

CHAPTER VII

FOREIGN POLICY ATTITUDES OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN SERBIA: HOW FAR FROM THE EAST, HOW CLOSE TO THE WEST?

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Introduction

Following democratic changes in 2000, the new Serbian (Yugoslavian) government proclaimed European and Euro-Atlantic integration as “the basis of the country’s foreign policy orientation” (Dragojlović et al., 2011: 295). While accession to the European Union (EU) was placed as the primary foreign policy goal in 2001, the 2004 Defence Strategy additionally labelled joining NATO as one of the country’s “vital security and defence interests” (Скупштина СЦГ, 2004). However, such an orientation has been constantly challenged by the far-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS), which was winning almost 30% of the popular votes in three consecutive parliamentary election cycles (2003, 2007, 2008). Together with a gradual shift of the national-conservative Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) towards more Eurosceptic positions and its advocating for the country’s military and political neutrality (Коштуница, 2013), pro-European forces embodied in the Democratic Party (DS) were not sufficiently strong to accelerate internal reforms and move Serbia closer to the EU.

In light of the failed negotiations on Kosovo’s status and, consequently, its unilateral secession, Serbia’s political landscape underwent a significant transformation. Even though military neutrality was proclaimed with the votes of nearly

nine-tenths of the parliamentary members, the ruling coalition fell apart soon after Kosovo declared independence. United under a pro-European platform, in the context of changed circumstances and the support of leading EU member states for Kosovo's independence, the ruling parties were unable to reach a consensus on modalities for proceeding with the European integration process. From that point forward, every government will strive to somehow reconcile the interest of EU membership with at least the formal maintenance of Kosovo as part of Serbia. The foreign policy strategy formulated by the DS governments, known as the concept of "four pillars", was embraced and further developed in practice by the SNS-led governments.

Meanwhile, the majority of opposition parties have endeavoured to reconcile the country's aim to become an EU member and to propose a resolution for the Kosovo issue that would satisfy Serbia's vital national interests. On the other hand, holding the EU responsible for Kosovo's secession and asserting that Serbia's recognition of it is the key condition for its EU accession, the New DSS advocates for the ceasing of the European integration process, suggesting that Serbia should revise its relations with the EU on a politically neutral but mutually beneficial basis. At the same time, Western support of Kosovo's secession and its international affirmation, together with the EU enlargement fatigue, indirectly led to the emergence of right-wing populists seeking to propose a foreign policy alternative in the form of turning Serbia towards the BRICS. All things considered, this work will comprehensively present the foreign policy views of all parliamentary groups in Serbia, aiming to answer the central research question: "Which aspects of Serbia's foreign policy strategy enjoy parties' consensus and which are contested to a lesser or greater extent?"

Kosovo's Secession and the Transformation of Foreign Policy Views in Serbia's Political Landscape (2007 – 2012)

A thorough understanding of the internal dynamics and ideological shifts of political parties in Serbia – particularly regarding their foreign policy attitudes – cannot be achieved without considering the still open Kosovo issue.¹ The unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo, initially encouraged and later internationally recognised by the leading Western nations, directly caused the DSS's shift from pro-European to increasingly Eurosceptic positions. In the atmosphere of an inability to reach a compromise solution on the Kosovo status and

1 In this article, the author refers to Kosovo as an entity of disputed international status, which remains to be resolved under the EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue.

Serbia's rejection of Ahtisaari's proposal for the so-called "supervised independence" of Kosovo (UNSC, 2007), strongly supported by the USA (Reuters, 2007) and the majority of European countries, the DSS adopted the Declaration on Serbia's Military Neutrality at its Main Board session on 28 October 2007 (NSPM, 2007). Following the failure of the final attempt to solve the Kosovo status issue, while confronted with the reality that "some Western states were encouraging Albanian representatives in Kosovo and Metohija (KiM) to declare the province's independence and threatening the Republic of Serbia with recognition of this unlawful act," the National Assembly adopted the Resolution on the Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order, in which military neutrality was declared (HCPC, 2007). Through this Resolution, Serbia explicitly rejected the possibility of joining the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO), which represents a geostrategic orientation that has persisted to this day, with practically no significant political actor seeking to alter it.

Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008 and its almost immediate recognition by the US and key EU member states (first France and the UK, then Germany, Italy, etc.) subsequently triggered new frictions within Serbia's political landscape. Although Serbia's political parties reached a broad consensus to reject this unilateral act in the National Assembly, the question of potentially redefining relations with the EU emerged as a dividing issue among key political actors, eventually causing the government's collapse. Namely, after the far-right and then-opposition SRS proposed a resolution obliging the government not to sign any document with the EU unless it explicitly affirmed that Kosovo was part of Serbia, a rift emerged within the ruling coalition (RSE, 2008). While Prime Minister Koštunica's DSS and conservative New Serbia (NS) accepted the SRS proposal, President Tadić's DS refused to support it, stressing its commitment to "insisting on Serbia's accelerated path to the EU" (Ibidem). Moreover, the other, smaller coalition partner, G17+, rejected the radicals' proposal even more strongly, with its leader accusing Koštunica of pushing the country into self-isolation (Ibidem). As a result, the ruling coalition collapsed less than 10 months after its formation, leading to snap parliamentary elections in Serbia, where the "For a European Serbia" list, headed by the DS, secured victory with more than 38% of the votes.

However, despite their electoral victory, the pro-European block fell short of the parliamentary seats needed to form a ruling majority on their own. Faced with the necessity of securing a coalition partner to support the continuation of the country's European integration process, the DS achieved a "historic reconciliation" with the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) (Политика, 2008). As a result, eight

years after the fall of its founder and authoritarian leader, Slobodan Milošević, the successor of the League of Communists once again assumed power, now officially embracing a pro-European agenda. Meanwhile, in the context of the previously signed Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU, the individually strongest political party and a key opponent of Serbia's EU integration split over the support to the SAA. Namely, the deputy president of the SRS, Tomislav Nikolić, along with 17 MPs – including Aleksandar Vučić, the undisputed leader of Serbia nowadays – left the party to establish what they described as the “modern right” Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Although this ideological schism in the anti-EU, far-right SRS and the consequent foundation of the pro-EU, centre-right SNS was initially perceived as a victory for European forces in Serbia's party landscape and expected to solidify the country's Western foreign policy orientation, things became significantly more complex, particularly following the SNS's rise to power in 2012.

Even though the newly formed government positioned “commitment to Serbia's European future” as the first among the key elements of its programme, emphasising that “full EU membership is in the deepest Serbian interest” (Влада РС, 2008), its foreign policy was far from solely pro-Western in practice. Aiming to simultaneously advance EU integration and enhance economic development, while also securing Russia's and China's political support in its diplomatic campaign over Kosovo, the Serbian government implemented what became known as a “four-pillar foreign policy.” While Serbia, following a period of strained relations with Western countries due to their recognition of Kosovo's independence, returned its ambassadors to Washington and European capitals shortly after the formation of the new government (Balkan Insight, 2008), the parliament simultaneously ratified the Energy Agreement with Russia (HCPC, 2008), paving the way for the sale of Petroleum Industry of Serbia to Gazprom in December 2008. In a similar manner, 2009 saw reciprocal visits by Serbian and US high-ranking officials, alongside Russian President Medvedev's visit to Belgrade, during which several agreements were concluded between the two sides. Furthermore, in the same year, Serbia officially applied for EU membership (EC, 2011: 3) after previously signing the Agreement on Strategic Partnership with China (MFACN, 2009). Overall, during the period from 2008 to 2012, by simultaneously restoring relations with the US, deepening ties with Russia and China, and obtaining EU candidate status, the Serbian government set the stage for a multi-vector foreign policy. The unresolved Kosovo issue will remain a key determinant of Serbia's foreign policy, which will, despite the regime change, maintain the four-pillar foreign policy.

Serbian Progressive Party and Aleksandar Vučić's Political Era (2012 – present)

After the founder and then-leader of the SNS, Tomislav Nikolić, defeated the serving head of state, Boris Tadić, in the 2012 presidential elections, Serbia entered a new political era marked by the rule of Aleksandar Vučić. By declaratively embracing Serbia's European path but also preserving what was seen as "traditional friendly relations" with Russia and deepening a "strategic partnership" with China, the SNS did not abandon the previously established principles of foreign policy. On the contrary, although the concept of the "four pillars" was no longer invoked in official political discourse, this approach was further developed in practice and, along with the additionally affirmed military neutrality, solidified as the cornerstone of Serbia's foreign policy to this day.

