

Politeja

No. 4(73), 2021, pp. 85-96

<https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.18.2021.73.05>

Licensing information: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Natasza STYCZYŃSKA 

Jagiellonian University in Kraków

natasza.styczynska@uj.edu.pl

## WHO ARE BELGRADE'S MOST DESIRED ALLIES?

### NARRATIVE ON THE EUROPEAN UNION, CHINA AND RUSSIA DURING SERBIAN PARLIAMENTARY CAMPAIGN OF 2020

**ABSTRACT** Serbia presents itself as a country skillfully balancing between the European Union (EU), Russia, and Asia, trying to maintain good political and economic relations with the biggest players on the international arena. The Covid-19 pandemic and China's media-publicized assistance to Serbia has affected the perception of which countries are seen as Belgrade's true allies. At the same time, Serbia remains a EU candidate country (membership negotiations officially started in 2014) and the European Union is not only Serbian biggest trading partner, but also the biggest donor. The main aim of the article is to compare the distinctive meaning that EU membership and cooperation with non-EU countries (mainly China and Russia) has for Serbian political parties, taking into account that the Covid-19 pandemic and the 'vaccine diplomacy' influenced the Serbian public discourse and perception on who is the Belgrade's most trustful partner.

**Keywords:** Serbia, parliamentary elections, political parties, EU integration, Covid-19 pandemic

## INTRODUCTION

Serbia presents itself as a country skillfully balancing between the European Union (EU), Russia, and Asia, trying to maintain good political and economic relations with the biggest players on the international arena. During the 2020 parliamentary campaign, President Aleksandar Vučić, whose Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) led in opinion polls, had been vocally supportive of Chinese leader Xi Jinping but also underlined strong ties between Serbia and the Russian Federation. At the same time, Serbia remains a EU candidate country (membership negotiations officially started in 2014) and the European Union is not only Serbian biggest trading partner but also the biggest donor.<sup>1</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic and China's media-publicized assistance to Serbia has affected the perception of which countries are seen as Belgrade's true allies.

After the break-up of Yugoslavia, the NATO intervention, and the declaration of independence by Montenegro and Kosovo, foreign policy issues, including European integration, fostered the emergence of a clear division on the Serbian political arena and in the discourse of political parties. However, it seems that in the last decade the most mainstream parties have become 'catch-all' parties and it is difficult to identify their ideological stance or to place them on the right-left spectrum.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, most parties present pro-EU positions though the issue of integration is not discussed in detail either within the parties or in the public discourse. The Covid-19 pandemic and the reactions to it have become a litmus test for relations between states not only in Europe but worldwide. One example, perhaps, is how the pandemic was used to influence relations between the Balkan states and the EU as well as other major players on the international arena. The organisation of elections and, above all, the electoral campaign that was conducted during this period is unprecedented. Therefore, it is difficult if not impossible to compare the 2020 Serbian parliamentary elections to former ones as the context of the campaign was incomparable to any previous ones.

This article aims to compare the distinctive meaning that the EU membership and cooperation with non-EU countries (mainly China and Russia) has for Serbian political parties. The main focus is on narrative, but to analyze it fully one needs to take into consideration the specific context of the 2020 elections. We know from existing research that the Covid-19 pandemic and the 'vaccine diplomacy' influenced the Serbian public discourse in 2020<sup>3</sup> but the official documents remain worth studying in order to bring to light the way the true allies of Belgrade are portrayed. Knowing that the EU is the biggest partner in terms of trade and investments, the main questions remain to what extent this fact is reflected in the official party narratives, and how the other, potentially

---

<sup>1</sup> H. Conely et al., "Becoming a Chinese Client State. The Case of Serbia", *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 2020, p. 4, at [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200924\\_Chinese\\_Client.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200924_Chinese_Client.pdf), 25 May 2021.

<sup>2</sup> In western democracies the process of "de-ideologization" was observed as early as 1966 by Otto Kirchheimer.

<sup>3</sup> H. Conely et al., "Becoming a Chinese Client State..."

alternative allies such as China and Russia, are perceived. To answer these questions, I conducted qualitative content analysis, with empirical material consisting of programs of all relevant political parties in Serbia available during the 2020 election year.

The first part of the article presents a broader context of the 2020 parliamentary elections, which were postponed and boycotted by opposition parties. The second part focus is on the analyses of the narrative on the EU, China, and Russia seen through the prism of the party manifestos, before moving to the conclusion.

