

SERBIA'S BALANCING ACT BETWEEN THE EU AND RUSSIA: OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

БАЛАНСУВАННЯ СЕРБІЇ МІЖ ЄС І РОСІЄЮ: МОЖЛИВОСТІ ТА ЗАГРОЗИ

Heba O.I.,

*Senior Academic Assistant in the European Interdisciplinary Studies Department
College of Europe (Natolin Campus),
PhD Student in the International Politics Department
Uzhhorod National University*

The article analyses Serbia's bilateral relations with the European Union (EU) and Russia and their mutual compatibility. As a candidate country negotiating membership since 2014, Serbia is supposed to align its foreign policy with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including the endorsement of statements condemning Russia's violation of international law against Ukraine, and the introduction of sanctions against Russia. Serbia has hitherto not aligned with a single Russia-related EU statement and has repeatedly emphasised that it will not impose sanctions on Russia, for which it is regularly criticised by Brussels. Instead, Serbia has developed the relations of strategic partnership with Russia, which it considers to be compatible with its EU membership aspirations.

The study finds that the strategic partnership between Serbia and Russia is primarily of (geo-)political nature. On the one hand, Serbia is mostly interested in Russia as a dedicated supporter over the Kosovo issue which is capable of obstructing Kosovo's international recognition thanks to its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council and in other international structures. On the other hand, one of Russia's primary objectives in foreign policy is containing NATO's expansion in Europe, and Serbia, having adopted military neutrality in 2007 and remaining the only country in the Western Balkans that does not aspire to join NATO, appears to be the best suited partner to pursue this goal.

The article concludes that as Serbia is harvesting benefits from both the EU and Russia it has to be mindful of the potential threats that Russia may pose in the process of the normalisation of relations between Serbia Kosovo. Over the last decade, Russia has secured a comfortable dominance in Serbia's media sphere and can easily use this asset to undermine the legitimacy of the Serbian authorities and fuel political turmoil in case, for instance, it is not pleased with the compromise reached between Belgrade and Pristina. Being a non-consolidated democracy, Serbia may lack resilience to withstand Russia's subversive measures, which may equally include the use of far-right movements and of Russia-linked NGOs across Serbia.

Key words: Serbia, EU, Russia, foreign policy, Western Balkans.

У статті проаналізовано двосторонні відносини Сербії з Європейським Союзом (ЄС) та Росією, а також їхню взаємну сумісність. Будучи країною-кандидатом, що проводить переговори щодо членства в ЄС від 2014 р., Сербія повинна узгодити свою зовнішню політику із спільною зовнішньою та безпековою політикою (СЗБП) ЄС, включаючи підтримку заяв, що засуджують порушення міжнародного права Росією проти України та введення санкцій проти Росії. До цього часу Сербія не підтримала жодну із заяв ЄС щодо Росії та неодноразово наголошувала на тому, що вона не введе санкцій проти Росії, за що її регулярно критикує Брюссель. Натомість Сербія розвинула відносини на рівні стратегічного партнерства з Росією та вважає, що вони сумісні з її прагненнями щодо членства в ЄС.

Дослідження доводить, що стратегічне партнерство між Сербією та Росією за своєю сутністю є насамперед (geo-)політичним. З одного боку, Сербія здебільшого зацікавлена в Росії як у надійному союзнику в питанні Косова, який має змогу перешкодити міжнародному визнанню Косова завдяки постійному членству в Раді Безпеки ООН та інших міжнародних структурах. З іншого боку, однією з основних прерогатив зовнішньої політики Росії є обмеження експансії НАТО в Європі, а Сербія, проголосивши військовий нейтралітет у 2007 р. та залишаючись єдиною країною на Західних Балкан, яка не прагне членства в НАТО, є найкращим партнером для досягнення цієї мети.

Як висновок зазначається, що в той час, як Сербія збирає вигоди одночасно від відносин з ЄС та Росією, вона повинна зважати на потенційні загрози, які може нести Росія у процесі нормалізації відносин між Сербією та Косово. Протягом останнього десятиліття Росія забезпечила собі комфортне панування в медіапросторі Сербії та може з легкістю використати цей ресурс задля підриву легітимності сербської влади та розпалювання політичної нестабільності у випадку, наприклад, незадоволення компромісом, який досягнуть Белград та Приштина. Як неконсолідованій демократії Сербії може не вистачити стійкості, щоб протистояти підривним заходам Росії, які можуть також включати використання крайніх правих рухів і неурядових організацій, пов'язаних із Росією, на території Сербії.

Ключові слова: Сербія, ЄС, Росія, зовнішня політика, Західні Балкани.

