



THE EU, GERMANY AND SERBIA: GEOSTRATEGIC INTERESTS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN DEMOCRATIZATION

The coming of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to power (2012) enjoyed wide public support (by the academic community, civil sector and media). However, the support given to it by the West's international community was even more important. Namely, it received assurances from the SNS leaders (Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić) that they switched to Euro-Atlantic integration. The West believed that the "shift" of the SNS towards the centre of the political spectrum was a guarantee for Serbia's European orientation. Such an attitude of the West towards Serbia stems from the fact that Serbia



Olaf Scholz and Aleksandar Vučić in Belgrade July 19th 2024

photo: FoNet

is perceived as the central country in the Western Balkans and the factor of (in)stability in the region. In this connection the key roles were played by Germany and the United States. As the most important EU country as well as due to its strategic and economic interests in the region, Germany played a dominant role during the last two decades.

Duško Lopandić, President of the Forum for International Relations of the European Movement in Serbia, notes that Vučić's rise to power

was linked to the support he enjoyed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel's party in the middle of the last decade due to his promise that he would cooperate in solving the Kosovo problem. In return, he was also given support for accession negotiations with the EU, German investments and the entry of the SNS into the European People's Party Group (EPP).¹

Already in 2013, in order to confirm its pro-European orientation, the SNS signed the Brussels Agreement on the Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations Between Belgrade and Pristina, which was concluded under the EU auspices in Brussels. At that time, a higher-level dialogue was also established and, at the very beginning, it was constructive: numerous agreements leading to Kosovo's sovereignty over its entire territory were signed. However, the impasse occurred with Russia's penetration of the Balkans, primarily Serbia, Montenegro and the Republic of Srpska, aiming to obstruct the expansion of the EU and NATO in the Western Balkans. This also coincided with the disengagement of the Western community, which enabled the agreement on the division of Kosovo (by Aleksandar Vučić and Hashim Thaçi) with the support of an international lobby group rallying prominent European, American and regional figures.

This "deal" on the division of Kosovo was prevented by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had a great influence on Vučić. Her farewell tour also included the visit to Serbia, which was considered as great support to Vučić. Although the authoritarian character of the government was already visible, Germany ignored this fact. The reports of the European Commission (EC) on Serbia's progress were benevolent,

1 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-nemacka-rio-tinto/>

without referring to Serbia's very weak and problematic progress, especially with respect to Chapters 23 and 24 (the rule of law, human rights, media freedom...) Her support, coupled with the support of Russian President Vladimir Putin, albeit with a different motivation, gave great momentum to Aleksandar Vučić who skillfully used that support for Serbia's affirmation at the international level, relying on four foreign policy pillars – China, Russia, the EU, primarily Germany, and the United States.

The German presence in Serbia is characterized by economic involvement and investments, which are the single largest in the region. In that period, Russia's financial involvement was minimal. It was focused on the spread of soft power in which it was very successful. This is also demonstrated by the fact President Putin has been the most popular politician in Serbia for years. Russia has very skillfully used Serbia's frustration with its defeats in the wars of the 1990s and has encouraged its revisionism when it comes to these defeats.

The West's attitude towards Serbia changed after Russian aggression against Ukraine, which fundamentally changed the geopolitical picture of Europe (although it was already changing over time). Serbia refused to align its foreign policy with that of the EU or, in other words, it did not want to impose sanctions against Russia primarily due to its close relations with Moscow, which it did not want to sacrifice.

In that period, the Brussels Agreement 2 and the Ohrid Agreement, by which Kosovo's independence is recognized, were concluded. Both Agreements became an integral part of Chapter 35 which means that Serbia cannot become an EU member without recognizing Kosovo.

This position of Serbia forced the EU to change its attitude towards it whereby Germany had the leading role once again. This was followed by the “Banjska case”² (the incursion of a Serbian paramilitary group into northern Kosovo, probably with the idea of forcing the division of Kosovo), the electoral fraud (December 2023) and, naturally, the adoption of the Resolution on Srebrenica at the United Nations (2024), which was sponsored by Germany. This was accompanied by the Serbian media campaign against Germany. The tension was finally eased with the arrival of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Belgrade and the signing of the Serbia-EU Memorandum on Sustainable Raw Materials.