## BACKGROUND – 2020 ELECTIONS IN THE SHADOW OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND MASS PROTESTS

On June 21, 2020 parliamentary, regional (the parliament of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina) and local elections were held in Serbia. The vote was supposed to take place on April 26 but was postponed due to the declaration of a state of emergency because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The campaign took place in the specific circumstances of the pandemic, as well as a strong conflict in the political arena, with one of its emanations being mass protests that had been going on since 2018. Protests, one of the biggest since the anti-Milosevic Bulldozer Revolution of 2000, led by the opposition Coalition for Serbia, gained strength after Borko Stefanovic, an opposition politician and one of the coalition leaders, got beaten by unknown assailants. Every Saturday, the protests in Belgrade and other major cities of Serbia (as well as Vienna and Prague) gathered crowds dissatisfied with the SNS domination and semi-authoritarian rule of Vučić.<sup>4</sup>

The protests continued until the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 and were partially continued after the end of the first lockdown. The protesters demanded first of all the resignation of the president, and the protests indicated the lack of consent to the restriction of the freedom of the press, the authoritative aspirations of the ruling party, corruption scandals, and deteriorating public finances. The protests have been heavily criticized in the mainstream media, which are owned by government-controlled businesses. Both opposition and international organizations pointed to the lack of objectivity of the Serbian media. The Freedom House report downgraded Serbia from a democracy to a 'transitional or hybrid regime,' pointing out not only endangered media freedom but also increasing corruption and state capture and strongman tactics by the government.<sup>5</sup> The report stated that in the last years SNS *has steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organizations.*<sup>6</sup> As a result of the inability to negotiate with the government camp, major opposition parties boycotted the elections, claiming that in

<sup>4</sup> S. Mladenov-Jovanović, "‘One out of Five Million’: Serbia’s 2018-19 Protests against Dictatorship, the Media, and the Government’s Response", *Open Political Science*, vol. 2 (2019), pp. 1-8.

<sup>5</sup> Freedom House, *Nations in Transit – Serbia Country Report 2020*, at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2020>, 20 May 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

these circumstances they are neither free nor fair. Due to the boycott, the turnout was much lower than usual (48.88%).<sup>7</sup>

Serbia (together with Montenegro) is a front runner for the EU accession and President Vučić as well as his SNS party are known for the pro-EU rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> The SNS official manifesto also underlines the need for a pro-EU policy of Serbia. In view of this, his high criticism towards the EU and praising China for medical assistance during the Covid crisis could come as a surprise. As early as March 2020, Vučić called the Chinese President Xi Jinping *a true friend and a brother of the Serbian people* and described EU solidarity as *a fairy tale*.<sup>9</sup> This type of rhetoric was not only welcomed in China and mainstreamed by Chinese media but contributed to the perception the EU failed and the only true help in a time of need comes from outside of Europe. Apart from China, the other (and hardly new) strategic ally is Russia, perceived by a majority of the society as a trustful partner, whose position strengthened during the Covid crisis by 'vaccine diplomacy' among other things, as it delivered the first batch of Sputnik V vaccine in December 2020.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the opposition boycotting the elections, the voting took place as planned and the SNS-led coalition For Our Children won the elections as expected. The coalition received 60.65% of the votes, which gave 188 out of 250 seats in the parliament.<sup>11</sup> Second came the Socialist Party of Serbia-United Serbia Coalition (SPS-JS) with 10.4% of the votes and 32 seats, followed by the Serbian Patriotic Alliance (SPAS) with 11 seats (3.8%).<sup>12</sup> Four minority parties also entered the parliament: the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (9 seats), the Muamer Zukorlic – Only Right – Party of Justice and Reconciliation (SPP) – Democratic Party of Macedonians (4 seats), the Albanian Democratic Alternative – United Valley (3 seats), and the list of SDA Sandzak – Dr Sulejman Ugljanin (3 seats).<sup>13</sup> The current Serbian parliament is "left without pro-EU if any, opposition,<sup>14</sup>" as the pro-EU candidates, such as Free Citizens Movement and United Democratic Serbia failed to reach the 3% threshold.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Election Guide, at <https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/242/>, 20 May 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Stance on the EU integration was one of the main reasons for SNS to be created, after a group of pro-European politicians led by A. Vučić split from radical-right Serbian Radical Party (SRS) in 2008.

