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THE IMPACT OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA ON SHAPING FOREIGN POLICY AFTER 2012

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Abstract
Since 2012, the Republic of Serbia has been governed by the Serbian Progressive Party, and since 2017 its chairman has also been the president, who has full power in his hands. In the first years after taking power, this group implemented a policy that could have been surprising to public opinion, considering the fact that it separated from the Serbian Radical Party. The negotiations on Kosovo, which brought a number of agreements, the diplomatic offensive that created Serbia as a European partner and regional hegemon, dynamic progress in the EU accession process and the promotion of Western European values were the elements that noticeably exposed the change in the image of this country in relation to the previous decades. However, the second term of government began to fit into the pattern of the global phenomenon of populism, leading to the ruling group taking over the structures of the separation of powers and limiting democracy in the country. Subsequent general elections brought the strengthening of this party in the structures of the state, whose level of democracy was rated increasingly lower in international rankings. Moreover, the political system of Serbia itself began to be presented in scientific and expert analyses as an example of stabilitocracy. The aim of this topic is to analyse the specific power of President Aleksander Vučić and his party in relation to shaping the state's multi-vector foreign policy.

Keywords
Republic of Serbia, Aleksander Vučić, stabilitocracy, multi-vector policy, Serbian foreign policy

Introduction

The Republic of Serbia has been governed by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) without interruption since 2012. In 2017, its leader and former PM, Aleksandar Vučić, was appointed as president, concentrating the totality of state power in his hands. In the first years of their rule, the progressives surprised international public opinion with an unex-

pected policy, given that they had split off from the Serbian Radical Party. Right-wing and conservative, they were predicted to reverse the policies introduced after 2000 by previous ruling parties, committed, both in name and platform, to democratic reform. Democratic reform was championed by Boris Tadić, who took over the legacy of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić, assassinated in 2003. Even though Tadić openly declared a plan to pursue democratic transformation and set Serbia on a pro-Western course, the changes that actually took place in the country in the first decade of the 21st century failed to address the hopes of both Serbian citizens and international actors. The Republic of Serbia[1] found itself in a situation similar to that of many other countries of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, embroiled in a series of military conflicts in the 1990s that had set back their post-communist transformation by approximately a decade. Specific to Serbia was its precarious regional and international position after the war, as the country was viewed by some of the most important western states as exclusively responsible for the outbreak. What's worse, the ambiguous approach of Serbian politicians and Serbian society to their role in the conflict and their reluctance to cooperate with International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), as well as their obstruction towards prosecuting the main perpetrators of war crimes, outweighed the new foreign policy course allegedly declared by the government. Even worse, the stalemate around Kosovo, which continued to drag on after 2000, further contributed to the image of Serbia as an uncompromising nation that had failed to reflect on the previous decade and chose to obstinately stand their ground (Bieber, 2018, 180). This had undermined the credibility of the new government and its declarative commitment to democratic transformation and willingness to join the EU. Serbia's growing economic ties with the Russian Federation could additionally raise concerns in Brussels, especially if it concerned a country aspiring to join the EU, where Russia was building influence in strategic areas, such as security. In this context, the rise to power in 2012 of the Serbian Progressive Party, an offshoot of the nationalist and anti-Western Serbian Radical Party, seemed to be the ultimate death knell of democratic reform. However, the progressives took their foreign policy in a rather unexpected direction for global public opinion. First, they achieved a milestone in Kosovo by signing the Brussels Agreement in 2013. Then, in 2014, they launched a massive pro-Western diplomatic offensive, coinciding with the Berlin Process, established on the initiative of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Serbia's cooperation with the West intensified, which encouraged EU investment in the country, and the EU accession process accelerated considerably. In parallel, Serbia launched an intensive, and ultimately successful, campaign to improve its image both in the region and beyond.

A completely opposite trend, however, emerged in its internal policy. According to international rankings, the level of democracy inside Serbia started to decline after 2015 and continues to diminish as of writing ("Nations in transit. Methodology", Freedom House, 2022). State power has been gradually concentrated in the hands of one party, both in central and local government, as well as other institutions and agencies associated with the Serbian Progressive Party. Aleksandar Vučić, who stepped in as Serbia's president in 2017, pursued a populist internal policy, also familiar from other post-communist countries, which in Serbia took on a special form known as "stabilitocracy". While the first term of the SNS was characterised by reform and an opening to the West, the second began to fall

[1] Before 2003, Serbia was part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and later, until 2006, part of a state known as Serbia and Montenegro.

under the global phenomenon of populism, as the SNS gradually restricted democracy and dismantled the structures of the tripartite division of power. Successive general elections further consolidated its position within state institutions and the political system in Serbia began to be described as a stabilitocracy.

The purpose of this article is to determine whether and, if so, how the stabilitocratic internal policy of President Aleksandar Vučić and his party[2] has influenced Serbia's foreign policy in the last decade. Much has been written on the issue of the Serbian internal political system; scholarly analysis have converged on many details, but also presented many diverse and interesting insights. This article will focus on the specific features of Serbian stabilitocracy and its elements that most strongly determine the course of its foreign policy.

The article is divided into four sections. The introduction outlines the general subject matter and defines the article's research goals and methods. Section two analyses current definitions of stabilitocracy as a variant of populism and discusses the main features of Serbian policy that have led to the emergence of a stabilitocratic system. The next section is dedicated to the process of foreign policymaking by Belgrade, with diplomatic and economic factors being identified as its most important determinants. The article ends with a summary and conclusions.

The author puts forward two research hypotheses. The first, consistent with the research question, assumes that stabilitocracy–the current political system in the Republic of Serbia characterized by a strong leader–greatly influences the setting of foreign policy directions.

The second hypothesis assumes that the attempt to create a multi-vector policy is an attempt to break the actually existing and well-established dichotomy in foreign policy, which has existed since the 20th century and is therefore difficult to break. The Serbian authorities have been striving for this breakthrough since the first decade of the 21st century through attempts to create a policy based on four pillars (Pawłowski, 2023, 22), which laid the foundations for the construction of a multi-vector policy in the second decade of the 21st century.

The topics discussed in the text have been covered in accordance with the assumptions corresponding to the paradigm of new liberalism, which assumes that a state in international relations pursues its interests that are not clearly contradictory or completely convergent with the interests of other states (in accordance with the assumptions of neorealism and neoliberalism, respectively). Instead they are implemented within the framework of mutual interdependence of states, which must make concessions and may or may not strive to coordinate states' policies. In any case, their actions aimed at pursuing state interests are limited by the interests of other states. The implementation of these interests is determined by the policy strategy of a given state, which in turn is influenced by state preferences, consistent with current social views, interests and institutions (Tenerowicz, 2015, 32). State preferences are therefore a tool for shaping state strategy. Strategy is, in turn, an emanation of the will of an individual/social group/society, which is to be implemented by a capable state and its institutions. These behaviours, carried out externally, are considered as shaping international relations by a given country.

