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Between the Western conditionality and Russia's return to the Balkans: Serbia's foreign policy orientation (2000–2012)

Abstract

The article analyzes the transformation of Serbia's foreign policy under democratic governments from the fall of Milošević to the return to power of reformed nationalist parties (2012) through interactions with international factors of influence (EU, USA, Russia). Serbia's diplomatic initiatives in this period were significantly determined by the Kosovo issue, but also by the unwillingness of official Belgrade to secure a stronger position and support within the Euro-Atlantic bloc, where the dominant attitudes towards Serbia were based on political narratives from the 1990s. Serbia's The Four Pillars Foreign Policy (EU, US, Russia, China) avoided risks in the phase of economic and social consolidation, but also made State's position static in the long term, both in regional and European affairs.

Keywords: Serbia, foreign policy, conditionality, The West, Russia

Methodological framework

The main goal of this article is to explain the specifics of Serbia's foreign policy position at the beginning of the 21st century in relation to all other European post-socialist countries through conceptualization. Author primarily uses method of analysis within the case was used (local causality and interpretative context) as well as comparative explanation, especially on the examples of Western and Russian policies towards Serbia. Through a "between-case" analysis, the author points out similarities and differences in the policies of institutions and government officials in Serbia. The historiographic method is limited by the unavailability of primary archival material for the period under study and mainly refers to the internal criticism of media articles as sources and literature. A chronological contextualization as a segment of this method in the article was used to draw a more complex conclusion.



Introduction

The dissolution of the Yugoslavia in 1991 opened a crisis in the Serbia's foreign policy position under the rule of Slobodan Milošević. The refusal of the Serbian state leadership to accept the decisions of the Conference on Yugoslavia and the Badinter Commission on the dissolution of Yugoslavia, which, in fact, placed the entire process under the control of the European Economic Community (EEC), was the first step in the international isolation of Serbia. At the initiative of Germany, economic sanctions were imposed on Serbia by the EEC at the end of December 1991. After the outbreak of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the UN Security Council imposed a complete economic embargo on Serbia and Montenegro (may 1992). Immediately before that, these two former Yugoslav republics formed a new and internationally unrecognized state – the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), which was part of Milošević's plan for international recognition of the FRY's continuity with the previous state. Milošević's expectations team Russia and China would prevent international sanctions proved to be a strategic foreign policy failure: Russia voted in favor of the UN resolution, while China abstained, in line with its non-conflict orientation with US and EEC interests in Europe during the 1990s¹.

Milošević sought to relax relations with the West through a more cooperative approach during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, faced with the country's rapidly weakening economic potential and growing social problems². His pressure on the Serbian leadership in BiH culminated in the signing of the Dayton Agreement, which partially lifted Serbia from economic sanctions, but left it internationally isolated. Until the military resolution of the Kosovo crisis (1998–1999), Serbia sought to improve its regional position by cooperating with the socialist authorities in Bulgaria and Greece (1996–1997), but also by establishing new relations with the former Yugoslav republics (Croatia, BiH, Macedonia). The bombing of the FRY in 1999 was the result of Milošević's policy of ignoring the US victory in the Cold War, the achievement of its unipolar world power, and the strong political interaction of post-socialist states (Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania) in the Balkans with US and EU interests. In this sense, Serbia's policy in the 1990s was marked as a disruptive factor in American foreign policy strategies.

The absence of a foreign policy strategy of the ruling elites in Serbia corresponded to the views of parts of the American establishment. They had tended to trivialize complex issues by “personalizing the presumed source of the troubles for the sake of their international plans realization”³. Stereotypical depictions of the uncivilized Balkan were also used, as well as the portrayal of Milošević as a constant communist authoritarian threat⁴.

Serbia's international course during Milošević's rule in the 1990s, regardless of its consequences for the entire society, was primarily directed towards key goal – his sur-

¹ Chen Jin, *From Mao to Deng: China's Changing Relations with the United States*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2019, pp. 20–21.

² Mihailo Crnobrnja, *The Yugoslav Drama*, McGill Queens University Press, 1996, pp. 174–188.

³ R. Craig Nation, *US policy and the Kosovo crisis*, in: *The International Spectator*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 1998, pp. 26–27.

⁴ For more information on modern and stereotypical views of the Balkans among Western intellectual and political elites, see: Maria Todorova, *Imagining Balkans*, Oxford University Press, 1997 (in polish: Maria Todorova, *Balkany wyobrażone*, Czarne, 2008).

vival in power. The isolation of the FRY by international sanctions, the collapse of the economic system, the strengthening and abuse of the repressive state apparatus, the contemptuous attitude towards the opposition and the war with NATO are the most significant features of Milošević's rule. During the conflict with NATO, the Serbian authoritarian leader, in an unsuccessful attempt to find a security umbrella, initiated the FRY's accession to the alliance of Russia and Belarus. On the other hand, the conflict in Kosovo, Milošević's electoral defeat (2000) and the collapse of his system of government intensified and consolidated the mediation initiatives of the West and Russia regarding the future of Serbia and the FRY. Despite their very different views on the bombing of the FRY in 1999, the West and Russia organized a joint peacekeeping mission led by Finnish diplomat Martti Ahtisaari and Russian envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin, which handed Milošević a document ending the war. The two presidents, Clinton and Putin, were in close contact about ending the crisis in Belgrade caused by Milošević's refusal to accept the election results (September 2000) and reached a high degree of agreement on this. For both sides, Milošević was part of the political past⁵.

