

FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS: A CASE STUDY*

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Abstract:

The article aims to investigate the main direction of Serbian foreign policy in the post-Milosevic period. The article argues that Serbia was confronted with a negative external image, which emerged after the crimes against humanity that occurred in former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, during the conflicts that marked the dissolution of this multi-national federation. The article shows how Serbia overcame this negative perception through a pragmatic pro-European policy and intelligently used the 2015 migration crisis to show a new face to European leaders. Moreover, the article shows that Serbia is trying to keep a balance between Russia and the EU, but that this balance is increasingly precarious.

Keywords: Serbia, Russia, EU, foreign policy.

Serbia's foreign policy

The internal and international context which serves as a basis for analysis of the Serbian foreign policy suffered significant changes over the previous 20 years. Different actors and systemic units that can influence the Serbian foreign policy suffered significant transformations, both concerning their strategic objectives and interest as well as regarding policies and actions. The relevant main contextual variables which account for the Serbian foreign policy in the last two decades are:

1. External variables

- The re-drawing of European map
- The dissolution of some actors and the emergence of some new ones
- The failure of Western governments to handle conflicts
- The lack of common European policies and coherent strategic objectives concerning the Balkans

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- The strong dependence of the Balkan, Central and Eastern European states of the decision-making context and the external capabilities of important players (the EU, the US, The Russian Federation).

2. Internal variables

- Political chaos both concerning ideologies and at the individual level (personalities were strongly connected to Milosevic's inheritance).
- Internal difficulties concerning governance and international reputation as a viable and autonomous partner.
- Failed or anemic institutional reforms.
- The involvement of Yugoslav intelligence services in the conflicts from the 1990s and the involvement of former officers in important public/private structures, where they could influence state reforms.
- Systemic corruption and organized crime (developed especially during the war years).
- An anxious society regarding Serbia's territorial integrity and feelings of frustration concerning the different labels attached to the Serbian people – xenophobic, ultra-nationalist, aggressive, focused on the past.
- The personalization of foreign policy and the lack of a strategic vision accepted by all parties.

Analysis bases

One of the most frequent analysis frameworks employed to understand Serbia starts from a bias which the last century did nothing but confirm. The myth of "ancestral hatred" in the Balkan area is based on the unscientific views of Robert Kaplan who, in 1993, published *Balkan Ghosts* (2005). In this work, he argued that the peoples of the Balkans are "unusually savage and inclined to violence" Even if the thesis of Balkan violence emerged in works previous to those of Kaplan, entering classified CIA reports in the 1950s, Kaplan's work, published in 1993, inflamed the official rhetoric of leaders such as John Major, Bill Clinton and even the EU mediator for the region, David Lord Owen and spread an image of a violent, hateful Balkans among the public opinion.

If, in the last years of the XX century, the topic of "violent and ultranationalist Serbs" was revived, the second decade of the XXI century introduced a new variable in the attempt to understand Serbia's foreign policy behavior: Serbia's alleged closeness to a revived Russia. In addition to their inability to find a solution to the issue of Kosovo, Europeans and Americans were particularly about Serbia's economic and political opening towards the Russian Federation.

When attempting to understand the Serbian foreign policy, one must not forget that Socialist Yugoslavia adopted, even since 1948, a foreign policy which tried to balance between the two large political and military blocs. **Yugoslavia, together with other non-European states formed the Un-aligned movement¹. Serbia will always employ a form of non-alignment and will undertake cost-benefit analysis when attempting to achieve national interest objective. Serbia will befriend those who will support its economic and social development.**

The main lines of analysis

WHAT IS SERBIA?

This article does not aim to undertake a historical approach to Serbia, but only to describe its main characteristics, as a unit – a state actor of the international system.

The disintegration of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia led both to a change in the region's geostrategic position and to a need to re-define the states' foreign policy objective. In the case of newly emerging states, one can state that foreign policy changed radically. The recognition, according to international treaties, of a sovereign state, represents an essential aspect for understanding the field of foreign policy and international relations.

