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# MANY FACES OF SERBIAN **FOREIGN POLICY**

## PUBLIC OPINION AND **GEOPOLITICAL BALANCING**

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**BCSP**

November 2020



# Many Faces of Serbian Foreign Policy

## Public Opinion and Geopolitical Balancing

*The findings of the public opinion survey conducted by CeSID for the needs of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) in the period from September 15 to October 5, 2020, on a representative sample of 1,200 citizens of Serbia.*

Preliminary data were analyzed by BCSP researchers:

**Maja Bjelos, Vuk Vuksanovic** and **Luka Steric**

### Introduction

Public opinion survey conducted by CeSID shows that Serbian citizens have complex views on Serbian foreign and security policies, in which there are different strands of thinking. When it comes to threat perceptions, the Serbian public associates most threats with regional affairs, on which it shows divergent views as a result of government-induced narratives. The issue of Kosovo dominates among the matters that Serbian citizens perceive as vital for national security and the one with which citizens associate most of the perceived threats.

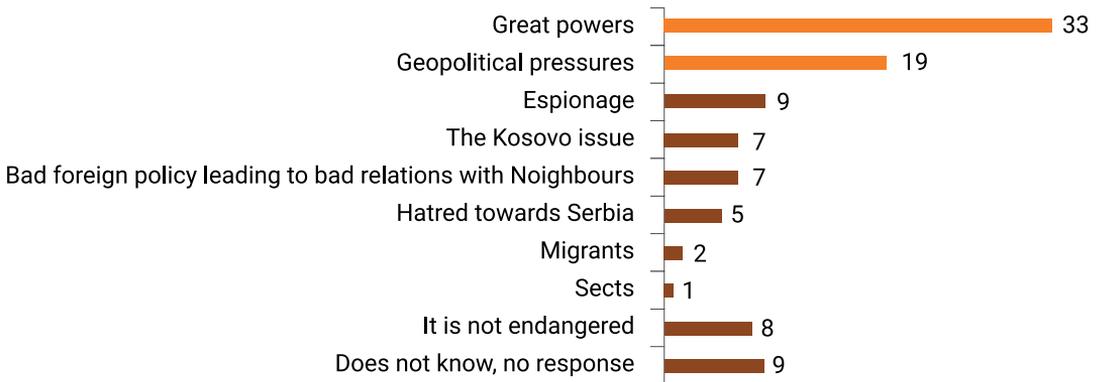
In recent years, Serbia conducted a foreign policy based on balancing among great powers and trying to maintain ties with them without fully tilting towards either one of those. The great powers around which Serbian policy mostly revolves are the EU, the US, Russia, and China. This policy has a strong domestic foundation as public opinion surveys show incredibly divergent views on how the Serbian public perceives these four great powers and what is the central dilemma of Serbian foreign policy, the Kosovo dispute. These perceptions are both a product of objective factors, like the unresolved Kosovo dispute, and of the way Serbian leadership communicates with its citizenry on these issues. On issues like relations with Russia and China, Serbian leadership projects narrative that is most likely to benefit them domestically. These divergent moods help shape Belgrade's balancing among great powers and its multi-faceted foreign policy. The Serbian leaders try to maintain a balance among these geopolitical players to win the emotionally divided voters domestically, while also sending messages on foreign policy that will strengthen them domestically.

In terms of Serbia's relations with countries in the region, the landscape is complex. The Serbian government has invoked a narrative domestically that targets the neighbouring countries. However, the attitudes of the citizenry are optimistic when it comes to the issues like the possibility of an armed conflict breaking out in the Balkans. However, the perception of ethnic groups like Albanians remains burdened with the Kosovo dispute.

## Threat Perception

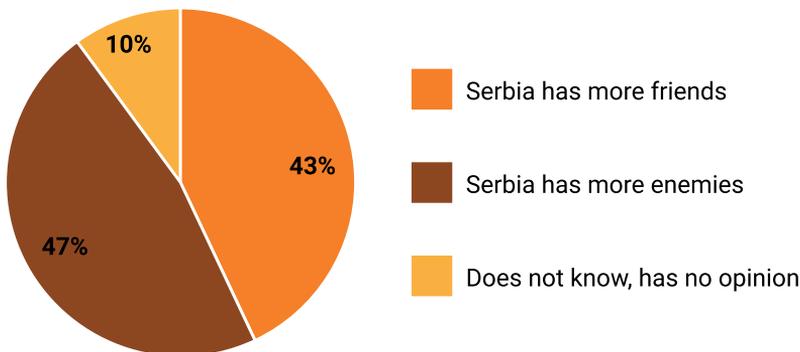
There are divergent views on what Serbian citizens perceive to be the greatest national security threats to their country, particularly in regards to the issues related to Serbia's regional environment. These divergent attitudes are both the result of the historical legacy of the conflicts of the 1990s as well as of the conflicting messages that the Serbian elite sends to its citizens on national and regional security.

**Graph 1.** What threatens Serbia's security from the outside? (in %)



In 2020, 47 per cent of Serbs believe that Serbia has more enemies than friends as opposed to forty per cent in 2017. On a more optimistic note, there has also been an increase in the number of Serbs who believe that Serbia has more friends than enemies. This number has increased to 43 per cent compared to 23 per cent in 2017. Of the EU countries, citizens have the greatest trust in Greece, Hungary and Romania, and only 1-2 per cent in Germany and France.

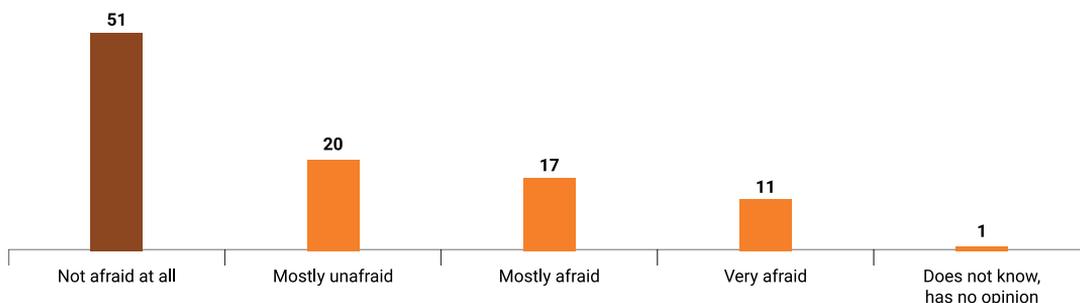
**Graph 2.** Does Serbia have more friends or enemies in its neighbourhood? (in %)



Despite the dichotomy friend-enemy and the rise in the number of those believing that Serbia has more enemies than friends, there has also been a significant increase in the number of those who do not fear the breakout of armed conflicts in the Balkans. Compared to 2017, the number of those who do not fear the armed conflict rose from 16 to 51 per cent. The number of those who are mostly unafraid of armed conflict has decreased from 39 to 20 per cent. These numbers are encouraging as the total number of those unafraid of conflict rose from 55 per cent in 2017 to 71 per cent in 2020.