However, the West’s multi-year policy of pandering to Serbia, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other hand, enabled the present government to continue with the total devastation of the society and institutions and the subjugation of the media, thus directing them towards discrediting and compromising all opponents – from the opposition to journalists. The starting point of the West was its belief that it would draw Serbia to its side. However, as Alicia Kearns, a British MP, points out, this is not seen on the ground.³

In a word, the West has turned its back on democratic regression in Serbia in order to achieve its strategic goals. The question is whether the circumstances will definitely push Vučić to that side, or the strong

2 Even after ten months, Serbia failed to do anything to legally untangle what actually happened on 24 September last year in the village of Banjska in northern Kosovo.

An investigation is not in sight and there is no indication of when the indictment will be filed.

3 <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/cnn-zapadni-pristup-vu%C4%8Di%C4%87u-destabilizuje-balkan/7223930.htm> l

desire for the realization of the “Serbian world” project, which is well underway, will prevail. Bearing in mind that Serbia cannot realize this project by itself, Russia’s support is still relevant. This incites fear in the region, which is not unfounded, that Belgrade has got the green light from the West to have Montenegro and the Republic of Srpska as compensation for the loss of Kosovo.

We should not lose sight of the fact that the Balkans are the security priority for Europe and NATO, especially after Russian aggression against Ukraine. Thus, NATO is developing its potentials in order to prevent any escalation in the region. The number of KFOR and EUFOR members has been increased; NATO bases are being built in Albania and Romania. At the NATO Summit in Washington, Albania, Greece, Bulgaria and Romania signed an agreement that enables the rapid cross-border movement of troops and the delivery of weapons to NATO’s eastern flank.⁴

The movements of the Serbian army are also monitored, while the Quint maintains Montenegro’s Euro-Atlantic orientation despite very unfavourable tendencies in Montenegro itself. Dodik’s constant provocations in Bosnia and Herzegovina are regularly met with harsh statements by the EU, the United States, NATO and the High Representative.

4 <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/svet/3926597-rumunija-bugarska-i-grcka-potpisale-sporazum-na-samitu-nato-ako-krene-ono-najgore-ovo-je-od-velike-vaznosti>

GERMAN POLICY TOWARDS BELGRADE

The behaviour of the German diplomacy towards Serbia is characterized by a conciliatory policy, which was especially evident during Angela Merkel's term in office as Chancellor, although Serbia has always conducted a distinctly nationalist-revisionist policy, destabilizing the region with its territorial aspirations. Such an attitude of the West and Germany encourages Belgrade to carry out a very aggressive policy towards its neighbours with impunity, not to mention a very toxic narrative that prevents the normalization of relations in the region.

Germany is undoubtedly Serbia's most important country, so that its insistence on democratic standards is crucial. If it abandons or relativizes its criteria, hardly any other EU country will have such authority to insist on the proclaimed standards.

Despite Germany's benevolent attitude, Belgrade conducted a very intense anti-German campaign during the last two years, because it was Germany that took a tougher stance vis-à-vis Serbia after Russian aggression against Ukraine due to its refusal to side with the EU and impose sanctions against Russia. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Serbia in 2022 but, at that time, there were other issues on the agenda, ranging from the imposition of sanctions against Russia to the relations with Kosovo and the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Another reason for Germany's more critical attitude since 2022 was its reaction to the Banjska case and, in particular, the electoral fraud in

December 2023. However, the fact that Germany was the main sponsor of the Resolution on Srebrenica at the United Nations caused an almost hysterical reaction in Belgrade.

Despite this campaign, Vučić always emphasized that Germany is economically vital for Serbia and that he wants the best possible relations with it. He recalled that this was possible when Angela Merkel was Chancellor. And then, as he said, some other people came and wished the end of Serbia or the Serbia they wished to see.⁵

However, Vučić skillfully manipulated with the entire "noise" regarding the preparation and adoption of the Resolution on Srebrenica at the United Nations, using it as the main topic of the ruling party's local election campaign.

Russia also joined the campaign, emphasizing that Germany has no moral right to stand behind the Resolution, because it is the country that exterminated tens of millions of people during World War II and committed countless crimes against humanity which have no statute of limitations.⁶

However, Germany's relations with Serbia were not shattered because, among other things, it is the largest investor in the Serbian economy, which, in essence, shows its attitude towards Serbia.

