

Closer to the West? Serbia's foreign policy after the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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Over the past decade, Serbia's foreign policy has been defined by the key dilemmas it faces over the shape of the state, including the issue of Kosovo, and the desire to balance between the main actors present in the Balkans: the West, Russia and China. The Serbian ruling class have been trying to play these actors off each other and balance their influences for their own benefit and also, in part, for the benefit of the state. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has significantly reduced their room for manoeuvre. They have come under pressure from the West, which wants Belgrade to pursue a foreign policy in line with the Western course and to limit its ties with Moscow. Despite symbolic gestures of support for the Kremlin, the Serbian government seems to be increasingly aware that Russia is decreasingly capable of protecting Belgrade's interests. Although in some areas Moscow may be replaced by Beijing, Serbia is set to step up efforts to build closer ties with Western structures.

The key determinants of foreign policy

Serbian foreign policy is defined by a fundamental dilemma over the desired shape of the state. It concerns the stance on Kosovo's independence and, to a lesser extent, on the situation of ethnic Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as well as its relations with the West. The Serbian ruling elite is divided over the concept of how to build a modern state. The Serbian leaders can choose from two options which will define their framework of action. One of them envisages intensive efforts to integrate with the EU and to enhance Serbia's legal and institutional convergence with European structures. In the current circumstances, however, this would require Serbia to 'normalise' relations with Prishtina and, in the longer run, to recognise Kosovo's independence. The alternative is to give up state modernisation efforts based on Western models and adopt a course of balancing between the West, Russia and China, while hoping that Kosovo and Republika Srpska will be reintegrated into Serbia as a result of a radical global shift, even if this scenario seems extremely unlikely today.

For a decade, the country's foreign and security policy has been shaped by a party which wields almost absolute power, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), its leader Aleksandar Vučić, and the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS), which is part of the government coalition. So far, their strategy has been to play the main global centres of power off against each other in an attempt to obtain various concessions



and at the same time avoid full integration with any of them (a so-called 'interface periphery'). This is reminiscent of the policy Yugoslavia adopted during the Cold War: as a representative of the Non-Aligned Movement, it maintained a strong international position and could skilfully balance between the two blocs. At present, the orientation of Serbia's foreign policy is a result of the elite's desire to treat the country as a reservoir of material benefits, and on the other hand, of their realistic thinking about the international order. The prevailing belief is that international relations are not defined by a system of standards and values, but are rather a result of a game of interests between the largest players.

The government's strategy of balancing between the key global players is linked to very strong resentment rooted in Serbian society. Serbs see relations with the West in the last three decades as

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a series of humiliations (the break-up of Yugoslavia, the impoverishment resulting from Western sanctions, the bombings by NATO forces in 1999, the loss of Kosovo and the need to cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia). At the same time, this public sentiment is stoked by the government elite and the media they control (and by some of the right-wing opposition media) and is used to legitimise Serbia's cooperation with Russia and China. Belgrade often presents Russia and China as opponents of the West and as Serbia's allies who defend its interests in the international community.

Serbia's foreign policy potential is largely affected by its peripheral economic status in Europe, which is the result of a shortage of economic resources, the country's inert development and the fact that it remains outside Euro-Atlantic integration structures. Serbia has a relatively good geographical location and strong links with the key European economies. Regardless of this, the country has limited access to the most important Western financial resources (for example, EU cohesion funds) and cannot co-shape the West's strategy towards the region. So far, the chances of this changing have been very slim – the vast majority of Serbian public are opposed to NATO membership, and integration with the EU is progressing extremely slowly and concerns mainly economic and trade areas, which are important for Brussels.

Since Serbia is treated as a peripheral country and has no real chance of changing the status quo, the ruling class also uses the concept of balancing between superpowers to legitimise their moves. They claim that this policy has led Serbia to a 'golden period' of economic development in the last decade, characterised by wage growth, an influx of foreign investments and the implementation of large infrastructure projects. In fact, the country not only failed to catch up with Western Europe, but also almost entirely failed to eliminate economic disparities with neighbouring Croatia. In 2013 the average level of Serbian GDP *per capita* was 38% lower than Croatia's. By 2021, this difference had decreased by only 2 percentage points.¹ Although Serbia has 75% more residents than Croatia, it is currently 7.6% behind it in economic terms.