Restoration of Serbian statehood and key internal factors in determining foreign policy orientation (2000–2006)

The new authorities in the FRY immediately after the victory over Milošević began the country's integration into the international community, breaking the economic sanctions and gaining full membership in the UN. For the new Yugoslav diplomacy (2001), in addition to Euro-Atlantic integration, foreign policy goals were based on regional cooperation, improving bilateral relations in the region, developing balanced relations with the US and Russia, and intensifying relations with Third World countries⁶.

Although Milošević's opposition in Serbia, like the authorities in Montenegro, had clear plans for a European future, there were too many differences among them about the way to implement them. Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović boycotted the FRY presidential elections (2000), wishing to gain a tactical advantage regardless of their outcome⁷. From his perspective, Milošević's victory would radicalize and internationalize Montenegro's position, while Koštunica's success opened the way for the evolutionary "withering away" of the FRY in achieving the ultimate goal – a sovereign and independent Montenegro. The Montenegrin elite held fast to its independence project, but agreed to talks with Yugoslav President Koštunica and Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić on restructuring relations within the FRY. In February 2003, with the mediation of the European Union, an

⁵ More details about American and Russian positions at the time of Milošević's fall from power in: *Clinton Digital Library. Memorandum of Telephone Conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin – 30.09.2000* (online). Declassified Documents Concerning Russian President Vladimir Putin", <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/100505> (date accessed: 21.07.2022).

⁶ Dragan Đukanović, Ivona Lađevac, *Prioriteti spoljnopolitičke strategije Republike Srbije*, in: *Međunarodni problemi*, Vol. LXI, br. 3, 2009, pp. 346–347.

⁷ William Montgomery, former U.S. ambassador to the FRY, was present at the talks in Rome between US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Đukanović, during which Albright sought support for Koštunica. The Montenegrin president rejected the proposal (Vilijam Montgomeri, *Kad ovacije utihnu*, Beograd 2010, pp. 30–31).

agreement was reached on the creation of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, which, after three years, allowed each member state to hold a referendum on independence. For Montenegrin sovereignists, during the period 2000–2005, “majority Montenegro” had to postpone the realization of its plans for independence due to “EU regional interests”⁸. The achievement of Montenegrin independence in the referendum (2006), in which the sovereignism strongly confronted the pro-Serbian and pro-Yugoslav political structures, simultaneously opened the way to a new constitutional foundation for Serbia.

In the initial phase of consolidation (2000–2001), the new authorities in Serbia faced an armed rebellion by Albanians (OVPMB) in the municipalities of southern Serbia which led to close cooperation with KFOR forces, but also with Western diplomats in Belgrade, creating an atmosphere of mutual trust. Nevertheless, it soon became clear that Serbia was not satisfied with the EU and US policy towards Kosovo. For Serbian Prime Minister Đinđić, the “systematic elimination of the presence of Serbian statehood in Kosovo was unacceptable”, in relation to issues of legislation, customs, property and international representation⁹.

Although dissatisfied with the development of the Kosovo issue, neither Đinđić nor Koštunica questioned Serbia’s planned European course. However, from a Western perspective, it was increasingly obvious that keeping Kosovo within Serbia was not compatible with its European integration. For the Serbian Prime Minister, Serbia’s efforts to set up a broad free trade zone in the Balkans, a policy of reconciliation and good neighborliness, as well as full cooperation with the international community should have been reflected in respect for Serbian interests in Kosovo. Đinđić sought to resolve the Kosovo issue as soon as possible, so as not to hinder Serbia’s path to the EU, but he was also dissatisfied with the attitude of European officials towards his proposals. For representatives of the largest EU countries, the Serbian prime minister’s plans were premature and devoid of understanding of the broader foreign policy context¹⁰.

After the assassination of Prime Minister Đinđić (2003), the ruling elite in Serbia sought to conduct policy towards Kosovo by postponing and avoiding key issues, trying to reconcile the European agenda in foreign policy with the position on territorial sovereignty and integrity based on UN Resolution 1244. In Koštunica’s foreign policy agenda, the European transition of post-Milošević Serbia had to follow a clear “state-building line”, which treating Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia. During his terms as prime minister (2004–2007, 2007–2008), this politician tried to find a broad political compromise between the government and the opposition on the topics of the new Constitution and Kosovo¹¹. The Serbian state leadership accepted the decision of the UN Security Council (2003) which emphasized that the future of Kosmet would depend exclusively on the application of the principle of

⁸ Srđan Darmanović, *Crna Gora – nova nezavisna država na Balkanu*, in: *Referendum u Crnoj Gori*, Podgorica 2006, p. 15.

⁹ Jovica Pavlović, *Kosovo kao platforma za političko nadigravanje: pitanje nacionalnog identiteta, državnog interesa ili populističke demagogije?*, in: *Političko nadigravanje zemalja Zapadnog Balkana*, Center for Applied European Studies – CPES, 2022, p. 246.

¹⁰ In his last interview, Đinđić stated that he received messages from the international community not to “make too much noise about the Kosovo issue.” In addition, he called the unresolved status of Kosovo “a white death for Serbia, from which it is slowly and surely dying”. Zoran Djindjic poslednji intervju, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4_F3im7o0 (date accessed: 17.12.2024).

¹¹ Vojislav Koštunica, *Zašto Srbija a ne Evropska unija*, Beograd 2012, p. 10.

“standards before status” and the implementation of the guidelines outlined by the international administration in Kosovo (UNMIK). Following the decision of the international community to open negotiations on the status of Kosovo (2005), the Serbian negotiating team defined the possibilities of maximum concessions on the most important political issue for the country with the platform of “more than autonomy, less than independence”. With the adoption of the Constitution of Serbia (2006), a compromise legal act of the three most significant political factors – the Democratic Party (DS), the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and supported by the public engagement of the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the position towards Kosovo as an “integral part of the territory of Serbia” was finally defined¹².