5 <https://www.dw.com/sr/%C4%8Dega-nema-u-cirkusu-vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-protiv-nema%C4%8Dkih-novina/a-64289067>

6 <https://happytv.rs/vesti/politika/nemci-odakle-vam-pravo-pobili-ste-10-miliona-ljudi-rusi-udarili-na-nemacku-zbog-rezolucije-o-srebrenici-preokret/735941/>

THE REVERSAL OF THE WEST'S BEHAVIOUR

The Memorandum on Sustainable Raw Materials signed by Serbia and the EU has prompted a public debate in Serbia, which builds on the earlier indignation not only by the opposition, but also by the wider public, especially experts, with respect to the potential lithium mining in the Jadar valley (in the vicinity of Loznica). On the other hand, the present regime and the representatives of the EU, especially Germany, express the assurances that, as stated by Chancellor Scholz, they consider it their duty to protect the environment and that they will always be an active partner and rely on the knowledge of engineers and other experts. The Executive Vice-President of the European Commission, Maroš Šefčovič, believes that this is a clear indicator and proof that Serbia can be progressively even more integrated into the EU economy. Apart from the government's unison assurance chorus assurance of the benefits of the Memorandum, President Vučić summed it up with a short statement: "It will be a quantum leap for Serbia".⁷

The agreement on lithium exploitation has changed the West's behaviour. Although the Serbian media have led an anti-European and, in particular, anti-German campaign on a number of occasions, neither the EU nor Berlin have seriously reacted to it. It is obvious that this is a question of geostrategic interests, because the Europeans want to become more independent from China which has raw material reserves, as well as to prevent its further penetration, which has been discussed on several occasions.

7 <https://www.nin.rs/politika/vesti/53345/sta-je-srbiji-donela-solcova-poseta>

The majority of EU politicians has welcomed this agreement as Serbia's turn to the EU and its integration into the EU economic flows. However, a lot of negative criticism has also been heard, including a reminder that the Serbian public has been deceived because in January 2022 the then Prime Minister Ana Brnabić stopped the lithium mining project due to environmental protests. However, this was only a bluff, because things changed dramatically thereafter. Josip Juratović, a member of the Bundestag, points out that "the key question is not whether lithium will be mined in Serbia, but whether Serbian institutions are strong enough to supervise compliance with the standards".⁸ In this sense, as he said, "neither Germany nor the EU can guarantee any standards without the functioning of democratic institutions in Serbia itself".⁹ Bodo Weber, a Senior Associate of the Democratization Policy Council, believes that it is about the policy aiming to get raw materials at all costs, ignoring the standards that the German government talks about when the democratic aspects and environmental protection are in question. He also believes that it is about sending the message about trading in industrial and geopolitical interests within the scope of green transition, which has a harmful effect on the democratic principles and values and thus on the interests of Germany and the EU. Namely, (lithium) extraction without a democratic process will mean that either the region will move further away from its EU-oriented future, or that a larger part of the EU will move further and further away from its core values.¹⁰

8 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/juratovic-nemacka-i-eu-ne-mogu-garantovati-standarde-uiskopavanju-litijuma-u-srbiji/b>

9 Ibid.

10 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/scholz-evropska-komsija-srbija-litijum/33041952.html>

Florian Bieber, a professor at the University of Graz, believes that Serbia has no independent institutions or media with national coverage and there is no critical civil society space. Thus, there is no guarantee that the mining project will comply with the Serbian standards (let alone with the EU ones).¹¹

In his commentary, Nikolas Busse, Foreign Editor, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), has pointed out that there are three good reasons why Germany and other EU countries should buy lithium from Serbia: “First, Europe can thereby reduce its dependence on Chinese batteries. Second, closer economic relations can make Serbia not to rely too much on Moscow and Beijing. Third, this increases the incentive for Vučić not to play a destructive role in the conflict with Kosovo.”¹²

