

# **PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF SERBIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDST OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE**



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The data presented in the report derive from the Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB) survey. WBSB is a new regional initiative launched by KCSS in 2020, implemented in cooperation with the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) in Serbia and Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance (CSDG) in Albania, supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). WBSB serves as an instrument to measure public perceptions in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia on different security-related issues. The findings demonstrate how citizens perceive or are informed about the issues presented in this report. As such, the views presented in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the KCSS, BCSP, CSDG or NED.

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# **PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF SERBIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDST OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE**

December 2022

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The war in Ukraine did not significantly affect the perception of the Serbian public regarding the major issues of Serbian foreign and security policy. In this context, this relates to how Serbian citizens think about the influence of great powers in their country and how the public perceives its relations with Russia and Western security institutions, the EU and NATO. The public opinion surveys also showed that the issue of Kosovo is still being perceived as a major foreign policy priority.

There is a powerful cynicism in how the Serbian public views great power influences, as most respondents believe that external great powers bribe Serbian politicians and moguls to further their interests in the country. Russia and China are perceived as close foreign policy partners of Serbia, putting them in clear advantage over those who favour the EU on that front. The respondents also believed that Russia and China are sincere friends of Serbia and not players guided by their self-interest. As opposed to the study conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) in 2020, which noted that Serbs perceived Chinese influence in the country as more positive than Russian influence, the latest survey shows that those who believe Russian influence in Serbia is positive have a slight edge over those who believe the same about Chinese influence. This is most likely the result of the fact that China has not been in the spotlight in recent months.

As opposed to Russia and China, the EU is being cynically perceived as a self-interested actor. On that same front, there are more of those who perceive the EU's policies towards Serbia as hostile than those who perceive these policies as friendly. When it comes to perceptions of the US, the spectrum is dominated by those who perceive the US as a self-interested power and those who perceive it as an enemy of Serbia. The public also treats the issue of foreign direct investments (FDI) as important for the country's foreign policy. However, the FDI are more likely to be considered highly important among those who favour the EU membership than among those who oppose the membership.

Despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the public opinion survey demonstrates that Russia is still a major vector in Serbian foreign policy. Extremely positive perception of Russia is a product of recent Serbian history but also of the radical pro-Russian narrative that was pushed for years in the pro-government media and tabloids. Serbian public largely subscribes to the Russian point of view on the Ukraine war, with the majority blaming NATO and the US for its outbreak. The majority of the Serbian public is against introducing sanctions against Russia, with the majority doing so on the ground that Serbia experienced sanctions in the 1990s. This fact demonstrates that Serbian perceptions of Russia are frequently based on historical experiences from the 1990s.

Still, despite sympathies towards the Russian side in the ongoing war, the Serbian public is also showing a balanced take on some other issues, proving how deep the Serbian balancing act is embedded with the Serbian public. Most of the population believes that Serbia needs to maintain neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine war. In the same spirit, most respondents did not think there would be winners in the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine since everybody would be at a loss. Similarly, the majority was willing to accept both Russians and Ukrainians fleeing the war, although the same welcoming stance was not displayed regarding the Russian deserters. Russia is still being perceived as the country's

greatest friend and most important foreign policy partner. Some Serbian perceptions of Russia are unrealistic, as demonstrated by the fact that the majority believes that Russia will be the dominant power in the XXI century, not China or the US.

In regards to the EU, the polls showed that although war generated hope among some in the Western Balkans that the new geopolitical crisis would give stronger impetus to the EU enlargement, that did not impact the perception of the EU in the Serbian public. Serbian citizens remain divided over the country's possible membership in the EU. The survey also identified two clear trends. The first is the evident decline in support for EU integrations since the incumbent Serbian government came to power in 2012. The second trend is a rise in Euroscepticism and of the opponents of European integrations due to anti-EU messaging in the pro-government media and tabloids, particularly in the past five years. The polls clearly suggest a strong disappointment with the past twenty years of political transition, which is particularly acute among older generations that do not believe that the EU will ever accept Serbia as a member. Among the younger generations, the prevailing mood is that the EU will accept Serbia as a member, but not in the near future.

Regarding NATO, security cooperation between Serbia and NATO is highly advanced, particularly regarding security crises in the north of Kosovo. Serbian officials frequently refer to NATO's mission in Kosovo (KFOR) as a stabilising force. While it does not aspire to become a member, Serbia is a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme, exercising within this programme Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), the highest level of cooperation between NATO and non-member states.<sup>1</sup> However, the Serbian public continues to view NATO negatively. Most respondents view NATO as the enemy and a self-interest geopolitical player. In the surveys, those who are against NATO membership for Serbia and in favour of neutrality are a powerful majority.

