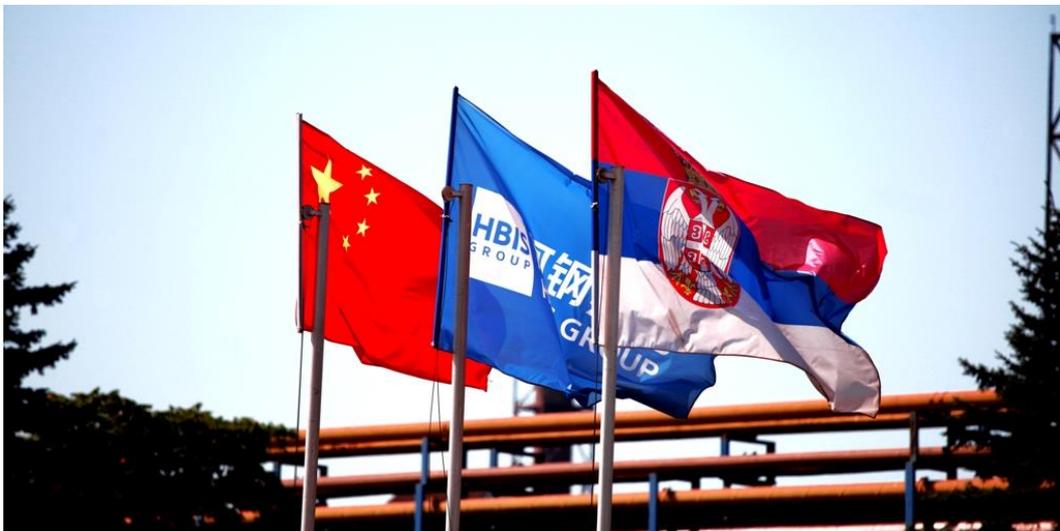
In July 2016, HBIS officially overtook management of the facility and started operation. At the time, the Smederevo steel mill was recording poor business results and HBIS Group was the

²⁴⁰ Ministry of Economy of RS, Sale and purchase agreement for certain assets of Zelezara Smederevo from 18 April 2016, available at: http://www.privreda.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/ASPA-FINAL-Asset-Sales-And-Purchase-Agreement-initialized_1.pdf

²⁴¹ “Hesteel Serbia officially takes over Zelezara Smederevo”, HBIS Serbia, available at: <http://www.hbissrbia.rs/index.php?link=en/news-view/1711/hesteel-serbia-zvanicno-preuzeo-zelezaru-smederevo>

only company ready to take a risk and place a bid to purchase the steel mill complex despite the low price of steel on the market. As one of the motives for this risky decision can be found in the idea that HBIS, as a state-owned enterprise, wanted to secure a supply of steel products for upcoming infrastructure projects implemented by Chinese companies in the region, as well as enable relatively easier access to the EU steel market. In order to show its long-term interest in the development of the Smederevo steel mill, three years after its acquisition, the HIBS group started construction on a new factory in the Smederevo complex, investing \$120 million in this project.²⁴² Today, the Smederevo steel mill employs approximately 5,000 workers and this company is the largest Serbian exporter year after year.²⁴³ Therefore, it represents an important player in the Serbian economy.

Image 4: Flags in front of the Smederevo steel mill complex – HBIS Serbia



Source: official website of HBIS Serbia

Chinese interest in the Serbian metallurgical sector was seen once again when Zijin placed a bid to acquire the **Bor mining and smelting complex (RTB Bor)**. Namely, in 2018, the Serbian Government announced a call for the submission of bids for a strategic partnership in a decrepit copper mining and processing complex. By the decision of the tender commission, Zijin's offer won against U Gold from Russia, while Canadian company Diamond Fields did not fulfil all the formal criteria. The winning bid implied the implementation of a investment

²⁴² “Groundbreaking ceremony for the new sintering line was held in HBIS group Serbia company”, HIBS Serbia available at (in Serbian): <http://www.hbissrbia.rs/index.php?link=en/news-view/2341/u-kompaniji-hbis-group-serbia-polozen-kamen-temeljac-za-novu-aglo-liniju>

²⁴³ Nova, “Železara najveći izvoznik, slede Zidin i Tigar“, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://nova.rs/vesti/biznis/zelezara-najveci-izvoznik-slede-zidin-i-tigar/>

in the amount of \$1.26 billion in return for 63% ownership of the Bor complex.²⁴⁴ According to the Contract, Zijin was obligated to pay, of the promised \$1.26 billion, \$350 million for the capital increase, and \$200 million to pay back inherited debts, and the rest as investment in the company over the next six years.²⁴⁵ Also, it was agreed that Zijin would keep all of the complex's 5,000 jobs and double production in the next three years.²⁴⁶

In mid-December 2018, Zijin officially took over management of the company, and its name was changed to Zijin Bor copper. Ten days later, Zijin announced that it had acquired almost 90% of the stakes of the Canadian company Nevsun, which had exclusive rights for the exploration of 100% of the “upper zone” and 60% of the “lower zone” of the Čukaru Peki copper and gold deposit near Bor.²⁴⁷ Less than a year later, news arrived that Zijin had bought the remaining rights for exploration of the “lower zone” of Čukaru Peki from the American company Freeport for \$390 million.²⁴⁸ According to the latest news, Zijin is planning to invest \$800 million in 2020 in different projects in the Bor complex, including opening new mine sites, expanding existing ones, reconstructing and expanding copper smelter capacities, and related activities.²⁴⁹ With its operation of the Čukaru Peki site, for which assessed reserves of copper and gold are in quantities similar to those produced by the Bor complex in its more than century-long history,²⁵⁰ the impact on the Serbian economy of this complex will be even larger. Nevertheless, the importance of this company for the Serbian economy today is already great, as it represents the second largest exporter from Serbia and employs a significant number of people.²⁵¹

²⁴⁴ Insajder, “Kineski Zidin strateški partner RTB Bor”, 2018, available at (in Serbian): <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/12030/>

²⁴⁵ Nova ekonomija, “Šta su to Kinezi kupili”, 2018, available at (in Serbian): <https://novaekonomija.rs/arhivazdanja/broj-54-oktobar-2018/%C5%A1ta-su-to-kinezi-kupili>

²⁴⁶ Ugovor o strateškom partnerstvu između Republike Srbije, RTB Bor i Zijin Mining Group, September 2018, available at (in Serbian): https://media.srbija.gov.rs/medsrp/dokumenti/rtb_bor-ugovor-za-objavu.pdf

²⁴⁷ Seebiz, “Zijin kupio kompaniju koja razvija projekat Čukaru Peki u Boru”, 2018, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.seebiz.eu/tvrtke/zijin-kupio-kompaniju-koja-razvija-projekat-cukaru-pek-u-boru/189495/>

²⁴⁸ Ekapija, “Zijin kupuje deonice Freeporta za 390 mil USD - Rudnik bakra i zlata Čukaru Peki biće 100% u vlasništvu Kineza”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.ekapija.com/news/2680027/zijin-kupuje-deonice-freeporta-za-390-mil-usd-rudnik-bakra-i-zlata>

²⁴⁹ Seebiz, “Kineski Zijin ulaže u srpsku rudu 800 miliona dolara”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.seebiz.eu/tvrtke/kineski-zijin-ulaže-u-srpsku-rudu-800-miliona-dolara/223708/>

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Plutonlogistics, “Zijin Bor u vrhu tabele – Ovo su NAJVEĆI IZVOZNICI iz Srbije u prvoj polovini 2020”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://plutonlogistics.com/izvoznici/zijin-bor-u-vrhu-tabele-ovo-su-najveci-izvoznici-iz-srbije-u-2020/>

Box 6: Controversy about offers for the Bor complex

Although the tender commission appointed for the assessment of offers received for potential strategic partners in the Bor complex claimed that everything was done fairly, not everyone agreed. Namely, the Russian company U Gold, second on the list, officially protested against the process and the decision made in favour of China's Zijin. According to claims made by U Gold, they sent an incomparably better offer, far more favourable for the Serbian state, which authorities did not present faithfully and adequately to the Serbian public.²⁵² Going into the details, an increase in the number of job places and higher production outputs were the main advantages as compared to the Zijin offer.

Image 5: Part of the Bor mining and smelting complex



Source: bor030.net

Apart from the metallurgy sector, other areas in which Chinese companies are present in Serbia include the production of automotive parts and tires. The first Chinese-owned factory for the production of automotive engines and general industrial parts was opened in Barič (Obrenovac) by **Mei Ta Europe** in 2017. To support the employment of 770 workers, the Serbian Government heavily subsidised this factory. Namely, the Government allocated €21 million from the state budget for this purpose, providing the company with more than €27,000 per

²⁵² Danas, "U gold: Naša ponuda za RTB Bor povoljnija za Srbiju", 2018, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.danas.rs/ekonomija/u-gold-nasa-ponuda-za-rtb-bor-povoljnija-za-srbiju/>

employee.²⁵³ In addition, Mei Ta was gifted 14 hectares of land, free infrastructure connections, free water and garbage collection for three years, financing of students in internship, and no obligation to pay VAT, customs fees, and local tax revenue.²⁵⁴ In mid-2019, the Mei Ta's second factory was opened, again with state subsidies but now to a lesser extent. For the creation of 1,360 new jobs, Mei Ta was promised an additional €11 million.²⁵⁵ In both agreements, Mei Ta was obligated to invest approximately €60 million in each factory and, based on these numbers, the Serbian Government provided approximately a quarter of the investment in these projects without taking any ownership. Even though such generous subsidies seem like an unusual practice, they can also be observed in cases of companies coming from all over the world to Serbia, as an economic policy to attract foreign investments that has been promoted in Serbia for some time now. In any case, looking at data from the Serbian Business Registry in 2019, Mei Ta employed approximately 2,500 workers in its Obrenovac plant but recorded a loss of €25 million despite the subsidies given.

Image 6: Mei Ta production facility in Barič



Source: eKapija.com

The second investment worth mentioning here is the construction of a tire factory in Zrenjanin by **Shandong Linglong**. This investment is worth approximately €800 million, and

²⁵³ Agreement of awarding funds – Republic of Serbia and Mai Ta Europe from November 2015, available at: <https://www.istinomer.rs/multimedia/pdfs/786782458890230.pdf>

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Agreement of awarding grant incentives – Republic of Serbia and Mai Ta Europe from October 2019, available at: <https://novaekonomija.rs/assets/documents/Mei-Ta-Ugovor-2019.pdf>

construction was launched in March 2019, with a plan to start production in 2021.²⁵⁶ Based on the original announcement, this 500,000 square meter plant in Zrenjanin will be the largest tire production facility in this part of Europe as well as the first European factory of China's tire production industry.²⁵⁷ As in the previous example, a set of benefits from the Serbian Government was provided for this investment as well. Along with a gift of 95 hectares of land, Linglong will also receive €75 million in subventions from the state budget for employing 1,200 workers.²⁵⁸

Image 7: Project launching ceremony – Linglong tire factory



Source: FoNet

Box 7: Pollution Without a Cost

A common problem with a number of the most important Chinese investments in Serbia is the question of the pollution which the operation of these facilities produces.²⁵⁹ Production capacities in Smederevo and Bor are long outdated, and massive investments are needed as these industries are widely known to be top polluters. The age of the equipment is clear from situations in which it is sometimes necessary to stop production in order to prevent total

²⁵⁶ Ekapija, "U Zrenjaninu položen kamen temeljac za fabriku guma Shandong Linglong, posao za 1.200 ljudi", 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.ekapija.com/news/2455049/u-zrenjaninu-polozen-kamen-temeljac-za-fabriku-guma-shandong-linglong-posao-za>

²⁵⁷ Ibid; and Linlong, "Linglong Tire's Factory in Serbia, the First European Factory of China Tire Industry", 2019, available at: https://en.linglong.cn/content/details34_38475.html

²⁵⁸ Nova ekonomija, "Kineskoj fabriki guma zemljište, subvencije i sad ulica", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/kineskoj-fabriki-guma-zemlji%C5%A1te-subvencije-i-sad-ulica>

²⁵⁹ Al Jazeera, "Srbija: Kina gradi, ekolozi brinu", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/srbija-kina-gradi-ekolozi-brinu>

ecological catastrophe: the latest example being in Bor in September 2020.²⁶⁰ In other cases, the Zrenjanin tire factory is being constructed in the middle of arable land which is used for crop cultivation, and the Mei Ta's Obrenovac plant is located right next to the city's water treatment facility. The main issue here is the lack of publication of environmental impact studies by the relevant ministry, and the general lack of interest of the authorities in the environmental costs which these investments entail.

In the Serbian financial sector, the **Bank of China** is now operating in the country, having opened a branch in Belgrade in 2017 as a subsidiary of its Budapest centre. For now, this bank is only dealing with corporate clients, providing them a wide range of loan services. However, the Bank of China's share of the total net assets of the Serbian banking sector is less than 1%, and it employs only 30 people.²⁶¹ In any case, the operation of this financial institution in Serbia contributes to the development of economic cooperation between Serbia and China regardless of the size of its asset holding.

Image 8: Opening Ceremony of the Bank of China's Serbian branch, 2017



Source: tanjug.rs

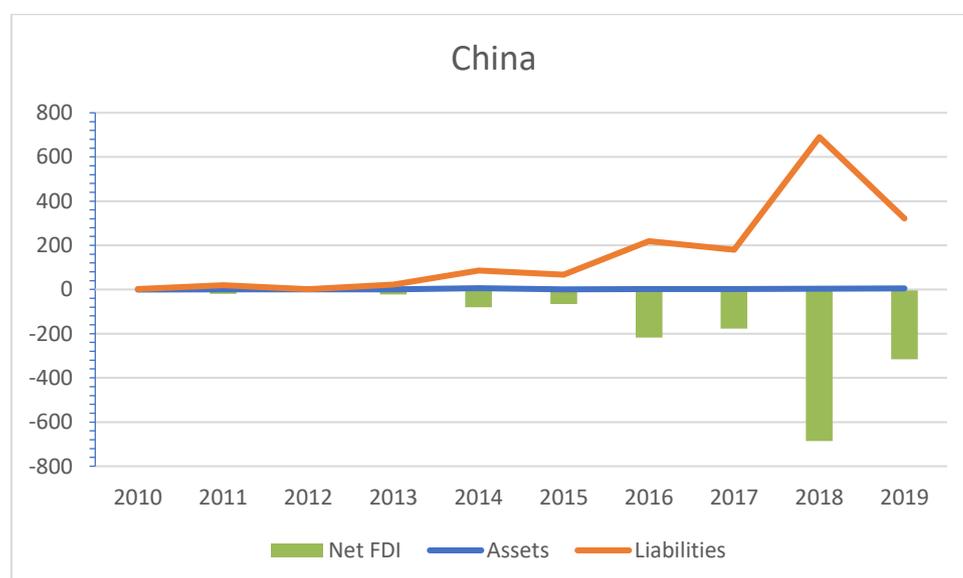
Looking at direct investments on the aggregate level, a peak in 2018 is noticeable at first glance, the year when the highest level of Chinese investment in Serbia was recorded (Graph 4). This

²⁶⁰ Politika, "Rad topionice bakra u Boru zaustavljen da bi se smanjilo zagađenje", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.politika.co.rs/sr/clanak/462667/Rad-topionice-bakra-u-Boru-zaustavljen-da-bi-se-smanjilo-zagadenje>

²⁶¹ National Bank of Serbia, Financial Statements of Banks, available at: https://www.nbs.rs/sr_RS/finansijske-institucije/banke/bilans-stanja/

peak was caused by Zijin’s payments for two thirds of ownership of RTB Bor. Excluding this detail particular to 2018, it can be concluded that a general trend of increasing Chinese investment can be observed in the last 5 years. On the other side, Serbian investments in China have remained marginal over the last 10 years. Therefore, a net inflow of foreign direct investment was characteristic of Sino-Serbian relations from 2014 onwards. However, as compared with other investors in Serbia **over the last 10 years, China is ranked third, behind the EU and Russia, accounting for only 7.7% of the total value of foreign direct investments in this period.**

Graph 4: Foreign direct investments with China in the period from 2010 to 2019



**in million EUR*

Source: National Bank of Serbia, authors' representation

II. 2. 3 Cooperation in Infrastructure Projects

As mentioned earlier in the text, the Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation in the Field of Infrastructure between Serbia and China signed on 20 August 2009 represents a turning point in economic relations between Serbia and China. The aim of this agreement was an affirmation of friendly ties and a desire to enhance bilateral cooperation in all areas of importance to the two countries, especially in the field of infrastructure. The highlight of this cooperation, therefore, was the development and implementation of infrastructure projects in

Serbia with the technical assistance of experts, and necessary machinery and equipment, from China.²⁶² This agreement was amended on several occasions, with the most important addition to the original text in 2013, adding **a clause which states that projects agreed under the auspices of the 2009 agreement are not subject to normally obligatory public tender procedures for the implementation of investments and the delivery of goods and services.**²⁶³

Road Infrastructure – many a little makes a mickle

The first tangible project, envisioned in the 2009 Agreement, was the construction of the 1.5 km long **Zemun-Borča bridge**, connecting two Belgrade municipalities across the Danube. The building of the Mihajlo Pupin bridge (which is its official name, but this bridge is often referred to as “China’s bridge”) started in October 2011 and lasted for 3 years. The China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) was in charge of this project’s implementation and the loan for its construction was provided by China’s Exim Bank.²⁶⁴ According to the signed loan agreement, Exim Bank was obligated to ensure 85% of the funds necessary for the implementation of the project, with the rest coming from the Serbian state budget.²⁶⁵ Accordingly, the Exim Bank made available \$217.4 million for the project, with a 3% annual interest rate and a 15-year repayment period (with the first 3 years as a grace period).²⁶⁶ The contract for the bridge’s construction is still not available to the public, but according to official statements, Chinese workers undertook most of the implemented work.²⁶⁷ In addition, all the products and services used in this project were exempt from VAT and customs duties, and it is

²⁶² Zakon o potvrđivanju sporazuma o ekonomskoj i tehničkoj saradnji u oblasti infrastrukture između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Narodne Republike Kine (Law on the Ratification of the Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation in the Field of Infrastructure Between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the People's Republic of China), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 90/2009.

²⁶³ Zakon o potvrđivanju Aneksa br. 2 Sporazuma o ekonomskoj i tehničkoj saradnji u oblasti infrastrukture između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Narodne Republike Kine (Law on the Confirmation of Annex no. 2 of the Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation in the Field of Infrastructure Between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the People's Republic of China), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 13/2013.

²⁶⁴ The official name of Exim Bank is the Export-Import Bank of China, but for purposes of simplicity, in this text its abbreviated name will be used.

²⁶⁵ Zakon o potvrđivanju Ugovora o zajmu za kredit za povlašćenog kupca za projekat most Zemun - Borča sa pripadajućim saobraćajnicama, između Vlade Republike Srbije kao zajmoprimca i kineske Export-Import banke kao zajmodavca (Law on Confirmation of the Loan Agreement for the Eligible Buyer for the Zemun - Borča Bridge Project with Associated Roads, between the Government of the Republic of Serbia as the Borrower and the Chinese Export-Import Bank as the Lender), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 11/2010.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Gradnja, “Gradnja mosta Zemun-Borča u septembru”, 2010, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.gradnja.rs/gradnja-mosta-zemun-borca-u-septembru/>

therefore hard to assess how much this project contributed to the Serbian economy. In any case, this project represented an entryway for Chinese companies to implement future projects, both in Serbia and throughout the region.²⁶⁸

The next notable project in the development of Serbia's road infrastructure is the participation of Chinese companies in construction works on **Highway E-763** (also known as Corridor XI). This highway will connect Belgrade with the border with Montenegro (and further with Adriatic port Bar), measuring in total approximately 270 km. Due to its complexity, its length, and, consequently, the funds needed for this project, the Serbian Government made a decision to divide its construction into 11 sections.²⁶⁹ For 7 of its sections, the Serbian Government signed several contracts with Chinese construction companies and Exim Bank; for 3 sections (Donji Banjani-Boljkovci, Boljkovci-Takovo, Takovo-Preljina) Azerbaijani companies and loans were provided, one section (Ub-Lajkovac) was financed from the Serbian state budget and constructed by domestic companies, and for the longest single section (Požega-Boljare, measuring 107 km), a Memorandum of understanding was signed with the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC).

Obrenovac-Ub (26 km) and **Lajkovac-Ljig** (24 km) were the first sections for which construction was arranged between the Serbian Government and Shandong Hi-speed Group in May 2013. For the funding of these construction works, Exim Bank provided a loan in the amount of \$301 million, with a 2.5% annual interest rate and a 15 year repayment period. This loan was predicted to fund of 90% of the project's value, and the Serbian government was responsible for providing the remaining funds.²⁷⁰ According to the commercial contract with the Shandong Hi-speed Group, it was obligated to hire Serbian subcontractors for at least 40% of the contract's total value.²⁷¹ However, this project was marked by a corruption scandal, as

²⁶⁸ Radio Slobodna Evropa, Građevinari iz Kine angažovani na projektima u Srbiji", 2013, available at (in Serbian):<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/gradjevinari-iz-kine-angazovani-na-projektima-u-srbiji/24956317.html>

²⁶⁹ Beograd (Surčin)-Obrenovac; Obrenovac-Ub; Ub-Lajkovac; Lajkovac-Ljig (Donji Banjani); Donji Banjani-Boljkovci; Boljkovci-Takovo; Takovo-Preljina; Preljina-Prijevor; Prijevor-Lučani; Lučani-Požega; Požega-Boljare, available at: <http://www.koridor10.rs/sr-lat/beograd-juzni-jadran>

²⁷⁰ Zakon o potvrđivanju Ugovora o zajmu za kredit za povlašćenog kupca za projekat izgradnje autoputa E-763 (deonica Obrenovac-Ljig) između Vlade Republike Srbije koju predstavlja Ministarstvo finansija i privrede, kao zajmoprimca i kineske Export-import banke, kao zajmodavca (Law on the Confirmation of the Loan Agreement for the Eligible Buyer for the E-763 Highway Construction Project (Obrenovac-Ljig Section) between the Government of the Republic of Serbia represented by the Ministry of Finance and Economy, as the Borrower and the Chinese Export-Import Bank, as the Lender), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 13/2013.

²⁷¹ Commercial contract for construction of highway E-763, sector Obrenovac-Ljig, authors' archive.

the Serbian subcontractor selected by Shandong, Energorprojekt Niskogradnja, subcontracted works to other Serbian companies under dubious conditions.²⁷²

In August 2019, part of E-763 from Obrenovac to Preljina was ceremonially opened to the public as all of its sections were finished. To be fully functional, the section from Ub to Lajkovac (which had been built by domestic companies), had to be repaired due to its poor execution before the Obrenovac-Preljina section could be opened. For this job the Serbian Government hired Shandong Hi-speed Group, with an estimated additional €13 million in costs for the implementation of repairation works.²⁷³ No further information is publicly available.

The next section for which a contract was signed with CCCC in June 2016 was the **Obrenovac - Beograd (Surčin) section**. For this 17.6 km long stretch, a predicted cost of \$234 million was assessed, with 85% funded by a loan from Exim Bank (around \$200 million).²⁷⁴ The annual interest rate of 2.5% and its 15 year repayment period were identical conditions as in the first two sections.²⁷⁵ Officially, works on this section began in March 2017 and lasted until December 2019, when this section was opened for traffic. According to statements from officials, for this section was also insisted on the participation of domestic construction firms in the implementation of this project to the amount of at least 49% of its value.²⁷⁶ However, except for generalised statements in the media, no report was published with exact information on who worked on which activities in order to assess its contribution on the Serbian economy.

The last section for which a commercial contract was signed, and funds were secured, was the **Preljina-Požega section**. The contact for this section was signed in November 2017, also using CCCC for its construction at a cost of \$523.5 million. As in the previous agreements, 85% of necessary funds (\$445 million) were provided by Exim Bank, with a repayment period of 15

²⁷² Balkan Insight, “Veselinovic-linked Consortium Bags 75m Dollar Contract in Secret Deal”, 2015, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/06/08/veselinovic-linked-consortium-bags-75m-dollar-contract-in-secret-deal/>

²⁷³ Insajder, “Izgradnja dela već izgrađene deonice autoputa Ub-Lajkovac koštaće najmanje dodatnih 13 miliona evra”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/15159/>

²⁷⁴ Zakon o potvrđivanju Ugovora o zajmu za kredit za povlašćenog kupca za Projekat izgradnje autoputa E-763 (deonica Surčin–Obrenovac) između Vlade Republike Srbije, koju predstavlja Ministarstvo finansija, kao zajmoprimca i kineske Export-Import banke, kao zajmodavca (Law on the Confirmation of the Loan Agreement for the Eligible Customer for the E-763 Highway Construction Project (Surcin-Obrenovac Section) between the Government of the Republic of Serbia, represented by the Ministry of Finance, as the Borrower and the Chinese Export-Import Bank, as the Lender), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 11/2016.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Danas, “Deonica autoputa Surčin-Obrenovac sutra će biti puštena u saobraćaj”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.danas.rs/ekonomija/deonica-autoputa-surcin-obrenovac-sutra-ce-bit-pustena-u-saobracaj/>

years and a new interest rate of 3%.²⁷⁷ Construction works officially began in May 2019 and are expected to last two and a half years.²⁷⁸

Box 8: Powerful clause

Interestingly enough, in all agreements signed by the Serbian government for loans from Exim Bank, there is the following clause “*The goods, technologies and services purchased by using the proceeds of Facility [borrowed funds] shall be purchased from China preferentially, according to the commercial contract*”. Therefore, without proper reporting on what the borrowed funds are used for and to whom they are paid, there is not enough information to properly assess such projects’ benefits to the Serbian economy.

In order to completely connect Belgrade with the Montenegrin border (at Boljare) by highway, two sections remain to be agreed upon. For the **Beograd (Surčin)-Beograd (Novi Beograd)** section, a commercial agreement was signed with CCCC for the construction of approximately 8 km of road at a price of \$70.5 million.²⁷⁹ However, a loan agreement for this section has not yet been specified with Exim Bank. For the last section, **Požega-Boljare**, only a Memorandum of understanding has so far been signed with CCCC, with an estimated project value of about €1.5 billion.²⁸⁰

Box 9: What Price do Taxpayers Pay?

The price of the E-763’s projects are a question often raised by the public. This is because these projects were assigned without public tenders, and, therefore, the fact that solely one bidder was involved raises questions about the fairness of prices paid. In addition, commercial contracts signed by the Serbian Government with construction companies were

²⁷⁷ Zakon o potvrđivanju Ugovora o zajmu za kredit za povlašćenog kupca za Projekat izgradnje autoputa E-763, deonica Preljina-Požega, između Vlade Republike Srbije, koju predstavlja Ministarstvo finansija, kao zajmoprimca i kineske Export-Import banke, kao zajmodavca (Law on the Confirmation of the Loan Agreement for the Eligible Customer for the E-763 Highway Construction Project, Preljina-Požega Section, between the Government of the Republic of Serbia, represented by the Ministry of Finance, as the Borrower and the Chinese Export-Import Bank, as the Lender), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 6/2019.

²⁷⁸ Ekapija, “Počela izgradnja deonice autoputa Preljina-Požega - Investicija vredna 450 mil EUR, radovi gotovi za dve i po godine“, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.ekapija.com/news/2507659/pocela-izgradnja-deonice-autoputa-preljina-pozega-investicija-vredna-450-mil-eur-radovi>

²⁷⁹ Danas, “Potpisan ugovor s kineskom firmom o izgradnji auto-puta Novi Beograd-Surčin”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.danas.rs/ekonomija/potpisan-ugovor-s-kineskom-fimom-o-izgradnji-auto-puta-novi-beograd-surcin/>

²⁸⁰ Novosti, “Potpisan memorandum sa Kinezima za autoput Požega – Boljare”, 2018, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/ekonomija/aktuelno.239.html:719344-Potpisan-memorandum-sa-Kinezima-za-autoput-Pozega---Boljare>

often hidden from the public, making further assessment of the cost-effectiveness of projects difficult to do. The last case which raised suspicions among the Serbian public is the Surčin-Novi Beograd segment of this project, with a projected cost of nearly \$10 million per kilometre. Except for additional vague explanations that were announced through the media, and calls from civil society for a more transparent process, taxpayers did not get complete information about what they are actually paying for.²⁸¹

Apart from works on highway E-763, Chinese construction firms are engaged in other projects in developing Serbia's road infrastructure. Two additional projects are in progress while initial agreements have been reached for several others. In November 2016, an agreement was signed with the Power Construction Corporation of China (PCCC) for the construction of a section of the **Belgrade bypass** (a bridge over the Sava River near Ostružnica-Bubanj Potok) for €228 million. Almost a year later, in September 2017, this agreement was amended with a new agreed price of RMB 1.69 billion (around \$256 million).²⁸² As in the other agreements for loans from Exim Bank, 85% of the project's value was to be financed with an annual interest rate of 2.5% and a 15 year repayment period.²⁸³ The specificity of this project, however, was that **it was the first loan in Chinese yuan (RMB) for transport infrastructure taken by the Serbian Government from Exim Bank.** Works on this section had been opened on a few occasions, largely for political promotions, but September 2018 can be marked as the real start of the project's implementation.²⁸⁴ For the last section of the Belgrade bypass (Sector C) **Bubanj Potok-Pančevo**, the Serbian Government signed a Memorandum of understanding with a consortium of PCCC and Azerbaijani Azvirt in April 2019, but so far, no final agreement has been made.

²⁸¹ Danas, "Transparentnost: Nejasno da li je opravdana cena izgradnje autoputa Novi Beograd-Surčin", 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.danas.rs/politika/transparentnost-nejasno-da-li-je-opravdana-cena-izgradnje-autoputa-novi-beograd-surcin/>

²⁸² Zakon o potvrđivanju Ugovora o državnom koncesionalnom zajmu za Projekat izgradnje obilaznice oko Beograda na autoputu E70/E75, deonica: most preko reke Save kod Ostružnice – Bubanj Potok (Sektori 4, 5 i 6) između Vlade Republike Srbije, koju predstavlja Ministarstvo finansija, kao zajmoprimca i kineske Export-Import banke, kao zajmodavca (Law on the Ratification of the State Concession Loan Agreement for the Belgrade Bypass Construction Project on the E70 / E75 Highway, Section: Bridge over the Sava River near Ostružnica-Bubanj Potok (Sectors 4, 5 and 6) between the Government of the Republic of Serbia, represented by the Ministry of Finance, as the borrower and the Chinese Export-Import Bank, as the lender), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 15/2018.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Istinomer, "Obilaznica oko Beograda – komedija u tri čina", 2018, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.istinomer.rs/analize/obilaznica-oko-beograda-komedija-u-tri-cina/>

The second project which is ongoing is the construction of a high-speed road between the towns of **Iverak and Lajkovac**. This 18.3 km road should connect the city of Valjevo with Highway E-763. According to announcements from the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure of the Republic of Serbia, this project will cost €158 million and will be financed by the state budget, with Shandong as the appointed company for the implementation of construction works.²⁸⁵ Construction works officially began in June 2020 and the deadline for the finalisation of works is 36 months after the start.²⁸⁶

The latest news about the participation of construction firms from China in the development of road infrastructure in Serbia is their involvement in the express road from **Novi Sad to Ruma** (the Fruškogorski corridor). Namely, in October 2020, representatives from the Serbian Government and the CRBC signed a contract for the implementation of this project worth €606 million.²⁸⁷ Apart from the road's length of 48 km not many details are known. According to announcements from Serbian officials, Exim Bank will also provide the loan for this project, but conditions remain unknown.²⁸⁸

Rail Infrastructure – A Single but Valuable

China's main project in Serbia's rail sector is the high-speed rail connection between Belgrade with Budapest. The idea of linking the Serbian and Hungarian capitals, and further, the Greek port of Piraeus, with a high-speed rail network, resonated internationally due to the size of the investment and the involvement of several parties. A great deal of opposition has emerged regarding the implementation of this project, with ongoing debate in Hungary about its feasibility. Despite that, works on this project in Serbia began in September 2017, with an official opening of reconstruction works on the **Belgrade-Stara Pazova** section of this line in July 2018.²⁸⁹ The commercial agreement for this 34.5 km long section of the Belgrade -

²⁸⁵ Ekapija, "Potpisan ugovor o gradnji brze saobraćajnice koja će Valjevo spojiti sa auto-putem Miloš Veliki vredan 158 mil EUR - Radovi kreću 17. Juna", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.ekapija.com/news/2906925/potpisan-ugovor-o-gradnji-brze-saobracajnice-koja-ce-valjevo-spojiti-sa-auto>

²⁸⁶ Politika, "Počela izgradnja saobraćajnice Lajkovac-Iverak: do Beograda za 35 minuta", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/456371/Pocela-izgradnja-saobracajnice-Lajkovac-Iverak-do-Beograda-za-35-minuta>

²⁸⁷ Politika, "Potpisan ugovor za izgradnju Fruškogorskog koridora", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/463941/Potpisan-ugovor-za-izgradnju-Fruskogorskog-koridora>

²⁸⁸ Ekapija, "Kineska kompanija CRBC gradiće Fruškogorski koridor - Potpisan ugovor vredan 606 mil EUR za saobraćajnicu od Novog Sada do Rume", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.ekapija.com/news/3028955/kineska-kompanija-crbc-gradice-fruskogorski-koridor-potpisan-ugovor-vredan-606-mil-eur>

²⁸⁹ Beobuild, "Počela rekonstrukcija pruge Beograd - Stara Pazova", 2018, available at (in Serbian):

<http://beobuild.rs/po%C4%8Dela-rekonstrukcija-pruge-beograd--stara-pazova-p2801.html>

Budapest railroad was signed in November 2016 with China Railway International and China Communications Construction Company as the designated construction firms. In May 2017, funding for this project was guaranteed by an Exim Bank loan in the amount of \$298 million which should cover 85% of the project's value (approximately \$350 million), with a 2% annual interest rate and a 15 year repayment period.²⁹⁰

At approximately the same time as reconstruction works started on the Belgrade-Stara Pazova section, the Russian company RZD began the modernisation of the second, Stara Pazova-Novı Sad section. For the third and final section, connecting the Serbian capital with the Hungarian border (**Novı Sad-Kelebija**), the Serbian Government signed a contract with the same two companies appointed for the reconstruction of the first section: China Railway International and China Communications Construction Company. The contract for this section was signed in July 2018, but works have not yet begun. In any case, a loan agreement was made with Exim Bank for this section as well, in the amount of \$988 million with the same conditions as the previous one (funding 85% of the total project's value at 2% annual interest rate with a 15 year period for repayment).²⁹¹ The total project value is \$1.16 billion and calls for the reconstruction of 108 km of rail infrastructure, allowing trains to reach speeds of up to 200 km per hour.

The rail link between Belgrade and Budapest can be seen as one segment of China's Maritime Silk Road, as it will eventually connect to the maritime storage centre located in the port of Piraeus which is majority-owned by the Chinese company COSCO. The idea to connect the ports of the Far East with Central and Southeast Europe by rail passing through North Macedonia and Serbia sounds like a reasonable move. However, this will not be an easy job taking into account the poor conditions of the rail infrastructure in both countries and the time needed for the finalisation of the whole venture. In any case, China found interest in engaging

²⁹⁰ Zakon o potvrđivanju Ugovora o zajmu za kredit za povlašćenog kupca za Projekat modernizacije i rekonstrukcije mađarsko-srpske železničke veze na teritoriji Republike Srbije, za deonicu Beograd Centar – Stara Pazova između Vlade Republike Srbije, koju predstavlja Ministarstvo finansija, kao zajmoprimca i kineske Export-import banke, kao zajmodavca (Law on Confirmation of the Loan Agreement for the Eligible Customer for the Project of Modernization and Reconstruction of the Hungarian-Serbian Railway Connection on the Territory of the Republic of Serbia, for the section Belgrade Center-Stara Pazova between the Government of the Republic of Serbia, represented by the Ministry of Finance banks, as a lender), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 11/2017.

²⁹¹ Zakon o potvrđivanju Ugovora o zajmu za kredit za povlašćenog kupca za Projekat modernizacije i rekonstrukcije mađarsko-srpske železničke veze na teritoriji Republike Srbije, za deonicu Novi Sad – Subotica – državna granica (Kelebija), između Vlade Republike Srbije, koju predstavlja Ministarstvo finansija, kao zajmoprimca i kineske Export-Import banke, kao zajmodavca (Law on Confirmation of the Loan Agreement for the Eligible Customer for the Project of Modernization and Reconstruction of the Hungarian-Serbian Railway Connection on the Territory of the Republic of Serbia, for the section Novi Sad - Subotica - State Border (Kelebija), between the Government of the Republic of Serbia the borrower and the Chinese Export-Import Bank, as the lender), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 6/2019.

in the development of this route in Serbia, and along with the Belgrade-Budapest project, further support was found for a Belgrade-Niš-North Macedonian border extension as well. For now, only a general agreement has been reached, but according to announcements from the line Minister Zorana Mihajlović, a commercial agreement with China's CRBC is nearly finalised.²⁹²

Energy Sector – Coal in the Lead

In the field of energy, the most important project, in which China is involved in Serbia, is the reconstruction of the **Kostolac thermopower plant's** existing blocks B1 and B2, and the construction of a new block B3. For this work, the China Machinery Engineering Corporation and Serbian officials signed the General agreement in June 2010, agreeing upon the implementation of this project in two phases.

The first phase was dedicated to the rehabilitation of the two existing 350 MW blocks, and a project of desulphurization of these two blocks, along with the development of supporting infrastructure.²⁹³ For the implementation of this work, a commercial agreement was concluded in December 2010, and, one year later, funding was secured. Exim Bank again provided the loan to support this project, providing 85% of total project value (\$345 million) with a 3% annual interest rate and a 10 year repayment period.²⁹⁴ In July 2017, works on this phase were completed, and a few months later, the second phase was officially started.²⁹⁵ The **second phase** included the construction of the new, 350 MW block B3, as well as the expansion of the Drmno open coal mine to 12 million tons per year of production.²⁹⁶ As in the first phase, Exim Bank provided a loan for 85% of the cost of construction works, but this time with a 2.5%

²⁹² Ekapija, "U toku pregovori sa CRBC za brzu prugu do Niša i Preševa - Za tri meseca predlog ugovora, radovi sledeće godine?", 202, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.ekapija.com/news/2967071/u-toku-pregovori-sa-crbc-za-brzu-prugu-do-nisa-i-preseva>

²⁹³ Komisija za kontrolu državne pomoći (Commission For State Aid Control), Rešenje 401-00-00090/1/2016-01, available at:

<http://www.kkdp.gov.rs/doc/odluke/Resenje-%20Paket%20projekta%20Kostolac-B%20Power%20Plant%20Projects.pdf>

²⁹⁴ Zakon o potvrđivanju Ugovora o zajmu za kredit za povlašćenog kupca za prvu fazu Paket projekta KOSTOLAC-B POWER PLANT PROJECTS između Vlade Republike Srbije kao zajmoprimca i Kineske Export-Import banke kao zajmodavca (Law on the Ratification of the Loan Agreement for the Eligible Customer for the First Phase KOSTOLAC-B POWER PLANT PROJECTS Project Package between the Government of the Republic of Serbia as the Borrower and the Chinese Export-Import Bank as the Lender), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 1/2012.

²⁹⁵ Beta, "Počela izgradnja novog bloka u Termoelektrani Kostolac", 2017, available at (in Serbian):

<https://beta.rs/ekonomija/ekonomija-srbija/78109-pocela-izgradnja-novog-bloka-u-termoelektrani-kostolac>

²⁹⁶ Komisija za kontrolu državne pomoći (Commission For State Aid Control), Rešenje 401-00-00090/1/2016-01, available at:

<http://www.kkdp.gov.rs/doc/odluke/Resenje-%20Paket%20projekta%20Kostolac-B%20Power%20Plant%20Projects.pdf>

annual interest rate and a 13 year repayment period.²⁹⁷ The commercial contract for this phase was signed in November 2013, with a predicted total project value of \$716 million, and with a predicted project deadline of 52 months from the beginning of its implementation. The capacity enlargement of the Drmno coal mine was finished in January 2020 while works on the construction of the B3 block are still in progress and when completed, will provide approximately 5% additional electricity capacity to the Serbian energy system.²⁹⁸

One more project which is in some way connected to the energy sector and is worth mentioning is the construction of a **heating pipe from Obrenovac to Novi Beograd**. As the contract signed for this project at the end of 2017 between the Serbian Government and the PCCC expired, the two sides signed a new one in January 2020. Based on this contract, a loan from Exim Bank was expressly approved a week later. The total cost of this project was assessed at €194 million, and this loan should cover 85% of it and be repaid in the next 15 years.²⁹⁹ The conditions of this loan are a bit different from the previous agreements, as for this one, a floating interest rate based on the sum of EURIBOR and the margin (270 basic points) was assigned.³⁰⁰ According to announcements from Serbian officials regarding the implementation of this project, the hot water, which is a by-product of Obrenovac's thermal power plant, will be used to heat flats in Belgrade and in this way cover the costs of the project's implementation in 12 years.³⁰¹ As the project's contract is not available to the public and the negotiation process was out of the public eye with no tender procedure, there are doubts about the truthfulness of these statements.

²⁹⁷ Zakon o potvrđivanju Ugovora o zajmu za kredit za povlašćenog kupca za drugu fazu Paket projekta KOSTOLAC-B POWER PLANT PROJECT između Vlade Republike Srbije, koju predstavlja Ministarstvo finansija, kao Zajmoprimca i kineske Export-Import banke kao Zajmodavca (Law on Confirmation of the Loan Agreement for the Eligible Buyer for the Second Phase Project Package KOSTOLAC-B POWER PLANT PROJECT between the Government of the Republic of Serbia, represented by the Ministry of Finance, as the Borrower and the Chinese Export-Import Bank as the Lender), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 2/2015

²⁹⁸ Ekapija, "Završeno proširenje kapaciteta kopa Drmno - Obezbeđen ugalj za treći blok TE Kostolac B", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.ekapija.com/news/2744392/zavrsheno-prosirenje-kapaciteta-kopa-drmno-obezbedjen-ugalj-za-treci-blok-te-kostolac>

²⁹⁹ Zakon o potvrđivanju Sporazuma o zajmu (Zajam za ugovaranje stranog projekta o izgradnji) za Projekat izgradnje toplovoda Obrenovac – Novi Beograd, između kineske Export-Import banke, kao zajmodavca i Republike Srbije, koju zastupa Vlada Republike Srbije postupajući preko Ministarstva finansija, kao zajmoprimca (Law on Ratification of the Loan Agreement (Loan for Contracting a Foreign Construction Project) for the Obrenovac-New Belgrade Heating Project, between the Chinese Export-Import Bank, as a lender and the Republic of Serbia, represented by the Government of the Republic of Serbia acting as the Borrower), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 3/2020.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ekapija, "Obezbeđen kredit od 193 mil EUR za izgradnju toplodalekovoda Obrenovac-Novu Beograd - Radovi počinju na jesen 2020", 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.ekapija.com/news/2736622/obezbedjen-kredit-od-193-mil-eur-za-izgradnju-toplodalekovoda-obrenovac-novi-beograd>

Debt to China – Loans, not Investments

Even though they are often presented as “investments” to the Serbian public, all of the above-mentioned projects are financed by the loans: in other words, **Serbian taxpayers will eventually have to pay for all the infrastructure projects done by Chinese construction companies.** This is not surprising for someone who carefully followed the development of relations between the two countries, but for an average Serbian citizen, this may not be so clear.

According to the available data from the Serbian Ministry of Finance, the latest information from the end of June reveals that approximately \$1.3 billion is currently owed to China Exim Bank.³⁰² Put in perspective, the current debt to China is not large, constituting approximately 7% of the Serbian external debt and 4% of the total public debt. Nevertheless, the total amount of funds available as loans is nearly \$3.7 billion.³⁰³ Therefore, although a part of these loans are in the final stage of repayment or still not withdrawn in the amount stated in loan agreements, close monitoring of the future progression of Serbian debt to China is needed.

On a couple of occasions, the Serbian Government also signed agreements on economic and technical cooperation with China, but without many details in it. The main point in all these agreements was information that the **Chinese Government would provide non-refundable financial assistance to the Serbian Government with the aim of further developing friendly relations and economic and technical cooperation between the two countries.** The first of these grants, in August 2013, provided RMB30 million (\$4.4 million) for projects upon which two Governments will agree upon later.³⁰⁴ The next one, roughly a year later, was identical to the previous one but provided RMB35 million (\$5.15 million) instead.³⁰⁵ Another two agreements were signed in June 2016 and provide RMB100 million (\$14.7 million) in assistance in the areas of infrastructure, and human resources training and RMB30 million in aid through the donation of medical equipment.³⁰⁶ Even though in these documents the

³⁰² Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Serbia, Public Debt Administration, Quarterly Report- June 2020, available at: <http://www.javnidug.gov.rs/eng/default.asp?P=118&MenuItem=4>

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Sporazum o privredno-tehničkoj saradnji između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Narodne Republike Kine (Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation Between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the People's Republic of China), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 11/2013.

³⁰⁵ Sporazum o privredno-tehničkoj saradnji između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Narodne Republike Kine (Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation Between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the People's Republic of China), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 1/2015.

³⁰⁶ Sporazum o privredno-tehničkoj saradnji između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Narodne Republike Kine (Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation Between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the People's Republic of China), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 9/2016.

purposes for the donated funds are more precisely given, both agreements end with the clause “... and other projects on which both sides agree”. The most recent grant, from May 2017, was intended for the implementation of potential projects such as the donation of medical equipment, in the amount of RMB 100 million (\$14.7 million).³⁰⁷ Although grants from China are not large compared to those provided by other actors, their regularity and often-vague details deserves focus in analysis of the Chinese economic presence in Serbia.

Even though a relatively new player in the Serbian economy, China has quickly become a country with which Serbian officials frequently opt to cooperate. A gradual increase in bilateral economic cooperation is notable in a number of areas. In trade, a trend of an ever-increasing total value of goods and services exchanged between the two countries is clear. In addition, the number of projects involving Chinese construction companies and loans from Exim Bank is also rising, while the scope of sectors in which they are active is widening. A growing amount of funds invested in the Serbian economy, and expanding complexity of mutual business activities increases, especially with the establishment of the strategic partnership in RTB Bor, also characterises economic cooperation between Serbia and China. Therefore, even though the economic presence of China in Serbia is limited at the moment, the trend of its intensification from year to year is apparent.

II. 3 China’s Soft Power

II. 3. 1 Positive Attitudes of the Local Population towards China

Despite being geographically distanced from Serbia, the cooperation China has established with Serbia since 2008/09 has earned it respect among the Serbian population. Strong support predates even the 2016 comprehensive strategic partnership and China’s acquisition of the Smederevo steel mill and RTB Bor. A poll shows that a larger percentage of citizens believed, during the period from 2009 to 2015, that Serbia’s interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with China than with the EU.³⁰⁸ In fact, in 2009, 88% of

³⁰⁷ Sporazum o privredno-tehničkoj saradnji između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Narodne Republike Kine (Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation Between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the People's Republic of China), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 5/2017.

³⁰⁸ International Republican Institute (IRI), “Survey of Serbian Public Opinion”, 2015, Ipsos Strategic Marketing, slide 21, available at: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/serbia_november_2015_poll_public_release.pdf

respondents answered that Serbia's interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with China, and 82% with the EU, whereas in 2015 the numbers were 89% and 71%, respectively. Another poll from 2017 showed that citizens regarded China, alongside Russia, positively, and the EU, alongside the US, negatively.³⁰⁹

The reason why China outperforms the EU in this matter is because the former is not as socially divisive of an issue as the latter is; there are, for instance, Eurosceptics in Serbia, whereas a concept such as Sino-scepticism is basically non-existent. In addition, while the EU is commonly seen as an actor “pressuring” Serbia to recognise Kosovo, particularly among the young population,³¹⁰ China supports Serbia on this issue, presenting another reason that contributes to how the public perceives these actors. **These results show that China is not primarily seen through the lens of how it behaves in its own domestic, political environment, but rather through the Serbian context.**³¹¹ For this reason, the soft power of China and its position in the eyes of Serbian citizens is unlikely to be shaken by issues such as the increasing grip of Beijing on Hong Kong or the mistreatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. An issue here is that these problems are not extensively covered by the Serbian media, if at all, which is why a large portion is unaware of the local population unaware of how Beijing is handling situations domestically.

In fact, **China has traditionally been less prevalent than Russia and the EU in the Serbian media.** Nevertheless, when it does make media appearances, it is, according to research from 2019, **typically presented in a positive or neutral manner.**³¹² China’s media appearances thus proportionally work better for it than the EU’s, as the latter is, according to the same research, mostly presented in a neutral light, with some elements of both positive and negative reporting on it.

The fact that the media portrays China in such a manner also contributes to the way the public perceives it today. When it comes to how the local population sees the quality of Sino-Serbian

³⁰⁹ BCBP, “Perception of Serbia’s Foreign Policy”, 2017, available at:

http://bezbednost.org/upload/document/public_perception_of_serbias_foreign_policy.pdf

³¹⁰ Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije (KOMS), “Alternativni izveštaj o položaju i potrebama mladih u Republici Srbiji”, 2020, p.160, available at (in Serbian):

<https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Alternativni-izves%CC%8Ctaj-o-polo%CC%8Caju-i-potrebama-mladih-u-RS-2020.pdf>

³¹¹ Philippe Le Corre and Vuk Vuksanović, “Serbia: China’s Open Door to the Balkans”, *The Diplomat*, 2019, available at:

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/01/01/serbia-china-s-open-door-to-balkans-pub-78054>

³¹² *Istinomer*, “Coronavirus Has Changed the Course of Foreign Policy”, 2020, available at: <https://english.istinomer.rs/analyses/coronavirus-has-changed-the-course-of-foreign-policy/>

relations, according to a public opinion survey from 2018, citizens of Serbia rated it as “very close” (+52 points on a scale from -100 to +100).³¹³ The same overwhelmingly positive attitude also ranks Serbia high with regard to citizens’ expectations for future cooperation with China, as they believe that the impact of the BRI on Serbia in the next five years will be “very fruitful” (+31 points). As this poll was conducted in then-16 participating countries of the 16+1 Framework, **Serbia not only topped the Western Balkan countries, but also every other country in the Framework. This comparative analysis reaffirms that China has a valuable level of soft power in Serbia.**

However, **the level of China’s soft power has its limits.** In fact, despite the strong belief that Serbia should continue to cooperate with China, a poll from 2017 shows that China is not even listed among the top 15 countries in which citizens from Serbia would like for them or their children to live.³¹⁴ A poll published in December 2019 by the Serbian Ministry of European Integration showed that **only 5% of the local population saw the Chinese model of state development as appropriate for Serbia**, for instance.³¹⁵ Another poll from 2020 also shows that China is definitely **not on the list of top living places** for those intending to depart from Serbia.³¹⁶ When it comes to where the youth would prefer to move to and live in, a youth-centred 2020 survey shows that the EU remains their number one choice, whereas the number of those preferring China was too small to classify in its own category.³¹⁷

What appears to be common theme of all polls measuring opinions of Serbian citizens on foreign actors is that Russia is in fact considered as Serbia’s closest friend, while the EU is considered as the best destination for work and living. **China is typically far outperformed by Russia and the EU on both of these fronts.** What makes the EU so appealing for Serbian citizens over China is that it is considered, according to research from 2017, as a destination where democracy, rule of law, and human rights are respected, while China is seen as a rising economic and technological power.³¹⁸ Nevertheless, **considering how distant China is from**

³¹³ China-CEE Institute, “How the CEE Citizens View China’s Developments”, 2018, available at: <https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/SURVEY2017.pdf>

³¹⁴ Srećko Mihailović, “Which empire to lean on... Serbia between the East and the West”, Demostat, 2017, available at: <http://demostat.rs/en/vesti/istrazivanja/which-empire-to-lean-on-serbia-between-the-east-and-the-west/214>

³¹⁵ Serbian Ministry for European Integration, “Public Opinion Poll”, December 2019, p.27, available at (in Serbian): https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/ijm_dec_19.pdf

³¹⁶ Institut za evropske poslove, “Stavovi građana Srbije prema Rusiji,” 2020, slide 16, available at (in Serbian): <http://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Stav-gra%C4%91ana-Srbije-prema-Rusiji-mart-2020.pdf>

³¹⁷ Krovna organizacija mladih Srbije (KOMS), “Alternativni izveštaj o položaju i potrebama mladih u Republici Srbiji”, 2020, p. 202.

³¹⁸ BCBP, “Perception of Serbia’s Foreign Policy”, 2017, available at:

Serbia, and that it represents a “relatively new” external actor in Serbia, it may be concluded that China “punches beyond its weight” in regard to its soft power in this country. This becomes particularly evident upon realising that in 2019 China was ranked 27th in the world in a global comparative analysis of soft power.³¹⁹ Up until the COVID-19 pandemic, it seemed as if China would be unable to take a more prominent place in the eyes of the local population than it already had. However, Sin-Serbian COVID-19 diplomacy has caused shifts in public perceptions. The most notable example of this, from a public opinion poll conducted during the pandemic, shows that 39.9% of Serbian citizens believed that China was the largest donor to Serbia.³²⁰ The EU took second place with 17.6% of respondents, and Russia third with 14.6%. This data was especially important considering that the percentage of those having this opinion regarding China doubled in just a year (increasing by 21 percentage points), while Russia and the EU used to outrank it, with 25.5% and 25.3% of respondents accordingly.³²¹ Another study conducted during the pandemic by the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Belgrade showed that the majority of Serbian citizens believe that the assistance provided by China will be efficient in the fight against the virus, while the EU’s assistance was seen as the least efficient (Russia scored in between China and the EU).³²² There is also an interesting trend visible among Serbia’s youth, as according to a youth-centred survey, in that 13% of the younger population think Serbia should align its foreign policy with China’s.³²³ Although Russia and the EU score higher in this regard with 30% and 21% respectively, this data is important, as it shows that Sino-Serbian cooperation during the pandemic has increased popular Serbian support. In fact, the same survey was conducted since 2017, and only in 2020 did China become a notable answer among young respondents. Considering that the Government played a key role in shaping citizens’ opinions on the roles of different foreign powers during the pandemic, the process of presenting China in the forefront was primarily an internally-led process. Nevertheless, polls show that this resulted in a significant boost for China’s soft power.

http://bezbednost.org/upload/document/public_perception_of_serbias_foreign_policy.pdf

³¹⁹ Portland, “The Soft Power 30 – China’s Profile”, 2019, available at:

<https://softpower30.com/country/china/>

³²⁰ Institut za evropske poslove, “Istraživanje javnog mnjenja – Stavovi građana prema Rusiji“, 2020, slide 5, available at (in Serbian):

<http://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Stav-gra%C4%91ana-Srbije-prema-Rusiji-mart-2020.pdf>

³²¹ Ibid.

<http://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019-Stav-gra%C4%91ana-Srbije-prema-Rusiji-mart-2019-final.pdf>

³²² Faculty of Political Science, “Stavovi građana Republike Srbije o COVID-19”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/Izve%C5%A1taj-Stavovi-gra%C4%91ana-Republike-Srbije-o-COVID-19.pdf?jezik=lat>

³²³ KOMS, “Alternativni izveštaj o položaju i potrebama mladih u Republici Srbiji“, 2020, p.163.

The continuation of these trends can be expected, as well as the strengthening of relations between Serbia and China, especially bearing in mind that China's President Xi Jinping accepted an official invitation from President Vučić to visit Serbia.³²⁴ The fact that the Chinese President has not visited any other country in Central and Eastern Europe twice indicates how important his arrival would be for Sino-Serbian relations,³²⁵ as well as for China's soft power.

II. 3. 2 People-to-People Cooperation

Besides political and economic cooperation, people-to-people cooperation is another key aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). **For China, the people-to-people cooperation is a way to present its international approach as benevolent and citizen-friendly.** As such, this is aimed to popularise the BRI and grow China's soft power, which has lagged behind its Western rivals.

According to the Global Index, China ranked 27th in the world in terms of its soft power in 2019.³²⁶ As China's weaknesses in the "Government" sub-index stem from low scores in areas of individual freedoms and liberties, **its culture represents its key strength in its soft power.** In fact, it is indicated that Chinese culture ranks 8th in the "Culture" sub-index, which is unsurprising considering, for instance, that it has the highest number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the world and the second-highest number of Olympic medals from the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics and the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. It also performs well in terms of its art and tourism metrics.³²⁷ Therefore, **it is certain that China will continue to self-promote worldwide, and in Serbia.**

Namely, **the positive development of relations in the areas of politics and economics has created fertile ground for cultural cooperation as well.** In the 2009 Strategic Partnership between Serbia and China, the two sides agreed to continue to expand cooperation in the fields of culture, education, sports, science and technology, tourism, aviation, health, radio, television, and news, and actively encourage cooperation between youth and non-governmental

³²⁴ B92, "Chinese President Xi Jinping announced his visit to Serbia in talks with Vucic", 2020, available at: https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2020&mm=04&dd=14&nav_id=108326

³²⁵ China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE), "Empty shell no more: China's growing footprint in Central and Eastern Europe", 2020, p.23.

³²⁶ Soft Power 3.0, China Country Profile, 2019, available at: <https://softpower30.com/country/china/#:~:text=Despite%20a%20tumultuous%20year%2C%20China.front%20over%20the%20past%20year.>

³²⁷ Ibid.

organisations in both countries.³²⁸ What is interesting is that this, at that time, highest bilateral document, stressed the commitment to organise a Chinese Cultural Festival in Serbia later that year. Furthermore, in the 2013 *Joint Statement on Deepening the Strategic Partnership*, the two sides emphasised that **people-to-people and cultural exchanges are an important pillar of the strategic partnership between China and Serbia**.³²⁹ In addition, when the 16+1 Framework Summit was held in Belgrade in 2014, the *Belgrade Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries* were produced, explicitly stating that deepening people-to-people and cultural exchanges and cooperation at the sub-national level represents a major priority.³³⁰ This same prioritisation was maintained at the latest organised summit in Dubrovnik in 2019.³³¹

Finally, **what makes Serbia distinct from the rest of the region is the fact that it has generally been the first Western Balkan country to make milestones with China in terms of people-to-people cooperation**.³³² The following showcases examples of notable cooperation in this area.

Benefiting from City-Twinning and Province-Twinning

Although the strategic partnership between Serbia and China contains important points on politics and economic, it also addresses culture. One aspect in this area is a focus on sister cities. In fact, according to the president of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, **“friendship city relations have become one of the important channels used to implement the BRI”**.³³³ This sort of cooperation was an important theme at the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in the area of “sub-national cooperation”. For now, China has formed sister-city relations with more than 700 cities in

³²⁸ Joint statement of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Serbia on the establishment of a strategic partnership, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2009.

³²⁹ Joint Statement on Deepening Bilateral Strategic Partnership, 2013.

³³⁰ CEEC-China, “Belgrade Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries”, 2014, available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1224905.shtml

³³¹ CEEC-China, “The Dubrovnik Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries”, 2019, available at:

<https://www.ceec-china-croatia.org/files/dubrovnik-guidelines.pdf>

³³² Milan Igrutinović, Miloš Janjić and Strahinja Subotić, “China’s Impact in the Western Balkans”, European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade), Think Initiative, 2019, p.52.

³³³ China Daily, “Sister city relations promote cooperation”, 2019, available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/global/2019-04/26/content_37462677.htm

countries involved in the BRI, with Beijing alone as a sister city to 21 capitals all over the world.³³⁴

China's activity in this field has even led some to warn that such relations should not be taken for granted, as city-twinning "clearly plays a role in China's broader geo-strategic ambitions".³³⁵ **Although sister cities are primarily intended to foster economic and cultural relations, this type of cooperation also has political elements.** In other words, the rate and depth of cooperation between cities is also dependent on the overall political relationship between the country in question and China. For example, when the Prague City Council approved a sister-city agreement with Taipei (Taiwan) in January 2020, Shanghai responded by cancelling its own sister-city agreement with Prague, which was established in 2017.³³⁶ This decision came after Beijing also ended its sister-city agreement with Prague in 2019 after the new mayor refused to commit to the One China Policy.³³⁷

In fact, in 2013 the importance of sister-city agreements was recognised at the 16+1 Framework Summit in the *Bucharest Guidelines*, where it was stated that "[c]ooperation at the sub-national level will be encouraged and supported as one of the important pillars of China-CEEC cooperation". In order to better facilitate cooperation on this level, the same Guidelines state that the China-CEEC Association of Provincial governors should be established. For this reason, it was envisioned that China-CEEC Local Leaders' Meetings would be held once every two years.³³⁸

When it comes to practical Sino-Serbian cooperation in this area, **the relationship between Belgrade and Beijing begins far before the establishment of the BRI, back in 1980.** To illustrate how unique this sister-city agreement was at that time, Beijing's mayor pointed out that **Belgrade was the first European city to build such a relationship with the Chinese capital.**³³⁹ Just a year later, another sister-city agreement was made between Novi Sad and Changchung, the capital of China's Jilin Province. Ever since, Serbia remained the only

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ Annabelle Timsit, "The surprisingly vital role sister cities play in Chinese diplomacy", QUARTZ, 2020, available at:

<https://qz.com/1846303/sister-cities-play-surprisingly-vital-role-in-eu-chinese-relations/>

³³⁶ Matej Šimalčík and Adam Kalivoda, "Sister-City Relations and Identity Politics: The Case of Prague, Beijing, Taipei, and Shanghai", CHOICE, 2020, available at: <https://chinaobservers.eu/sister-city-relations-and-identity-politics-the-case-of-prague-beijing-taipei-and-shanghai/>

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

³³⁸ China-CEEC, "The Bucharest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries", 2015, available at: http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zdogjhz_1/t1410594.htm

³³⁹ China Daily, "Days of Beijing in Belgrade' brings spirit of Chinese capital to Serbia", 2017, available at: https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2017-09/17/content_32106746.htm

country in the region with two cities with Chinese counterparts. As the people-to people cooperation between China and Serbia continues to increase, **more city-twinning is certainly expected, particularly as no such twinning has yet taken place between Serbia and China in the period after the dissolution of Yugoslavia.**³⁴⁰

Cooperation between twinned cities continues to this day. In fact, the 2009 Strategic Partnership even mentions providing support for Beijing and Belgrade to jointly organise the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of their sister-city relations. This shows that China highlighted the cultural importance of this practice even before the official launch of the BRI. In another example, Belgrade's mayor went to China in 2015 at the invitation of Beijing's mayor, to mark the 35th anniversary of the signing of the cooperation agreement between their cities. Not only did they express their willingness to intensify cooperation in the areas of tourism, culture, education, and exchange of experience regarding the functioning of public administration, but also in economics and business.³⁴¹ For this reason, Belgrade's Mayor also met with representatives from major Chinese companies in Beijing. Just two years later, Belgrade welcomed Beijing's mayor during the kick-off of the "Days of Beijing in Belgrade" event.³⁴² Not only did this event include cultural exhibitions and galleries, but also a business forum. This example also shows that **cultural links, in this case between Serbian and Chinese cities, also have an economic component and benefits.**

When it comes to Novi Sad, as the capital of Serbia's autonomous Vojvodina province, its relations with Changchun, the capital of Jilin Province, also led to the **establishment of friendly relations between Vojvodina and Jilin in 1986.**³⁴³ Interestingly, an agreement to this end was signed during the visit of Chinese PM Zhao Ziyang to then Yugoslavia. This agreement stipulated that in order to upgrade the friendship between Yugoslavia and China, the two provinces would promote exchange and cooperation in the fields of industry, agriculture, trade, science and technology, culture and art, education, health, and sports. Even

³⁴⁰ Milan Igrutinović, Miloš Janjić and Strahinja Subotić, "China's Impact in the Western Balkans", European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade), Think Initiative, 2019, p.52.

³⁴¹ Serbia's Embassy in China, "Visit of the delegation of Belgrade to Beijing", 2015, available at: <http://www.beijing.mfa.gov.rs/news.php>

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Protocol note on the establishment of friendly relations between the Socialist Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (SFR Yugoslavia) and the Ji Lin Province (the PR China), 1986, available at: http://region.vojvodina.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Ji_Lin__APV_11071.pdf

today, these two sides are exploring how to further deepen their cooperation.³⁴⁴ It shows **that sister-city relations can also produce proactive “sister-province” cooperation.**

Since then, **Vojvodina has also attracted interest from other Chinese provinces as well.** In 1996, a year before China and Serbia signed a *Declaration on Friendly Relations* during Slobodan Milošević’s visit to China, **Vojvodina and Hunan** signed a Framework Agreement.³⁴⁵ After signing of Strategic Partnership, a Letter of Intent to Establish Cooperation between **Vojvodina and Henan** was signed in 2011,³⁴⁶ and a Friendship Agreement was signed between **Vojvodina and Guangdong** Province was signed in 2012.³⁴⁷ All of these agreements were signed before the launch of the BRI in 2013. Cooperation has continued in its aftermath as well.

In 2016, when Serbia and China signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, **Vojvodina and Hainan Province** signed a Letter of Intent for Establishing Cooperation.³⁴⁸ Since then, cooperation has evolved, and in 2018 the two provinces signed a Memorandum of Understanding for Strengthening Cooperation, in which they agreed to work together on **providing support for the implementation of joint projects at the regional level within the BRI**, as well as in cooperation within the 16+1 Framework.³⁴⁹ The cooperation between these provinces continues to this day, as illustrated by the visit of Vojvodina’s PM to Hainan in 2019, when the two sides elevated their cooperation by signing an agreement on the establishment and development of friendly relations and cooperation.³⁵⁰

It appears that the Chinese highly appreciate the spirit of cooperation with Vojvodina, as a Letter of Intent for Establishing Friendly Relations was signed between **Fujian Province and**

³⁴⁴ *Danas*, “Saradnja AP Vojvodine i kineske provincije Đilin”, 2018, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/saradnja-ap-vojvodine-i-kineske-provincije-djilin/>

³⁴⁵ Framework Agreement between Vojvodina and Hunan, 1996, available at: http://region.vojvodina.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Okvirni_sporazum_kineska_provincija_Hunan_2491.pdf

³⁴⁶ Letter of Intent to Establish Cooperation between Vojvodina and Henan, 2011, available at: http://region.vojvodina.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Pismo_o_namerama_Henan_Kina_APV_480.pdf

³⁴⁷ Friendship Agreement between Vojvodina and Guangdong, 2012, available at: http://region.vojvodina.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Sporazum_APV_Guangdong_20121127_1351.pdf

³⁴⁸ Letter of Intent for Establishing Cooperation between the Vojvodina and Hainan, 2016, available at (in Serbian): http://region.vojvodina.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/20190301_Hajnan_2016_12891.pdf

³⁴⁹ Memorandum of Understanding for Strengthening Cooperation between the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and the Province of Hainan, 2018, available at: <http://region.vojvodina.gov.rs/sporazumi/?lang=en>

³⁵⁰ Agreement on Establishing and Developing Friendly Relations and Cooperation between the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (the Republic of Serbia) and the Hainan Province (People’s Republic of China), signed in Boao, PR China, 2019, available at: http://region.vojvodina.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/sporazum_Boao_APV_2019_03_29_13011.pdf

Vojvodina in 2018.³⁵¹ The cooperation was already elevated between the two provinces in July 2020,³⁵² with the signing of an agreement aiming to “continue to actively implement the consensus reached by the two heads of state, further intensify exchanges and expand cooperation”.³⁵³ Interestingly, **the Zijin Mining Group, which acquired the RTB Bor, is from the Fujian Province**, and donated supplies to help Vojvodina during the pandemic. Also important in Vojvodina’s cooperation with Fujian is the fact that Chinese President Xi Jinping occupied various party and government posts from 1985 to 2002 in Fujian,³⁵⁴ and was its governor from 2000 to 2002.³⁵⁵

Finally, the last Chinese province with which Vojvodina signed a Letter of Intent on Establishing and Developing Friendly Relations and Cooperation was **Hebei Province** in 2019.³⁵⁶ Interestingly, **Hesteel Group, the company which acquired the Smederevo Steel mill, is from Hebei Province.**

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, its sister provinces from China aided Vojvodina. According to the Serbian embassy in China, Fujian, Hunan, and Hainan donated medical equipment to Vojvodina, including 70,000 protective masks, 1,000 protective suits, 3,000 protective face visors, 20,000 pairs of protective gloves, and 70,000 disposable protective masks. Other provinces such as Jilin, Henan, Guangdong, and Hebei stated that they were waiting for official approval to do so.³⁵⁷

All things considered, it appears this Serbian autonomous province is relevant for the Chinese, not only from the cultural standpoint, but also from the economic, particularly as one of the milestones of bilateral state cooperation which has yet to be completed, the Belgrade-Budapest hi-speed railway, crosses through this region.

³⁵¹ Letter of Intent for Establishing Friendly Relations between the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (Republic of Serbia) and the Fujian Province (People’s Republic of China), 2019, available at:

http://region.vojvodina.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Sporazum_Fu_ien_srpski_24_12_19_13211.pdf

³⁵² China Daily, “Fujian, Vojvodina establish sister province ties”, 2020, available at:

http://subsites.chinadaily.com.cn/fujian/2020-06/23/c_502257.htm

³⁵³ China’s Embassy in Serbia, “Ambassador Chen Bo attended the online signing ceremony of the agreement between Fujian Province and Vojvodina Province”, 2020, available at (in Chinese):

<http://rs.chineseembassy.org/chn/sgxx/sghd/t1791480.htm>

³⁵⁴ China.org, “Xi Jinping’s 17 years in Fujian”, 2012, available at:

http://www.china.org.cn/china/2012-11/21/content_27179199.htm

³⁵⁵ Britannica, “Xi Jinping biography”, available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Xi-Jinping>

³⁵⁶ Letter of Intent on Establishing and Developing Friendly Relations and Cooperation between the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (the Republic of Serbia) and the Hebei Province, 2019, available at:

http://region.vojvodina.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Hebej_20190805114956999_13462.pdf

³⁵⁷ RTV, “Bratske provincije iz Kine obezbedile pomoc za Vojvodinu”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/vojvodina/novi-sad/bratske-provincije-iz-kine-obezbedile-pomoc-za-vojvodinu_1109317.html

Image 9: Vojvodina and its Sister Provinces in China



Source: Authors' own representation

Introduction and Proliferation of Chinese language

In Serbia, Chinese language learning is available in some schools. Although there were some **attempts in the early 2000s to include Chinese as an optional language in Serbian schools, these were largely considered unsuccessful**, as insufficient resources were invested in this idea and Chinese native speakers were not invited to join.³⁵⁸

The turning point in this area was signing of the 2009 Strategic Partnership. As in this document education was highlighted as an area in which there should be improvement, in the same year the two sides signed a Programme of Education Cooperation.³⁵⁹ It envisioned cooperation between the University of Belgrade and the University of International Studies in Beijing, the development of a Confucius Institute in Belgrade, the introduction of

³⁵⁸ *Politika*, “Od septembra kineski jezik u gimnazijama”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/429267/Drustvo/Od-septembra-kineski-jezik-u-gimnazijama#!>

³⁵⁹ *Danas*, “Saradnja Srbije i Kine u oblasti obrazovanja”, 2009, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/saradnja-srbije-i-kine-u-oblasti-obrazovanja/#sthash.S30tDJkW.dpuf>

Chinese language teachers at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade, as well as cooperation between the Philological Gymnasium in Belgrade and the Gymnasium of Sremski Karlovci and schools in China. This same programme also allows for other forms of cooperation, primarily for master's and doctoral studies, with an increase in the number of scholarships available for Serbian students in China.