The war and the years of reconstruction had diverse consequences on Serbia, both concerning the country's image abroad and on the way that the Serbian state functioned:

- independence
- new borders
- the emergence of new neighbours on those borders
- the initiation and development by neighbours of new and previously impossible forms of cooperation, considering Serbia's image during the war
- the effort of fighting the image of an aggressive, warlike, criminal Serbia, as seen by the international community in the 1990s
- the loss of territory
- the presence of foreign troops on the country's territory
- the unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo and the increase of frustrations at the national level, the anxiety of political elites and the population concerning the future of Serbia as a nation (Dollard, 1939; Berkowitz, 1969)
- the reform of state institutions

¹ Founded in Belgrade in 1961, by states which refused to take part in the two blocs

- the reform of the defence and security sectors
- legislative and strategic reforms
- the difficulty of rejecting personalized practices in foreign policy and of the nationalist speech and behavior
- the change of generation, the change of mentalities in order to succeed in changing organizations and institutions

In order to answer the question of What is Serbia and where does it lie in the international system (both from a geographic and a hierarchic point of view) in the international system? we must consider the following directions for analysis:

1. From a geographic point of view, Serbia is located in a politically unstable region, deeply affected by the problems of massive migration. From a geopolitical perspective, Serbia, as well as other states in the region are located in an area of confrontation between East and West,

2. Serbia is trying to obtain a honourable position in the European system, sometimes using the Kosovo issue as a means to negotiate. From a hierarchical point of view, Serbia "missed the start" towards democratization. However, the last two years proved the capacity of the Serbian nation to coalesce popular will and of its elites to overcome their nationalist anxieties.

WHERE IS SERBIA TODAY?

Concerning military security, the Balkan region is currently consolidated. The security vacuum created through the dissolution of the Yugoslav state system does not exist any more, but the region is today rather divided than connected:

- political division – the "Western Balkans" term was created by the international community to distinguish between countries in the region: Slovenia, which is now considered as a part of Central Europe, Bulgaria and Romania, current members of the EU and NATO;

- the Kosovo issue is a priority of the EU and Serbian foreign policy, as well as that of other powers having security interests in the region: however the issue is far from being solved;

- the inheritance of the regional wars and conflicts, as well as the international demonization/victimization of the parties involved, as well as the consolidation of perceptions formed during conflicts still affect regional relations;

- obvious differences between the states regarding their stages of euro-Atlantic accession.

At the same time, one can see that, taking into account the latest international events (the migrant crisis, the Russian military intervention

supporting the Bashar al-Assad regime, the terrorist attacks in Paris, the terrorist attack (Stirile Protv, 2015) on a Russian airplane travelling from Sharm el-Sheikh to Sankt Petersburg), a worse security situation in the Western Balkans is not impossible.

In this regional context, one needs to mention that Serbia expressed its intention to join the EU and NATO, thus marking its re-integration in the international community. This took place in November 2000, on the occasion of the Zagreb Summit, which marked the beginning of a new age of regional cooperation and reconciliation (European Commission, 2000). Formally, the negotiations for the accession of Serbia to the EU began on the 21st of January 2014, with the first Intergovernmental conference on Serbian integration.

Concerning Serbia's NATO membership, this is not on the list of Serbian priorities, as a simple cost-benefit analysis (Petrovic, 2007) can show that neither the Serbian elites, nor the population are willing to go through the long road of NATO accession.

Serbian foreign policy

Main foreign policy actions

Within the first half of 2015, Serbia was considered a regional actor having a incoherent foreign policy, which varied, according to context and own interests, between East and West.

At the same time, the political developments of the past months showed that Serbia is capable of approaching its international situation in a realistic and pragmatic manner. Thus, the effort of regaining its international credibility was maximized during the migrant crisis through giving up nationalist and xenophobic discourse. As opposed to other states in the region, Serbia turned out to have a tolerant and "European" action in the migrant crisis. Serbia continued its policy of diplomatic balancing between its internal needs and the legacy of collective memory and the need to adopt a rational behavior on the global arena (B92, 2015a).

The European political crisis caused by the inability to offer a unitary response to the migratory waves offered an initial advantage to Serbia, which allowed it to have leverage in Berlin. The pragmatic but deeply humanitarian approach that Serbia took in the migrant crisis turned it into a accepted discussion partner, which was seen as "respected and capable to efficiently solving the problems at hand" (B92, 2015a).

Despite not being part of the European Union, Serbia undertook the obligation of hosting refugees/migrants, as part of its "constructive" approach to foreign policy (Mediafax, 2015).

A first effect of the “unexpected” coherence in the Serbian foreign policy was noticed in the 2015 European Commission report on Serbia. The introduction of the document showed “Serbia remains faithful to the strategic objective it undertook to fully join the EU...it implements an ambitious political and economic agenda and successfully finalized the requirements of the action plan. Serbia is playing a constructive role in the region. It fulfils its obligations for the normalization of relations with Kosovo ...and played a role in handling the migrant crisis...as well as actively contributing in the regional and international cooperation fora” (European Commission, 2015).

