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Russian-Serbian relations: opportunities and limitations

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Аннотация

In 2022 was conducted a joint scientific research project of the two institutions – Institute of International Politics and Economics (Belgrade, Serbia) and Faculty of Political Science, Lomonosov Moscow State University (Moscow Russia). The project's name was «Russian-Serbian relations: opportunities and limitations». In the conducted research, the following topics were analyzed: limitations concerning formal institutions and informal practices in the social and political life of Serbia and Russia, the foreign policy of the two countries and their priorities in current international relations, including relations with the EU, bilateral economic, energy and military relations, as well as scientific and technological cooperation. The conclusions reached by the researchers on this project are presented in eight points.

Ключевые слова: Russia, Serbia, domestic politics, foreign politics, Russian-Serbian relations

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¹ Limitations in research: formal institutions and informal practices in the social and political life

² The research project examines the post-socialist and post-soviet development of Serbia and Russia through the lens of competition between formal institutions and informal practices in the social and political life. Informal governance is a relatively new concept in social sciences, that describes the ambivalence of the informal practices, which not only corrupt the formal institutions, but supplement or even substitute them when they are inefficient in the provision of their basic functions. The starting points in the socialist past and the trajectories of the further transitions of two countries had a lot of similarities, including similar trends in informal governance. However, after the three decades of the transformation they demonstrate different results in relation towards the political fields and basic economic institutions. Advanced democratic practices do not eliminate informal institutions and sometimes can only stimulate them. The holistic approach towards the research and development in this field is needed. Russian scholars can borrow a lot from their Serbian colleagues to cover the gaps in this sphere of studies.

³ Serbia and Russia had to work hard to improve their stateness after the collapse of the previous forms of their states. Weak formal institutions evoked strong informal practices, rooted in the past as well as emerged with the transformations of the economic and political life. They had different correlations with formal institutions, creating sophisticated socio-cultural capital, that provided survival for one social groups and concentrations of power for the others. Neither of these processes can be assessed only in positive or negative ways because of the ambivalence of informality, thus they require careful studies.

⁴ **Serbia's foreign policy and bilateral relations between the two countries in current international relations**

⁵ A nation's foreign policy, which determines how it interacts with other actors, is affected by at least three fundamental factors: its geographic position, its historical experience, and the structure of the international political system. In the past two decades, Serbia's foreign policy has been shaped using standard evaluations and calculations pertaining to the three aforementioned factors. First off, Serbia's location geographically places it largely within the EU and NATO's surroundings. Although four countries in the Western Balkan region are not members of the EU, and judging by the current situation, they will not become so even in the foreseeable future (Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and North Macedonia), NATO has persistently expanded along the southeastern geopolitical vector. Besides Serbia, the only country left outside this military alliance was Bosnia and Herzegovina. Due to the complex two-entity internal structure, the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to NATO is blocked by one entity – the Republic of Srpska. The Serbian ethnospace remains an island in the European NATO ocean. Serbia has to cooperate with the EU and NATO, it is a matter of "geographical necessity". The inevitable result of this cooperation between unequal partners in terms of potential political, military, and economic power is that it frequently disadvantages Serbia. At certain moments, Serbia simply did not have the institutional, human, or financial resources to fully protect its interests. Therefore, the influence of the EU and NATO in Serbia is strengthened, and not the other way around. After all, this is what happened to all of the small states and even regional powers that participated in the European and Euro-Atlantic integration processes. It is also important for the political geography of the region that after 1999 the status of Kosovo remained "questionable" and after 2008 it was problematized. That is, the resolution of the UN Security Council defined that Belgrade and Pristina must agree on "substantial autonomy", but these negotiations failed, which served as a reason for the Albanians to unilaterally declare independence. The key Western countries not only managed this process but also directed it. Although it seems a bit schizophrenic, Serbia is condemned to close cooperation with actors who encourage secession in one part of its territory. The so-called "Republic of Kosovo" did not establish diplomatic relations with the majority of non-Western actors (among them are the most important ones: Russia, China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, the Republic of South Africa, etc.), but it did with the overwhelming majority of Western actors and Balkan states (excluding Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Romania). Therefore, "geographical necessity" could not also mean "political necessity".

