



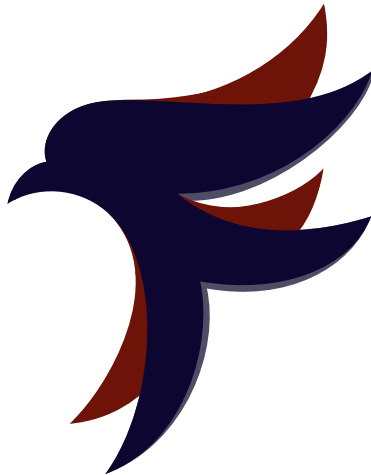
FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

EURASIA PROGRAM

# SERBIA ON THE EDGE

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Cover image: A protestor leans out of a car and holds a flare, while taking part in a rally in support of Russia, in Belgrade, Serbia, March 13, 2022. REUTERS/Zorana Jevtic



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Richard Kraemer

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**he time has come to openly regard the Republic of Serbia for what it is: A stalwart Russian and Chinese ally run by a semi-authoritarian government that proactively pursues ideologically irredentist territorial expansion in the Western Balkans.

Today's Serbia poses a threat to regional and transatlantic security. Under President Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the Serbian government is rapidly building its military, overtly backing ultranationalist provocateurs in neighboring states, cementing Belgrade's ties to Moscow, and consolidating partnerships with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Integral to its efforts to actualize the "Greater Serbia" ideology, Serbia's and Russia's Orthodox Church leadership cooperate closely and in concert with their political counterparts. Without a significant Westward shift in its orientation, Serbia will continue on an authoritarian trajectory aligned with U.S. adversaries.

Contemporary Serbia presents a quandary for U.S. and European strategists and policymakers. A genuinely democratic and Euro-Atlantic-oriented Serbia has been sought by Brussels and Washington alike. Yet, decades after Yugoslavia's violent dissolution and related North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) interventions in the 1990s, most Serbians reject NATO cooperation and are lukewarm towards the European

Union (EU).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the U.S. and its democratic allies in Europe are less able to leverage prospective memberships as a means of transatlantic integration. Further complicating relations with Serbia is Aleksandar Vučić's overt embrace of Beijing and Moscow.

The depth of Serbia's growing dependence on those powers jeopardizes U.S. and European security on multiple fronts. The Vučić government's enduring endorsement of ultranationalist narratives and their subversive purveyors continues to intensify discord in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Its military build-up is gravely disconcerting; Belgrade responds only with specious explanations.<sup>2</sup> The country's ever-greater reliance on Russian oil and gas as a client and transit state for Gazprom, Russia's state-owned energy giant, puts it at odds with Brussels,<sup>3</sup> Washington, and several Central-Eastern European capitals. Belgrade and Beijing's economic, technological, and increasingly military cooperation accelerates as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) further entrenches itself in southeast Europe. In sum: Serbia's expanding alignment with authoritarian powers and regional anti-democratic forces reflects its illiberal worldview and disabling narrative of national victimhood.

Western policymakers persistently view Belgrade's government with the misunderstanding that, given the right incentives,

1 International Republican Institute. "Western Balkans Regional Poll, February 2, 2020 – March 6, 2020." Iri.org. March 2020. [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/final\\_wb\\_poll\\_for\\_publishing\\_6.9.2020.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/final_wb_poll_for_publishing_6.9.2020.pdf).

2 Blank, Stephen. "Can Selling Weapons to Serbia Create Peace in the Balkans?" The National Interest, September 26, 2021. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/can-selling-weapons-serbia-create-peace-balkans-194448>.

3 Commission Staff Working Document on the European Energy Security Strategy, *State of the Energy Union 2015*, SWD 2015 404 Final, Brussels, 2015, [https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/ener/files/documents/3\\_EESS.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/ener/files/documents/3_EESS.pdf), accessed December 6, 2021.



**Serbia's expanding alignment  
with authoritarian powers and  
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national victimhood.**





Serbia will moderate, democratize, and gradually integrate into transatlantic institutions. This assumption is misguided. It diminishes, if not excludes, the need for a national reckoning among the Serbian people.

## **Serbia needs courageous and sincere leadership to acknowledge past sins and move the nation forward.**

As with post-war Germany's Willy Brandt, Serbia needs courageous and sincere leadership to acknowledge past sins and move the nation forward. For example: A genuine *Kniefall von Warschau*<sup>4</sup> event could spur an honest discussion among Serbian peoples about the atrocities committed during Yugoslavia's dissolution. Whatever the catalyst, a broad acknowledgment of past crimes against humanity is categorical if Serbia is ever to become a democratic and open society. Without it, Serbs will remain disproportionately susceptible to domestic irredentist forces fed by malign foreign powers set on keeping the Western Balkans removed from the transatlantic community. Until such a national reckoning, Western decision-makers should adopt a more pragmatic approach to relations with a Belgrade

government dismissive of genuine transatlantic partnerships. For as long as Pan-Serb ultranationalism is considered by Serbia's leaders to be acceptable in political discourse, the kind of genuine democratic values and institutions shared within the transatlantic community will remain unrealized. Accordingly, the U.S. and its European allies should encourage Serbia to focus on itself, not its neighbors. In that vein, Western policymakers would be wise to stop expecting a breakthrough in Kosovo-Serbia status negotiations. It has become an empty dialogue that only keeps Kosovo locked outside of international institutions and other benefits of recognized statehood. A revised approach should also discontinue pushing an ineffective EU integration process as the primary means of democratically transforming Serbia.

4 Hille, Peter. "Poland and Germany: 50 Years since Willy Brandt's Historic Gesture," Deutsche Welle, December 6, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-poland-reconciliation-willy-brandt/a-55828523>.

# SERBIA'S WAR FOOTING

**C**risis is again looming in the Western Balkans. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a member of the country's presidency, Milorad Dodik, and the Republika Srpska (RS) Assembly in Banja Luka are cooperating in an unprecedented push for state secession; preparations are underway for potential violence. Nearby, Montenegrin society is arguably more politically divided than ever in its modern history. Recalling the 2016 attempt to overthrow the democratically elected government in Podgorica,<sup>5</sup> there stands the potential for internecine political violence. In neighboring North Macedonia, dim prognoses of future European Union ascension have weighed down the Atlantic-facing Social Democrats, leaving them more exposed to Euroskeptical, pro-Russian political forces.<sup>6</sup>

Key sources of this instability emanate from President Aleksandar Vučić's Serbia. His Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) government politically, financially, and culturally aids ultranationalist groups active in its neighboring countries. The SNS government works in tandem with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), a ceaselessly reliable opponent of greater European/transatlantic integration, socio-religious tolerance, and the recognition of Kosovo's statehood. Categorically integral to the Serbian government and church's machinations is the

sympiotic backing that they receive from Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin.