This is clearly reflected in the SNS programme platform, adopted in the year preceding their ascent to power. Although EU membership is listed as the primary basis of their foreign policy, the programme simultaneously highlights military neutrality, enhanced cooperation with Russia, China, and Japan, as well as striving for the best possible relations with the US (CHC, 2011: 39). Thirteen years later and after more than twelve years of dominant rule in Serbia, the foreign policy principles of the SNS have remained largely unchanged. In the Programmatic Goals adopted on 6 December 2024, the SNS emphasises that Serbia "can enhance its role and position in the world only by acting as a *bridge between East and West* (italicised S.M.), cooperating with all its friends, and leveraging the benefits stemming from both hemispheres, whether from the East or the West (CHC, 2024). Furthermore, although the SNS remains committed to Serbia's EU membership, its programme underscores that Serbia "can only join the EU as a whole, with KiM as its integral part" (Ibidem). When it comes to relations with other centres of power, as before, the focus is on developing the closest ties with Russia and China, with India now being added to the party's programme (Ibidem). However, it is noteworthy that there is no explicit mention of the US, which can be assumed to be implicitly included under the formulation "other major political and economic powers" (Ibidem). Additionally, in the briefly described context of the "sharp confrontation between NATO and Russia", the SNS perceives military neutrality as the "only logical and reasonable solution" for Serbia (Ibidem).

The analysis of the SNS program should certainly be supplemented with an analysis of the program of its far largest and most significant coalition partner, the SPS. Just as in the 2010 SPS Program, where it is stated that this party will provide "full support to the EU accession process" (CIIC, 2010: 24), their 2014

Program Declaration describes the commitment to EU membership as a “strategic and political, historical and civilisational choice” that should lead to the “Europeanization of Serbian society as a whole” (СПС, 2014: 84–85). On the other hand, in both program documents, SPS emphasised that Serbia “should develop the concept of (active) military neutrality”, describing it as non-membership in military alliances while remaining open to various forms of international security cooperation (СПС, 2010 :22; 2014: 86). Much like its larger coalition partner, the SPS describes Serbia’s geostrategic position through the metaphor of a “bridge” or a “crossroads between the West and the East, the North and the South” (СПС, 2010: 24; 2014: 88). In this regard, SPS also supports further development of relations with all major powers, specifically listing them the US first, then Russia and China, followed by India, Brazil, and others (Ibid; 2014: 85).² Overall, it can be concluded that the SPS’s foreign policy principles closely align with those outlined in the SNS’s program.

In practice, already within the initial years of its rule, the SNS-SPS coalition demonstrated a foreign policy strategy that was largely consistent with that of the DS-SPS government. Throughout 2012 and 2013, Serbia reached almost full alignment with the EU’s foreign policy declarations and measures and constructively engaged in the EU-facilitated dialogue with Pristina, characterised by the elevation of negotiations to the highest political level and culminating in the signing of the Brussels Agreement (EC, 2013: 5). On the other hand, Serbia simultaneously deepened its strategic partnership with China (Председник РС, 2013) and obtained observer status in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (PACSTO, 2013). While maintaining good relations with Russia was relatively unproblematic at the time, this began to change sharply by early 2014 – a period characterised by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and support for Donbas rebels, which led the US and EU to respond with sanctions against Moscow. From that moment and even after the Russian open aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the SNS-dominated governments have consistently refused to align with Western sanctions on the Kremlin. In addition, Serbia substantially advanced both its economic and political ties with China in this period, setting itself apart from other Western Balkan countries that prioritised the Euro-Atlantic integration over all other foreign policy relations (Митровић, 2023: 79-80).

2 That being said, it should not be overlooked that the socialists’ latest program document dates a decade ago, while today, especially judging by their actions during the election campaigns, it appears that Russia holds a more favoured position in their stance. See: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/izborna-kampanja-srbija-ratni-zlocini-rusija-invazija-pretnje/32718745.html>.