[2] It should be mentioned that Alexander Vučić was formally the chairman of the Serbian Progressive Party until May 2023. At his request, party elections were held on that date and his trusted associate Miloš Vučević became the head of the SNS.

Therefore, we have here three levels of activity, correlated with each other, which Andrew Moravcsik presented as the method of levels of analysis, which was refined to meet the needs of the changing political realities after the collapse of the Cold War system (originally introduced into the theory of international relations by K. N. Waltz, M. A. Kaplan and J. D. Singer (Gardocki, 2013, 134). Its basic division includes the level of individual/social actors, then the level of the state and the level of the international system (Moravcsik, 1997, 516), although this is not the only or final division. Some scientists propose other divisions of levels, more adequately adapted to their research, but based on the levels indicated originally. This, however, makes this method both flexible, transparent and simple, which was pointed out from the very beginning of its creation (Gardocki, 2013, 136 and 137). Moreover, the method is an integral part of the systemic analysis method, which the author also uses in the text to present the discussed issues.

It is worth noting that the three-stage model can be applied to countries where there are such elements of democracy as civil society, due to the fact that social attitudes and expectations are important when creating state preferences. In countries where the authorities do not take into account average citizens and their political will, creating preferences according to oligarchic needs, this model may still function, but it is certainly modified due to the fact that the will of the actor/individual coincides with the level of the state and its institutions.

In the case of the Republic of Serbia analysed in the text, in the conditions of stabilitocracy, we are dealing with a specific situation, but still one that fits into the model of levels of analysis. On the one hand, with a stabilitocratic system, we are dealing with an appropriated state, controlled by the authorities, not allowing the public to have real co-decision making. On the other hand, we are not dealing with a complete disregard of the public will in creating the directions of foreign policy, because despite the appearance of democracy, this government still needs the legitimacy of the electorate supporting it in order to maintain its democratic image. The system that limits the role of the individual and society in terms of their civic activities, and especially their influence on politics in the case of Serbian politics, at the same time maintains the appearance of the existence of a phenomenon called a "transmission belt" by Andrew Moravcsik, which in the conditions of a well-functioning democracy is a kind of translation of preferences and power social of individuals and groups on state policy (Moravcsik, 1997, 518). The state authorities–in this case, Serbia–gathering the largest electorate and obtaining the highest result in the elections are to show that the majority of society approves the political directions set by the president and its party, thus confirming their preferences.

Analysing the case of the Republic of Serbia, it should be noted, in accordance with the assumptions of the second hypothesis, that when shaping the state's foreign policy, we are dealing with a specific situation of the domination of the dichotomous model over the multi-vector model and attempts to reverse this situation. The situation, in turn, is made more difficult by the fact that social preferences transmitting their preferences to state institutions are proportionally divided. The point is that the preferences of both groups are mutually exclusive at the ideological level, system of principles, values and affiliation, regionally and even globally, to different groups of countries. It is about the differences between those who support accession to the EU and those who support cooperation with the Russian Federation. While the pro-Western and pro-EU direction became a declarative choice after 2000, it was not a new choice due to the fact that, already in the second

half of the 19th century, western Balkan Peninsula countries today were in the orbit of the influence of Austria, Hungary, Germany, France or Italy. After the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), strengthening international relations with the West and adopting democratic models from there was synonymous with modernity and civilisational advancement, placing these countries among other first-world countries. For countries that remained under the communist regime for almost half a century, even for post-Titoist Yugoslavia, the choice between Western modernity and the real lack of alternative to the desire for development and change was a choice made out of compulsion. This resulted in the creation of the so-called peripheral elite syndrome (Zarycki, 2009, 174) and left these countries for the next decades in the process of chasing Western standards and with a peripheral complex.

The social group opting for cooperation with the Russian Federation was perceived as one guided by sentimental, identity, cultural and national categories. Importantly, it was devoid of the peripheral complexes and insufficient level of civilisational development (in this case, democratic) analogous to the above. There is no escape from this dichotomy, and any choice will be unacceptable to about half of Serbian society. The project of a multi-vector policy, apart from material benefits, is primarily intended to bring benefits in the form of covering this dilemma, which even has an ontological dimension. This is supposed to be a kind of reconstruction of the reality of foreign policy, and at the same time a re-evaluation of foreign policy, which will allow for making decisions accepted by the majority of society.

To analyse this issue, the approach of new liberalism is not sufficient, because it does not sufficiently justify the problem and conditions of this dichotomy. Hence, Serbia-EU and Serbia-Russian Federation relations should be viewed rather in line with a constructivist approach. It is related not only to the desire to build a political, economic or military partnership, but is also conditioned by the adoption of common principles and values (Wendt, 1999, 19; Curanović, 2013, 110 and 111), striving to unify certain aspects of life both within the state and as well as the Community (within the EU), such as the legal system or human and minority rights. In the case of Russia, we are dealing with additional premises implying this cooperation of an intersubjective nature, related to the importance of community, culture, identity and sharing a common image of an eternal friend.

The third level of analysis, presented by Moravcsik, concerns the international system and the configuration of interdependent preferences, which are an emanation of the state's foreign policy with all its dynamics, the ambition to pursue the state's interests, with the limitations resulting from the state's similar activity. This level includes an attempt in the text to comprehensively present the process of shaping multi-vector policy by the Serbian authorities. Konrad Pawłowski (2023, 27–28) describes, in an extremely concise and accurate manner, the overall implementation of this country's foreign policy, which is consistent with the assumptions of the new liberalism paradigm:

> Serbia's multi-vector policy is not static. In practice, it is a dynamic policy aimed at adapting the state to the complex and changeable international environment, implemented by balancing in the international arena and positioning itself in specific international realities. Therefore, it is a policy that is, to some extent, variable and reactive, much more tactical than strategic, dependent on the specific needs of the state and changing circumstances, conducted in a way that, in the opinion of the authorities in Belgrade, best protects the interests of Serbia and its citizens in a given international situation.

This article analyses previous studies on the issues discussed, both in terms of the phenomenon of stabilitocracy and its nature in the Republic of Serbia, as well as the conditions for building a multi-vector policy. Scientific and expert texts (usually written by academic researchers) were used, especially the Institute of Central Europe from Lublin and The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (*Beogradski Centar za Bezbednosnu Politiku)*. The analysis was also based on reports from organisations analysing the state of democracy in the world (Freedom House) and the European Union. In addition, state documents and information from the official government and parliamentary websites of the Republic of Serbia were also used.