At the same time, pro-European Serbian Prime-minister, Aleksandar Vucic undertook, in November 2015, a visit in the Russian Federation, where he met Dimitri Medvedev, Vladimir Putin and other representatives of the Russian government, presiding over the official opening of the Russia- Serbia business forum.

Vucic stated, in the beginning of the visit “(...) We are grateful to Russia for the help it offered us in the UN Security Council, in UNESCO² and in other international organizations, as well as for the way it helped us in our efforts of preserving territorial integrity and indivisibility” (B92, 2015b). The international recognition of the Serbian change of vision came through its inclusion in the UNESCO executive director’s office, when the UN was troubled about including Kosovo as a full member of UNESCO.

Prime-Minister Vucic declared, in a interview with Russian news agency Sputnik (Sputnik news, 2015) that “the EU would have granted Serbia a maximum grade in foreign policy if not for special relations between us and the Russian Federation and Serbia’s refusal to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation”.

On the other hand, in a speech addressed to the National Assembly (Tanjug, 2015), Vucic declared “I will fight until my last drop of energy so that Serbia goes forward without ever being in danger of going back to the past”, and demanded the Serbian political class a rational and reasonable debate without the “empty and falsely patriotic speech” which characterized the 1990s.

Even a partial analysis of Serbian foreign policy can show that its main coordinates are gliding between East and West that it aims to regain international credibility and to join the European Union.

² In October 2015, an ample Serbian diplomatic process took place to stop Kosovo’s attempt to join UNESCO. On the 22nd of October, in Paris, on the meeting of the UNESCO executive committee, the vote was equally split (14/14).

Doctrines, strategies and actions – regarding security and defense

From a strategy and doctrine point of view, all states in the Western Balkans elaborated their own defense and security doctrines. Even if these documents are inspired by their Western counterparts, their adoption showed a trend towards the normalization of the region. On the other hand, Serbia, as well as other neighbouring states need to overcome the moment of “technical” perceptions on security and the security environment and to try to “assimilate” the necessary values to place these documents in a normative framework.

We do not aim to initiate a detailed analysis of the ways to elaborate and operationalize the Serbian security and defense strategies. We believe that foreign policy represents the projection of a connection between national interests and universal/national values. Thus, the following works are recommended reading for detailing the Serbian foreign and security policy:

- Ejodus Filip, Savkovic Marko, *Emergent Concept of National Security Policy in Republic of Serbia*, in Center for European and North Atlantic Affairs;
- Seroka J., *Serbian National Security and Defense Strategy: Forever Wandering in the Wilderness?*, in The Journal of Slavic Military Studies, vol.23, pp 438-460, editor Routledge;
- Jelena Radoman, *Serbia and NATO, from enemies to (almost) partners*, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2012;
- *Serbia, Foreign Policy and National Security Yearbook*, Strategic Information and Developments, International Business Publications, USA;
- Filip Ejodus *The Brussels Agreement and Serbia's National Interest: A positive Balance Sheet?* Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Belgrade office, Analysis www.kas.de.

Foreign policy decision-making

The president of the Republic of Serbia does not have foreign policy prerogatives, but only represents the country abroad. The construction and the foreign policy decision, as well as the selections of state instruments to achieve them is the responsibility of the government.

At the same time, international analysts were very preoccupied by the presence of Serbian troops in the 9th of May 2015 Moscow parade and interpreted the gesture as a defiance against the West. A realistic analysis of the event shows that the official Serbian foreign policy is based on pragmatism and ambiguity (considering that the president, Tomislav Nikolic, decided to send the soldiers in his capacity as supreme commander of the armed forces), especially given that Serbia undertook common military exercises in the NATO-Partnership for Peace framework. In 2007, Serbia proclaimed its military neutrality through appealing to the “collective memory” and the benefits it

previously obtained as a non-aligned country. Moreover, any analysis concerning the military dimension of Serbian policy had to consider that, until now, Serbia has been completely dependent on Russia regarding military technology and that it participated in NATO exercises with Russian material (Balkan Insight, 2015).