Government Composition Under SNS Leadership: Reflection of the Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

SNS's balanced foreign policy approach is visible not only through external partnership choices but also through internal choices. Namely, since the SNS came to power in 2012, and especially after the 2014 elections, although the party has typically been able to form a government on its own, it has consistently sought coalition partners. The SNS's attempt to mirror the country's multi-vector foreign policy in domestic political relations is especially reflected in the parties and individuals who, thanks to the will of the SNS, became part of the Serbian government. Despite the official and permanent commitment to strive towards membership in the EU,³ Serbia's governments would also regularly include politicians known for their significant pro-Russian stances, such as Nenad Popović from the Serbian People's Party, Aleksandar Vulin from the Socialist Movement, or nowadays Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski from the Oathkeepers. However, together with these, ministers would also be individuals with notable pro-Western stances, such as the former ambassador to the USA and current minister of Foreign Affairs, Marko Đurić, or minister of European Integration, Professor Tanja Mišćević. By forming these types of "mosaic" governments, the SNS effectively demonstrated a lack of a cohesive foreign policy orientation, allowing President Vučić to navigate the country's foreign policy almost as his personal domain.

The fact that the views and actions of certain government members are sometimes in sharp contrast to their official policy is best exemplified by the statements and actions of the current Deputy Prime Minister and long-serving Minister, Aleksandar Vulin. Namely, he firmly argued that "there is no place for Serbia in the EU", which he described as nearing its end, therefore suggesting that Serbia should seek an alternative offered by BRICS (N1, 2024a). While Deputy PM Vulin met with Putin in Moscow to convince him that Serbia is "not only a strategic partner but also an ally of Russia" (PTC, 2024), just a few months later, Foreign Minister Đurić held talks with the American Deputy Secretary of State on enhancing cooperation and establishing a strategic dialogue between Serbia and the US (Политика, 2025). Moreover, despite the fact that the current Government Programme declares EU membership as a strategic goal, a minister was appointed who just five months prior to their appointment, accused the EU of "denying Serbia the right to exist" while describing European integration as "a process of Serbian disintegration" (Danas, 2023). However, although the

3 For more information, see the archive of Serbia's government programme, available from: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/template/en/2438/keynotes-archive.php>.

selection of minister and their subsequent behaviour, at first glance, suggest notable foreign policy inconsistency, they are, in fact, deliberately crafted to fit into the logic of a multi-vector policy in which a small state “bargains with various external actors and tries to extract benefits from all of them” (Gnedina, 2015: 1024).

Foreign Policy Attitudes of Opposition Parties: Is Anyone Truly Contesting the Multi-Vector Foreign Policy?

Foreign policy attitudes of opposition parties in Serbia should also be examined in relation to the question of where they see the country's future between the West and the East. However, the fact that more than 53% of citizens believe Serbia belongs to neither the West nor the East, along with 14% of those who do not have an answer, demonstrates that the foreign policy of the ruling party is firmly grounded in prevailing public opinion (Spring Insight, 2022: 5). On the other hand, those who explicitly choose sides are divided, with a slightly higher share of citizens believing that Serbia belongs more to the East (19.6%) than to the West (13.2%) (Ibidem). This indicates that the opposition – expected to propose alternatives to government policy and eventually replace it once – would likely be able to rely on only a small share of the electorate if it advocated for a complete foreign policy alignment with one side. In other words, placing Serbia on the imaginary geopolitical map – whether closer to the West or the East – constitutes a challenge that opposition parties must navigate amid the Serbian public, which is, to a large extent, against choosing sides.

The electoral campaign that took place in the first months of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 stands out as a significant case of study on this. At that time, even the parties with the strongest pro-European orientation refrained from taking a clear stance in favour of imposing sanctions on Russia – seen as a very unpopular measure among Serbian voters. For instance, Dragan Đilas – the President of the Party of Freedom and Justice (SSP), often labelled as one of Vučić's key opponents – stated that the opposition condemns the Russian invasion, but his principal position was that Serbia should never impose sanctions on anyone (Euronews 2022). The fact that neither of the pro-European parties in Serbia was willing to even mention imposing sanctions on Russia during the election campaign, while their condemnation of Russia's actions in Ukraine was largely framed in a diplomatic manner, was also well noticed in Radio Free Europe's research. For example, while the Social Democratic Party (SDS) of former President Tadić expressed “support for Ukraine's sovereignty” and the nowadays

Green-Left Front (ZLF) emphasised its “anti-militarist position and commitment to Western values,” it was only the Movement of Free Citizens (PSG) that urged the government to “unequivocally condemn the act of aggression” (RSE, 2022).