Accordingly, there exists a Belgrade-Moscow-Russo-SOC triumvirate united in their joint and separate agendas. Together, they have, for decades, strategically fomented bigoted and irredentist messages through local anti-Western/pro-Russian proxy actors. Their influence operations and propaganda campaigns have succeeded in curbing broader public support for European integration, membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and liberal democracy.<sup>7</sup> These operations produce—and reinforce—ethnically Serb populaces that are largely skeptical of, or opposed to, liberal Western institutions, alternatively backing authoritarian-trending elites beholden to Moscow and, more recently, Beijing.

With this groundwork laid, Vučić has positioned Serbia to promptly take advantage of potential conflagration in the region. His objective is Serbia's territorial expansion, sought at the opportune time. Vučić's intentions are reflected in the following:

***Military Spending.*** Serbia has sharply increased its defense spending. Belgrade's decision to up its defense budget by 43 percent to \$1.14 billion in 2019 spurred apprehension in Brussels

5 Bajrovic, Reuf, Vesko Garcevic, and Richard Kraemer. "Hanging by a Thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro." Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 12, 2018. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/07/hanging-by-a-thread-russias-strategy-of-destabilization-in-montenegro/>.

6 Jakov Marusic, Sinisa. "Zaev Steps Down as North Macedonia's Prime Minister." Balkan Insight, December 23, 2021. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/23/zaev-steps-down-as-north-macedonias-prime-minister/>.

7 Kraemer, Richard. "Malign Foreign Influence in the Western Balkans: The EVC Review 2020." European Values Center for Security Policy, January 22, 2021. <https://www.europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Malign-Foreign-Influence-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>.



A meeting between leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian President Vučić in late February, 2022.  
Source: Facebook / Патријарх српски Порфирије

and Washington.<sup>8</sup> The following year's arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic failed to curb Vučić's appetite for more weapons and a bigger army. Despite COVID 19-related economic contractions and healthcare pressures, Serbia's 2021 defense budget peaked at \$1.5 billion—more than twice that of 2018.<sup>9</sup>

*Armament Acquisition.* In 2020, Serbia received several Chinese "Rainbow" CH-92A attack drones capable of missile and grenade delivery.<sup>10</sup>

That same year, Russia gifted Belgrade the first batch of a total 30 T-72 tanks, followed by 20 BRDM-2 armored vehicles.<sup>11</sup> Serbia also purchased Russian Pantsir S-1 air defense systems,<sup>12</sup> perhaps to compliment the Mistral-3 MANPAD system that Vučić bought from France in 2019.<sup>13</sup> There are reports that Serbia is talking to the Israelis about anti-tank weaponry and to the Turks about their battle-tested Bayraktar drones.<sup>14</sup>

8 "Serbia Had the Highest Military Expenditure in 2019." [www.euractiv.com](https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short_news/serbia-had-the-highest-military-expenditure-in-2019/). EURACTIV, April 28, 2020. [https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short\\_news/serbia-had-the-highest-military-expenditure-in-2019/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short_news/serbia-had-the-highest-military-expenditure-in-2019/).

9 Gadzo, Mersiha. "What Is Serbia Trying to Achieve with Its Military Buildup?" *Al Jazeera*, October 6, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/6/the-situation-is-dangerous#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20Serbia%20made%20headlines,percent%20from%20the%20previous%20year.>

10 "Serbia Receives Chinese CH-92A Attack Drones." *Defense World*, July 1, 2020. [https://www.defenseworld.net/news/27326/Serbia\\_Receives\\_Chinese\\_CH\\_92A\\_Attack\\_Drones.](https://www.defenseworld.net/news/27326/Serbia_Receives_Chinese_CH_92A_Attack_Drones.)

11 "Vucic: Donation of Russian Battle Tanks Significant Progress for Army." *N1*, November 28, 2020. <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/a677508-vucic-donation-of-russian-battle-tanks-significant-progress-for-army/>.

12 "Russia Delivers Pantsir Air-Defense Systems to Serbia," *Deutsche Welle*, February 22, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-delivers-pantsir-air-defense-systems-to-serbia/a-52481436.>

13 "Serbia Breaks Tradition and Signs Contract for French Missiles." *Overt Defense*, August 7, 2019. <https://www.overtdefense.com/2019/08/07/serbia-breaks-tradition-and-signs-contract-for-french-missile/>.

14 "Serbia Is on a Shopping Spree for Weapons." *The Economist*, October 30, 2021. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2021/10/30/serbia-is-on-a-shopping-spree-for-weapons.>



*Belligerency.* Serbian saber-rattling grew in 2021. Amidst heightened tensions in the autumn, Vučić raised the specter of a Serbian armed forces invasion of north Kosovo. In September, he told NATO Secretary General Hans Stoltenberg that NATO had a 24-hour period to respond to any violence against “our population” (i.e., ethnic Serbs) there; otherwise, Serbia “will react and not allow a repeat of what happened in 1995 and 2004.”<sup>15</sup> For emphasis, Belgrade flew MiG-29s and deployed armor personnel carriers near Kosovo’s borders.<sup>16</sup>

Reinforcing this posture is Serbia’s war footing. According to then-Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin, Russia and Serbia held a total of 29 joint military exercises in 2019 alone.<sup>17</sup> These exercises included the use of Pantsir air defense systems, weapons-capable Rainbow drones, and Russian-operated S-400 surface-to-air missiles.<sup>18</sup>

*SNS Capture of Regional Cable TV.* Serbia’s media space is closing. Serbia’s traditional media outlets increasingly purvey state-sanctioned stories and narratives. Reporters Without Borders has reported in recent years a steady decline in Serbia’s independent press freedom,<sup>19</sup> as independent journalists labor under government pressure. Reporters and investigative media outlets are subject to physical and—sometimes—

death threats, which notably shook the N1 regional news service in Serbia.<sup>20</sup>

## The impaired state of media freedom in Serbia bodes poorly for the region as well.

The impaired state of media freedom in Serbia bodes poorly for the region as well. The Serbian state’s cable and broadband operator, Telekom Srbija, aspires for a domestic market monopoly while gunning for cable network dominance in the Western Balkans. In July 2021, Telekom Srbija’s pay-TV affiliate Arena Sport purchased the broadcast rights for the English Premier League—at six times the amount of its current licensing agreement<sup>21</sup>—with capital raised by

15 “Vucic: NATO to React within 24 Hours.” N1, September 27, 2021. <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/vucic-nato-to-react-within-24-hours/>. Vučić’s chronological references are in reference to incidents of violence between ethnic Kosovars and Serbs in present-day Kosovo during those years.

