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Article

The Evolution of Serbian Foreign Policy under Vucic: Navigating between the European Union and Russia

Abstract: *This comprehensive analysis delves into the evolution of Serbian foreign policy under the leadership of Aleksandar Vucic, elucidating the nation's endeavours to navigate the complex interplay of interests and alignments that define its relationships with both the European Union and Russia. The study examines the historical context, Vucic's rise to power, Serbia's interactions with the EU and Russia, and the challenges and opportunities associated with the nation's balancing act. It highlights the pragmatic, adaptive, and strategically autonomous approach to international relations that has characterized Vucic's foreign policy legacy, while also considering potential trajectories for Serbia's foreign policy in the post-Vucic era. In conclusion, the study offers recommendations for future research on Serbian foreign policy and international relations, emphasizing the need to explore the various factors that may influence the nation's future alignment with the EU or Russia, as well as the domestic political dynamics, regional geopolitics, economic imperatives, and security concerns that may impinge upon Serbia's strategic calculus.*

Keywords: *balancing act; European Union; foreign policy; Russia; Serbia*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background on Serbian foreign policy in the post-2012 period

The intricacies of Serbian foreign policy in the post-2012 era, replete with intricate diplomatic machinations, necessitate a profound examination of the *modus operandi* employed by the nation's ruling elite, predominantly under the aegis of President Aleksandar Vucic. The elucidation of this phenomenon is vital for comprehending the labyrinthine geopolitical landscape that has emerged in the Balkans since the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. This period, characterized by a subtle yet intricate balancing act between the European Union and Russia, has engendered a unique trajectory for the Serbian state in the broader international arena. In the post-2012 epoch, Serbian foreign

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policy has pivoted around the central theme of European integration, concomitantly striving to maintain robust bilateral ties with the Russian Federation, notwithstanding the often contradictory nature of these dual objectives. The rationale for this approach emanates from a complex melange of historical, cultural, and strategic factors that have engendered a foreign policy oscillating between these two poles of influence.

The geopolitical ramifications of Serbia's strategic orientation in this period have reverberated far beyond its immediate environs, with the nation emerging as a focal point in the broader contestation between the European Union and Russia for supremacy in the Balkans. This evolving dynamic has imbued Serbia's foreign policy with a significance that belies the relatively diminutive size and economic prowess of the nation, rendering an analysis of its trajectory all the more compelling. Additionally, the study of Serbian foreign policy in the post-2012 era, and its adept navigation of the complexities inherent in its strategic position, serves as a valuable heuristic tool for understanding the broader trends that have come to define the evolving post-Cold War order (Ponomareva, 2020; Simic, 2013; Vucic, 2020). These trends include the growing multipolarity of the international system, the resurgence of nationalist sentiment, and the increasing salience of regional powers in shaping the global geopolitical landscape.

This article seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of Serbian foreign policy under Vucic, examining the myriad factors that have informed its unique trajectory and elucidating the complex interplay between the European Union and Russia in shaping its course. In so doing, it aims to contribute to the broader scholarly discourse on the dynamics of contemporary international relations, while offering valuable insights into the future prospects for Serbia's foreign policy orientation.

1.2 Importance of understanding the nuances of Serbia's foreign policy

The importance of understanding the nuances of Serbia's foreign policy transcends the regional context, providing valuable insights into the larger realm of international relations, particularly as it pertains to the complex interplay between various actors in a multipolar world. A comprehensive analysis of Serbia's unique balancing act elucidates the myriad ways in which small and medium-sized states navigate the intricacies of global politics, while simultaneously pursuing their national interests in an increasingly interconnected and competitive international system.

In the context of the European Union's enlargement policy and the broader geopolitical contestation between the EU and Russia, Serbia's foreign policy approach offers an intriguing case study of a nation striving to maintain equidistance from both poles of influence. This delicate diplomatic tightrope walk illuminates the challenges faced by states situated at the nexus of competing regional and global aspirations, as well as the strategies they employ to safeguard their sovereignty and national interests in a volatile geopolitical environment.

Furthermore, a nuanced understanding of Serbia's foreign policy contributes to the broader discourse on the impact of historical and cultural factors in shaping the strategic orientations of states. The case of Serbia exemplifies the enduring salience of historical legacies and cultural affinities in informing a nation's foreign policy choices, notwithstanding the inexorable forces of globalization and the ostensible appeal of regional integration.

A deepened comprehension of the subtleties of Serbia's foreign policy also facilitates an appreciation of the challenges faced by the European Union in its pursuit of a coherent and ef-

fective enlargement strategy. The Serbian case highlights the inherent limitations of the EU's conditionality-based approach, as well as the need for a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of the complex socio-political realities that underpin the foreign policy choices of aspiring member states.

Finally, a thorough examination of Serbia's foreign policy under Vucic's stewardship yields valuable insights into the broader trends that have come to define the contemporary international order, including the resurgence of nationalist sentiment, the increasing salience of regional powers, and the growing complexity of the global geopolitical landscape. By shedding light on these phenomena, the study of Serbia's foreign policy contributes to the development of a more comprehensive and sophisticated understanding of the forces that shape the contours of global politics in the 21st century.