⁶ "Political necessity" was therefore determined by the remaining two criteria – historical experience and the transformation of the structure of the world political

system. On the one hand, in the historical context, Western powers acted hostile towards Serbia. Russia protected Serbian interests when and as much as it could. In the Serbian foreign policy vision, relying on Russia appeared as an option in the last decade of the 20th century, and then it was further elaborated and concretized. On the other hand, the change in the balance of power in world politics and the relative and absolute decline in the military, political, and economic potential of the US and its allies have weakened their interest in the Balkans over time (they focus on more important regions and topics), and the pressure on Serbia gradually subsides. Thus, a certain room for maneuver was opened for the elaboration and concretization of Serbian-Russian relations and, no less importantly, for Serbian-Chinese relations. Establishing and upholding strong ties with Russia and China is what is meant by "political necessity." Public opinion, which consistently puts pressure on political decision-makers, also has an impact on this outcome.

⁷ Keeping the above observation in mind, it is quite unlikely that the complete breakdown of relations between Russia and the West after February 2022 will have any impact on Serbia-Russia relations. Russia remains one of the priorities of Serbia's foreign policy. Certainly, it is difficult to anticipate that relations with Russia will continue to advance at the current rate given the altered geopolitical landscape and Serbia's location. This primarily refers to the implementation of initiatives to establish an office of the Ministry of Defense of Russia in Belgrade, to cooperate with the company Rosatom, and to build a nuclear power plant in Serbia in the foreseeable future. However, even without that, it is likely that the agreements made thus far and the projects begun will not be broken. Because, in addition to "geographical necessity", there is also "political necessity".

⁸ **Foreign policy priorities of Russia in the context of a changing world order**

⁹ In building its foreign policy, Russia takes into account the context of the transformation of the world order. The growing tension in relations between the Russian Federation and the United States and its allies, which are exerting sanctions pressure on the Russian economy, stimulates Russia to develop relations with non-Western countries. In these relations, Russia pays special attention to the expansion of interaction with the growing centers of world and regional politics, standing on positions similar to it on key issues of international politics. In a number of areas, Russia is demonstrating its readiness to continue selective cooperation with individual Western countries on a mutually beneficial basis. First of all, we are talking about cooperation in the energy sector (nuclear energy, pipeline gas exports, LNG projects).

¹⁰ The analysis carried out shows that in the main regions of the world, Russia at the foreign policy level seeks to develop mutually beneficial trade, economic and technological cooperation. In Russia's foreign policy, the importance of sectoral areas of economic cooperation is growing. In this regard, Russia attaches increasing importance in foreign policy to various areas of economic diplomacy, in which individual ministries of the Russian government, leading Russian companies and corporations, as well as specialized institutions to support the development of trade and economic ties between Russian business and foreign counterparties take part.

¹¹ Of particular importance for Russia's foreign policy is trade, economic, transport and logistics integration with states located in the Eurasian space, designed to provide the Russian Federation with access to the regional markets of third countries. The effectiveness and efficiency of such bilateral and multilateral international projects will largely determine the prospects for solving the problems of development of Russia itself, as well as have a significant impact on its foreign policy partners.

¹² As an alternative to the further growth of international competition and confrontation, Russia is helping to increase representativeness in promising formats of multilateral international cooperation on a wide range of issues (EAEU, SCO, BRICS, OPEC+, Gas Exporting Countries Forum). With regard to the development of multilateral international institutions, Russia is promoting the agenda of inclusive cooperation, primarily in the Eurasian space. At the same time, Russia forms the basis of international agreements for cooperation with developing countries located in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America in economic and technological areas of mutual interest.

