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**Serbia's Foreign Policy Response to the War in Ukraine: A Luxury or a Necessity?**

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## Contents

<b>Introduction and Methodology</b>	<b>3</b>
Reasons for Serbia imposing sanctions	4
<b>Chapter 1.1</b>	<b>5</b>
1.2 Serbia and the EU	6
1.3 Nato	8
1.4 Serbia and Russia	9
Contemporary relations	11
Energy and Economics	12
Political	13
Military	14
Summary	15
<b>Chapter 2.1 Reasonings for not imposing sanctions</b>	<b>15</b>
2.2 Maintenance of Russian Political Support	16
2.3 Economic reasons	17
2.4 Internal political reasons	19
2.5 A continuation of policy	22
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>25</b>

## Introduction and Methodology

On the 24th of February, Russian tanks, jets, and soldiers rolled into Ukraine, greatly expanding the scope of the conflict that has been troubling the country since 2014. Despite months of build-up in the period before the invasion, the attack brought a shock effect upon the countries of the world which implemented a sharp reaction and round condemnations toward Russia. The European Union quickly imposed a sanctions regime against Russia which was joined by many non-EU states, with traditionally neutral states such as Austria, Finland, the Republic of Ireland and Switzerland being notable inclusions. Out of all of the European states, there are only three which have not joined with the sanctions. Belarus, which is heavily aligned with Russia, the Republic of Turkey which despite being a NATO member, exerts a very much independent and unique approach to its foreign policy, and Bosnia and Herzegovina who have been obstructed by Bosnian Serbs blockading attempts to join the sanctions. The final European country which has not joined in on EU-led sanctions is Serbia, who, as a negotiating candidate, should be striving to comply with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). This paper seeks to explore the various reasons why Serbia has not joined the sanctions. Given the impact that the invasion of Ukraine has had on European and global affairs, it is important to detail why a country, and particularly an EU candidate country, is going against the grain and not aligning with EU policy.

The reasons are of course multifaceted and deserve close attention and discussion. This is what this paper sets out to do, by providing an overarching analysis of Serbia's foreign policy response to the crisis. To undertake this, qualitative research techniques have been used to contrive answers and discussion. A wide range of sources are referred to including historical books and relevant academic papers that discuss both Serbian and Russian foreign policy. As well as this, media sources have been examined to obtain recent and contemporary information. The bulk of the literature shall be examined in the first chapter when providing context for topic of the thesis.

To give appropriate context to how this happened the first chapter of the paper shall discuss Serbia being 'between east and west'. First of all, Serbia is currently a negotiating candidate for the EU and has been building toward EU-Atlantic integration. Therefore it is important to provide the context of its journey toward this, as well as examine the struggles that it faces with regard to this. The second part of the first chapter shall then cast light upon Serbia's historical relationship with Russia, its growing ties with the country, and the impact of Russian interference on Serbia's domestic affairs. The intention of this chapter is to give the reader a good understanding of the situation that Serbia was in prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and to provide a bedrock from which the thesis can delve into a second chapter that can provide a good scope of analysis toward the rationale of Serbia's response to the war in Ukraine. This section shall delve deeper into the key reasons identified that offer an explanation of Serbia's response.

The analysis shall consider whether Serbia's response was a luxury, where it had free reign to make the decisions it had, or whether, due to the factoring constraints in its international

policy, it was a necessity with no other viable option available. The paper shall conclude that the response was largely a necessity, but that a degree of leeway is available for the government to change its course. It shall also be argued that Serbia's lack of options is a result of its own historical decisions and approach to international affairs. First of all, however, a methodology in how this paper seeks to examine this shall be provided followed by a rationale as to why Serbia should join with EU sanctions in order so that the question as to why it has not can be explored.

#### Reasons for Serbia imposing sanctions

Before we begin our analysis, it must be stated why Serbia should join EU sanctions on the Russian Federation. The main, overriding reason is that Serbia is an EU candidate country and is fully expected to align with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy as part of the accession process (European Commission). EU foreign policy is covered in chapter 31 of negotiations which Serbia has yet to open. In the EU Commission's report on Serbia for 2021, it had a large degree of critique of Serbia with regards to Chapter 31, and in particular, highlighted its non-alignment with the EU vis-a-vis its relations with Russia. The report states:

“Serbia is moderately prepared in the area of common foreign, security and defence policy (CFSP) and made some progress over the reporting period. Serbia's CFSP alignment patterns remained largely unchanged. A number of Serbia's actions went contrary to EU positions on foreign policy. In 2020, Serbia's alignment rate with relevant High Representative statements on behalf of the EU and Council Decisions was 56%, but rose to 61% as of August 2021. Serbia continued to participate in EU crisis management missions and operations under the common security and defence policy.

In the coming year, Serbia should in particular:

- improve its alignment with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy and avoid actions that go against EU positions on foreign policy;
- adopt the action plans for the implementation of new national security and defence strategies, in a manner fully reflecting Serbia's EU orientation in these areas.” (EU Commission 2021, p.124)

This shows us that the viewpoint of the EU Commission prior to February 2022 was relatively unsatisfactory due to Serbian positions being in contradiction to the EU's. A brief uptick in alignment was noted, but on the whole, Serbia isn't close to being aligned to EU foreign policy which it must achieve in order to enter the political bloc. It is also clear that since the Russian invasion in February 2022, Serbia has completely ignored the advisory option of the EU commission on avoiding actions that are contrary to EU foreign policy, which Serbia has clearly done by dismissing calls for it to align with EU sanctions against Russia. Additionally, the report highlights severe dissatisfaction with Serbia's close relationship with Russia:

“Serbia continued to develop **intense relations and strategic partnerships with a number of countries worldwide**, including Russia and China. Frequent high-level contacts and regular bilateral visits with Russia were maintained. In December 2020, the Russian Minister

of Foreign Affairs visited Belgrade, and in February the Russian Deputy Prime Minister was in Belgrade for the meeting of the inter-governmental committee for trade, economic and scientific-technical cooperation. In February 2021, the Chairman of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs, listed on the EU sanctions list, was in Belgrade. The Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Moscow in April and June 2021. During his visit to Moscow in June 2021 the Serbian Minister of Defence assessed that the defence cooperation between Serbia and Russia was at a historic high. In July 2021 the Serbian President received the Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, listed on the EU sanctions list. Two-overhauled MIG-29 from Belarus were delivered to Serbia in April 2021. In June 2021, Serbia participated in the annual tripartite military drill with Russia and Belarus (“Slavic brotherhood”). Russian assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic was continuously emphasised by the Serbian leadership.” (EU Commission 2021 p.125).

This highlights great concern with Serbia’s stance towards Russia. What we can see that the commission feels is particularly undermining regarding its position is the highlighting of key meetings between high-level personnel, particularly with ones who are under EU sanctions. If EU concern with Serbia was high before the February invasion, then its aversion to changing its foreign policy positions toward Russia in face of a huge crisis has surely stripped the EU of any confidence that it had in Serbia in doing so beforehand. Officially it hasn’t harmed Serbia just yet as the country has not begun to negotiate chapter 31, but not aligning with the EU on a matter that seriously threatens the bloc’s security will do Serbia no favours in the long term. Having looked at the key reason as to why Serbia should be joining EU-led sanctions, the paper shall provide the relevant context to help lay out Serbia’s circumstances that have led to it taking the course it has.