Stabilitocracy and its determinants in Serbia

Different theoretical models, as well as the dynamic realities on the ground that are shaped by political entities across the globe, have forced political science scholars to create new definitions that would aptly describe the features of newly emerging systems. The concept of stabilitocracy arose in reference to a specific phenomenon on the spectrum of democracy, where totalitarianism is placed at one end, and consolidated, or liberal, democracy at the other. Scholars have defined stabilitocracy as a model that fails to rise to the level of complete, consolidated democracy and is best analysed as non-liberal democracy or a hybrid system. Importantly, the concept was specifically designed to describe the features of political systems that have developed in the Western Balkan region. The term was first used in 2012 to refer to the power system in Albania. In the years that followed, it was also applied to other non-EU Balkan countries, including the Republic of Serbia (Bieber, 2018, 176, 180; Tournois, 2023, 3). Stabilitocracy is a portmanteau word combining *stability* and *power* (in Greek: *kratos*) (Domachowska, 2020, 145; Rekść, 2022, 102).

The chief feature of a stabilitocracy is its focus on maintaining a state of stability and equilibrium, although in the longer term, the system, with its anti-democratic standards, may actually destabilise the situation not only within the state, but also across the region (Domachowska, 2020, 145; Bursać, 2021). Importantly, the political games played to preserve the stabilitocratic model of power often involve provoking and (ostensibly) resolving regional crises. "Stabilitocracies regularly create tensions with their neighbours, because they need crises to legitimise their iron-fist rule" (Rekść, 2022, 106). In Serbia, the situation is especially delicate; the country cannot afford to actively escalate regional conflicts, as it still needs to rebuild its image and position, which can be easily lost again. In this context, the policy of the current government in Pristina, which clearly contributes to conflict, obviously plays into the hands of Belgrade. However, for the West, including the Balkans in the Euro-Atlantic system, it is not just a matter of ensuring long-term regional stability but also a way to stave off international actors who might be interested in bringing the region under their own sphere of influence, such as Russia, China and Türkiye (Domachowska, 2020, 146; Kozovic, 2022, 7–8), which will be addressed in more detail in part two.

It is important to mention that, in fact, stabilitocracy is not a unique phenomenon with distinct features that cannot be found in any previous political systems. It is closely related to populism and uses analogous methods of wielding internal power (Rekść, 2022, 108).

Stabilitocracy refers not just to a centralised system of power dominated by one party, but also a network of its interrelationships and its rule over the structures of power and

public institutions, which affects aspects such as media freedom, civil liberties and human rights. This type of influence on the state and the institutions that shape its political and social realities is sometimes technically referred to as *state capture* (in Serbian: *zarobljena država*), a term frequently employed to describe the gradual decline of democratic standards that occurs through the mechanisms used to consolidate power by populist regimes. These processes have not escaped the attention of international organisations that rate global levels of democracy, especially in developing countries, and publish annual rankings, which have already shown their gradual decline. What is particularly characteristic of Serbia is that, despite a high degree of civic awareness, Serbs do not consider democracy as absolutely necessary for the state and its citizens to prosper (Petrović, Hercigonija, 2022, 4; Kozovic, 2022, 13–14). Additionally, Serbia's EU accession process has exposed the conditionality mechanism as effectively toothless, as Serbian "political elites have hardly made any real effort to implement consistent and tangible democratic reforms that would signal a genuine interest in EU accession and alignment with Western ideas, values, and beliefs" (Kozovic, 2022, 14), which, however, did not prevent them from gaining international legitimacy.

The most fundamental feature of stabilitocracy, often emphasised by scholars and shared by the whole Balkan region, is the role played by strong leaders, who undermine the principles of democracy, weaken the rule of law and reduce media freedom in an effort to preserve their own power. More often than not, such leaders will present their actions to the public as temporary measures taken to ensure their authority and skill can help preserve the stability of the state and the economy through hard times (Bieber, 2018, 181; Bieber, 2019, 20; Mikucka-Wójtowicz, 2014, 94). Usually, they will project an image of themselves as politicians with the strength to prevent the further escalation of an external conflict and, hence, indispensable guarantors of stability in international relations. Such has also been the strategy of Aleksandar Vučić. In the first years of his term, however, this aspect did not often arise in regional foreign policy, which was initially dedicated to diplomacy and a campaign to rebuild Serbia's international position, as a consequence of which Serbia appeared as a guarantor of stability in the region and who seriously committed to building good neighbourly relations. This strategy was also aligned with the philosophy of regional hegemony, to which Serbia had aspired throughout its history. Its elements included, for instance, a conciliatory approach to Pristina, which seemed to stabilise the situation in Kosovo. In addition, Serbia regularly opened new chapters in the EU accession process, limited its military cooperation with Russia and, because of its geographical location, played a key role in mitigating the refugee crisis. Yet all this coincided with a parallel shift away from democracy in internal policy. The West failed to react immediately, but the tide began to change in 2020, when the non-democratic early parliamentary elections that were held during the COVID-19 pandemic and boycotted by the opposition raised many red flags at the EU. The EU sent an envoy, Vladimir Bilčík, to hold talks with the leaders of the opposition parties and began to take a greater interest in the situation inside the country. This coincided with the rise to power in Kosovo of Albin Kurti, whose policy toward Serbia and the Serbian minority in the country substantially altered the diplomatic climate between Belgrade and Pristina. Bilateral relations soon deteriorated and a series of incidents occurred in Kosovo between Serbs on one side and the Kosovan government and regular Albanians on the other. This prompted Europe to take a renewed interest in the "Kosovo question", while Vučić capitalised on these elements of

Kurti's policy to accuse the Kosovan government of destabilising regional peace. Kosovo, however, was not the only flashpoint in the region. Regular diplomatic incidents with Croatia also occurred, and, despite its effort to build good neighbourly relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia pursued two divergent policies, one targeted at Sarajevo and the other at its own citizens. In September 2023, for example, in his address to parliament, the president emphasised the essence of the Serbian community as a single nation with one flag and one homeland (Aleksandar Vučić, 2023).

The popularity of strong leaders can be traced back to the political legacy of the 1990s. In times of armed conflict and a constant threat to statehood, the political dominance of strong leaders began to play an important role in the absence of any new political and systemic solutions that could fill the gap after the fall of communism. In addition, in Serbia, strong leadership was integral through most of its national and state history, including the 20th century, first in the Kingdom of Serbia, then the first Kingdom of Yugoslavia, headed by a Serbian dynasty, and later after WWII under the rule of Josip Broz Tito. As such, Serbia did not see the absence of democracy, which had already been absent before 2000, as a threat to its functioning as a state, which may also go toward explaining the attitude toward democracy that the Serbian society continues to show today, as discussed above (Petrović, Hercigonija, 2022, 4).