Instead of modernising and resolving the problem of technological backwardness, the government focused on taking loans from entities outside Europe, mainly China, to finance large and not necessarily profitable infrastructure projects, such as the Belgrade–Budapest railway line. Serbia aspires to be a political leader of the Western Balkans. However, despite its ambitions and demographic potential, for the time being, Serbia has no chance of accelerating economic growth to the degree

¹ These data originate from Državni zavod za statistiku (gov.hr) and Republički zavod za statistiku Srbije.

necessary to play this role. The factors that stand in the way of Serbia's ambitions include: the lack of real reforms, the pathologies and abuses inherent in its political system, generous subsidies offered to foreign investments with low added value, increasing state debt and remaining on the periphery of the European economic system.

The difficult relations with the West

Formally, Serbia's relations with the West have been defined by two milestones: granting EU candidate status in 2012 and the launch of accession talks with Brussels in 2014. Currently, 22 out of 35 negotiating chapters are still open and only two (science and research, and education and culture) have been provisionally closed. However, the integration process has recently stalled and is limited to general declarations formulated by Serbian officials and representatives of the EU. Serbia needs to normalise its relations with Kosovo since this is a condition for joining the EU, though this will not be straightforward. Serbian political leaders have been using this issue to strengthen their image as defenders of national interests. Furthermore, they have previously sought support from Russia and China, which do not recognise Kosovo.

The Association Agreement came into force in September 2013. As a result, a free trade area was created and Serbia was obliged to

” **The EU's enlargement policy was one of the factors which contributed to the development of hybrid systems and stagnation in the Western Balkans.**

harmonise its legislation with EU laws. This created the opportunity to enhance the economic integration between Serbia and the EU as the Serbian economy became open to the inflow of Western capital. Foreign direct investments (FDI) from the EU reached €17.5 billion between 2010 and 2020, accounting for 68% of the total in Serbia. Serbian exports to EU member states also soared from €5 billion in 2012 to €14 billion in 2021 (for comparison, in 2021, Serbian exports to Russia were worth €840 million and to China €820 million). Furthermore, Western banks have a 75% share in Serbia's banking sector due to the acquisitions carried out over the last five years. As a result, the country's dependence on Western capital has increased significantly. In addition, Belgrade can be offered relatively cheap but conditional development loans by the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), amongst other institutions.

So far, the Serbian ruling class have shown no interest in making the kind of serious transformation effort which is needed to build closer ties with the EU. They are not interested because this would make it harder for them to appropriate public funds and control individual sectors of the economy.² Instead, they are using accession negotiations to legitimise their own economic model and ensure the regime's financial stability. The EU accession process should lead to legal and institutional convergence, especially in the fields of the rule of law, democracy and human rights. However, hardly any progress has been made in these areas. In many cases, we can even speak of regression. Moreover, the EU's enlargement policy may have contributed to the development of hybrid systems in the Western Balkans – although the countries in this region tend to be pro-Western and guarantee stability on the peninsula, they do not build democratic institutions or the rule of law.³

² J. Veljkovic, A. Djordjevic, 'Firm Linked to Minister's Father Paid Less for Arms', *Balkan Insight*, 19 September 2019, balkaninsight.com.

³ D. Pavlović, 'Is European Enlargement Policy a Form of Non-Democracy Promotion?', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 2023, pp. 1–23.

To some extent, Brussels is also responsible for Serbia's stagnation, as in recent years it has continuously placed less emphasis on institutional reforms in the country.⁴ Instead, it has been focused on political and trade issues. The EU expected Belgrade to maintain stability in the region, i.e. to normalise relations with Kosovo through the implementation of the so-called Brussels Agreement of 2013,⁵ and to neutralise the separatist tendencies among Bosnian Serbs. In return, some EU leaders were willing to ignore the abuses of the governments in the region. The elites in Belgrade maintained close political ties with the West while fuelling anti-Western sentiment among the Serbian public. This was facilitated by the European actors themselves, who at the time of the SNS's inception in 2008 recognised the leaders of the party originating from radical and nationalist circles as a new moderately right-wing force with a pro-Western orientation.⁶ Numerous interactions with Western leaders (including with the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and activists of the European People's Party, which the SNS is a member of) enabled the Serbian president to gain additional legitimacy. The pro-government media presented him as a world-class politician who was skilfully balancing between superpowers, which allegedly enabled Belgrade to regain agency on the international arena. This made it easier for Vučić himself to consolidate the system of power, protect party interests and expand clientelist networks, which led to a further erosion of democratic standards.⁷

The continuing global economic and energy crisis is making Serbia increasingly dependent on the West, especially in financial terms.