## Chapter 1.1

In order to have an understanding of the reluctance of Serbia to impose sanctions on Russia or to align with the normative European policy on the issue, it is necessary to provide a thorough overview of the various axis of Serbian foreign policy which this chapter shall explore. Geographically and identity-wise, Serbia may be described as a country that ‘sits neither east nor west’ (Lazic 2004), thus there are various angles from which Serbia tackles its foreign policy objectives. Serbia under the ruling SNS has been described as maintaining a balancing act between diverging polarised powers (Kovacevic 2019). Indeed, this has been seen in the years prior to the SNS’s ascent to power with Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 which can be seen as a key point in a deviation of foreign policy objectives and a departure from the normative approach toward the EU in the years prior.

This chapter shall be broken into various sections to help understand the context of Serbia’s position on the war in Ukraine. First of all, our discussion of Serbia’s relationship with the European Union and NATO shall be delivered. It should be mentioned that a clear distinction must be made between the two bodies, as Serbia has a desire to join one and not the other. Some members of the EU and NATO are overlapping and there is a strong linkage to their approaches to the war in Ukraine, but they are fundamentally different organisations. Thus, when discussing Serbia’s approach to its Euro-Atlantic integration and relationship, it must

be split into the EU-led and NATO-led. When discussing the sanctions it should also be noted that they are EU-led and not NATO. Hence, Serbia as a candidate country should be complying with the EU's stance, however, as it does not intend to join NATO it can hold a different one.

After discussing Serbia's approach toward the West vis-a-vis the EU and NATO, its relationship with Russia shall be discussed. There have been various avenues of growing ties between the countries, which is crucial to understanding Serbia's response to the war in Ukraine. It should be mentioned that Serbia's axis of foreign policy reaches far further beyond the West and Russia, with strong linkages with China, Turkey, its neighbourhood, and other third countries (Bieber & Tzifakis 2019), however, to focus more directly on the core of the thesis, these shall be omitted from this section.

The well-noted crux of Serbia's foreign policy approach is the status of Kosovo. Although deserving of a subchapter to itself, due to the issue being formative toward its approach and linkage with both the West and Russia, the issue shall be considered throughout this section. After painting a picture of the various angles that Serbian foreign policy takes it's hoped that the reader will have a stronger understanding of the contextual issues that have led to Serbia responding the way it did toward the war in Ukraine.

## 1.2 Serbia and the EU

The first subchapter shall consider Serbia's relationship with the EU. Since the watershed moment of modern Serbian politics on the 5th of October and the overthrow of Milošević, the newly elected Serbian government aimed to make a clear cut with the turbulent 90s and the dissolution of Yugoslavia and take the path toward Europe (Subotic 2011). This was clear from the onset under the premiership of Zoran Djindjic, whose radical initiatives brought sweeping changes throughout the country, and brought forward a feeling of optimism that Serbia was well upon the path to Europe. "Europe is our house and there's no price too high to pay...I am for Europe" (Subotic 2011 p. 324). The fast changes, particularly compliance with the ITCY's indictments against those who were suspected of war crimes proved too much, marking a second watershed moment with Djindjic's assassination in March 2003, which was orchestrated by members and former members of Serbia's state security Special Operations Unit (Subotic 2011).

It's been claimed that Serbia's European dream died with Djindjic, but every governing party since then has placed EU accession as its main strategic objective and the EU even intensified its efforts with Serbia after the assassination (Stahl 2013). This is certainly not to suggest that they have been clearly on the path toward the EU, with Kostunica being the notable leader who voiced strong opposition over many parts of the journey, with eurosceptics largely dominating the political scene after the assassination of Djindjic (Subotic 2011). As well as that, the main voice of opposition to the EU was Seselj's Serbian Radical Party, (SRS), but the party was always in opposition since the rule of Milosevic. The SRS's split in 2008 led to the formation of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) which has governed Serbia since 2012. The key reason for the split was the issue of the EU with the pro-EU moderates splitting off to form the SNS as supporting EU integration was seen as key to them gaining the keys to power (Stojić 2022).

The marked starting point of Serbia's journey toward the EU can be viewed as coming three months after Djindjic's assassination at the 2003 Thessaloniki summit (Stahl 2003). A commitment was made by the EU who offered "unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries" and that the future of the Western Balkans lay in the EU, opening the door for the European project to become 'the only game in town' (Panagiotou 2021). From here on, the Western Balkan countries, including Serbia, pushed forward to integrate and align with EU bodies. Since the optimism of progress in Thessaloniki, reality has slowly set in, and the tangibility of Serbia joining the EU drifts back and forth. This has had a tremendous effect on the morale of the countries that wish to join with Panagiotou (2021, p.230) writing that "European policy and the slow pace of enlargement have left a political vacuum in Southeast Europe: the fact that only Croatia has joined the European Union since the Thessaloniki is seen as an indication that the great expectations created by the summit have not been fulfilled."

The next key milestone for Serbia came in 2008 with the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). This was significant as it established contractual obligations and rights between the EU and Serbia for the first time (Bank of Serbia), setting the pathway for its eventual assent. The SAA entered into force in September 2013, and then it was on to the next step, receiving candidate status.

Candidate status was granted to Serbia in March 2012 with negotiations officially beginning in January 2014. The event which strongly emphasised as causing the breakthrough is the signing of the Brussels agreement in 2012, which aimed for a normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, under EU oversight (Ejdus 2020). The Kosovo issue has been seen as the main issue or the crux point in Serbia's relationship with the EU as normalisation of relations has been seen as a requirement as outlined in chapter 35 of EU negotiations (EU Commission 2021). Although it has officially always been rejected, given that five EU member states - Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia, Spain, and Romania - don't recognise the independence of Kosovo, it's been strongly suggested that Serbia would need to recognise Kosovo to join the EU. This was emphasised by German chancellor Olaf Scholz earlier this year (Bajrami and Semeni 2022), bringing Serbia's future in its relationship with the EU closer toward a sum zero game. The issue of Kosovo, along with the slow pace of negotiations, particularly when compared with other former communist countries, has caused popular support in Serbia to join the EU to drop drastically in the past decade, with a recent poll showing that a greater amount of citizens are against joining the bloc than in favour (Dartford 2022). Despite these setbacks, the government of Serbia has remained committed to the EU as being Serbia's final destination.

The other aspect of the slow process is the apparent inability of the EU to use its 'transformative effect' in Serbia and its Western Balkan neighbours (Economides & Ker-Lindsay 2015). Reforms have been excessively slow and democracy has been weakened since the SNS came to power in 2012 (Dragojlov 2020). In 2020 Serbia was downgraded to being a competitive authoritarian regime by Freedom House, seemingly drifting away from the EU norms it's supposed to be progressing toward. This has been well documented, with Serbia being described as being a stabilitocracy (Bieber 2018). This is where authoritarian regimes receive support from the EU in exchange for the alleged regional stability that they provide. The workability of the current status quo that Serbia is in

has been heavily disputed, with Bieber (2018) arguing that the continuation of stabilitocracy actually adds to regional instability. A key aspect of the authoritarian nature of the ruling party is the lack of media freedoms and the impact this has on democracy (Vladislavljević 2020). This in turn has built heavily toward polarisation of the real benefits of the EU helping to shift public opinion away from it. This has helped to contribute to an atmosphere of de-Europeanisation, whereby the lack of media freedoms can be seen as a drift away from progressing toward the EU (Castaldo & Pinna 2018).

Despite the slow progress and serious shortfalls in the Europeanisation process, when it comes to economic support the EU begins to show itself to be the 'only game in town'. Over 60% of Serbia's trade comes from the block and its four biggest trading partners are EU member states (EU in Serbia). Serbia also benefits from development aid from the EU amounting to €3 billion per annum (Ministry of European Integration Serbia). Regardless of the EU providing funds for various projects, being the biggest trader and foreign direct investor in the country, the EU has failed to market itself sufficiently to the population. The impact of the EU is relatively unknown or unrecognised by a significant proportion of the population. For instance, a study in 2016 showed that just 24% of the population believed that the EU was Serbia's biggest economic benefactor whilst the same amount believed it was Russia (Panagiotou). Russia only provides 0.5% of assistance funds, whereas the EU over 60%. This highlights a weak point of the EU which is exploitable by Russia.