16 Ibid.

17 “Serbia to Host Slavic Shield Air Defense Drills in Mid-October, Says Source.” TASS, September 27, 2021. <https://tass.com/defense/1342977>.

18 “Serbia Tests Chinese Drones, Russian Jets at Major Exercise.” Reuters, October 10, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-military/serbia-tests-chinese-drones-russian-jets-at-major-exercise-idUSKBN26V00A>.

19 “Serbia : Fight against Impunity Continues: Reporters without Borders.” Reporters Sans Frontieres, April 20, 2021. <https://rsf.org/en/serbia>. See, also, Freedom House’s Nations in Transit reports for Serbia 2014-2021, which characterize Serbia’s deteriorating free media space as a “trend accelerating since 2014.” See, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2018> and following years’ reports.

20 Zivanovic, Maja. “N1 TV Station Targeted by ‘Death Threat’ in Serbia.” Balkan Insight, May 17, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/05/n1-television-warns-on-new-threats-02-05-2019/>.

21 Dziadul, Chris. “Chris Dziadul Reports: Telekom Srbija Update.” Broadband TV News, October 15, 2021. <https://www.broadbandtvnews.com/2021/10/15/chris-dziadul-reports-telekom-srbija-update/>.



Serbian defense ministry shared photos of the Russian-made MiG-29 aircraft in a 2020 statement guaranteeing sovereignty of Serbian skies.(mod.gov.rs)

selling state-corporate bonds to the National Bank of Serbia.<sup>22</sup>

Telekom Srbija's Arena Sport broadcasts major Western European leagues throughout of the former Yugoslavia.<sup>23</sup> By controlling the most popular and widely watched leagues in the soccer-crazed Western Balkans, Telekom Srbija will dominate the pay-TV provider market. This effort is part of a greater effort to undermine media market share held by United Group, whose N1 reporters produce genuinely independent news and analysis. If such outlets are shutdown, then Belgrade will manage its political messaging on an affiliated pay-channel's

"news" programming. Moreover, it provides a ready and reliable avenue for various soft power deployments in Serbia's near abroad.

*Caustic Ideological Rhetoric.* It is common for Serbia's political class to stir up popular sentiment with bigoted paeans to Pan-Serb ideology. Yet, a rhetorical Rubicon was crossed in 2021 when Minister of Internal Affairs Aleksandar Vulin called for the consolidation of the "Serb World." Vulin unabashedly stated, "The task for this generation of politicians is to unite Serbs wherever they live."<sup>24</sup>

Vulin's remarks came two short months before

22 Milosavljević, Marko. "Game on for the Premier League in the Balkans?" Open Democracy, July 16, 2021. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/game-premier-league-balkans/>.

23 Almost all; Arena Sport does not broadcast to Kosovo.

24 "Critics Condemn Minister's Call to Unite 'Serb World'." Al Jazeera, July 20, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/19/critics-condemn-ministers-call-to-unite-serbian>.



President Vučić presents decorations on the Statehood Day of the Republic of Serbia. (Presidency of Serbia / Dimitrije Goll)

September 2021 “Serb Unity Day” celebrations in Belgrade. Alongside an approving Vučić at a celebratory parade in Belgrade, Milorad Dodik declared, “Our country is not Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is Serbia.”<sup>25</sup> Today, amidst the emerging crisis in Bosnia precipitated by Dodik’s efforts to secede RS, Vučić nonetheless continues to reward him. Most recently, Vučić publicly promised Dodik in November 2021 increased financial support to RS municipalities and infrastructure amidst the growing unrest.<sup>26</sup>

Croatia’s generally successful transatlantic integration has helped to insulate the country from Serbia’s advances; however, the same cannot be said for other former Yugoslav

republics. In addition to interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, Belgrade and the SOC have proactively brokered the change—whether by democratic means or otherwise—of the democratically elected government in Podgorica.

Serbia’s relative military might, historically close ties with Russia, and absence of a regional adversary, beg the question: For what purpose is Serbia suddenly arming? And why during a time of a health crisis and considerable economic uncertainty?

25 Stojanovic, Dusan. “New Serb Unity Day Triggers Worries across the Balkans.” Associated Press, September 15, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/lifestyle-holidays-europe-serbia-montenegro-efad1f4026ce76e696ed47925ebbb9c2>.

26 “Serbia’s VUCIC Promises More Aid for Bosnia’s Milorad Dodik.” N1, November 15, 2021. <https://ba.n1info.com/english/news/serbias-vucic-promises-more-aid-for-bosnias-milorad-dodik/>.



# ENDURING “GREATER SERBIA”

**G**reater Serbia (aka Pan-Serbism) is a chauvinistic, irredentist ideology that advocates the unification of all ethnic Serbs under one rule. Its fulfillment may only be realized with the incorporation of all Balkan lands currently and historically populated by Serbs. Through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Greater Serbia ideology proved an ever-dependable catalyst for political action and violence. So far, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has shown little diminishment of its elementally ultra-nationalistic appeal.

Greater Serbia has deep roots, originating with the 1844 publication of *Načertanije* (i.e., “The Draft”) by Serbian statesman Ilija Garašanin.<sup>27</sup> A secret document unpublished until 1906, *Načertanije* became the key policy blueprint for Serbia’s rulers.<sup>28</sup> With it, Garašanin promoted the unification of “Serb lands” that reflect the borders of a 13-14<sup>th</sup> century Serbian empire. With time, it came to simply encompass territories inhabited by Serb communities. Garašanin’s vision inspired generations of Serbian nationalists in the decades following 1848, including those behind the assassination of Hapsburg Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed numerous efforts to achieve a Greater Serbia. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia’s Karađorđević monarchy skillfully employed Pan-Serbist rhetoric in its efforts to centralize power during the interwar period. The fascist/Nazi-aligned Chetnik guerilla movement justified their numerous atrocities committed during the Second World War in pursuit of

**Vučić eschews ultranationalist rhetoric in his interactions with EU officials while quietly maintaining and advancing ultranationalist objectives**

Greater Serbia. While Josip Broz Tito managed to stifle the force of Serbian nationalism under the state policy of “brotherhood and unity,” the Greater Serbian project returned soon after his death in 1980. Lighting the fire for outwardly popular Serb resentment, the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences’ (SANU) notorious 1986 Memorandum interpretively resurrected Garašanin’s vision through an ultranationalist lens.<sup>29</sup> The document provided the intellectual framework for the re-ignited sense of Serb victimhood and subsequent calls for national unification. The SANU Memorandum afforded a

27 Garašanin, Ilija. “The Draft.” Central European University Press, January 1, 1970. <https://books.openedition.org/ceup/2321?lang=en>.