Research problem. Serbia's main strategic goal in its foreign policy is becoming a member of the European Union. This is the choice that has been constantly implemented by Serbia since it submitted its membership application to the EU at the end of 2009 and is approved by a plurality

of the Serbian citizens. Serbia was granted a candidate status by the EU in 2012 and launched accession negotiations, divided into 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire*, two years later. As of December 2019, Serbia has opened 18 chapters and provisionally closed two.

In the meantime, Serbia has been cherishing close ties with Russia, which were upgraded to the strategic partnership level in 2013. While states are generally welcome to develop as ambitious relations as they please with other states around the globe, it is important to ensure that they do not contradict each other. Serbia's relations with Russia commenced to be seen as worrisome by the European Union in 2014 after Russia annexed Crimea and started its military aggression in Eastern Ukraine, thus, becoming subject to condemnation and an increasing sanctions regime on the part of the EU. The EU invited Serbia and all other enlargement countries to align with its policy towards Russia as foreseen by the provisions of Chapter 31 of the *acquis*. Relying on Russia's lasting support over the Kosovo¹ issue, Serbia decided to retain friendly relations with Russia and, in its balancing act between the EU and Russia, it failed to align with the EU's Russia policy. Normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo also forms an integral part of Serbia's accession conditionality under Chapter 35 of the *acquis*. This is the conundrum within which Serbia needs to navigate its foreign policy inasmuch that its two primary foreign policy objectives, namely membership in the EU and the preservation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, including Kosovo and Metohija, are attained.

Literature review and the research gap the article addresses. The present research lies at the junction of European studies and foreign policy analysis as it studies the foreign policy of Serbia in relation to the EU and Russia, including the main factors which influence its formulation. The Western Balkans has been intensively researched since the breakup of Yugoslavia and these days the two main areas of scholarly attention are: the European integration of the Western Balkans [1; 2; 3] and the role of non-Western actors in the region [4; 5; 6]. This article combines the two directions and aims at studying Serbia's balancing act between the EU and Russia from an interdisciplinary way. Its contribution to the scholarly discussion is the analysis of threats that Serbia's balancing act between the EU and Russia may pose to the Serbian state in light of the Russian geopolitical ambition in the Balkans.

Objectives of the article. The objectives of the article include:

- outline the main features of the strategic partnership between Serbia and Russia and the two countries' underlying interests therein;
- analyse the opportunities and threats of Serbia's balancing act between the EU and Russia.

Main text of the article. The inaugural part of the article outlines the main features

of the established strategic partnership between Serbia and Russia and offers an analysis of the two countries' main interests behind it. The second section summarises the opportunities the balancing between the EU and Russia creates for Serbia and analyses potential threats that it may pose.

1. Serbian-Russian strategic partnership

Serbia and Russia have always described their relations as the ones between brotherly, Orthodox, Slavic peoples and, thus, have understood each other's interests better than the remaining players in Europe. Whenever possible, Russia has been ready to use its military might and diplomatic power to uphold the national interests of Serbia. One of the main exceptions, in addition to complicated relations between Tito and Stalin, was the period following the breakup of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Russia was weakened economically and had to formulate its *modus vivendi* in the post-Cold war liberal world order. Striving to be a responsible member of the international community, Russia backed the imposition of arms embargo and other sanctions on the SFR of Yugoslavia (present-day Serbia and Montenegro) in the UN Security Council in the course of the Bosnian War (1992–1995) and did the same with regard to the FR of Yugoslavia (present-day Serbia and Montenegro) after its army invaded Kosovo in 1998. Russia's attempt to support Serbia militarily during the Kosovo turned to be rather symbolic than substantial since when Russian Bosnia-stationed soldiers arrived in Kosovo the situation was under the control of NATO forces. After a decade-long contribution to peacekeeping missions in the Balkans, Russia withdrew its peacekeepers in 2003.

The two countries have nevertheless kept good memories of past cooperation and reactivated their relations on 24 May 2013 in Sochi when Presidents Nikolić and Putin signed the Declaration on the Strategic Partnership between Serbia and Russia. The remaining parts of this section analyses the milestones of their strategic partnership in the key fields such as political and military cooperation, economic cooperation and the role of religion in Serbian-Russian ties.

1.1. Political and military cooperation

In the political sphere, Russia has been systematically supportive of Serbia's stance over the Kosovo issue. In particular, it refused to recognise Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 and considers its succession from Serbia a breach of international law facilitated by the West. Furthermore, Russia consistently upholds the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Serbia, including Kosovo and Metohija, in all international structures. Being a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Russia is also instrumental in keeping Kosovo out of the UN, membership in which is widely regarded as *sine qua non* for a state's international recognition. This is possible since the procedure leading to

¹ References to Kosovo are without prejudice to positions on status. They are in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244/99 and the opinion by the International Court of Justice on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

membership, outlined in Article 4 of the UN Charter, foresees a decision of the UN General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council, which requires the concurrent votes of permanent members in line with Article 27 paragraph 3 of the UN Charter [7]. Therefore, Russia's single vote against would be sufficient to preclude the draft resolution from being adopted by the UN organ.

