

Serbia through the Lens of Small States' Foreign Policy. Balancing between the European Union and the Russian Federation

Jan Graf, Martin Solik¹

Abstract: *The small states' foreign policy has long been a neglected topic in academic circles because the very definition of "small state" was discussed only after World War II. However, in the accelerated dynamics of global security, foreign policy of small states is gradually gaining importance. This study aims to clarify Serbia's foreign policy orientation in the context of the security developments related to the Russian aggression in Ukraine, which has forced many states to reassess their security policy. Using a case study approach, the authors seek to highlight if Serbia's foreign policy is built on the general premises of the small states' foreign policy, and how its specific features enable Serbia's balancing act. For this purpose, three characteristics of the small states' foreign policy have been selected: military neutrality, efforts to join international organisations, and the commitment to fully respect international law. Based on expert interviews and the analysis carried out, the authors conclude that Serbia contradicts two theoretical assumptions about the foreign policy of these states, a fact that paradoxically helps Belgrade maintain close relations with both Brussels and Moscow. However, due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, an easier path to the EU opens for Belgrade, and this type of foreign policy could therefore come to an end.*

Keywords: Serbia, European integration, Russia, foreign policy, small states.

Introduction

The Western Balkan countries have become a geopolitical flashpoint for powerful countries and organisations. On the one hand, the Russian Federation is seeking closer cooperation with them and, on the other hand, the European Union (EU) supports their European integration.

The EU has already signed several agreements with individual states in the region to ensure multi-level cooperation in the political, economic, security, and social spheres (De Munter, 2024). Moreover, since 2009–2010 the citizens of these countries (except Kosovo) have been exempted from visa requirements.

¹Jan Graf is a PhD candidate at the Department of Human Geography and Regional Development at the University of Ostrava in Czechia.

E-mail: jan.graf@osu.cz.

Martin Solik PhD, MPA, is an assistant professor at the Department of Human Geography and Regional Development at the University of Ostrava in Czechia.

E-mail: martin.solik@osu.cz.

In turn, Russia opposes these efforts to integrate the Western Balkans into the EU, because it perceives the West as a staunch adversary. Hence, to better serve its geopolitical interests, the Kremlin has decided to get a firm foothold in the Balkans, and its ambition to increase its political and economic influence in this area begins to materialise. For example, in 2014, a Russian representative at the UN did not endorse the continuation of the EUFOR mission, which had long been operating in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Previously, the Kremlin had used the financial crisis of the eurozone to gain political and economic influence in the Balkan Peninsula (Petrillo, 2013). However, Russia is not the EU's only competitor in this region. China is also a key player; see for example Bjeloš (2019), Vladisavljev (2022), or Dimitrijević (2020).

Serbia's foreign policy is characterised by the endeavour to establish correct relations with all the major powers on the international stage. It is based on four pillars and encompasses relations with both Western (EU and US) and Eastern states (China and Russia). Serbia has a specific relationship with each of these actors. While relations with Beijing and Moscow focus on the promotion of economic and political interests (e.g., the Kremlin supports unremittingly Serbia's position on Kosovo's political status), Serbia also maintains very strong economic ties with EU Member States. Nevertheless, its relations with the United States of America are tenuous and complicated by the Serbian society's negative views on the US and its particular stance on the future political status of Kosovo (Beckmann-Dierkes and Rankić, 2022).

Serbia's foreign policy is becoming increasingly important against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine that altered Europe's security situation. It has taken on a new dimension since the deterioration of the West's relations with Russia. It will therefore be interesting to watch and reflect on the positions the Serbian political elites will take in the future. Belgrade is widely perceived as one of Moscow's few allies in Europe, along with Minsk. In this context, the EU could opt to accelerate the European integration of the Western Balkans (Serbia included), while the Kremlin might try to reverse this trend with its malign influence.

Our primary research objective is to establish whether Serbia builds its foreign policy on the theoretical premises of the small states' foreign policy and, in doing so, how it manages to pursue its pragmatic policies based on cooperation with both the EU and Russia. A secondary objective is to infer how Serbia's foreign policy might change due to the security developments triggered by the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Will Serbia manage to maintain its pragmatic foreign policy, or will it be compelled to take sides in the future? It is worth noting that no previous study has analysed Serbia's foreign policy from the "small state" perspective. Hence, we decided to fill this research gap with the current study.

This paper does not cover the events that preceded the collapse of Yugoslavia and led to the creation of an independent Serbian state. It deals only with Serbia's relations with the EU and the Russian Federation between the years 2012 and 2022, which saw the Kremlin's growing influence in Serbia, as well as changes in Belgrade's relations with the EU. We have chosen this timeframe (before the Russian invasion of Ukraine) for two key reasons. First, the primary data (drawn from expert interviews and archival work) were collected in the second half of 2021 and, thus, do not capture

the events of the last three years. Second, this study seeks to clarify the nature of Serbia's multi-vector foreign policy before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, we hope to stimulate further research on Serbia's foreign policy post-February 2022. Thus, the ambition of our current scholarly contribution is to generate – among academics and experts – discussions about the future direction of Serbia's foreign policy and diplomacy. Despite these self-imposed limitations, we present a possible scenario for the development of Belgrade's foreign relations with Moscow and the EU.

Literature review

Serbia's foreign policy has been the subject of several academic articles in recent years. Its ambivalence is highlighted in Ristić's study (2012), which concludes that President Tomislav Nikolić was in favour of a broader cooperation with Russia in the early days of his political career. However, during the 2012 election campaign, he promised his fellow citizens that Serbia would move closer to EU membership under his leadership (Ristić, 2012). Konitzer has a similar outlook on Serbia's geopolitical orientation, pointing out that narratives justifying Serbia's possible cooperation with both the East and the West are emerging in the Serbian public discourse (Konitzer, 2011).

