

<https://doi.org/10.4467/2543733XSSB.25.021.22518>

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## The impact of the war in Ukraine on changing the nature of the Republic of Serbia's relations with the Russian Federation

### Abstract

The Republic of Serbia is the closest partner (and strategic partner) of the Russian Federation among the countries of the Balkan Peninsula. The long-standing and multifaceted cooperation is based on cultural and religious proximity, as well as mutual understanding and respect regarding the implementation of foreign policy priorities and national interests understood according to the theoretical perspective – realism. Russia's war with Ukraine has affected the bilateral relations of Russia and Serbia in the security field and in political, economic (including energy) and cultural issues. Through a comparative analysis, the study examines how Russian-Serbian cooperation has evolved after 2022 in comparison to its development between 1992 and 2022.

**Keywords:** Serbia, Russia, Ukraine, partnership, national interest

### Introduction and Methodology

Relations between the Republic of Serbia and the Russian Federation are conducted with varying intensity due to historical and geopolitical conditions. Since the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 and the dismemberment of the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in 1992, Russia and Serbia<sup>1</sup> have cooperated continuously, especially in the areas of politics, security, economy (including energy and infrastructure), and culture. Serbia is Russia's closest political and economic partner among the Western Balkan countries.

Since the full-scale war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, the Republic of Serbia has maintained an ambiguous stance. On the one hand,

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<sup>1</sup> After the dismemberment of the SFRY, the Serbs, together with the Montenegrins, formed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1992–2003), which was later transformed into the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (2003–2006). Since 2006, there has been an independent Republic of Serbia.



Serbia invariably supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine and, on the other hand, guided by the principle of balancing in foreign policy according to the concept of the four pillars of foreign policy announced in 2009, it seeks to maintain correct and forward-looking relations with Russia. At the same time, decision-makers in Serbia remain under pressure from, among others, the European Union and the United States, which expect Serbia to openly take a stand against Russia.

In order to deepen the analysis and understanding of bilateral cooperation between Serbia and Russia, it is reasonable to refer to the realist paradigm, in which one of the basic concepts is the national interest. National interest in the realist approach is homogeneous, constant and defines the goals and priorities of the state in an anarchic international environment. Paul Seaubery understands the national interest in two ways, normatively and descriptively<sup>2</sup>. The normative approach assumes that the national interest is a set of current state priorities and that their realisation is possible through a state's participation in the system of international relations. The descriptive approach specifies that these are priorities that are achievable in a specific time perspective. The opposite understanding of the national interest is presented by Hans Morgenthau, who argues that the national interest is fixed and usually remains a certain imaginary state that is pursued rather than actually achieved. Morgenthau defines the national interest primarily in terms of gaining, maintaining, and maximizing power as a means of ensuring the security and survival of the state<sup>3</sup>. When it comes to the national interests of Serbia and Russia, both Seaubery's and Morgenthau's concepts are partly implemented.

Since the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, through the period of remaining in a federal state with Montenegro, Serbia has made successive attempts to precisely shape its national interest<sup>4</sup>. Formally, the national interest has not been directly defined (e.g. in the Constitution), which makes it imprecise, changeable and perpetuated primarily in the narrative of decision-makers. So far, the priority has been the issue of territorial integrity, in particular with regard to Kosovo, whose independence Serbia consistently questions. In this case, the national interest is long-term and unchanging, which corresponds to Morgenthau's realistic approach. Moreover, Serbia's foreign policy is shaped by the desire to balance relations between the West (EU, NATO) and Russia and China. Normatively, Serbia declares its desire for European integration, but at the same time maintains a strategic partnership with Moscow and Beijing, which corresponds to the descriptive analysis of the national interest as a set of goals that can be achieved at a given moment.

Russia's national interest was formally regulated in the 1990s, among others, by the provisions of the 1997 National Security Concept. The national interest „has a long-term nature and determines the main goals, strategic and current tasks of the state's domestic and foreign policy [...]. Russia's national interests in the international arena consist in ensuring sovereignty, strengthening Russia's position as a power – one of the influential centers of the multipolar world, developing equal and mutually beneficial relations with

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<sup>2</sup> P. Seaubery, *Power, Freedom and Diplomacy: The Foreign Policy of the United States of America*, New York 1963, p. 85–87.

<sup>3</sup> H. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Boston 1993.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the historical conditions and attempts to define the national interest by the Serbs, see M. Babić, „Zaklety krąg sprzeczności”: *Synteza społeczna i interes narodowy w Serbii (zarys problemu)*, „Przegląd Europejski” 2013, No 2 (28).

all countries”<sup>5</sup>. Russia’s unwavering priority remains maintaining its status as a superpower and preventing the dominance of a single center of power in international relations. Moscow opposes the hegemony of the United States and seeks to shape a multipolar world, which is consistent with a realistic understanding of national interest as a struggle for power and security. In addition, an important aspect is the protection of the “near abroad” (*blizhneye zarubezh'ye*), i.e. the post-Soviet space, where Russia aspires to the role of a political and economic hegemon. Protection means maintaining Russia’s influence, which results from historical, cultural, and economic ties, as well as the strategic need to ensure a buffer zone of influence. As in the case of Serbia, pragmatism and flexibility in foreign policy allow Russia to adapt its behavior to the dynamic reality of the international environment, which is consistent with the descriptive concept of national interest.

The national interests of Serbia and Russia are aligned, which is the basis for the strategic partnership of the two countries<sup>6</sup>. For both partners, the national interest is linked to sovereignty, inviolability of state borders and maintaining territorial integrity, as well as the maintenance of a strong position among the states of the region<sup>7</sup>, which is reflected in the mutual understanding between Russia and Serbia and bilateral cooperation regarding, inter alia, the mutually beneficial non-recognition of the independence of the Republic of Kosovo. Russia, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, does not allow the recognition of Kosovo as a state at the UN. With Russia’s support on this leading issue, Serbia does not act against its interests, regardless of the country’s controversial foreign policy. In the rhetoric of decision-makers and in the memory of the peoples of both states, memories of a period of greater power are cherished, in the case of Russia from the USSR and Serbia from the SFRY period. The memory of the power of the state and the nation is used by populists postulating the desire to make the states more important again in the system of international relations than they are today, even to present this desire as a necessity, a destiny and a national interest.