The number of those who are very afraid of armed conflict breaking out increased from nine per cent in 2017 to eleven per cent in 2020. The number of those who are afraid most of the time fell from 29 to 17 per cent. The total number of those who fear the conflict fell from 38 per cent in 2017 to 28 per cent in 2020.

**Graph 3.** Are you afraid of an outbreak of armed conflict in the Balkans in the next five years? (in %)



The weariness of the population in both Serbia and the region from both the wars of the 1990s and socio-economic problems drives the fall in numbers of those fearful of war. This is in sharp contrast with the pro-government media and tabloids that in recent years constantly flaunted the possibility of a war in the Balkans. In between 2016 and 2017 the pro-government tabloids *Srpski telegraf* and *Informer* wrote about the possibility of war and conflict 265 times.<sup>1</sup> However, 29 per cent believes that Kosovo is the potential source of future armed conflict in the Balkans, followed by 16 per cent who think it will be a struggle between NATO and Russia for influence in the Balkans. While the latter is unlikely, particularly given the limited and declining influence of Russia in the region, the former speaks that for many Serbs Kosovo remains the central issue of the country's foreign and security policy.

In 2018, the pro-government tabloids including *Informer*, *Alo* and *Srpski telegraf* in two-thirds of their headlines on the conflict between Serbs and Albanians pointed to the necessity of intervention by police, military and even paramilitary forces.<sup>2</sup> On that front, when asked who has the most interest in starting a war in the Balkans, 40 per cent answered Kosovo Albanians, 25 per cent answered NATO and eight per cent who said Albania. These answers all point to the linkage with the issue of Kosovo directly or indirectly.

The powerful emotional pull of the Kosovo dispute is also demonstrated by the fact that 52 per cent of respondents believed that Serbia should intervene militarily in Kosovo if the Balkan conflict impacted Serbs in Kosovo. As opposed to that, 69 and 58 per cent of the respondents respectively stated that Serbia should not intervene if the same situation were to transpire in Montenegro or Bosnia and Herzegovina. Similarly, 57 per cent of the examinees would not join their compatriots in Montenegro in case of armed conflict, and 54 per cent said the same in case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As opposed to that, 47 per cent would join their compatriots in case of a conflict regarding Kosovo, while 46 per cent would refrain from doing so. Simultaneously, 54 per cent of respondents said that they are fearful of the prospect of Greater Albania being formed.

1 Rat je najjeftinija reč srpskih tabloida (War is the Cheapest Word of the Serbian Tabloids), *FakeNews Tragač*, 11 March 2019, <https://fakenews.rs/2019/03/11/rat-je-najjeftinija-rec-srpskih-tabloida/>  
2 Ibid.

In terms of who they perceive as the greatest enemy, 30 per cent of respondents identified Croatia, 20 per cent Albania and 13 per cent the US. One per cent even identified Kosovo as an independent entity. There are two reasons for these numbers. First, is the factor of history, where Kosovo and the Croatian military offensive “Operation Storm” remain the most traumatic episodes for the Serbs from the Yugoslav Wars. The second is the tendency that has been rekindled in recent years of leaders in the region scoring domestic points “by simply demonising neighbours and minorities.”<sup>3</sup> There is an evident increase in negative perceptions of Germany compared to 2017 (55-23 per cent), which can be linked to Germany’s firm stance on Kosovo’s independence and the implementation of the rule of law reforms.

Among the respondent, 33 per cent of examinees believe that great powers are the gravest national security threat, followed by 19 per cent named the geopolitical pressures, 9 per cent who think it is espionage and 7 per cent who believe it is the Kosovo dispute. These numbers also point to the fact that the Serbian elite shower the society with hyperbolic portrayals in which Serbia is the constant target of great power intrigues.

## The European Union in Retreat

EU membership has been a self-proclaimed goal of the Serbian Government since 2005<sup>4</sup>, but only 9 per cent of respondents consider it to be Serbia’s main foreign policy priority. The public is convinced that the three most important foreign policy priorities are the preservation of Kosovo as part of Serbia (24 per cent), strengthening cooperation with neighbouring countries (20 per cent) and strengthening cooperation with Russia (20 per cent).

Serbia’s foreign policy alignment with the EU dropped significantly from 89 in 2013 to 53 per cent in 2019.<sup>5</sup> In the international fora, Serbia refrains from voting on UN or EU resolutions that are contrary to Chinese or Russian interests. For example, Serbia has not imposed sanctions on Russia and supports China’s Xinjiang province policies, where severe human rights violations against Muslims groups take place. Although Serbia is an EU candidate country, only a fifth of respondents (20 per cent) believe that the country should harmonise its foreign policy with the EU (including the US). At the same time, the vast majority think that Serbia should align its foreign policy with Russia and China (57 per cent).

The current scope of Serbia’s cooperation with China and Russia has raised concerns among European decision-makers about Serbia’s foreign policy direction. However,

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3 Dimitar Bechev, The West needs to call Russia’s bluff in the Balkans, *LSE EUROPP*, 27 February 2017, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/02/27/the-west-needs-to-call-russias-bluff-in-the-balkans/>

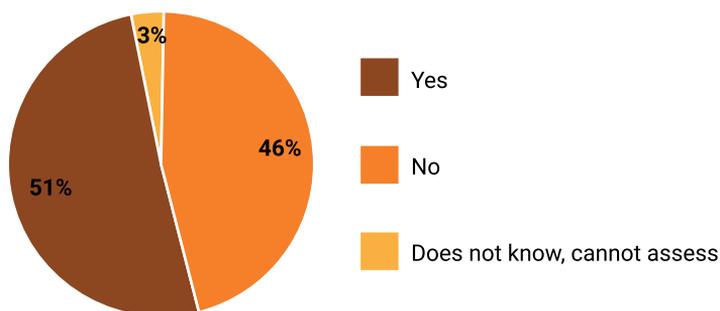
4 Serbian National Strategy for the Accession of SCG (Serbia and Montenegro) to the EU, *Ministry of European Integration – Government of the Republic of Serbia*, <https://www.mei.gov.rs/eng/documents/national-documents/serbian-national-strategy-for-the-accession-of-scg-to-the-eu>

5 Nedzma Džananović, Foreign Policies in the Western Balkans: Alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, April 2020, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/16144.pdf>; Igor Novaković, Natan Albahari, Jovana Bogosavljević, An analysis of Serbia’s alignment with the European Union’s foreign policy declarations and measures in 2019, *ISAC Fund*, January 2020, <https://www.isac-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ISAC-CFSP-Analysis-2019-1.pdf>

foreign policy analysts argue that this “is not permanent realignment, but a case of opportunism pursued as long as [...] Serbia is not paying a high price for its partnership with China.”<sup>6</sup>

