



New Serbian Strategic Documents – What a difference a year makes

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The draft versions of the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (NSS) and the Strategy of Defense of the Republic of Serbia (NDS) have finally entered the parliamentary verification procedure. Namely, due to the current dynamics of the global, regional and domestic developments, the actual strategies of national security and defense endorsed back in 2009 are evidently outdated.

Also, the partners of the Republic of Serbia (RS), both governments and international organizations need updated relevant strategic documents on the basis of which it will be possible to make forecasts regarding future cooperation and assess the level and quality of partnership with the Republic of Serbia, which has significantly improved its international position thanks to the manner and the volume of participation in multinational operations.

CEAS assumes that the final adoption of these strategies will accelerate the opening of Chapter 31 in the negotiations with the EU - Foreign, Security and Defense Policy.

CEAS hopes that all the parties shall responsibly participate in the process of consideration, making necessary amendments and adopting these important documents, as well as other legislative and normative documents that should originate from them, either by the current or a subsequent convocation of the RS' National Assembly. A boycott of the upcoming elections, which was announced by the opposition political parties, would constitute avoidance of these very important civil and governmental duties.

This is especially important if we bear in mind the new geopolitical and regional circumstances and the fact that the documents are being adopted in an extremely difficult period of the ongoing negotiations on new relations between Belgrade and Pristina. The forthcoming assembly session and discussion of the documents will provide an opportunity for confirmation of the intention to improve the general atmosphere and functioning of the assembly, and give a chance to opposition leaders and other parties to present their views on the drafts and possible amendments, as the last year's public debate was very short and surprisingly few parties took part in it. This is an exceptional opportunity for their policies and plans to be heard, apart from those pertaining to the election procedures. For every country, it is very important to reach a general consensus regarding foreign policy, security and defense policies, in line with a realistic assessment of the strategic environment and common national interests that are within the realm of the possible.

CEAS is pleased that new draft versions of NSS and NDS, among other things, include the following: protection of environment and resources of the Republic of Serbia is recognized as a national interest (NSS new version); one of the announced elements of the national security policy is a significant increase of the number of citizens trained for defense of the country (NSS new version); a professional approach, control and supervision are included among the key principles of the functioning of the national security and defense systems (NSS, NDS new

versions); the sentence reading: “Russian Federation shall continue to strengthen its political influence and advance its capacities and its position in certain regions and globally” has been omitted (the new version of NDS does not contain this sentence); it is recognized that spreading of false news and disinformation within the concept of hybrid and information warfare may adversely affect the functioning of the elements of defense system (NDS new version); KFOR is explicitly named as the guarantor of the Brussels Agreement (NDS new version); it is explicitly stated that the system of defense shall be under democratic and civilian control (NDS new version) and The Serbian Army is named explicitly as the subject of implementation of the defense strategy.

New strategies should harmonize the phrases that pertain to the level of cooperation of the Republic of Serbia with Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), because the new version of NSS mentions the observer status of RS, which is not mentioned in the new draft of NDS. Also, NSS makes references to expansion and deepening of cooperation, whereas the NDS mentions expansion and deepening of cooperation with CSTO, but there is no mention of the observer status.

Our overall assessment is that these documents are Kosovo-centered and that they do not depict global and regional context in a way that would be expected from a country which proclaims that joining the EU is among its national interests. They rather suggest what the policies and measures pursued in final phases of possible continuation of negotiations would be and Belgrade’s key expectations.

Nevertheless, with full understanding of the very complicated situation in which Serbian Government endorsed the new versions, especially with regard of trying to reach a multidimensional comprehensive agreement with Pristina that would not cause big concerns and other unwanted actions among Serbs living in Kosovo and elsewhere, CEAS is worried that some of the new elements in these drafts can be interpreted too arbitrarily, leading to misunderstandings and problems at the local, global and, primarily, regional level. This is particularly the case with the sections on protection and preservation of the Serbian people wherever they may live, as a newly introduced national interest, and patterns of protection of the special parallel relations with the Republic of Srpska.

Bearing in mind that new provisions are introduced into the Draft Security and Defense Strategies, rather than into the foreign policy one, and that they resemble the “compatriots living abroad” concept (Russian World Concept) pursued by the Russian Federation, in the period in which many policy makers and commentators raise concerns about security implications of various possible outlooks of the Belgrade - Pristina agreement and Serbia defense and security ties with Russia, CEAS expects them to cause concerns with many regional and Western actors.

Practices show that attempts to misuse or weaponize compatriots living abroad can expose them to be seen as the “fifth column” in the countries where they live. CEAS hopes that this will not be the case with Serbs wherever they live, and that protection of their individual and collective rights by Republic of Serbia will only contribute to the improvement of relations with countries in which they live.

The “little green men” scenario in Crimea also comes to mind. Many parties in the region and the world have their own interests and plans for the future outlook of Belgrade-Pristina agreement (or a failure to reach one). Scenarios similar to the Crimean one, in all their

variations, attempted by state or non-state actors, can be especially dangerous bearing in mind the presence of EUFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina and KFOR in Kosovo. In order to subdue provocations, preempt misunderstanding and avoid incidents that can escalate CEAS advocates that Serbian government honors all its agreements with KFOR, EU and UN to the full extent, and maintains the best possible level of communication and cooperation with KFOR.

American military experts assess that: The National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and National Military Strategy all note that future confrontations among the major powers may most often occur below the level of armed conflict. In this environment, economic competition, influence campaigns, paramilitary actions, cyber intrusions, and political warfare are likely to become more prevalent.

Such confrontations increase the risk of misperception and miscalculation, among the powers with significant military strength, which may then increase the risk of armed conflict. In this context, the US capability to influence the outcomes of both global and regional events must be reconsidered. The growing divergence among great powers (i.e., the US, China, and Russia) regarding what constitutes legitimate or acceptable deterrence, compulsion, and escalation management activities should be carefully examined.¹

Experts warn that: the “Russian World” is perhaps Russia’s most controversial piece of policy. While the terms “Compatriots” and “Russian Diaspora” were not new when President Vladimir Putin took office, the first time he officially mentioned the term “Russian World” was in 2001 before the first World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad. Specifically, Putin stated, “the notion of the Russian World extends far from Russia’s geographical borders and even far from the borders of the Russian ethnicity.” From this moment onwards, the Russian government erased the boundaries between ethnic Russians and those who identified themselves belonging to the cultural-linguistic-spiritual sphere of the Russian Federation. “Russian World,” can be best described as the ideological concept guiding the way in which Russia’s responsibility to “compatriots” abroad manifests itself into concrete policy. Overall, “Russian World” is such a versatile piece of policy that it can be observed in Russia’s 2015 National Security Strategy just as it can be seen in Russia’s 2018 “Decree on the Concept of the State Migration Policy.”²

CEAS truly hopes that, for all reasons listed above, by-laws and other documents that will succeed the strategies, starting with action plans for their implementation, shall reduce the possibility of arbitrary interpretation or define in more detail the procedures for assessment of threats to stated interests, as well of means for their protection and improvement in order to preserve domestic and regional stability and security. Experiences and good practices and policies of NATO and EU Member States with similar issues of large number of compatriots living abroad, in particular in neighboring countries, should be thoroughly examined and considered for implementation.

¹ Russian Strategic Intentions. A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper. May 2019. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000016b-a5a1-d241-adff-fdf908e00001>

² Assessment of the Future of ‘Russkiy Mir’ in Russia’s Grand Strategy. Real Clear Defense. December 2018. Available at: https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/12/31/assessment_of_the_future_of_russkiy_mir_in_russias_grand_strategy_114070.html