

## Walking on a Tight Rope – The Serbian Balancing Act after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

### Executive Summary

- This paper highlights Serbia's intricate diplomatic dance amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine, emphasizing the government's efforts to maintain its longstanding balancing act between the West and the East despite growing geopolitical confrontation and polarization.
- Serbia's official stance on the war in Ukraine, outlined in the National Security Council's conclusions, is to emphasize support for Ukraine's territorial integrity while refraining from imposing sanctions on Russia.
- Serbia has resisted aligning with EU sanctions against Russia, preserving its strategic neutrality. Such a position despite external pressures is aimed at maintaining a delicate balance that serves the government's interests, preserves the country's foreign policy goals, prevents economic repercussions, and upholds popular sentiment against sanctions in the domestic public.
- Reports suggest Serbian arms may have been indirectly supplied to Ukraine, leading to tensions with Russia. Serbia denies the allegations, accentuating its commitment to neutrality and refusal to contribute to the conflict.
- Serbia has navigated a fragile balance in UN resolutions and other political declarations, condemning Russia's actions while avoiding support for sanctions. The strategic use of symbolic votes has allowed Serbia to manage international relations and domestic expectations.
- The government's complex narrative has sought to communicate with both the West and Russia, simultaneously managing internal expectations by emphasizing the country's principled foreign policy.

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### Walking on a Tight Rope

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 caused a tectonic shift in European and global affairs. The Western Balkans was not an exception – in just a few days, the complete security and political picture of the region radically changed. The conflict in the East of the continent exacerbated existing tensions and raised fears for potential spillover to the region with a particularly fragile security architecture. The new landscape revealed a much more prominent place for the Western Balkans in the European and EU security mosaic. This fact raised the urgency of the Western actors to ensure the stability and geopolitical alignment of the region. Suddenly, after two decades of neglect, the Western Balkans was back on the EU agenda due to geopolitical concerns.

The effects of this major turn of events have been particularly hard for Serbia which was forced to question and potentially rethink its entire foreign policy doctrine. For over a decade, the key element of Serbian foreign policy has been the balancing act between the West and the East – the EU and the US on the one side, and Russia and China on the other. The rationale behind this strategy can be found in the attempt to reconcile two issues at the top of the national agenda – the EU accession process that ties Serbia firmly to the West, and the Kosovo dispute in which the support of Moscow is the strongest card left to play for Belgrade in the international arena. Moreover, the balanced foreign policy approach greatly benefits the current government both domestically and internationally. In the sharply divided public, the only way for a catch-all party to preserve its popularity is by playing on both sides of the fence. Simultaneously, the regime in Belgrade has tactically used its unique position as the key security actor in the region to play different foreign actors against each other to reduce international pressures that could endanger its position domestically.

However, after the February 2022 invasion, such a position appeared impossible to maintain. In the radically polarized international arena, the pressure to choose sides has risen to the level of the ultimatum – you are either with us, or against us. Moreover, the position of Serbia has deteriorated on several issues. The urgency to solve all unresolved tensions on European soil has placed Belgrade under pressure by Western actors to swallow bitter pills regarding the Kosovo issue, such as accepting in principle a new Franco-German proposal

as the new framework for the normalization dialogue. Long-term special ties with Moscow have made Serbia an easy target for the accusations of other countries in the region that Belgrade is the Kremlin's Trojan horse which Moscow might use to jeopardize regional stability in order to divert the attention from Ukraine elsewhere. Facing such difficult circumstances, the Serbian government needed to come up with a strategy regarding the country's position in the radically changed environment and respond to the crucial geopolitical dilemma.

### Two vectors of Serbian doctrine regarding the war

The official position of Serbia regarding the war in Ukraine was established in the conclusions of the National Security Council on February 25, 2022, a day after the invasion started. These conclusions clearly outline the two main principles going forward. On the one hand, Serbia has pledged to fully support the territorial integrity of Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> The first few articles state that this is a continuation of a well-established and consistent doctrine of following the principles and rules of international law which mirrors the position of Serbia regarding the declaration of independence of Kosovo: "Just like it is committed to the preservation of sovereignty and integrity of its own territory, the Republic of Serbia is likewise advocating respect for territorial integrity of other sovereign countries and the principle that borders can be changed only in accordance with the rules of international law."<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Article 8 affirms that Serbia will not introduce sanctions against the Russian Federation. However, the text was carefully formulated so that it leaves the possibility for sanctions to be introduced going forward, in case the reluctance to do so would endanger the vital economic and political interests of the country. Another important message interwoven in the phrasing of this article was emphasizing the fact that this decision is largely motivated by the history of sanctions Serbia faced in the 1990s: "As a country that experienced sanctions of the West in the recent past and whose compatriots in Republika Srpska are suffering from sanctions today, the Republic of Serbia believes that it is not its vital political and economic interest to impose sanctions against any country at this moment, nor to representatives or business entities of

1 Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Conclusion of the National Security Council of Serbia from 25 February 2022", February 25 2022, <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/news/conclusion-national-security-council-serbia-25-february-2022>.  
2 Ibid, Article 3.