However, the war in Ukraine poses a challenge to maintaining the Russian-Serbian partnership. By answering the research question of the extent to which the Russia-Ukraine war has changed the nature of relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia after February 24, 2022, this article aims to show the significance of the war in Ukraine for Russia-Serbia bilateral relations. Moreover, the appeal to the realistic category of national interest allows to try to understand why the Russia-Ukraine war has

<sup>5</sup> Koncepcija nacional'noj bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii (utverzhdena Ukazom Prezidenta RF ot 17 dekabnja 1997 g. No 1300). For more on the differences between Russia’s national interests (*nacional'nye interesy*) and its national values (*nacional'nye cennosti*), see Ju. V. Fenenko, *Sushhnost' i obshhaja karakteristika nacional'nyh cennostej, interesov i celej Rossijskoj Federacii*, „Municipal'nyj mir” 2009, No 1–4.

<sup>6</sup> The Declaration of Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Serbia and the Russian Federation was signed in Sochi in 2013.

<sup>7</sup> The need to maintain the position of a strong state is also linked to the concept of status, which needs to be understood differently for the two countries. Serbia is trying to maintain its status as a leader in the region and needs recognition from states with similar potential and capabilities, while at the same time it remains in the process of systemic transformation. Russia, on the other hand, due to its specific state structure and historical experience, as well as its development path, which has been different from the Western one for decades, seeks recognition of its position in the international environment, firstly by states that are on a par or higher in the category of powers (e.g. the US and China), and secondly, recognition of its superpower status without expecting a change in its principles of operation and identity. See: A. Curanović, *W pogoni za równością. Status w polityce zagranicznej Rosji*, Lublin 2020.

not redefined Russia-Serbia partnership as significantly as it has in the case of other European countries.

The author reviewed the state of cooperation between Serbia and Russia between 1992 and 2022 in four areas, which at the same time constitute the comparative categories in this analysis and are as follows: political partnership, economic partnership (including energy), security cooperation and soft power (culture, religion, media). Then, using a comparative method, the author showed how the nature of cooperation in the above-mentioned fields has changed after February 24, 2022 and how these transformations correspond to the national interests of both partners.

### **Three Decades of Cooperation between Serbia and Russia: 1992–2022**

After the collapse of the USSR, in the 1990s Russia, plunged into a multifaceted crisis, did not clearly define its interests in the Balkans, although it had a constant presence there. The disappearance of the SFRY from the political map of the world and the emergence of new states on its ruins made possible the next iteration of the struggle for Russia's influence in the region<sup>8</sup>. Along with the US and China, Russia is one of the states that can have a real impact on ending or exacerbating local conflicts and unresolved systemic or transformational issues left over from the break-up of Yugoslavia and the wars of the 1990s (most notably Serbia's desire not to recognise the Republic of Kosovo and the non-functional state system in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Marko Babić detailed three pillars of Russia's involvement in the Western Balkans: „The first pillar is Russia's privileged position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which provides the possibility of a veto right on all UN processes in the Western Balkans contrary to its *raison d'être*. The second pillar is Russia's growing economic importance in the region. It is a major energy supplier and is increasingly emerging as an investor and trading partner. The third pillar is the historical, cultural and political relations between Russia and the nations and countries of south-eastern Europe with Orthodox tradition”<sup>9</sup>. Russia's cooperation with the countries of the region is uneven, and its presence in the Balkans within the above-mentioned pillars is most noticeable in the Republic of Serbia. When analysing the strategic partnership between Serbia and Russia, it is worth highlighting four main areas of cooperation: security, political relations, economy (including energy and infrastructure) and soft power.

The basis for cooperation between Russia and Serbia in recent years has been converging security interests. The Balkans are a bridgehead in southern Europe that is not yet institutionally fully integrated into Western structures. Russia is keen to maintain this state of affairs and to prevent the North Atlantic Alliance from expanding eastwards and drawing closer to its borders, which it regards as a fundamental threat to its existence and security (Vladimir Putin has repeatedly emphasised this publicly since taking office as Russian

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<sup>8</sup> The Western Balkans in particular are an area of competition for political and economic influence between Russia, China and the West – the European Union (primarily Germany and Great Britain) and the United States.

<sup>9</sup> M. Babić, *Rosja na Balkanach Zachodnich. Interesy narodowe i wpływy polityczne*, in: *Balkany w XXI wieku. Problemy konsolidacji i integracji*, M. Babić, I. Jakimowicz-Ostrowska (eds.), Warszawa 2014, p. 55.

president in 2000)<sup>10</sup>. Serbia is the only country in the region that openly declares that it is not interested in NATO membership, which is, among other things, the result of Operation Allied Force in 1999. Moreover, according to Slobodan Antić: „the genesis of Putin’s power lies in NATO’s attack on Yugoslavia”<sup>11</sup>. The bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia by NATO forces was interpreted by Russia as a warning and a signal that the West is not a stable and trustworthy partner in international relations.

Both Serbia and Russia define security in traditional, realist terms. Both states are concerned with maintaining the immutability (not reduction) of their borders, with strengthening the state’s importance in the international arena and with nurturing the national interest, which George Kennan portrayed as an overriding and necessary need for the survival of the state. According to H. Morgenthau, the power of the state enables it to maintain a prominent position among states as major actors in international relations<sup>12</sup>. Taking into account numerous factors (including territorial, demographic, natural e.g. raw materials, military and other factors), Russia as a power is pursuing a superpower foreign policy (examples of Russia’s demonstration of power are its seizure of the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008 and its increasing attacks on Ukrainian territory since 2014). In the case of Serbia’s borders, the topic is rather ambiguous. As already mentioned, Serbia presents Kosovo and Metohija as its integral region. At the same time, representatives of the authorities of the Republic of Serbia participate in official meetings and talks with representatives of the authorities of the Republic of Kosovo, which makes it possible to conclude that de facto Serbia recognises the independence of Kosovo, although de jure it does not.