¹³ In the face of growing threats to national and international security, Russia seeks to develop military and military-technical cooperation with the developing countries of Eurasia, Africa and individual countries of Latin America. Russia pays special attention to building relations in this area with countries located in close proximity to Russian borders, regional powers, as well as states of geopolitical and geo-economic significance.

¹⁴ **European integration of Serbia and its relations with Russia**

¹⁵ Serbia's two main foreign policy priorities are: EU membership and privileged relations with Russia. Thus, it was examined how Serbia's balancing act between two powerful external actors—the European Union and Russia — affects its foreign policy. Some consider it a pragmatist strategy based on the need to guarantee security and economic growth, leading to a neo-Titoist foreign policy of balancing.

¹⁶ Serbia's foreign policy orientation was established as long-term and intended to be as resistant to tactical changes as possible the war in Ukraine, which brought about tectonic shifts in relations between the EU and Russia, made it difficult for Serbia to maintain its specific position. It was crucial to demonstrate how relations between the EU and Russia have deteriorated in the new international context and to examine how the EU and Russia are now using their influence to try to sway Serbia's foreign policy decisions.

¹⁷ Given Russia's foreign policy objectives and its relations with the West, it is not surprising that Moscow is exerting great effort to maintain its hold on Serbia, its last stronghold in the Western Balkans. The European Union also wants Serbia's laws and policies, especially its foreign policy, to be more in line with the EU's after granting its candidate status. As a result of this approach by Russia and the European Union, Serbia finds itself in a very precarious position. Serbia has become a place where the West and Russia can practice their confrontations and show their influence in this part of Europe.

¹⁸ It is difficult for Serbia to turn its back on Russia, given that the two countries' relations were founded not only on the historical links between the two nations and their

shared religious and cultural history but also on economic and political interests. They have developed for years in various areas, most notably in the energy sector, making Russia's contribution to maintaining the energy stability of our country particularly crucial. Also, the status of Russia's veto in the UN Security Council is still essential because Belgrade relies on Moscow to block Kosovo's eventual membership in international institutions and organizations. Russia's support for Serbia's Kosovo policy is crucial, even though it is always limited by its geopolitical objectives, which sometimes align with Serbia's and sometimes do not. The fact that many Serbs are against sanctions and in favor of Russia also impacts Serbia's domestic politics and, thus, its foreign policy. But Serbia's geographical position makes it impossible to turn its back on the European Union. Most foreign direct investments come from EU countries, and most of our country's trade is with Western Europe. Because of this, the Serbian economy would suffer a lot if talks with the European Union were to stop, if access to EU funds was cut off, and if foreign investments were to stop coming in. That is why it is expected that, despite extensive and intense relations between Serbia and Russia, European integration will remain Serbia's foreign policy priority.

¹⁹ Since the positions of the European Union and the Russian Federation are now openly at odds, both in bilateral relations and in the work of international organizations, Serbia's policy of strategic balancing with each of the actors mentioned above leaves it in a position where it is highly unpredictable and, in the end, an unreliable foreign policy actor. Considering Serbia's most important foreign policy goals, it is hard to figure out how to strategically position the country so it can get through this time. How much longer Serbia will be able to keep this balance between Russia and the West without putting its chances of entering the EU in danger or seriously deteriorating relations with Russia is an open question. Serbia's foreign policy room for maneuver is getting smaller, making things harder for the country. Certainty is one thing. The war in Ukraine has once again shown how Serbia's security and economic growth, as a small country, may be significantly affected by the geopolitical ambitions of the major international powers.