This is precisely what the Russian permanent representative to the UN did at the Security Council meeting on 8 July 2015 when the draft commemorative resolution dedicated to the 20th anniversary of genocide in Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, was being discussed. Ten members of the Security Council voted in favour, another four abstained and Russia alone voted against and, thus, vetoed the draft resolution to the liking of Serbia and the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Russian ambassador motivated his vote by claiming that the draft resolution "*sought to place the blame on one community*" and that the "*people of Bosnia and Herzegovina and beyond had reacted to the draft very painfully*". He equally questioned the appropriateness of tabling a draft resolution on the Security Council's agenda stating that the "*role of the Council was to strengthen international peace and security; let historians judge events and tribunals deliver verdicts*" [8].

As a matter of fact, the tribunals had delivered their verdicts way before the draft resolution occurred in the Security Council. In particular, the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the case "The Prosecutor vs. Radislav Krstić" ruled on 19 April 2004 that "*by seeking to eliminate a part of the Bosnian Muslims, the Bosnian Serb forces committed genocide*" [9, p. 12] and found Mr Krstić "*guilty of aiding and abetting genocide*" [9, p. 87]. It further unequivocally stated that [9, p. 13] "*the law condemns, in appropriate terms, the deep and lasting injury inflicted, and calls the massacre at Srebrenica by its proper name: genocide*". In addition, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued its judgment in the case "Bosnia and Herzegovina vs. Serbia and Montenegro" on 26 February 2007 and ruled that Serbia "*had not committed genocide*", "*had not conspired to commit genocide, nor incited the commission of genocide*", and "*had not been complicit in genocide*" [10, p. 198–199]. The ICJ, however, found that Serbia had "*violated the obligation to prevent genocide [...] in respect of the genocide that occurred in Srebrenica in July 1995*", had "*violated its obligations [...] by having failed to transfer Ratko Mladić [...] for trial*" as well as had "*violated its obligation to comply with the provisional measures ordered by the Court on 8 April and 13 September 1993 [...], inasmuch as it failed to take all measures within its power to prevent genocide in Srebrenica in July 1995*" [10, p. 199].

Both courts function under the auspices of the UN and their impartiality is beyond doubt.

Even though the rejected draft resolution referred to the mass killings that took place in July 1995 in Srebrenica as 'genocide' as established by the cited above judgments of the ICTY and the ICJ, it did not contain references to any community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, even when mentioning the victims of this and many other horrific crimes that were committed in the course of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The draft resolution, *inter alia*, condemned the crime of genocide at Srebrenica, stated that its acknowledgement and acceptance as such is a prerequisite for reconciliation and condemned its denial. It further expressed its "*sympathy for and solidarity with the victims on all sides of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina*" [11; emphasis added].

The aforesaid considerations demonstrate that the sponsors of the draft resolution made all efforts to avoid problematic wording and produce an international document that would not antagonise any stakeholders, and almost succeeded in this endeavour. Russia vetoed it primarily because of its close relations with Serbia and Republika Srpska. On 4 December 2019, during the meeting of presidents of Russia and Serbia in Sochi, President Vučić emphasised how important for Serbia was Russia's veto on this draft resolution, which, in his words, would have made the Serbs bear a stigma of '*genocidal people*' [12].

In return, Serbia has proven to be one of Russia's few European partners in the UN as far as the resolutions of the General Assembly (GA) regarding Russia's annexation of Crimea are concerned. Even though Serbia verbally supports Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, it voted against 6 out of 7 GA resolutions that have been adopted since 2014 and condemned the temporary occupation of Crimea and Sevastopol, Ukraine by the Russian Federation. Once it did not vote at all. For a country that presumably strives to retain neutrality on the issue under consideration in order not to worsen strategic relations with Russia, the logical voting choice would be 'abstention' as resolutions in the UNGA on these matters are adopted by a "*majority of the members present and voting*" (Article 18, paragraph 3 of the UN Charter) [7].

Besides, over 2014–2019, Serbia did not endorse any of the EU's 47 declarations with regard to Russia's actions against Ukraine despite its candidate status and EU accession negotiations under way. This partly resulted in Serbia's lowest rate of alignment with the EU CFSP among the Western Balkan countries in 2019 (53%). Furthermore, Serbia refused to introduce the EU-agreed restrictive measures and sanctions against Russia, but at least promised to the EU not to benefit from the Russian-imposed embargo on

food imports from the EU countries, and respected its commitment.