The first decade of the 21st century–when Serbia had strong political leaders but with far less power than Aleksandar Vucić would later wield–showed that a policy of decentralisation and declarative democratisation may be less effective at pushing through reforms (as was the case in Serbia) and achieving a transformation that would be positively received by Western Europe. The progress of Serbia's EU accession process is a case in point: it seems that the democratic forces that ruled Serbia in the first decade of the 21st century were unable to carry out reforms thorough enough to significantly accelerate this process. Additionally, there were the above-mentioned issues, related to Kosovo or cooperation with ICTY. This only happened after 2012. The situation resembles that of communist Yugoslavia, when despite the absence of internal democracy, Western Europe still decided to pursue relatively close cooperation with the country.

At the same time, the political model of a strong leader did not lead to a system as oppressive as Soviet totalitarianism or fascism, and it was not inefficient enough economically to estrange its society or even push it to change the system toward a more decentralised model. In addition, leaders were held up as the incarnation of authority, legitimising it with their own name ("80% of SNS's electorate would never vote for the party if it was headed by someone other than Vučić") (Cupać, 2020, 28). This could be observed in the last decade, but also in earlier general elections, where the leader's name was added to the name of the party.

No less importantly, the popularity of stabilitocracy can be also traced back to the financial crisis of 2008, which showed that even the most highly developed, democratic countries and organisations in the world are just as vulnerable to economic upheaval and just as unable to protect their citizens as those on the outside of exclusive organisations like the EU. Populist and stabilitocratic politicians rose to power on the crest of a wave of criticism levelled against the democratic governments that have failed their people. In parallel, the economic crisis deepened the EU's reluctance to open its gates to new members, which made aspiring nations face an uncertain future (Bieber, 2018, p. 180). The return of strong leadership in the Balkans is also traceable to the traditional model of

power, which might fail to improve social conditions, but does guarantee a certain degree of stability and clout in the international arena.

When talking about strong leadership as an element of stabilitocracy, it is also important to mention another characteristic feature of the system: the powerless opposition. The opposition is politically powerless, since the people and the international community all share a deeply entrenched belief that there exists no alternative to the current government. Another phenomenon characteristic of stabilitocracy, clearly identifying it as a kind of populism (Tournois, 2023, 4) is that the ruling party builds its platform to include postulates that respond to broader social demand, regardless of ideology, and thus covers the entire political spectrum, rendering other parties redundant. This is what Aleksandar Vučić's party has done, clearly echoing the 1990s, when Slobodan Milošević's platform similarly appropriated many social postulates, leaving the opposition without a political trump card. The regression of democracy under the rule of these two politicians sparked fierce protests from the political opposition and the general public. However, the West, which gave legitimacy to both these leaders, seemed to turn a blind eye to civic protests against the political situation inside the country, which was also widely reported by international organisations. Western politicians continued to see the former and the current president of Serbia as the most credible political partners (Pawłowski, 2019, 19–21; Korzeniewska-Wiszniewska, 2008, 195–206).

Another method that allows the SNS and the president to stay in control, and to preserve and consolidate their power, i.e., early parliamentary elections, is specific to the Republic of Serbia. "In a multi-party system, such elections are usually meant to provide the citizens with a mandate to reassert their political will after the government has lost parliamentary majority. Not so in Serbia: early elections here have only served to increase the personal power of Aleksandar Vučić" (Veljković, 2017; Petrović, 2023). After 2012, early elections were held in 2014, 2016, 2020, 2022 and in December 2023. In this context, the continuing social support for Vučić (c. 60%) and his party may come as a surprise, especially given the weakness of the state, its economy and its institutions. This, however, has to do with the state-run propaganda of success and the prevalent narrative of economic growth, along with an effort to convince the people that a takeover of power by the opposition would inevitably make things worse (Rekść, 2022, 115). The ability to maintain a convincing narrative also allows Serbia to attract foreign partners and allies.

Taking into account international reports on the state of democracy in Serbia, it should be stated that the EU cannot ignore the actual state of the Serbian state, despite the conciliatory attitude of Aleksander Vučić. One may, however, may get the impression that the EU itself wants to see Serbia in a better light than it actually is. This can be proven by the latest report of the Committee for International Relations of EU Representative Vladimír Bilčík on the assessment of the internal situation and foreign relations of the Republic of Serbia, which points to the improvement of internal aspects of state policy required by the EU. In his report, Bilčík applauds changes such as constitutional amendments, praises "progress on the rule of law and fundamental rights… normalisation and de-escalation of relations with Kosovo", better alignment with EU's common foreign and security policy, measures on improving the electoral conditions and the media environment through inter-party dialogue. He also notes "some progress" in the fight against corruption. Bilčík welcomes the organisation of the EuroPride march, a demonstration of the LGBT community, even though he fails to note that the tradition of September LGBT parades in

Serbia is already more than twenty years old, and the security of the demonstration has gradually improved under the rule of the SNS. Other achievements of the government mentioned in the report include new measures to protect minorities, other vulnerable social groups–such as the Roma community–and children. The rapporteur also tempers his praise of the improvements in media freedom with strong criticism of the abuse of free speech and hate speech; he decries the punishment of social activism with court trials and bemoans attacks against media outlets and journalists critical of the government. Other positive developments listed in the report include economic aspects, such as progress on privatization, but the rapporteur also mentions the formal and legal barriers to its further advancement (Bilčík, 2023).

However, the protests that have swept across Serbia under the slogan "Serbia against violence" (*Srbija protiv nasilja*)" suggest that the state of fundamental rights inside the country has not improved, as reflected in their current postulates (Protivnasilja.rs). Bilčík's report underlines the importance of a framework "enabling CSOs[3] to operate freely and participate in policymaking in inclusive and meaningful ways" and "welcomes the stronger representation of national minorities in the new parliament", which should probably be read as an expression of approval for activities of this kind and a signal to the government that they should take a hands-off approach.