## Walking on a Tight Rope

the respective.”<sup>3</sup> Both of these messages are directed to the domestic public as much as foreign actors.

The rest of the text has also been an attempt to balance out political messages to foreign actors. Aside from repeatedly reaffirming the support for the inviolability of Ukrainian borders, Serbia has offered humanitarian help to the affected Ukrainian people.<sup>4</sup> However, the text does not contain a clear condemnation of Russia other than the general statement that “the violation of territorial integrity of any country, including Ukraine, is very wrong.”<sup>5</sup> Also, no military help was offered to Ukraine. Instead, the document is doubling down on the principle of neutrality and proclaims an immediate stop to military practices and other activities with foreign partners for the foreseeable future.<sup>6</sup> This measure was lifted relatively quietly for the wider public with the military exercise Platinum Wolf in June 2023, a traditional exercise the Serbian Armed Forces held with the armed forces of seven NATO member countries and Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>7</sup>

## Stance on sanctions – playing a waiting game

As proclaimed in February last year, up until this day Serbia has not aligned with the EU sanctions against the Russian Federation. Despite repeated calls and pressures from both the EU and US officials and institutions,<sup>8</sup> the Serbian Government has so far opted not to follow the EU’s common foreign and security policy regarding restrictive measures against Moscow. Ever since the beginning of the Russian invasion on Ukraine, this fact has been an issue at the top of the agenda of every meeting between Serbian and Western officials. Regardless of the fact that this has been one of the main reasons for halting any progress on the EU path for over a year, as well as for putting Serbia under high pressure on other topics such as the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, the decision to abstain from introducing sanctions has remained intact. Nonetheless, the Serbian leadership has been vocal about the possibility of changing this policy in the future in case the price for

the vital interests of the country becomes too high.<sup>9</sup> Whether this is a real possibility or merely a way of keeping the West, Russia and the domestic public in limbo in order to enlarge maneuvering space is a matter of interpretation.

There are several reasons why the Serbian leadership has decided to follow this risky strategy. Firstly, the decision to introduce sanctions would unequivocally signify the end of the balancing act of Serbian foreign policy, the doctrine that has been the core instrument of the current regime to appease both the West and the East and in turn get a free hand to strengthen its grip on power domestically over the last decade. Secondly, Russia might respond to potential sanctions by reassessing its support for Serbia over the Kosovo dispute in the UN Security Council, which is still one of the strongest remaining assets in the hands of Belgrade. Another issue the Government is concerned about would be the potentially higher gas price from Russia as a result of such a decision, which would further deteriorate the economic situation in the country that is already facing rising inflation. The final and possibly crucial argument for the Government is how highly unpopular such a decision would be at home since the Serbian public is widely against imposing sanctions on Russia. Since the beginning of the war several polls have shown that the support for sanctions has never reached 20 percent, while often being under 10 percent of voters in favor.<sup>10</sup>

Although Serbia has not introduced restrictive measures directly, Belgrade officials repeatedly claim that it will not allow the wall of sanctions against Russia to be bypassed through its territory nor via Serbian companies or banks. This was underlined by President Vučić after the meeting with EU Commissioner for Enlargement Oliver Varhelyi in December 2022: “No one can bypass the EU sanctions on Russia through Serbian territory, and Serbia is reacting to such attempts and penalizing them.”<sup>11</sup> The same was confirmed after the meeting Vučić had with the EU envoy for sanctions

3 Ibid, Article 8.

4 Ibid, Article 12.

5 Ibid, Article 6.

6 Ibid, Article 9.

7 Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Defence, “International exercise Platinum Wolf 23 begins”, June 15 2023, <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/20198/pocela-medjunarodna-vezba-platinasti-vuk-2320198>.

8 N1, “EP: Serbia to align with EU sanctions policy”, November 23 2022, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/ep-serbia-to-align-with-eu-sanctions-policy/>.