Although some schools, such as that of Sremski Karlovci, had introduced the Chinese language to curricula already in 2010,³⁶⁰ **a significant advancement in this regard was made in 2011, with the launch of pilot project designed to promote proliferation of the Chinese language, in which 31 elementary schools and high schools were encompassed in the proposed programme.**³⁶¹ The idea behind this agreement was to enable professors from China, several of whom also speak Serbian, to teach Chinese to pupils as native speakers. It was envisioned that China would fund the teachers' salaries, accommodation, and food, and provide books and dictionaries for students, and that the Serbian Ministry of Education would provide health insurance and transportation for the teachers. Even the then-**minister of foreign affairs of Serbia called upon Serbian pupils to start learning Chinese, arguing that China represents “a key factor in global peace and the global economy”.**³⁶² Meanwhile, considering that the programme was positively evaluated, and promoted, by the Confucius Institute and the Chinese Embassy,³⁶³ this project continued in the following years. The latest agreement regarding this project was renewed in 2016, set to last until 2020.

Fast-forward to 2019, **the National Education Council of Serbia sent a recommendation to the Serbian Minister of Education to install the Chinese language as an optional language at all high schools (gymnasiums) in Serbia.**³⁶⁴ Interestingly, this proposal was made in cooperation with experts from the Confucius Institute, among others, and it was verified by the state Institute for the Advancement of Education, which approves all newly-introduced plans and programs in schools. It is currently unknown what the final decision will be regarding this matter. Even if the state leaves it up to individual schools to decide whether or not they want

³⁶⁰ China's Embassy to Serbia, “Počeli časovi kineskog jezika u filološkoj gimnaziji u Karlovcima”, 2010, available at:

<http://rs.chineseembassy.org/srp/zsgx/whjv/t768084.htm>

³⁶¹ *Vreme*, “Kineski raj u srpskim učionicama”, 2012, available at:

<https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1042266&print=yes>

³⁶² *Blic*, “Kineski od ponedeljka u 32 škole u Srbiji”, 2012, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/kineski-od-ponedeljka-u-32-skole-u-srbiji/z5f0clv>

³⁶³ *RTS*, “U Srbiji kineski jezik uči oko 3.000 đaka i studenata”, 2016, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/2480521/u-srbiji-kineski-jezik-uci-oko-3000-djaka-i-studenata.html>

³⁶⁴ *Politika*, “Od septembra kineski jezik u gimnazijama”, 2019.

to introduce the language as an option, **it is expected that as time passes, and Sino-Serbian cooperation increases, together with China's stronger global presence, the number of schools offering the Chinese language will increase.**

When it comes to the number of those learning the Chinese language, according to official data from the Ministry of Education from 2019, there are 2,000 of those learning it optionally, in 34 elementary schools and 24 high schools. Interestingly enough, **these classes are taught by native Chinese speakers delegated by China's Ministry of Education.**³⁶⁵ When it comes to the level of higher education in Serbia, not only is Chinese taught at the University of Belgrade, but also at private universities. A notable example is the Chinese Centre at John Naisbitt University, which was established in cooperation with the Chinese Embassy and continues to operate. Its purpose goes beyond language courses, aiming to improve academic, cultural, and political-economic cooperation between two countries. Whereas its vision is to become a recognisable brand in the Serbian market, as well as in the Chinese market in the future, and to cooperate with all those who are interested in the improvement of cooperation between Serbia and China.³⁶⁶

A High Contribution to Tourism

China is highly valuable to Serbia in its contribution to tourism as well. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, based on the total number of registered visitors to Serbia in 2019, **the largest number of tourists visiting Serbia came from China** (including Hong Kong), amounting to approximately 145,000 in that year.³⁶⁷ This group therefore outperformed both Serbia's immediate neighbours from the region, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (136,000), Turkey (107,000), Croatia (103,000), Bulgaria (100,000), and Montenegro (90,000), as well as other large countries such as Germany (104,000), and Russia (64,000). The same applies when looking at the aggregated sum of nights spent in Serbia, with Chinese visitors being the second largest contributors in this category as well, spending a total of approximately 268,000 nights in Serbia.³⁶⁸ Although this is a lower number compared to the

³⁶⁵ *Politika*, "Od septembra kineski jezik u gimnazijama", 2019.

³⁶⁶ Katarina Zakic, Ana Jovancai Stakic, and Ana Jurcic, *Managing Cooperation Programs Between Serbia and China in the Field of Higher Education*, 14th International Scientific Conference on Economic and Social Development, 2016, available at:

http://chinesecenter.megatrend.edu.rs/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Pages-from-esd_Book_of_Proceedings_Belgrade_2016_Online.pdf

³⁶⁷ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, "Turistički promet – decembar 2019," 2020, p.4, available at:

<https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2020/Pdf/G20201020.pdf>

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

number of tourists from BiH (294,000), it is still higher than Montenegro (234,000), Turkey (227,000), Russia (220,000), Germany (203,000), Croatia (199,000), and Bulgaria (169,000).

What has been crucial to this inflow of Chinese tourists was the fact the 2016 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership stated that both sides were willing to create more favourable conditions for personnel exchange between the two countries and introduce more convenient measures for citizens from both sides to travel, do business, and study abroad in each other's countries.³⁶⁹ After the agreement in 2016, **visa liberalisation between the two countries was established in January 2017, directly impacting the travel rate.** Citizens from both countries were granted the right for a 30-day stay in, or transit through, China and Serbia without the need for a visa.

At the time it was signed, this represented a milestone in mutual relations, and additional proof of mutual trust and reliance between the two nations, especially as **Serbia was the first Western Balkan country to have abolished visas with China.**³⁷⁰ **Even today it remains only one of the few European countries to have done so.** This visa regime liberalisation produced tangible, on the ground benefits. In fact, in 2016, the total number of Chinese tourists visiting Serbia was only around 14,000,³⁷¹ while in comparison, in 2017 this number had multiplied two and a half times,³⁷² and nine times in 2019. When it comes to the amount of nights spent in Serbia, before visa liberalisation, Chinese tourists spent approximately 43,000 nights per year in the country,³⁷³ while just a year later this number had more than doubled,³⁷⁴ and by the end of 2019, it had increased fivefold. Therefore, time-comparison data indicates that visa liberalisation was a key factor that has led to a significant rise in the number of Chinese tourists visiting Serbia.

In other words, **after visa liberalisation, Chinese visitors went from being a negligible group in Serbian tourism to the most important. It is likely that this trend will continue in the same direction in the following period** (discounting changes caused by the COVID-

³⁶⁹ Joint statement of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Serbia on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016.

³⁷⁰ Milan Igrutinović, Miloš Janjić and Strahinja Subotić, "China's Impact in the Western Balkans", European Policy Centre (CEP - Belgrade), Think Initiative, 2019.

³⁷¹ Republički zavod za statistiku, "Turistički promet – decembar 2016, 2017, available at: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2017/Pdf/G20171018.pdf>

³⁷² Republički zavod za statistiku, "Turistički promet – decembar 2017, 2018, available at: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2018/Pdf/G20181018.pdf>

³⁷³ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, "Turistički promet - decembar 2016", 2017, p.4, available at: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2017/Pdf/G20171018.pdf>

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

19 pandemic). For this reason, Serbian officials stated in 2020 that the establishment of direct air travel from Beijing was being considered.³⁷⁵ In a final example, as Serbia was eager to maintain a high level of tourists from China, it decided to keep its borders open to China during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Passport Index, Serbia was one of the only European countries to keep such a regime with China during the pandemic, alongside Albania, Belarus, and Ukraine.³⁷⁶

Cultural Activities of the Confucius Institute

The Confucius Institute (CI) is a key aspect of China’s cultural diplomacy. This institute defines itself as a “Chinese cultural centre that works under the Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language”. In the context of the BRI, it was endorsed by “China’s Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries” in 2012 as part of the 16+1 Framework.³⁷⁷ In other words, the CI is supposed to represent a key institute of China, representing its culture abroad, similar to what the British Council does for the UK, Instituto Cervantes for Spain, and the Goethe-Institut for Germany. However, one notable difference is that there have been some concerns as to whether, and to what extent, different branches of the CI represent an extended arm of the Chinese government, or as some would put it “a tool to scrub clean its image abroad”.³⁷⁸ In other words, unlike the aforementioned European institutes, the **CI lacks “the principle of non-intervention by the government”**.³⁷⁹

Concerns stem from the fact that while the CI cooperates with local universities, it is supported by Hanban (officially, the Office of the Chinese Language Council International), which is a public institution composed of representatives from 12 ministries and commissions within the Chinese government, under the oversight of the Ministry of Education.³⁸⁰ Although not

³⁷⁵ *Politika*, “Er Srbija” bi mogla da otvori liniju do Kine”, 2020, available at:

<http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/453300/Ekonomija/Er-Srbija-bi-mogla-da-otvori-liniju-do-Kine>

³⁷⁶ Passport Index, “China”, July 2020, available at:

<https://www.passportindex.org/comparebyPassport.php?p1=cn&fl=&s=yes>

³⁷⁷ China – CEEC, “China’s Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries”, 2015, available at: http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zdogjhz_1/t1410595.htm

³⁷⁸ The Sydney Morning Herald, “Confucius says school’s in, but don’t mention democracy”, 2011, available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/education/confucius-says-schools-in-but-dont-mention-democracy-20110219-1b09x.html>

³⁷⁹ *University World News*, “Australia: Another Confucius Institute established”, 2011, available at:

<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20110923212438464>

³⁸⁰ Falk Hartig, “Confusion About Confucius Institutes: Soft Power Push or Conspiracy? A case study of Confucius Institutes in Germany Queensland University of Technology, 2010, p.3, available at:

everyone sees the CI as a “propaganda tool” of the Chinese Communist Party, some nevertheless point out that branches of the CI, in this case in Germany, turn quiet or even silent when it comes to some sensitive topics, which is why it is not seen as practising “comprehensive and pure cultural diplomacy”, but, rather, “a cultural diplomacy with Chinese characteristics”³⁸¹ or even “Communist Party characteristics”.³⁸²

The first CI to open in the Western Balkans was in Belgrade in 2006 at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade. Interestingly, this took place seven years after the BRI was initiated, and only two years after the first CI was founded in South Korea. From a comparative standpoint, the symbolism of this CI appears even more valuable considering that **China opened a CI in Belgrade at the same time it opened its first CI in Berlin.**³⁸³ By the end of 2017, Serbia was the only Western Balkan country with two branches of the CI established on its soil, with the second opened in Novi Sad.

According to the CI’s own words, the CI in Belgrade aims to promote the Chinese culture and language, presenting China to the people of Serbia, connecting individuals and institutions who study the Chinese language or culture in Serbia, making a reference database of Chinese culture and language materials available in Serbia, along with other activities related to cultural cooperation between Serbia and China”.³⁸⁴ To this end, it offers courses on the Chinese language (offering different levels), Chinese calligraphy, and Chinese cuisine.³⁸⁵ It also organises lectures, exhibitions, and movie screenings.

Regardless of its organising structure and direct links to Beijing, the CI appears to have a positive effect on promoting the Chinese culture and language in Serbia. What was found is that **although branches of the CI do not provide commentary on day-to-day political events regarding Serbia or China, they do engage in active cooperation with the Ministry of Education, together with the Chinese embassy.** As mentioned in the section concerning the promotion of the Chinese language, the CI has so far positively evaluated pilot projects in Serbia and actively engaged with Serbian institutions to enable optional Chinese language instruction in all high schools (gymnasiums) in Serbia. Despite some concerns in the West

<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.458.49&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

³⁸¹ Ibid, p.1

³⁸² *University World News*, “Australia: Another Confucius Institute established”, 2011.

³⁸³ Konfuzius-Institut, “The Confucius Institute at the Free University of Berlin”, available at:

<https://www.konfuziusinstitut-berlin.de/ueber-uns/>

³⁸⁴ Confucius Institute in Belgrade, “About us”, available at: <http://old.fil.bg.ac.rs/konfucije/about%20us.html>

³⁸⁵ Faculty of Philology, “FAQ”, available at:

http://old.fil.bg.ac.rs/konfucije/Confucius%20Institute%20in%20Belgrade_FAQ.pdf

regarding the nature of the CI's work, the expert community in Serbia has not found any reason to issue similar concerns in Serbia.

Establishment of the Chinese Cultural Centre

Considering that people-to-people cooperation is a significant component of the BRI and China's approach to Serbia, **the premise for the establishment of a Chinese Cultural Centre came about in 2013, when Serbia and China signed their *Joint Statement on Deepening the Strategic Partnership***. In this document, the two sides committed to actively promoting the establishment of cultural centres in each other's countries and providing support and convenience for their work.³⁸⁶ A concrete agreement to establish mutual cultural centres, making them a platform for cultural exchange, was signed a year later in 2014.³⁸⁷ The total value of The Chinese Cultural Centre in Belgrade is estimated to be €45 million,³⁸⁸ and **is supposed to be**, according to the words of the then-Chinese Ambassador to Serbia Lee Manchang, **the largest Chinese Cultural Centre in all of Europe**.³⁸⁹ The project will host a cinema, theatre, library of Chinese books, and various educational facilities. Just two years later in 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Serbian President Nikolic attended the foundation-laying ceremony of the Chinese Cultural Centre in Belgrade.³⁹⁰

Image 10: Start of construction works - Chinese Cultural Centre Belgrade

³⁸⁶ Joint Statement on Deepening Bilateral Strategic Partnership, 2013

³⁸⁷ DZWWW, "Belgrade Chinese Cultural Center Shandong Enterprise Construction Shandong Management" 2016, available at (in Chinese): <http://paper.dzwww.com/dzrb/content/20160619/Article01006MT.htm>

³⁸⁸ Blic, "'Energoprojekt' će graditi Kineski kulturni centar", 2017, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/beograd/energoprojekt-ce-graditi-kineski-kulturni-centar/cwj4k2x>

³⁸⁹ RTS, "Kineski kulturni centar u Beogradu – prvi na Balkanu", 2017, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/16/kultura/2868216/kineski-kulturni-centar-u-beogradu--prvi-na-balkanu.html>

³⁹⁰ China News, "Belgrade Chinese Cultural Center witnesses the friendship between China and Serbia forged with blood and life", 2016, available at (in Chinese): <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2016/06-18/7908566.shtml>



Source: news.cn

Its construction, however, **officially started in 2017**. Although it was originally intended to be fully constructed by the end of 2018, works were postponed multiple times. In August 2020, however, Chinese Ambassador Chen Bo stated that the project was nearing completion.³⁹¹

Interestingly, **the location of the centre is the same as that of the former Chinese embassy that was bombed in 1999**. To make the symbolic value even greater, in 2016, the road outside the Chinese Cultural Centre was renamed "Confucius Street", and the square was named "Sino-Serbia Friendship Square" by the City of Belgrade.³⁹² As a final touch, in 2017 a statue of Confucius was unveiled and placed next to the construction site, intended to celebrate the sincere and unbreakable friendship between the two nations.³⁹³

As agreed back in 2014, **Serbia reciprocated this gesture in 2018, opening its own Ivo Andrić Cultural Centre in Beijing**.³⁹⁴ What matters is the fact that **it is one of only two Serbian cultural centres abroad, after the one in Paris**. Although the Serbian government intended on constructing such centres in Beijing, Moscow, Berlin, Washington D.C., and

³⁹¹ *Danas*, "Ambasadorka Čen Bo: Kineski kulturni centar pri kraju", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/ambasadorka-cen-bo-kineski-kulturni-centar-pri-kraju-foto/>

³⁹² *China Daily*, "President Xi pays homage to Chinese killed in 1999 embassy bombing", 2016, available at:

https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitoe/2016-06/17/content_25753200.htm

³⁹³ *B92*, "Monument to Confucius unveiled in Belgrade", 2017, available at:

https://www.b92.net/eng/news/society.php?yyyy=2017&mm=04&dd=13&nav_id=101016

³⁹⁴ Serbian government, "Serbian Cultural Centre opened in Beijing", 2018, available at:

<https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/134504/serbian-cultural-centre-opened-in-beijing.php>

Trieste, as according to the “Strategy for Cultural Development 2017-2027”,³⁹⁵ it is clear which side was prioritised. In the same strategy, the Government emphasises the particular importance of the area of cultural industry within the BRI, while adding that the Cultural Centre in Beijing will serve to promote the Serbian culture in China, with a “wider Asian perspective” with regards to this promotion, showcasing areas such as art performances, design, the audio-visual industry, video games, and animation from Serbia. Furthermore, not only will it aim to present Serbia’s art, language, and culture to the Chinese public, but it will also promote Serbian film and Serbia as a filming location. Furthermore, as reminded by the Serbian minister of culture and information, only a few Serbian authors have had their works translated into Chinese, adding that the Cultural Centre will be the place for Chinese publishers to learn about modern Serbian literature, enabling more major Serbian works to be translated into Chinese.³⁹⁶ All of these elements show that **Sino-Serbian cooperation goes beyond economic considerations.**

II. 4 Concluding Remarks on China

China is a game-changer in terms of geopolitics in the Western Balkans. International policymakers and experts have observed Russia as the primary source of discomfort in the region for a long time, but China now appears to be taking centre stage. Not only has China made political and economic breakthroughs in the past years, but Serbia has also chosen to strongly prioritise China in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. This rapid rise in cooperation caught many off guard. Nevertheless, this study shows that **the roots of such cooperation were established as early as 2009, when the two sides signed a *Strategic Partnership*.** In this partnership, it was clearly stated that China is interested in expanding its cooperation with Serbia in areas such as politics and foreign policy, economics and investments, military and police, culture and tourism, hi-tech, and other sectors. This was more than just another document filled with empty phrases. Since then, by taking a gradual and step-by-step approach, Sino-Serbian cooperation has managed to achieve milestones in each and every one of these areas. The fact that Serbia and China elevated their relationship to the highest

³⁹⁵ Serbian government, “Strategija razvoja culture Republike Srbije od 2017. do 2027”, 2017, p.112, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.kultura.gov.rs/docs/dokumenti/predlog-strategije-razvoja-kulture-republike-srbije-od-2017--do-2027--/-predlog-strategije-razvoja-kulture-republike-srbije-od-2017--do-2027-.pdf>

³⁹⁶ E-kapija, “Serbia to open cultural center in China on November 29”, 2017, available at: <https://www.ekapija.com/en/news/2321049/serbia-to-open-cultural-center-in-china-on-november-29>

possible level in 2016 by signing a *Comprehensive Strategic Partnership* was thus a matter of natural progression.

Looking back at how it all started and what has driven Serbia and China closer together, officials often like to make links to the “traditional and steel friendship between” the two that goes back deep into the past. Yet, **productive Sino-Serbian cooperation is a relatively new phenomenon.** In fact, **the key determinant** that set the real starting point in their relations was their **mutual adherence to, and promotion of, the principle of territorial integrity**, particularly in the aftermath of Kosovo’s self-declared independence in 2008. It shows that Realpolitik, seeking advantage in one another, was the key factor that brought the two sides together.

What further gave weight to this relationship is the fact that **Serbia chose China as one of the four pillars of its foreign policy even before its official launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013.** The fact that every government of Serbia has prioritised close relations with China is what has facilitated the sustainability of their subsequent cooperation. As a result, it has also contributed to the positive view of China shared by Serbian citizens. Yet, despite the fruitfulness of Sino-Serbian cooperation, this study finds that some elements of it can be damaging to Serbia’s path towards the EU.

From a political standpoint, the key damaging aspect to Serbia’s EU accession process stemming from its cooperation with China is Serbia’s refusal to align with EU foreign declarations targeting China. No matter whether the declarations were about geopolitics or human rights, before or after the launch of the BRI, Serbia has never aligned with them. As such, it stands out from the rest of the Western Balkan region, which generally adheres to the EU’s calls to align. This refusal to align directly works against its obligation under Chapter 31 to progressively align its foreign policy with that of the EU. What deepens Serbia’s foreign policy commitment to China is the fact it stands by its Asian partner in international forums such as the UN, while increasingly and proactively sending messages of support to Beijing and the Chinese Communist Party. It appears that Belgrade’s willingness to unconditionally stand by China’s side, even at the cost of a negative reputation in Brussels and the speed of its accession process, was what has earned it trust in Beijing. This kind of trust is what also led to the extension of cooperation in other areas as well.

The fact that Serbia is organising joint police drills, and is considering organising joint military exercises with China, all while beginning to acquire sophisticated weapons from it, might be another matter of concern, not only for the EU, but also for the US. Considering that China is the second-largest donor to the Serbian Ministry of Defence is yet another example of the fact that China is interested in multi-layered cooperation with Serbia. Another area which includes security concerns are Serbia's technology partnerships with China, notably with Huawei, with whom Serbia has been conducting multiple projects in the past years. Cooperation in all of these areas indicates that the **Belt and Road Initiative goes far beyond purely economic considerations.** As the East and West are increasingly suspicious of each other, these questions of China's political, security, and technological importance are going to further complicate Serbia's balancing act on its path to the EU. The fact that the 2020 Washington Agreement contains a clause directly targeting Chinese technology, notable in terms of its potential future 5G cooperation with Serbia, will be a significant challenge, if not the most significant, to Sino-Serbian relations.

As China is a relatively new player in Serbian politics, it is also new to economic cooperation with Serbia. Even though many see the announcement of the BRI in 2013 as a starting point of China's more assertive global outreach, its economic relations with Serbia had been raised to a higher level even back in 2009, with the signing of an Agreement on economic and technical cooperation. Since then, economic cooperation between the two has continued to grow.

Trade relations between China and Serbia follow the trend of their overall economic cooperation, as the recorded value of traded goods increases from year to year. After analysing the details of their bilateral cooperation, it can be concluded that **Sino-Serbian trade patterns now follow, in a broad sense, the template of trade relations between an underdeveloped and a developed country,** in which the former exports mainly raw materials and imports technologically-advanced products. As a result, in addition to the **inevitable rising trade deficit between Serbia and China,** development perspectives are not bright in this balance of power and increasing trade volumes.

Even though investments from China ensure employment for many workers in Serbia and contribute to Serbian exports, **the problem with these investments is that they are present primarily in relatively high-polluting industries and engaged in the production of goods at a lower level of technological advancement.** In other words, as long as Serbia exports

copper and gold to China, where it used to produce electronic chips which will be components of mobile phones or laptops, and eventually imported from China as finished products, it would be unrealistic to expect that such cooperation could significantly boost Serbia's economic development.

What is also characteristic of the business cooperation between the two countries is **the progressive complexity of mutual relations. This relation evolved from the simplest form of cooperation, with the Chinese acquisition of the Smederevo steel mill, through greenfield investment, exemplified in the Zrenjanin tire production plant, and all the way to a strategic partnership, as the most advanced form of cooperation, in the RTB Bor copper mining and smelting complex.** In this way, China has shown its willingness to create advanced business links with a long-term perspective and confirms its readiness to cooperate with the Serbian government on a partnership basis.

The effects of **cooperation between Serbia and China in infrastructure projects** are questionable primarily due to their **non-transparent deal making, frequent circumvention of public procurement procedures,** and agreed conditions that remain far from the public eye, even after the completion of projects. Making agreements for infrastructure projects at the level of political elites without public tenders cast doubts on the actual competitiveness of agreed-upon projects. In other words, if agreements are reached behind closed doors, public scrutiny is avoided and consequently, the justifications for the use of taxpayers' money are questionable.

Therefore, apart from the benefits provided to citizens by new or renovated infrastructure, **the spillover effects of projects implemented with Chinese loans on the Serbian economy cannot be measured, as the cost-effectiveness of these projects and their contracted conditions remain inaccessible to the public.** Nevertheless, this practise should not be linked only to those projects done with Chinese involvement, as it is rather the style of economic governance generally imposed by the Serbian government, regardless of who is a partner. **As the development of a robust system of rule of law is a precondition for EU membership, Serbia's deal-making processes are a serious matter of concern.**

Besides the political and economic partnership between the two states, **the people-to-people aspect of cooperation is also relevant, especially as Serbia has consistently been the first country in its region to make milestones with China in this regard.** Particularly important

is the fact that Chinese citizens now represent the largest group of tourists visiting Serbia, after visa liberalisation between the two countries. As a way to further expand cooperation, there is also an increasing trend in sister city and provincial cooperation between Serbia and China, which is expected to continue going forward. Furthermore, the fact that the Chinese language is increasingly being taught in Serbian schools, in coordination with the Confucius Institute, is an element that can assist in bridging the cultural gap between the two countries. No criticisms in this area could be found whatsoever.

Alongside these aspects, **China stands strong in terms of Serbian public perceptions of the existing cooperation**, with high expectations for future cooperation as well. Although the citizens of Serbia prefer the EU over China in terms of a preferred place to live, for China it is important that there is no such thing as “Sino-scepticism” in Serbia, unlike the widespread phenomenon of Euroscepticism. In other words, **China is not a politically or socially divisive or sensitive issue, which is why its non-democratic practices at the domestic level are unlikely to affect its level of support among the Serbian population.** In fact, as long as China continues to support Serbia’s territorial integrity, while increasingly engaging in business activities in Serbia, the local population is likely to continue to hold a very favourable opinion of China. Therefore, although geographically distanced, **China punches above its weight in terms of its soft power in Serbia.**

This fact became particularly clear **during the COVID-19 pandemic, when China showed its willingness and ability to take swift and proactive action in coordination with the Serbian government.** For Beijing, these actions further strengthened its already positive reputation in Serbia and increased its leverage in this part of Europe. For Belgrade, this has allowed it to scapegoat the EU while side-lining Russia, and thus increase its bargaining power in the balancing act. In this regard, the manner in which Serbian officials systematically and continuously portrayed China as a key ally during the pandemic was done at the expense of the EU’s image and efforts in Serbia.

It remains yet to be seen to what extent this pro-China and Eurosceptic rhetoric has impacted the already-volatile levels of overall support to EU membership shown by the local population. Nevertheless, what is already known is that the majority of citizens, as shown by polls, have started to believe that China is the biggest donor to Serbia – thus minimising the fact that in reality this honour belongs to the EU. **By turning its back on the EU and choosing instead**

to focus on this “steel friendship” in a time of crisis in Europe, Serbia directly went against the expectation that candidate countries are not to only align their policies but also their rhetoric with the values and actions of the EU, in times of good and bad.

All things considered, **although China has not shown an apparent will to undermine Serbia’s accession process, it is becoming clear that increasing Sino-Serbian cooperation is not fully compatible with Serbia’s EU aspirations.** Yet, it appears that there is no end in sight to the expansion of cooperation between these two states. Having in mind the continuous and multi-layered cooperation shown so far between Serbia and China, it is not an exaggeration to argue that **Sino-Serbian relations have never in history been this close, proactive, and productive.** As such, these relations represent a win-win situation for Chinese and Serbian officials.

On the one hand, China manages to nurture close cooperation with a European country aspiring to join the EU at a time when the EU is defining it as a “systemic rival”. Although it has long projected its power in Asia and even Africa, the fact that China now has a solid European partner contributes to its ability to project its power globally, and thus increase its leverage. Furthermore, it appears that **Serbia’s objective of EU membership goes hand-in-hand with the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China’s economic interests.** Not only would the EU accession of the region diminish administrative and customs barriers, but it would also boost regional connectivity, thus making it easier to transport Chinese goods across the region to the rest of Europe.

On the other hand, without a credible date of accession in sight, Serbia’s officials turn to China as an alternative source of financial support. The fact that the close relationship with China generates not only loans but also investments in key strategic sectors allows these officials to present any breakthroughs as their own successes. In other words, cooperation with China is politically lucrative, as job retention and job creation is turned into political votes. On top of this, the increasing foothold of China, seen as competition by the West, allows **Serbia to essentially raise its bargaining power in the geopolitical arena.** Not only does it strengthen Serbia’s claim over territorial integrity, but Belgrade is able to use Beijing to blackmail Brussels along the lines of “either you speed up the accession process and provide us with substantial grants and ease up the accession process, or we turn our attention to our brotherly China”. Although the EU should not succumb to open blackmail, **if it does not step up its**

game and become more involved as a political and economic player, the Serbian political establishment will not have sufficient incentives to turn its back on China.

III Russia – The Eurasian Brown Bear Extending to its Limits

Russia has traditionally been the main target of the EU's concern when it comes to the impact of third actors in Serbia. From the EU's perspective, Russia is an authoritarian regime whose aim is to disrupt the Serbia's accession process of, as well as those of other countries of the region, by playing the role of a spoiler and generally countering the Euro-Atlantic processes. What raises these fears is the fact that Serbia is closely aligned with Russia in the international arena and is overdependent on Russia's gas and oil. Also, Russia's outperformance of the EU in the arena of soft power in Serbia has a major impact on this situation.

Some of these fears do have some basis in reality. However, when it comes to Russia's negative impact on Serbia's EU accession process, it also appears that the EU has shown a lack of genuine understanding of why Serbian decision-makers and its population have shown sympathies to Russia and willingness to cooperate with it. By gaining careful and in-depth insights on why there is a close relationship between Serbia and Russia, the EU can react as it should and develop certain measures to nudge Serbia, with time, closer to the EU's overall position on Russia. The following sub-chapters discuss how Russia has managed to become an influential player in Serbia, by analysing its impact in political, economic, and social spheres.

III. 1 Political Relations with Russia

III. 1. 1 History Matters for Contemporary Politics

Considering Russia's traditional presence in Serbia and the rest of the region, it would be misleading to fully characterise it as an external actor. A better way to label Russia is as a **“semi-external” player**.³⁹⁷ In fact, the historical presence of Russia in the region goes back centuries, with mixed results when it comes to working in favour of Serbia's national interest. A notable example of Russia's positive engagement was in the early 19th century,³⁹⁸ when it

³⁹⁷ Dejan Jović, “Accession to the European Union and Perception of External Actors in the Western Balkans”, *Croatian International Relations Review*, XXIV (83), 2018, p.7, available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328633346_Accession_to_the_European_Union_and_Perception_of_External_Actors_in_the_Western_Balkans

³⁹⁸ Marko Savić, “Ruska geopolitika I Balkan”, Podgorica, University of Montenegro – Faculty of Political Sciences (MA Thesis), 2016, p.45, available at (in Serbian):

aided local rebels in their fight against the Ottoman empire, or when Russia's Tsar Nikolai II joined the First World War in Serbia's defence. Furthermore, the relationship is often related with the myth of "Slavic brotherhood", whose key element is the uniting shared practice of Orthodox Christianity. Another important element is that Serbia and Russia never engaged in armed conflict against one another throughout their histories. **Such moments and historical developments remain as visible memories in the hearts and minds of the local population, but also in the hearts and minds of Serbian political elites.**³⁹⁹

Today, these "positive" memories outweigh the negative ones in public and political discourse in Serbia. Having in mind the differences between Yugoslavia and Serbia, an example of when interests of Belgrade and Moscow clashed includes the interwar period, when the "first" Yugoslavia and the USSR did not maintain diplomatic relations,⁴⁰⁰ or the Cold War era, during which, the "second" Yugoslavia and the USSR were on the brink of war after Tito's break from Stalin in 1948.⁴⁰¹ In fact, **the official historical narrative intentionally skips moments of poor Serbo-Russian relations.**⁴⁰² This makes it more difficult, both for political elites and the general public, to objectively view and rationally reassess Russia and its activities even today.

Fast-forward to the 1990s, the West and Serbia have typically taken opposing positions, while Russia was too weak to play direct favourites and had to be satisfied with a backseat role. From the War in Croatia (1991-95) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-95), to the Kosovo War and the NATO bombing campaign (1998-99), the interests of Serbia and the West have been largely diametrically opposed. Internationally and domestically weakened, in the 1990s, **Russia at first was unable to impose any serious objections to the West's activities in the Balkans.**

https://www.academia.edu/31675776/RUSKA_GEOPOLITIKA_I_BALKAN_master_thesis

³⁹⁹ Belgrade welcomed a monument to the aforementioned Tsar Nikolai II donated by Russia, placing it in a park near Serbia's National Assembly and close to the Russian Cultural Centre, on the site of the former Russian Embassy.

Balkan Insight, "Belgrade Gets Statue of Russia's Last Tsar", 2014, available at:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2014/04/08/belgrade-gets-russian-tsar-romanov-statue/>

⁴⁰⁰ *Politika*, "Zadevice obe Jugoslavije s Moskvom", 2020, available at:

<http://ts625317v031.moji.oblaci.rs/sr/clanak/456859/Zadevice-obe-Jugoslavije-s-Moskvom>

⁴⁰¹ Another notable historical example of when the Russian and Serbian interests did not align was the late 19th century. Namely, when the Treaty of St. Stefano was signed in 1878 (ending the war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire), Russia pressed the Ottoman Empire to accept the creation of an autonomous Bulgarian principality, in fact a Greater Bulgaria, as an instrument for Russian dominance in the Balkans. At that time, this was seen as a direct threat to Serbian interests, perceiving Bulgaria as a rival. These provisions were significantly modified by the Treaty of Berlin, signed in the same year, which recognised an autonomous, but much smaller, Bulgaria within the Ottoman Empire.

See: Miroslav Svirčević, "The Establishment of Serbian Local Government in the Counties of Niš, Vranje, Toplica and Pirot Subsequent to the Serbo-Turkish Wars of 1876–1878", *Balkanica XXXVII*, 2006, p.112, available at: <http://www.doiserbia.nb.rs/img/doi/0350-7653/2006/0350-76530637111S.pdf>

⁴⁰² CEAS, "The Russification of Serbia", 2014, p.96, available at: <https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/publikacije/Mapping-Russian-influence-in-Serbia.pdf>

In fact, in the early 1990s, Russia was focused on cooperating and band wagoning with the US, which is why it also agreed to the strict UN sanctions placed on Serbia in the 1990s.⁴⁰³ The wars in Croatia and BiH ended in 1995, with negligible Russian involvement, which was limited to a supporting role for what was mainly a US effort, albeit one that had value in its softer approach to official Belgrade. Later on, Russia contributed to peacekeeping and mediation efforts led by NATO.⁴⁰⁴

Things started to change, however, during the Kosovo War, when Russia openly opposed NATO's intention to bomb Yugoslavia. After it became apparent that the NATO bombing campaign was about to start without the official approval of the UN Security Council (UN SC), the Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, on his way to Washington D.C., turned his plane around and returned to Russia in protest.⁴⁰⁵ Other than using its veto power in the UN SC in favour of Belgrade, and criticising NATO for violating norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity, Russia was powerless to prevent the bombing. Just days after the bombing ended, Russia dispatched a peacekeeping contingent to Kosovo, without prior authorisation from, or coordination with, NATO. The standoff between Russia and NATO lasted for two weeks, seriously risking a military confrontation. In the end, the standoff ended peacefully, with a strategic victory for NATO. Even after the war ended, Russia has had no presence in Kosovo following the withdrawal of its Kosovo Force (KFOR) contingent in 2003.⁴⁰⁶ Nevertheless, thanks to Russia's support in the UN, the NATO bombing campaign is still considered by the Serbian public and political elite as illegitimate and against international law. Hence, **the Kosovo War represented a turning point for Russia, as it allowed it to amass political capital and increase its soft power in Serbia.**

The historical context is highly relevant to understanding Russia's view of the region today, particularly as history is commonly used as a tool for achieving political and economic interests. **Although the region is not a top geostrategic priority for Russia, it nevertheless remains "a secondary political arena in its wider rivalry with the West".**⁴⁰⁷ As such, the

⁴⁰³ Dušan Reljić, "Rusija i Zapadni Balkan", ISAC, 2009, p.8, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.isac-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Rusija-i-zapadni-balkan.pdf>

⁴⁰⁴ Maxim Samorukov, "A Spoiler in the Balkans? Russia and the Final Resolution of the Kosovo Conflict", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019, p.2, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/WP_Samorukov_Balkans_v2.pdf

⁴⁰⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, "Primakov Does U-Turn Over Atlantic, Heads Home", 1999, available at: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1999-mar-24-mn-20482-story.html>

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁴⁰⁷ Vuk Vuksanović, "Granice istoka: Šta žele Rusija i Turska na Balkanu?", Interview for *Al Jazeera Balkan* (08:10 – 08:20), 2018, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UphtzENL8oA>

region also bears symbolic value to Russia,⁴⁰⁸ as it lost its status of being a great power after being marginalised in regional affairs during the 1990s and wishes to regain some strength. The perception that Russia was humiliated in 1999 by the US was henceforth used as a justification for its stronger engagement – “payback for the West’s arrogance”.⁴⁰⁹ Furthermore, by reengaging with the region, most notably with Serbia, it has been working on rebuilding its status as a European and world power piece by piece. In other words, **by exerting its influence beyond its borders and in the EU’s immediate neighbourhood and US’ geopolitical sphere of influence, Russia is reaffirming its position as a global power.**

III. 1. 2 Non-recognition of Kosovo as a Key Point of Leverage

Russia’s non-recognition of Kosovo’s*⁴¹⁰ self-declared independence represents its key point of leverage when it comes to its relations with Serbia. From the standpoint of domestic law, Serbia’s Constitution of 2006 considers Kosovo (officially known as Kosovo and Metohija) to be Serbia’s southern autonomous province, as was the case with Serbia’s constitutions throughout the 20th century. From the international standpoint, Serbia’s territorial integrity is legally guaranteed by UN SC Resolution 1244. In the hearts and minds of most Serbs, Kosovo remains a key aspect of the Serbian identity. Furthermore, as some argue, the formal recognition of Kosovo’s independence would signify “an *a posteriori* justification of the NATO bombing campaign”.⁴¹¹ Unlike the West, **Russia has shown an understanding of how important the issue of Kosovo is for the collective memory of Serbs, using this to its advantage.**

What also increased Russia’s importance was the fact that Serbia had almost no other major political ally that would actively come to its aid in the international arena in the in the post-war negotiations on Kosovo (closer relations with China only started to intensify in 2008 and

⁴⁰⁸ Vuk Vuksanović, “Granice istoka: Šta žele Rusija i Turska na Balkanu?”, interview for *Al Jazeera Balkan* (6:00 – 6:35) available at (in Serbian): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UphtzENL8oA>

⁴⁰⁹ Dimitar Bechev, “Making Inroads: Competing Powers in the Balkans”, in “The Balkans: Old, New in Stabilities: A European Region Looking for its Place in the World”, ISPI, 2020, p.55, available at: https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/isp_i_report_balcani_2020_0.pdf#page=48

⁴¹⁰ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence. For the sake of simplicity, the asterisk will not be used in the rest of the chapter.

⁴¹¹ Dejan Jović, “Accession to the European Union and Perception of External Actors in the Western Balkans”, *Croatian International Relations Review*, XXIV (83), 2018, p.23.

2009).⁴¹² The common understanding between Belgrade and Moscow was also reflected in their rejection of UN mediator Martti Ahtisaari's plan to resolve the status of Kosovo, as they both perceived it as another plan for Kosovo's independence.⁴¹³ In this context, **Serbia's rapprochement with Russia was followed by the simultaneous discounting of any possibility of membership in NATO,**⁴¹⁴ resulting in Serbia's proclamation of military neutrality in 2007, which Belgrade applies to this date.⁴¹⁵ This proclamation has opened up more space for the development of a sort of special relationship with Russia.⁴¹⁶

After Kosovo declared independence in 2008, accompanied by its swift recognition by many Western countries, Russia stepped in as an irreplaceable supporter of Serbia's claim. In fact, Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, described the secession by saying that it is a "terrible precedent which will de facto blow apart the whole system of international relations and come back to hit the West in the face".⁴¹⁷ Since then, support for the EU in Serbia has struggled to remain high. With the exception of a spike in the EU's popularity in Serbia after visas were abolished in 2009, support for Serbia's accession to the EU has declined and has remained volatile ever since. To illustrate the importance of the issue of Kosovo for the Serbian collective identity, polls show that two thirds of the population would be unwilling to support EU accession if it required the recognition of Kosovo's independence.⁴¹⁸ Russia is fully aware of this fact, and **is using it to boost its own appeal, making it costly for any political elite to turn their back to Moscow.**

What makes Russia's support so valuable is the fact it is a permanent member of the UN SC. Due to its veto power, practically nothing can be done regarding the status of Kosovo in the UN without the unanimous approval of all permanent members of the SC. This fact has long

⁴¹² Dušan Reljić, "Rusija i Zapadni Balkan", ISAC, 2009, p.11.

⁴¹³ *Financial Times*, "Russia rejects plan for Kosovo", 2007, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/f3f09aae-30a0-11dc-9a81-0000779fd2ac>

⁴¹⁴ Dragan Đukanović and Ivona Lađevac, "Prioriteti spoljnopoličke strategije Republike Srbije", *Međunarodni Problemi*, p.354.

⁴¹⁵ National Assembly of Serbia, "Rezolucija Narodne skupštine o zaštiti suvereniteta, teritorijalnog integriteta i ustavnog poretka Republike Srbije", 2007, point 6, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/sr/index.php/component/content/article/65-zastita-suvereniteta?lang=lat>

⁴¹⁶ Filip Ejđus, "Serbia's Military Neutrality: Origins, Effects and Challenges", CIRR XX(71), 2014, p.59, available at: http://www.filipejđus.com/Public/Uploads/Attach/ejđus_2014serbias_military_neutrality_origins_effects_and_challenges_54b8cfa33d585.pdf

⁴¹⁷ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, "Putin calls Kosovo independence 'terrible precedent'", 2008, available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/world/putin-calls-kosovo-independence-terrible-precedent-20080223-gds2d5.html>

⁴¹⁸ Miloš Popović, "Public perception of Serbia's foreign policy", Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), 2017, slide 30, available at: http://www.bezbednost.org/upload/document/public_perception_of_serbias_foreign_policy.pdf

represented a win-win situation for Serbia and Russia. On the one hand, keeping close ties to Russia thus enables Serbia to effectively guarantee that Kosovo will not gain a seat in the UN.⁴¹⁹ On the other hand, **by insisting that any solution between Belgrade and Priština must be approved by the UN SC, Russia has found a way to effectively secure and maintain its political leverage in Belgrade in the long run.**⁴²⁰

Furthermore, **Serbo-Russian cooperation goes beyond just the UN.** In the 2013 strategic partnership between Russia and Serbia, for instance, it is stated that the two sides will also interact within international frameworks such as **the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and other international forums.**⁴²¹ As Kosovo has struggled to acquire membership in international bodies, such as UNESCO,⁴²² and Interpol,⁴²³ Russia's support to Serbia's cause has mattered all the more.

Russia's readiness to fully back Serbia in this regard has been demonstrated by symbolic gestures as well. In 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN issued a complaint against Kosovo's Foreign Minister for using an inappropriate background (in the form of the yellow-blue flag of Kosovo) during his speech at the UN Security Council web conference.⁴²⁴ Furthermore, **Russia's has supported Serbia's international campaign for the de-recognition of Kosovo's proclaimed independence.** For this reason, Kosovo's Foreign Minister in 2019 went so far as to accuse Russia of aiding Serbia in "coercing" countries to revoke their diplomatic recognition of Kosovo.⁴²⁵

These examples indicate that, unlike China, which often has a moderate and limited approach when it comes to publicly and rhetorically dealing with the issue of Kosovo, Russia has always

⁴¹⁹ For this reason, Serbia's Foreign Minister, Ivica Dačić, even stated that Kosovo will join the UN when "pigs fly".

See: B92, "Serbia will recognize Kosovo when pigs fly – FM", 2018, available at:

https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2018&mm=09&dd=17&nav_id=105082

⁴²⁰ NI, "Bocan Harčenko o Kosovu: Stav Rusije kristalno jasan i dobro poznat", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a598493/Bocan-Harcenko-o-Kosovu-Stav-Rusije-kristalno-jasan-i-dobro-poznat.html>

⁴²¹ Government of Russia, "Strategic Partnership between Russia and Serbia", 2013, available at (in Russian):

<http://kremlin.ru/supplement/1461>

⁴²² B92, "Details emerge of vote in UNESCO's Executive Board", 2015, available at:

https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2015&mm=10&dd=22&nav_id=95800

⁴²³ B92, "Kosovo's bid to join Interpol fails", 2018, available at:

https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2018&mm=11&dd=20&nav_id=105558

⁴²⁴ *Večernje novosti*, "Ruski predstavnik očitao lekciju ministru tzv. Kosova: Zastava nepriznate republike neprikladna na sednici Saveta bezbednosti UN", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:861260-Ruski-predstavnik-ocitao-lekciju-ministru-tzv-Kosova-Zastava-nep priznate-republike-neprikladna-na-sednici-Saveta-bezbednosti-UN>

⁴²⁵ *Axios*, "Kosovo foreign minister: Russia is aiding Serbia's derecognition 'fraud'", 2019, available at:

<https://www.axios.com/kosovo-derecognition-serbia-russia-united-nations-dbcf7413-2a3f-49f0-b2b4-667bcba66084.html>

been at the forefront, as a country providing the loudest vocal, and strongest rhetorical, support to Serbia. Not only have such verbal actions been useful to Serbia from the international standpoint, but also from the domestic, particularly as the unresolved issue of Kosovo still dominates the Serbian public and political agenda. Therefore, **the fact that Russia has continuously demonstrated its willingness to *proactively* use its position in the UN SC and rhetoric to push Serbia's views on Kosovo (unlike China, whose approach, although supportive, is more passive), is the reason why it has typically been seen as an irreplaceable partner by the Serbian establishment.** ⁴²⁶

Box 10: Russia and the 2013 Brussels Agreement

After the UN General Assembly agreed to move the venue of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina from the UN to the EU in 2010, the talks have been held in Brussels. Commenting on the fact that Serbia succumbed to demands coming from Washington and Brussels, Russia's former ambassador to Serbia, Aleksandr Konuzin, illustrated Russia's displeasure by publicly saying that "[Russians] cannot be more Serbs than Serbs."⁴²⁷ Nevertheless, Russia has not stopped standing by Serbia's side even when the Brussels Agreement was signed in 2013 by Belgrade and Pristina.⁴²⁸ In fact, Moscow and Belgrade even signed a Strategic Partnership that year.

Even though the EU hailed the Agreement as a major achievement, it turned out, later on, that its full implementation has not taken place. Namely, the key issue that concerned Belgrade, which automatically got the backing of Russia, is the fact that Priština never implemented the key aspect of the Agreement - on forming an Association of Serbian Municipalities in northern parts of Kosovo where Serbs consist the majority of the population. **As the implementation of the Brussels Agreement remained incomplete,**

⁴²⁶ Russia and China have shown the willingness and ability to work together when it comes to backing Serbia's claim of its territorial integrity. For example, in 2008, when their foreign ministers gathered (together with their Indian counterpart), they issued the following statement: "[T]he unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo contradicts Resolution 1244. Russia, India and China encourage Belgrade and Priština to resume talks within the framework of international law and hope they reach an agreement on all problems of that Serbian territory." *Russa Today*, "Russia, China & India insist Kosovo and Serbia resume talks", 2008, available at: <https://www.rt.com/news/russia-china-and-india-insist-kosovo-and-serbia-resume-talks/>

⁴²⁷ B92, "Ambassador who could not be "more Serb than Serbs", 2012, available at: https://www.b92.net/eng/insight/tvshows.php?yyyy=2012&mm=09&nav_id=82233

⁴²⁸ Brussels Agreement - First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations, 2013, available at: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/cinjenice/en/120394>

Russia used it as opportunity to build its case, by arguing that the whole process has ended in “the state of deep conceptual crisis,” all thanks to the way Brussels handled the negotiations.⁴²⁹ Therefore, the longer the EU is unable to broker an effective solution to the two negotiation parties, the longer will Russia be able to sharpen its criticism of the whole process.

When it comes to the Belgrade-Priština dialogue, Russia has, from time to time, issued open criticism of Serbia’s “softness”.⁴³⁰ This became particularly clear as the word “compromise” with Kosovo became more commonly heard from Serbian officials.⁴³¹ One of the more popular ideas advocated by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić in 2018⁴³² was a land swap, which would essentially ethnically separate the ethnic Serbian and Albanian communities. After the US showed some interest in this idea, alongside the then High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini, Russia became alarmed. In the wake of these developments, the spokesperson for the Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova said it was up to Belgrade and Priština to agree a deal, but pointedly added that “the deal has to reflect the interests of the Serb people” if Russia is to back it.⁴³³ **Conscient of public sentiment in Serbia, Russia uses this as a tool to reinforce its position, while striving to limit the outcomes of the dialogue.**

Although the idea of a land swap does not appear to be on the agenda anymore, particularly due to strong opposition by many EU member states (especially Germany), the completion of the Belgrade-Priština dialogue with the signing of a comprehensive and legally-binding document on the normalisation of relations still remains a requirement which will determine Serbia’s future EU membership. In this context, it is important to note that Moscow warns, even in 2020, against attempts to force “definitive normalisation”, which it defined as counterproductive, as well against the imposition of pre-prepared solutions and timeframes.⁴³⁴

⁴²⁹ Russian News Agency, “EU-mediated dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo remains in deep crisis — Russian diplomat”, 2018, available at: <https://tass.com/politics/1030925>

⁴³⁰ Artem Patalakh, “Emotions and Identity as Foreign Policy Determinants: Serbian Approach to Relations with Russia”, 2018, p.14.

⁴³¹ *NI*, “Vučić: Srbija spremna da razgovara o kompromisu za Kosovo, a ne ultimatum”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a659434/Vucic-Kompromis-za-Kosovo-a-ne-ultimatum.html>

⁴³² *NI*, “Džon Bolton: Razgovaralo se o razmeni teritorija kao rešenju za Kosovo”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a616588/Bolton-potvrdio-da-se-razgovaralo-o-razmeni-teritorija.html>

⁴³³ *The Guardian*, “US-backed Kosovo land-swap border plan under fire from all sides”, 2018, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/03/us-backed-kosovo-land-swap-border-plan-under-fire-from-all-sides>

⁴³⁴ *B92*, “Bocan Harčenko: Stav Rusije je...”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2020&mm=10&dd=19&nav_category=11&nav_id=1749797

Statements of this kind showcase that **the closer Belgrade and Priština get to closing a final deal, the more Russia will become a burden to Serbia's political establishment** - particularly as they want to avoid a situation in which Russians would look like “truer Serbs” than themselves.

Box 11: Russia and the 2020 Washington Agreement

The fact that the US became more actively involved in the Belgrade-Priština dialogue in 2019 and 20 added a new layer of geopolitical importance to the issue for Russia. Although Serbian President Vučić publicly asked his Russian counterpart in 2017 whether they would be willing to get involved as mediators in the dialogue, in case the format of the dialogue was to widen,⁴³⁵ Russian involvement never came about despite the fact they expressed willingness to partake. It is hard to imagine that the US and the EU would ever agree on Russia's entry into negotiations. Therefore, **if this moment is imagined as a game of musical chairs, Russia was the player that lost its chair.** It demonstrates that, although Russia is a country with significant political leverage in Serbia, it has its limits.

Considering that Belgrade was at first sceptical regarding Priština's calls for the US to get involved, the US administration surprisingly found a common ground with Belgrade. Not only did the signing of the 2020 Washington Agreement show that Serbia is ready to make concessions in order to strike points with the US, but it also calls on Serbia to diversify its energy supplies (cutting away some of Russia's influence).⁴³⁶ Such a breakthrough, after years of uneasy relations between Serbia and the US, are also reflected in the rhetoric of Serbia's President, who overwhelmingly praised the US administration for its involvement in the dialogue upon his return from Washington D.C.⁴³⁷ Russia's immediate reaction to this situation was best exemplified in a tweet from the spokesperson for Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova, in which the Serbian President was directly ridiculed for

⁴³⁵ *NI*, “Vučić: Ako bude širenja dijaloga, Rusi spremni da se uključe”, 2017, available at (in Serbian): <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a350655/Vucic-Ako-bude-sirenja-dijaloga-Rusi-spremni-da-se-ukljuce.html>

⁴³⁶ *NI*, “Šta je potpisano - tekst sporazuma”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a636581/Tekst-sporazuma-Beograd-Pristina.html>

⁴³⁷ *Danas*, “Vučić: Amerika gleda Srbiju drugim očima”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.danas.rs/politika/vucic-amerika-gleda-srbiju-drugim-ocima/>

going to the White House.⁴³⁸ **Such a step was unprecedented in Serbo-Russian relations, indicating that Russia will not tolerate Belgrade's deals with the US behind its back.**

Furthermore, it is widely understood that these steps toward Serbo-American rapprochement were the reason why Putin's planned visit to Serbia in October 2020 never came to fruition.⁴³⁹ As Putin regularly visits Serbia, this decision could to be interpreted as a latest warning to Belgrade that Russia's patience is running out. **As Moscow is increasingly sending signals of distrust towards the Serbian political leadership, the geopolitical chessboard in the region has become all the more complicated in 2020.**

All things considered, it is simply not in Russia's interest for relations between Belgrade and Priština to be fully, and once and for all, normalised, as **an effective solution to the Kosovo issue would deprive Russia of its key political leverage.** In that scenario, Russia's political partnership with Serbia would risk becoming redundant, as Serbia would have fewer incentives to continue with its current policy towards Russia. It is also unknown whether and how Serbia would readjust its economic and energy policies vis-à-vis Russia. Considering that the Western Balkans represents a geostrategic region that is at the crossroads between the East and West, **it can be expected that Russia will do its best to sustain its leverage in Serbia, in order to continue using it as a relatively costless and effective bargaining chip during negotiations with the West.**⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁸ *NI*, "Zakharova compares Vucic's meeting with Trump to scene from 'Basic Instinct'", 2020, available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a636875/Zakharova-compares-Vucic-s-meeting-with-Trump-to-scene-from-Basic-Instinct.html>

⁴³⁹ See: *Serbian Monitor*, "Putin cancels his visit to Serbia", 2020, available at: <https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/putin-cancels-his-visit-to-serbia/>

⁴⁴⁰ Even in case of a Belgrade-Priština deal, Russia might choose to use the situation to its advantage. Although it is not expected to recognise Kosovo, it could potentially use the situation in order to further reaffirm its claim on Crimea - which it claims has legitimately seceded from Ukraine according to referendum results in 2014. In fact, Vladimir Putin made the following parallel between the case of Kosovo and Crimea: "you are talking about annexation, but can we call a referendum held among the people living in the region annexation? Then Kosovo's self-determination was also annexation. Why do you not say Kosovo was annexed after the invasion of NATO troops? You do not say that. You are talking about the Kosovars' right to self-determination".

Russian President Vladimir Putin, "Interview with Austrian ORF television channel", 2018, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57675>

III. 1. 3 Serbia's (non) Alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy

It is important to note that **all post-2000 governments of Serbia have stressed the importance of keeping closer ties with Russia, no matter whether these governments were pro-EU or Eurosceptic.** From today's perspective, it is a fact that the vast majority of political parties in Serbia continue to advocate for the necessity of keeping close cooperation with Russia, while simultaneously prioritising Serbia's path towards the EU. This self-positioning of the political elite is partially based on their own personal and identity-based beliefs, and also on the overall positive attitudes of the local population towards Russia. Thus, **even if the opposition were to win** enough seats in the National Assembly to form a new government, it is expected that **Serbia's official position towards Russia would not see major change.**

Candidate countries are required to progressively align with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as they move closer to membership. Such obligations are encompassed by the Chapter 31. Even though this chapter is considered to be of a technical nature and has not presented a significant problem for other countries during previous enlargement cycles, in Serbia's case it bears special political weight. **Due to Serbia's strategic and pragmatic appreciation of Russia, the former has been categorically unwilling to work against Russia's interests in the foreign policy arena.**

The fact that Serbia has not adopted any official foreign policy strategy allows it to swim in the waters of international relations as it sees fit, **resulting in the pragmatic orientation of its foreign policy.** Unsurprisingly, this continues to cause serious concern in Brussels, and especially in those EU member states with security concerns regarding Russia such as the Baltic states. In fact, while reaffirming unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans, EU leaders also reiterated their calls at the 2020 Zagreb Summit for all partners to progress towards full alignment with EU foreign policy positions - which is telling in terms of the increasing importance the EU gives to this topic.⁴⁴¹ As a response to EU's nudging of Serbia, the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova described such calls "as an undisguised blackmail".⁴⁴²

⁴⁴¹ Zagreb Summit Declaration, 2020, available at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43776/zagreb-declaration-en-06052020.pdf>

⁴⁴² Russian Embassy to Serbia, "Odgovor portparola MIP Rusije Marije Zaharove na pitanje medija o samitu EU – Zapadni Balkan", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

https://serbia.mid.ru/sr/pres_tsentar/news-

[serb/odgovor_portparola_mip_rusi_e_mari_e_zaharove_na_pita_e_medi_a_o_samitu_eu_zapadni_balkan/](https://serbia.mid.ru/sr/pres_tsentar/news-serb/odgovor_portparola_mip_rusi_e_mari_e_zaharove_na_pita_e_medi_a_o_samitu_eu_zapadni_balkan/)

From the perspective of Serbia's establishment, imposing sanctions on Russia, in order to align fully with the EU's CFSP, would not have any significant short-term payoffs besides some level of appreciation from the EU. The same goes for its rejecting to vote on resolutions targeting Russia in the UN General Assembly and other international bodies. As the pace of its EU accession process primarily hinges upon its comprehensive rule of law reform process, which has been quite sluggish so far, and dialogue with Priština, which has yet to be advanced, **Belgrade has no incentive whatsoever to change its foreign policy course regarding Russia at the moment**, despite the fact that Serbia will eventually need to fully align with the EU's CFSP if it wants to join the EU.

If EU-led sanctions were to be imposed by Serbia on Russia, for example, they would cause further distancing between the two, while the latter could potentially "soften" its approach towards Kosovo. In practice, Russia could *abstain* from voting against Kosovo's membership in international organisations or could even stop with its vocal rhetorical support of Belgrade. It could also limit energy (gas) supplies to Serbia through prices and delays.⁴⁴³ Furthermore, as much of the Serbian population considers Russia as a kin-state and a patron, the Serbian government would effectively risk alienating many of its voters. In fact, the majority of the local population appears to be satisfied with the existing cooperation between Russia and Serbia.⁴⁴⁴ Taking these elements into account, **although communication between Moscow and Belgrade is facing some difficulties, particularly after the Washington Agreement, it cannot be predicted that Serbia will make a change its policy towards Russia anytime soon**. According to expert calculations, in 2019, Serbia has had an alignment rate of 57%, aligning with 52 of the 91 declarations of the EU.⁴⁴⁵ Most of the cases of non-alignment took place in circumstances that concerned Russia in one way or another. The data also indicates that Serbia was the country with the lowest alignment score in the Western Balkans. Interestingly, BiH shows a similar non-alignment rate to Serbia,⁴⁴⁶ mostly due to the fact that its entity, Republika Srpska, follows Belgrade's strategy and refuses to give its consent to declarations condemning Russia. This pattern shows that **by maintaining good relations with Belgrade, Russia simultaneously secures the support of Banja Luka as well**: in this way, Russia kills two birds with one stone.

⁴⁴³ More on Serbia's energy dependency to Russia can be found in the economic sub-chapter.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, slide 21

⁴⁴⁵ Igor Novaković, Natan Albahari and Jovana Bogosavljević, "An analysis of Serbia's alignment with the European Union's foreign policy declarations and measures in 2019", ISAC, 2019, p.2, available at:

<https://www.isac-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ISAC-CFSP-Analysis-2019-1.pdf>

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid, p.4.

To be more specific, in 2019, over a quarter of the cases (11 out of 39) in which Serbia refused to align with were related to Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian crisis and other events related to it.⁴⁴⁷ Furthermore, it appears that **Serbia is also stopping short of aligning with other declarations that are even indirectly related to Russia.** For instance, two concerned Myanmar, and one each concerned Syria and the use of chemical weapons.⁴⁴⁸ Serbia's unwillingness to fully comply with the EU's CFSP in other cases is also explained by the fact that the majority of these cases involve countries or citizens of countries that did not recognise Kosovo. Simply put, **whether a country has or has not recognised Kosovo is the key variable in explaining how likely it is that Serbia will chose to align or not with a certain declaration.**

As Serbia's refusal to align with declarations directly or indirectly targeting Russia has been well-documented in the past, the following only focuses on examples from 2020. For instance, **despite the fact that Serbia and Russia had their lows during 2020, the former has nevertheless continued to back the latter in its foreign policy.** A notable, and the latest, example of this took place **in September 2020, when Belgrade refused to align with an EU declaration on the poisoning of Alexei Navalny,**⁴⁴⁹ a prominent Russian opposition leader, in which the EU condemned the assassination attempt in the strongest possible terms. Other declarations directly targeting Russia with which Serbia refused to align in 2020 were:

- 16 March – regarding the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol;⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁷ ISAC goes into detail of what exactly is covered by each declaration Serbia refused to align with: “of the eleven declarations related to the situation in Ukraine that Serbia did not align with, nine concerned either the extension or expansion of already existing restrictive measures against entities and individuals from Russia and Ukraine. One declaration marks the anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol and condemns it, including 2018's arrests of Ukrainian soldiers in the Kerch Strait, the construction of the Kerch Bridge, breaches of international law in violation of free passage through the Kerch Strait, and the militarization of the Crimean peninsula. The declaration also emphasizes the EU's refusal to recognize elections held by the Russian Federation in the Crimean Peninsula and condemns the rampant violations of human rights, most egregiously affecting the Crimean Tatars, in the area. The final declaration related to this topic marks the anniversary of the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 and reiterates support to establish accountability and truth. Furthermore, it announces that charges will be brought by an investigative team and calls on Russia to cooperate and accept responsibility.” See: Ibid., p. 2.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Declaration of the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the poisoning of Alexei Navalny”, September 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2H1bxOU>

⁴⁵⁰ Declaration by the High Representative Josep Borrell Fontelles, on behalf of the European Union, on the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, March 2020, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/03/16/declaration-by-the-high-representative-josep-borrell-fontelles-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-the-autonomous-republic-of-crimea-and-the-city-of-sevastopol/>

- 27 March – regarding listing the European Endowment for Democracy as an “undesirable organisation”,⁴⁵¹
- 7 May⁴⁵² – regarding the alignment of certain countries concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine;⁴⁵³ and on the alignment of certain countries concerning restrictive measures directed against certain persons, entities and bodies in view of the situation in Ukraine;⁴⁵⁴
- 16 July – regarding the occasion of the 6th anniversary of the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17;⁴⁵⁵
- 26 August – regarding the alignment of certain countries concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia’s actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine.⁴⁵⁶

In sum, in 2020, Serbia refused to align with seven declarations in total which directly targeted Russia. This shows that Serbia is not yet ready to directly compromise its relationship with Russia, and that the latter’s political leverage still holds significant importance. Nevertheless, there were **some signs of change in 2020 that indirectly compromised this relationship, namely, by aligning with declarations against Russia’s traditional ally**

⁴⁵¹ Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on listing the European Endowment for Democracy as an “undesirable organisation”, March 2020, available at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/03/27/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-listing-the-european-endowment-for-democracy-as-an-undesirable-organisation/>

⁴⁵² Two declarations adopted in May only address whether or not countries decided to align with the legally binding decisions made by the Council of the EU which impose restrictive measures. Even as such, they are included in the overall assessment of Serbia’s foreign policy alignment.

⁴⁵³ A declaration by the high representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain countries concerning restrictive measures in respect to actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine, May 2020, available at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/05/07/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-alignment-of-certain-countries-concerning-restrictive-measures-in-respect-of-actions-undermining-or-threatening-the-territorial-integrity-sovereignty-and-independence-of-ukra/>

⁴⁵⁴ A Declaration by the high representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain countries concerning restrictive measures directed against certain persons, entities, and bodies in view of the situation in Ukraine, May 2020, available at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/05/07/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-alignment-of-certain-countries-concerning-restrictive-measures-directed-against-certain-persons-entities-and-bodies-in-view-of-the-situation-in-ukraine/>

⁴⁵⁵ Declaration on the occasion of the 6th anniversary of the downing of the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, July 2020, available at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/07/16/malaysia-airlines-flight-mh17-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-occasion-of-the-6th-anniversary-of-the-downing/>

⁴⁵⁶ Declaration by the high representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain countries concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia’s actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine, August 2020, available at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/08/26/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-alignment-of-certain-countries-concerning-restrictive-measures-in-view-of-russia-s-actions-destabilising-the-situation-in-ukraine/>

Belarus. Ever since the EU introduced restrictive measures against Belarus in 2012, Serbia has continued to align with declarations reaffirming these measures on an annual basis. Yet, Serbia stopped short of aligning with EU declarations on restrictive measures in April 2019 and March 2020, which must have caused positive reactions not only in Minsk but also in Moscow.

Nevertheless, this trend was short-lived as Serbia decided to align with a declaration against the presidential elections in Belarus in August 2020. In this declaration, it is highlighted that the elections were “neither free nor fair”, while accusing Belarusian authorities of deploying “disproportionate and unacceptable violence” in response to protests.⁴⁵⁷ This was not a one-time move, however, particularly as Serbia aligned with another declaration, a month later, criticising “the increasingly open disregard for the rule of law in Belarus,” while also joining the EU’s “determination to impose sanctions on individuals responsible for violence”.⁴⁵⁸ For now, it is unknown what kind of pressure was put on Serbia to align with these declarations. Nevertheless, this shows that Serbia’s foreign policy alignment can be shaken up and thus modified. **This move can also be interpreted as an indirect message that Serbia will not continue to openly and unconditionally back Russia’s interests on every front.**

Box 12: Russia’s Aid to Serbia in the Fight Against COVID-19

Considering Russia’s high popularity among the Serbian population, many expected it to swiftly come to Serbia’s aid after the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was outpaced in its response, however, by China, Norway, and the EU. Nevertheless, according to the analysis of this study, **Russia was fairly quick, representing the fourth country chronologically to send assistance to Serbia.**⁴⁵⁹ Although Russia’s first assistance came just ten days after Serbia’s President made a public plea calling for international assistance to fight against the virus – China soon took the spotlight.