Instances of derision of the EU from the ruling SNS party have also been increasingly notable. This includes the anti-EU rhetoric from the government after the signing of the Brussels Agreement as a method to maintain support having made significant concessions regarding Kosovo (Mladenovic 2022). This occurred again during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, with Vucic saying "European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairy tale on paper", as he pleaded with China for support (Simic 2020). Stojic (2016) also argues that European values are not at the heart of the party's values, and instead use the EU as a tool for political success.

In essence, the slow progress with the EU has contributed to the creation of a power vacuum whereby third-party states are able to use the soft power tools at their disposal to create a mirage of alternative options for the Western Balkan states, particularly in Serbia, where a balancing act to international relations has been well noted. The EU leverage over Serbia has been reduced and the Europeanisation effect in Serbia has largely failed, the EU still stands staunchly as Serbia's only realistic pathway to prosperity.

### 1.3 Nato

The second part of Serbia's gaze toward the West is its relationship with NATO. This is particularly relevant to examine as the war in Ukraine has been commented as a proxy war between the West and Russia and a key reason for the assault. The history between Serbia and NATO is certainly a fractious one, starting with the bombing of the Bosnian Serb Army in 1995. Although distinct from the state of Serbia, the Bosnian Serbs were supported both directly and indirectly by Belgrade (Glenny 2012). The real point of fracture, however, was the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999 during the Kosovo war. The barrages of bombs targeting civilian infrastructure outwith the province of Kosovo and the deaths of

civilians have led to a situation whereby NATO membership would be completely unacceptable to the majority of Serbs (Marciacq 2020).

In the years after the Kosovo war, cooperation between Serbia and NATO began to grow. Initially, this was through having to work together over Kosovo (Stojković & Glišić). The Serbian prime minister was also not opposed to NATO in principle (Ejdus 2014A). This speculation was put to a halt in 2007 when Serbia declared military neutrality (Ejdus 2014A). The decision was quick to be made as there was barely a discussion of the subject in the months and years ahead of it (Sekora 2010). This led to an understanding that this was a reaction to the expected declaration of independence of Kosovo, which came in the months after. It can also be viewed as a signal towards Russia of a blockade of any future possibility of joining NATO, thus furthering support from Russia vis-a-vis Kosovo.

Since its declaration of neutrality, there seems to be a lack of political appetite to expand upon it or withdraw from it, with any prospect of Serbia joining NATO seemingly a distant prospect. This can be seen through the complete lack of public support for the idea of Serbia joining NATO with 80% against it and 5% in favour (European Western Balkans 2020). Despite this, Serbia cooperates closely with NATO through the Partnership for Peace programme, taking part in joint exercises and having certain units up to NATO standards (Marciacq 2020). Serbia, therefore, has a difficult relationship with the alliance due its history with it, which in turn means that there is no appetite to join the organisation. Serbia does, however, cooperate closely with it and trains its troops to its standards.

#### 1.4 Serbia and Russia

When examining Serbia's response to a Russian invasion it is of course necessary to take a detailed examination of Serbia's development of relations with Russia. The sub-chapter shall be broken into two sections. Serbian-Russian relations are considered to be "based on a deep mutual feeling of friendship, centuries-old history of relations and the tradition of the linguistic, spiritual and cultural closeness of the fraternal peoples" (Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), which makes it necessary to examine historical relations between the two countries. The first part shall consider relations up until the 1990s and the fall of the Soviet Union, and the second section shall be more detailed in providing an overview of what constitutes contemporary relations between the countries.

We can mark the ties between Russia and Serbia well before 1838 when official bilateral ties were first established between the states. Both peoples share a degree of cultural heritage through being Slavic peoples, the Cyrillic alphabet, and the orthodox faith, which brings forward a degree of natural kinship (Jovanović 2021). Russia has been proactive in the Balkan peninsula since the late 18 century when its borders expanded toward the Black Sea. From there, great support was offered by Russia to the slavs and orthodox peoples of the region in their struggles to form nation-states. This was part of Russia's wider strategic objective of breaking down the Ottoman empire, taking Constantinople, and having control of the Dardanelles Straits (Clark and Foxall 2014 p.5). Russia fought three major wars against the Ottomans in the 19th century with each other furthering the national interest of particular Balkan nations which brought with it a "genuine feeling of closeness built by common

struggle on the foundations of ethnic/religious affinity” (Headley 2008 page 11). With regards to Serbia, there were highs and lows in the relationship, including a feeling of betrayal after the Congress of Berlin 1878 where Russia favoured Bulgaria’s dreams and aspirations as part of Russia’s drive for dominance (Glenny 2012). Serbian positions toward Russia in the period from here up until the outbreak of the First World War switched depending on the government of the time (Glenny 2012).

The Austro-Hungarian attack upon Serbia in July 1914 brought with it a swift response from Russia who came to Serbia’s defence, cementing itself as its protector. In his memoirs, Tsar Nicholas the first wrote of the intervention saying :

“Russia, related by faith and blood to the Slav peoples and faithful to her historical traditions has never regarded their fates with indifference. Today it is not only the protection of a country related to us and unjustly attacked that must be accorded, but we must safeguard the honour, the dignity, and integrity of Russia's position among the great powers”. (Healey page 11)

These words show sincerity toward Pan-Slavism and the position of Russia acting as a leader of the Orthodox world, but the latter part shows that pragmatic reasoning also lay at the heart of the decision to intervene just as it had during the country’s 19th-century Balkan adventures.

The fall of Tsarist Russia and the establishment of the Soviet Union brought with it a withdrawal of Russia from the Balkans where a victorious Serbia formed Yugoslavia. The latter months of the Second World War took the country back into the region when the Red Army assisted in pushing the Germans out of the territory (Majstorovic 2016). From the war's end, Tito’s Yugoslavia developed firm yet brief ties with the Soviet Union until a firm cut was made due to Soviet interference in with country’s internal affairs (Crampton 2002, p.26) This resulted in the explosion of Yugoslavia from the Comintern in 1948 with diplomatic relations not been restored and normalised until 1987 due to Gorbachev’s de-idealisation of foreign policy (Headley 2008).

Therefore, when examining the shared history of the countries until the fall of the Berlin Wall much of the relations between Serbia and Russia was based largely on pragmatic interests with a degree of Slavic brotherhood depending on the circumstances in order to suit agendas. It has been argued that despite various political agendas that altered the ideologies of both countries, general support between the people still existed. A.V. Karasev, for instance, writes:

“Throughout the centuries the peoples of Russia and the Yugoslav peoples endured not a few historical cataclysms, conquests, for a long time lost their independence, bore enormous human and material losses in the course of the cruellest wars, but managed to preserve and carry through all the vicissitudes of fate, a feeling of sincere friendship and love for each other.” (sourced from Headley 2008 p.27)

Although the language may be colourful, the quotation nevertheless, whether imagined or not, shines a light upon the fraternity that exists between the peoples. This feeling is then often utilised and manipulated by the media and political leaders with regard to the affairs of

today, as shall be discussed at a further point in the thesis. Thus we can summarise by saying that beyond the ethnic and religious ties, Serbia was assisted in crucial points in its history: assistance in creating the state in the nineteenth century, and protecting the very existence of the state in the twentieth.