1.3 Overview of the article's main arguments and structure

This article endeavours to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of Serbian foreign policy under the leadership of Aleksandar Vucic, with a particular focus on the nation's adept navigation between the European Union and Russia (Mitrovic, 2021). By elucidating the complex interplay of historical, cultural, and strategic factors that have informed Serbia's unique trajectory, the article seeks to offer valuable insights into the broader dynamics of contemporary international relations, as well as the challenges and opportunities faced by small and medium-sized states in an increasingly multipolar world. To achieve this objective, the article is structured in the following manner:

- A historical contextualization of Serbia's foreign policy prior to Vucic's rule, outlining the key political and social factors that influenced the nation's international relations and the role of the European Union and Russia in shaping its strategic orientation.
- An analysis of Vucic's rise to power and the influence of the Serbian Progressive Party on the country's foreign policy, examining the motivations and factors that have driven Vucic's foreign policy decisions.
- A detailed exploration of Serbia's relationship with the European Union under Vucic, focusing on the status of accession negotiations, areas of cooperation and contention, and the impact of the EU's conditionality on Serbia's domestic reforms.
- An overview of Serbia's ties with Russia during Vucic's tenure, emphasizing major areas of cooperation such as energy, defence, and economic relations, as well as the role of cultural and historical links in shaping the relationship.
- An analysis of Vucic's diplomatic strategies in maintaining relationships with both the EU and Russia, including the challenges and benefits of Serbia's balancing act in the international arena, and case studies of specific foreign policy decisions that demonstrate the country's nuanced approach.
- An assessment of the implications of Vucic's foreign policy legacy for the future of Serbian foreign policy, exploring potential trajectories and the factors that may influence the nation's alignment with either the EU or Russia.
- A conclusion that recapitulates the article's main arguments and findings, reflects on the significance of Serbia's foreign policy under Vucic, and offers recommendations for future research on Serbian foreign policy and international relations.

Through this multifaceted examination of Serbia's foreign policy, the article aims to contribute to the broader scholarly discourse on the evolving dynamics of global politics while

shedding light on the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Serbia as it navigates a complex and rapidly changing international landscape.

2. Historical Context: Serbia's Foreign Policy Prior to Vucic's Rule

2.1. Brief overview of Serbia's foreign policy during the 1990s and early 2000s

The tumultuous period of the 1990s and early 2000s, encompassing the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the ensuing internecine conflicts, and the eventual establishment of Serbia as a separate nation-state, profoundly shaped the contours of Serbian foreign policy. During this epoch, the country's strategic orientation was inextricably linked to the broader geopolitical machinations that defined the post-Cold War era, as well as the exigencies of nation-building in a rapidly evolving regional context. The 1990s were characterized by the ascendance of Slobodan Milošević, whose irredentist ambitions and bellicose rhetoric precipitated a series of bloody conflicts across the former Yugoslav republics. During this time, Serbia's foreign policy was primarily driven by ethno-nationalist considerations, as Milošević sought to consolidate a Greater Serbia by leveraging the country's military prowess and exploiting historical grievances. This belligerent posture resulted in international isolation and economic sanctions, which further exacerbated the precarious domestic situation in Serbia (Dzankic *et al.*, 2021; Guzina, 2022).

The fall of Milošević in October 2000 heralded a new era in Serbian foreign policy, marked by a pronounced shift towards Euro-Atlantic integration and a concerted effort to normalize relations with its neighbours. Under the stewardship of President Vojislav Koštunica and Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić, Serbia embarked on a series of far-reaching political and economic reforms aimed at securing the nation's accession to the European Union and NATO (Emini, 2022; Vanchoski, 2021). Despite the pro-Western orientation of these leaders, the legacy of the 1990s continued to cast a long shadow over Serbia's foreign policy, as the country grappled with the exigencies of post-conflict reconstruction, domestic political instability, and contentious issues such as the status of Kosovo.

During the early 2000s, Serbia's foreign policy was also shaped by the growing influence of the European Union, which emerged as a key actor in the Western Balkans (Vörös and Tarósy, 2022; Vuksanovic, 2021), offering the prospect of integration as a means of fostering regional stability and economic development. Concurrently, Serbia maintained its historical ties with Russia, which provided crucial diplomatic support on contentious issues such as Kosovo, as well as economic assistance in the form of energy deals and investment. This nascent balancing act between the EU and Russia would come to define Serbia's foreign policy in the ensuing years, laying the groundwork for the intricate diplomatic maneuvering that would characterize the nation's strategic orientation under Vucic.

2.2. Key political and social factors that influenced Serbia's international relations

The labyrinthine complexities of Serbia's international relations during the 1990s and early 2000s were predicated upon a *mélange* of political and social factors, ranging from ethno-nationalist imperatives and historical legacies to the exigencies of state-building in a turbulent regional milieu. The interplay of these factors engendered a foreign policy orientation that was at once reactive to the vicissitudes of global politics and deeply enmeshed in the idiosyncrasies of Serbia's own historical and socio-political context. Foremost among these factors was the ethno-nationalist fervour that pervaded Serbian society during the 1990s, fuelled by the incendiary rhetoric of political elites and the instrumentalization of historical grievances for political gain. This chauvinistic *zeitgeist* not only informed Serbia's irredentist ambitions, but also served as a catalyst for the internecine conflicts that ravaged the former Yugoslavia, thereby shaping the contours of the country's foreign policy in profound and lasting ways.

Concomitantly, the historical legacy of the non-aligned movement (Teofilaktu, 2021), of which the former Yugoslavia was a founding member, continued to reverberate in Serbia's foreign policy orientation, imbuing it with a proclivity for straddling the divide between East and West. This penchant for equidistance was further reinforced by the exigencies of post-conflict reconstruction and the need for economic assistance from a diverse array of international partners, including both the European Union and Russia. The socio-political landscape of Serbia during this period also played a crucial role in shaping the country's international relations, as the nation grappled with the Herculean task of transitioning from a socialist system to a market-based economy, while simultaneously navigating the treacherous waters of democratization and nation-building. The vicissitudes of domestic politics, characterized by factionalism, corruption, and entrenched patronage networks, often impinged upon the formulation and execution of foreign policy, rendering it susceptible to the vagaries of the domestic political arena.