⁴⁵⁷ Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the presidential elections in Belarus, August 2020, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/08/11/belarus-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-the-presidential-elections/>

⁴⁵⁸ Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the escalation of violence and intimidation against members of the Coordination Council in Belarus, September 2020, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/09/11/belarus-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-the-escalation-of-violence-and-intimidation-against-members-of-the-coordination-council/>

⁴⁵⁹ Strahinja Subotić, “Timeline of Foreign Assistance for Fighting COVID-19”, European Policy Centre, 2020, available at: <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Timeline-of-foreign-assistance.pdf>

In fact, Belgrade's reception of Russia's assistance was rather lukewarm, far overshadowed by China's swift deployment of aid. This is particularly important, as **this occasion marked the first instance in which China's increasing presence directly reduced Russia's chances of scoring points in the eyes of the Serbian public.** The fact that Serbian authorities put aid from China on a pedestal allowed them to reduce their reliance on Russia while at the same time allowing them to criticise the EU when needed. This move is not insignificant, particularly considering that Russia is the country the Serbian establishment has traditionally boosted in the media as its patron and used as a bogeyman to scare the EU. **Could the COVID-19 pandemic be a game-changer and a sign that Serbia will choose Beijing over Moscow? Possibly.**

When it comes to concrete numbers regarding the medical equipment sent by Russia, the first package of assistance included 15,000 COVID-19 tests, and strangely enough, it did not arrive via an official state flight but rather via AirPink – owned by a Serbian media magnate close to the Serbian government.⁴⁶⁰ Soon after, on the 3 and 4 April, eleven planes arrived carrying: eight doctors and other staff; ventilators, medicine, and other equipment; eight medical teams comprised of one general, 42 officers, 42 sub-officers, and two members of the Russian Ministry of Health, and; 16 special motor vehicles intended for the disinfection of facilities and roads.⁴⁶¹ According to Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexandr Botsan-Kharchenko, these vehicles have disinfected 160 objects in 35 cities.⁴⁶² Furthermore, on 24 April, the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre donated equipment to the Serbian Ministry of Interior, including 3,000 caps, 600 visors, 200 pairs of goggles, 3,000 masks, 100 filter masks, 3,000 protective coats, and 3,000 pairs of fittings.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶⁰ *Novosti*, "I Rusija je uz Srbiju teškim danima: Iz Moskve u Beograd stiglo 15.000 testova za koronu", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:855268-I-Rusija-je-uz-Srbiju-U-TESKIM-DANIMA-Iz-Moskve-u-Beograd-stiglo-15000-testova-za-koronu>

⁴⁶¹ Serbian Ministry of Defence, "Eleven airplanes delivered medical aid from the Russian Federation", 2020, available at:

<http://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/15843/jedanaest-aviona-dopremilo-medicinsku-pomoc-iz-ruske-federacije-15843>

⁴⁶² Russian Embassy to Serbia, "Intervju ambasadora Rusije u Srbiji Aleksandra Bocan-Harčenka za list "Politika", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

https://serbia.mid.ru/sr/pres_tsentar/news-serb/interv_u_ambasadora_rusi_e_u_srbi_i_aleksandra_botsan_kharchenka_za_list_politika_9_ma_2020_godin_e/

⁴⁶³ Serbian government, "Serbian-Russian humanitarian centre donates equipment to Interior Ministry", 2020, available at:

<https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/154947/serbian-russian-humanitarian-centre-donates-equipment-to-interior-ministry.php>

Three days later, Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić thanked Russia for “the donation of medical supplies and equipment” as well as “the humanitarian aid [...] sent by the Russian Peace Fund”⁴⁶⁴ - **no information is provided on what exactly this Fund’s aid entailed.** When Radio Free Europe tried to contact Serbia’s National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with Russia and China to find more details on the aid provided by Russia, they responded that they were not operating during the pandemic “given that the majority of employees in that state office were older than 65”, with the movement of the elderly being restricted at that time.⁴⁶⁵

Meanwhile, **Russian companies operating in Serbia also assisted Serbia:** Lukoil (Oil Company) donated approximately EUR 17,000 to the Serbian National Health Insurance Fund,⁴⁶⁶ and provided fuel to the Torlak Institute of Virology, Vaccines and Serums.⁴⁶⁷ Also, Sberbank (a Russian state-owned bank) made a financial donation to the National Health Insurance Fund, contributed to the procurement of ventilators, donated funds to be used for the purchase of protective equipment for medical workers to UNICEF, and donated medical instruments for patients with severe respiratory conditions to Kikinda’s General Hospital (as the city was badly hit by the pandemic).⁴⁶⁸

The latest research from the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Belgrade shows that **50.5% of Serbian citizens believe that the help provided by Russia will probably help Serbia in the fight against the virus**, while 14.7% of respondents believe it is very likely to help Serbia. Approximately 20% of respondents thought that it will not help much, and approximately 10% of respondents did not have an opinion. The results of this research show that people showed the most trust to China and Russia, while the EU was trusted the least in terms of the effectiveness of its assistance.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁴ Serbian government, “Exceptional relations, cooperation with Russia in fight against coronavirus”, 2020, available at: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/155223/exceptional-relations-cooperation-with-russia-in-fight-against-coronavirus.php>

⁴⁶⁵ *Radio Free Europe*, “Ko je koliko pomogao Srbiji tokom pandemije”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ko-je-koliko-pomogao-srbiji/30511328.html>

⁴⁶⁶ Lukoil, “Lukoil Provides Donation to the Republic Health Insurance Fund”, 2020, available at: <https://lukoil.rs/en/News/News?rid=458847>

⁴⁶⁷ Lukoil, “Lukoil Srbija’s Support to the Torlak Institute”, 2020, available at: <https://lukoil.rs/en/News/News?rid=457367>

⁴⁶⁸ Sberbank, “Sberbank donirala sredstva RFZO – u Unicefu, Opštoj bolnici u Kikindi i Anji Stojanović”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.sberbank.rs/o-nama.930.html?newsId=421>

⁴⁶⁹ Faculty of Political Science, “Stavovi građana Republike Srbije o COVID 19”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/Izve%C5%A1taj-Stavovi-gra%C4%91ana-Republike-Srbije-o-COVID-19.pdf?jezik=lat>

III. 1. 4 Russia's Relations with Serbia's Mainstream Parties, High Officials, and Parliament

The first years of the post-2000 regime saw no major milestones in relations with Russia, as there were only modest efforts to provide concrete geopolitical support to Serbia.⁴⁷⁰ **The relations between the two, however, began to intensify in the period between 2004 and 2008**, as it became evident that Belgrade would need Moscow's support to resolve the issue of Kosovo's status.⁴⁷¹ At that time, it was the conservative and Eurosceptic Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica who was the key actor driving the policy of intensification of relations with Russia.⁴⁷²

Nevertheless, **even pro-EU actors, such as former President Boris Tadić, realised that the prioritisation of Russia is a must in the ever-increasing complexity of the international arena.** This prioritisation was even highlighted in the inaugural speech of his first term as President of Serbia in 2004, in which he envisioned prioritised balancing relations with three "centripetal powers" - Brussels, Washington, and Moscow.⁴⁷³ Just a year after Kosovo declared independence in 2008, former President Tadić introduced the "four pillar" structure of Serbia's foreign policy, thus effectively cementing the importance of the relationship with Russia (while acknowledging China's rising importance as well).⁴⁷⁴

This geopolitical positioning of Serbia allowed Russia to strengthen its leverage. For instance, in 2008, Serbia and Russia reached an agreement on allowing the Russian company Gazprom Neft to purchase 51% of the shares of the Petroleum Industry of Serbia (NIS) (*more on this in the economic chapter in this study*). From that point on and until now, Serbia has continued to justify the policy of "sitting on multiple chairs simultaneously", or, as some call it, the "policy of maximum benefit."⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁰ Nikola Kosović, "What makes Russia so popular in Serbia? Origins of Russia's Soft Power", Central European University (MA Thesis), 2016, p.41, available at: www.etd.ceu.hu > kosovic_nikola

⁴⁷¹ Dragan Đukanović and Ivona Lađevac, "Prioriteti spoljnopolitičke strategije Republike Srbije", *Međunarodni Problemi*, p.354, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.doiserbia.nb.rs/img/doi/0025-8555/2009/0025-85550903343D.pdf>

⁴⁷² Dušan Reljić, "Rusija i Zapadni Balkan", ISAC, 2009, p.11.

⁴⁷³ Boris Tadić, Presidential Inaugural Address, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, 2004, available at (in Serbian): http://www.mfa.gov.rs/Srpski/Bilteni/Srpski/b110704_s.html

⁴⁷⁴ Igor Novaković, "From Four Pillars of Foreign Policy to European Integration", ISAC, 2013, available at: https://www.isac-fund.org/download/From_four_pillars_of_foreign_policy_to_european_integration.pdf

⁴⁷⁵ Lukasz Reszczyński, "From Isolation to Stabilization – The New Opening in Serbian Foreign Policy", NSPM, 2010, available at:

After the ruling Serbian Progressive Party came to power in 2012, Belgrade continued this course of foreign policy balancing. **It appears, in fact, that the new political elite has even intensified this balancing act.** On the one hand, Serbia opened its EU accession negotiation process in 2014, while, on the other, it continued to further institutional relations with Russia, notably by signing a strategic partnership in 2013,⁴⁷⁶ remaining the only Western Balkan country to do so.⁴⁷⁷ In the same year, **Serbia acquired observer status in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)**, an intergovernmental alliance between Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Besides Serbia, the only other observer in this organisation is Afghanistan. Since then, the National Parliament of Serbia has had a Delegation to the CSTO, which takes part in CSTO parliamentary sessions and Committee work.⁴⁷⁸

Box 13: Strategic Partnership between Russia and Serbia

In 2013, Serbia and Russia signed the Strategic Partnership, with the intention of deepening mutual relations. It envisages increasing cooperation between the two countries “to the highest level”.⁴⁷⁹ The declaration covers all areas of interaction, including politics, trade, the economy, culture, science, technology, and education.

In the area of politics, it was agreed that: regular meetings at the level of heads of state and heads of government be held; **the practice of political consultations** on bilateral and international issues of mutual interest be expanded; information on ongoing or planned foreign policy initiatives be shared, along with coordination of efforts in the international arena in order to solve common problems; information on activities and initiatives that are being implemented or planned in the framework of the Eurasian project be shared, and; dialogue between representatives of political actors, especially In terms of interparliamentary communication, among other measures.⁴⁸⁰

<http://www.nspm.rs/nspm-in-english/from-isolation-to-stabilization-%E2%80%93-the-new-opening-in-serbian-foreign-policy.html?alphabet=l>

⁴⁷⁶ Besides Russia, Serbia has strategic partnerships with France, China, Italy, and the UAE.

⁴⁷⁷ Artem Patalakh, “Emotions and Identity as Foreign Policy Determinants:

Serbian Approach to Relations with Russia”, 2018, p.3, available at: <https://philarchive.org/archive/PATEAI>

⁴⁷⁸ National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, “Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization of the Collective Security Treaty”, available at:

<http://www.parlament.gov.rs/national-assembly/composition/delegations/delegations.44.497.html>

⁴⁷⁹ Government of Russia, “Strategic Partnership between Russia and Serbia”, 2013, available at (in Russian):

<http://kremlin.ru/supplement/1461>

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

From the economic standpoint, the further development of cooperation was agreed upon for the energy sector, in the interests of strengthening energy security **with an emphasis on the implementation of joint, largescale projects in the oil and gas industries**, ensuring stable supplies of natural gas, oil, and other forms of energy. In addition, it was also agreed that the joint work within the framework of the Intergovernmental Russian-Serbian Committee on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation be intensified.

The context of this partnership's signing is also important to consider. In fact, it was signed just a year after Serbia acquired EU candidate status, in the year when the Brussels Agreement was reached and when the European Council gave the green light to begin negotiations with Serbia. Considering that Serbia also signed a *Joint Statement on Deepening the Strategic Partnership* with China in 2013, this year therefore represented the peak of Serbia's balancing act. In other words, **Belgrade wanted to send a signal to Moscow that bilateral relations will continue to matter despite new commitments made to Brussels and Beijing.**

The latest milestone took place in 2019, when **Serbia signed a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEAU)**, integrating the existing bilateral agreements with Russia (2001), Belarus (2009), and Kazakhstan (2010), and extending a single free trade agreement with the EEAU to the markets of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan as well. Even though the key aspect of the agreement is of an economic nature, many interpreted it through the lens of politics, as new evidence of increasing ties between Serbia and Russia.⁴⁸¹ **In the cases of both the CSTO and the EEAU, Serbia was the first and only European country to have signed such agreements.**

When it comes to individual high officials who have nurtured close relationships with Russia, former President **Tomislav Nikolić (2012-17) stood out as the most notable Russophile among Serbia's high officials.** Even though he continued to prioritise the EU on an official level during his presidency, he never hid the fact that he personally prefers Russia to the EU. After getting elected, but before his official inauguration, his first visit was to Moscow,⁴⁸² thus

⁴⁸¹ *European Western Balkans*, "Sporazum sa EAEU ništa ne menja, tržišta EU i regiona i dalje najvažnija za Srbiju", 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/sporazum-sa-eaeu-nista-ne-menja-trzista-eu-regiona-dalje-najvaznija-za-srbiju/>

⁴⁸² *Deutsche Welle*, "Nikolić se „uči za predsednika"", 2012, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.dw.com/sr/nikoli%C4%87-se-u%C4%8Di-za-predsednika/a-16013494>

sending a clear message to Brussels where his true preference lay. Considering that Brussels typically represents the first destination of Serbia's highest officials, such a move indicated how the rest of his presidency was going to look. In fact, throughout his presidency, Nikolić continued to refer to Russia as the truest of all allies and as a "motherland".⁴⁸³

Considering that Nikolić and Putin established close personal relations, the former awarded the latter the Order of the Republic of Serbia, 1st Degree in 2014.⁴⁸⁴ Reciprocating such an act of symbolic importance, Putin awarded Nikolić the Order of Friendship in 2017.⁴⁸⁵ This behavioural and attitudinal orientation by Nikolić towards Russia harkened back to his earlier beliefs and practices, when he used to stand for anti-EU politics (prior to 2008 during his membership in the Serbian Radical Party).⁴⁸⁶

Box 14: 2014 Military Parade in Belgrade

One of the highlights of Nikolić's presidency, in terms of his relations to Russia, was his invitation to Putin in 2014 to attend, as an honorary guest, a grand military parade intended to mark the 70th anniversary of liberation of Belgrade that took place with the help of the Red Army.⁴⁸⁷ Due to Putin's tight schedule, the parade was even organised four days earlier than the actual date of the anniversary.⁴⁸⁸

Considering that Serbia issued a personal invitation to Putin during the EU's major clash with Russia over the Crimea crisis, Serbia's actions sent negative signals to EU member states. This event was heavily televised and covered by the print media, and

⁴⁸³ B92, "Nikolić: Što je čoveku majka, to je Srbiji Rusija", 2015, available at:

https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=12&dd=03&nav_category=11&nav_id=1070220

⁴⁸⁴ Office of the President of Russia, "Vladimir Putin awarded the Order of the Republic of Serbia I Degree", 2014, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46810>

⁴⁸⁵ National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, "Russia's President Putin decorates former President of Serbia and incumbent National Council President Tomislav Nikolić with Order of Friendship on the National Unity Day", 2017, available at: <http://www.knsrk.gov.rs/eng/a0032.php>

⁴⁸⁶ During those days, as the vice-president of the Serbian Radical Party, Nikolić asserted that he would prefer to see Serbia as a Russian province than as an EU member. See:

Janusz Bugajski, "Return of the Balkans: Challenges to European Integration and U.S. Disengagement", Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013, p.11, available at: <https://bit.ly/2WWE7a7>

⁴⁸⁷ RTS, "'Pobede iz rata proslavljaju se paradom", 2014, available at:

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/1721132/pobede-iz-rata-proslavljaju-se-paradom.html>

⁴⁸⁸ Danas, "Nadležni resori bez zvaničnog odgovora", 2014, available at:

<https://www.danas.rs/politika/nadlezni-resori-bez-zvanicnog-odgovora/>

accompanied by public ovations and chants such as “Putin the Serb” and “We don’t need the EU”,⁴⁸⁹ thus further contributing to the process of strengthening Putin’s image in Serbia.

Even though Nikolić no longer represents a significant political figure in Serbia, his actions throughout his presidency did in fact contribute to the development of closer ties with Russia. In his post-presidency role as a promotor of Russo-Serbian relations, since 2017 Nikolić has been the head of the National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with Russia and China, and continues to advocate for more active cooperation with Russia.⁴⁹⁰ When it comes to Russia, the official framework envisions the National Council to consider, direct, and coordinate the implementation of the strategic partnership between Serbia and Russia.⁴⁹¹

Besides Nikolić, **the former Prime Minister (2012-13), current Minister of Foreign Affairs, and First Deputy Prime Minister Ivica Dačić, leader of the Socialist Party of Serbia, the second largest party, is also considered to have very close ties to Russia.** It is even widely speculated that it was Putin who pleaded to Vučić to keep Dačić and his party as coalition partners in his government, as one of the most pro-Russian politicians in Serbia.^{492,493} In terms of official cooperation with Russia, Dačić co-chairs the Serbian-Russian Intergovernmental Committee on Trade, Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation. So far, there have been 18 joint meetings, with the aim of assisting in the harmonisation and realisation of joint projects.⁴⁹⁴ Considering his close relationship with the Russian establishment, Dačić was awarded two honours in 2018, the Medal of Pushkin and the Order of Friendship, for achievements in strengthening friendship and cooperation between nations in the previous years.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁸⁹ *Radio slobodna Evropa*, “Ovacije za Putina, zvižduci za kišu”, 2014, available at:

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/paradno-za-putina/26639375.html>

⁴⁹⁰ National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China, “Council President Nikolić and Russia’s Ambassador Aleksandr Botsan-Kharchenko discuss enhancement of Serbia-Russia cooperation”, 2019, available at: <http://www.knsrk.gov.rs/eng/a0132.php>

⁴⁹¹ National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China, “about us”, available at: <http://www.knsrk.gov.rs/eng/o-nama.php>

⁴⁹² *European Western Balkans*, “Serbian Foreign Minister Dačić honoured as Russian ‘Friend’”, 2018, available at:

<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/02/07/serbian-foreign-minister-dacic-honoured-russian-friend/>

⁴⁹³ *Danas*, “Ko su saveznici Putinove partije u Srbiji?”, 2016, available at (in Serbia):

<https://www.danas.rs/politika/ko-su-saveznici-putinove-partije-u-srbiji/>

⁴⁹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, “Ministar Dačić na 18. zasedanju srpsko-ruskog Međuvladinog komiteta za trgovinu, ekonomsku i naučno-tehničku saradnju”, 2020, available at:

<http://www.mfa.gov.rs/sr/index.php/pres-servis/saopstenja/22350--18-05032020?lang=lat>

⁴⁹⁵ *European Western Balkans*, “Serbian Foreign Minister Dačić honoured as Russian ‘Friend’”, 2018, available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/02/07/serbian-foreign-minister-dacic-honoured-russian-friend/>

Box 15: Russian Humanitarian Centre in Niš

An element that stood out as a particular hindrance in the eyes of the US and the EU was the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Niš.⁴⁹⁶ Interestingly, it was Foreign Minister Dačić who came forward in this case, advocating in favour of granting diplomatic status to the centre.⁴⁹⁷ Although this centre has operated in Serbia since 2012 as an intergovernmental, non-profit, humanitarian organisation,⁴⁹⁸ its status has long remained unclear.

In this regard, the EU has been warning Serbia, from as early as 2015⁴⁹⁹ and even in the latest 2020 Serbia Country Report,⁵⁰⁰ that it needs to ensure that the Russian Centre does not duplicate the role of the European Commission's Emergency Response Coordination Centre and it does not contradict the conditions for Serbia's participation in the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. For the US, the key concern regarding this centre was that it might be misused for the purposes of espionage, a point which the US expressed more clearly than the EU

In fact, it was only after the US put strong pressure on Serbia, particularly after warnings from US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Hoyt Brian Yee,⁵⁰¹ that this issue has dropped from the agenda of the Serbian government. **As the Russian employees of this Centre were not given diplomatic immunity, this example shows that the US can effectively exert pressure on the Serbian establishment.** It also shows that political pressure from the US has had more leverage than that of the EU in driving Russia's footprint out of Serbia.

⁴⁹⁶ Although its focus was on the prevention and handling of emergency situations, it was originally envisioned that the staff of the centre would enjoy the same legal status as the administrative and technical staff at the Russian embassy.

Balkan Insight, "Russian Centre in Serbia Scorns Espionage Claims" 2017, available at:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2017/09/11/russian-serbian-humanitarian-centre-rebuffs-spy-accusations-09-08-2017/>

⁴⁹⁷ *European Western Balkans*, "Serbian Foreign Minister Dačić honoured as Russian 'Friend'", 2018, available at:

<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/02/07/serbian-foreign-minister-dacic-honoured-russian-friend/>

⁴⁹⁸ RSHC, "8th Anniversary of Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center", 2020, available at:

<http://en.ihc.rs/news/2020/04/25/8-eng>

⁴⁹⁹ European Commission, "2015 Serbia Country Report", 2015, available at:

https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_serbia.pdf

⁵⁰⁰ European Commission, "2020 Serbia Country Report", 2020, available at:

https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia_report_2020.pdf

⁵⁰¹ *European Western Balkans*, "Hoyt Yee's visit to Serbia still provokes reactions", 2017, available at:

<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/10/30/hoyt-yees-visit-serbia-still-provokes-reactions/>

Unlike Nikolić or Dačić, analysis of Vučić's speeches does not show as many instances of emotional attachedness to Russia. Although it appears that Vučić takes on Russia with a more econocentric and rationalistic approach, he has nevertheless continued to encourage building more bridges with Russia on the political, economic, and social, levels. In fact, **when it comes to Russia, Vučić understands he can use it as a bargaining chip to achieve two key goals: first, to reaffirm and strengthens his local support, and second, he can use it to spook the EU, that is, to nudge it into giving him more concessions on Serbia's path to the EU.** Knowing this, it is unsurprising that in his inaugural speech in 2017, Vučić stated that Serbia has "successfully resisted all the pressures" to turn its back on Russia, and has promised to keep a close relationship with it.⁵⁰² Recognising his contribution to the development of bilateral relations, Vučić was even awarded the Order of Alexander Nevsky by Putin in 2019.⁵⁰³ The fact that he received this award was unique, as it was, at that time, awarded only to the presidents of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁰⁴

Box 16: The Partnership Between the Serbian Progressive Party and the United Russia party

Cooperation between the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and Putin's United Russia party officially began even before the former came to power. Namely, **the first Cooperation Agreement with United Russia was signed by the SNS's president and founder Nikolić in 2010,**⁵⁰⁵ just two years after the party was created. The agreement envisioned that the two parties would consult each other and exchange information in areas of bilateral and international relations, and would share their experience in the field of party building, organisational work, control and audit activities, and training and preparation of personnel.⁵⁰⁶

The cooperation between the two parties apparently was mutually beneficial, as it was decided that the partnership would be continued even after Vučić became the head of the

⁵⁰² *Danas*, "Govor predsednika Srbije Aleksandra Vučića", 2017, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.danas.rs/politika/govor-predsednika-srbije-aleksandra-vucica/>

⁵⁰³ *B92*, "Putin's decree awards Order of Alexander Nevsky to Vucic", 2019, available at: https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2019&mm=01&dd=07&nav_id=105927

⁵⁰⁴ *Al Jazeera Balkans*, "Zašto je Vučić dobio orden od Putina", 2019, available at (in Serbian): <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/zasto-je-vucic-dobio-orden-od-putina>

⁵⁰⁵ *RTV*, "Jedinstvena Rusija i SNS potpisale sporazum o saradnji", 2010, available at (in Serbian): http://www.rtv.rs/sk/politika/jedinstvena-rusija-i-sns-potpisale-sporazum-o-saradnji_219466.html

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

SNS. Interestingly, **although the SNS became an associate member of the European People Party (EPP),⁵⁰⁷ the largest European party family with strong reservations towards Russia, in 2016, it did not discourage it from signing a *Renewed Cooperation Agreement with United Russia* two years later.⁵⁰⁸** The agreement included planned bilateral consultations and exchange of information, the exchange of party delegations at various levels, the organisation of expert meetings and the implementation of other bilateral initiatives, and the organisation of bilateral and multilateral seminars, conferences and roundtables on the most important issues in Russian-Serbian relations.⁵⁰⁹

Already in 2019, the two parties signed an enhanced cooperation agreement, expressing commitment to strengthen the strategic partnership between them and pledging to continue joint cooperation.⁵¹⁰ Besides sending a strong symbolic message of how well the relationship between the two has developed, the agreement includes holding bilateral inter-party consultations and business forums, alternately in each country, and the involvement of youth and other partner organisations and associations in this cooperation.⁵¹¹

Aside from affiliations and cooperation between individual Serbian parties with Russia, the National Assembly of Serbia also cooperates with its Russian counterpart. **Parliamentary cooperation was institutionalised in 2015**, after Serbia agreed to the proposal of then-Chairman of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs Aleksey Pushkov **to establish a Serbo-Russian Interparliamentary Commission for Cooperation**. At that time, the agreement that was reached was of particular importance, as emphasised by Pushkov, since Russia has had such agreements only with four other countries – China, Italy, France, and India.⁵¹²

This proposal came in the midst of Serbia's promising not to join the EU in imposing any sanctions on Russia in the context of the Crimea Crisis. By 2020, there were five sessions of

⁵⁰⁷ B92, "Serbia's ruling SNS party joins EPP as associate member", 2016, available at:

https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=11&dd=15&nav_id=99693

⁵⁰⁸ RTS, "Sporazum o saradnji SNS-a i Jedinstvene Rusije", 2018, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3301259/sporazum-o-saradnji-sns-a-i-jedinstvene-rusije.html>

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ *Novosti*, "SNS i Jedinstvena Rusija produbljuju partnerstvo", 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3457894/sns-i-jedinstvena-rusija-produbljuju-partnerstvo.html>

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² B92, "'Srbija ostaje neutralna u sukobu EU i Rusije'", 2015, available at:

https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=06&dd=15&nav_category=11&nav_id=1004625&version=amp

the Interparliamentary Committee, each time co-chaired by President of Serbia's National Assembly and one of the key members of the SNS Maja Gojković.⁵¹³ In the last session of this Committee, it was agreed to establish an Institute for the Preservation of Historic Memory, which would aim to preserve the joint legacy and fight against the “minimisation of the sacrifices of the Serbian and Russian people”.⁵¹⁴ Finally, the sessions are also attended by the chair of Serbia's Delegation to the CSTO.

Another way for Serbia's parliamentarians to keep close relations with Russia is via Serbia's National Assembly's Group of Friendship with Russia. Parliamentary friendship groups are formed on a voluntary basis for the purpose of the voluntary improvement of relations with a specific country. As members of the assembly can simultaneously belong to multiple groups, there are, according to the official website of the National Assembly, 110 groups of friendships. The one with Russia stands as the largest, with 133 members.⁵¹⁵ As the assembly has 250 members in total, it means that the aforementioned group contains more than half of the total number of the members of parliament. Intriguingly, the second place is shared between Belarus and China, with 104 members each. Groups that follow are those of Germany (86), Italy (81), and the US (77). Comparing membership sizes may serve as an indicator of how well Russia is received by the members of the assembly. Although the group is informal, its chair participates at the sessions of the aforementioned Interparliamentary Commission.

III. 1. 5 Russia's Relations with Right-Wing Opposition Parties and Organisations in Serbia

Besides maintaining relations with mainstream political parties, Russia manages to do the same with a number of opposition parties.⁵¹⁶ **Keeping close ties with various political parties in**

⁵¹³ National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, “U Moskvi održano Peto zasedanje srpsko-ruske parlamentarne komisije za saradnju”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

http://www.parlament.rs/U_Moskvi_odr%C5%BEano_Peto_zasedanje_srpsko-ruske_parlamentarne_komisije_za_saradnju.38663.941.html

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, “Parliamentary Friendship Groups”, available at:

<http://www.parlament.gov.rs/national-assembly/composition/parliamentary-friendship-groups/parliamentary-friendship-groups.499.html>

⁵¹⁶ Interestingly, there is one party called the “Russian Party”, allegedly representing the Russian minority in Serbia and gathering pro-Russian Serbs. Its founding in 2013 was promoted by the Russian embassy in Serbia. Nevertheless, it holds no seats in National Assembly, while it managed to acquire one seat in the Assembly of the city of Šabac in 2020. It appears that it also has working relationship with the current ruling party of Serbia, with whom it had consultations in the same year. As their impact is negligible, they are not further analysed in this chapter.

Serbia is another aspect that differentiates Russia from other foreign powers which have an interest in Serbia.

The biggest opposition party that Russia has a close relationship with is the **Serbian Radical Party (SRS)**. This party is openly anti-EU and NATO, pro-Russia, and very nationalistic. Even though it does not represent a significant power in Serbia, it does carry some weight in the Serbian political scene, having been a notable presence since the early 1990s and even becoming a coalition partner to Slobodan Milošević's Government during the late 1990s. Another indicator of its importance is the fact that current President Vučić, and Former President Nikolić were both key members of the SRS.

In the SRS's official programme, it is stated that one of its aims is to enable the membership of Serbia in the Eurasian Economic Union, an economic union of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia.⁵¹⁷ Alongside this membership, the SRS also advocates for joining the CSTO.⁵¹⁸ Finally, in order to protect Serbia's territorial integrity, it calls for the establishment of Russian military bases on Serbian territory.⁵¹⁹ Such efforts do not represent just irrelevant small talk, as **the SRS is in fact recognised by the Russian establishment**. Notably, former Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin visited the headquarters of the SRS to meet their leader Vojislav Šešelj, a war criminal convicted by the International Tribunal in Hague. They both agreed that the "future of Serbia is in the East".⁵²⁰

Another opposition party closely affiliated with Russia is the conservative Movement **Dveri** ("the Gates"). Ever since Dveri joined the parliament in 2016, they have become more and more visible, allowing them to further promote their views against the EU membership. In their political programme, it is clearly stated that they would choose Russia as Serbia's number one foreign ally and partner. Also, not only would they cancel accession talks with the EU, but they

See: Russian Embassy to Serbia, "Ruska stranka u Šapcu", 2013, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.ambasadarusije.rs/sr/vesti/ruska-stranka-u-sapcu>; N1, "GIK proglasio konačne rezultate lokalnih izbora u Šapcu", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <http://rs.n1info.com/Izbori-2020/a661841/Konacni-rezultati-izbora-u-Sapcu.html>; and Info Press, "Šabac: Sastanak predstavnika SNS i Ruske stranke", 2020, available at: <https://www.infopress.rs/politika/sabac-sastanak-predstavnika-sns-i-ruske-stranke/>

⁵¹⁷ Srpska radikalna stranka, "Program", 2019, p.43, available at (in Serbian):

https://www.srpskaradikalnastranka.org.rs/files/dokumenta/program_2019.pdf

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., p.21.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ B92, "Rogozin i Šešelj: Budućnost Srbije okrenuta istoku", 2016, available at:

https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2016&mm=01&dd=12&nav_category=11&nav_id=1084255

would also annul the Brussels agreement (reached between Belgrade and Priština in Brussels in 2013).⁵²¹

The key difference between the SRS and Dveri is that the latter appears to be less radical and more willing to work, and strike compromises with, pro-EU opposition parties. The result of such compromises was the creation of the opposition semi-formal alliance Savez za Srbiju (“Alliance for Serbia”), whose main aim is the change of the current government. Nevertheless, Dveri’s representatives continue to depict themselves as an anti-EU and NATO, with very positive sentiments towards Russia. For this reason, commenting on the geostrategic importance of the city of Niš, the leader of Dveri, Boško Obradović, argued that all of the employees from the Russian Humanitarian Centre in this city should be given diplomatic immunity.⁵²² In this context, he also endorsed the idea of establishing Russian military bases on the territory of Serbia,⁵²³ a way in which his party aligns with the SRS.

Furthermore, even though Serbia does not officially recognise Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the delegation of Dveri, together with its leader Boško Obradović, regularly visit Crimea and advocate for its recognition as part of Russia.⁵²⁴ The latest example of fruitful cooperation with Russian counterparts took place in 2019, when **Dveri invited a Crimean delegation to the National Assembly of Serbia. Such actions were officially endorsed by Russia**, as this meeting was attended as well by Vice-Chair of the Committee for Foreign Affairs of Russia’s State Duma (lower house) Natalia Poklonskaya. After Crimea’s flag was displayed in the National Assembly, the Ukrainian embassy in Serbia strongly protested.⁵²⁵ **Considering that the majority of the local population believe that Serbia should recognise Crimea as part of Russia,**⁵²⁶ **it is unsurprising that Serbian authorities remained silent on the issue.**

When it comes to the **activities of Russian-inspired organisations in Serbia**, one study from 2016 shows that **there are more than a hundred** such organisations. To specify, there are 10

⁵²¹ Dveri, “Program – van EU i savez sa Rusijom”, available at (in Serbian):

<https://dveri.rs/zasto-dveri/program/van-eu-savez-sa-rusijom/>

⁵²² *Južne vesti*, „Razgovor sa Boškom Obradovićem“, 2018, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.juznevesti.com/15-minuta/Bosko-Obradovic-i51478.sr.html>

⁵²³ Ibid.

⁵²⁴ Dveri, “Boško Obradović na Jalti: Krim je Rusija, Kosovo je Srbija”, 2018, available at (in Serbian):

<https://dveri.rs/2018/04/20/1436/bosko-obradovic-na-jalti-krim-je-rusija-kosovo-je-srbija/>

⁵²⁵ *Radio slobodna Evropa*, “Zastava Krima u Skupštini Srbije, osuda Ambasade Ukrajine”, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zastava-krima-u-skupstini-srbije-protest-ukrajine/30309656.html>

⁵²⁶ Institute for European Affairs, “Stavovi građana Srbije o EU, NATO, Rusiji i Kosovu”, 2016, slide 15, available at (in Serbian): <http://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Stav-gradjana-Srbije-o-EU-NATO-Rusiji-i-Kosovu-jul-2016.pdf>

organisations of Russian compatriots, 21 associations of citizens, 6 student organisations, 16 movements with political action, 14 political parties, 8 internet portals, 2 Russian organisations that have offices in Serbia, 16 pro-Kremlin media sources, 6 Russian media sources, 3 Russian foundations, and 5 cultural and educational institutions, as well as 2 internet portals of unknown ownership.⁵²⁷ It can be assumed that the number of Russian-affiliated organisations has since increased..

Even though not all of these organisations are classified as extreme in their activities, it was identified that a large number of them are Eurosceptic and nationalistic.⁵²⁸ In their work, the issue of Kosovo remains a defining moment, whereas Russia is portrayed as a patron and a saviour: the protector of Serbia's national interests. Many of these organisations became more involved in political and public life in Serbia in the aftermath of Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. One of the most prominent Russophile, anti-EU, right-wing, and nationalistic organisations mentioned is the Serbian patriotic movement **Zavetnici** ("testifiers"), which has a close relationship with the Russian establishment. In a show of its importance, during his visit to Belgrade **in 2016, the Foreign Minister of Russia Sergei Lavrov met with representatives from this movement.**⁵²⁹ A year later, members of Zavetnici were guests at the headquarters of Putin's United Russia party.⁵³⁰ In 2019, this movement turned into a political party and took part in the 2020 parliamentary elections in Serbia (but failed to surpass the electoral threshold).⁵³¹ Even though their political impact in Serbia is still relatively minor,⁵³² they nevertheless manage to target a portion of the youth population and receive considerable media attention.

⁵²⁷ Study of the Center for Euro–Atlantic Studies(CEAS), "Eyes Wide Shut - Strengthening Of Russian Soft Power In Serbia: Goals, Instruments, And Effects", 2016, p.7, available at:

https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/publikacije/CEAS_Studija_-_%C5%A0irom_zatvorenih_o%C4%8Diju_ENG.pdf

⁵²⁸ Study of the Center for Euro–Atlantic Studies(CEAS), "Eyes Wide Shut - Strengthening Of Russian Soft Power In Serbia: Goals, Instruments, And Effects", 2016, p.82

⁵²⁹ *Radio Free Europe*, "Serbian Ultrationalists Making Mark Despite Failure At The Ballot Box", 2018, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-zavetnici-oath-keepers-ultranationalism-russia-lavrov/29094995.html>

⁵³⁰ Luke Kelly, "Overview of research on far-right extremism in the Western Balkan", 2019, University of Manchester, p.9, available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d309f7aed915d2fe9ea6aec/620_Western_Balkans_far_Right.pdf

⁵³¹ *Nova*, "Zavetnici predali izbornu listu RIK", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://nova.rs/politika/zavetnici-predali-izbornu-listu-rik/>

⁵³² Dženeta Begić, "Russia's Resurgence in The Western Balkans: Effects on the Political and Social Context of the EU Negotiations of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina", 2018, Central European University (CEU), 2018, p.20, available at: [www.etd.ceu.edu › begic_dzeneta](http://www.etd.ceu.edu/~begic_dzeneta)

Box 17: Serbian Extremists Join Pro-Russian Forces in Ukraine

Serbia forbids its citizens from taking part in any foreign conflict. Yet, a number of Serbs have joined Russian ranks, taking part in the conflict that is currently taking place in Eastern Ukraine. As these actors are inspired by the notion of “Orthodox Brotherhood” and ultra-nationalism,⁵³³ alongside potential financial gains, **this example illustrates the most extreme support of Serbs towards Russia and how far radicalisation can go.**

In 2015, the Ukrainian ambassador to Serbia stated that there were approximately 300 Serbian mercenaries in the Donbass region.⁵³⁴ The same ambassador did not hide his feelings regarding **Serbia’s reluctant and sluggish behaviour towards addressing this issue,**⁵³⁵ while adding that Russia is misusing Serbia to destabilise the Western Balkan region, as well as the EU.⁵³⁶ For this reason, bilateral relations between Belgrade and Kiev have reached a low point. By 2018, criminal proceedings in this matter were held against 45 people, with the High Court in Belgrade sentencing 28 of them guilty. Out of these 28, only 4 were sentenced to prison, while 24 of them were placed on probation as part of a deal with the prosecutor.⁵³⁷ The exact terms of their settlements remain unknown and unavailable to the public.⁵³⁸ Such decisions raised concerns about the validity of the process, especially as the Amendments to the 2014 Criminal Code of Serbia call for imprisonment from six months to five years for those who participate in foreign conflicts.⁵³⁹ Also, there were allegations that the security services of Serbia have not promptly provided the Ukrainian investigating authorities with information requested on the Serbian fighters in Ukraine, which is directly tied by some to Serbia’s unwillingness to disturb its relations with Russia.⁵⁴⁰ Finally, **there**

⁵³³ Predrag Petrović and Isidora Stakić, “Extremism Research Forum – Serbia Report”, British Council, 2018, p.10, available at: https://www.britishcouncil.rs/sites/default/files/erf_report_serbia_2018.pdf

⁵³⁴ *Radio slobodna Evropa*, “Srbija će kazniti plaćenike koji ratuju u Ukrajini”, 2017, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-bih-placenici-ukrajina/28789953.html>

⁵³⁵ RTV, “Objavili identitete Srba zbog nereagovanja Srbije”, 2017, available at (in Serbian):

https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/objavili-identitete-srba-zbog-nereagovanja-srbije_861753.html

⁵³⁶ *Radio slobodna Evropa*, “Diplomatska vatra Srbije i Ukrajine”, 2017, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-ukrajina/28844961.html>

⁵³⁷ *Radio slobodna Evropa*, “Dobrovoljci iz Srbije pod istragom ukrajinskog Tužilaštva”, 2018, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/dobrovoljci-ukrajina-tuzilastvo-istraga-rat/29321680.html>

⁵³⁸ Predrag Petrović and Isidora Stakić, “Extremism Research Forum – Serbia Report”, British Council, 2018, p.33, available at: https://www.britishcouncil.rs/sites/default/files/erf_report_serbia_2018.pdf

⁵³⁹ *Insajder*, “Uhapšen komandant Četničkog pokreta zbog slanja srpskih dobrovoljaca u Ukrajinu”, 2018, available at: <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/11986/>

⁵⁴⁰ *Radio slobodna Evropa*, “Dobrovoljci iz Srbije pod istragom ukrajinskog Tužilaštva”, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/dobrovoljci-ukrajina-tuzilastvo-istraga-rat/29321680.html>

are fears that the process of radicalisation will continue in Serbia, as it appears that even the media in Serbia “glorifies” or justifies the actions of these Serbian extremists.⁵⁴¹

All things considered, it may be concluded that Russia represents an important foreign player, not only for the mainstream political parties, but also for opposition parties in Serbia as well. It also has increasing support from local, right-wing organisations in Serbia. **The level of the political presence of Russia and political support from within Serbia is something that distinguishes Russia from other external actors, such as China and Turkey.**

III. 1. 6 Military and Defence Cooperation

Serbia’s military cooperation with foreign powers remains a prominent feature of its foreign policy.⁵⁴² It takes place in a setting in which Serbia’s policy of military neutrality remains a key aspect. Ever since 2007, in the context of Kosovo’s secession, **Serbia has relied on the policy of military neutrality to justify balancing its relations between the East and West. This positioning has resulted in increased cooperation between Serbia and Russia in the area of defence.** In the 2019 Country Report on Serbia, the European Commission even noted, aside from frequent high-level contacts and regular bilateral visits with Russia, there is “military technical cooperation, including joint military drills, sustained relations with the CSTO, and arms trade arrangements”.⁵⁴³ This increasing cooperation is part of Serbia’s larger strategy of increasing its military capabilities, with significant budget spending on the military. In fact, this trend of increasing defence expenditures has been noticeable since 2016.⁵⁴⁴

The grounds for this substantial military cooperation were established with the strategic partnership between Russia and Serbia signed in 2013. It states that Belgrade and Moscow

⁵⁴¹ *Radio slobodna Evropa*, “Ukrajina čeka podatke o srpskim plaćenicima”, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srpski-placenicici-u-donbasu/29019607.html>

⁵⁴² *European Western Balkans*, “Serbia’s new national security and defence strategies: Balancing between NATO and CSTO”, 2019, available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/11/12/serbias-new-national-security-and-defence-strategies-balancing-between-nato-and-csto/>

⁵⁴³ European Commission, *Serbia Country Report*, 2019, p.92, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-serbia-report.pdf>

⁵⁴⁴ *Radio Free Europe*, “Zbog čega se Srbija naoružava i po koju cenu?”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zbog-cega-se-srbija-naoruzava/30441835.html>

will work together on building military cooperation on a long-term basis, and building up military-technical cooperation.⁵⁴⁵ In fact, later that year, **as a follow-up to the Strategic Partnership, the two sides signed an Agreement on Military Cooperation** (ratified in 2014).⁵⁴⁶ Its adoption stipulated the creation of a joint work group, which was to annually develop a bilateral military cooperation plan. According to the Serbian Minister of Defence, this document was highly important as it regulated the relations between the Armed Forces of Serbia and Russia for the first time in 15 years.⁵⁴⁷ Furthermore, in 2014, **Russia and Serbia signed an Agreement on Military-Technical Cooperation** (ratified in 2015).⁵⁴⁸ Its focus was on arms and military equipment deliveries and the exploitation, overhaul, and modernisation of military material. Military cooperation with Russia has seen significant developments since then, with exercises including in the areas of tactics, ground troops, air forces, and anti-aircraft warfare.

The first joint military exercise between Russia and Serbia was held in 2014 (“SREM-24”). Ever since, the number of joint exercises has been increasing. In 2015, Serbia participated in a **trilateral** military exercise with Russia and Belarus (“**Slavic Brotherhood**”). This has remained the key form of exercise, since then organised on an annual basis. Since the locations of these trilateral exercises rotate, it was organised for the first time in Serbia in 2016, and then again in 2019. Furthermore, **since 2015**, there have been **air force tactical exercises** between Serbia and Russia (“**BARS**”) organised annually. These exercises were held in Serbia in 2016, 2018, and expected in 2020. Serbia’s **ground troops** have also started annual exercises in Russia **since 2017** (“**Western Military District**”). Furthermore, the first joint **anti-aircraft warfare** exercises were held in Serbia **in 2019** (“**Slavic Shield**”), with Russian S-400 missile system and a Pantsir anti-aircraft gun and missile system taking part in military drills outside Russia for the first time.⁵⁴⁹ Finally, Serbia has taken part in **CSTO military exercises since**

⁵⁴⁵ Government of Russia, “Strategic Partnership between Russia and Serbia”, 2013, available at (in Russian): <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/1461>

⁵⁴⁶ Agreement on Military Cooperation between Russia and Serbia, Official Gazette, 2014, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/mu/skupstina/zakon/2014/7/6/reg>

⁵⁴⁷ B92, “Serbia, Russia sign agreement on defense cooperation”, 2013, available at (in Serbian):

https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=11&dd=13&nav_id=88325

⁵⁴⁸ Agreement on Military-Technical Cooperation between Russia and Serbia, Official Gazette, 2015, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/viewdoc?uuid=ea071041-7259-4d8a-a7a7-66020981fa2b®actid=408931&doctype=reg>

⁵⁴⁹ *Business Standard*, “US warns Serbia off buying Russian missile systems”, 2019, available at: https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/us-warns-serbia-off-buying-russian-missile-systems-119110201026_1.html

2017, and since 2016 as an observer. All things considered, it is evident that **since 2014 the number and types of joint military exercises between Serbia and Russia have increased.**

Meanwhile, it is important to note that **the continuity of jointly conducting the “Slavic Brotherhood” exercise was interrupted for the first time in 2020.** At first, it seemed that this exercise would still take place in September 2020, as according to Belarus’ defence ministry, regardless of the fact that Minsk was then facing the biggest protests in its history.⁵⁵⁰ Yet, just one day before the beginning of this exercise, it was revealed that Serbia has decided to suspend all joint international military exercises for the next six months.⁵⁵¹ Although Serbian authorities cited the EU’s pressure to leave the planned exercise with Belarus or risk losing its “European future”, **Serbia’s pulling out also potentially presented the first limits to Serbia’s prospects to hold military exercise with Russia in a multilateral format. This was a significant win for the EU and the US, as neither before have been successful in halting the increased trend of Serbo-Russian joint military exercises.** As Serbia also abruptly joined the EU declarations targeting Belarus in 2020, it is questionable whether such multilateral military exercises will continue in the future.

Another important aspect in terms of bilateral cooperation is the acquisition of military equipment. **Although often presented in the media as donations, most of the military equipment acquired from Russia appears to be paid for by Serbian taxpayers.** Notable examples of purchased equipment (based on publicly available information) include five **transportation helicopters (Mi-17V-5)**, four **fighting helicopters (Mi-35M)**, and six **anti-aircraft defence systems (Pantsir-S1).**

Nevertheless, some donations have occurred. Serbian authorities were especially satisfied with the donation of six **fighter jets (MiG-29)** from Russia.⁵⁵² However, these were not entirely free, as Serbia needed to pay EUR 180 million for their overhaul. For this amount of money, as some experts argue, Serbia could have bought new fighter jets from the West.⁵⁵³ Other

⁵⁵⁰ Independent, “Belarus chaos: Russian and Serbian armed forces to take part in military exercises as anti-Lukashenko protests continue”, 2020, available at:

https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/belarus-military-russia-serbia-lukashenko-protests-b416914.html?utm_content=Echobox&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1599570203

⁵⁵¹ *Radio Free Europe*, “Serbia Withdraws From Belarus Military Exercise, Citing EU Pressure”, 2020, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-withdraws-from-belarus-military-exercise-citing-eu-pressure/30829735.html>

⁵⁵² *Radio Free Europe*, “SIPRI: Srbija najveći vojni ulagač na Zapadnom Balkanu”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sipri-srbija-ulaganja-vojska-naoruzavanje/30574806.html>

⁵⁵³ *European Western Balkans*, “Naoružavanje i vojna neutralnost: Kuda ide odbrambena politika Srbije?”, 2020, available at (in Serbia):

donations include 10 **BRDM-2 patrol vehicles** (20 more to come), and 30 **T-72B12 battle tanks**, which are yet to be transported from Russia to Serbia.⁵⁵⁴

Considering that Serbia has increasingly been acquiring weapons from Russia in recent years, the US Special Envoy Matthew Palmer warned Belgrade to be "careful" about acquiring significant Russian military systems if it wishes to avoid US sanctions.⁵⁵⁵ Considering this pressure, which became particularly apparent after a visit to Serbia by the US State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for Counter-Proliferation, Sanctions Enforcement and Regional Affairs Thomas Zarzecki, **the Serbian President announced in December 2019 that Serbia would stop buying weapons from Russia.**⁵⁵⁶ **In other words, Serbia caved to strong US pressure, which has shown the limits of Serbia's readiness to irritate the West for the sake of collaborating with Russia.**

Box 18: Cooperation with NATO

Even though defence cooperation with Russia is notable, however, its impact should not be overstated. Only by taking a brief comparative look into the extent of Serbia's cooperation with NATO will this point be made clear. In fact, **even though Serbia is strongly opposed to any prospects of NATO membership, it nevertheless cooperates closely with this organisation.** The largest milestone in this cooperation took place in 2015, when they agreed on the Individual Partnership Action Plan, the highest possible level of cooperation between NATO and a non-member.

Simply by looking at **the number of exercises with NATO in which Serbia participates**, one can see that this number **outnumbers that of exercises Serbia has participated in with Russia severalfold.** In the period between 2012 and 2019, Serbia has participated in 109 joint military exercises with NATO and its member states.⁵⁵⁷ In 2019 alone, Serbia

<https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/naoruzavanje-vojna-neutralnost-kuda-ide-odbrambena-politika-srbije/>

⁵⁵⁴ Serbian Military, "Godišnja konferencija ministra odbrane o ključnim rezultatima u 2019. godini, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

http://www.vs.rs/sr_lat/vesti/481B48A62A5711EABEE30050568F5424/godisnja-konferencija-ministra-odbrane-o-kljucnim-rezultatima-rada-u-2019godini

⁵⁵⁵ *Business Standard*, "US warns Serbia off buying Russian missile systems", 2019, available at:

https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/us-warns-serbia-off-buying-russian-missile-systems-119110201026_1.html

⁵⁵⁶ *Balkan Insight*, "Serbia to Stop Buying Weapons, President Says", 2019, available at:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/03/serbia-to-stop-buying-weapons-president-says/>

⁵⁵⁷ Institute for European Affairs, "Stavovi građana Srbije prema NATO", 2019, available at (in Serbian): <http://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/13-Stav-gra%C4%91ana-Srbije-prema-NATO-u-mart-2019.pdf>

conducted three times more military exercises with NATO and its members than with Russia.⁵⁵⁸ **Public polls show that most people in Serbia seem to be unaware of these facts.**⁵⁵⁹

In this context, **Russia has also made donations to the Serbian Ministry of Defence. However, this aspect is difficult to analyse due to this ministry's overall untransparent manner of functioning.** In the 2020 Information Sheet of the Ministry of Defence, however, an overview of donations to the ministry from foreign countries in the period from 2007 to 2019 is provided. It shows that the last time Russia provided donations was in 2014 (totalling less than EUR 50,000), whereas the US comes out on top in all years.⁵⁶⁰ Other countries that outperformed Russia in terms of providing donations were China, Norway, Denmark, and the UK. Simply by looking at this information sheet, it appears that Russia is rather irrelevant to Serbia in terms of its donations to the Ministry of Defence.

In order to do away with a dilemma of showing who the largest donor to Serbia in this sector, the Ministry of Defence provided a public explanation in 2019 by arguing “those donations that are in progress are not shown (in the information sheet), or both parties still have not agreed to disclose data on the amount of these donations”. If these projects are taken into consideration, **the ministry adds, Russia is in fact the largest donor.**⁵⁶¹ This represents an attempt to make sure that the public has no doubts on whether, and to what extent, Russia helps Serbia. **Such discrepancies between formal documents and reality often show how untransparent the work of Russia's military engagement with Serbia is.**

It is worrying that the public does not have hard data provided in a transparent manner on these issues. The Ministry of Defence does not publish written information on when the procurement of weapons is carried out, in those cases in which the Law on Public Procurement does not apply.⁵⁶² For this reason, the only official data available for citizens are statements for the

⁵⁵⁸ Balkanska bezbedonosna mreža, “Srpska vojna saradnja u 2019: 13 vežbi sa NATO i četiri sa Rusijom”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.balkansec.net/post/sa-kim-je-srbija-vojno-sara%C4%91ivala-u-2019-13-ve%C5%BEbi-sa-nato-i-%C4%8Detiri-sa-rusijom>

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., slike 15

⁵⁶⁰ Ministry of Defence of Serbia, “Information Sheet”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): http://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/file/staticki_sadrzaj/informator/2020/maj/Informator_o_radu_april_2020_lat.pdf

⁵⁶¹ *NI*, “Ministarstvo odbrane: Rusija najveći donator Vojske Srbije”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a504150/Rusija-najveci-donator-Vojske-Srbije.html>

⁵⁶² Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, “Da li znamo šta kupujemo?”, 2018, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.bezbednost.org/Sve-publikacije/6900/Da-li-znamo-sta-kupujemo.shtml>

media by the President or the Minister of Defence. President Vučić went as far to say: “we, with our friends from the Russian Federation, have **[another] arrangement that we don't talk about**, we don't like to talk about, we want to surprise our people, our citizens, and to some extent, our soldiers”.⁵⁶³ Such untransparent behaviour resulted, for example, in the 2019 decision of the Ministry of Defence of Serbia to reject the request of Radio Free Europe to hand over contracts and annexes to agreements between Serbia and Russia, as well as between Serbia and Belarus, on the donation of military equipment.⁵⁶⁴

In order to understand how Serbia perceives its defence and military cooperation with Russia today, it is necessary to take a look at the latest documents adopted by the Serbian government. The most relevant of these are the 2019 Strategy on National Security and the 2019 Strategy on Defence, as these are typically perceived as an “ID card” of Serbia’s foreign and security policy.⁵⁶⁵ As noted before, Serbia has formally based its policy of balancing between the East and West (or, in this case, military cooperation with Russia and NATO) on the concept of military neutrality adopted by the National Assembly in 2007.⁵⁶⁶ In 2019, **the concept of military neutrality was introduced for the first time in a new strategy on national security,**⁵⁶⁷ **representing the highest-level strategic document in this area.**⁵⁶⁸ Efforts to further codify Serbia’s military neutrality are intended to create and maintain solid ground for Serbia to cooperate with both the East and West.

From Russia’s standpoint, Serbia’s dedication to military neutrality is particularly useful as it goes hand-in-hand with its own security paradigm of halting NATO’s further expansion eastwards.⁵⁶⁹ Furthermore, by encouraging Serbia to sustain its military neutrality,

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁴ Radio slobodna Evropa, “Ministarstvo odbilo RSE: Ugovori o ruskoj vojnoj donaciji tajni”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30185047.html>

⁵⁶⁵ *European Western Balkans*, “Serbia’s new national security and defence strategies: Balancing between NATO and CSTO”, 2019, available at:

<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/11/12/serbias-new-national-security-and-defence-strategies-balancing-between-nato-and-csto/>

⁵⁶⁶ National Assembly of Serbia, “Rezolucija Narodne skupštine o zaštiti suvereniteta, teritorijalnog integriteta i ustavnog poretka Republike Srbije”, 2007, point 6, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.mfa.gov.rs/sr/index.php/component/content/article/65-zastita-suvereniteta?lang=lat>

⁵⁶⁷ Jelena Pejić Nikić, “Vojno neutralna evropska Srbija između Republike Srpske i Velike Albanije”, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.bezbednost.org/Sve-publikacije/7085/Vojno-neutralna-evropska-Srbija-izmedju-Republike.shtml>

⁵⁶⁸ Ministry of Defence of Serbia, “Strategy on National Security of Serbia”, 2019, available at:

http://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/file/staticki_sadržaj/dokumenta/strategije/2019/Strategy%20of%20National%20Security%20od%20the%20Republic%20of%20Serbia.pdf

⁵⁶⁹ Žarko Petrović, “Russia’s perception of Serbian neutrality” in “Neutrality in the 21st century: Lessons for Serbia”, ISAC, 2013, p.105, available at: <https://www.isac-fund.org/download/NEUTRALNOST-ENG-F-2WEB.pdf>

Russia also manages to keep Bosnia and Herzegovina from joining NATO, as Banja Luka follows Belgrade's lead. In addition, the unresolved status of Kosovo also prevents Priština from joining NATO. Therefore, from the geopolitical standpoint, **Russia's support of Serbia's concept of neutrality enables it to effectively prevent NATO from having the Western Balkans fully under its umbrella.** Having in mind that Montenegro became the 29th member of NATO in 2017, and North Macedonia the 30th in 2020, Russia has strong incentives to further build its relations with Serbia in the following period.

Furthermore, in the 2019 Strategy on Defence of Serbia, it is stated that working with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), alongside Serbia's participation in the Partnership for Peace programme and cooperation with the EU's security and defence structures, strengthens national, regional, and global security.⁵⁷⁰ This sentence, although brief, is particularly important, as it **represents the first time that the CSTO was referred to in a Strategy of Defence of Serbia.**⁵⁷¹ It is also added that Serbia is committed to extending and enhancing cooperation with this organisation, as well as its member states.⁵⁷² As Serbia had signed an agreement with the CSTO in 2013, the inclusion of this organisation in Serbia's defence strategy for the first time represents a signal that cooperation is now more appreciated by Belgrade, which is why it is expected that the CSTO will gain a more important role in the policy of Serbia's Ministry of Defence in the future.

It should be noted, however, that increased attention is not only given to the CSTO; the Defence Strategy also emphasised that Serbia will also continue to enhance partnership relations with NATO within the Partnership for Peace programme.⁵⁷³ Special attention is also paid to the improvement of Serbia's national security and defence through the process of European integration. It is highlighted that Serbia will continue to participate in EU military operations and civilian missions, and will intensify its participation in the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) bodies and integrated structures.⁵⁷⁴ Therefore, the latest defence strategy

⁵⁷⁰ Ministry of Defence of Serbia, "Strategy of Defence of the Republic of Serbia", 2019, p.1 available at: http://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/file/staticki_sadrzaj/dokumenta/strategije/2019/Strategy%20of%20Defence%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Serbia.pdf

⁵⁷¹ Parliamentary Assembly of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, "For the first time, cooperation with the CSTO is included in the Defense Strategy of the Republic of Serbia - Minister of Defense Alexander Vulin", 2019, available at: <https://paodkb.org/events/v-strategiyu-oborony-respubliki-serbiya-vpervye-vklyucheno>

⁵⁷² Ministry of Defence of Serbia, "Strategy of Defence of the Republic of Serbia", 2019, p.16, available at: http://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/file/staticki_sadrzaj/dokumenta/strategije/2019/Strategy%20of%20Defence%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Serbia.pdf

⁵⁷³ Ibid., p.17.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., p.14.

illustrates that Serbia, defined as a “military neutral state”,⁵⁷⁵ is determined to continue with its “balancing act” in the future. Considering the strategic dedication to cooperate with the CSTO, Serbia’s acquisition of arms from Russia, and joint military exercises, it appears that Russia has an important level of strategic relevance to Serbia.

Box 19: “The Spy Scandal”, 2019

In terms of security, it is worth mentioning that in 2019 a video from 2018 surfaced in which the **deputy military attaché at Russia's embassy in Belgrade can be seen bribing a former Serbian military officer**. In the media, this affair became known as the “spy scandal”. To make the matters worse, it appeared that the Serbian security services had obtained evidence of the same Russian diplomat contacting other members of the Serbian army.⁵⁷⁶ Scandal erupted, and the story gained e increased public attention right before Vučić’s scheduled visit to Russia. Once the two leaders met, they agreed that the affair is over. The Russian intelligence officer has also since been removed from Serbia.⁵⁷⁷

Some argue that the timing of the event was perhaps a Government attempt to distract the public’s attention from a huge corruption scandal at that time, which is why the affair is not seen as a significant hurdle in the bilateral relations of Russia and Serbia.⁵⁷⁸ Others however insist that this case is yet another signal that relations are not going as smoothly as is presented.⁵⁷⁹ **Due to the lack of credible information, it is still unclear how this incident should be interpreted**, particularly as this topic has not resurfaced in the public arena.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., p.4.

⁵⁷⁶ *The Guardian*, ” Serbian president accuses Russia of spy plot involving army”, 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/21/serbia-investigates-video-claiming-to-show-russian-spy-paying-off-official>

⁵⁷⁷ *Deutsche Welle*, “Serbia's president Aleksandar Vucic confirms Russian spy operation after bribe video”, 2019, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/serbias-president-aleksandar-vucic-confirms-russian-spy-operation-after-bribe-video/a-51359672>

⁵⁷⁸ *Deutsche Welle*, “Špijunska afera u Srbiji: mnogo buke, malo detalja”, 2020, available at: <https://www.dw.com/bs/%C5%A1pijunska-afeta-u-srbiji-mnogo-buke-malo-detajla/a-51364377>

⁵⁷⁹ Vuk Vuksanović, “From Russia With Love? Serbia’s Lukewarm Reception of Russian Aid and Its Geopolitical Implications”, LSE Ideas, 2020, available at: <https://lseideas.medium.com/from-russia-with-love-serbias-lukewarm-reception-of-russian-aid-and-its-geopolitical-implications-a911b3ec09a7>

III. 2 Economic Cooperation between Serbia and Russia

Economic relations between Serbia and Russia, like political relations, have been long-standing and traditionally connects two countries. Moreover, political and economic cooperation were, and still are, highly intertwined in the specifics of the relations of the two countries considered. Today, the highlight of economic relations between the two countries can be seen in cooperation in one sector – energy. Natural resources, in the first-place oil and gas, represent Russia’s main export product while Serbia is not abundant in these much-needed energy sources. As access to a supply of petroleum products is always connected to the security of the country, negotiations about this issue are often translated on the political level. The case of Serbo-Russian relations is no exception. Historical ties further cement the inevitable connection between economics and politics and make the assessment of arranged business deals highly complex. Even though Russian activities in the railway and financial sectors are present in Serbia, they are much less valuable than its role in the energy sector.

III. 2. 1 Foreign Trade Relations – A Large Potential with Low Utilisation

The first free trade agreement between Serbia and Russia was inked in August 2000 in Belgrade, a couple of months before the change of Serbia’s political establishment in October 2000. This agreement was, however, ratified in the Serbian National Assembly in May 2001 by a new parliamentary majority. Although this agreement was never ratified by the Russian side, it is envisaged that its application would take place from the moment of signing.⁵⁸⁰ The part of this agreement also concerned providing a list of goods for which provisions from this contract would not be applied and the possibility of changing listed products every year.

The main goal of the Serbo-Russian trade agreement of 2000 was to deepen and improve mutual trade and economic cooperation in order to accelerate the economic developments of the two countries. Therefore, to establish a free trade regime, provisions were approved for the majority of goods covered by Chapters 1-97 of the Harmonized Commodity Description and

⁵⁸⁰ B92, “Srbija i Rusija - interes jači od emocija”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): https://www.b92.net/biz/fokus/analiza.php?yyyy=2009&mm=10&nav_id=387683 ; The Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation Legislative Database

Coding System (HS).⁵⁸¹ In other words, goods which can be proven to originate from Serbia⁵⁸² are not subject to customs duties when exported to the Russian market and vice versa. A subsequent protocol, which is an integral part of the free trade agreement, provided a list of goods for which this preferential status was not approved, with updates from 2009 and 2011. According to the latest update, imports from Serbia to Russia of products like poultry meat, some types of cheese, sugar, sparkling wine, alcoholic drinks, tires, cigars, cotton fabrics, tractors and motor vehicles, are not covered by the free trade agreement.⁵⁸³ On the other side, the import of tires, and tractors and motor vehicles from Russia do not have privileged status at Serbian borders.⁵⁸⁴

Even though some of the products which are excluded from the free trade regime with Russia represent a large chunk of the Serbian national production base,⁵⁸⁵ this agreement with Russia opened a new door for indirect benefits for the Serbian economy. According to the Development Agency of Serbia, the trade agreement with Russia is one of the most important trump cards that Serbia has in attracting foreign investments, as **no other country in the world has free trade with Russia, except for the former Soviet republics.**⁵⁸⁶ For now, however, it seems that this benefit is not utilised to its full potential as exports remain at a relatively low level (see Graph 1).

The second and at the most recent event in trade relations between the two countries was the signing of a free trade agreement between Serbia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸¹ Zakon o potvrđivanju sporazuma između Savezne Vlade Savezne Republike Jugoslavije i Vlade Ruske Federacije o slobodnoj trgovini između Savezne Republike Jugoslavije i Ruske Federacije (Law on the Ratification of the Agreement between the Federal Government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Government of the Russian Federation on Free Trade between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Russian Federation), Official Gazette of the FRY - International Agreements No. 1 of 11/05/2001

⁵⁸² More precisely, at least 50% of the content of the product should originate from Serbia.

⁵⁸³ Zakon o potvrđivanju Protokola između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Ruske Federacije o izuzecima iz režima slobodne trgovine i pravilima o određivanju zemlje porekla robe uz Sporazum između Savezne vlade Savezne Republike Jugoslavije i Vlade Ruske Federacije o slobodnoj trgovini između Savezne Republike Jugoslavije i Ruske Federacije od 28. avgusta 2000. godine (Law on the Ratification of the Protocol between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Russian Federation on Exemptions from the Free Trade Regime and Rules on Determining the Country of Origin of Goods with the Agreement between the Federal Government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Government of the Russian Federation on Free Trade between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Russia), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 8/2011-73

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁵ Product like motor vehicles and tires in industrial sector and sugar and cheese in agriculture.

⁵⁸⁶ Development Agency of Serbia, "Sporazumi o slobodnoj trgovini", available at (in Serbian):

<https://ras.gov.rs/podrska-izvozu/sporazumi-o-slobodnoj-trgovini>

⁵⁸⁷ The Eurasian Economic Union is an international organisation for regional economic integration which provides the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labour among its members (which include the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Belarus, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Russian Federation).

in October 2019. As a Russia is leading party in this body, and by far the biggest economic and, consequently, trade partner in it, it is worth to provide some details on this contract which was signed in Moscow. Highly promoted to the Serbian public often as more than a trade agreement, a closer look at the text of this contract reveals **little significant change in comparison to the previous agreement**. The main changes for Serbia are the inclusion of the markets of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan (two relatively poor and economically underdeveloped countries with less than 9 million inhabitants in total), as well as yearly, duty-free quotas for the export of cigarettes (2,000 tons), alcohol (35,000 litres, all types of fruit brandy), and cheese (400 tons). For the Russian side, nothing changed from the bilateral protocol of 2011.⁵⁸⁸

Events that happened at the international scale in the last decade have also had an impact on the Russian economy, which in turn had a spillover effect on trade relations with Serbia. Looking at exports from Serbia to Russia shown on Graph 5, after a steady increase, there is a noticeable decline in value in 2015 and 2016. This can be explained, at least to some degree, by a slump in the Russian ruble and galloping economic crises which reduced domestic demand, limiting Russian total imports.⁵⁸⁹ Together with the high volatility of the price of oil on the international market (the main export product from Russia), Serbia's value of import from Russia recorded ups and downs. Nevertheless, during the entire reported period, Serbia has a constant trade deficit with Russia, reaching even \$1.8 billion in 2011. Also, it should be noted here that in the last three years there has been a sharp increase in imports from Russia, with the value of exports not exceeding \$1 billion. Consequently, a **rising deficit in trade with Russia is an issue for closer monitoring, as in 2019 it represented almost a quarter of the total Serbian foreign trade deficit**.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁸ Zakon o potvrđivanju Sporazuma o slobodnoj trgovini između Republike Srbije, s jedne strane i Evroazijske ekonomske unije i njenih država članica (Law on the Ratification of the Free Trade Agreement between the Republic of Serbia, on the one hand, and the Eurasian Economic Union and its Member States), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 3/2020

⁵⁸⁹ The total imports of Russia in 2015 and 2016 were around \$182 billion each year, \$100 billion less than in 2014. UNCTAD data base, available at: <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/wds/TableViewer/tableView.aspx>

⁵⁹⁰ The total Serbian trade deficit with foreign countries in 2019 was \$7.1 billion. Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, available at: <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/170301?languageCode=sr-Cyrl>

Graph 5: Foreign trade in goods with Russia as a partner for the period from 2010 to 2019



*in million USD

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, authors' representation

Looking at which product groups are represented in trade data, piece of information immediately catches the eye – the domination of mineral fuels and, to a certain extent, food. On the Serbian side in 2019, one third of Serbian exports consisted of agricultural products (food and raw materials), while clothing accessories, rubber tires, and machinery (industrial and electrical) accounted for approximately 10% of total exports each. The export of medicaments, paper and cardboard, and copper took also positions on the list of the top-ten exported products. On the other hand, **more than half of imports from Russia was consisted of petroleum and gas**. Other notable products included iron pipes and helicopters. The rest of the product groups were not nearly as important, accounting for 5% or less of total imports in 2019.

Table 4: Ten biggest product categories of exports and imports with Russia as a partner, 2019

Product	Exports (thous. USD)	Product	Imports (thous. USD)

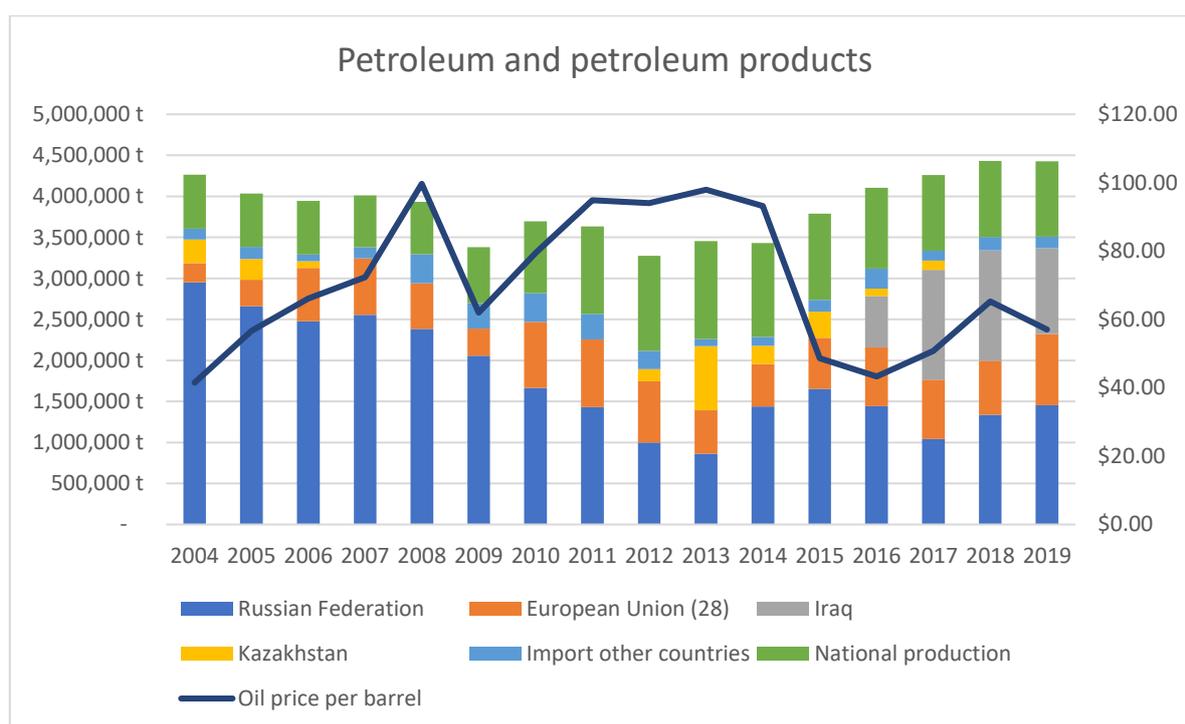
05 - Vegetables and fruit	199,774	33 - Petroleum and petroleum products and related materials	719,762
84 - Articles of apparel and clothing accessories	104,209	34 - Gas, natural and manufactured	650,546
62 - Rubber manufactures, not elsewhere specified	85,625	67 - Iron and steel	264,970
74 - General industrial machinery and equipment and machine parts	76,261	79 - Other transport means and equipment	193,515
54 - Medicinal and pharmaceutical products	72,490	56 - Fertilizers (other than crude)	121,722
64 - Paper, paperboard, and articles of paper pulp, of paper, or of paperboard	43,722	68 - Non-ferrous metals	116,757
68 - Non-ferrous metals	38,398	12 - Tobacco and tobacco manufactures	66,637
02 - Dairy products and birds eggs	35,248	32 - Coal, coke, and briquettes	56,613
22 - Oil-seeds and oleaginous fruits	34,222	52 - Inorganic chemicals	46,432
77 - Electrical machinery, apparatus and appliances, and electrical parts thereof	28,033	57 - Plastics in primary forms	46,414

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, authors' representation

Petroleum oil and its derivatives are traditionally the most important group of products imported to Serbia. As Russia plays an important role in supplying international, and consequently, the Serbian market, with these products, it is important to explore the relationship that results on this occasion. Looking at the aggregate level of imports of petroleum and petroleum products in Serbia visible on the Graph 6, it seems that import quantities largely followed the world price of oil, especially in the period after 2008. Connected or not with the

selling of 51% of the shares of the Serbian national petroleum company (NIS)⁵⁹¹ to the Russian company Gazprom, from 2008 onwards, imports from Russia began to decrease as new players Kazakhstan and Iraq entered the game. Therefore, on the aggregate level, it could be concluded that **in the last decade Serbia has become less dependent on Russia for the import of petroleum and petroleum products.**

Graph 6: Import and national production of petroleum and petroleum products from 2004 to 2019

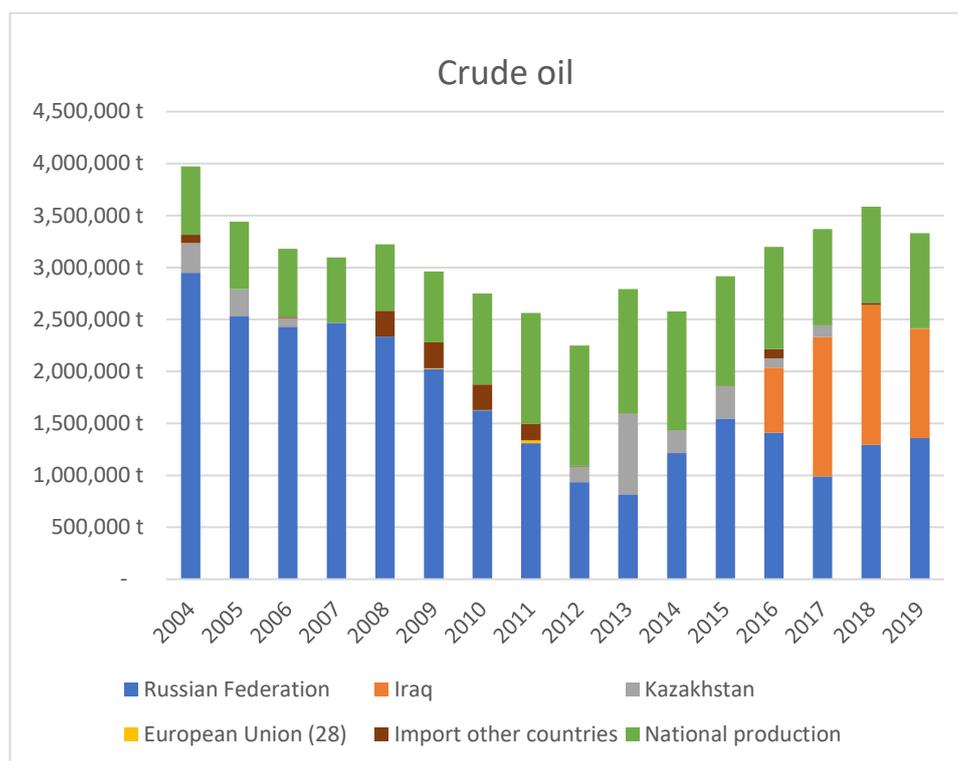


Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Energy balance of the Republic of Serbia from 2006 to 2020, macrotrends.net, authors' representation

Going deeper into the details, looking at crude oil and oil derivatives as separate groups, more valuable information can be revealed. With respect to the greater participation of crude oil in the total import of petroleum and petroleum derivatives, this product mainly depicts the same conclusions as previously pronounced for whole group – **declining trend in imports is visible, but with a high share of crude oil still coming from Russia (Graph 7).** On another hand, in the import of petroleum derivatives, the domination of products from the EU is obvious (Graph7).