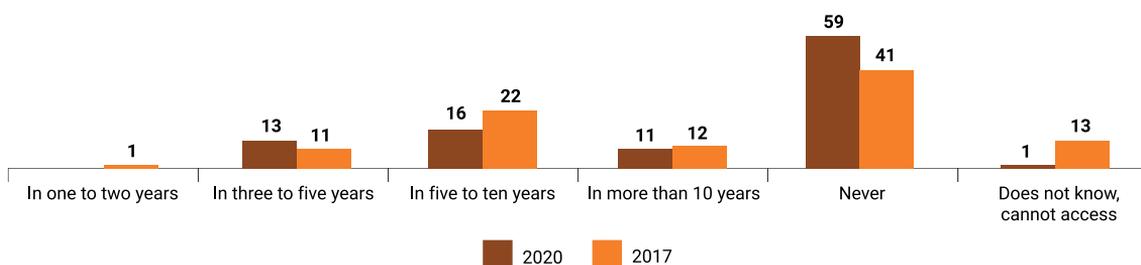
Serbia’s partnerships with Russia and China, along with years of anti-Western narratives and propaganda pushed through the pro-government mainstream media<sup>7</sup>, has resulted in a decline of the support of Serbian citizens for the country’s EU membership. The latest research shows that there is a relative majority that believes Serbia should not become a member of the EU (51 per cent), while only 46 per cent of respondents are in favour of membership. The number of those opposing the EU membership increased from 35 per cent in 2017. The staunchest supporters of EU integration are among respondents aged 30 to 44 (58 per cent), with primary education (54 per cent), as well as those living in rural areas rather than cities (51 per cent vs 42 per cent). In comparison, the region Šumadija and Western Serbia stand out in terms of support (53 per cent). In contrast, young people aged 18 to 29 (33 per cent) and people living in the capital (38 per cent) are mainly against EU membership.

**Graph 4. Should Serbia become an EU member? (in %)**



Compared to three years ago, there is growing pessimism about the date when Serbia will join the EU. Today, 58 per cent of people think that Serbia will never enter the EU, two-thirds are indifferent to the future of the EU and would not mind the EU falling apart due to internal problems. The results further show that almost half of the citizens think that the EU does not want to accept Serbia as a member.

**Graph 5. When do you think Serbia will become a member of the EU? (in %)**



<sup>6</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, In Serbia, the Chinese Trojan Horse Tactic Works – For Now, *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE)*, 23 July 2020, <https://chinaobservers.eu/in-serbia-the-chinese-trojan-horse-tactic-works-for-now/>

<sup>7</sup> Vuk Velebit, Proruski narativ u srpskim medijima [Pro-Russian Narrative in the Serbian Media], *Talas.rs*, 20 May 2019, <https://talas.rs/2019/05/20/pro-ruski-narativ-prvi-deo/>

Growing Euroscepticism and deterioration of the public support to the EU membership are also associated with the slow speed of the EU accession process. So far, Serbia has opened 18 out of 35 chapters in negotiations with the EU. However, due to a lack of progress in implementing some political criteria and the rule of law reforms, EU integration stalled in 2020, and no chapters were opened. Nevertheless, the dominant perception of the two-thirds of respondents is that the primary condition for membership is resolving the Kosovo dispute, which helps explain the negative attitude because the preservation of Kosovo within Serbia is seen as the most important political issue. However, most citizens realistically assess that there is no or minimal progress in areas such as the fight against corruption and organised crime, ensuring the independence of the judiciary, depoliticising public administration and organising fair elections.

The EU has allocated a significant amount of funds to support Serbia in the fight against the pandemic COVID-19,<sup>8</sup> but only 3 per cent of Serbian citizens are aware of this. This is a direct consequence of probably the most-watched speech by the Serbian President in mid-March shortly after the imposition of the state of emergency. At the time, the President unfoundedly criticised the EU, while at the same time placing his greatest faith on China, the only country able to help Serbia in the given situation.<sup>9</sup> The lack of public awareness and information about EU assistance to Serbia is also a consequence of the failure of the Union's public diplomacy, and not just the Government's unequivocal propaganda to present China as a key ally.

## USA and NATO – So Close and Yet So Far from the American Dream

Diplomatic relations between the United States and Serbia have improved significantly under the presidency of Donald Trump. This trend has not been translated into broader public support and a positive image of the US in Serbia. The United States remains unpopular in Serbian public because of the legacy of the 1990s and support for Kosovo's independence, although the official narrative of the United States was different during the Trump administration. As a result, almost 60 per cent of Serbian citizens believe that the United States has a negative influence on Serbia.

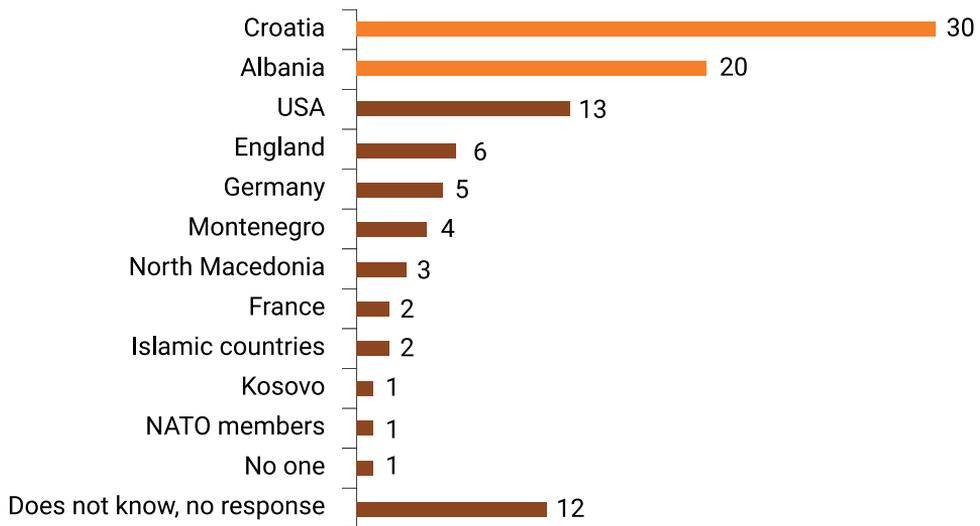
In contrast, 13 per cent of them consider the US to be Serbia's greatest enemy. After signing the so-called Washington Agreement at the beginning of September and the opening of the office of the American Development Agency in Belgrade, it was presented to the public that Serbia will become an economic power thanks to the United States. Regardless of the amount of American investments in the state and private sector, almost two thirds of citizens (69 per cent) believe that the US invests in Serbia because of its interests, and not because it is a friend of Serbia.