### Contemporary relations

The break-up of the Soviet Union and the advent of the wars in the former Yugoslavia brought with it a new approach from the Russian Federation, with old Tsarist ideas of Russia having a special role in the Balkans returning (Clark and Foxall 2014 p. 5). Russia was opposed to the use of force against a fellow Orthodox Slav country and people during interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo. Its inability to halt this was a marked sign of Russia's decline in international politics, bringing with it a fearsome loathing (Panagiotou 2021). The shame felt in the nineties has in turn set the ground for the foundation stones placed in the following years, cementing the Balkans as a battlefield in Russia's framing of an Eastern, Russian-led world against an aggressively expanding Western one. With no common border, a NATO lake between them, and limited economic apparatus when compared with the EU, Russia uses its available toolkit to extraordinary effect. This section shall thus give an overview of Russia's toolkit and Serbia's approach to the Russian state.

Russia's main strategic objective in the Western Balkans is to hinder NATO and EU expansion in the region (Strategic Comments 2019). Russia views NATO as its main threat, and although NATO expansion to small West Balkans states would not be a major threat to Russia given their size and distance, NATO hegemony in the region is viewed as a prelude to an expansion upon Russia's own borders, namely Ukraine and Georgia (Bechev 2017). Thus Russia notably interfered in Montenegro and North Macedonia on the eve of their NATO accessions, with an alleged coup attempt in Montenegro and an intensification of propaganda efforts in North Macedonia (Stronski & Hines 2019). Officially, Russia is not against EU enlargement in the region. However, it uses its media propaganda tools to cast the EU in a negative light - inept, corrupt, weak, and unable to effectively assist the region, instead being the cause of its problems (Stronski & Hines 2019). NATO membership on the other hand is Moscow's red line, with Serbia having ruled itself out of joining the alliance it allows for a closer development of relations between the two states.

Russia was limited in its assistance to Serbia in the nineties, having its hands tied with major domestic issues. As well as this, Russia was largely unsupportive of Serbia due to Milosevic's backing of the failed coup d'etat attempt in 1991 which ended with Yeltsin taking the reins of power (Glenny 2012 p. 637). Additionally, it did comply and voted for sanctions on the country during the Yugoslav wars in 1992, as well as partaking in the setting up of the Hague tribunals in 1995 (Djukic 2015). Support for Serbia began to turn when NATO began threatening to bomb the VRS but was unwilling to back this with anything substantial (Glenny 2012 p. 639).

Russia did however align with Serbia at a crucial point in 1999, voting at the UN Security Council against the NATO bombing campaign. This has proved to be paramount for Serbia in maintaining its claim to Kosovo, as blockage of approval allows the country to pursue the claim that the bombing and the subsequent loss of autonomy over the province as illegal. It was at this point that Russia hammered its stake into the future security arrangements in

Kosovo by racing a contingent of troops from Bosnia to Pristina airport, prompting a stand-off with British troops (Bechev 2020). Russia was thus thereafter part of the KFOR mission until its withdrawal in 2003. Importantly, the war's aftermath in August 1999 saw the signing of a free trade agreement between Serbia and Russia, offering a fig leaf to the sanction-torn, infrastructure-obliterated, and economically depleted country in its efforts to rebuild.

The stepping down of Yeltsin and the advent of Putin at the turning of the millennia brought with it gradual and growing relations. The early noughties saw both countries progress with generally good, amicable relations with the West, with the turning point coming in the months prior to Kosovo's UDI, when the likelihood of the event started to become an inevitability. The first positive signal that Russia received was Serbia's declaration of neutrality which wiped away any foreseeable prospect of Serbia joining NATO, thus turning away from Moscow's red line of NATO membership. The decisive moment of Kosovo's UDI on 17 February 2008 prompted a diplomatic scramble from Serbia for its province not to be recognised by other states (Ejdus). This turned into a partial failure, with just over half of UN states recognising it in this period. The success since that day is that it's not recognised as a UN member state due to Russia and China's backing as sitting members of the UN Security Council. Russia's support for Serbia's key strategic objective (along with EU membership), has resulted in much closer collaboration, along with particular strings attached. The coming section shall provide an overview of the dynamics of the growing ties since Russia's crucial support was leant in 2008. It shall be broken into various sections where Russia's arms of influence have been noted, including energy and economics, political and military ties.

### Energy and Economics

The first aspect to be considered is the economic ties between the countries, which will focus on energy, as this is the by-far overriding key to the foundation of the bilateral economic relations between the countries. In the months building toward Kosovo's UDI, it started to become very clear that the big string attached would be Russia's deep involvement in Serbia's energy sector. This became particularly obvious a month before the event when the government-owned energy provider, Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), had a 51% stake sold to Russian energy giant Gazprom for 400 million euros (Reuters 2008). This was about a fifth of the stake's value, with Serbia having its push for a 2 billion euro sale pushed back (Clark and Foxall 2014). The country had essentially handed away a controlling stake in its energy autonomy valued at 9% of the country's GDP. Other potential bidders were locked out of the process, with the handover being essentially assumed to be a handover of Serbia's energy sector in exchange for Russian support vis-a-vis Kosovo (Ejdus 2014B). The move was lambasted by many and described as a "robbery of Serbia's citizens" by one EU commissioner (Vogel 2008). Although 500 million euros of future investment was included as part of the deal, it's been claimed that this would only amount to what would be required for basic required upgrades to maintain the current infrastructure and not a far-reaching development.

A second key aspect of further Russian involvement in Serbia's energy sector was the proposed construction of the South Stream pipeline which was also signed in January 2008 (Bechev 2017). This proposed pipeline would cross from Russia to Bulgaria through the Black Sea, and then through Serbia and into the EU. This would provide Serbia with an estimated 200 million euros in transit fees per annum. However, the project fell apart in 2014

in wake of EU-led sanctions against Russia due to its annexation of Crimea. Further hope of a similar revival of the project were awoken when it was announced that Russia's alternative pipeline project, Turkstream, would transit through Serbia. Hopes of this have been partially dashed since the widening of the war in Ukraine in 2022. Russia's dominance of Serbia's energy sector is well publicised to the country's population with posters of an interlocking Russian-Serbian flag placed prominently on Belgrade's Gazela bridge, and with Gazprom being the sponsor of Red Star Belgrade Football Club since 2010 (Bechev 2019). Overall, Serbia is heavily dependent upon Russia to help meet its energy needs with Gazprom having a huge stake in its internal energy network, providing Russia with immense influence over Serbia.

Russia's economic apparatus towards Serbia beyond energy is relatively limited. Its FDI in Serbia tends to sit below 5% of total investments in the country - 4.9% in 2014, 4.6% in 2015, and dropping to 3.9% in 2016 (Bechev 2020). Comparatively, the EU pushes through 70-80% of FDI, blowing Russia's significance in this regard out of the water. As well as this, only 5% of Serbia's exports go to Russia, with the EU and its immediate neighbourhood being far more important when considering economic linkages. Exports to Germany for example, are worth more than 2.5 times to Serbia than its exports to Russia (World Bank 2019). When examining the statistics a year later, Russia has decreased in importance as a trade partner, with \$50 million less exported to the country, dropping to its sixth most important export partner, and an incredible \$1 billion drop in Russian imports (\$2.5 billion 2019, \$1.5 billion 2020) (World Bank 2020). Although the Coronavirus pandemic must be taken into account, Serbia was able to grow with other trading partners in the same period, despite an overall slight drop in trade, showing that its a country that was able to adapt to the crisis well. Hence, although an important trade partner, comparatively the EU is multiple times more important to the country, with multiple EU countries far more important for Serbia regarding trade.

