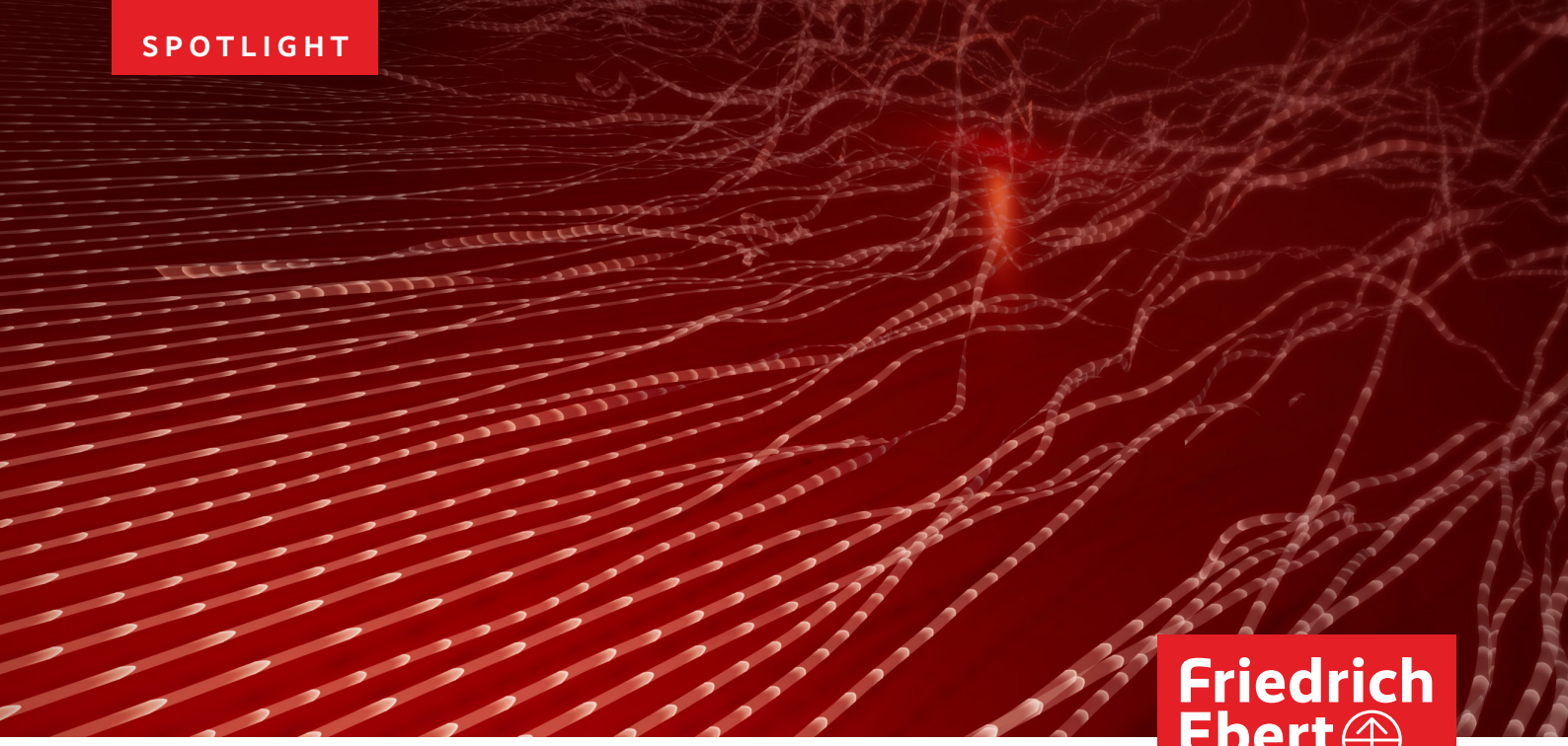
SPOTLIGHT



Author:
Dr. Vuk Vuksanović
Senior Researcher, Belgrade Center for Security Policy
Peer reviewers:
Maja Bjeloš
Senior Researcher, Belgrade Center for Security Policy
and
Dr. Srdjan Cvijić
President of the International Advisory Committee
of the Belgrade Center for Security Policy

Through The Eyes of a Serb

Public Opinion in a Time of Global Upheaval

Key takeaways:

- → *Serbs see their country as geopolitically marginalised, mistrust Western-led institutions, and pragmatically balance between Russia, China, and the West, driven more by historical grievances and caution than ideology.*
- → *Widespread poverty and frustration with stalled EU enlargement deepen inward-looking attitudes, while pro-government narratives reinforce declining faith in membership and normalise geopolitical balancing.*
- → *Serbs overwhelmingly favour diplomatic solutions over military action, prioritising domestic socio-economic stability while showing limited but notable support for global issues like climate change and human rights.*

Introduction

In an era marked by renewed great power rivalry, rising insecurity, and fragmented multilateralism, understanding how smaller states perceive their place in global politics has become increasingly important. Serbia, a non-EU country situated at the crossroads of Europe's geopolitical periphery, offers a compelling case study. While often portrayed as a marginal actor in international affairs, Serbia remains the most geopolitically consequential state in the Western Balkans—a region whose stability is critical to European security and enlargement policy. A mixture of historical trauma, geopolitical scepticism, and unresolved questions of identity, status, and alignment shapes public perceptions in Serbia. Against this backdrop, Serbian society's outlook on the world offers a valuable lens through which to examine the broader contestation of international norms and institutions and, most importantly, the altered balance of power.

This report draws on data from Security Radar 2025: Europe – Lost in Geopolitics, a public opinion survey conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) across selected European and neighbouring countries. The survey captures how citizens perceive security threats, great power competition, and international institutions in a rapidly shifting world order. To complement the aggregate results published by FES, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) was granted access to the full Serbian dataset. This enabled a more granular analysis, with comparisons across demographic subgroups and over time—most notably with findings from the 2022 edition of the same survey, conducted during the early phase of the war in Ukraine.[1] Although the survey data were collected before Donald Trump's electoral win, they still offer valuable insights into how the Serbian public perceives international affairs and their country's place in the world.

The methodological approach employed in this analysis is both comparative and interpretive in nature. It combines quantitative survey data with qualitative contextualisation drawn from Serbia's political history, foreign policy behaviour, and media landscape. Special attention is paid to how public opinion reflects or diverges from elite discourses and strategic narratives promoted by state institutions and dominant media. The analysis further considers Serbia's enduring foreign policy hedging strategy and the domestic political context, marked by illiberal governance, polarised media, and narratives of national grievance that are frequently instrumentalised by political elites. By situating survey findings within this broader landscape, the report does not treat public opinion as static or purely reactive; rather, it views public opinion as a co-produced and politically conditioned expression of identity, insecurity, and strategic preferences.

