

DEMOCRACY AND ITS ABUSE - MALIGNANT INFLUENCES ON SERBIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND SECURITY ORIENTATION*

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ABSTRACT

The marginal areas of Europe can threaten the legal, economic, and democratic achievements of the European Union. Conflicts, crises, and extreme political options affect political and democratic trends in Europe. The Western Balkans' approach to European and Euro-Atlantic integration affects the EU's stability and democracy. Russia maintains the Western Balkans as a potential hotbed of crises that drain democratic resources and relativize the political achievements of the EU. A paper analyzes Russia's hybrid forms of action towards the countries of the Western Balkans. Russia seeks to expand its area of influence through Serbia's media, energy, and political influence. Russia encourages Serbia's frustrations to stop its European integration and distance it from cooperation with NATO. These findings should generate a broader horizon of the national interest of transforming the Balkans into a region of stability and prosperity, which would achieve the strengthening of the general values, political and democratic achievements of the EU.

Keywords: Balkans, CSDP, EU, hybrid warfare, Russia, Serbia

* The paper is part of Strategic Research Institute research project „Security challenges of the Western Balkan countries in the European security paradigm“, No 46-24/21.04.2023.

1. GENERAL GEOPOLITICAL FRAMEWORK

Determining the geopolitical framework of the Republic of Serbia may seem like a straightforward task. However, defining the concept of geopolitics itself can pose a challenge. Some researchers follow the interpretation by political geographers Van der Wusten and Dijkink, who define geopolitics in three ways: as an analytical approach that considers a country's international position in light of its geographical characteristics, a set of rules for managing the state based on this analysis, and a discourse that describes and evaluates the country's position in the world, using such analyses and rules.¹ Geopolitical analyses that consider both geographical and political factors are essential for understanding the state of a country or region. Zbigniew Brzezinski, a well-known political scientist and geostrategist, explains the influence of geography on politics and its role in shaping the geopolitical landscape.²

In the 21st century, alternative postmodern geopolitics is challenging traditional geopolitical approaches. Sophisticated models of systemic geopolitics focus on the imbalance of international relations to predict peaceful collaboration between nations. Trilateralism envisions democratic and autocratic entities coexisting sustainably for a multilateral world. Richard Haas proposes a non-polar world based on the global structure and multinational organizations.³ Haas argued that the multipolar world failed due to the clash of liberalism, communism, and fascism. The bipolar world ended with the "Cold War," and we are now experiencing a brief unipolar moment that will be replaced by a non-polar world, where non-state actors hold power. Haas emphasizes the need for multilateral cooperation among these actors, promoting a networked structure of coordinated non-polarity over the traditional nation-state system.⁴

The world adapts quickly to changes essential for the evolution of civilization. The EU's foreign and security policy must adapt to geopolitical reality without imposing a rigid order. Unfortunately, peripheral European areas create crises that threaten the EU's legal, economic, and democratic achievements. Conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, and the Caucasus, along with humanitarian crises, illegal migration, hybrid democratic regimes, and extreme politics, affect EU political and

¹ Van der Wusten, H.; G. Dijkink, *German, British and French Geopolitics: The Enduring Differences*, Geopolitics, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2002, pp. 19-38.

² Brzezinski, Z., *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, 1997.

³ Haas, R. N., *The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance*, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 87, No. 3, 2008, pp. 44-56.

⁴ *Ibid.*

democratic trends. Peace in Europe and the global perspective of civilization are threatened as never before.

The US election raised concerns about NATO's principles. EU values its relationship with the US but understands the importance of self-sufficiency. Europe recognizes the threats posed by Russia and China and is committed to investing in defense collaboratively. It cannot rely solely on the US for security.

A peaceful solution to the war in Ukraine seems unlikely due to Russia's inflexible war goals. Russia seeks to boost its military capabilities, which could be achieved through a "frozen conflict" agreement. However, it is essential to note that the term "frozen conflict" may be exploited for political gain. Therefore, the European Union must ensure that Ukraine emerges victorious in war and peace.

The EU must support Ukraine while addressing internal cohesion challenges. Modern conflicts are not limited by distance. The consensus principle of agreement obstructs quick responses to security threats. Southeastern Europe is integral to the continent. The Western Balkans' inconsistent approach affects the region's democracy and stability. Political elites promote outdated populist ideas, encouraging internal conflicts.

1.1. Characteristics of contemporary conflicts and hotspots

Europe faces a critical moment in a changing global environment with no clear path to peace, stability, and prosperity. Recent conflicts have disrupted traditional geopolitical order and challenged long-standing security principles. Russia's aggression against Ukraine exposed the weaknesses of the European security architecture.⁵ The EU needs a swift review of its security policy to become a strong deterrent and respond effectively to modern threats. Victory in future conflicts relies on alliances shaped by technology, politics, and the economy. Concerns over conflicts between major powers are valid, leading to increased military spending and changes in warfare.⁶ Commitment is expected to increase, and new bilateral and multilateral relationships will be established. These relationships will first identify common security interests and strengthen and improve support. The war

⁵ Borrell, J., *The war against Ukraine and European security*, 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/war-against-ukraine-and-european-security_en], Accessed 18 March 2024.; Tocci, N., *How Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine Transformed Europe*. 2023, [<https://www.socialeurope.eu/how-the-war-in-ukraine-has-transformed-the-eu>], Accessed 10 March 2024.

⁶ Fang, S., *et al.*, To Concede or to Resist? The Restraining Effect of Military Alliances, *International Organization*, Vol. 68, No. 4 2014, pp. 775–809; Leeds, B. A., Do Alliances Deter Aggression? The Influence of Military Alliances on the Initiation of Militarized Interstate Disputes, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 2003, pp. 427–439.

in Ukraine reminds us how devastating wars between state entities can be and highlights the real threat posed by authoritarian regimes' imperial ambitions.

The rise of unmanned weapon systems defines the war in Ukraine. These systems are becoming more precise with affordable components. However, both sides face challenges due to the rapid depletion of supplies and inadequate production capabilities, which hinder their ability to meet the demands of the battlefield.⁷ During the war, it became clear that the world, especially the EU, was unprepared. Recently, the US introduced a National Defense Industrial Strategy to tackle its lack of capacity, responsiveness, and resilience—the first strategy in history.⁸ At the same time, the European Union adopted the Agreement on increasing production capacity to respond to the impossibility of delivering the required amount of ammunition to Ukraine.⁹ Meanwhile, the Russian economy became reliant on the war effort, with 3.5 million employees in the defense industry and importing ammunition from Iran and North Korea.¹⁰ Russia's military-industrial resilience points to the weaknesses of the international sanctions regime, which should be designed in a more efficient and functional way.¹¹

Both Ukraine and Russia are worn out from the war, with heavy losses and supply issues rendering their offensives ineffective. However, Ukraine has managed to prevent Russian offensives, strike the Black Sea Fleet, improve air defense, and

⁷ Gressel, G., *Beyond the counter-offensive: Attrition, stalemate, and the future of the war in Ukraine*. Council of the EU and the European Council, 2024, [<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/documents-publications/library/library-blog/posts/think-tank-reports-on-the-invasion-of-ukraine/>], Accessed 15 March 2024.