²⁰ **Economic cooperation between Serbia and Russia: opportunities and limitations**

²¹ Serbia's economic cooperation with the Russian Federation takes place between two countries of unequal size and economic power. In this exchange, Serbia is buying energy products from Russia (gas and oil), which are extremely important and this determines the constant imbalance in the foreign trade exchange between the two countries in favor of the Russian Federation. On the other hand, the size of this exchange has been increasing in recent years and Serbia is managing to place on the large Russian market a number of its products and its branches of economy. Opportunities for further development of economic cooperation between the two countries are increasing, not only in trade exchange. Economic branch in which both countries have special interests in cooperation is energy, where the Russian side is the majority owner of the Serbian Oil Industry. There are special opportunities for deepening cooperation in agriculture, construction and tourism. The political factor of relations in Europe, as well as the outcome of the Ukrainian crisis, can significantly affect further economic cooperation between the two countries. Russian-Serbian geopolitical relations and traditional friendship are a great guarantee for the maintenance and development of economic cooperation between the two countries.

22 If Russia is in the specific position of having primarily energy products as strategic export products with low elasticity of demand, which also applies to Serbia, for which it is a very important import item, what are the additional opportunities for the development of economic cooperation between the two countries? It seems to be the agricultural sector, where Serbia has some comparative advantages in the production and potential greater export of a number of products that are in short supply on the large Russian market. In the period of sanctions, this factor has an additional multiplier and importance. Among other things, this especially applies to fruits and vegetables, especially if they were processed and therefore more resistant to the time period. In addition, a whole range of other forms of cooperation in agriculture between the two countries is possible. Russia is a country of huge arable land, especially chernozem (the highest quality land for cultivation). On the other hand, climatic factors, including the lack of moisture (so irrigation is needed), somewhat reduce the benefits of part of the soil for agricultural production. In this direction, part of the high-quality arable areas in Serbia are suitable for a number of crops, including organic production. Cooperation in the field of joint production and investment, especially on Serbian soil, are opportunities that can be developed. Cooperation in the field of joint production and investment, especially on Serbian soil, are opportunities that can be developed. To this should be added joint investments in organic production, as well as in hybrid crops and then the application and resale of such licenses. Similar ventures are also possible in animal husbandry, and extensive cooperation between certain regions of the two countries has already begun. Agricultural industry is the area of additional processing of agricultural products, which would improve cooperation in the field of agriculture.

23 Tourism, where significant progress is possible, should be added here. The spas of Serbia offer a number of opportunities to tourist companies from Russia, but also the sale and lease of real estate for companies and individuals from the Russian Federation (even outside the spas, that is, in the rest of the territory of Serbia).

24 Due to the closeness of the two peoples and countries, it is possible to deepen cooperation in the field of military industry, where joint investments are also possible. Likewise, within the framework of transport, cooperation could be expanded by introducing new flights, as well as investments in the construction of transport infrastructure in Serbia. Special attention could be paid to improving cooperation in the field of energy, where significant infrastructure projects are possible. In the field of banking, Russian banks should be given the opportunity for further penetration into Serbian areas. Finally, in the field of construction, the Serbian side has a tradition of building on Russian territory, which can be further improved.

25 Restrictions on economic cooperation between Serbia and Russia also exist. Serbia has the opportunity to initially import almost constantly high amount of energy products (oil and gas, as well as their derivatives) so that, despite the existing trade agreement, it does not have enough economic capacity to offer Russia such a wide range of products for export. Hence, economic cooperation with Russia should be deepened in important areas, where certain comparative advantages of Serbia could yield results. This refers to agriculture first of all, then to tourism, as well as traffic. Construction is a great chance for Serbia to break into the Russian market again and regain its previous positions. Serbia's strategic decision to join the European Union can also be a potential obstacle if it is approached dogmatically and inelastically. The chances of Serbia joining

the European Union are realistically small, and on the other hand, the conditions from Brussels on a series of issues for the continuation of the European path are evident.

²⁶ If we look at the broader geopolitical component, there could potentially be a further development of the situation in the region, Europe and the world, where Serbia would have a more serious geopolitical interest in establishing even closer relations with the Eurasian Union and Russia itself, while relations with the EU could become further distant. Specifically, the outcome of the Ukrainian crisis and conflict can be reflected in these circumstances. Hence, in the current Ukrainian crisis, pressure has increased politically on Serbia to impose sanctions on Russia and in parallel to drastically reduce its economic cooperation with it, which would be suicidal for geopolitical Serbian interests as a whole. On the contrary, the looming epilogue of the Ukrainian crisis hints at the success of Russia, including the possession of part or all of Southeast Ukraine in its structure. This would significantly strengthen Russia's geopolitical influence in the Balkans.