At the same time, in the security context, Serbia, although officially remaining a neutral state, regularly strengthens its military potential. The Serbian Armed Forces are retrofitting themselves with equipment from Russia. In 2017 Russia handed over six MiG-29 frontline fighters free of charge to the Air Force Base in Batajnica, near Belgrade<sup>13</sup>. In July 2019 Serbia received BRDM-2 reconnaissance armoured vehicles, designed back in Soviet times, and in November 2020 T-72MS tanks, which are now among the most modern equipment at the disposal of the Serbian Armed Forces. Within the framework of security cooperation, Serbs and Russians regularly participate in joint training and military exercises (e.g. Slavic Brotherhood in 2016 and Slavic Shield in 2018).

In April 2012, an Agreement was signed between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Serbia on the establishment of the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Aid Centre. The facility, based in Niš, was officially established

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<sup>10</sup> One of the reasons for Russia’s attack on Georgia in 2008 and Russia’s aggression against Ukraine that began in 2014 are the efforts by Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO.

<sup>11</sup> S. Antić, *Dva zavetna naroda: Rusi i Srbi*, Beograd 2023, p. 71–72.

<sup>12</sup> H. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Boston 1993, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> The ceremonial transfer of the equipment was attended by the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić and the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation Sergei Shoigu. The event was organised on the 73rd anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade, which was carried out by Yugoslav partisans together with soldiers of the Red Army. The transfer of the MiG-29 was not only an expression of cooperation in the field of security, but also had a symbolic dimension, emphasizing the mutual memory and historical friendship of both countries. For more on the role of historical memory in relations between Serbia and Russia, see: D. Rastegaev, *Istoricheska pamjat’ v rossijsko-serbskih otnoshenijah, rabochaja tetrad’* 87, Rossijskij sovet po mezhdunarodnym delam, Moskva 2024.

for the purpose of preventing and counteracting humanitarian disasters in the Balkans<sup>14</sup>. The Center, in cooperation with universities from Russia and the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations, regularly conducts courses and specialized trainings. In 2014–2018 alone, the Center provided comprehensive training to over 500 specialists from the Republic of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. A specialized Serbian-Russian unit operating within the Center is the Mine Clearance Department, which operates on the territory of Serbia and neighboring countries to ensure the safety of the population and to restore facilities and lands mined during the wars of the 1990s to economic circulation. Since 2010, approximately 2.7 million square meters of land have been cleared and put into use, and over 2,000 explosive facilities have been discovered and destroyed<sup>15</sup>. It is worth noting that fighter jets, helicopters and engineering troops of the Russian Federation military are also permanently stationed at the Centre. According to the conclusions of NATO surveillance missions, the Centre provides a base for Russian intelligence activities throughout the Balkan Peninsula.

The second area of partnership between the two countries is political cooperation. Serbia does not recognise the independence of the Republic of Kosovo, which was declared in 2008, and considers its territory as one of the regions integrally belonging to Serbia – the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija. For Serbs, Kosovo is a historical part of their identity and the nucleus of Serbianness in the shape of the Taggart heartland – a mythical land from which the very ‘essence of the nation’ originates. As Ewa Bujwid-Kurek writes: „All political forces repeated like a mantra that if Kosovo is the medieval cradle of the Serbs, it must be defended by all means, including the most extreme ones, not even excluding war”<sup>16</sup>. Russia supports the leading Serbian interest in the international arena by, among other things, using its veto power in the UN Security Council on Kosovo and its (non-)recognition as an independent state. It can be said that Russia is the guarantor of the full non-recognition of Kosovo by the UN Security Council<sup>17</sup>. Having the support of Russia on an issue crucial for Serbia as a state and the national identity of the Serbs, Serbia does not go against Russia’s interests (as exemplified not so much by the maintenance but the intensification of cooperation between the two countries after the start of the war in Ukraine), as underlined by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić: „On behalf of the citizens of Serbia, I would like to thank you for the support that Russia has always given to Serbia in times of trial. [...] Russia has repeatedly protected Serbia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. [...] Serbia has shown that it is a reliable partner of the Russian Federation. Serbia has never acted against the interests of your country when Russia has fallen on hard times”<sup>18</sup>. A sym-

<sup>14</sup> Joint actions of Russian-Serbian units could be observed, for example, during the floods in Serbia in 2014. Within two days, more than 2,000 residents were evacuated from the flood zone in the town of Obrenovac.

<sup>15</sup> Posolstvo Rossii v Respublike Serbii, *Rossijsko-serbskij Gumanitarnyj centr*, <http://ambasadarusije.rs/ru/rossijsko-serbskij-gumanitarnij-centr> (date accessed: 09.01.2025).

<sup>16</sup> E. Bujwid-Kurek, *Wstęp*, in: *Konstytucja Republiki Serbii*, Warszawa 2018, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> In addition to Russia, the People’s Republic of China also has and uses the right of veto. It was China and Russia that opposed the Allied Force operation in 1999 and defended Yugoslavia. See: K. Hermann, *Strategic Partnership of the Republic of Serbia and the People’s Republic of China. Political and economic implications of cooperation from Serbia’s perspective*, „Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs” 2024, No 3, pp. 179–193.

<sup>18</sup> Presidential Executive Office’s Information Office, *Meeting with President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic*, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57434> (date accessed: 12.01.2025).

bolic gesture of political cooperation was, for example, Serbia's behaviour during the detention and arrest of Alexei Navalny in 2021. The Serbian authorities refused to impose sanctions against Russia, thus acting against the recommendations of the European Union. Serbian analyst Dragomir Andjelković openly commented on this decision with the words: „Western countries understand that we will not impose sanctions on Russia because of the Kosovo conflict. We need Russia's support to protect national sovereignty”<sup>19</sup>. It is clear how important it is for the Republic of Serbia that the Russian Federation supports its position on Kosovo. This is tantamount to Serbia pursuing its national interest.

The third area of partnership between Russia and Serbia is economic cooperation. The two countries are signatories to dozens of bilateral agreements on joint investments, infrastructure and energy projects. Russia has provided Serbia with financial loans on three occasions (in 2013, 2016, 2019) on favourable terms, which Serbia has been able to meet despite the low efficiency of its domestic economy and relatively small revenues in the state budget. The regularity of the loan agreements proves that both countries have considered themselves loyal and trustworthy partners. The financial resources obtained from the loans from Russia have been invested by Serbia in, among other things, the development of the railway infrastructure (execution of the electrical infrastructure on the sections Stara Pazova- Novi Sad and Valjevo – Vrbnica and the construction of a new dispatching centre, responsible for railway traffic on the whole territory of Serbia). By investing in the expansion of the railway infrastructure in Serbia, the Russians can directly contribute to the location of key transport hubs, which they then use for the export and import of goods to and from Russia from across the Balkan region. In addition, and most importantly, during the repayment period of the loan, Serbia will not choose to make a clear turn towards cooperation and integration with the West (despite remaining in the EU accession process), which for the Russians is a guarantee to maintain their influence in the region. By supporting Belgrade financially, the Russians have not only invested in their ally's infrastructure, but more importantly in its loyalty and a certain extension of cooperation for years to come. However, it should be borne in mind that this is an asymmetrical partnership, as shown by the relations in the energy sector.

