

## **SERBIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS AS KEY OBSTACLE TO SERBIA'S EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION**

The latest European Commission Serbia 2019 Report has accented its relations with Russia, which are once more confirmed by the newly adopted Serbia's National Security Strategy. Report highlighted maintenance of frequent high-level contacts and regular bilateral visits with Russia, accompanied with military cooperation, including joint military drills, sustained relations with the Collective Security Treaty Organization and arms trade arrangements.<sup>1</sup> Emphasizing strong and close relations between Republic of Serbia and Russian Federation in diverse domains within document that traces Serbia's progress in the context of its Euro-integration process obviously present one of the key obstacles when it comes to possibilities of Serbia to integrate within EU and NATO structures.

Republic of Serbia always had unique and close ties to Russia and therefore considered as Russian sphere of influence in the Balkans. So far, Serbia perceives Russia in positive terms and as a key strategic partner when it comes to its crucial foreign policy partners.<sup>2</sup> Key political ties in terms of Serbian and Russian close relations is Russian non-recognition of Kosovo's\* independence, while their cultural, religious and historical ties make this closeness even stronger, especially in terms of Russian disapproval of NATO bombing campaign of Serbia and previously mentioned Kosovo\* issue. Consequently, Russia has been perceived as a defender of Serbia's national interests within UN Security Council. Besides, the background of Serbia-Russian relations is reinforced by Russian soft-power mechanisms. In other words, there is significant influence of "Russian-friendly media outlets and journalists, hoping to spread pro-Russian or anti-Western narratives in local languages" within the Balkan region.<sup>3</sup> The result of these phenomena is reflected through public discourse that favors Russia and reject Serbia's integration with the EU and NATO. In this manner, there is a common opinion that Russia is using Serbia as a mechanism in order to "establish a friendly pocket on a hostile continent".<sup>4</sup> Strong Russian involvement in Serbia's economic, military, intelligence and energy sectors creates its political and economic dependence that slows down Serbia's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Newly adopted Strategy of National Security of Republic of Serbia (2019) has accented Serbia's commitment to military neutrality and its close cooperation with four key foreign policy partners: Russian Federation, European Union, United States of America and People's

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<sup>1</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: 2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy {COM(2019) 260 final} – Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-serbia-report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Istraživanje: Građani Srbije naklonjeniji Rusiji i Kini u odnosu na SAD i EU – Available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a456929/Istrazivanje-Gradjani-Srbije-naklonjeniji-Rusiji-i-Kini-u-odnosu-na-SAD-i-EU.html>

<sup>3</sup> Is Russia Up to No Good in the Balkans? – Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/13/is-russia-up-to-no-good-in-balkans-pub-78335>

<sup>4</sup> EU and Russia vie for influence in volatile Balkans region – Available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2018/02/24/eu-and-russia-vie-for-influence-in-volatile-balkans-region/>

Republic of China. Although there weren't conditioning requests coming from these powers regarding to Serbia's orientation so far, main question raised here is long-term sustainability of this decision within complex regional political and security scenes. For instance, EU accentuated the fact that Serbia did not agree to impose sanctions on Russia in response to Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine.<sup>5</sup>

Some questions were raised in the context of intensification of Serbian cooperation with Russia in the military, economic and energy fields, strategic cooperation and many other domains. For instance, in 2016, both parties signed military cooperation agreement "which included purchasing new equipment for the Serbian army from Russia, and upgrading the Russian arms previously purchased by the Serbs".<sup>6</sup> Establishing Serbian-Russian humanitarian center in Niš raised European and American concerns on these forms of cooperation and remains "under the veil of mystery and doubted by many".<sup>7</sup> Most recently joint military exercise took place in July 2018, named "Slavic brotherhood" and Russian security assistance to Republic of Serbia continue to grow. More aggressive Russian foreign policy towards Balkans obviously inhibits Serbia's Euro-Atlantic integration, especially when having in mind those strong linkages in domain of military and intelligence services. Recent visit of Russian Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev, to Serbia for commemorations of 75th anniversary of the city's liberation from Nazi German occupation, came on the same period when EU fails to open membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia. Another important visit to Belgrade with strong security and political implications was the visit of Sergey Naryshkin, the Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, who emphasized the necessity of Russian-Serbian close cooperation and information exchange.<sup>8</sup> These moves of Russian public diplomacy could be seen as fostering Russian influence and presence in this part of the Balkan peninsula.

While EU still remains main investor in Republic of Serbia, Russia's level of economic involvement shouldn't be neglected so far. In terms of energy security, which Russia uses as main economic tool, it is important to note that Serbia has ratified Energy Community Treaty in 2006 and committed itself to undertake necessary measures and to implement the relevant EU energy *acquis communautaire* in order to integrate within European energy market. From the other hand, Russia is present within this area as significant investor and trade partner. Considering that Russian oil and gas company, Gazprom Neft, became majority owner of Serbian oil and gas company, NIS, in February 2009 and consequently has been controlling Serbian energy market, energy dependency question is at the stake at the moment. This kind of state was evoked recently especially in terms of possible Serbia's role within Russian new

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<sup>5</sup> Strategic challenges for Serbia's integration with the European Union – Available at: <https://depot.ceon.pl/bitstream/handle/123456789/15428/Strategic%20challenges%20for%20Serbia%E2%80%99s%20integration%20with%20the%20European%20Union.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>

<sup>6</sup> Strategic challenges for Serbia's integration with the European Union – Available at: <https://depot.ceon.pl/bitstream/handle/123456789/15428/Strategic%20challenges%20for%20Serbia%E2%80%99s%20integration%20with%20the%20European%20Union.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>

<sup>7</sup> The Bear Never Sleeps: The Position of the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre in Niš – Available at: <https://www.esjnews.com/serbian-russian-humanitarian-centre-in-nis>

<sup>8</sup> Na Balkanu veoma napeto – Sergej Nariškin govori za RTS – Available at: <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3708673/direktor-spoljne-obavestajne-sluzbe-rusije-situacija-na-balkanu-veoma-napeta.html>

geopolitical and energy project named Turkstream which makes EU more energy dependent from Russian natural gas. European concerns are mainly concentrated around the fact that these Russian aspirations could be used as a significant mechanism for energy exporting country manipulation.

In domain of soft-power mechanisms, Russia is able to exacerbate political fissures in the Balkans, including financing support to far-right groups across the region. Beside information campaigns through local media outlets, pro-Russian politicians and right-wing groups, Russia keeps maintaining its presence in Serbia through sponsorships of football teams, schools, Orthodox church activities, charity events, and Russian language and cultural associations. These soft power tools enable anti-Western narratives and strengthen Russian political and cultural ties with Serbia.

Describing the Balkans as a gateway to Europe or as a transit area settled within triangle consisting of EU, USA and Russia, gives to Serbia specific and complex political and security dynamics. Close historical, orthodox, security, economic and energy cooperation between Serbia and Russia do represent one of the factors which has significant impact on further dynamics of the Serbia's integration within Euro-Atlantic structures. Russian diplomatic efforts and media narratives aim at democratic decay and political polarization which complicate Serbia's EU and NATO prospects. To combat Russian malign influence in this part of the Balkans, Serbia's strong commitment to its EU future should be unambiguous. Besides, Euro-Atlantic structures should demonstrate their strong commitment to the region and help those states to raise awareness on Russian malign presence. Convincing Serbia that it is indeed desired part of Euro-Atlantic integration, Russian influence could be weakened within Balkan region.