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**Social, Economic and Political Transition of the  
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## IMPACT OF THE EU IN SERBIA' S TRANSITION AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOR IN 2008-2013

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### Abstract

The European Union, like European integration, is the determining factor in the modern development of the Balkan states. In 2013, Western Balkans turned to the rest of the Balkans making European integration both more attractive and more difficult.

Since 2000, the European Union has been shaping the political scene of all the Balkan states, leading the more convenient and profitable players of that time to power. The most interesting and challenging state is the Republic of Serbia.

For a decade, the EU both openly and latently, but quite successfully, solved all the political and social crises that occurred in Serbia. These included a series of conflicts between the Democratic Party and the Democratic Party of Serbia, Zoran Djindjic and Vojislav Kostunica, and later Vojislav Kostunica and Boris Tadic. It also included talks on Kosovo's status. Crises arose constantly. The biggest crises for the political situation in Serbia were the crisis of 2006, the elections of 2008 and elections of 2012. All of these were resolved by EU methods of economic pressure and strong political lobbying; for example, the rise to power in Serbia in 2012 of the famous nationalist Tomislav Nikolic and his rapid political reorientation. There is no doubt that the EU consciously rejected Tadic. There were at least two reasons for that. Firstly, Boris Tadic, in fact, had not kept his promise given to the European Commission to sign an agreement between Belgrade and Pristina. Secondly, the public dissatisfaction with the Democrats was so strong and the results of their ten year rule so poor that even if Tadic had signed the agreement he probably would not have been accepted either by the public or by parliament. The EU made a bet "on the left". This has led Nikolic to victory and to an actual full stop in the Kosovo issue which is believed to be the most acceptable of the currently existing solutions.

Indeed, it is the only possible of all existing solutions, but with a few "buts". The first "but": the Serbs for the thirteen years of their transitions, coupled with excessive pressure, double standards from the global players in general and the EU in particular, have been unable to develop any foreign policy strategy. This is neither as a real activity nor as a legal document. As a result, Serbian diplomacy and the political establishment are constantly rushing from one side to the other, in deadlock moments trying to gather support of Russia or China, but as soon as they feel that there is room for manoeuvre, they make all decisions on their own or in reliance upon the European partners. The complete absence of alternative options is making Serbia an extremely weak player. It gives the opportunity for the European Union and other partners (as well as for Russia, China or Arab countries) to force any decisions, including frankly no-win decisions, upon Serbia. If the

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Serbs were a little wiser, if they held a real policy of strategic cooperation with Russia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, without abandoning a European perspective, they would not have been so controlled. The second “but”: over the decade, the EU has formed a political scene in Serbia and tied its internal development to European processes, resulting in-most of the Serbian diplomats and political leaders constantly being engaged in negotiations in Brussels or Strasbourg. They almost cannot concentrate on the East. The third “but”: the signing of the agreement between Belgrade and Pristina only partially solves the Kosovo problem. Perhaps it may be put aside if the EU quickly improves the financial situation in Serbia which has long been virtually bankrupt. If it does not, it is the Kosovo question which will be the starting point for the escalation of social and ethnic tensions.

Finally, there is a danger that the previously successful EU will not be able to cope with the solution of the national question in the Balkans. In addition to Albanian, there objectively exist Serbian, Bosnian, Macedonian and Hungarian questions. Open support of one ethnic group while ignoring the interests of the others in the history of the region has always led only to new conflicts. The EU should remember this as well as their negative experiences in dealing with the Yugoslav conflicts during the 90s.

**Key words:** political transformation, Serbia, European Union, foreign policy of Serbia, internal politics in Serbia, party transformation.

## INTERNAL POLITICS

The defining characteristic of Serbian political life in the last few years has been the gradual shift from multi-party into a genuinely two-party system.