⁸ Clark, J., *DOD Releases First Defense Industrial Strategy*, 2024: National Defense Industrial Strategy 2023, Department of Defense, [<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3644527/dod-releases-first-defense-industrial-strategy/>], Accessed 10 March 2024.

⁹ The Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) at a glance, European Commission, 2024, [https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-defence-industry/asap-boosting-defence-production_en], Accessed 10 March 2024.

¹⁰ Lillis, K. *et al.*, *Exclusive: Russia producing three times more artillery shells than US and Europe for Ukraine*, CNN, 2024, [<https://ktvz.com/politics/cnn-us-politics/2024/03/11/exclusive-russia-producing-three-times-more-artillery-shells-than-us-and-europe-for-ukraine-2/>], Accessed 11 March 2024; Bermudez Jr. J., Cha, V. and Jun, J., *Major Munitions Transfers from North Korea to Russia*, CSIS, 2024, [<https://beyondparallel.csis.org/major-munitions-transfers-from-north-korea-to-russia/>], Accessed 10 March 2024.

¹¹ Russian Military Performance and Outlook, Congressional Research Service, 2024, [<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12606>], Accessed 11 March 2024.; Stewart, B., *Russia is facing more than 16,000 sanctions — so why hasn't its economy buckled?* CBC News, 2024. [<https://www.cbc.ca/lite/story/1.7141305>], Accessed 12 March 2024.

integrate long-range missiles into their operations.¹² Although it did not achieve territorial gains, provide non-Western support, or deliver the necessary ammunition supplies, it failed to halt Russian defense production.¹³ It is reasonable to predict that in 2024, Russia and Ukraine will have achieved technological and tactical parity, resulting in defense operations without any operational or strategic successes on either side.

War is complex because it involves difficult decisions and can lead to devastating consequences. Sadly, the number of armed conflicts in the world is only increasing, particularly those involving non-state parties.¹⁴ An example of the current conflict between Israel and Hamas illustrates the drastic asymmetry in military capabilities, which has led to the development of new means and methods to fight the enemy.¹⁵ Civilian populations are often at the forefront of modern conflicts, as governments and armed groups require their support to maintain legitimacy. Unfortunately, civilians are also the most vulnerable group in these conflicts, and neither side tends to prioritize their well-being or protection.

In addition, in the last two decades, an increasing number of parties have become involved in armed conflicts, making them more complex and difficult to resolve.¹⁶ Modern warfare has evolved from traditional confrontation between two states to a situation where multiple actors fight in the same space. That is evident in civil wars like those in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. State actors often use mediators to carry out combat operations on the conflict's territory to further their goals and interests.¹⁷

The proliferation of armed groups and the increasing number of states willing to intervene in foreign conflicts contribute to modern warfare's complex and multifaceted nature. While the West's attention has been primarily focused on the

¹² Dickinson, P., *Ukraine's Black Sea success exposes folly of West's "don't escalate" mantra*, Atlantic Council, 2024, [<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-black-sea-success-provides-a-blueprint-for-victory-over-putin/>], Accessed 5 March 2024.

¹³ Watling, J.; Reynolds, N., *Russian Military Objectives and Capacity in Ukraine Through 2024*, RUSI, 2024.

¹⁴ Herre, B.; Rodés-Guirao, L.; Roser, M.; Hasell, J.; Macdonald, B., *War and Peace*, 2023, [OurWorldInData.org].

¹⁵ Cronin, A. K., *Hamas's Asymmetric Advantage What Does It Mean to Defeat a Terrorist Group?* Foreign Affairs, 2023, [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/hamas-asymmetric-advantage-gaza-cronin>], Accessed 13 March 2024.

¹⁶ Complex conflict characteristics, ICRC, 2024, [<https://sri.icrc.org/risks-opportunities/complex-conflicts/complex-conflict-characteristics>], Accessed 12 March 2024.

¹⁷ Mitrović, M.; Nikolić, N., *Hibridni rat*. Medija centar 'Odbrana', Beograd, 2022.

conflict in Ukraine, the reality is that the nature of warfare has evolved beyond the traditional state-to-state confrontations to include multiple actors fighting within the same operational space. That is evident in the ongoing civil wars in countries like Syria, Yemen, and Libya, where the number of armed groups involved is complex to ascertain, along with the involvement of foreign nations either directly or indirectly. State actors often use intermediaries to carry out military operations in these conflicts to achieve their goals and interests.¹⁸ The things mentioned above have significant implications for prolonging the conflict and for post-conflict rehabilitation after the conflict ends. As a result, support relationships are expected to remain relevant in the years to come.

The factors that shape modern warfare include the significant impact of advanced combat techniques on operational strategies, the evolving role of space in the battlefield and the utilization of space technology and artificial intelligence, the growing significance of long-range and high-altitude operations, the increased deployment of special forces, and the professionalization of armed forces.¹⁹ In modern times, the chance of an unexpected attack has decreased. However, propaganda and information activities have become crucial in supporting war efforts. The rapid technological revolution and its effect on the defense industry have made it necessary to train soldiers in a way that matches the development of combat systems.²⁰

The technological revolution calls for the integration of the private sector in the war. The private sector will represent a complementary sixth domain in addition to the five domains of warfare. This integration will be realized through contractual arrangements with top cybersecurity providers and communication companies. Training and exercises will be included in the national defense budgets. An excellent example is SpaceX, which operates the Starlink satellite internet constellation, proven critical on the battlefield in Ukraine.²¹

1.2. The impact of contemporary conflicts on the EU

Conflicts can originate locally but quickly escalate and cause widespread national, regional, and global consequences due to external interests. The EU countries'

¹⁸ Watts, S. *et al.*, *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: State Motivations and Future Trends*. RAND, Santa Monica, 2023.

¹⁹ Rațiu, A.; Roșu, O., *The impact of some emerging technologies in modern military actions*, Scientific Bulletin Vol. XXVI, No. 2(52), 2021, pp. 188-194.

