



BULLETIN

No. 39 (771), 17 April 2015 © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) • Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz • Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk • Artur Gradziuk • Dariusz Kałań
Piotr Kościński • Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Marcin Terlikowski

Have Your Cake and Eat It: The Dilemma of Serbia's Relations with the EU and Russia

Tomasz Żornaczuk

Neither the start of negotiations with the EU at the beginning of 2014, nor the aggravating crisis in Ukraine at that time, have loosened Serbia's close relations with Russia. Meanwhile, in the changing international situation, the policy of equal distance towards Moscow and Brussels is risky because it puts Serbia in the middle of a dispute between the two parties. Since the country's integration with the EU remains a priority for the government in Belgrade, it is worth seeing this process as an opportunity for the achievement of national interests through coordinating positions with the EU, including with the aim to create the energy union.

The Asymmetry of the Serbian–Russian Relations. The primary objective of Serbia's eastern policy is not to isolate Russia. For this reason, Belgrade did not join the EU sanctions (although, among the countries aspiring to the EU, Montenegro and Albania have done so), and also reacted very sparingly to the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. Despite assurances of respect for Ukrainian territorial integrity, Serbia was absent during the vote on the UN General Assembly resolution condemning the annexation. Events in south-eastern Ukraine have not only failed to undermine confidence in Moscow, but they have also become an excuse to deepen the dialogue. In the middle of the Ukrainian conflict, in November 2014, the first joint military exercises in eight years were organised (the next are to be held in autumn this year). This was presented by Russian propaganda as a show of Russia's power and proof that it is not alienated in Europe.

At the same time, the Serbian–Russian relations are characterised by a distinct lack of partnership. This may be evidenced by the way Moscow treated Belgrade when cancelling the construction of the South Stream gas pipeline (the Serbian government learned about it from the media), which was considered strategic by both sides, as well as during the recent dispute over the export of apples. In March this year, the Russian Agricultural Agency warned of the possibility of a ban on imports of fruit from Serbia because of the suspicion that they were sourced from EU countries, including Poland. Although the matter was cleared up in a few days, the way the Russians approached the issue (raising their doubts without an official document) suggests that Moscow's confidence in Belgrade is limited.

Asymmetric cooperation, raised to the level of strategic partnership from 2013, is justified by Belgrade's high degree of dependence on Moscow, primarily in the energy sector and the economy. Russia won a very strong position on the Serbian market for natural gas and oil, by buying a majority stake in the state company Naftna Industrija Srbije (51% in 2008, increased to 56% in 2011). The company manages gas and oil resources, which are mostly derived from Russia (99% of gas, and 80% of oil). Although trade relations are less intense, Russia became the second biggest receiver of Serbian exports in 2014. Economic cooperation is in growth, and its revival can be observed due to the freezing of Moscow's relations with the EU agri-food markets. While the value of Serbian vegetables exported to Russia did not change between 2013 and 2014, the value of fruit exports increased by approximately 50%, and exports of meat went up almost tenfold.

Cooperation with Russia and the Attraction of the West. Serbia is willing to cooperate closely with Russia, as there is a strong consensus on the Serbian political scene that these relations are strategic. This is due to a doctrine

adopted in 2008, and implemented by each successive government, defining the main directions of Serbian foreign policy and listing the EU, the United States, Russia and China among the key partners, and stating the role of the country as a bridge between them. This position is backed by all political parties in parliament, and by the president. Not coincidentally, the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade was celebrated with the participation of Vladimir Putin, and in the spring of this year the Serbian army will take part in the parade in Moscow to commemorate the end of the Second World War. However, the political agreement would not be possible without social support: according to research by Ipsos, carried out in February, half of Serbia's population perceived Russia positively, while 18% had negative feelings about the country. This is due to the lack of historical friction between the two countries, but also to media bias (those offering reliable criticism on relations with Russia are in the minority), as well as the efforts of Moscow, which has for years emphasised the historical, cultural and religious closeness of the two nations, with the help of a number of cultural institutions or intensive contacts between the two Orthodox churches. These activities are complemented by initiatives clearly noticeable by the public, such as help in fighting forest fires and in rescue operations during last year's floods. Of no less importance is the Russian opposition to detaching Kosovo from Serbia, which, especially when most of the EU and the U.S. have agreed to the independence of the province, means that Moscow is perceived by many Serbs as a loyal ally in the international arena.