<sup>9</sup> M. Rudge, J. Oertel, "Serbia's Coronavirus Diplomacy Unmasked", 26 March 2020, *European Council of Foreign Relations*, at [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_serbias\\_coronavirus\\_diplomacy\\_unmasked/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_serbias_coronavirus_diplomacy_unmasked/), 25 May 2021.

<sup>10</sup> T. Ozturk, "Russian Sputnik V Vaccine Arrives in Serbia", *Anadolu Agency*, 30 December 2020, at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russian-sputnik-v-vaccine-arrives-in-serbia/2093707>, 25 May 2021.

<sup>11</sup> *The Government of the Republic of Serbia, Final Results of Parliamentary Elections in Serbia Announced in Belgrade*, 6 July 2020, at <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/158391/final-results-of-parliamentary-elections-in-serbia-announced.php>, 25 May 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> "Serbian Parliament Left Without Clear Opposition as the Ruling Party Wins Partially Boycotted Elections", *European Western Balkans*, 22 June 2020, at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/06/22/serbian-parliament-left-without-clear-opposition-as-the-ruling-party-wins-partially-boycotted-elections/>, 20 May 2021.

<sup>15</sup> The election threshold was lowered from 5% to 3% only a few months before the elections.

## WHO IS BELGRADE'S MOST DESIRED ALLY? ANALYSIS OF PARTY MANIFESTOS

Political parties undoubtedly belong to the most important actors in contemporary politics. They perform several functions, one of which is ideological in nature, related to the construction and expression of ideological postulates, as well as their dissemination among potential voters.<sup>16</sup> Through election programs and manifestos, parties communicate this vision, thus becoming producers of political discourse. This article focuses on election programs and manifestos of political parties with the exclusion of spoken statements from the analysis. This approach is based on the idea to study the official discourse of parties instead of individual statements, which sometimes tend to be emotional and based on personal experiences.<sup>17</sup> The programs of political parties function as universal communication tools with a potential voter by presenting a vision of the world or the way of interpreting reality by a given political party, as well as presenting actions that should be taken in specific situations.

Although there were four parliamentary elections in Serbia in the last decade, it seems that the political parties are not motivated to produce programs and electoral manifestos specifically for each of the campaigns. Party documents are often outdated, but still, they are the only available official stance on the most important issues. For the purposes of this article, 21 program documents issued by relevant political parties that entered parliament as a result of the elections in June 2020 have been analyzed. When analyzing the documents, I focused on coding both negative and positive references to Serbia's cooperation with the European Union, Russia, and China, as well as accompanying arguments in order to understand who and why is perceived as the country's most desirable ally.

Table 1. Results of 2020 parliamentary elections and distribution of seats

Party/Coalition	% of votes	Seats
For Our Children (SNS–SDPS–PS–PUPS–PSS–SNP–SPO–NSS)	60.65 %	188
SPS–JS–ZS–KP	10.38%	32
Serbian Patriotic Alliance	3.83 %	11
Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians	2.23%	9
Straight Ahead (SPP–DPM)	1%	4
Albanian Democratic Alternative	0.82%	3
Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak	0.77%	3

<sup>16</sup> More about functions of political parties in G. Almond, B. Powell, *Comparative Politics: A Development Approach*, Boston 1966.

<sup>17</sup> K. Kłosińska, *Etyczny i pragmatyczny. Polskie dyskursy polityczne po 1989 roku*, Warszawa 2012.

The winner of the election is the SNS-led coalition For Our Children, with an overwhelming dominance of SNS, the largest party in government. The Progressive Party has already won the elections in 2012, 2014, and 2016, giving Vučić power over the government. His position was strengthened even more when he was elected President of Serbia in 2017. SNS is perceived as right-wing and populist, and the coalition it leads has all the features of a catch-all actor. During the 2020 campaign, SNS *promoted pro-Russian and pro-Chinese policies while simultaneously keeping avenues open toward eventual EU membership, despite increased Euroscepticism emanating from President Vučić*.<sup>18</sup>

Formally, President Vučić's prerogatives are very limited, but the full extent of his control over the party was confirmed by the election campaign, in which other SNS politicians (including Prime Minister Ana Brnabic) were virtually absent. The name of the electoral list, 'Aleksandar Vučić – For Our Children,' both in the local and parliamentary elections, did not even include the name of the party focusing instead on the role of the leader.<sup>19</sup>