Rather than offering prescriptive recommendations, this report aims to interpret how Serbs see the world—and why. It seeks to understand the emotional, historical, and material undercurrents that shape Serbia's geopolitical outlook, its scepticism toward Western institutions, its ambivalence toward multilateralism, and its preference for diplomatic balancing. In doing so, the report sheds light on the psychological and strategic foundations of Serbia's foreign policy posture in an era of global uncertainty.

Rearview Reflections: Serbia's Gaze on the World

The 2025 survey paints a complex and layered picture of how Serbs view their country's place in the world—one shaped by historical legacies, geopolitical realities, and contemporary uncertainties. The Serbian public is marked by a deep sense of disillusionment with the present international standing, with 76% of Serbs who believe their country lacks the international status it deserves. **The persistent sense of underrecognition is clear in public opinion surveys, which show dissatisfaction with Serbia's post-Cold War international standing.**

This creates a psychological paradox that remains difficult to manage—both for Serbian leaders and for international actors engaging with Serbia. Although there is public support for a multivector foreign policy, the perceived failure of current leadership to gain international respect suggests a gap between strategic intent and outcomes. Serbian frustration with the West and affinity for Russia are rooted in memories of the 1990s, the Kosovo issue, and disillusionment with the post-Milošević transition.[2]

This perception is critical in understanding both public sentiment and the mindset of Serbia's political elites. Živorad Kovačević, a prominent Serbian diplomat and the last ambassador of Yugoslavia to the United States, once characterised Serbian diplomacy in the 1990s as oscillating between 'arrogance and subservience' in its communication with the West.[3] Kovačević's remarks reflect more than just the crude political behaviour of the 1990s; they reveal a deep and enduring emotional and psychological landscape that still influences both Serbian leaders and the wider public. Serbia is a small country with limited global influence, yet it remains the most geopolitically significant state in the Western Balkans. It is the largest former Yugoslav republic in terms of both territory and population, and its land and river corridors connect Western Europe to the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond. This strategic location has attracted engagement from non-Western powers such as Russia and China, particularly during periods when the US and EU have appeared inattentive or dismissive.[4]

1 Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung (FES), "Security Radar 2022: Navigating the disarray of European Security," February, 2025, https://peace.fes.de/security-radar-2022.html.

2 Maksim Samorukov and Vuk Vuksanovic, "Untarnished by War: Why Russia's Soft Power Is So Resilient in Serbia," Carnegie Politika, January 18, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/01/untarnished-by-war-why-russias-soft-power-is-so-resilient-in-serbia?lang=en

3 Živorad Kovačević, Srbija i svet: Između arogancije i poniznosti [Serbia and the World: Between Arrogance and Subservience] (Beograd: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji – Biblioteka Svedočanstva Br.19, 2004), https://www.helsinki.org.rs/doc/Svedocanstva19.pdf.

4 Gordon N. Bardos, "Why America Is Blind to Serbia's Bright Future," The National Interest, January 17, 2019, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-america-blind-serbias-bright-future-41832.

Henry Kissinger once famously described Germany as 'too big for Europe, too small for the world.' In Serbia's case, the sentiment might be reversed: 'too marginal for Europe and the world, too important for the Balkans.' Serbian pride draws heavily from its history, including resistance to Ottoman rule, victories in two world wars, and the cultural and political stature enjoyed during Yugoslavia's communist era. This historical narrative fuels a national self-image of a small but proud country that deserves international respect, even from powers like the US, Russia, or China.

Dissatisfaction with Serbia's international standing is compounded by significant concern among Serbs (72%) about their personal futures. Their top worries include inflation (92%), war and conflict (86%—a sharp rise from 73% in 2022), economic crisis (86%), and climate change (80%). The focus on economic hardship is understandable, given Serbia's status as a middle-income country[5] still recovering from the socioeconomic disruptions of the Yugoslav breakup, wars, and international sanctions. These concerns have been exacerbated by the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.[6] Domestically, economic vulnerability is evident: as of February 2025, one in five Serbian citizens is at risk of poverty, 45% struggle to make ends meet, and more than 15% report being unable to afford meat or fish on a daily basis.[7] Economic hardship, the lingering trauma of the 1990s, and the impact of global crises such as the 2009 financial crisis, COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine have only deepened this sense of strategic isolation.

Nearly half of the respondents believe their economic situation will worsen in the future. Nevertheless, 63% recognise that Serbia's prosperity is linked to the well-being of other nations, though this marks a 6% drop from 2022. This decline suggests a slight erosion of the awareness of global interdependence. Still, Serbs understand that their country remains reliant on foreign capital, commodities, and technology, even amid global trends toward deglobalisation.

Growing sensitivity to climate change in Serbia can be attributed to rising environmental awareness, particularly in response to the negative environmental impact of Chinese investments[8] and the widespread public opposition to Rio Tinto's lithium mining project.[9] As Serbia transitions into a middle-income country, its population has become more attentive to environmental issues that affect their quality of life beyond mere economic survival.

Several factors contribute to the growing concerns about war. First, there is an increasing sense that the global and European security landscape is more volatile, particularly due to the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. Second, Serbia's historical experience with war—ranging from the Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s to the devastation of two world wars—contributes to an ingrained anxiety. Finally, Serbian political elites frequently invoke war and instability in their rhetoric. In 2024, for instance, President Aleksandar Vučić claimed that World War III was a conceivable outcome of the conflict in Ukraine.[10] Western media and commentators also play a role, often amplifying narratives suggesting that the Ukraine war could spill over into the Balkans under Russian orchestration.[11] While such scenarios are highly unlikely due to Serbia's limited military capabilities and the regional balance of power, the narrative persists in the Western Balkans media and influences public sentiment.

A Bird's-Eye View, the Serbian Way: How Serbs Perceive Global Security

Serbian respondents increasingly believe that the global order will be dominated by 'my country first' policies (74%) and by wars and conflicts (72%). The latter view obviously corresponds with a more conflict-prone international environment that has replaced cooperation once facilitated by Western-led institutions. The former appears to stem from a widespread acceptance—shared by major powers such as the US, China, and Russia, as well as smaller states like Serbia—that the post-unipolar era is characterised by multipolarity. In this emerging new order, characterised by multiple centres of power, countries are embracing foreign policy realism and prioritising their national interests. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio acknowledged this shift in a January 2025 interview.[12]

The Serbian public's view on this issue clearly reflects the idea of the shifting global balance of power—an idea now openly acknowledged by top policymakers such as Marco Rubio. Serbs express considerable mistrust toward multilateral institutions, though they hold more favourable views of bodies like the UN and OSCE compared to explicitly Western institutions such as NATO and the EU. Notably, 60% of respondents support a stronger role for the UN, while 53% share a similar view regarding the OSCE. This reflects Ser-

5 World Bank Group, "Serbia - Country Climate and Development Report : Executive Summary," November 25, 2024, https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099112224141020492/p1792051702c500f31ae31111a0f0e99466#:~:text=Serbia%2C%20an%20upper%2Dmiddle%2D,from%20the%20COVID%2Drelated%20recession.