The inclination towards a partnership with Russia in Serbia's foreign policy is explained by Patalakh (2018), who argues that the political elite's pro-Russian attitudes are rooted in the history of the Serbian-Russian relations, and in the cultural affinities between the two nations (in this case, the Orthodox Church plays an essential role). According to Patalakh, identity and emotions are instrumental in Serbian-Russian relations, and thus strengthen the cooperation on defence issues (stepping up Serbia's defence) and mutual trade (Patalakh, 2018). Belgrade's balancing act between Russia and the EU is highlighted, for example, in recent studies conducted by Ponomareva (2020), and Beckmann-Dierkes and Rankić (2022). Hartwell and Sidlo (2017) analyse Belgrade's foreign policy relations with Beijing, Moscow, Washington, and Brussels, providing thus the most comprehensive overview of Serbia's relations with major international actors.

In Serbia's foreign policy, the Kosovo issue is often mentioned as one of the obstacles on Belgrade's EU path. This is confirmed by Bieber's study "The Serbia-Kosovo agreements: an EU success story?" (2015), which summarises the history of the negotiations on the future political status of Kosovo, negotiations wherein the EU played a key role. Juzová *et al.* (2022), on the other hand, point to Serbia's lack of democratisation as an impediment to closing the accession chapters. However, none of the above studies has looked at Serbia from the angle of the "small state" concept and considered the evolving security situation in Europe in the context of the Russian aggression.

The concept of "small state" in international relations and specific features of small states' foreign policy

The international system does not consist only of great powers. Small states clearly predominate (Maass, 2009). Nevertheless, they have long been overlooked in

scholarly research. The first attempt to define a small state can be traced back to the Treaty of Chaumont (1814) during the Napoleonic Wars. Small states have become a topic of academic interest since the 1940s (Glazebrook, 1947). A valuable analysis is provided in David Vital's *The Survival of Small States* (1971). Vital reflects on how they can be defined and how they shape their foreign policy, given their limited power in the international system. In his 1968 book, Rothstein concludes that small and weak states join international organisations to protect their security interests and increase their foreign policy leverage.

Other authors have addressed the issue of the military neutrality of small states. Radoman (2021) highlighted its historical aspects in Sweden and Serbia. Although Serbia is not a typical example of a military-neutral state, it has been committed to this principle in its foreign policy since 2007, with the approval of the Serbian Parliament. Hey (2003) and Simpson (2020) also share the belief that small states are usually military neutral. Moreover, in Keohane's view (1969), their foreign policy is influenced by domestic factors. More recently, Brady and Thorhallsson (2020), Long (2017), Radoman (2018, 2021), and Baldacchino and Wivel (2020), among others, have dealt with the small states' foreign policy.

Before moving on to Serbia's foreign and security policy, it is necessary to ask what characteristics a state must have to be considered small. Several authors have discussed this issue, but there are no clear criteria for establishing the relative size of a small state: see, for example, Henrikson (2001), or Maass (2009). An analysis conducted by Baldacchino and Wivel (2020) provides an interesting overview of this concept. Handel argues that a small state can be identified by its power capacity. Simply put, if a state has less power capacity than the great powers, it automatically falls into the category of small states (Handel, 2016). This definition is the least difficult. Today, the key to determining great powers is whether they are permanent members of the UN Security Council (Fiemotongha *et al.*, 2021) and possess nuclear weapons (Handel, 2016).

The realists bring to the debate a different definition of the small state. They believe it is necessary to use quantifiable data to get a clear picture of what is deemed a small state and what no longer is. They focus on the size of the economy in terms of GDP, or on the size of the population. Last but not least, they look at the defence expenditure or the state dimensions (Crowards, 2002). However, it is worth noting that it is practically impossible to determine the exact quantifiable threshold under which states can be considered small. According to the World Bank, a country with less than 1.5 million inhabitants on its territory is a small state (World Bank, 2022a). Nevertheless, this criterion might be too strict and counterproductive in the very operationalisation of the concept (Baehr, 1975), since states with a slightly larger population do not differ from them significantly in terms of power capacity. Jean-Marc Rickli and Khalid Almezaini (2016) have also criticised the use of this criterion in categorising states. Despite this wave of criticism, some authors still think that the number of inhabitants is crucial in determining whether a state is small or not.

Confoundingly, there is no single definition of "small states" agreed upon by

the experts. For Briguglio, Persaud and Stern (2006), small states are territorial units with no more than 1.5 million people. Kuznets (1960), on the other hand, includes in this category states with a population of less than 5 million. In his turn, Vital (1967) assumes that the population of a small state from among the developed countries does not exceed 15 million inhabitants, while that of a small developing state can comprise twice that number of people. It is equally difficult to quantify the economic performance of small states.

The population size remains the most important criterion in defining small states because it forms the basis of a country's capacity to promote its interests abroad and defend itself in case of an attack. Small states often resort to military neutrality being aware that they are surrounded by more powerful countries.

In light of the aforementioned definitions, the authors of this study consider that a small state is a territorial unit with fewer than 15 million people. The current research builds on Hey's (2003) concept of "small state foreign policy", which provides some essential insights. Hey has identified 10 characteristics that inform the behavioural patterns of the small states in international relations. The limited scope of our study has not allowed us to cover all of them. Hence, we have focused on three key aspects of their foreign policy: i.e., military neutrality, the efforts to join international organisations whenever possible, and the commitment to respect international law (Hey, 2003). These aspects and the way we tackled them in the empirical part of the study are further explained and justified.

Small states are forced to face challenges arising from their small size. Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2017) describe this situation very well in their paper. They point out that an insufficient population limits a state's power, e.g. in economic and diplomatic negotiations. Membership in international organisations can help small states overcome some of the difficulties they encounter (for instance, the weak negotiating position in commercial and diplomatic matters). From this perspective, a very relevant contribution was made by Panke's (2012) study, which summarises the benefits small states derive from their membership in international organisations. This phenomenon is discussed by other authors, too. See, for example, Scheldrup (2014), Long (2017), and Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2017). The latter argue that a "highly institutionalized, cooperative, and peaceful international system" is most beneficial for small states (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2017).

Starting from these theoretical assumptions, we first sought to uncover whether Serbia, beyond its frequent political proclamations, really aspires to EU membership. Theoretically, Belgrade would benefit not only economically, but also diplomatically from its possible membership because its bargaining position with the EU members would be strengthened. Yet, Serbia maintains very close relations with Russia, even though the Kremlin is committing unprecedented war crimes in Ukraine. Therefore, we aim to pinpoint the obstacles that prevent Serbia from advancing towards EU membership and identify the pillars of Belgrade's cooperation with Moscow.