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8 The European Union Announces 93 Million Euros to Serbia to Fight Coronavirus, *The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia*, 26 March 2020, <http://europa.rs/the-european-union-announces-93-million-euros-to-serbia-to-fight-coronavirus/?lang=en>; Ivan Vejvoda, EU Support to Serbia and COVID-19, *Foundation Centre for Democracy*, 2020, <http://www.centaronline.org/en/publication/1807/eu-support-to-serbia-and-covid-19>

9 Majda Ruge and Janka Oertel, Serbia's coronavirus diplomacy unmasked, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 26 March 2020, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_serbias\\_coronavirus\\_diplomacy\\_unmasked/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_serbias_coronavirus_diplomacy_unmasked/)

**Graph 6.** Which country is the biggest enemy of Serbia? (in %)



Although most NATO members are also EU member states, in the eyes of the Serbian public, NATO is considered a tool in the hands of the United States. Despite ten years of self-proclaimed military neutrality, Serbia has reached the highest level of political cooperation with NATO by signing the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) in January 2015.<sup>10</sup> However, the entire process of cooperation with NATO has been held under the public radar to a great extent, and information about it is limited to the high officials' statements. Ever since the NATO intervention, negative sentiment towards the Alliance has prevailed in the part of the Serbian public. Serbian citizens' attitudes towards NATO are being shaped by an uninformed debate devoid of facts, which opens up space for various misperceptions.

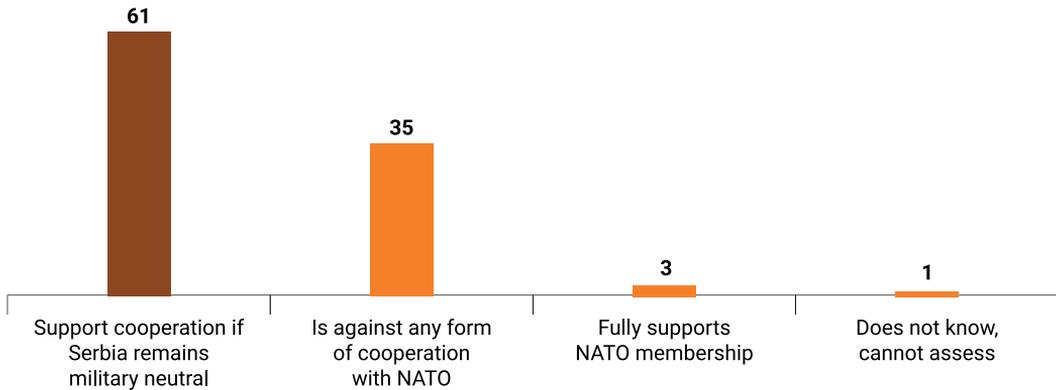
Moreover, the media landscape in Serbia, characterised by an increasing tabloidisation additionally fuels the anti-NATO rhetorics and hampers an unbiased and independent public discussion.<sup>11</sup> The BCBP's public opinion survey has shown that over 60 per cent of the citizens support the current level of cooperation with NATO [within the framework of the Partnership for Peace], but want Serbia to remain militarily neutral. Only 3 per cent support Serbia's membership in NATO, while over 80 per cent believe that this will not happen. Given the sensitivity of the topic and polarised public, political elites continuously refrain from building a public profile of cooperation with NATO to maintain their ratings.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> New IPAP confirmation of upward trend in partnership with NATO, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/147414/new-ipap-confirmation-of-upward-trend-in-partnership-with-nato.php>

<sup>11</sup> Marija Ignjatijevic, Time to Fuel Debate on Serbia-NATO Relations with Facts Rather than Emotions, *Belgrade Security Forum*, October 9, 2020, <http://www.belgradeforum.org/time-to-fuel-debate-on-serbia-nato-relations-with-facts-rather-than-emotions/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

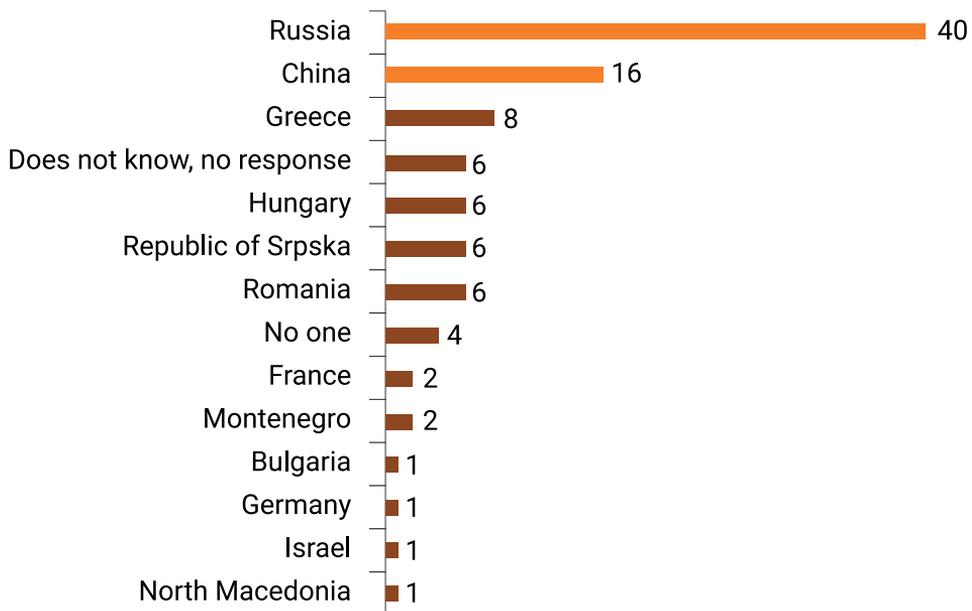
**Graph 7.** What kind of relations should Serbia have with NATO? (in %)



## Russia – The Eternal Big Brother

The domestic politics and Serbian public opinion play a significant role in Serbian ties with Russia as the leaders in Serbia like to maintain close relations with Russia so they can please the pro-Russian parts of the electoral. This logic revolves around the emotional pull that the Kosovo issue has on Serbian citizens and popularity of Russia among swaths of the public.<sup>13</sup>

**Graph 8.** Which country is Serbia's best friend (open-ended question)?



The Kosovo dispute remains the dominant issue of Serbian foreign policy as evident from the cited public opinion polls. The political parties in power, irrespective of their formal ideological profile, have to conduct anti-secessionist policy on Kosovo to avoid domestic backlash. Consequently, in that anti-secessionist foreign policy, Serbia