²⁰ Cohen, R. *et al.*, *The Future of Warfare in 2030: Project Overview and Conclusions*, RAND, Santa Monica, 2020

²¹ Kramer, F., *The sixth domain: The role of the private sector in warfare*, Atlantic Council, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, 2023.

growing reliance on multinational corporations with advanced technological domains, such as the United States of America and China, suggests higher convergence and homogeneity. However, symmetrical shocks like the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the abandonment of industrial policy for export competitiveness have led to systemic divergence and polarization, not only between member states but also within them. The war in Ukraine has highlighted the need for the European Union to re-examine its internal organization and view of the world. That is necessary to address the challenges of collective security and democratic values.²²

The recent European conflict is the most significant since the Second World War. Unfortunately, it is likely to negatively impact the economic growth of the European Union countries.²³ The increased lack of certainty will negatively affect both consumption and investment. The sanctions imposed on Russia will also lead to rising energy prices and inflation. The European Union's economy has displayed vulnerability due to a high dependence on Russian energy and certain crucial raw materials and semi-products such as iron, grains, and artificial fertilizers. The automotive sector has experienced a significant slowdown due to disruptions in the supply of palladium and nickel.²⁴ The European Union has recently agreed to take steps towards strengthening its economic resilience by significantly reducing its dependence on energy imports from Russia. In addition to this, the EU has also committed to systematically improving its defense capabilities. This decision reflects Brussels' recognition of the strategic importance of positioning itself well in light of the inevitable changes in the global geopolitical order.

In 2022, Vladimir Putin's attack on Ukraine backfired. The Ukrainian army resisted, and the West united against Russia. The Russian economy suffered, with the ruble losing value and inflation increasing.²⁵ Many multinational companies have already left or are in the process of leaving Russia. At the same time, Russia's military spending has been increasing significantly. Although the Russian economy

²² Håkansson, C., *The Ukraine war and the emergence of the European commission as a geopolitical actor*, *Journal of European Integration*, 46:1, 2024, pp. 25-45.

²³ Tocci, N., *How the war in Ukraine has transformed the EU*. Social Europe, 2023, [<https://www.iwm.at/europes-futures/publication/how-russias-full-scale-invasion-of-ukraine-transformed-europe/>], Accessed 18 March 2024.

²⁴ Hache, E., *Russian metals: another headache for manufacturers*, Polytechnique Insights, 2022, [<https://www.polytechnique-insights.com/en/braincamps/geopolitics/industry-autonomy-scarcity-the-ripples-of-war-in-ukraine/russian-metals-another-headache-for-manufacturers/>], Accessed 18 March 2024.

²⁵ Marrow, A., *Russian rouble set for steady decline back past 100 vs dollar in 2024*, Reuters, 2023, [<https://www.reuters.com/markets/currencies/russian-rouble-set-steady-decline-back-past-100-vs-dollar-2024-2023-11-03/>], Accessed 16 March 2024.

is predicted to decline in 2024, the country's gross domestic product is expected to grow between 1.5% and 2.6% due to the rise in oil prices and the increase in military-industrial production.²⁶ High military spending will certainly help Russia in the short term, but the long-term outlook for the Russian economy, which has come to depend on war, is bleak.

The European Union has agreed to bear the cost of ending the war on European soil, as the future of European security and democracy depends on it. All EU member countries have realized the need to increase their defense spending, not just in quantity but also in terms of integration and coordination, thereby enhancing the quality of their defense capabilities.²⁷

Europe is committed to improving security and defense capabilities in an increasingly unstable world. However, irresponsible statements made during the US election campaign have called into question the postulates of Euro-Atlantic values and collective security. That has led the European Union to reinvigorate the idea of greater European military integration through the European Defense Union. Although this initiative would rely on NATO's capabilities, it would not require the principle of consensus in decision-making.²⁸ The Alliance may elect a new NATO Secretary General from the eastern wing of EU. EU may establish a commissioner for security and defense to increase defense industry production capacities. EU is allocating more resources towards defense, with Germany contributing the most²⁹, and Estonia in relative terms with 2.62% of gross national income³⁰. Denmark donated all artillery capabilities and ammunition to Ukraine, along with 2.31% of its gross national income as aid.³¹

²⁶ At a Glance (Russia). International Monetary Fund, 2024, [<https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/RUS>], Accessed 19 March 2024.

²⁷ Borrell, J., *Investing more together in Europe's defence*, EEAS EU, 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/investing-more-together-europe%E2%80%99s-defence_en], Accessed 19 March 2024.

²⁸ Jones, M., *'Reckless': Trump's threat to NATO allies sparks fierce backlash in Europe*, Euronews, 2024, [<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/02/12/reckless-trumps-threat-to-nato-allies-sparks-fierce-backlash-in-europe>], Accessed 20 March 2024.

²⁹ Mölling, C.; Schütz, T., *Germany's Defense Budget 2024 - The Planned Increase Is Not Yet Enough*, German Council on Foreign Relations, 2023. 1, [<https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/germanys-defense-budget-2024>], Accessed 20 March 2024.

³⁰ Psychogiou, V., *A historical record: Estonia's 2022 defence budget increases to 2.3% of the GDP*, Finabel, 2022, [<https://finabel.org/a-historical-record-estonias-2022-defence-budget-increases-to-2-3-of-the-gdp/>], Accessed 20 March 2024.

³¹ Ostiller, N., *Denmark announces new military aid package for Ukraine worth \$336 million*, The Kyiv Independent, 2024,

Germany has abandoned its traditional pacifist position and is responsible for European defense. The new German Defense Policy Guidelines, presented in November 2023, have defined Russia as the greatest threat to Germany's security, and the Bundeswehr has been given a new central task - warfare.³² Germany is focusing on improving military cooperation with Indo-Pacific nations like India, Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, and Japan. This shift could make Germany the world's third military power and aligns with its global interests, supported by alliances within the Euro-Atlantic Alliance and its economic power.³³

1.3. The transfer of conflicts to Southeast Europe and the destabilizing potential of the EU

The Ukraine war caused Southeast European countries to increase military spending and focus on security. The Middle Eastern crisis decreased arms and military equipment deliveries to Ukraine, highlighting potential Russian influence in the Western Balkans and affecting the involvement of the West. Russian influence in the Western Balkans is aimed at preventing European integration and any rapprochement with the European Union.³⁴ Putin responded to Ukraine's move towards closer European integration with a full-scale invasion. Serbia's dependence on Russian gas complicates the situation. Despite recognizing Ukraine's territorial integrity, Serbia heavily relies on Russia's support in the UN Security Council regarding Kosovo's final status, preventing them from joining Western sanctions against Moscow.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Serbia has seen a sharp increase in the number of Russian citizens and companies operating in the country. That has led to a rise in real estate rental and consumer prices. During this period, 1,612 companies and 7,511 entrepreneurs from the Russian Federation were registered with the Agency for Business Registers, compared to only 58 companies and 71 entrepreneurs from Ukraine.³⁵ Serbia is becoming a popular destination for

[<https://kyivindependent.com/denmark-announces-new-military-aid-package-for-ukraine-worth-336-million/>], Accessed 20 March 2024.