“The Serbian party system continued to change – to ‘institutionalize’ – along different lines to other post-communist countries. According to traditional thinking, Serbia still did not fulfill the conditions for the ‘institutionalized party system’ because: (i) there was no stability in the sense of more or less equal electoral results for the parties in subsequent elections; (ii) parties were not really embedded in society; (iii) parties had no legitimacy among the elite and citizenry; and (iv) party organizations failed to become more important than the leaders and their coteries”<sup>124</sup>.

The 2008 election campaign vividly illustrated dynamics when Vojislav Kostunica and his Democratic Party of Serbia opted to focus their campaign strategy almost exclusively on opposing Serbia’s Stabilization and Association Agreement which the party felt was a de facto threat to Serbia’s territorial integrity. Public opinion data in the months leading up to a question about the most important issue facing Serbia, “Kosovo” rapidly rose through the ranks of other options to peak at the first place in February when Kosovo declared its independence. Kostunica announced the end of the government and new elections on 8 March. Another round of the survey taken later in March showed the Kosovo issue plummeting past issues such as unemployment and living standards until by May it sat in third place, just ahead of corruption and crime. Kostunica and the

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<sup>124</sup> Teokarevic Jovan (2011) “Ten years of post-Milosevic transition in Serbia: problems and prospects” *The Western Balkans and the EU: the hour of Europe*, Chaillot papers. P.59-80

DSS went on to suffer a major electoral defeat which has called into question the future of both Kostunica and the party. .. Serbs were unwilling to be held hostage by their co-nationals in Kosovo.

As far as for SPS, after it entered the "For a European Serbia" coalition led by the Democratic Party in 2008, many observers expressed surprise and skepticism about the SPS's "spontaneous adaptation" to a modern, European-type social democratic party. An exploration of the party's post-2000 history, however, indicates that this changes...was actually another in a long series of transformation steps which, in this case, received an additional catalyst from the SPS's largely serendipitous position as "kingmaker" following the May 2008 elections<sup>125</sup>.

The death of Slobodan Milosevic on 11 March 2006 offered a potential opportunity to break the deadlock within the party. Following an appropriate outpouring of party emotions to pacify Milosevic supporters, extremists might have capitalized on Milosevic's passing to deal a final blow to his supporters in the party...Soon after Milosevic's funeral, Serbia suffered the double blows of the freezing of its Stabilization and Association negotiations and a victory for the pro-independence option in Montenegro's referendum. After these setbacks a new impetus was given to the long-suffering effort to ratify a new constitution, which in turn resulted in new elections being called for January 2007. With these major events unfolding and elections looming on the horizon, any attempt to radically rearticulate the party's platform would risk alienating the party's critical pro-Milosevic base while failing to attract new voters in sufficient numbers to surpass the government's 5% threshold.

The party's fortune changed once again in 2008. Following another weak showing in the May elections, the SPS nonetheless found itself again in the role of "kingmaker". In retrospect, the SPS emitted a number of signals during the campaign indicating that the party was charting a more substantively pro-European course. One indication was provided by the decision to join in a coalition with the United Serbia led by the highly pragmatic and recent EU convert, Dragan Markovic "Palma". Palma's political center in Jagodina clearly benefitted from the largesse of EU and EU-based donors, and his political stance regarding the "Kosovo or EU" question was neatly summarized by the statement that "patriotism won't put a fuel in your tractor". Other signals included campaign statements which largely avoided questions regarding Kosovo, the ICTY and related issues in favor of a focus on socio-economic messages... Seizing an opportunity to enter government, return to the public eye and stem the party's continuing decline, the SPS took a decisive step towards reconfiguring its policy platform by assertively recasting itself as a "European" social democratic party, joining Serbia's post-election pro-European government and concluding a pact of reconciliation with its old DS rival.