In public, there is also a mood that Serbia, on security and military matters, should cooperate with Russia and China more than it does with NATO. The public is also sharply against any cooperation with NATO, while those in favour of cooperation with NATO are in favour as long as Serbia maintains its neutral status. The war in Ukraine additionally worsened Serbia's perception of NATO, which continues to be burdened with the legacy of the 1999 Kosovo war. The surveys established the sharp divide as those who watch pro-government media are against NATO membership, while those in favour of membership are more likely to watch opposition media.

The survey also established that the issue of Kosovo continues to dominate the foreign policy agenda for the Serbian public, as the majority of respondents view the issue as very important for the country's foreign policy. What was striking was the salience of the Kosovo issue for the younger generations in Serbia. The research also established that those who view Kosovo as important are more likely to oppose EU membership for Serbia. Most of those favouring EU membership also view Kosovo as important.

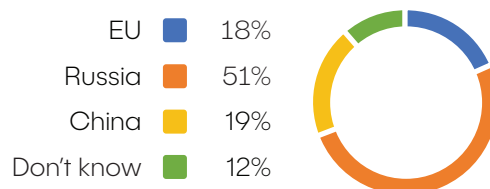
There are also nuances, as those who emphasise Kosovo are more likely to blame Ukraine and the West for the outbreak of the Ukraine war. This fact shows how the legacy of the 1999 war continues to shape the Serbian public's perception of contemporary affairs. Those who do not consider Kosovo a priority for Serbian foreign policy are more likely to blame Russia for the war and be more likely to favour Serbia introducing sanctions against Russia. However, for those who are against the sanctions, Kosovo is less of a factor in shaping their preferences than the fact that Serbia experienced sanctions in the 1990s and the perception of Russia as Serbia's greatest friend.

# VIEWS ON GREAT POWERS

Almost 70% of citizens believe foreign powers are bribing politicians and moguls in Serbia to realise their interests. That percentage is even more pronounced among citizens between the ages of 30 and 50, among whom as much as 80% believe that foreign powers are buying the support for their benefits. In contrast, half the oldest citizens think this is the case. That is why the perception of the role of the great powers in Serbia and the priority that citizens give to foreign policy partnerships is extremely important.

Half of the Serbian citizens see Russia as Serbia's closest foreign policy ally. In particular, the oldest and the youngest parts of the population stand out, as over half of them see Moscow as a primary partner. At the same time, this number is slightly lower among the middle-aged generations. Next in line is China, with a slight edge over the EU. China is the most visible foreign policy ally precisely for the population between the ages of 30 and 60, while the oldest and especially the youngest citizens do not perceive it in that capacity. The European Union comes only third on this list, although it is by far the most noticeable among young people, one-quarter of whom see it as the key partner, and the least visible among the oldest citizens. Also, less than a fifth of Serbian citizens considers membership in the European Union as a very important foreign policy priority of Serbia, while slightly less than a half believe that this issue is mostly or somewhat important. Women, the young, and the highly educated give greater importance to European integration. The importance of European integration is greatest for the citizens of western and central, as well as southeastern Serbia, while the citizens of Belgrade and Vojvodina attach much less importance to this topic. Among other potential priorities citizens were asked about were: the Kosovo dispute, attracting foreign direct investments (FDI), trade in arms and military equipment, strengthening cooperation with neighbours and Serbia's regional position, protecting Serbs in the region, strengthening cooperation with individual great powers (the US, Russia and China).