#### Political

There have also been efforts to strengthen political ties between the countries. Notably, there is a formal inter-party agreement between Putin's United Russia and Serbia's ruling SNS (Marciacq 2020). The parties are relatively aligned in some aspects, being regarded as sovereign democracy parties with outlooks such as social conservatism, statism, anti-NATOism, and an emphasis on national sovereignty closely aligned. Much like United Russia, the SNS is also viewed as being a populist broad church, with a range of views amongst their respective memberships. Additionally, United Russia has established formal connections with other Serbian parties on the political right such as Dveri and the Democratic Party of Serbia (Marciacq 2020).

Political appeasement from the SNS toward Moscow has been demonstrated several times with a well-noted incident being Putin's visit to Belgrade in January 2019. Tens of thousands of people were bussed into Belgrade for the visit, with many of them being coerced with small payments of money, to create a theatre performance of support for the Russian president, who greeted the long-waiting crowd with a brief, apathetic 'thank you' (Bechev 2019).

Political forces from Russia also have a visible presence on the Serbian political scene. The Night Wolves motorcycle gang is viewed as being an arm of the Kremlin, with strong nationalistic views, and has made itself visible in Serbia and the wider region. The group has been noted at various events, most recently at a mass rally against the EuroPride event. Large support for Putin and Russia was noted at the gathering, with some commentators alleging that the event was funded by the Kremlin (Euractiv 2022).

The role of the media plays a huge role in garnering public support for Russia, and thus subsequently creates a barrier for the state to change its foreign policy positioning and impose sanctions on Russia. It has been well noted that there has been a severe downgrading of media freedom in Serbia since the SNS came to power in 2012 (Vladislavljević). The majority of news television channels and newspapers are heavily pro-government, meaning that they publish material that supports government actions and positions. This has been clear with regard to Russia over the past decade, with Serbian media generally taking a firm pro-Russia line in its stories. The pompousness in which Russia and Putin have been painted by the Serbian media over the years has inevitably added to the perception that Russia is Serbia's closest ally. As well as this, the Russian news outlet Sputnik has Serbian language publications meaning that Russia can project what it wishes to the Serbian population. On top of this, it is thought that Russia Today may start broadcasting on Serbian television in the near future (Wesolowsky 2022).

Political cooperation between Serbia and Russia increased further in 2013 after the countries signed a strategic partnership agreement to boost cooperation between them at an international level (Clark and Foxall p.11). This has had an impact with regard to Serbia's alignment with CFSP sanctions. Serbia was relatively consistent in following CFSP guidelines until 2014 when it had a notable drop to an annual average of around 50% (Cardwell & Moret 2022). This was not only refusing to sanction Russia but also countries such as Belarus, Libya, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. All of whom have strong political connections with Russia. This points to a turning point in Serbia's foreign policy decisions, with a tilt toward Russia. Therefore we can view a heightened political impact from Russia upon Serbia at both a national and international level.

### Military

There has also been a growth in military ties between the countries in recent years. In 2012 Russia opened the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Nis. Although set up to deal with humanitarian disasters, as seen during the floods in 2014, it was widely viewed with great suspicion as a possible pretext for the building of a Russian military base. It was thus viewed as being a major threat, as this would mean a Russian base just 100 kilometres away from the US's Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo (Bechev 2017 p.187). This never transpired with Serbia rejecting requests for this up until recently when Vucic dismissed reports that Russia was due to build a base in Serbia (N1 2022). Rumours have also been maintained that Russia has been using the centre as an intelligence base, a claim constantly rejected but not helped by demands from the Russian Foreign Ministry of demanding that its staff receive diplomatic immunity.

Importantly, a fifteen-year bilateral defence cooperation agreement was signed between Belgrade and Moscow in November 2013. The basis of the agreement was for sharing

strategic information and paved the way for joint military exercises. Since then military cooperation has grown between the countries with the Slavic Brotherhood training exercises, along with Belarus highlighting the growth in ties (Marciacq 2020). Although military cooperation has increased, this has never led to a formal alliance ever being proposed. Indeed, Serbia actually cooperates far more with NATO countries than with Russia, meaning that its military ties with Russia shouldn't be overstated.

Additionally, Russia donated six Mig-29s to Serbia in 2017 on the basis that Serbia would cover the 50 million dollar repair costs. Belarus also donated a further four in 2021, bringing Serbia's fleet of Mig-29s from four to fourteen in the space of four years, a relatively large increase (N1 2021). Although eyebrows may be raised at this, it can be seen as a rational option. First of all, Serbia has rejected the pathway to NATO, meaning that the defence benefits that it would receive, as well as subsidised military technology, are absent. Secondly, it is logical for Serbia to acquire advanced aircraft that its pilots are trained to use, having used the Mig-29 since 1987. There is also a counterweight to the argument that Serbia is increasingly militarily dependent on Russian technology is that it also leans to the west, with the country currently in talks with France to purchase twelve Rafale jets (Vasovic 2022), which is a possible nod to the west given that this opened up after the 24 February invasion. Thus despite increasing military cooperation with Russia, its continued strong ties with the NATO alliance paint this as an ideal example of the balancing act that Serbia pursues.

### Summary

In summary, Russian-Serbian ties have become increasingly closer in recent years. Russia has maintained mixed, yet friendly relations with Serbia during the chaos of the nineties, yet the real growth in cooperation can be understood through Serbia's Kosovo dilemma. Serbian dependence on Russian political support became much more apparent in the build-up toward Kosovo's UDI, with far greater Russian influence in political, diplomatic, economic, and military matters. Russia maintains this influence through its effective toolkit that it uses to an effect well beyond its economic tools.

## Chapter 2.1 Reasonings for not imposing sanctions

Having made an examination of Serbia's perspective of its position with both the West and Russia, this chapter shall build upon this background by providing an analysis as to why Serbia has not joined EU sanctions. The framework of this discussion shall be examined through the lens of whether this has been a rational decision whereby Serbia has had the luxury of having a free choice in the matter, or, whether due to the longstanding circumstances, Serbia did not have true autonomy to take an alternative approach.

This chapter shall be broken into several subchapters, each of which shall consider a different reason for Serbia's approach. First of all, since it is an integral part of Serbian foreign policy, we shall look at whether Serbia has avoided sanctions due to Russia's support in aiding Serbia in its attempts to retain Kosovo. The discussion of territorial integrity has been a major theme in the war in Ukraine, and the 'Kosovo precedent' has been

weaponised by Russia to provide a justification for annexing Ukrainian territory, thus the matter deserves special attention.

Secondly, we shall consider economic pragmatism as a reason. This, of course, must be considered as the purpose of sanctions is to cause economic pain upon the sanctioned, In doing so, however, the sanctions also hurt the sanctioner, thus it must be considered whether a key reason for Serbia not imposing sanctions is to protect its economic security. The country has relatively good trade relations with Russia, but the key issue regarding economic relations is the energy aspect, an issue that is currently haunting the governments of Europe.

From here, internal political reasons shall be discussed. This shall be two-pronged in the analysis. Firstly, looking at political parties and their widespread aversion to the use of sanctions and secondly, the public perspective on the use of sanctions and how this transcends onto a political unwillingness to use them.

The last part of the analysis shall consider that Serbia not joining in on sanctions should come as no surprise as it is simply a continuation of its foreign policy. Serbia has been playing a well-noted balancing act with its foreign policy, aiming to appease the West and join the EU whilst at the same time retaining Kosovo. As part of this discussion, the paper shall also discuss the identity issues that have caused this policy by considering Ejdus's (2019) argument that the country suffers from ontological issues which cause it to pursue a policy of avoidance in order to not have to deal with deep, difficult issues.

All of the reasons are heavily interlinked to varying degrees, and none of them would stand out as a single issue without the others in support. It shall be argued and concluded though that the primary reason for Serbia's position vis-a-vis the war in Ukraine is the political disruption it would cause in the country, which would pose a threat to the ruling party.