Gazprom bought out a significant portion of the shares of NIS (*Nafina Industrija Srbije*), which operates in Serbia, in December 2008<sup>20</sup>. This was an important investment as NIS was one of Serbia's leading companies in terms of taxes paid to the state budget and remains the only entity in the country that explores, processes and produces both oil and gas. Since 2008 Serbia is almost entirely dependent on Russian natural gas supplies

<sup>19</sup> S. Miteva, *Populism and cozy ties with Russia and China: Vucic takes Serbia further away from EU*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/populism-and-cozy-ties-with-russia-and-china-vucic-takes-serbia-further-away-from-eu/> (date accessed: 12.01.2025).

<sup>20</sup> As early as 2006, the Russian concern Gazprom began cooperation with the Serbian JP Srbijagas, on the occasion of the initiative to build the South Stream. One of the two planned lines was to lead from Russian territory, through Serbia, ultimately to Slovenia and Austria. At the time, cooperation with Russia was one of the first initiatives decided by the Serbian government after the dissolution of the federation of Serbia and Montenegro in 2006, which proves the importance of the Serbian-Russian partnership. After Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, the project encountered a number of legal obstacles from the European Union and was suspended. In 2018, Srbijagas and Gazprom began work on the construction of the Serbian Stream (*Srpski tok*), a pipeline transporting natural gas from Russia through the Black Sea and Bulgaria to Serbia. The Serbian stream was incorporated into the structure of the Turkish Gas Pipeline (TurkStream), which replaced the failed South Stream pipeline and began transmitting gas in 2020.

(in order to diversify sources, from the end of 2023 Serbia also buys gas from Azerbaijan). Thus, Serbia has become a transit state through whose territory Russia can distribute its gas to almost the entire post-Yugoslav area. „Gazprom is a tool, a weapon, and in the gas pipeline network it oversees not only gas but also ideology flows”<sup>21</sup>. Control of the energy sector in Serbia allows Russia to simultaneously control the state budget, influence investments and the results of tenders related to their execution, as well as the distribution of the infrastructure network and the foreign policy directions of the government in Belgrade<sup>22</sup>.

The economic interaction between Russia and Serbia is also important in social terms. Russia in the period 2012–2020 was one of the most popular emigration destinations for workers deciding to leave Serbia. Usually these were labour and temporary migrations, less often permanent ones. According to analyses conducted by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, in 2020 alone, 45.8 percent of the construction and renovation work carried out by Serbian workers outside the borders was carried out specifically in Russia<sup>23</sup>. The Russian labor market was attractive to Serbs at that time, in some sectors almost as attractive as the markets of EU countries.

A not insignificant fourth aspect of Serbian-Russian relations is the role of soft power, through the use of which Russia is present in the public, media and cultural space in Serbia (Serbia’s soft power in Russia is also present, but less significantly). The importance of historical ties, sentiment, symbols, religion, tradition, culture is emphasised. According to Vuk Vuksanović, „Russia’s appeal to the Serbian public has less to do with what this country is and more with what it is not. Russia is not the West”<sup>24</sup>. First of all, it is about memories of the Allied Forced operation. Moreover, Serbs perceive the West more as a political and economic community than an „association” of authentic values.

With regard to soft power, it should be emphasized that the nations have remained Orthodox from the moment they formed their identity. Although the Serbian Orthodox Church officially remains in full independence from the Russian Orthodox Church, there are strong ties between the institutions, and the Russian Church and Patriarch Kirill, who has headed it since 2009, enjoy respect and authority among Serbs. The Vice-Chairman of the External Church Relations Department of the Russian Orthodox Church, Nikolai Balashov, declared in 2013 that „the Russian Church supports the position of its sister Serbian Church on Kosovo. Representatives of our Orthodox Church in all international forums available to us bear witness to the tragic fate of the Orthodox people in Kosovo and Metochia and the churches located in this Serbian cradle”<sup>25</sup>. The ubiquitous Kosovo issue

<sup>21</sup> V. Panjuškin, M. Zigar, *Gazprom novo rusko oružje*, Kragujevac 2009, p. 268.

<sup>22</sup> In January 2025, the US Department of State announced the imposition of sanctions on further entities in the Russian energy sector, including Gazprom Neft and Surgutneftegaz, along with their dependent companies (the sanctions entered into force in October 2025). Thus, the sanctions also apply to the Serbian NIS. The Americans expect Russian capital to withdraw from NIS, which poses an unexpected challenge to the Republic of Serbia and requires immediate analysis and implementation of possible ways to secure NIS, and thus the citizens and entire industry of Serbia.

<sup>23</sup> Republički zavod za statistiku, *Građevinski radovi u inostranstvu*, <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-cyrl/ve-sti/20210615-gradjevinski-radovi-u-inostranstvu/> (date accessed: 10.01.2025).

<sup>24</sup> V. Vuksanović et al., *Beyond Sputnik and RT: How Does Russian Soft Power in Serbia Really Work?*, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, Belgrade 2022, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Srbin info, *Ruska crkva o SPC i Kosmetu*, <https://srbin.info/pocetna/vestidana/ruska-crkva-o-spc-i-kosmetu/> (date accessed: 11.01.2025).

demonstrates that political and religious interests are closely intertwined and that traditional Serb-Russian cooperation is deeply rooted.