Vladimir Putin also needs Serbia as a destination for his official visits where he is generally adored and always warmly received by the public. Since 2014, the number of European countries that could offer similar reception to Vladimir Putin has significantly shrunk. Visits to Belgrade play an important role in the Kremlin media's narrative about the rightfulness of Russia's foreign policy by symbolically portraying Vladimir Putin as an influential world leader who is welcomed in a brotherly Slavic and predominantly Orthodox Balkan country. Similarly, Aleksandar Vučić is a frequent guest in Russia, which is also masterfully used by the Kremlin media to exemplify that Russia does not suffer from isolation in world politics. For instance, Aleksandar Vučić has been among the first heads of state to accept Vladimir Putin's invitation to attend the military parade in Moscow on 9 May 2020 commemorating the 75th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany in the Second World War.

What is, however, much more important to Russia in geopolitical terms is Serbia's approach to NATO. Russia has openly stated in numerous of its foreign policy concept that it "*maintains negative perspective towards NATO's expansion, the Alliance's military infrastructure approaching Russian borders, and its growing military activity in regions neighbouring Russia*" [13]. This is why Russia's foreign-policy priority is to avert or at least complicate NATO's expansion in regions like the Balkans. Serbia happens to be the only country in the Balkans that does not aspire to join NATO, mainly because of NATO bombing of its territory in the course of the 1999 Kosovo War. The National Assembly of Serbia declared in 2007 the "*neutral status of the Republic of Serbia towards effective military alliances until a referendum is called, at which the final decision on this issue will be made*" [14]. The same point of the resolution provided the reason for such a decision, namely the "*overall role of NATO, from the illegal bombardment of Serbia without a Security Council decision to Annex II of the rejected Ahtisaari's plan, which determines that NATO is "ultimate supervisory authority" in an "independent Kosovo"*" [14].

Serbia's military neutrality makes it a suited partner for Russia in terms of military alliances. It is also the biggest country in the Western Balkans in terms of territory and population. Furthermore, Serbia is the strongest military power in the region. Its defence budget in 2018 reached 904 million dollars and was 5 times bigger than that of the runner-up Albania [15].

In 2013, Serbia was granted the observer status in the Russian-dominated military alliance of Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which also lists Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as its members. In 2014, following Vladimir Putin's participation in the first

in 30 years military parade in Belgrade, dedicated to the anniversary of the liberation of the city from Nazi occupiers in the Second World War, the first Serbian-Russian military training was held. Since then, numerous joint military drills have been organized annually, including with the army of Belarus, e.g. the Slavic Brotherhood. Besides, Moscow has transferred 30 T-72 tanks, 10 BRDM2 vehicles and 6 MiG-29 fighter aircrafts to Belgrade as military aid. Serbia has also contracted the Russian side to supply Mi-8 and Mi-35M helicopters [16].

Serbia's military neutrality does not exclude interactions with NATO. In fact, Serbia cooperates with NATO on the basis of two-year Individual Partnership Action Plans (IPAP) and participates in NATO's Partnership for Peace programme. In 2016, Serbia carried out 200 activities with NATO and only 17 with Russia. Serbia also contributes to a number of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions of the European Union, which is taken into consideration when Chapter 31 of the *acquis*, i.e. "Foreign, security and defence policy" is negotiated [5, p. 15].

When the Ministry of Defence of Serbia published the overview of donations the Serbian Armed Forces received from foreign partners over 2014-2018, it turned out that the United States was the top donor with 10 million dollars of aid in equipment and money, followed by China (5.2 million euros), Norway (0.6 million euros), Denmark (0.5 million euros), and the UK (0.17 million pounds). All countries in the top five but China are NATO members and Russia is not mentioned at all, implying the insignificance of its military aid [17]. After the information was released, the Serbian Ministry of Defence had to comment on Russia's absence in the ranking and stated that Serbia actually received its biggest donations from Russia even though no specific numbers were disclosed. Russia was allegedly not indicated in the overview because its donations to Serbia which are underway or confidential were not included in the calculations [16].

1.2. Economic cooperation

The economic cooperation between Serbia and Russia does not seem to be a priority of their strategic partnership. Even though Serbia and Russia concluded a free trade agreement already in 2000, Serbia trades much more with the EU than Russia. The situation will not change much after the recent signing of the free trade agreement between Serbia and Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union in October 2019, which also comprises Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

In 2018, Serbia exported goods worth 15.5 billion euros. Russia was Serbia's third main exports destination (5.6%) after the EU (70.3%) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (8.3%). North Macedonia is on the fourth place with 4.0% of Serbian exports. As for

the imports, last year Serbia imported goods worth 21.8 billion euros, with the EU being the leading importer (60.5%), followed by China (8.4%) and Russia (7.9%). This means that in Serbia's total trade in goods with the world in 2018 (37.4 billion euros), its leading trading partner was the EU (64.6%), followed by Russia (6.9%). It is important to note that Serbia purchases most of its gas and crude oil from Russia, which represent a substantial share of imports coming from this country. Nevertheless, it is clear that the economy of Serbia is much closer integrated with the EU single market than the economy of Russia despite the possession of free trade agreements with both the EU and Russia. [18, p. 8].