The phased transformation of the international provisional in Kosovo into a community with forms of statehood was accompanied by a worsening of the position of the Serbs in Kosovo. Although the Albanian side did not do much to prevent the endangerment of Kosovo Serbs and did not fulfill the political obligations from the “standards before status” document, the EU and the US did not block the activities of the Albanian political factor towards independence¹³. Western governments did not want the KFOR peacekeeping troops and the UNMIK missions as well to get into trouble with the Kosovo Albanians, so they reacted only formally when the pogrom hit the Serbs (March 2004) followed by mass attacks on people, property and religious institutions. As a result, the government in Belgrade organized a peace protest calmed the tense atmosphere in society, while the Serbian Parliament adopted a document on “special Serbian autonomy within the framework of Kosovo autonomy”. This document did not have a binding character in the upcoming negotiations and was directed towards the internal political situation and the pacification of ultra-nationalists¹⁴.

Except in the first year (2000–2001), when Serbia's return to international institutions was a consequence of the consensus of the authorities, but also of the broad interest of all members of the UN Security Council and European countries, it turned out that Serbia's foreign policy position until the restoration of statehood (2006) was defensive and faced with the expectations of Western countries that official Belgrade renounces the entire Milošević's political legacy. Therefore, despite the opening of opportunities related to European integration, Serbia seemed much more like an object than a subject of international politics. This also reflected on its regional position, weakening Serbia's efforts to resolve all traumatic issues from the post-Yugoslav legacy in an open dialogue, especially with Croatia and BiH. On the other hand, it should be said that Serbia, within the FRY (until 2003) and the state union with Montenegro (until 2006), was very involved in the work of regional initiatives (Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe, Southeastern Europe Cooperation Process, etc.) through which the international community cooperated with the Balkan states with the aim of achieving peace, democracy, strengthening human rights and

¹² *Ustav Republike Srbije*, Beograd 2006, pp. 3–4.

¹³ Iain King, Whit Mason, *Peace at any Price. How the World Failed Kosovo*, Cornell University Press, 2006, pp. 191–193.

¹⁴ During a peaceful protest in Belgrade, small groups of far-right extremists and football hooligans set fire to mosques in Belgrade and Niš, which led to a relativization of Western media condemnation of the pogrom against Serbs (Nebojša Vladislavljević, *Uspon i pad demokratije posle Petog oktobra*, Beograd 2019, pp. 178–179).

economic development¹⁵. Encouraging the development of bilateral and multilateral relations in Southeast Europe was also derived from the strategic positioning of the EU and the US. For Western governments, it was necessary to stop the “cyclical repetition of conflicts characteristic of the peoples of the Balkans” and normalize their relations through the establishment of truth, responsibility and reconciliation¹⁶.

Democratic Serbia and the West between different perceptions and expectations

From the very beginning, the Serbian post-Milošević elite sought to fully open up the European integration processes and thereby neutralize the difficult foreign policy legacy, marked by international sanctions and a complete lack of understanding of global processes after 1989. Both Đinđić and Koštunica saw Serbia as a democratic country within the EU, but their tactical views on achieving that goal differed markedly. Đinđić was an energetic, charismatic leader, inclined to impose his own pace in domestic and foreign policy, while Koštunica, inclined to evolutionary changes on solid foundations and legalism, was an advocate of achieving a broad consensus in defining key foreign policy directions¹⁷. Inheriting the rivalry from the opposition times, both sides deepened their political differences, regardless of the need to harmonize relations in order to resolve many strategic and operational issues. As Prime Minister (2001–2003), Đinđić had a strong formal and informal diplomatic activity that often met with the dissatisfaction of the President of the FRY Koštunica and the federal authorities. As a pronounced Euro-enthusiast, Đinđić often said that “Serbia’s path to the EU has no alternative” and that the country was ready to quickly and energetically overcome numerous problems in this regard.

Key issues, in addition to the status of Kosovo, were related to the Hague Tribunal’s requests for the extradition of all war crimes indictees. The Serbian prime minister, in talks with foreign ambassadors, tried to postpone the resolution of these issues for two years so that his government could consolidate and, from his point of view, do the key things: attract foreign investment, rebuild the devastated industry and increase employment. Đinđić correctly concluded that an inflexible Western policy of conditionality¹⁸ would not only affect the decline in his government’s popularity, but would also ignite a strong nationalist rebellion, which could be exploited by the parties of the “old system”. Although foreign representatives in Serbia concluded that the arguments of the Serbian prime minister were well-founded, his demands were “absolutely impossible to fulfill”¹⁹.

¹⁵ Duško Lopandić, Jasminka Kronja, *Regionalne inicijative i multilateralna saradnja na Balkanu*, Beograd 2010, pp. 57–73.

¹⁶ Dragan Đukanović, *Zapadni Balkan: od sukoba do Evrointegracija*, in: *Godišnjak Fakulteta političkih nauka 2009, III deo: Međunarodna politika i međunarodni odnosi*, Beograd, 2009, pp. 496.

¹⁷ Obrad Kesic, *An airplane with eighteen pilots: Serbia after Milosevic*, in: *Serbia since 1989: Politics and Society under Milosevic and After*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA, 2005, p. 107.

¹⁸ More details about the term *Political Conditionality* and the Balkans conditionality process by the West in: Joel T. Shelton, *Conditionality and the Ambitions of Governance: Social Transformation in Southeastern Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

¹⁹ V. Montgomeri, *Kad ovacije utihnu*, p. 90.