## 2.2 Maintenance of Russian Political Support

The first rationale for the non-imposition of sanctions that shall be considered is not imposing sanctions on Russia due to the country's firm support toward Serbia due to the Kosovo issue. Whilst progressing toward the EU and engaging in the Europeanisation process, the country, holding by the terms set in its constitution, has scrambled to receive international support in trying to hold onto its southern province. The most important sponsor of this has been Russia, which has firmly stood by Serbia, even submitting documents in support of the country during Serbia's engagement with the UN court (Bechev 2017 p.62). Of course, the support lent by Russia came with heavy strings attached, notably the almost handover of Serbia's energy infrastructure, and a heavy reliance on Russian energy. The non-imposition of sanctions may be viewed as another string to maintain Russian support for Serbia's claim to Kosovo, which leans towards a form of soft coercion. This was analysed as being the case in 2014, during the Russian seizure of Crimea, when Serbia acted in the same manner as it has in 2022, in not aligning with EU sanctions. Thus, in many ways, Serbia's actions can be seen as a continuation in the vein of maintaining its 'Slavic Brotherhood' with Russia by returning Russia's support for Serbia vis-a-vis Kosovo by supporting Russia through the maintenance of neutrality.

However, we must discuss the scope of this further as a loss of Russian support would unlikely have a huge impact on changing the current deadlock regarding Kosovo. First of all, China also has a chair on the UN Security Council and would also maintain the line that Kosovo is a part of Serbia, thus not permitting Kosovo to join the UN and other international bodies. China would almost certainly maintain this line due to its longstanding issues with Taiwan and its claim to sovereignty over the territory. Thus, Serbia imposing sanctions on Russia would unlikely have recognition of Kosovo being a serious result to damaging its relationship with the country as Serbia would be able to maintain support from China, not changing the situation. This therefore would make Serbia's choice a luxury and not a necessity with regard to the prospect of losing further sovereignty over Kosovo, meaning that other reasons must be taken into account to prove that Serbia's choice came out of necessity.

As well as this, the simple trade-off for not imposing sanctions in order to maintain Russian support is too simple an explanation for what is a multi-layered phenomena. It may actually be in Russia's interests to eventually recognise Kosovo, having used the Kosovo precedent as justification in its attempts to annex regions of Ukraine (Rotaru & Troncotă 2017). As well as that, an outright condemnation from Serbia that goes beyond its actions at the UN through the imposition of sanctions would send a strong message that it's serious about the sovereignty of borders, adding weight to its argument that the secession of Kosovo is a clear violation of its territorial integrity.

### 2.3 Economic reasons

One rationale for Serbia not imposing sanctions on Russia is economic reasons. This is a contending factor as the whole purpose of sanctioning a country is to cause them economic harm through a united embargo against them. This additionally inflicts economic self-harm as trade ties are either severed or greatly reduced. An insight into the financial sacrifice that Serbia would have to undertake must therefore be demonstrated so it can be decided whether sanctioning Russia would indeed harm Serbia to the extent that the option should not be contemplated.

As explained, the real depth of these ties lies in the energy sector which is largely owned and supplied by Gazprom. Serbia receives about 85% of its gas needs from Russia (Bechev 2017), making it exceptionally reliant on the country for its energy security. This puts the country in a complex position regarding the implementation of sanctions.

The EU-led sanctions do not currently cover gas supplies, so if Serbia were to apply sanctions as they currently stand it would not affect its energy supply. However, it is highly expected that sanctions will be extended when European countries have secured energy supplies from other sources and can wean themselves off Russian gas. Additionally, it may be Russia that makes the call by turning off the tap in response to current sanctions. Serbia's neighbour Bulgaria has already experienced this when its supply was cut off along with Poland's in April 2022 for not paying for the gas in Rubles (Strzeleck 2022). This was done in the face of the contracts expiring this year putting the countries under deeper pressure. It was additionally done in countries where historically Russia has wielded huge influence

which could make Serbia vulnerable if it were to impose sanctions due to its historical relations with Russia which could be painted as a great betrayal.

Had Serbia also joined the sanctions at the beginning of the invasion along with EU member states, it may have found itself under deep pressure from Russia, as its ten-year contract was also due to expire at the end of May 2022 (Reuters 2022). This could have come at the price of a highly increased cost for the new contract or alternatively a complete cut-off as seen in Bulgaria and Poland. Thus, it can be seen as a logical choice from the Serbian government not to join the EU-led sanctions so as to protect its energy security which it was able to claim when the country signed a new three-year contract with Russia for gas supplies at a favourable rate. Despite this, Serbia is also facing a huge energy crisis this winter along with most other European states. Between October and March, it is expected that the country will pay double the amount for energy imports than what it did last year, coming to a total of around three billion euros, or 4.5% of its GDP (eKathimerini 2022). As well as this, the government has been issuing stark warnings to its citizens about the upcoming harsh winter (Radio Television Serbia 2022). Therefore, although Serbia has managed to partially protect its energy security it's not managed to shield its citizens from the effects of the crisis by avoiding taking part in sanctions.

The sanctions have also impacted Serbia's route to crude oil. Although the country has not joined the sanctions, its route for oil comes through Croatia which has sanctioned oil, meaning that Serbia will no longer have access to it from November (EURACTIV 2022). Serbia has also had to seek gas and electricity flows from Azerbaijan (Dragojlo 2022) to diversify its supplies which shows that regardless of whether Serbia imposes sanctions or not, it is still going to suffer the economic impact of the instability and cutoffs from supplies.

The fact that Serbia receives the vast majority of its gas from Russia, does not in fact paint the full picture. Gas only makes up around 15% of Serbia's energy mix, with domestically produced coal providing the majority of its energy in producing electricity (Young & Macura 2020). Yes, a disruption or cut-off from Russian gas may produce a short-term crisis, but it is one that can be temporarily resolved with a switch to other means to make up the 15% shortfall until new supplies of natural gas can be sourced. This was the case in 2009 when the Western Balkans was heavily affected by the 2009 gas crisis (Bechev 2017 p.205).

The counter to this point is that there is a significant amount of state capture in the energy sector in Serbia and directors are closely tied with the ruling party (Bechev 224b). To continue current deals and functions as they are would thus help to maintain the clientelistic structures as they are, instead of having to source gas from a new provider, thus placing a stumbling block in any attempts to wean away from Russian gas.

As mentioned earlier, although Russia is an important trade partner for Serbia, its economic might is very limited when compared to the EU and the value of its trade with Serbia has dropped recently. Additionally, since Serbia is on an EU-oriented trajectory, the country would indeed have to abandon its free trade agreement with Russia when it joins the bloc. The EU has by far substantiated itself as Serbia's most important trade partner with an average annual 7.4% increase over the past decade, with half of EU trade in the Western Balkans being with Serbia (Eurostat). Serbia's overall trade volume with the EU is more than twelve times greater than what it is with Russia, with a trade volume of 30.28 billion euros

with the EU compared with 2.37 billion with Russia. Russia is thus far, far, away from even matching the economic power that the EU has (EU in Serbia, 2021). If it were to ever come to the question over which to side with, there would only be one sensible answer.

Therefore, the economic harm that Serbia would do to itself by sanctioning Russia doesn't provide a full justification for not imposing them. First of all, regardless of whether or not Serbia sanctions the country, it is still going to bear a degree of fallout due to every neighbouring state also sanctioning the country. This has been apparent with crude oil for which it had to source new partners. Secondly, the sanctions do not currently apply to gas, so Serbia would likely continue as it were. There would have been a chance that Serbia would have had to pay a higher price for its gas when it signed a new contract in May 2022. However, gas only makes up around 15% of Serbia's energy supply and the country has shown its ability to adapt during a crisis, such as the Ukraine gas crisis of 2011. Thus, pragmatic, economic reasons do not supply a fully rounded answer in Serbia not imposing sanctions on Russia. This leads us to assume that there is a further political rationale regarding the issue which we shall discuss next.