At the same time, there is a compromise between the political parties in parliament, on the country's EU integration as an overarching objective in foreign policy. Groupings with different views did not receive seats for the first time in last year's parliamentary elections, and no longer have a significant voice in the public debate. Also, the majority of society has a pro-European attitude: in the last two years, between 44% and 51% of Serbia's citizens were in favour of accession to the EU, while 19% to 34% were of the opposite opinion. Moreover, the approach to NATO is slowly changing at the political level. Although public support for Serbia's accession is still very low (approximately 10%), the government in Belgrade is trying to work closely with the Alliance. The organisation of Serbian forces, and management procedures, have long been in line with NATO's standards. The relations were further strengthened at the beginning of 2015, with the signing of the Individual Action Plan for Partnership (IPAP), which is the main form of cooperation with NATO for countries that have no membership aspirations. On the other hand, the experts from non-governmental research centres in, among other places, Belgrade, advocate for even greater rapprochement. They argue that one cannot formulate an effective national security policy based on the political dependence of the past.

Subject or Object? Serbia seeks to create a model of foreign policy based on maintaining an equal distance between Belgrade, Brussels, and Moscow. However, the asymmetry in relations with Russia indicates only an illusory partnership in bilateral contacts, and the increasingly clear intentions of the Kremlin, which has tried to reinforce the divisions in Belgrade's foreign policy and discourage Serbia's overtures towards the EU. Similar mechanisms have been used by Russia in relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, such as Slovakia and Bulgaria, which also used the concept of the bridge in its foreign doctrine. However, it is the EU that remains the only player capable of supporting modernisation and transformation in Serbia. Rapprochement with the EU, despite the fatigue of Brussels and many Member States, still gives a chance to coordinate activities in the areas relevant to the interests of the state, such as energy policy. After the fall of the South Stream project, the EU has proposed the inclusion of Serbia in the creation of an energy union, support for the construction of a gas interconnector with Bulgaria, and loans from the European Investment Bank for regional energy projects.

The concept of the bridge and an equal distance means that Serbia remains in fact on the periphery of international relations, and sometimes serves as the subject of disputes between the EU and Russia. Currently, it may be expected that the Kremlin will try to take advantage of the slow Belgrade–EU talks: despite the start of accession negotiations, in the first 15 months Serbia has not opened any chapter. The EU, in turn, will count on the disappointment of the Serbs with Moscow's dismissive treatment, but it should be also aware that, without clear success in EU integration, this will not translate into policy reorientation in Belgrade. Still, intensifying the debate in electronic and print media on the role of Russia in Serbia's politics may turn out to be important. Although the voices calling for a revision of the relations remain in the minority, their stimulation indicates that the topic will be increasingly crucial in Serbian public discourse, which may be reflected in the programmes of some political parties.

Meanwhile, the EU should work towards a swift opening of the first negotiating chapters in membership talks with Serbia, even more so since the screening procedure, or a review of Serbian law in terms of its compatibility with EU law, has just ended. This will be a clear signal for the government in Belgrade and for the Serbian public that the process has not slowed down. In addition, the experience of negotiations with Croatia shows the correlation between the stage in the integration process and the dynamics of reforms on the road to the EU. More intense recent Polish support on the expert level is a positive move, and should be continued. However, it is also worth taking care of closer relations at a high political level. By doing so, working contacts would be all the more visible in the Serbian society, and belief in the effectiveness of the due process of transformation and integration with the EU would become more popular.