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CHALLENGES OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA'S MILITARY NEUTRALITY IN A CHANGED SECURITY ENVIRONMENT***

Abstract

The deepening geopolitical conflict between the West and the Russian Federation, intensified by the war in Ukraine, has caused significant changes in the security environment of the Republic of Serbia and has dramatically complicated the realization of its national and defense interests. Military neutrality, as an essential defense interest and a key security commitment, is also conditioned by changes in the security environment of the Republic of Serbia, but also by vital national interests, such as preserving territorial integrity, the prospect of membership in the European Union and ensuring energy security. Therefore, the research subject in this paper is the relationship between the connection and conditionality of the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia, key changes in the security environment caused

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by the war in Ukraine, and the aforementioned vital national interests. The paper starts from the hypothetical position that changes in the security environment of the Republic of Serbia make it challenging to implement the policy of military neutrality, especially regarding the aforementioned vital national interests. The analysis of the aforementioned connections and relations is based on the theoretical postulates of the realist school of international relations, according to which great powers and other international actors use all available instruments to project power and pursue interests in an anarchic system. In the changed geopolitical circumstances, the policy of military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia, based on balanced cooperation with the parties to the Ukrainian conflict, is increasingly difficult to sustain because there is a serious “blackmail” potential of the aforementioned parties, linked to the vital national interests of the Republic of Serbia, such as membership in the European Union, preservation of territorial integrity, energy and economic security of the Serbian state and society. The research methodology is based on the analysis of relevant sources and literature.

Keywords: challenge, sustainability, military neutrality, security environment, war

INTRODUCTION

Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine has triggered significant changes in the security landscape of the Republic of Serbia. Contrary to Russian expectations, the United States, the European Union, and their allies have enacted comprehensive sanctions against the Russian Federation. All European nations have condemned Russian aggression and are offering full support and assistance to Ukraine in its defense against this intervention. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has reinforced its transatlantic partnership, while Sweden and Finland have relinquished their long-standing neutral status to join this military alliance. All remaining neutral states in Europe, except for the Republic

of Serbia, have imposed sanctions on the Russian Federation and aligned their foreign and security policies with those of leading Western countries.

The deteriorating relations between the West and the Russian Federation have complicated the Republic of Serbia's geostrategic position, given its military neutrality policy. Leading members of NATO and the European Union, since the onset of the war in Ukraine, have been applying continuous political, diplomatic, and economic pressure on the Republic of Serbia to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation, thereby compelling it to take a side in the conflict. The Republic of Serbia's refusal to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation significantly jeopardizes its prospects for European Union membership. Conversely, introducing sanctions against Russia would threaten the vital national interests of the Republic of Serbia, including preserving territorial integrity and assuring Serbia's energy and economic security.

An analysis of the sustainability of the concept of military neutrality about the fundamentally changed security environment and the aforementioned vital national interests should point to potential challenges in creating and implementing the future security and defense policy of the Republic of Serbia and possibly initiate a broader academic and expert discussion on possible ways to overcome them in the turbulent and crisis times that are inevitably ahead.

CHANGES IN THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

The war in Ukraine has caused significant changes in the security architecture of Europe, with consequences that directly affect the security environment of the Republic of Serbia. The war in Ukraine seriously undermined the post-Cold War security regime established in Europe after 1991 in 2014 when the West imposed limited sanctions on the Russian Federation for its annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine. Relations between the West, especially NATO, and the Russian Federation, from 2015 until the beginning of the Russian intervention in Ukraine

on February 24, 2022, have been on a constant downward trajectory, fluctuating between dialogue, demonstrations of military power, economic sanctions, and even indirect confrontations in proxy wars, such as Syria, Mali, and Ukraine.

With the start of Russia's "special military operation" in late February 2022, relations between the West and Russia have escalated to the level of open diplomatic, economic, and even cultural war, with the dangerous potential for such a confrontation to take on a direct military and nuclear character. Led by the United States, all members of the European Union, NATO, and their allies condemned the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and gradually imposed unprecedented, comprehensive diplomatic, economic, and sports sanctions on Russia (see S&P Global Market Intelligence [S&P GMI] 2024; Council EU 2025). In more detail, after the beginning of the Russian military intervention in February 2022, over 21,600 sanctions were imposed on Russia and international political and economic entities, as well as prominent individuals cooperating with this state, to reduce its political, economic, technological and military ability to wage war in Ukraine and achieve its war goals (Castellum.AI 2025). Almost one-third of the sanctions target entities and individuals outside of Russia (Vuksic 2025).

At the same time, the West has initiated a global propaganda campaign, blocking all Russian media outlets and limiting the flow of information from Russian sources on the Internet and social networks, labelling them as Russian propaganda. In particular, the European Union and NATO member states have prohibited the operation of Russian state TV stations, and numerous Internet companies have either suspended their operations in Russia or blocked multimedia content from Russian sources, considering them malicious or propagandistic (Thompson 2022; Lomas 2022).