6 European Parliament, "Economic impact of Russia's war on Ukraine: European Council response," February 23, 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/da/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)757783.

7 Vreme, "Golden age: Every fifth citizen of Serbia is at risk of poverty," February 20, 2025, https://vreme.com/en/vesti/zlatno-doba-svaki-peti-gradjanin-srbije-u-riziku-od-siromastva/.

8 Vuk Vuksanovic, "How Serbia Became China's Dirty-Energy Dumping Ground," Foreign Policy, July 16, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/16/serbia-china-bri-coal-copper-dirty-energy-dumping-ground/.

9 Colin McClelland, "Left and right 'unite' against Rio lithium project in Serbia," Northern Miner, October 18, 2024, https://northernminer.com/news/left-and-right-unite-against-rio-lithium-project-in-serbia/1003872457/.

10 Politika, "Vučić: Pred svetom dva scenarija – treći svetski rat ili mir u Ukrajini [Vučić: The World Faces Two Scenarios - The Third World War or Peace in Ukraine]," March 15, 2024, https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/604311/vucic-pred-svetom-dva-scenarija-treci-svetski-rat-ili-mir-u-ukrajini.

11 The Telegraph, "Could Kosovo be the next Ukraine?," April 9, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9i-2YwoyDlk.

12 U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Marco Rubio with Megyn Kelly of The Megyn Kelly Show," January 30, 2025, https://www.state.gov/secretary-marco-rubio-with-megyn-kelly-of-the-megyn-kelly-show/.

bia's outlook as a small state that sees the UN framework and traditional international law as essential protections for its interests. **The UN Security Council—where Russia and China hold veto power—is viewed as a crucial counterweight to Western dominance, including the three Western powers that are part of the Council (the US, UK, and France), and especially given that U.S. interventions in the Balkans during the 1990s bypassed the Council.** Crucially, the ability of Russia and China to block Kosovo's UN membership is seen as a strategic safeguard.[13] As for the OSCE, although it focuses on Euro-Atlantic security, it is seen as more inclusive and balanced than NATO, primarily because Russia also has a seat at the table, making it less susceptible to U.S. dominance and, therefore, more acceptable in Serbian eyes. It is worth noting that, unlike NATO, which is a military alliance, the OSCE is a cooperative security organisation that covers a broader spectrum of Euro-Atlantic security, encompassing not only Russia but also countries from the Caucasus and Central Asia.

When it comes to the European Union, Serbian public opinion remains divided: 46% oppose a stronger role for the EU, while 42% are in favour. Serbia's relationship with the EU remains strained, with nearly two-thirds of respondents (65%) perceiving a conflict between EU policies and Serbia's national interests. This scepticism stems from a variety of sources. Since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the EU has endured a series of high-profile challenges—including the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic—all of which have undermined its influence and prestige in Serbia.[14] This contributed to the stalled EU accession path for Serbia, which also did not help the EU's image. The EU's image has also been deliberately eroded by an aggressive anti-EU campaign led by pro-government media and tabloids, which often portray the Union as a decaying, morally bankrupt institution hostile to Serbian interests. This narrative serves both to stoke nationalist sentiment by presenting an external adversary and to distract from domestic scandals and authoritarian drift.[15]

The EU itself has contributed to this decline in credibility. A notable example is the case of North Macedonia, whose EU accession path was stalled due to a bilateral dispute with Bulgaria, despite its consistent pro-EU orientation. This has reinforced the perception that EU membership is neither a reliable nor a rewarding prospect.[16] Additionally, the EU's muted response to ongoing anti-government, anti-corruption, and student-led protests in Serbia[17] has further damaged its standing, reinforcing public doubts about the EU's commitment to democratic principles in the region.

Public opposition to NATO remains particularly strong in Serbia, with 78% of respondents opposing an expanded role for the alliance. This sentiment is largely rooted in resentment over the 1999 NATO bombing campaign and the subsequent unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence in February 2008. As Kosovo moved toward independence, the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), led by then-Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica, abandoned its earlier Euro-Atlantic rhetoric and policies. Instead, the party launched a staunchly anti-NATO campaign, culminating in the 2007 parliamentary declaration of military neutrality. Even the more Western-oriented Democratic Party (DS), which was in coalition with the DSS at the time, ultimately supported the neutrality declaration, despite its own pro-European orientation.

Public opinion data from December 2008, the year Kosovo declared independence, underscored the depth of anti-NATO sentiment: only 28% of respondents supported NATO membership, while 55% opposed it. An additional 18% declined to express an opinion, reflecting either uncertainty or discomfort in engaging with the issue.[18] This early post-independence polling set the tone for Serbia's long-standing mistrust of NATO, a theme that remains a persistent feature in public discourse today.

Since the early 2000s, various nationalist parties—both major and minor—have capitalised on widespread anti-NATO sentiment in Serbia to bolster their nationalist credentials and use NATO as a convenient scapegoat. This trend intensified after 2014, when pro-government media and tabloids, under the influence of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), began routinely portraying NATO in a negative light. These sustained attacks have helped keep public opinion firmly against the alliance.[19]

On the 25th anniversary of the 1999 NATO bombing campaign, this sentiment was on full display. Pro-government outlets ran emotionally charged headlines such as: "They will never take away our freedom. Serbia is free, defiant, and brave" and "They killed our children, dismembered the territory, but despite everything, we are stronger, and Serbia is alive." These narratives reinforce the antagonistic view of NATO, often ignoring the current, more pragmatic state of NATO–Serbia relations.

13 N1, "Vucic: I will ask Russian, Chinese presidents to veto Kosovo's UN membership," September 13, 2022, https://n1info.rs/english/news/vucic-i-will-ask-russian-chinese-presidents-to-veto-kosovos-un-membership/.

14 Vuk Vuksanovic, "Systemic pressures, party politics and foreign policy: Serbia between Russia and the West, 2008 -2020," (PhD Dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2021), 51-61, https://etheses.lse.ac.uk/4323/.

15 Thomas Brey, "Column: Serbia's pro-government media block reform," Deutsche Welle, November 4, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/serbias-pro-government-media-hampering-reform-demanded-by-the-west/a-63632915.

16 European Western Balkans, "Bilateral disputes harmed EU accession of North Macedonia, current framework unsustainable," November 20, 2024, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/11/20/bilateral-disputes-harmed-eu-accession-of-north-macedonia-current-framework-unsustainable/.

17 Laurent Geslin, "EU silent as protests in Serbia gain momentum," Euractiv, February, 2024, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu-silent-as-protests-in-serbia-gain-momentum/.