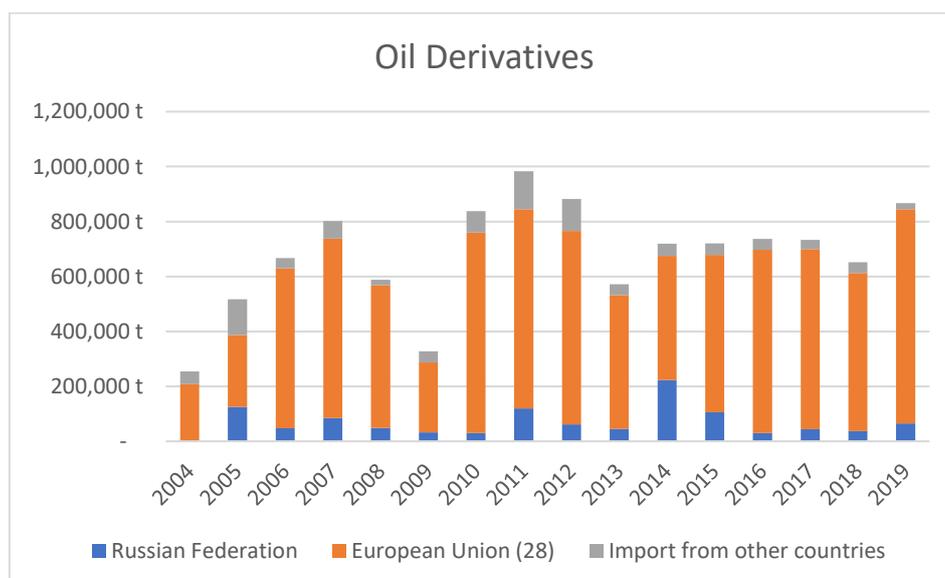
⁵⁹¹ More details about transaction of controlling rights for NIS from the Serbian government to Gazprom are provided in the next chapter.

Graph 7: Import and national production of petroleum crude oil from 2004 to 2019



Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Energy balance of the Republic of Serbia from 2006-2020, authors' representation

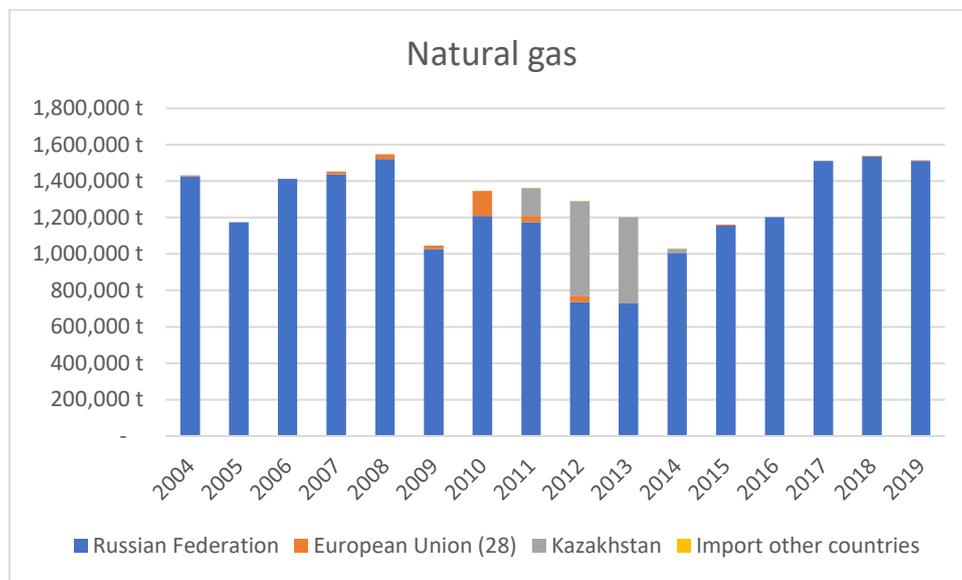
Graph 8: Import of petroleum oil derivatives from 2004 to 2019



Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, authors' representation

Regarding natural gas, the situation is a bit different. As Serbia only has access to one gas pipeline (crossing the border with Hungary) for the transport of mainly Russian gas across Ukraine, it is not surprising that almost all imported natural gas comes from Russia. As domestic production capacities are modest, **dependence on Russian natural gas is significant**. However, this is not the case only with Serbia, as many countries in Europe have the same issue due to scarcity of their own reserves on one side, and the huge production of Russia on the other.

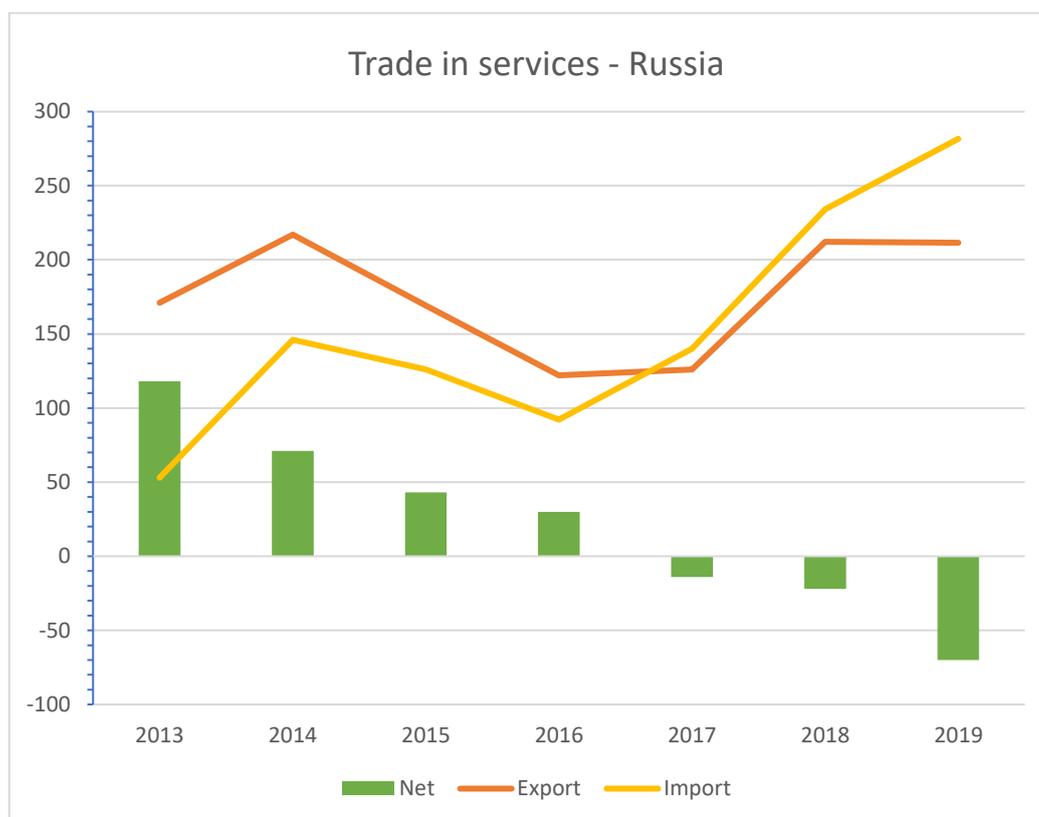
Graph 9: Import of natural gas from 2004 to 2019



Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, authors' representation

Trade in services between Serbia and Russia is worth far less than trade in goods. In 2019 it reached the highest level but, with a value of nearly €500 million, was six times less than the trade in goods in that same year. In any case, similarly to the trade in goods, there is a sharp decrease in trade activities in the period from 2015 to 2016. From the next year, the values of both exported and imported services have grown rapidly, but now with a net deficit on the Serbian side. **Even though the deficit in the trade of services visible from 2019 is not large in value, a sharp rise in imports combined with stagnant exports should be a matter of concern for Serbian policymakers responsible for foreign trade relations.**

Graph 10: Foreign trade in services with Russia as a partner for the period from 2013 to 2019



*in million EUR

Source: CEFTA Statistical Portal, authors' representation

Taking into account the specific sectors in which residents of two countries provide services to each other, it is clear that in 2019, the main field of activity in both imports and exports was construction services. The dominance of this sector shows that it alone represented 36% of total export, and 40% of total import value. Interestingly enough, the second most important sector in both exports and imports is unclassified services, which is followed by transport and travel services. These four classifications lines account for approximately 90% of all services exchanged between Serbia and Russia in 2019.

Table 5: Export and import of services by sector with Russia as a partner, 2019

Sector	Export (thous. EUR)	Sector	Import (thous. EUR)
Construction Services	77,020	Construction Services	113,320

Other business services	47,510	Other business services	77,220
Transport	46,230	Travel	24,420
Travel	22,380	Transport	21,660
Telecommunications, computer, and information services	11,050	Maintenance and repair services	15,840
Personal, cultural, and recreational services	3,000	Telecommunications, computer, and information services	10,540
Maintenance and repair services	2,310	Insurance and pension services	8,720
Charges for the use of intellectual property	990	Personal, cultural, and recreational services	4,170
Financial services	760	Financial services	3,670
Insurance and pension services	230	Charges for the use of intellectual property	1,140
Manufacturing services on physical inputs owned by others	70	Government services,	940
Government services,	60	Manufacturing services on physical inputs owned by others	-

Source: CEFTA Statistical Portal, authors' representation

III. 2. 2 Investments and Business Cooperation

The energy sector in the lead

The first intergovernmental agreements for economic cooperation in the energy sector between Serbia and Russia after the collapse of their state unions took place in the mid-1990s. Namely, in 1995 the Agreement between Yugoslavia and the Russian Federation on deliveries of natural gas from Russia and, in 1996, the Agreement between Yugoslavia and the Russian Federation on cooperation in the construction of a gas pipeline on the territory of Yugoslavia, were signed between the two countries.^{592,593} As a result of the second agreement, a joint company for the construction of gas pipeline systems, and the transport and trade of natural gas – named Yugorogaz – was created. This company continues to operate in Serbia, now as a joint-stock company with shares owned by Gazprom (50%), Srbijagas (25%), and Centrex Europe Energy & Gas AG (25%).⁵⁹⁴ As there are clear indications that Centrex is actually in control of Gazprom and Yugorogaz in Serbia, representing one entity which at the same time possesses gas pipelines, imports natural gas from Russia, and sells it to the final consumer, the operation of this company is not in the line with EU regulative principles, according to an assessment done by the European Energy Community.⁵⁹⁵ In addition, many scandals regarding Centrex's buying shares of Yugorogaz in 2005, the exclusive right to Yugorogaz to sell the majority of imported natural gas from Gazprom to Srbijagas from 2007 onwards, and questionable commission fees for doing so, are an inseparable part of the economic cooperation between Russia and Serbia, led by influences other than pure economics.⁵⁹⁶

These mentioned agreements, however, are just the beginning of a series of political trade-offs at the expense of the Serbian economy. The main umbrella agreement for deep and

⁵⁹² Sporazum između Savezne vlade Savezne Republike Jugoslavije i Vlade Ruske Federacije o isporukama prirodnog gasa iz Ruske Federacije u Saveznu Republiku Jugoslaviju (Agreement between the Federal Government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Government of the Russian Federation on deliveries of natural gas from the Russian Federation to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), Official Gazette of the SRJ - International Agreements No. 4/96

⁵⁹³ Sporazum između Savezne vlade Savezne Republike Jugoslavije i Vlade Ruske Federacije o saradnji u izgradnji gasovoda na teritoriji Savezne Republike Jugoslavije (Agreement between the Federal Government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Government of the Russian Federation on cooperation in the construction of a gas pipeline on the territory of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), Official Gazette of the SRJ - International Agreements No. 4/96

⁵⁹⁴ Yugorogaz, official web presentation, available at: <http://www.yugorogaz.rs>

⁵⁹⁵ European Energy Community, Opinion 2/17, available at: https://energy-community.org/dam/jcr:a9d334fe-28f9-4c9f-95e8-3fbee356a2b/Opinion_02_2017_certification.pdf

⁵⁹⁶ For more information regarding the abovementioned suspicious activities, see more in Insajder, "Energy (non) agreement", available at (in Serbian): <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/energetski/214/>

comprehensive cooperation in the energy sector was signed in December 2008. Even though the Serbian side wanted an agreement which would condition implementation of all three discussed topics to each other – selling of 51% of NIS, construction of gas storage site at Banatski Dvor, and the construction of the South Stream gas pipeline – in the end, a compromise was signed. Namely, on 25 January 2008, the Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Russian Federation on Cooperation in the Field of Oil and Gas, was signed, in which it was stated that: Serbia would sell 51% of NIS to Gazprom, and; in good faith from both sides, the realisation of three projects would go ahead, including the construction of a transit gas pipeline system (South Stream), the construction of underground gas storage at Banatski Dvor, and the reconstruction and modernisation of NIS’s technological complex.⁵⁹⁷ This agreement was ratified in the Serbian National Assembly on 9 September 2008, but without belonging Protocol which defined the price of €400 million for the purchase of 51% of NIS, with the obligation of investing €500 million into the modernisation of its facilities.⁵⁹⁸ Therefore, the Serbian government accepted Gazprom’s offer only by the Conclusion of the Government from 23 December 2008, based on which transaction was formally done.⁵⁹⁹

Although the agreed-upon price for NIS was lower than expected, internal turbulence on the political scene in Serbia, and Kosovo’s declaration of independence pushed forward this incredibly naïve decision, which did not require any conditionalities to guarantee the South Stream construction. The development of this project was announced by Serbian politicians as a great deal, providing a secure supply of natural gas for Serbia, and significant commission fees for transport through Serbia.⁶⁰⁰ However, in 2014, the South Stream project was officially cancelled, leaving the Serbian government with 30% of shares in NIS, with the rest distributed to citizens (from which Gazprom bought an additional 5%).⁶⁰¹

⁵⁹⁷ Zakon o potvrđivanju sporazuma između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Ruske Federacije o saradnji u oblasti naftne i gasne privrede (Law on the Ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Russian Federation on Cooperation in the Field of Oil and Gas Economy), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 83/2008

⁵⁹⁸ Ekapija, “Poslanici potvrdili energetske sporazum sa Rusijom”, 2008, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.ekapija.com/news/191619/poslanici-potvrdili-energetski-sporazum-sa-rusijom>

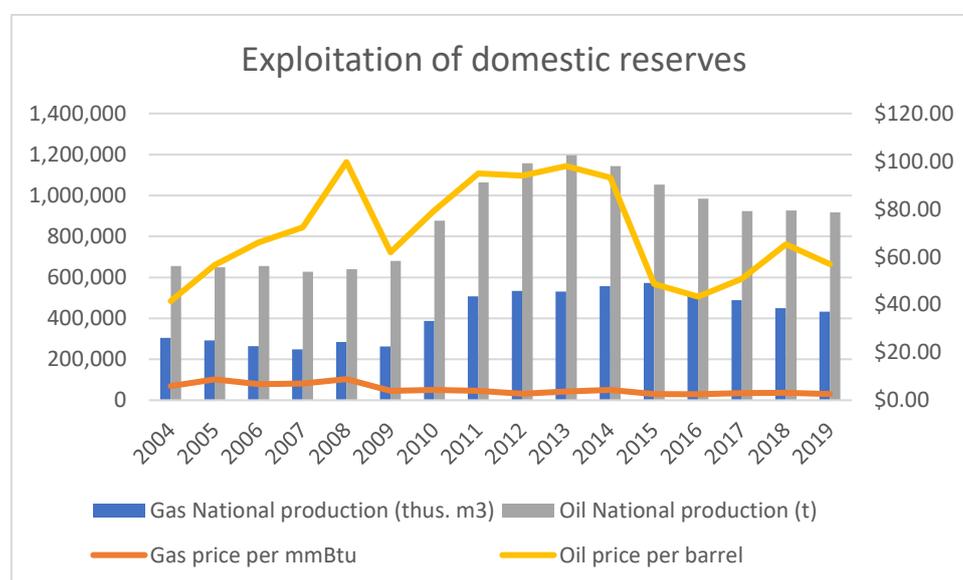
⁵⁹⁹ NIS, “Ugovor o prodaji i kupovini akcija”, available at (in Serbian): <http://ir.nis.eu/fileadmin/template/nis/pdf/en/corporate/CompanyRegulations/ugovor-o-kupovini-i-prodaji-akcija.pdf>

⁶⁰⁰ Isinomer, “Ovako je tekao „Južni tok“”, 2014, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.istinomer.rs/analize/ovako-je-tekao-juzni-tok/>

⁶⁰¹ NIS, “Struktura akcionarskog kapitala na dan 30.06.2020.”, available at (in Serbian): <http://ir.nis.eu/sh/akcije-i-dividenda/akcije-i-vlasnicka-struktura/>

Putting aside the question of whether the price of NIS was reasonable⁶⁰², it seems that negotiators somehow were unworried about the fact that by selling NIS, Serbia also sells its oil and gas wells and geothermal springs without any conditions related to their utilisation. Serbia is not abundant in oil and gas reserves, but from data about extraction in the period after the sale of NIS to Gazprom, there is a notable willingness of the new owner to utilise the much of resources at a convenient time. In other words, with the rise of the world price of oil and gas, Gazprom was eager to push domestic production and maximise its short-term profit (Graph 11). These profitable actions were even more attractive for Gazprom as NIS's royalty fees for extraction are relatively low.⁶⁰³

Graph 11: Production of crude oil and natural gas from domestic wells from 2004 to 2019



Source: Energy balance of the Republic of Serbia from 2006 to 2020, macrotrends.net, authors' representation

In any case, today NIS employs approximately 11,000 workers, records net profit from 2010 onwards and invests in the modern system of oil processing at its Pančevo refinery.⁶⁰⁴ Also, in 2019, NIS contributed €1.4 billion to the national budget of Serbia through taxes and other public revenues, accounting for approximately 13% of the total Serbian budget revenue and

⁶⁰² At the moment of its sale, NIS was recording losses of €100 to €200 million annually; RTV, “Privatizovati NIS što pre - gubici 200 miliona evra”, 2007, available at (in Serbian):

https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/privatizovati-nis-sto-pre-gubici-200-miliona-evra_33258.html

⁶⁰³ Insajder, “Danas pitamo: Zašto NIS i dalje plaća rudnu rentu manje nego što je zakonom propisano?”, 2018, available at (in Serbian): <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/pitanjedana/11895/>

⁶⁰⁴ NIS, NIS Annual report, 2019, available at (in Serbian): https://www.nis.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Annual_Report_2019_ser.pdf

around 3% of the Serbian GDP.⁶⁰⁵ With a total of €3 billion of invested funds since 2009 NIS has succeeded in positioning itself in the markets of neighbouring countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, and Romania.⁶⁰⁶ Therefore, improvements in NIS's business operation are visible when compared to the situation before 2008, which was characterised by losses making and poor management.

Another deal in the energy sector, far less important than the sale of NIS, was the Lukoil's acquisition of the state-owned retailer of oil and gas products Beopetrol on a public tender. This deal was done in August 2003, when Lukoil and the Privatization Agency of the Government of Serbia signed the deal for the price of €117 million and the obligation to invest €85 million for a package of 79.5% of shares.⁶⁰⁷ After some decapitalisation activities, this Russian company gained almost 100% of shares in the newly-branded company Lukoil Srbija.⁶⁰⁸ The Anti-Corruption Council of the Government of the Republic of Serbia produced a report in 2003 which indicated irregularities in the implementation of Lukoil's investment obligations, but to this date, no official proceeding was conducted on this matter.⁶⁰⁹ In any case, today Lukoil is the second largest retailer of petroleum products in Serbia by number of gas stations.⁶¹⁰ But, it recorded profit of only €6 million in the last year, with 180 employees (and an additional 800 indirect employees in its dealer network) which makes Lukoil a much less significant player in this industry than NIS.⁶¹¹

Investments in the financial sector – four entities, one player

There are three banks from Russia operating in the Serbian market. Only Sberbank, however, can be counted as relatively important player in the Serbian banking sector. The other two, Expobank and API bank, together have a share of approximately 0.6% of the total net assets in

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁷ The Privatisation Agency of the Republic of Serbia, Agreement for the sale and purchase of socially-owned and share fund capital of Beopetrol a.d. by public tender, available at:

<http://www.priv.rs/upload/company/contract/2339749.PDF>

⁶⁰⁸ Lukoil, Lukoil Annual financial report for 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<https://lukoil.ru/FileSystem/9/467182.pdf>

⁶⁰⁹ Ekapija, "Prodajom "Beopetrola" ruskoj kompaniji "Lukoil" država oštećena za 100 mil EUR?", 2013, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.ekapija.com/news/799303/prodajom-beopetrola-ruskoj-kompaniji-lukoil-drzava-ostecena-za-100-mil-eur>

⁶¹⁰ Lukoil, official web presentation, available at (in Serbian): <https://lukoil.rs/en/About/GeneralInformation>

⁶¹¹ Lukoil, Lukoil Annual financial report for 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://lukoil.ru/FileSystem/9/467182.pdf>

the banking sector.⁶¹² In the insurance sector, the joint company of Russian Sogaz (51%) and Srbijagas (49%) currently operates, but with a share of only 1.25% of the total premiums on the market.⁶¹³

Sberbank came to the Serbian market as part of Sberbank Europa, which bought branches of the Austrian-owned Volksbank in South East Europe in February 2012.⁶¹⁴ Accordingly, in late 2012, an official statement was issued that, from then on, Volksbank would continue to do business under the name of Sberbank Srbija.⁶¹⁵ Today, the bank provides services to individuals and enterprises with 33 branches in Serbia and a total of 734 employees.⁶¹⁶ With a share of around 3.5% of the total net assets of the banking sector in Serbia, Sberbank is still a relatively small player, not having a place in the country's top 10 banks.⁶¹⁷

Russian investments – aggregated dimension

Apart from relatively small investments in the production of rubber (Vulkan gume Niš) and copper tubes (FBC Majdanpek), no largescale single investments can be recorded in sectors other than energy and finance. On the aggregate level, however, **in the last ten years, investments from Russia accounted for nearly €2.5 billion and an approximate 12% share of total net foreign direct investment in Serbia, giving Russia second place after the EU.**⁶¹⁸

As shown on the Graph 12, economic crisis in Russia caused by falling oil prices and the falling value of the ruble have also influenced the level of investments coming to Serbia, which were already began to slow down at that time. From 2016, however, a strong growth in funds coming to Serbia from Russia is notable. On the other side, the outflow of investments of Serbian citizens to Russia was consistently insignificant during the observed period. Therefore, the **net inflow of investments from Russia has constantly risen from 2016.**

⁶¹² National Bank of Serbia, Financial Statements of Banks, available at: https://www.nbs.rs/internet/english/50/50_5.html

⁶¹³ National Bank of Serbia, Insurance Companies Operations, Number of policies and premiums by insurance companies in 2019, available at: https://www.nbs.rs/internet/english/60/60_2/izvestaji/god_T8_2019.pdf

⁶¹⁴ Sberbank Europe has full ownership of Sberbank, in which the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation is the principal shareholder, owning 50% of the bank's authorised capital plus one voting share, with the remaining 50% held by domestic and international investors.

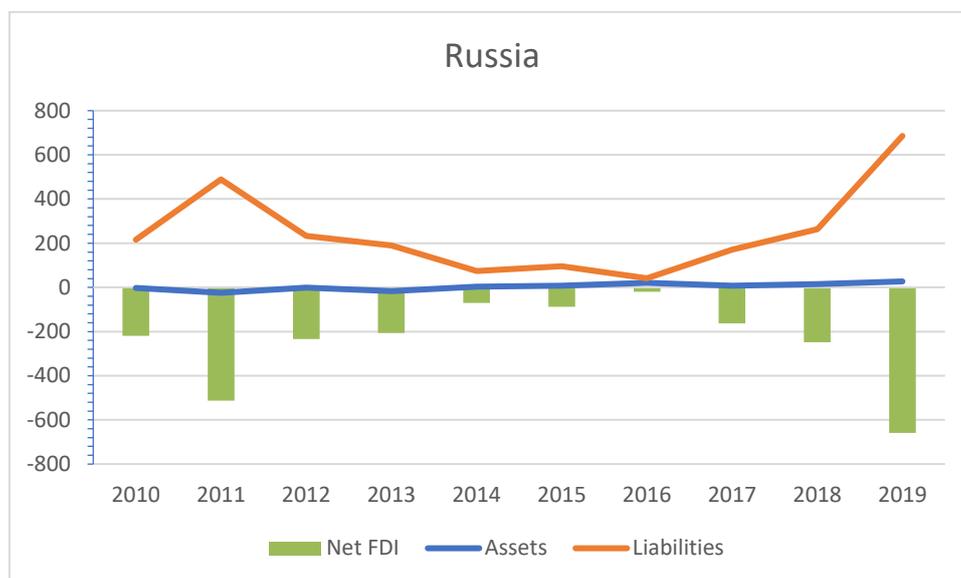
⁶¹⁵ Bizlife, "Volksbanka od sada posluje kao Sberbank Srbija", 2012, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.bizlife.rs/biznis/poslovne-vesti/52069-volksbanka-od-sada-posluje-kao-sberbank-srbija/>

⁶¹⁶ Sberbank, official web presentation, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.sberbank.rs/o-nama/o-sberbank>

⁶¹⁷ National Bank of Serbia, Financial Statements of Banks, available at: https://www.nbs.rs/internet/english/50/50_5.html

⁶¹⁸ National Bank of Serbia, Serbia's Balance of Payments - Foreign direct investments by country, available at: https://www.nbs.rs/internet/english/80/platni_bilans.html

Graph 12: Foreign direct investments with Russia as a partner for the period from 2010 to 2019



*in million EUR

Source: National Bank of Serbia, authors' representation

Cooperation in infrastructure projects

In the field of infrastructure projects, relations between Serbia and Russia are dominated by one transport sector – **rail**. As many years passed without any investment in the maintenance of Serbia's railways, trains in Serbia were getting to be slower on average than back in the 1880s, when railway transport first began in Serbia.⁶¹⁹ Serbian political leaders, therefore, sought foreign help as the national budget could not support investment in this sector.

As a result, the first intergovernmental agreement for a credit line in the amount of \$800 million was signed in January 2013 in Moscow.⁶²⁰ The purpose of this agreement was to finance 85% of the value of goods delivered, construction works implemented, and services provided, by Russian companies in the rail sector in Serbia, with a 10-year repayment period, and a 4.1% annual interest rate on this loan.⁶²¹ Although there were some delays in drawing the approved

⁶¹⁹ Blic, "Vozovi sporiji nego u 19. veku", 2007, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/tema-dana/vozovi-sporiji-nego-u-19-veku/zt6thhd>

⁶²⁰ Zakon o potvrđivanju sporazuma između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Ruske Federacije o odobrenju državnog izvoznog kredita Vladi Republike Srbije (Law on Ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Russian Federation on the Approval of the State Export Credit to the Government of the Republic of Serbia), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 3/2013

⁶²¹ Ibid.

funds, some projects funded by this credit line have started. According to statements from the line ministry, **four such projects are already finished**, including construction of the second track of the Belgrade (Pančevo bridge)-Pančevo (14.9 km) railroad, the reconstruction of six railroad sections of Corridor X (112.3 km), the reconstruction of the Belgrade (Resnik)-Valjevo (77.6 km) railroad, and the delivery of 27 diesel trains. **One project is still in progress**: the construction of the Stara Pazova-Novı Sad railroad (36.2 km), started in March 2018.⁶²² As official contracts for the realisation of these projects are not available to the public, according to the statements of Serbian officials, the most valuable individual projects are: the section of the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railroad from Stara Pazova to Novi Sad,⁶²³ at the cost of \$248 million; the section of the Belgrade-Bar railroad between Resnik and Valjevo, at the cost of \$80 million, and; \$100 million for 27 diesel-motor trains from the Russian manufacturer Metrovagonmas.⁶²⁴

The second and the newest agreement about cooperation in the railway sector between Serbia and Russia was signed in October 2019 in Belgrade. By this agreement, it was concluded that Russia would lend €172.5 million to Serbia in order to finance 75% of the value of **three announced projects**: the electrification of Stara Pazova-Novı Sad railroad, the construction of a trains dispatch centre, and the preparation of technical documentation for the reconstruction of the Valjevo-Vrbnica railroad section.⁶²⁵ Similar to the previous agreement, in this agreement was predicted that a minimum of 75% of the value of delivered goods, implemented construction works, and provided services would be provided by Russian companies. The repayment period for this loan is 5 years, with an agreed annual interest rate of 2%.⁶²⁶ Again, no official contracts are available to the public, but, by an announcement from the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, construction of a railway dispatch centre is estimated to cost €127.4 million, works on the construction of electrical infrastructure on the

⁶²² Vreme, “Koliko koštaju pokloni”, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1657545>

⁶²³ For the other two sections on the Belgrade-Budapest railroad, Chinese companies are in charge.

⁶²⁴ Novosti, “Za pet godina Srbija dobija 1.000 km novih pruga: Beograd - Budimpešta šinama za velike brzine do kraja 2023. godine”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/ekonomija/aktuelno.239.html:839858-Za-pet-godina-Srbija-dobija-1000-km-novih-pruga-Beograd--Budimpesta-sinama-za-velike-brzine-do-kraja-2023-godine> ; Železnice Srbije,

“Četiri nova ruska voza puštena danas u saobraćaj”, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.zeleznicesrbije.com/cetiri-nova-ruska-voza-pustena-danas-u-saobračaj/?lang=lat>

⁶²⁵ Zakon o potvrđivanju sporazuma između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Ruske Federacije o odobrenju državnog izvoznog kredita Vladi Republike Srbije (Law on Ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Russian Federation on the Approval of the State Export Credit to the Government of the Republic of Serbia), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 16/2019

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

Stara Pazova-Noví Sad section €91.9 million, and the preparation of technical documentation for the reconstruction of 210 km of the railway from Valjevo to the border with Montenegro €10.7 million.⁶²⁷

Even though, by official statements from the Serbian Ministry of Finance, the approved €800 million credit is still not completely withdrawn, and the second credit line is not yet being used, the fact is that **Russian loans are the most important drive in the revitalisation of the rail sector in Serbia, along with loans from China.** As stated by the executive manager of Serbian Railway Infrastructure, in the last 5 years, 227 km of railroads in Serbia were modernised, while work on an additional 134 km is in progress, representing far more than the 31 km done in the period from 2008 to 2014.⁶²⁸ By simple calculation, it appears that approximately 90% of all revitalised kilometres of rail in Serbia in the last 5 years were financed by loans from Russia. Also, it should be noted that when works are done on the currently-opened rail projects the relative importance of Russian loans will decrease as the majority of further railroad kilometres are financed by loans from China.

One more sector for which the Russian side's interests are clear is **gas transportation infrastructure.** After the failure of South Stream, in recent years, another gas transport project came into the picture. The construction of Turk Stream, with half of South Stream's planned capacity, began in May 2017, eight months after an official agreement between Russia and Turkey was concluded. The main idea behind this gas pipeline is securing an alternative to transporting gas through Ukraine. In contrast to the failed South Stream, on this occasion it was decided that each individual country that wants to participate in the utilisation of Turk Stream would construct gas infrastructure in their own country. Shortly thereafter, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary expressed their interest in participating in the second line of Turk Stream, as the first, comprising half of its capacities (two lines of 15.75 million m³), being reserved for Turkish domestic consumption.⁶²⁹

⁶²⁷ Ekapija, "Potpisan ugovor između kompanija RZD International i Infrastruktura železnice Srbije - 230 mil EUR za rekonstrukciju pruga i Dispečerski centar", 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.ekapija.com/news/2372859/potpisan-ugovor-izmedju-kompanija-rzd-international-i-infrastruktura-zeleznice-srbije-230-mil>

⁶²⁸ Novosti, "Za pet godina Srbija dobija 1.000 km novih pruga: Beograd - Budimpešta šinama za velike brzine do kraja 2023. Godine", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/ekonomija/aktuelno.239.html:839858-Za-pet-godina-Srbija-dobija-1000-km-novih-pruga-Beograd---Budimpesta-sinama-za-velike-brzine-do-kraja-2023-godine>

⁶²⁹ RTS, "Šest stvari koje treba da znate o gasovodu "Turski tok"?", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/13/ekonomija/3801702/sest-stvari-koje-treba-da-znate-o-gasovodu-turski-tok.html>

Although the first cubic metres of gas began to pass through Turk Stream in January 2020, Serbia has so far not yet received any. According to announcements from Serbian officials, works on the 403 km-long pipeline in Serbia by Gastrans, a joint firm of Russian Gazprom (51%) and Srbijagas (49%), are almost finished, but there remains a lot to do in Bulgaria.⁶³⁰ With the finalisation of construction works in Bulgaria, Serbia will have access to a second direction of natural gas supply, in this way decreasing, at least a bit, the risk of disruption in the delivery of gas and its dependency on a route passing Ukraine. However, what is still unknown is the quantity of gas that will be transported to Serbia, the cost and conditions of construction works done by Gastrans and paid by Serbian taxpayers, and when, this pipeline will actually start to work. Without having this information, it is hard to assess the economic viability of the whole project. Also, another point of concern is the consistent warning coming from the European Energy Community that the development of projects like Turk Stream is not in line with EU regulations, and is against the spirit of promotion of competition which is a main principles of the EU.⁶³¹ Namely, the main problem which the Energy Community states regarding Turk Stream is that competition on the market in Serbia is severely limited by this project, as Gastrans is the owner of both the gas and the gas pipeline concerned, details which are not in accordance with the third energy package.⁶³²

Foreign debt towards Russia

The first credit from Russia for the consolidation of a Serbian national budget (covering a budget deficit from 2000 onwards) was received in 2010. According to the agreement, “in order to further strengthen friendly relations between the two countries“, Russia loaned \$200 million to the Serbian government, with an annual interest rate of LIBOR plus 2.95% , and with a repayment period of ten years.⁶³³ A similar arrangement was concluded also in 2013, when a loan of \$300 million was approved, with an additional \$200 million available if Serbia agree an economic programme with the International Monetary Fund.⁶³⁴ The arranged annual interest

⁶³⁰ Beta, “Neizvestan rok za dotok gasa Turskim tokom u Srbiju”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://beta.rs/ekonomija/ekonomija-srbija/121712-neizvestan-rok-za-dotok-gasa-turskim-tokom-u-srbiju>

⁶³¹ Radio Slobodna Evropa, “Energetska zajednica: 'Turskim tokom' u Srbiji diskriminisano tržište”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30366647.html>

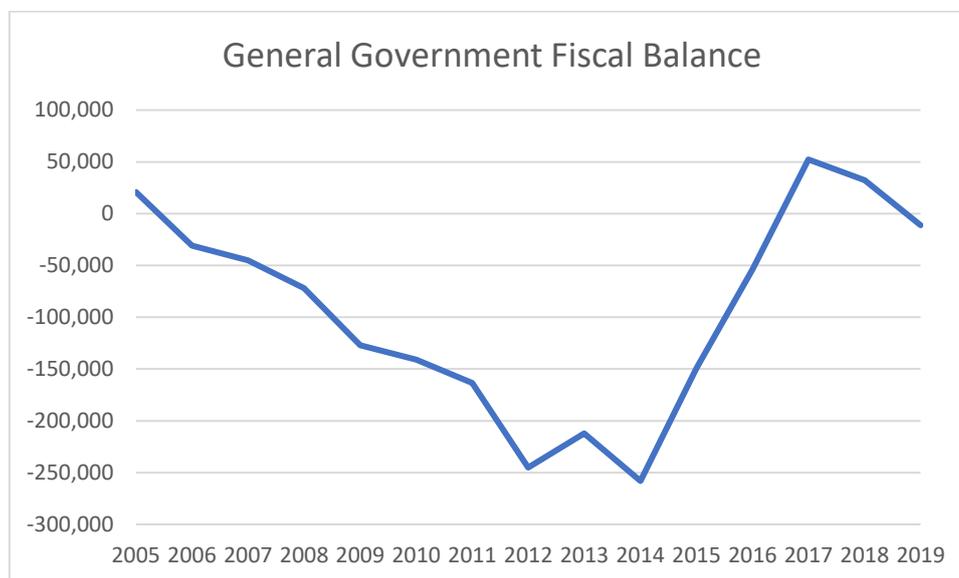
⁶³² Ibid.

⁶³³ Zakon o potvrđivanju sporazuma između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Ruske Federacije o odobrenju državnog kredita Republici Srbiji (Law on the Ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Russian Federation on the Approval of the State Loan to the Republic of Serbia), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 8/2010

⁶³⁴ Zakon o potvrđivanju sporazuma između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Ruske Federacije o odobrenju državnog finansijskog kredita Vladi Republike Srbije (Law on the Ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Russian Federation on the Approval of the

rate for this agreement was 3.5%, with a repayment period of eight years.⁶³⁵ As can be seen from Graph, **loans from Russia came at a time of serious problems in public finance in Serbia, and helped to overcome accumulated difficulties at the time.**

Graph 13: Serbian general government fiscal balance, 2005-2019



** in million RSD (Serbian dinars)*

Source: National Bank of Serbia, authors' representation

The other two loans that Serbia took from Russia were already mentioned above, both for the purpose of investment in Serbia's rail sector. However, latest data available from the Ministry of Finance of Serbia (30.06.2020), shows that Serbia has only two credit lines open with Russia, consisting of \$93.75 million from a loan from 2013 to support the Serbian budget, and \$677 million from another loan from 2013 dedicated to railway reconstruction.⁶³⁶ Therefore, the share of debt owed to Russia is on the level of approximately 4% of total foreign debt, and 2.5% of the total public debt of Serbia.⁶³⁷ That is not significant amount at the moment, but it should be monitored as it is expected to rise in the future with a start of utilisation of latest agreed loan for infrastructure development.

State Financial Loan to the Government of the Republic of Serbia), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 7/2013

⁶³⁵ Ibid.

⁶³⁶ Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Serbia - Public Debt Administration, Quarterly Report- June 2020, available at: <http://www.javnidug.gov.rs/eng/default.asp?P=118&MenuItem=4>

⁶³⁷ Ibid.

Taking all this information into consideration, it can be confirmed that economic cooperation between Serbia and Russia is often based on political connections. This is particularly true for the energy sector, where all recent decisions, like the selling of NIS or the building of the Turk Stream natural gas transport corridor, are led primarily by political decisions and rarely by economic rationality. In addition, imports from Russia show a notable dependence on oil and, particularly, natural gas, and with relatively limited Serbian exports to Russia do not contribute to the mitigation of the trade deficit created from energy imports. The energy sector, therefore, represents the key determinant of Serbo-Russian economic cooperation, with rail and, to some degree, the financial sector, also complementing economic relations between two countries.

III. 3 Russia's Soft Power in Serbia

In international relations, it is widely recognised that hard power is not the only kind of power to take into consideration regarding the overall potential impact one country may have on another. In this context, **the concept of soft power** is introduced. It is defined as **“the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment”**.⁶³⁸ The High Representative of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell goes so far as to argue that “soft power itself is increasingly used as a weapon”.⁶³⁹

Interestingly, **even Putin has addressed the question of *мягкая сила* in an op-ed, describing it as “a set of tools and methods for achieving foreign policy goals without resorting to arms, instead using information and other leverage”**.⁶⁴⁰ Even though Putin warns that “these methods are often used to cultivate and provoke extremism, separatism, nationalism, manipulate public consciousness, and directly interfere in the domestic politics of sovereign states”,⁶⁴¹ **what distinguishes Russia in its relations from Serbia as opposed to other states is its heavy reliance on soft power. .**

⁶³⁸ Joseph S. Nye Jr, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616, Public Diplomacy in a Changing World, 2008, p.94, available at:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25097996?seq=1>

⁶³⁹ Josep Borell, “Building Global Europe”, EEAS, 2020, available at:

https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/84888/building-global-europe_en

⁶⁴⁰ Vladimir Putin, “Россия и меняющийся мир”, *Московских новостях*, 2012, available at (in Russian):

<http://www.mn.ru/politics/78738>

⁶⁴¹ Ibid.

Without discussing the details of Russia's soft power in Serbia it will be impossible to understand why Serbia keeps balancing between the EU and Russia, even though it is politically and economically dominantly dependent on the former. The following represents an analysis of public support for Russia in Serbia, the trend of Putinisation, and the role of the media, and the importance of the Serbian Orthodox Church in nurturing close ties with Russia.

III. 3. 1 Supportive Public Opinion

The high levels of Euroscepticism in Serbia create fertile ground for Russophilia. Namely, Serbia's accession process has progressed slowly in the past decade, with no end in sight. This process, accompanied by strong conditionality policies, has led to frustration and disbelief among the local population. In fact, according to a 2020 poll, every second person in Serbia has given up the idea that Serbia will ever manage to join the club of EU member states.⁶⁴² In fact, Russia's image building process feeds on the negative image of the EU and the West, whose interests were diametrically opposed to Serbia's in the 1990s, and are still today with regards to the issue of Kosovo.

The anchor of Russia's ability to grow its seeds in Serbia is the supportive public opinion it finds there. Each and every public opinion poll conducted in Serbia shows that Serbs nurture a particular sort of emotional attachedness to Russia.⁶⁴³ From this attachedness stems the belief that Serbia's interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with Russia.⁶⁴⁴ Recognising the fact that Serbs see Russia as the friendliest country to Serbia,⁶⁴⁵ Russia's First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin described, during his visit to Belgrade in 2012, the relationship between Serbia and Russia as a sort of a marriage that is not only of convenience⁶⁴⁶ "but also of love".⁶⁴⁷ Fast-forward to 2020, and **the latest polls show that 86% of Serbs**

⁶⁴² Regional Cooperation Council, "Balkan Barometer 2020 - Public Opinion Analytical Report", 2020 p.41, available at: <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/95/balkan-barometer-2020-public-opinion-survey>

⁶⁴³ For a detailed overview of public opinion polls in Serbia see: Artem Patalakh, "Emotions and Identity as Foreign Policy Determinants: Serbian Approach to Relations with Russia," 2018, p.3, available at: <https://philarchive.org/archive/PATEAI>

⁶⁴⁴ International Republican Institute (IRI), "Survey of Serbian Public Opinion", 2015, slide 20.

⁶⁴⁵ Srećko Mihailović, "Which empire to lean on... Serbia between the East and the West", *Demostat*, 2017, available at: <http://demostat.rs/en/vesti/istrazivanja/which-empire-to-lean-on-serbia-between-the-east-and-the-west/214>

⁶⁴⁶ It appears that the emotional attachment of Serbs to Russia is not necessarily reciprocated. According to a Russian public survey from 2016, Serbia ranks as Russians' 12th most favoured country.

See: Levada Center-Center, "Friends and enemies", 2016, available at:

<https://www.levada.ru/en/2016/06/10/russia-s-friends-and-enemies-2/>

⁶⁴⁷ B92, "Rogozin to Serbia: Russia and Putin 'stand with you'", 2012, available at:

perceive Russia as a friend, while 57% give President Aleksandar Vučić credit for such a good relationship.⁶⁴⁸

The positive perception of Russia sometimes leads to twisted interpretations of reality. According to a public opinion poll from December 2019 conducted by the Serbian Ministry for European Integration (MEI), for instance, **Russia is perceived as the second largest donor to Serbia.**⁶⁴⁹ It should be noted that it even represented a close second in this poll, with 23% of votes, as compared to the EU with 26%. **In earlier polls, it was even perceived as the number-one donor to Serbia** (such as in the December 2016 poll).⁶⁵⁰ This perception is staggering, considering that Russia is not even among the top ten donors to Serbia, whereas the EU is by far the largest.⁶⁵¹ Other research from 2017 indicated that Serbs consider Russia to be **the world's strongest military power** (by far outperforming the US, China, and the EU in this poll).⁶⁵² Even though Russia's economic power is poorly evaluated, its political power is considered to be on par with that of the US, whereas the EU's influence is largely neglected.⁶⁵³ Such findings indicate that Russia is **successful at projecting an asymmetric image of power**, even when it does not match reality.

From the perspective of foreign policy, most people believe that Russia has had **a positive effect on Serbia's foreign policy**, whereas the effect of the EU is rated as negative.⁶⁵⁴ Other research from 2020, in the context of the **COVID-19 pandemic**, shows that respondents believe that Serbia should rely on Russia and China in terms of foreign policy, while the EU again scored poorly.⁶⁵⁵ The same applies when analysing the position of the younger population, as according to a 2020 youth-focused survey, 30% of respondents believed that

https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2012&mm=11&dd=28&nav_id=83374

⁶⁴⁸ Institute for European Affairs, "Stavovi građana Srbije prema Rusiji", 2020, slide 5, available at (in Serbian): <http://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Stav-gra%C4%91ana-Srbije-prema-Rusiji-mart-2020.pdf>

⁶⁴⁹ Serbian Ministry for European Integration, "Public Opinion Poll", December 2019, p.24, available at (in Serbian):

https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/ijm_dec_19.pdf

⁶⁵⁰ Serbian Ministry for European Integration, "Public Opinion Poll", December 2016, p.24, available at (in Serbian):

https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/istrazivanje_javnog_mnjenja_decembar16.pdf

⁶⁵¹ Ibid, p.25.

⁶⁵² Miloš Popović, "Public perception of Serbia's foreign policy", Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), 2017, slide 9.

⁶⁵³ Ibid, slide 10 and 14.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid, slide 15.

⁶⁵⁵ Faculty of Political Science, "Stavovi građana Republike Srbije o COVID 19", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/Izve%C5%A1taj-Stavovi-gra%C4%91ana-Republike-Srbije-o-COVID-19.pdf?jezik=lat>

Serbia should align its foreign policy with Russia's, whereas 21% picked the EU, 13% China, and 2% the US.⁶⁵⁶

All of these previously-described elements indicate that Russia has a significant level of soft power in Serbia. As such, it **not only outperforms other foreign powers such as China and Turkey, but also the EU** – at least from an emotional standpoint. Such formidable levels of power took years to develop, and it appears that they are quite stable, if not cemented in place. It also shows that **Serbia typically sees Russia in a more favourable light than most countries in the world**, especially considering that Russia was ranked in 2019 as the 30th most powerful country in the world based on global comparative analysis of soft power.⁶⁵⁷

Box 20: Tourism – Notable, but not Significant

Ever since 2009, **visas are not required to travel between Russia and Serbia.**⁶⁵⁸ Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, Serbia stopped short of introducing any travel restrictions to Russians. The only other countries to have done the same were Albania, Belarus, Moldova, and North Macedonia.⁶⁵⁹ The issue of visas is going to become an increasingly important issue for Serbia as it progresses on its path to the EU, as it will have to align with the EU's visa policy. In practice, this will mean that its visa agreement with Russia will need to be annulled prior to Serbia's acquisition of membership.

When it comes to the number of Serbian tourists traveling to Russia, in 2019, there were 52,000.⁶⁶⁰ This number puts **Serbian tourists in 38th place in terms of visitors to Russia.**

⁶⁵⁶ <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Alternativni-izves%CC%8Ctaj-o-poloz%CC%8Caju-i-potrebama-mladih-u-RS-2020.pdf>

⁶⁵⁷ Portland, "The Soft Power 30 – Russia's Profile", 2019, available at: <https://softpower30.com/country/russian-federation/>

⁶⁵⁸ B92, "Bezvizni režim Srbije i Rusije", 2009, available at (in Serbian): https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2009&mm=02&dd=20&nav_category=11&nav_id=346009

⁶⁵⁹ Passport Index, "Russia", August 2020, available at: <https://www.passportindex.org/comparebyPassport.php?pl=ru&fl=&s=yes>

⁶⁶⁰ Russian Federal Agency for Tourism, "Information on the number of tourist trips of foreign citizens to Russia in 2019", available at (in Russian): <https://www.russiatourism.ru/contents/statistika/statisticheskie-pokazateli-vzaimnykh-poezdok-grazhdan-rossiyskoy-federatsii-i-grazhdan-inostrannykh-gosudarstv/vyborochnaya-statisticheskaya-informatsiya-rasschitannaya-v-sootvetstvii-s-ofitsialnoy-statisticheskoy-metodologiyey-otsenki-chisla-vezdnykh-i-vyezdnykh-turistskikh-poezdok/>

On top of this, it appears that the trend of tourists traveling from Serbia to Russia is **decreasing** (with 67,000 tourists in 2014).⁶⁶¹

Despite favourable visa arrangements, Russians are not even in the top ten groups of tourists visiting Serbia. In fact, based on the **total number of registered visitors to Serbia in 2019**, **Russians represented the 12th largest group of visitors**, at approximately 64,000.⁶⁶² In fact, they are by far outperformed by tourists from China (including Hong Kong) (144,000), and Turkey (107,000). Yet, Russia's score improves when it comes to **the aggregated sum of total nights spent in Serbia**. According to this parameter, **Russians represented the 5th largest group of visitors to Serbia** in 2019, spending approximately 220,000 nights in total.⁶⁶³ Although this is a high number, Russians were again outperformed by China (including Hong Kong) (268,000), and Turkey (227,000). Another positive element in the area of tourism is that the number of Russian tourists appears to be rising when compared to previous years.⁶⁶⁴ Therefore, it can be concluded that **the inflow of Russian tourists to Serbia is notable and rising, but still not as significant as the impact of tourists from elsewhere**.

Meanwhile, it is important to note that despite the fact Russia enjoys formidable public support in Serbia, it does not mean that the local population perceives it as a desirable place to live or as a preferred model of governance. In fact, only 13% of the people who participated in the MEI's opinion poll chose Russia as a role-model, whereas wealthier Western countries such as Switzerland, Germany, and Norway, outranked it.⁶⁶⁵ Other polls also showcase that the majority of Serbs would prefer live in the Western countries, whereas only a tiny minority

⁶⁶¹ Russian Federal Agency for Tourism, "Information on the number of tourist trips of foreign citizens to Russia in 2014", available at (in Russian): <https://www.russiatourism.ru/contents/statistika/statisticheskie-pokazateli-vzaimnykh-poezdok-grazhdan-rossiyskoy-federatsii-i-grazhdan-inostrannykh-gosudarstv/vyborochnaya-statisticheskaya-informatsiya-rasschitannaya-v-sootvetstvii-s-ofitsialnoy-statisticheskoy-metodologiyey-otsenki-chisla-vezdnykh-i-vyezdneykh-turistskikh-poezdok/>

⁶⁶² Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, "Turistički promet – decembar 2019", 2020, p.4, available at: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2020/Pdf/G20201020.pdf>

⁶⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁴ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, available at: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-cyrl/oblasti/ugostiteljstvo-i-turizam/turizam/>

⁶⁶⁵ Serbian Ministry for European Integration, "Public Opinion Poll", December 2019, p.27.

would choose Russia instead.⁶⁶⁶ The same applies when it comes to the preferences of the Serbian youth.⁶⁶⁷

Polls also show that what gives the EU a comparative advantage over Russia is its development of democracy, rule of law, and human rights.⁶⁶⁸ In layman's terms, **a typical Serb would rather choose to live in a developed Western country with rule of law rather than Russia, despite the fact that they may normatively agree more with its set of cultural and religious values.** Religion also plays a role, as many in Serbia believe that Russia shares their best interests, as they consider Russians to be "Orthodox brothers".⁶⁶⁹ This positioning of Serbs towards Russia may be defined as "emotion-driven cooperation", whereas cooperation with the EU is based on "pragmatic utility maximization".⁶⁷⁰ It is therefore unsurprising that **Serbs do not fully belonging in either the West or the East,⁶⁷¹ but somewhere in between.**

Box 21: Grand Rally for Putin in 2019

The latest episode of the media boom and public attention to Russia took place during Putin's visit to Belgrade in 2019. Not only was the key topic featured on all media channels, but the people "spontaneously" went out to the streets to greet the Russian President at the St. Sava Temple. It is estimated that over **120,000 people attended this rally,⁶⁷² representing something never before seen in Serbia's modern history during the visit of any foreign leader.** This was Putin's fourth visit to Belgrade, the others having taken place in 2001, 2011, and 2014.⁶⁷³

The government did its best to give a "hero's welcome" to the Russian President.⁶⁷⁴ In fact, it is not a secret that the ruling party invested heavily in organising the massive rally,

⁶⁶⁶ Srećko Mihailović, "Which empire to lean on... Serbia between the East and the West", Demostat, 2017.

⁶⁶⁷ 2020, p.202, available at (in Serbian): <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Alternativni-izves%CC%8Ctaj-o-poloz%CC%8Caju-i-potrebama-mladih-u-RS-2020.pdf>

⁶⁶⁸ Miloš Popović, "Public perception of Serbia's foreign policy", slide 14.

⁶⁶⁹ International Republican Institute (IRI), "Survey of Serbian Public Opinion", 2015, Ipsos Strategic Marketing, slide 24, available at: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/serbia_november_2015_poll_public_release.pdf

⁶⁷⁰ Artem Patalakh, "Emotions and Identity as Foreign Policy Determinants: Serbian Approach to Relations with Russia", 2018, p.1, available at: <https://philarchive.org/archive/PATEAI>

⁶⁷¹ International Republican Institute (IRI), "Survey of Serbian Public Opinion", 2015, slide 26.

⁶⁷² *Novosti*, "Putin građanima ispred Hrama Svetog Save: Hvala na prijateljstvu", 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3390623/vucic-i-putin-u-hramu-svetog-save.html>

⁶⁷³ *BBC*, "Putin četvrti put među Srbima", 2019, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-46893532>

⁶⁷⁴ *The Guardian*, "Putin gets puppy and hero's welcome on Serbia trip", 2019, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/17/putin-attacks-west-role-in-balkans-ahead-of-lavish-serbia-visit>

especially by arranging transportation and nudging people to come to Belgrade from different cities in Serbia. Knowing that the government was facing weekly, massive protests from the #1in5million movement at the time, **Putin's visit served to boost the appeal of domestic leaders in the eyes of the local public.**

Interestingly, **Putin was reluctant to address the public during the rally**, as he argued that his visit plans typically do not include his participation in public rallies. After the Serbian President and Patriarch strongly and repeatedly pleaded him to address the audience, his address was short and humble: "Thank you, thank you for your friendship" (repeated both in Serbian and Russian).⁶⁷⁵ Some have interpreted Putin's reluctance to demonstrate open goodwill to his Serbian counterpart as a sign that relations between the two may not be as warm as it is often portrayed in the media.⁶⁷⁶

III. 3. 2 Putinism and the State of Media

In Serbia, the rise of Russia is synonymous with the rise of Vladimir Putin. It appears now that the former is hardly imaginable without the latter, due to the high level of appreciation for Putin and his work by the local population in Serbia. It could be argued that his rise on the global level, and close relations with Serbia, have led to the creation of a home-grown Putin personality cult in Serbia. Interestingly, former President of Serbia Tomislav Nikolić even once publicly stated that nobody, besides Putin, could have beaten him in the presidential elections.⁶⁷⁷ Statements of this kind indicate how highly Putin is appreciated, and there is even hard data to confirm this fact. Gallup research indicated that **in Serbia, 83% of respondents viewed Putin favourably**, whereas only 12% of respondents had unfavourable opinions, and 5% did not have opinions.⁶⁷⁸ Looking at this data from the global perspective (of 57 analysed countries), **the only country that has more appreciation for Putin is Kazakhstan** (at 88%).

⁶⁷⁵ B92, "120,000 Serbians welcome Putin in Belgrade", 2019, available at:

https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2019&mm=01&dd=17&nav_id=106015

⁶⁷⁶ Vuk Vuksanović, "From Russia With Love? Serbia's Lukewarm Reception of Russian Aid and Its Geopolitical Implications", LSE Ideas, 2020

⁶⁷⁷ *Radio slobodna evropa*, "Nikolić: Putin bi me pobedio u Srbiji", 2012, available at:

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/24594218.html>

⁶⁷⁸ Gallup, "Global Leaders - Gallup International's 42nd Annual Global Opinion Poll," 2018, available at: https://www.gallup-international.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2018_End-of-Year_Global-Leaders.pdf

It appears, even, that Putin is even **more appreciated in Serbia than in Russia** (61%).⁶⁷⁹ Sometimes, this appreciation takes extravagant forms in Serbia. In 2016 for example, the citizens of Adžince, a small village in Southern Serbia, voted to change their village's name to "Putinovo" (roughly translated as "Putin's village").⁶⁸⁰ This is not the lone case of Serbian appreciation of Putin, as there are, in fact, more than dozen cities in Serbia that have given him honorary citizenship.⁶⁸¹

Box 22: A "Tough Hand" in Serbia

Research conducted by the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Belgrade showed that the **majority of Serbs aged between 15 and 29 believe that the system of governance named "tough hand" would best fit the Serbian mentality.**⁶⁸² Considering Putin's unimpressive democracy and human rights record, these findings shed new light on why Putinism has been able to develop in Serbia.

There are a number of reasons why the Serbian population looks sympathetically at an authoritarian regime like Putin's. Namely, **the Serbia of 2020 is not the same country it was in the early 2000s**; the notion of hope, which emerged when Milošević was brought down, has been replaced by exhaustion. First, Serbia has still not solved issues regarding its territorial integrity, representing a topic that "eats up" space that could have been devoted to democratic reforms. Second, EU membership is still out of sight, causing citizens to become more and more tired of the whole process. Third, Serbia has still not managed to establish good neighbourly relations in the region, with transitional justice measures not yet implemented. Finally, the transition process remains unfinished, as Serbia still struggles to reach a formidable and stable level of democratic consolidation, in fact backsliding in this area. In 2020, Serbia is considered a "hybrid regime" by Freedom House, for instance.⁶⁸³ Factors such as these contribute to the growth of authoritarian sentiment in Serbia, and the image of Russia helps these seeds grow faster.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰ *Politico*, "In Serb village, praise for Putin and hopes for Trump", 2017, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-village-putinovo-praise-putin-hopes-for-trump/>

⁶⁸¹ *Radio slobodna Evropa*, "Da li bi Putin pobedio Vučića na izborima u Srbiji?", 2015, available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/most-da-li-bi-putin-pobedio-vucica-na-izborima-u-srbiji/27057092.html>

⁶⁸² *Radio slobodna Evropa*, "Mladi i EU: Čvrsta ruka za Srbiju", 2016, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mladi-i-eu-cvrsta-ruka-za-srbiju/27775186.html>

⁶⁸³ Freedom House, "Dropping the Democratic Façade", 2020, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade#Facade>

What is especially important to highlight is that **positive sentiments of the local population towards Russia are primarily internally driven**, rather than created via directives or carefully articulated actions from Russia. Even though Russia welcomes such developments, Russia itself is not the main engine of Russophilia in Serbia. In order to demystify this paradoxical situation, it is important to highlight that **the domestic media plays a major role in shaping public perceptions on Russia.**

The European Commission repeatedly indicated that Serbia faces major limitations in its freedom of the media, and has made no progress at all when it comes to freedom of expression.⁶⁸⁴ Think tanks have also often pointed out the severity of this issue.⁶⁸⁵ In fact, media freedom has been a key hurdle that Serbia has faced on its path to the EU. In this context, most government-controlled tabloids and TV channels focus on exploiting the popular mindset with a “nationalistic-conservative ideological matrix”.⁶⁸⁶ In this, framework **Russia fits well, allowing domestic actors to counterbalance the impact and values of the West.** In this sense, Russia allows domestic stakeholders, primarily state officials, to shape public sentiments and thus score valuable points.

When it comes to the topic of third actors and their presences and impacts in Serbia, media in Serbia often publish articles whose original sources are unknown. Research on this topic shows that **approximately one third of media reports about international actors in Serbia do not mention any source for their news, with the majority of such articles are pro-Russia and anti-US oriented.**⁶⁸⁷ Closely related to this phenomenon is the fact that Serbia is one of the countries most strongly impacted by fake news (out of 47 analysed countries).⁶⁸⁸ One fake-news tracking agency has identified around 950 fake news articles on cover pages of the country’s most popular tabloids in 2019, while Putin, alongside the Serbian President, has been promoted in an exceptionally positive light.⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁴ See the latest European Commission country report on Serbia from 2019, available at:

<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-serbia-report.pdf>

⁶⁸⁵ Coalition PrEUgovor, “Report on Progress of Serbia in Chapters 23 and 24”, 2019, available at:

<http://preugovor.org/Alarm-Reports/1553/Coalition-prEUgovor-Report-on-Progress-of-Serbia.shtml>

⁶⁸⁶ Artem Patalakh, “Emotions and Identity as Foreign Policy Determinants: Serbian Approach to Relations with Russia”, 2018, p.10.

⁶⁸⁷ *Krik*, “Medijsko izveštavanje o međunarodnim akterima“, 2018, slide 4, available at (in Serbian):

<http://crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Regionala-analiza-medijskog-izvestavanja.pdf>

⁶⁸⁸ European Communication Monitor, “Strategic Communication And The Challenges Of Fake News, Trust, Leadership, Work Stress And Job Satisfaction”, EACD/EUPRERA, p.18, available at:

http://www.communicationmonitor.eu/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/ECM18-European-Communication-Monitor-2018.pdf

⁶⁸⁹ Raskrinkavanje, “Najmanje 945 lažnih vesti na naslovnicaama četiri tabloida u 2019.”, KRIK, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

Not only is Russia promoted as a kin state, but its leader, Vladimir Putin, has been idealised as a “saviour” of Serbdom. In fact, most stories about Russia in the Serbian media are not about Russia per se, but rather about Putin as a statesman.⁶⁹⁰ **Tabloids identified as spreaders of fake news and promoters of Russia have close ties to the government**, including *Informer*, *Srpski telegraf*, *Alo*, and *Kurir*.⁶⁹¹ The key characteristics of these outlets are sensationalism, favouritism, and bias. As these media publications are among the most widely read in Serbia, the effects they produce on the local population are not difficult to imagine. All things considered, the following logic applies: **as cover pages featuring Putin sell well, media outlets have no incentive to stop glorifying him, especially as it also works to the benefit of the Serbian government, which highly encourages the idea of feeding the narrative of “Serbia in between Russia and the West”.**

Even though domestic media do most of the work when it comes to the promotion of Russia’s image in Serbia, there are some channels originating from Russia that are also present in Serbia. Namely, **when it comes to Russian-based media, one that comes in the forefront is *Sputnik*, a media house which aims, in their own words, to “present to the global public an alternative view of world events**, which is not shaped by the influence of western mass media”.⁶⁹² *Sputnik* is successful in its reach as it is the only influential Russian media outlet that publishes articles dedicated to the news market in Serbia,⁶⁹³ as well as regular radio broadcasts and media service through a mobile application **since 2015, in the Serbian language.**

Various actors have different opinions about *Sputnik*’s activity. The way *Sputnik* reports is typically met with high level of suspicion in the EU, while the same cannot be said for Serbia’s perceptions of it. In 2016 for instance, Latvia shut down *Sputnik*, calling it Moscow’s propaganda tool,⁶⁹⁴ while the State Secretary of the Serbian Ministry of Culture and Information argued that it is a good thing that *Sputnik* is widely circulating and quoted in

<https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=557>

⁶⁹⁰ Vuk Velebit, “Proruski narativ u srpskim medijima (3) – Vučićeva uloga”, Talas, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<https://talas.rs/2019/05/24/pro-ruski-narativ-treci-deo/>

⁶⁹¹ Raskrinkavanje, “Najmanje 945 lažnih vesti na naslovnica četiri tabloida u 2019.”, KRIK, 2019.

⁶⁹² *Russia Beyond*, “‘Sputnik’ za novi pogled na svet”, 2014, available at:

<https://rs.rbth.com/politics/2014/11/17/sputnik-za-novi-pogled-na-svet-35057.html>

⁶⁹³ Vuk Velebit, “Proruski narativ u srpskim medijima (2) – Zašto su domaći mediji emotivniji od ruskih?”, Talas, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://talas.rs/2019/05/22/pro-ruski-narativ-drugi-deo/>

⁶⁹⁴ *Radio Free Europe*, “Latvia Blocks Russian Sputnik Site As Kremlin ‘Propaganda Tool’”, 2016, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/latvia-blocks-russian-news-site-sputnik-calling-kremlin-propaganda-tool/27643252.html>

Serbia, as it shows how balanced and independent they are as a source of information.⁶⁹⁵ This view was shared by the Serbian President at that time, Tomislav Nikolić, who welcomed the editorial board of *Sputnik* to his office on the day they started operations in Serbia.⁶⁹⁶

Sputnik's operations remain controversial, and many warn that Russia effectively wages “information warfare” in Serbia and the region relying on *Sputnik* and other Russian-led media houses.⁶⁹⁷ It is also often emphasised that ***Sputnik* has worked with some Serbian media owners to provide content directly through their local branches, in order to promote ideas sympathetic to Russia while appealing to the anti-NATO and anti-EU sentiments of the population.**⁶⁹⁸ These outlets typically work on promoting the Russian perspective of international relations, discrediting the EU and NATO, and presenting Russia as Serbia's closest ally.⁶⁹⁹

Some even warn that these actions are **aimed against Serbia's EU accession process and reconciliation in the region, as these media outlets often present Serbia as a country that has been repeatedly humiliated by the EU**, while constantly reminding the Serbian population of the disputes and conflicts during the 1990s in the region.⁷⁰⁰ Typically, the key thematic approach of such publications is to present the EU as an unattractive alternative, while simultaneously highlighting the better” and “more historically authentic and traditional” relations with Russia.⁷⁰¹ Finally, some allege that **the Serbian edition of *Sputnik* acts as a disinformation hub, regarding political and geopolitical issues, for the region as well, notably for BiH.**⁷⁰² The same research shows that *Sputnik* appears as a main “connection” between media from Serbia and the BiH entity Republika Srpska.⁷⁰³

⁶⁹⁵ *Sputnik*, “Sputnik – novi pogled na svet”, 2016, available at (in Serbian):

<https://rs.sputniknews.com/drustvo/201601201102656997-sputnjik-novi-pogled-na-svet-sasa-mirkovic/>

⁶⁹⁶ *Sputnik*, “Predsednik Srbije čestitao ‘Sputnjiku’”, 2015, available at:

<https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/rusija/2015020259168/>

⁶⁹⁷ John Cappello, “Russian Information Operations in the Western Balkans”, Real Clear Defense, 2017, available at:

https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/02/02/russian_information_operations_in_the_western_balkans_110732.html

⁶⁹⁸ Center for the Study of Democracy, “Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint In Serbia”, Policy Brief No. 72. 2018, p.2, available at: <http://old.csd.bg/artShow.php?id=18118>

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid., pp.16-17.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid., p.17.

⁷⁰¹ Center for the Study of Democracy, “Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe”, 2016, p.62, available at:

https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/1601017_Conley_KremlinPlaybook_Web.pdf

⁷⁰² Raskrinkavanje and WhyNot, “Disinformation in the online sphere - The case of BiH”, 2019, p.8, available at:

https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf

⁷⁰³ Ibid.

While recognising Russia’s direct or indirect presence, and its activities in the media sphere in Serbia, its corrosive impact, however, should not be overstated. In fact, one comparative study shows that “the press in Serbia reports more sensational stories and more positively about Russia and Serbian-Russian relations than Russia’s *Sputnik* does in Serbia.”⁷⁰⁴ According to this research, it is the Serbian media that actively engages in the simultaneous glorification of Russia and demonisation of the West. In layman’s terms, **it is Serbian (and not Russian) media outlets who are doing most of the dirty work.** A simple look at the daily cover pages of the most popular publications in Serbia confirms this fact. All things considered, the media’s diffusion of news does indeed play a significant role in nurturing and growing Russia’s soft power in Serbia, yet, it appears that the latter is due more credit for these efforts than the former.

Box 23: Media as a Double-Edged Sword?

Although the media plays an increasing role in improving Russia’s image in Serbia, the summer of 2020 has shown that they can go the other way around, when needed. In fact, the first notable example of pro-government tabloids’ willingness and ability to go against the interests of Russia appeared in 2020, when they **blamed Russian-backed extremists for organising “violent” protests in Belgrade.**⁷⁰⁵ The protests were triggered after the Government announced its intention to reinstate curfew due to the COVID-19 pandemic, while they continued due to the general dissatisfaction with the erosion of the state of democracy in the country. Considering that this was the biggest anti-Government protest in years, the fact that Russia was the one to get the blame in the media increased the stakes.