The biggest challenge that Koštunica and Đinđić faced in their cooperation with the Hague tribunal was the extradition of former President Slobodan Milošević. In this case, the US conditionality of the cessation of financial aid caused deep divisions in the government – unlike the pragmatic Đinđić, Koštunica saw no possibility of such a move, since the laws of the FRY prohibited the extradition of its own citizens. Milošević was finally extradited to the Hague tribunal, after Đinđić's questionable reference to the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (1990), according to which Serbia could not apply federal laws if its interests were threatened²⁰. In this way, Đinđić thus cut the “Gordian knot” of Serbian politics and public debate among experts and politicians about the venue for the trial of Milošević and his associates. However, the failure to reach a consensus on this issue dramatically affected relations in the government and disrupted the possibilities of cooperation on major international and internal issues. Within the ruling democratic coalition in Serbia, many held the view that international pressure to extradite Milošević was directly related to the subsequent justification of NATO's bombing of Serbia²¹.

After the assassination of the Serbian Prime Minister, some influential foreign media criticized the policy of pressure towards Serbia. Thus, the French *Le Monde* stated that the US constantly conditions Serbia by blocking financial support from international institutions in case of insufficient cooperation with the Hague Tribunal²². Regardless of the fact that they formally welcomed the formation of a new Serbian government headed by Koštunica (March 2004), the following month the US demanded full cooperation from official Belgrade regarding the extradition of the indicted former Bosnian Serb leaders, Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, and the State Department blocked significant financial resources intended for Serbia in Congress²³.

European officials, at the same time, believed that Koštunica, after reaching direct agreements with the indictees on surrender to the Hague Tribunal, was ready to take key steps towards the EU and transform the position of a post-communist conservative politician into a right-wing liberal and European integralist. They believed that the Resolution of the Serbian Parliament on EU accession (October 2004) defined the country's European future as a “strategic national goal”, for which Serbia is “fully prepared to meet all necessary preconditions”²⁴. Therefore, officials in Brussels decided to support Serbia's efforts to negotiate a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU (October 2005). However, due to the EU's dissatisfaction with Serbia's cooperation with the Hague Tribunal, negotiations were suspended in May 2006 and resumed only in 2007, after the election victory of the Democratic Party, under the leadership of Serbian President Boris Tadić (2004–2012)²⁵.

The lack of the necessary consensus within the Tadić-Koštunica government (2007–2008) regarding cooperation with the Hague Tribunal was accompanied by the distancing

²⁰ Konferencija za novinare povodom izručenja Slobodana Milosevica, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUHEZm-8cMw> (date accessed: 15.11.2024).

²¹ N. Vladislavljević, *Uspón i pad demokratije...*, p. 117.

²² Marek Waldenberg, *Rozbicie Jugosławii*, Warszawa 2005, p. 436.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Branislav Radeljić, *The Politics of (No) Alternatives in Post-Milošević Serbia*, in: *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2014, p. 248.

²⁵ Ibidem.

of the DSS and DS positions regarding the increasingly likely (self)declaration of Kosovo's independence. As a result, until 2012, negotiations with the EU were unstable and associated with deep internal crises, changes in the foreign policy course of political parties in Serbia, and the emergence of new important factors in the struggle for power (Serbian Progressive Party – SNS, 2008)²⁶. There was a broad consensus in Serbia about the non-acceptance of Ahtisaari's plan for Kosovo (2007) and the recognition of independence of this international protectorate by the US and most countries in Europe (2008).

Nevertheless, unlike Tadić's DS, which did not want to interrupt the path of EU integration, Koštunica's DSS chose a Eurosceptic platform and imposed Serbia's strategic orientation of military neutrality. This plan was essentially intended to prevent Serbia from joining the EU. Political practice in Southeast Europe contained, in addition to the European, a North Atlantic component, while Serbia's military neutrality left unharmonized security issues in relations with its own strategic reality – NATO²⁷. By making far-reaching foreign policy and security moves regarding the status of Kosovo under time pressure, the political and intellectual elite around Prime Minister Koštunica overlooked that military neutrality also implies comprehensive armament to defend the self-proclaimed position. Such a concept, which implied the reform and modernization of the army based on its own forces, required significant financial resources that Serbia lacked²⁸.

President Tadić's *compromise policy* ("Both Kosovo and the EU") gained support in the snap elections of May 2008, which marked the beginning of reshaping of political relations in Serbia, and the positioning of the previously influential DSS on the right political margin. Serbia signed the SAA (ratified by EU countries only in 2010 due to the obstructive actions of the Netherlands)²⁹ and on its own initiative began implementing the Interim Trade Agreement (2009), thus entering into a high trade risk in exchange with EU countries³⁰. In addition, the EU conditioned the ratification of the SAA on Serbia's cooperation in changing the international mission in Kosovo (EULEX instead of UNMIK), with the task of implementing the Ahtisaari plan for Kosovo³¹. Given Serbia's formal application (2009) for EU membership, the fulfillment of all obligations related to the Hague Tribunal (Mladić's arrest in 2011), and Belgrade's stance regarding the start of negotiations with the government in Pristina (2011), official candidate status was granted to Serbia by European Council (March 2012).

²⁶ Mirella Korzeniewska-Wiszniowska, *Dynamics of the Serbian EU accession process – key issues and the challenges of state democratization in an era of populism*, Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe, Vol. 17, No.4, 2019, p. 53.

²⁷ Branislav Milosavljević, *Ograničenja vojne neutralnosti Republike Srbije*, in: *Uticaj vojne neutralnosti Srbije na bezbednost i stabilnost u Evropi*, Beograd 2016, p. 151.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 152–154.

²⁹ Due to the proven responsibility of its own peacekeeping forces in Srebrenica (1995), the Netherlands had a particularly negative attitude towards Serbia's integration with the EU until all the demands of the Hague Tribunal were met (especially the arrest of Mladić).