<sup>13</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, Russia Remains the Trump Card of Serbian Politics, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 17 June 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82090>

becomes dependent on Russia as Moscow's veto in the UN Security Council is one of the strongest assets of Belgrade's Kosovo policy. By relying on Russia, Serbia hopes to extract a more beneficial final settlement of the territorial dispute. As long as Serbia lacks the solution of the Kosovo dispute that is acceptable to both the international community and the domestic constituency, Russia will be a vector in Serbian foreign policy.<sup>14</sup>

The public opinion shapes Serbian policy towards Russia even beyond the Kosovo issue. In Serbia, there is a positive perception of Russia, which is a product of memories of the Western interventions in the 1990s and the emotional backlash to Kosovo's independence.<sup>15</sup> Since 2014 with the Ukraine Crisis and consolidation of power in the hands of Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by Aleksandar Vučić the pro-Russian narrative in the political, media and public discourse augmented significantly. During that period, the Serbian leadership pushed pro-Russian narrative aggressively within pro-government media and tabloids to indulge the pro-Russian sentiments in the Serbian electorate that are particularly pronounced among the voters of the SNS.<sup>16</sup> Today, 40 per cent of the examinees perceive Russia as Serbia's greatest friend. Among examinees, 72 per cent believe that Russian influence in the country is positive, which is an increase from 61 per cent in 2017.

The reasons guiding the Serbian Government to distribute pro-Russian discourse are both domestic and international. The Serbian leadership thus acts as a heterogeneous conglomerate trying to win both pro-Russia and pro-EU voters.<sup>17</sup> In doing so, Serbian leaders also try to leverage the West. By inflating the Russian threat and generating an image of Serbian leadership being surrounded by pro-Russian forces, the West is more willing to tolerate democratic backsliding and illiberal trends to prevent the hypothetical emergence of a pro-Russian government.<sup>18</sup>

However, the positive perception of Russia in the Serbian public and Moscow's stance on the status of Kosovo represent a potential problem for Serbian leadership. The Serbian elite are fearful that Moscow may veto in the UN Security Council any settlement of the Kosovo dispute negotiated by Belgrade with Priština. Due to the public opinion, the Belgrade government is tempted to prolong the resolution of the Kosovo dispute, but the Western support to the incumbent elite in Belgrade is dependent on their cooperation on the issue of Kosovo. Given the popularity of Putin and Russia in Serbia, Serbian public and Vučić's constituents would interpret the Russian veto as Putin being more willing to defend Kosovo than Vučić.<sup>19</sup> Namely, 69 per cent of respondents believe that Russian policy towards Serbia is one of friendship. This is opposed to 26 per cent who say that Russian policy is based on self-interest, three per cent who believe that Russia is not interested in Serbia and two per cent who believe this policy is hostile.

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14 Vuk Vuksanovic, Why Serbia Won't Stop Playing the Russia Card Any Time Soon, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 28 October 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80188>

15 Vuk Vuksanovic, Serbs Are Not "Little Russians", *The American Interest*, 28 October 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/07/26/serbs-are-not-little-russians/>

16 Valerie Hopkins, In Balkans, Britain rejoins battle for influence, *Politico*, 30 March 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/balkans-bbc-britain-rejoins-battle-for-influence-russia-soft-power/>

17 Vuk Vuksanovic, Russia Remains the Trump Card of Serbian Politics; Vuk Vuksanovic, Why Serbia Won't Stop Playing the Russia Card Any Time Soon; Vuk Vuksanovic, Serbs Are Not "Little Russians"

18 Dimitar Bechev, Russia's Foray into the Balkans: Who Is Really to Blame?, *Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI)*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/10/russias-for-ay-balkans-really-blame/>

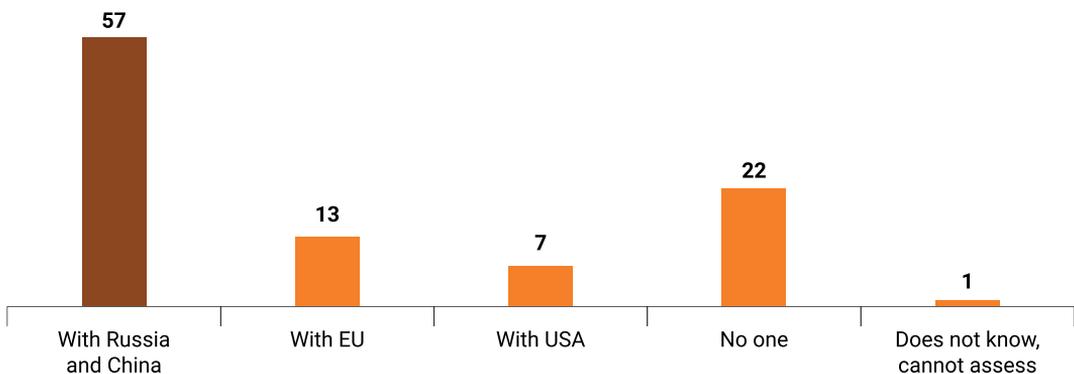
19 Maxim Samorukov, Escaping the Kremlin's Embrace: Why Serbia Has Tired of Russian Support, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 22 January 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/78173>

Serbian leadership is aware of this risk and tries to minimise exposure to a Russian veto. This is one of the reasons why the Russian aid to Serbia for combating COVID-19 pandemic was not met with the same enthusiasm from the Serbian elite and the media as the Chinese aid.<sup>20</sup> Only ten per cent of Serbs identified Russia as the country that provided the most aid to Serbia to combat the pandemic. During and after the violent anti-government protests in July 2020, caused by the Government's attempt to re-impose lockdown, pro-government media and tabloids accused pro-Russian elements of fomenting unrest to overthrow the Government.<sup>21</sup> These accusations were a partial attempt to dampen pro-Russian sentiments in Serbia during the period when Serbian leaders were engaging the Trump administration on Kosovo. However, pro-Russian views remain high despite the attacks on Russia by the pro-government media and tabloids during the protests.

Despite the scaling back in partnership with Russia and Government's projection of pro-Russian narrative, Serbia will not be able to give up on its partnership with Russia, particularly in light of Joseph Biden becoming the new US President. Biden is expected to take a tougher stance on Serbian in regards to Kosovo, which will force Belgrade to re-engage with Moscow once again. Equally, the significant obstacle is the public opinion mood. It will be difficult for Serbia to sever its ties with Russia, particularly if the public perceives that Belgrade is doing so under the pressure of the US and the West. The unpopular stance of the US will also make any abandonment of Russia troublesome as Serbs will perceive it as a capitulation to the US pressure. This shift would be a dangerous policy domestically for the ruling party from the standpoint of public opinion.