28 See, Clark, Christopher. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers 2012), pp. 17-22.

29 Cobric, Dobrica. “SANU Memo.” Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media. Accessed November 17, 2021. [https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/archive/files/sanu\\_memo\\_e3b3615076.pdf](https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/archive/files/sanu_memo_e3b3615076.pdf).





Serbian President Vučić on a 2015 visit to Germany with former German Chancellor Merkel. (Facebook / Bundesregierung)

new generation of ultranationalists the ideology for the genocidal policies implemented against the non-Serb peoples during the wars of Yugoslavia's dissolution.

The ascent of SNS to the helm of political power in Belgrade has accompanied a quiet regression to the political mindset of the Slobodan Milošević years. While the authoritarian and expansionist policies of Milošević were overt and temerarious, Vučić employs a deceptively transatlantic veneer, domestically wresting authoritarian control while externally presenting himself as a reliable guarantor of regional security. Meticulously balancing his diplomatic

posture, Vučić eschews ultranationalist rhetoric in his interactions with EU officials while quietly maintaining and advancing ultranationalist objectives.

This surreptitious approach—shrouded by democratic affectations—distracts the West, thereby permitting Belgrade to concentrate on its plan to revive Greater Serbia. Regardless of whether Milošević, Vučić, or the next, it is this singular imperial ambition that perseveres as the guiding inspiration and go-to catalyst for Serbian populists. Fundamental to the Greater Serbia vision is Belgrade's intimate partnership with Moscow.

# RUSSIA AND SERBIA: HISTORICAL TIES THAT BIND—STILL

The People's Radical Party was the dominant ruling party from 1880-1928 in the political landscape that eventually took the form of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Historian Christopher Clark describes Radical Party leader Nikola Pašić as “the apex of Serbian politics before, during, and after Sarajevo assassination in 1914.”<sup>30</sup> From the command of various ministerial heights, Pašić vociferously contended that Greater Serbia was unachievable without Russia's direct support.<sup>31</sup>

Over 100 years later, this view remains pertinent. Whether more pragmatic or ideological, Serbian ultranationalists past and present have looked to Russia for material and political backing, save Chetnik leader Draža Mihailović's alliances with Italian fascist and German Nazi forces in the 1940s. Otherwise, Belgrade-Moscow ties are historically tenacious. Their formidability runs deeper than Pan-Slavic narratives and a common Christian Orthodox faith.

Lasting alliances are built on shared values and perceptions. Effectively binding contemporary Russia and Serbia is the common worldview of their ruling elites. These kindred spirits harbor ingrained victimhood and resentment over empires lost. Their rulers are historically autocratic-monarchical, and so largely antithetical to liberal democratic values and institutions. Accordingly, Russia and Serbia view European and transatlantic institutions with skepticism and distrust. Ultranationalism temperately pervades their political cultures until wrought for domestic mobilization when advantageous to ruling powers.

From this sociocultural alignment proceeds the coordination of their primary geopolitical aim in the Western Balkans: Establish Serbia as the preeminent regional power. Vučić's revanchist agenda seeks to upend the balance of power and refashion regional relations based on Serbian hegemony. For ultranationalist Serbs, such an outcome would achieve the “justice” envisioned under Greater Serbia.

From Moscow's perspective, Belgrade positioned as such would afford the Kremlin a reliably needed ally to project its strategic interests throughout the Balkans. Serbia placed at the regional acme would further inhibit and/or prevent other Western Balkan states' further transatlantic integration. Serbia's authoritarian-leaning elites, crony capitalists, and reactionary elements of civil society afford Putin the agents necessary to expand Russian influence in Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.


In pursuit of Greater Serbia, Belgrade and Moscow cooperate to:

***Roll back NATO presence in the Western Balkans.*** The diminishment and dissolution of NATO remains a long-standing goal of Putin. Consequently, Russia has actively undermined political and popular support for NATO membership throughout the Western Balkans. Engaging ultranationalist, Euro-Atlantic skeptic actors in the region, Kremlin influence operations run the gamut. Some examples: Russia orchestrated a failed coup d'état in Montenegro in 2016 in a violent effort to prevent

<sup>30</sup> Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, p. 17.



A photograph of Russian President Vladimir Putin walking through a crowd at a military parade. He is wearing a dark, buttoned raincoat over a white shirt and a dark red tie. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to his left. Other men in suits are visible in the background, some holding umbrellas, suggesting it is raining. The image has a blue tint at the bottom where the text is located.

**The diminishment  
and dissolution of  
NATO remains a long-  
standing goal of  
Putin.**

Russian President Vladimir Putin was the guest of honor at a 2014 military parade in Belgrade, Serbia's first in decades.  
(modgov.rs)

its coming NATO ascension.<sup>32</sup> Its government ardently labored to politically undermine Greece and (now) North Macedonia's Prespa agreement, which paved the way for the latter's NATO membership as of 2020.<sup>33</sup> With Belgrade's endorsement, Moscow encourages Milorad Dodik to obstruct the fulfilment of Bosnia's NATO Membership Action Plan. Russia's regional-language, Serbia-based media outlet *Sputnik* and local media under its influence decry NATO regularly. These malign interventions would be significantly more challenging without Vučić's reliability as a Russian beachhead.