In an author article for Focus, Claudia Kemfert, Professor of Energy Economics at the German Institute of Economic Research and Leuphana University of Lüneburg, points out that “this deal is still problematic for two reasons. First, the potential damage to the environment can be serious. Therefore, the extraction of raw materials should only be allowed if the environmental and social standards are met. The German Government and the EU should insist on the relevant certificates. Second, although Serbia is a candidate country for EU membership, it does not support EU sanctions and has concluded free trade agreements with Russia and China”. As she also points out, “the freedom of the press is stifled, while the judiciary is not considered to be

11 <https://direktno.rs/vesti/drustvo-i-ekonomija/541260/florijan-biber-evropska-unija-nemacka-litijum.html>

12 <https://www.dw.com/sr/nema%C4%8Dka-%C5%A1tampa-tri-razloga-za-litijum-iz-srbije-i-dva-protiv/a-69721610>

completely independent. The geopolitical criteria should also play a role. Consequently, Serbia is not an ideal partner for both reasons”.¹³

According to the British agency Reuters, the mine in Serbia could satisfy 90 per cent of the current needs of Europe which is trying to reduce its dependence on China – the dominant player on the “white gold” market.¹⁴

Criticism is also directed at Chancellor Olaf Scholz, because he is prepared to throw himself into the arms of an autocrat for the sake of raw materials. The Austrian daily newspaper Der Standard points out that there are several worrying things about the lithium deal with Aleksandar Vučić.¹⁵

Even in a Politico text it is written, inter alia: “After years in the diplomatic doghouse, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić is being catapulted back into the political limelight thanks to the European Union’s – and particularly Germany’s – voracious appetite for the raw materials needed to build electric cars”.¹⁶

However, all negative reactions boil down to the fact that the agreement favours the authoritarian leader and that democratic standards and liberal values are ignored.

13 Ibid.

14 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rudnik-litijum-jadarit-jadar-rio-tinto/33034209.html>

15 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/becki-standard-nemacka-se-zbog-litijuma-baca-u-zagrljaj-autokrate/>

16 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/tekst-o-vucicu-obojen-prezrivim-i-otrovnim-tonom-suzana-vasiljevic-pisala-briselskom-politiku/>

THE GOVERNMENT'S LOBBYING

In order to affirm the Lithium Agreement, the Serbian Government has launched a daily campaign, emphasizing all the economic benefits it will bring to Serbia. However, it has been caught off guard by the daily protests of citizens against lithium mining in Serbia, which is a growing problem, while the Government's reaction is inadequate and only increases the animosity towards any idea about mining. Any criticism against the ruling party, President Vučić or their policy is met with ad hominem attacks, slander campaigns and hate speech. In addition, President Vučić and his closest associates keep radicalizing the narrative on the endangerment of Serbs in the region and announce themselves on every date commemorating the Serbian victims of the Second World War and the wars of the 1990s.

With such behaviour the authorities prevent any critical opinion on the realization of a public project, thus invalidating any open and professional debate.

In order to mitigate criticism, President Vučić has said that the opening of the lithium mine is possible in 2028 and that mining will not begin without the German guarantees. "We won't even try to start (mining) until the Germans guarantee us that our rivers and mountains will be clean and that the landfilling operation will be carried out in accordance with all European standards."¹⁷

17 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-nemacka-rio-tinto/>

Dubravka Djedović Handanović, Minister of Mining and Energy, stated that "Serbia has a unique opportunity not only to be an exporter of finished products, not only batteries, but also electric vehicles. We have the opportunity to use mineral raw materials. If the whole of Europe is moving towards self-sustainability, I do not see any reason why Serbia should not do the same if it has minerals such as jadarite".¹⁸

Some members of the SNS, like Nebojša Bakarec, accuse the opposition that its goal is to stop the development of Serbia and prevent the use of a rare strategic raw material – lithium, the new gold. "The opposition's narrative on lithium is inquisitionally hysterical, inciting and pandering to subconscious fears. It intentionally causes panic, spreading lies and conspiracy theories."¹⁹

In March 2022, the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) presented the collection of papers on the Jadar project in which, among other things, it was pointed to its harmfulness, negative effects and possible consequences if it is realized.²⁰

Academician Slobodan Vukosavić believes that the goal of the story about lithium is to divert attention from the fact that the West wants our minerals, but not lithium the price of which plummeted during the last two years and that new types of batteries, which do not contain danger like lithium ones, are being developed. He adds that the