#### 2.4 Internal political reasons

Another explanation for Serbia's non-imposition of sanctions is that it could lead to a significant loss in stature of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which could factor toward a loss in power. The SNS can be described as a 'broad church' and was formed in 2008 as a result of a split from the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) when the progressives sought to take a pro-EU stance (Dragojlov 2020). This does not mean that those who formed the SNS are Europeans at heart, with many having been flame stokers during the conflicts in the nineties, rather, it is widely considered to be formed out of political opportunism given the huge public support for joining the EU during this time period. Thus the elected delegates, members, and voters come from a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives. Many view them as the only credible party to achieve EU accession, whilst others are due to the party's traditional social stances. There's thus a wide range of opinions with many of the party's delegates and members outright opposed to imposing sanctions on Russia, having come from the more traditional side of the party. Additionally, some members of the government cabinet are openly pro-Russian, most notably the minister of interior Aleksandar Vulin who has been outspoken for his support for Russia during the war, including a visit to Moscow in August 2022 (Stojanovic 2022). The counter for this within the cabinet is the Minister of Energy, Development and Environmental Protection, Zorana Mihajlovic who has called out Russia for taking advantage of Serbia not imposing sanctions on the country, showing that there is a disparity in opinions within the cabinet (bne IntelliNews 2022). The move toward the presidentialisation of the Serbian political system, however, has President Aleksandar Vucic as the decision maker for everything, government ministers often act as mouthpieces for opinions that he does not wish to publicly say, lest it potentially damages his image.

The invasion of Ukraine came just weeks before the Serbian parliamentary and presidential elections that were held on the 3rd of April. It was highly speculated that no action would be taken by the Serbian government vis-a-vis the conflict in Ukraine so as to obtain a secure victory in the elections (Burazer et.al 2022). It was also commented on that the Serbian

government utilised the uncertainty created by the war to score electoral points, notably using the campaign slogan 'Mir, Stabilnost, Vucic' (peace, stability, Vucic).

The elections resulted in the SNS requiring a coalition partner(s) for the first time since 2014 with none of the potential ones being in favour of sanctions against Russia (Burazer et.al 2022). As well as this, there was a significant showing from pro-Russian parties, notably Dveri and Zavetnici along with the more subtly pro-Russian party the Serbian Party of Socialists (SPS), the former party of Milosevic who have been part of the ruling coalition parties since 2008.

It's not just the ruling SNS and the right of Serbian politics that are opposed to sanctions. The centre-left social democrat party, the Party of Freedom and Justice (SSP), the primary opposition party, is also divided on sanctions. The party called for respect of international law and the sending of humanitarian aid to Ukraine but stopped short of suggesting sanctions (European Western Balkans 2022). A debate on the matter in the Serbian parliament was called for by its deputy leader Borko Stefanovic, but on the whole, there is a lack of drive from the party to strongly push for sanctions (bne IntelliNews 2022). Calls have been made from minority parties and smaller parties such as the green-left coalition Moramo to impose sanctions (Danas 2022), but these parties alone have little to no impact on the direction of government policy. Thus, the lack of political drive from the opposition, as well as their limited impact means that there is very little pressure from within the parliament for the government to impose sanctions. Indeed, the main pressure from within the parliament is to maintain the status quo and preserve neutrality.

On top of pro-neutrality and pro-Russian perspectives within the Serbian Parliament, the government also has to contend with the vast majority of the electorate being against sanctioning Russia. A poll in June 2022 from Demostat found that 80% of the Serbian population was against sanctioning Russia, with just 9% in favour (Demostat 2022). This is far from saying that the population is pro-war, or in support of Russia's actions as the same poll also found 81% felt that Serbian neutrality should be protected at all costs, compared to just 9% who believed the country should stray from it which shows a strong inclination for the country to protect its own interests first before other countries. There are various reasons for this including the legacy of a neutral Yugoslavia during the Cold War which were a founding state of the non-Aligned Movement. As well as this the country is generally deeply opposed to foreign intervention in other countries' conflicts given the traumatic experience of the NATO bombing campaign against the country in 1999. The same Demostat poll also found that the Serbian population's perspective on the causation of the War in Ukraine differed from the more typical European perspective with 7% claiming that Russia was at fault, whereas 54% believed it was NATO's. Affinities toward Russia were also found, with 40% believing that Russia was the closest country to them in Europe and 45% favouring Putin as their favourite world leader. With the majority of citizens against sanctions and a sizable amount feeling affinity towards Russia and Putin it puts the Serbian government in an unenviable position should it pursue sanctioning Russia.

Polls have shown that the Serbian population believes that Russia is Serbia's trading partner. As was noted earlier, this is not the case with EU member states by far surpassing Russia with more than 60% of imports and exports being through its member states (.). As well as this, polling has found that Serbs felt that Russia was equal to the EU in its financial

assistance to the country. This is well beyond reality with Russia providing just 0.5% of financial assistance to the country (Panagiotou 2021).

This leads this paper to argue that this aspect of the reasoning to not impose sanctions as being more of a necessity than a luxury. If the government were to do so, it would seriously undermine its legitimacy by taking a position that is extremely unpopular. The purpose of the SNS is to remain in power and to maintain control of the state apparatus (Dragojlov 2020), thus choosing an option that contradicts that is not an option for the government. It should be noted that many of the SNS core voters were formerly core voters of the SRS before the party split. They hold conservative views and believe that strong relations with Russia should be maintained and enhanced. Upsetting them over this matter would likely cause the SNS to have a political crisis and have a strong core of its voter base swept away, thus sanctioning Russia may well be akin to the party committing suicide.

Anti-NATOism in Serbia is perhaps the key reason for the Serbian public not being in favour of joining the EU-led sanctions. The conflict has often been framed as a NATO versus Russia proxy war (Livingstone 2022). When considered through this lens, the legacy of NATO's bombs and its continued security presence in Kosovo means that many Serbs are likely to have a good idea of who they (don't) support when the reasoning behind the war is framed in this manner. As examined earlier in the paper, Serbia has consistently rejected the idea of joining NATO. The Serbian population are also averse to sanctions as they themselves suffered under sanctions in the nineties and are well aware of the hardships they cause.

The pressure on the Serbian Government due to internal pressures is thus significant. Despite calls from EU member countries for the country to align with the bloc's sanctions, the government is in such a position that if it were to do so, could cause political turmoil. Firstly, SNS members, elected deputies, and ministers are against sanctions with some even supportive of Russia. This could cause turbulence within the party and a loss of electoral support for the government, possibly in so far that it could lead to a split within the party, with Vucic having less personal control over the will of less prominent deputies. No potential coalition partners would endorse imposing sanctions either, with the most likely and strongest, the SPS being seen as being close to Russia and certainly in favour of neutrality. Pressure from the far-right is also a major issue. Two far-right parties, Dveri and Zavetnici, entered parliament in the April elections and are openly supportive of Russia, calling for stronger ties between the countries. Although these parties don't have a voice in government positions, they can shout loudly from the streets.

The leaders of these parties organised rallies against Europride being held in Belgrade (N1 2022). Although these marches were for a separate issue, banners of Putin's face and Russian flags were seen at these events along with a presence from the Nightwolves motorcycle gang, who are viewed as being an arm of the Kremlin. There is therefore a heated political atmosphere in the country that if there were to be an imposition of sanctions on Russia, there could be an intensification of street protests, orchestrated by the far right and perhaps influenced by the Kremlin.