On the borderline of cooperation between Serbs and Russians in the fields of religion and culture is the example of the construction of St Sava Church in Belgrade, one of the largest Orthodox churches in the world. Construction began as early as 1935, but due to the many tragic historical events unfolding in Serbia since then, the finishing work has not yet been finalised. The construction of the Orthodox church has been heavily subsidised by the government in Moscow and Gazprom, and Serbian and Russian teams of professionals are working on the temple, while the work is being directed by the famous Russian iconographer and sculptor Nikolai Muhin. Confession of the Orthodox faith is an element of the national identity of both Serbs and Russians. It is also a common denominator of intimacy between the two peoples, a symbol, as well as a starting point for political and business projects.

The Russian House operates in Belgrade, while the Cultural Centre of the Republic of Serbia operates in Moscow. The so-called Houses, i.e. the Russian House and the Serbian House, are institutions operating in close consultation with and under the supervision of the parent embassies in the foreign country. The houses organise language courses, film screenings, concerts, exhibitions, host artists and journalists, and are often a meeting place for the diaspora, for whom they arrange special events. The centres also promote native history and maintain links with the host country and society. They fulfil the functions of both a cultural centre and an information centre.

Back in 2007, Russia launched an international project called *Russia Beyond The Headlines* (since 2017, *Russia Beyond*), aimed at popularizing Russian politics, culture, and history. The project included publishing a brochure called „*Ruska Reč*”, which was a supplement to „*Politika*”, the oldest and one of the most prestigious dailies in Serbia. The publication primarily aimed to promote a positive image of Russians among Serbs and to popularize the Russian narrative on the above-mentioned topics. Often, texts were published on close Serbian-Russian relations, common values, economic and military cooperation, and narratives critical of the West. The publication „*Ruska Reč*” was implemented for almost a decade.

Since the early 1990s, Russians and Serbs have been further strengthening their areas of cooperation. Both countries are guided by national interests when pursuing foreign policy priorities. For the Serbs, this is to prevent the loss of Kosovo, which is formally possible thanks to Russian support in the UN Security Council. Russia, on the other hand, has the need to maintain its power and influence in the Western Balkans, made possible by its positive relations with Serbia. Concrete political decisions, closely linked to security policy and economic relations, make Russia and Serbia stable partners.

### **Relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia after February 24, 2022**

The start of the full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine on February 24, 2022 and its aftermath proved to be a challenge to the sustainability of the Russia-Serbia partnership. While Western countries unequivocally declared their support for Ukraine from the first

day of the war and criticised Russia's actions, the Serbian government, on the one hand, expressed its disapproval of the hostilities and, on the other hand, did not stop conducting dialogue and implementing joint projects with Russia. Below, the author presents the state of relations between Serbia and Russia after the start of the war in Ukraine in four key areas of their cooperation to date: security, politics, economy (including energy), and soft power.

The intensification of hostilities in Ukraine was a motivation for NATO member states and countries intending to join the Alliance in the near future to work immediately to extend the Alliance's reach eastwards. Finland joined NATO in April 2023, Sweden joined in March 2024 and Bosnia and Herzegovina has been declaring its willingness to join for years. In the war doctrines and foreign policy concepts of the Russian Federation, on the other hand, the increase of NATO's military capabilities and the placement of member states' military infrastructure near Russia's borders is regularly presented as a potential source of armed conflict arising from a threat to its national security. While NATO has increased its defence capabilities, Serbia is invariably not interested in membership of the Alliance. Although this is a decision primarily related to historical experience, it is also reflected in Serbian-Russian relations. Russia does not perceive Serbia as a threat and does not fear attacks and accusations from it. Serbia remains a reliable security partner for Russia. At the same time, arms in support of the Ukrainian military are exported from Serbia, which is in line with the multi-vector foreign policy pursued by Serbia.

Speaking of political relations, it is worth noting what position Serbia takes towards Russia's war with Ukraine at the United Nations. The Government of the Republic of Serbia supports the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine (which is motivated by the Kosovo and Metohija issue mentioned above), while criticising the actions of the Russian Federation and calling for an end to the war. As of February 2022 the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), within the framework of the Eleventh Extraordinary Special Session of the UNGA, has passed 8 resolutions relating to the war in Ukraine, and Serbia has responded as follows:

1. UNGA resolution A/RES/ES-11/1 adopted on March 2, 2022. The international community called on Russia to cease hostilities against Ukraine and withdraw all troops from Ukrainian territory, including Donbas and Crimea, and for Russia to withdraw its decision to recognise the independence of the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic. It also condemned Belarus for its involvement in the conflict and stressed the importance of Ukraine as a global food producer. Serbia supported the resolution.
2. UNGA Resolution A/RES/ES-11/2 adopted on March 24, 2022. The UN General Assembly called on Russia to withdraw from Ukrainian territory and condemned attacks targeting civilians and infrastructure. The need to provide humanitarian assistance to victims of the war was emphasised. Serbia supported the resolution.
3. UNGA resolution A/RES/ES-11/3 adopted on April 7, 2022. Russia's membership rights in the UN Human Rights Council suspended<sup>26</sup>. On the same day, the Russian

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<sup>26</sup> For the first time in the history of the Organization, a state that is a permanent member of the UN Security Council has resigned from its membership of the UN Human Rights Council.

Federation decided to resign from the UN Human Rights Council. Serbia supported the resolution.

4. UNGA resolution A/RES/ES-11/4 adopted on October 12, 2022<sup>27</sup>. Recognised that the referendums held from 23–27 September 2022 in the Kherson, Donetsk, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia regions, the outcome of which unequivocally allowed the regions to be annexed to the territory of the Russian Federation, are invalid under international law. It called on the states of the world not to recognise the results of the referendum and on Russia to immediately withdraw from Ukraine. Serbia supported the resolution.
5. UNGA Resolution A/RES/ES-11/5 adopted on November 14, 2022. The UN General Assembly held that Russia must answer criminally for violations of international law during the war in Ukraine and pay war reparations to Ukraine. Serbia abstained from the vote.
6. UNGA resolution A/RES/ES-11/6 adopted on February 23, 2023. On the eve of the first anniversary of the outbreak of the war, there was a renewed call for a cessation of hostilities and for Russian withdrawal from Ukrainian territory. Serbia supported the resolution.
7. UNGA resolution A/RES/ES-11/7 adopted on February 24, 2025. The international community condemns the aggression of the Russian Federation, calling for the immediate and complete withdrawal of Russian forces from the territory of Ukraine, as well as for the cessation of hostilities and the initiation of a peace process in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. Furthermore, the resolution underscores the necessity of ensuring accountability for war crimes, protecting the civilian population, and enhancing international cooperation to mitigate the global consequences of the war, particularly in the areas of food, energy, and nuclear security. Serbia supported the resolution<sup>28</sup>.
8. UNGA resolution A/RES/ES-11/8 adopted on February 24, 2025. The resolution honors the victims of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, reaffirms Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and calls for the prompt establishment of a just and lasting peace. Serbia abstained from the vote.