Finally, the broader geopolitical context of the post-Cold War era, marked by the ascendance of the European Union as a normative power and the gradual re-emergence of Russia as a countervailing force, exerted a profound influence on Serbia's international relations. The country's strategic orientation was ineluctably shaped by the push and pull of these external forces, as it sought to navigate a precarious path between integration and independence, the exigencies of its historical alliances, and the allure of newfound partnerships.

In sum, the intricate tapestry of political and social factors that influenced Serbia's international relations during the 1990s and early 2000s laid the groundwork for the complex foreign policy orientation that would come to define the nation's trajectory under the aegis of Aleksandar Vucic. By elucidating these factors and the historical context in which they emerged, one can gain a deeper understanding of the forces that have shaped Serbia's contemporary foreign policy and the broader dynamics of global politics in the post-Cold War era.

2.3 The role of the European Union and Russia in shaping Serbia's foreign policy

The European Union and Russia, as pivotal actors in Serbia's post-Yugoslav foreign policy trajectory, have exerted considerable influence over the nation's strategic orientation, each proffering a distinct set of political, economic, and security incentives that have served to shape the contours of Serbia's international relations in myriad ways (Marciacq, 2020). The European Union,

with its normative power and allure of integration, has emerged as a potent force in the Western Balkans, seeking to foster regional stability and economic development through the promulgation of its *acquis communautaire* and the deployment of various instruments of conditionality. Concurrently, Russia, as a resurgent power with longstanding historical and cultural ties to Serbia, has sought to maintain its sphere of influence in the region, offering diplomatic support and economic assistance as a means of cementing its strategic partnership with Belgrade.

The European Union's role in shaping Serbia's foreign policy has been multifaceted, encompassing a range of political, economic, and security dimensions (Canveren and Aknur, 2020; Panagiotou, 2021; Tota, 2020). Through the Stabilisation and Association Process and the prospect of eventual accession, the EU has incentivized a series of far-reaching domestic reforms aimed at aligning Serbia's legal and institutional frameworks with European standards. Furthermore, the EU has sought to encourage regional cooperation and reconciliation in the Western Balkans, with a view to mitigating the lingering vestiges of ethno-nationalist animus and fostering a climate conducive to the peaceful resolution of outstanding disputes.

Be that as it may, the EU's influence on Serbia's foreign policy has not been unmitigated, as the allure of integration has at times been tempered by the exigencies of domestic politics and the country's historical and cultural affinities with Russia. The latter, as a countervailing force in the region, has played an instrumental role in shaping Serbia's foreign policy by providing crucial diplomatic support on contentious issues such as the status of Kosovo, as well as by offering economic assistance in the form of energy deals, investment, and military cooperation. The Kremlin's steadfast support for Serbia's territorial integrity and its opposition to Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence have imbued the relationship with a strategic dimension that has served to cement the ties between Belgrade and Moscow.

In addition, the deep-seated cultural and historical links between Serbia and Russia, underpinned by a shared Slavic and Orthodox heritage, have further reinforced the bilateral relationship, lending it an affective dimension that transcends the realm of pure geopolitics. This confluence of strategic and cultural factors has imbued Serbia's foreign policy with a dual orientation, as the nation has sought to navigate the complexities of its relationship with both the European Union and Russia in pursuit of its national interests.

In this intricate geopolitical milieu, Serbia's foreign policy has been marked by a delicate balancing act between the twin poles of European integration and Russian partnership, reflecting the nation's proclivity for equidistance and its desire to maintain its sovereignty and independence in an increasingly interconnected and competitive international system. As the country's strategic orientation continues to evolve under the stewardship of Aleksandar Vucic, the role of the European Union and Russia in shaping Serbia's foreign policy will remain a central feature of the nation's diplomatic trajectory, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of global politics and the challenges faced by small and medium-sized states in an increasingly multipolar world.

3. Vucic's Rise to Power and the Serbian Progressive Party

The ascendance of Aleksandar Vucic to the zenith of Serbian politics was predicated upon a confluence of domestic and international factors that engendered a propitious political milieu for his meteoric rise (Bieber, 2020; Spasojevic, 2020). The vicissitudes of the Serbian political landscape during the late 2000s and early 2010s, characterized by an interregnum of weak

and fractious governments, endemic corruption, and simmering socio-economic discontent, provided fertile ground for the emergence of a strong and decisive leadership figure capable of navigating the labyrinthine complexities of the nation's domestic and international challenges. At the epicentre of this shifting political landscape was the Democratic Party, which, despite its initial success in ushering in a new era of post-Milošević politics, had become increasingly enfeebled by internecine strife, a lack of strategic direction, and an inability to deliver on the promise of European integration. This enervation of the ruling party created a political vacuum that facilitated the resurgence of nationalist forces and the establishment of new political actors, chief among them the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which emerged as a formidable contender for power (Dušan, 2019; Hebda, 2020).

The SNS, founded in 2008 by a cadre of erstwhile nationalists who had severed their ties with the Serbian Radical Party, sought to redefine the contours of Serbian politics by espousing a pragmatic, pro-European agenda that was nonetheless predicated upon a strong and assertive national identity. The party's meteoric rise was further buoyed by the charismatic leadership of Vucic, whose political acumen and adept management of the media landscape allowed him to cultivate a persona as a reformist and anti-corruption crusader, in addition to being at the end of a staunch encomiast discourse (Jeftic, 2022). In the wake of the global financial crisis and its attendant repercussions on the Serbian economy, Vucic's promise of sweeping reforms, coupled with his adroit positioning as a bulwark against the perceived excesses and incompetence of the ruling elite, resonated with an increasingly disenchanting electorate. The SNS's resounding victory in the 2012 parliamentary elections, which saw the party secure a plurality of seats and form a coalition government with the Socialist Party of Serbia, marked the beginning of Vucic's ascent to the apex of political power.