Official SNS political agenda is organized around the project of joining the EU, which will bring *institutional and economic strengthening of Serbia and is serving the long-term interest of all our citizens*.<sup>20</sup> Although the foreign policy is not the most elaborated part in the main program of SNS, apart from the EU integration the party declares *peaceful foreign policy based on military neutrality, intensification of cooperation with the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, and Japan*.<sup>21</sup> In the case of cooperation with Russia, the identity and cultural aspects are highlighted as the document states that *special attention should be paid to the common interest in conservation and promotion Orthodoxy and Slavic identity*.<sup>22</sup>

For Our Children coalition lacked ideological coherence as it includes, apart of SNS, also the leftist Movement of Socialists, Social Democratic Party of Serbia, Euro-sceptic, and pro-Russian Serbian People's Party, Party of United Pensioners, Strength of Serbia Movement, monarchists from Serbian Renewal Movement, and the People's Peasant Party representing mainly interests of farmers.<sup>23</sup> The Coalition program leaflet is full of photos of Vučić with world leaders as well as information about accomplished and perspective investments (mainly in infrastructure). One of the flagship projects for the coalition is a gas pipeline, which the program illustrates with a picture of the Serbian leader next to Bulgarian PM Boyko Borisov, Turkish President Recep Tayyip

<sup>18</sup> Centre for Strategic and International Studies, *Serbia Parliamentary Elections*, 21 June 2021, at <https://www.csis.org/programs/european-election-watch/serbia>, 26 May 2021.

<sup>19</sup> M. Szpala, "Wybory w Serbii – manifestacja dominacji Vučića", *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich*, 24 June 2020, at <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2020-06-24/wybory-w-serbii-manifestacja-dominacji-vucicia>, 26 May 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Serpska Napredna Stranka, *Program*, 2011, p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> *Za Naszu Decu*, 2020, at <https://zanasudecu.sns.org.rs/#srbija2025>, 20 February 2021.



Erdogan, and the president of Russia Vladimir Putin.<sup>24</sup> The part dedicated to the foreign policy is enigmatic and only points out at the importance of *membership of Serbia in the EU with securing and strengthening partnership connection with Russia, China, and the US*.<sup>25</sup>

Besides the joined manifesto, it's interesting to look at those parties in the SNS-led coalition that are not sharing the pro-European views voiced by President Vučić and the SNS party. One of them is the anti-EU Serbian People's Party (SNP), which sees *Russia as one of Serbia's most important political and economic partners* and underlines that *Serbia had no closer friend than Russia in the past*.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, the party opposes Serbia's accession to the European Union because, according to the SNP manifesto, *rational reasons indicate that it is not in our economic and political interest*.<sup>27</sup> A similar stance can be observed when it comes to the security issues, as SNP advocates *military neutrality and rejection NATO membership*.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, the Movement of Socialists (PS) declares the need to intensify cooperation with Russia on political, economic, and cultural levels, as well as *with China and the countries of the Southeast European region*.<sup>29</sup> The party opposes Serbian accession to the EU and states that *no one prevents Serbia from adopting positive European values, such as the depoliticization of the judiciary, the reduction of social differences, and the creation of a Scandinavian-type welfare state, without being an EU member*.<sup>30</sup>

While the PS and SNP voice the need to deepen the cooperation with Russia, it seems that the most pro-EU views in SNS-led coalition can be found in the monarchist Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), that declares EU membership as one of the most important interests of Serbia, but also points out at the favourable location of the country that should be treated as a *bridge between Europe and Asia, the Adriatic and the Danube, the Balkans and Russia*.<sup>31</sup>

The left-wing coalition led by the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) included United Serbia (JS), the Greens of Serbia (ZS), and the Communist Party (KP). Although the coalition was running in the elections outside of the SNS-led block, SPS and JS are long-lasting allies of President Vučić and part of governing coalition. SPS is a center-left while JS is a center-right party, but despite the differences, they agree on the issues such as denying Kosovo's independence. SPS advocates for EU membership and underlines ideological ties with international networks, such as the Party of European

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> *Koalicija oko Srpske Napredne Stranke "Za Naszu Decu"*, 2020, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> *Srpska Narodna Partija, Program*, 2020, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> *Pokret Socialista, Program*, at <http://pokretsocijalista.rs/page/osnivacki-program/program-politicke-partije.html>, 17 March 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> *Srpski Pokret Obnove, Program*, 2014, at <http://www.spo.rs/doc/program-spo-eds.pdf>, 17 March 2021.

