

# CEP Insight

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## In the Shadow of the Middle East

### EU and Serbia's Israeli-Palestinian Policies Compared

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict once again [escalated](#) on 7 October 2023, resulting in tens of thousands of [casualties](#) and a further exacerbation of the already delicate regional circumstances. Such an unexpected crisis underscores the persistent nature of this conflict, with each outbreak carrying implications felt far beyond the Middle East. This paper embarks on a nuanced exploration of the EU's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, with a particular focus on the recent developments. Going beyond the official statements and commonplace narratives of EU foreign policy, it delves into the intricate internal dynamics of the EU and its member states, aiming to understand their various positions, motivations, and contradictions.

As the EU's Israel-Palestine policy is dissected, the questions also arise: What is Serbia's stance on this issue and is its position on this matter also a part of its *both East and West* geopolitical equation? Answering these questions is warranted, as Serbia continues to find itself in a delicate balancing act of nurturing its partnerships with the East, despite its official strategic priority being EU membership. Through rigorous analysis, the paper evaluates the extent of Serbia's alignment with EU policies on the mentioned conflict and uncovers the multifaceted factors influencing its position. As the role of the Israel-Palestine conflict is examined as a litmus test for unity and diversity of opinions within the EU, Serbia's standpoint is scrutinised, and broader questions regarding its policy alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) are addressed.

#### *Navigating Divergence: The Complexities of Consensus Building in the EU*

The official EU policy towards the Israel-Palestine conflict has historically been characterised by its commitment to peace promotion and the maintenance of impartiality. Up until this point, the EU has consistently advocated for a two-state solution, declaring it to be the only viable path to securing peaceful coexistence between the Israeli and Palestinian populations. Hence, EU institutions have constantly invoked international law, specifically all pertinent UN resolutions, to ensure adherence to the international legal framework in the region. Moving beyond rhetorical support, the EU has proactively participated in peace initiatives. A notable example is its [participation](#) in the Quartet on the Middle East, alongside the UN, USA, and Russia, recognising the urgent need for joint efforts of extra-regional global players in helping resolve this conflict. But in addition to its involvement in multilateral forums, the EU is one of the most vital [economic partners](#) to Israel, while it remains the largest aid donor to Palestine, [assisting](#) it in humanitarian efforts and preparation for future statehood. These ties with both sides have traditionally enhanced the EU's credibility as an impartial mediator, allowing it to extend its invitations to both parties for dialogue and reconciliation.



However, in the current war, the EU has struggled to assert a decisive stance. This is mostly rooted in the decision-making procedure of the EU's CFSP – more precisely – in its requirement for unanimity. Seeking consensus amidst the starkly divergent views of certain member states has rendered the EU somewhat impotent. Furthermore, EU top diplomats have made statements more reflective of their respective national positions rather than presenting a unified message of a supranational organisation with a clear mission. Namely, the European Commission's President Ursula von der Leyen made statements [perceived](#) by the public as pro-Israeli despite Israel's disproportionate use of force.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Oliver Várhelyi, the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, seemed to follow the pro-Israeli position of his native Hungary.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, Josep Borell, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, showed great understanding for the Palestinian side,<sup>3</sup> while the European Council's President Charles Michel avoided using language that would clearly label him as pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian.<sup>4</sup> As a final consequence, the cacophony in the EU's top diplomatic arena carved out an extended space for member states' voices to appear louder and sometimes be misconstrued as the official EU views.

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Some member states have recently shown a strong inclination towards Israel. Four of them, Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, have all [voted](#) against the October 2023 [UN General Assembly resolution](#) which condemned the violence and called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, a resolution which Israel strongly opposed. In these countries, the prevailing narrative has been revolving around Israel's

1 She has been criticised for avoiding explicitly calling Israel to adhere to international humanitarian law while solely [emphasising](#) its right to self-defence.

2 On 9th October, he unilaterally [announced](#) an immediate suspension of all payments to Palestine. The EU spokesperson later denied that this was among the plans.

3 In the early dates of the conflict, he [underscored](#) the imperative that Israel's right to self-defence must align with international humanitarian law and protect civilians. His later statements leaned even more towards the pro-Palestinian perspective, as he [asserted](#) that the EU should exhibit greater sympathy for Palestinians and categorically [rejected](#) Israel's supposed plan to reoccupy Gaza post-war.

4 He [insisted](#) on both Israel's rights and obligations, reiterating that no double standards should be permitted and that the international humanitarian law ought to be applied in the same manner, whether in Ukraine or Gaza. His reference to international law against the backdrop of glaring mass atrocities committed in Gaza has signalled his empathy towards the Palestinian position.

fight against terrorism, exemplified by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's [justification](#) that "terror is unacceptable". In fact, this robust pro-Israeli position is more likely to stem from an alliance with Israel PM Benjamin Netanyahu's regime.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to this, the Czech and Israelis have a much longer history of friendship,<sup>6</sup> which prompted the Czech PM Petr Fiala to [announce](#) the relocation of the Czech embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem "in a matter of months", a tangible expression of solidarity. Furthermore, Austria and Croatia have actively sought ways to cultivate ties with Israel, most likely aiming to address and redress the antisemitic Nazi legacies of World War II. However, these pro-Israeli positions appear particularly troubling amid the Netanyahu regime's current mass violations of human rights in Gaza, potentially eroding the EU's credibility as an impartial mediator.