As Prime Minister and later as President, Vucic's tenure has been marked by a series of bold and often controversial policy initiatives aimed at consolidating state power, overhauling the nation's sclerotic bureaucracy, and enhancing Serbia's strategic position in the international arena. In this context, the SNS's influence on the country's foreign policy has been inextricably linked to the broader dynamics of Serbia's domestic politics and the party's ideological commitment to a pragmatic, equidistant approach to international relations.

The Serbian Progressive Party, under the aegis of Aleksandar Vucic, has played an instrumental role in shaping the contours of Serbia's foreign policy during a critical juncture in the nation's post-Yugoslav trajectory. Occupying a unique position within the Serbian political landscape, the SNS has sought to strike a delicate balance between its pro-European inclinations and its commitment to preserving the country's historical and cultural ties with Russia, thereby engendering a pragmatic and equidistant approach to international relations that has come to define the *modus operandi* of Serbian diplomacy in the Vucic era.

Central to the SNS's foreign policy agenda has *officially* been the pursuit of European integration, which the party promotes as a *sine qua non* for the country's long-term political stability and socio-economic development. Leveraging its reformist credentials and its commitment to the European project, the SNS-led government has made significant strides in aligning Serbia's legal and institutional frameworks with the EU *acquis*, advancing the nation's accession negotiations, and fostering regional cooperation and reconciliation in the Western Balkans. Notwithstanding these achievements, the SNS's European orientation has not been without its challenges, as the party has been compelled to navigate the treacherous waters of the EU's conditionality, particularly with respect to the normalization of relations with Kosovo and the implementation of key domestic reforms.

Simultaneously, the SNS has been assiduous in cultivating and deepening Serbia's strategic partnership with Russia (and being heavily criticized after continuing in such a fashion after the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine), cognizant of the myriad benefits that accrue from maintaining close ties with a resurgent power that shares a common cultural and historical heritage with Serbia. Under the stewardship of the SNS, the bilateral relationship has been marked by a significant intensification of cooperation across a wide array of sectors, including energy, defence, and economic relations. This deepening of ties with Russia has not only served to buttress Serbia's geopolitical position in the region but has also provided a valuable counterbalance to the pressures and constraints emanating from the European Union and other Western actors.

In this intricate geopolitical milieu, the SNS has deftly navigated the complexities of Serbia's foreign policy by adhering to a pragmatic and equidistant approach that seeks to maximize the benefits of the country's engagement with both the European Union and Russia, while preserving its sovereignty and independence in an increasingly interconnected and competitive international system. This delicate balancing act, which has been a hallmark of the SNS's stewardship of Serbian foreign policy, underscores the party's pivotal role in shaping the nation's strategic orientation and its broader engagement with the global community.

The foreign policy decisions of Aleksandar Vucic and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) have been informed by a multiplicity of factors and motivations, reflecting the intricate interplay of domestic and international dynamics that have shaped the nation's strategic orientation during this pivotal period in its post-Yugoslav history. Foremost among these factors has been the overarching imperative of safeguarding Serbia's sovereignty and independence in the face of myriad challenges and constraints emanating from the international system, while simultaneously pursuing the country's long-term political stability and socio-economic development.

Concurrently, Vucic's foreign policy has been informed by the desire to maintain and deepen Serbia's historical and cultural ties with Russia, recognizing the manifold benefits that accrue from sustaining a close relationship with a resurgent power that shares a common heritage and a strategic outlook that is often congruent with Serbia's own geopolitical interests. This Russo-centric orientation has been driven by a confluence of strategic and affective factors, including Russia's steadfast support for Serbia's territorial integrity, its opposition to Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence (Samorukov, 2019), and the deep-seated cultural and historical affinities that bind the two nations together.

Another key factor that has shaped Vucic's foreign policy decisions has been the exigencies of domestic politics, which have often necessitated a delicate balancing act between competing interests and constituencies. Vucic's pragmatic and equidistant approach to international relations, which seeks to maximize the benefits of Serbia's engagement with both the European Union and Russia, is in part a reflection of the complex and often conflicting demands of the nation's domestic political landscape. By adroitly navigating these pressures and constraints, Vucic has sought to forge a foreign policy that is attuned to the nation's interests and aspirations, while maintaining its sovereignty and independence in an increasingly interconnected and competitive international system. In sum, the foreign policy decisions of Aleksandar Vucic and the SNS have been influenced by a complex constellation of factors and motivations, which collectively underscore the intricate and multifaceted nature of Serbia's engagement with the global community during this critical juncture in its post-Yugoslav trajectory.

4. Serbia's Relationship with the European Union during the reign of Aleksandar Vucic

4.1 The status of EU accession negotiations and progress made during Vucic's rule

The tenure of Aleksandar Vucic and the SNS has witnessed a marked intensification of Serbia's engagement with the European Union, as evidenced by some progress made in the realm of EU accession negotiations and the implementation of key reforms requisite for the country's eventual membership in the bloc. The initiation of Serbia's EU accession negotiations in January 2014, which transpired under the aegis of the SNS-led government, marked a watershed moment in the country's European trajectory, signifying a formal recognition of its candidacy and setting the stage for a comprehensive and far-reaching process of legal and institutional harmonization with the EU *acquis*. Since the commencement of these negotiations, Serbia has opened a considerable number of negotiation chapters, making tangible progress in aligning its legal framework with the European Union's norms and standards in areas such as the judiciary, fundamental rights, justice, freedom, and security, among others.