Another integral part of economic links between countries is foreign direct investments. In the case of Serbia, 70.6% of foreign direct investments into the country's economy in 2018 (out of 3.5 billion euros) came from the EU countries. Hong Kong holds the second place with 12.4%, and Russia is third with 6.8% respectively [19]. Again, it should be noted that Russian investments are concentrated mainly in the energy sector, which is politically sensitive. In 2008, Gazprom Neft, subsidiary of the Russian-government-controlled Gazprom, acquired 51% of shares of Serbia's oil company Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), which owns a refinery in the town of Pančevo and a network of 400 filling stations in the Balkans market. Since the acquisition of NIS, Gazprom Neft has invested around 3 billion dollars and is planning to disburse another 1.4 billion dollars by 2025 [12]. Serbia's ambition to benefit financially from transiting Russian gas via the South Stream through the Serbian territory failed altogether with Gazprom's South Stream project. Russia then offered Serbia to transit its gas to Central Europe which will be coming from the Turk Stream. By the end of 2019, Serbia constructed all necessary gas pipelines and transportation infrastructure in its territory.

As far as macroeconomic assistance to Serbia in the form of grants and loans is concerned, the EU has been its largest donor and lender. Over the last 18 years, Serbia received 3.6 billion euros in grants from the EU (CARDS, Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, multi-country programmes) for projects in various fields, including the rule of law, public administration, agriculture, environment, etc. The EU has also lent Serbia more than 4.3 billion euros through the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the Council of Europe Development Bank. EU countries' individual donations to Serbia over 2007–2016 reached 524 million euros in total. Based on the information that is available in open sources Russia has not given grants to Serbia. As for the loans, Serbia borrowed more than 1.67 billion euros from Russia over the last decade [20].

1.3. Role of religion in the strategic partnership between Serbia and Russia

The Orthodox Christianity is a shared religion of Serbia and Russia and its importance in the relations between the two countries is hard to overestimate. It is not a coincidence that the first line of the preamble of the declaration on the strategic partnership between Serbia and Russia reads: *“based on the deep mutual feelings of friendship, centuries-old history of relations and traditions of linguistic, spiritual and cultural closeness of the fraternal peoples of the two countries”* [21]. The thesis of the brotherhood of two Slavic Orthodox peoples, i.e. the sense of shared history and identity is frequently underlined by the presidents of Serbia and Russia as the true basis for the friendly relations between the two nations. This narrative also gives their strategic partnership a symbolic meaning and escapes the typical pragmatic approach to political alliances, i.e. the one based on interests.

Besides, it resonates well among the citizens of the two partner countries. This is why the Russian government invests money in highly symbolic objects like St. Sava Church in Belgrade – the biggest church in Serbia and one of the biggest in the Balkans. The Ministry of Culture of Russia together with Gazprom Neft has been funding the construction of the temple as well as the creation of inner mosaics for a number of years. Vladimir Putin has visited the church several times and his visits were always well covered in the Serbian media. In 2011, Patriarch Irinej bestowed upon him the highest award of the Serbian Orthodox Church – the Order of St. Sava.

The spiritual underpinning of the brotherhood is further strengthened by the cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church. In the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, both Churches found themselves in a similar situation, which continues until modern times and has its repercussions. Some of the eparchies under their jurisdiction happened to be abroad after new independent states were founded and borders were drawn. In line with the canonical law of the Eastern Orthodoxy, every state is entitled to have its own autocephalous church. Therefore, numerous Orthodox communities in post-Yugoslav and post-Soviet states started to seek autocephaly from Belgrade or Moscow respectively. Neither the Serbian Patriarch nor the Moscow one were keen on approving such requests, which would result in the loss of entire eparchies together with believers and property, and would diminish their influence in the Eastern Orthodoxy. They rejected all petitions and stated that autocephaly was contrary to the canonical rules. Then the clergy who supported the idea of autocephaly established new churches despite the lack of recognition of the Orthodox world. This is why at least two Orthodox churches function in Ukraine, Belarus, Baltic states, Montenegro and North Macedonia etc.

The Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches back each other in this process and strive to counter the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople led by Patriarch Bartholomew who is *primus inter pares* among the primates of the autocephalous Orthodox Churches. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has the right to grant an autocephaly to a church *via* issuing the specific decree called a 'tomos'. This is also how the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches, among many other, became autocephalous. However, the Moscow and the Serbian Patriarchs question this right of the Ecumenical patriarchate because it has several times issued tomoses to the Orthodox communities in post-Soviet states that the Moscow Patriarchate is eager to preserve in its structure. The last event of this kind took place at the end of 2018 – beginning of 2019 when the newly-established Orthodox Church of Ukraine was granted autocephaly. The Moscow Patriarchate immediately reacted by severing full communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate and subsequently with all other churches that recognised the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

The Serbian Patriarchate sided with the Moscow Patriarchate and is hoping not to see similar developments in its vicinity, in particular North Macedonia and Montenegro. Contrary to its expectations, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is nowadays looking into the situation concerning the Orthodox believers and jurisdictions in North Macedonia and it is not excluded that 15 existing autocephalous Orthodox Churches will be joined by another one.