18 Vuksanovic, "Systemic pressures, party politics and foreign policy." 134.

19 Ibid., 211-213.

For example, while the war in Ukraine prompted Serbia to suspend participation in all international military exercises, the only exception up until that point was "Platinum Wolf 2023," a joint exercise co-organised by the United States European Command and the Serbian Armed Forces, and hosted on Serbian soil.[20] Prior to the Ukraine conflict, Serbia participated in 14 military exercises with NATO members and partners in 2021, compared to just 4 with Russia.[21] However, **such facts are largely absent from pro-government media, which tend to highlight Serbia's military cooperation with Russia while downplaying or ignoring its ties with NATO.**[22] More recently, Serbia also participated in another Platinum Wolf 25 exercise with the US. In late July, Serbia and China plan to conduct a joint military exercise, Peace Defenders-2025, involving special forces from both countries.[23] The fact that only military exercises from the US and China are exempt from the ban on international military exercises suggests that there is a strong perception that the US and China are the new superpower states of the XXI century, and that Serbia is willing to accommodate these two powers accordingly. The challenge naturally remains deep in the XXI century on how Belgrade will maintain that balance given the increased security rivalry between Washington and Beijing.

The enduring nature of anti-NATO sentiment is also reflected in earlier public opinion surveys. In the 2022 FES poll, only 9% of Serbs supported a stronger role for NATO. This underscores the profound impact of the events of 1999 and 2008 on the collective memory. Anti-NATO attitudes have become a central element of both political discourse and national identity—persisting even among younger generations born after the 1999 conflict.

Within this broader context, 75% of Serbian respondents consider NATO enlargement a threat—a figure that surpasses even the figure in Russia (69%), where FES conducted the same poll. Likewise, there is overwhelming opposition to the use of nuclear weapons, with 85% rejecting them outright and only 14% accepting their use as a last resort. **Military interventionism is also broadly opposed. These views are deeply rooted in Serbia's historical experience: as a member of non-aligned Yugoslavia during the Cold War and as a target of military interventions during the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, Serbia developed a distinct aversion to coercive force, especially when applied by great powers and without UN Security Council approval**. This resistance reflects both a strategic survival instinct and a normative stance against destructive tools of power, particularly in a world dominated by stronger global actors. Precisely because Serbia is not a nuclear power, its stance on nuclear weapons underscores this principled opposition, shaped by the perspective of a small and historically vulnerable state.

Reflecting its leadership, the Serbian public remains supportive of a multivector foreign policy. A majority of respondents favour cooperation with China (67%), Russia (64%), and the EU (60%). By contrast, only 42% support cooperation with the United States, while 49% oppose it. The strong preference for ties with Russia and China is unsurprising given Serbia's historical grievances with the West and the pro-Russian and pro-Chinese narratives consistently promoted by the Serbian government's media ecosystem. The United States remains particularly unpopular, largely due to the 1999 NATO intervention and the broader perception that US policies have historically undermined Serbian interests.[24]

Despite continued support for a multivector foreign policy, a noticeable shift has occurred since 2022, with declining favorability toward all four major global powers—except China. In 2022, 75% of respondents supported more cooperation with Russia, 72% with the EU, and 55% with the United States. By contrast, only support for China remained stable at 67%. This overall decline reflects a deep-seated Serbian tendency to distrust great powers, viewing them either as predatory or opportunistic actors that use small countries like Serbia as geopolitical pawns. Since Serbia began the process of rebirth as a modern nation-state in the early 19th century, with its uprisings against the Ottoman yoke, to the present day, Serbia and the rest of the Balkans have frequently been targets of either military campaigns or geopolitical manipulations by the great powers, shaping this perception. The war in Ukraine has only reinforced this perception over the past three years.

Positive views of China appear to stem from its geographic distance and its perceived detachment from European security conflicts. In contrast, nearly half of respondents (49%) now believe Serbia should not enhance cooperation with the United States. These numbers suggest the emergence of a pragmatic, realist strand in Serbian public opinion—one that values improving relations with the US, even if historical grievances persist. For many, this reflects a broader belief, visible even during Donald Trump's first administration, that the US—by virtue of its power and responsiveness—could be a more effective partner than the EU.[25] At the same time, support for cooperation with the US is significantly lower among younger Serbs. Only 30% of those aged 18 to 29 favour stronger ties with Washington. This may reflect a broa-

20 Balkan Defence Monitor 2024, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), February 27, 2024, p.38. https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/balkan-defence-monitor-2024/.

21 Balkan Defence Monitor 2021, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), March 14, 2022, p.37, https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/balkan-defence-monitor-2022/.

22 Marija Ignjatijevic, "Military cooperation between Serbia and the USA: dynamically under the public radar," Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), April 14, 2021, pp. 3, 6. https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/military-cooperation-between-serbia-and-the-usa-dynamically-under-the-public-radar/.

23 Stefan Vladisavljev, "A Quiet Signal: Serbia Deepens Military Ties with China Amid Global Distractions," China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) , July 19, 2025, https://chinaobservers.eu/a-quiet-signal-serbia-deepens-military-ties-with-china-amid-global-distractions/.

24 Maja Bjelos, Vuk Vuksanovic, Luka Steric, "Many Faces of Serbian Foreign Policy Public Opinion and Geopolitical Balancing,", Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), November 2020, https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/many-faces-of-serbian-foreign-policy-public-opinion-and-geopolitical-balancing/.

25 Ekaterina Entina, "Southeast Europe in Russia's Current Foreign Policy," Südosteuropa Mitteilungen, no. 2 (2019): 78.

der trend in the Western Balkans, where nationalist sentiment among youth has been on the rise in recent years.[26]

These survey results were collected prior to Donald Trump's electoral victory in the United States. As the US–Serbia relations continue to evolve, and given Serbia's relatively high receptiveness to Trump compared to European nations, it is possible that public perceptions of the United States will improve.[27] In October 2024—just ahead of the US presidential election—polls showed that Trump enjoyed his highest approval rating in Serbia, with 59% of respondents indicating they would vote for him in a hypothetical election. Hungary and Bulgaria followed at 49%, in stark contrast to most of Europe, where the majority expressed support for the Democratic candidate, Kamala Harris.[28]

Serbian enthusiasm for Trump was already evident during his first term. For many Serbs, Trump's rise in 2016 offered a symbolic outlet for frustrations—stemming not only from traumatic memories of the Yugoslav collapse and the 1990s wars, but also from dissatisfaction with the failures of Serbia's post-Milošević transition. In the Serbian collective imagination, many of those failures are associated with the Clinton family, further explaining the symbolic appeal of a Republican victory.[29]

Indeed, Serbia is one of the few countries that welcomed the electoral wins of both George W. Bush and Donald Trump. Among conservative circles, both leaders are seen as Christian fundamentalists who did not personally participate in the 1990s NATO interventions and are thus considered more sympathetic to Serbia's position on Kosovo.[30] For pro-Western liberals in Serbia, while Trump's values may be unpalatable, his presidency is sometimes viewed pragmatically—as an opportunity for rapprochement with Washington that could be more easily sold to a sceptical public.