18 <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/balkan-srbija-ekolozi-rio-tinto-litijum-evropska-unija-eu-iskopavanje-pismo/7674295.html>

19 Lov na litijumske veštice, Politika, 7 August 2024.

20 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-rudnik-litijum-jadarit-jadar-rio-tinto/33034209.html>

intention is “to get our minerals – while being here – because we actually sell them cheaply, as it has been practiced so far”.²¹

As to criticism from the opposition, the President of the National Assembly, Ana Brnabić, has replied that the deputies of the Green-Left Front, the Democratic Party and the Movement of Free Citizens have confirmed that they are not against lithium mining, but are against it at present, while this government is in power. In her response to the accusations of corruption, she has asked them – who do you think has corrupted them – the German government or the European Union and then why Germany and the EU have not been accused of corruption.²²

President Vučić is not used to large-scale protests the against the lithium agreement; he was especially taken aback by the reactions of the residents of smaller towns where his electoral base is otherwise secure. In his frequent public appearances, he points out that the opponents of lithium mining are telling lies about the project, that the state will not do anything that can endanger the health of its citizens and that “there will be no mining for at least another two years”. Under the pressure of mass protests, a medical expert team was even set up to study the health effects of lithium mining, but only a few believe in its professional integrity.²³

21 <https://novimagazin.rs/vesti/329602-akademik-zapad-hoce-nase-minerale-koje-dajemo-budzasto-prica-o-litijumu---da-skrenu-paznju-s-toga>

22 <https://www.nin.rs/politika/vesti/53312/potpisan-memorandum-vucic-o-velikoj-sansi-koju-necemo-propustiti-solc-o-projektu-jadar>

23 “Formiran medicinski tim stručnjaka za proučavanje uticaja litijuma na zdravlje”, Politika, 7 August 2024

Despite all assurances, dissatisfaction is increasing and the government is taking increasingly radical measures, claiming that these protests are not about lithium, but about overthrowing the government in the streets, which it will not allow. The big protest in Belgrade (10 August) rallied about 40,000 people. Judging by the government’s reaction, it was shaken by it. All government-controlled media were put into action, led by TV Pink, which claimed that the protesters were planning a coup. President Vučić stated that he had been warned by the Russian security services in writing about the preparation of mass riots in Serbia, the ultimate goal of which was a coup and the removal of the legitimately elected state leadership.²⁴ He also claims that the protests in Belgrade were part of a hybrid approach and attempts to carry out so-called colour revolutions in various ways and accused the founder of the United Group, Dragan Šolak, of being behind them.²⁵ At the same time, showing nervousness, he pointed out that “we still do not know whether we will enter into the mining deal or not”.²⁶

REACTIONS OF THE OPPOSITION, THE PUBLIC AND THE OPPOSITION MEDIA IN SERBIA

A very heated debate about the justification of mining in Serbia is underway, protests are organized all over the country, while the headlines in the opposition media boil down to two key words – “colony state”, such as the headlines “Serbia’s vision is not to be a mining colony”, “Serbia must not be a colony for the enrichment of world companies,

24 “Vučić: Moskva nas upozorila na pripremu državnog udara”, Politika.

25 “Predsednik Vučić: Biću najgori policajac za ‘Rio Tinto’”, Politika, 12 August 2024.

26 Ibid.

“The Serbian people does not agree to be a Western colony”, “Serbia is no one’s colony and no one will destroy our country”.

One part of the public, especially the expert one, believes that economic cooperation, such as the agreement on lithium, anticipates an economic model that puts Serbia in a peripheral position and turns it into a specific raw material base of the German industry which, by investing in the Serbian market, actually imports cheap materials, energy and labour. Thus, the former Ambassador and Vice-President of the Serbia Centre party, Mihailo Brkić, believes that “the lithium mine in Jadar” would be a prominent example of a semi-colonial position. The short-term symphony of the interests of the two parties, the EU and Serbia, will actually lead to the divergence of national interests in the long run. Therefore, the weaker party, which is certainly Serbia, will suffer because the economically, populationally and ecologically devastated area is not the area that the EU needs”. According to him, “After embarking on lithium mining, Serbia could become an example of something that is called ‘the curse of resources’ or ‘abundance paradox’ in economics”. He mentioned the island country of Nauru as an example.²⁷