## In concert with the Kremlin, Serbia is using its geography as a Russian gas transit state.

***Position Serbia as a vital energy conduit for European markets.*** In concert with the Kremlin, Serbia is using its geography as a Russian gas transit state. With the inauguration of the TurkStream pipeline in January 2020, Gazprom commenced deliveries to states in the Balkans' east via the Black Sea and Turkey. Moscow

and Belgrade intend to export Russian gas to broadly service European markets, transiting through the Serbian Stream pipeline system to Hungary and potentially beyond.<sup>34</sup> Operated by Swiss-based company Gastrans, with state monopoly Srbijagas as the minority shareholder (49 percent), Gazprom maintains the controlling ownership.<sup>35</sup>

Serbian Stream is not the only major energy concern in which a Russia firm is dominant. In addition to Gazprom being the country's primary natural gas provider, Gazprom Neft is the majority shareholder (56.1 percent) in the Pančevo petroleum refinery, Serbia's largest. Serbia imports 60 percent of its oil needs, with Russia providing the lion's share.<sup>36</sup> Taken together, key parts of Belgrade's energy portfolio are at Moscow's command, leaving Serbia politically exposed. However, as a transit state for gas to Bosnia and Hungary and increasing oil refinement capacity at Pančevo, Serbia's reach into neighboring markets is setting to expand—and with it, attendant SNS political influence.

***Inculcate Serbs and other Western Balkan nations with anti-Western narratives.*** Since the establishment of his SNS party, Vučić himself has eschewed ultranationalist rhetoric for the sake of image in Western and Central European capitals. Nonetheless, his government's ongoing media capture continues to permit space for the Greater Serbia ideology, tacitly indicating state approval.

Greater Serbia's geopolitical ambitions demand strong popular support. Its attainment requires the broad and ubiquitous messaging of

32 Bajrovic, Garcevic, & Kraemer, *Hanging by a Thread*.

33 Stronski, Paul. "A Difficult Balancing Act: Russia's Role in the Eastern Mediterranean." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 28, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/28/difficult-balancing-act-russia-s-role-in-eastern-mediterranean-pub-84847>.

34 "Serbian President Opens Key Section of Russia-Led Balkan Pipeline." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, January 1, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-vucic-balkan-stream-natural-gas-pipeline-opening/31029293.html>.

35 Elliott, Stuart. "Serbian Regulator Approves Gastrans as Independent Gas Grid Operator." S&P Global Platts, February 24, 2020. <https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/natural-gas/022420-serbian-regulator-approves-gastrans-as-independent-gas-grid-operator>.

36 Worldometer. "Serbia Oil." Worldometer. Accessed December 19, 2021. <https://www.worldometers.info/oil/serbia-oil/>.





A torn and faded Serbian Radical Party poster, advocates of the Greater Serbia ideology. (Flickr / Ivan Radic)

narratives that stand squarely in opposition to the values and institutions championed by the U.S. and its European allies. Standard fare for *Sputnik* (Srbija) and the like includes the “Kosovo Political Project,”<sup>37</sup> victimized reminiscence of the 1999 NATO bombings,<sup>38</sup> anti-LGBT content,<sup>39</sup> and the West’s purportedly conspiratorial intentions the Western Balkans.<sup>40</sup> These narratives

are augmented by pervasive propaganda, disinformation, and baseless conspiracy theories, all of which are disseminated domestically and regionally through traditional media outlets, social networks, and the SOC.

37 “Kosovo: 'Failure' of One of the West's Most Expensive Political Projects.” *Sputnik International*, February 18, 2017. <https://sputniknews.com/20170218/kosovo-political-project-1050819070.html>.

38 Cerin, Sandra. “Srbija Pamti - Najnovije Vesti Na Temu.” *Sputnik Srbija*, June 16, 2019. <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/godisnjica-agresije/>.

39 Vucic, Maria. “Tabloidi Optužuju Evropu I LGBT Zajednicu Da ‘Uvode Pedofiliju’ U Srbiju.” *Raskrikavanje*, August 1, 2018. <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=-Tabloidi-optuzuju-Evropu-i-LGBT-zajednicu-da-uvode-pedofiliju-u-Srbiju-221>.

40 Republika. “Лазански: НАТО Го Добива Криволак, а Македонија Станува Депонија За Радиоактивна Муниципалитет.” *Република*, February 11, 2019. <https://republika.mk/vesti/balkan/lazanski-nato-go-dobiva-krivolak-a-makedonija-stanuva-deponija-za-radioaktivna-municipalitet/>. See also: “Заев Од Сорос Барал Пари, Од Рама Албански Гласови, На Ел Чека Му Дале Бомби За ДУИ? (2).” *Република*, November 11, 2019. <https://republika.mk/vesti/makedonija/zaev-od-soros-baral-pari-od-rama-albanski-glasovi-na-cheka-mu-dale-bombi-za-dui-2/>.

# CHURCH & STATE: THE BELGRADE AND MOSCOW PATRIARCHIES

**R**ussian interventions in Serbia's socio-political spheres are holistic. Extending beyond parties, the Kremlin deputizes ultranationalist influencers crucial to molding public opinion. Pivotal to this approach is the allegiance of the SOC. With the Kremlin's hand directing, it is the function of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to liaise with and support the SOC when it best suits the Kremlin's agenda for Serbia and the Western Balkans.

The SOC is an ultranationalist institution *par excellence*, so much that it is difficult to underestimate its role and historical significance in Pan-Serb ideology. Through the sacralization of national identity, the SOC has, for centuries, provided many Serbs with a requisite cultural and ethnic uniqueness: "The SOC considers itself a bearer of an authentic national identity. It protects . . . the Serbian nation as an organism that cannot survive or develop if divided or detached from its religious, Orthodox roots. Hence the perception that being a Serb means being Orthodox."<sup>41</sup> Considering this to be a fundamental tenet, it is unsurprising that the SOC maintains an outsized role in Serbian politics and the quest for Greater Serbia.

**Today, the  
Serbian  
Orthodox Church  
is a primary  
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Serbian politics  
and public life.**

The dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia ran parallel to a process of de-secularization in Serbia that "was widely accompanied by ethnocentrism and nationalism, the official rehabilitation of which was needed in order to confirm religion in its traditional role of national institutions and values."<sup>42</sup> It was in large part the politicization of nationalist mythology that drove the attendant wars of the 1990s, then cementing the SOC's re-cast role as a semi-state institution through to the present.

Today, the SOC is a primary influencer in Serbian politics and public life. One public opinion poll

<sup>41</sup> Radmila Radić, Radmila & Vukomanović, Milan. *Religion and Democracy in Serbia since 1989: The Case of the Serbian Orthodox Church, in Religion and Politics in Post-Socialist Central and Southeastern Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 181.

<sup>42</sup> Radic & Vukomanovic, *Religion and Democracy in Serbia since 1989*, p. 180.