Socialist.<sup>32</sup> According to SPS, *Serbia and the Serbian people historically, culturally, economically, in one word, civilizationally belong to the European community of peoples* and this is why EU membership is a strategic national interest of the country.<sup>33</sup> United Serbia backs the EU accession, although its rather enigmatic and short program almost does not mention foreign policy.<sup>34</sup> The two smaller coalition parties: the Greens and Communist Party, come from two opposite sides of the political spectrum, Greens advocating for liberal Europe and Serbian accession, while Titoist KP voices anti-capitalism.<sup>35</sup>

The 2020 newcomer was the Serbian Patriotic Alliance (SPAS) center-right, a conservative party led by Aleksandar Sapic from 2018 until its dissolution and merging into SNS.<sup>36</sup>

Although the manifesto points out the most important areas and lists proposed reforms, external relations or foreign policy is not mentioned directly, apart from the constatation that globalization is inevitable, and Serbia, being part of the process, should mind its national interest first.<sup>37</sup>

The last part of the analyses of the manifestos will be dedicated to four minority parties that entered the parliament in 2020. All of them were re-elected and improved their score comparing to the 2016 elections.<sup>38</sup> In the program prepared for 2020 parliamentary elections, Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians underlines that its stance on the foreign policy of Serbia *in the last two and a half decades has not deviated from the basic principles: the measure of loyalty to the country we live in demands Serbia's accession to the European Union*.<sup>39</sup> The party does not mention other strategic alliances, but underlines that more effort is needed *to speed up the process of Serbia's accession to the European Union, consolidate democratic institutions, and strengthen the rule of law, more efficient harmonization with the *acquis communautaire*, protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, and economic reforms*.<sup>40</sup> Equally pro-European is the program of both Straight Ahead (SPP–DPM) that represents Macedonians and Bosniak minority of Sandzak region in south Serbia,<sup>41</sup> and Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak.<sup>42</sup> Al-

<sup>32</sup> Socijalistička Partija Srbije, *Statut*, 2018, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Socijalistička Partija Srbije, *Program*, 2014, p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Jedinstvena Srbija, *Program*, 2011, at <http://www.jedinstvenasrbija.org.rs/program-stranke>, 5 May 2021.

<sup>35</sup> More about Greens can be found at <https://zelenisrbije.org/> and Komunistička Partija at <http://www.kp.rs/>.

<sup>36</sup> N1, Deklaracija SPAS-a i SNS, 29 May 2021, at <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/deklaracija-spas-a-i-sns/>, 1 June 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Srpski Patriotski Savez, *Program*, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> *Izveštaj o ukupnim rezultatima izbora 2020*, at <https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs/extfile/sr/9419/Izveštaj%20o%20ukupnim%20rezultatima%20izbora%2020201.doc>, 1 June 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Savez Vojvodanskih Mađara, *Izborni program 2020-2024*, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Stranka Pravde i Pomirenja, *Programska načela 2017*, at [http://spp.rs/?page\\_id=2590](http://spp.rs/?page_id=2590), 1 June 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Stranka Demokratske Akcije Sandžaka, *Program*, 2009.



banian Democratic Alternative is focused on increasing the visibility of the Albanian minority in Serbia; due to the shortage of party documents, its stance on international relations remains unclear.

## CONCLUSIONS

The 2020 parliamentary elections and the campaign preceding them took place at a very specific time, namely the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, which according to commentators *has opened up space for a 'battle of narratives' between China and Western democracies*.<sup>43</sup>

Focusing the campaign around the president Vučić rather than prime minister Brnabić was one of the most visible aspects of the campaign. Moreover, documents issued by political parties, including SNS, not only treated foreign policy and international relations in a very general manner, but were often out of date, and political discourse was geared towards discussions about economic profits. In the 2020 campaign, similarly to the previous ones, Vučić pursued a populist and increasingly authoritarian 'third-way' rhetoric that is a combination of pro-EU arguments while at the same time maintaining good relations and deepening ties with Russia and China.<sup>44</sup> By analyzing the programs, one can only confirm the earlier observations of researchers who wrote that the EU is present in the manifestos, but only in fairly general terms. The European Union is becoming an important point of reference in party programs, although in fact many of these declarations are very outward, and their implementation is often even more superficial.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, cooperation with countries such as Russia or China seems to be largely declarative, which does not mean that it has no influence over the public perception of these countries. On the contrary, according to the polls, currently, most Serbians consider Russia and China to be the greatest allies of Serbia, while the EU is not perceived as the important partner.<sup>46</sup> China is portrayed as a solid partner, and moreover a politically convenient one since it does not insist on democratic values and does not recognise Kosovo's independence. China is also increasingly present in the Serbian industry.