This progress has been facilitated by the implementation of an array of structural and legislative reforms, which have aimed at overhauling the nation's sclerotic bureaucracy, enhancing the transparency and efficiency of public administration, and fostering the rule of law. Furthermore, the Vucic government has demonstrated a willingness to engage in dialogue and cooperation with the EU on matters of regional import, such as the normalization of relations with Kosovo and the promotion of reconciliation and stability in the Western Balkans.

Notwithstanding these advances, the accession process has not been devoid of challenges and obstacles. The EU's conditionality, which stipulates the fulfilment of stringent benchmarks and criteria as a prerequisite for accession, has at times strained the relationship between Serbia and the European Union, particularly in relation to the issue of Kosovo and the implementation of key domestic reforms. Additionally, the enlargement fatigue that has beset the European Union in recent years, coupled with the rise of Euroscepticism and the attendant concerns surrounding the bloc's capacity for further integration, has injected a measure of uncertainty and complexity into Serbia's European aspirations.

4.2 Key areas of cooperation and contention between Serbia and the EU

The multifaceted relationship between Serbia and the European Union under Vucic's aegis has been marked by a panoply of convergences and divergences, encompassing an array of key areas in which cooperation and contention have coalesced to forge a complex and often ambivalent dynamic between the two entities.

In the realm of cooperation, several salient domains have emerged as focal points for collaboration between Serbia and the European Union. First and foremost, the process of European integration has necessitated the implementation of a plethora of legal and institutional reforms, which have been facilitated by the provision of financial and technical assistance from the EU. This assistance has been instrumental in enhancing the capacity of the Serbian state to

undertake the requisite reforms, while also fostering the development of civil society and promoting good governance.

Secondly, regional stability and security in the Western Balkans have been prominent areas of cooperation, with both Serbia and the EU striving to mitigate the pernicious effects of lingering ethnic tensions, organized crime, and transnational security threats. In this context, Serbia has been an active participant in regional initiatives aimed at fostering reconciliation, enhancing cooperation in the fields of law enforcement and border management, and bolstering the region's resilience to external destabilizing influences.

However, the relationship between Serbia and the European Union has not been devoid of points of contention, which have served to underscore the intricacies and complexities of their engagement. One such area of contention pertains to the normalization of relations with Kosovo, which remains a highly emotive and politically charged issue for Serbia. While the EU has consistently emphasized the importance of resolving this issue as a prerequisite for accession, Serbia has been cautious in navigating this delicate matter, seeking to balance the imperatives of the European project with the deeply ingrained sentiments of its domestic political landscape.

Another area of contention concerns the implementation of key domestic reforms, particularly in relation to the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and the protection of fundamental rights. The EU has been increasingly vocal in its criticism of the perceived shortcomings in these areas, expressing concern over the concentration of power, the erosion of media freedom, and the adequacy of anti-corruption efforts. These concerns have occasionally strained the relationship between Serbia and the European Union, highlighting the challenges that both entities face in reconciling their respective interests and priorities in the context of the accession process.

4.3 The impact of the EU's conditionality on Serbia's domestic reforms

The European Union's conditionality, a cornerstone of its enlargement policy, has exerted a profound and multifaceted impact on Serbia's domestic reforms, serving both as a catalyst for change and a source of contention within the nation's socio-political milieu (Pickering, 2011). This conditionality, which stipulates the fulfilment of stringent benchmarks and criteria as a prerequisite for accession, has engendered a complex dynamic between the EU and Serbia, with the former wielding considerable influence over the trajectory of the latter's domestic transformation.

The impact of the EU's conditionality on Serbia's domestic reforms can be observed in multiple domains. Firstly, it has provided a powerful impetus for the implementation of far-reaching legal and institutional changes aimed at harmonizing the nation's legal and regulatory frameworks with the EU *acquis* (Kmezic, 2019; Richter and Wunsch, 2020). This process has entailed the adoption of a plethora of new legislation, as well as the modification of existing statutes, in areas such as the judiciary, fundamental rights, public administration, and the economy. These reforms, although at times arduous and politically fraught, have led to the progressive alignment of Serbia's legal system with European norms and standards, enhancing the country's prospects for eventual membership in the bloc.

Secondly, the EU's conditionality has engendered a measure of external pressure on Serbia to undertake critical domestic reforms, particularly in the realms of the rule of law, the inde-

pendence of the judiciary, and the protection of fundamental rights. The EU has been assiduous in its monitoring of Serbia's progress in these areas, employing a combination of incentives and disincentives to encourage the nation's adherence to its reform commitments. This external pressure has been instrumental in fostering a culture of accountability and transparency within Serbia's public institutions, while also galvanizing the development of civil society and the consolidation of democratic norms.

Notwithstanding these positive developments, the impact of the EU's conditionality on Serbia's domestic reforms has not been without its challenges and drawbacks. The stringent nature of the accession criteria, coupled with the perception of external interference in the nation's domestic affairs, has at times engendered a degree of resistance and resentment within the Serbian political landscape, particularly among nationalist and Eurosceptic factions. Furthermore, the pace and depth of certain reforms have been called into question by critics who argue that the EU's conditionality has led to a superficial and incremental approach to reform, characterized by a focus on legal harmonization at the expense of substantive change.

The EU's conditionality has had a profound and multifaceted impact on Serbia's domestic reforms under Vucic's rule, serving as both a catalyst for change and a source of contention within the nation's socio-political landscape. While the accession process has yielded tangible progress in many areas, the challenges and complexities associated with the EU's conditionality underscore the intricate interplay between external influence and domestic agency in the ongoing transformation of Serbia's polity, society, and economy.