A meeting between leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian President Vučić in late February, 2022.  
(Facebook / Патријарх српски Порфирије)

ranked the SOC as the top institution “improving the life of family and friends.”<sup>43</sup> Vučić is keenly aware of the SOC’s clout. Notwithstanding certain disagreements,<sup>44</sup> with the patriarchate perceived as a core element of Serbian identity, ultranationalist Serbian parties need to maintain an affirmative relationship with the SOC. Putin likewise grasps these implications and has used the SOC as foil for Vučić should his foreign policy run afoul of the Kremlin’s agenda. Thus, Moscow’s agenda for Serbia and Western

Balkans includes the reinforcement of public support for a powerful SOC whose worldview is lockstep with the ROC.

Accordingly, the Russian state enlists the ROC regarding Serbian relations. For example, state visits are carefully coordinated with Moscow and Belgrade’s respective Orthodox Churches. Soon after Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Putin paid a three-day visit to Serbia; the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus’ Kirill soon followed. Among multiple events, then-Prime

43 Sixty-five percent of respondents expressed greatest confidence in religious institutions, after the army and schools/universities (only 4 and 8 pts behind, respectively). See, “Survey of Serbian Public Opinion.” International Republican Institute, July 2015. [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-09-21\\_survey\\_of\\_serbian\\_public\\_opinion\\_july\\_4-15\\_2015.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-09-21_survey_of_serbian_public_opinion_july_4-15_2015.pdf).

44 SNS and SOC divergences typically arise when Vučić takes steps publicly towards EU integration or a resolution over Kosovo-Serbia disputes. See, Vasovic, Milenko. “Serbian Patriarch Irinej: Religious Leader or Political Cheerleader?” Balkan Insight, May 20, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/04/serbian-patriarch-irinej-religious-leader-or-political-cheerleader/>.

Minister Vučić met with Kirill to substantively explore spaces for greater cooperation between the two churches and two states.<sup>45</sup> Afterwards, Kirill consecrated a Belgrade monument to Russian Tsar Nicolas II as Serbian and Russian troops conducted their first-ever joint military exercise.<sup>46</sup> Another more enduring example of Russia and Serbia's religio-political relations is the Church of St. Sava in Belgrade. The Kremlin and ROC worked hand-in-glove over the last few years to afford needed funds and construction materials to erect what became one of the largest sacral buildings in Eastern Orthodoxy.<sup>47</sup>

In 2018, the SOC publicly supported the ROC's refutation of the autocephaly newly granted to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew.<sup>48</sup> Following Kirill's lead in the matter, former SOC Patriarch Irinej vociferously accused Bartholomew of provoking a schism in the broader Orthodox Church.<sup>49</sup> In so doing, the SOC demonstrated its loyalty to Moscow over that to Ecumenical Constantinople. Meanwhile, in Belgrade, former Patriarch Irinej made clear to Orthodox communities in Montenegro and Macedonia that the SOC will not relinquish its extraterritorial authority by tolerating a national autocephaly in either country.

## **Putin knows that together with the ROC he can rely on elements in the SOC to back and convey Russia's position among the region's Serbs.**

These and other examples of cooperation alone do not inoculate Belgrade and Moscow from disagreement.<sup>50</sup> When those of a socio-political nature arise, Putin knows that together with the ROC he can rely on elements in the SOC to back and convey Russia's position among the region's Serbs. It is the SOC's popular influence and relative independence from the state that keeps the Kremlin mindfully close to it. In return, the SOC maintains its power and autonomy in part thanks to its mighty Russian benefactors. This relationship's dynamic is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

45 Barisic, Srdjan. "The Role of the Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches in Shaping Governmental Policies." Biserko, Sonja (Ed.), *The Warp of the Serbian Identity* (Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2016) 108.

46 Glavonjic, Zoran. "Belgrade Plays down Joint Military Exercise with Russia." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, November 14, 2014. <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-plays-down-russia-military-exercise/26692231.html>. See, also, "Serbia: Patriarch Kiril consecrates Belgrade monument to Russia Tsar." RT Ruptly, November 16, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MDL77519Lo>.

47 "Rus ice preobraziti Hram Svetog Save." Sputnik – Republic of Serbia, April 13, 2015. <https://rs.sputniknews.com/20150413/1231626.html>.

48 "Ukraine Orthodox Priests Establish Independent Church." BBC, December 15, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46575548>.

49 Zivanovic, Maja. "Serbian Bishops Back Russian Patriarch on Ukraine." Balkan Insight, November 20, 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/10/17/serbian-orthodox-church-align-stance-with-russian-patriarch-10-17-2018/>.

50 This was the case in October 2020 when Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov abruptly cancelled their planned attendance at the Church of St. Sava's consecration purportedly due to COVID-19 related issues; however, some analysts opined that Putin chose to be demonstrably upset over Vučić's then-recent overtures to Pristina in response to pressure from the Trump White House.





Russian President Vladimir Putin was the guest of honor at a 2014 military parade in Belgrade, Serbia's first in decades. (modgov.rs)

# THE CHINA FACTOR

In March 2020, at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Vučić turned heads with his arrogant dismissal of decades of substantial EU economic aid.<sup>51</sup> In a remarkable paean to PRC General Secretary Xi Jinping, Vučić maintained that:

European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairy tale on paper. . . . We expect a lot and have the highest hopes in the only ones who can help us in this difficult situation—and that is the Republic of China. We asked China for everything.<sup>52</sup>

Vučić's unabashed sycophancy towards Beijing's largesse has served him and his SNS party well. Combining PRC-funded infrastructure projects and foreign direct investment, Serbia boasts the highest level of PRC engagement in the Western Balkans at €9.7 billion (\$11 billion), €4.3 billion (\$4.87 billion) more than Viktor Orban's Hungary.<sup>53</sup> At nearly \$11 billion in financing, this

amount is significant considering Serbia's gross domestic product of \$53 million.<sup>54</sup> As of April 2021, the CCP has made available to Belgrade loans amounting to 12 percent of that figure.<sup>55</sup> Significant PRC investments include the HBIS Group's purchase of the Smederevo steel mill<sup>56</sup> and Zinjin Mining's acquisition of the RTB Bor copper smelter.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to heavy industry, the CCP aims to establish Serbia as a key node in the "Digital Silk Road" envisioned for Europe. The primary vehicle for these investments is Huawei, which is building the country's 5G network, providing surveillance technology, and assisting in the development of state-owned data centers. Initiatives include "Smart City," which seeks to improve data storage, gathering, and management;<sup>58</sup> "Safe City," in which Huawei works with the Ministry of Interior for crime control through the installation of 1,100 surveillance cameras featuring facial

51 The European Union is Serbia's top donor at €1,819 million with the PRC in 5<sup>th</sup> place at a committed €56 million of which estimates indicate only €6.6 million delivered (2020 figures). See, Conley, Heather; Hillman, Jonathan; and Ruy, Donatienne. "Becoming a Chinese Client State: The Case of Serbia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 24, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/becoming-chinese-client-state-case-serbia>.