9 Balkan Insight, “Vucic Can’t ‘Swear’ Serbia Will Not Join Sanctions on Russia”, March 10 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/10/vucic-cant-swear-serbia-will-not-join-sanctions-on-russia/>.

10 Radio Slobodna Evropa, “U Srbiji raste podrška uvođenju sankcija protiv Rusije”, November 25 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-podrska-sankcijama-protiv-rusije/32149039.html>.

11 Tanjug, “Vucic: No bypassing of Russia sanctions through Serbian territory”, December 2 2022, <https://www.tanjug.rs/english/politics/937/vucic-no-bypassing-of-russia-sanctions-through-serbian-territory/vest>.

## Walking on a Tight Rope

David O'Sullivan in May 2023 in Belgrade: "Even though Serbia has not imposed sanctions on the Russian Federation, as a credible partner, it will not leave room for it to be used for illegal actions, which would enable third countries to avoid the regime of EU restrictive measures."<sup>12</sup> However, a group of investigative journalists claims that certain companies from Serbia founded by Russian citizens do serve to circumvent sanctions imposed on Russia to procure components used in the production of weapons and military equipment.<sup>13</sup>

## A conundrum on Serbian weapons in Ukraine

Another key element of the proclaimed doctrine is the decision not to sell or send armaments to either of the sides on the Ukrainian battlefield. However, various reports have put the truthfulness of this official stance into question. In February this year, Russian state-affiliated media Mash announced that Serbian arms were being used against Russian troops, providing photo evidence of rockets in question. The authenticity of the armament has been confirmed by several Serbian military experts.<sup>14</sup> This report has offered evidence that the weapons produced by the Serbian company Krušik have been exported to Turkey through a Canadian company, and Turkey then exported the same weapons to Ukraine through an American company via Slovakia.<sup>15</sup> This accusation implies that Serbia has willingly sold weaponry to Ukraine via several middlemen to avoid political implications. Such claims were additionally fueled in April, when the documents were leaked from the Pentagon stating that Serbia has pledged to send lethal aid to Ukraine or has already delivered it.<sup>16</sup>

This information has raised alarms in Moscow and led to the most visible friction in the bilateral relations since the beginning of the aggression. The spokesperson of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Marija Zaha-

rova stated that the allegations of Serbian weapons in the arsenal of the army of Ukraine caused deepest concern in the Kremlin. She stated that Moscow asked Belgrade for an official position on the information that weapons were delivered to Ukraine from Serbia, adding that they will follow this story closely: "This is too serious an issue, including from the point of view of Russian-Serbian relations, to react on the merits right now, it is necessary to rely on the facts."<sup>17</sup>

Serbian officials promptly reacted and denied these accusations. Minister of Defense Miloš Vučević published a statement saying that Serbia "does not sell our weapons and military equipment to any side in the conflict. Whether private companies buy on third markets and sell to companies in other countries is not a question for Serbia."<sup>18</sup> President Vučić was also vocal on the subject, claiming that "not a single piece of Serbian weapons, tools, or ammunition was sold to Russia or Ukraine, and those who claim otherwise should be ashamed, because they are harming Serbia."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, both Embassies of the United States and Ukraine officially stated that, according to their knowledge, Serbia has not exported weapons to Ukraine.<sup>20</sup> However, according to the Serbian law, Turkey as the final buyer cannot export the imported weapons without the approval of the competent ministry of the country of origin.<sup>21</sup> In summary, whether Serbia did deliberately yet secretly send armament to Ukraine in order to appease the West for not introducing sanctions on Russia remains an open question.

## Political declarations as messengers of strategic ambiguity

In order to mitigate the increasingly loud pressures due to the decision not to introduce sanctions, Serbia has regularly voted for international declarations

12 Radio Free Europe, "Vučić rekao da 'Srbija ne ostavlja prostor za nezakonite radnje' u pogledu EU sankcija Rusiji", May 11 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rusija-eu-sankcije/32407530.html>.

13 N1, "Balkan Security Network: Russia uses companies in Serbia to circumvent sanctions", August 6 2023, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/balkan-security-network-russia-uses-companies-in-serbia-to-circumvent-sanctions/>.

14 Voice of America, "Krušikove rakete u rukama Ukrajine komplikuju odnos Beograda i Moskve", March 6 2023, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/srbija-rusija-ukrajina-rakete-g2000-rat-oru%C5%BEje-prodaja/6991576.html>.