³⁰ Milica Delević, Vladimir Medak, *Srbija i Evropska unija – jedanaest godina kasnije*, in: *Politički život*, Beograd 2011, p. 12; Decision taken by Serbia to implement unilaterally the Interim Agreement on trade and trade-related matters between the European Community and the Republic of Serbia, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:083:0028:0028:EN:PDF> (date accessed: 14.12.2024).

³¹ Slobodan Samardžić, *Evolution of the Relations between Serbia and the European Union*, in: *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations*, nr 1 (t. 51), 2015, pp. 142–143.

Germany, as Serbia's most important foreign trade partner in the EU, supported its European integration, but demanded Serbia's full cooperation with EULEX and the dismantling of Serbian government structures in the north. This was unacceptable to President Tadić, whose plan from early 2012 included the so-called four-level autonomy for Serbs in Kosovo. The Serbian side proposed a special status for northern Kosovo, the autonomy for Serbian enclaves and the extraterritoriality of religious sites of historical and cultural significance³². The formation of a new government (2012) of reformed ultranationalists (SNS) ended a continuous period of the post-Milošević democratic authorities' path towards the EU, heavily burdened by the legacy of the 1990s, especially the issues of war crimes and the status of Kosovo.

In the period 2000–2012, Serbian public opinion continuously supported Serbia's path towards the EU, on the condition of keeping a partial state presence in Kosovo. President Tadić's foreign policy was a space for compromise between the plans of Đinđić and Koštunica: it did not question the country's European integration, it sought to participate constructively in the main international forums on the Kosovo issue, but it did not want and could not completely deprive Serbia of sovereignty in Kosovo. The path to the EU not only politically, but also economically and culturally bound Serbia to the European community of states. As part of European integration Serbia has significantly increased the competitiveness of its economy, adopted a whole set of anti-corruption measures. In addition, it has implemented laws in the field of human and minority rights and started cooperation with NATO (Partnership for Peace, NATO mission in Belgrade, Serbian Mission in Brussels)³³.

On the other hand, the European Union's policy towards Serbia was only a segment of Brussels' strategy towards the Western Balkans within which conditionality aid on demands for political and economic reforms was an effective tool of European political elites, and which the largest number of European Union citizens supported³⁴. After ten countries joined the EU in 2004, skepticism emerged among citizens, primarily triggered by attitudes in France and the Netherlands regarding constitutional changes. Between 2006 and 2008, the majority of EU citizens were reluctant to support the integration of Western Balkan countries³⁵. The economic crisis of 2008 further worsened the mood within the EU regarding the continuation of integration processes, but EU officials still wanted to maintain the momentum in this given the previous economic and political investment in the Western Balkans³⁶. Restraint about further integration was certainly influenced, in addition to the economic crisis, by the emergence of rivalry with challenger states (Russia, China) that used political fissures within the EU and various financial and security influences on non-

³² Tadićev plan za Kosovo u četiri tačke, <https://www.dw.com/bs/tadi%C4%87ev-plan-za-kosovo-u-%C4%8Detiri-ta%C4%8Dke/a-15686478> (date accessed: 07.12.2024).

³³ Delević, Medjak, *Srbija i Evropska unija – 11 godina kasnije...*, p. 15; Nevena Radosavljević, *Šta je Individualni Plan partnerstva Srbije i NATO*, Beograd 2017, pp. 3–5.

³⁴ Lenard J. Koen, Džon R. Lempi, *Prihvatanje demokratije na Zapadnom Balkanu*, Beograd 2013, p. 417.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 418–419. Of all the countries in the Western Balkans in 2008, only Croatia's support for EU integration was over 50%. Support for Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro was around 40%.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 443. Shortly before leaving his post as EU High Representative for Foreign Policy in July 2009, Javier Solana noted that „EU foreign policy was born in the Balkans” and added „the EU had invested too much to allow Balkan countries to deviate from the EU's pull”.

integrated European areas (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldavia, Western Balkans) to pursue their own geopolitical interests³⁷. In the opinion of many citizens of Western Europe, the new EU members of 2004 have not fulfilled their obligations in line with their expectations. This has led to pressure on European governments and Brussels to tighten criteria regarding the independence of the judiciary, media freedom and, in particular, the principles and fundamental values of the EU in order for the integration process to continue³⁸.

The US did not differ from Brussels in its policy of conditionality towards Serbia. During a visit to President Bush (May 2001), FRY President Koštunica was openly told that “American financial support for Belgrade depends on cooperation with the Hague Tribunal”. This was a condition for the US to participate in a donor conference at which Serbia wanted to raise more than a billion dollars for the reconstruction of the country³⁹. After Milošević’s extradition to The Hague, the atmosphere at the White House meeting with Serbian Prime Minister Đinđić (November 2001) was more relaxed – Serbia supported the „US fight against global terrorism”, while at the same time requesting additional American economic assistance for economic transformation⁴⁰. The US supported the cancellation of two-thirds of Serbia’s debt to the London and Paris Clubs. Serbia’s total debt was reduced by several billion dollars, while the American company *US Steel* bought the *Sartid* steel mill, becoming the largest foreign investor in Serbia at the beginning of its post-Milošević transition. However, the US ignored Đinđić’s demands to revitalize the Serbian economy by investing in Serbian companies⁴¹.

The US tried to distance itself from Prime Minister Koštunica during the diplomatic clashes with Belgrade over Kosovo (2006–2008) and tried to encourage President Tadić’s pro-European path. For this reason, US Vice President Joseph Biden announced from Belgrade (2009) that he had “agreed to disagree on Kosovo” with the Serbian side and added this would not jeopardize US support for Serbia on its path to the EU⁴². Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, at a meeting with Tadić (2010), encouraged the Serbian side to begin negotiations with representatives of Kosovo Albanians and emphasized the satisfaction of official Washington with Serbia’s attitude towards the Hague Tribunal.