This divide echoes a long-standing tension within the post-Milošević political elite. The coalition that toppled his regime was itself split: some favoured alignment with the Democrats due to their Euro-Atlantic orientation that advocated the Western Balkans being integrated in Euroatlantic institutions, while others believed Republicans were a better fit, given their lack of direct involvement in military actions against Serbia and the less hostile public perception they carried.[31] Trump has and may still generate appeal among parts of the Serbian population due to his aversion to the EU, as the Serbian population's growing disillusionment with the EU has already been noted.[32]

Trump's initially stated intention to end the war in Ukraine and his aversion to military interventionism have also made him appealing to segments of Serbian society weary of great power conflicts—especially on European soil. Many hope that an end to the war could serve as a catalyst for warmer US–Serbia relations.[33] This interest is shared by high-income men aged 40 to 59, who tend to support stronger ties with the US, regardless of which party controls the White House.

However, the Trump phenomenon also carries the potential to damage the United States' standing in Serbian public opinion. As the political crisis in Serbia continues to deepen and presuming the Trump administration begins to be seen as a protector of the current regime, this perception could alienate segments of the population already critical of the government. One early indicator of this risk was the visit of Donald Trump Jr., the son of President Trump, to Belgrade in March 2025, where he met with President Aleksandar Vučić to discuss potential business ventures.[34]

A more striking example involves widespread public opposition to a controversial real estate project linked to Trump's inner circle. Serbian citizens have expressed strong resistance to plans for transforming the former General Staff building—heavily damaged during the 1999 NATO bombing—into a luxury hotel complex spearheaded by Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law.[35] Despite vocal opposition from experts, the Serbian government removed the building from the register of cultural heritage sites, clearing the way for the redevelopment. In response, students organised a large-scale protest and submitted an initiative to the Constitutional Court, calling for a review of the government's decision to revoke the building's protected status.[36]

26 Journalift, "Striving Nationalism Among Youth: Who is Adding Fuel to the Fire?," August 17, 2022, https://journalift.org/striving-nationalism-among-youth-who-is-adding-fuel-to-the-fire/.

27 Alexander Rhotert, "US President Donald Trump's trio for the Balkans," Deutsche Welle, February 18, 2025, https://www.dw.com/en/us-president-donald-trumps-trio-for-the-balkans/a-71649332.

28 Novus, "Novus/Gallup International – Harris vs Trump," October 25, 2024, https://novus.se/en/egnaundersokningar-arkiv/2024-10-novus-gallup-international/.

29 Igor Zlatojev, "Why Serbs like Trump," Prishtina Insight, November 15, 2016, https://prishtinainsight.com/serbs-like-trump/.

30 Vuksanovic, "Systemic pressures, party politics and foreign policy." 213-215.

31 Aleksandra Joksimović, *Srbija i SAD : bilateralni odnosi u tranziciji [Serbia and the USA: bilateral relations in transition] (Belgrade: Čigoja štampa, 2007), 131–32.*

32 Marija Stojanovic, "US elections: What should the Western Balkans expect from the return of Donald Trump, and what from the victory of Kamala Harris?," European Western Balkans, August 23, 2024, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/08/23/us-elections-what-should-the-western-balkans-expect-from-the-return-of-donald-trump-and-what-from-the-victory-of-kamala-harris/.

33 Talha Ozturk, "US election: Serbians rooting for Trump's return to the White House," Anadolu Agency, October 31, 2024, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-election-serbians-rooting-for-trump-s-return-to-the-white-house/3380857.

34 Reuters, "Donald Trump Jr visits Serbia, meets President Aleksandar Vucic," March 11, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/donald-trump-jr-visits-serbia-meets-president-aleksandar-vucic-2025-03-11/.

35 Eric Lipton, "New Luxury Hotel in Serbia Will Be a Trump-Kushner Joint Project," New York Times, January 24, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/24/us/politics/trump-kushner-serbia-hotel.html.

36 Radio Slobodna Evropa, "U Beogradu ‚Protest za Generalštab' studenata u blokadi na godišnjicu NATO bombardovanja [In Belgrade, ‚Protest for the General Staff' of students in the blockade on the anniversary of the NATO bombing] ," March 24, 2025, https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/protest-generalstab-studenti-u-blokadi-nato-bombardovanje/33357481.html.

Adding to the tension, Serbia has been disproportionately affected by Trump's current tariffs—the country most severely impacted in the Balkans.[37] These trade measures have generated a cynical reaction from some Serbs, especially given the lack of a strong or coherent response from Serbian officials. Together, these developments suggest that while Trump may enjoy some popularity in Serbia, his close ties to the ruling elite and the impact of his policies could easily shift public sentiment in a more negative direction.[38]

Roughly 50% of Serbian respondents oppose economic decoupling from Russia and China, indicating that the distant prospect of EU membership is insufficient to justify abandoning key benefits, such as access to Russian gas or Chinese infrastructure loans. How this sentiment will evolve remains uncertain, particularly given the unclear future of NIS, the Gazprom-owned oil and gas company operating in Serbia. The outgoing Biden administration imposed sanctions on NIS due to its Russian ownership, but the Russian side has shown no intention of selling its shares. Meanwhile, the Trump administration—possibly influenced by Belgrade's lobbying or ongoing normalisation talks between Washington and Moscow—has delayed implementing Biden's executive order. However, despite sanction waivers, NIS is struggling to buy oil from foreign traders, while in Serbia, its former clients are seeking alternative fuel suppliers as they are fearful of US sanctions.[39]

Additionally, the future of Serbian public sentiment may hinge on how Chinese infrastructure projects in the country are affected by escalating US-China tensions. If such projects come under American pressure, it could shift public opinion. According to the 2025 survey, public support for cooperation with Russia and China received a boost following the fraudulent and widely criticised 2023 elections in Serbia. While the government has long used ties with Moscow and Beijing to gain leverage with the West, the survey's interpretation overlooks another key factor: the EU's declining credibility. The erosion of EU influence, combined with Western tolerance of Serbia's democratic backsliding, has enabled Russian and Chinese inroads—and the West must also bear some responsibility for this dynamic.

The Serbian public has clearly perceived the end of Western primacy in global affairs. Only 23% of respondents view the EU as a rising global power, and even among younger respondents (aged 18–29), only 30% share that belief. While this younger cohort shows slightly more optimism, the overall numbers point to deep disappointment. Youth are typically expected to be more supportive of the European project, but they have grown up amid narratives of the EU's decline, contributing to their scepticism.