Serbia voted 'in favour' during the adoption of 6 out of 8 UNGA resolutions, while having abstained in two votes. Officially, the Government of the Republic of Serbia opposes military action in Ukraine and, by supporting the UN resolutions, thus recognises Russia as the aggressor, although it does not apply sanctions against Russia. This is in line with the realisation of Serbia's national interest and based on the concept of the four pillars of foreign policy.

The ambiguous stance of the Serbian authorities was also confirmed on September 15, 2022, when the Declaration on the need to increase cooperation with the Russian Federation at the bilateral level and within the framework of international organisations was submitted to the President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, Vladimir Orlić. Among

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<sup>27</sup> The resolution was adopted by 143 votes in favor, 35 abstentions (including China) and 5 against (Russia, Belarus, Syria, North Korea, Nicaragua), and 10 countries did not participate in the vote. This is the highest support for a resolution in the history of the United for Peace procedure.

<sup>28</sup> After the vote, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić admitted in a statement to Happy TV that he had made a mistake and should have abstained. His statement was welcomed by Russia.

other things, the Document stipulated that it was extremely important to intensify military cooperation between the two countries, and proposed that a referendum be held in Serbia regarding the introduction of sanctions incriminating Russia (this was not implemented).

However, in September 2022, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, Serbian Foreign Minister Nikola Selakovic and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov signed an agreement on mutual consultations between Serbia and Russia on foreign policy issues for 2023–2024, which Serbian Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin commented: „expanding cooperation with Russia is not a matter of respecting the past, but a responsible decision directed towards the future”<sup>29</sup>. President Vučić met with President Putin on the margins of the 3rd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing. Serbia’s efforts to maintain a balance in the implementation of foreign policy and to pursue the national interest are evident. For Russia’s part, maintaining a strategic partnership with Serbia is key to maintaining its presence in the region. Moreover, especially during the period of sanctions, this is a valuable partnership, as with the help and mediation of Serbia, some sanctions can be circumvented to the benefit of Russia.

Serbia remains the only country in Europe that has not adopted and implemented sanctions against Russia<sup>30</sup>. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić noted that „it is not in Serbia’s vital political and economic interest to impose sanctions on any country”<sup>31</sup>. Serbia’s national interest and political priority is to keep Kosovo and Metohija within its borders and it has the support of Russia at the UN Security Council on this issue, which could cease once Serbia imposes sanctions to weaken Russia. However, there are more and more voices saying that after February 24, 2022. Russia has violated international law to such an extent that it has ceased to be a reliable partner for Serbia, and its support no longer means much and cannot be treated as a reliable option during the dialogue on Kosovo’s independence<sup>32</sup>. Nevertheless, the fact that also the EU countries, e.g. Hungary or Slovakia, continue cooperation and dialogues with Russia shows that Russia remains a partner for Europe (the terms of cooperation may change, but it is not likely to end permanently) and the implementation of successive bilateral agreements between Serbia and Russia is going on smoothly, while Russia’s position on Kosovo remains unchanged.

Serbia has had EU candidate status since March 2012. The government in Belgrade does not choose to introduce sanctions against Russia in Serbia recommended by the EU, knowing that this has the effect of slowing down the progress of the accession process. However, the EU is gradually ceasing to be seen as a credible and forward-looking partner in the region, especially in Serbia, so that a positive conclusion of the accession process

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<sup>29</sup> The Associated Press, *EU candidate Serbia and Russia sign foreign policy agreement*, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-united-nations-general-assembly-foreign-policy-moscow-serbia-c63b0ca1271dd5b2ee3008bdcb7de23> (date accessed: 10.01.2025).

<sup>30</sup> Serbia acted similarly in 2014, when the EU imposed sanctions on Russia after its annexation of Crimea. At that time, Russia responded by, among other things, limiting concessions for the export of food products from the European Union, e.g. feed and apples from Polish producers. The situation turned out to be economically beneficial for Serbia, which, not belonging to the EU, took on the role of an intermediary. As a result, goods and food products produced in the EU reached the Russian market via Serbia, bypassing the sanctions in force.

<sup>31</sup> Srpska napredna stranka, *Vučić: Srbija Poštuje Međunarodno Pravo, Nećemo Uvoditi Sankcije Rusiji*, <https://www.sns.org.rs/novosti/vesti/vucic-srbija-postuje-medjunarodno-pravo-necemo-uvoditi-sankcije-rusiji> (date accessed: 11.01.2025).

<sup>32</sup> O. Dragaš, *Kraj ruskog sveta/ Rusija, Ukrajina, Balkan*, Beograd 2022, p. 35.

seems to be only a declarative and not an actual strategic goal for the Serbs. The US and the EU countries, especially Germany, are putting pressure on Belgrade, on the one hand demanding that Serbia join the sanctions and pursue common European foreign policy goals, and on the other hand demanding that Serbia recognise the independence of Kosovo. Will a small state like Serbia manage to maintain its position in the face of opposition from stronger partners?

Despite the war in Ukraine, relations between Serbia and Russia were maintained at the highest level. President Vučić held telephone conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, among others, on April 6, 2022; May 29, 2022; October 20, 2024 and March 7, 2025. During the second call, a new contract for the supply of gas to Serbia from Russia was agreed, as „Russia will continue to supply Serbia with natural gas without interruption”<sup>33</sup>. According to Aleksandar Vučić’s later public statements, the gas price proposal Serbia received is extremely favourable compared to the rate paid by other countries in Europe. Serbia’s energy security is dependent on Russia, so it would not be beneficial for Serbia to support the sanctions packages proposed by the West (however, as previously mentioned, the Serbian company NIS under Gazprom’s control has also been sanctioned since 2025, so the situation remains evolving. The problem was discussed, among others, during the conversation of the presidents on March 7, 2025). In October 2023, the two presidents met backstage at the Third International Forum of the Belt and Road Initiative in Beijing. At the invitation of President Putin, President Vučić participated in the May 9, 2025, commemorations in Moscow marking the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II. Subsequently, on September 2, 2025, Presidents Vučić and Putin met in Beijing during the ceremonies observing the 80th anniversary of China’s victory over Japan in World War II.