In analyzing the SPS's actions following the elections, it is critical to again note the role played by Western veto players. The SPS's post-2000 weakness has saved it from strong and sustained opposition from the US and various EU actors who focused most of their efforts on containing the

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<sup>125</sup> See for the details: Konitzer Andrew (2013) *Speaking European: Conditionality, Public Attitudes and Pro-European Party Rhetoric in the Western Balkans*. EU Conditionality in the Western Balkans edited by Florian Bieber. Routledge. P.96, 102, 103, 106

significantly stronger SRS. Nonetheless, Western veto actors did weigh in during the 2003 governmental negotiations as it became clear that DSS's Kostunica might consider forming a government with the SPS. This pressure, along with the opposition of other likely coalition government members such as the Serbian Movement for Renewal and G17, probably influenced Kostunica's decision to accept the SPS's support for the minority government without the party's formal participation. In this case, the international community accepted Kostunica's decision as a necessary compromise considering the worst case possibility of an SRS-DSS government. A similar logic came into play in 2008. When faced with the threat of a coalition consisting of SPS, DSS and SRS, and with Milosevic now removed from the equation, US and European actors could give their blessing to a new government including both the pro-European "for European Serbia" and the SPS.

The story of the SRS's post-2000 trajectory provides another example of how a combination of shifts in public attitudes and selective intervention by veto actors can create tensions between party introverts and extroverts; however, in contrast to the other parties, the tensions in this case resulted in party fragmentation and the creation of new, rhetorically pro-EU party led by defecting SRS extroverts.

A vivid example of conflict between party extroverts and party introverts, a major schism occurred within the party in the aftermath of SRS's 2008 electoral "defeat" which resulted in Tomislav Nikolic simultaneously choosing to leave and being expelled from the party. While a well publicized disagreement between party president Vojislav Seselj and Tomislav Nikolic over the decision to hack a vote for the Stabilization and Association Agreement in September 2008 provided the actual catalyst for the split, evidence of disagreements could be found as early as 2000 when Nikolic introduced statement about the EU integration into the party's parliamentary campaign and Nikolic's own presidential elections.

The Serbian media's coverage of tensions among the Radicals was soon overshadowed by the capture and extradition of Radovan Karadzic, the rather feeble street protests led by the SRS and DSS following the arrests, and the Radicals' subsequent obstruction of the new parliament. When deputies returned to the parliament following a several-week recess, however, they were immediately confronted with rapidly spiraling conflict in the SRS. Events leading up to the SAA vote suggested a conscious effort to escalate the internal crisis. During initial debates, SRS hardliners placed curses on Serbian "traitors" like Boris Tadic and all Radicals who were in contact with him... Development reached a crescendo on 4 September when Nikolic's call to vote for an amended version of the Stabilization and Association agreement created a stir within the party and phone call by hardliners to The Hague. The next day, the vote for the SAA failed indicating clearly that members of the SRS rejected Nikolic's order. Shortly after, Nikolic announced his resignation from the party and he was immediately followed by 13 SRS MPs who together formed club

“Napred Srbijo”. Days later, Nikolic announced the creation of the new Serbian Progressive Party<sup>126</sup>.

*Before the abovementioned split within the Serbian Radical Party which took place in autumn 2008, political parties in Serbia could be divided according to several criteria, two of which are more important than the others. First, they could be divided into three camps, with the DS (representing the ‘civic’ option) on one side, the SRS (‘nationalist’ or ‘chauvinistic’) on the other, and the DSS in between as a kind of a ‘national democratic’ option. The two opposing poles in this triad also*

*comprised the traditional divide between the ‘modernizers’ (equal to ‘pro-Europe’) and ‘traditionalists’ (equal to ‘nationalists’). The other divide existed only in Serbia at that time: between the ‘systemic’ and ‘anti-systemic’ parties; the former had a two-thirds majority in parliament (DS, DSS and some smaller parties) and the latter consisted of the SRS and to some degree the SPS – parties of the ‘ancient regime’.*

*When in autumn 2008 the newly-created Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) of Tomislav Nikolic decided to change sides and distance itself from the radicals and draw closer to the DS, the most important phase in the transformation of the party system was finally complete. The pro-European camp was strengthened at the expense of the nationalists, and the ‘anti-systemic’ category lost its previous significance as it was narrowed down to the Radical Party alone. This finally made Serbia comparable to other post-communist countries in the Balkans and Central Europe.*