China acquired key Serbian companies in the heavy sector: a steelworks in Smederevo and a mining and metallurgical company in Bor.<sup>47</sup> 2017 also saw the start of the modernisation of the Belgrade-Budapest railway line, which is being carried out by

<sup>43</sup> M. Rudge, J. Oertel, "Serbia's Coronavirus Diplomacy Unmasked."

<sup>44</sup> S. Miteva, "Populism and Cozy Ties with Russia and China: Vučić Takes Serbia Further away from the EU", *EURACTIV*, 20 April 2021.

<sup>45</sup> D. Mikucka-Wójtowicz, "Europeizacja partii oraz systemów partyjnych Serbii i Chorwacji – między rzeczywistością a iluzjami", *Politeja*, vol. 12, no. 5(37) (2015), pp. 161-191.

<sup>46</sup> H. Conely et al., "Becoming a Chinese Client State...", p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> M. Szpala, "Wybory w Serbii..."

Chinese companies and financed by a Chinese loan<sup>48</sup> and has become a flagship investment, promoted in For Our Children Coalition's election materials. Interestingly, the co-operation with China appears to have been skillfully promoted, as recent data show that China has less economic influence on the CEE states than presumed.<sup>49</sup>

The idea of cooperation with Russia and its perception as an alternative to co-operation with the European Union has a long tradition. In contrast to cooperation with China, cultural and identity issues are of high importance here. Russia is perceived by part of the Serbian political elite as an old friend and reliable partner, also in the area of security. This is now being compounded by economic issues, such as the Turk Stream gas pipeline, which is supposed to transport Russian oil via Turkey to EU countries. The project is being implemented in a non-transparent way and, if it comes into being, it will strengthen the position of Russian companies on the gas markets of south-eastern European countries, derailing EU plans to liberalize and integrate these markets.<sup>50</sup>

In conclusion, it can be noted that although the division into pro- and anti-EU parties is clearly visible in the political arena, the nature of the program documents indicates a very superficial treatment of this issue and shows that, in reality, European integration is not a priority for the largest political parties. In a similar vein, Jelena Subotić observed that *in countries where the European idea is not broadly shared*,<sup>51</sup> *pro-European groups will find it hard to forge crosscutting coalitions needed to successfully promote Europeanization with all its associated costs*.<sup>52</sup> The slow pace of the process is primarily due to a lack of determination on the part of the Serbian authorities (i.e. the SNS-led coalition with a majority in parliament) to implement reforms and to the regression in priority areas for the EU (the judiciary and the rule of law). We are dealing with a declarative interest in integration<sup>53</sup> and attempts to maintain good relations with both the EU and Russia and China, with simultaneous progressive aideologisation of parties, most of which can hardly be located on the left-right spectrum, as their rhetoric is purely populist and utility-driven. Due to the economic benefits, one can expect that President Vučić and his party (with numerous coalition partners) will try to pursue such a multi-vector policy for as long as possible.

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> T. Matura, "Chinese Investment in Central and Eastern Europe: A reality check", *Central and Eastern European Center for Asian Studies*, April 2021, pp. 1-12.

<sup>50</sup> M. Szpala, "Wybory w Serbii..."

<sup>51</sup> The most recent Eurobarometer survey that included Serbia was taken in the summer of 2020. It found that while 85 percent of Serbians feel attached to their country, only 15 percent feel attached to the EU.

<sup>52</sup> J. Subotić, "Europe is a State of Mind: Identity and Europeanization in the Balkans", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 55 (2011), p. 309.