³² Schreer, B. *Germany's new defence-policy guidelines*, IISS, 2023, [<https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/11/germanys-new-defence-policy-guidelines/>], Accessed 3 March 2024.

³³ Milenović, N. *et al.*, *Serbia and Germany-from Suspicion to Trust*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015.

³⁴ Russia and the Western Balkans Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference. European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022, [[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)747096_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf)], Accessed 5 March 2024.

³⁵ APR, 2024, [<https://apr.gov.rs/pocetna.1898.html>], Accessed 5 March 2024.

Russians due to the absence of visa requirements and low tax rates. The country also provides easy access to the European Union market. Despite media portrayals, the majority of the Russian community in Serbia does not support Putin's policies. Serbia aims to join the EU and has made progress in economic integration, but some politicians prioritize relations with Russia over vital interests. The only unresolved issue related to EU integration is Serbia's alignment with the CSDP and sanctions against Russia.

2. RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE VECTORS IN PREVIOUS CONFLICTS

Vladimir Putin called the fall of the Soviet Union the worst geopolitical disaster of the 20th century. The color revolutions - Rose, Orange, Tulip, and Velvet - showed that Russia might lose its sphere of influence, forcing Kremlin to consider soft power combined with hybrid warfare. Russia aims to increase its influence through soft power and traditional diplomacy. Nye says soft power relies on culture, political values, and foreign policy.³⁶ Hybrid warfare is a military strategy that combines conventional warfare with unconventional tools, such as using paramilitary groups, implementing economic sanctions, spreading propaganda and fake news, influencing a nation's morale, and conducting cyber operations against the opposition.³⁷

The fear of Western soft power has led to Russia's destructive use of soft power, which aims to manipulate public opinion through funding cultural and minority rights projects abroad. This subversive use of soft power poses a security threat to the European Union and countries in the Russian zone of interest.

The conflict in Ukraine highlights the use of aggressive tactics in soft power and hybrid warfare. Russia relied on cyberspace and social media networks to impact morale on both sides.³⁸ Russia's aggressive intelligence activities, obstruction of energy diversification, and digital authoritarianism are threatening Southeast Europe. In addition to these, the implementation of Russian compatriot policy, marketing of fragmented history about fraternal relations, and imposition of a narrative about Russia's economic dominance are also part of the malignant influence of Russia in the region. Lack of adequate resistance in the region makes it partly a victim of Russian foreign policy.

³⁶ Nye, J., *Power and foreign policy*, Journal of Political Power, No. 4:1, 2011, pp. 9-24.

³⁷ Mitrović, M.; Nikolić, N., *op. cit.*, pp. 145-150.

³⁸ Duguin, S.; Pavlova, P., *The role of cyber in the Russian war against Ukraine: Its impact and the consequences for the future of armed conflict*, European Union, 2023, [[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/702594/EXPO_BRI\(2023\)702594_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/702594/EXPO_BRI(2023)702594_EN.pdf)], Accessed 5 March 2024.

3. ABUSE OF DEMOCRACY - SERBIA UNDER RUSSIA'S "HARSH" POWER ATTACK

Research supports the conclusion that Serbia, like the entire Balkans, is a training ground for hybrid warfare.³⁹ We aim to analyze Russia's hybrid action toward Serbia by examining the environment, strategic determinations, motives, models of action, instruments, and entities involved in exerting influence. Additionally, we will summarize the observed goals and evaluate the achieved results.

3.1. Frame

Russia's actions towards Serbia's national security goals⁴⁰ mainly target two key issues - EU integration (a foreign policy concern) and the status and relationship with Kosovo (a security, internal political, and foreign policy concern).

3.1.1. EU integration

Serbia achieved only a moderate level of preparedness in foreign relations by 2023, and no progress was recorded overall. As of August 2023, its compliance with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy was only 51%. This was due to disagreements on restrictive measures against Russia and statements regarding Russia and Ukraine. Serbia also disagreed with statements on human resources and EU restrictive measures against Russia, China, Belarus, and Iran.⁴¹

From the point of view of Russia and EU integration, it should be emphasized that Russia does not place either the Western Balkans region or Serbia in the focus of its foreign policy activities or the achievement of its future strategic goals.⁴² Russian foreign policy places Western Balkans, including Serbia, outside its priority focus. That suggests this region is not a priority for Russian foreign policy engagement. However, Russian scientists studying the current situation and Russian foreign policy's declared priorities suggest that the Western Balkans approach can be altered. They propose transitioning from bilateral to multilateral cooperation, creating and supporting pro-Russian political forces in countries like Serbia, Slo-

³⁹ Mitrović, M., *The Balkans and non-military security threats – quality comparative analyses of resilience capabilities regarding hybrid threats*, Security and Defence Quarterly, Vol. 5, No. 22, 2018, pp. 20-45.

⁴⁰ National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, Službeni glasnik RS, broj 94, 27 December 2019

⁴¹ Republika Srbija Izveštaj za 2023. godinu, Evropska komisija, 2023 [https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu_dokumenta/godisnji_izvestaji_ek_o_napretku/izvestaj_ek_23.pdf], Accessed 21 March 2024.

⁴² Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation [Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации], February 20, 2013

venia, Croatia, and Albania, expanding the presence of Russian media in the Balkans, continuing economic investments in regional industrial and energy projects, intensifying educational, trade, and cultural cooperation, adopting a constructive approach to religious issues, and developing multilateral cooperation platforms in which Russia actively participates and attracts Western Balkan countries to participate as well.⁴³

Serbian-Russian friendship is often romanticized by nationalist groups in both countries and used by opportunistic leaders for political gain. Both countries prioritize their interests, while political elites effectively employ shared historical and emotional narratives to maintain power. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has also shown the practical side of Moscow-Belgrade relations.⁴⁴ Moreover, if it does not openly advocate against Serbian EU integration, Russia, through its proxy agents, is doing everything to create an anti-European mood in Serbia.