52 "Serbia's state of emergency: 'China is the only country that can help.'" CGTN, March 16, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P42OrsA045M>.

53 Matura, Tamas. "Chinese Investment in Central and Eastern Europe – A reality check" Central and Eastern European Center for Asia Studies, April 2021. <https://www.china-cee-investment.org/>. See, also, Janda, Jakub and Kraemer, Richard. "Orban's Hungary: A Russia and China Proxy Weakening Europe." European Values Center for Security Policy, December 8, 2021. <https://europeanvalues.cz/en/orbans-hungary-a-russia-and-china-proxy-weakening-europe/>

54 Shopov, Vladimir. "Serbia Turns Multi-Vector Foreign Policy into Development Model... with China's Help." China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE), April 7, 2021. <https://chinaobservers.eu/serbia-turns-multi-vector-foreign-policy-into-development-model-with-chinas-help/>.

55 Ibid.

56 Steel Orbis. "HBIS Group Serbia to Invest €150 Million in Zelezara Smederevo Mill by 2020." SteelOrbis, July 5, 2018. <https://www.steelorbis.com/steel-news/latest-news/hbis-group-serbia-to-invest-150-million-in-zelezara-smederevo-mill-by-2020-1047202.htm>.

57 "Zijin Mining Takes over RTB Bor for USD 1.46 Billion." Karanovic & Partners, February 4, 2019. <https://www.karanovicpartners.com/news/rtb-bor-privatisation-zijin-mining/>.

58 Vasovic, Aleksandar. "Serbia Chooses Links with China to Develop Economy, Telecoms despite U.S. Warning Campaign." Reuters, August 13, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-china-huawei/serbia-chooses-links-with-china-to-develop-economy-telecoms-despite-u-s-warning-campaign-idUSKCN2592AN>.





**China and Serbia  
align in their  
rejection of  
erstwhile territories'  
independence for  
Taiwan and Kosovo,  
respectively.**



Huawei and Serbia's Office for Information Technologies and eGovernment signing a cooperation agreement in December, 2020. (e.huawei.com)

recognition software;<sup>59</sup> and the opening of a regional innovation and development center in Belgrade.<sup>60</sup>

Key Chinese investment priorities are Serbia's telecom and broadband sectors. Working in close association with Telekom Srbija, Huawei established its partnership with the state-owned telecom and broadband operator in a 2016 non-binding agreement for €150 billion.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, the Vučić government rejected its invitation for the Trump administration's 5G Clean Network Initiative, signaling Belgrade's preferences.

In exchange, Serbia supports China in international political fora and provides Beijing a staging ground for its political, economic, and technological interventions in Europe. China and Serbia align in their rejection of erstwhile territories' independence for Taiwan and Kosovo, respectively. This authoritarian empathy is regularly on display in various United Nations' bodies, where Serbia votes the PRC line.<sup>62</sup> Regionally, Telekom Srbija's efforts at regional cable and broadband capture subsequently extend Huawei's reach into the Western Balkans. Relatedly, Serbia's regionally popular vaccine diplomacy was underpinned by Beijing's low-cost

59 "Huawei Knows Everything about Cameras in Belgrade – And They Are Glad to Share!" Share Foundation, March 29, 2019. <https://www.sharefoundation.info/en/huawei-knows-everything-about-cameras-in-belgrade-and-they-are-glad-to-share/>.

60 "China's Huawei opens innovation centre in Serbia." bne Intellinews, September 15, 2020. <https://www.intellinews.com/china-s-huawei-opens-innovations-centre-in-serbia-191947/?source=serbia>.

61 "Telekom Srbija and Huawei launch €150mn project to develop a landline network in Serbia." bne Intellinews, October 6, 2016. <https://www.intellinews.com/telekom-srbija-and-huawei-launch-150mn-project-to-develop-landline-network-in-serbia-107530/>.

62 Hartwell, Leon & Vladislavljev, Stefan. "Serbia's Delicate Dance with the EU and China." Just Security, December 22, 2020. <https://www.justsecurity.org/73885/serbias-delicate-dance-with-the-eu-and-china/>.





President Xi Jinping met with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić in Beijing, February 2022. (fmprc.gov.chn)

Sinopharm, a mutually beneficial arrangement boosting Serbia's image while simultaneously promoting the brand of an otherwise substandard PRC product.<sup>63</sup>

Through its abundant support, China aids and abets Vučić's Greater Serbia ambitions. Pan-Serb ideology, however, is irrelevant to the CCP's Balkan calculations. Beijing's aim is regional stability for the facilitation of maximum PRC trade and investment, culminating in the uninhibited flow of Chinese goods and services to European markets via eastern Adriatic Sea ports. Fortunately for Vučić, the CCP lends itself to partnering with authoritarians and their corrupted institutions; however, PRC-backed entities would be as well content to work with a

Western Balkans in the EU.

China's greater goal is not entirely exclusive of Russian designs in the region. Yet, they stand to diverge in one significant respect: Russia's endgame for the Western Balkans is their exclusion from European and transatlantic institutions. So separated, Russia will endeavor to project military power territorially via aligned auxiliaries, such as Serbia and RS, and by sea from deep-water ports in the Adriatic.<sup>64</sup> To this end, Moscow will thwart Western Balkan states' Euro-Atlantic integration through destabilization campaigns and alliances with the region's anti-Western agitators.

63 "Foreigners Flock to Serbia to Get Coronavirus Vaccine Shots." ABC News, March 31, 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/foreigners-flock-serbia-coronavirus-vaccine-shots-76798518>.

64 Bajrovic, Garcevic, & Kraemer, "Hanging by a Thread."

# BELGRADE THE BRIDGE

**C**ontrary to some assessments,<sup>65</sup> Serbia need not be a competition ground between Beijing and Moscow. Rather, Vučić's goal to make Serbia the predominant power in the Western Balkans stands to bridge the two countries' desired outcomes.