The backlash of these allegations was so intense, and the accusations against Russia were so impactful at the moment of their release that even the Russian Ambassador to Serbia Aleksandr Botsan-Kharchenko had to strongly refute these claims in public.⁷⁰⁶ Such accusations represented unique novelty in the Serbian media and political arenas, particularly as it is typically the West that carries the blame when it comes to examples of domestic

⁷⁰⁴ Vuk Velebit, “Serbian press more biased than Russian “Sputnik”, interview at Meta.MK, 2019, available at: <https://meta.mk/en/vuk-velebit-serbian-press-more-bias-than-russian-sputnik/>

⁷⁰⁵ Kurir, “Udar na Srbiju: Desničarske proruske snage stoje iza protesta!”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3494521/udar-na-srbiju-desnicarske-proruske-snage-stoje-iza-protesta>

⁷⁰⁶ Alexander Bocan Harchenko (@BocanHarchenko), “Pogotovo je tužno da su izmišljotine lakomisleno podržane od strane niza medija zemlje.”, 2020, Twitter, available at: <https://bit.ly/3mrc4ZU>

unrest.⁷⁰⁷ It should be noted that there is a wide consensus among the expert community that this tabloid smear campaign aimed against Russia was not independent, but planned in accordance with the Serbian government, whose **aim at this time was to scapegoat Russia to score some points in the West**,⁷⁰⁸ particularly with the US, with whom Serbia signed an agreement shortly after. This example has showcased that it is not Russia that dictates the Serbian media, which can act, and might increasingly act, against its interests, but rather domestic forces.

III. 3. 4 The Role of the Serbian Orthodox Church

Even though Serbia is officially a secular country, it would be a mistake to neglect the political influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), especially when it comes to the development of closer ties with Russia. Serbia is a country of 84.6% declared Orthodox believers,⁷⁰⁹ where a sense of national and religious belonging are typically considered to go hand-in-hand.⁷¹⁰ Having this context in mind, what enables the SOC to have a significant say in matters of public affairs is the fact that, according to public opinion polls, it remains, alongside the army, **the most trusted institution in Serbia by citizens**, more than political institutions.⁷¹¹ The same applies to the opinions of young people – as said earlier.⁷¹² Hence, what the SOC says and does regarding Russia matters.

Besides the bottom-up support, the SOC also has a close working relationship with the Serbian government. It manages this even though the latter is seeking to strike a compromise with Priština. **The key “political” elements that define the public policies of the SOC is their**

⁷⁰⁷ Srbija Danas, “Sprema se novi udar na državu: Zapad daje 100 miliona za rušenje Vučića”, 2018, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/info/sprema-se-novi-udar-na-drzavu-zapad-daje-100-miliona-za-rusenje-vucica-2018-06-17>

⁷⁰⁸ Vuk Vuksanović, “Belgrade’s New Game: Scapegoating Russia And Courting Europe”, War on the Rocks, 2020, available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/belgrades-new-game-scapegoating-russia-and-courting-europe/>

⁷⁰⁹ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Population by Ethnicity and Religion, 2011, available at: <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/3102010003?languageCode=en-US>

⁷¹⁰ Violeta Cvetkovska Ocofoljić and Tatjana Cvetkovski, “The Influence of Religion on the Creation of National Identity in Serbia”, 2010, Journal of Identity and Migration Studies 4(2), p.1, available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/47685464_The_Influence_of_Religion_on_the_Creation_of_National_Identity_in_Serbia

⁷¹¹ CeSID, 2017, “Javno mnjenje Srbije: Politički aktivizam građana Srbije”, 2017, slide 10, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.cesid.rs/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/POLITI%C4%8CKI-AKTIVIZAM-GRA%C4%90ANA-SRBIJE-2017.pdf>

⁷¹² Faculty of Political Sciences, “Stavovi studenata o evroatlanskim integracijama u Srbiji”, University of Belgrade, 2016, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/4764?jezik=lat#prettyPhoto>

Euroscepticism, anti-NATO sentiment, uncompromising stance on Kosovo - which it calls “the holy land of Serbia” and the “Serbian Jerusalem” - and naturally, **a strong pro-Russia stance**. As such, it is quite vocal when it comes to commenting on political events, whilst promoting its conservative and nationalistic view of Serbdom.

The status of Kosovo has been and remains to be the focal point which brings together the SOC and Russia. In fact, the SOC has played an important role in beefing up the importance of Kosovo, as its strategy of sacralisation – implemented together with political stakeholders and largely accepted by the local population – has made the issue of Kosovo untouchable and sacrosanct, thus delineating (un)acceptable ways of political practice towards this issue.⁷¹³ One example of the SOC voicing its opinions in the political context is when it sharply criticised the Brussels Agreement signed between Belgrade and Priština, while warning that the price of Serbia’s potential EU membership would be the formal recognition of an independent Kosovo.⁷¹⁴ In this context, Russia came as a natural ally, not only for the Serbian government’s, but also for the SOC’s, agenda.

One of the key channels of Russo-Serbian communications represents SOC’s cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) – often seen as part of the Russian state apparatus and closely cooperating with the highest Russian political officials.⁷¹⁵ Describing the importance of the ROC and Russia, the Serbian Patriarch Irinej had the following to say: “the Russian people and the Russian church have never failed us. We are spiritually, morally, and historically connected, and that connection will remain throughout our history. This is evident even now, when we have the Russian people and the Russian state as great helpers and supporters in our opportunities in relation to Kosovo, so we count on that help and hope that it will enable us to preserve our centuries-old, and holy, Kosovo and Metohija.”

A notable episode of earlier cooperation between the SOC and the ROC took place during the NATO bombing campaign in 1999, when the then-Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow visited Belgrade and gave a liturgy at the St. Sava Temple to tens of thousands of attendees together

⁷¹³ Filip Ejdus and Jelena Subotić, “Kosovo as Serbia’s Sacred Space: Governmentality, Pastoral Power, and Sacralization of Territories”, in Ognjenovic, G. *et al* (Eds.) “Politicization of Religion, the Power of Symbolism - The Case of Former Yugoslavia and its Successor States”, 2014, p.179, available at: https://www.academia.edu/9756015/Kosovo_as_Serbia_s_Sacred_Space_Governmentality_Pastoral_Power_and_Sacralization_of_Territories

⁷¹⁴ Pravmir, “Serbian Church criticizes Brussels agreement”, 2013, available at: <https://www.pravmir.com/serbian-church-criticizes-brussels-agreement/>

⁷¹⁵ Marcel Van Herpen, *Putinism: The Slow Rise of a Radical Right Regime in Russia*, Palgrave, 2013, p.184, available at: <https://bit.ly/2Jve3L4>

with the Serbian patriarch.⁷¹⁶ Furthermore, **the current Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia also visited Belgrade during the NATO bombing campaign, and to this date remains a strong and vocal supporter of Serbo-Russian relations.**⁷¹⁷ In the context of Kosovo's* declared independence in 2008, which the ROC described as “an abnormal event”, it expressed its solidarity with Orthodox believers in Serbia, while backing up the position of the Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church.⁷¹⁸

Even though the issue of Kosovo is the key element that unites the ROC and the SOC, it is important to note that the former's support to the latter extends to other issues as well. The latest case in which this came apparent was with the recent passing of a controversial law in Montenegro, adopted in December 2019, which envisions that religious groups unable to provide evidence of ownership risk losing religious sites that had belonged to them, proves the strength of this relationship. The SOC – whose relations with Montenegro's government are poor – claims this could allow the state to rob it of its property, which has invoked strong reactions from Serbian populations living in Montenegro and Serbia, as well as the Serbian government.⁷¹⁹ In this situation, the ROC stood firmly behind the SOC, with the Russian **Patriarch Kirill even stating that what is happening in Montenegro to the SOC's property did not even take place during the Ottoman period**⁷²⁰ – a period considered to be most horrific to the local population and church.

Not only does the SOC nurture close relations with its counterpart in Russia, but it also does the same when it comes to the Russian statesmen. It is therefore unsurprising that there are **regular official visits of Russian ambassadors to the SOC.**⁷²¹ **The same applies the other way,** with the ROC in Moscow receiving Serbia's highest officials. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow

⁷¹⁶ Serbian Orthodox Church, “Patrijarh Kiril: Divimo se hrabrosti Srba na Kosovu”, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

http://www.spc.rs/sr/patrijarh_kiril_divimo_se_hrabrosti_srba_na_kosovu

⁷¹⁷ Ibid.

⁷¹⁸ Serbian Orthodox Church, “The Russian Orthodox Church is at one with Serbs”, 2008, available at:

http://www.spc.rs/eng/russian_orthodox_church_one_serbs

⁷¹⁹ *Balkan Insight*, “Serbian Bishop Meets Montenegro PM to Resolve Religion Law Dispute”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/14/serbian-bishop-meets-montenegro-pm-to-resolve-religion-law-dispute/>

⁷²⁰ *Novosti*, “Patrijarh ruski Kiril: Ovo što se danas dešava u Crnoj Gori nije bilo ni pod Turcima”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/planeta.300.html:839667-Patrijarh-ruski-Kiril-Ovo-sto-se-danas-desava-u-Crnoj-Gori-nije-bilo-ni-pod-Turcima>

⁷²¹ Study of the Center for Euro–Atlantic Studies (CEAS), “Eyes Wide Shut - Strengthening Of Russian Soft Power In Serbia: Goals, Instruments, And Effects”, 2016, p.73, available at:

https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/publikacije/CEAS_Studija_-_%C5%A0irom_zatvorenih_o%C4%8Diju_ENG.pdf

and All Russia even bestowed the reward of the International Fund of Unity of Orthodox Peoples to Former President Nikolić in 2017.⁷²²

Furthermore, statements of support to Serbia and the SOC by the ROC are often accompanied by strong, supportive statements from the highest Russian officials. For this reason, **Vladimir Putin was awarded the Serbian Orthodox Church's highest distinction, the St. Sava Order of the First Degree, by the patriarch of the SOC in 2007, finally receiving it in 2011.**⁷²³ It was not the only time that the SOC has honoured a Russian official, as Former Russian President and PM Dimitry Medvedev received the same order in 2009.⁷²⁴

The positive relations between the SOC and the ROC, and the Serbian and Russian states, have resulted in some investments to religious sites as well. A notable example of this took place in 2012, when **a protocol was signed regarding Russian participation in the interior decoration of the St. Sava Temple in Belgrade,**⁷²⁵ the largest Orthodox temple in Serbia and one of the largest in the world. As proposed by Russian President Putin and the Russian Federal Agency for International Humanitarian Cooperation (*Rosstrudnichestvo*), the project, worth €4 million, was financed by Russia's energy giant Gazprom Neft and completed by artists from the Russian Academy of Arts.⁷²⁶ As such, it was endorsed by, and coordinated with, the highest Serbian officials. Former President Nikolić even periodically presided over the Committee for the Erection of St. Sava Temple, whose other members were Russian representatives from NIS, Gasprom Neft, and the *Rosstrudnichestvo*.⁷²⁷ The temple's mosaics were completed in 2018, and Gazprom and the SOC have signed another investment agreement, with the

⁷²² B92, "President receives award presented by Russian patriarch", 2016, available at:

https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=03&dd=10&nav_id=97323

⁷²³ Serbian Orthodox Church, "Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin awarded the Serbian Orthodox Church's highest distinction", 2011, available at:

http://spc.rs/eng/russian_prime_minister_vladimir_putin_awarded_serbian_orthodox_church%E2%80%99s_highest_distinction

⁷²⁴ Serbian Orthodox Church, "An Order of St Sava formally handed to President of the Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev", 2009, available at:

http://www.spc.rs/eng/order_st_sava_formally_handed_president_russian_federation_dmitry_medvedev

⁷²⁵ Official website of the St. Sava Temple, "Chronology", available at (in Serbian): <http://hramsvetogsave.rs/O-Hramu/Gradnja-Hrama/Hronologija>

⁷²⁶ Official website of the St. Sava Temple, "Oslikavanje kupole hrama", available at (in Serbian):

<http://hramsvetogsave.rs/O-Hramu/Oslikavanje-kupole-Hrama>

⁷²⁷ Office of the Serbian President, "Sednica Glavnog odbora Društva za podizanje Hrama Svetog Save", 2016, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.predsednik.rs/lat/pres-centar/saopstenja/sednica-glavnog-odbora-drustva-za-podizanje-hrama-svetog-save>

mediation of the ROC, by which the former commits to invest additional €6 million, to continue the Russian participation in completing the temple's interior mosaics.⁷²⁸

A visit to the St. Sava Temple has become an almost an unavoidable stop for Russian officials during trips to Belgrade, thus illustrating the value they ascribe to the power of its symbolism. For instance, all the highest officials of Russia, including Vladimir Putin in 2019,⁷²⁹ Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in 2018,⁷³⁰ and Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu in 2017,⁷³¹ have visited the construction site, and each time were accompanied not only by the highest Serbian officials, but also by clerks and the patriarch of the SOC. The reason why the Serbian government insists on including a visit to the temple during official visits of Russian officials may be found in President Vučić's own words: that the temple represents a symbol of the brotherhood between Serbs and Russians, while pointing out that Rastko Nemanjić received his monastic name of Sava in a Russian monastery at Mount Athos.⁷³² **The invocation of religious and cultural connotations during bilateral visits has become standard practice, and such activities only further solidify Russia's soft power in Serbia.**

Box 24: The Ukrainian Church Crisis

The relationship between the ROC and the SOC is reciprocal. One church organisation backs the other, and vice versa. The latest example that illustrates **the ROC's benefits from cooperating with the SOC can be seen in the case of the Church Crisis in Ukraine in 2018**. The strong ties between the SOC and the ROC were further solidified during the dispute between the Moscow and Constantinople Patriarchates, after the latter granted independence to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which had previously answered to Russia. As the SOC faces a similar problem with the Montenegrin and Macedonian Orthodox

⁷²⁸ RTS, "Još šest miliona € za Hram Svetog Save", 2019, available at (in Serbia):

<https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:784717-SRBIJA-JE-SVOJ-CAMAC-UVEK-VEZIVALA-ZA-VELIKI-RUSKI-BROD-Sest-miliona-evra-za-oslikavanje-oltara-Hrama-Svetog-Save>

⁷²⁹ RTS, "Putin građanima ispred Hrama Svetog Save: Hvala na prijateljstvu", 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3390623/vucic-i-putin-u-hramu-svetog-save.html>

⁷³⁰ NI, "Lavrov u Hramu Svetog Save: Hvala na oslikavanju kupole", 2018, available at (in Serbian):

<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a366486/Vucic-i-Lavrov-u-Hramu-Svetog-Save.html>

⁷³¹ RTS, "Šojgu i Vulin posetili Hram Svetog Save", 2017, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/2911481/sojgu-i-vulin-posetili-hram-svetog-save.html>

⁷³² RTS, "Vučić: Mozaik u Hramu Svetog Save još jedan simbol bratstva Srba i Rusa", 2018, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/3047256/vucic-i-lavrov-na-predstavljanju-mozaika-u-hramu-svetog-save.html>

Churches, it openly stood up in support of the ROC and its claim.⁷³³ It did so by arguing that the Patriarchate of Constantinople “made a canonically unfounded decision” by granting the status of Autocephaly to the Church of Ukraine.⁷³⁴ For this reason, the SOC considers the aforementioned decision non-binding. The only different step it did take from the ROC is stopping short of breaking its relations with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. This example shows that even the ROC has direct advantages from cooperating closely with the SOC.

All things considered, **the SOC remains an important actor, facilitating closer ties between the Serbian and Russian peoples, churches, and states.** Even if Belgrade and Priština resolve their issues and sign a comprehensive and legally-binding agreement (as the EU aims to accomplish), it is unlikely that the SOC will diminish its prioritisation of the Kosovo issue. A large number of medieval Serbian monasteries are found in Kosovo, which gives the SOC a strong incentive to continue to invest substantial efforts in this issue. Therefore, the ROC is likely to continue to have an important role in the future, as its support represents a cornerstone of the SOC’s power. For this reason, the SOC is also likely to keep close ties to the Russian political establishment, while simultaneously promoting Russia as a historical and cultural motherland for Serbs.

III. 4 Concluding Remarks on Russia

For Moscow, keeping close ties with Belgrade has long been a relatively costless strategy. Even though Serbia is not an especially relevant partner to it in terms of trade or investment, it does serve to reaffirm Russia’s regional presence. Since Russia currently has no other close partners in the Western Balkans, particularly after Montenegro and North Macedonia joined NATO, Serbia represents the last bastion where it still holds significant political leverage. Not only is Serbia the central player in the region, but it also has significant importance due to its relations with Republika Srpska, and by keeping close ties with Belgrade Russia also

⁷³³ Maxim Samorukov, “A Spoiler in the Balkans? Russia and the Final Resolution of the Kosovo Conflict”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019, p.6, available at:

https://carnegieendowment.org/files/WP_Samorukov_Balkans_v2.pdf

⁷³⁴ The Serbian Orthodox Church, “Position of the Serbian Orthodox Church on the Church Crisis in Ukraine After the Newest Decisions by the Patriarchate of Constantinople”, 2018, available at:

http://www.spc.rs/eng/position_serbian_orthodox_church_church_crisis_ukraine_after_newest_decisions_patriarchate_constanti

simultaneously scores points with Banja Luka. At the same time, by discouraging dialogue between Belgrade and Priština, Russia keeps its leverage in Serbia, which prevents Kosovo from joining NATO. As a result, this has allowed Russia to keep the EU on its toes, as well as utilise its leverage to sustain and energy monopoly in Serbia and boost its soft power in the region.

In fact, **the analysis of Russia's presence in Serbia shows that it is a significant player, both from the top-down and bottom-up perspectives.** When it comes to the top-down development of Russia's power in Serbia, meaning its development of closer relations with Serbia's highest officials, **Russia's support for Serbia's territorial integrity has proven to be of primary importance.** Ever since 2008, all Serbian governments and heads of state have prioritised cooperation with Russia. This cooperation was also reaffirmed with the signing of the 2013 *Strategic Partnership*. Since then, bilateral cooperation has been quite substantive.

Key milestones during this period include Serbia's acquisition of observer status in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation National Assembly in 2013, the start of military exercises in 2014 and a gradual increase in their number ever since, the start of interparliamentary cooperation in 2015, the signing of a *Renewed Cooperation Agreement* by the ruling parties of Serbia and Russia in 2018, and Serbia's signing of a free-trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union in 2019. In addition, not only has Serbia started to acquire weapons from Russia, but it has also never aligned with any EU declaration in the area of the Common Foreign and Security Policy which targets Russia, representing the key explanation for Serbia's low alignment rate. All of these aspects indicate that, **on the political level, Serbo-Russian cooperation has been very fruitful in the past years.**

When it comes to the bottom-up perspective, Russia is the foreign state with the most soft power in Serbia. This is based on cultural and historical links, but also upon connections with the Serbian Orthodox Church. Vladimir Putin is also extremely popular among the Serbian population, with a sort of Putin personality cult existing in Serbia. The Serbian media, supported by Russian outlets, plays an important role in facilitating this cult. These elements are not to be neglected, as soft power makes a big impact on how the population perceives Russia, in this way driving it away from the EU. **Its immense level of soft power further solidifies Russia's political leverage, and makes it costly for Belgrade to turn its back on Moscow.**

Although it is far outmatched by the EU when it comes to the overall trade, investments, and donations it represents in Serbia, Russia manages to remain a significant actor in

Serbia's energy sector. In this area at least, Russia has resources which Serbia needs. Therefore, an unequal distribution of power often transfers questions from the economic sphere to the field of politics, where decisions are rarely made purely based on economic logic. This was the case when the majority of NIS was sold to Gazprom, for which the agreement was made between political leaders from Serbia and Russia instead of through free market competition. It is clear, nevertheless, that the Serbian government did not have sufficient financial backing for the more-than-needed investment in the maintenance and modernisation of NIS's production capacities. Also, the government was unlikely to introduce corporate governance in this company. Therefore, **the change in NIS's operations was required, yet the hasty and non-transparent sale of NIS to provide a political favour was not justified.**

Although credit lines from Russia have helped in the process of revitalising the rail sector in Serbia, they are still insufficient for the requirements to reach modern standards, as decades without any investment have made their mark. With the inclusion of limited action in the Serbian financial sector, **the presence of Russian capital in the Serbian economy is largely based in these three fields: energy, rail, and finance.**

In terms of trade relations, it is obvious that Serbia represents a much smaller economic power on the international scale than Russia. As a result, worldwide changes that have affected the Russian economy, like shifting oil prices, have caused serious disruptions in trade between two countries (along with decreased funds coming from Russia as direct investments). Also, **a Serbian dependence on oil and especially natural gas imports from Russia is evident.** On the side of Serbian exports, despite existing trade privileges, the apparent lack of capacity and inadequate structure of the domestic economy is obvious, as **Serbia's full potential in trade with Russia remains underexploited.**

Overall analysis shows that Russia is **the foreign actor with the most capacity to disturb the EU's reach in Serbia**, particularly as their interests are mutually exclusive. **However, its impact should not be overestimated.** The analysis points that there are four reasons for this.

First, **although Russia used Serbia to act as a spoiler in the region *vis-à-vis* the West, Serbia also uses Russia for domestic politics purposes.** In this case, it was a win-win situation, and far from a scenario in which Russia can be portrayed as a power misusing Serbia against its will. On the one hand, the topic of Russia enables Serbia to reaffirm its balancing policy and raise its importance in the eyes of the West, and on

the other, it allows the political establishment to score easy points with some of the voters.

Second, **despite the fact that Serbia and Russia have achieved notable milestones in the past decade, notable cracks have started to appear in their relationship**, particularly as the US became more involved in the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština. The more Serbia pivots to the West (which it appears ready to do), the less Russia will be able to proactively engage with Serbia.

Third, **as China is increasing its foothold in Serbia, Russia's long-guarded irreplaceability is diminishing**, particularly as China comes with significant potential to provide economic incentives while also standing strong in favour of Serbia's territorial integrity. This became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, as Moscow was openly side-lined when Belgrade opted to sing Beijing's praises.

Finally, **Russia's level of soft power will depend on whether, when, and to what extent, the Serbian establishment will tone down its pro-Russia rhetoric in the public sphere**. The fact that pro-government tabloids have engaged in open slander of Russia during the protests in summer 2020 in Belgrade has sent the message that Belgrade can harden its approach towards Russia if it wishes to.

IV Turkey – Pragmatic Cooperation between the Grey Wolves

Turkey's role in Serbia should not be considered in the same manner as that of any other foreign power. There are a variety of geographic, historical, demographic, cultural, religious, and political reasons for this. Turkish presence in Serbia, even today, is characterised by a sense of multilayeredness

Unlike China and Russia, Turkey is geographically a part of the Balkans, at least in part.

For this reason, it would be wrong to label it as an external rather than regional power. As Turkey sits upon the Bosphorus - as a bridge between the East and the West - it has strived to keep a presence in the Balkans, naturally, as a way of maintaining its European stronghold. Turkey's proximity to the Balkans has contributed to the outsized role it has played in the region throughout history

When it comes to history, Serbia and Turkey have diametrically opposed perspectives of the past. The former views the Ottoman period as a period of enslavement, whereas the latter views it as a glorious era that enabled the two communities to live in peace and prosperity.⁷³⁵ This clash of narratives continues to this day, yet it appears not to be an obstacle to strengthening cooperation between the two countries.

Despite the fact there used to be a large number of Turks living in the Balkans,⁷³⁶ populations today are much smaller, with less than a thousand Turks living in Serbia.⁷³⁷ Nevertheless, what

⁷³⁵ It should be noted that bilateral relations between Turkey and Serbia have been essentially good during the most of the "short 20th century" – from the creation of Yugoslavia, and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the Republic of Turkey, until the collapse of Yugoslavia. During this period, the two sides were even formally allied (in two short-lived Balkan alliances). In any case, relations in this period were devoid of conflict and security challenges.

For a fairly comprehensive overview of relations between Turkey and Yugoslavia, see: Institut za strategijska istraživanja, "Balkanski pakt 1953/54", Belgrade, 2008.

⁷³⁶ The depopulation of Serbia by the Turks started in the 19th century. The Turkish civilian population, which lived almost exclusively in urban areas, started to emigrate after Serbia was granted autonomous status in 1830. According to further agreements, in 1862, all remaining Turkish civilians were to leave Serbia, whereas Turks military garrisons stationed in six towns were to leave in 1867. The last major exodus of Turks from Serbia took place in the aftermath of the Balkan wars of 1912-13, when Turkey lost most of its Balkan territory.

See: Aleksandra Vuletić, "Censuses in 19th century Serbia: inventory of preserved microdata", Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, 2012, p.7, available at:

<https://www.demogr.mpg.de/papers/working/wp-2012-018.pdf>

; and Berna Pekesen, "Expulsion and Emigration of the Muslims from the Balkans", *European History Online*, 2012, available at:

<http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/europe-on-the-road/forced-ethnic-migration/berna-pekesen-expulsion-and-emigration-of-the-muslims-from-the-balkans>

matters in contemporary times is the fact that **a large number of Turks living today in Turkey have Balkan origins**. Even the founder of the modern Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (“Father of the Turks”), was a Balkan Turk. In fact, it is estimated that at least 20 percent of Turks have ancestral links to the Balkans.⁷³⁸ For this reason, many Turks consider the Balkans as the birthplace of their ancestors, which is why it continues to be in their attention and close to their hearts. A large number of these descendants have been applying for and receiving Serbian citizenship,⁷³⁹ in accordance with Serbian law, on the grounds of their ancestral origins.

Also, as the Balkans were the part of the Ottoman empire, it is unsurprising that **many elements of Turkish culture are still relevant**. These cultural elements range from the shared cuisine and “Turkisms” that are found in local languages,⁷⁴⁰ to religion and architecture. Amongst these, **Islam stands out as an especially powerful element which enables Turkey to nurture its soft power, particularly when it comes to Muslims living in Serbia or Bosniaks** - a minority group in Serbia. In fact, it is widely understood that Bosniaks tend to perceive Turkey as their patron and protector, with a heavy influence of the imperial past and of the shared religious bonds. In fact, in modern times, Serbia’s relationship with Bosnia and Herzegovina has been a key issue that has traditionally drawn significant attention from Turkey in the area of politics. After the introduction of the trilateral mechanism in 2010, connecting Ankara-Belgrade-Sarajevo it appears that this issue is not as problematic as it used to be.⁷⁴¹

However, the key bilateral political disagreement today lies in Turkey’s support for the self-proclaimed independence of Kosovo*.⁷⁴² In fact, Turkey was the second country to recognise Kosovo’s self-declared independence in 2008, and continues to be a keen promoter

⁷³⁷ Looking at the Turkish demographic presence in the Balkans today, the populations of Turks are as following: around 60,000 Turks live in Bulgaria, 13,000 in Romania, 12,000 in North Macedonia, 10,700 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 8,000 in Albania, 3,500 in Kosovo, 2,000 in Montenegro, 600 in Serbia, 250 in Croatia and 200 in Slovenia. See: Hamdi Firat Buyuk, Alexander Clapp and Serbeze Haxhijaj, “Diaspora Politics: Turkey’s New Balkan Ambassadors”, *BIRN*, 2019, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/03/19/diaspora-politics-turkeys-new-balkan-ambassadors/>

⁷³⁸ Hamdi Firat Buyuk, Alexander Clapp and Serbeze Haxhijaj, “Diaspora Politics: Turkey’s New Balkan Ambassadors”, *BIRN*, 2019, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/03/19/diaspora-politics-turkeys-new-balkan-ambassadors/>

⁷³⁹ The numbers are provided in IV. 3. 4

⁷⁴⁰ Even the word Balkan is of Turkish origin and according to *National Geographic*, it means a “chain of wooded mountains”. See: National Geographic, “Da li znate odakle potiče naziv Balkan?”, 2014, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.nationalgeographic.rs/vesti/2897-da-li-znate-odakle-potice-naziv-balkan.html>

⁷⁴¹ More info in this in IV. 4. 1. 3

⁷⁴² This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence. For the sake of simplicity, the asterisk will not be used in the rest of the chapter.

on the global stage. Despite this, the highest officials of Serbia and Turkey describe bilateral relations as “the best in modern history.”⁷⁴³ In parallel to the development of political relations, **economic cooperation seems to follow such a positive trend as well.** The growth of trade value and the number of investments seems to be on the rise, with an increased interest from Turkey in taking part in the financing and construction of parts of Serbia’s infrastructure.

Considering these developments, the following chapters will answer how Turkey and Serbia have reached this point in relations, while also providing answers on how Turkey’s activities in the areas of politics, economics, and culture impact Serbia’s EU integration process.

IV. 1 Political Relations Between Serbia and Turkey

When it comes to Turkey’s relationship with Serbia, the period between 1991 and 2020 may be divided into four phases.⁷⁴⁴ The first phase took place during the 1990s, when Turkey began to show greater interest in the Balkans, particularly with the aim of protecting Muslim communities during the Yugoslav wars, while preserving its impression as a secular state in the international arena. In the second period, between 2002 and 2008, representing Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s early years in power, the seeds of “Neo-Ottomanism” were more actively planted in the Balkans. Common for these two phases is the Euro-Atlantic orientation of Turkish policies.

The third phase, from 2009 to 2014, marks a substantial rise in Turkish foreign policy activities during Ahmet Davutoğlu’s tenure as Foreign Minister of Turkey. During this period, Turkey implemented concrete measures to substantially increase ties with Balkan countries with significant Muslim communities, as well as with Serbia – a country with a majority Orthodox population. The final and fourth phase commenced after the attempted coup d’état took place in 2016. Since then, Turkey made radical moves on the domestic front, especially visible in Erdoğan’s drastic grab of power. Consequently, this phase is marked by Erdoğan’s further

⁷⁴³ B92, “Erdogan: the best bilateral relations in modern history”, 2019, available at:

https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2019&mm=10&dd=07&nav_id=107346

⁷⁴⁴ See other typologies: Asli Aydintaşbaş, “From myth to reality: How to understand Turkey’s role in the Western Balkans”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2019, available at:

https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/from_myth_to_reality_how_to_understand_turkeys_role_in_the_western_balkans; and

Igor Novaković, “Analysis Post “zero problems with neighbours” in the Western Balkans A view from Serbia”, *ISAC Fund*, 2020, available at:

<https://rs.boell.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/zero%20problems%20with%20neighbours.pdf>

personalisation of Turkey's activities in foreign affairs as well as increased cooperation with Serbia. All of these phases have had their own effects on Turkey's policy on Serbia. For this reason, they are examined in detail in the following parts.

IV. 1. 1 Turkey's Head-start – the Politics of Euro-Atlanticism (1990 – 2001)

In order to understand Turkey's presence in Serbia in 2020, it is important to start by explaining Turkey's foreign policy during the 1990s – a period which was marked by Turkey's increased interest in, and engagement with, the Balkans. In fact, Turkey's involvement in Balkan affairs was closely interlinked with the end of the Cold War, which was considered a turning point, with the reinvigoration of Turkey's foreign policy.⁷⁴⁵ What dominated Turkish policy at that time was its Euro-Atlantic orientation, which is why its actions in the Balkans were aligned with the activities of the US and EU. For these reasons, **Turkey did not represent a player which was of concern for the West, at least not concerning its Balkan policy, during the 1990s.**

During the war in Yugoslavia, Turkey was a key supporter of independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), while putting a particular focus on protecting the interests of Bosniak populations. At that time, Turkey was very active in the international arena, and argued for the necessity of international military measures, with politicians from Ankara comparing the role of Turkey in BiH to that of the US in the Persian Gulf.⁷⁴⁶ Ever since, Turkey has been nurturing close cooperation with Bosniaks living not only in BiH, but also in Serbia. In fact, **Turkey's relationship with Bosniaks in Serbia**, representing the second largest minority group in Serbia (after Hungarians), **has been the focal point drawing its interest in developing ties with Serbia** and remains as such to this day.

Box 25: Turkey's Security and Military Involvement with Serbia

Another matter crucially important to Turkey's relationship with Serbia was the issue of Kosovo in the late 1990s. Before the NATO bombing campaign of Serbia started, Turkey's Foreign Minister İsmail Cem even submitted a three-stage plan in 1998, to de-escalate the

⁷⁴⁵ Darko Tanasković, "Neo-Ottomanism: The Doctrine and Foreign Policy Practice", 2010, Službeni glasnik, p.27

⁷⁴⁶ Birgül Demirtaş, "Turkey and the Balkans: Overcoming Prejudices, Building Bridges and Constructing a Common Future", *Perceptions*, Volume XVIII, No.2, pp. 167-168, 2013, available at: http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Birgul_Demirtas.pdf

conflict in Kosovo. This was to no avail, as Yugoslavia accused Turkey of aiding Albanian armed groups in Kosovo.⁷⁴⁷

As a member of NATO, Turkey participated in the bombing campaign by sending aircraft, while allowing NATO to use its airbases for operations against what was then Yugoslavia.⁷⁴⁸ Some argue that, unlike NATO's intervention in BiH,⁷⁴⁹ Turkey only reluctantly approved action against Yugoslavia (as it was also facing its own Kurdish secessionist claims).⁷⁵⁰ In this context, it is especially relevant that **Turkey has taken an active part in different international missions on Serbia's territory**, such as the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), the OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission, and contributed to the NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR).

Simultaneously, Turkey was pushing ahead its own EU accession process at that time, which gave further credibility to its actions. An important milestone in this regard was the signing of a customs agreement with the EU in 1995 and the EU's decision to grant Turkey candidate status for EU membership in 1999. Soon after, in October 2000, Serbia overthrew an authoritarian regime and started its democratic transition process, and ever since, joining the EU has been priority number one in Serbia's foreign policy. **With the gradual restoration of peace and stability in the Balkans, the EU's role has been continuously increasing in the region, both politically and economically, limiting the space for any substantial growth of Turkey's impact.**⁷⁵¹

⁷⁴⁷ Bülent Sarper Ağır and Murat Necip Arman, "Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Western Balkans in the Post-Cold War Era: Political and Security Dimensions", in a book "Turkey's Foreign Policy and Security Perspectives in the 21st Century", 2016, p.149, available at: <http://bit.ly/2TDWLAi>

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁰ The list of missions and operations Turkey took part in the region are the following: the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR), the UN Stabilisation Force (SFOR), the NATO Implementation Force (IFOR) in BiH, Multinational Operation Alba in Albania, and NATO Task Force Essential Harvest and Amber Fox in North Macedonia.

⁷⁵¹ Bülent Sarper Ağır and Murat Necip Arman, "Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Western Balkans in the Post-Cold War Era: Political and Security Dimensions", *Turkey's Foreign Policy and Security Perspectives in the 21st Century*, 2016, p.151, available at: <http://bit.ly/2TDWLAi>

IV. 1. 2 Growing the Roots of Neo-Ottomanism – A Focus on Muslim Communities (2002 – 2008)

Turkey's Euro-Atlantic focus continued even after Erdoğan's rise to power in 2002. In fact, the high point in Turkey's relationship with the EU took place in 2005, when the EU opened accession talks with Turkey. Meanwhile, Turkey continued to expand its presence in EU operations in the Balkans, taking part in seven different missions,⁷⁵² including EULEX. Furthermore, Turkey's support for the region's EU perspective was clear.

Erdoğan did not prioritise the Balkans during the early years of his power, as his focus was primarily on internal reforms.⁷⁵³ Nevertheless, the seeds for growing closer ties were indeed planted during this period, with the help of his chief advisor (2003 to 2009) and Foreign Minister (2009-2014), and later Prime Minister (2014-16), Ahmed Davutoğlu, who is considered to be the architect of Turkey's renewed proactive approach to the region. Indicating that Turkey "experiences regional tensions at home", he argued that Turkey needs to become more active in order to ensure the implementation of his "zero problems with neighbours" approach.⁷⁵⁴

Box 26: Neo-Ottomanism

Perceiving Turkey's Muslim-oriented approach, researchers developed **the concept of "Neo-Ottomanism", typically describing Turkey's return of self-confidence in the area of foreign policy, basing the projection of its influence on its multicultural, Muslim, and imperial, past.**⁷⁵⁵ From the standpoint of the Serbian expert community, Neo-Ottomanism is commonly seen as "a mixture of Islamism, Turkism and Ottoman imperialism".⁷⁵⁶ This paradigm "embraces a grand, geostrategic vision of Turkey as an effective and engaged regional actor, trying to solve regional and global problems".⁷⁵⁷ This notion is important, as

⁷⁵² Meltem Müftüler-Baç, "Divergent Pathways: Turkey and the European Union: Re-Thinking the Dynamics of Turkish-European Union Relations", Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2016, p.139, available at: <http://bit.ly/334Dk7Z>

⁷⁵³ Asli Aydıntaşbaş, "From myth to reality", 2019, p.8.

⁷⁵⁴ Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy", *Foreign Affairs*, 2010, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/20/turkeys-zero-problems-foreign-policy/>

⁷⁵⁵ Ömer Taspınar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism", Carnegie Papers, 2008, p.3, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10_taspinar_final.pdf

⁷⁵⁶ Darko Tanasković, *Neo-Ottomanism: The Doctrine and Foreign Policy Practice*, 2010, Službeni glasnik, p.19.

⁷⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

traditional, Kemalist foreign policy of Turkey tended to be more passive on the international stage, while putting aside, if not ignoring, the Ottoman period.⁷⁵⁸

It is important to highlight that the roots of this approach can be traced back to the late 1980s, with the particular role of the Turkish President Turgut Özal. This explains Turkey's emphasis on protecting Muslims in the region throughout the 1990s.⁷⁵⁹ Yet, considering that Turkey's foreign policy, in general, tried to keep a secular appearance in the Balkans throughout the 1990s, a **“leap forward” in terms of this approach took place in the post-2000 era.**⁷⁶⁰

Originally, Davutoğlu described his vision towards the Balkans as a scholar, in his book *Strategic Depth* in 2001,⁷⁶¹ where he argued in detail how Turkey should engage in the Balkans. According to this vision, **Turkey possesses strategic depth due to its history and geographic position, which is why it is supposed to play a leading role in the Balkans as a central power,** especially by capitalising on its soft power potential.⁷⁶²

In the blueprints of his vision, Davutoğlu pays special attention to BiH and Albania, while stopping short of elaborating any plan for engagement with Serbia.⁷⁶³ In line with this approach, the focus was on a regional arc - described by Davutoğlu as the **“Turkish Balkan geopolitical and geo-cultural lifeline”**, stretching from Bihać (in north-western Bosnia, part

⁷⁵⁸ The key elements of Kemalism were the following: republicanism, revolutionarism, secularism, statehood, nationalism, and peoplehood. Among these, uncompromising secularism and assimilating Turkish nationalism were the most important elements. See: Darko Tanasković, *Neo-Ottomanism: The Doctrine and Foreign Policy Practice*, 2010, Službeni glasnik, p.16.

⁷⁵⁹ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Samim Akgönül, “Turkey Forced marriage or marriage of convenience with the Western Balkans”, 2019, p. 228.

⁷⁶⁰ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Samim Akgönül, “Turkey Forced marriage or marriage of convenience with the Western Balkans”, in Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (eds.), *The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries*, 2019, p. 225, available at:

https://www.academia.edu/39817698/Turkey_Forced_marriage_or_marriage_of_convenience_with_the_Western_Balkans

⁷⁶¹ Interestingly, the term “strategic depth” is found in military literature, usually denoting the distance between enemy forces and the main centres of gravity of a country. See: Anit Mukherjee, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, available at: <https://idsa.in/askanexpert/Whatistrategicdepth>

⁷⁶² The vision does not only focus on the Balkans. In fact, Turkey is seen as a Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf, and Black Sea country, which is why it can simultaneously exercise influence in all these regions and thus claim a global strategic role. See: Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, “The Davutoğlu Doctrine and Turkish Foreign Policy”, Hellenic Foundation For European And Foreign Policy, 2010, available at: <http://bit.ly/2PMM3Gv>

⁷⁶³ Sena Marić, “Turkey’s Neo-Ottoman policy on the Balkans: does it clash or match with the EU?”, MA thesis, College of Europe, 2011, p.13, available at:

https://www.academia.edu/7648793/Turkey_s_Neo-Ottoman_policy_on_the_Balkans_does_it_clash_or_match_with_the_EU

of the Bosnian-Croat federation), through Central and Eastern Bosnia, through Sandžak (a region linking Serbia and Montenegro), Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Kirjali (southern Bulgaria), to Eastern Thrace (the European part of Turkey).⁷⁶⁴

Accordingly, Turkey has been establishing Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) offices throughout the region since 2004, with the focus on rebuilding religious and cultural sights from the Ottoman era, but also on engaging with local communities by building schools and hospitals. Yet, **TIKA was unable to start its operations in Serbia, and thus in Sandžak, as Ankara's relations with Belgrade were still strained at the time.**

Looking closely at Turkey's proactive endeavours in the region, it appears that most of them have been limited to the Balkan countries with significant Muslim populations, such as Albania, BiH, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, with BiH as the frontrunner.⁷⁶⁵ Consequently, cooperation with those Balkan countries with Muslim majorities boomed during Davutoğlu's term, especially in terms of building closer cultural and religious ties. However, it soon became evident that **the prioritisation of BiH has necessarily rendered Turko-Serbian relations of significant importance as well.**⁷⁶⁶ The realisation that relations with Serbia needed to be strengthened represented a key component of Turkey's next phase in foreign relations with the Balkans.

IV. 1. 3 Turkey's Rise – Putting Serbia on the Agenda (2009 – 2015)

The notion of Neo-Ottomanism could never help Turkey to build its influence and footprint in non-Muslim communities, especially due to their negative perceptions of the Ottoman past. The first to understand this were the Turkish academic and expert communities, which have warned of its counterproductive effects of Neo-Ottomanism.⁷⁶⁷ As one Turkish

⁷⁶⁴ See: Sena Marić, "Turkey's Neo-Ottoman policy on the Balkans", 2010, p.15.

⁷⁶⁵ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Samim Akgönül, "Turkey Forced marriage or marriage of convenience with the Western Balkans", in Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (eds.), *The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries*, 2019, p. 230, available at: https://www.academia.edu/39817698/Turkey_Forced_marriage_or_marriage_of_convenience_with_the_Western_Balkans

⁷⁶⁶ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Samim Akgönül, "Turkey Forced marriage or marriage of convenience with the Western Balkans", 2019, p. 230.

⁷⁶⁷ Vladimir Ajzenhamer i Vladimir Trapara, "Turska politika prema Srbiji i Zapadnom Balkanu u kontekstu aktuelnih međunarodnih i regionalnih trendova", p.10, 2013, available at (in Serbian): https://www.academia.edu/5594276/Turska_politika_prema_Srbiji_i_Zapadnom_Balkanu_u_kontekstu_aktuelnih_me%C4%91unarodnih_i_regionalnih_trendova

professor put it back in 2010, “the Ottoman reference is helpful considering Turk/Muslim populations in the Balkans, but self-destructive considering the rest, thus is harmful for the envisaged mediator role”.⁷⁶⁸ Therefore, in order to sustain close relations with Muslim communities in the Balkans and generally strengthen its regional footprint, Turkey has had to change its approach. It realised that Serbia is the key factor in the regional stability, and that it had to work more to gain its trust, especially in the areas of politics, economics, and security.

Although Davutoğlu’s approach also envisioned “zero-problems with neighbours”, Turkey’s **recognition of Kosovo’s independence in 2008 did not improve its already-weak relations with Serbia, especially as Serbia decided, consequently, to withdraw its ambassador from Ankara.** In order not to strain relations any further, Turkey never in fact responded to this move from Serbia and has kept its ambassador in Belgrade.⁷⁶⁹ Just a year later, relations started to change in a positive direction.

Namely, **after a long period of looking askance at each other, Serbia and Turkey began to make political and economic breakthroughs.** One of the first notable milestones consisted of the signing of a free-trade agreement between the two countries in June 2009 in Istanbul.⁷⁷⁰ A month later, Davutoğlu, who assumed the office of Turkey’s Foreign Minister, not only visited Belgrade and Sandžak, but also signed a memorandum of understanding with Serbian authorities to enable TIKA to operate in Serbia.⁷⁷¹ In October of the same year, Turkey’s president Abdullah Gul came to Serbia, which stood out as the first visit of a Turkish president to Serbia in 23 years.⁷⁷² These developments have set the ground for overcoming the past and focusing on forward-facing cooperation.

⁷⁶⁸ İnan Rüma, “Turkish foreign policy towards the balkans: new activism,neo-ottomanism or/so what?”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly* (Vol.9, No.4), 2010, p.139, available at: <http://turkishpolicy.com/files/articlepdf/turkish-foreign-policy-towards-the-balkans-new-activism-neo-ottomanism-or-so-what-winter-2010-en.pdf>

⁷⁶⁹ Bülent Sarper Ağır and Murat Necip Arman, “Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Western Balkans in the Post-Cold War Era: Political and Security Dimensions”, in *Turkey's Foreign Policy and Security Perspectives in the 21st Century*, 2016, p.160, available at: <http://bit.ly/2TDWLAi>

⁷⁷⁰ Free Trade Agreement between Serbia and Turkey, 2009, available at: https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi_download/zakon_o_potvrđivanju_sporazuma_o_slobodnoj_trgovini_izmedju_republike_srbije_i_republike_turske.pdf

⁷⁷¹ RTV, “Turskoj agenciji TIKA omogućene aktivnosti u Srbiji”, 2009, available at (in Serbian): https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/turskoj-agenciji-tika-omogucene-aktivnosti-u-srbiji_139173.html

⁷⁷² Muhidin Mulalić, “Prospects for Trilateral Relations between Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina”, *Insight Turkey* (Vol. 21, No. 2), 2019, pp.133, available at: <http://bit.ly/2Q3bP9r>

Box 27: Signs of Defence Cooperation

In 2009, a Defence Cooperation Agreement between Serbia and Turkey was signed in Ankara.⁷⁷³ Completion of this agreement represented a continuation of cooperation in the sphere of defence from the 2004 signing of the Protocol on Cooperation in Military Science and Technology.⁷⁷⁴ However, cooperation in the defence sector should not be over-emphasised. Typically, military cooperation between Serbia and Turkey has been less based on the scale of large, joint activities and more about bilateral visits of security and military officials. Therefore, **cooperation in the area of defence appears to represent a political token of goodwill and mutual understanding rather than a genuine intensification of security cooperation.**⁷⁷⁵

For Serbia, such developments represented a good opportunity to end its self-imposed diplomatic isolation in the wake of the rapid, worldwide recognition of Kosovo's independence, and an attempt to mitigate the effects of the looming world economic crisis.⁷⁷⁶ Furthermore, by engaging more closely with Turkey, an initiative was jointly led by Serbia's Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić and Davutoğlu with the idea of **normalising relationships between the divided Muslim communities in Serbia, and thus stabilising the Sandžak region as well** (see Chapter IV.3.2).⁷⁷⁷

For Turkey, better relations have only allowed it to implement the “zero-problems with neighbours” policy, but also ushered a path for establishing closer cultural cooperation with Sandžak as well. To this end, **Turkey has had to look beyond the Neo-Ottoman framework, extending cooperation to Belgrade, and thus marking the greatest strategic shift in its Balkan policy to date.** In practice, Davutoğlu has started to strongly reject the “Neo-Ottoman”

⁷⁷³ The plan was supposed to facilitate education and training, as well as preparation for joint special forces training. See: Đorđe M. Pavlović, “Odbrambena saradnja Srbije i turske kao pokazatelj sprovođenja Davutoğluove strategijske dubine“, *Vojno delo*, 2009, p.96, available at:

http://www.odbrana.mod.gov.rs/odbrana-stari/vojni_casopisi/arhiva/VD_2016-3/68-2016-3-07-Pavlovic.pdf

⁷⁷⁴ The protocol was supposed to enable mutual military training and education, military cooperation of the armed forces, exchange of military observers, cooperation in the defence industry, army organization, military medicine, military topography, military history, military science, as well as the joint development, production, promotion, and placement of military equipment. See: Đorđe M. Pavlović, “Odbrambena saradnja Srbije i turske kao pokazatelj sprovođenja Davutoğluove strategijske dubine“, 2016, p.96.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.103.

⁷⁷⁶ Igor Novaković, “Analysis Post “zero problems with neighbours” in the Western Balkans A view from Serbia”, ISAC Fund, 2020, p.9.

⁷⁷⁷ Aleksandar Raković, “Turska inicijativa za ujedinjenje islamske zajednice u Republici Srbiji (2011)”, Institut za evropske studije, 2013, p. 241, available at (in Serbian):

http://www.ies.rs/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Misa_Djurkovic_i_Aleksandar_Rakovic_ur_Turska_-_regionalna_sila.pdf

label, adding that there have been efforts to strengthen the most problematic relations in the region, pointing to Serbia.⁷⁷⁸

The first step in that direction was for Turkey to impose itself as mediator between Serbia and BiH. According to Davutoğlu's own words, the operative principle of this focus was "proactive and pre-emptive peace diplomacy".⁷⁷⁹ Through 2010, **Davutoğlu's intensive shuttle diplomacy resulted in the signing of the Trilateral Consultation Mechanism.** As part of this mechanism, foreign ministers from Ankara, Belgrade, and Sarajevo have met nine times in a very short time span.⁷⁸⁰ The resulting benefits of these activities were concrete and tangible, such as visa liberalisation between Serbia and Turkey, the appointment of a BiH Ambassador to Belgrade (filling a post that had been vacant for three years), and the adoption of the Declaration on Srebrenica by the Parliament of Serbia (which condemned the crimes committed against the Bosniak population in Srebrenica in 1995) as obliged by the International Court of Justice.⁷⁸¹ In fact, **establishing trilateral cooperation between Turkey, BiH, and Serbia became a major milestone of Turkish foreign policy at that time.**⁷⁸² As a result, Turkey received international praise for its political achievement in the region.⁷⁸³ Such developments also represented a new chapter in relations with Serbia, as, up until then, Turkey was conditioning cooperation with Serbia, by insisting that Belgrade put checks on Banja Luka (by controlling Republika Srpska more), and lead the Bosnian Serbs to make concessions to Bosniaks in BiH.⁷⁸⁴ Furthermore, **the success of the Mechanism demonstrated the ability of Turkey to exert its power in the close neighbourhood, thus reaffirm its status of an important regional power.**

⁷⁷⁸ *Business Turkey*, "Turkey not pleased with neo-Ottoman label", available at:

<https://businessturkeytoday.com/turkey-not-pleased-with-neo-ottoman-label.html>

⁷⁷⁹ Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy", *Foreign Affairs*, 2010.

⁷⁸⁰ Asli Aydıntaşbaş, "From myth to reality: How to understand Turkey's role in the Western Balkans", European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019, p.10.

⁷⁸¹ The Istanbul Declaration makes a direct link between these results and the Trilateral Mechanism. It states that the states "have welcomed the concrete results of the Turkey-BiH-Serbia Trilateral Consultation Mechanism, including the appointment of the BiH Ambassador to Belgrade and the adoption of the Declaration on Srebrenica by the Parliament of Serbia, as historical steps towards full normalization in the Balkans".

See: Istanbul Declaration, 2010, available at: <http://www.nspm.rs/nspm-in-english/istanbul-declaration.html>

⁷⁸² Another trilateral mechanism was established by Turkey with BiH and Croatia. Both trilateral mechanisms were centred around BiH.

⁷⁸³ Erhan Türbedar, "Trilateral Balkan Summit in Istanbul", TEPAV, 2010, p.1, available at:

[https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1274094120r2517.Trilateral Balkan Summit in Istanbul.pdf](https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1274094120r2517.Trilateral%20Balkan%20Summit%20in%20Istanbul.pdf)

⁷⁸⁴ Vladimir Ajzenhamer i Vladimir Trapara, "Turska politika prema Srbiji i Zapadnom Balkanu u kontekstu aktuelnih međunarodnih i regionalnih trendova", p.10, 2013, available at (in Serbian):

[https://www.academia.edu/5594276/Turska politika prema Srbiji i Zapadnom Balkanu u kontekstu aktuelnih me%C4%91unarodnih i regionalnih trendova](https://www.academia.edu/5594276/Turska_politika_prema_Srbiji_i_Zapadnom_Balkanu_u_kontekstu_aktuelnih_me%C4%91unarodnih_i_regionalnih_trendova)

Box 28: The Istanbul Declaration, 2010

As a peak to the trilateral talks, *the Istanbul Declaration* was signed by the leaders of BiH, Turkey, and Serbia in 2010.⁷⁸⁵ This event was historic for several reasons. First, never before have these three sides sat together in order to show “determination in overcoming historical differences, and building a common future based on tolerance and mutual understanding”. Second, it cooled down the turbulent relations between BiH and Serbia,⁷⁸⁶ after the latter expressed its “commitment to the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and the legal personality of BiH”. Third, it set the framework for future cooperation based on the following key pillars: “security for all, high level political dialogue, economic interdependence and preservation of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious social fabric of the region”. Fourth, it was agreed that Serbian President Boris Tadić, together with Prime Minister Erdoğan, would visit BiH to commemorate the 15th Anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre, as the first head of state of Serbia to do so. Finally, Turkey has emphasised the “importance of pursuing the necessary steps for integration with European structures”, while supporting BiH’s reforms on its NATO path.⁷⁸⁷ Having nurtured closer regional cooperation, **these concrete outcomes were in line with the countries’ EU accession requirements, namely good neighbourly relations.** Following up on such achievements, the leaders of the triad reaffirmed these messages and committed to further cooperation during the next trilateral meetings held in Karađorđevo (Serbia) in 2011 and Ankara in 2013.⁷⁸⁸

The success of the trilateral mechanism has also led to the rise of bilateral cooperation between Serbia and Turkey. Accordingly, **Erdoğan visited Serbia later in 2010 in order to usher the path to a “new era” of a mutual, strategic relationship.** During this visit, the focus was on economic, political, and cultural cooperation. Particular emphasis was put on Sandžak. In fact, after opening the Centre for Turkish Culture in Novi Pazar alongside Serbian President Tadić,

⁷⁸⁵ Istanbul Declaration, 2010

⁷⁸⁶ What caused high tensions in 2010, for example, between BiH and Serbia, was the arrest in London of BiH’s former Vice President Ejup Ganić on an extradition request from the Serbian authorities relating to the 1992 ambush of a Yugoslav army column in Sarajevo. See: Ian Taynor, “Former Bosnian president Ejup Ganić arrested at Heathrow”, *the Guardian*, 2010, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/01/ejup-ganic-bosnia-heathrow-arrest>

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁸ Muhidin Mulalić, “Prospects for Trilateral Relations between Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina”, *Insight Turkey* (Vol. 21, No. 2), 2019, pp.131-132.

Erdoğan described Sandžak as a “bridge” between Serbia and Turkey.⁷⁸⁹ In the aftermath of these successful consecutive visits by the highest Turkish officials, the first large Turkish investor, the Jeanci company, came to Serbia and opened a textile factory in 2011.⁷⁹⁰ Other Turkish companies, particularly from the textile industry, soon followed.

However, even though relations have started to see a positive trend in the early 2010s, not everything went smoothly. In fact, **one notable rupture in relations occurred when Erdoğan, during his visit to Kosovo in 2013, remarked that “Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo”.** Consequently, Serbia’s President Tomislav Nikolić, who had won the presidential elections in 2012, has de facto ended his participation in further trilateral summits. Namely, the president of Serbia saw this remark as a violation of Serbia’s territorial integrity and good-neighbourly relations with Turkey, while also representing an “act of aggression” by Turkey, albeit without arms.⁷⁹¹ For this reason, no further trilateral summits were held at the highest level in the following years.

What is important to note is that Nikolić’s refusal to attend trilateral meetings did not result in the end of the trilateral mechanism. In fact, the trilateral meetings continued to take place between 2015 and 2018 on a ministerial level, especially between ministers of economics and trade and ministers of foreign affairs.⁷⁹² As the Government is the branch of the Serbian executive that formulates foreign policy, at that time headed first by Ivica Dačić and then by Aleksandar Vučić, Nikolić was powerless as president to put to halt the improvement of relations with Turkey. Furthermore, Davutoğlu himself visited Belgrade twice in two years, in 2014 as a Foreign Minister, and in 2015 as a Prime Minister, when he also visited Sandžak. Therefore, **Nikolić’s move against the trilateral mechanism was just a short-lived stunt rather than an actual foreign policy shift against Turkey.**

Such developments lead to the conclusion that **the issue of Kosovo is not a topic that could seriously and substantially damage improving relations between Serbia and Turkey.** In

⁷⁸⁹ *Blic*, “Tadić, Erdogan: Počela nova era u saradnji”, 2010, available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/tadic-erdogan-pocela-nova-era-u-saradnji/zhfjj6h>

⁷⁹⁰ *Južne vesti*, “Turci zakupili "Leteks" iz Leskovca“, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.juznevesti.com/Drushtvo/Turci-zakupili-Leteks-iz-Leskovca.sr.html>

⁷⁹¹ Davutoğlu offered an explanation that Erdoğan’s speech in Kosovo was misinterpreted and that his words were taken out of context. Even though Nikolić conditioned his further participation at the trilateral summits with Erdoğan’s official apology, the latter never issued one. See: *Novosti*, “Nikolić: Turska agresija bez oružja”, 2013, available at: <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:460715-Nikolic-Turska-agresija-bez-oruzja>

⁷⁹² Muhidin Mulalić, “Prospects for Trilateral Relations between Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina”, *Insight Turkey* (Vol. 21, No. 2), 2019, p.133.

this context, it is not expected that this issue will be reopened in the near future, especially after Erdoğan stated that any solution for Kosovo is acceptable to Turkey, as long as Belgrade and Priština mutually agree to it.⁷⁹³ This positioning of Turkey illustrates its pragmatism and delicate approach towards Serbia, representing an important examples which showcases that the biggest bilateral issue between Turkey and Serbia does not have the capacity to stand in the way of the betterment of bilateral relations. As the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština is encompassed by Chapter 35 of Serbia's negotiation process, a key chapter upon which Serbia's EU future depends, the fact that Turkey is not disrupting progress in any manner whatsoever is encouraging.

IV. 1. 4 Personalisation of Turkey's Foreign Policy – Erdoğan as a Victim and a Victor (2016-current day)

IV. 1. 4. 1 Post-Coup Development of Relations

Turkey's foreign policy aimed at the Balkans, and thus at Serbia, witnessed certain modifications since 2016, what appeared to be a critical juncture for Erdoğan. What profoundly impacted him personally and his rule was the attempted coup d'état by a faction of Turkey's armed forces in multiple cities on 15 July 2016. From the perspective of power relations, Erdoğan presented himself in the international arena simultaneously as a victim of the plotter's plan to overthrow him, and at the same time, a victor, emerging triumphant from the clash, which allowed him to further strengthen his grip on power. Although his power grab was noticeable even prior to the coup, the domestic arena in Turkey was rapidly sent into a downward spiral in its aftermath. This became visible as Erdoğan stepped up his action against dissidents,⁷⁹⁴ notable against the members of the Gülen Movement, particularly during the state

⁷⁹³ NI, "Vučić: Hvala Erdoganu jer je spreman da prihvati svako rešenje o Kosovu", 2019, available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a532430/Vucic-o-odnosima-Srbije-i-Turske.html>

⁷⁹⁴ The swiftness and scale of the crackdown has led to the observation that the attempted coup was followed by a "counter coup" carried out by President Erdoğan. Not only has he arrested the suspected military personnel, but he has used the event as a pretext to fight against Turkey's remaining dissidents, including journalists and NGOs. Furthermore, ties with the EU and the US have been further severed, as it was widely believed that the US supported the putschists, while the EU attracted outrage because of its perceived inaction and passivity. Both the EU and the US have done away with such accusations and have instead criticised Turkey for its hard-line approach against any perceived opposition. See: Cengiz Çandar, "A New Turkey? Implications of the Failed Military Coup and Subsequent Political Coup", CIRSD, 2016, available at: <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-autumn-2016--issue-no-8/a-new-turkey-implications-of-the-failed-military-coup-and-subsequent-political-coup>

of emergency that was repeatedly extended for two years. Considering the gravity of the authoritarian drift and lack of any progress in the area of Fundamentals in Turkey, **the EU has de facto frozen its negotiations with Turkey in 2018.**⁷⁹⁵

All of these events have also impacted Turkey's foreign policy. In fact, as part of an internal power struggle, and just two months before the attempted coup, **there was a split between Erdoğan and Davutoğlu.** Even though Turkey has not officially departed from its “zero problems with neighbours” policy in the Balkans,⁷⁹⁶ it is evident that Turkish foreign policy became centralised and personalised in Erdoğan's character⁷⁹⁷ - dubbed as “Erdoganism”.⁷⁹⁸ **Ever since Davutoğlu left office, it appears that Turkey's official state visits to the region have declined.**⁷⁹⁹ Nevertheless, this does not mean that the Western Balkans have lost their importance to Turkey, especially considering that Erdoğan has been struggling to cope with an increasingly complicated domestic and international environment during this period.

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Even in such a difficult environment for Turkish foreign policy, **Serbia has in fact managed to keep close ties to the Turkish establishment, particularly as the attempted coup was sharply criticised by the Serbian President Vučić,** who was among the first world leaders to officially express support to Erdoğan on the very night of the coup. Considering that the EU was not as vocal and swift in providing genuine support in condemning the attempted coup – described by the pro-government Turkish media as a “wait-and-see-policy”⁸⁰¹ – Erdoğan himself stressed that he will never forget the strong and early support that came from Serbia and his “dear friend” Vučić.⁸⁰² The expert community agrees that such clear and swift support to Erdoğan during and after the attempted coup also **contributed to the personal connection between Vučić and Erdoğan,** while also raising concerns that the former often idealises the latter and his “one-man regime”.⁸⁰³ Ever since, cooperation between the two has continued to develop, both multilaterally and bilaterally.

Box 29: Erdoğan as seen by Serbia's Public

A Gallup international survey from 2018 showed that Erdoğan's is still largely viewed unfavourably - 45% view him unfavourably, as compared to 32% with favourable opinions, and 23% without an opinion.⁸⁰⁴ **Although Erdoğan's public standing in Serbia is not optimal, his ranking appears to be improving.** For instance, in 2017, a Gallup survey measured 55% unfavourable perceptions, 25% favourable, and 25% indifferent.⁸⁰⁵

Therefore, in just a year, the number of those viewing Erdoğan unfavourably decreased by 18% (-10 percentage points), while those viewing him favourably increased by 28% (+8 percentage points). To make firm conclusions, one will need to follow future polls on Erdoğan's popularity in Serbia.⁸⁰⁶ Nevertheless, as Erdoğan increases his personal ties with Serbia's President as the time passes, his standing might further improve.

Even though the context has changed in the aftermath of the attempted coup, some elements of Turkey's approach to Serbia have remained intact – notably, the trilateral mechanism between Turkey, BiH, and Serbia. Although an official apology from Erdoğan as requested by the former President Nikolić for the remark that “Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo” never came, trilateral meetings at the highest level were reinstated in 2018. In fact, trilateral cooperation was re-energised (even though it never officially ceased to function), with a summit organised in Istanbul, this time with Aleksandar Vučić replacing Nikolić as Serbian president, and in 2019 in Belgrade. What emerged as a direct product of these talks was an initiative to finance and implement the project concerning the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway. Not

⁷⁹⁵ European Commission, “Turkey”, 2019, available at:

https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/turkey_en

⁷⁹⁶ Igor Novaković, “Analysis Post “zero problems with neighbours” in the Western Balkans A view from Serbia”, ISAC Fund, 2020, p.9.

⁷⁹⁷ Asli Aydıntaşbaş, “From myth to reality: How to understand Turkey's role in the Western Balkans”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2019, p.14.

⁷⁹⁸ Asli Aydıntaşbaş, “From myth to reality: How to understand Turkey's role in the Western Balkans”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2019, p.14.

⁷⁹⁹ Hamdi Firat Buyuk, “Granice istoka: Turska i Srbija - najbolji prijatelji?”, interview for Al Jazeera Balkans, 24:05 – 26:00 minutes of the video, 2019, available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=aFMukRiEdJc&feature=emb_title

⁸⁰⁰ Hamdi Firat Buyuk, “Granice istoka: Turska i Srbija - najbolji prijatelji?”, interview for Al Jazeera Balkans, 24:05 – 26:00 minutes of the video, 2019, available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=aFMukRiEdJc&feature=emb_title

⁸⁰¹ *Anadolu Agency*, “The July 15 Coup has dented the EU reputation”, 2019, available at:

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/opinion-the-july-15-coup-has-dented-the-eu-reputation/1534105>

⁸⁰² *Al Jazeera Balkans*, “Vučić poručio Erdoganu: Srbija uz Tursku i u noći puča”, 2017, available at:

<http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/vucic-porucio-erdoganu-srbija-uz-tursku-i-u-noci-puca>

⁸⁰³ Maja Bjeloš, “Country Report 1 – Serbia”, in “Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Influences of Non-Western External Actors”, Barbora Chrzová, Anja Grabovac, Martin Hála, Jan Lalić (Eds.), *The Prague Security Studies Institute*, 2019, p.23, available at: <http://bit.ly/2wThh8o>

⁸⁰⁴ Gallup, “Global Leaders - Gallup International's 42nd Annual Global Opinion Poll”, 2018, available at:

https://www.gallup-international.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2018_End-of-Year_Global-Leaders.pdf

⁸⁰⁵ Gallup, “Gallup International's 41st Annual Global End of Year Survey”, 2018, available at:

https://www.gallup-international.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017_Global-Leaders.pdf

⁸⁰⁶ Regrettably, Gallup has not measured Erdoğan's popularity in Serbia prior to 2017, which is why one cannot analyse trends in this case.

only was improving this road presented as a matter of regional stability, but it was also praised as a project that could have positive effects on reconciliation overall in the region.⁸⁰⁷

When it comes to bilateral relations between Serbia and Turkey during this period, it is notable that Erdoğan visited Serbia twice in a short time span, in both 2017 and 2019. These visits and the recent closer partnership between the states are explained by the fact that **Serbia publicly stood by Turkey during a time of crisis and thus managed to strike points with Erdoğan.** Both times, Erdoğan was accompanied by large business delegations from Turkey and given a red-carpet welcome in Belgrade. It is noticeable that the focus of his visit was primarily regarding economic circumstances. Besides the emphasis on the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway, the two sides agreed to make arrangements for more Turkish companies to come to Serbia and start business. In fact, **the improvement of political relations between Serbia and Turkey have resulted in positive economic developments, as a number of Turkish textile companies opened factories in rural and underdevelopment regions of Serbia after Erdoğan's 2017 visit.** Interestingly, almost none of these factories were to be located in Sandžak, but were rather put next to the Corridor X which does not pass through this region with strong Bosniak community. The fact that the Corridor X represents a connector between Europe and Turkey showcases that the pure economic interest of Turkey has dominated over its religious ties with the people of Sandžak in this case.

Box 30: The 2019 Military Agreement and Arms Acquisition Between Serbia and Turkey

Although the key theme of Erdoğan's visit in 2019 was the economy, another theme was defence. This visit was an attempt to deepen the cooperation which had originally started with the 2004 Protocol and 2009 Agreement. Namely, officials from Turkey and Serbia signed the Serbia-Turkey Framework Military Agreement, which focuses on military training and education, military medicine and health services, military legal systems, mapping and hydrography, exchange of personnel for professional development, information and experience sharing regarding military, scientific, and technological research, and carrying out training programs on mines and improvised explosive devices (Article 4).⁸⁰⁸

⁸⁰⁷ *Balkan Insight*, "Belgrade-Sarajevo Highway 'to Bring Serbia and Bosnia Closer'", 2019, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/08/belgrade-sarajevo-highway-to-bring-serbia-and-bosnia-closer/>

⁸⁰⁸ Zakon o potvrđivanju Okvirnog vojnog sporazuma između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Republike Turske, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/archive/files/lat/pdf/zakoni/2020/3162-19%20-Lat..pdf>

In fact, **Serbia's president went so far as to indicate that Serbia is interested in buying arms from Turkey.**⁸⁰⁹ A year later, it was revealed that Serbia was eyeing Turkish “Bayraktar” armed drones, as these have reportedly proved effective when deployed in conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh.⁸¹⁰ Considering that Serbia has increasingly been buying arms from foreign countries such as Russia and China, the latest announcement indicates that Serbia will continue with the practice of diversifying its arms imports. As Turkey is a NATO member, there has not been public criticism on this matter by the US, as was the case for arms imported from Russia and China.

For Turkey, this step would also be a change, particularly considering that it has traditionally been reluctant to arm the Serbian side due to its conflict history in the 1990s with the ethnic Albanians and Bosniaks. Therefore, **if arms transactions do take place, they will showcase a new level of partnership between Turkey and Serbia**, as well as a new level of mutual trust. In addition, it appears that these drones are manufactured by a company owned by the son-in-law of Turkish President Erdoğan, which further showcases how relations between Serbia and Turkey are potentially being used for personal gains as well.⁸¹¹

All things considered, **the development of relations between Serbia and Turkey appears to be a win-win situation for authorities from Belgrade and Ankara.** On the one hand, while Turkey has become less popular in the West and has continuously lost international prestige, **relations with Belgrade allow Erdoğan to present himself as a peacekeeper and his foreign policy as a success.** For example, when Western leaders refused to attend Erdoğan's presidential inauguration ceremony in 2018, Vučić showed up as a guest of honour, alongside other Balkan leaders. The same thing happened during the opening ceremony of the new Istanbul Airport in 2018. Some have even dubbed such actions as the “diplomacy of turning

⁸⁰⁹ *Balkan Insight*, “Serbia and Turkey Pledge to Boost Defence Cooperation”, 2019, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/07/serbia-and-turkey-pledge-to-boost-defence-cooperation/>

⁸¹⁰ Hamdi Firat Buyuk, Serbia Considers Buying Turkish Armed Drones”, *BIRN*, 2020, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/06/serbia-considers-buying-turkish-armed-drones/>

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.*

up”.⁸¹² Portraying Turkey as an emerging power allows Ankara to work on its self-image, a policy oriented towards Turkish voters.⁸¹³

On the other hand, **Serbian officials pragmatically present the rising economic presence of Turkey as way to grow the domestic employment rate.**⁸¹⁴ **As this in return can win political points in the home front, Belgrade appears ready to openly play its part in pro-Erdoğan political theatrics.** For example, during his visit to Turkey in May 2018, Serbia’s President Vučić stated that the Turkish leader deserve credit for the “rapid improvement“ of bilateral cooperation, while adding that Turkey is the “most powerful force in the Balkans”.⁸¹⁵ The latest illustration of the willingness of Serbia’s officials to back Erdoğan took place in March 2019, when they went so far as to congratulate Erdoğan for winning the local elections, even before the final count of votes was over. Although it later turned out that Erdoğan lost Istanbul and Ankara, Vučić, unsurprisingly, did not issue a congratulatory note to the opposition bloc who won the majorities in these cities.⁸¹⁶ **Considering that Serbia is a candidate country aspiring to join the EU, such actions *vis-à-vis* Turkey’s leadership does not send a positive signal to Brussels or to any power that prioritises the importance of rule of law.**

IV. 1. 4. 2 Serbia’s Alignment with EU Declarations on Turkey

The personalisation of relations between the Serbian and Turkish leadership has not, however, always resulted in Serbia’s unconditional support of Turkey in terms of its foreign relations. This quickly becomes evident by looking at how Serbia has aligned with EU declarations targeting Turkey. The authors of this study identified five cases of such declarations between 2016 and 2020. Although the number of such declarations is rather small

⁸¹² Asli Aydıntaşbaş, “From myth to reality: How to understand Turkey’s role in the Western Balkans”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019, p.16.