As regards national security, it is noteworthy that small buffer states are more exposed to the threat of losing their independence, while pursuing their foreign policy goals: see, for example, Valeriano and Van Benthuyssen (2012), or Fazal (2004). The

sword of Damocles of a potential invasion constantly hangs over them, which means that they must strive to maintain their statehood (Poast, 2013). Therefore, they try to form alliances with more powerful neighbouring states. In the specialised literature, the term “bandwagoning” refers to alliances between a weaker state and its stronger neighbour (see, for example, Walt, 1987). The problem, however, is that requests for alliances with a stronger state are often ignored. An example from history is Hungary's attempt to get Great Britain on its side in a possible conflict against Tsarist Russia. Moreover, when such a military alliance is forged, its commitments are often not honoured: e.g. the case of Poland, which asked for help in a conflict against Russia in the late 18th century (Poast, 2013). In his seminal work, *Politics Among Nations* (1948), Morgenthau already pointed out that the sovereignty of small and weak states inherently requires the consent of stronger actors. This means that the existence of small states depends on decisions taken by more powerful states. Neutrality is perceived by small and weak states as a chance to preserve their sovereignty. This option designed to ensure national sovereignty is also acknowledged by Radoman (2021) who presents the cases of Sweden and Serbia in her book *Military Neutrality of Small States in the Twenty-First Century*.

The security threats that small states deal with relate to the third feature of their foreign policy we focused on, namely the willingness to respect international law and to see it enforced on the international stage. This is an essential aspect because, unlike great powers or other powerful states, small states do not have sufficient military and economic leverage to impose their will at the international level (Lupel and Mälksoo, 2019). The international law protects, to some degree, the weaker states, and their leaders are very much aware of it. Consequently, small states are among the strongest supporters of international law within the international system, though individual countries may interpret this law differently.

And yet, are these assumptions confirmed by the way Serbia conducts its foreign and security policy? Is this country militarily neutral and what kind of security policy does its government pursue? Does its military neutrality indicate an ambiguous direction of its foreign policy, with Russia on one side, and the EU states on the other?

Methodological framework

Our interpretative case study is primarily based on the expert interviews we have conducted. An interpretative case study is usually characterised by the fact that its theoretical framework gives the researcher a means to formulate his conclusions (Lijphart, 1971). In this case, the concept of “small state” is applied to the foreign policy orientation of Serbia, which – despite its interest in joining the EU – has visible links to the Kremlin. As already mentioned, the timeframe chosen is the period 2012-2022.

We have opted for this type of case study because it allows us to test the validity of the assumptions made in the theoretical part of this article. If those assumptions are invalidated, we can point to a case that is outside the scope of the basic theoretical premises. This would mean that the concept of “small state foreign policy” is not universally applicable.

Finally, it should be noted that most studies, except of Patalakh's 2018 study,

are descriptive in nature and, hence, do not enable a different perspective on Serbia's behaviour in international relations. We are convinced that the concept of "small state foreign policy" can provide a new perspective on Belgrade's foreign policy.

Thus, the objective of this study goes beyond verifying hypotheses to generate knowledge on a carefully selected case. The study monitors the specific multi-vector foreign policy of a typical small state, namely Serbia. Using process tracing, the paper divides the Serbian foreign policy into a chain of events along which causal relations are traceable. Based on these causal relations, one can discover factors that influence Serbia's ambivalent foreign policy.

The necessary data was collected in two phases. During the first phase, we strived to gather and use, as much as possible, existing and/or published data (especially, scientific/scholarly articles, speeches of the current Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, and official foreign policy documents of Serbia, Russia and the EU) and to identify areas with missing or insufficient data. We filled those gaps in the second phase of data collection, during our field research in Serbia (namely in Belgrade, and in the city of Novi Sad) in August 2021. Respondents belonging to the Serbian civil society, academia, and political elites were found through the snowball sampling method (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Browne, 2005; Noy, 2008). In general, this sampling technique implies that the researcher gradually contacts individuals (sample respondents) that refer him to other respondents, thus, forming an imaginary chain composed of all the respondents.

In August 2021, two gatekeepers (a representative of the Serbian academia, and a municipal politician from Belgrade), contacted in advance based on publicly available information, were selected for the survey. They referred us to further potential respondents. The interview with the gatekeepers was preceded by biographic preliminary research, which helped us lay out the topic of the interviews. Thanks to the gatekeepers' contacts, it was possible to carry out interviews with a representative of the diplomatic staff of an EU country in Belgrade, an academic in Novi Sad, and a representative of the non-profit sector in Serbia. The acquired interviews cannot be clearly categorised due to the occasionally tough requirements of field research, the necessity to adapt to local conditions and to process continuously the collected data.

The dialogues with the gatekeepers were expert interviews following a four stage elicitation process (cf. Flick, 2009), consisting of:

- (1) *An overview interview*, wherein an expert freely expresses his/her opinion on the given issues.
- (2) *A structured interview*, whereby an expert answers the researcher's specific questions that mirror the statements the interviewee made in the overview interview.
- (3) *Analyses of the acquired data* performed during the field research.
- (4) Supplementary questions presented to the interviewee based on acquired data.

Other interviews had a freer structure, as they had to take into account the respondent's personality and the situation in which they were conducted.

In the process of recruiting respondents, the authors encountered several

problems, which might have thwarted the efforts put into this study. From among these, it is worth mentioning: the refusal of several respondents to meet us in person (of course, this may render some of the conclusions herein subjective), and the relatively small number of respondents. We have tried to overcome these limitations by including relevant respondents with knowledge of the issues targeted by our research, and we have sought to maintain a balance of opinions. Hence, we have selected respondents from different professions: academics, diplomats, and NGO workers.

Nevertheless, we are aware that it is not possible to draw from a handful of interviews generally valid conclusions that can apply to the entire Serbian population. Hence, we have approached critically the interviewees' opinions to avoid any unconscious bias. Further research is needed to explore in depth the views of Serbian society on such sensitive topics.

The expert interviews (five in total), conducted in English, lasted almost three hours. Their length ranged from 60 minutes (the longest interview) to 30 minutes (the shortest one). We have prepared an interview outline to introduce the interviewees to the research topic before asking them questions. To clarify any ambiguity, the researchers asked additional questions. As the data presented is quite sensitive, the respondents expressed their wish to remain anonymous; the authors fully respected their anonymity.