Speaking of the current convocation of Serbia’s National Assembly, constituted in February 2024, it comprises 18 parliamentary groups, of which 11 can be labelled as opposition groups. From an ideological standpoint, the opposition parliamentary groups encompass a wide spectrum, ranging from the left and greens, through centre-left and centre-right parties, to the nationalists, right-wing and eco-populists. Precisely because of the large number of opposition groups, as well as the diversity of their ideological stances, it is most suitable from a research perspective to start the analysis with pre-election coalitions.

Serbia Against Violence: A Big Tent Coalition Lacking Unique Foreign Policy Orientation

In this regard, the coalition of opposition parties that won the largest share of votes (23.66%) in the elections participated under the list “Serbia Against Violence” (SPN), bringing together 11 parties, political movements, and citizens’ associations. Developing their platform around the demands of the protests of the same name – “Serbia Against Violence,” the demonstrations’ organisers and future coalition members formalised a “Pact for Victory,” articulated in 10 concise points. However, as this document primarily represents an agreement on the opposition parties’ methodology to replace the government, it offers little in terms of programmatic details while remaining completely silent on foreign policy. After they had already submitted their election list and were deeply involved in the election campaign, SPN representatives were given the opportunity once again to present their program in an interview with Euractiv. Nevertheless, when questioned about their coalition’s position on the EU and sanctions against Russia, they avoided giving a direct response. Instead, they explained that their aim is to form a technical government after winning the elections, which would then prepare new “free and fair elections, where citizens will be able to decide on ideologies, policies and programs” (Euractiv, 2023b). On the other hand, it was emphasised that the coalition’s stance regarding the Kosovo issue was clear – it is an integral part of Serbia and there must not be recognition of it as an independent state (Ibidem). However, this absence of clearly articulated foreign policy stances could be important research finding. It indicates that the unified opposition – even when it is dominantly composed of centre-left and few centre-right parties, many of which hold strongly pro-European positions – struggles to identify common ground on foreign policy matters.

Left-centre SSP stands out as individually the strongest political party within the SPN coalition. As an observer within the Party of European Socialists (PES), SSP strongly supports Serbia's EU accession process. At the very outset of its programme platform, the SSP pledges to fundamentally restore the European integration process to ensure Serbia becomes a full member of the EU in the shortest possible time (CCII, 2022: 2). Unlike the ruling SNS and SPS, which, alongside European integration, advocate for balanced cooperation with other major powers (such as the US, Russia and China), the SSP exclusively highlights strengthening relations with the EU and the US, thereby clearly affirming its pro-Western orientation (Ibidem: 6). Although before the April 2022 elections, the SSP president emphasised that Serbia should never impose sanctions on anyone, shortly after, he adjusted his position, stating that while he remains "principally against sanctions on Russia," Serbia is in a situation "where it has no choice" (Danas, 2022). Later that year, Đilas stated that "the policy of cooperation with everyone is no longer possible," adding that "neutrality at this moment is perceived as siding with the other side" (N1, 2022b). However, SSP's programme contains explicit guarantees regarding the preservation of Serbia's military neutral status, which appears to be interpreted by this party in a very narrow sense – as the absence of membership in military alliances (CCII, 2022: 6). When it comes to regional relations, the SSP outlines its dedication to resolving open issues with neighbouring countries while ensuring the protection of the rights and interests of the Serbian people in the region, including cultivating special ties with the Republic of Srpska. Regarding the Kosovo issue, the SSP proposes the adoption of a Declaration on Reconciliation between the Serbian and Albanian peoples, intended to bring genuine normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina while respecting the Constitution of Serbia and UN Security Council Resolution 1244. In a nutshell, it can be concluded that the SSP unequivocally holds pro-Western foreign policy positions, though it also recognises the importance of protecting Serbian national interests concerning Kosovo and the Republic of Srpska.