**GRAPH 1** THE CLOSEST FOREIGN POLICY PARTNER OF SERBIA

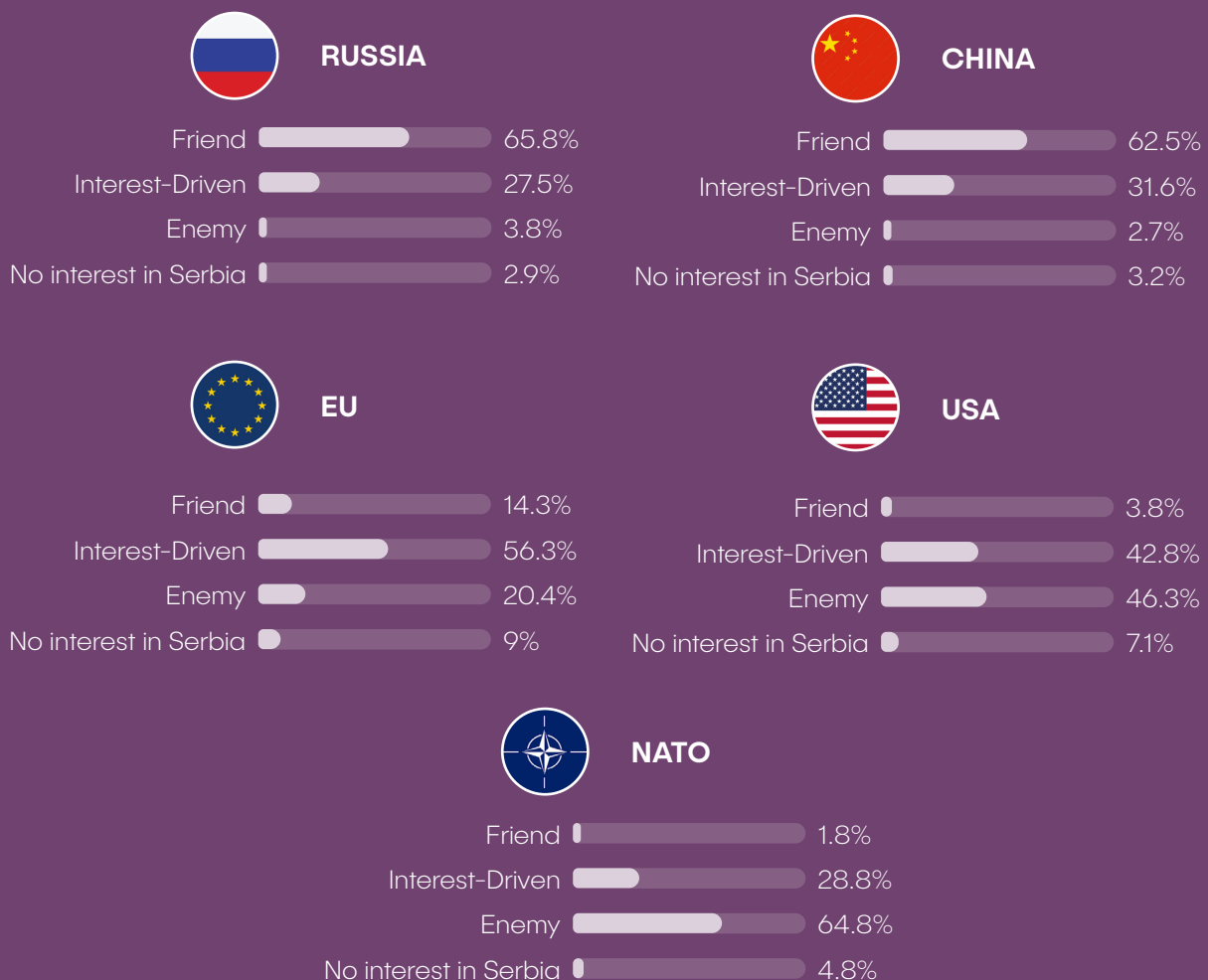


The emotional aspect is particularly important for analysing citizens' perception of foreign policy actors. There is a clear division in how citizens understand the great powers' motivation for their policy towards Serbia. Almost two-thirds of citizens see Russia and China as sincere friends of Serbia. The remaining third believes that the two Eastern powers are primarily guided by their interests in their treatment of Serbia, while the number of those who see them as enemies is very small. Although there is continuity

in the friendly perception towards Russia and China, there has been a certain shift in attitudes regarding the gradation between these two countries in the last two years. Namely, the public opinion survey conducted by the BCSP in 2020 showed that citizens saw China's influence more positively than Russia's influence on Serbia <sup>2</sup>, while now Russia has a slight edge. This change can be explained by the fact that China was not in public's spotlight recently, suppressing the topics on which China raised its popularity, such as large direct investments and aid during the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, more than half of the citizens perceive the European Union as an actor primarily guided by its own interests in its policy towards Serbia. Among the remaining citizens, a few more perceive Brussels' policy towards Belgrade as hostile (20%) than friendly (14%). This attitude may indicate that most citizens who support Serbia's membership in the EU primarily see the benefits of membership and are not excessively Euro-enthusiastic. Namely, among the majority who see the EU as an interest-driven actor towards Serbia, more than half highlight the issue of membership as a somewhat or rather important foreign policy priority. At the same time, only 12% perceive this issue as a key priority of Serbian foreign policy. Finally, concerning the US, citizens are divided between those who see Washington as a self-interested actor (43%) and a narrow majority who see the US as Serbia's enemy (46%), while the number of those who perceive it as a friend is negligible.