In the empirical part of this study, the focus is on Serbia's efforts to join the EU and on the way its government has advocated for the respect of the principles of international law, while trying to maintain Serbia's military neutrality. We have chosen to tackle these two features of the small states' foreign policy (namely, the commitment to observe international law and military neutrality) in one separate section because we believe they are inextricably linked to the defence policy. This was well illustrated by the examples of Finland and Sweden who have recently reconsidered their long-standing position on military neutrality in light of the Kremlin's violations of international law. Finland joined NATO in April 2023, and Sweden in March 2024.

Serbia's efforts to join international organisations – the case of the EU

Given its population size and economic performance, Serbia is undoubtedly a small state. With less than seven million inhabitants, a territory of over 88,000 km² (the 19th largest country in Europe), and a nominal GDP of about 131 billion euros (2021), Serbia meets all the aforementioned criteria to be classified as a small state. According to the World Bank, Serbia belongs to the upper middle-income countries (World Bank, 2022b), so one can say that it is not yet one of the most advanced economies in the world.

Its geopolitical orientation has already raised concerns at the beginning of the last decade, due to particular developments on its domestic political scene. Konitzer alludes to this fact in his article "Serbia between East and West" (2011). He recalls that during the 2008 Serbian parliamentary elections, there was a debate on whether Serbia should envisage greater cooperation with the EU or gear its foreign policy more towards Russia (Konitzer, 2011). Savić's (2014) analysis, which presents five basic geopolitical narratives of Serbia, also tackles this topic. In his opinion, more than half of those

narratives (i.e., three) concern the geopolitical orientation of the country. In addition to the traditional West versus East dichotomy, a narrative depicting Serbia as a “bridge between the West and the East” emerges in the public discourse. Its proponents argue that it is necessary to cooperate with both the West (the EU and the United States) and the East (Russia).

Among the proponents of this line of action are the former president of Serbia, Tomislav Nikolić, and the former leader of the Serbian Radical Party, Vojislav Šešelj. Nikolić used this narrative to defend Serbia's foreign policy vis-à-vis the EU and Russia. He argued that Serbia should be an imaginary bridge between the two sides (Savić, 2014). The reference to Nikolić's statement is not accidental in this section of our study. We consider that a crucial feature of the small states' security policy is their military neutrality, which entails the pursuit of a balanced foreign policy designed to avoid taking sides in a potential conflict. Former Prime Minister and current Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić shares the views of Nikolić and Šešelj on this topic, as confirmed by two of our interviewees: a diplomatic representative and an academic. The diplomatic representative commented on Vučić's foreign policy orientation: “You know, President Vučić's rhetoric is interesting. Vučić's rhetoric is different externally and internally. Externally, he is clearly committed to European integration and is in favour of the country's EU membership. However, domestically the situation is different. Brnabić is a mere puppet in the hands of Vučić: she is not a strong personality, but a technocrat who follows the instructions of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (...), I believe that Serbia has no real interest in becoming a member of the EU” (*Interview 1 with a diplomatic representative in Belgrade*). This opinion is similar to that of another interviewee: “If you look at Vučić's political career, this man was a fierce opponent of the West in the 1990s. Of course, the bombing of Belgrade by the West played a role in that (...), today one can say that he is sitting on two chairs. On the one hand, Vučić announces that Serbia wants to join the EU, but on the other hand, he is trying to strengthen relations with Russia. In principle, it can be said that Serbia is trying to pursue a pragmatic foreign policy, it wants to have good relations with the EU, Russia or China” (*Interview 4 with an academic in Belgrade*).

This Balkan country has made continuous efforts to join the EU since 2009, when it officially applied for EU membership. Its aspirations were heightened in 2012, when it was granted candidate status. However, twelve years later, Serbia is still in the Union's waiting room (Ponomareva, 2020). Concrete steps for its EU accession were made in 2015, when negotiations started with the first two out of the 30 accession chapters. By 2020, 18 chapters had already been opened. “You see, it is not so important how many chapters are opened or not opened. What is important is how many of them will be closed (...); we see this in the example of Türkiye, which has opened all accession chapters, but is not able to close them”, said the academic we interviewed in Novi Sad. Moreover, in his opinion, EU Member States are hypocritical towards Serbia, and although Serbia is trying to align its legislation with EU standards, it has come under fire from the EU. “I do not think our judiciary and corruption are in a worse state than in Bulgaria or Romania, for example. But these countries are in the EU, we are not” (*Interview 2 with an academic in Novi Sad*). However, reports from the European Commission indicate that the EU legislation is only partially implemented in Serbia,

and the process of implementation is slow (European Commission, 2020; 2021).

Kosovo's status is the most pressing issue that hampers the ongoing European integration process. Serbia has found once again a strong supporter in Russia, which opposes the Western countries' convictions on this burning territorial issue. That is why the alliance with Russia is so relevant to Serbia: "In principle, Russia is very important for Serbia, as well as China, because in the UN, on issues related to Kosovo, Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or the declaration of Great Britain that Serbia should be recognised as a country that has committed genocide, Russia can veto these proposals" (*Interview 4 with an academic in Belgrade*). Kosovo's situation greatly complicates Serbia's ambitions to join the EU. The issue of its independence was one of the key points of the so-called Berlin Process, launched in 2014. However, that initiative did not lead to a swift resolution of Kosovo's status, despite promises of a possible admission of Serbia to the EU in 2018, in case of a successful resolution. Following other unsuccessful attempts at solving that territorial dispute (Davos 2019, Washington 2021), the prospect of Serbia's accession to the EU seems unlikely. As Zordan points out, Belgrade is not particularly interested in joining the EU because it is satisfied with its current format of relations with both the EU and Russia (Zordan, 2022). According to one interviewee, the country's eventual admission to the EU depends heavily on whether the Member States are interested in Serbia at all. His statement suggests that rather the opposite is the case (*Interview 3 with a municipal politician in Belgrade*).