5. Serbia's Relationship with Russia under Vucic

The relationship between Serbia and Russia during Vucic's rule has been characterized by a distinctive amalgamation of historical, cultural, and strategic affinities that have engendered a multifarious and intricate bond between the two nations. While Vucic's tenure has witnessed an intensification of Serbia's engagement with the European Union, it has concomitantly been marked by a sustained and deepening rapport with Russia, reflecting the nuances and complexities of Serbia's foreign policy orientation in the post-2012 period.

Underlying the Serbia-Russia relationship during Vucic's rule are the deep-seated cultural and historical ties that have historically bound the two nations together, anchored in their shared Slavic and Orthodox Christian heritage (Barišić, 2016). These affinities have imbued the relationship with a measure of solidarity and mutual identification that transcends the vicissitudes of contemporary geopolitics, providing a durable foundation for bilateral cooperation and understanding. At the strategic level, the relationship between Serbia and Russia under Vucic has been marked by a confluence of interests and priorities, which have served to reinforce the bonds between the two countries. While Serbia has pursued a steadfast course towards European integration, it has also sought to maintain and enhance its relationship with Russia as a means of diversifying its international partnerships and safeguarding its national interests in the face of an increasingly complex and uncertain global landscape.

This strategic calculus has manifested itself in several key domains, including energy, defence, and economic relations, which have emerged as pivotal areas of cooperation between Serbia and Russia during Vucic's tenure. Moreover, the relationship has been further bolstered by frequent high-level political exchanges and consultations, which have provided a platform for the articulation of shared perspectives and the development of collaborative initiatives. In

this context, the Serbia-Russia relationship under Vucic has been characterized by a dynamic interplay of historical, cultural, and strategic factors that have coalesced to forge a multifaceted and intricate bond between the two nations, reflecting the broader contours of Serbia's foreign policy orientation in the post-2012 era.

In the domain of energy cooperation, Serbia and Russia have cultivated a robust partnership that spans the entire energy supply chain, from the exploration and extraction of natural resources to the construction of critical energy infrastructure. A salient example of this collaboration is the TurkStream gas pipeline, which serves to transport Russian natural gas to Serbia and other countries in the region (Garding *et al.*, 2021). This project, which has been operational since 2020, has significantly enhanced Serbia's energy security and diversification, while also fostering closer ties between the two nations in the realm of energy policy.

Defence cooperation constitutes another pivotal area of collaboration between Serbia and Russia under Vucic. This partnership has manifested itself in various forms, including the provision of Russian military equipment and technology to Serbia, as well as the conduct of joint military exercises and training programs. The acquisition of sophisticated Russian weaponry, such as the S-400 air defence system and MiG-29 fighter jets, has bolstered Serbia's defence capabilities and underscored the strategic importance of the bilateral defence relationship. Moreover, the collaboration in the realm of defence has served to reinforce the perception of Russia as a reliable and steadfast partner in the face of regional and global security challenges.

The economic relations between Serbia and Russia have likewise witnessed a marked intensification during Vucic's rule, with the two nations engaging in a diverse array of trade and investment activities. Russian investment in key Serbian industries, such as energy, infrastructure, and telecommunications, has contributed to the nation's economic development, while also engendering a measure of interdependence between the two countries. Furthermore, the establishment of a free trade agreement between Serbia and the Eurasian Economic Union, which is dominated by Russia, has provided additional impetus for the expansion of bilateral economic ties.

The major areas of cooperation between Serbia and Russia under Vucic, including energy, defence, and economic relations, have served to consolidate and deepen the bilateral relationship, reflecting the multifarious and intricate nature of their rapport. These spheres of collaboration have not only reinforced the strategic underpinnings of the Serbia-Russia partnership, but have also served to underscore the complex interplay of interests and priorities that define the broader contours of Serbia's foreign policy orientation in the post-2012 era.

The role of cultural and historical ties in shaping the relationship between Serbia and Russia under Vucic is indeed a testament to the enduring influence of the past on the present and the complex ways in which these foundational bonds continue to inform and permeate the multifarious facets of their bilateral rapport. These ties, firmly rooted in the shared Slavic heritage and the common religious tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy, have imbued the Serbia-Russia relationship with a sense of fraternity and mutual affinity that transcends the vagaries of contemporary geopolitics and the exigencies of strategic calculus.

The cultural and historical ties between Serbia and Russia have manifested themselves in various forms and domains during Vucic's rule, underscoring their significance in shaping the overall character and tone of the bilateral relationship. One notable example is the role of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church in fostering closer ties between the two nations through religious diplomacy, joint religious celebrations, and the exchange of

religious artefacts and relics. These religious interactions have served to nurture a sense of spiritual kinship and solidarity, thereby reinforcing the bonds of affinity and understanding that undergird the Serbia-Russia relationship.

Additionally, the cultural and historical ties have engendered a sense of mutual identification and empathy between the two nations, particularly in the realm of public opinion and popular perceptions. Filled by Russian propaganda, these ties have increasingly been seen as of high relevance in the public eye (Stefano, 2018; Zivotic and Obradovic, 2022).

6. Balancing Act: Navigating between the European Union and Russia

6.1 Analysis of Vucic's diplomatic strategies in maintaining relationships with both the EU and Russia

In the intricate web of international relations, Vucic's diplomatic strategies have exemplified the delicate balancing act of maintaining and cultivating relationships with both the European Union and Russia, deftly navigating the complexities inherent in pursuing such a course. The nuances of this balancing act are predicated upon a confluence of historical, cultural, and strategic factors, which have coalesced to shape Serbia's foreign policy orientation under Vucic's rule.