**GRAPH 2** ATTITUDE TOWARDS SERBIA





Attracting foreign investments is seen as an important foreign policy priority by about 70% of citizens across all age categories. That percentage is slightly higher among young people between the ages of 18 and 29 and somewhat lower among citizens between the ages of 40 and 49. As expected, citizens of the poorer regions of southeastern Serbia attach more importance to this issue than citizens of Belgrade, but also central and western Serbia. However, it is surprising that foreign investments are more the focus of citizens with higher incomes, with most of those who emphasise the importance of foreign investments falling into the category of citizens with the highest incomes. Also, the data show that citizens who would vote for Serbia's accession to the European Union see the importance of foreign investments as more important (80%) than those who oppose the EU accession (50%).

# RUSSIA – BIG BROTHER EVEN IN TIME OF WAR

Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not shake Moscow's standing in Serbian public opinion, showing disappointment with the West and the pro-Russian narrative pushed for the past eight years by the pro-government media and tabloids that have powerfully shaped the public's perceptions including in the context of the ongoing war. As a result, Russia remains an important vector in Serbian foreign policy.

A couple of days before the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić stated: "Some eighty-five per cent of people will always side with Russia whatever may happen. These are the facts I am faced with as the country's president." <sup>4</sup> The statement omits that the pro-government media generated such enormous popularity for Russia in the country. Since 2014, the pro-Russian narrative has been distributed so that the local elites can profit from Russia's popularity in Serbia and deter the West from criticising democratic backsliding in the country. <sup>5</sup> The pro-government tabloids followed the same course in their coverage of the Ukraine war. Two days before the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 22 February 2022, the front pages of the pro-government tabloid *Informer* contained the main headline that read "Ukraine attacked Russia", while another headline in the same tabloid edition stated that "America is pushing the world into chaos". Later on, some content in the pro-government tabloids knew to take a more balanced tone, but a generally pro-Russian focus remained. <sup>6</sup>

As a result of this approach, Russia's popularity in Serbia is so high that no government can pursue a policy that goes against Russia's interest without attracting significant hostility from the electorate. According to the surveys, 55% of respondents do not believe there is a viable alternative to EU membership for Serbia, as opposed to 21.6% who do and 23.4% who do not have an answer to the question. Among those who believe in the alternative, 47% believe cooperation with Russia is the alternative to the EU. Among the citizens who fall under the category of those of age 65+, 61.2% believe that Russia is the alternative to the EU. The inclination of this grouping can be potentially explained by the predisposition of the senior population to be more conservative and also by the fact that this generation is disappointed, having vivid memories of both the 1990s and the failures of the post-Milosevic transition.

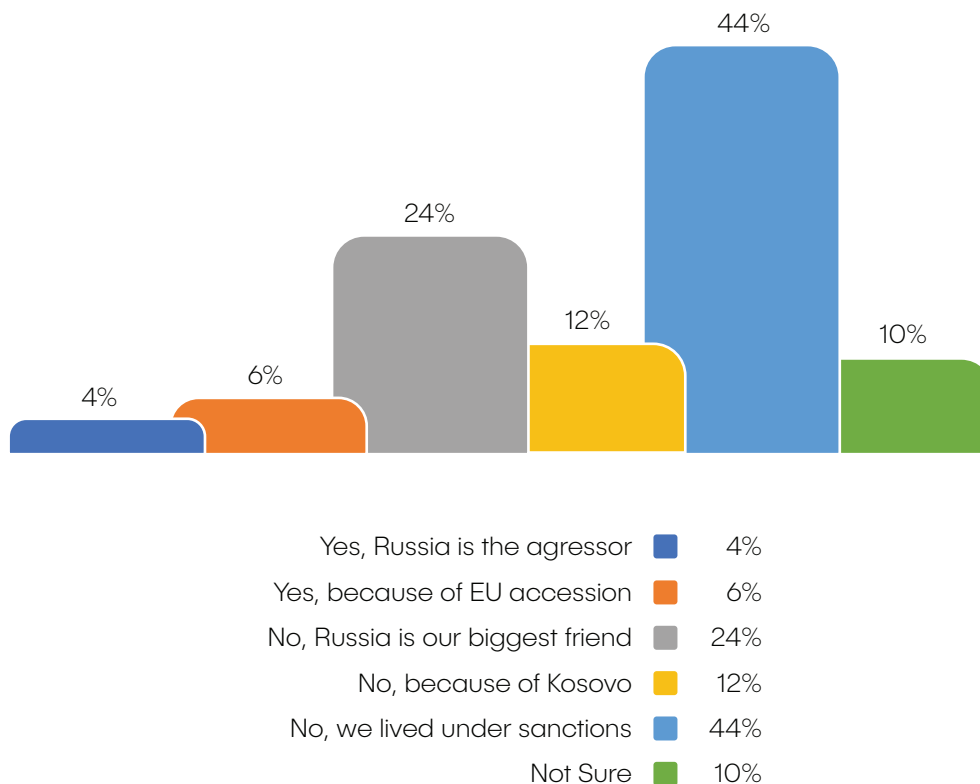
What is worrisome is that among the people between the ages of 18 and 29, 42% share this view. That generation has no or very few memories of the 1990s. They experienced disappointment with the transition and were heavily exposed to pro-Russian content in the media domain. The level of education also shapes preferences. Those with elementary education are more likely to see cooperation with Russia as an alternative to the EU than a university education. The latter group is more likely to be cognizant that Serbia's ties with the EU are more substantive than those with Russia, and they are more likely to be involved in a profession that is more exposed to the EU factor.