The Association of Environmental Organizations of Serbia (SEOS) sent a letter to the representatives of the European Commission in which it assures them that it “remains fully committed to preventing the Jadar

27 <https://www.nin.rs/politika/vesti/51901/brkic-kopanje-litijuma-u-srbiji-prokletstvo-resursa-i-sudbina-naurua>

lithium project from ever being implemented. If necessary, we will organize mass protests and civil disobedience as we did in 2022.”²⁸

The anti-lithium protests are the most powerful protest movement in recent history. There is also a massive response in smaller towns; 20 out of 28 protests were larger than the previously largest anti-violence protests. Aleksandar Gubaš, Director of the Archive of Public Protests, points out that the percentage of the local population’s participation has dramatically increased in smaller settlements that are close to the planned lithium mining zone. This proves that fear and anxiety are the strong motivators of such a huge response by the local population.²⁹

Aleksandar Gubaš believes that such a civil rebellion cannot be ignored or extinguished by media spin and campaigns.³⁰

Many critics of such lithium mining, like Dr Aleksandar Matković,³¹ believe that “our current model of attracting foreign investment to the Republic of Serbia has been exhausted and it has been like that for some time. The only problem is that no one wants to publicly admit that the king is naked and there is no campaign that can change this”.³² He further points out that, according to the Rio Tinto study, Ser-

28 <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/balkan-srbija-ekolozi-rio-tinto-litijum-evropska-unija-eu-iskopavanje-pismo/7674295.html>

29 “Najsnažniji protestni pokret u novijoj istoriji”, *Danas*, 7 August 2024.

30 *Ibid.*

31 He is a scientific associate at the Institute of Economic Sciences in Belgrade, member of the “China, Law and Development” Network at the University of Oxford, United Kingdom, external associate at the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam, Netherlands, and member of the Green-Left Front in Serbia.

32 <https://www.danas.rs/dijalog/licni-stavovi/otvoreno-pismo-rio-tinto/>

bia will “get” about 1.9 billion euros in total, which amounts to about 3% of GDP, in addition to indirect costs. A total amount of about 25 million euros is anticipated for the Municipality of Loznica and about 5 million euros annually for the local development fund, student scholarships and the like. In essence, the effects will be locally concentrated, which is commendable, but is not revolutionary and will not bring so much benefit to the whole of Serbia, despite the rhetoric of Vučić and his supporters.³³

The insinuations about who is preparing the coup have mainly been directed at the West, which is rather contradictory if one takes into account that the Memorandum on Lithium was signed with the German Cancellor and the European Commission.

However, journalist Boško Jakšić does not believe that anything can stop the machinery that has been set in motion for lithium mining in Serbia, because it is backed by the interests of the West and powerful multinational companies. Thus, it will be difficult to stop it even if the President is against this project.³⁴ He points out that the preparation of the terrain for lithium mining began much earlier, like Vučić’s statements that he was “stupid for allowing the Government to suspend the Jadar project”. Since then, however, everything has been going as expected. The executive and judicial branches of government only follow the presidential directives.³⁵

33 Ibid.

34 <https://www.nin.rs/politika/vesti/53984/ne-verujem-da-ista-moze-da-zaustavi-masineriju-koja-je-pokrenuta-za-iskopavanje-litijuma>

35 <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/intervju-bosko-jaksic-rudarenje-litijuma-moguće-u-celoj-srbiji-sve-je-pocelo-posle-vuciceve-izjave-da-je-ispao-glup/>

On the other hand, Miša Brkić, an economic journalist, believes that Serbia needs a mine and a battery factory and a car factory. And there must be some kind of political unity instead of the position “Get out of Serbia, we are against it”. He also mentions that the Jadar project was started much before Vučić’s coming to power. In 2012, he set on the already prepared chair, while in the meantime Green-Left activists, anti-globalists and far-right nationalists sided with the opponents. He believes that if a Russian state company came to build a lithium mine in Posavina, some of the opponents would have welcome Russian capital and fraternal Russian technology.³⁶

DOES THE AGREEMENT BRING SERBIA CLOSER TO THE EU?