The Western Balkans may not be an area of primary interest to Russia, but it still considers the region a vital place to implement its foreign policy tactics. These tactics primarily involve advocating against NATO and EU integration, as well as the independence of Kosovo. Russia aims to encourage instability and anti-Western sentiment while strengthening its position as a great power. To achieve its goals, Russia uses Serbia as a base. Serbia's support in resolving the issue of Kosovo is essential for Russia's strategic interests in the Western Balkans.

A closer examination of Russian-Serbian relations reveals that the two countries prioritize their interests and use each other to achieve foreign policy goals rather than providing unconditional support, as commonly believed in public discourse and media narratives. While Russia and Serbia maintain good political and economic ties, the political elites of both countries approach bilateral relations opportunistically to strengthen their position and power.

3.1.2. Relations with Kosovo

Russia favors Serbia in the OUN and has taken a position to support any agreement that Serbia adopts. Russian officials also tend to highlight the example of Albanians in Kosovo as a positive practice of the people's right to secession when-

⁴³ Entina, E.; Pivovarenko, A., *Russia in the Balkans*, RIAC report, 13 January 2019.

⁴⁴ Miholjčić-Ivković, N., *Russia-Serbia Relations: True Friends or Pragmatic Players?* Geopolitical Monitor, 2024, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/russia-serbia-relations-true-friends-or-pragmatic-players/>, Accessed 22 March 2024.

ever they defend Russia and the Russian people regarding various forms of independence, autonomy, and even succession.⁴⁵

Russia has often referred to the NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 and the Western recognition and support of Kosovo as a justification for its policy. Following the Russian war against Georgia, Putin used the “precedent of Kosovo” to justify recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁴⁶ Later, Putin did the same with Crimea, the self-proclaimed ‘Donetsk People’s Republic’ and the ‘Luhansk People’s Republic’ in eastern Ukraine.⁴⁷ Russia’s foreign policy positions and its desire to achieve its imperial goals of the “Russian world” suggest that it uses Serbia’s internal political relations and emotions for its benefit. Despite Russia’s stated support for Serbia in the OUN regarding the normalization of relations with Kosovo, Russia exploits the “Kosovo precedent” to justify its aggressive policy. That shows a lack of principles and duplicity, as Russia is acting in its interests rather than in the interests of Serbia’s national security. Serbia’s declared goals are the normalization of relations in the Balkans and the peaceful resolution of the Kosovo issue.

3.2. Action motives

Russia aims to regain its status as a global power and has been pursuing an expansionist foreign policy based on the idea of “Great Russia.” This policy is focused on restoring Russia’s former glory as an imperial and respected power globally and is driven by irredentist claims. As a result, smaller countries, particularly those outside Russia’s immediate neighborhood, are considered peripheral areas for the country’s influence to expand and are not considered worthy of strategic planning.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Barlovac, B., *Putin Says Kosovo Precedent Justifies Crimea Secession*, BalkanInsight, 18 March 2014, [https://balkaninsight.com/2014/03/18/crimea-secession-just-like-kosovo-putin/], Accessed 22 March 2024.

⁴⁶ Samorukov, M., *Novyj Kosovskij Precedent. Kak Rossija Otreagiruet na Soglaszenie Belgrada i Prishtiny* [A new Kosovo precedent. How Russia will react to the agreement between Belgrade and Pristina], Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 April, 2019, [https://carnegie-moscov.org/commentary/78173], Accessed 5 March 2024.

⁴⁷ Stojanovic, D., *Explainer: Putin’s Balkan narrative argument for Ukraine War*, AP News, March 5, 2022, [https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin-racial-injustice-serbia-kosovo-756fa71c7a-b417115ee3521a95791ca7], Accessed 23 March 2024; Gabrielyan, G., *Russia’s Second Front. How the Kremlin’s “sagging” in the Balkans [Второй фронт России. Как “проседает” влияние Кремля на Балканах]*, RadioFreeEurope, March 15, 2022, [https://www.svoboda.org/a/vtoroy-front-rossii-kak-prosedaet-vliyanie-kremlya-na-balkanah/31848184.html], Accessed 15 March 2024.

⁴⁸ Miholjic-Ivkovic, N., *op. cit.*, note 44.

3.3. Action models

In its attempt to exert influence on Serbia's foreign policy, Russia uses several developed models of influence.

3.3.1. Russia's soft power towards Serbia

Each country assesses soft power differently because its sources vary. In contemporary research, the term "hard" power is increasingly used in addition to hard and soft power. This term refers to the ability of authoritarian regimes to penetrate, infiltrate, and manipulate the information environment in democratic liberal societies. Hard power is described as part of a new global competition to lead, influence, or coerce action through political means.⁴⁹ Serbian citizens generally travel to EU countries for better living conditions, despite their expressed sympathies towards Russia and Putin. That suggests that the social values of the West take priority as they strive to integrate into developed democracies while simultaneously glorifying the authoritarian and undemocratic Russian state system.

Soft power involves voluntarily accepting the party's values that offer power without coercion or conditioning. However, Russia's soft power towards Serbia does not appear to result in acceptance and identification but rather a constructed and romanticized narrative of an alleged indissoluble and always positive historical connection between the two countries. This narrative does not align with the truth, considering the various contradictory interests that both states have had throughout history.

Russia's soft power in Serbia often uses distorted interpretations of historical events, perpetuating the myth of "century-old friendship," "Slavic and Orthodox brotherhood," and "traditional historical ties" between the Serbian and Russian people. The myth that Russia is the "protector" of the Serbs and that Russia's "sacrifice" for Serbia is historically verified is widespread. That contrasts rational and critical historical science, which has a different perspective. In reality, Russia is an empire that, like other great powers in the Balkans, has achieved its imperial intentions. This policy has remained essentially unchanged for over two centuries.⁵⁰ Russia is using its soft power means, such as energy and political support, to manipulate public opinion in Serbia. This manipulation is based on President

⁴⁹ Mitrović, M., *The criticism of the universal expression of soft power from the point of view of a small state*, Vojno Delo, 5/2022, 2022, pp. II/15- II/28.

⁵⁰ Bešlin, M. *Serbian–Russian relations 19th to the 21st century: Myths, Misconceptions, and Stereotypes against the rational knowledge of the past and present*. In CEAS, *Eyes Wide Shut - Strengthening of Russian Soft Power in Serbia*, CEAS, Belgrade, 2016.