The countryside is more open to seeing ties with Russia as the alternative to the EU than those in urban communities, which more conservative leanings of the countryside can easily explain. In this group, the majority are unemployed and are not on in search of a new job, like those receiving pensions or housewives. Their stance can partly

be explained by the fact that these people do not perceive the EU as important for economic well-being.

The pro-Russian sentiments are also shaping Serbian perception of the Ukraine war. Only 11.8% of Serbs believe that Russia is responsible for the war, as opposed to 31.6% who claim it is NATO and 29.2% who believe it is the US. Among those who blame NATO, the majority fall in the age group between 50 and 65 years or 65 years and above. These generations are those who remember the 1990s and the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia by NATO. This fact gives additional strength to the fact that Russia is popular because of the society's emotional frustration with the West. On that same note, 44.1% of citizens are against the sanctions because Serbia experienced them in the 1990s, 24.3% because Russia is considered Serbia's greatest friend, and 11.8% because of the issue of Kosovo. Various age categories back this sentiment. The lowest level of support for this proposition is among a group aged between 18 and 29 years old with little or no memory of the 1990s. The support for this perspective is greater among the older groups who have memories of that period. These results show how deeply this emotion is ingrained in society. The big paradox is that the justification of the 1990s does not prevent the Serbian government from introducing sanctions against other countries, including Russia's ally Belarus, where Belgrade aligned with the EU's sanctions over Minsk's involvement in the invasion of Ukraine. <sup>7</sup>

**GRAPH 3** SHOULD SERBIA INTRODUCE SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA



The public opinion poll also demonstrated that the Serbian balancing act between Russia and the West is deeply ingrained in Serbian public opinion. Among the respondents, 45.5% believe Serbia should be neutral in the Ukraine war. When asked

about the potential winners, 48.6% believed there would be no winners since everybody would lose, and 39.9% thought Russia would win the war. Most of the population, 52.2%, is willing to accept both Ukrainians and Russians forced to flee their countries due to war. As opposed to that, 26.1% of the population is not accepting of either Russians or Ukrainians.

In contrast, the public is much more divided on whether they would accept Russian deserters, as 40.8% would accept them, 41.5% would not, and 17.7% simply do not know. Highly educated citizens of Belgrade are more likely to accept Russian deserters. This can be explained by the fact that even during the 1990s, Belgrade was known for a more liberal and pacifist outlook. In general, the educated in urban communities in any country are usually against the policies of draft and mobilisation. Serbia's relations with Russia will survive, but they are already much less substantive due to Western pressures. A strong example of this was a June 2022 episode when Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had to cancel a planned visit to Belgrade because the European air space was closed for Russian airliners.<sup>8</sup>

However, despite these objective constraints, the public still expects the relationship with Russia to be important, thus ensuring that the Serbian government will maintain this relationship primarily to avoid alienating these potential voters. The issue of Kosovo will also keep Russia relevant both for Serbian public opinion and for the country's foreign policy. In the survey, 45.4% of Serbs believe that the issue of Kosovo should be a priority in Serbian foreign policy, and they consider the issue to be "very important". At the same time, 52.3% of respondents do not think that Serbia should recognise Kosovo. The salience of Kosovo in Serbian domestic politics and public opinion makes Russia a necessity for the Serbian foreign policy elite.<sup>9</sup>

When asked about the country's greatest friend, 65.8% considered Russia a friend of Serbia, and 27.5% thought that Russia was only looking after its interests, not after Serbia. People aged 65 and above were strongly convinced that Russia is a friend of Serbia, showing not just the already noted conservatism associated with Russia among the elderly population but also the staying power of Russia in the public domain. Namely, Serbia is an ageing society which means that the elderly population will be an important voting bloc that politicians need to win over if they were to stay in power. Those in other ageing groups, like those aged between 30 and 39, and those aged between 40 and 49, take a much more cautious approach as they are more likely to believe that Russia looks after its interests. However, the fact that there those who believe that Russia is not acting out of its self-interest are in such high numbers demonstrates that the radical pro-Russian narrative has also instilled a sense of naivety in the Serbian public on the nature of Serbo-Russian ties.