The Serbian Orthodox Church equally supports the Russian Orthodox Church in its quest for the revision of the Eastern Orthodoxy order as it aspires to be the centre of gravity on equal terms with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Even before the schism between the two Patriarchates over the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Patriarch of Moscow, together with the Serbian Patriarch, declined Patriarch Bartholomew's invitation to participate in the June 2016 Pan-Orthodox Council in Greece. Both Churches later stated that the meeting was not Pan-Orthodox and, thus, the decisions made were not binding. Patriarch Bartholomew invested a lot into the success of the council in Greece which was to become the first Pan-Orthodox Council since 1872 and many analysts say that the absence of the Russian and Serbian Patriarchs was aimed at undermining his efforts and demonstrating that he did not manage to unite primates of all autocephalous Orthodox Churches around one table.

2. Opportunities and threats of Serbia's balancing act between the EU and Russia

The opportunities that Serbia enjoys from its friendly relations with Russia, in addition to its EU path, have been discussed at large in the preceding part. As could be seen, Russia keeps the cost of its

strategic partnership with Serbia low and preserves Serbia's sympathy with diplomatic moves obstructing the international recognition of Kosovo and politically sensitive investments in the energy sector. It secures popularity among the Serbian citizens mostly because of common Slavic and Orthodox roots and support of Serbia's territorial integrity. In the military and economic spheres, the EU and the US are cooperating with Serbia much more intensively than Russia. However, all but five EU countries and the US recognised Kosovo's independence and this is the issue that matters to Belgrade the most. Therefore, one can conclude that Serbia uses the opportunities that arise from its balancing act between the EU and Russia, even though in the case of Russia they are more of political and identity-related nature than of real economic benefit.

The threats that the balancing act between the EU and Russia pose to Serbia are intertwined with opportunities it has created. The major factor is again political. Belgrade exploits Russia's support on the Kosovo issue as a trump card in the EU facilitated dialogue with Pristina. This places Russia among stakeholders whose position on the issue may prove decisive for the overall success of the dialogue. As the Kremlin strives to present Russia as a superpower which has leverage to decide on world affairs, the current situation around Kosovo is suitable to Moscow.

Second, since the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo forms part of the former's EU membership conditionality, no progress in the process also means no progress on Serbia's EU path and more frustration among the Serbian population. This leads to low credibility of the EU accession process in the eyes of the Serbian citizens, who these days are already among the most pessimistic in the Western Balkans about their country's entry to the EU in the nearest future. This popular feeling of disenchantment with the EU is exactly what Russia strives to achieve. Being opposed to the Western structures like NATO or the EU, Russia's objective in the Western Balkans is to freeze the *status quo* and to avert or at least slow down the enlargement of these organisations toward the region [5, p. 27].

Third, the Kremlin has portrayed its role in the Kosovo status issue both domestically and internationally as the one of the protector of the Orthodox, Slavic brothers (Serbia) from the imperialistic West (NATO/USA) that occupied a province of Serbia (Kosovo). This plot perfectly fits the Kremlin narrative about the protection of Russian speakers in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine or wherever else they reside in general. The third important aspect about the process is that it is facilitated by the European Union and its eventual success will not only imply the success of the EU's diplomacy, but will also once again illustrate the strength of the EU's

soft power, which motivates European states to reach painful compromises for the sake of the hope for EU membership. These considerations lead to a conclusion that Russia is not genuinely interested in the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo and will, most probably, act if the events are unfolding not to its liking.

At the official level, the Russian leadership has stated that Russia will support any solution that is acceptable to Belgrade. It is, however, important to remember that Russia never announces its plans in advance. In the case of Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU, Russia did not voice any concerns or objections until it became clear that the agreement was to be concluded in late 2013. Then it used all available arsenal, including blackmailing and bribery, to the Ukrainian leadership with the purpose of averting the signing of the agreement in Vilnius. Later Russia blatantly invaded and annexed Crimea and started a military aggression in Eastern Ukraine. In one of his interviews, President Putin renounced Russian soldiers in Crimea (infamous 'green men') and said these were local rebels. This is but one example how Russia seems to be indifferent to certain issues and then suddenly transforms into a major player with a hidden agenda.