Putin's authoritarian regime. It is a one-sided approach, without reciprocity and exploiting the weaknesses of an immature democracy. This type of manipulation is known as "sharp" power. Public diplomacy is a valuable tool for influencing the position of a nation or state and is an instrument of soft power. It involves acting strategically toward a foreign audience and differs from traditional, institutional diplomacy.⁵¹

Probably the most active subject of Russian public diplomacy in Serbia is the Russian House in Belgrade, the official representative office of Rosotrudnichestva, the agency for cooperation with the diaspora. It is a state organization under the control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia. The main activity focuses on a kind of "positive propaganda," using cultural and historical stereotypes to strengthen political influence. The website of the Russian House is dominated by announcements related to the war in Ukraine, but also many publications dedicated to the war in Yugoslavia from the nineties, about the bombing of Belgrade, as well as numerous announcements and events of a religious nature, but related exclusively to Orthodoxy. The training ground for the appearance of pro-Russian so-called war commentators who deal with the establishment of political and security vectors of Russia towards Serbia and other countries in the region is the "Balkanist" website, which operates under the auspices of the Russian House in Belgrade. The key messages of the posts on this site are inciting hatred and constantly fueling negative narratives based on the consequences, victims, and tragedies of the wars of the 1990s and the abuse of the NATO-FRY conflict in 1999. The editors of "Balkanista" use the tragic epoch in the history of modern Serbia to play with the feelings of people in whose hearts the memories of the war are still fresh, bringing back memories of the conflict between Serbia and NATO, which the Russian side did not have no connection; A negative and accusatory narrative towards the EU suggesting that the European Union is blackmailing Serbia because of its relations with Russia. Features of posts that refer to "statements" from reliable EU sources do not have links to the sources available, but neither do the names of the authors of the statements.⁵²

With the help of the Russian House, Russian propagandists openly organize anti-American and anti-European manifestations where they openly express their aggressive attitude towards NATO and the European Union, encourage Serbs not to

⁵¹ Mitrović, M., *Javna diplomatija u paradigmi hibridnog koncepta sukoba*, Vojno delo, No 2/18, 2018, pp. 309-325.

⁵² Smirnov, M., *Ruski uticaj u Srbiji: Od negovanja kulturnih veza do otvorene propaganda*, NIN, 2023, [<https://www.nin.rs/drustvo/vesti/42869/ruski-uticaj-u-srbiji-od-negovanja-kulturnih-veza-do-otvorene-propagande>], Accessed 25 March 2024.

cooperate with others, fuel their memories of past conflicts, and ask them to refuse cooperation in the future.⁵³

3.3.2. Economy/energy

In the field of economy, the primary relations between Serbia and Russia are related to the particular export status of Serbian agricultural products to Russia. However, Russia's economic contributions to Serbia are less substantial than the pro-Russian media often presents them to be. Despite having a robust economic relationship, Russia has not made any significant exceptions or support for Serbia, except in agriculture. Russia still needs to show support for Serbia's industrial import niches.⁵⁴ Russia owns all of Serbia's oil and gas energy capacities, making it an utterly energy-dependent country. That is part of Russia's "energy offensive" in Southeastern Europe, where it has very dominant and economically significant interests. Gazprom, a Russian national company under the control of state institutions, owns a majority stake of 51% in Serbia gas. Lukoil, another Russian company, acquired the capacity and infrastructure of Serbia's Beopetrol in 2003 for 117 million euros. In 2008, Gazprom purchased Naftna Industrija Srbije - NIS for 400 million euros, creating a new joint venture called Serbia Gas that Russia completely controls. The dominance of Russian interests in Serbia's oil and gas sector indicates a solidly packed intensive perception management campaign in the country's economic approach analyses of Russian-Serbian relations.⁵⁵

3.4. Instruments

3.4.1. Information warfare

The Russian Federation approaches strategic communication thoroughly, comprehensively, and planned. They prepare strategic documents and develop organizational units with long-term projections of their interests.⁵⁶ Modern media, particularly the Internet, have been identified as a significant threat to Russia's internal information security. The use of information tools in Serbia, mainly aimed at managing perception, has been recognized in the actions of Russian cultural

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Srpski izvoz u Rusiju porastao za 17,9 odsto*, Beta, 2016, [<http://www.blic.rs/vesti/ekonomija/srpski-izvoz-u-rusiju-porastao-za-179-odsto/j76kxqj>], Accessed 9 March 2024.

⁵⁵ Lakićević, M., *Russian market – a chance for Serbia or myth*. In CEAS, *Eyes wide shut - Strengthening of Russian soft power in Serbia: Goals, instruments, and effects*, 2016, pp. 74-81.

⁵⁶ Mitrovic, M., *Russian strategic communication - endless information warfare*, Security science journal, Vol. 3, No 2, 2022, pp. 28-54.

associations, media, and manipulations. These manipulations exploit the pre-existing cultural closeness between the two peoples, the Orthodox Church, political parties, and sponsored civil movements.⁵⁷

The media; Two primary sources influence the media in Serbia. First, it is hard to identify sponsored media because of the need for more transparency in Serbian media and the absence of legal regulation. Second, there is the direct influence of the media center Sputnik Serbia and Russia Today. Sputnik is a powerful tool for creating and spreading Russian disinformation and manipulation in Serbia. Most of the largest national publishing agencies, such as Večernje Novosti, Politika, Pink, Studio, B, Informer, Pečat, NSPM, Standard, Novi Standard, and Pravda, directly share news and comments from Sputnik.

Internet platforms; The Russian Cultural Center in Belgrade is affiliated with various cultural and informational centers. The online platform “About Serbia in Russian” is crucial in enhancing the understanding of Russian-Serbian relations. It also contributes significantly to fulfilling the “borderless” information dissemination goal to the Serbian audience.