” **The pro-government media presents President Aleksandar Vučić as a world-class politician who is helping Serbia regain agency on the international arena.**

This is due to the rapidly growing

current account deficit (in 2022, it reached around 8.4% of GDP, compared to 4.4% a year earlier), which is additionally escalated due to the increasing costs of raw materials and electricity imports. Serbia's negative net international investment position has invariably been high: 80% of GDP (the country's financial liabilities are much higher than its foreign assets). This is another illustration of the Serbian economy's high dependence on the inflow of external funds. At the end of 2022, faced with problems with access to foreign capital, Belgrade asked the IMF to launch a flexible stand-by arrangement of €2.4 billion in exchange for the promise to carry out certain structural reforms in the energy sector.⁸ In addition to professionalising the management of the most important state-controlled companies in the sector, Srbijagas and EPS (Elektroprivreda Srbije), the government has undertaken to raise electricity and gas prices. Investments are expected to improve the efficiency of electricity production. This should reduce the current account deficit, at least to some extent. In December 2022, the EU prepared an Energy Support Package for the Western Balkans. As part of this, Serbia has received €165 million of non-refundable financial assistance to deal with the effects of the energy crisis (including price increases for small and medium-sized enterprises and households). It has also gained access to €500 million in EU grants and financial guarantees distributed in the countries of the region covered by the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF). The instrument is aimed at supporting the diversification of gas supply sources, the energy transition and investments in the renewable energy

⁴ S. Richter, N. Wunsch, 'Money, Power, Glory: The Linkages Between EU Conditionality and State Capture in the Western Balkans', *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 27, Issue 1 (2020), pp. 41–62.

⁵ The agreement between Kosovo and Serbia consists of 15 sections and concerns the creation of the Association/Community of Serb-majority municipalities (comprising ten municipalities inhabited by Serbs), as well as the police, education, spatial planning, the economy, culture, health, telecommunications and energy, amongst other issues. For more on the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue and problems with the implementation of the Brussels Agreements, see M. Szpala, 'Hostages to dialogue. The process of normalising Serbian-Kosovar relations', *OSW Commentary*, no. 214, 8 June 2016, osw.waw.pl.

⁶ See the documentary *SNS – The Beginning 2008* (*Dokumentarni film – "SNS: Početak – 2008."*), N1, youtube.com.

⁷ 'Freedom House: Western Balkan countries remain hybrid regimes, decline for Serbia and BiH', *European Western Balkans*, 20 April 2022, europeanwesternbalkans.com.

⁸ *Republic of Serbia: Third Review Under the Policy Coordination Instrument, Request for a Stand-By Arrangement, and Cancellation of the Policy Coordination Instrument-Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for the Republic of Serbia*, International Monetary Fund, 20 December 2022, imf.org.

sector.⁹ The WBIF is the source of the largest non-repayable subsidy for Serbia in history. It received €598 million last December for the modernisation of the Belgrade–Niš railway line.¹⁰

Despite the increasing structural economic dependence on the West, public support for building closer bonds with the EU has been

” The potential for maintaining a tactical alliance with Russia is eroding due to Russia’s increasing isolation in the international community.

at a record low in recent months. According to surveys, only 35–40% of Serbs support EU membership, while only 4–5% want their country to join NATO. Only 8% of respondents accept integration into the EU structures on condition of their country recognising Kosovo’s independence.¹¹ The Serbian public increasingly tends to see any involvement of Western entities in their country as a manifestation of Western hypocrisy and a neocolonial approach. This accusation is partly justified. Large Western corporations investing in the country enter into close relations with the government. They offer jobs to the favourites of local party structures in exchange for generous subsidies and favourable business conditions (such as the possibility of circumventing environmental and labour protection standards)¹² and help the SNS leaders strengthen the instruments of control over the party members.

The erosion of the tactical alliance with Moscow

In recent years, Serbian-Russian relations have been determined by the Serbian political elite’s calculations concerning contacts with the West and Russian strategic interests in the Balkans. Belgrade needed Moscow so it could strengthen its negotiating position on Kosovo. In turn, this cooperation created opportunities for the Kremlin to destabilise the situation in the region and diverted the West’s attention from areas of greater importance for Moscow.

Serbia’s relations with Russia have a historical and cultural background. Therefore, it is possible to promote all forms of cooperation as an expression of ‘fraternal relations’. Russia’s efforts to block the recognition of Kosovo’s independence and declarations about defending the interests of Bosnian Serbs strengthen the belief about its friendly attitude towards Serbia.