²⁷ **Military cooperation between Russia and Serbia**

²⁸ Serbian-Russian military cooperation was already established in the first years of the creation of the modern state of Serbia, that is, at the beginning of the 19th century. It has lasted for over two hundred years, had its ups and downs, and is currently facing a great temptation in the realization of its forms given the sharp confrontation of NATO and the EU with the Russian Federation regarding the war in Ukraine. For Serbia, as a continental country surrounded by NATO members, geography represents the biggest obstacle to maintaining and further developing military cooperation with the Russian Federation. On the other hand, the convergence of political interests and views, the productive historical balance of relations between the two nations and two states, similarities in strategic culture, and the considerable use of Soviet (Russian) equipment in the Serbian armed forces, represent factors that promote and facilitate military cooperation between Serbia and Russia.

²⁹ The development of this cooperation in the future will depend, above all, on the outcome of the war in Ukraine, that is, the political solutions that will result from it. Failure in the realization of the set goals of the so-called special military operation and the crisis and turmoil in Russia itself due to the economic war led by the West, would deprive Serbia of a reliable ally and partner in military cooperation and literally push it back to the 1990s in a political and strategic sense. Russia's military success in Ukraine, which the EU, NATO, and the US would not reconcile with (it would not gain legitimacy from their side; the harshest possible sanctions would remain), would not significantly ease the position of Serbia, given that it would remain in the NATO environment. However, at least on the psychological and political level, it would send significant signals to Serbian society that it is worth being patient and waiting for the recomposition of the balance of power, both in Europe and at the global level. The Russian military success in Ukraine, which would simultaneously be accompanied by the breaking of the coherence of the global West on the political, economic, and social levels and its stratification according to different criteria, would enable Serbian-Russian military cooperation to continue and even deepen. Also, that success would strengthen those political forces and subjects in Serbia who advocate closer cooperation with Russia to the detriment of those pro-Western and vice versa. The realization of the first

scenario would give these forces "wind in their sails", while Russia's reputation in Serbian public opinion would drop significantly. In other words, the future of Serbian-Russian military cooperation almost exclusively depends on global political circumstances, the failure/success of Russian policy, and strategy in the Ukrainian conflict; therefore, in short, on Russia itself. Of course, all the listed scenarios contain the assumption that the current war in Ukraine will not escalate and spill over its borders to the entire European continent, which would certainly represent the worst possible development for all parties (not) involved in the current conflict.

³⁰ **Potentials of energy cooperation between Russia and Serbia: towards the construction of a nuclear power plant**

³¹ From what has been said so far, we can draw several basic conclusions regarding nuclear energy and the energy transition in Serbia. First, nuclear energy, despite the flaws that every type of technology has, has the greatest potential for improvement (fusion and thorium reactors), ensures constant supply regardless of natural conditions, produces the least polluting particles, gives the most energy in relation to the amount of fuel, reduces transportation costs, and, in the long run, it represents the most profitable form of energy production. Second, Serbia is completely dependent on coal and gas in terms of energy, so it is necessary to start the process of the energy transition. The history of the Yugoslav nuclear program and the current modest personnel resources at Serbia's disposal have been analyzed. Building on this, the third conclusion is that Serbia, as a small country, would solve most of its energy problems and needs with one nuclear power plant. Fourth, the environmental reasons for the enormous pollution of coal-fired thermal power plants and the recent collapse of the power system in Serbia accelerate the energy transition and thinking about nuclear power plants. The development of nuclear power facilities is currently prohibited on Serbian soil, but if political will exists, changing the law would be the easiest thing to do. Fifth, Russia is today the largest and most advanced exporter of nuclear technology in the world, which, along with the existing strategic partnership and energy arrangements with Serbia, guarantees certainty in the successful construction of a nuclear power plant, expertise and subsequent supply of nuclear fuel. Finally, Serbia has already taken concrete steps in cooperation with ROSATOM, the most powerful nuclear corporation in the world, with which it has signed several formal agreements. The Serbian political leadership publicly sends messages of cooperation with Russia in nuclear technology and talks about the potential for building a nuclear power plant, either independently or together with one of the neighboring countries. ROSATOM will build a research nuclear reactor in Serbia, and the signed agreements seem to be just the beginning of a much larger cooperation, the crown of which could be the construction of a nuclear power plant.