It will be difficult to fully reverse the course of Serbian policy towards Russia at this moment in time, both because of the unresolved Kosovo dispute, and the public opinion moods. In the survey, 57 per cent of examinees believe that Serbia should coordinate its foreign policy with Russia and China and 24 per cent feel that in the domain of security policy, Serbia should strengthen its cooperation with Russia. Partnership with Russia is degraded, but the powerful pull of Kosovo issue and Serbia and domestic popularity of Russia will still force Belgrade to keep Moscow nearby.

**Graph 9.** *With whom should Serbia harmonise its foreign policy? (in %)*



20 Vuk Vuksanovic, *From Russia With Love? Serbia's Lukewarm Reception of Russian Aid and Its Geopolitical Implications*, LSE IDEAS, Strategic Update June 2020

21 Vuk Vuksanovic, *Belgrade's New Game: Scapegoating Russia and Courting Europe*, *War on the Rocks*, 28 August 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/belgrades-new-game-scapegoating-russia-and-courting-europe/>

## China – The New Brother

**Table 1.** How do you assess these actors' influence on Serbia? (in %)

	Good influence	Bad influence	No influence	I do not know, I cannot assess
<b>Russia</b>	<b>72</b>	7	21	
<b>United States (America)</b>	32	<b>59</b>	5	4
<b>European Union</b>	24	<b>68</b>	7	1
<b>China</b>	<b>87</b>	4	9	
<b>Germany</b>	37	<b>55</b>	4	4
<b>Hungary</b>	<b>70</b>	18	8	4
<b>Turkey</b>	49	26	20	5
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	41	22	21	16

Just like in the case of Russia, the narrative on China has been extremely positive. China is second only to Russia as 16 per cent of respondents identified China as Serbia's greatest friend. These positive sentiments are based on objective factors. Namely, both Serbian leadership and the public at large perceive China as a benevolent, rising global power that did not recognise Kosovo's independence, and the memories of the bombed Chinese Embassy during NATO intervention of 1999 also generate a sense of sympathy.<sup>22</sup>

However, this is an incomplete portrayal as China is a newcomer to the Balkans, and it exercises restraint on local disputes that do not affect Chinese national interests.<sup>23</sup> The rise in pro-Chinese sentiments is also the product of an effort by the Government in Belgrade. Ever since Serbia became one of the major recipients of Chinese financing through Belt and Road Initiative, (BRI) the SNS-led Government promotes China to promote itself domestically as an enabler of the influx of Chinese capital and use it for electoral purpose.<sup>24</sup>

In doing so, the Government has relied on the fact that it dominates the media sphere and on the fact that the knowledge on China in Serbian society, media, academia and policy community is limited.<sup>25</sup> The TV remains the daily source of information on political affairs for 41 per cent of examinees. Most of the TV stations in the country have an editorial policy which is government-friendly, and these TV stations will not report any negative news on China. The Serbian leadership also tries to suppress any information critical of China.

22 Philippe Le Corre and Vuk Vuksanovic, Serbia: China's Open Door to the Balkans, *The Diplomat*, 8 October 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/serbia-chinas-open-door-to-the-balkans/>

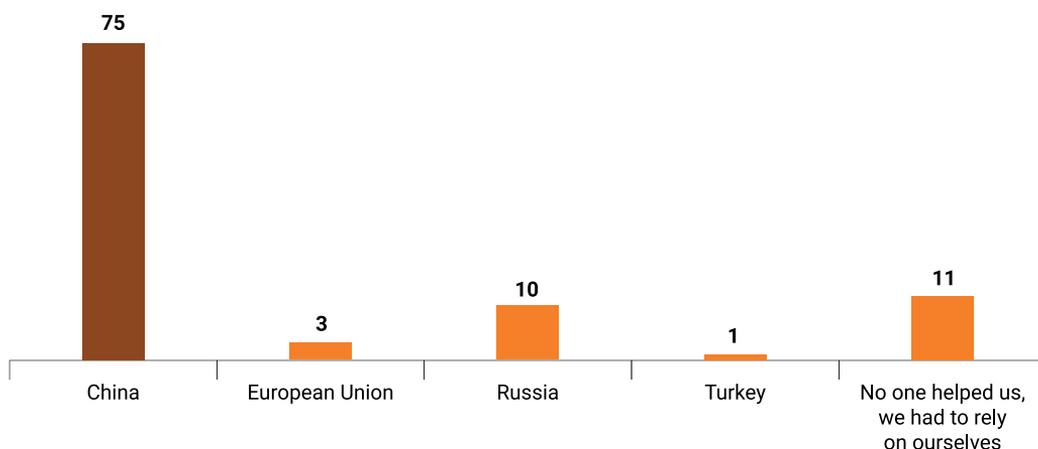
23 Vuk Vuksanovic, The Unexpected Regional Player in the Balkans: China, *War on the Rocks*, 29 November 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/unexpected-regional-player-balkans-china/>

24 Vuk Vuksanovic, Light Touch, Tight Grip: China's Influence and the Corrosion of Serbian Democracy, *War on the Rocks*, 24 September 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/light-touch-tight-grip-chinas-influence-and-the-corrosion-of-serbian-democracy/>

25 Ibid.

The Serbian tendency to promote China domestically came to the fore during March and April 2020 amidst the state of emergency introduced to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. President Vučić famously discounted the EU's solidarity as a "fairytale" while referring to China as "the only country that can help us" and to Chinese President Xi Jinping as a "brother."<sup>26</sup> Belgrade's enthusiastic embrace of Beijing's "mask diplomacy" was motivated by both desire to leverage the EU, but also with Government's desire to promote itself domestically as a facilitator of friendship and partnership with a rising China.<sup>27</sup> The push of the pro-Chinese campaign during the pandemic was also part of the process in which Serbia was replacing Russia with China as its primary partner in the non-Western world.<sup>28</sup> Serbia sees the partnership with China as a more convincing card to employ in an attempt to leverage the West than Russia, given China's status as a rising global power.<sup>29</sup>

This push has been successful as 75 per cent of respondents falsely believed that China provided most aid to Serbia to combat the pandemic. During the pandemic, the EU has provided Serbia 93 million euros, while the Serbian leadership did not disclose how much medical equipment was donated and how much was sold to Serbia by China. 1 Moreover, 87 per cent of examinees believe that Chinese influence in the country is positive—an impressive increase from 2017 survey when 53 per cent of Serbs rated this influence as positive. It has been stated that 57 per cent of Serbs believe that their country should align its foreign policy with Russia and China.



**Graph 10.** Who helped Serbia the most during the COVID-19 pandemic? (in %)

There were some areas where the push by the Government to promote pro-Chinese narrative did not lead to the significant upsurge in pro-Chinese sentiments. Only five per cent of the examinees believed that strengthening cooperation with China is a priority of Serbian foreign policy and only eight per cent that Serbia should enhance cooperation with China in the security policy domain. Serbs do not perceive China as a military power like Russia. Depending on the future course of security cooperation between Serbia and China, that reality may change alongside the public opinion mood.