*During the last three years, on the basis of these changes, two key political actors – DS and SNS – have managed to grow, marginalizing along the way their smaller allies in power and in the opposition, and becoming the undeniable centers of gravity at the two ends of the Serbian political spectrum. Serbian has thus acquired a genuine two-party system. Equally important is the ideological rapprochement of the SNS to the pro-European mainstream, i.e. to its main contender DS. The two parties now occupy the center of the Serbian political spectrum, without any serious competition from other parties, and with the DS formally positioned slightly to the left and the SNS slightly to the right of center<sup>127</sup>.*

For example, the rise to power in Serbia in 2012 of the famous nationalist Tomislav Nikolic and his rapid political reorientation was realized under the patronage of EU. There is no doubt that the EU consciously rejected Tadic. There were at least two reasons for that. Firstly, Boris Tadic, in fact, had not kept his promise given to the European Commission to sign an agreement between Belgrade and Pristina. Secondly, the public dissatisfaction with the Democrats was so strong and the results of their ten year rule so poor that even if Tadic had signed the agreement he probably would not have been accepted either by the public or by parliament. The EU made a bet "on the

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p.104, 106, 107

<sup>127</sup> Teokarevic Jovan (2011) “Ten years of post-Milosevic transition in Serbia: problems and prospects” The Western Balkans and the EU: the hour of Europe, Chaillot papers. P.59-80

left". This has led Nikolic to victory and to an actual full stop in the Kosovo issue which is believed to be the most acceptable of the currently existing solutions.

The policy of the last decade has been a joint attempt with Europe to overcome this pattern. However, without the total commitment of the European Union it always fails. As a result, since the 2000's, the European Union almost openly forms the party-political system in Serbia. A good example was the recent presidential and parliamentary elections in 2012. It is clear that the Kosovo problem is a stumbling block, both for the further development of Serbia and for the reputation of the European Union. Nevertheless, the public mood was so tense that the attempt to solve the problem by Democrats could lead to adverse consequences. Quite naturally the Progressive Party of Tomislav Nikolic came to power and he became president. The main slogan of his campaign was "We do not give up Kosovo". Boris Tadic, despite negligible gap in the votes, also did not require a recount. And the European Union in general congratulated Tomislav Nikolic on his victory even before the official announcement of election results.

It may seem illogical, but it quickly becomes clear that this is a strategically planned step of the European Union. The need for joining the EU is not disputed by anyone in Serbia. It is not disputed by Tomislav Nikolic. His election bid dependent on Russia and its aid has not justified itself. As with any normal state, Russia is implementing its economic interests in the region, deliberately distancing itself from interfering in political issues in Serbia, participation in which, according to the Serbian scenario, de-facto provides confrontation between Russian and the international community. Serbs themselves - and it is revealed later in this article - are pursuing an extremely inconsistent policy, trying to hold their position using emotions rather than trying to build a solid alternative strategy.

In theory it is only the European Union today who can tackle Serbia's economic problems as such, rather than their individual parts. The European Commissioners placed reliance on this and were not mistaken. They not only managed to get Belgrade and Pristina to the negotiating table, but also to achieve the conclusion of the agreement. The reforms, which would normally be carried out by the "right" forces were implemented by "left". Why? The explanation is simple: if such an agreement was signed by a democrat, Boris Tadic, he would suffer the fate of Zoran Djindjic . A radical change in domestic and foreign policy, and as a result, the temporary isolation of Serbia , would be almost inevitable. But now, as of today, Europe has managed a lowering of its rating in the community and Serbia itself - with regular, but not numerous protest rallies. However, this is the current situation. What will happen next in a situation where Kosovo de- facto is given up for nothing is unknown.