15 N1, "Ruski medij tvrdi – srpsko oružje ide u Ukrajinu, Vučević negira izvoz na front", February 27 2023, <https://n1info.rs/biznis/ruski-medij-tvrdi-srpsko-oruzje-ide-u-ukrajinu-vucevic-negira-izvoz-na-front/>.

16 Deutsche Welle, "Tajni dokumenti SAD: Srbija ipak šalje oružje Ukrajini?", April 12 2023, [https://www.dw.com/sr/tajni-dokumenti-sad-srbija-ipak-%C5%A1alje-oru%C5%BEje-ukrajini/a-65285480?maca=ser-rss-ser-pol-eu\\_vestirs-4711-xml-mrssl](https://www.dw.com/sr/tajni-dokumenti-sad-srbija-ipak-%C5%A1alje-oru%C5%BEje-ukrajini/a-65285480?maca=ser-rss-ser-pol-eu_vestirs-4711-xml-mrssl).

17 Radio Free Europe, "Rusija 'zabrinuta' zbog informacija o prodaji srpskog oružja Ukrajini", March 2 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-ukrajina-prodaja-srpskog-oruzja-/32296323.html>.

18 N1, "Ruski medij tvrdi – srpsko oružje ide u Ukrajinu, Vučević negira izvoz na front", February 27 2023, <https://n1info.rs/biznis/ruski-medij-tvrdi-srpsko-oruzje-ide-u-ukrajinu-vucevic-negira-izvoz-na-front/>.

19 Voice of America, "Krušikove rakete u rukama Ukrajine komplikuju odnos Beograda i Moskve", March 6 2023, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/srbija-rusija-ukrajina-rakete-g2000-rat-oru%C5%BEje-prodaja/6991576.html>.

20 Radio Free Europe, "Ambasada SAD: Po našim saznanjima Srbija ne prodaje oružje Ukrajini", April 12 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ministar-srbija-odbrana-ukrajina-oruzje/32360381.html>.

21 N1, "Ruski medij tvrdi – srpsko oružje ide u Ukrajinu, Vučević negira izvoz na front", February 27 2023, <https://n1info.rs/biznis/ruski-medij-tvrdi-srpsko-oruzje-ide-u-ukrajinu-vucevic-negira-izvoz-na-front/>.

## Walking on a Tight Rope

aimed at condemning Russia, except in cases where they supported the introduction of sanctions. On March 2 2022, Serbia voted in favor of adopting a United Nations resolution that demands the Russian Federation to immediately end its invasion of Ukraine and unconditionally withdraw all its military forces from the neighboring country. The representative of Serbia claimed their delegation is committed to the principles of sovereignty and the territorial integrity of all nations and that it will continue to advocate for ending the conflict.<sup>22</sup> This decision a week after the start of the invasion of Ukraine set the tone for future votings of Serbia on declarations regarding the war. Vučić explained Serbia's position as principled: "The text does not mention any sanctions, but it is certainly very important for us to condemn the destruction of the territorial integrity of any member country. We believe that this is a principled, serious and responsible position of the state of Serbia, which has never violated international law."<sup>23</sup>

On March 24 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a new non-binding resolution demanding an immediate end to the war in Ukraine from Russia, and Serbia was once again among the countries that voted in favor of the resolution. The resolution blames Russia for the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and calls for an immediate ceasefire and the protection of millions of civilians and their homes, schools and hospitals critical to their survival.<sup>24</sup> However, the vote on April 7 for the exclusion of Russia from the UN Human Rights Council UNHRC was a far more complicated decision to make, since it had concrete consequences rather than the symbolic ones from previous resolutions. Nonetheless, Serbia was among the countries that supported the expulsion of Russia.<sup>25</sup> This time, President Vučić was far more vocal in presenting Serbia's vote as a result of pressure in order to reduce the backlash for this decision: "Our decision was to abstain, but then you get countless heavy pressures that have nothing to do with the personal (threats). No one blackmailed me,

but they are blackmailing the country. They tell you, do you know, that today or tomorrow it will be decided whether we will be exempted from the (European Union) oil sanctions package? We are a militarily neutral country, but we are not a politically neutral country, we are on the European path."<sup>26</sup>