Economic cooperation also extends to the communications sector. After the start of hostilities, unlike European Union countries, Serbia did not close its airspace to Russian airlines. Flights from Belgrade to Moscow are also operated by the Serbian company AirSerbia and the Russian airline Aeroflot Russian Airlines, and Belgrade Airport now serves as a hub for travellers between European capitals and Moscow. In addition, the Russian-Serbian Intergovernmental Committee on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation, whose 20th anniversary session was held in November 2024, continues to function. The National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China (*Kancelarija Nacionalnog saveta za koordinaciju saradnje sa Ruskom Federacijom i Narodnom Republikom Kinom*), based in Belgrade and led by former Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić, continues to function. Although the Council organizes meetings with the Russian Ambassador to Serbia, its impact on the country’s political and economic affairs is negligible.

Between February 24, 2022 and June 24, 2022 alone, 370 companies and 906 entrepreneurs from Russia opened accounts in Serbian banks and registered business activities in Serbia, and nearly 10,000 Russian citizens decided to move to Serbia<sup>34</sup>. On the one hand,

<sup>33</sup> Administratsiya Prezidenta Rossii, *Telefonnyy razgovor s Prezidentom Serbii Aleksandrom Vuchichem*, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68524> (date accessed: 10.01.2025).

<sup>34</sup> N. Beckmann-Dierkes, S. Rankić, *Serbian Foreign Policy in the Wake of the War in Ukraine*, <https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/16191335/Serbian+Foreign+Policy+in+the+Wake+of+the+War+in+Ukraine.pdf/30d4a7d9-a80a-9f8b-9ff2-999425df715a?version=1.0&t=1659106333262> (date accessed: 14.01.2025).

this means that in the face of sanctions, the Serbian market has become more attractive than before for Russian entrepreneurs, who have not only created new jobs in Serbia, but also contribute revenue to the Serbian budget while maintaining business links with partners remaining in Russia. On the other hand, professional work in Serbia allows Russians (men) to escape the probable necessity of going to the front.

At the soft power level, Serbia's relations with Russia have remained uninterrupted since February 24, 2022. There is a continuous operation of Russian media in Serbia that is popular with the public, including a TV channel, an app and the Sputnik Srbija website. In addition, a Serbian-language edition of Russia Today (Russia Today Balkan, RTB) was launched in November 2022 in the form of a website and social media profiles (Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and YouTube), and Russia Today Balkan was launched as a 24-hour TV channel in December 2024. The increased presence of Russian media in Serbia during the war was a controversial decision that was criticised by, among others, Vladimír Bilčík, Slovakia's representative in the European Parliament (EP) and the EP's rapporteur on Serbia. In Bilčík's words, the Belgrade government's approval of the launch of the Russian platform „goes completely against the commitment to the basic principles of the rule of law, democracy, fundamental rights and freedoms for all. [...] We must support strong, independent and free media, not propaganda tubes of a country that is at war with Europe, with EU enlargement, against our values, because this would be detrimental not only to Serbia, but also to the entire Western Balkans region”<sup>35</sup>. Despite criticism, the Serbian government decided to launch RTB. The news portal Vostok is also popular in Serbia, publishing news from Russia or about relations between Serbia and Russia.

Bilateral cultural cooperation is also worth mentioning. In July 2023, the Days of Spiritual Culture of Russia and Serbia were celebrated in Serbia, within the framework of which, among other things, the Moscow Synodal Choir performed at St Sava Church in Belgrade<sup>36</sup>. During the numerous events of the Days, the Orthodox ties linking the two peoples and the common traditions and values were highlighted. A seminar on 'Directions and prospects of Russian-Serbian educational cooperation in the fields of culture and art' was also organised, where representatives from the University of Arts in Belgrade, the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts, the State Institute of Cinema and Television in St. Petersburg and other institutions discussed plans for joint projects and student mobility. Moreover, the Russian House in Belgrade, offers a programme of cultural events almost every day, e.g. organising film screenings, conferences in cooperation with the University of Belgrade, concerts e.g. performances by the winners of the solo singing competition 'Serbian Solo Song', and stationary and away meetings to highlight the contribution of Russians to the development of Serbia and the Russian historical heritage in the area. The Russian House in the Serbian capital prides itself on being the oldest Russian cultural centre outside the country. Serbian institutions in Russia are not as active, but the Serbian diaspora living within the Russian Federation also remains within an organised community cultivating its roots.

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<sup>35</sup> Statement by Vladimír Bilčík for N1 television, Dnevnik, November 15, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRC9keY-fMI> (date accessed: 11.01.2025).

<sup>36</sup> During the performance on 29.07.2023, in addition to the repertoire, the Choir performed two Serbian national songs: „*Tamo daleko*” and „*Vera večna vera slavna*”, which moved the gathered crowd, and the organizers on the Serbian side expressed gratitude for the centuries-old friendship between the two nations and thanked the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. The author of the article was present at the event.

## Conclusions

The war in Ukraine has changed the nature of relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia in all four basic areas of cooperation: security, politics, economics (including energy), and culture. First, security. The Russian-Ukrainian war has not changed Serbia's position on its NATO membership, and therefore Serbia, in accordance with the provisions of military doctrines and the foreign policy priorities of the Russian Federation, remains a safe partner for Russia on the Balkan Peninsula. At the same time, aggression against Ukraine and conduct contrary to applicable international law have caused Russia's voice in the international arena to cease to be reliable. Although Russia remains a member of the UN Security Council, its position on maintaining the territorial unity of Serbia with Kosovo and Metohija may soon lose its significance, which will be a clear defeat for Serbia and may force it to change its official position.