When asked about ranking cooperation with great powers, 39.2% consider cooperation with Russia very important. Again, this category was dominated by respondents aged 65 and above. The same is true when the respondents were asked who Serbia's most important foreign policy partner is. The dominant answer was Russia, with 50.5% expressing such a view.

Russian standing in Serbian public opinion 45.1% of people believe that Russia will be the dominant power in the XXI century. Despite the fact that Sino-American rivalry will determine the dominant power in the XXI century, and despite Russian mixed

performance so far in the Ukraine war, the majority still believed that Russia would be the dominant power in the XXI century. The public's answer to this question shows in a very powerful way how the radical pro-Russian narrative generated an unrealistic perception of Russia and its capabilities in Serbia.

What guarantees the further staying power of pro-Russian sentiments in Serbian public opinion is that there is an overlap between people who expressed pro-Russian attitudes with those people who get their information from pro-government TV stations and those who fully support the policies of the incumbent President Aleksandar Vučić. On almost all the questions where there is sympathy towards Russia and its perspective on the war in Ukraine, the population lists TV as the most trusted source of information. For this category, the most frequently mentioned TV channel is the national broadcaster, RTS and occasionally powerful private pro-government network TV Pink, showing the main source of the pro-Russian narrative.

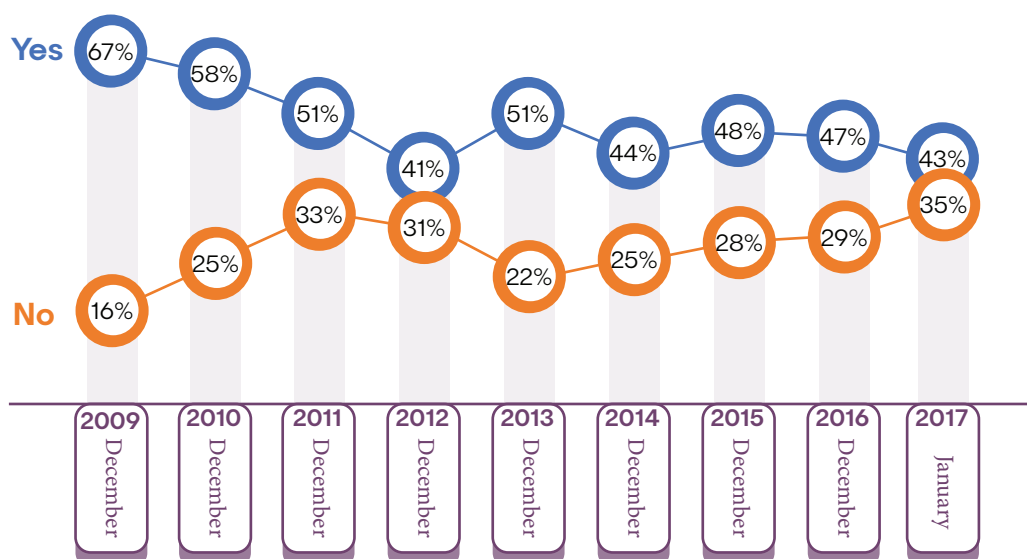
What is interesting is that while the majority of the population cites the experience of the 1990s as the main reason for the refusal to introduce sanctions against Russia, for those who get their information from the RTS, the issue of Kosovo and friendship with Russia play a bigger role for this group. It also needs to be underscored that those who identified themselves as full supporters of Aleksandar Vučić's policies are more likely to perceive cooperation with Russia as the alternative to the EU. More curious is that within this group, there are even more those who perceive cooperation with China as the alternative to the EU. This can partly be explained by the fact that the pro-Chinese rhetoric has increased in recent years by Aleksandar Vučić and his associates.

# EUROPEAN DREAM SLIPPING AWAY

After Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the enlargement of the European Union to neighbouring countries became a topic again. The EU's geostrategic enlargement to Ukraine and Moldova amid the war caused different reactions among the leaders and the population of the Western Balkans. Most Western Balkan countries saw the new geopolitical crisis as an opportunity to gain candidate status, open negotiations or speed up European integration. At the same time, Balkan politicians and citizens were frustrated that Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status before Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Albanian, North Macedonian and Serbian politicians were deeply frustrated by the deadlock in accession process.<sup>10</sup> However, this did not affect the change in the attitudes of Serbian citizens towards the country's membership in the European Union. Serbian citizens remain divided (46%:46%) over the country's possible membership in the EU.