An interesting opinion that echoes the above analysis and conclusion was published in 2020: "ideologically and politically, Serbian society today is torn apart by the same dilemmas as it faced at the beginning of the third decade of the 19th and the 20th centuries. Discussions that cannot escape the dichotomy of East/West, democracy/authoritarianism, reform/maintenance of the status quo, modernity/tradition, citizenship/nationality, religiosity/secularism, resemble conflicts between hostile, irreconcilable camps rather than political debates between members of a single society and people united by a common future". They are also part of the issue of ontological security, defined by Antony Giddens as a phenomenon that is inherently necessary and desired by society that wants to avoid anxiety caused also by the very dilemmas that have accompanied Serbian society for over three decades. (Cupać 2020, 11, 14, 19; Zašto Srbija dva veka ne može da izgradi građansko društvo?, 2020). The phenomenon is typical not just of Serbia, but also of other Balkan states, as well as post-communist states in general. This issue, however, goes far beyond the scope of this article. A rather pessimistic conclusion of the article quoted above is that the traditionalist, conservative model has no real future, while the modernist, European project lacks crucial social backing, and the lack of a solution to the conundrum is the main reason why the process of state-building, which started two centuries ago, has still not been completed. What is more, the process, not just in Serbia, but also in other states in the region, has been unfolding in an area of the "clash of contradictory interests of large powers, which makes small Balkan states[4] objects of large international political processes rather than independent entities that participate in them on equal terms" (Jagiełło-Szostak, 2021, 74–75; Zašto Srbija dva veka ne može da izgradi građansko društvo?, 2020). It should be noted that the small Balkan states have no ability to effectively change that status. The best they can do is commit themselves to an attempt to break this policy of dichotomy towards a multi-vector policy, as outlined in this article below, which best helps protect their national interests in the current system, enabling them to skilfully

[3] CSO — civil society organisation

[4] Such as Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania or Bosnia and Herzegovina.

balance between larger powers interested in expanding their sphere of political and economic influence in the Balkans through cooperation. This seems to be the practice of Belgrade. An interesting hypothesis was also put forward by Serbian philosopher Milan Mladenović, who identified a "shared philosophical foundation of the policies once implemented by Djindjić and today promoted by Vučić" (Zašto Srbija dva veka ne može da izgradi građansko društvo?, 2020). These foundations include "ideologies, an acceptance of post-ideological discourse, their pragmatism, or the implementation of policies aligned with the 'hegemonic spirit of the age'", as well as the Adenauerian "catch all" strategy, "which involves the inclusion of different political sensitivities within the party (and an openness to ideologically heterogeneous coalition partners) to achieve national 'political unity', as understood by Schmitt, 'and «complete mobilization»' in pursuit of a "higher goal". And the goal is the modernisation and Europeanisation of Serbia (Stojanović, 2018; Zašto Srbija dva veka ne može da izgradi građansko društvo?, 2020). This hypothesis may seem rather far-fetched insofar as it is difficult to verify; the two politicians can hardly be compared, as their terms of service are incommensurate: Djindjić only had two years to achieve his objectives, while the current president has already been in power for more than a decade. It is also a highly controversial move to compare their political ideologies. While Djindjić was seen in his time as a democrat in the Western European sense, the stabilitocratic rule of Vučić, referred to by some of his supporters as "a kind of enlightened absolutism" seems to negate any similarities between them. However, the "pro-European opposition in Serbia has been vanquished, because Aleksandar Vučić hijacked its agenda" and has (or has had until now) the backing of the EU (Cupać, 2020, 19; Zašto Srbija dva veka ne može da izgradi građansko društvo?, 2020; Tournois, 2023, 5).

Stabilitocracy and foreign policy in Serbia

The way to stabilitocracy is sometimes said to have been paved by the regimes of the 1990s (Rekść, 2022, 103). However, the political dominance of one leader and one party, the phenomenon of state capture and clientelism had been integral to the Serbian model of power at least since the middle of the 20th century. Although communism also had a strong added ideological component, Serbia's internal policy today largely overlaps with the political mechanisms of communist Yugoslavia. While these mechanisms were not analysed through the prism of today's conceptual framework, they were no doubt inherent in the political reality of the time (Kozovic, 2022, 13). Communist leader Josip Broz Tito presented himself as a guarantor of stability for the countries of the region, which had adopted different styles of communism, influenced either by Moscow, within the framework of the Comecon and the Warsaw Pact, or by Beijing. At the same time, all these states, including Yugoslavia, directly neighboured on non-communist countries that belonged to the organisations of the Western world. As mentioned before, Yugoslavia's foreign policy was thus a delicate balancing act, tiptoeing along a line between the East and the West, a policy later institutionalised in the 1960s with the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), with a seat in Belgrade. While its member states were not completely unaligned, especially in terms of ideology, the NAM did indeed provide an alternative for countries that sought solutions beyond the bipolar system of the Cold War. This balancing act, performed under the pretext of neutrality, facilitated multilateral cooperation and allowed it to avoid building alliances with only one side, which would have forced Yu-

goslavia to abandon its neutral position. Characteristically, the evolution of Yugoslavian communism toward socialism was applauded by the West and shaped the image of Josip Broz Tito as a flexible politician committed to a relatively liberal economic and civic policy, and hence as an equal partner for democratic leaders.

As a country aspiring to the political legacy of communist Yugoslavia, the Republic of Serbia returned to the policy of "non-alignment" (Rekść, 2022, 113, Tournois, 2023, 4, 8–9), as promoted by Aleksandar Vučić, with the rise to power of the SNS. As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs puts it:

> Serbia's presence in the Non-Aligned Movement and cooperation with non-aligned countries does not interfere with its European perspective. It is rather a complementary aspect of Serbia's foreign policy orientation. Observer status also enables the Republic of Serbia to monitor global political and economic issues from the perspective of non-aligned countries and to promote comprehensive bilateral cooperation with these countries.

It should be added that after the collapse of the SFRY, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia received observer status only in 2001 (since the establishment of the FRY in 1992, this status was suspended), and then Serbia and Montenegro retained it, after changing the name of the country from FRY. After 2006, the Republic of Serbia maintained this status (*Pokret nesvrstanih zemalja* (PNZ). It should be emphasised that this reference is essentially symbolic. Since the end of the Cold War, the Non-Aligned Movement has lost its raison d'être to the same extent as during the communist period, especially in the European dimension, which is what Tito's Yugoslavia represented. Participation in this movement after the collapse of the Yugoslav state should be interpreted rather in terms of self-definition as the successor of the SFRY, as well as attempts to search for the most convenient solutions for creating the assumptions of international policy. Although the slogan of neutrality appeared already in the first decade of the 21st century, in the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia from 2009, the formulation of political neutrality appears as one of the listed principles of the functioning of the national security system, it was not developed in the document (Strategija nacionalne bezbednosti Republike Srbije, 2009, 32). Moreover, real political decisions, problems and challenges that Serbia had to face (including the issue of Kosovo, cooperation with the ICTY, cooperation with the Russian Federation in strategic areas for state security, policies towards countries in the region and declarations of willingness to join the EU) meant that the policy of the Republic of Serbia could not be treated in terms of neutrality. In its place, a more accurate and better definition of Serbia's attitude appeared: multi-vector policy. In the next state security strategy from 2019, political neutrality was replaced by military neutrality, which also aroused controversy, even within Serbian society itself (Strategija nacionalne bezbednosti Republike Srbije, 2019). Taking into account Serbia's real military cooperation with NATO and the Russian Federation (expanded in recent years to include China), as well as the relatively short period of the lack of involvement in armed conflicts or distancing itself from the consequences related to them, it is difficult to describe Serbia as a neutral or non-involved state. Here, too, the multi-vector formulation is more appropriate. Non-alignment became the foundation of any future foreign policy. Ostensibly based on neutrality in the international arena, it involves a constant balancing act and a multi-vector foreign policy based on different models of international relations. This format best describes the nature of the Serbian international involvement in recent years.