Vucic's diplomatic strategies, in their essence, have been characterized by a pragmatic, *realpolitik*, and adaptive approach, predicated on the principle of officially safeguarding Serbia's national interests while simultaneously engaging with multiple partners in the international arena. This pragmatism has manifested itself in the pursuit of a policy of equidistance, which entails the simultaneous deepening of relations with the EU and Russia, without overtly aligning with either side to the detriment of the other. In order to maintain this delicate balance, Vucic has employed a variety of diplomatic tactics and instruments that reflect the intricate interplay of interests and priorities shaping Serbia's foreign policy. One such tactic has been the frequent and high-level political engagement with both the EU and Russia, which has provided a platform for the articulation of shared perspectives, the development of collaborative initiatives, and the resolution of potential disputes or points of contention.

Furthermore, Vucic's diplomatic strategies have been marked by a keen awareness of the significance of symbolism and gesture in the realm of international relations. This awareness has been evident in the careful calibration of diplomatic signals, such as state visits, the signing of agreements, and the public expressions of support or solidarity, which have been used to signal Serbia's commitment to both the European integration process and the deepening of ties with Russia. Another salient feature of Vucic's diplomatic strategies has been the emphasis on diversification, which entails the broadening of Serbia's international partnerships and engagements beyond the confines of the EU-Russia axis. This diversification has manifested itself in the pursuit of stronger ties with other regional and global actors, such as China, Turkey, and the United States, thereby reducing Serbia's dependence on any single partner and enhancing its strategic autonomy.

6.2 Case studies of specific foreign policy decisions that demonstrate Serbia's balancing approach

In order to elucidate the intricacies of Serbia's balancing approach under Vucic's rule, it is instructive to examine specific case studies of foreign policy decisions that exemplify the nation's pursuit of equidistance between the European Union and Russia, thereby illuminating the subtle dynamics and trade-offs that inform Serbia's diplomatic endeavours in the international arena. One such case study pertains to Serbia's stance vis-à-vis the contentious issue of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. While adhering to the principles of international law and the inviolability of territorial integrity, Serbia abstained from imposing economic sanctions on Russia, thereby eschewing the prospect of alienating its traditional ally and partner. This circumspect and nuanced position, predicated on the imperative of maintaining the delicate equilibrium between its commitments to the European integration process and its ties with Russia, exemplifies the intricacies of Serbia's balancing approach in the realm of foreign policy. Needless to say, Serbia has been heavily criticized on this account.

Another illustrative case study is Serbia's engagement with the European Union in the domain of energy policy, which has witnessed the nation's assiduous pursuit of a strategy that seeks to harmonize its commitments under the EU's Energy Community Treaty with its longstanding partnership with Russia in the energy sector. By forging ahead with the implementation of EU energy regulations, while concurrently preserving and deepening its cooperation with Russia in the realm of natural gas supplies and infrastructure projects, Serbia has adeptly navigated the complex interplay of interests and priorities that underpin its balancing approach.

A further case study that sheds light on Serbia's balancing act is the nation's pursuit of enhanced defence cooperation with both the European Union and Russia. On the one hand, Serbia has participated in joint military exercises and initiatives under the auspices of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), thereby signalling its commitment to the European integration process and the norms and values that undergird it. On the other hand, Serbia has concurrently sought to strengthen its defence ties with Russia, through the acquisition of military hardware, joint military exercises, and technical cooperation, thereby reinforcing the historical bonds and strategic partnership that define the Serbia-Russia relationship.

These short, illustrative case studies, encompassing the spheres of geopolitics, energy, and defence, serve to illuminate the nuances and complexities of Serbia's balancing approach under Vucic's rule, as the nation deftly navigates the intricate interplay of interests, priorities, and alignments that characterize its foreign policy orientation. The subtle dynamics and trade-offs that underpin these foreign policy decisions underscore the dexterity, adaptability, and pragmatism that are requisite for the pursuit of equidistance in the contemporary international arena.

7. Implications for the Future of Serbian Foreign Policy

7.1 Assessment of Vucic's foreign policy legacy and its impact on Serbia's international standing

In appraising the ramifications of Vucic's foreign policy legacy for the future trajectory of Serbian foreign policy, it behoves us to consider the multifarious dimensions of his tenure and their attendant implications for Serbia's international standing. Vucic's pursuit of a "balancing act between the Russia and the West" (Vuksanovic, 2021, p. ii), predicated upon the principles of

pragmatism, adaptability, and strategic autonomy, has indelibly shaped the contours of Serbia's foreign policy orientation, with profound consequences for its position in the global arena.

The most salient aspect of Vucic's foreign policy legacy, perhaps, is the manner in which it has engendered a more nuanced and dexterous approach to international relations, exemplified by the nation's ability to navigate the intricate interplay of interests, priorities, and alignments that define the contemporary geopolitical landscape. This has conferred upon Serbia a measure of strategic flexibility, as it has sought to cultivate relationships with a diverse array of regional and global actors, thereby reducing its dependence on any single partner and enhancing its international standing. Moreover, Vucic's foreign policy legacy has been characterized by a pragmatic engagement with both the European Union and Russia, as Serbia has endeavoured to strike a delicate balance between its aspirations for European integration and its enduring ties with its traditional ally. This has enabled Serbia to maintain its position as a key interlocutor in the region, fostering dialogue and cooperation between the EU and Russia on a range of issues, while also preserving its own national interests and sovereignty.

Furthermore, Vucic's tenure has witnessed the deepening and diversification of Serbia's economic ties, as the nation has sought to expand its trade and investment partnerships, particularly in the realms of energy, technology, and infrastructure. This economic diversification has bolstered Serbia's resilience and growth prospects, while also creating a foundation for enhanced cooperation and integration in various domains, thereby augmenting its international standing.