Imagine Greater Serbia realized: RS secedes and incorporates into the Serbian state or in a federated union. A politically charged and potentially fraudulent referendum in Montenegro results in a majority of its citizens approving of reunification with Serbia. The new Open Balkans free-trade initiative now comprises Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia,<sup>66</sup> the latter's influence secure in being the largest economy among them.<sup>67</sup> With Kosovo's status unresolved, its people languish in unrealized potential and underdevelopment until their hand is forced at the negotiating table. Bosnia and Herzegovina will endeavor to survive while isolated between a quietly pro-Russian government in Zagreb and a Belgrade with whom Sarajevo will have strained relations at best.

In this scenario, both Beijing and Moscow win with Belgrade as the Western Balkans' undisputed powerbroker. Serbia becomes both the guarantor of regional stability and compliant gatekeeper for Russian and Chinese access and presence. NATO is out, leaving a gaping hole in European security, from potential military conflict to migrant crises. Transatlantic security is further

**Vučić's goal to make Serbia the predominant power in the Western Balkans stands to bridge Russia and China's desired outcomes.**

compromised with the harboring of Russian warships in the Adriatic. The EU is left outside as well, leaving Western Balkan states tethered to Russian and Chinese economic aid and, subsequently, those adversaries' antagonistic European policy agendas. The European corpus is now cancerous, as authoritarian designs, thought, and action metastasize from its southern beachhead.

65 E.G. Velebit, Vuk. "China has Overtaken Russia as Serbia's Great Ally," Balkan Insight, July 8, 2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/08/china-has-overtaken-russia-as-serbias-great-ally>.

66 Taylor, Alice. "Three Western Balkan leaders sign agreements to open trade and travel for citizens." Euractiv, December 21, 2021. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/three-western-balkan-leaders-sign-agreements-to-open-trade-and-travel-for-citizens/>.

67 2021 World Bank GDP estimates (approximate): Serbia's \$56 billion USD GDP towers over Albania at \$16 billion and North Macedonia at \$13 billion.





Agreements signed at the Open Balkans Summit in December, 2021. (Twitter / Serbian Government)

# CONTAINMENT OR BIGGER CARROTS?

**T**his paper suggests that Serbia should be acknowledged as a diffuse threat. It is a fluid approach, one that allows for flexibility and resultant expansion. Vučić parlays to Western stakeholders the multiple vectors of ultranationalist influence with which he claims to contend, thus limiting his movement. This, in turn, permits him the geopolitical fence-sitting that has both characterized and plagued Serbia's citizens. To date, the West's primary failure is belief that on his own accord, Vučić will reciprocate Euro-Atlantic assistance for the abundant funds and patience that Brussels and others have shown. Regrettably, Belgrade's unsubstantiated fawning over the PRC's comparatively meagre assistance at the outset of the COVID pandemic demonstrates otherwise.<sup>68</sup>

In an era of increasingly limited resources and domestic concerns among the electorate, foreign assistance—financial and political—in the European space should not be given with a blank-check approach. The Chinese and Russians pursuing various interventions in Serbia do so with an understood quid pro quo principle. The transatlantic community should adopt the same for the short-term until Serbian elites demonstrate their understanding that the virulent nationalism of Greater Serbia must be surrendered if they are to feasibly ascend to EU membership.

Brussels and Washington communicate this message, but half-heartedly. Despite years of financial support from the EU and U.S. for

Serbia's economic development and democratic institution building, it was Xi Jinping's face readily plastered on Belgrade billboards.

## THE BATTLE FOR SERBS' HEARTS AND MINDS IS NOT BEING GENUINELY FOUGHT FOR BY LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC EUROPE

The battle for Serbs' hearts and minds is not being genuinely fought for by liberal democratic Europe. The hope that Belgrade's elites will afford crumbs in return for the EU and NATO's consistent overtures appears dimming. Given Vučić's dominance of the political sphere, his multi-vector approach to managing international relations, and certain EU member state's ambivalence towards enlargement, Brussels and

<sup>68</sup> According to reporting by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, the EU committed €93 million available to Serbia, with €15 million in immediate assistance and €78.4 million reallocated from pre-accession funds. By comparison, China provided 14 million masks and a light medical team with two test laboratories. See, Feyerabend, Beckman-Dirkes, Ruttershoff, and Haibach. "Balkans: Geopolitics in the time of Corona." Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, April 17, 2020. <https://www.kas.de/en/country-reports/detail/-/content/balkans-geopolitics-in-times-of-corona>.



Washington shouldn't be surprised with their diminishing returns.

This disinterest is not lost among Serbs; nor is the lack of conditionality for the Vučić government. Nuanced diplomacy is not the way forward. Serbians must clearly understand that they are much welcome in the Euro-Atlantic community—on terms shared within the community just like any other. The West will remain at a disadvantage if it continues to use a playbook based on naive idealism versus the hard-knock politics of the region.

Pursuing the tried-and-failed conciliatory approach is a poor use of transatlantic resources. As resources diminish, the West need better employ them. To date, Vučić is affording a very weak return on investment.

Full-throated condemnation and isolation of Vučić's Serbia—while arguably justified—may well spur the attitudinal shift sought among Euro-Atlantic leadership. For now, Vučić has prioritized paying public favor to a Greater Serbia ideology incompatible with open, democratic societies. Whether or not he is “of the faithful” is largely indeterminable. Vučić's commitment to Greater Serbia may wane given certain realities and incentives. The transatlantic community should continue to afford the latter while making clear the former.

Regarding the former, aspiring autocrats have a persistent tendency to view—or at least advocate—their states as having significantly greater impact on world affairs than reality dictates. In turn, this permits the likes of Vučić, Orban, Erdogan, and—until recently—Lukashenko to overestimate their bargaining chips. Serbia remains overwhelmingly reliant on EU trade and its assistance—along with that from the U.S.—which isn't available without strings attached.

Should Belgrade fail to respond with sufficient public acknowledgment, appreciation of, and

commitment to democratic Europe and America's decades-long support, Western partners should withdraw assistance—political, financial, and military—gradually and proportionately. Furthermore, should failed recognition persist, transatlantic leadership should redistribute its myriad resources to Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Aid firmly conditioned on rule of law institutionalization, conducive conditions for economic development, and vociferous public diplomacy in defense of democracy and open markets in those states would be much better spent.



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