This is not to suggest that Russia may do the same to Serbia. First of all, Russia does not have a land border with Serbia nor does it have troops stationed in Serbia's approximate neighbourhood. Moreover, Serbia is a landlocked Southeastern European country, which is mainly surrounded by NATO countries (Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Croatia). There are peacekeeping forces under the aegis of NATO in Kosovo (KFOR) and the EU in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR Althea). North Macedonia is awaiting the ratification of its accession protocol by all NATO countries to become its 30th member. Second, Serbia is far less important to the Kremlin than post-Soviet states like Georgia, Ukraine, or Moldova for the restoration of Russia's self-proclaimed 'legitimate sphere of influence' hence it will not risk aggravating the current crisis in relations with the West and facing further painful sanctions.

Deepening the confrontation with the West will also deter Russia from using another type of hard power – economic sanctions. Besides, economic sanctions would rather not harm the Serbian economy much due to the low volume of Serbian-Russian trade as discussed in the preceding section. Therefore, Russia will most likely not exploit coercion towards Serbia in order to achieve its geopolitical goals. Due to the geographic location of Serbia, Russia has limited capabilities and, what is more important, it would be hardly possible for Russia to camouflage its involvement and not bear the consequences from the West.

The tools Russia is already intensively using in the Western Balkans and will be prone to capitalise on in Serbia are co-optation and subversion. "*Co-optation works through the extension of incentives to political and business elites and individuals in strategic positions aimed at creating relationships of dependence, which in turn provide Russia with advantage*" [5, p. 10]. Co-optation is Russia's favourite instrument of leveraging influence in the Western Balkans. In the case of Serbia, the country's dependence on Russia on the Kosovo issue makes the Serbian leadership dependent on the Kremlin. Since Russia has been portrayed in the media and is generally viewed in Serbia as a guarantor of its territorial integrity, the Kremlin's support of a particular candidate or political party can play a decisive role in the elections. This relationship makes it hardly possible for Serbian leaders like Aleksandar Vučić to neglect the Kremlin's requests on a particular issue. The Kremlin may threaten the Serbian leadership to withdraw its support in order to dissuade them from reaching a compromise with Pristina.

But a more powerful instrument at the Kremlin's disposal is subversion. "*Subversion is directed at society at large [...] and is geared towards undermining adversaries rather than compelling another party to abide with Russian preferences*" [5, p. 10]. The crucial advantages of subversion are its low cost and the execution through covert means, e.g. outsourcing, which makes it difficult to identify the true actor who is standing behind it. Subversion takes the form of disinformation, manipulation or distortion of information, and open or covert support of radical local actors and is equally referred to as 'political warfare'. [5, pp. 10, 12]. These techniques are used to shape public opinion and perceptions in targeted countries by means of manipulating the information that reaches the audience.

Russia has developed a strong sharp power in Serbia and is capable of undertaking covert subversive measures on a massive scale. Vladimir Putin is the most popular politician among Serbs as the network of Serbian media has been used for a number of years to create the appropriate reputation for him as the true protector of Serbia. The same media have been building the image of Russia as the stronghold of traditional Orthodox values that is in constant struggle with wrong alien values promoted by the West. The EU and NATO are the frequent targets of the Kremlin's disinformation not only in Serbia, but in the Balkans in general.

Besides, Russia has nurtured links with many political movements in Serbia and has secured a pool of proxies like the far-right movement Dveri. Lots of Serbian NGOs receive funding from Russia for culture-related projects. As the hybrid warfare is not foreign to Russia, all these assets may be

used by Russia in order to deligitimise the Serbian leadership and spur popular disobedience and riots in case the compromise reached between Belgrade and Pristina does not suit the Kremlin.

The measures may include, for instance, portraying the president of Serbia as a traitor of national interests of Serbia. This could be particularly powerful message if the Patriarch of Moscow, closely linked to the Kremlin, persuades the Serbian Patriarch to issue a statement along these lines. It is well known that some of the oldest monasteries of the Serbian Orthodox Church are located in Kosovo, which is often called the “Serbian Jerusalem”. In 2019, Serbian Patriarch Irinej awarded Aleksandar Vučić with the Order of St. Sava for his ‘great deeds’ aimed at the preservation of Kosovo and Metohija within Serbia’s borders. It was for the first time in the Church’s eight-century history that the President of Serbia received the highest Church award, which again shows how important the Kosovo issue is to the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Conclusions. Serbia’s balancing act between the EU and Russia is induced by the challenges to its sovereignty and territorial integrity in Kosovo. This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that Serbia’s EU integration is conditioned, *inter alia*, on the normalisation of relations with Kosovo. As Russia has proven to be Serbia’s reliable partner and supporter on the Kosovo issue, Serbia has no choice but balancing

its EU membership aspirations with the strategic partnership with Russia. On the other hand, Russia strives to be present in the Balkans and act as a major power therein. Since most countries in the region already joined NATO or aspire to do so, Serbia’s choice of military neutrality made it a suited partner for Russia.