⁸¹³ Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis, “The Western Balkans as a Geopolitical Chessboard? Myths, Realities and Policy Options”, BiEPAG, 2019, p.11, available at: http://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/The_Western_Balkans_as_a_Geopolitical_Chessboard.pdf

⁸¹⁴ More on the economic cooperation can be found in subchapter IV.3

⁸¹⁵ *Politika*, “Vrtoglavi uspon saradnje Beograda i Ankare”, 2018, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/403283/Vucic-o-vrtoglavom-usponu-saradnje-s-Turskom>

⁸¹⁶ Vuk Velebit, “Lični odnosi umesto nacionalnih interesa – Vučićeva spoljna politika na primeru Turske”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://talas.rs/2019/06/27/licni-odnosi-vucic-erdogan/>

compared to those targeting Russia or China, it nevertheless is sufficient in showcasing Serbia's genuine foreign policy orientation vis-à-vis Turkey.

In November 2016, Serbia aligned with a Declaration which expressed grave concern over the developments in the months after the coup was attempted, particularly warning of the deterioration of human rights and rule of law in Turkey.⁸¹⁷ In this way, Vučić's statements of public support to Erdoğan contradicted Serbia's alignment with this declaration. What may explain Serbia's move in this case is the probable strong pressure exerted by the EU, for which this declaration bore particular importance, while Serbia did not want to further risk damaging its already-weak alignment rate. Another reason why Serbia chose this stance, is because the declaration itself is not fully directed against Turkey, as in some parts it states that Turkey's actions against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), listed by the EU and its member states as a terrorist organisation, are legitimate, while reaffirming its stand with Turkey in its fight against terrorism.

The first case in which Serbia refused to align its position with the EU on a Turkey-related declaration was in March 2018, with regards to a declaration expressing, among other things, deep concern about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afrin (Syria) following a Turkish military operation. The reason why Serbia chose to refuse to align with this particular declaration is the fact it was not only calling upon Turkey to cease its activities in Syria, but it was also asking the same of Russia.⁸¹⁸ Had the declaration only targeted Turkey, it is questionable whether Serbia would risk deteriorating its already-weak history of alignment with the EU declarations.

For example, **when Turkey was the sole country against whom a declaration was directed in October 2019, based on a military operation in north-eastern Syria, Serbia joined the EU in calling upon Turkey to cease its unilateral military action.**⁸¹⁹ The same declaration reaffirmed the EU's commitment to the unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the Syrian

⁸¹⁷ Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the latest developments in Turkey, 2016, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/11/08/hr-declaration-turkey/>

⁸¹⁸ Declaration by the High Representative Federica Mogherini on behalf of the EU on Syria, March 2018, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/03/15/syria-declaration-by-the-high-representative-federica-mogherini-on-behalf-of-the-eu/>

⁸¹⁹ Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on recent developments in north-east Syria, October 2019, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/10/09/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-recent-developments-in-north-east-syria/>

state. Considering that Syria does not recognise Kosovo as an independent country, it is unsurprising that Serbia stood by Damascus over Ankara.

Another case was in **January 2020, when Serbia aligned with a declaration stating that countries will ensure that their national policies conform with the EU's Decision ((CFSP) 2019/1894) concerning restrictive measures in view of Turkey's unauthorised drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean.**⁸²⁰ Not only did this declaration condemn Turkey for its illegal drilling activities in Cyprus' exclusive economic zone, but it also established a framework for targeted restrictive measures against persons and entities responsible for, or involved in, these drilling activities. Such a decision by Serbia is explained by the fact that Greece and Cyprus are both close allies, and have strong political leverage in terms of supporting its cause as two out of the five EU member states that have not recognised Kosovo's independence.

As evidence that Serbia is trying to safeguard its relations with Turkey whenever possible, it is worth noting that did not align with a follow-up declaration by the EU's High Representative adopted in March 2020. It includes the addition of two persons to the list of natural and legal persons, entities, and bodies set out in the Annex to Decision ((CFSP) 2019/1894) concerning restrictive measures.⁸²¹ Since this declaration is not as important as the previous one, **Serbia tried to send a signal to Ankara that it will stand with it as long as the risks entailed are not too great.**

The authors of this study have identified that out of five analysed declarations, four were aimed directly and solely against Turkey. If these four are taken into account, **Serbia had 75% alignment rate with the EU.** If all five are considered (thus including the one on Afrin which also targets Russia), then the alignment rate goes down to 60%. In other words, **although Serbia is open to consider backing Turkey, its support will not be unconditional.** This is another indicator that shows that **Turkey has nowhere close to the political leverage in**

⁸²⁰ Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain third countries concerning restrictive measures in view of Turkey's unauthorised drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, January 2020, available at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/01/31/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-alignment-of-certain-third-countries-concerning-restrictive-measures-in-view-of-turkey-s-unauthorised-drilling-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>

⁸²¹ Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain countries concerning restrictive measures in view of Turkey's unauthorised drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, March 2020, available at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/03/31/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-alignment-of-certain-countries-concerning-restrictive-measures-in-view-of-turkey-s-unauthorised-drilling-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>

Serbia that Russia and China have, as countries whom Serbia has fully backed in Brussels in the past. Having this in mind, it becomes clear that it is not the issue of rule of law that drives Serbia's alignment rate when it comes to Turkey, but its strategic interests.

All declarations considered, it may seem surprising that Serbia has shown a significant level of reluctance to stand by Turkey when it comes to the EU's declarations, particularly as Vučić and Erdoğan have built greater cooperation during this period. The decisions of Serbia to go against Turkey in order to align with the EU's declarations may be explained by the fact that such activities do not bring into question the cooperation between the two states, as Ankara is well aware of the fact that Serbia prioritises support in the foreign arena largely based on whether a country supports Kosovo's independence. In other words, **Ankara probably never expected Belgrade to stand by it in relations with Brussels, especially as the two countries have not signed a strategic partnership, as Belgrade has with Moscow and Beijing.**

Box 31: Serbia from the Turkish Perspective

The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Relations has a special webpage reflecting on the bilateral relations between Turkey and Serbia.⁸²² **According to their view, relations between Turkey and Serbia have reached a pinnacle in the last years.** Even though these two countries have no common border, both of them consider each other as neighbours, which, according to them, confirms the shared importance of their bilateral relations. Furthermore, **they point out that the trilateral mechanism constitutes a precedent for relations between regional countries.** Other achievements, according to the Ministry, consist of the Free Trade Agreement, the Agreement on Infrastructure Cooperation, the mutual abolition of visas, and the launching of TIKA's activities in Serbia. Finally, **Sandžak is viewed as “a bridge of friendship”**, while adding that both Turkey and Serbia endeavour to spread their developing political relations to other areas, particularly economic and commercial fields in the future.

⁸²² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, “Relations between Turkey and Serbia”, available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-serbia.en.mfa>

IV. 1. 4. 3 The Fight against the Gülenists

Another defining moment of the post-2016 era in Turkey was its prioritisation of the fight against the Gülen Movement. On the one hand, the followers of Fethullah Gülen (called Gülenists), describe this movement (“Hizmet”, meaning “service” in Turkish) as a “faith-inspired civil society movement that seeks to create a culture of coexistence within universal, humanist values and is comprised of volunteers”.⁸²³ On the other hand, Erdoğan has described the movement as a “parallel state” and a “terrorist organisation” (FETO). Although the political conflict between Erdoğan and Gülen began in 2013, the fight against the latter became priority number one for Erdoğan in the aftermath of the attempted coup in 2016. In fact, Erdoğan accused the movement of plotting to overthrow him under the guiding hand of its leader (and his former ally), Gülen. Domestically, this has resulted in a massive purge of schools, colleges, NGOs, companies, and banks linked to the movement.⁸²⁴

Likewise, Turkey started prioritising the fight against the Gülenists in the international arena as well, and especially in the Balkans, where the Gülenists have spread since the 1990s, but increasingly in the 2000s. **Shutting down institutions that have ties to Gülen throughout the Balkans has become a key priority to Erdoğan, along with pressuring countries of the region to hand over suspected citizens that are considered foes of the Turkish regime.** This focus has rendered **Turkish foreign policy less visionary, strategic, and long-term oriented, and more pragmatic and prone to adaption to domestic needs.**

The fact that Balkan leaders have shown willingness to conform to Erdoğan’s prosecution of the Gülenists,⁸²⁵ has raised eyebrows in Brussels, as this process is sometimes done through untransparent actions that damage rule of law. The most notable case in this regard took place

⁸²³ Gülen Movement, “What is the Hizmet movement?”, 2012, available at:

<http://www.gulenmovement.com/what-is-hizmet-movement.html>

⁸²⁴ “Erdoğan and Gülen were close allies until 2013, before which thousands of Gülen supporters took up positions in the army, police, judiciary and bureaucracy... Erdoğan fired more than 170,000 public servants including army and police officers, judges, teachers, bureaucrats, doctors and academics over alleged links with terrorist organisations... Some 160,000 people have been detained by police while 70,000 have been sent to prison. Altogether, 155,000 have been investigated or prosecuted, according to the Turkish justice ministry.”

See: Hamdi Firat Buyuk, Alexander Clapp and Serbeze Haxhijaj, “Diaspora Politics: Turkey’s New Balkan Ambassadors”, *Balkan Insight*, 2018, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/03/19/diaspora-politics-turkeys-new-balkan-ambassadors/>

⁸²⁵ Igor Novaković, “Analysis Post “zero problems with neighbours” in the Western Balkans A view from Serbia”, ISAC Fund, 2020, p.9.

in Kosovo, when six Turkish nationals were arrested there over links to schools financed by Gülen, albeit apparently without the knowledge of Kosovo's Prime Minister.⁸²⁶

When it comes to Serbia, although it does not designate the Gülen Movement as a terrorist organisation, the Turkish Government made an official request to Belgrade to close all Gülen-led and inspired schools on its territory.⁸²⁷ As a next step, Erdoğan announced that Turkey will be opening Maarif foundations in Serbia⁸²⁸, created by the Turkish Parliament in 2016 as the sole official provider of Turkish-backed education abroad, with the aim of promoting teachings alternative to those of Gülenist schools.⁸²⁹ These events indicate that the **domestic fight between Erdoğan and the Gülenists has also had spillover effects in Serbia.**

It is unofficially known that the Gülen Movement manages several cultural and educational institutions in Serbia. For example, the *Anadolu Agency*, a Turkish media outlet producing content in Serbian, has publicly pinpointed some whom it suspects to have been part of the Gülen movement.⁸³⁰ It listed organisations such as “Most” (the Bridge) and “Horizont” (the Horizon) in Novi Pazar, and the Beyza private school and Educational Centre in Belgrade, as part of the wider Gülen network. The authors of this study were unable to find any reliable information on what has happened to the organisations in Novi Pazar, as they show no online traces of activities, which is why it is driving the perception that they have been under pressure to lay low. When it comes to the two Beyza organisations in Belgrade, the authors have tried contacting both centres. They were told that these organisations have ceased working. **Although there is no hard evidence that Gülen institutions were forcefully shut down by the Serbian Government,**⁸³¹ **the circumstances of their closure remain unclear.**

⁸²⁶ *Reuters*, “Six Turks arrested in Kosovo over Gülen links extradited to Turkey”, 2018, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-kosovo/six-turks-arrested-in-kosovo-over-gulen-links-extradited-to-turkey-anadolu-idUSKBN1H51JL>

⁸²⁷ *Blic*, “Zahtev iz Turske: Zatvorite Gulenove škole u Srbiji”, 2016, available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/zahtev-iz-turske-zatvorite-gulenove-skole-u-srbiji/zrscxrv>

⁸²⁸ *Anadolu Agency*, “Turkey-Serbia herald a new era in relations”, 2019, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkey-serbia-herald-a-new-era-in-relations/1607301>

⁸²⁹ *Balkan Insight*, “Schools a New Tool of Turkish Influence in Albania”, 2019, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/09/04/schools-a-new-tool-of-turkish-influence-in-albania/>

⁸³⁰ *Anadolu Agency*, “Ambasador Bozay: Informisao sam srbijanske vlasti o terorističkoj organizaciji FETO u Srbiji”, 2016, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/balkan/ambasador-bozay-informisao-sam-srbijanske-vlasti-o-teroristi%C4%8Dkoj-organizaciji-feto-u-srbiji/625306>

⁸³¹ Vesa Bashota et al., “Western Balkan at the Crossroads: Assessing non-democratic External Influence Activities – Briefing Paper IV, External Influence in the Cultural and Religious Sphere”, Prague Security Studies Institute, p.28, available at: http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/635_briefing-paper-4-external-influence-in-the-cultural-religious-sphere.pdf

Some even allege that Serbian officials in fact played a role in this affair, as **the Gülen institutions reportedly decided to “voluntarily” suspend their operations because of frequent state monitoring, pressure from financial inspections and the Ministry Education from Serbia.**⁸³² In such a scenario, even if the institutions voluntarily closed, the culpability of Serbian officials remains, as they appear to have contributed to creating an unfavourable or hindering environment for these institutions, thus resulting in the fulfilment of Erdoğan’s intentions. The issue of their closure of these organisations is a matter of concern and warrants further attention, particularly considering the fact that **Turkish officials have publicly stated that they have received “positive signals” from Serbian authorities regarding their call to close these institutions.**⁸³³

Human rights activists and lawyers from Serbia became further alarmed after Serbia’s Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić made a pledge that **Serbia will “not shelter anyone who fights against Turkish interests”.** They have warned that extraditions could violate Serbian international obligations.⁸³⁴ Serbia and Turkey signed an extradition agreement in 2013, only exchanging instruments on the ratification of the agreement in 2020.⁸³⁵ Although the Serbian Government has not extradited any Gülenists to Turkey, the very idea that it would be ready to do so appears to have been another signal to Gülenists that they are unwelcome in Serbia, a reason why many of them seem to have left.⁸³⁶

Statements which give credibility to possible extraditions of Gülenists **oppose the EU’s stance on this issue**, as it has continuously and openly warned Turkey not to continue to escalate the fight against the Gülen Movement, domestically and abroad, while calling on it to respect the human rights of the accused dissidents and the due process of law.⁸³⁷ For instance, Germany

⁸³² Srećko Latal and Hamdi Firat Büyük, “Political Influence In Southeast Europe In Current Turkish Foreign Policy”, in *SOUTHEASTEUROPE in Focus*, No.5, 2020, p.61, available at: https://www.sogde.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/SOE_Focus_5_2020_Turkey.pdf

⁸³³ *Blic*, “Zahtev iz Turske: Zatvorite Gulenove škole u Srbiji”, 2016.

⁸³⁴ *Balkan Insight*, “Dacic Pledge to Turkey Worries Serbian Rights Advocates”, 2018, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/08/21/serbia-s-pledge-to-turkey-worries-human-rights-advocates-08-20-2018/>

⁸³⁵ Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Ugovor o izručenju sa Turskom”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/sr/index.php/konzularne-vesti/124-2013-12-02-15-07-40/22246-2020-01-30-23-59-44?lang=lat>

⁸³⁶ Srećko Latal and Hamdi Firat Büyük, “Political Influence In Southeast Europe In Current Turkish Foreign Policy”, in *SOUTHEASTEUROPE in Focus*, No.5, 2020, p.61

⁸³⁷ According to the EU’s counter-terrorism coordinator Gilles de Kerchove, the EU does not share Turkey’s view that Gülenists represent a terrorist organisation and would need to see “substantive” evidence to change its stance. See: *Reuters*, “EU says needs concrete evidence from Turkey to deem Gülen network as terrorist”, 2017, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-turkey-security/eu-says-needs-concrete-evidence-from-turkey-to-deem-gulen-network-as-terrorist-idUSKBN1DU0DX>

has sharply criticised the mass arrests in Turkey and has thus refused to extradite individuals Ankara claims were involved in the plot or linked to Gülen’s network.⁸³⁸ In contrast, the, to this point, open support of Serbia’s Government for Turkey shows that **any potential violations of human rights or rule of law by Turkey will not stand in the way of their bilateral relations.**

Meanwhile, it is important to note that **Belgrade and Ankara signed a number of cooperation agreements in the areas of security and joint policing during Erdoğan’s visit in 2019.**⁸³⁹ **This interest in deepening cooperation is not coincidental, considering that the fight against the Gülen Movement is among Turkey’s key priorities.** Namely, among the latest agreements was *the Security Cooperation Agreement*, in which Turkey and Serbia pledge to cooperate in the areas of transnational organised crime, drug trafficking, trafficking in human-beings and weapons, and smuggling of migrants, among other areas (Article 1). What is particularly important is that the agreement also says that Serbia and Turkey will together work on combatting terrorism, with “cooperation in information, criminal intelligence and assessment sharing, as well as operational cooperation” (Article 2.3). This includes the **prevention of the activities of members and supporters of terrorist organisations reported by either of the parties as posing threats to national security.** It is also noted that the parties will ensure that they have already established “urgent executive measures to **prevent further terrorist propaganda** simultaneously”, (Article 2.3.a) as well as measures “regarding the persons and institutions providing financial or other support” to terrorist organisations in their territories (Article 2.3.b).⁸⁴⁰

Furthermore, the two sides also signed a *Memorandum of Understanding on Joint Police Patrols*, **allowing Turkish police officers to operate on Serbia’s soil**, especially during the tourist season.⁸⁴¹ Some have already warned that **Turkey might misuse the presence of its police force to pursue Erdoğan’s critics in Serbia.**⁸⁴² The basis of such fears was justified by the fact that Turkey’s Deputy Foreign Minister Yavuz Selim Kıran stated that the “joint

⁸³⁸ Ibid.

⁸³⁹ Government of Serbia Official Website, “Serbia, Turkey sign several cooperation agreements”, 2019, available at: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/145995/serbia-turkey-sign-several-cooperation-agreements.php>

⁸⁴⁰ Security Cooperation Agreement between Serbia and Turkey, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/archive/files/cir/pdf/zakoni/2020/2881-19.pdf>

⁸⁴¹ *NI*, “Srbija i Turska uvode zajedničke policijske patrole”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a532476/Srbija-i-Turska-uvode-zajednicke-policijske-patrole.html>

⁸⁴² *Nordic Monitor*, “Turkey deploys police in Serbia to expand witch-hunt against Erdoğan critics”, 2020, available at: <https://www.nordicmonitor.com/2020/03/turkey-deploys-police-in-serbia-to-extend-witch-hunt-against-erdogan-critics/>

patrol activities will also benefit the detection and capture of members of terrorist organisations who may attempt to escape to European countries with false documents”.⁸⁴³ The focus here is likely on members of the Gülen Movement. Interestingly, statements regarding the details of these security agreements caught the attention of the Turkish media,⁸⁴⁴ while being fully neglected by their Serbian counterparts.

Not only has this issue stayed under the radar of Serbian media outlets and the wider public, but **there has also been strong and explicit distancing from the Gülenists by the two Islamic Communities operating in Serbia.**⁸⁴⁵ Such details indicate that **Turkey has managed to capitalise on its soft power potential with the Muslim communities in Serbia.** In Sandžak, parts of the local population have done the same, along with Novi Pazar’s city authorities, which have explicitly stated that they are not providing any sort of support to organisations tied to the Gülen Movement.⁸⁴⁶ **It is highly concerning that the deputy major of Novi Pazar, Faruk Suljević, was removed from his function at the insistence of Turkey due to his alleged close ties to the Gülenists.**⁸⁴⁷ This example shows that the Turkish prioritisation of this issue has also had political repercussions in Serbia as well.

The extreme case was the doing of the online portal *Sandžak Press*, rumoured to be closely associated with the Islamic Community in Serbia. Just ten days after the attempted coup against Erdoğan in 2016, this portal published an article titled “Gülenists in Sandžak“ in which it accuses a number of people of working with the Gülen movement.⁸⁴⁸ Many of the accused were in fact members of the rival religious organisation in Serbia called the Islamic Community of Serbia. This example shows that **the case of Gülen has been used even within Serbia in power struggles between the Muslim religious communities.**

⁸⁴³ *MBS News*, “Accepted in Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Commission: Turkish and Serbian security forces to joint patrol at border crossings”, 2020, available at: <https://www.mbs.news/a/2020/02/accepted-in-parliaments-foreign-affairs-commission-turkish-and-serbian-security-forces-to-joint-patrol-at-border-crossings.html>

⁸⁴⁴ *Sozcu*, “Turkish police to catch FETÖ in Serbia”, 2020, available at (in Turkish): <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/gundem/turk-polisi-sirbistanda-fetocu-yakalayacak-5617563/>

⁸⁴⁵ More on the relationship between Turkey and Serbian Islamic Communities in sub-chapter IV.3

⁸⁴⁶ Grad Novi Pazar, “Grad Novi Pazar podržava zvanične institucije Republike Turske”, 2016, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.novipazar.rs/vesti-aktuelnosti/politika/2798-grad-novi-pazar-podrzava-zvanicne-institucije-republike-turske>

⁸⁴⁷ *Sandžak Press*, “Pod pritiskom Turske, vlast smijenila Faruka Suljevića zbog veza sa FETO organizacijom”, 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://sandzakpress.net/pod-pritiskom-turske-vlast-smijenila-faruka-suljevica-zbog-veza-sa-feto-organizacijom/>

⁸⁴⁸ *Sandžak Press*, “Gülenisti u Sandžaku”, 2016, available at: <https://sandzakpress.net/gulenisti-u-sandzaku/>

Box 32: Extradition of a Kurdish Political Activist Against the Recommendation of the UN

When it comes to the willingness of Serbia to be fully compliant with Turkey's extradition requests, especially important is the case of a Kurdish political activist, Mr. Cevdet Ayaz, who was arrested in Serbia on 30 November 2016 and extradited to Turkey on 25 December 2017, in the midst of Erdoğan's harsh crackdown on Kurdish nationalism in Turkey and the Middle East. Of special concern is that **Serbian authorities used their political influence to ensure that the extradition took place, despite the fact that the European Court of Human Rights has already examined the complainant's case and found that Turkey violated his right to liberty and security in 2006.**⁸⁴⁹

After analysing the matter in detail, the UN Committee Against Torture concluded that Serbia's extradition of the complainant to Turkey constituted a violation of two articles of the Convention Against Torture: Article 3, which prohibits the extradition of persons to another state where there are substantial grounds for believing that he or she would be in danger of being subjected to torture, and Article 22, due to a lack of cooperation with the Committee in good faith, particularly due to a lack of compliance with the Committee's request of 11 December 2017 for interim measures for the complainant not to be extradited.⁸⁵⁰ What remains as a key issue is that the Committee found that the Minister of Justice of Serbia did not carry out an assessment as to whether the charges against the

⁸⁴⁹ At first, the complainant was not provided adequate translation during proceedings and it was not established for which criminal offence that the complainant been convicted in Turkey. Then, his appeal went back and forth between the Higher Court in Šabac and the Appellate Court in Novi Sad. All of this took almost a year. Realising that pre-trial detention expires after one year, and as the complainant had applied for asylum in Serbia, the Serbian Ministry of Justice requested re-scheduling the hearing from 22 November 2017 to 15 November 2017, thus effectively buying some time to make the extradition happen before the end of the deadline. Eventually, the deadline did elapse, as the Appellate Court in Novi Sad quashed the decision of the Higher Court in Šabac for the third time, which is why the detention was officially repealed. Yet, Mr. Ayaz never gained his freedom as the police secretly transferred him to a detention centre on the same day he was released. Eventually, on 14 December 2017, the Appellate court upheld the decision of the High Court to extradite the complainant. Serbia's Minister of Justice rendered a positive decision on the matter swiftly (just a day later), and Mr. Ayaz was extradited to Turkey on 25 December 2017.

See: UN Committee against Torture, "Decision adopted by the Committee by the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment", August 2019, available at:

<https://www.asylumlawdatabase.eu/sites/default/files/aldfiles/CATC67D8572017.pdf>

⁸⁵⁰ This was even referred to by the European Commission in its 2020 Serbia country report. Yet, other EU actions or public statements regarding this issue seem not to have surfaced.

See: European Commission, "Serbia 2020 Country Report", 2020, p.31, available at:

https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia_report_2020.pdf

complainant were of a political nature.⁸⁵¹ **Despite the violations that took place during the extradition process, the Serbian government has successfully kept this issue under the rug, and it has certainly boosted its appeal in the eyes of Ankara.**

Considering that as of 2020, Serbia is no longer considered to be a “semi-consolidated democracy”, but rather a “hybrid regime” according to Freedom House,⁸⁵² such practices might continue and should be expected. As the observed authoritarian drift in Serbia is mostly “an indigenous product”,⁸⁵³ happening with or without Turkey’s involvement, it also shows **that the pressure exerted by Turkey on Serbia was likely not strong, and that Serbia most likely wilfully complied to extradite Mr. Ayaz.**

IV.2 Economic Cooperation Between Serbia and Turkey

Roots for greater economic cooperation between Serbia and Turkey can be traced to the not so distant past. Namely, events in the last ten years largely influenced the level of cooperation visible today. The first important event in this relationship was the ratification of the Free Trade Agreement in 2009 after which, in 2011, the first larger Turkish investor came to Serbia. The next five years passed in mutual adjustments of two economies, which were followed with a period of intensification of trade relations and business activities. The recent developments in the field of infrastructure projects, such as construction works on Belgrade-Sarajevo highway by Turkish contractor and supported by Turkish loan, bring the level of cooperation to a higher, notable, scale.

⁸⁵¹The minister was required to do so by the Law on International Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters and by the decision of the Appellate Court in Novi Sad.

See: UN Committee against Torture, “Decision adopted by the Committee by the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment”, August 2019

⁸⁵² Freedom House, “Serbia 2020”, Nations in Transit, 2020, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2020>

⁸⁵³ Dimitar Bechev, “Turkey's Policy in the Balkans: More than Neo-Ottomanism”, ISPI, 2019, available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/turkeys-policy-balkans-more-neo-ottomanism-22835>

IV. 2. 1 Foreign Trade Relations – Trade is Increasing, Turkey is Leading

It is worth starting this discussion with trade relations, as in this area was the initial step towards the further strengthening of economic cooperation between Serbia and Turkey. The first agreement for the mutual reduction of trade barriers between the two countries was concluded on 1 June 2009 in Istanbul. On this occasion, it was agreed to mutually abolish import duties and quantitative restrictions on all industrial products coming from the two countries.⁸⁵⁴ **For importing Serbian products to Turkey, this benefit immediately came into force after ratification in national parliaments of both countries, and for some products coming from Turkey, the Serbian administration introduced a transition period with a maximum duration of six years for the gradual lowering of duties to the zero rate.**⁸⁵⁵ Regarding food and agriculture products, aside from official recognition of the importance of this sector for both national economies, the parties grant each other relief in quantitative restrictions and duties for certain groups of products. The parties have also concluded that they will cooperate to achieve progressive liberalisation and the mutual opening of their markets for investments and trade in services in the future.

A second round of trade negotiations between Serbia and Turkey was undertaken in 2017 and finished in January 2018, when the new arrangement was agreed between the two parties in Ankara. However, the official date of entry in the force of this arrangement was more than a year after, on **1 June 2019.**⁸⁵⁶ The main gains of this new round of negotiations were the **further relaxation of quantitative restrictions concerning the import of agricultural products** and better cooperation in the trade of services. For Serbia, the biggest change in comparison to the previous agreement is the **duty-free export to Turkey of 5,000 tons of beef, 35,000 tons of sunflower oil, 15,000 tons of sunflower seeds, and 5,000 tons of soya beans.** Apart from establishing zero duty quotas for new product groups, for some frozen vegetables (like peas, beans, and sweet corn) and prunes **previously-agreed quantities for yearly duty-free imports were doubled.** On the other side, Serbia granted **duty-free import from Turkey** for 1,500 tons of **pomegranate**, 750 tons of **grapes** and 500 tons of **strawberry**, with more

⁸⁵⁴ According to the agreement, industrial goods were defined as products which are covered from Chapters 25 to 97 of the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (HS). Similarly, agricultural products, fish, and fish products are included in Chapters 1 to 24 of the HS.

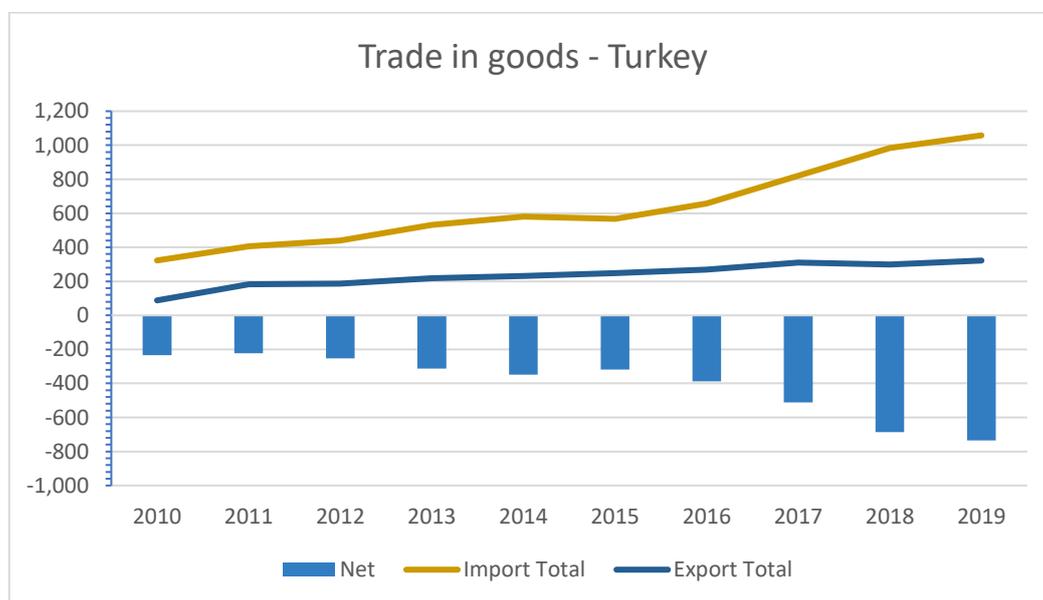
⁸⁵⁵ The official date of entry into force of this document was on 1 September 2010.

⁸⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, Official Note, available at: <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/mu/ministarstva/drugiakt/2019/5/18/reg>

than doubled quantities for other product groups, such as an additional 2,500 tons of bakery products, 2,000 tons of tomatoes, and 600 tons of raisins. Regarding the trade of services, the establishment of a free trade regime between the two countries with a detailed list of special obligations for certain types of services, was given the green light.⁸⁵⁷

Closer economic cooperation with a basis in the abovementioned agreements has had a clear effect on the growth of bilateral trade between Serbia and Turkey. The value of the overall trade in goods between the two countries in the last ten years rose by approximately \$1 billion, reaching a level of nearly \$1.4 billion in 2019 (Graph 14). What is also notable from Graph 14 is the much larger increase of Serbian imports from Turkey than exports to Turkey. This trend is especially visible in the period after 2012 (to a lesser extent) and 2015, when duty protections for certain product groups that originally had agreed-upon transition times, expired. Expressed in an export to import ratio, only 30.5% of imports was covered by export in 2019. Consequently, the **Serbian trade deficit has been rising consistently**, exceeding \$700 million in 2019. The development of this trade deficit represents clear evidence that the **Serbian economy is less competitive than Turkey's** one.

Graph 14: Foreign trade in goods with Turkey as a partner for the period from 2010 to 2019



**in million USD*

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, authors' representation

⁸⁵⁷ Zakon o potvrđivanju Protokola I Sporazuma o slobodnoj trgovini između Republike Srbije i Republike Turske i Protokola III o trgovini uslugama Sporazuma o slobodnoj trgovini između Republike Srbije i Republike Turske (Law on the Ratification of the Protocol I of Agreement on free trade between the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Turkey and Protocol III on trade in services of Agreement on free trade between the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Turkey), Official Gazette of RS no. 12/2018

Regarding product groups, the most important product category of Serbian exports to Turkey in 2019 was rubber product translated to the specific product – tires (Table 6). Together with flat-rolled products of iron or steel, copper, and gold, these four categories accounted for more than 40% of total exports. Among other notable export product groups were also industrial (mainly pumps for liquids) and electrical machinery, paper, tobacco, leather, and vegetable oils. On the other side, primary products for imports were textile yarn and fabrics. Also, apparel imports is notable, and joined with yarn consist of 25% of total imports. Electrical machinery and road vehicles each represented 10% of total imports. Interestingly enough, many of the products imported were marked with “unclassified” or “miscellaneous” labels.

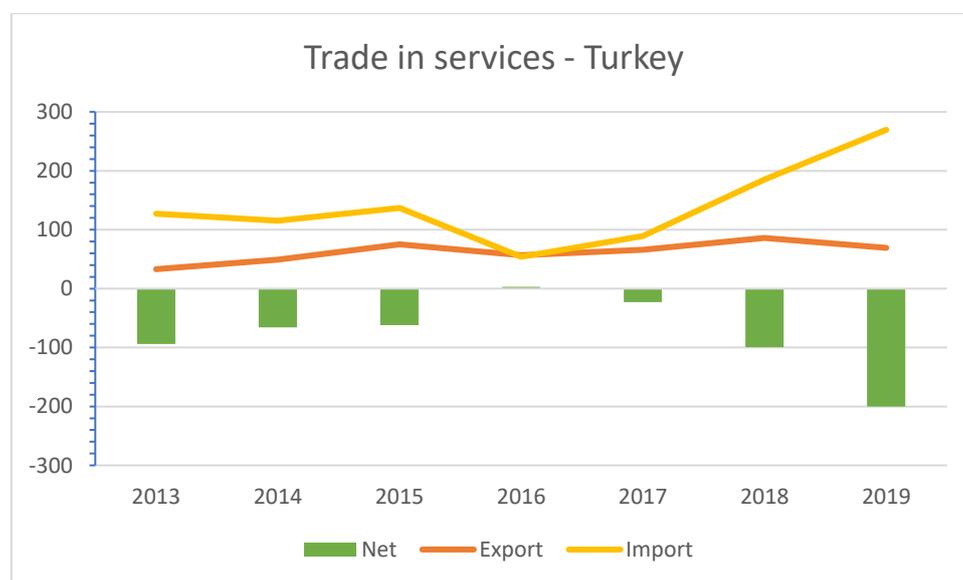
Table 6: Ten biggest product categories in exports and imports with Turkey as a partner, 2019

Product	Exports (thous. \$)	Product	Imports (thous. \$)
62 - Rubber manufactures, not elsewhere specified	50,383	65 - Textile yarn, fabrics, made-up articles and related products	149,415
67 - Iron and steel	36,242	77 - Electrical machinery, apparatus and appliances, and electrical parts thereof	101,529
68 - Non-ferrous metals	24,947	78 - Road vehicles (including air-cushion vehicles)	100,933
74 - General industrial machinery, and equipment, and machine parts	24,669	84 - Articles of apparel and clothing accessories	95,766
77 - Electrical machinery, apparatus and appliances and electrical parts thereof	21,844	99 - Unclassified goods	84,517
12 - Tobacco and tobacco manufactures	18,196	67 - Iron and steel	47,461
61 - Leather, leather manufactures and dressed furskins	17,524	69 - Manufactures of metals, not elsewhere specified	42,773
97 - Gold (excluding gold ores and concentrates)	12,899	05 - Vegetables and fruit	41,066
64 - Paper, paperboard, and articles of paper pulp, of paper or of paperboard	11,381	72 - Machinery specialised for particular industries	37,438
42 - Fixed vegetable fats and oils: crude, refined or fractionated	10,080	89 - Miscellaneous manufactured articles, not elsewhere specified	31,805

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, authors' representation

Trade in services between Serbia and Turkey is much less developed as compared to trade in goods, at least according to the official statistics data. In 2019, the value of the services provided by residents of one country to residents of another was valued at approximately €340 million in total (Graph 15), which was around one quarter of the realised trade in goods that year. In the last seven years (for which data is available) services are increasing in value, with two specific details: there has been much stronger growth of imports than exports in services in the case of Serbia, and 2016 as an exception from general trend in case of Turkey. Similar to the trade in goods, Serbia records a multiplied growth of the import of services in comparison to export with Turkey as a trading partner. In 2019, the Serbian export to import ratio hit the lowest level – 25.5%. Accordingly, the trade deficit for services recorded its highest level ever of €200 million last year. **Only one disruption that can be observed in the sharp growth of imports from Turkey and the trade balance happened in 2016.** This short interruption of the flow of services was the result of political destructions which happened in Turkey in 2016, which heavily hit the tourism sector and seriously reduced the inflow of Serbian tourist to Turkey that year.

Graph 15: Foreign trade in services with Turkey as a partner for the period from 2013 to 2019



**in million EUR*

Source: CEFTA Statistical Portal, authors' representation

In a deeper analysis of the sectors that contribute most to the trade in services between the two countries, the travel and transport sectors stand out from the rest (Table 7). The travel sector, which includes tourism, is a particularly notable generator of imports, producing 75% of the total value of services provided to Serbian citizens by Turkish citizens. Transport has

approximately the same importance for both sides, as well as unclassified business services. The rest of the sectors are much less represented.

Table 7: Export and import of services by sector with Turkey as a partner, 2019

Sector	Export (thous. €)	Sector	Import (thous. €)
Transport	29,220	Travel	204,630
Travel	23,970	Transport	34,250
Other business services	9,710	Other business services	9,010
Personal, cultural, and recreational services	1,960	Construction services	5,840
Maintenance and repair services	1,570	Telecommunications, computer, and information services	4,420
Telecommunications, computer, and information services	1,190	Manufacturing services on physical inputs owned by others	3,290
Construction services	1,080	Charges for the use of intellectual property	2,810
Government services	330	Personal, cultural, and recreational services	2,650
Charges for the use of intellectual property	100	Government services	1,890
Financial services	80	Maintenance and repair services	600
Insurance and pension services	60	Insurance and pension services	170
Manufacturing services on physical inputs owned by others	20	Financial services	90

Source: CEFTA Statistical Portal, authors' representation

IV. 2. 2 Investments and Business Cooperation – The Textile Industry in the Forefront

In parallel to negotiations about trade in goods and services, in 2018 an **agreement on the mutual encouragement and protection of investments** was signed with the idea of promoting greater economic cooperation between Serbia and Turkey, in particular by encouraging mutual investments.⁸⁵⁸ Therefore, the main goal was to provide fair and equitable treatment to

⁸⁵⁸ Zakon o potvrđivanju Sporazuma između Vlade Republike Srbije i Vlade Republike Turske o uzajamnom podsticanju i zaštiti ulaganja (Law on Ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Republic of Turkey on Mutual Encouragement and Protection of Investments), Official Gazette of RS no. 12/2018

investments made in both Turkey and Serbia. Also, full protection and security for investments following the principles of international law were mutually granted by this legal act. The application of this agreement, in the view of its signatories, will foster a business environment that will stimulate capital and technology flow between two countries, with their overall economic development as the final result.⁸⁵⁹

However, the first investments come much earlier than this agreement. Back in 2011, a textile factory producing mainly denim was opened in Leskovac by Jeanci. This city in the south of Serbia was widely known for its textile industry which collapsed together with almost the entire Serbian industrial base in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, what remained, aside from empty production facilities, is the experience of the workforce that was previously employed there. Therefore, Jeanci, on its official web presentation, highlights the experience in the textile industry found in Leskovac.⁸⁶⁰ In the first year of operation, this company employed 150 workers, after which it expanded its capacity in Leskovac, as well as opened a new facility in Krupanj in 2015 soon after a flood devastated this town.⁸⁶¹ According to the latest available data from the Serbian Business Registers Agency (SBRA) in 2018, Jeanci has an average of 900 employees.⁸⁶² According to the long-standing practice of the Serbian Government for attracting foreign investment regardless of the country of capital origin and level of technological advancement of investment, Jeanci received €6 million for employing 760 workers or, put simply, €5,000 for each worker.⁸⁶³

After this initial step, couple of new textile factories were opened by investors from Turkey. The first in this group was Aster in Nis in 2016, with an announced 2,000 new workplaces in the next 2 years, receiving an incentive from the Serbian state of nearly €2 million.⁸⁶⁴ However, data from the SBRA shows an average of 730 employed workers in 2018. In 2017, Kraljevo, Kragujevac, and Lebane got one textile factory each. Eurotay in Kraljevo was announced as the biggest of these factories, with 2,500 workplaces but only 23 employees were officially

⁸⁵⁹ Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of Republic of Serbia, “New Free Trade Agreement signed between Serbia and Turkey”, 2018, available at: <https://mtt.gov.rs/en/releases-and-announcements/new-free-trade-agreement-signed-between-serbia-and-turkey/>

⁸⁶⁰ Jeanci official web page, available at: <http://www.jeanci.com/en.php>

⁸⁶¹ Jugmedia, “Za 9 godina “Džinsi“ broj radnika uvećao sa 150 na 950”, 2019, available at: <https://jugmedia.rs/za-9-godina-dzinsi-broj-radnika-uvecao-sa-150-na-950/>

⁸⁶² Serbian Business Registers Agency – Companies data search

⁸⁶³ Ekapia, “Uručeni ugovori o podsticajnim sredstvima - 22 kompanije zapošljavaju 5.000 ljudi i investiraju 120 mil EUR”, 2012, available at: <https://www.ekapija.com/news/643848/uruceni-ugovori-o-podsticajnim-sredstvima-22-kompanije-zaposljavaju-5000-ljudi-i-investiraju>

⁸⁶⁴ Južne vesti, “Turski "Aster tekstil" otvorio fabriku u Nišu”, 2016, available at: <https://www.juznevesti.com/Ekonomija/Turski-Aster-tekstil-otvorio-fabriku-u-Nisu.sr.html?c=Komentari>

employed in 2018, as production began last summer. Textile production plants in the other two cities were more modest. In 2018, in Kragujevac's Berteks plant, there were nearly 250 employees,⁸⁶⁵ while in Lebane's LebanTeks, there were nearly 150 workers, both below half of the announced positions.⁸⁶⁶ At the beginning of 2018, one more textile factory was opened by Turkish investors; a plant in Lazarevac, in which 600 new workplaces were announced after Birlesik Textile bought the building from the Belgrade clothing company Beko which was in bankruptcy.⁸⁶⁷ Even though the announced numbers of workers in these production plants seem large, 20 years ago in Leskovac alone there were more than 10,000 people employed in the textile industry.⁸⁶⁸

Apart from investments in the textile sector, Turkish investors were active, to a lesser extent, in the automotive industry. The largest investment in low-pressure fluid circulation systems was made by Teklas Automotive in Vladičin Han in 2016. The value of this investment was assessed to be approximately €11.3 million, with state aid for 42% of that amount based on the obligation of Teklas to employ a minimum of 400 workers – meaning nearly €12,000 per employee.⁸⁶⁹ According to the latest data, Teklas had 540 employees on average in 2018.⁸⁷⁰ A second plant with much smaller capacities for the production of automotive components was opened in 2017 in Žitorađa by Soylemez. The plan was to employ 160 workers over three years with €1.1 million in incentives from Serbian Government, but in 2018, only 16 people worked here.⁸⁷¹ Even though it is not part of the automotive industry, it is also worth noting the Flex Academy factory for producing steel pipes, opened in Priboj in 2018 and employing approximately 150 workers – half of what was announced.⁸⁷² Although all these mentioned

⁸⁶⁵ Ekapija, “Turski Berteks duplira broj radnika - U Kragujevcu šiju garderobu za Zaru, C&A, Stradivarius...”, 2018, available at:

<https://www.ekapija.com/news/2057175/turski-berteks-duplira-broj-radnika-u-kragujevcu-siju-garderobu-za-zaru-ca>

⁸⁶⁶ RTS, “Lebane dobilo prvu fabriku posle 30 godina”, 2017, available at:

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/13/ekonomija/2985489/otvorena-fabrika-za-proizvodnju-prediva-u-lebanu-.html>

⁸⁶⁷ RTS, “Mali: Nova radna mesta u fabrici tekstila u Lazarevcu”, 2018, available at:

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/2728/izbori-2018/3013785/mali-do-kraja-februara-600-radnih-mesta-u-fabrici-tekstila-u-lazarevcu.html>

⁸⁶⁸ Jugmedia, “Leskovac od giganta do industrijskog patrljka”, 2014, available at: <https://jugmedia.rs/leskovac-od-giganta-industrijskog-patrljka/>

⁸⁶⁹ Commission for State Aid Control of Republic of Serbia, Resenje broj 401-00-00054/2015-01, available at: <http://www.kkdp.gov.rs/doc/odluke/Resenje%20-%20Ugovor%20o%20oddeli%20sredstava%20izmedju%20RS%20i%20privrednog%20društva%20doo%20Teklas%20Automotive.pdf>

⁸⁷⁰ Serbian Business Registers Agency – Companies data search

⁸⁷¹ Ministry of Economy of Republic of Serbia, Contract 401-00-990/2017-10, available at:

<http://privreda.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/SOYLEMEY-RUBBER-PLASTIC-2017-Ugovor.pdf>

⁸⁷² Ekapija, “Turski Flex academy pokrenuo proizvodnju čeličnih cevi u Priboju”, 2018, available at:

<https://www.ekapija.com/news/2052601/turski-flex-academy-pokrenuo-proizvodnju-celicnih-cevi-u-priboju>

projects are relatively small in the amounts of capital invested and workforces employed, their importance for local development is substantial. Namely, it is notable that investments from Turkey are often located in smaller towns in Serbia. Therefore, despite their relatively modest capital abundance, they are indeed bringing new life to these places where they started production.

In the sector of financial services, the most important recent event was the **acquisition of two thirds of the shares of Čačanska banka by the Turkish firm Halkbank** from a group of shareholders including the Serbian state, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the International Finance Corporation. The transaction was done in 2015 and was worth €10.1 million, after which, in 2017 and 2018, Halkbank bought additional shares on the stock market and, through recapitalisation, gained 99.94% ownership of the company.⁸⁷³ Today, Halkbank has a nearly 2% share of the total net assets of the banking sector in Serbia, thus taking 16th place among the 26 banks that operate in Serbia.⁸⁷⁴

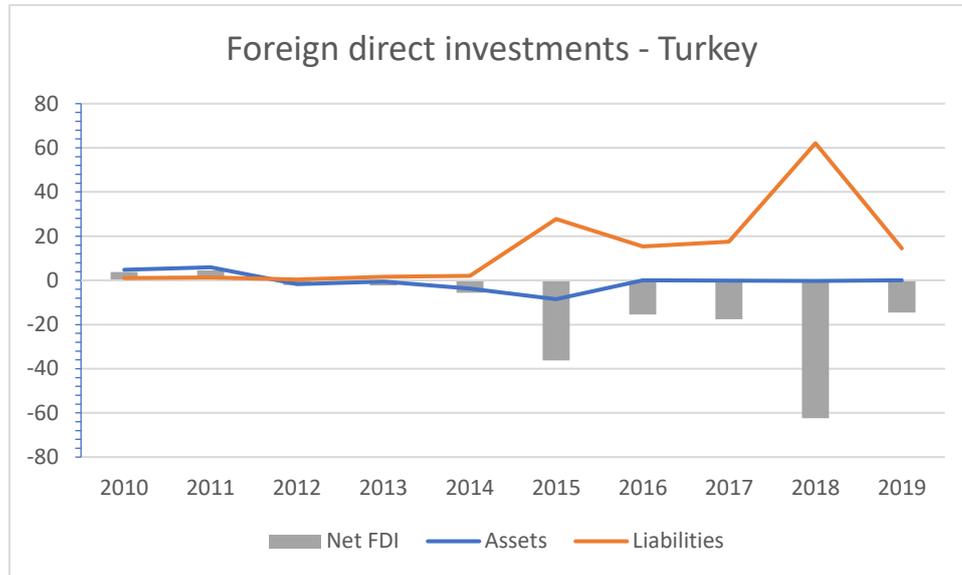
Looking at foreign direct investments on an aggregate level, companies and individuals from Turkey invested **nearly €150 million** in Serbia in the last ten years according to official data from the National Bank of Serbia.⁸⁷⁵ At the beginning of the observed period, a small outflow of funds from Serbian companies and individuals to Turkey is notable, with a minor inflow of capital from Turkish residents (Graph 16). However, from 2014 the situation has been changing in the opposite direction, as capital inflow from Turkey to Serbia has a strong positive trend, with 2018 as the most fruitful year. In contrast, the outflow of capital from Serbia to Turkey has always been negligible. Consequently, in 2018 Serbia recorded its highest net inflow of foreign direct investments from Turkey.

⁸⁷³ Halkbank Beograd official web presentation, <http://www.halkbank.rs/kljucni-dogadjaji.nsp>

⁸⁷⁴ National Bank of Serbia, Financial Statements of Banks, available at: https://www.nbs.rs/internet/english/50/50_5.html

⁸⁷⁵ National Bank of Serbia, Serbia's Balance of Payments - Foreign direct investments by country, available at: https://www.nbs.rs/internet/english/80/platni_bilans.html

Graph 16: Foreign direct investments with Turkey as a partner for the period from 2010 to 2019



**in million EUR*

Source: National Bank of Serbia, authors` representation

IV. 2. 3 Cooperation in infrastructure projects – intensification of relations in 2019

The end of 2019 was particularly intensive for bilateral cooperation between Serbia and Turkey in road infrastructure projects. Namely, the implementations of three projects began in this period: the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway, the Pojate-Preljina highway, and the reconstruction of the existing state road between Novi Pazar and Tutin. In all of these projects, Turkey is the origin of the funding loan and/or the construction company.

The most important investment project mentioned above is the **Belgrade-Sarajevo highway**, for which the Turkish side has provided the credit line and contractor. The plan is that the future highway will connect Belgrade and Sarajevo by two routes (Image 11).⁸⁷⁶ Therefore, in Serbia, there will be two sections: from Sremska Rača to Kuzmin (with a length of 17 km and a cost of €220 million) and from Požega to Kotroman (with a length of 60 km and a cost of €830

⁸⁷⁶ Due to disagreements among political elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the first place, it was decided that the future road will be built in a sort of ring which will connect Belgrade and Sarajevo by two routes (Sarajevo-Žepče-Tuzla-Brčko-Bijeljina-Kuzmin-Sremska Rača-Belgrade, and Sarajevo-Pale-Rogatica-Višegrad-Kotroman-Požega-Belgrade).

million).⁸⁷⁷ The agreement between the Serbian Government and the Tasyapi company for the construction of first section from Sremska Rača to Kuzmin was signed in October 2018 and, on that occasion, the cost of the project was agreed at €250 million, including the development of project documentation for the second section, from Požega to Kotroman.⁸⁷⁸ As in other intergovernmental agreements concluded by Serbian officials for infrastructure projects, generally regardless of whatever partner is concerned, **the public tender procedure was neglected.**⁸⁷⁹

Image 11: Belgrade – Sarajevo highway map



Source: Blic, Sve o autoputu Beograd-Sarajevo

The Serbian Government planned to finance 80% of construction works on the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway by loan, and an **agreement with Ziraat Bankasi⁸⁸⁰ and Denizbank, two Turkish banks**, was signed in December 2019. In this agreement, total funds in the amount of €219.2 million were allocated for two projects: €19.2 million for the Novi Pazar - Tutin road reconstruction and €200 million for the construction of the Sremska Rača-Kuzmin section of the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway together with preparation of the design for the Požega-Kotroman section. The interest rate for both credit lines is 2.5% per annum, and a two-year

⁸⁷⁷ Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications of Republic of Serbia, “Potpisan komercijalni ugovor za izgradnju deonice autoputa Beograd-Sarajevo”, 2018, available at: <https://mtt.gov.rs/slider/potpisan-%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BCercijalni-ugovor-za-izgradnju-deonice-autoputa-beograd-sarajevo/>

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁹ Danas, “Transparentnost Srbija: Još jedan izvođač radova bez tendera”, 2018, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/transparentnost-srbija-jos-jedan-izvodjac-radova-bez-tendera/>

⁸⁸⁰ Ziraat Bankasi is a state-owned bank.

grace period and 21 equal semi-annual repayment instalments are arranged for the first one, and a four-year grace period and 18 equal semi-annual repayment instalments are arranged for the second.⁸⁸¹ Even though the loan agreement was signed in late December, construction works started in October 2019 in Sremska Rača with President Erdoğan's visit to Serbia, and are predicted to be completed in two and a half years. In official statistics, according to the latest available information from 30 June 2020, the total amount of money withdrawn so far was €40 million which represents, at the same time, the total amount of Serbian debt to Turkey.⁸⁸²

The commercial agreement for the **Novi Pazar-Tutin road reconstruction** was concluded in October 2018, also with Tasyapi. The value of this entire project is €24 million for a 20.5 km long state road that will improve connections for nearly 150,000 people living in this area.⁸⁸³ Although works began at the end of September, not so much has been done in the meantime on the ground. However, the Serbian Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, in response to questions regarding the pace of the execution of works, reported that all works are progressing according to plan and the finalisation of the project will be 24 months after its beginning, in October 2021.⁸⁸⁴

Box 33: Construction companies malversation

The Turkish company Tasyapi, which is working on these projects financed by the loan, came into the public spotlight in March 2019, when its director of local branch, together with officials from the Institute of Transportation (CIP), was detained in Vranje on suspicion of corruption. Namely, the deputy general director and two representatives of the CIP, the director of the Serbian branch of Tasyapi, and the owner of the Vodogradnja company from Vranje were arrested on suspicion of receiving bribes when hiring a subcontractor for the construction of apartments for members of the security services in Vranje. According to the public prosecutor's report, CIP officials together with the Tasyapi branch director asked for

⁸⁸¹ Zakon o potvrđivanju Ugovora o kreditu između Republike Srbije (kao Korisnika kredita) i T.C. Ziraat Bankasi A.Ş. i Denizbank A.Ş. (kao Davalaca kredita) (Law on confirmation of the loan agreement between the Republic of Serbia (as a loan user) and T.C. Ziraat Bankasi a.ş. and Denizbank a.s. (as a lender)), available at: <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/archive/files/cir/pdf/zakoni/2020/3217-19.pdf>

⁸⁸² Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Serbia - Public Debt Administration, Quarterly Report- March 2020, available at: <http://www.javnidug.gov.rs/eng/default.asp?P=118&MenuItem=4>

⁸⁸³ The Government of Republic of Serbia, Contract for reconstruction of Novi Pazar-Tutin road signed, available at: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/132748/contract-for-reconstruction-of-novi-pazar-tutin-road-signed.php>

⁸⁸⁴ Sandzak press, "Ministarstvo o putu NP-TT: Čekamo na dozvole, rekonstrukcija će biti gotova do 2022. Godine", 2019, available at: <https://sandzakpress.net/ministarstvo-o-putu-np-tt-cekamo-na-dozvole-rekonstrukcija-ce-bit-gotova-do-2022-godine/>

a €20,000 bribe in order to choose Vodogradnja as the subcontractor for land works and concrete supply despite their offering a higher price than other bidders.⁸⁸⁵ Also, in September of the same year, the labour inspection discovered 53 unregistered workers working for Tasyapi, but that wasn't the case only for this company – the same inspection discovered 42 unregistered workers working for the Austrian company Strabag.⁸⁸⁶

In consortium with the American infrastructure development giant Bechtel, the Turkish company Enka got the opportunity to participate in the **construction of Pojate-Preljina highway**, also known as the Moravski corridor. The agreement for this 112 km-long road, which will connect Corridor X and Corridor XI and around half a million people in this area, was signed on 5 December 2019. Ten days later, construction officially started with a plan to finish in four years.⁸⁸⁷ The announced value of the project is €745 million plus 20% for additional works, with a plan for it to be financed by loans from foreign investment corporations, funds, and banks.⁸⁸⁸

Even though there was an officially-announced public call for the selection of a strategic partner for the construction of the Pojate-Preljina highway section, a memorandum of understanding between the Serbian Government and Bechtel was concluded ten months prior.⁸⁸⁹ Also, **some of the specifics listed in the public call, such as the requirement for valid proof of the level of competence of the bidder is measured only by projects done in South-East Europe, cast doubt on the whole process as limitation on a projects implemented only in certain part of Europe seems unjustified.**⁸⁹⁰ Together with a lex specialis adopted on this occasion that suspends the Law on Public Procurement, a lack of transparency and public scrutiny can again be noted, regardless of the contracting partner.

⁸⁸⁵ Jug press, “Hapšenja zbog malverzacija sa izgradnjom jeftinih stanova”, 2019, available at:

<https://jugpress.com/hapsenja-zbog-malverzacija-sa-izgradnjom-jeftinih-stanova/>

⁸⁸⁶ Danas, “Omiljeni državni „stranci“ zapošljavaju na crno”, 2019, available at:

<https://www.danas.rs/ekonomija/omiljeni-drzavni-stranci-zaposljavaju-na-crno/>

⁸⁸⁷ Radio Slobodna Evropa, “Počela izgradnja novog autoputa u Srbiji”, 2019, available at:

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30326583.html>

⁸⁸⁸ Ekonomске vesti, “Odakle će se finansirati Moravski koridor?”, 2019, available at:

<http://ekonomskavesti.com/privreda/odakle-ce-se-finansirati-moravski-koridor/>

⁸⁸⁹ Insajder, “Moravski koridor gradiće firma s trogodišnjim obrtom od najmanje milijardu evra”, 2019, available at: <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/15260/>

⁸⁹⁰ Public call for selection of a strategic partner in the implementation of the project for the construction of the infrastructure corridor of highway E-761, section Pojate-Preljina, available at:

<https://www.mgsi.gov.rs/lat/dokumenti/javni-poziv-za-izbor-strateskog-partnera-na-realizaciji-projekta-izgradnje>

Apart from the building of nearly 400 apartments by Tasyapi for members of the security services in Vranje and Niš at the cost of approximately €13 million followed by the bribe scandal (see Box 33), one more investment activity draws attention. Namely, Turkey expressed interest in **investing in adapting the Morava military airport near Kraljevo for civil purposes**. An agreement on financing the project of reconstructing part of the airport was even signed in 2012 by the Serbian Minister of Defence and the Turkish ambassador in Serbia at that time.⁸⁹¹ In this agreement, a €10 million donation from the Turkish Government was provided for the adaptation of the runway for passenger aircraft. However, one year later, the Serbian Minister of infrastructure announced that the Serbian Government would not accept this donation as it was conditioned with a deal for the reconstruction of the airport by a Turkish firm which offered an unfair price. Namely, the asking price of the Turkish company was in the amount of €28 million, approximately €10 million higher than costs forecast by domestic construction companies.⁸⁹² Although the Morava Airport has been officially open for civil transport since June 2019, an adaptation of the existing runway or building a new one is still on hold. All in all, Serbia represents a smaller economy with a lower level of competitiveness as compared to Turkey. In trade relations, this notion is represented by a standing deficit between the two countries, which is expected to increase in the future as a result of recently agreed trade reliefs. Similarly, cooperation in business activities and infrastructure projects is likely to grow in coming years. However, if the current model of cooperation continues, the contribution of Turkish investments to Serbia's economic development is unlikely to produce major benefits as, so far, investments have been concentrated in relatively low-tech sectors. Also, increasing debt from the implementation of infrastructure projects with Turkish support should not be ignored. Therefore, although the presence of Turkey in the Serbian economy is currently on the low level, it can be expected that Turkish participation will moderately increase in years to come.

⁸⁹¹ Gradjevinarstvo, "Turska ulaže 10 miliona evra u aerodrom "Morava" kod Kraljeva", 2012, available at: <https://www.gradjevinarstvo.rs/vesti/5456/810/turska-ulaze-10-miliona-evra-u-aerodrom-morava-kod-kraljeva>

⁸⁹² Gradjevinarstvo, "Ilić: Ne treba nam turska donacija za aerodrom", 2013, available at: <https://www.gradjevinarstvo.rs/vesti/8563/810/ilic-ne-treba-nam-turska-donacija-za-aerodrom>

IV. 3 Cultural and Religious Cooperation with Turkey

Turkey's former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Davutoğlu explained the emphasis on soft power as part of Turkey's "new discourse and political style", which became "consistent and systematic", as well as more "visionary" rather than crisis-oriented.⁸⁹³ The following will look at how Turkey is capitalising on its strong soft power among Muslim communities in Serbia. Furthermore, the following parts will explore several ways in which Turkey is seeking to improve its image among the non-Muslim population of Serbia and thus win over their "hearts and minds".

IV. 3. 1 Turkey's Ties to Sandžak – Turning Soft Power into Political Capital

When it comes to Turkey's relation to Serbia, the first thing that typically comes to mind is its Neo-Ottoman desire to keep and grow close ties with Muslim communities. In Serbia, most Muslims live in the Sandžak region, and there is a saying that "what Russia is for Serbs, Turkey is for Sandžak"⁸⁹⁴ – in other words, a patron and protector. This notion is not far-fetched, as Bosniaks do indeed share close cultural ties to Turkey. For example, looking at Davutoğlu's notion of strategic depth, one can easily notice his **emphasis on the cultural, religious, and emotional connection with Bosniaks** (and Albanians), thus representing the axis of Turkey's link to the region, while adding that Turkey is their "safe haven, their homeland".⁸⁹⁵

According to the 2011 census, there are 145,000 Bosniaks living in Serbia.⁸⁹⁶ As such, they represent around 2% of the total population and are the second largest minority group in Serbia.⁸⁹⁷ They predominately live in Sandžak, in municipalities such as Novi Pazar, Sjenica, and Tutin, in which they constitute a majority, but also in large numbers in the municipalities

⁸⁹³ Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy", *Foreign Affairs*, 2010, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/20/turkeys-zero-problems-foreign-policy/>

⁸⁹⁴ B92, "Ono što je Rusija za Srbe, to je Turska za Sandžak", 2016, available at:

https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2016&mm=08&dd=08&nav_category=11&nav_id=1163694

⁸⁹⁵ Sena Marić, "Turkey's Neo-Ottoman policy on the Balkans: does it clash or match with the EU?", 2011, p.16.

⁸⁹⁶ The Muslim population in Serbia, however, is 222 thousand, according to the latest available census, totalling approximately 3% of the population. The census does not show to which branch of Islam do they belong to, but the basic assumption is that the vast majority belongs to the Sunni branch, as is the case in Sandžak. As Turkey is also largely Sunni denomination, there is plenty of room for religious cooperation.

Ibid., Population by Religion

⁸⁹⁷ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, "Population by Ethnicity, Age and Sex, 2011", available at: <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/3102010403?languageCode=en-US>

of Nova Varoš, Priboj, and Prijepolje. The existence of such a large minority allows Turkey to politically exploit this connection and use it as a pretext for deepening its foothold in Serbia and the region. To this extent, **a large part of Turkey’s focus on soft power consists of an emphasis on the Ottoman past in order to reaffirm its “kin-state” status in the eyes of the Muslim communities in Serbia today.**⁸⁹⁸

What warrants further Turkish involvement and further feeds into religious narratives is the fact that the Sandžak region is among the poorest and least developed regions in Serbia. According to data provided by the National Agency for Regional Development of Serbia, there are five levels of regional development to be found in Serbia. The municipalities of Tutin and Prijepolje belong to the lowest of these levels – “devastated municipalities” – with levels of development below 50% of the state average. On the next lowest level are Priboj, Sjenica, and Nova Varoš – as “significantly underdeveloped municipalities”, representing between 50 and 60% of the state average. Finally, there is the middle level of development – “insufficiently developed municipalities” – such as Novi Pazar, at between 60 and 80% of the state average.⁸⁹⁹ To this end, Sandžak is considered to be among the least developed in Serbia. All of this creates **a feeling among the local population that they have been neglected by the Serbian Government, which explains why they support an increased role for Turkey.**

When it comes to political relations within Sandžak, they are quite versatile, as there are different political fractions that compete with each other and remain strong political opponents. It appears, however, that supporting Turkey represents an issue of outstanding importance to all such factions of domestic politics and a point that unites them. Besides strongly condemning the Gülen Movement, the key leaders of the three biggest Bosniak parties agreed to hold a joint political and public gathering in Novi Pazar to express support to Erdoğan in the aftermath of the attempted coup.⁹⁰⁰ A couple of thousand citizens went to the streets on that occasion. At that time, the city was full of Turkish flags, while a large screen was installed which allowed

⁸⁹⁸ Ronald H. Linden and Yasemin İrepoğlu, “Turkey and the Balkans: New Forms of Political Community”, 2013, *Turkish Studies*, p.234, available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263499194_Turkey_and_the_Balkans_New_Forms_of_Political_Community

⁸⁹⁹ The last available report is from 2014. See: National Agency for Regional Development of Serbia, 2014, available at: <https://www.regionalnirazvoj.gov.rs/Lat/ShowNARRFolder.aspx?mi=171>

⁹⁰⁰ Forum za etničke odnose, “Mapiranje Sandžaka”, 2017, p.21, available at: <http://fer.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/MAPIRANJE-SAND%C5%BDAKA-1.pdf>

the local citizens to follow Erdoğan's large rally in Istanbul.⁹⁰¹ Examples of this kind show that **Turkey represents a focal point for political parties in Sandžak.**

Image 12: Image of Public Rally in Support of Erdoğan in Novi Pazar, 2016



Source: Politika

The fact that Turkey made an announcement in 2019 that it will open a consulate in Novi Pazar plays into this narrative,⁹⁰² as well as the fact that Novi Pazar's city assembly decided to award Erdoğan the title of honorary citizen in 2018.⁹⁰³ Also, **it appears Erdoğan readily exploits the Sandžak region to mobilise thousands of Bosniaks in support of his candidacy in elections in Turkey.** As happened in 2016 and 2018. Furthermore, Erdoğan regularly meets with officials from the Bosniak National Council of Sandžak, the highest representative body for Bosniaks in Serbia. Such development creates a twofold situation: on the one hand, **considering the high-level of Turkey's soft power and Erdoğan's personal appeal in Sandžak, Belgrade will think twice before disturbing or backsliding in its relations with Ankara, as such actions could have negative consequences in Sandžak as well;** on the other hand, the unconditional level of admiration and support coming from political parties and a

⁹⁰¹ *Politika*, "I gulenista na mitingu podrške Erdoganu", 2016, available at:

<http://www.politika.co.rs/sr/clanak/360942/Politika/I-gulenista-na-mitingu-podrske-Erdoganu>

⁹⁰² *Hurriyet Daily News*, "Turkey to open consulate general in Serbia's Novi Pazar", 2019, available at:

<https://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkey-to-open-consulate-general-in-serbias-novi-pazar-147238>

⁹⁰³ *Balkan Insight*, "Turkey's Erdogan Awarded by Serbian City", 2018, available at:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/20/turkey-president-awarded-by-serbian-city-04-20-2018/>

large part of the local population in Sandžak **allows Turkey to exploit this relationship to its advantage in a relatively costless manner, projecting its power beyond its borders for domestic purposes.**

Box 34: Friends of Sandžak

Turkey is also addressing the problems in Sandžak in a multilateral manner, as a member of an informal diplomatic group formed in 2009 under the name “Friends of Sandžak”. It consists of foreign ambassadors stationed in Serbia, coming from Turkey, the USA, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Japan, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Spain, and Austria, as well as representatives from the EU, UN, and OSCE. Its key goal is provide economic support to the impoverished Sandžak.⁹⁰⁴ Yet, it should be noted that this group **appears to be under-operationalised**, acting more in practice as an arena for ambassadors to share their views rather than as an engine of change.

IV. 3. 2 Attempts at Reconciling the Two Rival Islamic Communities

The exploitation of religious ties has been one of the key aspects of Turkey’s soft power in the Western Balkans. Yet, when it comes to Serbia, the situation is complex, as **Turkey has tried to utilise its soft power and influence to reconcile the country’s two opposing Islamic communities.** Namely, since 2007 there are two parallel structures that claim to have the sole and exclusive right to represent Muslims in Serbia. One is named the “Islamic Community of Serbia” (ICoS), led by the grand mufti from Belgrade. The other is the “Islamic Community in Serbia” (ICiS), headquartered in Novi Pazar and subordinated to the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose grand mufti oversees it from Sarajevo. While Serbia has officially recognized the existence of both communities, the fact that the ICiS perceives the ICoS as a “para-religious structure” that had committed a so-called coup in 2007 with the help of the Serbian Government at the time⁹⁰⁵ makes reconciliation between the two all the more difficult. Tensions between officials from the two communities have remained high, sometimes resulting even in physical violence (as in late the 2000s in Sandžak), while the latest stumble

⁹⁰⁴ Forum za etničke odnose, “Mapiranje Sandžaka”, 2017, p.44, available at:

<http://fer.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/MAPIRANJE-SAND%C5%BDAKA-1.pdf>

⁹⁰⁵ Islamska zajednica u Srbiji, “Muftija dr. Dudić: ‘Svi koji žele vraćanje jedinstva su dobronamjerni ukoliko to čine kroz sistem Islamske zajednice’”, 2016, available at: <https://mesihat.org/2016/08/13/muftija-dr-dudic-zaturske-novine-svi-koji-zele-vracanje-jedinstva-su-dobronamjerni-ukoliko-to-cine-kroz-sistem-islamske-zajednice/>

was an accusation from the ICiS that the ICoS has been cooperating with the Gülenists,⁹⁰⁶ a situation denied by the latter. Considering the gravity of the split between the two communities, there have been warnings that such competition damages the legitimacy of both communities, leaving space for extremists to attract disaffected believers.⁹⁰⁷

For all of these reasons, **it seemed natural for Turkey to attempt to step in and mediate between the two Islamic communities.** In fact, not only do religious officials from these communities often meet with their Turkish counterparts in Serbia and Turkey, but they have also expressed strong support to Erdoğan, particularly defending him in the aftermath of the attempted coup. Regarding the feud between the communities, **Turkey has warned many times that the worst thing that can happen to Muslims in Serbia is to remain so clearly divided.** The ability to enter the local politics and act as a mediator is a factor that makes Turkey's presence unique in the region compared to other actors.