The diplomatic offensive, which, as mentioned earlier, the Republic of Serbia has waged since 2015, has been calculated to show its citizens that their relatively small state can implement a foreign policy not just on a regional or European scale, but also global scale, perhaps not in the form of bilateral relations, but according to its ability, in the form of contacts with rich and influential Western European leaders, as well as the US, Russia, China or the Persian Gulf. It should be stated that in foreign policy, Alexander Vučić "inherited" from Boris Tadić the concept of basing Serbian international policy on the so-called four pillars (Brussels, Moscow, Beijing and Washington). The assumptions of this policy were beneficial to Serbia, but the authorities did not develop it before 2012 (Pawłowski, 2023, 22), remaining in the above-mentioned EU-Russian Federation dichotomy. In his foreign policy, Vučić decided not only to use the conceptual solutions of the previous government, but also to expand them, building a multi-vector policy. The indicated year of 2015 was not accidental, but also not absolute. At that time, important events in the international arena coincided, relating to the Balkans as well as the internal situation in Serbia, which allowed the then Prime Minister Aleksander Vučić to strengthen his internal and international position. On an international scale, it was important for the development of regional cooperation to launch the Berlin Process, in which Serbia, as one of the largest countries in the region and the largest state of the former SFRY, could and wanted to play an important role. Regional cooperation was an important platform for this. This coincided with the growing interest in the Balkan region in the context of the geopolitical game between the broadly understood Western countries and the Russian Federation, China and Türkiye (Jovanović, 2021, 6). At the same time, the West began to turn a blind eye to the slowdown or even regression in the democratization of the country towards the countries of the region, which could have been a guarantor of stability and cooperation that became the dominant value in the approach to the policies of these countries (which in turn directly led to the emergence of the phenomenon known as now called stabilitocracy). At the same time, Alexander Vučić gained strong legitimacy in his own country, receiving a parliamentary majority in early elections (Number of seats received in parliament – X National Assembly Convocation – Broj dobijenih mandata – X saziv Narodne skupštine Republike Srbije), allowing him to exercise power independently. It was then–still as prime minister, thanks to this electoral result–that he strengthened his personal position in the state while subordinating the institutions and state administration to his party, which he headed as prime minister and will stand as president. All these factors will allow him to build the image of the Prime Minister and then the President of Serbia as a strong and, above all, effective politician, a large regional state that has an influence on the policy implemented in this region. This image helped successfully convince the leaders of Western countries that Vučić is an important and valuable player who cannot be ignored in the policy towards Southeastern Europe. This belief will allow Serbia to tighten cooperation with the West in the coming years, while simultaneously degenerating the democratic system (Jovanović, 2021, 8–11), developed between 2000 and 2015[5]. After 2015, the level of democracy gradually decreased, placing Serbia at the level of countries with a hybrid regime. The above-mentioned diplomatic offensive was also part of this geopolitical interest in the Balkans. In addition to the ongoing and now intensified

[5] It is worth mentioning that, according to the Freedom House ranking, Serbia has been an independent state since 2006. Until 2015 it was perceived as a free country with full democracy (Freedom in the World 2014 The Annual Survey of Political Rights & Civil Liberties, 2015, 851).

cooperation with the EU and the Russian Federation, cooperation with Türkiye, the countries of the Middle East and China, which is strongly entering the region of Central and Southeastern Europe, is being tightened – Vučić several times, between 2015 and 2023 visits China (Jovanović, 2021, 6).

At the global level, Serbia's relations with the EU began to deteriorate, which slowed down the accession process. At the same time as political cooperation with the EU was weakening, Belgrade was distancing itself from some aspects of cooperation with Russia (e.g. on the military level, where Serbia's interest would turn towards China and France). Taking into account Aleksander Vučić's process of breaking the long-standing dichotomy in Serbian politics, the war in Ukraine, beginning in February 2022, influenced Serbia's relations with Russia, bringing it also to a more prominent place in international public discourse. It was also an opportunity for the Serbian authorities to reevaluate their current policy, which, due to close relations with Moscow and its regional foreign policy, placed Serbia among countries closer to the model of Asian power (former post-Soviet countries) than among European democracies. Moreover, at that moment Brussels' unyielding position of siding with the Russian Federation or the Western bloc made Serbia face the need to take a stance in foreign policy. Vučić made a politically unambiguous declaration at the Davos Summit in December 2022. This fact resulted in the actual weakening of contacts between the two countries, which was also echoed in the public space in the form of statements by Russian and Serbian politicians commenting on the lack of unanimity of the current allies regarding the international situation and mutual relations (Korzeniewska-Wiszniewska, 2022). Although it is a fact that Serbia did not join the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by Western countries, Belgrade's position, supported by the president's official statements, made it possible to note the fact that the nature of Serbian-Russian relations is different from the previous ones.

Additionally, Serbia's attempts to launch cooperation with BRICS countries[6] cemented its relations with the Arab states in the Persian Gulf and China, helped it break out of this dichotomy and avoid having to declare its allegiance either to the East or the West (Pawłowski, 2023, 23).