26 Vuk Vuksanovic, China Has Its Eyes on Serbia, *Foreign Policy*, 8 April 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/08/china-serbia-aleksander-vucic-xi-jinping-coronavirus/>

27 Vuk Vuksanovic, China and "Mask Diplomacy" in the Balkans, *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI)*, 30 April 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/china-and-mask-diplomacy-balkans-25898>

28 Vuk Vuksanovic, From Russia With Love?

29 Vuk Vuksanovic, Belgrade is embracing China as it ditches its Russian alliance, *Reaction*, 10 July 2020, <https://reaction.life/belgrade-is-embracing-china-as-it-ditches-its-russian-alliance/>

The future of Sino-Serbian partnership will also be dependent on the US policies towards China and Serbia. Still, it would be domestically risky for Serbian leadership if its public perceives it as scaling back on the partnership with China as a result of pressure by the unpopular US. This tendency was seen in September 2020. After the White House agreement on economic normalisation between Belgrade and Priština was signed, Serbian leadership tried to be evasive about provisions of prohibiting instalment of 5G infrastructure by the untrusted vendors'. This was done both to avoid angering China whose company Huawei is the apparent target of the provision and the domestic audience.<sup>30</sup>

## Regional Relations On a Path Towards Pacification of the Public Perception

The perception of the Serbian public towards the country's immediate neighbourhood has been predominantly hostile ever since the Yugoslav wars during the 1990s. With few exceptions, most leaders and governments in Belgrade have been adding fuel to the fire by engaging in loud feuds with governments in the region, as it has been the easiest way to strengthen domestic support.

Nonetheless, there seems to be a positive shift of perspective in the public eye regarding regional relations over the last few years. Comparing the data to the results of the 2017 survey shows that the number of examinees who believe that friends mostly surround Serbia has doubled from 23 to 43 per cent. However, the opposing view that Serbia has more enemies in the neighbourhood is also on the rise, ascending from 40 to 47 per cent, representing, therefore, the position of almost half of the population. Also, the number of those who claim that they do not see the regional relations through such binary dynamics has plummeted from 30 to only 10 per cent over the last three years, which shows that the simplistic narrative of friends of enemies in the international arena is gaining ground in the electorate.

These results have been somewhat surprising, taking into account a very belligerent narrative about other regional actors that have dominated the pro-government mainstream media landscape in Serbia in recent years. One of the reasons for the more balanced sentiment in the public eye despite such a conflict-driven narrative might also be related to those same media outlets depicting the Government, and especially President Vučić, as the major protagonist of the peace and reconciliation in the region. The most recent example is how the Washington agreement has been portrayed as the historic breakthrough in settlement of the Kosovo issue. Another important positive impulse for the regional views of the Serbian public might have been the long-awaited regime change in Podgorica which is expected to significantly contribute to the reparation of relations between the two countries which have at least publicly been broken for years.

Of all the nations in the region, the mistrust towards Albanians prevails. This mistrust originates from the Kosovo conflict since they are perceived as most likely aggressors in the neighbourhood. Every second respondent has identified Albanians as the group that could initiate an armed conflict in the Balkans, either coming from Kosovo (40 per cent) or Albania (8 per cent). This data is also reflected in 54 per cent of examinees who

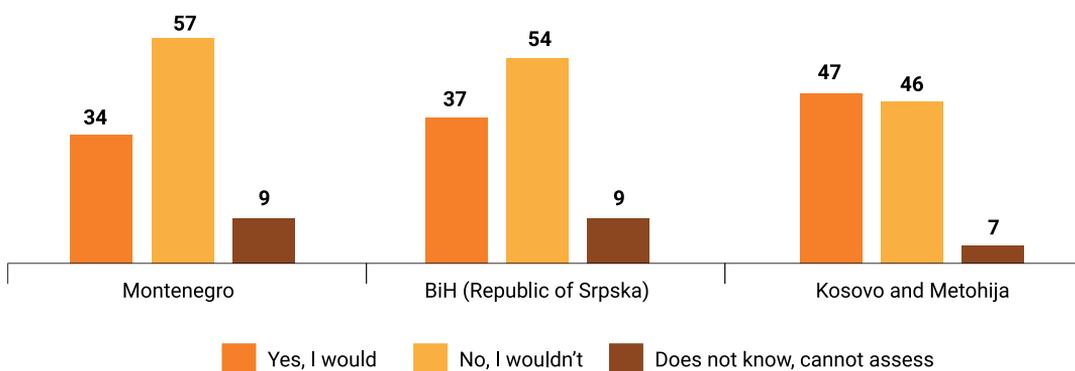
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<sup>30</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, In Serbia, China's Digital Silk Road Might Be in Trouble Very Soon, *The Diplomat*, 23 September 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/in-serbia-chinas-digital-silk-road-might-be-in-trouble-very-soon/>

are afraid of the creation of Greater Albania. Furthermore, one-fifth of the electorate views Albania as the greatest enemy of Serbia, which is second only to 30 per cent who headlines Croatia in this regard. Nevertheless, one encouraging figure shows that two-thirds of the people interviewed believe that lasting peace between Serbs and Albanians is possible, with half of all respondents think it is only achievable in case of the peaceful resolution of the dispute over the status of Kosovo.

The entity of the Republic of Srpska undoubtedly holds a special place in the perception of the Serbian public. Survey shows that 58 per cent of people think that the Republic of Srpska should secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina and become an integral part of Serbia. Regardless of the recent bloody history of conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, examinees do not seem to evaluate such secession as a high-risk situation, with only 3 per cent of responders recognising the status of the Republic of Srpska as the leading cause for concern for the regional peace in the future. One possible explanation for such a surprising result would be that they do not see this development as very likely to happen, and therefore are focusing on currently pressing issues as a primary cause for concern.