On the 7th October 2015, the Serbian president congratulated Russian president Putin on the occasion of his birthday. Even if this is an official message, where the exact wording is less important, this message means much more than can immediately be seen "Mr. Putin, your internal leadership and the way you are pursuing your foreign policy objectives show steadiness and wisdom. You represent a tower of strength and support for us, Serbs, a far less numerous people occupying a country far smaller than Russia. Due to a combination of circumstances we are required to apply a double standard in our policy. From the bottom of my heart, I wish you happiness and success in your activity" (Predsednik, 2015).

If one appealed to political psychology and role theories in the analysis of foreign policy, we could say that the main Serbian political personalities are playing a common tune where each is meant to represent a different part in Serbia's road between Russia and the West. The Vučić – Nikolić³ duo took up the pro-European tune, but gave it different nuances according to the international context and a pragmatic anchor in the Serbian cognitive and affective patterns.

At the same time, Serbia is expanding its pro-Eastern orientation to include China. Within the context of the visit that Vučić will undertake in China, the Chinese ambassador to Belgrade, Li Manchang, stated (Beta, 2015) on the 18th of November 2015 that "the Serbian government has a wise foreign policy (...) each foreign policy has better and worse parts, none is perfect, but I have a deep respect for the way that the Serbian government takes foreign policy decisions". The words of the Chinese ambassador regarding China having a close friend in the EU when Serbia will join, one can see that the bilateral relationship will be deepened for the benefit of both states and Serbia will be supported in its goal to join the EU.

³ Alternatively, the former Serbian president, Boris Tadić, even if he was always considered a pro-Western politician argued for Serbia keeping an equilibrium between the EU, the US and Russia.

Conclusions

In the Balkans, no wars are local !

The New York Times, 7 April 1999

As mentioned before, the variable that can affect the whole pattern of analysis of Serbian foreign policy is the domestic one. Even if, in this moment, the behavior on the international stage is predictable, any internal change (government, elites, social movements) can introduce a new degree of uncertainty. In this moment, Serbia's European future depends, in addition to international events and developments, on the state's capacity to give up the "clan-based politics", which relies on patronage power relations, corruption and ethnic collectivism. Serbia finds itself, today, before a paradoxical situation⁴: the main demand of the EU to Serbia is to build, inside, a solid democracy, a solid economy and a state based on democratic institutions and values. On the other hand, the EU admission and the European discipline would ensure a much faster development of the rule of law and democracy (Timmins and Smith, 2010).

The existence of common objectives of former Yugoslav states will ground future good relations. In 2015, Serbia made significant progress in improving its relationships to its neighbours. Building a foreign policy and developing bi and multilateral relations from common efforts and objective to combat common threats and risks (terrorism, all kinds of traffic, organized crime, massive migration, radicalization) will contribute, on the long term, to the stabilization of the Balkans.

A few strategic aspects need to be monitored in the near future, in order to have a better understanding of Serbia's foreign policy:

- The influence of public narratives on threats and the increase in popular distrust about the interests of the great Western powers in the region (a wider attention need to be grants to the Russian-influenced media and to opinion leaders that can be directed from outside Serbia).
- The continuation of the current behavior within the OSCE and the development of the same constructive role in other regional organizations
- The development of better relations with Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, but also the continuation of the constructive dialogue with Croatia and Bosnia – Herzegovina. Within this context, official persons with a inflammatory

⁴ A similar situation was recorded during Turkey's accession negotiations. Within this context, the last-minute change of the EU's approach to Turkey (the re-opening of negotiations on the background of the migrant crisis and the Syrian conflict) proves that morality in international relations is implemented differently by different states and that states can modify the behavior of other states when they can.

rhetoric appealing to the “religious and cultural inheritance” of Serbia must be monitored.

- Concerning relations with the EU, Serbia will continue to strengthen its relations with Germany, as, according to the Belgrade officials, Germany holds the key to Serbian accession in the Union. Serbia will try, as much as possible (without endangering its relation with Russia) to align its policies with the EU.

Overall, any analysis concerning the Serbian foreign policy and its international behavior will need to account for the fact that these are intrinsically connected with the national issue and aim, more or less explicitly, to influence the situation in Kosovo in the advantage and according to the Serbian national interests. On the other hand, the European Union states would have to reconfigure their approach and their interests to Serbia, giving credit to the political will manifested towards democracy. An increased trust by the neighbors and European states will lead to increased trust by the population in political elites.

All of Serbia's foreign policy priorities have to be analyzed in a wider framework which includes cost-benefit analysis and to directly consider national, economic and security interests understood through national identity, cultural and historical legacy, without abusing the nationalist rhetoric.

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