Turkey became involved in attempts to mediate as soon as the two communities split. **In 2008, the Turkish Ambassador Suha Umar, began negotiations, whose aim was not to provide a final agreement, but at least to gather the conflicting sides at the same table.** It seems that the ambassador was successful in his aim, as the Muslim leaders agreed on a Code of Behaviour in 2009. Yet, this initiative was short-lived, as the ICiS accused the ambassador of openly siding with the ICoS, and has gone so far as to argue that his actions are not even endorsed by Erdoğan himself.⁹⁰⁸

From then on, it was Davutoğlu who took the baton. **What is noteworthy is that it was Serbian establishment who made an informal request to Turkey to step into the matter.**⁹⁰⁹ The process was intended to be jointly led by Serbia's Foreign Minister Jeremić and by his counterpart Davutoğlu. A breakthrough came in the Agreement on the Unity of the Two Islamic Communities in 2011.⁹¹⁰ Recognising that the clash is not only of a religious nature, but also a power struggle, in order to merge the two communities into a single structure, one of the

⁹⁰⁶ *Politika*, „„Gülenisti” u Novom Pazaru”, 2016, available at:

<http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/359591/Drustvo/Gulenisti-u-Novom-Pazaru>

⁹⁰⁷ Predrag Petrović and Isidora Stakić, “Extremism Research Forum – Serbia Report”, British Council, 2018, p.4, available at: https://www.britishcouncil.rs/sites/default/files/erf_report_serbia_2018.pdf

⁹⁰⁸ Aleksandar Raković, “Turska inicijativa za ujedinjenje islamske zajednice u Republici Srbiji (2011), Institut za evropske studije, 2013, p. 239, available at (in Serbian):

http://www.ies.rs/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Misa_Djurkovic_i_Aleksandar_Rakovic_ur_Turska_-_regionalna_sila.pdf

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid, p.241

⁹¹⁰ *Danas*, “Ujedinjenje Islamske zajednice glavna tema”, 2011, available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/ujedinjenje-islamske-zajednice-glavna-tema/>

requirements was that the highest representatives of the ICoS and ICiS would not occupy any leading positions within the newly-unified structure. Also, religious representatives were not to take part in any political activities.⁹¹¹ The proposed agreement was even endorsed by the Bosniak members of the Serbian Government at the time and prominent political figures, such as Sulejman Ugljanin and Rasim Ljajić.⁹¹² Yet, this time, it was the ICoS who was displeased with the process, as it complained that it was not invited to take part in meetings that were held in Ankara between the ICiS and the Turkish establishment.⁹¹³ Another reason why the ICoS could not accept the “deal” is that it was allegedly envisioned that the ICoS would essentially be dissolved, being integrated as part of a *single* Islamic community which would be under the jurisdiction of the Islamic Community of BiH.⁹¹⁴ In other words, **Turkey was seen as working in favour of the ICiS and thus not a neutral mediator.** Therefore, despite some initial optimistic expectations that the communities would overcome their differences, **Turkey has failed to strike a successful compromise that would suit both.** Ever since, Erdoğan has been meeting with officials from these communities during his visits to Serbia, but to no avail.

Fast forward to 2020, and it is unclear whether, and to what extent, Turkey will be able to continue its mediating efforts, particularly as it appears that it is currently leaning more towards the ICoS. The fact that both the Turkish ambassador to Serbia and an official from Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) have attended the inauguration of the new mufti for Novi Pazar of ICoS seems to affirm this fact.⁹¹⁵ This action has infuriated the rival ICiS, which has consequently threatened to sever all ties to Diyanet, and have called on Erdoğan to change Diyanet’s course of action.⁹¹⁶ There is no publicly available information on why Turkey has openly sided with one side over the other. Developments of this kind have reflected negatively on Turkey’s potential to act as a neutral arbiter in talks between the two communities and to help to reach an effective solution.

⁹¹¹ RTV, “Islamsku zajednicu u Srbiji ujedinjuje Turska?”, 2011, available at:

http://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/islamsku-zajednicu-u-srbiji-ujedinjuje-turska_278141.html

⁹¹² *Danas*, “Ujedinjenje Islamske zajednice glavna tema”, 2011, available at:

<https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/ujedinjenje-islamske-zajednice-glavna-tema/>

⁹¹³ Aleksandar Raković, “Turska inicijativa za ujedinjenje islamske zajednice u Republici Srbiji (2011)”, Institut za evropske studije, 2013, p. 244

⁹¹⁴ *Danas*, “Ujedinjenje Islamske zajednice glavna tema”, 2011

⁹¹⁵ *Radio slobodna Evropa*, “Može li Turska pomiriti muslimane u Srbiji?”, 2019, available at:

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-turska-muslimani/29797693.html>

⁹¹⁶ *Sandzak Live*, “Sabor IZ u Srbiji upozorio turski Dijanet - 'Prekinut ćemo odnose sa vama’”, 2019, available at: <https://www.sandzaklive.rs/index.php/sandzak-religija/1433-sabor-iz-u-srbiji-upozorio-turski-dijanet-prekinut-ceso-odnose-sa-vama>

All things considered, it may be concluded that **although Turkey possesses massive soft power capital among Serbia’s Muslim communities, it has failed to strike the right balance between the opposing sides. As its ability to mediate appears to be decreasing, it is unlikely that the two Islamic communities will reconcile any time soon.**

IV. 3. 3 The Role of TIKA – Preserving Ottoman Heritage

One of the key soft-power instruments that has allowed Turkey to operate in Serbia is TIKA (the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency). Within the framework of Turkey’s international cooperation and development assistance, TIKA was founded in 1992 with the focus on “implementing sustainable projects and activities which will improve cultural cooperation, protect common historical heritage, and support economic and social development processes with an anthropocentric approach”.⁹¹⁷ TIKA opened an office in Serbia in 2009. It was initially situated within the facilities of the Turkish embassy in Belgrade, but in 2010 moved its offices into a separate building.⁹¹⁸ Since arriving in Serbia, according to its data, **TIKA has implemented over 250 projects between 2010 and 2019,⁹¹⁹ with the total estimated value of €24 million.⁹²⁰**

In addition, it appears that TIKA’s activities are fully transparent. In fact, according to Serbia’s Information System for the Coordination of Development Assistance, the year-to-year value of TIKA’s donations can be shown in the following chart.

⁹¹⁷ TIKA, “Annual Report 2017”, Department Of Strategy Development, 2018, p.20, available at: https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/2018/2017%20Faaliyet%20Raporu/AR_2017%20web.pdf

⁹¹⁸ Information System for Coordination of the Development Assistance to the Republic of Serbia, “TIKA - History of bilateral cooperation”, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.evropa.gov.rs/Evropa/PublicSite/Donor.aspx?OrganisationId=2221>

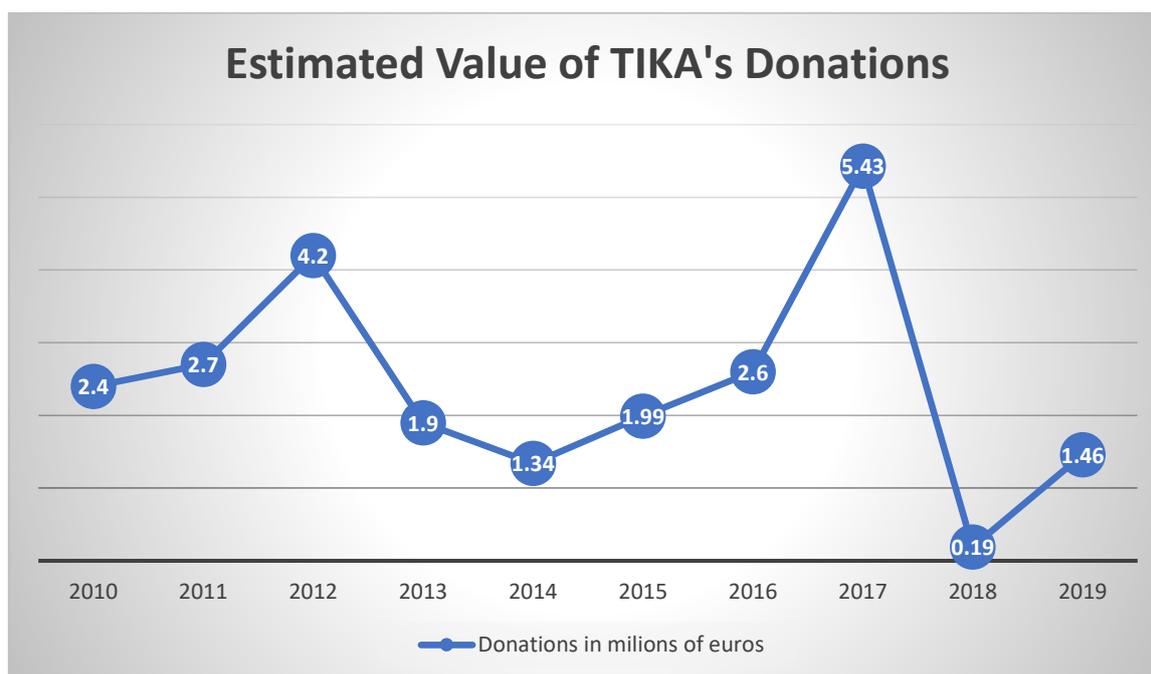
⁹¹⁹ RTS, “TIKA u Srbiji realizovala 268 projekata”, 2019, available at:

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/13/ekonomija/3686030/tika-u-srbiji-realizovala-268-projekata-.html>

⁹²⁰ The official total sum of Turkish donations provided by the Information System for the Coordination of Development Assistance to the Republic of Serbia is €34 million. Yet, as it also included €10 million for the reconstruction of part of the Morava Airport, which was subsequently suspended, the project was removed from the calculations of this study.

Information System for the Coordination of Development Assistance to the Republic of Serbia, “TIKA – Estimated disbursement and allocation overview (values are in millions of euros)”.

Graph 17: Estimated Value of TIKA's Donations



Source: authors' representation and modified calculations based on data provided by Serbia's Information System for the Coordination of Development Assistance⁹²¹

The development assistance it provides is in the form of technical, financial, and economic aid, as well as humanitarian assistance in emergency situations.⁹²² It should be noted, however, that besides the contribution it offers, **it is not rare to see the highest Turkish officials attend the opening ceremonies of sights renovated by TIKA in Serbia.** This allows these officials to self-promote, as well as point out cultural aspects as an important pillar in bilateral relations.

The matter of cultural funding can be analysed from the regional perspective as well, in order to get a full picture of the situation. In terms of Turkish Bilateral Official Development Assistance, the TIKA 2017 Development Assistance Report⁹²³ shows that \$ 65.25 million was provided to the Western Balkan countries. Among the countries of the region, Serbia received

⁹²¹ Ibid.

⁹²² Typically, after the submission of a project proposal, the TIKA office in Belgrade performs the first degree of evaluation. If a project proposal is evaluated as acceptable, it is then submitted to the TIKA headquarters, where a final evaluation of the project proposal is performed and a final decision on whether or not the project will be funded is made.

See: Information System for Coordination of the Development Assistance to the Republic of Serbia, "TIKA – Assistance to the Republic of Serbia"

⁹²³ TIKA - Turkish Development Assistance Report 2017, Department Of Strategy Development, 2018, p.28, available at:

<https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/2019/Turkish%20Development%20Assistance%20Report%202017/Kalkinma2017EngWeb.pdf>

the 5th most, with a total of \$6.47 million.⁹²⁴ Even though this amount of assistance is valuable, **these numbers should not create the impression that Turkey is a major financial contributor to Serbia.** For instance, the EU's pre-accession assistance to Serbia during the period from 2014 to 20 has been €1.5 billion, totalling €220 million per year and thus significantly more than Turkish assistance.⁹²⁵

Comparing the Turkish assistance to Serbia to that provided elsewhere in the region, it only outranks Montenegro (\$3.36 million). Other countries that outranked Serbia were BiH (\$20.40 million), North Macedonia (\$13.16 million), Kosovo (\$10.67 million), and Albania (\$6.49 million). Looking at this data, BiH is a particularly interesting case, as not only does it get three times more financial assistance than Serbia, but it is also receives the 5th most benefits of all countries Turkey cooperates with across the globe (being outranked only by Syria, Somalia, Palestine, and Afghanistan). **This regional comparison seems to reaffirm that the soft power activities of Turkey often depend on how densely an area is populated by Muslims.**

When it comes to concrete, on-the-ground benefits, analysis of TIKA projects in Serbia shows that they can be separated into four different groups: first, projects related to renovating cultural sites from the Ottoman period; second, projects related to health care and equipment upgrades in hospitals; third, projects concerning the construction of schools; and, finally, the renovation of contemporary Islamic sites.

The first group, regarding **cultural sites from the Ottoman era**, hosts numerous projects and as such **is not exclusive to Sandžak, as the Turkish legacy has left cultural sites throughout Serbia.** Notable examples include the renovation of Shaikh Mustafa's Turbe in Belgrade (2013), the restoration of the Damat Ali-Pasha Tomb in Belgrade (2017), the renovation of the Sokullu Mehmed Pasha Fountain in Belgrade (2017), the reconstruction of the Ram fortress in Eastern Serbia (2019), and the reconditioning of the reading room of the Novi Pazar Ras Library (2019).⁹²⁶

⁹²⁴ This amount is higher than the data provided by Serbia's Information System for Coordination of the Development Assistance for 2017. Nevertheless, the differences are not significant, and the conclusions derived from both sources are therefore valid.

⁹²⁵ European Commission, "Serbia - financial assistance under IPA II," available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/funding-by-country/serbia_en

⁹²⁶ Interestingly, the reading room was named "15th of July", to commemorate the attempted coup that took place on that date in 2016.

Image 13: Shaikh Mustafa's Turbe in Belgrade before and after its TIKA-funded restoration



Source: turkishlegacyinserbia.weebly.com/

The second group of projects, concerning **equipping hospitals**, provides tangible benefits to local populations. Even though these do not represent large scale, health-system wide upgrades, they are **targeted efforts to address the specific needs of certain hospital centres**. For example, these include the reconstruction of the gynaecology and obstetrics wards in Novi Pazar (2015), the renovation of the Dragutin Filipovic Jusa Children's Home in Belgrade (2017), the donation of an ambulance to the hospital in Belgrade (2019), and the renovation of the gynaecology and obstetrics wards of the Novi Pazar State Hospital (2019).

The third group, related to the **school construction**, has enabled tangible benefits as well, allowing a larger number of pupils to attend classes. For example, new sections of the Dr. Ibrahim Bakić elementary school in a village near Tutin (2012), of the Muharem Kadriu Elementary School in Veliki Trnovac, an Albanian-populated area in southern Serbia(2013), and of the Ćamil Sijarić Elementary School in Novi Pazar were opened (2014). Projects of this kind **have so far been exclusively dedicated to satisfying education needs in the Muslim-dominated areas of Serbia**.

The last group of projects concerns the **renovation of religious sites, such as mosques, in Serbia**. The only notable case of development in this area was the restoration of the Valide Sultan Mosque in Sjenica. This restoration was particularly important as it is the only "selatin" mosque, meaning a mosque built by Ottoman sultans, in Serbia. Activities focused on religious affairs are in line with the activities of Diyanet, which supports the Hanafi school of Islam in

contrast to the Saudi-funded, and more radical, Salafism.⁹²⁷ Yet, **it does not seem that TIKA has dedicated any further significant efforts to investing in mosques in Sandžak (unlike in BiH).**

Image 14: Image of the restoration of the Valide Sultan Mosque in Sjenica by TIKA



Source: tika.gov.tr

Even though activities in this area are often one-sided, that is, directed from Turkey to Serbia, there was an instance where Serbia also contributed to furthering cultural relations with Turkey. In 2019, the Serbian Minister of Foreign Relations unveiled a commemorative plaque in Belgrade to honor Galip Balkar, a Turkish ambassador in former Yugoslavia who was assassinated by Armenian terrorists in 1983.⁹²⁸ This memorial brings the two countries closer and has no clear negative impact.

Box 35: TIKA – Interest in the Area of Security

Besides some commonly-understood cultural areas of interest, **TIKA has shown readiness to finance security-related projects as well.** Namely, in 2018, TIKA funded the training of two Serbian journalists in war correspondence in Turkey.⁹²⁹ In the same year, TIKA funded

⁹²⁷ Igor Novaković, “Analysis Post “zero problems with neighbours” in the Western Balkans A view from Serbia”, ISAC Fund, 2020, p.24.

⁹²⁸ *Novosti*, 2019, “Dačić i Čavušoglu otkrili spomen ploču ubijenom turskom ambasadoru u SFRJ”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/drustvo/aktuelno.290.html:823017-Dacic-i-Cavusoglu-otkrili-spomen-plocu-ubijenom-turskom-ambasadoru-u-SFRJ>

⁹²⁹ Information System for Coordination of the Development Assistance to the Republic of Serbia, “Obuka ratnog dopisništva“, 2018, available at (in Serbian):

the training of 16 members of the Serbian police in detecting false travel documents and investigating drug trafficking.⁹³⁰ According to TIKa, this training was provided in Belgrade as part of the International Police Training Cooperation Project, designed for coordination and experience-sharing with Turkish law enforcement. It was jointly conducted with the Turkish Security Directorate.⁹³¹ A second round of education was financed in 2019, in which Serbian police were educated on drug trafficking investigations in Serbia, while another training session on murder investigations was held in Turkey.⁹³²

For now, there is **no publicly available information which would further clarify why TIKa, as a cultural institution, would finance projects in the area of security**, and whether there will be more such activities in the future. As Serbia and Turkey have signed security and police cooperation agreements in 2019, it is expected that such projects will continue in the future. It remains regrettable that **TIK a office in Belgrade never responded to an official request for an interview made by the authors of this study**, whose aim was to acquire more information on this matter.

All things considered, the activities of TIKa represent a valuable contribution from Turkey to Serbia. Even though the amount of TIKa's investments is rather small as compared to the EU's contributions, its projects work to satisfy the needs of the local population while also preserving historical heritage in Serbia. Therefore, **TIK a's contributions are a win-win for Serbia and Turkey, helping Serbia to preserve cultural sights, renew religious objects, equip hospitals, and build schools (especially in poorer areas), while at the same time allowing Turkey to build its soft power in Serbia and reaffirm its regional presence.**

<http://www.europe.gov.rs/Evropa/Management/Isdacon/Reports/Show.aspx?Report=/ G Reports/ G DONATI ONS/Donation&DonationId=4590>

⁹³⁰ Information System for Coordination of the Development Assistance to the Republic of Serbia, "Projekat saradnje policijske obuke I", 2018, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.europe.gov.rs/Evropa/Management/Isdacon/Reports/Show.aspx?Report=/ G Reports/ G DONATI ONS/Donation&DonationId=4589>

⁹³¹ *Hurriyet Daily News*, "TIK a helps Serbian security with job training", 2018, available at:

<https://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/tika-helps-serbian-security-with-job-training-134706>

⁹³² Information System for Coordination of the Development Assistance to the Republic of Serbia, "Projekat saradnje policijske obuke II", 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.europe.gov.rs/Evropa/Management/Isdacon/Reports/Show.aspx?Report=/ G Reports/ G DONATI ONS/Donation&DonationId=4755>

IV. 3. 4 Other Cultural Elements - Soap Operas, Tourism, Education, and Citizenship Acquisition

Soap Operas

Besides the close relations Turkey maintains with the Muslim communities in Serbia and the activities of TIKa, Turkey also has means of gradually increasing its soft power among Serbia's non-Muslim communities. **Especially after the 2010s, ties between Serbia and Turkey are exemplified in increasing tourism, soap operas, and education scholarships.**

Since the 2010s, Turkish soap operas have become highly popular and widely televised in Serbia. **These TV series are widely considered to an effective instrument to increase Turkey's soft power,⁹³³ and to help to improve the country's shaky image among the local population.⁹³⁴** Some explain this popularity by noting that Serbs identify with the patriarchal values of these Turkish shows, and enjoy spotting the many cultural and linguistic similarities that they recognise while watching.⁹³⁵ One research project even analysed the impact of one the most popular series, *Suleiman the Magnificent*, on the local audience. According to this study, this series has influenced respondents to think more about Turkish culture and its modern history, **increasing their desire to get to know this culture, for instance, by visiting Istanbul or by learning the Turkish language.⁹³⁶** As there is no custom of dubbing TV shows in Serbia, these series also brought the Turkish language into many Serbian homes. Acknowledging the rise in popularity of Turkish TV series, **the Free Trade Agreement signed between Turkey and Serbia even contains a special section on the "Coproductio**n of Films and TV series"****, with the intention of easing procedures for this kind of activities.⁹³⁷

⁹³³ Nehir Ağırseven and Armağan Öрки, "Evaluating Turkish TV Series as Soft Power Instruments", 2017, available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322130468_Evaluating_Turkish_TV_Series_as_Soft_Power_Instruments

⁹³⁴ *Balkan Insight*, "Much-loved Soaps Polish Turkey's Image in Balkans", 2019, available at:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/18/much-loved-soaps-polish-turkeys-image-in-balkans/>

⁹³⁵ *Balkan Insight*, "Turks Bewitch The Balkans With Their Addictive Soaps", 2013, available at:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2013/05/01/turks-bewitch-the-balkans-with-their-addictive-soaps/>

⁹³⁶ Katarina Panajotović, "Recepcija TV serije „Sulejman Veličanstveni" u Srbiji - antropološka analiza", BA Thesis, University of Belgrade – the Faculty of Philosophy, 2018, p.13, available at (in Serbian):

https://www.academia.edu/37788229/Recepcija_TV_serije_Sulejman_Veli%20%28Danstveni_u_Srbiji_-_antropolo%C5%A1ka_analiza

⁹³⁷ Free Trade Agreement between Serbia and Turkey, Section VIII, 2018, available at:

<http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/archive/files/lat/pdf/zakoni/2018/1167-18-lat.pdf>

Studying in Turkey

Nowadays it is also much easier for Serbian students to study in Turkey than it was in the past. The earliest available document detailing the presence of Serbian students on the website of Turkey's Ministry of Education goes back to 2006/07, when there were only 9 students from what was then Serbia and Montenegro studying on scholarships provided by the Turkish Government.⁹³⁸ The number of students did not significantly change until the 2013/14 academic year, when the scholarship was expanded to reach 170 Serbian students.⁹³⁹ An even more significant expansion took place in 2015/16, when there were a staggering 970 Serbian students in Turkey.⁹⁴⁰ That year, however, represented an outlier, as after 2016's coup attempt, the number of Serbian students in Turkey drastically fell and returned to the usual rate. In fact, according to the data from the Turkish Ministry of Education, in the 2018/19 academic year, there were, in total, 134 Serbian students in Turkey, most of them in bachelor's studies.⁹⁴¹ **Analysis of the overall amounts of Serbian students in Turkey shows that the number has increased as bilateral relations between the two countries were strengthened,** especially after the introduction of the trilateral mechanism in 2010. When it comes to Turks studying in Serbia, according to data from the Serbian Statistical Office, there were 50 of them in the 2018/19 academic year.⁹⁴²

Tourism

Turkey is becoming an increasingly attractive tourist destination for Serbian citizens. According to official data from the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, approximately **282,000 Serbian tourists visited Turkey in 2019, representing the highest rate in the post-2000 period.**⁹⁴³ Interestingly, the rate of Serbs traveling to Turkey appears to be dependent on political events. Namely, in 2008, when Turkey recognised Kosovo's independence, the number of Serbian tourists dropped 40%. Furthermore, in 2016, the year of the attempted coup against Erdoğan, the number of Serbian tourists dropped 38% (as Turkey's tourism witnessed

⁹³⁸ Turkish Ministry of Education, "National Education Statistics – 2012-13", p.219, available at: http://sgb.meb.gov.tr/istatistik/meb_istatistikleri_organ_egitim_2012_2013.pdf

⁹³⁹ Turkish Ministry of Education, "National Education Statistics – 2013/14", available at: http://sgb.meb.gov.tr/istatistik/meb_istatistikleri_organ_egitim_2013_2014.pdf

⁹⁴⁰ Turkish Ministry of Education, "National Education Statistics – 2006-07", available at: http://sgb.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2012_12/06020711_meb_istatistikleri_organ_egitim_2006_2007.pdf

⁹⁴¹ Turkish Ministry of Education, "National Education Statistics – 2018/19", p.241, available at: http://sgb.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2019_09/30102730_meb_istatistikleri_organ_egitim_2018_2019.pdf

⁹⁴² Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, "Visoko obrazovanje 2018-19", p.50, available at: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2019/Pdf/G20196011.pdf>

⁹⁴³ Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Turkey, "Border Statistics 2019", 2020, available at: <https://www.ktb.gov.tr/EN-249299/yearly-bulletins.html>

a sharp decline in a general sense that year). Such numbers indicate that both domestic political developments in Turkey, as well as those involving Serbia, indeed impact the travel plans of Serbs. **Although Turkey benefits from increasing numbers of Serbian tourists, it should be noted that Serbs are the 33rd largest tourist group in Turkey**, being far outnumbered, for instance, by Russians, Germans, and Bulgarians.

Tourism also benefits Serbia. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, **Turks were the third largest group of tourists visiting the country**, with approximately 107,000 visitors, based on the total number of registered visitors to Serbia in 2019. This group is only outperformed by the tourists coming from China (including Hong Kong) (144,000), and BiH (136,000). Interestingly, Turkish tourists outperform Germans (104,000), Croats (103,000), Bulgarians (100,000), Montenegrins (90,000), and Russians (64,000).⁹⁴⁴ Furthermore, **based on the aggregated sum of the total nights spent in Serbia, Turks were the fourth largest group visiting Serbia in 2019**, spending approximately 227,000 nights in the country. They were outperformed only by the tourists from BiH (294,000), China (including Hong Kong) (268,000), and Montenegro (234,000). Turks outperformed tourists from Russia (220,000), Germany (203,000), Croatia (199,000) and Bulgaria (169,000).⁹⁴⁵

The fact that Serbia and Turkey mutually agreed to abolish visas in 2010 was of essential importance for the increase of tourism. In addition, the fact that Serbia and Turkey did not impose travel restrictions on each other during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates that this relationship can manage the test of time. As such, Serbia was among a few European actors not to impose restrictions to Turkey, such as Albania, Belarus, Kosovo, Montenegro, Moldova, and North Macedonia.⁹⁴⁶ Therefore, all of the relevant data indicates that **Turkish tourists provide a valuable contribution to tourism overall in Serbia, and it is likely that this trend will continue to develop in the following period.**

Language learning

Another instrument of Turkey's soft power in Serbia is the Yunus Emre Institute, which has operated in Belgrade since 2015, when it was opened during the visit of Turkish Prime Minister, Davutoğlu. This body was originally created in Turkey by the Turkish Government

⁹⁴⁴ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, "Turistički promet – decembar 2019," 2020, p.4, available at: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2020/Pdf/G20201020.pdf>

⁹⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁶ Passport Index, "Turkey", August 2020, available at: <https://www.passportindex.org/comparebyPassport.php?p3=tr&fl=&s=yes>

in 2007 as a public foundation. Today, it has 58 centres around the world.⁹⁴⁷ According to their own words, the institute's vision is "to increase the number of people who forge bonds with, and are friendly to, Turkey all around the world", while their mission is "to enhance Turkey's recognition, credibility and prestige in the international arena".⁹⁴⁸ **Besides organising events which promote Turkish culture and art, it also provides language courses in different Serbian cities.** As previously mentioned, after the Turkish soap operas became popular, the number of people studying Turkish in Serbia increased. The institute is in close cooperation with the Turkology Department of the University of Belgrade, and it also plans to open a branch in Novi Pazar.⁹⁴⁹ The latest relevant public event it organised, with the support of the Turkish embassy, was the "Turkish Film Week" that took place in September 2019.⁹⁵⁰

Box 36: The COVID-19 Crisis and Turkey's Aid to Serbia

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the Serbian president pleaded on 15 March 2020 for international assistance in providing medical equipment to fight the virus. Analysis shows that **Turkey responded relatively quickly to this request, representing, chronologically, the 6th foreign actor to provide aid to Serbia.**⁹⁵¹ In fact, on 1 April 2020, the Turkish textile company Tasyapi, which operates in Serbia donated 25 intensive care beds, five ventilators, and other medical equipment to a hospital in Belgrade.⁹⁵² The largest assistance came on 8 April, when a plane arrived from Turkey carrying 2,000 sets for testing, 100,000 masks, and 2,000 protective suits.⁹⁵³ Furthermore, **Turkey also sent assistance specifically to Sandžak** in April, providing a mobile x-ray machine, 20,000 masks, 1,000 protective suits, and other various supplies.⁹⁵⁴ It continued sending assistance to Sandžak even in July, after it became

⁹⁴⁷ Yunus Emre Institute, "Corporate - Yunus Emre Institute", available at:

<https://www.yee.org.tr/en/corporate/yunus-emre-institute>

⁹⁴⁸ Yunus Emre Institute, "Corporate – Vision-Mission", available at:

<https://www.yee.org.tr/en/corporate/vision-mission>

⁹⁴⁹ See: *Daily Sabah*, "Common history and culture: More Serbians learn Turkish with Yunus Emre Institute in Belgrade", 2016, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/balkans/2016/06/08/common-history-and-culture-more-serbians-learn-turkish-with-yunus-emre-institute-in-belgrade>

⁹⁵⁰ *Danas*, "Nedelja turskog filma od 15. do 20. septembra u Beogradu", 2019, available at:

<https://www.danas.rs/kultura/nedelja-turskog-filma-od-15-do-20-septembra-u-beogradu/>

⁹⁵¹ Strahinja Subotić, "Timeline of Foreign Assistance for Fighting COVID-19", European Policy Centre (CEP), 2020, available at: <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Timeline-of-foreign-assistance.pdf>

⁹⁵² RTV, "Mihajlovićeva zahvalna kompaniji Tašjapi na donaciji medicinske opreme", available at (in Serbian): https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/mihajloviceva-zahvalna-kompaniji-tasjapi-na-donaciji-medicinske-opreme_1109083.html

⁹⁵³ *Radio slobodna Evropa*, "Humanitarna pomoć iz Turske stigla u region", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30541707.html>

⁹⁵⁴ *Danas*, "Ambasador Turske: Pokazali smo solidarnost i odgovornost", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.danas.rs/svet/ambasador-turske-pokazali-smo-solidarnost-i-odgovornost/>

one of Serbia's worst-hit regions.⁹⁵⁵ Such assistance was part of Turkey's wider strategy when it comes to the region, having provided assistance during the pandemic to other Balkan countries as well.

What stood out during the pandemic were statements made by the Serbian Minister of Defence, Aleksandar Vulin, who declared Turkey as "a friend", while welcoming the plane carrying the medical equipment. He notably **added that Serbia will remember who came to its aid in this time of need, which is why it will adjust its future policies accordingly.**⁹⁵⁶ Such messages carry significant weight, especially considering that during the early stages of the pandemic, the Serbian President issued a statement in which he proclaimed the end of European solidarity.

Applications for Serbian Citizenship

Another matter which is often neglected is the fact that **there has been a trend of mass applications for Serbian citizenship by Turks with ancestral roots in Serbia** (mainly Sandžak). This process began after the introduction of the Serbian Law on Citizenship in 2004 and amendments to it in 2007, drastically simplifying the procedure for acquiring citizenship (primarily aimed at Serbia's diaspora and those emigrating from former Yugoslav republics living and working in Serbia).⁹⁵⁷

According to data from the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, throughout the past decade, **applicants from Turkey were the largest group to become newly-naturalised citizens of the Republic of Serbia** (if citizens from ex-Yugoslav countries are excluded).⁹⁵⁸ Between 2011 and 2017 for example, **there were in total 6,570 Turks who successfully acquired Serbian citizenship, representing an average of 938 successful cases of naturalisation per year.** Although this number does not seem big, it is significant from a

⁹⁵⁵ TRT, "Pomoć iz Turske stigla u Novi Pazar", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.trt.net.tr/srpski/region-1/2020/07/04/pomoc-iz-turske-stigla-u-novi-pazar-video-1449032>

⁹⁵⁶ Radio slobodna Evropa, "Humanitarna pomoć iz Turske stigla u region", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30541707.html>

⁹⁵⁷ Radio Free Europe, "Začarani krug dvojnog državljanstva", 2007, available at (in Serbian):

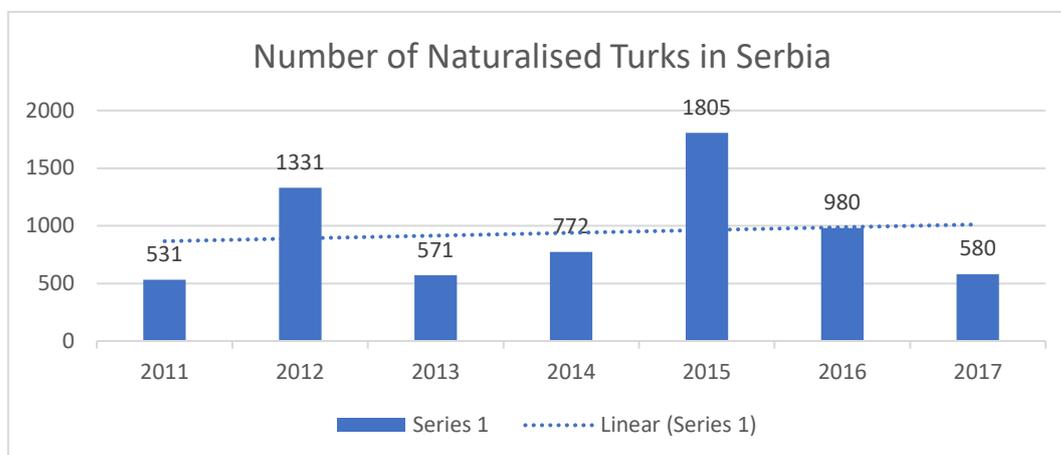
<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/716281.html>

⁹⁵⁸ Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, "Migration Profiles", 2011-18, available at:

http://www.kirs.gov.rs/wb-page.php?kat_id=161

comparative perspective, having in mind that, for example, in the period in question, only 617 Russians in total successfully acquired Serbian citizenship: an average of 88 per year.

Graph 18: Number of Naturalised Turks in Serbia



Source: authors' representation of the data collected from the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration

It appears that two factors have made Serbia's passport attractive to Turks. First, **unlike the case for Turkish citizens, since 2009 citizens of Serbia do not require visas to travel to the EU.** Considering that Turkey has a large diaspora in the EU, especially in Germany, it is unsurprising that visa-free access to the EU would be appealing for a certain number of Turks that have origins in Serbia. In fact, the Serbian passport is comparatively stronger than the Turkish. According to the Global Passport Power Ranking, Serbia has the 68th strongest passport in the world, while Turkey has the 89th.⁹⁵⁹ Similarly, according to the Henley Passport Index, Serbia's passport ranks as the 40th best while Turkey's ranks as the 55th.⁹⁶⁰

Second, Turkey has witnessed increasing authoritarianism displayed by Erdoğan, especially after the Gezi protests in 2013. **As since then Turkey has witnessed significant democratic backsliding, this may also explain the sudden spike in naturalisation applicants in 2015** (see Graph 18), just a year before the coup was attempted. Strongly illustrating this point, one Turkish applicant, when asked why she was applying for Serbian citizenship, replied "the

⁹⁵⁹ Global Passport Power Rank, "Individual Passport Power Rank", available at: <https://www.passportindex.org/byIndividualRank.php?ccode=tm>

⁹⁶⁰ Henley Passport Index, "Passport Index Comparison", available at: <https://www.henleypassportindex.com/compare-passport>

Ataturk Republic is gone. Why else would I leave my country?”.⁹⁶¹ Another fact that reaffirms this argument is that **two thirds of the Turks living in Serbia voted for Erdoğan’s rival from the Republican People’s Party in the 2018 Turkish presidential elections.**⁹⁶² Furthermore, emigration from Turkey due to political dissatisfaction is part of a larger emigration trend in Turkey today. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), the number of emigrants increased by 42.5% in 2017 as compared to the year before.⁹⁶³

It should be noted, however, that **the trend of acquiring Serbian citizenship by Turks fell dramatically in 2018.** Although there is no precise number provided for the number of Turks naturalised in 2018, the fact that they were listed as part of the “other” category of citizens naturalised in the official data of the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration shows that this number is low. It is explained by the fact that the 2018 amendments to the Law on Citizenship had taken effect, which made it more difficult to acquire citizenship by descent. This provision effectively prevents Turks from seeking the citizenship of Serbia, as typically several generations have passed since they last lived in Serbia.

Taking all of these elements into account, it can be concluded that Serbia and Turkey are indeed mutually contributing to the improvement of bilateral relations, which also applies on the societal level. Although one should not overestimate this relationship, as many in Serbia still perceive Turkey through the vision of an Ottoman-era aggressor, it has solid ground for the further improvement of its image, particularly as polls show that **most Serbs do support better relations with Turkey.**⁹⁶⁴

IV. 3 Concluding Remarks on Turkey

Despite their differences, Turkey and Serbia have managed to find common ground, which has led to an increased cooperation in the areas of politics, economics, and culture.

⁹⁶¹ Balkan Insight, “Politika u dijaspori: novi ambasadori Turske na Balkanu”, available at (in Serbian): <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/03/19/politika-u-dijaspori-novi-ambasadori-turske-na-balkanu/?lang=sr>

⁹⁶² *Balkan Insight*, “Politika u dijaspori: novi ambasadori Turske na Balkanu”, available at (in Serbian): <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/03/19/politika-u-dijaspori-novi-ambasadori-turske-na-balkanu/?lang=sr>

⁹⁶³ Turkish Statistical Institute, available at: <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=30607>

⁹⁶⁴ International Republican Institute (IRI), “Survey of Serbian Public Opinion”, 2015, Ipsos Strategic Marketing, slides 20 and 22, available at: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/serbia_november_2015_poll_public_release.pdf

The analysis shows that 2009 represented a critical juncture, as prior, relations were cold and unproductive, whereas a trend towards the improvement of bilateral relations constantly improved ever since. A notable result in the early period of the development of relations was the success of a trilateral mechanism between Turkey, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Not only has it contributed to regional stability, but the activities within this mechanism have even complemented the EU's efforts towards establishing good-neighbourly relations in the Balkans. It has allowed Turkey to stand out as a relevant regional player which can project power, and has enabled Serbia to rebuild its regional ties, as well as increase its economic cooperation with Turkey in the subsequent period.

Meanwhile, **the fact that Belgrade stood out in support of Erdoğan strongly and swiftly on the night of the attempted coup in 2016 has been a crucial factor which has cemented the personal relationship** between the Serbian and Turkish leadership. As the EU was accused of taking a “wait-and-see policy” by Ankara, this event further strengthened the trust and connections between the two leaders. Yet, what remains a concern is that the personalisation of this relationship has diminished the importance of state institutions, and has led to Serbia's willingness to compromise on matters of rule of law for the sake of gaining favours with Turkey.

The key concern in this regard is Serbia's expressed willingness to assist Turkey in the fight against the Gülen movement at the cost of rule of law procedures. Not only have the two sides signed security agreements that might be misused against individuals that Turkey suspects of terrorism, but Turkey's officials have also publicly argued that they have received “positive signals” regarding their request to close Gülen institutions in Serbia. Although there is no hard evidence that these institutions were forcefully shut down by the Serbian government, there are some indications that Serbian officials in fact played a role in this affair, by creating an unfavourable or hindering environment for the operation of these institutions, which was effectively forcing them to “voluntarily” close and thus playing right into Turkey's hands.

Another concern in the domain of rule of law, stemming from Serbo-Turkish cooperation, is the fact that Serbian authorities used their political influence to ensure that the extradition of a Kurdish political activist took place. This was done based on an official request by Turkey, and against the recommendation of the UN Committee Against Torture. Although no other such extraditions took place, there is a concern that there is a high likelihood

that this will happen, particularly after Serbian officials have publicly stated that they will not shelter anyone who fights against Turkish interests. As in the case of the closure of Gülen institutions, the willingness of Serbia to comply with Turkey's extradition request goes against the development of rule of law procedures and the spirit of Serbia's EU accession process. Therefore, although Turkey has not shown willingness to intentionally stand in the way of Serbia's EU accession process, its activities nevertheless require monitoring in order to prevent future cases that might lead to the deterioration of rule of law in the country.

It is also important to highlight that despite progress in building bilateral relations and close cooperation, **the extent of Turkey's political leverage in Serbia should not be overstated.** A notable divergence between the two is visible in terms of Serbia's willingness to align, in most cases, with the EU's declarations targeting Turkey. What prevents Turkey from becoming a genuine strategic partner of Serbia, is its recognition of Kosovo, a key factor in determining Serbia's foreign policy alignment decisions. As Ankara is aware of this fact, Serbia's alignment with the declarations does not represent a hindrance in their bilateral relations, especially as it has never been brought up by either side in public in public discourse. The fact that Ankara has made it clear that it would support any deal on Kosovo, as long as it is mutually agreed upon by Belgrade and Priština, is another indicator that this issue is unlikely to further impair their future bilateral relations.

Meanwhile, **the pragmatic betterment of political of relations was accompanied by a parallel trend of building closer economic ties between Turkey and Serbia.** Such developments became particularly noticeable after 2009, when Free Trade Agreement was signed by the two states, and after 2016, when a number of Turkish textile companies opened their businesses in Serbia. These developments and milestones were accompanied by a parallel and intertwined process of political alliance-building. This way, the two processes re-enforced each other and resulted in pragmatic cooperation.

The rising trend of business activities and investments coming from Turkey is primarily driven by opportunistic factors. Namely, although parts of Serbia are inhabited by ethnic minorities that have strong links to Turkey, investors opted for the particular locations for their investments that provided the best conditions in terms of Government subsidies, developed infrastructure, and availability of experienced workforce. This shows **Turkey's readiness to look beyond the Neo-Ottoman framework.** Furthermore, Turkey's increasing willingness and ability to finance and take part in the construction of sections of Serbia's highways have

also been notable. However, **full transparency of the processes** of negotiating intergovernmental agreements, with the equal treatment and non-discrimination of all interested parties during their implementation, **has yet to be ensured**.

Despite the fact that trade cooperation is increasing, **Serbia has a rising trade deficit toward Turkey, which reflects the Serbian economy's lower level of competitiveness**. This balance is likely to continue to characterise relations between the two countries, especially in light of adjustments to the recently agreed trade reliefs. Furthermore, despite their geographical proximity, Turkey is still far from being a dominant economic influence in Serbia, both in terms of trade volume and investment. **Although Turkey does not possess strong economic leverage in Serbia, it nevertheless remains a valuable partner**, particularly as there is an increasing trend of opening factories in small and rural municipalities, which are in desperate need of investments and jobs of any kind.

Besides the increasing political and economic cooperation, **what also makes Turkey stand out is its special relationship with the Muslim communities in Serbia. Yet, its substantial level of soft power in this regard appears to be a double-edged sword for Serbia**. On the one hand, Turkey appears to have had some positive impacts from these bonds, with regards to cultural cooperation through TIKA, particularly by its renovation of a number of cultural sites throughout Serbia, as well as by its provision of medical equipment and opening schools in the Sandžak region. Furthermore, despite failing to reconcile the two Serbian Islamic communities, Turkey's involvement in this issue is likely to remain of valuable importance in the future. Therefore, the Turkish special relationship to Bosniaks living in Serbia has allowed it to take the role of a mediator and stabilising force in terms maintaining of multi-ethnic relations in Serbia.

On the other hand, there have been instances where the personal popularity of Erdoğan has enabled him to mobilise citizens and political forces in Sandžak for his personal political gain. This mobilisation has, for instance, allowed Erdoğan to gather support in this region against the Gülen Movement. **Turkey's soft power capital has become amassed to such a degree that it is able to exert its power in Sandžak in a relatively costless manner**. For this reason, there is a high likelihood that Turkey will continue to misuse its soft power capital in Serbia for domestic purposes in the future, and thus bring into question the integrity of its impact in Serbia.

All things considered, it appears that Turkey has, gradually, especially under Erdoğan's leadership, managed to successfully ***lock-in its position in Serbia as a valuable partner and regional power***. As long as Erdoğan remains the key political figure in Turkey, it is likely that it will continue to exert some level of political influence on Belgrade. In this regard, Turkey is likely to limit its interference in Serbia regarding issues in its domestic fights against the Gülenists and Kurds, while maintaining its special relationship with the Muslim communities of Sandžak. On top of this, it is expected that Turkey will also continue to encourage the business activities of Turkish companies in Serbia. Therefore, although the study shows that Turkey is not a power of central importance to Serbia, it is nevertheless an influential actor.

V Serbia's Other Relevant Foreign Partners

V. 1 Azerbaijan – a Partner from the Caucasus

As a small ex-Soviet country located in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan is a secular state known for its significant oil and gas reserves, its authoritarian regime, and its longstanding territorial disputes with Armenia. Although Belgrade recognised the independence of Azerbaijan in December 1991, it took six years for the two states to establish diplomatic relations, doing so in August 1997.⁹⁶⁵ The following shows how such a slow start was later compensated by closer Azerbaijani-Serbian cooperation in the aftermath of Kosovo's* self-proclamation of independence in 2008.

Even though Azerbaijan is comprised, like Kosovo*, of a Muslim-dominated population, and its closest relationship is with Turkey, a country whose leader publicly stated that “Turkey is Kosovo and Kosovo is Turkey”⁹⁶⁶, it has nevertheless fully backed Serbia regarding the issue of Kosovo's* secession, describing this action as an “illegal act”.⁹⁶⁷ **To this date, Azerbaijan has not voted in favour of accepting Kosovo* to Interpol, UNESCO, or the Venice Commission.**⁹⁶⁸ **Likewise, Serbia fully backs Azerbaijan's claims over Nagorno-Karabakh**, which was demonstrated when it supported the 2008 UN General Assembly Resolution 62/243 which reaffirmed “continued respect and support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan within its internationally recognized borders” while demanding “the immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of all Armenian forces from all the occupied territories” of Azerbaijan.⁹⁶⁹ By supporting this resolution, Serbia positioned itself against the US and France, as well as Russia, which traditionally favours Armenia.⁹⁷⁰ **To date, Serbia remains a strong supporter of Azerbaijan's side in the dispute.**

⁹⁶⁵ Embassy of Azerbaijan to Serbia, “Azerbaijan-Serbia relations”, available at: <https://belgrade.mfa.gov.az/content/52>

⁹⁶⁶ World Bulletin, “PM Erdogan: Turkey is Kosovo and Kosovo is Turkey”, 2013, available at: <https://www.worldbulletin.net/diplomacy/pm-erdogan-turkey-is-kosovo-and-kosovo-is-turkey-h121375.html>

⁹⁶⁷ Reuters, “Azerbaijan says not recognizing Kosovo independence”, 2008, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-serbia-azerbaijan/azerbaijan-says-not-recognizing-kosovo-independence-idUSL1856553120080218>

⁹⁶⁸ National Assembly of Serbia, “Zamenik ministra spoljnih poslova Azerbejdžana u poseti Narodnoj skupštini”, 2019, available at (in Serbian): http://www.parlament.gov.rs/Zamenik_ministra_spoljnih_poslova_Azerbejd%C5%BEana_u_poseti_Narodnoj_skup%C5%A1tini.36606.941.html

⁹⁶⁹ UN General Assembly, Resolution 62/243, 2008, available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/62/243>

⁹⁷⁰ The Positions of EU and OSCE Minsk Group on UN General Assembly Resolution 62/243, available at:

Considering that the two sides have found a common language - stressing the importance of territorial integrity – embassies between the two countries were established in 2010 and 2011, while the heads of state officially visited one another for the first time during the same period.⁹⁷¹ In other examples of growing ties, the Serbian-Azerbaijani Chamber of Commerce was established in 2010,⁹⁷² and the first meeting of the Serbian-Azerbaijan Intergovernmental Commission of Trade and Economic Cooperation, along with the first Serbian-Azerbaijani business forum, took place in Belgrade in 2011.⁹⁷³

As both political and economic cooperation began to increase, in the 2010s **the two sides reached a milestone by signing a strategic partnership in 2013,⁹⁷⁴ accompanied by an Action Plan in 2018.⁹⁷⁵ In fact, until 2018, there were five presidential inter-state visits, one by the Serbian prime minister, ten mutual visits by foreign ministers, and numerous other meetings by other government officials and members of parliament.⁹⁷⁶ From the economic standpoint, **notable projects with Azerbaijani involvement included the construction of the Ljig-Preljina section of motorway Corridor XI from 2012 to 2016,⁹⁷⁷ and the construction that started in 2019 of a highway from Ruma to Šabac and an express road from Šabac to Loznica.⁹⁷⁸ Both projects were conducted by the same Azerbaijani contractor, **AzVirt**, based on a loan arranged with Azerbaijan. The construction of the Ljig-Preljina section was financed almost completely by a €300 million loan approved by the Azerbaijani Government with a 4% annual interest rate.⁹⁷⁹ Regarding the Ruma-Šabac-Loznica project, the****

<https://karabakhfacts.com/the-positions-of-eu-and-osce-minsk-group-on-un-general-assembly-resolution-ares62243/>

⁹⁷¹ Embassy of Serbia to Azerbaijan, “Retrospective of relations between Serbia and Azerbaijan”, available at: <http://www.baku.mfa.gov.rs/us.php>

⁹⁷² The Serbian-Azerbaijani Chamber of Commerce, available at: http://sakom.org.rs/?page_id=43

⁹⁷³ Embassy of Serbia to Azerbaijan, “Retrospective of relations between Serbia and Azerbaijan”

⁹⁷⁴ By then, Serbia had only signed strategic partnerships with China and Italy in 2009, France in 2011, and the United Arab Emirates and Russia in 2013.

See: Government of Serbia, “Relations of Serbia, Azerbaijan on level of strategic partnership as of today”, 2013, available at:

<https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/91925/relations-of-serbia-azerbaijan-on-level-of-strategic-partnership-as-of-today.php>

⁹⁷⁵ RTV, “Vučić i Alijev potpisali akcioni plan o strateškom partnerstvu”, 2018, available at (in Serbian): http://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/vucic-i-alijev-potpisali-akcioni-plan-o-strateskom-partnerstvu_919824.html

⁹⁷⁶ Vuk Vuksanović, “An Unlikely Partnership in Trouble: Serbia and Azerbaijan”, Rusi, 2020, available at: <https://rusi.org/commentary/unlikely-partnership-trouble-serbia-and-azerbaijan>

⁹⁷⁷ E-kapija, “Ljig-Preljina highway on Corridor 11 opens”, 2016, available at:

<https://www.ekapija.com/en/news/1590848/ljig-preljina-highway-on-corridor-11-opens>

⁹⁷⁸ Serbian Ministry of Construction Transport and Infrastructure, “Mihajlovic: We Are Starting The Construction of High Speed Highway Ruma-Sabac-Loznica”, 2019, available at:

<https://mgsi.gov.rs/en/aktuelnosti/mihajlovic-we-are-starting-construction-high-speed-highway-ruma-sabac-loznica>

⁹⁷⁹ Zakon o potvrđivanju sporazuma o zajmu između Vlade Republike Srbije kao zajmoprimca i Vlade Republike Azerbejdžan kao zajmodavca za finansiranje izgradnje deonice Ljig - Boljkovci, Boljkovci - Takovo i Takovo -

situation is a bit complicated as despite announcements of the beginning of works and the willingness of the Azerbaijani Government to grant a new loan, no official agreement for a credit line has been signed. Therefore, on 30 June 2020, the Serbian debt toward Azerbaijan consisted of a total of €185 million, all from one project: the 40km long Ljig-Preljina highway section.⁹⁸⁰ What remains problematic however, as many have warned,⁹⁸¹ is that these and other projects were agreed upon under conditions of political influence and limited transparency.⁹⁸²

Azerbaijan's soft power is rather limited in Serbia, outmatched by far by Russia and China's, for instance.⁹⁸³ Yet, the cultural and humanitarian cooperation between Azerbaijan and Serbia is nevertheless increasing. The most notable examples of this include: the establishment of the Azerbaijani Cultural Centre in Belgrade in 2010; the unveiling of a controversial statue of late Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev in 2011 in a Belgrade park whose renovation was funded by the Azerbaijani government;⁹⁸⁴ the renovation of the only mosque in Belgrade (Bajrakli mosque) in 2012 with the help of the Azerbaijani government;⁹⁸⁵ the first assistance provided to Serbia in the aftermath of the catastrophic 2014 floods was provided by Baku (according to the Serbian PM);⁹⁸⁶ the establishment of the Centre of Azerbaijani Language and Culture at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade in 2018;⁹⁸⁷ the agreement to establish direct flights connecting Belgrade and Baku,⁹⁸⁸ the

Preljina autoputa E-763 u Republici Srbiji (Law on Ratification of the Loan Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia as the Borrower and the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan as the Lender for Financing the Construction of the Sections Ljig - Boljkovci, Boljkovci - Takovo and Takovo - Preljina of the E-763 Motorway in the Republic of Serbia), Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 1/2012.

⁹⁸⁰ Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Serbia - Public Debt Administration, Quarterly Report- June 2020, available at: <http://www.javnidug.gov.rs/eng/default.asp?P=118&MenuItem=4>

⁹⁸¹ *Al Jazeera Balkans*, "Enigma azerbejdžanskog ulaganja u Srbiju", 2012, available at (in Serbian): <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/enigma-azerbejdžanskog-ulaganja-u-srbiju>; and

Vreme, "Šta se krije iza Behtela", 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1702175>

⁹⁸² Interestingly, in August 2020, during financial audits conducted by authorities in Baku, reasonable suspicions were established that a large amount of Azerbaijani budgetary funds was not used for their intended purposes by the ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Republic of Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was detained in Belgrade as a suspect during the investigation.

See: *NI*, "Azerbaijan's ambassador to Serbia arrested", 2020, available at:

<http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a629470/Azerbaijan-s-ambassador-to-Serbia-arrested.html>

⁹⁸³ See chapters on China and Russia in this policy study.

⁹⁸⁴ *Radio Free Europe*, "Belgrade Erects Statue to Former Azerbaijani President", 2011, available at:

https://www.rferl.org/a/belgrade_erects_statue_to_ex-azerbaijani_president/24229017.html

⁹⁸⁵ *Radio Free Europe*, "Beogradska Bajrakli džamija: Paljevina sanirana, počinioci nekažnjeni", 2012, available at (in Serbian):

https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bajrakli_dzamiya_u_beogradu_steta_sanirana/24568851.html

⁹⁸⁶ *Danas*, "Brnabić dočekala avion sa medicinskom pomoći iz Azerbejdžana", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/brnabic-docekala-avion-sa-medicinskom-pomoci-iz-azerbejdžana/>

⁹⁸⁷ *RTS*, "Jačanje veza između univerziteta u Beogradu i Bakuu", 2018, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/3119249/jacanje-veza-izmedju-univerziteta-u-beogradu-i-bakuu.html>

⁹⁸⁸ *See News*, "Serbia, Azerbaijan agree to launch Belgrade-Baku flight", 2018, available at:

abolishment of visa requirements for Azerbaijani tourists in 2018, and;⁹⁸⁹ assistance provided by the Azerbaijani government to Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2020.⁹⁹⁰

Azerbaijani-Serbian relations are not, however, without their setbacks. Namely, the most relevant current issue between the two is **regarding Serbia's arms exports to Armenia.** Baku launched an official protest over "a large consignment of mortar shells of various calibres and other ammunition" delivered by Serbia and used by Armenia against Azerbaijan during the July 2020 border clashes.⁹⁹¹ Although Serbia initially defended this private weapons sale as legal, the Serbian President later described the deal as a "wrong decision".⁹⁹² Consequently, he has initiated talks to settle this issue, while adding that a high-ranking delegation from Serbia will be sent to Azerbaijan to investigate the situation.⁹⁹³ This affair acquired a new level of severity, considering that the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan re-erupted in the meantime. Although Serbia has joined an EU Declaration calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities,⁹⁹⁴ , it is yet to be seen how this episode will impact future Azerbaijani-Serbian relations.

Overall, Serbia has developed a fruitful relationship with Azerbaijan in the past decade in the areas of politics, economics, and culture. For now, apart from the mentioned issues regarding the lack of transparency of some important contracts, **Azerbaijan's increasing cooperation with Serbia has not caused any significant negative impacts on Serbia's EU perspective,** particularly as Azerbaijan's behaviour has not been, so far, an issue that was specifically addressed in declarations of the High Representative on behalf of the EU.

In fact, the EU itself has been stepping up bilateral cooperation with Azerbaijan, a country with whom it already closely cooperates as part of the Eastern Partnership, in order to conclude a

<https://seenews.com/news/serbia-azerbaijan-agree-to-launch-belgrade-baku-flight-613316>

⁹⁸⁹ Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Ukinute vize za državljane Republike Azerbejdžan, nosioce običnih pasoša", 2018, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/sr/index.php/2013-06-28-10-17-10/19790-2018-05-30-11-40-34?lang=lat>

⁹⁹⁰ Government of Serbia, "Help proof of friendship, partnership between Serbia, Azerbaijan", 2020, available at: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/156282/help-proof-of-friendship-partnership-between-serbia-azerbaijan.php>

⁹⁹¹ *Jam News*, "Weapons shipments from Serbia to Armenia through Georgia – fact or fiction?", 2020, available at: <https://jam-news.net/azerbaijan-announced-the-supply-of-weapons-from-serbia-to-armenia-through-georgia/>

⁹⁹² *Al Jazeera*, "Serbia mends fences with Azerbaijan after selling arms to Armenia", 2020, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/08/serbia-mends-fences-azerbaijan-selling-arms-armenia-200807135222135.html>

⁹⁹³ *NI*, "Azerbaijan's Aliyev: Concerns over use of Serbia-made ammunition by Armenians", 2020, available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a627815/Azerbaijan-s-Aliyev-Concerns-over-use-of-Serbia-made-ammunition-by-Armenians.html>

⁹⁹⁴ EU Statement on Nagorno-Karabakh, EEAS, October 2020, available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/council-europe/86524/eu-statement-nagorno-karabakh_en

new comprehensive agreement.⁹⁹⁵ Nevertheless, the EU's increasing cooperation with Azerbaijan does not stop the former from paying close attention to problems in the fields of human rights and fundamental freedoms.⁹⁹⁶ The European Parliament particularly stands out for its calls in this area, which point to serious concerns over the continuing deterioration of the human rights situation in the country.⁹⁹⁷ The fact that Serbia has never publicly spoken against the practices of Azerbaijan's authoritarian regime illustrates that the issue of human rights and rule of law, and their potential future deteriorations, are unlikely to harm bilateral relations in any way whatsoever.

⁹⁹⁵ European Commission, "EU report: Stepping up bilateral cooperation with the perspective of concluding a new comprehensive EU-Azerbaijan agreement", 2019, available at:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_1674

⁹⁹⁶ European Commission, "Report on EU - Azerbaijan relations in the framework of the revised European Neighbourhood Policy", 2019, available at:

https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/2019_report_on_eu-azerbaijan_relations_in_the_framework_of_the_revised_european_neighbourhood_policy_0.pdf

⁹⁹⁷ European Parliament, "Resolution on Azerbaijan", 2015, available at:

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2015-0316_EN.html

V. 2 The United Arab Emirates – Serbia’s Closest Gulf Partner

Despite the fact there are no obvious geographical, geostrategic, or cultural links tying the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Serbia together, the last decade has seen an increase in political and economic cooperation between the two. The following explains **how the UAE has changed from being a country with whom Serbia did not have formal diplomatic relations with to a country described by the Serbian political establishment as “the most important partner of Serbia in the Gulf region”**.⁹⁹⁸

The UAE and Serbia have traditionally been on the opposing sides of the political arena. In fact, not only did the UAE actively support Bosnian Muslim factions during the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-95, providing support diplomatically and militarily), but it also publicly called for military intervention in 1998 against Serbia during the Kosovo War and was one of the first non-NATO member states to have supported the NATO bombing campaign of Serbia in 1999.⁹⁹⁹ Although it took the UAE and Serbia eight more years to officially establish diplomatic relations (in 2007),¹⁰⁰⁰ the two states did not immediately grow closer, especially as **the UAE was the first Arab state to recognise Kosovo’s* independence in 2008**.¹⁰⁰¹ **Nevertheless, relations finally began to improve when new political elites came to power in Serbia in 2012**.¹⁰⁰²

As Serbia sought investment, it decided to turn another page in relations with the UAE, a rapidly growing economy. **What motivated the UAE’s interest in Serbia was a primarily business-oriented logic**, particularly as it has been preparing for its post-oil future by

⁹⁹⁸ *NI*, “Dačić u UAE: Dogovor o ukidanju viza za državljane Srbije”, 2018, available at:

<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a421546/Dacic-Zelimo-stratesko-partnerstvo-sa-UAE.html>

⁹⁹⁹ Ibrahim Al Abed and Petter Hellyer (eds.), “United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective”, Trident Press, 2011, p.177, available at: <https://bit.ly/31BwaIK>

¹⁰⁰⁰ Serbian Ministry of Foreign Relations, “bilateralni odnosi sa stranim državama”, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.mfa.rs/sr/index.php/spoljna-politika/bilateralni-odnosi/117-bilateralni-odnosi/11545-ujedinjeni-arapski-emirati?lang=lat>

¹⁰⁰¹ Sultan Al-Qassemi, “It’s not enough for the UAE just to recognise Kosovo”, 2008, available at:

<http://sultanalqassemi.blogspot.com/2008/10/its-not-enough-for-uae-just-to.html>

¹⁰⁰² An individual considered to have contributed to establishing initial contact between the new Serbian political establishment and the UAE was Minister of Economy and Regional Development of the outgoing government and Minister of Finance and Economy of the newly formed government Mladen Dinkić. He was even appointed as chairman of Serbia’s Committee for Cooperation with the UAE in 2013.

Vreme, “Presušile najave”, 2015, available at:

<https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1328058>; and B92, 2013, available at:

B92, “Dinkić made deputy in Committee for Cooperation with UAE”, 2013, available at (in Serbian): https://www.b92.net/eng/news/business.php?yyyy=2013&mm=08&dd=26&nav_id=87445

diversifying its economy and strengthening its hold on global business.¹⁰⁰³ It appears that **the main engine of this change was the personal connection between Serbia's then-Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Defence (later PM and President) Aleksandar Vučić and the UAE's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed.** This relationship flourished; in a very short time span, they began to refer to each other as “friends”¹⁰⁰⁴ and even “brothers”.¹⁰⁰⁵ The expert community most commonly describes such personal relationships as a top-down and informal way of conducting business and politics, common both for Serbia and the UAE.¹⁰⁰⁶

In fact, **this personal touch to relations has had spillover effects on certain actions of the Serbian Government, which were marked with suspicion and controversy.** Between 2013 and 2014, as investigative journalists revealed, Serbia's government has quietly granted citizenship to Mohammed Dahlan, adviser to the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, as well as to his family and five of his supporters. Although the Serbian government never provided an explanation for its rationale in this case, it is suspected that it chose to do so as Dahlan is credited with helping to facilitate the UAE's investments in Serbia. He was even decorated by Serbia's President with the Medal of the Serbian Flag for his efforts. What makes this issue even more unusual is the fact that Dahlan was convicted in absentia for corruption in Palestine, showing that **Serbia's relationship with the UAE has clear political consequences as well.**¹⁰⁰⁷ Furthermore, the fact that Serbia has provided protection to Dahlan **further complicated its relations with Turkey,** a rival of the UAE. Turkey had in fact issued an arrest warrant for Dahlan, as it accused him of taking part in 2016's attempted coup.¹⁰⁰⁸ For now, Turkey has not taken this issue publicly. Nevertheless, this example shows the complexity of Serbia's balancing act.

¹⁰⁰³ Tena Prelec, “The UAE's presence in the Balkans: Commercial interest, geopolitical calculations, or a meeting point between ‘sultanism’ and authoritarianism?”, LSE Ideas, 2018, available at:

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2018/07/11/the-uaes-presence-in-the-balkans/>

¹⁰⁰⁴ RTV, “Vučić i šejk Abdulah potpisali izjavu o strateškom partnerstvu”, 2013, available at (in Serbian):

http://www.rtv.rs/sk/politika/vucic-i-seik-abdulah-potpisali-izjavu-o-strateskom-partnerstvu_371375.html

¹⁰⁰⁵ Blic, “Šejk se raspitivao o Titu, Vučića oslovljavao s “moj brat Aleksandar””, 2013, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.blic.rs/vesti/tema-dana/seik-se-raspitivao-o-titu-vucica-oslovljavao-s-moj-brat-aleksandar/md7pzkw>

¹⁰⁰⁶ Tena Prelec, “Doing Business in the Balkans, UAE Style”, ISPI, 2019, available at:

<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/doing-business-balkans-uae-style-22840>

¹⁰⁰⁷ Balkan Insight, “Serbia Quietly Grants Citizenship to Abbas Rival”, 2015, available at:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2015/01/30/serbia-quietly-grants-citizenship-to-abbas-rival/>

¹⁰⁰⁸ Voice of America, “Muhamed Dahlan, Palestinac sa državljanstvima Srbije i Crne Gore, na listi najtraženijih terorista u Turskoj”, 2019, available at:

<https://www.glasamerike.net/a/muhamed-dalan-palestinac-sa-dr%C5%BEavljanstvima-srbije-i-crne-gore-na-listi-najtra%C5%BEenijih-u-turskoj/5205798.html>

The critical juncture in terms of bilateral relations took place in 2013, when Serbia and the UAE signed a *Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership*. This move represented a breakthrough, particularly considering that the UAE remains the only non-EU country recognising Kosovo* with whom Serbia has made such a commitment.¹⁰⁰⁹ In fact, in an accompanying 2013 *Agreement on Cooperation*, the two sides primarily focused on extending bilateral cooperation in the fields of industry, commerce, agriculture, investment, customs and taxes, finance and banking, transportation and related infrastructure, and real estate. Other mentioned fields included security and military, culture, education and sports, and judicial and media cooperation, among others. Such cooperation was supposed to be followed by the intensification of official visits and the establishment of a joint committee or subcommittees to work on the themes covered by this agreement.¹⁰¹⁰

At the same time, **the two states agreed to extend cooperation to the area of defence as well.** In 2013, the two sides also signed an Agreement on Defence Cooperation, in which it was stated that a Joint Commission on Defence would be established, which would oversee cooperation in the areas of armaments and defence technologies, education and military training, military data, military intelligence work, and other defence areas.¹⁰¹¹

In practice, **this newly-established partnership has produced immediate benefits for the relations between the two countries.**¹⁰¹² Politically, Serbia opened an embassy in Abu Dhabi for the first time in 2013, and the UAE opened its own in Belgrade just a year later. Since, there have been regular high official visits to both the UAE and Serbia. In this context, it is important to note that the two countries have established close cooperation in terms of arms sales.

¹⁰⁰⁹ France and Italy, as powerful EU member states, recognise Kosovo* and have strategic partnerships with Serbia, while other strategic partnerships have been signed with those opposing Kosovo's* independence, such as China, Russia, Azerbaijan, and Greece.

¹⁰¹⁰ However, the fact that the Article 6 of the agreement stated that “[a]greements, contracts, programs and projects agreed in accordance with this agreement will not be subject to public procurement, public tender, public competing procedure or any other procedure defined in the National Legislation of the Republic of Serbia”, offered a glimpse at how and why future deals will also lack transparency. The fact that such a clause was left as part of the agreement represents a contradiction to Serbia’s obligations towards the EU in the areas of public procurement and competition rules.

See: Cooperation Agreement between Serbia and the UAE, Official Gazette, 2013, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/mu/skupstina/zakon/2013/3/4/reg>

¹⁰¹¹ Agreement on Defence Cooperation between Serbia and the UAE, Official Gazette, 2013, available at (in Serbian): <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/mu/skupstina/zakon/2013/3/5/reg>

¹⁰¹² Acknowledging the increasing presence of the UAE in Serbia, Former Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić argued that Serbia does not lean towards the UAE because of its economic power, but due to the “traditional partnership and open friendship between the two nations”. Considering the historical background presented in this paper, it quickly becomes clear that statements of this kind are far from the truth.

See: President of Serbia, “Tradicionalno partnerstvo i prijateljstvo Srbije i Emirata”, 2013, available at:

<https://www.predsednik.rs/lat/pres-centar/saopstenja/tradicionalno-partnerstvo-i-prijateljstvo-srbije-i-emirata>

According to official data from the Serbian Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Communications, **the UAE was the top export destination for Serbian arms in 2018.**¹⁰¹³ Considering that the UAE, together with Saudi Arabia, has led a bombing campaign in Yemen that has killed and injured thousands of civilians, there are concerns that it has been exploiting a loosely-regulated Serbian arms market to distribute weapons across the Middle East.¹⁰¹⁴

From the economic stand-point, a notable joint project included the formation of **a strategic partnership between Serbia's JAT Airways and the UAE's Etihad Airways, with Etihad acquiring a 49% stake in, and management rights for, the Serbian carrier**, while the Serbian government would keep the rest of shares and JAT's piled debt. As part of this deal, JAT Airways was rebranded as Air Serbia. To further promote the deal, Air Serbia's inaugural flight was to the UAE's capital, Abu Dhabi. Another highly important project in this relationship is the **Belgrade Waterfront urban revitalisation project**, supposedly with a cost of \$3 billion, with the aim of creating a new city centre in a previously-rundown 1.8 million square metre area along the Sava River in Belgrade.¹⁰¹⁵ A UAE-based developer, Eagle Hills, owns 68% of the project and the Serbian government owns the remaining 32%.¹⁰¹⁶ The latest development in business relations among Serbia and the UAE was the **selling of Agricultural Combine Belgrade (PKB)** to the Al Dahra company for €120 million. Even though this complex, which includes 17,000 hectares of agricultural land near Belgrade, needed investments for revitalisation, the selling price was estimated to be a half of the fair value of the purchased assets.¹⁰¹⁷ **A commonality of all of these projects is that they were promoted as key elements of the current Serbian political establishment's legacy.**

Another commonality of all projects is the amount of controversy and public outcry that followed their introductions. What instigated these reactions was **the lack of transparency of**

¹⁰¹³ The official data from the ministry can be found at the following: *Radio Free Europe*, "Gde Srbija izvozi naoružanje?", 2019, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-izvoz-naoruzanje/29776974.html>

¹⁰¹⁴ Amnesty International, "Yemen 2019", 2019, available at:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/yemen/report-yemen/>; and Middle East Eye, "The UAE's shadowy dealings in Serbia", 2015, available at:

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uaes-shadowy-dealings-serbia>

¹⁰¹⁵ Belgrade Waterfront, "About", available at:

<https://www.belgradewaterfront.com/en/about/belgrade-waterfront/>

¹⁰¹⁶ *Serbian Monitor*, "In 2018, Serbian government spent EUR 33mln on buying land for Belgrade Waterfront project", 2019, available at:

<https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/in-2018-serbian-government-spent-eur-33mln-on-buying-land-for-belgrade-waterfront-project/>

¹⁰¹⁷ *Insajder*, "Povoljnom kupovinom PKB-a Al Dahra zaradila 106 miliona evra", 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/14779/>

deal-making processes, the unavailability of contracts to the public, the rapid parliamentary procedures used to push them forward, and the dubious concessions that were granted to investors. Although the Serbian establishment prefers such an approach to business even when involving other foreign investors, no other cases have drawn as much as media and expert attention as the two UAE-related projects – Air Serbia and Belgrade Waterfront. Air Serbia, for instance, became the subject of a formal investigation by the European Commission at the beginning of 2014, with the threat that it could lose its license to fly in Europe as doubts surfaced about whether Etihad’s investments were in line with EU rules on ownership.¹⁰¹⁸ In the case of Belgrade Waterfront, **the European Parliament called on authorities, in its 2016 Serbia Report, to address a case of unlawful demolition of private property** by a group of unidentified masked men, intended to make way for the implementation of the project in Belgrade’s Savamala district, expressing concerns that there were no advances in the investigation to bring the perpetrators to justice.¹⁰¹⁹

Apart from the intensification of relations in terms of investments, the UAE's role in supporting the Serbian budget is also notable. Namely, in 2014, the **Government of Abu Dhabi** approved a \$1 billion loan with an interest rate of 2% to the Serbian government to help in covering the national budget shortfall.¹⁰²⁰ Two years later, a similar \$1 billion agreement was confirmed, but now the official lender was the Abu Dhabi Development Fund and the interest rate was 2.25%.¹⁰²¹ **With these two credit lines, the UAE holds 11% of Serbian external, and 6.5% of total, debt which represents the largest debt owed to an individual country by Serbia at the moment.**¹⁰²²

In terms of soft power, the UAE lacks solid ground in Serbia. In fact, its position is currently unfavourable, with **its name having become synonymous with controversies** stemming from the aforementioned projects. Also, as a non-secular, Muslim country, it does not have the

¹⁰¹⁸ Although the European Commission concluded that the airline’s new ownership structure was in line with the EU’s rules after a two-year long investigation, it called on responsible authorities to continue to monitor the situation.