As observed by Magdalena Rekść, "In a situation of almost absolute state control over the media, the average Serb is surrounded by a narrative that proclaims the achievements of the president, praises his economic success, and applauds his visionary foreign policy, based on a skilful balancing act between Russia and the European Union, and (especially during the pandemic) a growing cooperation with China" (Rekść, 2022, 113). The fact is, that first decade, during the rule of the democrats, this dichotomy, with European Union on the one hand and the Russian Federation on the other, was particularly apparent, widely reflected and influenced social attitudes. The way in which the proponents of either solution justified their choice was also quite characteristic. Pro-Westerners talked about the need to carry out political and economic reforms in the spirit of democracy, while those who supported closer ties with Russia preferred to speak of perennial cultural and religious affinities, or traditional Russian-Serbian friendship. Typically, while social support for European integration dropped as the accession process dragged on and state reforms failed to bring satisfactory results, the number of those who argued for Russia seemed to remain constant. This is hardly surprising, given that the two factions have

[6] Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa.

justified their support with completely different arguments. While those in favour of the West usually rely on measurable parameters such as the degree of reform, improvements in the economic and political situation of the state and its people, with little to no ideological narrative, arguments in favour of closer ties with Russia tend to appeal to sentiment and emotion. Economic cooperation with Russia is now very well developed (there is even a free trade zone and large-scale Russian investment in Serbia plus cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Community), but it is still far weaker than with the European Union[7] (*The EU and Serbia,* 2023, 1; *Russia. Economic relations*; *Russian sources of influence in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina*). This, however, does not prevent the case for Russia from being made based on other, intangible factors. As a consequence, it is difficult to think of an argument that could sway pro-Russia supporters, as opposed to the pro-Western group. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the current model of power in Serbia is closer to that of Hungary, what is–thanks to UE–a softer version of Russia, than any Western European country (Lakičević, 2023; Korzeniewska-Wiszniewska, 2012, 8).

Nevertheless, the accumulation of power in the hands of one party and its leader, the president of Serbia, means that Vučić is the main creator of foreign policy, even though he builds it with the aid of relevant institutions. His position in the state and in the eyes of the people makes him exclusively responsible for its final shape. Serbia's choice of a multi-vector policy was thus an attempt to escape a dichotomy that put it in a position of dependence on dominant external powers. In addition, while its effort to build an international network of cooperation initially forced Serbia to take decisions that ruled out any future partnership (or further rapprochement) with one party or the other, building relations with other foreign partners helped break that pattern; Belgrade no longer had to tread a fine line between two parties, but could employ different foreign policy-making approaches. What is more, multi-vector activity could also be a way to overcome the peripheral elite syndrome, as discussed by Magdalena Rekść (2022, 113–114), and emerge as a state with a global policy. There is an impression that the current president of Serbia has succeeded where his democratic predecessors failed: he knew how to use Serbia's historical role as a bridge between East and West (Jagiełło-Szostak, 2021, 76) to its advantage, not only to improve its actual political and economic conditions, but also to show that his state, one of the largest in the Balkans, continues to aspire to the rank of regional hegemon and leader. The latter goal is no longer just a dream, as it was in the early 1990s, when the third Yugoslavia was born, but already a fact. Serbia has become an important actor, with a critical location at the heart of the Balkan Peninsula. This role and policy is also rooted in the fact that many Serbs continue to live in neighbouring countries, which allows Belgrade to shape bilateral relations with the countries in question, but also influence their internal policy, especially in places where Serbs represent a significant minority, e.g. in Montenegro or Bosnia and Herzegovina (Korzeniewska-Wiszniewska, 2017).

Among all of its neighbours, Kosovo is the country with which Serbia has had the most troubled relations. Even though Serbs represented a small percentage of the population, they were privileged by the constitution, which had to do with the policy imposed on Kosovo after 2008. This continued to inflame the Albanian society and its politicians, just as the issue of separatism and its consequences remained unacceptable for the Serbs. The conflict became a touchstone of Serbian democratic transformation. As mentioned

[7] By the end of 2023 total EU Foreign Direct Investment in Serbia amounted to €20.9 billion in 2022. The total volume of trade in goods with the EU was €36.5 billion in 2022.

before, it was also an element of a political game that manufactured destabilisation so that it could be put to political use by President Vučić. Crucially, however, Kosovo was a pawn in a larger game, not just that of Belgrade, but also that played by Brussels and Moscow, although the latter two political centres had divergent goals and motivations, not to mention narratives, vis-a-vis the Serbs. In a stabilitocracy, the dominant narrative is controlled to the extent that state institutions control the media, which inform society of the scope and orientation of cooperation with foreign players. This tool has allowed it to influence Serbian public opinion and mould its either pro-Western or pro-Russian orientation (Maričić, 2022; Vuksanović, 2022, 5; Pawłowski, 2023, 23).

In addition, Serbian society is poorly informed about the mechanisms of economic development and the current economic situation of the country, and the political narrative largely shapes their ideas about the economic position of external actors. This is why, for instance, many see the Russian Federation as the most important economic partner of Serbia, with China second, and remain unaware of the actual scale and role of European involvement (Kozovic, 2022, 24; Mirel, 2022, 1–2).

Relations with China rest on two main pillars. One is the active involvement of Beijing in the economic development of Serbia and the region, which directly benefits Serbian citizens. Issues such as the rule of law, environmental protection or employee rights are obviously side-lined in this context. The other pillar is a narrative of friendship between the two leaders (even though foreign policy in Serbia is formally decided by the government and the PM, not the president), which fits in perfectly with the current model of power. The basis of that friendship is traced back not just to a shared communist legacy, but also the events of 1999, when three Chinese citizens were killed in an accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the NATO intervention in Serbia. Another common denominator is a similar position with respect to the territories that unilaterally seceded from the two countries (Jagiełło-Szostak, 2021, 87–90; Tournois, 2023, 10).

Other strategic partners interested in bringing the Balkans into their spheres of influence include Türkiye, which has dedicated the past 10 years to strengthening mutual relations with a mind set on the restoration of its Ottoman legacy. In recent years, Serbia significantly stepped up its cooperation with Türkiye, signing a number of agreements and attracting the seventh largest volume of Turkish investment. While Türkiye was not initially a country of interest for Belgrade, its significant presence in the Balkans ultimately could not be ignored in its foreign policy (Turska, 2023). All the more so because Türkiye, implementing a program sometimes referred to as neo-Ottomanism for over a decade, is developing cooperation with the countries of the Balkan Peninsula not only in political and economic areas, but also in cultural areas. However, its participation in regional policy is significant (Bieniek, Jagiełło-Szostak, Szyszlak, 2023, 18, 20, 28).