The equally strong parliamentary group emerging from the SPN coalition is the centre-right group, comprising ten MPs from the People's Movement of Serbia (NPS) and two from the New Face of Serbia (NLS). The NPS supports Serbia's membership in the EU, perceiving it as a "path towards building the state in line with European values" rather than simply a standalone goal (HIIC, n.d.). However, this party considers that this should exclude cooperation with other major international partners, including the USA and countries of BRICS (Ibidem). In that regard, the NPS wish Serbia to be "a meeting point of East and West, promoting peace, solidarity, and regional cooperation in line with the baseline principle

of military neutrality” (Ibidem). In a similar way, the NLS highlights that Serbia stands as “the East to the West, and the West to the East”, which is why this party advocates for both military and political neutrality and foreign policy based on four pillars (HJC, 2023: 12). Additionally, the NLS offers concise analyses of the key foreign policy factors shaping Serbia’s relations with the EU, the US, Russia, and China, highlighting the benefits and drawbacks of cooperation with each, yet refraining from establishing a hierarchy of their significance to Serbia. Although the NLS acknowledges the EU’s significance, both as an economic union and a peace project that upholds the highest civil rights, it contends that the EU is currently uninterested in the enlargement (Ibidem). Therefore, Serbia must not be “servile” towards the EU, particularly regarding issues related to Kosovo or family values, which are supposedly undermined by the EU laws incompatible with Serbian culture and tradition (Ibidem). To summarise, although both the NPS and NLS lean towards conservative social values and endorse a diversified foreign policy, the NPS favours Serbia’s EU accession process, in contrast to the NLS, which is much more sceptical about it.

The third-largest parliamentary group resulting from the SPN coalition is the ZLF, built upon the programmatic foundations of the “Don’t Let Belgrade D(ri)own” movement and the unification of several other local initiatives with similar ideological orientations. As a full member of the transnational European Green Party (EGP), the ZLF (n.d.) determines EU accession as its goal, emphasising that European integration represents “an important step towards a stable and just state.” Moreover, the ZLF regards European values, together with the broader European political and cultural environment, as essential components in shaping Serbia’s development. In that regard, ZLF’s parliamentary group president, Radomir Lazović, stated that his party believes Serbia should align its foreign policy with the EU on all matters, including Russia, though he avoided being explicit about the sanctions (NIN, 2024). However, when it comes to NATO, Lazović considers that Serbia does not belong there and should remain neutral (N1, 2022a). In line with ZLF’s position on the EU as Serbia’s strategic direction, Lazović emphasised that the Kosovo issue should also be part of a European solution for Serbia, which would include substantial autonomy for Kosovo Serbs as a safeguard of their vital interests (N1, 2024b). While he stopped short of explicitly clarifying ZLF’s position on Kosovo’s status, he underlined that a frozen conflict would be the most tragic outcome and questioned how to coexist with people unwilling to live in Serbia, thus implying that Kosovo’s reintegration is unrealistic (Ibidem). In this regard, ZLF has shown a willingness to accept the so-called Franco-German plan for Kosovo, which would effectively commit Serbia to an

implicit recognition of Kosovo through the acceptance of its passports, national symbols, and membership in international organisations, on the condition that it ensures meaningful autonomy and protection for Serbs and Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo (NIN, 2024). In essence, the foreign policy views of the ZLF can be described as fully pro-European, reflected in their support for resolving the Kosovo issue through the framework of the Brussels dialogue and their clear distancing from undemocratic Eastern powers.

Most of the other MPs elected from the SPN list are organised within two parliamentary groups headed by the Serbia Centre (SRCE) and the DS. The remaining five belong to the eco-populist group Ecological Uprising,⁴ while three members of the liberal association PSG operate jointly with representatives of the Bosniak and Albanian minorities. The SRCE and the DS are the only political organisations advocating for the adoption of the country's Foreign Policy Strategy in which EU membership would be defined as a foreign policy priority (ĐC, n.d.; CPIJE, 2023: 72). Both parties support Serbia's military-neutral status, for which the DS insists on being operationalised in the Foreign Policy Strategy, while the SRCE considers it compatible with international security cooperation, particularly with NATO through the Partnership for Peace and its Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission (Ibidem:81). However, while the SRCE advocates for the improvement of strategic cooperation with the USA, a continuation of cooperation with China, and the preservation of good relations with Russia (Ibidem: 73), the DS does not mention other foreign policy partners in its programme. Although the DS and the SRCE share a stance on the importance of safeguarding the rights and interests of the Serbian community and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo, the SRCE is explicit regarding red lines in the dialogue with Pristina – specifically, the rejection of both implicit and explicit recognition of Kosovo, as well as its potential UN membership (Ibidem: 75).