See: *Insajder*, “Srpsko-arapska posla, transkript prve epizode”, 2018, available at (in Serbian):

<https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/srpskoarapskaposla/11335/Srpsko-arapska-posla-transkript-prve-epizode.htm>

¹⁰¹⁹ European Parliament, “Resolution on the 2016 Commission Report on Serbia”, 2017, available at:

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0261_EN.html

¹⁰²⁰ Zakon o potvrđivanju sporazuma o zajmu između Vlade Republike Srbije kao zajmoprimca i Vlade Emirata Abu Dabi (Ujedinjeni Arapski Emirati) kao zajmodavca u vezi sa zajmom u iznosu od 1.000.000.000 američkih dolara, Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 5/2014.

¹⁰²¹ Zakon o potvrđivanju ugovora o zajmu između Vlade Republike Srbije i Fonda za razvoj Abu Dabija za budžetsku podršku, Official Gazette of the RS - International Agreements No. 10/2016

¹⁰²² Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Serbia - Public Debt Administration, Quarterly Report, June 2020, available at: <http://www.javnidug.gov.rs/eng/default.asp?P=118&MenuItem=4>

ability to win over the “hearts” of the local population like Russia does, for example. Nevertheless, **the UAE has not given up entirely on securing its image in Serbia.** From the humanitarian stand-point, it sent an emergency planeload of humanitarian and medical aid to Serbia in March 2020 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰²³ According to the analysis, the UAE was fairly quick to provide this aid, representing the **5th country chronologically to send assistance to Serbia during the pandemic.**¹⁰²⁴ It also provided assistance in building houses for citizens affected by the 2014 floods.¹⁰²⁵ Another important aspect in soft power relations is tourism. In fact, the UAE is becoming increasingly attractive to tourists from Serbia, particularly with direct flights between Dubai and Abu Dhabi and Belgrade. For this reason, the two countries **agreed to abolish visas in 2018**, effective as of 2019.¹⁰²⁶

In addition, **another area in which the UAE is building its soft power is the Sandžak region in Serbia**, an area populated primarily by Muslims. With the aim of boosting its appeal in this region, it funded the completion of a Diagnostic Centre at the General Hospital of Novi Pazar in 2017.¹⁰²⁷ At that time, the UAE also funded the renovations of an elementary school and kindergarten in this city.¹⁰²⁸ These three projects are estimated to have cost approximately €7 million.¹⁰²⁹ Some have indicated, however, that the UAE may be using its close ties to, and investment strategies in, Serbia to thwart its rival Turkey from establishing a firm foothold and spreading its own economic and geopolitical influence in the Western Balkans.¹⁰³⁰ By investing

¹⁰²³ *CorD*, “Plane from the UAE with medical aid arrived in Serbia”, 2020, available at:

<https://cordmagazine.com/news/plane-from-the-uae-with-medical-aid-arrived-in-serbia/>

¹⁰²⁴ Strahinja Subotić, “Timeline of foreign assistance for fighting COVID-19”, European Policy Centre (CEP), 2020, available at: <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Timeline-of-foreign-assistance.pdf>

¹⁰²⁵ Embassy of Serbia to the UAE, “First lady of the Republic of Serbia meets representatives of UAE humanitarian organisations”, 2014, available at:

<http://www.abudhabi.mfa.gov.rs/newstext.php?subaction=showfull&id=1417333610&ucat=19&template=Headlines&>

¹⁰²⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, “Vize za inostranstvo i informacije o državama”, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.mfa.gov.rs/sr/index.php/konzularni-poslovi/putovanja-u-inostranstvo/vize-za-inostranstvo-i-informacije-o-drzavama/100-spisak-zemalja-za-putovanje-u-inostranstvo/10570-uae?lang=lat>

¹⁰²⁷ *Anadolu Agency*, “Novi Pazar dobio savremeni Dijagnostički centar, bez listi čekanja”, 2017, available at (in Serbian):

<https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/zdravlje/novi-pazar-dobio-savremeni-dijagnosti%C4%8Dki-centar-bez-listi-%C4%8Dkanja-/824564>

¹⁰²⁸ In order to further boost its appeal among the local Muslim population, the UAE distributed meals for Iftar during Ramadan in collaboration with the Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation and the UAE Red Crescent, and in coordination with the Serbian Islamic Community, in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Novi Pazar.

See: *CorD*, “UAE Embassy Donates Aid to Muslims in Serbia”, 2016, available at:

<https://cordmagazine.com/events/uae-embassy-donates-to-muslims-in-serbia/>

¹⁰²⁹ *RTV*, “Sedam miliona evra iz Emirata za Novi Pazar”, 2015, available at (in Serbian):

http://rtv.rs/sr_ci/ekonomija/aktuelno/sedam-miliona-evra-iz-emirata-za-novi-pazar_591787.html

¹⁰³⁰ The fact that the UAE’s ambassador to the US argued that his country’s rulers “don’t want Turkey...to be able to shape a dinner menu much less a country”, and that Turkey under President Erdoğan presents a “long-term

in such efforts, **the UAE shows that Turkey is not the only Muslim country ready to support citizens in Sandžak, and that the UAE’s approach to Serbia sometimes stretches beyond simply business.**

All things considered, **the UAE’s impacts on Serbia’s EU perspective are mixed.** For now, there are no indications that this country would oppose Serbia’s membership in the EU, nor that it is actively working to undermine it. Yet, some activities undertaken by the Serbian government related, in one way or another, with the country’s relationship with the UAE, do harm rule of law processes in Serbia, and thus in turn hurt Serbia’s EU prospects. For this reason, the activities of the UAE in Serbia require close monitoring going forward.

threat”, shows the true feelings of the UAE towards Turkey. Based on this, it can be inferred that the UAE would prefer for the political and economic relations of Serbia and Turkey to be limited.

Middle East Eye, “The UAE’s shadowy dealings in Serbia”, 2015, available at:

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uaes-shadowy-dealings-serbia>; and

Daily Sabah, “UAE doesn’t want Turkey to even shape a dinner menu, Otaiba says”, 2017, available at:

<https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2017/08/04/uae-doesnt-want-turkey-to-even-shape-a-dinner-menu-otaiba-says>

V. 3 The US – Serbia’s Uneasy Relationship with the World’s Leading Superpower

The United States of America (US) is a leading global power with major influence on the Western Balkans. Although the region has not been on the list of the US’s top priorities since the end of the 1990s, during which it left an indelible mark, the US continues to closely engage with the region. That the US has been the key supporter of Kosovo’s* attempts towards state-building, as well as the main driver of NATO’s expansion into the region (with Montenegro joining in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020), showcases just how much it values the region’s geostrategic position. **It also strives to drive out other powers from the region: predominately Russia but increasingly China.** Only by comprehending this context can the US’s complicated relationship with Serbia be understood.

From an economic standpoint, formal trade relations were completely re-established between the two countries only in 2003, when the US gave Serbia the status of “most-favoured nation”, allowing preferential terms of trade.¹⁰³¹ Still, **Serbia’s trade relationship with this huge market has remained underdeveloped and underutilised.** The recent engagement of the US-based company Bechtel in Serbian infrastructure development is notable, however. In consortium with the Turkish company Enka, Bechtel is participating in the **construction of the Pojate-Preljina highway** which will cost the Serbian government approximately €745 million plus an extra 20% for additional works not specified at the moment.¹⁰³² Nevertheless, **politics remains the key defining point of bilateral relations between Serbia and the US.** Namely, the relationship between the US and Serbia has traditionally been overburdened by the issue of the status of Kosovo*. The lowest point in bilateral relations since the 1999 NATO bombing campaign of Serbia was marked when the US embassy in Belgrade was set ablaze by protestors in the aftermath of Kosovo’s* 2008 self-proclamation of independence. Another case from the past that still burdens bilateral relations is the death of the Bytyqi brothers, Americans of Kosovo-Albanian origin, who were detained and killed by unknown perpetrators in aftermath of the Kosovo War. This case remains a high priority for the US, and the US State Department still expects Serbian authorities to fully investigate, and bring to justice, those responsible.¹⁰³³

¹⁰³¹ Demostat, “Trgovina sa SAD”, 2018, available at (in Serbian): <https://demostat.rs/sr/vesti/istrazivanje/trgovina-sa-sad/329>

¹⁰³² For more information about this project see the chapter in this study dedicated to cooperation in infrastructure projects between Serbia and Turkey.

¹⁰³³ *Radio Free Europe*, “U.S. House Presses Serbia On Murders Of Three U.S. Brothers”, 2019, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/u-s-house-presses-serbia-on-murders-of-three-u-s-brothers-during-kosovo-war/30232674.html>

With the aim of renewing bilateral relations and encouraging Serbia to “tone down” its rhetoric towards Priština,¹⁰³⁴ then-US Vice President Joe Biden came to Serbia in 2009, followed by a visit by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton a year later. Although no significant breakthroughs were made during these visits, **relations with the US started to improve somewhat. This evolution could be attributed to Belgrade’s willingness to negotiate with Priština** since 2010, particularly after the signing of the 2013 Brussels Agreement and subsequent agreements in 2015.¹⁰³⁵

Moderate improvements in relations came with Donald Trump’s presidency, as he was perceived by the Serbian government as a much better option for Serbia than his rival, Hillary Clinton. In spite of his “America First” principle, **the Trump administration has indeed shown greater readiness to engage as a mediator in a dialogue between Belgrade and Priština, as well as lend an ear to Serbian voices.** Although sceptical at first of possible US mediation efforts, even considering to involve Russia, widening the dialogue format,¹⁰³⁶ Serbian authorities appear to have found common ground with the US administration,¹⁰³⁷ whose President already had widespread support among the local population.¹⁰³⁸ In fact, the role of the US in negotiations particularly intensified after Richard Grenell was appointed as a Special Presidential Envoy.¹⁰³⁹ Considering that he was US ambassador to Germany at the time, and later appointed Acting Director of National Intelligence, Grenell’s presence indicated that the US was willing to step up its game.

¹⁰³⁴ *Balkan Insight*, “Mixed Emotions Ahead of Biden Balkans Visit”, 2009, available at:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2009/05/16/mixed-emotions-ahead-of-biden-balkans-visit/>

¹⁰³⁵ Milan Krstić, “Budućnost odnosa Srbije i SAD – Kosovo, Rusija i Republika Srpska”, 2020, Talas, available at (in Serbian): <https://talas.rs/2020/01/30/buducnost-odnosa-srbije-i-sad/>

¹⁰³⁶ *NI*, “Vučić: Ako bude širenja dijaloga, Rusi spremni da se uključe”, 2017, available at (in Serbian):

<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a350655/Vucic-Ako-bude-sirenja-dijaloga-Rusi-spremni-da-se-ukljuce.html>

¹⁰³⁷ Aleksandar Vučić Official Website, “Ako Tramp pobedi, Srbiji će biti lakše”, 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://vucic.rs/Vesti/Najnovije/a37665-Vucic-smatra-da-bi-u-slucaju-pobede-Donlada-Trampa-Srbiji-bilo-lakse-vucic.rs.html>

¹⁰³⁸ The fact that Donald Trump run against Hilary Clinton in the 2016 Presidential race was what has earned him popularity among the local population, especially as the latter is considered as an extension of Bill Clinton, who was U.S. president at the time of the NATO bombardment in 1999.

Ekspres, “Trampomanija sa šajkačom: Kako je prva Srbija zavolela drugu Ameriku”, 2016, available at (in Serbian): <https://www.ekspres.net/svet/trampomanija-sa-sajkacom-kad-je-prva-srbija-zavolela-drugu-ameriku>

¹⁰³⁹ Grenell’s first notable achievement was the signing of agreements by both Belgrade and Priština to develop rail and motorway connections to help facilitate the flow of people and goods, together with an agreement to re-establish direct flights between the two cities for the first time in 21 years.

See: US Embassy to Serbia, “Special Presidential Envoy Grenell on Serbia-Kosovo Rail and Highway Agreements “, 2020, available at:

<https://rs.usembassy.gov/special-presidential-envoy-grenell-statement-on-serbia-kosovo-rail-and-highway-agreements/>

However, **the fact that the US has become increasingly assertive regarding the Belgrade-Priština dialogue has at the same time somewhat negatively impacted the role and reputation of the EU**, under whose umbrella negotiations were officially led in the past decade. The first notable split between the US and the EU took place when it came to the proposed idea of a land swap, as the US hinted that it would be ready to back the idea (thus reversing its prior dismissal of any further border changes in the region),¹⁰⁴⁰ while EU member states such as Germany strongly voiced their disapproval of it.¹⁰⁴¹ Furthermore, the fact that the US brought the negotiating sides to Washington D.C. in September 2020,¹⁰⁴² bypassing Brussels, effectively sent the message that the EU is unable to sort out geopolitical issues in its own backyard, as was the case during the 1990s.

Meanwhile, the fact that the economic normalisation agreement signed in the White House included a clauses unrelated to the dialogue (such as for Serbia to move its embassy to Jerusalem),¹⁰⁴³ showed that Belgrade-Priština negotiations were, in part, co-opted by Trump for his own domestic agenda in the context of the upcoming presidential race. This move also represented a poke in the eye of the EU, as it has traditionally been a vocal opponent of moving embassies to Jerusalem.¹⁰⁴⁴ If Serbia fulfils this commitment, the rift between Belgrade and Brussels will further widen, in an example which shows that the **US’ activities in the Western Balkans can potentially cause direct harm to the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy**. Such unilateral moves are detrimental, particularly considering that Serbia already has a weak record in aligning its policy with that of the EU. Therefore, although the US supposedly

¹⁰⁴⁰ *The Guardian*, “US-backed Kosovo land-swap border plan under fire from all sides”, 2018, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/03/us-backed-kosovo-land-swap-border-plan-under-fire-from-all-sides>

¹⁰⁴¹ *Politico*, “Angela Merkel: No Balkan border changes”, 2018, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-no-balkan-border-changes-kosovo-serbia-vucic-thaci/>

¹⁰⁴² Why these talks were scheduled in September is explained by the fact that the US elections were just two months away. The fact that President Trump managed to fit these negotiations into his schedule shows that he hoped to present this agreed deal as a matter of his successful leadership and foreign policy to the public during the presidential electoral race.

See: *European Western Balkans*, “Grenell: Kosovo and Serbia deserve economic normalization, let’s put politics aside”, 2020, available at:

<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/09/03/grenell-kosovo-and-serbia-deserve-economic-normalization-lets-put-politics-aside/>

¹⁰⁴³ US White House (@WhiteHouse), “President @realDonaldTrump just announced a historic breakthrough between Serbia and Kosovo! “, Twitter, 2020, available at:

<https://twitter.com/WhiteHouse/status/1301917811753783302?s=20>

¹⁰⁴⁴ *Independent*, “Jerusalem latest: All 28 EU foreign ministers warned Trump administration not to move US embassy”, 2017, available at:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/jerusalem-latest-updates-eu-foreign-minister-donald-trump-us-embassy-move-tel-aviv-palestine-edited-a8097521.html>

supports Serbia's path to the EU, its actions have not always been fully compatible or in sync with the EU's intentions and activities.

Where the US and the EU can agree politically is that Serbia “cannot sit on two chairs at the same time”, referencing Belgrade’s warm relations with Moscow.¹⁰⁴⁵ The US has repeatedly made open calls to the Serbian establishment to distance itself from Russia, arguing that Russia's increased involvement can only hurt Serbia's progress towards the EU. The fact that the previously-mentioned economic agreement also had a clause stating that Serbia will diversify its energy supply shows that the US aims to make Serbia less dependent on Russia. Throughout the past years, the US has also been trying to prevent Serbia from complying with Moscow's request for its staff at the so-called Russian Humanitarian Centre in Niš to be given diplomatic immunity.¹⁰⁴⁶ Another aspect of concern for the US was Serbia's willingness to buy military equipment from Russia, going so far as warning Belgrade to be "careful and cautious" about acquiring Russian military systems if it hopes to avoid US sanctions.¹⁰⁴⁷ In both cases, it appears that Serbia has caved in, **by taking a step away from Russia and complying with the US' requests, thus illustrating that the US still holds significant political leverage.**

What keeps Serbia as a potential asset in the eyes of the US is its increasing willingness to cooperate with NATO even if it continues to hold a firm stance against potential membership in this military alliance. In fact, a major milestone in relations between Serbia and NATO took place in 2015, when they agreed on the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), representing the highest possible level of cooperation between NATO and a non-member such as Serbia. Although Serbia cooperates with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), an intergovernmental alliance between Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, the number of exercises and activities Serbia participates in with it, or with Russia bilaterally, are far outmatched by Serbia's cooperation with NATO and the US.¹⁰⁴⁸ In fact, in the period from 2012 to 2019, Serbia has participated in 109 joint military exercises with NATO and its member states.¹⁰⁴⁹ **In other words, Serbia's practical military cooperation**

¹⁰⁴⁵ *Euractiv*, “Serbia’s EU bid leader insists Belgrade is not ‘sitting on two chairs’”, 2017, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/serbias-eu-bid-leader-insists-belgrade-is-not-sitting-on-two-chairs/>

¹⁰⁴⁶ *Balkan Insight*, “US Official to Visit Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre”, 2017, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/07/12/usa-representatives-to-visit-serbian-russian-humanitarian-centre-07-11-2017/>

¹⁰⁴⁷ *Business Standard*, “US warns Serbia off buying Russian missile systems”, 2019, available at: https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/us-warns-serbia-off-buying-russian-missile-systems-119110201026_1.html

¹⁰⁴⁸ For more on joint military exercises with Russia, see the chapter on Russia of this policy study.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Institute for European Affairs, “Stavovi građana Srbije prema NATO”, 2019, available at (in Serbian):

with the West comes on top and is unlikely to be brought into question by Serbia's occasional gaze towards the East.¹⁰⁵⁰

When it comes to US' soft power in Serbia, the results are mixed. On the one hand, its film, digital, and music industries are the most pervasive of any country's. In addition, the US is a country which remains highly attractive to many Serbian tourists, as well as to students due to its high-ranking universities. On the other hand, public polls show that the local population still blames the US for the NATO bombing campaign of Serbia in 1999, during which a large number of innocent civilians lost their lives and much of Serbia's infrastructure was destroyed. Serbs also see the US as a key patron of Kosovo's* independence, a reason the majority of citizens think that Serbia should not align its foreign policy with that of the US.¹⁰⁵¹ Therefore, by bearing in mind the variety of positive and negative aspects regarding the US' image in Serbia, it becomes clear why, as according to a September 2020 poll,¹⁰⁵² the local population on average rates bilateral cooperation with the US with a mark of 2.63 (on a scale from 1 to 5).

Nevertheless, **the US actively engages in reshaping its image in Serbia**, particularly through its Agency for International Development (USAID), responsible for providing financial assistance in various areas. Its key focuses in Serbia include legal and judicial development, democratic participation and civil society, anti-corruption organisations and institutions, and legislatures and political parties.¹⁰⁵³ According to its data, USAID donated \$15 million to Serbia in 2018, and started its programme in Serbia in 2001 with a donation of \$98 million.¹⁰⁵⁴ The US also focuses on providing humanitarian aid to Serbia through this agency. The latest example of such assistance took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the US donated \$1.38 million, partnering with UNICEF¹⁰⁵⁵ and the Red Cross of Serbia.¹⁰⁵⁶ Such efforts were

<http://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/13-Stav-gra%C4%91ana-Srbije-prema-NATO-u-mart-2019.pdf>

¹⁰⁵⁰ See the chapter on Russia for more details on Serbia's military cooperation with Russia.

¹⁰⁵¹ Faculty of Political Science, "Stavovi građana Republike Srbije o COVID-19", University of Belgrade, 2020, p.22, available at (in Serbian):

<http://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/Izve%C5%A1taj-Stavovi-gra%C4%91ana-Republike-Srbije-o-COVID-19.pdf?jezik=lat>

¹⁰⁵² Institute for European Affairs, "Stavovi građana Srbije prema Americi", 2020, slide 6, available at (in Serbian):

<http://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020-Stav-gradjana-Srbije-prema-SAD-mart.pdf>

¹⁰⁵³ USAID, "U.S. Foreign Aid by Country – Serbia", 2020, available at:

https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/SRB?fiscal_year=2018&implementing_agency_id=1&measure=Obligations

¹⁰⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵⁵ USAID, "USAID partners with UNICEF to assist serbia in combating COVID-19", 2020, available at:

<https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/videos/usaaid-partners-unicef-assist-serbia-combating-covid-19>

¹⁰⁵⁶ US Embassy in Serbia, "USAID Partners with Serbian Red Cross on COVID-19 Response", 2020, available at: <https://rs.usembassy.gov/usaaid-partners-with-serbian-red-cross-on-covid-19-response/>

even reinforced by donations from private US companies, such as the United Group¹⁰⁵⁷ and McDonald's,¹⁰⁵⁸ which provided \$1 million and €34,000 worth of donations respectively. On top of this, realising that investments and donations are insufficient to erase negative perceptions from the past, the US Embassy in Belgrade has taken a more proactive and "personalised" approach in its public diplomacy in recent years in order to reach wider audiences.¹⁰⁵⁹

All things considered, the US remains a global superpower which is able to strongly project its power in Serbia. Although the US is not necessarily always on the same page with the EU, they remain key allies, especially as they both aim to better integrate Serbia into the Euro-Atlantic world, pulling it further away from Russia and from increasingly-important China. Regardless of the results of the US presidential elections in November 2020, the US is expected to keep Serbia on its radar as a key player in the region. The only thing that might change, in the case of Trump's failure to secure a second term, is its willingness to intrude into the EU's efforts to reach a legally-binding normalisation agreement between Belgrade and Priština.

¹⁰⁵⁷ N1, "U celosti isporučena medicinska oprema koju je donirala United Grupa", 2020, available at (in Serbian): <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a599982/U-celosti-isporucena-medicinska-oprema-koju-je-donirala-United-Grupa.html>

¹⁰⁵⁸ Nova ekonomija, "McDonald's u Srbiji donirao preko 4 miliona dinara u novcu i obrocima", 2020, available at (in Serbian):

<https://novaekonomija.rs/csr-club/2020/mcdonalds-u-srbiji-donirao-preko-4-miliona-dinara-u-novcu-i-obrocima>

¹⁰⁵⁹ Not only did the US appoint proactive ambassadors who speak Serbian fluently, such as Kyle Scott (from 2016 to 2019) and Anthony Godfrey (from 2019 to today), but the embassy started promoting the positive aspects of Serbian-American cooperation throughout history, such as with celebrations of the anniversary of the WWI partnership and the anniversary of the "Halyard Operation," and the production of a video commercial honouring the group of Serbian-Americans who worked on the Apollo Moon-landing programme in the 1960s and 1970s. See: Milan Krstić, "Godišnjica misije Halijard: Amerika i Rusija u nadmetanju za „srca i umove“ građana Srbije", Talas, 2019, available at (in Serbian): <https://talas.rs/2019/09/18/godisnjica-misije-halijard/>

VI Conclusion & Recommendations

VI. 1 Concluding Remarks

Given Serbia's size and political importance in the Western Balkans, its intensified cooperation with the non-EU countries analysed in this study is changing and further complicating the geopolitical landscape of this region. Considering this context, analysing different dimensions of foreign actors' influence, namely in terms of their political, economic, and social impacts, has proven to have great value in painting the full picture of the state of affairs regarding Serbia's accession process.

Although Serbia has made steps forward on its path towards the EU, particularly after the Stabilisation and Association Agreement was signed in 2008 and after accession talks were started in 2014, and in spite of being increasingly integrated into the EU market, it continues to seek attention from both of the East and the West. The longer Serbia's accession process has lasted, the more Serbia has cooperated with external actors – especially as they have shown the willingness and ability to tackle the niches not addressed by the EU. In fact, there is a clear, increasing trend of external actor involvement in Serbia in the aftermath of Kosovo's self-declared independence in 2008. This has been particularly apparent in the roles of Russia and China, and followed by Serbia's efforts to build closer relations with Azerbaijan, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, once the new political elites came to power in 2012.

Although not all activities undertaken between Serbia and these foreign actors are malign *per se*, in terms of Serbia's EU accession process, this study has shown that the analysed countries do nevertheless sometimes and in various degrees contribute to the deterioration of principles like rule of law, good governance, transparency, and public procurement. However, it is not usually foreign actors driving such deteriorations but Serbian officials, who prefer to conduct business away from public eyes. In fact, although the mentioned principles are essential to Serbia's accession process, Serbian officials see no direct benefits in changing their approach, regardless of who is on the other side of the table, while the external actors only follow their opportunistic interests.

Furthermore, the EU's leverage in Serbia is challenged as results of external actors' projects are becoming tangible, particularly when their actions are accompanied by overwhelming media coverage and praised by Serbia's officials. Also, the longer Serbia backs external actors

in terms of foreign policy alignment, the more trust between their leaderships is generated, which in turn creates the trend of extending cooperation in multiple areas. China is the most notable example of this phenomenon, as with its patient and step-by-step policy regarding Serbia it was successful in increasing its leverage in a relatively short period of time. In this regard, the Belt and Road Initiative goes beyond purely economic considerations and has ushered the path for widened and deepened Sino-Serbian cooperation.

Meanwhile, another trend can be seen in the fact that Serbian officials have shown readiness to extend cooperation with actors which have not been its traditional partners. The fact that Azerbaijan, as a Muslim country, has decided not to recognise Kosovo is a matter that has created fertile ground for greater economic cooperation. Nevertheless, Serbia has also shown the ability to pragmatically turn a blind eye on its disagreement over Kosovo with Turkey and the UAE, with the aim of generating further investment and business opportunities.

Additionally, it is clear that the geopolitics in the region are never static. This applies even to those foreign actors which have seemed to have had an irreplaceable position of a favourite, such as Russia. Although Russia, as a traditional partner of Serbia, has kept some level of leverage in terms of political capital and soft power, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that it is being replaced by China on the priority list of Serbia's officials. Furthermore, its position is slowly, but surely, losing importance, particularly as the US has shown willingness to reassert a stronger role through rapprochement with Serbia.

This creates a window of opportunity, as the EU has also announced a stronger geopolitical readiness to get involved. Without a revised, invigorated, and comprehensive EU approach to Serbia's delicate geopolitical context, which would include its impactful involvement in the areas of politics, economics, and social development, Serbia will not be incentivised to turn its back on its foreign partners.

VI. 2 Recommendations

The EU should be better engaged in making Serbia's EU accession process more politically and economically motivating. By doing so, the Serbian political leadership will have fewer incentives to eye the East. There are multiple ways to ensure this happens and to increase the EU's political, economic, and social capital. The following presents general conclusions and country-specific conclusions for EU policymakers regarding the foreign actors that were analysed in depth in this policy study.

VI. 2. 1 General Recommendations

- Implementing the revised enlargement methodology, first proposed in the French non-paper and then developed by the European Commission, would be another step in a positive direction, considering that the Serbian leadership has already shown readiness to accept this methodology.
 - EU member states should use the opportunity to politically steer the accession process with increased scrutiny, holding Serbia accountable in case of its failure to demonstrate clear political commitment to EU membership going forward. In cooperation with the European Commission, they should define a set of strict and measurable benchmarks, in order to better evaluate whether and to what extent Serbian authorities are committed to the notions of rule of law and human rights, both rhetorically and practically.
 - The trap of bilateralisation of the accession process should be avoided, as the use of bilateral issues to block individual countries' accession negotiations can undermine the legitimacy and credibility of the process. Instead, political steer should lead towards more transparency in terms of member states' expectations. The proposed annual Inter-governmental conferences could be the right place for setting those expectations, loud and clear, by producing roadmaps which would clearly set the priorities of member states.
 - Closer and accelerated integration can take place by allowing Serbia to gradually phase into individual EU policies and programmes, as the methodology envisions, based on its achieved level of progress in negotiations. The same should apply the other way around. In case of serious delays in

reforms, or even backsliding, performance-based IPA III would allow for reversibility principle to be applied.

- The EU should propose a potential date for Serbia's accession, with the aim of making the process more appealing, credible, and tangible. It would also provide greater insight for the public to follow how their Government is implementing its obligations. This proposed date could represent a moving target that could be reassessed based on annual monitoring reports.
- Once EU member states ensure a stronger political steer of the process, they should use the opportunity to create greater leverage *vis-à-vis* Serbia's alignment with Chapter 31, on foreign policy.
 - The EU should not lower its expectations when it comes to the requirement of Serbia to progressively align with the Common Foreign and Security Policy. What is needed is for the EU to hold Serbian officials accountable when they decide to publicly downplay the fact they aligned with certain declarations, as was the case with the one on Belarus. In other words, the EU should send a clear message that the alignment rate will only be considered genuine when it is accompanied by rhetorical endorsement as well.
 - The process of naming and shaming should be invoked even when it comes to Serbia's alignment in international bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Council, or when Serbia sends unilateral messages of support to authoritarian regimes.
 - A conditionality mechanism could be tied to pre-accession funds received by Serbia in order to raise the costs of not progressively aligning with the EU's CFSP. If this mechanism is applied, certain aspects of provision or restriction of pre-accession funds, those designated to CSO's, youth and media, should remain open to the beneficiaries.
 - The fact that the European Commission's 2020 Serbia Country Report dedicated more space to analysis of Chapter 31 is a positive step forward, and the subsequent reports should be even more detailed in this regard, as it raises awareness and gives further weight to this institution as a geopolitical actor.
 - In order to gain a full perspective on the situation and potentially develop a way forward, the High Commissioner's office should engage in an active consultation process with Serbian civil society organisations on this matter.

- Allowing Serbia to take part in the Conference on the Future of Europe as a candidate country, as then-candidates participated in the Convention on the Future of the EU in 2002-2003 as observers, would be a token of political dedication that could further help to build good faith, solidarity, and mutual trust. Therefore, EU institutions and EU member states should unanimously agree on inviting Serbia, and other Western Balkan countries, to participate as observer. The EU should also envision the inclusion of civil society organisations as part of the observer delegation as well.

- The EU should continue to strongly prioritise negotiations between Belgrade and Priština, as not only is this process essential for regional stability, but also as its unresolved status will remain a key determinant of Serbia’s current foreign policy. In this regard, better coordination and synchronisation of activities between the EU and the US is necessary. Otherwise, disunity decreases the EU’s leverage as a mediator, and negatively impacts the likelihood of reaching a comprehensive and legally-binding agreement in a timely manner. In that regard, there is a need to increase the transparency of the negotiation process as much as it is possible. This would make the negotiations more visible to EU member states and contribute to better understanding of the process among citizens of the two communities, requirements from both sides, and eventually the legitimacy of the process and its outcome.

- The EU needs to increase its cooperation with the National Assembly of Serbia, particularly considering there is a displayed trend of executive bias, and insufficient involvement of the assembly in the EU accession process.
 - The European Parliament should seek to strengthen the work both of formal bodies such as the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC), as well as the European Parliament’s informal group “Friends of Serbia”.
 - The EU should develop an action plan on how the European Integration Committees of various member states’ parliaments could become more actively involved, better coordinating their activities with those of their counterparts in Serbia.

- Legal and practical solutions should be sought to allow Serbia's parliamentarians to have observer status at the European Parliament as they do at the Assembly of the Collective Security Treaty Organization.
- Given the specificities of incumbent composition of the Serbian Assembly, the EU needs to find the ways to contribute to broader dialogue with those political parties which are not represented in this institution. This is necessary in order to strengthen the legitimacy of Serbia's European integration process.
- In order for the EU to strengthen its political and economic leverage in Serbia, it is essential that EU significantly increases its investments, and to do so before the even wider involvement of external actors.
 - The fact that the European Commission has already put forward an Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans as part of the Pre-accession Assistance for 2021-27 (IPA III), is a good starting point. Considering that the EIP strongly focuses on infrastructure, it could better equip the EU to outbid offers coming from third actors, particularly as the Plan is based on grants, and support through the proposed Western Balkans Guarantee Facility.
 - The EU should make sure that the funds distributed under the EIP are fully utilised, and that proposed flagship projects are implemented in a timely manner. If project experts are needed for these purposes, the EU could send them to Serbia to assist their Serbian counterparts. In order to produce tangible benefits for citizens, the EU needs to make sure that resources are being properly allocated, without leaving any room for untransparent and clientelist misuse by Serbian officials.
 - As Serbia will have less need to look for assistance from other foreign actors once the current development gap is narrowed, the EU should look further ways to finance projects in a manner that would build upon the existing Plan envisioned under the IPA III.
 - Gradual access to structural funds should be made available to Serbia, as originally proposed in the French non-paper on the revised methodology. The fact that such gradual access was not mentioned in the Commission's revised enlargement methodology represents a significant missed opportunity, which is why the EU needs to find alternative ways to back Serbia and the rest of the region.

- Germany and France, as leaders of the new geopolitical vision of European sovereignty, should be the frontrunners in advocating the need for greater investment in the region, as a sustainable way of strengthening EU's wider geopolitical autonomy.
- The EU should also include Serbia in the EU's framework for the screening of foreign direct investments (FDI) at least in a form of associated membership. This would allow for the better coordination of economic policies with the Union and for the establishment of clear principles/rules regarding receiving FDI. This way, foreign investments will be welcomed, but only if they are economically sound and based on real needs. Without this mechanism, these investments might be misused by Serbia's officials to further build closer ties with EU's competitors. With mutual coordination and an FDI screening tool in the place, this would also gradually lead to an improved convergence rate between the Serbian economy and the EU.
- EU officials need to insist more vocally on the principle of applying public tender procedures as standard practise used by Serbian decision-makers in choosing partners for infrastructure projects.
 - Local political elites should be encouraged not to restrict competition and to ensure the full transparency of the process of negotiating intergovernmental agreements with equal treatment and non-discrimination for all interested parties during their implementation. Selecting a partner which offers the best price and construction works conditions would have a positive impact on public finances and ensure the optimal use of resources.
- The visibility of existing and subsequent EU projects and investments, as well as their overall positive externalities on Serbia's economy, need to be better additionally promoted by the EU and the recipient government, both in the traditional and digital media. Only then will the distorted perceptions of Serbian citizens be altered, which could also provide a stronger support to pro-EU sentiments in Serbia.
 - Campaigns to raise the public awareness of EU activities should be developed for the short- and long-term perspectives and carried out across Serbia, while

the promotion of projects should be data-driven and tailored to specific audiences in order to maximise desired results.

- A comprehensive communication strategy for social media (including online news and social networks) should be developed, as these represent the main channels the youth rely upon for news and personal expression.
- The EU should step up its support of activities that would provide greater backing for the protection and promotion of media freedom and professional reporting in Serbia.
 - The EU should endorse the work of independent media and investigative journalists, particularly those exposing links between tabloids and official state structures, as the Serbian media has long represented one of the key elements reinforcing Russia's public appeal, and increasingly China's, among the local population.
 - EU assistance and the assistance of EU member states could be provided to independent media and investigative journalists in Serbia by increasing funding, as well as by sharing best practices and facilitating exchanges with journalists and others working in the media sector in the EU.
 - Although the European Commission's annual country reports on Serbia note year after year that there is no progress in terms of building media freedom, it should hire independent experts who could follow the process and pinpoint those responsible for this issue.
 - The EU could engage in an exercise of naming and shaming, especially when certain statements by Serbian high officials are used to boost pro-Russia or -China rhetoric, while conducting slander campaigns against the EU.
 - At the same time, in order for the EU to boost pro-EU sentiment among the Serbian population, the highest officials of the EU, such as the President of the European Commission, or the President of the European Council, should visit Serbia on a more frequent basis. Increased coverage will allow the EU to grab the attention of the local population and better promote the EU's achievements in Serbia. In addition, such coverage would allow the EU to send clear messages to local elites on its commitment to Serbia's European integration process. Yet, it should be noted that the limits of diplomatic language should not prevent these EU officials from warning that more progress in key areas is needed, while requiring clear rhetorical commitment from Serbian officials.

- The EU could consider using the existing channels of engagement and cooperation (Permanent Structured Cooperation - PESCO, European Defence Agency - EDA, and other relevant channels) to increase strategic communication with Serbia as a future EU member state. Serbia has already supported the PESCO and has announced its readiness to be included in it as soon as proper conditions are created, while it has signed an administrative cooperation agreement with the EDA in 2013. By extending on this, and ensuring better interoperability, the EU would have greater leverage to point that potential incompatibilities with regards Serbia's military and security cooperation with China and Russia might represent an obstacle for closer cooperation and Serbia's EU integration process.

VI. 2. 2 Country-Specific Conclusions

VI. 2. 2. 1 Recommendations Regarding China

- The EU should strengthen and increase its criticism of the Serbian political establishment for its Eurosceptic and pro-China rhetoric, which became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Assessments made in the European Commission's 2020 country report about the lack of public political commitment of Serbia's highest officials is a good step in this direction. If Serbian political elites do not place more emphasis on objective and unambiguous positive communication about the EU, EU institutions and member states should step up their criticism not only on paper but in public as well. In this regard, EU officials from the member states need to be more outspoken and coherent with their messages, and should not pay lip service to Belgrade.
- All EU institutions should step up the level of inclusion of Serbia, and the Western Balkans in general, in their strategic thinking.
 - Considering recent change in supply chains dynamics as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU should also include the Western Balkans as a strategic partner in initiatives focused on the establishment of shorter supply chains. Not only being on the same continent, but within the same region, the Western

Balkans can offer a viable alternative for production in Asia. With inclusion of WB officials in the development of planning and executing the mentioned initiative, a boost to the WB's national economies can also be expected as a positive externality of this win-win process. In return, the EU should require more accountability from the region's leaders in increased communication about EU's support and its effort to boost the economic development of the region.

- The EU's strategic thinking vis-à-vis Serbia should be proactive, not reactive. In this regard, the EU must make sure it does not repeat the same mistakes of the past, such as when a European Commission regulation about EU's restriction to export certain medical equipment outside the EU (and thus to Serbia) at the outbreak of the pandemic. Although the decision to exclude the region was later revoked, the message was already out, and Serbian officials took it as an excuse to openly criticise the work of EU institutions and build closer ties with China.
- The EU should pay closer attention to China's engagement with Serbia in the areas of security and hi-tech, which it appears not to have done to this point.
 - The EU should urge Serbia to maintain its credible European commitment and transparency in the context of Serbia's increasing purchase of sophisticated weaponry from China. Furthermore, the EU should synchronise its activities with the US in this area, which possesses notable political leverage in this regard.
 - The EU should underpin the importance of transparency while supporting the efforts of civil society and investigative journalists in their efforts to produce research and analysis on Serbia's increasing police and defence cooperation with China. This is important, as China is the second largest donor to Serbia's Ministry of Defence according to the ministry's 2020 information sheet, and as joint Sino-Serbian military exercises appear to be in discussion.
 - As Serbia's hi-tech reliance on China is steadily increasing at the cost of transparency and potential violation of citizens' rights, this issue needs to be put on the EU's agenda. As there are civil society organisations which already deal with these issues, their work should be publicly endorsed and financially

supported in order for them to continue monitoring this issue and raising public awareness.

VI. 2. 2. 2 Recommendations Regarding Russia

- The EU should support Serbian civil society organisations in their efforts to keep authorities accountable in disclosing information on the amount of equipment donated from Russia to the Serbian Ministry of Defence. This is relevant, as the current information sheet from the ministry does not do so exclusively when it comes to Russia, while being more transparent with others.
- The European People's Party (EPP), whose associate member is the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), needs to pay closer attention to the links and partnership agreements between the SNS and the United Russia Party.
 - The EPP should not turn a blind eye to this issue, particularly as the SNS signed a *Renewed Cooperation Agreement* with the United Russia Party just two years after gaining associate membership in the EPP in 2016. Constant political signalling is necessary to show that the EPP will not tolerate close partnerships with parties leading regimes with questionable democratic standards.
 - The EPP should signal its position with regards possible consequences on SNS's associate membership to this political group, should SNS continue to foster cordial relations with Russian political parties that do not share the same values as EPP.
 - The EPP's leadership should also more carefully articulate its standards during visits to Belgrade, as party cooperation should not lead to the neglect of serious issues like the respect for rule of law and media freedoms.
- The EU should further engage with civil society and local grassroots organisations in educational and awareness-raising activities that promote the EU's values and, as such, contribute to creating a culture of rule of law in Serbia. This is important in order to diminish the influence of extremist groups and right-wing parties in Serbia, most of whom favour pro-Russian rhetoric and have the potential to acquire seats in the National Assembly in the future.

- The EU should condition donations for the development of Serbia’s energy infrastructure with the compliance of the Serbian government with competition rules in the energy sector, especially as related to the trade in natural gas. In this regard, conditionality mechanisms need to be introduced with regard to the non-transparent business practises of the state-owned natural gas supplier Srbijagas. The same should be done when it comes to the declassification of agreements with the Russian company Gazprom regarding the prices and transportation of this fuel, as well as ensuring third-party access to the gas network. All of this would be officially linked to Serbia’s ability to access pre-accession funds. As some previous projects like the EU-funded gas interconnector between Serbia and Bulgaria were financed without clear conditionalities, it is high time that EU starts to strongly insist on this matter.

- Special attention needs to be paid to the increasing trend of fake news and disinformation campaigns by the Serbian and Russian media.
 - The EU should increase funds for local civil society organisations and investigative journalists who would engage in in-depth analysis and monitoring of the rise of Russophilia and Euroscepticism, fed both by the Serbian and Russian media. It would also allow the EU to stress the importance of objective reporting.
 - The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), created in 2020 based on the Commission’s 2018 “Action Plan against Disinformation”, should extend its scope beyond the EU, and cover Serbia and the Western Balkans, by either establishing national or regional Digital Media Research Hubs. In this manner, Russian-related campaigns, no matter whether they are instigated by Serbs or Russians, could be properly tracked and tackled.
 - The fact that the European External Action Service (EEAS) 2020 report on disinformation activities related to the COVID-19 pandemic included the Western Balkans, in which it revealed the widespread presence of COVID-19-related mis- and disinformation, is encouraging as it provides a solid basis for the better understanding of this topic and raising public awareness. Thus, subsequent EEAS reports of this kind should keep the region within the scope of their research.

VI. 2. 2. 3 Recommendations Regarding Turkey

- The EU should openly call upon Serbian authorities to investigate the allegations that Gülen institutions decided to suspend their operations in Serbia due to frequent state monitoring and pressure from Serbian financial inspections and the Ministry of Education. As Turkey has stated that it received positive signals from Serbian officials with regards to the closure of such institutions, the European Commission also needs to indicate the existence of these allegations in its annual reports on Serbia in order to raise awareness of the issue, and to send a message that the EU opposes such exertion of Turkish political capital.

- The EU needs to raise the importance of Serbian authorities' violation of the rules for extradition in the case of a Kurdish political activist, and their stated willingness to assist Turkey against all of those who act against Turkish interests.
 - The fact that the Commission's 2020 Serbia report referred to the issue of the Kurdish political activist is a positive step forward, yet the EU should not stop there, as it needs to publicly address this issue as well.
 - Not only does the EU need to make sure Serbia is held accountable, but it needs to send a clear message that it will not tolerate such cases in the future. As Serbia is not the only country in the region which complied with such a request from Turkey, the EU needs to see this as a regional problem, particularly as such extraditions might occur in the future.
 - Issues of this kind should not only be seen as a matter of Serbia's cooperation with foreign actors but should be considered an essential component of Serbia's obligation to improve rule of law standards encompassed by Chapter 23. For this reason, any potential use of the conditionality and reversibility mechanisms should take such issues into consideration.

- The EU needs to pay more attention to the regional challenges of Sandžak and its need for investment.

- The EU needs to engage, politically and economically, with Sandžak, particularly as it is among the poorest and least developed regions in Serbia, which has so far helped to justify Turkish involvement there.
- The fact that the European Commission announced an Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans is a good opportunity not only to invest in capital projects in the whole region but to address the specific needs of Sandžak as well.
- EU member states have the ability to push for the for stronger development of the Sandžak region, especially as Germany and France, for example, belong to an informal diplomatic group created in 2009 under the name “Friends of Sandžak”. Yet, as it stands, this group needs to be further operationalised, as in practice it has not been as active and vocal as it should. All of these proposed activities could usher the path towards the further stabilisation of the region and its economic growth, but also reduce the potential for Turkey to get involved and strengthen its foothold.

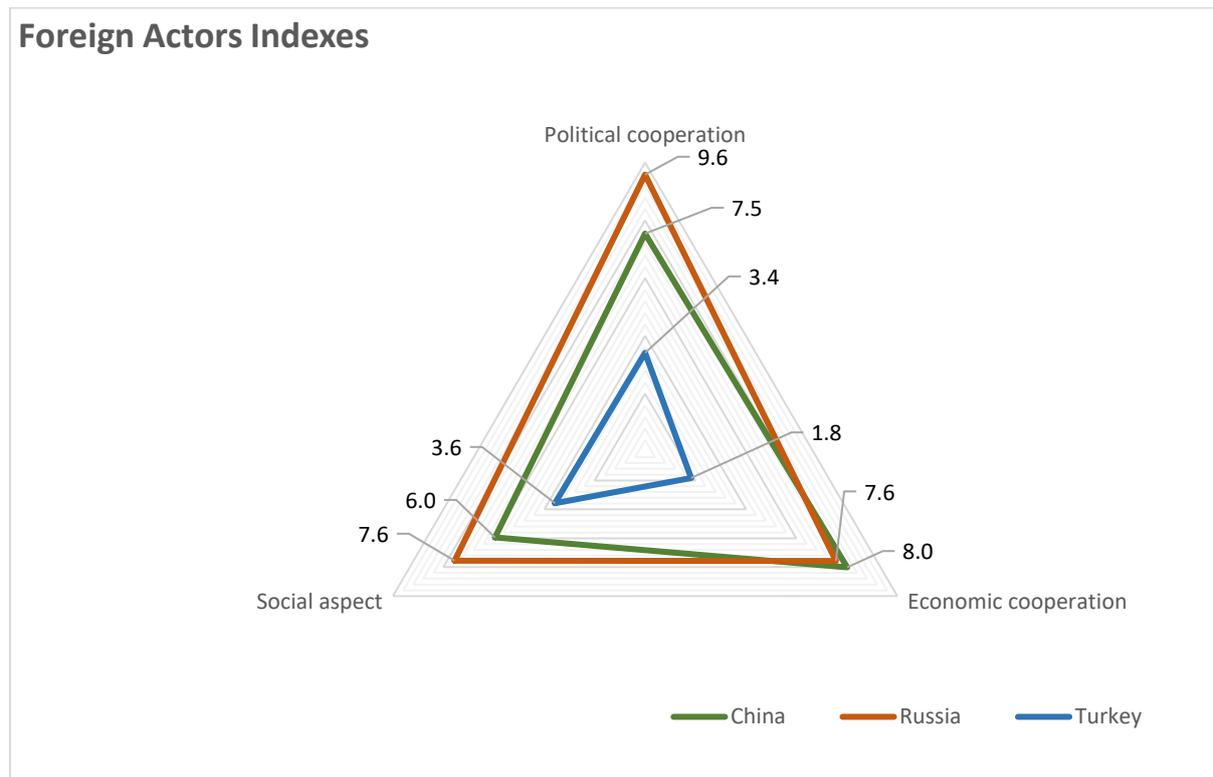
Annex 1 - Indexes

Brief Explanation of Index Development

The authors used the data and insight to score each analysed foreign actor on their political, economic, and social leverage across a range of policy areas in Serbia. Its development included weighing of different indicators, which was cross-checked with the findings of the policy study. This action is vulnerable to subjectivity, particularly when it comes to selecting the distribution of ponderers per indicator in a category. For this reason, the indexes represent an attempt to provide a rough approximation of analysed foreign actors leverage and ability to impact Serbia. The impact of personal biases is reduced by cross-checking the process of weighing with the findings of the policy study and available data from respectful institutions. The results do not indicate whether the influence of foreign actors is “good” or “bad” per se, but just indicating the level of leverage, relevance and power of that actor in comparison to other analysed actors. Finally, this represents only a pilot project, with the aim to encourage development of similar and more detailed indexes in the future.

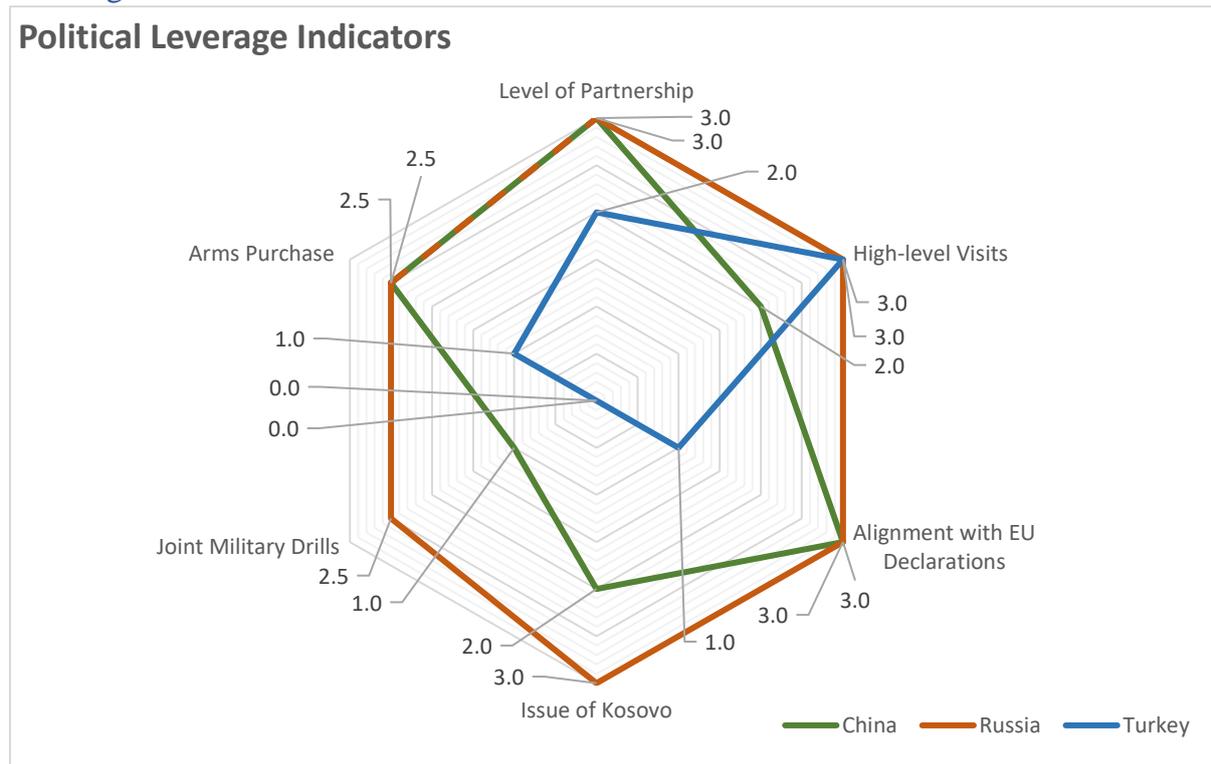
- **Political leverage** measures their ability to influence Serbia’s policies and processes, and it is based on their concrete actions in the following categories: level of partnership, level of cooperation with regards to the issue of Kosovo, high-level visits between Serbia and the specific country, level of Serbia’s unwillingness to align with EU declarations targeting the specific country, level military cooperation, and arms purchase.
- **Economic leverage** measures their ability to impact Serbian economy and it is based on their participation in following areas: value of trade in goods and services, value of foreign direct investments, level of debt to countries in question, and level of business cooperation.
- **Social influence** measures their ability to reach Serbian audiences and shape the public narratives, and it is based on the following categories: public opinion on whether Serbia’s interests are best served by maintaining relationship with the specific country, public opinion on whether they would live in the specified country, public opinion on the leader of the specified country, tourism to Serbia from a specific country, religious bonds and cooperation, COVID-19 media coverage, and donor perception.

Indexes of Overall Foreign Actors Leverage in Selected Areas:



According to the calculated indexes Russia is still holding the leading position regarding its importance in the area of political cooperation and social bonds with Serbia. But, regarding economic cooperation, the situation is much more equal, as China records a slightly greater value of the observed index. Turkey, as expected, records the best results regarding social bonds and political cooperation but still far from the rest two observed actors, Russia and China.

Leverage Indicators:

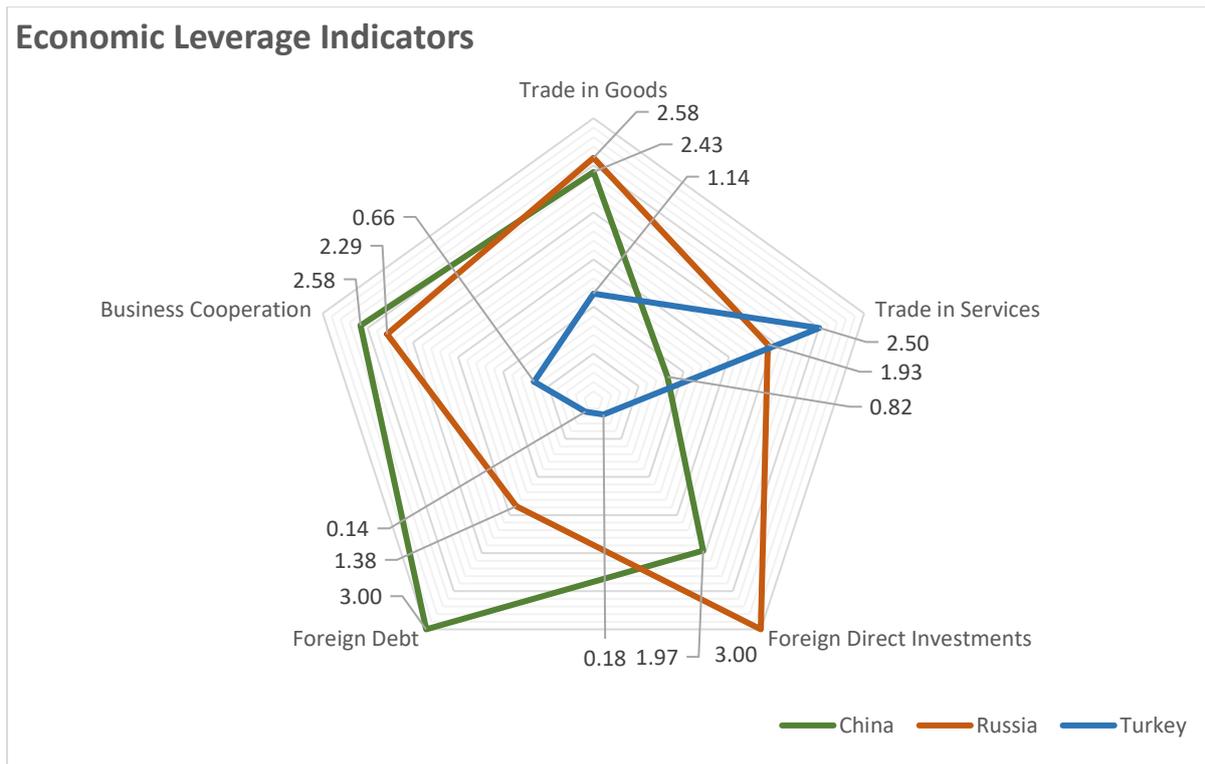


Although Turkey has some level of political leverage, it significantly lags behind Russia and China. What prevents it from becoming a stronger player is the fact that it still recognises Kosovo's self-declared independence. For this reason, Serbia, for now, still has no incentive to stop aligning with EU's declarations on Turkey. That is also why the two sides have not signed a signed strategic partnership. Nevertheless, the two countries have started talks of arms purchase, which shows that Turkey's political role is likely to rise in the next period.

Although China is far from Serbia, it nevertheless managed, in a relatively short-time span, to develop significant levels of political leverage. Yet, its leverage is not as strong as Russia's. For now, China has not been as vocal on the issue of Kosovo as Russia was, which is why it is not expected that the resolution of the Kosovo issue would hurt China's leverage as much it would hurt Russia's, which is more dependent on this issue. Furthermore, China has had no bilateral or multilateral military exercises. Yet, it appears that its leverage is likely to increase, especially as it started selling highly-sophisticated weaponry to Serbia, while there are talks on potential military excercies.

Despite the study shows that there have been some hurdles in the Russo-Serbian bilateral relationship, the indicator analysis shows that Russia still, nevertheless, maintains the strongest political leverage of the three analysed countries. Long has Russia's support to Serbia over the issue of Kosovo been the key parameter of relationship. Yet, as Belgrade appears more willing to strike compromises with Priština, particularly with the increased involvement of the US, Russia's powerful leverage might turn out to be a hindrance for the Serbian authorities. Furthermore, Russia has been continuously increasing cooperation with Serbia in terms of military cooperation and arms purchase. Yet, the fact that Serbia has stated that it will stop buying weapons from Russia (due to the US threat of sanctions), while backing away from the multilateral military exercise with Belarus and Russia, shows that Russia's political leverage is unlikely to remain as high as it has long been.

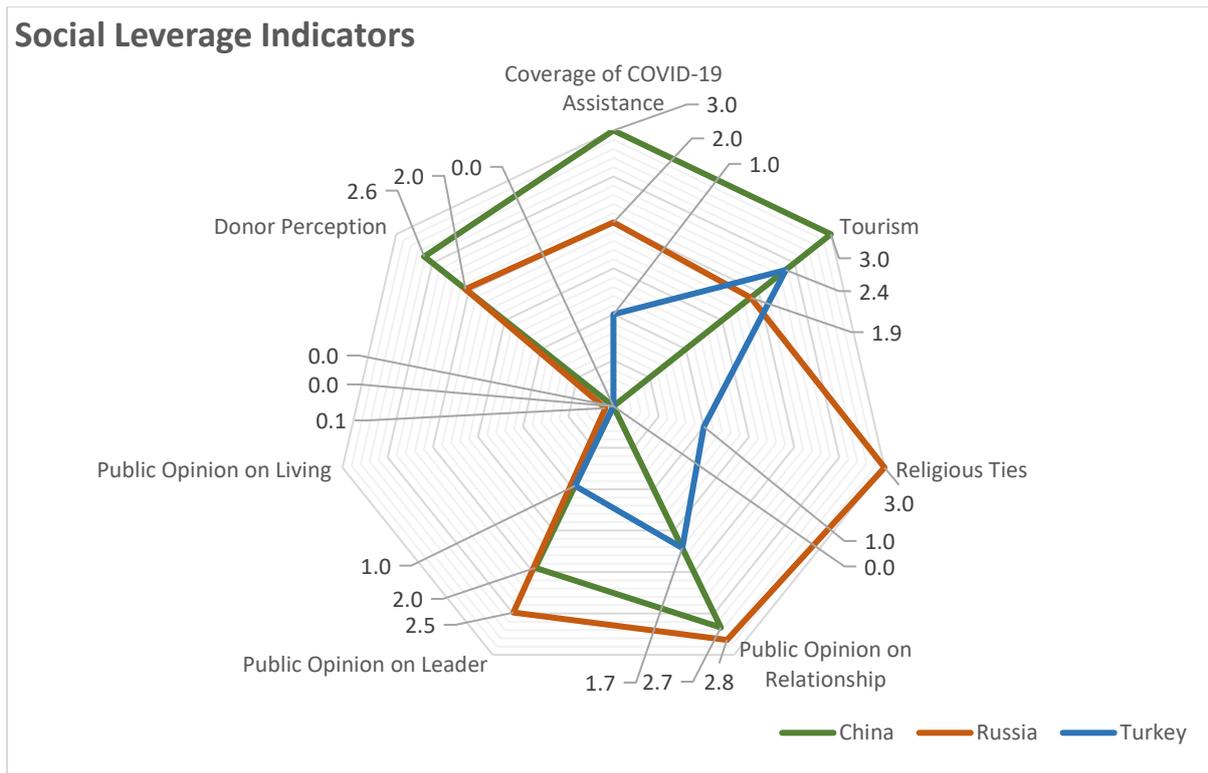
Economic Leverage Indicators



Turkey is a less valuable economic partner compared with the rest two analysed countries. Only one area is an outlier from the general conclusion from above. Trade in services is a more relevant issue when Serbo-Turkish relations are in question. This due to the highest deficit which Serbia has in trade in services with this country. However, as the value of trade in services is multiple times smaller than the value of trade in goods in the case of all three analysed actors, a higher value of this indicator does not give a great advantage to Turkey when calculating the aggregate index of economic cooperation.

The graph reveals one more valuable piece of information. While trade in goods and business cooperation are on more or less the same level of importance for the Serbian side, China records domination in amounts of funds that are borrowed to Serbia compared to Russia. On the other hand, the importance of invested funds is much higher in the case of Russia contrasted to China as primarily a result of the Gazprom investments in the NIS from 2008 onwards.

Social Leverage Indicators



Turkey is a country that significantly lags behind Russia and China, particularly as public opinion relationship and on leader is weaker. Nevertheless, as the study shows, it appears that Turkey is improving its image in Serbia in a step-by-step manner. The fact that tourism is playing a role is a valuable asset as well. Finally, considering that Turkey works on nurturing and exploiting religious ties with the Muslim population of Serbia is what allows it to have a stronger social leverage in at least one region in Serbia.

China is a country that is increasingly seeing the spill-overs from political and economic areas to social arena. The analysis of the social leverage indicators shows that despite the distance, and no religious ties, China has managed to develop a notable level of social capital. The fact that Belgrade chose Beijing over Moscow (or Brussels) during the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly improved its standing in the eyes of the public.

Despite the fact that Russia's political relationship with Serbia has witnessed some setbacks in the recent times, it appears that the public still remains largely in favour of Russia. The key difference from other external actors is not only the level of admiration towards the Russian president and Russia in general, but also the value of joint religious ties. In that regard, although Russia has lost some points during the COVID-19 pandemic, as less people perceive it to be the top donor than it was the case before, Russia remains the key external actor in the eyes of the Serbian public

Composition of Indicators

POLITICAL SUB-INDICATORS

The Level of Partnership (weight 20%)	The Issue of Kosovo (weight 30%)
0 No close partnership developed	0 Recognises Kosovo
1 Partnership in development	1 Does not recognise Kosovo but abstains in voting in the international arena
2 Publicly stated close partnership, but no written joint declaration on it	2 Does not recognise Kosovo and votes against Kosovo in the international arena
3 Joint statement on establishing strategic partnership signed and implemented	3 Does not recognise Kosovo, votes against Kosovo in the international arena, and actively works to undermine its legitimacy

High-Level Visits (weight 12,5%)	Alignment with EU's declarations targeting the specific country (weight 12,5%)
0 No visits whatsoever	0 Full alignment with the EU's declarations
1 Ministerial visits	1-2 Proportion to the highest value
2 Occasional high official visits and ministerial visits	
3 Frequent high official visits and ministerial visits	3 No alignment at all

Joint Military Drills (weight 12,5%)	Arms Purchase Cooperation (weight 12,5%)
0 No drills at all	0 No notable cooperation
1 Military drills in discussion	1 Discussion on establishing future arms cooperation
2 Bilateral military drills	2 Notable arms purchase
3 Bilateral and multilateral military drills ¹⁰⁶⁰	3 Purchase of high-end military equipment ¹⁰⁶¹

¹⁰⁶⁰ The score of 2.5 is given to those countries that have traditionally had score 3, but have witnessed some setbacks in recent times, which is why it currently remains unknown whether the cooperation might return to the score of 3, or might regress.

¹⁰⁶¹ The score of 2.5 is given to those countries that have traditionally had score 3, but have witnessed some setbacks in recent times, which is why it currently remains unknown whether the cooperation might return to the score of 3, or might regress. The same score is given if a country is currently transitioning from the score of 2 to the score of 3.

ECONOMIC SUB-INDICATORS

Trade in goods for the period 2010-2019¹⁰⁶² (weight 20%)	Trade in services for the period 2010-2019¹⁰⁶³ (weight 5%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total trade value (weight 50%) • Trade deficit value (weight 50%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total trade value (weight 50%) • Trade deficit value (weight 50%)
0 No trade	0 No trade
1-2 Proportion to the highest value	1-2 Proportion to the highest value
3 Highest value of all analysed countries	3 Highest value of all analysed countries

Foreign Direct Investments for the period 2010-2019¹⁰⁶⁴ (weight 30%)	Official Foreign Debt¹⁰⁶⁵ (weight 30%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value of sum of Assets and Liabilities (weight 20%) • Net FDI value (weight 80%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value of current debt on 30.09.2020 (weight 70%) • Value of funds that yet to be withdrawn on 30.09.2020 (weight 30%)
0 No FDI	0 No debt
1-2 Proportion to the highest value	1-2 Proportion to the highest value
3 Highest value of all analysed countries	3 Highest value of all analysed countries

Business cooperation¹⁰⁶⁶ (weight 15%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number enterprises (at least 49% ownership) in 2019 (weight 20%) • Number workers employed in 2019 by counted enterprises (weight 40%) • Value of Revenue in 2019 by counted enterprises (weight 40%)
0 No business cooperation
1-2 Proportion to the highest value
3 Highest value of all analysed countries

¹⁰⁶² Based on database of the Statistical office of Republic of Serbia.

¹⁰⁶³ Based on database of the National Bank of Serbia.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Based on database of the National Bank of Serbia.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Based on database of the Ministry of Finance of Republic of Serbia.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Based on database of the Serbian Business Registers Agency in a form of report provided by consultancy firm Bisnode.

SOCIAL SUB-INDICATORS

Public Opinion on whether Serbia’s interests are best served by maintaining relationship with the specific country (weight 20%)¹⁰⁶⁷	Public Opinion on whether they would live in the specified country (weight 10%)¹⁰⁶⁸
0 No favourable opinion	0 No willingness to live in the specified country
1-2 Proportion to the highest value	1-2 Proportion to the highest value
3 Highest value of all analysed countries	3 Highest value of all analysed countries

Public Opinion on the leader of the specified country (weight 20%)¹⁰⁶⁹	Religious bonds and cooperation (weight 20%)
0 No favourable opinion	0 No ties at all
1-2 Proportion to the highest value	1 Different religion, but some ties with local minorities
	2 Majority religion, moderate church relations
3 Highest level of favourable opinion	3 Majority religion, well-developed church relations

Tourism to Serbia from a specific country (weight 10%)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. of tourists visiting Serbia (weight 50%) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. number of the nights spent (weight 50%) 	
0 No tourists visiting and spending nights	
1-2 Proportion to the highest value	
3 Highest value of all analysed countries	

¹⁰⁶⁷ Although it appears that the poll from 2015 is outdated, the fact that it included Turkey as an option for those that were surveyed is what gave it value. This allowed the authors to use the same scale of grading for all three analysed countries. Cross-referencing with other research shows that the data from the 2015 poll on Russia and China is still largely in place even in 2020. International Republican Institute (IRI), “Survey of Serbian Public Opinion”, 2015, Ipsos Strategic Marketing, slide 24, available at:

https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/serbia_november_2015_poll_public_release.pdf

¹⁰⁶⁸ The same argument as presented in the previous footnote. Srećko Mihailović, “Which empire to lean on... Serbia between the East and the West”, Demostat, 2017, available at:

<http://demostat.rs/en/vesti/istrazivanja/which-empire-to-lean-on-serbia-between-the-east-and-the-west/214>

¹⁰⁶⁹ Based on Gallup’s 2018 research. The rankings are based on opinions of Serbia’s citizens of Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Gallup, “Global Leaders - Gallup International’s 42nd Annual Global Opinion Poll”, 2018, available at:

https://www.gallup-international.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2018_End-of-Year_Global-Leaders.pdf

Coverage of COVID-19 Medical Assistance (weight 10%)	Donor perception (weight 10%) ¹⁰⁷⁰
0 No media coverage	0 Not perceived as a donor
1 Low level of media coverage	1-2 Proportion to the highest value
2 Medium level of media coverage	
3 High level of media coverage	3 Perceived as the largest donor

¹⁰⁷⁰ The score was made by combining the results of two opinion polls – one from March 2020 and another one from September 2019. It was purely done, in order to get realistic view of public opinion's view of external actors, particularly as the March 2020 poll shows results that were highly impacted and thus skewed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Institut za evropske poslove, "Istraživanje javnog mnjenja – Stavovi građana prema Rusiji", 2020, slide 17, available at (in Serbian):

<http://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Stav-gra%C4%91ana-Srbije-prema-Rusiji-mart-2020.pdf>

and Institut za evropske poslove, "Istraživanje javnog mnjenja – Stavovi građana prema Rusiji", 2019, slide 10, available at (in Serbian):

<https://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019-Stav-gra%C4%91ana-Srbije-prema-Rusiji-mart-2019-final.pdf>

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