On October 12 2022, Serbia yet again voted in favor of the UN General Assembly Resolution condemning Russia's attempt to annex four regions of Ukraine. The resolution has called on countries not to recognize the four regions of Ukraine which Russia has claimed following referendums it organized in September, and demanding that Moscow reverse course on the attempted illegal annexation.<sup>27</sup> In February 2023, Serbia supported the UN Resolution that reaffirms the commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders, extending to its territorial waters. The measure also "reiterates its demand that the Russian Federation immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders, and calls for a cessation of hostilities."<sup>28</sup> These votes were less controversial in the Serbian public since the core argument in both resolutions was the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The only significant decision of the UN General Assembly that condemned the aggression which Serbia did not support was on November 14 2022. Serbia abstained from voting for a resolution stating that Russia must be held accountable for violating international law by invading Ukraine and that this should include paying compensation to Kyiv.<sup>29</sup> This shows a clear attempt by the Serbian leadership to use the symbolic and non-binding nature of most UN resolutions to send a positive message to the West and reduce the political pressure without antagonizing Moscow or the domestic public.

22 United Nations, "General Assembly Overwhelmingly Adopts Resolution Demanding Russian Federation Immediately End Illegal Use of Force in Ukraine, Withdraw All Troops", March 2 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12407.doc.htm>.

23 Radio Free Europe, "Srbija se u UN-u pridružila osudi ruske invazije", March 2 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-vucic-un-rusija-ukrajina/31732740.html>.

24 United Nations, "Ukraine: General Assembly passes resolution demanding aid access, by large majority", March 24 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114632>.

25 United Nations, "UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council", April 7 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782>.

26 Radio Free Europe, "Vučić: Srbija pod pritiskom glasala za isključenje Rusije iz UN saveta", April 7 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-srbija-vucic-un/31791738.html>.

27 United Nations, "Ukraine: UN General Assembly demands Russia reverse course on 'attempted illegal annexation'", October 12 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129492>.

28 Deutsche Welle, "Ukraine: UN members endorse resolution to end war", February 23 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-un-members-endorse-resolution-to-end-war/a-64799465>.

29 Danas, "Generalna skupština UN usvojila rezoluciju o ruskom plaćanju odštete Ukrajini, Srbija uzdržana", November 14 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/svet/generalna-skupstina-un-usvojila-rezoluciju-o-ruskom-placanju-odstete-ukrajini-srbija-uzdrzana/>.

## Walking on a Tight Rope

Table 1. How Serbia voted on UN Resolutions regarding Russia's aggression on Ukraine

Date	Resolution	Serbia's vote
March 2 2022	Resolution demanding the Russian Federation immediately end illegal use of force in Ukraine	YES
March 24 2022	Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine	YES
April 7 2022	Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council	YES
October 12 2022	Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations	YES
November 14 2022	Resolution on Russian reparations for Ukraine	ABSTAIN
February 16 2023	Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine	YES

Another important platform for political messages on the invasion of Ukraine was the first EU-Western Balkans meeting after the beginning of the aggression, held in Tirana in December 2022. The declaration signed by EU leaders after the meeting starts with an article that directly condemns Russia for the ongoing war in Ukraine: "Russia's escalating war of aggression against Ukraine is putting European and global peace and security at risk and underscores the importance of the strategic partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans region."<sup>30</sup> Article 4 was even more specific as it affirms the expected stance of candidate countries regarding the sanctions: "Standing together with the EU is a clear sign of Partners' strategic orientation, now more than ever, as Russia escalates its war of aggression against Ukraine. A common vision of the future involves mutual responsibilities and shared values. As we deepen our cooperation with Partners, we urge them to make swift and sustained progress towards full alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and to act accordingly, including on EU restrictive measures. We commend those Western Balkans Partners that are already demonstrating their strategic commitment in this regard by fully aligning with the EU CFSP and encourage those that have not done so to follow suit."<sup>31</sup> Although both the text of the declaration and the European leaders stated that all Western Balkans countries have aligned with the text of the declaration, president Vučić denied that Serbia supported the text: "I cannot stand behind something I did not write. I have nothing against them writing in the Declaration the fact that

we did not agree and imposed sanctions on Russia, that is a fact. I said – Russia introduced sanctions against Serbia in 1992, and Serbia did not – it is a matter of respect for us, what we went through for nine years suffering sanctions – we saw that they do not bring anything good to the citizens either and it is not natural for us to be the ones who will participate in that policy."<sup>32</sup>

In August 2023 another declaration was adopted at the informal meeting between representatives of the EU and candidate countries in Athens. One of the main messages in this declaration, which was this time signed directly by the Western Balkans' leaders, was the undivided support to Ukraine: "In the face of Russian aggression, we express our unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, based on the values of democracy and rule of law."<sup>33</sup> Despite the declaration seemingly demonstrating the unity of all signatories, Vučić announced the next day that he insisted that sanctions against Russia were not mentioned in the declaration as a precondition of him signing it: "Only Serbia was against it, and due to Serbia's insistence, the article concerning sanctions against Russia was not included in the text of the resolution."<sup>34</sup> However, the key message from this event was the first tête-à-tête meeting between Vučić and the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy that happened on the margins. Vučić used this opportunity to connect the Ukrainian and Serbian territorial issues and noted that sanctions against Russia were not

30 Tirana Declaration, December 6 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/60568/tirana-declaration-en.pdf>.