EU leaders have long criticised Serbia for its stance on Kosovo, and their strained relations were exacerbated by the deterioration of the relations between Kosovo and Serbia in the years 2022-2023. Nevertheless, EU leaders have consistently reiterated that the EU accession of the Western Balkans is crucial to the EU. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, has expressed himself in the same vein several times, during his visits in the region. In light of the current events that changed Europe's security situation, such assurances are very much needed so that the EU's influence is not replaced by that of other external actors.

The West's geopolitical challenger in Serbia is Russia. The Kremlin has long-standing interests in Serbia, as it has in the entire Western Balkan region. The Kremlin's situation is in fact easier because it pursues its strategic goals without spending large financial resources (Pavičić, 2019). In practice, Moscow's foreign policy toward the Balkans is based on several viable premises:

- First, Serbia's alliance with Russia at the highest political level, and Russia's support for the Kosovo issue.
- Second, the fact that the Kremlin relies heavily on the power of the "post-Soviet sentiment", very often reminding the Serbs who defeated Nazi Germany on the territory of former Yugoslavia. Hence, a strong historical bond reinforces the present relations between Russia and Serbia.

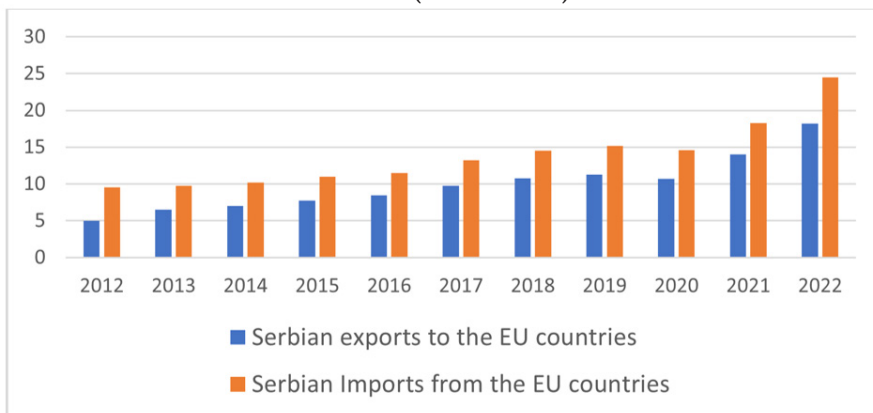
Russia tries to emphasise that it has always been on Serbia's side, e.g., in the conflicts with Bosnia and Kosovo (Pavičić, 2019). Incidentally, this was confirmed by one of our interviewees, who added: "The reason why Serbian society likes Russia is simple. In all the conflicts that were waged against us, the West supported our opponent (Bosnia, Albania) and I do not understand why. After all, we are members

of the Christian civilisation, just like the Czechs, Slovaks, or Bulgarians. Nevertheless, the West has supported the Muslims in the conflicts with us” (*Interview 5 with a representative of the non-profit sector in Novi Sad*).

These arguments shape Serbian public opinion and explain why many Serbs continue to perceive Russia as a friend even nowadays. The public mood in Serbia is also reflected in the opinion of one interviewee who considers Russia as Serbia’s friend and brother because it respects its positions (especially, on the issue of Kosovo’s independence). He thinks the West is largely hypocritical when, on the one hand, it recognises the independence of Kosovo and, on the other hand, it does not accept that the population of Crimea decided in a referendum to join Russia (*Interview 2 with an academic in Novi Sad*). In sharp contrast, Moscow has repeatedly sided with Serbia on the Kosovo issue, as it did during the recent riots of 2022-2023.

Though Russia condemned the violence that led to the loss of lives, it clearly supported Serbia’s territorial claims, which triggered critical remarks from the EU. It is therefore not surprising that Serbia is somewhat reluctant to obtain EU membership and continues to maintain close relations with the Kremlin. Hence, the balancing act between the EU and Russia seems to be a characteristic of the Serbian foreign policy. The diplomatic representative we interviewed suggested that Serbia’s foreign policy lacks a clear vector. “Serbia tries to pursue a multi-vector policy and cooperates with various countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and China. However, Serbia’s strongest ties are clearly with the Kremlin” (*Interview 1 with a diplomatic representative in Belgrade*).

Figure 1. Serbian volume of trade with the EU countries in 2012-2022 (in bill. euros)



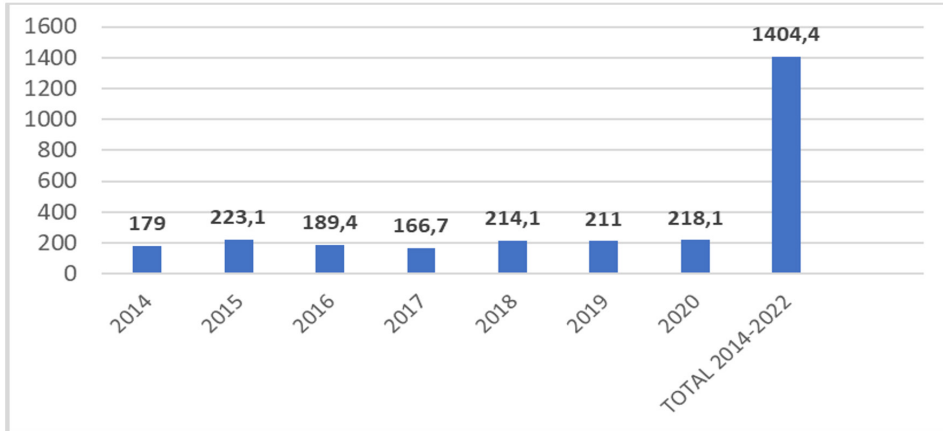
Source: Compiled by the authors, based on data from the European Commission (2024).

In economic terms, it seems more advantageous for Serbia to join the EU, as available statistics show. Just for illustration, in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic reached Europe and affected international trade (Eurostat, 2021), mutual trade between Serbia and EU Member States amounted to almost 25 billion euros (*Figure 1*). It should be noted that no other Balkan country has such a large trade exchange with the EU. Almost 50% of the EU’s exports to the Western Balkans go to Serbia, and Serbia’s

exported goods to EU Member States reach a similar level (Eurostat, 2021). In 2012, Serbia's exports to the EU single market did not even reach a nominal value of 5 billion euros, while at the end of the second decade of this century, they exceeded 11 billion euros (EU in Serbia, 2022).