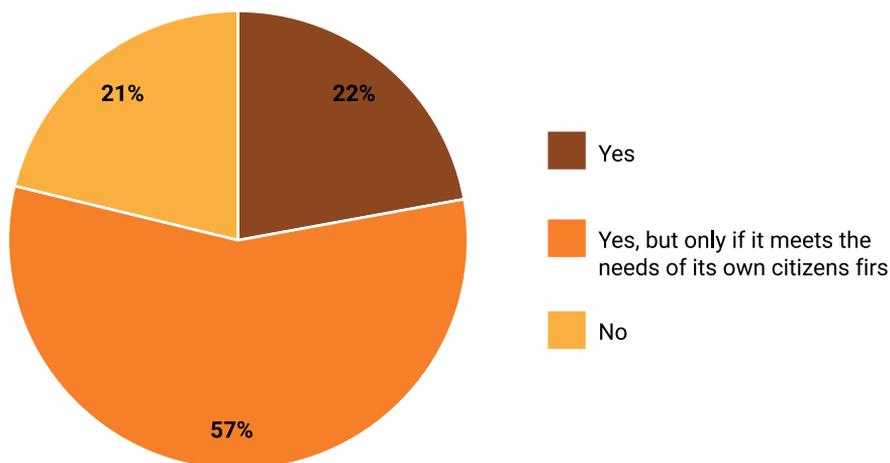
**Graph 11.** *Would you be willing to join your compatriots in an armed conflict in...? (in %)*



Nonetheless, when confronted with the question of whether Serbia should accept to recognise Kosovo’s independence if this would mean obtaining the Republic of Srpska in return, a staggering 80 per cent of the electorate dismisses such an idea. This suggestion has lately been repeatedly brought up by the leader of Bosnian Serbs Milorad Dodik, in light of the discussion about the territorial swap following ethnic lines as the path towards normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Priština.<sup>31</sup> The data shows that these statements did not help make this idea appealing to the Serbian public. This comes as no surprise when taking into consideration the central place that the issue of Kosovo has played in the narrative of Serbian national interests over the last decades. Furthermore, when asked if Serbia should allocate money from the state budget to help the Republic of Srpska, 57 per cent stated they would agree to it only once the needs of the citizens of Serbia have been fulfilled, which proves that regardless of the high sense of affiliation and affection Serbian public still perceives the Republic of Srpska as a foreign entity.

31 Dodik: North of Kosovo to remain in Serbia with Republika Srpska joining Serbia as well, KoSSev, 21 September 2019, <https://kossev.info/dodik-north-of-kosovo-to-remain-in-serbia-with-republika-srpska-joining-serbia-as-well/>

**Graph 12.** Do you think that Serbia should allocate money from the state budget for Republic Srpska?



Concerning relations between Serbia and Montenegro, the views of the Serbian public on the bilateral relations between the two countries are expected to change dramatically in the aftermath of the very consequential Parliamentary elections which will presumably bring about the regime change in Podgorica. The victory of the opposition forces is foreseen to facilitate the relaxation of relations between the two countries, which have at least in the public eye been very hostile in recent years. This is reflected in more than two-thirds of the surveyed citizens expecting the new Government in Montenegro to improve relations with Serbia.

The central theme of these elections has been the proposed law on freedom of religion which targeted the property of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. The majority of 59 per cent of responders have identified the fight over material goods and political influence as the leading cause of the conflict between the Montenegrin Government and the Serbian Orthodox Church. At the same time, only one-third of examinees sees it as an attempt by the Montenegrin Government to suppress the Serbian minority and the Serbian Orthodox Church, which might come as a surprise concerning the reputation that the church has in public. This may be the result of the discourse by the pro-government media in Serbia established to delegitimise parts of the opposition forces in the eyes of the Serbian public. This has been the case due to the apparent close ties between the incumbent Government in Belgrade and the departing Government in Podgorica, which have been publicly camouflaged with the narrative of fierce confrontation. This narrative was imposed to strengthen the domestic support of both regimes, as well as to silence the unpleasant critique of the Vucic's regime by the most prominent figures of the clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro regarding the Kosovo issue.<sup>32</sup>

Regarding views on the Little Schengen initiative for regional economic integration, more than half of the people examined were not familiar with this idea, with 55 per cent stating they are unaware of it. Out of those who are familiar with the initiative, two-thirds claim they are supporting this project. Since the information about the initiative has been very scarce, most examinees who endorse it are most likely either in favour of the close economic cooperation in the region in general or are merely echoing a highly positive tone that this initiative has received in the government-friendly media.

<sup>32</sup> Bishop Amfilohije calls Vucic traitor, says he will betray Kosovo, *Beta*, 17 June 2019, <https://beta.rs/en/112652-bishop-amfilohije-calls-vucic-traitor-says-he-will-betray-kosovo>

## Conclusion

In terms of threat perceptions, most Serbs see security threats and challenges in their regional environment. The views on the potential national security threats are divergent, and many of them were shaped by the narratives projected by the foreign policy elite through media. The Kosovo dispute continues to dominate the threat perception spectrum of the Serbian public. It is also one of the rare issues with which Serbs associate the prospect of an armed conflict in the Balkans. Consequently, Kosovo remains a highly emotional issue for the Serbian public and an important vector in Serbian foreign and security policy.

The connection between domestic politics and foreign policy is not restricted to Serbia, and in many countries, public opinion affects the foreign policy course of the Government. However, in Serbia, this process is pronounced as it takes place in a setting of weak institutions, in which the political parties and their leaders dominate the entire spectrum of public policy. Serbian leadership tries to balance among various external great powers expecting a domestic benefit of catching the votes of different voters with different international proclivities. In this process, the Government does not only act upon public opinion, but it also tries to shape the narrative to score domestically.

The EU remains formally the priority of Serbian foreign policy. Still, the lack of viable EU perspective and the dubious messaging by the Serbian leadership has seriously weakened public opinion support. As a result, the number of those who are opposed to the EU membership has risen, and so has the number of those who are indifferent towards the fate of the EU. The US remains highly unpopular due to the legacy of the 1990s and the US role in Kosovo's independence even though the official narrative of the US in Serbia was different during Trump's presidency. NATO remains unpopular in Serbian public due to memories of the 1999 war, and these sentiments eliminate any possibility that Serbia will join NATO.

Russia and China are relevant in the endeavour to gain domestic acceptance, as these are the great powers that are popular, particularly among the voters of the ruling SNS. The emotional sensitivity of the Serbian public to Kosovo issue and Russian popularity will still keep Russia as an essential vector in Serbian foreign policy. Chinese standing in the Serbian public opinion has significantly been improved as a result of the pro-Chinese campaign on the part of the Serbian leadership. As a result, any fluctuations in partnership with Beijing carries domestic risks for the Belgrade government. The current stalemate in Serbian EU accession and the uncertain path in relations with the US, under the newly-elected President Biden, will force Serbia to keep both Russian and the Chinese option open. As such, Serbian leadership has little incentive to attempt to change its public opinion discourse on Russia and China, as the domestic risks of angering the public opinion are too significant at this stage.

In regards to regional politics, the Serbian views on neighbouring countries remain multi-faceted, as the legacy of Yugoslav Wars are still there and the Serbian elite tended to push for a more belligerent tone on Serbia's neighbours. Croatia and Albania remain ranked as the greatest enemies by most Serbs. There have been positive trends as most Serbs show opposition to war and use of force in disputes with neighbours. However, the issue of Kosovo stands in isolation, indicating that it is one of the rare instances where the use of force is not discounted and demonstrating the salience of the Kosovo issue in Serbian politics.