The US and the EU had the same views on stabilizing the Western Balkans in accordance with their own security and economic interests, and Serbia, as a “key to ensuring regional stability”, was supposed to become a partner instead of a “disruptive factor” from the Milošević era⁴³. By integrating Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania (2004), Croatia and Albania (2009) into NATO, establishing peacekeeping missions in Kosovo (1999), BiH (1995), and Macedonia (1993–1999, 2003), and approving the plan for Montenegro’s

³⁷ Vesna Pavičić, *Serbia’s Orientation Challenge and Ways to Overcome It*, in: *Connections*, Vol. 18, No. 1/2, 2019, p. 116.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ Bush Links Aid to Yugoslavia to the Extradition of Milosevic, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/10/world/bush-links-aid-to-yugoslavia-to-the-extradition-of-milosevic.html> (date accessed: 08.12.2024).

⁴⁰ Serbian PM: Belgrade Glad to Participate in War on Terrorism, <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2001-11-07-35-serbian-67542602/286020.html> (date accessed: 08.12.2024).

⁴¹ Montgomeri, *Kad ovacije utihnu*, pp. 105–107.

⁴² Serbia Seeks New Ties With U.S. During Biden Visit, https://www.rferl.org/a/Serbia_Seeks_New_Ties_With_US_During_Biden_Visit/1736350.html (date accessed: 09.12.2024).

⁴³ State Department’s Integrated Country Strategy – Serbia, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ICS_EUR_Serbia_Public.pdf (date accessed: 18.12.2024).

accession to NATO, the US and its allies have fully taken control of all the most important Balkan security issues. Serbia initiated the procedure for signing the IPAP agreement (2011), which envisaged a high level of cooperation between a non-NATO country and this military alliance. Regardless of its self-proclaimed military neutrality, Serbia entered into a high level of relations with NATO, which, in addition to the political-security aspect, included military issues, protection of security information, and cooperation in the sphere of public diplomacy⁴⁴. The efforts of Serbian governments to join the EU and the continued support of citizens for this process as well, have also influenced the flexibility of the Serbian security community towards the dominant NATO security discourse in the region⁴⁵. In this way, the foundations were created for Serbia's non-membership cooperation with NATO to be aligned with the US and EU conditionality policy, which was dynamized after 2012 under the *stabilocracy* (an amalgam of *stabilisation* and *autocracy*)⁴⁶ of Aleksandar Vučić.

A brief history of a self-deception: the *Serbo-centric* perception of the Fourth Period of Russian policy in the Balkans

The Balkans have always been a zone for achieving peripheral Russian goals and influence, the fulfillment of which depended on Russia's political and military power in Eastern and Central Europe, or on the balancing of forces with other influential powers in European affairs. The earliest Russian interest in the Balkans was marked by sporadic aid to Orthodox churches and populations under Ottoman rule (15th–17th centuries). During the reign of Empress Catherine the Great (1762–1796), Russia imposed itself on the Ottoman Empire as the “protector of Orthodox” and planned a strategic division of spheres of interest with Austria, where the entire area inhabited by Serbs was left under the administration of Vienna. This period, which lasted until the end of the 19th century, ended with the failure of Russian imperial plans in the Balkans, but with the emergence of independent Orthodox Christian states (Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria)⁴⁷. In the third period, during the 20th century, Soviet Russia was the ideological and strategic enemy of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, a state controlled by Serbian elites and the Karadjordjević dynasty. The two states established diplomatic relations only in 1940, at a time when the European order was being torn apart by war. Tito's Yugoslavia had been outside the Soviet bloc since 1948 and was constantly balancing the influences of Washington and Moscow⁴⁸.

The fourth period of Russian presence in the Balkans and Serbia represents a political reflection of the deterioration of Russia's strategic relations with the USA and its closest European ally, UK. Since the military intervention of the US and its allies in Iraq (2003), and the “Color Revolutions” (Georgia 2003, Ukraine 2004–2005), Russia has sought to reorganize its own military forces and homogenize its security influence in the post-

⁴⁴ Radosavljević, *Šta je Individualni Plan partnerstva Srbije i NATO*, pp. 4–10.

⁴⁵ Jelena Radoman, *Serbia and NATO: From enemies to (almost)partners*, Belgrade Center for Security Policy, 2012, p. 18.

⁴⁶ Korzeniewska-Wiszniowska, *Dynamics of the Serbian EU accession process...*, p. 72.

⁴⁷ Aleksej Timofejev, *Mitovi o Rusiji i dinamika razvoja ruskih spoljnopolitičkih odnosa na Zapadnom Balkanu*, Odnosi Rusije i Srbije na početku XXI veka (zbornik radova), ISAC Fond, Beograd 2009, pp. 17–19.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 19–20.

-Soviet space. In this context, President Vladimir Putin's decision to withdraw the Russian military contingent from the international peacekeeping forces in BiH and Kosovo (areas of minimal Russian interest) should be viewed⁴⁹. Russian political and logistical support for the independence of Montenegro (2006) is only part of an attempt to maintain Russia's marginal influence in the Balkans through the entry of Russian privatization capital into strategic enterprises in Montenegro⁵⁰. At the same time, Russia was a very cooperative member of the international groups that prepared a plan for a solution to the status of Kosovo, but in the zone of its immediate interests it strongly encouraged the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to secede from Georgia⁵¹.