On the other hand, several member states have struck a balance and shown a greater understanding of the Palestinian position. Drawing on their own historical struggles for independence, Ireland has been a country known for advocating for Palestinian interests, as recently [demonstrated](#) when this Northwest European country decisively opposed calls to halt humanitarian assistance to Palestine.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the Spanish government has been clear in its support for the war-torn Palestinian population. The Spanish PM Pedro Sanchez has [expressed](#) "serious doubts" regarding Israel's commitment to abide by international law in its siege of the Gaza Strip, whereas one of his ministers has even [accused](#) Israel of an alleged crime of genocide.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the Belgian Deputy PM Petra De Sutter has even [called](#) the Belgian government to introduce sanctions on Israel. Although this has not happened (and is unlikely to happen), mostly pro-Palestinian Belgium was the first EU member state to [announce](#) a travel ban on extremist Israeli West Bank settlers. Although the extent to which the humanitarian positions of these individual member states have captured global attention is questionable, it still can be acknowledged that these countries hold the potential to restore the EU's shaken image due to the perceived pro-Israel bias.

Evidently, the EU has once again missed a crucial opportunity to enhance its foreign policy initiatives and demonstrate unity and geostrategic importance. Contrary to the [guidance](#) coming from reputable think tanks, both EU and member states' officials have conveyed conflicting messages. Their diverse assessments of unfolding events and proposed courses of action have undermined the coherence of the Union's stance. Notably, discussions surrounding the potential suspension of humanitarian aid to Palestine have raised questions about the Union's strategic planning capabilities, given the serious and enduring consequences of halting humanitarian assistance – implications that extend beyond Palestine to impact the EU

5 Notably, both regimes are often described as populist and prone to anti-Muslim sentiments.

6 The amicable relations date back to the time of the first Czech president, Tomáš Masaryk, who overtly supported the Zionist movement.

7 Additionally, the Irish foreign minister has [promised](#) a substantial 13M emergency aid package for Palestine.

8 While pro-Palestinian rallies have been [prohibited](#) in certain EU members, Madrid has seen 35,000 people in the streets marching in support of Palestinians, with high-level politicians [attending](#), such as Spanish Deputy PM Yolanda Díaz.

itself in the long run through potential mass migrant waves and accompanying social and security concerns. Moreover, the inability to speak with one voice, the consequence of consensus-based decision-making in CFSP, on crises happening just slightly beyond its immediate vicinity signals that the EU is still far from solidifying its status of a great power. This sends a message to external actors such as Russia and China that engaging in hybrid warfare and fostering discord among member states, as well as candidate states, remains a viable strategy.

### **Synchronising Serbia: A Closer Look at the Alignment with the EU**

Since the beginning of its accession negotiations in 2014, Serbia has aligned itself with all declarations of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During this period, they have amounted to a total of nine declarations related to the issue. In general, Serbia has endorsed the EU's balanced approach, which calls for immediate ceasefires when conflicts erupt, upholds civilian rights and expresses support for existing and future efforts towards conflict resolution. Despite this being just one issue on the EU's foreign policy agenda, Serbia's full alignment is noteworthy, especially considering its persistent reluctance to fully comply with the EU in this domain.

*Table 1: The list of declarations by High Representative on behalf of the EU in the period 2014-2024, all of which Serbia aligned with*

Date of declaration	Name of declaration
28 June 2014	Declaration on behalf of the EU on the latest developments following the abduction of three Israeli students
8 July 2016	Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the Middle East Quartet report
27 March 2019	Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the Golan Heights
28 January 2020	Declaration by the High Representative Josep Borrell on behalf of the EU on the Middle East Peace Process
15 August 2020	Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of EU on the announcement of a normalisation of relations between Israel and the UAE.
12 September 2020	Bahrain/Israel: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the establishment of diplomatic relations
30 July 2022	Lebanon: Declaration of the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the situation in the country
8 March 2023	Israel/Palestine: Statement of the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the latest developments
7 October 2023	Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the attacks against Israel

The question arises: What is the source of this (surprising) level of alignment? It is possible that the underlying reason lies in Serbia's professed commitment to the use of international law as a means to resolve international disputes. Serbia frequently employs the language of international law and consistently references UN Security Council Resolution 1244 when justifying its stance on Kosovo. This suggests that Serbia places significant importance on the UN as an international conflict resolution forum and is cautious not to contradict any official UN positions on matters related to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of UN member states. As a result, Serbia endorses the official UN point of view on the Israel-Palestine conflict, promoting a two-state solution and opposing violence and unilateral actions. This attitude closely mirrors that of the EU. Hence, the shared respect for international law becomes a common foundation upon which both Serbia and the EU build their positions.