Due to the very turbulent international circumstances, it is difficult to be certain about the true orientation of Serbia, that is, President Vučić. The fact is that the signing of the Memorandum on Sustainable Raw Materials objectively strengthens President Vučić’s position. The speculations as to whether Serbia has turned to the EU by signing this Memorandum are also the sphere of guesswork.

Above all else the question is whether the Memorandum and Vučić’s sudden turnabout after two years of his diplomatic isolation imply an accelerated path to EU membership or, as he said, “a quantum leap

36 <https://n1info.rs/biznis/ekonomski-novinari-oprecno-o-rio-tintu-odgovara-li-kopanje-litijuma-nekom-iz-vlasti-ili-celom-drustvu/>

into the future”³⁷, that is, whether reform stagnation, his close relations with Russia and China and, in particular, his attitude towards the region will be tolerated. The neighbouring countries fear that thanks to this Memorandum Serbia has got the green light to compensate Kosovo with Montenegro and the Republic of Srpska. Such fear is not unfounded bearing in mind Serbia’s actions in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the recent Declaration from the All-Serbian Assembly and very toxic narrative concerning all countries in the region.

The turnabout is certainly important when it comes to Serbia’s geopolitical orientation. However, it still seems that the Memorandum will not significantly speed up its EU accession path, because its multi-year stagnation and slow reform progress cannot be ignored, let alone the strengthening of authoritarianism, destruction of institutions and media, as well as the silencing of public space and critical thinking. Thanks to this agreement, President Vučić relativizes the EU’s criticism of the situation in Serbia during the last two years and, as it seems in essence, wishes to maintain Serbia’s status of “being on the path to EU accession” as long as possible, thus having access to EU funds.

Some analysts, like Ambassador (retired) Branka Latinović, conclude that the accelerated signing of the lithium agreement testifies about Serbia’s stronger turn to Europe. However, as she points out, it remains to be seen whether it will be accompanied by some other measures, bearing also military cooperation in mind.³⁸ Latinović says that it is still difficult to assess the political weight of Scholz’s visit, that is,

37 <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucic-i-solc-posle-potpisivanja-memoranduma-kvantni-skok-u-buducnost-za-srbiju-vazan-evropski-projekat/>

38 <https://www.nin.rs/politika/vesti/53345/sta-je-srbiji-donela-solcova-poseta>

whether other issues were also tackled, including the imposition of sanctions against Russia and EU accession.³⁹

Ambassador (retired) Srećko Djukić believes that, if the lithium project takes off, the value of Vučić’s “shares” will go up high in the region, all the more so because he has excellent relations with French President Emanuel Macron. US officials, including the US Ambassador in Belgrade, Christopher Hill, also praises him immensely, despite of what happened at the elections of 17 December 2023. China and Russia give him absolute support. In this way, Vučić is somehow becoming the master of the situation in the Western Balkans. His position will be increasingly stronger in contrast to Serbia’s prospects to join the EU, because he will continue to simulate being on the path to EU accession, while the European Union will continue to pretend not to see that.⁴⁰

There is no doubt that Russia follows closely what President Vučić does and keeps sending him messages. It has reacted harshly to the Financial Times’ revelation that Serbia has indirectly provided Ukraine with ammunition worth 800 million euros since the beginning of Russia’s invasion. Sergey Mardan, one of Russia’s leading military and political analysts, openly and fiercely criticized official Serbia and stated that “Serbia behaved as the worst whore”.⁴¹

The latest message in a series comes from Russian Senator Andrey Klimov, who predicts the imminent dissolution of the European Union

39 Ibid.

40 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-vucic-litijum-iskopavanje-protesti/33062595.html>

41 <https://srbin.info/svet/ruski-samar-vucicu-putinov-analiticar-srbija-se-ponela-kao-zadnja-kurva-video/?lang=lat>

like the Soviet Union. He also says that the BRICS door is open to Serbia. According to him, this would imply the pursuit of one's own policy without having any obligations and responsibilities vis-à-vis other structures. Consequently, the perception of the imminent collapse of the West is constantly promoted, which is not foreign to our elites, not only to politicians.⁴²