31 Ibid.

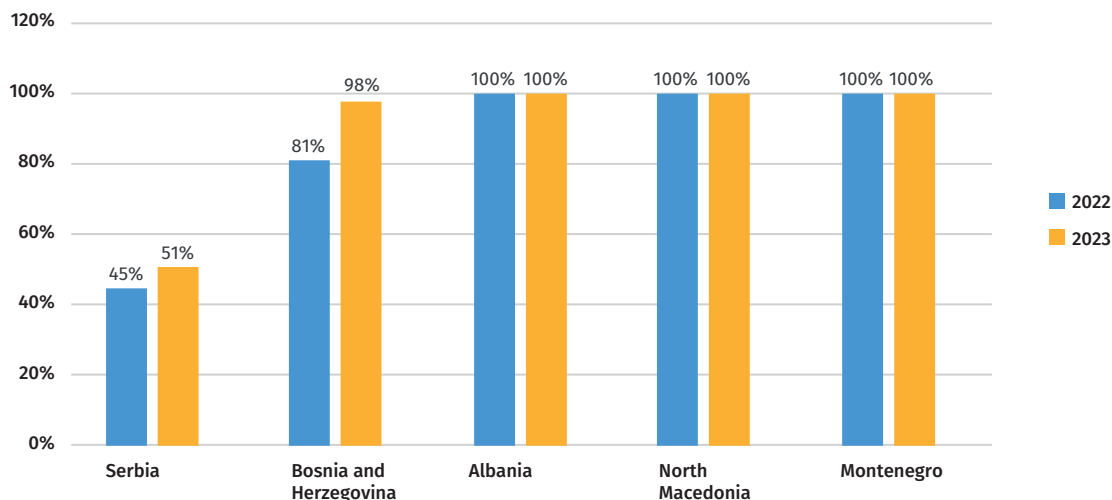
32 N1, "Vučić: O sankcijama Rusiji sam u Tirani govorio isto što i našem narodu", December 6 2022, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucic-dobro-je-sto-smo-bili-u-tirani/>.

33 Athens Summit Declaration, August 21 2023, <https://www.primeminister.gr/en/2023/08/21/32363>.

34 Radio Free Europe, "Vučić: Srbija bila protiv sankcija Rusiji u Atinskoj deklaraciji", August 23 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-srbija-sankcije-rusija-deklaracija/32561230.html>.

## Walking on a Tight Rope

**Figure 1. Common Foreign and Security Policy Alignment (per European Commission Annual Reports)**



discussed: “Serbia honors Ukraine’s territorial integrity, which we have been saying, clearly and unequivocally, since the beginning of the conflict. I confirmed the fact that Serbia supports Ukraine’s territorial integrity and that this will not change, unlike some who want to honor the territorial integrity of Ukraine, but not that of Serbia.”<sup>35</sup> Zelensky had a rather cordial message after the meeting: “An open, honest, and fruitful meeting with the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić. Good conversation on respect for the UN Charter and the inviolability of borders. On our nations’ shared future in the common European home.”<sup>36</sup>

One more example of mixed political signals from Belgrade regarding the war is its unclear position regarding the Crimea Platform. This initiative was launched by Ukraine in 2021 with the goal to gather countries and organizations advocating for reversing the 2014 annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. Membership in this initiative is one of the strongest symbolic signs of support to Ukraine in the conflict with Russia. At the third summit of the platform held in August 2023, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić gave a video address to the audience, which many saw as a clear sign of Serbia joining this initiative: “I would like to use this opportunity to emphasize our commitment to upholding the principles of international law, territorial integrity, and political independence of states as the foundation of our own foreign policy. Drawing from

our own experiences we genuinely empathize with and understand the Ukrainian people and Ukraine who have a true friend in Serbia. The Republic of Serbia is not value-neutral. We fully respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, a stance that we have consistently demonstrated in international organizations.”<sup>37</sup> Although in her speech she did neither condemn the Russian invasion nor mention sanctions on Russia or sending armaments to Ukraine, the general conclusion was that Serbia has decided to join the initiative. However, Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić went public the same day to claim that the Prime Minister’s speech is nothing more than support for the principle of sovereignty that is vitally important to Serbia: “Serbia did not join the Crimean platform or the declaration, the Prime Minister participated in the work of that meeting through a video message, but we did not support, nor did we accept that text of the Crimean platform, precisely because it goes beyond the framework that is acceptable to us.”<sup>38</sup>