The analysis of three areas of Serbian-Russian cooperation, namely political and military, economic, and religion-based has revealed that Russia prefers low-cost, symbolic solutions like votes in the UN Security Council or funding the construction of a major Orthodox church as opposed to significant investments in the critical infrastructure or the modernisation of the economy. This is why Serbia’s economic cooperation with Russia in terms of trade, foreign direct investments, grants or loans seems minor when compared with the EU.

The opportunities that Serbia enjoys from the balancing act between the EU and Russia come with certain potential threats. Russia plays on the weaknesses and divisions in the Western Balkans and is not interested in the success of the EU facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. The fear to lose its last stronghold in the Balkans, i.e. Serbia may provoke Russia to undertake subversive measures inside Serbia with a view to force the Serbian leadership to reject the compromise with Pristina and, thus, remain dependant on Russia.

REFERENCES:

1. Jelena Obradović-Wochnik and Alexander Wochnik. Europeanising the ‘Kosovo Question’: Serbia’s Policies in the Context of EU Integration. *West European Politics*. September 2012. Volume 35. Number 5. P. 1158–1181.
2. Maria Giulia Amadio Viceré. The Future Is Back: The EU, Russia and the Kosovo-Serbia Dispute. *Instituto Affari Internazionali Papers* 19 | 19. October 2019. 20 p.
3. Spyros Economides and James Ker-Lindsay. ‘Pre-Accession Europeanization’: The Case of Serbia and Kosovo. *Journal of Common Market Studies*. 2015. Volume 53. Number 5. P. 1027–1044.
4. Artem Patalakh. Emotions and Identity as Foreign Policy Determinants: Serbian Approach to Relations with Russia. *Chinese Political Science Review*. December 2018. Volume 3. Issue 4. P. 495–528.
5. Dimitar Bechev. Russia’s Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. 2019. URL: <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/russias-strategic-interests-and-tools-influence-western-balkans> (consulted on: 05.12.2019).
6. Stanislav Secieru. Russia in the Western Balkans. Tactical wins, strategic setbacks. *European Union Institute for Security Studies Brief* No. 8. 2 July 2019. URL: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/russia-western-balkans> (consulted on: 20.07.2019).
7. United Nations. United Nations Charter. URL: <https://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations/index.html> (consulted on: 17.11.2019).
8. United Nations. At Meeting Commemorating Twentieth Anniversary of Srebrenica Killings, Security Council Fails to Adopt Resolution. 8 July 2015. URL: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11961.doc.htm> (consulted on: 17.11.2019).
9. International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Appeals Chamber Judgment in the case “The Prosecutor vs. Radislav Krstić”. 19 April 2004. URL: <https://www.icty.org/x/cases/krstic/acjug/en/krs-aj040419e.pdf> (consulted on: 17.11.2019).
10. International Court of Justice. Judgment in the case “Bosnia and Herzegovina vs. Serbia and Montenegro” 26 February 2007. URL: <https://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/91/091-20070226-JUD-01-00-EN.pdf> (consulted on: 17.11.2019).
11. United Nations Security Council. Draft resolution S/2015/508. 8 July 2015. URL: http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2015_508.pdf (consulted on: 17.11.2019).
12. President of Russia. Press-conference in the aftermath of Russian-Serbian negotiations. 4 December 2019. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/62240> (consulted on: 05.12.2019).

13. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016). URL: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248 (consulted on: 18.11.2019).

14. The Government of the Republic of Serbia. Resolution of the National Assembly on the protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity and constitutional order of the Republic of Serbia. URL: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/kosovo-metohija/index.php?id=42050> (consulted on: 19.11.2019).

15. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. SIPRI Military Expenditure Database. URL: https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/SIPRI-Milex-data-1949-2018_0.xlsx (consulted on: 18.11.2019).

16. B92. Serbian Ministry of Defense claims: USA isn't the biggest donor of military equipment. 31 July 2019. URL: https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2019&mm=07&dd=31&nav_id=107089 (consulted on: 25.11.2019).

17. B92. Which country is, actually, the biggest donor in providing equipment to Serbian Army. 31 July 2019. URL: https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2019&mm=07&dd=31&nav_id=107086 (consulted on: 25.11.2019).

18. European Commission. Directorate-General for Trade. European Union, Trade in goods with Serbia. 3 June 2019. URL: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_serbia_en.pdf (consulted on: 16.11.2019).

19. National Bank of Serbia. Foreign direct investments, by country (BPM6) in 2018. URL: https://www.nbs.rs/internet/english/80/platni_bilans.html (consulted on: 16.11.2019).

20. The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia. EU assistance to Serbia. URL: <https://europa.rs/eu-assistance-to-serbia/?lang=en> (consulted on: 26.11.2019).

21. President of Russia. Declaration on the Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia. 24 May 2013. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/1461> (consulted on: 16.11.2019).