Serbia had to agree to Russian expansion in the energy sector in exchange for Russia’s political support. In 2008, a long-term energy cooperation agreement was signed, which paved the way for Gazprom Neft to take over the key Serbian petrochemical company Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS). In return, as the then Serbian President Boris Tadić claimed, Russia had promised to support Serbia’s interests in the UN Security Council (especially preventing the recognition of Kosovo’s independence).¹³ Currently, Russian entities not only control Serbian gas resources and transmission infrastructure,¹⁴ but also own half of Serbia’s only gas storage facility in Banatski Dvor. Russia uses these assets to protect

⁹ *Energy Support Package for the Western Balkans*, Western Balkans Investment Framework, 5 December 2022, neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu.

¹⁰ The final agreement was signed in February this year. The investment will cost approximately €2.78 billion. In addition to the grant under the Western Balkans Investment, it will be financed by the European Investment Bank (a loan of €1.18 billion has already been approved) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (a loan of up to €550 million).

¹¹ It should be noted, however, that opinion polls conducted after 24 February express temporary public sentiments and emotions, which were strongly influenced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the increased presence of pro-Russian propaganda in the mainstream Serbian media. This has led to an even greater radicalisation of views as well as to social and political polarisation. ‘Србија, лето 2022. – противљење увођењу санкција Русији порасло са 82,2 на 84 одсто. Чланство Србије у НАТО подржава 4,3 одсто, а противи му се 88,1 одсто’, Nova srpska politička misao, 31 July 2022, nspm.rs.

¹² D. Pavlović, *The Moneywasting Machine. Five Months Inside Serbia’s Ministry of Economy*, CEU Press, 2022.

¹³ R. Balać, ‘Privatizacija Naftne industrije Srbije – posao ili promašaj veka’, *Danas*, 16 December 2020, danas.rs.

¹⁴ The Serbian section of TurkStream belongs to the Serbian-Russian consortium GasTrans, which the Russians hold a 51% stake in, and the state-owned Srbijagas has a 49% stake. In 2021, 84% of the demand for gas was covered by gas exports from Russia, the remaining 16% comes from domestic sources. *Енергетски биланс републике србије за 2022. Годину*, Ministry of Mining and Energy, mre.gov.rs.

its interests. Friendly relations between the two countries are symbolised by the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre in Niš, which has existed since 2012. Formally, it holds training events for civil defence staff, but is widely believed to be a Russian intelligence outpost.¹⁵

Over the past few years, Moscow has used the close political and energy ties to expand its influence in Serbia's media, science, culture and NGO sector (e.g. the Orthodox

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Church). In the public debate, pro-Russian views are expressed by both the majority of the government-controlled media and some opposition media. Criticism of the West is the predominant narrative. In its radical version, the West is presented as an ally and sponsor of the government in Prishtina and of the Bosnian elite from Sarajevo, which poses a threat to national security. In contrast, Russia is seen as the only real and proven defender of Serbia's interests. This is one of the reasons why President Vladimir Putin is so popular among Serbs. In June 2022, more than 45% of respondents had a positive opinion about him, and around 40% indicated Russia as their closest partner (30% chose the EU)¹⁶. Vučić has been emphasising his unique relationship with Putin for years, which lends him credibility in the eyes of the more pro-Russian part of his electorate.¹⁷

In this atmosphere, since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the mainstream media have promoted Moscow's thesis that this decision is right. They have criticised the West, despite Serbia's officially neutral stance on the war. This resulted in numerous pro-Russian demonstrations in Belgrade. Such sentiments, however, do not necessarily reflect public approval of the aggression. They partly stem from Serbs' attitude towards the West and the need to improve dignity (self-compensation). In addition, a few months after the outbreak of the armed conflict, more moderate voices about it could be heard in the national mass media. The media refers to the invasion as a “special military operation” less often and tend to criticise Russia's army for its weakness more.

Major tensions can occasionally be seen in Belgrade's relations with Moscow. In most cases they are caused by disputes between the pro-Western and pro-Russian factions (represented by numerous law enforcement officials) inside the government coalition, which have crossed party divisions. The sale of mortar shells manufactured by the state-owned company Krušik to Kyiv as part of cooperation between Serbian arms companies controlled by the ruling class and NATO countries was revealed in 2019 and is a clear example of the crisis.¹⁸ The issue of Serbian arms exports to Ukraine returned after Russia invaded Ukraine. The media published photos of these weapons being seized by Russian troops. The recurring clashes in relations show that Serbia is ready to take actions that will harm Russia's interests, as long as they find them sufficiently beneficial.