However, once he got the power, Tomislav Nikolic, who had been fighting for it for over a decade, turned out to be a very weak president, completely caught in the shadow of his political son and successor Alexander Vucic. How and why did this happen?

Perhaps here, Theophil Pancic's irony is appropriate,



“apparently, Tomislav Nikolic became the new Dragan Markovic Palma. Not formally, but ideologically, which is generally more substantial. Palma, as you will remember is a man of Koncharevo who only late in life realized that “a tractor cannot be started by patriotism” which radically changed his understanding of life. And in fact, it also changed the balance of political forces in Serbia. Maybe Nikolic recently passed by a tractor, decided to see how it actually worked and filled the empty tank with a good share of proven quality 98-degree patriotism, a few excerpts of Vojislav Seselj, ... and tried to start the engine.

He tried once. Then he tried twice. When it did not work for the third time... a smart man from Kragujevac realized that there was something wrong with his view of patriotic fuel as the main engine of society. Thus, in the heart of Tomislav Nikolic there settled a doubt, and doubt is the seed of all apostasy ...”<sup>128</sup>

In short, once in power, Tomislav Nikolic realized that society did not have that Serbian nationalism, which was so well described by V. Seselj and which the president himself hoped to rely on.

Tomislav Nikolic recently often liked to say, "Everything I know about politics I learned from Vojislav Seselj." After a year of his presidency there is a clear sign that he has departed from the legacy of his guru. There was an interesting sketch by one of the well-known analysts Slavisa Orlovic

“the first visit after the election was to Russia, where Nikolic still as the chairman of the Progressive Party took part in the Congress of “United Russia”. But the first visit after his inauguration was to Brussels. Thus, Nikolic had two “first” visits. This is in keeping with his concept of “home with two gates”. The start of his mandate was marked by all kinds of blunders. He said that Vukovar was a Serbian city. He proclaimed that the Montenegrins are Serbs. He announced his intention to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In Russia he promised that Serbia would not join NATO. He said to V. Putin that only he could defeat him in Serbia.... Over time there were fewer blunders ... One of the features of the Nikolic presidency has been giving out a large number of awards and medals. In nine months Nikolic gave 246 of them: 48 orders and 198 medals. Most orders went to the East, especially to the leaders of the states of the former Soviet Union; among them Putin, Lukashenko, Nazarbayev Atambayev and Hugo Chavez received orders. In comparison, Tadic over 8 years of his reign gave only 368 awards in total. During the election campaign he criticized the talks of his predecessors on Kosovo and promised that, if elected, he would personally lead the negotiations, and would not give it to “some bureaucrat”. After the election, he just watched the negotiations from the sidelines. Only once did he arrive in Brussels with Dacic and Vucic. He often sent his advisor Djuric to the talks, although the most influential person in his entourage was Oliver Antic. He surprised everyone by the meeting with the President of Kosovo Atifete Yahyaga, whose name he hadn’t even know before. The last resolution on Kosovo was prepared in his office. He approved the agreement on Kosovo between

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<sup>128</sup> Pancic, Teofil (2012) Greh Tomislava N. ili: o limitima nihilizma. Plavusina dilema. Novi sad: Cenzura p.9

Belgrade and Pristina, although a few days earlier, he said that if there was nothing that the state officials could agree on, then citizens should elect a new president ... In the debates in the UN General Assembly, where he was the only present president, he compared the Hague tribunal with the Inquisition. Now, he is “swearing and apologizing on behalf of Serbia for the crimes committed in Srebrenica” ... In short, he is doing everything of which he accused his predecessor. But with less taste.<sup>129</sup>”

What accounts for this change? First of all, with the coming to power of Tomislav Nikolic it has become apparent, as for every politician, that the struggle for power and the exercise of power in states with poor or unstable operating institutional systems are based on a completely different basis. If the struggle for power is connected, first of all, with the competition of personalities, then its implementation in the non-functioning institutions is connected with the internal political weight, international legitimacy and, in the case of Serbia, with the direct support of the international community. The European Union has demonstrated to Nikolic what happens to those politicians who do not keep their word given to the European partners. Boris Tadic, who was an unequivocally pro-European oriented president, pet and protégé of Western partners, decided not to sign the final documents on Kosovo. He was instantly forgotten despite all his success in the initiation of Serbia to European values.