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Serbia has compelling economic and historical reasons to strive for an equilibrium in this dispute. On one side, according to the former Israeli Ambassador to Belgrade Alona Fisher Kamm, Israel has invested over \$2 billion in Serbia's economy between 2000 and 2020. However, Serbia must also consider the preferences of predominantly pro-Palestinian Muslim nations, several of which are among the largest investors in the country. According to the National Bank of Serbia's data, the UAE's foreign direct investments in Serbia have reached \$729 million between 2010 and 2023, while Türkiye's companies have directly invested more than \$326 million in the same period. On the historical side, the Serbian and Jewish people historically share strong kinship, especially deepened during the repressive Nazi regimes of World War II when both peoples faced persecution. Simultaneously, Serbia has cultivated an amicable relationship with Palestine since the times when the Non-Alignment Movement brought together both a socialist Yugoslavia and a newly formed Palestine, seeking the "third way" in the midst of the polarised Cold-War geopolitical landscape. A logical consequence of these interwoven relationships is that Serbia has pursued some form of neutrality – refraining from taking sides on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while also recognising the legitimate interests of both.

A facilitating factor for Serbia to embrace the EU policy towards Israel and Palestine is that this act does not hinder Serbia's relationship with Russia or China. When the declarations of the High Representative are reviewed, it strikes attention that Serbia's reservations were primarily linked to Russia and China, as it was careful not to endanger its multidimensional foreign policy and risk upsetting political partners that support its view on Kosovo. Fortunately for Serbia, no declaration regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the period 2014-2023 mentioned either Russia or China in any context. Additionally, this conflict is one of the few where Russia and the EU, at least nominally, have converging positions and have even shown the potential for constructive cooperation within the Quartet for the Middle East. However, it remains an open question whether Serbia would have behaved the same way if the policies of the EU and Russia on this issue had been diametrically opposed.

Nevertheless, there was a situation in which Serbia's official stance on Israel and Palestine appeared to be taking a different course: [the 2020 Washington Agreement](#). As part of his election campaign, former U.S. President Donald Trump sought to portray himself as a resolver of long-standing conflicts across the globe. In this context, he brokered the Washington Agreement between Serbia and Kosovo. This agreement, among other things, obligated Serbia to relocate its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move that was one of several agreement provisions that served solely the American establishment's interests and were unrelated to the issues of Serbia and Kosovo<sup>9</sup>. The EU issued [warnings](#), indicating that the relocation of the embassy would directly contradict its foreign policy. However, with the change of administration in Washington D.C. in 2021, pressure to implement this part of the agreement disappeared, thus enabling Serbia to keep its balanced position *vis-à-vis* the issue in question. The failure to implement this provision from the Washington Agreement could be seen as a strong signal that Serbia considered it wiser not to change course and potentially jeopardise its relationship with the EU, bringing new risks in terms of international politics.

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Accounting for the described factors, it can be concluded that, from the perspective of Belgrade, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is 'distant', not carrying direct impacts on Serbia or the Western Balkans. Being primarily oriented towards the EU while maintaining close relations with the USA, Russia, and China, the Serbian foreign policy is not particularly interested in political developments in the Middle East. Although Serbia maintains good economic ties with Israel, its continued relations with Palestine have not posed a threat to that economic partnership; therefore, there has been no necessity to adopt a more pronounced pro-Israel position. Moreover, Israel's [recognition](#) of Kosovo in 2020 has further disincentivised political rapprochement between Belgrade and Tel Aviv, particularly given Palestine's strong [opposition](#) to Kosovo's independence. Maintaining the *status quo*, i.e. maintaining neutrality, presents a convenient option for Serbia, allowing it to earn praise for aligning itself with the EU without compromising any particular national interest or endangering relations with any important partner.

<sup>9</sup> Such a symbolic move would have made Serbia the first European state to do so and thus strongly tilt its position towards Israel.

## About European Policy Centre - CEP

European Policy Centre - CEP - is a non-governmental, non-profit, independent think-tank based in Belgrade. It was founded by a group of professionals in the areas of EU law, EU affairs, economics and public administration reform, with a shared vision of changing the policy-making environment in Serbia for the better – by rendering it more evidence-based, more open and inclusive and more substantially EU accession driven. A profound understanding of EU policies and the accession process, the workings of the Serbian administration, as well as strong social capital, combine to create a think-tank capable of not only producing high-quality research products but also penetrating the decision-making arena to create a tangible impact. Today, CEP organises its work into four programme areas:

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- 2) Internal Market and Competitiveness
- 3) Regional Policy, Networks and Energy
- 4) Our Europe

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