³² **Cooperation among youth, scientific and technological cooperation**

³³ It should be emphasized that the launched study is a pilot study, and the findings are preliminary and require further discussion and testing. However, in our opinion, the continuation of this project is necessary. Such studies have potential, as they are able to identify the main value-semantic dominants in the public consciousness of the youth of Russia and Serbia. This will make it possible to understand what kind of "mental" problems may arise when trying to build a political dialogue between our countries and

outline specific prospects for work in the current international tension. In the current transformation of the traditional space of values of today's youth, it is especially important to build partnerships with countries that have a similar civilizational code. In Russia and Serbia, the state has traditionally been an important actor that can purposefully and comprehensively influence the building of national identity (primarily through information policy, policy in the field of education and culture, and memorial practices). Taking into account by the state the features of the ideological and value bases of the national identity of Russian and Serbian youth identified above is becoming extremely relevant in the context of increasing international tension and building a new architecture of international relations.

³⁴ Reflections on science policy in Russia lead us to a number of conclusions. Obviously, within the framework of political science, the need has arisen for systematic research of state scientific policy due to the fact that science today becomes the subject of reflection in the field of political knowledge. This is important not only because of the need for a scientific analysis of the political decisions made, but also for understanding the role of a modern scientist as a full participant in the political process in its interaction with political decision makers. Thus, we logically come to the conclusion that there is a need to develop a model of interaction in the triad "science-society-power", reflecting the specifics of their mutual perception and at the same time demonstrating the channels of their communication. It is the absence of such a model, unfortunately, that creates the conditions for the development of the erroneous idea of power elites and society as a whole that science and technology, or science and education, or science and innovation (and most often all at once) are a single sphere which is based on the same values, regardless of their specifics.

³⁵ This situation forms in the sphere of political decision-making a stable attitude towards science only as a tool that serves one or another sphere of social life and production: education, production of technologies and innovations, and not as a system of very special values and a social institution that ensures the achievement of goals. Scientific knowledge at the stage of "big challenges" in the field of interaction between scientific and political institutions, expressed primarily in the existence of communication barriers, in the absence of a single goal-setting and strategic planning in this triad, such a model could become a clear solution to the problems of science development, which are analyzed in article. We are talking about a number of significant problems and risks associated with the adoption of political decisions in the field of science management, the dominance of the technological role of science, the artificial competition of scientists, and also resulting in the suppression of creativity, originality of thinking, cooperation, and the ability to take risks, which is required for fundamental discoveries.

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Russian-Serbian relations: opportunities and limitations

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Abstract

In 2022 was conducted a joint scientific research project of the two institutions – Institute of International Politics and Economics (Belgrade, Serbia) and Faculty of Political Science, Lomonosov Moscow State University (Moscow Russia). The project's name was «Russian-Serbian relations: opportunities and limitations». In the conducted research, the following topics were analyzed: limitations concerning formal institutions and informal practices in the social and political life of Serbia and Russia, the foreign policy of the two countries and their priorities in current international relations, including relations with the EU, bilateral economic, energy and military relations, as well as scientific and technological cooperation. The conclusions reached by the researchers on this project are presented in eight points.

Keywords: Russia, Serbia, domestic politics, foreign politics, Russian-Serbian relations

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