A simple comparison of the trade relations between Serbia and Russia is quite enlightening. According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), mutual trade between them amounted to a little more than 2 billion euros in 2020, and most of it concerned mineral resources, especially the export of Russian gas and oil (OEC, 2021). Therefore, as regards commercial relations, the Kremlin cannot compete with the EU Member States, but it does offer energy raw materials that are indispensable to Serbia. The energy cooperation is very important, as Zordan (2022) highlights in his analysis. Official statistics show that Russia met 80% of Serbia's oil demand as early as 2014, and almost 2/3 of its gas consumption needs in 2020 (Energy Agency of the Republic of Serbia, 2021). Though Serbia signed a three-year contract with Gazprom in May 2022, wherein it committed itself to buying gas from Russia (Reuters, 2022a), Vučić declared that his country does not have to rely solely on Russian gas (Reuters, 2022c). The year 2023 saw the construction of an interconnector to a new pipeline in Bulgaria, which ensures gas supplies from Central Asia (European Commission, 2023). It is worth noting that the Serbian government paid only half of this €100 million investment, while the EU provided the rest (Savic, 2022).

Figure 2. EU pre-accession assistance to Serbia 2014-2020 (in mill. euros)



Source: Compiled by the authors, based on data from the European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, (2022).

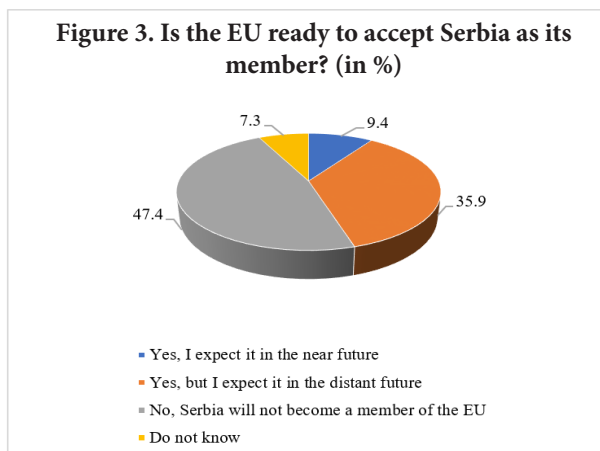
This overview clearly shows the EU's prevailing economic relations with Serbia. Pragmatically, it seems that EU accession would deepen the economic cooperation between Serbia and the EU's Member States, benefiting the former in particular. However, not only the financial advantages could play an important role in Serbia's decision to pursue its European integration goals. We should also take into account the fact that the European Union provides funds for Serbia to carry out the necessary reforms: e.g., over 1.5 billion euros in the period 2014-2020 alone (Figure 2). Thus, Serbia received the largest amount of funds from pre-accession assistance (European

Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, 2022).

Hence, economic aid should bring Serbia closer to European integration. This was also suggested by the diplomatic representative: “President Vučić has placed very little emphasis on how economically beneficial EU membership would be for Serbia. On the one hand, Serbs appreciate the economic support from the EU; but on the other hand, the political representation is not able to properly sell these benefits on the domestic political scene” (*Interview 1 with a diplomatic representative in Belgrade*).

This stance of the Serbian government has different consequences mirrored in the attitude of the Serbian society towards the EU. Another interviewee, a local politician, also commented on this issue: “In the beginning, there was a lot of enthusiasm in Serbia for the prospect of becoming a member of the EU, because, of course, we see the economic benefits of eventual membership. But, you know, the European integration process is full of problems and is progressing very slowly. This goes hand in hand with the decreasing support for the country's accession to this organisation” (*Interview 3 with a municipal politician in Belgrade*).

According to the *Globsec Vulnerability Index 2021 – Serbia*, 52% of the respondents would have liked to see Serbia join the EU. The declining support for this organisation can be described as a permanent trend (Globsec, 2021). This very fact points to further problems in the European integration process. If Serbia – just like the states of the ‘Bing Bang’ enlargement (e.g., the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, etc.) – were to hold a referendum on its EU accession nowadays, the option of joining this organisation would not necessarily win. This problem was pointed out by several experts, who admitted that public support for EU accession is below 50% for the first time since 2012, when the country was granted candidate status (N1, 2022).



Source: Vuksanović et al. (2022) (compiled by the authors).

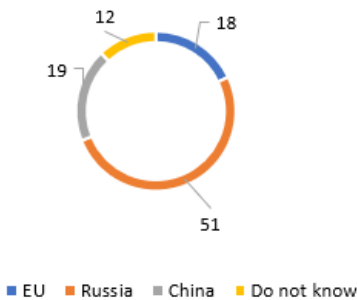
There is scepticism about Serbia's accession to the EU (*Figure 3*): more than 47% of the respondents believe the EU is not ready to accept Serbia as a Member State, less than 9.5% believe that Serbia will soon join the EU, and less than 36% are certain that Serbia will become a member of the Union in the distant future (Vuksanović et al., 2022).

On the contrary, Moscow was perceived very positively in Serbia before the invasion of Ukraine. More than 80% of Serbs

consider Russians their Slavic brothers and almost 60% see Russia as a strategic partner (Globsec, 2021). One of our interviewees argued that people in Serbia, especially in rural areas, do not perceive Russia as a threat (as it is often portrayed by the West), but

as their traditional protector who has always assisted Serbia in difficult times (*Interview 5 with a representative of the non-profit sector in Novi Sad*). Russia's aggression in Ukraine has not changed this trend. An opinion poll (*Figure 4*) conducted in October 2022 reveals that the Serbian society continues to feel great affection for Russia. More than half of the survey respondents consider it Serbia's closest foreign policy ally. Only 18% of them expressed their support for the EU option. Less flattering for the EU is the fact that 19% of the respondents believe that Belgrade's closest ally is Beijing, which is striking, to say the least, given the geographical distance between the two countries.

Figure 4. Who do you think is the closest ally of Serbia in foreign policy? (in %)



Source: Compiled by the authors, based on Vuksanović et al. (2022).

aggression in Ukraine. First, Finland was accepted into the North Atlantic Alliance, while Sweden had to await Hungary's approval to finally join NATO on March 7, 2024. In addition, the EU has broken off trade relations with Moscow and has largely reduced its dependence on Russian oil and gas imports.