The invasion of Ukraine has triggered processes aimed at loosening Serbia's bonds with Russia. Belgrade supports Ukraine in its struggle to preserve its territorial integrity. It has not recognised the annexation of Crimea, Donbas and the southern regions of the country. Although Serbia has not imposed sanctions against Russia, it is already feeling their negative effects. NIS, which is controlled by Russians, has been affected by restrictions imposed on importing Russian oil via the JANAF pipeline

¹⁵ M. Zivanovic, 'Russian Centre in Serbia Scorns Espionage Claims', *Balkan Insight*, 11 September 2017, balkaninsight.com.

¹⁶ I. Petronijević Terzić, 'Demostat: Građani prepoznaju EU kao najvećeg donatora i investitora, emotivno više vezani za Rusiju', *Demostat*, 29 June 2022, demostat.rs; 'Србија, лето 2022...', *op. cit.*

¹⁷ M. Szpala, 'Serbia wobec Rosji – przedwyborcza gra na czas', *OSW*, 11 March 2022, osw.waw.pl.

¹⁸ Z. Parafianowicz, A. Deneka, B. Godusławski, M. Miłosz, 'Jak wmontowano Polskę w sprzedaż serbskiej broni na Ukrainę', *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*, 19 December 2019, biznes.gazetaprawna.pl.

using the oil terminals in Croatia.¹⁹ Military cooperation is also weakening because Serbia cannot buy the weapons from Russia which it signed contracts for due to Western restrictions.

Will China replace Russia?

The Serbian-Chinese relations gained momentum after 2010 as a result of China's growing interest in investing on the periphery of the EU and also due to Serbia's desire to gain another partner for its influence-balancing policy. Since Romania and Bulgaria (in 2007) and Croatia (in 2013) joined the EU, they have been receiving significant EU funds to stimulate the development of their transport and energy sectors. This created the risk of disconnecting Serbia from European transport routes, and thus from Western capital. In order to overcome these disparities, it was necessary to implement investments. Belgrade hoped that the funds from China would not only finance the construction of infrastructure but also bring benefits to the ruling elite, which would not be the case with Western funds, since higher transparency standards apply.

In order to achieve its goals, Serbia joined China's Belt and Road Initiative and projects in the 16/17+1 format. In 2010–2019, Chinese in-

» China may replace Russia in some areas of Serbian foreign policy, especially those regarding the Kosovo issue and military cooperation.

vestments in Serbia were worth approximately €1.6 billion, and loans granted for the development of local infrastructure reached approximately €7 billion. Although these funds were distributed in a completely non-transparent manner and a large part was kept by the Serbian ruling class, they added legitimacy to the narrative about the state's modernisation.²⁰ Unfortunately, the Chinese projects were expensive and had little added value for the economy and were characterised by low environmental and labour rights standards.

The digital transformation is one of the areas where cooperation has been strengthened. Huawei has become a key player in the Serbian telecommunications market as it supplied the state-owned company Telekom Srbija with the components needed to upgrade its networks. According to materials from a journalistic investigation, Huawei has used sophisticated forms of corruption in Serbia.²¹ Recently, it also became involved in building a system of over 8,000 cameras in Belgrade. This project has sparked a great deal of controversy as it is viewed as an instrument for increasing control over society. Reportedly, law enforcement agencies used Chinese technologies to identify the demonstrators who took part in the mass anti-government protests already in 2021.²²

The Serbian government also used cooperation with China as proof of the state's efficiency during the COVID-19 pandemic. Serbia received significant medical assistance from China as part of the so-called 'mask and vaccine diplomacy'. Due to supplies from China and Russia, it was one of the first countries to vaccinate citizens with the first dose. It also shared the vaccines with other Balkan countries and thus tried to build its image as the region's leader. President Vučić presented Beijing's support as an expression of special bilateral relations and contrasted its attitude with the West's sluggishness and lack of solidarity. China's Sinopharm also decided to build a vaccine factory in Serbia. Its construction was completed in May 2022.

¹⁹ M. Szpala, A. Sadecki, 'Serbia: the forced abandonment of Russian oil', OSW, 13 October 2022, osw.waw.pl.

²⁰ T. Prelec, 'Our brothers', 'our saviours': The importance of Chinese investment for The Serbian government's narrative of economic rebound', *Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Analytical Study 3*, Prague Security Studies Institute, October 2020, balkancrossroads.com.

²¹ S. Dojčinović, V. Radojević, 'Chinese Tech Giant Huawei Had Secret Offshore Contracts With Men Linked to Serbian State Telecom Company', *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, 25 October 2021, occrp.org.