The second reason, and perhaps more important than the first, is that de-facto there is no political power behind Nikolic. He voluntarily gave it to Alexander Vucic, his “political son”. Today he holds the highest ranking. He is the head of the Progressive Party, Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of Defense, who controls all the security services. Today he has the strongest support of citizens<sup>130</sup>. He, in Orlovic’s opinion is profiting from an unstable political situation and early parliamentary elections, after which he will be able to get the Prime Minister’s chair<sup>131</sup>. Aleksandar Vucic, despite accusations of betraying Serbian national interests, could (including through a variety of public relations moves ) present the agreement on the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina as the success of Serbian diplomacy. Formally the agreement was signed by Ivica Dacic. The Progressive Party, and with it both Vucic and Nikolic came out from the blow: Nikolic through a conscious media non-participation in the negotiation process, Vucic through the propaganda of success in mass media. But the bottom line is it that the head of the country, which urgently needs a strong, decisive, capable of forming a rational relationship with external actors, leader, is a “wedding general” who is terrified by the West and who has de-facto handed the government furrows to his political successor. The leader who was unable even to give up power when the decision was made with which Tomislav Nikolic could not agree. The leader, who, instead of the actual development of economic and political relations with the countries of the region, is paying ceremonial visits to the neighbors with very important, from

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<sup>129</sup> Орловић, Славиша (2013) Ново мешање карата. Политика. 05. фебруар 2013.

<http://www.politika.rs/pogledi/Slavisha-Orlovic/Novo-mesanje-karata.sr.html>

<sup>130</sup> Антонић, Слободан (2013) Вучић као стабилизатор евроентузијазма. Нова српска политичка мисао: 30 April 2013. <http://www.nspm.rs/kolumne-slobodana-antonica/vucic-ka-stabilizator-evroentuzijazma.html>

<sup>131</sup> Орловић, Славиша (2013) Домаћин из Бајчетине. Политика. 07 мај 2013.

<http://www.politika.rs/pogledi/Slavisha-Orlovic/Domacin-iz-Bajcetine.sr.html>

a moral point of view, but useless for the immediate needs of Serbia, historic apologies (see his April visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina and June to Hungary).

Their duet with Alexander Vucic is interesting. Vucic is supported by the Western partners, whereas Tomislav Nikolic reflects traditional Serbian values. Today, it is paying off. Nevertheless, eventually, conflict in such a tandem is inevitable: the values represented in it are too different. Its intensity and negative consequences are almost directly dependent on the game, which Serbia would be able to play on the international scene by that time.

## **FOREIGN POLICY**

As for Serbian foreign policy priorities, four areas were selected: the European Union, Russia, China and the United States. This was stated by President Boris Tadic on the eve of the 2008 presidential campaign<sup>132</sup>. But then this step was simply inevitable in order to win. However, over the next five years, the concept was not developed or transformed. In its contents it is not equal, incomplete and does not give Serbia any room for maneuver.

The Serbia - EU Relationship fundamentally differs from all other identified priorities. As its main foreign policy priorities, Serbia has chosen integration into EU structures, i.e. joining the organization with all the ensuing legal obligations. In addition, the relationship of Serbia - EU involves the so-called “Europeanization of Serbia”, its integration into European standards and formats. Thus, it becomes apparent that this is not a relationship of equal partners.

It is also clear that in a bilateral relationship, whether Russian-Serbian, Serbian-American, or Serbian-Chinese, and no matter how they are perceived by Russian, Chinese and American elites, Serbia and Serbs cannot function in principle in the format of “tutor – student”. The statement about the “four equal pillars” of Serbian foreign policy is rather populist than actually existing.