Attempts to build a multi-vector policy undertaken by the Republic of Serbia seem to be the right direction for a country that would like to implement a policy referring to the tradition of non-aligned countries, or even a neutral policy. At the moment, however, Serbia has years of consistent attempts to implement such a policy ahead of it. At the moment, however, it must still break the pattern of dichotomy that it fell into in the first two decades of the 21st century. This is confirmed by the latest report of the Committee for International Relations of EU Representative Vladimír Bilčík on the assessment of the internal situation and foreign relations of the Republic of Serbia. The report expresses a deep concern about the decline in support for the EU within Serbian society, laments

its insufficiently restrictive policy toward the Russian Federation and its lack of alignment with the EU, as reflected in the close ties between the two countries, including the signature of agreements with Russia concerning shared foreign policy priorities for 2023–2024 and meetings with high-ranking Russian officials from the EU sanctions list. Moreover, it also condemns the opening of a Russian state-owned media outlet in Belgrade and the launch of its online news service in Serbian. Other issues raised in the report include gender discrimination and violence against women. While economic reforms are applauded, as mentioned above, the report also highlights the negative impact on regional economic development of Russian and Chinese investment, which rings alarm bells in the EU. Last but not least, Bilčík urges Serbia to "strengthen strategic communication and improve the visibility of EU funding". The report also recommends that regional cooperation should be developed and consolidated, with a special emphasis on Kosovo, and earlier decisions should be implemented, underlining that "there is no place for genocide denial…or the glorification of war criminals in an EU candidate country"[8] (Bilčík, 2023).

Conclusions

The ruling party, and especially its leaders, enjoy particularly high popularity in countries where power is held by populist parties. The party works to convince society that the situation in the country is getting better, that there is constant economic growth, accompanied by thorough social and economic reforms, and the quality of life is improving, while it also denies the existence of any viable alternative to its rule. The rhetoric is very similar in all post-communist countries with an unresolved westernisation complex. In Serbia, a Christian Orthodox country with a strong affinity to the eastern cultural sphere, associated with Orthodox Christianity and the Cyrillic alphabet–this line of argument may be all the more effective as, even putting aside the undesirable influence of Western ideologies, the Western understanding of politics and social behaviour is often said to be culturally alien to the Serbian nation. This westernisation complex is compounded by a persistent complex of peripherality and economic backwardness, a distinct political culture, rooted in the legacy of communism, as well as by the impact of the Western model of governance, which seems to place nations that choose a different model much lower on the ladder of civilisation. In addition, the government's ongoing campaign to foster a sense of helplessness in its opponents, and their lack of influence on political and social realities despite wide-scale mobilisation, has also contributed to keeping the model in place in the long term. In Serbia, mass protests have been held for nearly 8 years on a scale that is truly impressive in light of the country's demographics. However, the authorities have refused to enter into a dialogue with this section of Serbian society, as if to drive home the utter futility of political activism; this sends a clear signal to government supporters that, despite its large mobilisation, the opposition, be it social or political, has no real political agency, leaving the president and the ruling party as the only conduit of the will and authority of the Serbian nation.

[8] In 2009, some European countries, including the majority of the EU, recognised what happened in Srebrenica in the summer of 1995 as a crime of genocide. As for the glorification of war criminals, Bilčík is probably alluding to murals of Ratko Mladić (the former commander of the Bosnian Serb Army, who is now serving a life sentence for war crimes), captioned "a Serbian hero", which appeared in cities such as Belgrade.

However, there are signs that tolerance for the non-democratic policies of Belgrade is running out. This may be the effect of the impasse in the Kosovo crisis, which once again continues to escalate, leading to armed incidents and casualties. Goran Miletić, the director of an NGO called Civil Rights Defenders, points out that there is a real possibility that sanctions will eventually be placed on Serbia and the negative image of the Serbs as a conflictive factor that destabilises the region might return (*Da li će i kada UE uvesti sankcije Srbiji?*, 2023).

Again, the purpose of the early elections that took place in December 2023 were to consolidate the power of the president and his Serbian Progressive Party. The elections was probably intended to resolve or appease the crisis caused by the ongoing protests and prevent the political opposition from growing in strength. Some Serbian analysts urge the opposition to boycott the elections, like it did in 2020, based on arguments including wide-scale manipulations perpetrated by the authorities and their attempt to impose their own political framework on the entire political scene in Serbia. By boycotting the elections, the opposition would not allow the ruling party to wage political struggle on its own terms. Likewise, it would increase the likelihood that the internal situation in Serbia would attract the attention of the international community, especially the EU. In addition, the absence of the opposition from parliament would take away any legitimacy from the constitutional reform already announced by the ruling party in relation to Serbia's accession process. It would be an argument for rejecting these changes as pushed through on a whim by just one party. The SNS would thus be cast as a destabilising factor on the political scene in Serbia (Cupać, 2020, 27). That would be undesirable, even considering the fact that the majority of the most important political and economic partners of Serbia also adhere to a centralised model of power with the strong position of a leader, since Aleksandar Vučić undoubtedly wants to be perceived as a democratic and modern leader in the European sense of the word. The results obtained by his party are perhaps not the highest in the history of the last 12 years, but he has a sufficient number of seats (129 in the 250-seat parliament (51.6%) to exercise power on his own (Broj dobijenih mandata – XIV saziv Narodne skupštine Republike Srbije). The election results, as well as the course of the campaign itself, were condemned not only by the opposition, demanding not only a repeat of the votes, but also by the European Parliament, which submitted a draft resolution openly speaking about undemocratic practices (Rezolucja Parlamentu Europejskiego w sprawie sytuacji w Serbii po wyborach (2024/2521(RSP)). However, this will probably not affect the situation of the president and the parties in power.

Several conclusions present itself with regard to the impact of the political system on foreign policy in Serbia. The most important one, which also supports the research hypothesis formulated in the introduction, is that the stabilitocratic model of governance, where power is centralized in the hands of one party and until recently its leader, has a significant impact on foreign policy. The model also means that the main entity that shapes this policy, even though it is formally outside of his mandate, is the president, rather than the prime minister and the relevant ministry as required by the constitution. What is more, the president is also perceived as having the full agency in foreign policymaking by the international community. As the leader of the ruling party, the president likewise shapes the perception of international relations within Serbian society through his control of the state media. This, in turn, misleads and manipulates the people to shape attitudes that give apparent legitimacy to the actions of the authorities.

Another conclusion is that despite its multi-vector policy, the position of Belgrade in the international arena is still primarily determined by relationships with the EU and the Russian Federation. Relations with these two political entities continue to take centre stage. This also shows that, try as it may to build a multilateral foreign policy, Serbia continues to be trapped in the characteristic dichotomy, best illustrated by the latest Report on Serbia published by the Committee on Foreign Affairs Rapporteur Vladimír Bilčík. An attempt to break this dichotomy is, at the moment, an attempt to break the actual situation rather than a description of the actual state. Nevertheless, these attempts by state authorities may in the future develop a realistic image of a multi-vector policy, perhaps even characterised by the neutrality assumed in the current national security strategy.

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