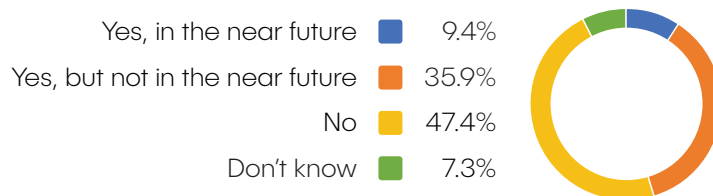
If the current level of support for EU membership is compared with earlier research conducted by Serbian Government's Office for European Integration, two trends can be observed. First, there is an evident decline in support for Serbia's accession to the EU since 2009, when Serbia got a visa-free regime. Despite the oscillations, support for Serbia's accession to the EU essentially continued to fall after the regime change in 2012. Nevertheless, the level of support to EU membership is stable. What is different is that the percentage of Eurosceptics and opponents has increased in the last five years thanks to the strong anti-EU campaign that the government is conducting through the pro-regime media. Despite growing Euroscepticism, polls conducted by the Ministry of European Integration from December 2017 to August 2021 showed that the public support for EU membership ranged between 52 and 57 percent.

**GRAPH 4** HOW WOULD YOU VOTE IN A REFERENDUM ON EU MEMBERSHIP?



The staunchest supporters of the EU membership are the population under the age of 50, especially young people, while those above 50 oppose EU integration. There is a gender difference as a higher percentage of men (49.2%) than women (42.6%) oppose country's membership in the EU. Furthermore, the population living in Belgrade, as well as in Vojvodina, is the most opposed to the EU membership, while the population of southeastern and central Serbia stands out in support of the EU. Those citizens with elementary education and incomes of up to 450 euros are the biggest opponents, while highly educated citizens with revenues of more than 800 euros provide the greatest support for Serbia's accession to the EU.

**GRAPH 5** DO YOU THINK THAT THE EU IS WILLING TO ACCEPT SERBIA AS A MEMBER STATE? (%)



The biggest disappointment in the EU is among the residents of Belgrade, as well as among the population over 50 years old and those with lower incomes. These categories of citizens think that the European Union is not ready to accept Serbia as a member state. On contrary, younger generations, especially the highly educated and those with higher incomes, are more optimistic and think that the Union is ready to accept Serbia as a member, but not in the near future. The citizens of central and western Serbia share this opinion. Considering the population behind the numbers, it can be concluded that in the long term, investment in independent media, education and an economic model that reduces the gap between rich and poor, as well as urban and rural areas, can generate greater support for the country's membership in the EU.

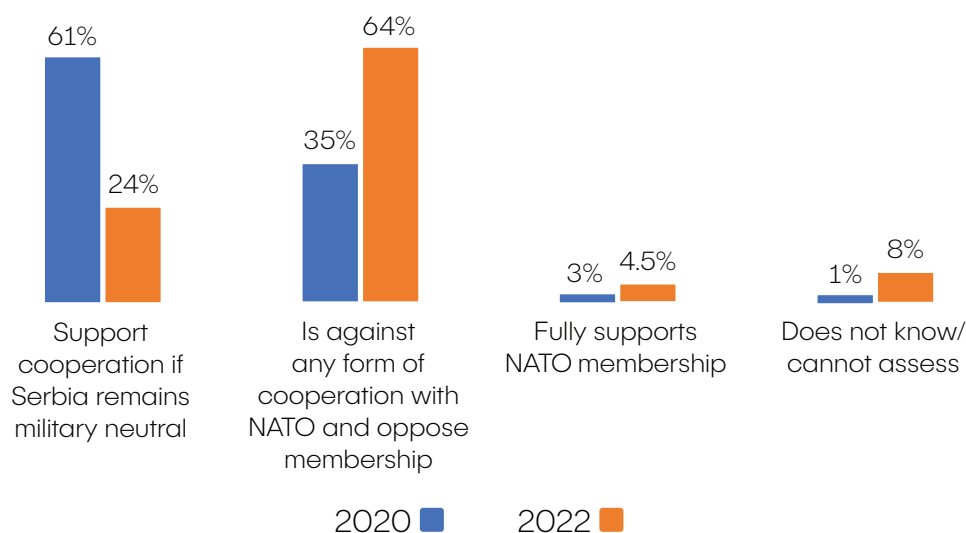
The prevailing belief is that Serbia is not yet a member of the EU because of the Kosovo issue (43.8%) and unresolved bilateral disputes (12.2%), as well as the EU's unwillingness to enlarge (16.5%). Only 13.1% think that poor state of democracy, corruption and lack of reforms prevent Serbia from becoming a member of the EU. Citizens' perception of this issue represent an echo of dominant political narratives transmitted through pro-government media. Those who identified themselves as supporters of Aleksandar Vučić's policies and watch pro-government media (RTS and TV Pink) are more likely to think that Serbia is not a member of the EU because of Kosovo and the EU's unwillingness to enlarge, as well as bilateral disputes. Among the minority who believe that the current state of democracy and the rule of law hinders Serbia's path to the EU, a relative majority opposes the Serbian president's policies and one-third watches independent TV stations and reads opposition newspapers. Bearing this in mind, it can be concluded that ardent opponents and advocates of the EU membership are essentially for or against the the Serbian president's policies.