For example, the United States as an announced key area of Serbian foreign policy. To date, it is strange to speak about it as a crucial moment in international politics for Serbia. Formally Serbia and the United States are in a neutral-positive relationship. Any political cooperation between Serbia and the United States is strongly emotionally charged, both because of memories of the bombing in 1999 and as a result of an uncompromising U.S. position on the issue of Kosovo. Therefore, it is too early to talk about the possibility of deploying a fully-fledged and more determined cooperation between these two countries.

Furthermore, the Russian-Serbian relations, contrary to what some Serbs and Serbian politicians might think, these cannot be independent from the Serbian-EU cooperation vector. Russia deliberately avoids interference in the resolution of political and foreign policy issues which are extremely important for Serbia. It only supports the Serbs, primarily because of its international

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<sup>132</sup> Энтина (Волкова) Екатерина (2011) Еще один путь в Европу: от нерушимой Югославии к неделимой Сербии. Екатеринбург. – 221с.

interests that lie in the legal field, and only in part because of the traditional Balkan patronage<sup>133</sup>. On the foreign policy level, Serbia cannot be a reliable pillar of Russian diplomacy for several reasons: a) it does not carry sufficient weight and b) it follows, above all, the interests of the EU. What's more, modern Serbia is not a partner consistently supporting the position of the Russian Federation in the international arena. A striking example of this was the fact that Serbia did not support the Russian draft of a new Treaty on European security in 2008, though it objectively met the interests of the state. Whenever it comes to a complete dead end, Serbs seek to enlist the support of Russia<sup>134</sup>. When they feel that there is room for maneuver, they prefer to make their own decisions, in accordance with the agreements with European partners. Let us consider the talks on Kosovo from the UN format under the wing of the EU; "Yes, Russia voted for a UN General Assembly resolution of the 9th of September 2010, which had been proposed by countries including Serbia. Following it, the European Union introduced the mechanism of mediation. And then Serbia was alone, without allies and support. Today, as before, we say that we are not going to push Serbia to a particular decision. It is Serbia's own business and the Serbian government's and Serbian people's own business..."<sup>135</sup> The strategic relationship cannot be built on the basis of market conditions, as demonstrated in cooperation between Russia and Serbia. So they can never lead to a real partnership.

In terms of economic cooperation, this area is attractive to Russia because of its markets, real and potential, but Russia's objective here is not in helping development of the Serbian economy, but the implementation of their own economic interests. Most of the allocated credits are targeted and focused on the implementation of joint Russian-Serbian projects.

The Strategic Partnership Agreement between Serbia and Russia, signed in Sochi 24 May 2013<sup>136</sup> cannot be considered something out of the ordinary. Serbia and Russia have many of such agreements. They are pleasant, show friendly relations and good intentions, but are not binding. Moreover, even in Serbia the attitude is ambiguous: "after nearly years of negotiations and after three such documents signed with Italy, China and France, it was the turn of Russia. The only aspect is that this latest agreement was signed at a time when it may be seen in two ways, if not wrong, especially in Berlin ..." <sup>137</sup>

Ironically, Serbian-Chinese relations are more consistent, but also without considering the real interests of Serbia. Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Serbia and the People's Republic of China was signed in 2009. It is known that today China is one of the few countries with monetary surplus. China is ready to invest in the future, with no concerns about security or stability or even about a quick financial return.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid

<sup>134</sup> Web of the President of Russia (2013)

<sup>135</sup> Interview of the Ambassador of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Serbia A.V. Chepurin for "Geopolitics" magazine (2013) Web of the Embassy of Russia in Serbia. <http://www.ambasadarusije.rs/ru/vesti/intervju-avecipurina-zurnalu-geopolitika>

<sup>136</sup> Web of the President of Russia (2013)

<sup>137</sup> НИИ online (2013) 32. Руска романа по европском такту (2013) НИИ online: 23 мај 2013. [www.nin.co.rs/pages/issue.php?id=78763](http://www.nin.co.rs/pages/issue.php?id=78763)