²² D. Krivokapić, 'A Disturbing Marriage: Serbia and China Team Up on Digital Surveillance', *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 27 January 2022, cepa.org.

Serbia and China are also developing military cooperation. Chinese military donations to Serbia have reached around €7–8 million since 2014. In 2020, the Serbian army received a supply of six CH-92 drones worth \$19.3 million from China. Four batteries of the FK-3 medium-range air defence system were delivered in April last year. Vučić claimed that these actions were part of a strategy for improving the country's security in the face of growing tensions between the West and Russia. Furthermore, several Chinese weapon manufacturers which are on the US blacklist due to their involvement in trading arms with countries such as Iran and North Korea, have registered their companies in Serbia.²³

China may replace Russia in some areas of Serbian foreign policy. The government in Belgrade already announced the signing of a trade agreement with China by the end of 2022 and are considering further purchases of Chinese weapons and military equipment. China also has a chance to become an important ally in the UN Security Council on the Kosovo issue. Furthermore, Serbia is aware of the fact that its Western partners may be less concerned about Chinese capital than Russian capital. One example is the construction of the Belgrade metro by Chinese and French companies.

Heading towards a deal with the West

Serbia is likely to maintain its 'special' relations with Russia in the coming months. However, the relations will be more and more superficial. The Serbian elite probably wants to remain neutral on the Ukraine war, so as not to irritate the pro-Russian part of the public. Furthermore, the increasing financial dependence on the West and erosion of the last fragments of ties with Russia (i.e. energy and military cooperation) will strengthen the country's pro-Western orientation.

The makeup of the government formed in October last year suggests that Serbia will move in this direction. People with a techno-

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cratic and pro-Western profile were appointed to key positions. This is how the nominations of Tanja Mišćević and Dubravka Đedović should be interpreted.²⁴ Mišćević, who supports harmonising Serbia's foreign and security policy with the EU's, was appointed Minister for European Integration. Đedović, the former Head of the European Investment Bank's Western Balkans Office, will serve as the Minister of Mining and Energy. The first efforts to diversify gas supply sources are already visible. Work is underway to build a gas interconnector on the border with Bulgaria, and preparations are being made to implement a similar project on the border with North Macedonia. Serbia is in talks with Azerbaijan about the possibility of buying larger volumes of natural gas within a few years²⁵ and is making efforts to reserve capacity at LNG terminals in Greece. These projects, combined with the existing infrastructure for transporting gas from the West (via Hungary), may lead to a radical reduction in Serbia's dependence on gas from Russia in the coming years.

From the Western perspective, the current weakening of Russia's position in the Western Balkans creates an opportunity to stabilise the region in the long-term and to provide it with new triggers for development. Serbia's increasing economic dependence on the West may lead to a legal and institutional convergence. This is possible if the EU member states speak with one voice and emphasise that Serbia has to carry out reforms and reduce Russia's influence. In recent months, the USA and the EU have shown increasing interest in creating an EU integration perspective for the region. The Berlin

²³ P. Urošević, 'Resare: Kineske vojne kompanije se na Balkanu predstavljaju kao civilne', Radio Slobodna Evropa, 14 June 2021, slobodnaevropa.org.

²⁴ 'Mišćević: Nema odustajanja od zajedničke politike sa EU', PTC - Радио-телевизија Србије, 4 November 2022, rts.rs.

²⁵ V. Spasić, 'Serbia to import gas, electricity from Azerbaijan, get oil via Croatia', Balkan Green Energy News, 22 December 2022, balkangreenenergynews.com.

Process was reactivated and BiH was granted EU candidate status. Brussels and Washington are jointly pushing for the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Prishtina. At the same time, they admit that some of Serbia's claims are reasonable, especially those concerning the status of the Serb minority living in the northern part of Kosovo. It cannot be ruled out that Serbia will make further attempts to leverage its position vis-à-vis the EU. However, given its increasing economic dependence on the West, this will not be enough to continue its policy of balancing between the key global powers.

A recent survey conducted by the University of Belgrade may also convince the government to further weaken relations with Russia and strengthen economic ties with the West. Its results reveal that over 47% of respondents believe that economic interests, such as economic development or wage increases, are the most important, and only 23% think that political issues are of key importance (Kosovo and Republika Srpska).²⁶

²⁶ R. Ranković, 'Građanima Srbije ekonomsko blagostanje važnije od očuvanja Kosova', Glas Amerike VOA, 7 October 2022, glasamerike.net.