Moscow also commented on the rise of the protests in Serbia through Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, who accused the whole West of trying to take advantage of the justified citizens' discontent and environmental concern, using the "Maidan" techniques to destabilize the situation in the country.⁴³ She points out: "We consider such tactics destructive and irresponsible. Abuses of this kind, especially in the current turbulent conditions, pose a direct threat to Serbia and call into question the constant efforts of the President and Government to ensure the sustainable development of the country and well-being of its citizens."⁴⁴

It is important to note that Serbia and Russia have formed a working group to cooperate in the fight against colour revolutions. Among other things, their cooperation anticipates "combatting mass riots" as well as surveying opposition activists, nongovernmental organizations and independent journalists.⁴⁵ Just in the current situation, the implemen-

42 "Klimov: 'EU će doživeti sudbinu Sovjetskog saveza'", Politika, 21 July 2024.

43 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/oglasila-se-zaharova-o-protestima-u-srbiji-evo-koga-je-okrivila/>

44 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/zaharova-o-litijumu-zapad-prirodnu-zabrinutost-gradjana-koristi-za-destabilizaciju/5xrcrmh>

45 <https://standard.rs/2021/12/07/nova-s-istrazuje-cime-se-bavi-srpsko-ruska-radna-grupa-za-objedene-revolucije/>

tation of such an agreement could bring Serbia into a serious conflict with the EU regulations and behaviour.

Ivana Stradner, Senior Advisor at the Foundation for Defense of Democracy in Washington, believes that Russia understands Serbia and Vučić better than the West, especially when it is about the ethnic problems in the region, the identity and cultural problems that can escalate at any time. She points out that Putin is not interested in the Balkans for ideological reasons, but because the Balkans are a trouble spot that he can always activate, using the "proxies" like Vučić and Dodik, and then positioning himself as a mediator and telling the West – if you don't want the Balkans to escalate even more, you must negotiate about Ukraine.⁴⁶

In his article published in the Financial Times, Misha Glenny, Rector of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, writes: "Vučić is a past master in gesture politics. But this goes beyond that. He is taking a big risk and so is the EU. If Rio Tinto can exploit the lithium with minimum damage to the environment, the rewards are considerable. But failure will both erode Vučić's iron grip on power in Serbia and leave the EU's critical raw materials policy looking, if not broken, then certainly tattered."

46 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-postaje-saveznik-brisela-da-li-litijum-jaca-njegovu-poziciju-u-regionu/>

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The geostrategic turbulence in Europe is increasingly reflected in its value orientation and standards. Although it clings to its civilizational achievements, it is precisely its policy of pandering to Serbia that shows how it is difficult to apply the standards in the cases like Serbia. On the other hand, the current Serbian government uses this very skillfully by being open to all those who want to invest and provide financial support.

The strategy of the West to attract Belgrade to its side at any cost and distance it from Russia, thus tolerating Serbia's behaviour, enhances distrust in the region, especially because Belgrade has not yet shown that it has given up its regional aspirations.

Giving priority to raw materials, such as lithium, pushes the insistence on the rule of law and EU standards aside, reinforces autocratic behaviour, ignores domestic protests and sends a wrong signal to the entire region.

Regardless of Chancellor Scholz's promises that standards for developing lithium capacities will be monitored, it is unlikely that the EU will insist on the environmental and social standards in Serbia, as there are no enough capacities to do so.

Any public debate has been either prevented or demonized, which increases the discontent of the citizens who have been protesting against the Rio Tinto project for years, because the basic data on environmental protection in that region are nontransparent and unavailable to the general public.

In the meantime, the Serbian Government adopted the Declaration of the "All-Serbian Assembly" which was condemned, inter alia, by the members of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denis Bećirović and Željko Komšić, as well as the European Union and the United States. Giving up the "Serbian world" will certainly be a prerequisite for confidence building and affirming Serbia as an important actor that will contribute to the pacification and stabilization of the region.

The Memorandum on Lithium additionally strengthens President Vučić's position and it is unlikely that the democratization of Serbia will be on the EU agenda in the foreseeable future. President Vučić still has room for balancing, but it is shrinking and the circumstances will push him more and more towards the West. If he still remains undecided and relies on Russia and China, Serbia will become isolated from its own surroundings where, in essence, its vital national interests lie. Such a position of Serbia suits not only the current elite, but also Russia.