In our view, in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, it is unthinkable that Serbia continues to serve as a 'bridge' between the West and the East. Hence, Serbia will soon have to decide which side to take. The fact that it is economically beneficial for Belgrade to enhance its cooperation with the West (and thus with the EU) argues in favour of broader cooperation. On the other hand, the Kosovo issue seems currently intractable, and the inability to solve this dispute is somewhat reflected in the slowdown of the EU accession negotiations.

Moreover, wider cooperation with Russia is apparently the wish of a significant part of the Serbian population. However, the deepening of relations with Moscow comes at a price. We have all seen in the last years how Russia treated its partners, when the latter acted contrary to its expectations. In this sense, we could mention the war in Georgia (2008), the annexation of Crimea (2014), the invasion of Ukraine (2022), or the recent disputes between Russia and the Republic of Moldova occasioned by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In all these cases, the Kremlin has used various strategies to make these states feel that they cannot do without Russia.

Nowadays, as previously indicated, Serbia's relations with the EU and Russia are largely determined by the Russian-Ukrainian war, and the question is: How will Serbia develop its relations with Russia in the future? Although Belgrade has been evasive on the issue of anti-Russian sanctions, it has formally condemned the Russian attack. Serbia's stance is therefore pragmatic. However, we believe that this position is unsustainable in the long run, since deep-rooted security assumptions in Europe are changing. Countries long considered neutral (Sweden and Finland) have decided to join NATO, as a result of the Russian

All these events should serve as a warning to Serbia that Moscow's favour does not last forever. It is not that Moscow would begin to threaten it with a military invasion, but it could refrain from endorsing Serbia's claims, in multilateral forums, on the issue of Kosovo's political status, which is crucial for Belgrade. The question of Kosovo will determine the future shape of relations between the EU and Serbia. EU leaders are aware that the successful integration of the Western Balkans requires the acceptance of Serbia. Otherwise, the entire region might be destabilised. This is another reason why Serbia represents a key player for the EU. In turn, Belgrade acknowledges the EU's great economic potential and, in our view, could eventually side with the EU. Nevertheless, in the near future, the nature of its foreign policy is likely to stay the same, since in the December 2023 elections President Vučić's party won once again by a fairly large margin. As those parliamentary elections were allegedly held under unfair conditions, the opposition contested the results, but to no avail. However, we are convinced that increasing pressure exerted by the EU leaders on Serbia to adjust its foreign policy will eventually lead this country to full EU membership.

Military neutrality and respect for international law as instruments of Serbia's balancing between the EU and Russia

Since 2007, Serbia has conducted its security policy in the spirit of military neutrality. Its Parliament has adopted a resolution enshrining the principle of military neutrality in the Serbian legal order, due to a crucial factor: the military intervention of NATO in Serbia in the late 1990s, which created a negative image (still evident today) of the Trans-Atlantic Alliance among the Serbs. That image has remained virtually unchanged, with less than one-tenth of the Serbian population agreeing to join the Alliance (Radoman, 2021).

This explains the government's elusiveness on the issue of NATO membership. It is consistent with the statements of our interviewees. One of them even mentioned that for Serbian politicians joining NATO is still a taboo (*Interview 1 with a diplomatic representative in Belgrade*). This was confirmed by President Vučić at one of his pre-election meetings, where he announced that Serbia would never become a member of the North Atlantic Alliance (TASS, 2022). In light of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, this is an interesting statement. Indeed, one can infer that he secretly supports Russian strategic interests in the Balkans.

One interviewee told us that Serbia is important to Russia for two main reasons. First, there are strong cultural and historical ties between the two nations, and second, in his opinion, Russia will do everything in its power to prevent further NATO expansion, as evidenced by the situation in Montenegro in 2017, when the Kremlin tried to overthrow the government (*Interview 2 with an academic in Novi Sad*).

Though NATO membership is not a priority of Serbia's foreign policy, it is worth noting that Serbia's security policy does not clash with that of individual NATO member states. Unlike Russia, Serbia does not question the existence of the North Atlantic Alliance (Radoman, 2021) and even cooperates with it on several levels. As early as 2006, the Serbian government signed the Partnership for Peace, followed by the deployment of a permanent mission to NATO Headquarters in Brussels in 2010. Furthermore, in 2016, the Serbian government signed an agreement allowing NATO to

pass through its territory (Radoman, 2021). Radoman notes, however, that government officials hardly mention publicly these NATO-friendly steps, as Serbian citizens have great reservations about the North Atlantic Alliance. One of our interviewees stated: “The trauma we experienced in 1999, when the North Atlantic Alliance bombed us, is still within us. I myself see, especially in social media, posts that are full of hatred and anger towards NATO” (*Interview 5 with a representative of the non-profit sector in Novi Sad*).

Therefore, the Serbian government needs to ponder its security policy actions. Striving for non-alignment and military neutrality is typical of a small state. The fact that Serbia did not support the Western sanctions against the Kremlin (for its aggression in Ukraine) also fits this strategy. Through the prism of the concept of “small state foreign policy”, this can be construed as Serbia’s effort to maintain maximum neutrality out of concern for its sovereignty (Zordan, 2022).

To sum up, Serbia does not exclude cooperation with NATO. Yet, it has no intention of joining the Alliance and continues to cooperate with the Kremlin in the military sphere. The Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Serbia and the Russian Federation was signed back in 2013. This document states that both states will seek to deepen their cooperation in the economic, political, and military spheres (Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). In this spirit, in 2014, Vladimir Putin was invited to the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Serbian capital (Radoman, 2021). Along with the economic cooperation (based on oil and gas supplies), the political and military cooperation is therefore equally important. Russia seeks to include Serbia in its integration structures and to supply it regularly with its weapons systems. These include MIG fighter jets and T-30 tanks. Another advantage is that Serbia does not have to buy additional weapons from Russia at full retail price. These factors make Russia the largest weapons supplier of Serbia (Ponomareva, 2020). Moreover, the Russian army organises joint military exercises with the Serbian army. In a 2021 publication, Radoman reported that military training operations have been conducted three times in the period 2014–2016 alone (Radoman, 2021).