The foreign policy legacy bequeathed by Vucic is thus probably best described as one marked by pragmatism, adaptability, and strategic autonomy, which has manifested itself in the deft navigation of the complex interplay of interests, priorities, and alignments that define Serbia's foreign policy orientation. This legacy, with its attendant implications for Serbia's international standing, is likely to shape the contours of the nation's foreign policy trajectory for the foreseeable future, as it continues to grapple with the exigencies and vicissitudes of the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

7.2 Potential trajectories for Serbian foreign policy after Vucic

As we contemplate the potential trajectories for Serbian foreign policy in the post-Vucic era, it is imperative to take cognizance of the multifarious factors, both endogenous and exogenous, that may exert a determinative influence on the nation's future orientation. While the precise contours of Serbia's foreign policy remain contingent upon a panoply of variables, several scenarios and possibilities merit consideration in light of the current geopolitical milieu.

One potential trajectory envisages a continuation of Serbia's balancing act, with the nation persisting in its endeavour to navigate the intricate interplay of interests, priorities, and alignments that define its relationships with both the European Union and Russia. This scenario would entail the maintenance of a pragmatic, nuanced, and dexterous approach to international relations, predicated upon the principles of strategic autonomy, adaptability, and pragmatism that have characterized Vucic's foreign policy legacy.

Another possible trajectory entails a more pronounced alignment with the European Union, with Serbia intensifying its efforts to accede to the bloc and deepen its integration with the EU's political, economic, and security architecture. This scenario could be precipitated by a constellation of factors, including the resolution of outstanding disputes with neighbouring states, the implementation of requisite domestic reforms, and a recalibration of the EU's en-

largement policy, which could collectively create a propitious climate for Serbia's accession to the Union.

Conversely, a third potential trajectory involves a closer alignment with Russia, as Serbia seeks to reinforce its traditional bonds and strategic partnership with its historical ally. This scenario could be engendered by a confluence of circumstances, such as an exacerbation of tensions between the EU and Russia, a perceived erosion of the benefits and prospects associated with European integration, or a re-evaluation of Serbia's national interests in light of the evolving geopolitical landscape.

In light of the above said, it could be claimed that the potential trajectories for Serbian foreign policy in the post-Vucic era are contingent upon a complex interplay of factors, encompassing the domestic political landscape, the external geopolitical environment, and the strategic priorities and imperatives that inform the nation's international relations. While the precise contours of Serbia's foreign policy remain indeterminate, the scenarios delineated herein provide a heuristic framework for envisaging the possibilities and challenges that may lie ahead for the nation in the ever-changing landscape of global politics.

7.3 Factors that may influence Serbia's future alignment with the EU or Russia

In discerning the factors that may influence Serbia's future alignment with the European Union or Russia, we must consider the many complex forces, both within Serbia and on the global stage, that could shape the nation's strategic thinking and foreign policy direction. The political dynamics within Serbia itself hold pivotal influence. The balance of power between political groups advocating closer ties with the EU versus those favouring alliance with Russia could profoundly impact Serbia's trajectory. Regional geopolitics also come into play. The resolution of disputes with neighbours and the dynamics of regional cooperation could affect Serbia's positioning vis-à-vis the EU and Russia. Furthermore, the stances of other regional actors toward the EU and Russia could inform Serbia's calculations.

The European Union's enlargement policy, particularly its approach to the Western Balkans, may prove decisive. A more open and supportive enlargement stance could incentivize Serbia to accelerate efforts to join the EU, while a more restrictive policy could have the opposite effect. Russia's regional and global strategy, especially its involvement in the Balkans and partnership with Serbia, is another crucial factor. A more assertive Russian presence in the region or deepening ties with Serbia could foster closer affiliation between the two countries.

Economic imperatives, like Serbia's need for investment, trade and market access, could also impact its alignment. The relative economic opportunities offered by the EU versus Russia may prove decisive. Additionally, security dynamics, including issues like migration, terrorism and weapons proliferation, could influence Serbia's positioning. Its perception of security interests and whether the EU or Russia can best address concerns may inform strategic thinking.

8. Conclusion

In summation, this treatise has delineated the multifaceted dimensions of Serbia's foreign policy under the aegis of Vucic, exploring the nation's endeavours to navigate the intricate interplay of interests and alignments that define its relationships with both the European Union and

Russia. Through an examination of the historical context, Vucic's rise to power, Serbia's interactions with the EU and Russia, as well as the challenges and opportunities associated with the nation's balancing act, the study has illuminated the nuances and complexities of Serbia's foreign policy orientation.

The significance of Serbia's foreign policy under Vucic lies in its pragmatic, adaptive, and strategically autonomous approach to international relations, which has enabled the nation to deftly navigate the vicissitudes of the contemporary geopolitical landscape, while also preserving its national interests and sovereignty. This legacy, characterized by the pursuit of a delicate balance between the aspirations for European integration and the enduring ties with its traditional ally, Russia, is likely to shape the contours of Serbia's foreign policy trajectory for the foreseeable future.

In light of the findings and insights gleaned from this analysis, it is recommended that future research on Serbian foreign policy and international relations should delve deeper into the implications of Serbia's balancing act, focusing on the various factors that may influence the nation's future alignment with the EU or Russia, as well as the potential trajectories for its foreign policy in the post-Vucic era. Furthermore, scholars should explore the domestic political dynamics and regional geopolitics that may impinge upon Serbia's strategic calculus, while also examining the role of economic imperatives, security concerns, and cultural and historical ties in shaping the nation's foreign policy orientation. By pursuing these avenues of inquiry, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the intricacies and nuances of Serbia's foreign policy in an ever-changing global landscape.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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