<sup>53</sup> SNS cooperates with European Peoples Party; before the 2020 elections Vučić and his SNS was supported by EPP's president Donald Tusk.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Almond G.A., Bingham Powell B., *Comparative Politics: A Development Approach*, Boston 1966.
- Centre for Strategic and International Studies, *Serbia Parliamentary Elections*, 2021, at <https://www.csis.org/programs/european-election-watch/serbia>.
- Conely H et al., "Becoming a Chinese Client State. The Case of Serbia", *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 2020, at [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200924\\_Chinese\\_Client.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200924_Chinese_Client.pdf).
- Election Guide, at <https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/242/>.
- "Serbian Parliament Left without Clear Opposition as the Ruling Party Wins Partially Boycotted Elections", *European Western Balkans*, 22 June 2020, at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/06/22/serbian-parliament-left-without-clear-opposition-as-the-ruling-party-wins-partially-boycotted-elections/>.
- Izveštaj o ukupnim rezultatima izbora 2020*, at <https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs/extfile/sr/9419/Izveštaj%20o%20ukupnim%20rezultatima%20izbora%2020201.doc>.
- Jedinstvena Srbija, *Program*, 2011, at <http://www.jedinstvenasrbija.org.rs/program-stranke>.
- Koalicija oko Srpske Napredne Stranke „Za Naszu Decu”, 2020.
- Matura T., "Chinese Investment in Central and Eastern Europe: A Reality Check", *Central and Eastern European Center for Asian Studies*, April 2021.
- Mikucka-Wójtowicz D., „Europeizacja partii oraz systemów partyjnych Serbii i Chorwacji – między rzeczywistością a iluzjami”, *Politeja*, vol. 12, no. 5(37) (2015), pp. 161-191, <https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.12.2015.37.11>.
- Miteva S., "Populism and Cozy Ties with Russia and China: Vučić Takes Serbia Further away from the EU", *EURACTIV*, 20 April 2021.
- Mladenov-Jovanović S., "‘One out of Five Million’: Serbia’s 2018-19 Protests against Dictatorship, the Media, and the Government’s Response", *Open Political Science*, vol. 2 (2019), pp. 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.1515/openps-2019-0001>.
- N1, *Deklaracija SPAS-a i SNS*, 29 May 2021, at <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/deklaracija-spas-a-i-sns/>.
- Pokret Socialista, *Program*, at <http://pokretsocijalista.rs/page/osnivacki-program/program-politicke-partije.html>.
- Rudge M., Oertel J., "Serbia’s Coronavirus Diplomacy Unmasked", *European Council of Foreign Relations*, 26 March 2020, at [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_serbias\\_coronavirus\\_diplomacy\\_unmasked/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_serbias_coronavirus_diplomacy_unmasked/).
- Savez Vojvodanskih Mađara, *Izborni program 2020-2024*, at <https://www.vmsz.org.rs/sr/izbori-2020> accessed 17.03.2021.
- Socijalistička Partija Srbije, *Statut*, 2018.
- Socijalistička Partija Srbije, *Program*, 2014.
- Srpski Patriotski Savez, *Program*, 2020.
- Srpska Narodna Partija, *Program 2020*, at [http://srpskanarodnapartija.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/program\\_SNP.pdf](http://srpskanarodnapartija.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/program_SNP.pdf).
- Srpski Pokret Obnove, *Program*, 2014, at <http://www.spo.rs/doc/program-spo-eds.pdf>.

Stranka Pravde i Pomirenja, *Programska načela 2017*, at [http://spp.rs/?page\\_id=2590](http://spp.rs/?page_id=2590).

Stranka Demokratske Akcije Sandžaka, *Program*, 2009.

Subotić J., "Europe is a State of Mind: Identity and Europeanization in the Balkans", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 55 (2011), pp. 309-330, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00649.x>.

Szpala M., "Wybory w Serbii – manifestacja dominacji Vučića", *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich*, 24.06.2020, at <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2020-06-24/wybory-w-serbii-manifestacja-dominacji-Vučicia>.

The Government of the Republic of Serbia, *Final Results of Parliamentary Elections in Serbia Announced*, 6 July 2020, at <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/158391/final-results-of-parliamentary-elections-in-serbia-announced.php>.

Ozturk T., "Russian Sputnik V Vaccine Arrives in Serbia", *Anadolu Agency*, 30 December 2020, at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russian-sputnik-v-vaccine-arrives-in-serbia/2093707>.

Za Naszu Decu, 2020, at <https://zanasudecu.sns.org.rs/#srbija2025>.

---

**Natasza STYCZYŃSKA** is an assistant professor at the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University. Currently, she is a researcher in two H2020 projects: *Populist rebellion against modernity in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism* (POPREBEL) and *EU Differentiation, Dominance and Democracy* (EU3D). Her academic interests include transformation processes in Central and Eastern Europe, party politics, nationalism, populism and euroscepticism in the CEE region and the Balkans.