Until the public release of the Ahtisaari plan for Kosovo (february 2007), Serbia did not rely too much on Russia in conducting its foreign policy. Vojislav Koštunica, a politician who insisted on Russia blocking this plan in the Security Council due to the "defense of Serbia's territorial integrity in Kosovo" (2007), as president of the FRY violated protocol and diplomatic norms during the visit of Russian President Putin to Belgrade by not waiting for his guest (2001)⁵². At the next meeting of state representatives in Sochi (2004), Putin rejected Prime Minister Koštunica's attempt to support the DSS candidate in the presidential elections in Serbia due to Russia's disinterest in interfering in the internal affairs of a state in which it had no real strategic interests⁵³. Russia was under suspicion by the Serbian democratic authorities as a "safe house" for members of the Milošević family, and the pro-Western Serbian public reacted with great dissatisfaction to messages from Russian state television that "Western marionette Zoran Đinđić deserved a bullet" (2008)⁵⁴.

Despite the fact that influential intellectuals in Kremlin circles believed that Russia would not block the adoption of Ahtisaari's plan for Kosovo in the Security Council, Putin decided to play for a sure win by taking advantage of Serbia's decisive stance on refusing to recognize Kosovo's independence⁵⁵. By withdrawing Western support for the Ahtisaari plan at the UN, Putin would have achieved an obvious victory on the global stage. On the other hand, he could have exploited Western insistence on the plan by pointing to "universal implications" which he intended to use to advance Russian interests in parts of Moldova, Georgia and, since 2014, Ukraine⁵⁶. Russia formally, through Putin's speech at the international security conference in Munich (February 2007), emphasized its role as a chal-

⁴⁹ Nataliya Bugayova, *How We got here with Russia: The Kremlin's Worldview*, Institute for the Study of War, 2019, pp. 16–17.

⁵⁰ Tranzicijsko uništavanje crnogorske industrije, <https://www.bilten.org/?p=8018> (date accessed: 10.12.2024).

⁵¹ Istorijat Južne Osetije i Abhazije: Kad je klupko počelo da se zapetljava?, https://rtv.rs/sr_lat/svet/istorijat-juzne-osetije-i-abhazije-kad-je-klupko-pocelo-da-se-zapetljava_77946.html (date accessed: 10.12.2024).

⁵² Miroslav Jovanović, *Dve Rusije: o dva dominantna diskursa Rusije u srpskoj javnosti*, in: *Odnosi Rusije i Srbije na početku XXI veka* (zbornik radova), ISAC Fond, Beograd 2009, p. 16.

⁵³ Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press, 2017, p. 57.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 56.

⁵⁵ Fyodor Lukyanov, a key figure in the main Russian foreign policy magazine *Russia in Global Politics* and the current president of the Russian Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, claimed that „Russia would not block the adoption of the Ahtisaari plan in the Security Council” (2007).

Rusija neće blokirati Ahtisarijev plan, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/698502.html> (date accessed: 29.11.2024).

⁵⁶ Bechev, *Rival Power*..., p. 60.

lenger to American global policy, particularly condemning NATO's expansion to Eastern Europe in the post-Cold War era. Since then, in Russian plans, the Balkans have gained importance as a Western "weak security belt", and the ambivalent international status of Kosovo as a means of relativizing state sovereignty⁵⁷.

Although the Eurosceptic Koštunica and his DSS were removed from power in 2008, the government under the influence of President Tadić (2008–2012) did not adopt a foreign policy strategy, defensively balancing between EU, US, Russia and China (*The Four Pillars Foreign Policy*)⁵⁸, which has remained to this day. This type of pretentious multilateral positioning of Serbia in international relations further convinced the EU and the US that conditionality is the best way to conduct policy towards Serbia, especially on the Kosovo issue. The authorities in Serbia did not consider the different and conflicting interests of Russia, the West and China in the Balkans, which prevented official Belgrade from achieving serious foreign policy successes⁵⁹. Wanting to give the impression of a determined candidate for the EU, Serbia unilaterally implemented an Interim Trade Agreement with the EU but also refused to vote for resolutions by Western countries directed against Russia in the UN and OSCE (2008–2009)⁶⁰.

Harmonizing relations with Russia on the international level was unfavorable for Serbia's European interests because official Moscow did not respect them too much. From a very narrow, Serbocentric perspective, Serbia's policy was focused on Russian support over the status of Kosovo, but did not consider Russia's unprincipledness and calculations regarding the primary interests of the Putin government in Georgia, and later in Ukraine⁶¹. Russia's attempts to compete with the West in the Balkans have been reinforced by an economic offensive. Putin achieved great success by signing an agreement with Sergei Stanishev and Kostas Karamanlis, the prime ministers of Bulgaria and Greece, on the construction of the Burgas-Alexandropoulos oil pipeline (2007), while the South Stream gas project was supposed to supply industrial zones in Italy, Greece, Hungary and Austria, passing through the Balkans⁶². Due to its policy on Kosovo, Serbia sold a majority stake in the oil industry (NIS) to Russia's Gazprom Neft (2008) and signed a contract to build South Stream. Earlier, the Russian oil industry entered the Serbian market with the purchase of Beopetrol by Lukoil (2003)⁶³.

Serbia believed that energy relations with Russia followed the cooperation of large EU members regarding the supply of Russian gas (Germany, Italy), which were also Serbia's

⁵⁷ Žarko N. Petrović, *Rusko-srpsko strateško partnerstvo: sadržina i domašaj*, in: *Odnosi Rusije i Srbije na početku XXI veka* (zbornik radova), ISAC Fond, Beograd 2009, p. 27.

⁵⁸ More details about this in: Serbia's Cooperation with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States of America, Policy Department, Directorate-General for External Policies, European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/133504/Serbia%20cooperation%20with%20China,%20the%20EU,%20Russia%20and%20the%20USA.pdf> (date accessed: 23.11.2024).