The social network; Many active Facebook groups with thousands of members are highly supportive of Putin. These groups typically have a narrative that involves praising Putin personally while also insulting, hating, and humiliating anyone who can be recognized as an opponent, whether it be an individual, a political movement, or a political party.⁵⁸

3.4.2. Subversive activities

Although there have been suspicions of Russian secret service activity in Serbia, there is no confirmed information about recent intelligence operations. However, doubts about the existence of such operations have been fueled by a spy affair in 2019, which exposed the operations of the Russian military intelligence service. The media also reported on recorded subversive actions by Russian intelligence officials, which were confirmed as authentic by Serbian experts. Despite this, the spy affair was largely overlooked, with little detail given, and it was noted that many

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ The most active profiles on social networks are: For brotherhood with Russian brothers (srb. За братство са браћом Русима), All of us who are for Putin and Russia (srb. Сви ми који смо за Путина и Русију), Vladimir Putin – Serbia (srb. Владимир Путин – Србија), Serbia Russia (srb. Srbija Rusija), Vladimir Putin Fun Club Serbia (srb. Владимир Путин фан клуб Србија), Russians news (srb. Руске вести), Russian Friendship Association (srb. Друштво пријатеља Русије), Euro – Asia Union (srb./ru. Евроазијска Унија-Евразийский союз), Glory to Russia (srb. Slava Rusiji), Serbian Russian movement – wolfs (srb. Srpski Ruski pokret vukovi)

foreign intelligence services are working towards their goals in Serbia, not just Russia. While the Russian side did not deny their involvement, they attempted to present the situation as a provocation by an unnamed third party.⁵⁹

Recruitment for warfare on the Russian side: The successful results of actions in creating the awareness of Serbian citizens based on propaganda and manipulation of information is the recruitment and inclusion of extremists from Serbia on the side of pro-Russian forces in Ukraine. There is no reliable data on their number, and estimates range from a few dozen to 300.⁶⁰ However, Serbian officials condemn such groups and distance themselves from them. The Criminal Code of Serbia prohibits its citizens from getting involved in such conflicts. As a result, only 28 court verdicts have been issued against those who participated in the conflicts in Ukraine.⁶¹ In addition to the public critical attitude of Serbian officials, there is public and unhindered action on recruiting Serbian citizens to participate in the war in Ukraine on the Russian side, especially by the Wagner Group, until the middle of 2023. Thus, the Russian mercenary group Wagner broadcast videos in the Serbian language to encourage recruitment for the war.⁶²

Paramilitary camps; In 2018, a youth camp named “Youth Patriotic Camp Zlatibor 2018” was organized on a famous mountain in Serbia. Russian instructors were invited to train children and young people aged 14 to 23 in martial and military arts. The camp was organized with the modern presence of representatives from the embassies of Russia. However, soon after its opening, the Serbian police closed the camp. President Aleksandar Vučić emphasized that the state will not tolerate such forms of training where children in uniform are taught military skills. Subsequently, research showed that 30 children from Serbia had traveled to Russia for the International War Patriotic Youth Camp earlier in the same year. The camp was organized under the patronage of the Russian government and led by the ultra-nationalist group ENOT Corp. The news of the camp’s closure was

⁵⁹ Petrović, I., *Spy affair in Serbia: a lot of noise, little details*, DW, 22 November 2019, [<https://www.dw.com/hr/špijunska-afeta-u-srbiji-mnogo-buke-malodetalja/a-51362388>], Accessed 2 March 2024.

⁶⁰ Karšić, Z., *Serbian volunteers and mercenaries in Ukraine and Syria*, Oslobođenje, 13 October 2017, [<https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/svijet/srpskidobrovoljci-i-placnici-u-ukrajini-i-siriji>], Accessed 12 March 2024.

⁶¹ Djurdjević, M., *Volunteers from Serbia under investigation by the Ukrainian Prosecutor's*, Radio Free Europe, 27 July 2018, [<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/dobrovoljci-ukrajina-tuzilastvo-istraga-rat/29321680.html>], Accessed 5 March 2024.

⁶² Delauney, G., *Ukraine war: Serbia uproar over Wagner mercenaries recruiting for Russia*. BBC, 2023, [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64329371>], Accessed 8 March 2024.

published soon after, but it was reopened in 2019 without military features but as ‘sports, recreational, and educational activities’.⁶³

3.5. Subjects of Russian action

3.5.1. Russian compatriot organization in Serbia

Various Russian compatriot organizations in Serbia are characterized by non-transparency and closedness of activities, clan organization, intense loyalty to Russia and Putin, and pro-militant orientation.⁶⁴ Besides being listed on the organization Russian Home’s website, its web pages are unavailable, and there are no official records of its membership or activities.

3.5.2. Political parties

According to data updated by CEAS research in 2016, there are 14 active pro-Kremlin political groups in Serbia. Among these, seven are registered political parties, five are citizens’ associations in the Agency for Economic Registers, and two movements are not registered at all. The following pro-Russian political parties have resigned from their operations in Serbia: Serbian Radical Party, Democratic Party of Serbia, Zavetnici, Dveri, Serbian People’s Party, Third Serbia, Russian Party, Party of Russians in Serbia, Serbian Russian Movement, Time for Action - Serbian League, Serbian League - New Serbian right-wing movement, “Svetozar Miletic” Movement, State Movement, Serbian Fatherland Front, and United Russian Party.

⁶³ Djurdjević, M. *Youth Camp ‘Zlatibor 2019’ under the radar* [Kamp za mlade ‘Zlatibor 2019’ ispod radara], Radio Free Europe, 24 July 2019, [<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/omladinsko-patriotskikamp-zlatibor-2019-ispod-radara-/30073335.html>], Accessed 1 March 2024.

⁶⁴ Registered Russian compatriot organizations in Serbia: Sveslavica mainly acting through direct contacts, local media and Youtube; General Cadet Association of Russian Cadet Corps Abroad (ru. Общекадетское Объединение Русских Кадетских Корпусов за рубежом при Русском Доме в Белграде); Russian Imperial Movement (srb. Руски империјални покрет); Association of Donbas Volunteers (srb. Савез добровољаца Донбаса), Association of Russian Compatriots „Luč“ (ru. Общество российских соотечественников „Луч“); Association of Compatriots and Friends of Russia (ru. Общество соотечественников и друзей России “Россия”); Association of Serbian–Russian Friendship Colonel Rajevski (ru. Общество сербско-русской дружбы “Полковник Раевский”); The Serbian–Russian Association Bela Crkva (ru. Сербско-русское общество “Белая Церковь”); Russian Wave (ru. Русская волна), Society for the Preservation of the Memory of Russians in Serbia (ru. Общество сохранения памяти о русских в Сербии), Association Homeland (ru. Общество “Домовина”).

3.5.3. Associations of citizens

According to data, 51 pro-Russian associations have been operating in Serbia since 2017, as reported by CEAS in 2016. Euroskepticism characterizes these associations. Some of the most influential ones include “Образ Свети Сава,” Serbian national movement “Ours” (srb. Српски народни покрет “Наши”), and Serbian national movement 1389 (срб. Српски народни покрет 1389). These three movements are active in cyberspace, with over 40 profiles and thousands of members. CEAS research shows that Serbia’s most intensive Russian influence was between 2005 and 2015. During this period, 109 organizations were formed that promoted different aspects of Serbian-Russian relations.⁶⁵ Two Russian NGOs, the Russian World Foundation and the Gorchakov Fund, are prominent in shaping Russia’s image in Serbia.