Meanwhile, 65% of respondents believe Russia's global leadership will continue to grow. While Russia remains an influential power, it also faces clear limitations. The fact that many Serbs associate the concept of "leadership" with Russia highlights both the enduring appeal of Russian soft power and the prevalence of pro-Russian narratives within Serbian society. This belief is not new—many Serbs have long seen Russia, rather than China or the United States, as the central power of the XXI century.[40]

Serbian perceptions of global rivalries remain focused on a US–Russia axis. The US and Russia are perceived as having more conflicting interests than any other international pairing, including the US-China relationship and the EU–Russia relationship. By contrast, Russia–China relations are viewed as the least contradictory. This perspective reflects Cold War-era thinking inherited from Yugoslavia, a belief in Russia's role as a counterweight to US hegemony, and the impact of the ongoing war in Ukraine. The view of Sino-Russian cooperation is shaped by the notion that these two non-Western powers are jointly challenging Western dominance—and by the increasingly visible alignment between Moscow and Beijing. The belief that Russia and China are collaborating to counter Western dominance is notably strong in countries such as Serbia, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkey.

A significant majority of Serbs (79%) believe that the European Union should prioritise diplomacy and non-military means over building a European army. This view stands in stark contrast to current trends within the EU, where many governments and their publics—concerned about the fading reliability of the U.S. security guarantee—are pursuing massive defence investments. The proposed "ReArm Europe Plan," which European leaders claim to involve €800 billion defence boost, signals this shift, even at the potential cost of weakening the European welfare state.[41]

Serbian attitudes toward European defence autonomy are more nuanced. The public is split on whether the EU can defend itself without U.S. support: 43% say no, while 41% believe it can. Nevertheless, there is broad agreement (78%) that Europe should reduce its dependence on the United States. Regardless of the ongoing tensions between the U.S. and EU, particularly under the Trump administration[42], there

37 Vuk Tesija et al., "Balkan Countries Weigh Potential Damage Inflicted by Trump's Tariffs," Balkan Insight, April 3, 2025, https://balkaninsight.com/2025/04/03/balkan-countries-weigh-potential-damage-inflicted-by-trumps-tariffs/.

38 Milorad Milovanović, „Dajte mu još nešto pored Generalštaba možda nam smanji carinu": Reakcije Srba na Trampovu odluku da Srbiji uvede carinu od 37% [Give him something else in addition to the General Staff, maybe he will reduce our customs duty": Reactions of Serbs to Trump's decision to impose a 37% tariff on Serbia]," *Nova S, April 3, 2025,* https://nova.rs/magazin/prica-se/reakcije-srba-na-trampovu-odluku-da-uvede-carinu-od-37-srbiji/.

39 N1, "OMV, Eko stop buying fuel from NIS: US sanctions hit NIS despite waivers," April 9, 2025, https://n1info.rs/english/news/omv-eko-stop-buying-fuel-from-nis-us-sanctions-hit-nis-despite-waivers/.

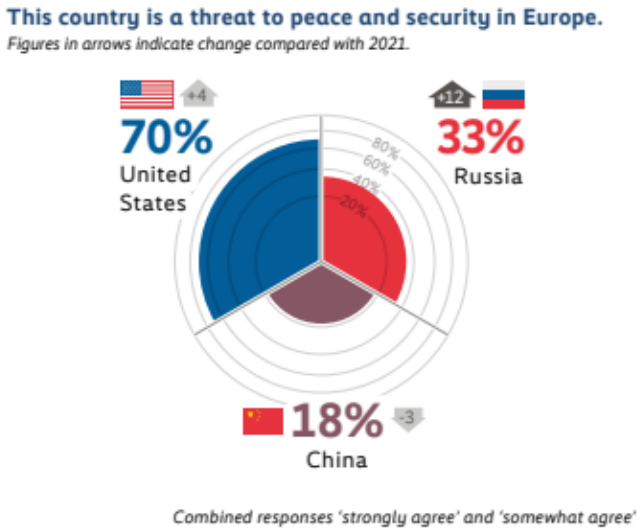
40 Samorukov and Vuksanovic, "Untarnished by War."

41 Janan Ganesh, "Europe must trim its welfare state to build a warfare state," Financial Times, March 5, 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/37053b2b-ccda-4ce3-a25d-f1d0f82e7989.

42 Abby Chitty, "US: Tensions around Ukraine and trade tariffs escalate as Trump prepares for Congressional address," Euronews, March 3, 2025, https://www.euronews.com/2025/03/03/us-tensions-around-ukraine-and-trade-tariffs-escalate-as-trump-prepares-for-congressional-.

is a prevailing sentiment in Serbia that Europe should chart a more independent, non-militaristic course in global affairs.

Serbia also stands out for its threat perceptions. It has the highest rate in Europe of those who view the U.S. as the greatest threat to peace and security on the continent, with 70% expressing this belief. In comparison, only 33% view Russia as a threat, and just 18% express the same sentiment about China. These numbers have all risen since 2022, when 66% viewed the U.S. as a threat, and only 21% said the same of Russia and China. This shift reflects the increasingly volatile international environment, as well as growing disillusionment with Western foreign policy and some disillusionment with Russia among parts of the population. Notably, a third of respondents now view Russia as a threat to European peace—representing a 12% increase since 2022. This suggests a degree of recalibration in public opinion after two years of Russia's military actions in Ukraine.



Regarding stance towards the US, Serbia is not alone in its reservations towards the US: several European countries have also begun to regard the Trump-led United States as a source of strategic uncertainty, potentially shaping the regional narrative moving forward.[43] Trump's strikes on Iran and the general instability this decision is generating in the Middle East might generate a more cautious approach towards the dangerously unpredictable Trump-led US. The same applies to Trump's decision to renew military aid to Ukraine generated by his inability to bring about a quick end to the conflict as he originally thought. However, both the Serbian perception of the US and Serbian leadership stance will be shaped by how much they perceive the Trump administration to be beneficial for Serbian self-interest, primarily regarding the Kosovo dispute. On that front, issues have also been raised as Trump alleged in public that Serbia planned to launch a war against Kosovo, only to be deterred by Trump's threat of freezing trade with Serbia. There has been no evidence to support Trump's claim that Serbia planned such a move, but a statement was probably made with the purpose of portraying President Trump as the dealmaker who prevents wars.[44] This demonstrates that, despite the Serbian leadership's attempts to build stronger ties with the Trump administration, there is room to doubt the success of this effort. However, it also shows that, despite the initial warm reception towards Trump in Serbia, there is potential for the generation of disapproval.

Russia's War, Serbia's Distance

There is a strong tendency among Serbs to align with the Russian perspective on the war in Ukraine, as exemplified by both 2025 and 2022 surveys. According to the survey, 36% of respondents place the blame on Ukraine, followed by 30% who blame the EU, and a striking 60% who blame the United States—the highest such figure recorded outside of Russia. Notably, this marks a significant rise from 2022, when only 38% of Serbs held the U.S. responsible. Serbian views also diverge sharply from the dominant Western narrative regarding Russia's role in the conflict: only 26% consider Russia the aggressor—again, the lowest percentage outside of Russia itself (22%). In contrast, 41% of respondents believe Russia is simply defending its national interests. Just 4% characterise Russia as an imperialist power.