⁵⁹ For more details on the rivalry between China's new Silk Belt strategy and Russia's Eurasian idea in the post-Soviet space after the global economic crisis, see: Michał Lubina, *Niedźwiedź w ceinid Smoka. Rosja-Chiny 1991–2014*, Kraków 2014, pp. 460–476.

⁶⁰ *Od četiri stuba spoljne politike do evropskih integracija* (grupa autora), ISAC fond, Beograd 2013, pp. 40–41.

⁶¹ Petrović, *Rusko-srpsko strateško partnerstvo...*, p. 28.

⁶² Dimitar Bechev, *Constructing South East Europe. The Politics of Balkan Regional Cooperation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 100–101.

⁶³ Miroslav Jovanović, *Srbi i Rusi 12–21 vek. Istorija odnosa*, Beograd 2012, p. 237.

most important foreign trade partners⁶⁴. However, the entire South Stream project aroused suspicion in Washington, as it has been treated as a means of expanding Russian energy influence in the Balkans. Taking advantage of the weaknesses of the Western policy of centralizing power in BiH, Russia functioned as a protector of the Dayton Agreement and the interests of Republika Srpska, which made it easier for it to buy the oil industry in this BiH entity.

In this way, Serbia's foreign policy and its regional interests slowly turned into an object of rivalry between the interests of the US, the EU and Russia in the Western Balkans, and the pro-European orientation of Serbian citizens was declining by the 2012 elections. Research by the Belgrade Center for Security Policy (September 2012) showed the foreign policy disorientation and ambivalence of Serbian citizens, which was a direct consequence of political decisions in the period 2008–2012. Thus, after the victory of the SNS in the 2012 elections, in just three months, support for EU integration dropped by as much as 10%, and in total to only 47%, while 35% of citizens were against joining the EU⁶⁵.

Conclusion

The democratic authorities in Serbia after 2000 sought to bring the country out of international isolation and resolve inherited problems in regional politics, without renouncing the right to state sovereignty in Kosovo. However, even though the complex situation required the achievement of a broad internal consensus for its resolution, there were serious disagreements within the Serbian ruling elites regarding international obligations (The Hague Tribunal), negotiations over Kosovo, but also, in general, the definition of a strategy for positioning Serbia in 21st century Europe. This led to Serbia's passive stance, especially during the time of the government of Vojislav Koštunica. In the context of the dispute with the West over the status of Kosovo, Serbia was forced to take a defensive position, which led to the adoption of an improvised and doctrinally unfounded strategy of military neutrality.

On the other hand, the US and EU's attitude towards Serbia stemmed from their policy towards Balkans as a sphere of interest, the post-war legacy in the post-Yugoslav region, but also from the intentions of the elites in the Western Balkans to be on the path of European integration. The policy of conditionality towards Serbia and other countries of the Western Balkans was supposed to control regional processes of reconciliation and regional cooperation. Besides, the Western Balkans region is positioned as the European periphery of global capitalism through ownership transformation and market opening. After 2008, the Serbian authorities were not ready to accept the Western position on an independent Kosovo as a *sui generis* case. At the same time, they tried not to cross the "red lines" in their relations with officials in Brussels and Washington and jeopardize the Euro-

⁶⁴ Dušan Reljić, *The Western Balkans between the EU, the USA and Russia*, in: *SWP Comments*, German Institute for International and security Affairs, 2019, pp. 4–6.

⁶⁵ Simultaneously, support in Serbia for the country's entry into NATO fell from 17% (2011) to 13.5% (2012). At the same time, Russia was identified as the greatest international friend (47%), while the US was identified as the greatest threat (43%). More details in: *Gradani Srbije: Između EU, Rusije i NATO*, Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku, Beograd 2012.

pean path and the security of Serbia, its economic development and the reconstruction of society. In addition, the distant attitude of Western governments towards Serbia and other Western Balkan countries was influenced by their public, which was otherwise less and less committed to integration processes after the economic crisis.

The Serbian authorities have wrongly projected the possibilities of cooperation with Russia on the Kosovo issue, not problematizing these relations through the strengthening of the EU and US disagreements with official Moscow, especially after the changes of government in Georgia and Ukraine (2003–2005), the beginning of the separatist processes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (2006), and Putin's speech at the Munich conference (2007). The efforts of the Serbian authorities to preserve Kosovo as a part of Serbia by relying on Russian influence caused added suspicion in the West and helped to emphasize old assessments and stereotypes about Serbia as a disruptive factor in the Balkans and a historical Russian ally. The Serbian political orientation had been set diffusely and on unrealistic grounds, because it projected the achievement of good relations with all major international actors (US, EU, China, Russia) at a time when relations within the unipolar world were beginning to antagonize. Because of this orientation, Serbia was seen as an uncooperative partner (the West), as a means of hindering complete Western domination in the Balkans (Russia), or as an extremely limited local space suitable for implementing an economic strategy in Europe (China).

Until the adoption of the Ahtisaari Plan, officials in Serbia did not try to make a clearer commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration through initiatives towards the EU, USA and NATO in exchange for keeping a certain form of sovereignty in Kosovo. On the other hand, the decision of the US and most EU members to recognize Kosovo as a state exempt from UN membership had far-reaching consequences for the international activities of the challenger states (Russia), caused disappointment among the pro-Western citizens in Serbia and strengthened Eurosceptic and anti-Western structures in Serbian political and security circles. In 12 years, democratic governments managed to pull Serbia out of international isolation and bring it to the stage of starting negotiations for EU membership, but at the same time, the process of declining pro-Western enthusiasm began with the return to power of „reformed” political forces, Milošević's allies from the 1990s.

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