3.6. The results and the set goals relations

The asymmetry of foreign policy interests influences the relationship between Russia and Serbia. Russia’s efforts in achieving its secondary goals, which aim to destabilize the European space, are minimal and are carried out through Serbia as its proxy of influence. On the other hand, Serbia is focused on rationalizing its foreign policy to promote critical development and long-term stability. That indicates an imbalance in goals and results, where Russia has no strategic goals in Serbia. However, Serbia has strategic interests in EU integration and developing closer relations within the framework of the Euro-Atlantic partnership. Considering Russia’s declared imperial goals and strategic documents, it is clear that there is a set of goals for Serbia:

- Creating favorable conditions for the realization of the Russian policy towards compatriots in Serbia.
- Rewriting history and promoting a narrative of traditionally strong Russian-Serbian relations throughout history.
- Utilizing propaganda and taking advantage of media freedom to promote pro-Russian sentiment.
- Establishing and supporting organizations and individuals who advocate for various aspects of Serbian-Russian relations.
- Emphasizing similarities in identity and political views.

⁶⁵ CEAS, *Eyes wide shut Strengthening of Russian soft power in Serbia: Goals, instruments, and effects*, CEAS, Belgrade, 2016.

- Strengthening the relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church.
- Imposing a contrived narrative of Russia as Serbia's primary economic partner.

Based on the progress made so far, Serbia's foreign policy performance and public opinion regarding its relationship with Russia, the EU, and NATO can be analyzed.

- There is an ongoing effort to slow down or completely halt Serbia's integration with the EU. That is fueled by a negative campaign, which aims to create a perception of the EU's imminent disintegration. The slow pace of European integration and the requirement of Serbia to recognize Kosovo has contributed to the rise of Euroscepticism in Serbia. According to the DEMOSTAT survey conducted in mid-2023, 22% of residents believe Serbia should prioritize its relationship with Russia (20% with the EU). Additionally, 42% think maintaining good relations with Russia is more important than continuing negotiations with the EU. The survey also revealed that the Serbian public is divided regarding EU membership, with same, 33% in favor and against.⁶⁶

- Serbia's cooperation with NATO in defense and security has been minimized due to constant, indiscriminate, and unrealistic criticism from civil groups, initiatives, and pro-Russian parties. Moreover, the negative experience of the armed conflict in 1999 is constantly highlighted, with a focus on the role of the USA. That has caused a deterioration in relations and created a negative public opinion towards NATO and the USA in Serbia.

- Serbia is being strongly influenced by pro-Russian organizations that tie the country to Russia in every aspect of social life, economy, energy, security, defense, and international relations. These organizations have an unquestionable and unconditional support for Russia and a negative attitude towards the USA, which is putting pressure on Serbia to execute Russian interests.

3. CONCLUSION

Based on Russia's influence in the region so far, we can conclude that the primary goals of Russian foreign policy are the destabilization of the Western Balkans, the demonization of cooperation with NATO and Euro-Atlantic integration, the delegitimization of the European Union and the process of European integra-

⁶⁶ Javno mnenje građana Srbije, DEMOSTAT, 2023, [<https://demostat.rs/upload/prezentacija.pdf>], Accessed 3 March 2024.

tion, as well as the obstruction of negotiations on the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina. The secondary goal is undoubtedly the stopping of democratic processes, the compromising of the concept of non-violent regime changes, and the relativization of transitional justice.

At this moment, when the global recomposition of geopolitical power is taking place, the political West is deluded by the declaratively expressed commitment to the processes of European integration in the Western Balkans region, which struggles with every step towards a democratically organized political system with long-term economic, social and political stability in a peaceful environment. Dedication to its security and the projection of influence, the West neglects the potential of an escalation of the conflict in the Western Balkans, which in a hypothetical context would have only one winner, which would undoubtedly be Vladimir Putin. That is why the European Union must remain consistent with its principles and promises regarding enlargement, precisely because of the geopolitical situation and vulnerability of the Western Balkans region. In this context, Serbia is particularly exposed and essentially represents the biggest victim of Russia's malignant influence in the region. Despite this, the Ukrainian army "magically" receives significant deliveries of arms and military equipment produced in Serbia, and this indicates that despite all Russian pressures, Serbia remains committed to the peace and stability of the region, as well as to the lofty universal ideal of freedom.

For Russia, Serbia is a part of the Western Balkans, a training ground for indirect influence, primarily for undermining the political dominance of EU and US influence in this part of Europe. For this purpose, Russia is using Serbia's support in resolving the Kosovo issue, favoring its strategic interests in the Western Balkans region and using Serbia as a base for exerting influence. Informational manipulation and psychological operation through agitation, the influence of social networks, the supported organization works, and the current problem in the relations between Serbia and Russia is also evident. Russia primarily projects its influence in Serbia through diplomatic, energy, and strategic communications. They strongly influence Serbian public opinion, develop animosity towards the USA and NATO, and create an environment for slowing down EU integration. Russia successfully implements its strategic communication through the combined appearance of propaganda through the media, social networks, sponsored organizations, and influential figures.

Following Russia's aspirations to establish multipolarity and control its spheres of interest, information warfare, and security development can be expected. In areas of Russian interest, it is possible to expect intensive action by sponsored organizations and political parties, which will affirm disinformation, conspiracy

theories, and other instruments of influence on public opinion supported by the media and social networks. For full effect, this performance is synchronized with the intense activity of public diplomacy, with pronounced Russian influence in the environment in which it operates. Turning public opinion towards Russian interests makes it possible to achieve the effect that the treated public will accept any critical action towards Russia as a negative effect on the Serbian public itself.

In the modern era, Russia has taken an offensive stance towards Serbia, with the aim of jeopardizing the position of the USA and the EU in the consciousness and mood of the Serbian population. However, Russia is not seeking to achieve direct control over Serbia due to its geographical and security-political positions, including the current war in Ukraine and the emotional distance between NATO and Serbia. Russia hopes to maintain its destabilizing potential and increase its strategic influence in the region.

Russia's stated goals do not involve gaining a strategic advantage. However, Russia believes that by weakening the institutions, general security, and political cohesion of the EU on the European continent, it can find new weak points to achieve its imperial goals. As a result, Russia aims to undermine the EU's institutions, general security, and political cohesion. By doing so, it hopes to find new vulnerabilities within the European continent to achieve its objectives.

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