Secondly, political cooperation. At the United Nations, through a resolution at the Eleventh Extraordinary Special Session of the UNGA, Serbia condemns Russia's actions on Ukrainian territory. At the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2023 President Vučić said that „despite centuries of traditional friendship with the Russian Federation”<sup>37</sup> Serbia will not stop supporting Ukraine and its right to territorial integrity. However, the UNGA resolutions did not contribute to stopping the political dialogue between the two countries. After the start of the war, talks (live and by telephone) took place more than once both at the level of the foreign ministers of Russia and Serbia, as well as the Presidents of the two countries themselves, which testifies to the ongoing mutual respect between the two partners. Furthermore, the Government of the Republic of Serbia did not decide to apply sanctions against Russia after February 24, 2022, just as it did not establish sanctions after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 or the arrest of Alexei Navalny in 2021 (by not recognizing the sanctions, Serbia supports Russia, but above all demonstrates the independence of its policy). While the non-imposition of sanctions is a politically motivated decision, it has economic consequences.

Thirdly, economically, by allowing businesses from Europe and Russia to continue to trade through its territory regardless of the West's existing sanctions against Russia, based on data presented by the State Statistical Service of Serbia (*Republički zavod za statistiku*) and the Federal State Statistics Service (*Federalnaya sluzhba gosudarstvennoy statistiki*) of Russia, an upward trend in the value of trade can be observed when comparing the period 2020–2021 and previous years with the period 2022–2024<sup>38</sup>. Financially, Serbia benefited from the war. What is more, while the countries of Europe reduced their use of Russian gas supplies, Serbia signed an agreement with Russia extending the partnership in

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<sup>37</sup> Statement by President of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić at the General Debate of the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, [https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/%5Bvariable%3Acurrent\\_session%5D/rs\\_en.pdf](https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/%5Bvariable%3Acurrent_session%5D/rs_en.pdf) (date accessed: 13.01.2025).

<sup>38</sup> Different amounts appear in the available studies and media reports, hence the author decided to refer to the official publications of the statistical offices of both countries. The State Statistical Service of Serbia regularly publishes updated data in the form of a monthly report. The Federal State Statistics Service published its compilations every two years until 2021, and annually from 2022 onwards. See: Republički zavod za statistiku, *Mesečni statistički bilten*, <https://www.stat.gov.rs/publikacije/> and Federalnaya sluzhba gosudarstvennoy statistiki, *Rossiya i strany mira*, <https://rosstat.gov.ru/folder/210/document/13241>.

this regard. On the one hand, this fact strengthens Russia's position in the Balkans and, on the other hand, ensures the energy security of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, the Russians are investing in the development of road and rail infrastructure in Serbia. It can be said that economically Serbia has, as it were, benefited from the war. Moreover, while European countries have reduced their use of Russian gas supplies, Serbia has signed an agreement with Russia extending the partnership in this regard.

Fourthly, when it comes to soft power and cultural cooperation, it must be acknowledged that the war in Ukraine has even strengthened them. There is an increasing presence of Russian-language media in Serbia, which provide alternative sources of information to „Western propaganda“. Events dedicated to the Orthodox faith, science and the arts are held regularly, and with sanctions and restrictions on Russians' movement to the West, they are increasingly choosing Serbia as a holiday destination. After the outbreak of the war, Serbia became home to thousands of emigrating Russians, so Serbian and Russian cultures naturally began to intermingle even more.

Since the beginning of the war, Russia has been pursuing a narrative according to which both Russia and Serbia are nations and states that have been trying their best to establish dialogue with the West for years, but the West has never listened to them or accepted them<sup>39</sup>. According to this narrative, the West, primarily through the media since the 1990s, has unfairly perpetuated the image of Serbs as aggressors, similarly to how it currently presents Russia, without taking into account its position and arguments explaining the conflict with Ukraine. Today, Russia is presented using the same slogans and images as Serbs were presented after the collapse of Yugoslavia and during the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Entina compares that for the West, relations between Russia and Serbia are equivalent to how Russia until recently perceived interactions between Kiev and Brussels.

Comparing how the nature of cooperation between Russia and Serbia has changed between 1992 and 2022 and after February 24, 2022 in the areas of security, politics, economy (including energy) and soft power, it can be noted that the war has not caused negative repercussions in Russia-Serbia bilateral relations. Long-standing projects initiated before the war (energy cooperation and infrastructure projects) continue, Serbia once again did not subject Russia to sanctions, Russia invariably maintains its favourable position for Serbia regarding the independence of Kosovo and Metohija. In line with the realist concept, it can be seen that both states are trying to pursue their goals and priorities without regard to criticism and unfavourable positions of other actors present in the international environment, while finding mutual understanding and the opportunity to pursue their interests.

Similarity of national interests of Serbia and Russia, at a time when the relationship was being tested indirectly by Russia's war with Ukraine and pressure from third countries aimed at discouraging Serbia from cooperating with Russia, proved important enough to contribute to the stable maintenance of the two countries' strategic partnership. National interest is the foundation of bilateral cooperation, determining both the forms of cooperation (e.g. joint participation in military exercises or academic exchanges of students and academics) and the scope of activities undertaken, e.g. political partnership (regarding

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<sup>39</sup> E. Entina et al., *Perspektivy rossijsko-serbskih otnoshenij v uslovijah sankcionnogo davlenija*, rabochaja tetrad' 77, Rossijskij sovet po mezhdunarodnym delam, Moskva 2023, p. 10.

Kosovo) or cooperation in the energy sector. Serbs and Russians have a long-standing history of cooperation which, on the one hand, is reinforced by numerous bilateral agreements and, on the other hand, the societies of both countries are favourably disposed towards each other, which is essential for a genuine partnership.

The war in Ukraine turned out to be both a challenge and an opportunity for the partnership between Serbia and Russia. Whether the Republic of Serbia decides to maintain a multi-vector foreign policy course (in line with the concept of the four pillars of foreign policy) in the future remains an open question. If Serbia were to successfully complete the accession process to the European Union, which is declaratively its strategic priority, its partnership with the Russian Federation could probably not continue as intensively as before. However, in view of the dynamically changing international environment, a situation in which Serbia as an EU Member State maintains its partnership with Russia cannot be ruled out either. After all, Hungary cooperates with Russia, and similar trends can also be seen in Slovakia. This allows one to conclude that Russia's war with Ukraine and the resulting sanctions packages and reduction of diplomatic relations between the European Union and Russia, represents a certain stage in the history of relations between the two entities, which, however, does not prejudge the shape of this partnership in the future.

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