



SERBIA, BETWEEN GROWING ASPIRATIONS AND REALISTIC LIMITATIONS OF THE POLICY OF A SMALL STATE

BY VLADIMIR VUČKOVIĆ

Originally published by [NI](#), 18.06.2023

Since the mid-2000s, Serbia has strived to position itself as the leading actor in the Western Balkans. To a large extent, regardless of its international reputation, Belgrade tried to imitate the foreign policy of socialist Yugoslavia, based on the balancing of power between East and West, which aimed at both military-political protection and obtaining economic aid from both sides.

Progressively, Boris Tadić's government in 2009 promoted the seemingly new concept of "4 pillars of foreign policy" – cooperation with the EU, the US, Russia, and China, giving this multi-vector policy the institutional framework itself.

However, the proclaimed foreign policy of "both East and West" was additionally strengthened after Aleksandar Vučić came to power in 2012, since then, Serbia has been embarking on signing strategic partnerships with the countries of the world, including with the UAE (2013), Russia (2014), China (2016), Azerbaijan (2018).

Even today, the balancing policy leads to wide social acceptance and, in a way, wider institutional establishment. It is dominantly reflected in the multiplication of strategic partnerships, indicating that despite Serbia's proclaimed path towards EU membership, it is dominantly relying on strengthening alternative politics.

Regardless of different interpretations, Serbia's need to achieve equal cooperation with both the East and the West can also be interpreted through Belgrade's effort to sit on several chairs at the same time – to a large extent, using the logic of bargaining and choosing politics of alternatives instead of opportunities, consequently opting for certain international actors that currently provide greater benefits than others.

Cooperation with the East is skillfully used by the Vučić regime in order to limit the legitimacy of the (Western) asymmetric EU conditionality policy. However, the Serbian elite continuously ignores those peculiarities that characterize small states and hybrid regimes. While the government continuously works to strengthen the cult of authoritarian personality and consolidate its power, it ignores important problems in which the state is unable to achieve a stable economic policy, especially due to a lack of transparency in the domain of financial procedures, economic-infrastructure projects and military-security cooperation with non-European actors.

Regarding the West's relationship with Serbia, the EU has positioned itself as an (un)powerful political actor that is fundamentally unable to influence the internal political events in the country. The Union's decision to put pressure on Belgrade and Pristina, which would ultimately normalize political relations, despite the conflicting views that characterize their starting points, is seen in Serbia as another in a series of Western ultimatums aimed at the complete degradation of vital state and national interests. If Serbia wants to stay on the European path, it is forced to continue the current dialogue, even though it strongly opposes the direct recognition of Kosovo and its membership in international organizations.

Consequently, Russia views its presence in Serbia, or the unresolved issue of Kosovo, as an excellent basis for strengthening its geostrategic position towards the West.

The case of China is somewhat different. Unlike Russia, Beijing relies heavily on economic levers of power in order to strengthen its influence in Serbia.

It is evident that Serbia is faced with a challenge between the growing aspirations and the real limitations of the multi-vector policy of a small state. Thus, the current government has brought the policy of cooperation with both the East and the West to the point of absurdity. Over time, this policy increasingly resembled movement without a goal, cooperation without a clear coherent political strategy. As a result, this kind of dispersive policy resulted in the observation of Serbia from both sides as an unreliable and insufficiently politically oriented country. Positioning itself as a buffer zone between East and West where cooperation on both sides is not only pragmatic but also productive, Serbia uses opportunities to position itself as a protector of the territorial integrity of sovereign states.

Objectively speaking, it is difficult to expect that the EU will allow the membership of another country that imitates Orbán's autocratic rule and the erosion of the rule of law.

Author: Vladimír Vučković, Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations and European Studies, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, vuckovic@mail.muni.cz

The article was written as part of the project „The Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Democratic Backsliding and External Actors' Influence” led by the Prague Security Studies Institute, sponsored by National Endowment for Democracy (NED). For more information, visit: www.balkancrossroads.com.