Despite being formally registered as a citizens' association and holding only three parliamentary seats, PSG's foreign policy agenda differs notably from most of the opposition parties in Serbia, which makes it worthy of special consideration. As the first point of its Political Platform, PSG (n.d.) prioritises "ending the policy of balancing between East and West and a clear alignment with European values and standards." Furthermore, it explicitly advocates for imposing sanctions against Russia and joining all other EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) decisions. While there is no explicit call for NATO membership, PSG

4 Given that Ecological Uprising's programme documents do not contain any foreign policy content, and considering its objectively small impact on Serbia's political landscape, it has not been included in the analysis.

believes that Serbia cannot afford neutrality and that not only European but also Euro-Atlantic integration represents the only sustainable foreign policy trajectory. Regarding its policy on Kosovo, PSG shares a similar stance with the ZLF, prioritising better living standards for the Serbian community and protection of cultural and historical heritage while endorsing the Franco-German plan (i.e., the Ohrid Agreement) for Kosovo. By being a full member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) since 2022, PSG positions itself as arguably the most pro-European political force in Serbia, though it remains largely marginalised in the country's political life.

National Democratic Alternative: Both Military and Political Neutrality

The National Democratic Alternative (NADA, also meaning “hope” in Serbian) is a right-wing coalition led by the New DSS and the Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia (POKS), which represents individually the largest opposition group in the Serbian Assembly. Established in January 2021 through an Agreement on Joint Political Action between the DSS and POKS, NADA participated in the 2022 and 2023 elections, achieving 5.37% and 5.02% of the votes, respectively. The first point of the coalition agreement outlined the defense of Serbian national interests in KiM, the Republic of Srpska, and wherever Serbs live, alongside a commitment to maintaining and strengthening Serbia's military neutrality and dedication to political neutrality (НАДА, 2021). They describe their Euroscepticism as a realistic rather than anti-European policy, arguing that, on the one hand, it is unacceptable to recognise the secession of part of the territory in exchange for EU membership, while on the other, the EU is unlikely to admit new members in the foreseeable future (Euractiv, 2023a). In that context, the NADA strongly opposes the Franco-German proposal and advocates for the continuation of diplomatic efforts to secure the withdrawal of Kosovo recognitions (Ibidem). Additionally, the NADA is firmly against the introduction of any sanctions against Russia, considering them detrimental to the vital security and economic interests of Serbia (Ibidem). However, it should be noted that the NADA recognises the importance of comprehensive cooperation with the EU and does not advocate for further rapprochement with Russia but political equidistance from the East and the West.

Nevertheless, while the New DSS explicitly calls for the halting of European integration and a referendum on political neutrality in its programme (Нови ДСС, n.d.), POKS already, in its Statute lists EU accession as one of its programme goals (ПООКС, 2017а, члан 1). Rooted in the Europeanism of the Kingdom of Serbia

and recalling the sacrifices made by the Serbian people for freedom and the values now embedded in the EU, POKS believes that Serbia should join those “to whom it has always belonged” (ПНОКС, 2017b: 11). On the other hand, while rejecting EU membership, the New DSS advocates for comprehensive cooperation with the EU, taking inspiration from the Swiss model of bilateral agreements or the Norwegian model of joining the European Economic Area (НОВИ ДСС, n.d.). Speaking about relations with other major powers, the New DSS prioritises cultivating friendly ties with Russia, followed by China, India and the USA (НОВИ ДСС, n.d.), while these countries (excluding India) also appear in the same order in POKS’s programme (ПНОКС, 2017b: 12). While the New DSS and POKS are united in the belief that Kosovo and Metohija are an inseparable part of Serbia, the New DSS considers the EU’s involvement in Kosovo’s “seizure from Serbia” as the primary cause for shifting the country’s relations with the EU to one of political neutrality (НОВИ ДСС, n.d.). In practice, the impression is that the influence of the more dominant partner (New DSS) has prevailed within the NADA coalition, advocating that Serbia should abandon its EU accession process and instead focus on establishing its relationship with the EU based on economic and other forms of partnership, without seeking membership.