This of course gives the government little room for manoeuvre making the position of avoiding imposing sanctions despite EU pressure the least complicated option. In this light, it

would seem that the choice of sanctions appears to be a necessity rather than a luxury as the internal political backlash that would come as a result may be to the point of a loss of authority. In summary, the widespread support for Russia from within Serbia is certain to cause a backlash should the government decide to align with CFSP.

## 2.5 A continuation of policy

This thesis must also consider that the non-alignment with sanctions can also be viewed as a continuation of government policy. Since the UDI of Kosovo Serbia has found itself having to balance its foreign policy very carefully as whilst its strategic aim is to join the EU, it is not willing to give up its claim to Kosovo, something that is highly expected of most EU member states with just five of them not recognising Kosovo's independence. Additionally, progress toward joining the EU has for Serbia has been an excruciatingly slow process when compared to historical enlargements of the bloc. These have both been key factors towards Serbia balancing its international affairs and have seen the involvement of 'third party states' in the region. The increasing ties with Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf States have been viewed by analysis as a balancing act from the states of the region as they seek alternative options to sustain themselves as the EU accession process travels agonisingly slowly. As part of this balancing act, Serbia has continued to withhold imposing sanctions.

As part of Serbia's journey to the EU, it should be moving away from this balancing act and aligning with its foreign policy with the EU. As noted in the introduction, Serbia has been called out by the EU Commission for not adhering to EU foreign policy as outlined in chapter 31 of negotiations. This has been occurring for years and Serbia has never signalled any change to alter its positions vis-a-vis Russia despite these prompts from the EU. If the country cannot do it when Russia is conducting wide scale aggression against a sovereign state, then it is very unlikely to do so on its own accord without significantly greater pressure from the EU. This points us to the rationale that Serbia's response to the war in Ukraine should not come as a surprise as Serbia is being consistent with its previous actions and positions.

The case for a continuation of policy can be made when making an examination of Serbia's response to the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea. Just as in 2022, Serbia did not impose sanctions on Russia and instead vowed to preserve ties with the country (Bechev 2020). This was reaffirmed a few months after the annexation in October 2014, when a military parade marking the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade was organised for the welcoming of Putin, reaffirming commitment from Serbia towards the country (Bechev 2020). In addition, Serbia has only met around 50% alignment with CFSP sanctions since 2014, largely due to non-compliance with ones aimed at Russia and its allies (Cardwell & Moret 2022).

### Identity Issue

We can also put forward the idea that Serbia not imposing sanctions on Russia comes due to identity issues. As was discussed in the first chapter when providing an overview of Serbia's relations with the West, nominally through the auspices of the EU and with Russia, Serbia finds itself balancing between the two sides. On one hand, the country is an EU

candidate country that views its future in the bloc, and on the other, there is a strong pull toward not wanting to sacrifice its dignity over the matter by giving up Kosovo through recognition. This puts Serbia in an incredibly perplexing position whereby the sum-zero game of the matter may be painted as being: formally hand over your territory and you shall subsequently receive the benefits of EU membership. Serbia, since 2008 has pursued both trajectories, despite the contradictions that they have.

When writing of Serbia's similar response in 2014, Ejdus (2014B), puts Serbia's response down to not being able to face up to its identity issues thus opting for a policy of avoidance so that it does not need to drift away from its balancing act. To go in support of Russia would seriously hamper its EU aspirations, perhaps jeopardising them entirely, to go the other way would add far greater risk to its last barrier to the recognition of Kosovo, that it is not a UN member state. Ejdus argues that instead of confronting these problems to either change its identity (which would take many years), or enact behaviour change, the country instead opts for avoidance. By insisting that the war in Ukraine is a NATO against Russia conflict and not a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, the excuse is used that it's staying neutral and not involving itself in a great powers conflict. This paper is in agreement that Serbia has sought to avoid an identity conflict by joining EU-led sanctions. To do so would cause a major political and societal rift where the consequences would be difficult to predict. Thus the safest option to maintain power in government is to completely avoid an issue that would profoundly change Serbia's foreign policy outlook away from maintaining a balancing act.

Although Serbia has formally condemned the invasion at the UN, putting it a step beyond abstention of the vote which it did in 2014, using the reasoning that the attack on Ukraine is a violation of the country's territorial integrity. This keeps the country consistent with its key argument in trying to retain Kosovo. On the other hand, it has not followed up on its condemnation with any substantive measures to reinforce it, favouring maintaining its strong ties with Russia, thus continuing its long-standing balancing act between major powers. A move from Serbia to impose sanctions would be truly significant as it would send a tremendous signal that without a doubt, the country is a true adherer to the belief of a country's territorial integrity.

## Conclusion

At this point of the thesis, we shall have a discussion of the findings of the paper and conclude. First of all, we shall examine whether Serbia's decision to impose sanctions on Russia was a luxury or a necessity. Having carefully explored the rationale behind Serbia's decision, this paper finds that Serbia's decision was closer to a necessity in order to not divert away from its current foreign policy path. As covered in the first chapter, Serbia has been playing a balancing act since the build-up towards Kosovo's UDI. The country is aware that the EU is the country's only realistic pathway toward economic prosperity, yet at the same time, it is unwilling to sacrifice its claims over Kosovo to do so.

This is not to say that the option that Serbia has of imposing sanctions is essentially unavailable to them. It is available to the country, but it would contain a degree of sacrifice that the leadership is very unlikely to be willing to take. First of all, there would be a high probability of retaliatory action from Russia by rescinding its veto toward Kosovo's UN

membership. Although Serbia would still have China to back its claims in denying Kosovo access to the UN, it would seriously undermine Serbia's attempts to try and retain sovereignty as Russia and China's veto may be viewed as being Serbia's last effective weapon.

Secondly, there is also the economic damage that sanctions would cause. The energy sector may not be hit immediately as Russia is currently still supplying gas to most countries that have sanctioned it, but there is the possibility that this could happen as it did to Poland and Bulgaria. Over time though this would become less relevant once a new interconnector via Bulgaria and North Macedonia is complete (Spasic 2022). Other exports would be cut off from access to Russian markets which would of course cause a great shock to the sectors that are heavily involved. The shock would likely be manageable though and would likely be short-lived as markets can be reconfigured relatively quickly as we were able to see when examining how Russia has very recently become less important trade-wise for Serbia between 2020 and 2021.

What would likely cause the greatest disturbance though is the internal political upset of the decision. Given the strength of support that we see either toward Russia or in preserving neutrality, there would be a big backlash from political opponents, some in the population, and within the ruling party itself. It must be considered that the SNS is ideologically very close to Putin's United Russia. It must also be said that many of the politicians in the party are essentially hardline nationalists and Russophilic having been born out of a split from the SRS. As noted, this was done to make them electable by posturing as being pro-EU to gain electoral support (Dragojlov 2020). The political turmoil that it could cause may result in Vucic losing a degree of legitimacy thus and putting his power at risk, something that is essentially non-negotiable.

Therefore sanctions aren't something that he would impose on his own accord unless an 'escape route' could be built where he could build a convincing rationale as to why Serbia had to join the sanctions regime. Therefore, given the political circumstances in the country, it is highly improbable that Serbia would join with sanctions and we can put the reasoning for not imposing them as being closer to a necessity. This should come as no surprise as this balancing act approach has been an integral part of Serbian foreign policy for years. The question now is whether it will become too difficult to maintain as the war in Ukraine intensifies and greater pressure comes from the EU for the country to join with sanctions. The EU has yet to wield the stick of halting accession negotiations, but the growth of the crisis means that Serbia may have to come to a decision.

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