### Conclusion: Different messages for different publics

In order to sustain its balancing act in increasingly challenging circumstances, Serbian officials needed to develop a complex narrative that would address several conflicting stakeholders at the same time. As we saw from the statements examined, the main message

35 N1, “Vucic with Zelensky: Ukraine remains determined not to recognize Kosovo”, August 22 2023, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/vucic-with-zelensky-ukraine-remains-determined-not-to-recognize-kosovo/>.

36 Ibid.

37 The third Summit of the Crimea platform, August 23 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TV5ZJTS\\_uwM&ab\\_channel=%D0%9A%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BC%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%Bo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TV5ZJTS_uwM&ab_channel=%D0%9A%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BC%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%Bo).

38 Beta, “Dačić: Srbija se nije pridružila Krimskoj platformi, uskoro možda susret sa Lavrovim”, August 25 2023, <https://beta.rs/content/189056-dacic-srbija-se-nije-pridruzila-krimskoj-platfomi-uskoro-mozda-susret-sa-lavrovim>.

## Walking on a Tight Rope

to the West has been that Serbia is not politically neutral. Rather, Serbia is ready to fully support the territorial integrity of Ukraine, including possibly with means secretly conveyed behind the curtain, as long as those measures would not irritate Russia or the domestic electorate directly. The red line that should not be crossed is aligning with the EU sanctions against Moscow. For this position to be acceptable to Western stakeholders, Belgrade needed a convincing argument that such a stance is necessary. While the Russian support related to the Kosovo dispute falls on deaf ears, Serbian gas dependence on Russia and the potential immense losses sanctions would cause on the fragile economy are the reasons many in the West understand. Since the beginning of the aggression, the pressure on Serbia to align with the EU and introduce sanctions on Russia has weakened, especially because Serbia was cooperative on most pressing issues for regional stability, for example accepting the so-called Franco-German proposal for the normalization of relations with Kosovo as the new framework for negotiations with Pristina.

On the other hand, the message to Russia is simple – the refusal to introduce sanctions despite all the pressures Belgrade is facing is nothing short of proof of ultimate political sacrifice and loyalty. The fact that Serbia remains one of the handful of European countries that has not introduced restrictive measures, alongside Belarus and Turkey, causes Moscow to look the other way on numerous decisions and statements. This includes various political declarations and allegations on armament exports to Ukraine which would in different circumstances provoke much harsher reactions. The Russian leadership has publicly shown appreciation for such a position of Serbia: “Russia knows what pressure Serbia is under, as well as other Balkan countries, in order to join sanctions. We deeply respect the Serbian people, Serbian culture, Serbian history, their commitment to traditional friends, and we are sure that Serbia will continue to make smart choices in this situation.”<sup>39</sup> However, cordial messages to the Serbian public from Vladimir Putin and others should

be regarded primarily as a way to strengthen public support towards Russia and consequentially increase the bottom-up pressure on the regime in Belgrade not to change its position: “I have heard many times: ‘We have to put pressure on them, it’s the weak link’. But the Serbs are not that kind of people, it’s not that kind of history, it is a different culture. Perhaps I will say a difficult thing: It is possible to destroy them, but it is impossible to break and subjugate them. The West does not understand this.”<sup>40</sup>

In reality, the Serbo-Russian relations have been rather turbulent over the last two years. Several pivotal moments can be traced as evidence of this. The first one was the suddenly announced visit of the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov to Belgrade in early June 2022.<sup>41</sup> The visit was cancelled within a few days because all potential transit countries prohibited Lavrov to use their airspace. Although the Serbian leadership officially protested for such an outcome,<sup>42</sup> it must have been relieved having in mind how alarming this visit would have been interpreted in the West. On the Russian side, this apparent proof of proximity might also be interpreted as a signal to Serbia that the regime in the Kremlin can instantly make things very unpleasant in case Belgrade decides to do a U-turn in its policy towards Moscow. Another critical moment was Putin’s statement from later that month when he stated that the so-called “Donbas republics” have the right to declare independence in line with the precedent established by the West in the case of Kosovo,<sup>43</sup> which the pro-government tabloids in Serbia reported as a sign of ultimate betrayal. The bilateral relations seemingly regained momentum during the UN General Assembly meeting in September 2022 when the two countries signed an agreement for mutual consultations on foreign policy matters.<sup>44</sup> However, Putin and Vučić have not had an official bilateral meeting since the invasion begun, but the Serbian president claims the two briefly met in Beijing in October 2023 during the International forum for the Chinese Belt and Road initiative.<sup>45</sup>