From the late 1970s, China has maintained close relations with Serbia. It did not turn away from its Balkan partner even in times of international isolation in the 1990s. In the past decade, Beijing is one of the most trusted friends, supporting the Serbian leadership position on Kosovo. It was against the bombing of Serbia by NATO forces in 1999, declaring that Western intervention violated international law. Since 2008, the Chinese government has consistently opposed the recognition of Kosovo's independence. It is clear that this position is not an act of demonstration of friendship, but a real concern for the growth of secessionist sentiments within China itself, but in general, it creates a very positive image of China in Serbia.

Regarding economic cooperation, recently we can say that it is gaining momentum. Conventionally, it can be divided into two areas: energy cooperation and reconstruction of transport infrastructure for the trans-European markets.

The Chinese are not only willing to take risk, in contrast to their European counterparts, but also offer more favorable conditions. For example, China Development Bank finances the construction of a coal plant in Stanari in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The project, worth 500 million euros, is carried out by China Dongfang Electric Corporation and costs half of what was previously proposed by competitors, a French company Alstom or Canadian-Polish consortium SNC-Lavalin and Rafako.”<sup>138</sup> All this once again confirms the seriousness of the PRC on the Balkan Peninsula. It is obvious that Serbia today is still a key player, which China relies on.

Serbia is potentially the most capacious and profitable market in the region, which, despite its instability is able to attract a lot of investment. The only difficulty for the Serbs is that, at least for a moment, they have to break away from the endless talks over Kosovo and EU membership and formulate their own strategic vision of investment projects. As one can see there are a lot of suggestions. But they are all basically in the field of infrastructure, i.e. do not give anything for domestic economic development of Serbia. The country leaders must develop an investment strategy. Until this is done, all the partners, including Russia and China, will use Serbia for their own advantage. If Serbs do not define a strategy now, then the train will have left already.

## CONCLUSION

Indeed, it is the only possible of all existing solutions, but with a few “buts”. The first “but”: the Serbs for the thirteen years of their transitions, coupled with excessive pressure, double standards from the global players in general and the EU in particular, have been unable to develop any foreign policy strategy. This is neither as a real activity nor as a legal document. As a result, Serbian diplomacy and the political establishment are constantly rushing from one side to the other, in deadlock moments trying to gather support of Russia or China, but as soon as they feel that there is room for maneuver, they make all decisions on their own or in reliance upon the European partners. The complete absence of alternative options is making Serbia an extremely weak player. It gives the opportunity for the European Union and other partners (as well as for Russia, China or

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<sup>138</sup> Poulain, Loic (2011) China's new Balkan Strategy. Central Europe Watch. Center for strategic and international studies. Washington. Vol.1, Number 2, August 2011

Arab countries) to force any decisions, including frankly no-win decisions, upon Serbia. If the Serbs were a little wiser, if they held a real policy of strategic cooperation with Russia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, without abandoning a European perspective, they would not have been so controlled. The second “but”: over the decade, the EU has formed a political scene in Serbia and tied its internal development to European processes, resulting in-most of the Serbian diplomats and political leaders constantly being engaged in negotiations in Brussels or Strasbourg. They almost cannot concentrate on the East. The third “but”: the signing of the agreement between Belgrade and Pristina only partially solves the Kosovo problem. Perhaps it may be put aside if the EU quickly improves the financial situation in Serbia which has long been virtually bankrupt. If it does not, it is the Kosovo question which will be the starting point for the escalation of social and ethnic tensions.

Finally, there is a danger that the previously successful EU will not be able to cope with the solution of the national question in the Balkans. In addition to Albanian, there objectively exist Serbian, Bosnian, Macedonian and Hungarian questions. Open support of one ethnic group while ignoring the interests of the others in the history of the region has always led only to new conflicts. The EU should remember this as well as their negative experiences in dealing with the Yugoslav conflicts during the 90s.

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