A majority of Serbs (60%) see the Ukraine war not as a clear-cut invasion but as a proxy conflict between Russia and the West over global influence. This is the highest percentage of all the surveyed countries. Indeed, while in Western countries, this percentage is low, among the surveyed non-Western countries, the percentage of those who believe this is a proxy war is much higher, including Turkey and Georgia (42%), as well as Kazakhstan (40%). When asked about the consequences of the war, 39% believe Russia has emerged stronger, while 41% say the same about China or view it as unaffected (38%). The EU, on the other hand, is widely seen as weakened by the conflict (46%). These attitudes are consistent with earlier findings from a 2022 BCSP study, which found that only 11.8% of Serbs held Russia responsible, compared to 31.6% who blamed NATO and 29.2% who pointed to the United States.[45]

When it comes to Serbia's stance on the conflict and the appropriate international response, the public shows clear sympathy for Russia and a preference for diplomatic neutrality. This tendency is deeply rooted in Serbia's own historical experiences, particularly those of the 1990s, which continue to shape perceptions of international intervention and global power dynamics. Consequently,

43 Matthew Smith, "Where does Western Europe stand on Ukraine, Donald Trump and national defence?," YouGov, March 6, 2025, https://yougov.co.uk/international/articles/51741-where-does-western-europe-stand-on-ukraine-donald-trump-and-national-defence.

44 N1, "Why Belgrade is silent about Trump saying that he prevented the war between Serbia and Kosovo," July 17, 2025, https://n1info.rs/english/news/why-is-belgrade-silent-about-trump-saying-that-he-prevented-the-war-between-serbia-and-kosovo/.

45 Vuk Vuksanovic, Luka Steric and Maja Bjelos, "Public Perception of Serbian Foreign Policy in the Midst of the War in Ukraine", Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), December 2022, p.7, https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/public-perception-of-serbian-foreign-policy-in-the-midst-of-the-war-in-ukraine/.

most Serbs believe their country should avoid entanglement in major geopolitical conflicts.[46]

In terms of the war's impact on Serbia, 56% believe the country has been largely unaffected. Only 20% think it has had a minor effect, and just 9% believe the impact has been significant. Public support for aiding Ukraine is also limited: 48% say it is unnecessary to continue providing support, while only 14% favour continued assistance. Among those opposed, the majority (76%) cite the need to end the war, followed by 17% who say the conflict is irrelevant to Serbia. A smaller number (4%) argued that supporting Ukraine is too costly, and 1% had no opinion.

Among the minority of Serbs who support aiding Ukraine, the preferred forms of assistance are overwhelmingly non-military. A majority (57%) favour humanitarian support, followed by 26% who back economic assistance. Only 14% supported providing military aid, while 3% were undecided. This public reluctance to engage militarily stands in stark contrast to Serbia's quiet involvement in the conflict—reports suggest that, via third parties, Serbia has supplied ammunition to Ukraine despite widespread domestic opposition to such measures.[47]

When asked about the potential outcomes of the war, 28% of Serbian respondents— the highest figure outside Russia—believe that Russia will achieve a military victory. Meanwhile, 40% expect the conflict to be resolved through diplomacy. Serbian attitudes toward Ukraine's integration into Western institutions also reflect strong resistance: only 24% support Ukraine's accession to the EU, and an even smaller share—just 10%—approve of its potential membership in NATO. Overall, Serbian public opinion strongly favours diplomatic solutions and neutrality. Nearly half (49%) support intensified diplomatic efforts to end the conflict, while 37% believe Serbia should maintain a neutral stance. The reason why the Serbian attitude on these issues is sometimes stronger than even in Russia itself has less to do with cultural or ideological factors, but, as already described, more to do with Serbian general anger directed against the West over the 1990s interventions and sanctions, Kosovo's independence, and the failures of the post-Milošević transition. This leads the Serbs to favour Russia as the power that balances the West and to perceive international conflicts through the lenses of their own experience.[48]

Looking Inward, Looking Lost: Disillusionment, Defiance, and Domestic Priorities

Only 36% of Serbs express optimism about their country's future, and even that cautious hope does not extend to their views on the broader European or global landscape. Attitudes toward EU accession remain particularly bleak, with only minor shifts since 2022. According to the latest survey, 38% believe the accession process is merely an illusion—that the EU has no real intention of accepting Serbia as a member—up from 33% two years earlier. Another 26% think that while accession may happen eventually, the process will be long and uncertain, marking a 10-point drop from 2022. Meanwhile, 18% now believe that Serbia should abandon the EU path entirely, convinced that membership would bring no tangible benefits—an increase from 15% in 2022. Only 9% still believe that, despite delays, Serbia has a realistic chance of joining the EU, a slight decline from 10% in 2022. The number of undecided respondents has also increased, from 4% to 7%.

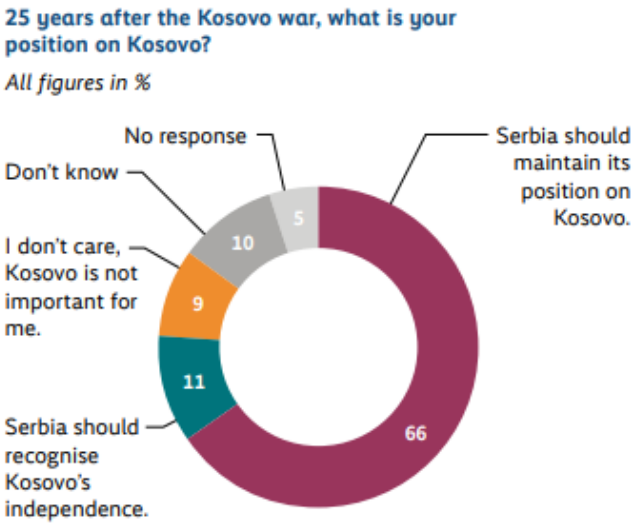
Across demographic groups, the status of Kosovo remains the dominant foreign policy issue. Two-thirds (66%) of respondents believe Serbia should continue its current anti-secessionist stance, while just 10% support recognising Kosovo's independence. Additionally, 10% were unsure how Serbia should act, 9% expressed indifference, and 5% offered no opinion. At the anti-government political rally organised by protesting students on St. Vitus Day (Vidovdan – 28 June), which commemorates the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, the Kosovo issue took centre stage. This highlights the salience of national symbols, including those of Kosovo, but it also reflects a strategic effort to challenge the regime's dominance over national narratives.[49] Nonetheless, it underscores the enduring significance of the Kosovo question in Serbian politics and the likelihood that even Vučić's potential successors will have to contend with this issue.