39 Telegraf, “Sergei Lavrov talks about Serbia for Serbian media: You are right to call yourselves independent”, March 28 2022, <https://www.telegraf.rs/english/3477463-sergei-lavrov-talks-about-serbia-for-serbian-media-you-are-right-to-call-yourself-independent>.

40 Blic, “Putin: Nemoguće je slomiti srpski narod”, October 5 2023, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/putin-nemoguće-je-slomiti-srpski-narod/19x3yl6>.

41 Radio Slobodna Evropa, “Rusija potvrdila da Lavrov dolazi u Srbiju”, June 3 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-lavrov-srbija-poseta/31882022.html>.

42 Voice of America, “Vučić nezadovoljan zbog okolnosti otkazivanja posete Lavrova i “histerije prema Srbiji””, June 5 2023, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/rat-u-ukrajini-ukrajina-rusija-srbija-lavrov-poseta-beograd-vucic-prelet-zabrana-solc/6604305.html>.

43 N1, “Putin: Right to recognise Donbas republics same as how Kosovo got recognition”, June 18 2022, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/putin-right-to-recognise-donbas-republics-same-as-how-kosovo-got-recognition/>.

44 Associated Press, “EU candidate Serbia and Russia sign foreign policy agreement”, September 24 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-united-nations-general-assembly-foreign-policy-moscow-serbia-c63b0ca1271dd5b2ee3008bdccb7de23>.

45 N1, “Vucic meets Putin in Beijing”, October 17 2023, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/vucic-meets-putin-in-beijing/>.



### Walking on a Tight Rope

Finally, it is important to understand how this ambivalent position is communicated domestically. The main narrative is that the government is facing immense pressures to introduce sanctions but endures nonetheless by insisting on its balanced and principled policy. The decision not to impose restrictive measures against Russia is not only justified by realpolitik reasons such as Moscow's support over the Kosovo issue or the gas dependence, but by emotional reasons too – namely, the historical friendship between the two Slavic countries, and the bitter experience of sanctions from the 1990s which several public surveys found to be the most common reasons for the electorate opposing sanctions. The survey that the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy conducted in October 2022 showed that 44 percent of citizens are against sanctions because Serbia experienced them itself in the 1990s, 24 percent because Russia is considered to be Serbia's greatest friend, and only 12 percent because of the issue of Kosovo.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, the government officials are consistently repeating in their statements that Serbia must support Ukraine not only to protect the principle of territorial integrity, but also to appease the West in order not to be excluded politically nor to suffer economically.

With parliamentary elections in December just around the corner, the sanctions on Russia remain one of the main topics dividing the Serbian political arena. While the Government and the right-wing opposition stand firmly against sanctions, the pro-European opposition parties are more or less vocal in supporting the introduction of sanctions. However, a regime change leading to a major shift in foreign policy does not seem likely at this moment. When thinking about the prospect of the Serbian strategy regarding the conflict in Ukraine going forward, we have to realize that the current doctrine has proved successful in achieving the goals the government has proclaimed. The appeasement of the West has been achieved relatively successfully without imposing sanctions on Russia. The calls from Western officials for alignment with the EU's restrictive measures are being progressively muted and less frequent as time goes by. Taking into account the high political and economic price the sudden shift of the course would bring, it does not seem likely that this formula will change in the months to come. The wave of unprecedented and unexpected events over the last few years has taught us to be careful with predictions. However, without a

game-changing event on the Ukrainian battlefield or the escalation of security threats in the Western Balkans, the most likely option is the continuation of the current doctrine of mixed messages and appeasement of both sides by other means.

<sup>46</sup> Bjeloš, Vuksanović, Šterić, "Public perception of Serbian foreign policy in the midst of the war in Ukraine", *Belgrade Centre for Security Policy*, December 2022, <https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Public-Perception-of-Serbian-Foreign-Policy-in-the-Midst-of-the-War-in-Ukraine.pdf>, page 7.