Serbia’s option for a balanced security policy, illustrated by its military neutrality, is also demonstrated by its stance towards the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), of which Russia is a founding member. In 2013, Russia offered Belgrade an observer seat in the CSTO’s parliamentary assembly (Zordan, 2022). Since then, the Serbian government has been cooperating with the member states of this organization (Collective Security Treaty Organization, 2023) without seeking to join it. This detail reinforces the thesis that small states embrace military neutrality.

The last factor we focus on in this study is Serbia’s tendency to disregard international law. Manifested in Belgrade’s stance toward the EU and Russia, this tendency clashes with the idea that the small states’ foreign policy is based on respect for international law. Serbia is a small state. Yet, its foreign policy swings back and forth between the EU, which supports the rules-based order, and Russia, which does not abide by international law. A prime example was the situation in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea. At that time, Serbia refused to support the European Union’s sanctions against Russia. Regarding this decision of Belgrade, one interviewee noted that the Serbian

government took into account the historical context that led the USSR to cede Crimea to Ukraine. According to him, Crimea historically belongs to Russia and the West should respect this fact (*Interview 3 with a municipal politician in Belgrade*).

Serbia's reluctance to join EU sanctions against Russia is mentioned in several European Commission (EC) reports (see, for example, Serbia Progress Report 2014). In these reports, the EC provides information on the progress of the accession negotiations and the implementation of legal norms required for EU accession. While an optimistic tone prevailed until 2014, a year later the Commission sharply criticised Serbia's position on Russia's annexation of Crimea (European Commission, 2015).

At the highest levels of Serbian politics, words were spoken in Russia's defence practically from the beginning of the occupation. As Zorić points out, top Serbian politicians met with their Russian counterparts 17 times between 2008 and 2016, including during the annexation of Crimea. Tomislav Nikolić, President of the Republic of Serbia (2012-2017), expressed the view that his country would always remain an ally of Moscow and would never accept EU-style sanctions against Russia (Zorić, 2017).

One of the interviewees explained to us the stance of the Serbian government and society on the Crimea issue. In his opinion, Serbs draw a parallel between the cases of Crimea and Kosovo. Therefore, they do not understand the West's different attitudes towards these two "similar" issues. While the West supports Kosovo's independence, it has a strong anti-Russian stance on the Crimea issue, which, according to the interviewee, denotes hypocrisy (*Interview 5 with a representative of the non-profit sector in Novi Sad*). However, those issues seem to be similar only taken out of their context. Indeed, some of the Russian Federation's closest allies (Syria, Cuba, Venezuela, Afghanistan, North Korea, and Sudan) currently recognise its 2014 annexation of Crimea. Yet, Kosovo's independence has been recognised based on remedial secession (after the mass ethnic cleansing carried out by the then Yugoslav government) by more than half of the UN member states.

A new potential fuse on the Russia-Belgrade-EU axis is the aggression against Ukraine, which started in February 2022. Belgrade has acted again in line with its envisioned balancing act between the Euro-Atlantic structures and Russia. It has supported a UN resolution condemning Russia's action against Ukraine, but – on the domestic political scene – Serbian MPs refused to call this act of Moscow "a war" (Morina, 2022) and opposed the anti-Russian sanctions. This conduct fully contradicts the spirit of the foreign policy of small states, which inherently strive to defend international law and enforce its observance. For Belgrade international law can be a means of balancing between the West and Russia to advance its interests, i.e. the annexation of Kosovo. Moreover, the Serbian public sides with Russia in the ongoing conflict, as evidenced by two demonstrations held in March and April 2022 (Filipovic, 2022; Euractiv, 2022).

Serbia's close relations with Russia are also illustrated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's scheduled visit to Belgrade in June 2022. Lavrov was forced to cancel his visit at the last minute, as his flight was denied access to the airspace of some countries due to European sanctions (Reuters, 2022b). According to Sztítás, Serbia's behaviour in the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine is a clear example

of how military neutrality can manifest itself on the international stage. Moreover, it also proves that EU officials' criticisms of the way Serbia handles this matter will not persuade it to change its position (Szitás, 2022).

Concluding remarks

Why have we applied the concept of “small state foreign policy” to Serbia's case? The Western Balkans are becoming the focus of a potential power struggle between the West and Russia, and this geopolitical contest is currently unfolding in Serbia, where Russia's influence (in the energy and defence spheres) and that of EU Member States (especially in the economic sphere) are evident. Thus, Serbia finds itself at a crossroads where it must choose between cooperation with the EU and deepening relations with Russia. We think that our research may facilitate the understanding of the factors Serbia considers in shaping its foreign policy. It may also serve as a springboard for further field research, or for a more pragmatic study of Serbia's balancing act between China and the West (i.e., US and EU). Additionally, the current article could be a model for structuring and diversifying the methodological approach in similar studies on the small states' balancing acts.

Serbian foreign policy seems to run counter to the theoretical assumptions about the small states' foreign policy. In the 2012-2022 period under review, our analysis showed that Serbia did not seek to join international organisations or fully respect international law. The only theoretical premise confirmed in Serbia's case is its compliance with the principle of military neutrality.

However, Belgrade's unusual political stances are part of its strategy to pursue the pragmatic foreign policy that has allowed it to cooperate with both Russia and the EU over the past decade. Though Serbia has proclaimed its interest in becoming a member of the European Union, it has extensively cooperated with Russia. This is largely due to the Serbian public opinion, which has long been in favour of Russia for historical, cultural and political reasons.

In our opinion, a change in Serbia's foreign policy can occur, if the EU pressures Belgrade into aligning its foreign policy with that of its Member States. Belgrade currently stands at a crossroads in its foreign policy relations. It will have to choose one of its strategic partners. From a pragmatic perspective, it should side with the EU with which it has strong trade ties, for the Kremlin has nothing to offer beyond political alliances and the idea of Slavic kinship. If Serbia continues to implement the necessary reforms for EU accession, while trying to resolve the Kosovo issue, its admission to the EU should not take too long. However, the outcome of the parliamentary elections held in December 2023 shows that, for the time being, things are unlikely to change substantially in terms of foreign policy, as Aleksandar Vučić's party still forms the most important part of the government.

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