46 Samorukov and Vuksanovic, "Untarnished by War."

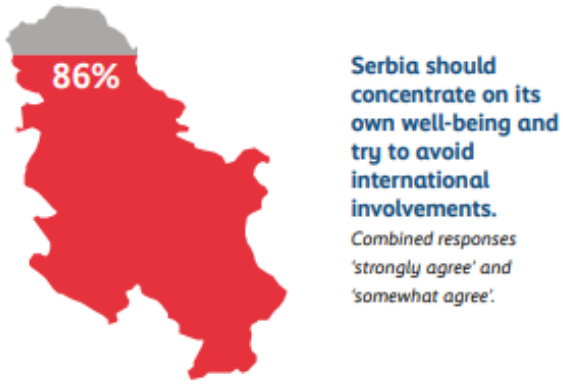
47 Maksim Samorukov, "Why Russia Tolerates Serbia Sending Arms to Ukraine," Balkan Insight, July 8, 2024, https://balkaninsight.com/2024/07/08/why-russia-tolerates-serbia-sending-arms-to-ukraine/.

48 Samorukov and Vuksanovic, "Untarnished by War."

49 Aleksandar Ivkovic, "No, Nationalism Has Not Taken Over the Student Protests in Serbia." European Western Balkans, July 9, 2025, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/07/09/no-nationalism-has-not-taken-over-the-student-protests-in-serbia/.



Domestic priorities clearly take precedence. An overwhelming 86% of Serbs believe the country should prioritise its own well-being and avoid significant international engagement. Yet, this inward-looking sentiment coexists with an apparent contradiction: 60% say Serbia should promote its values abroad. This tension reflects a deeper ambiguity—if not confusion—in Serbia's foreign policy identity. **While there is little appetite for activism on the world stage, there is also a desire for normative influence. Serbia is a unique case among the surveyed countries, as while it desires to refrain from international activism, it is first on the list; however, in its desire to promote its values abroad, it ranks second, behind Poland (62%). Moreover, what these "values" entail, however, remains unclear, especially in a society that is deeply polarised, emotionally divided, and politically fragmented.**



When asked about foreign policy priorities, Serbian respondents highlighted combating terrorism and extremism (51%), addressing human rights violations (48%), and tackling climate change (46%). **The survey reveals a surprising degree of concern for transnational issues—despite the dominant nationalist rhetoric in Serbia and the broader Balkan region, as well as the global trend toward deglobalisation. This suggests that the Serbian public is not entirely inward-looking and retains a certain sensitivity to global challenges.**

There is also strong public support for the idea that wealthy countries have a responsibility to protect poorer and more vulnerable nations and that international cooperation is essential to achieving global peace. Consistent with this, Serbs place greater trust in diplomacy and international institutions over hard power approaches. These views suggest the persistence of a worldview reminiscent of the Global South or nonalignment—one that exists not only among political elites but also within broader society.[50]

Despite this emphasis on diplomacy and social justice, almost half of respondents support increased military spending. This aligns with the Serbian government's recent focus on arms procurement and reflects the enduring public trust in the military, which remains one of the country's most respected institutions.[51] However, the public's broader preferences are clear: 67% of respondents favour prioritising social and economic investment over defence. Moreover, 61% believe such investments should be funded through a special levy on the wealthy without reducing budgets in other areas. The majority of the surveyed countries share this view, and Serbia's stance, especially, aligns with those of Western countries. **In short, while many Serbs respect and support the military, the prevailing sentiment prioritises socio-economic welfare over militarisation. This duality reflects a pragmatic balancing act between national strength and social justice in Serbia's evolving foreign policy consciousness.**

Conclusions: A Nation Between Worlds

The 2025 survey reveals a Serbian society navigating a profound sense of geopolitical ambiguity. Public opinion is shaped by an enduring belief in national exceptionalism coupled with a perception of marginalisation in global affairs. This duality reflects Serbia's unresolved position between its historical narratives, regional identity, and the evolving global order. While nostalgia and grievance continue to influence perceptions—particularly regarding NATO and the EU—there is also a clear preference for diplomatic nonalignment, pragmatic hedging, and a cautious stance toward great power rivalries. The disappointment with the EU is particularly pronounced and consequential. The EU's prestige has been declining for some time due to the crises transpiring in Europe over the past 15 years, the EU's neglect of the region, and the EU's inconsistency of ignoring rule of law transgressions of Serbian leadership for the sake of transactional deals, and the media bashing of the EU by pro-government media and tabloids in Serbia.

Economic vulnerability, disillusionment with the EU, and security anxieties fuel a retreat inward; yet, this is accompanied by a desire for normative relevance and engagement with global issues, such as climate change, terrorism, and human rights. The public's worldview increasingly resem-

50 Vuk Vuksanovic, "Aligning with the Non-Aligned: Serbia Follows in the Footsteps of Old Yugoslavia," Royal United Service Institute (RUSI), October 19, 2021, https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/aligning-non-aligned-serbia-follows-footsteps-old-yugoslavia.

51 European Western Balkans, "Who is spending the most on defence in the Balkans?," March 22, 2024, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/03/22/who-is-spending-the-most-on-defence-in-the-balkans/.

bles that of the Global South—emphasising sovereignty, socio-economic justice, and scepticism toward Western-led institutions. Although Serbia's alignment with Russia and China remains strong, it is less about ideological affinity and more a product of strategic disillusionment with the West and the failures of EU conditionality.

Ultimately, Serbia's foreign policy identity is not one of clear alignment, but of deliberate ambiguity. The Serbian public favours autonomy over alliance, stability over activism, and sees no imminent prospect for transformation under current domestic or international conditions. In this context, foreign policy becomes less a tool for integration and more a mechanism for resilience, anchored in caution, shaped by history, and increasingly disconnected from the promise of the European future. There appears to be no chance at this moment for this mindset and state of affairs to change, especially regarding Serbia's potential EU membership, given the nature of the ruling regime in Serbia and the fact that the EU is preoccupied with its own internal and external crises.

Author

Dr. Vuk Vuksanović
Senior Researcher at the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) and an associate at LSE IDEAS, a foreign policy think-tank within the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

Peer reviewers

Maja Bjeloš
Senior researcher, Belgrade Center for Security Policy

Dr. Srdjan Cvijić
President of the International Advisory Committee of the Belgrade Center for Security Policy

General Information

Publisher
FES Regional Office for International Cooperation
Cooperation and Peace
Reichsratsstr. 13/5, A-1010 Vienna
Phone: +43 1 890 38 11 205

Responsible
Christos Katsioulis

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the organisation for which the author works.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V. holds the rights to the photographic material. Use of the photographic material is only permitted when reporting on the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V. Commercial use of the photographic material is not permitted. If you have any questions concerning the clarification of rights, please contact the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.

The data set on which this study is based will be published through the Archive of Social Democracy once the analyses have been completed, unless contractual regulations or internal guidelines of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung prevent this. We publish research data at ↗ collections.fes.de

July 2025
© Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.