# SERBIA'S ETERNAL ENEMY

Serbia has productive political-military relations with NATO, yet this is not visible to the Serbian public. The good relations and communication between the Serbian government, the defence sector, and NATO came to the fore, especially during various crises in the north of Kosovo. Serbian officials frequently refer to NATO's peacekeeping mission in Kosovo as the strongest guarantor of the security of the Serbs in Kosovo. However, the Serbian public continues to view NATO negatively. Almost two-thirds of respondents (65%) view NATO as Serbia's enemy, while slightly less than one-third (29%) think that the Alliance is a self-interest geopolitical player.

Serbia's membership in NATO is not a subject of political debate because the overwhelming majority (84%) is against it. For this reason, the vast majority of Serbian citizens (70%) think that Serbia should remain military neutral, while more than one-fifth (22%) believe that the country should cooperate more with Russia and China on security and military matters. When asked what kind of relations Serbia should have with NATO, more than two-thirds confirmed that they oppose any cooperation with NATO. The percentage of those who oppose cooperation with NATO has almost doubled in the last two years. In contrast, those in favour of cooperation with NATO are in favour as long as Serbia maintains neutral status.

**GRAPH 6** WHAT KIND OF RELATIONS SHOULD SERBIA HAVE WITH NATO?



The war in Ukraine has only added to the strong anti-NATO sentiments and rhetoric, inhibiting impartial and independent public discussion. The media landscape largely shapes the discourse on NATO and, at the same time, public opinion because the fiercest opponents of NATO membership watch the national broadcaster RTS, while those who are in favour of NATO membership trust more independent media, such as TV N1. Interestingly, citizens with incomes higher than the national average (450–800 euros and above 800 euros) are the biggest opponents of Serbia joining NATO.



# KOSOVO'S STATUS AS THE FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITY

Three-quarters of Serbian citizens consider the fight for Kosovo to be an important or very important priority of Serbia's foreign policy. Among those who emphasise this issue as very important, the youngest respondents, between 18 and 29 years of age, and respondents older than 65 stand out. The fact that the younger generations give this level of importance to the issue of Kosovo shows that they matured and became politically socialised in an era when Kosovo dominated the domestic and international agenda in Serbia since it unilaterally declared independence in 2008. Also, the results of the survey show that this issue is more important to the citizens of southeastern Serbia and Vojvodina and somewhat less to the citizens of Belgrade, while citizens of western and central Serbia showed the least interest in this topic. The above-average interest of the citizens from Vojvodina in the issue of Kosovo can be interpreted as a reaction to the correlation they see between this topic and the issue of the status of Vojvodina within Serbia. Citizens who believe that the Kosovo issue is an important priority of Serbian foreign policy mostly do not support Serbia's membership in the EU, and two-thirds of those who support membership still consider the Kosovo issue an important priority.

The overwhelming majority of citizens who emphasise the importance of Kosovo's status see the West or Kyiv as the culprits of the war in Ukraine, which can be explained by the strong anti-NATO attitudes that are clearly associated with the 1999 bombing and the consequences that the war left on the Kosovo issue. However, only one-third of citizens who do not see the fight for Kosovo among the key priorities of Serbia's foreign policy point to Russia as the main culprit for the conflict in Ukraine. For two-thirds of citizens who believe that Serbia should side with Ukraine in the conflict due to European integration, the issue of Kosovo is not an important priority. Also, a clear majority of citizens to whom the issue of Kosovo is not highly important believe that Serbia should impose sanctions on Russia. On the other hand, among the citizens who classify Kosovo as a key priority, there are more people who oppose sanctions against Russia because it is a friend of Serbia than because of the support that Russia provides to Serbia on the issue of Kosovo, although this is also an important argument for not imposing sanctions on Moscow.

# ABOUT SURVEY

Belgrade Center for Security Policy conducted public opinion survey in the period from October 3 to 17, 2022, as part of the Western Balkans Security Barometer project led by Kosovar Centre for Security Studies with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy. The survey is conducted on a sample of 1,020 citizens of Serbia.

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