We – The Voice from the People: Right-wing anti-Western populists

The third opposition list to surpass the electoral threshold was the “We – The Voice from the People” (МИ–ГИН) movement, led by pulmonologist Branimir Nestorović, known for his controversial views and promotion of conspiracy theories. However, shortly after the elections, the movement split due to personal disagreements among its founders, resulting in MPs elected from this list now operating within two ideologically nearly identical parliamentary groups. Nestorović left the MI–ГИН with four other MPs to establish the “We – Power of the People” (МИ–СН) movement. As its primary programmatic goal, this movement states the “reintegration of the currently occupied KiM into Serbia’s constitutional and legal order,” advocating for the cessation of European integration (МИ–СН, n.d. -b). By characterising Russia and Belarus as “friendly countries,” the MI–СН supports intensifying cooperation with BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Ibidem). This movement opposes the alleged “falsehoods about climate change propagated by the West” and commits to “eliminating the neoliberal-globalist influence from state-run media” (МИ–СН, n.d. -a).

In a similar way, the MI–ГИН movement opposes the European integration process, arguing that the Serbian regime is progressively turning the country into a “Western colony” and that, thereby, Serbia needs a “decolonisation” (МИ–ГИН,

n.d. -a). From a foreign policy perspective, apart from revising relations with the EU, this “decolonisation” involves eliminating foreign NGOs’ influence, ceasing cooperation with the Ohio National Guard, and promoting partnerships with friendly states that did not recognise Kosovo (Ibidem). In that regard, this movement proudly shared that it was, as the only political entity from Serbia, present at the BRICS Summit in Sochi,⁵ where its representatives reportedly held meetings with high-ranking officials from the Russian Federation, as well as with representatives from China, India, the German AfD, and others (МИ-ГН, n.d. -c). Furthermore, in its programmatic principles for KiM, MI-GN explicitly states that what truly matters is a territory, which is why the movement suggests a range of measures aimed at restoring Serbia’s sovereignty over Kosovo, including having the Serbian army back to the province (МИ-ГН, n.d. -b). Overall, while Nestorović’s MI-SN can primarily be described as a populist and anti-globalist movement, MI-GN’s program embraces certain notably radical and extremist principles. Although both the MI-SN and MI-GN strongly emphasise the reintegration of Kosovo into Serbia as a goal, the second one seems more inclined to accept a military solution to this issue, emphasising the primary importance of the territory as such rather than the people living there.

Concluding Remarks

As illustrated in this paper, the unilateral declaration of Kosovo’s independence, recognised and promoted by the US and most EU member states, has largely reshaped not only Serbia’s official foreign policy but also the wider foreign policy perspectives of political parties. It has led not only the DSS to abandon Serbia’s European path and advocate for political neutrality but also caused DS to diversify the country’s foreign policy in practice, opening the door to strategic partnerships with other major countries, primarily Russia and China. The frustration stemming from Kosovo’s secession, backed by the West, has made Serbian public opinion prone to right-wing populism, which proposes an alternative by turning to BRICS while also advocating for the reintegration of Kosovo into Serbia, implicitly leaving the military option for achieving this open.

Research findings further confirmed that military neutrality, proclaimed in response to Kosovo’s anticipated unilateral secession, has now become an

5 It is apparent that the term “summit” was incorrectly used by the MI-GN movement, as it is typically used in international relations when referring to the meetings at the highest level between heads of state or government, whereas what was described here was, in fact, some kind of international conference.

indisputable element of Serbia's foreign policy. While EU membership is considered the primary foreign policy objective within the SPN coalition, its members have no consensus on whether this should imply abandoning partnerships with other major powers, including imposing sanctions on Russia. Additionally, the members of this coalition differ in terms of how far they are willing to go in pursuing a compromise solution to the Kosovo issue in order for Serbia to join the EU. These two issues hinder the formation of a truly united, pro-European opposition bloc in Serbia, while also indicating that many opposition parties do not fundamentally challenge the official multi-vector foreign policy. Adding to this the fact that right-wing parties advocate for halting the EU accession process, it can be concluded that the pursuit of EU membership is no longer an indisputable aspect of Serbia's foreign policy, if it ever was.

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