On the other hand, the constantly fueled fear of Russia has caused very significant changes in the security policies of the member states of the European Union and NATO. One of the leading countries in the European Union, Germany, has made several significant shifts in its security and defense policy, focusing on the long-term strengthening

of military capabilities and ties within the NATO alliance. Among other things, Germany announced the creation of a special fund for equipping and modernizing its armed forces in the amount of 100 billion euros, as well as an increase in the annual military budget to the previously agreed 2% of gross domestic product (Besch and Brockmeier 2022). Other NATO member states, at the summit of the heads of state of the NATO pact, held on March 24, 2022, in Brussels, just a month after the start of the Russian military intervention in Ukraine, collectively decided to rapidly increase their military budgets to reach previously agreed budget quotas (NATO 2022a). After decades of neutrality, Finland became a member of NATO on April 4, 2023, and Sweden on March 7, 2024. The motivations of these two countries for joining the North Atlantic Alliance are best expressed in the following sentence: "Russia's invasion has shown that Ukraine's Enhanced Opportunity Partner status is an insufficient deterrent, which adds impetus to the Finnish and Swedish NATO question" (Solli and Solvang 2022).

In military terms, NATO significantly increased its military presence on its eastern borders from mid-February to mid-March 2022, increasing the number of soldiers in its four battle groups, stationed in Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia and Poland, from 5,000 to 18,100 members. (Belkin 2022, 1). Also, at the NATO summit on March 24, 2022, it was decided to form four new battle groups in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia. NATO has 40,000 soldiers, 140 ships and 130 aircraft under its direct command as of March 21, 2022 (NATO 2022b). The number of US troops in Europe has increased to 100,000 soldiers, reaching its peak in 2005 (US DoD 2022). All member states of the European Union and NATO provide generous military and economic assistance to Ukraine's war efforts to defend its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Kiel's Institute for the World Economy estimates that Ukraine received about \$391.6 billion in military, humanitarian or financial assistance from January 2022 to October 2024, mainly from 41 donor countries (Antezza et al. 2024).

The European Union has decided to end its energy dependence on energy imports from Russia rapidly. The energy "derussification"

process in Europe began with the complete cessation of imports of Russian coal in August 2022, while imports of Russian oil and gas into Europe were significantly reduced (McWilliams et al. 2024).

Overseas imports of Russian oil into Europe have been completely halted, and oil from the Russian Federation is now imported only by the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia via the “Druzhba” pipeline, which were granted an exemption from sanctions due to their limited ability to diversify their oil supplies. The European Union has reduced its imports of Russian oil from 18% of its total imports to just 2% in 2024 (Eurostat 2024). This is an unstoppable trend, especially considering the announcement by representatives of the Czech Republic government that they will no longer seek an exemption for the import of Russian oil (Lopatka 2024).

A similar trend is observed in the import of Russian gas into the European Union, which has decreased from a 45% share of total European Union imports in 2021 to 18% in the first half of 2024. Also, the import and transit of Russian liquefied petroleum gas into the European Union has recently been banned (European Commission [EC] 2024, 4–5). At the start of January 2025, the flow of Russian gas to Europe through Ukraine was halted (Soldatkin and Peleschuk 2025). Currently, the only route for supplying Russia’s gas to Europe is via the “Turk-Stream” pipeline, and Ukraine has reportedly already attempted to damage the pipeline by launching drone attacks on gas facilities near Krasnodar in the Russian Federation (Reuters 2025).

Given the trends discussed in the energy sector, in the coming period, we can expect an intensification of the process of “derussification” of Europe in its dependence on Russian oil and gas. Countries that continue to import Russian energy, such as Hungary, Slovakia and Serbia, will be forced to rapidly diversify their supplies to mitigate the economic consequences of the interruption of imports of Russian energy. The aforementioned trend is only part of the global process of displacing Russian influence from Europe, especially in the Western Balkans region, which, according to Western assessments, is a potential hotbed and a suitable area for generating a new crisis and even conflict.

The aforementioned changes in the security environment of the Republic of Serbia indicate that the war in Ukraine has undeniably triggered a tectonic shift of accelerated political, security, and economic realignment in Europe. In this context, Serbia's geopolitical position can be encapsulated by an apocryphal saying of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States, which he frequently referenced in his political speeches, alluding to Hell in Dante Alighieri's "Divine Comedy": "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality" (cited in Ingallinella 2020).

In such circumstances, the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia is seriously threatened by pressure from key international actors to align Serbia with one of the parties in the conflict politically, security-wise, and economically.

CHALLENGES TO THE MILITARY NEUTRALITY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

As one of the basic principles of the security and defense policy of the Republic of Serbia, military neutrality is formulated very briefly, primarily as: "... the absence of membership in existing military alliances" (SNB RS, 24). In a conceptual sense, military neutrality is envisioned through the development of cooperation with the European Union and the NATO Pact, as well as with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (SO RS, 4). The aforementioned cooperation is carried out to actively contribute to "...the establishment and maintenance of international peace and security" (4). The declared concept of military neutrality is also being implemented to strengthen: "...the capabilities and capacities of the defense system and the improvement of the overall security of the Republic of Serbia and its citizens" (9).

From the perspective of the Republic of Serbia, military neutrality conceived in this way represents a legitimate security and defense option that actively contributes to the defense potential of deterrence (more in Stojanović 2020, 213–217). However, its limited and temporary character has not yet been decisively challenged in the Republic of Serbia's highest strategic and doctrinal documents, leaving room for

geopolitical calculations and pressure from great powers. In more detail, the “Resolution of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia on the Protection of the Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia” is still in force, which leaves open the possibility of holding a referendum regarding the final decision on neutrality (Rezolucija Narodne Skupštine Republike Srbije o zaštiti suvereniteta, teritorijalnog integriteta i ustavnog poretka Republike Srbije [Rezolucija NS RS], Art. 6).

Also, the status of military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia is not internationally guaranteed by the great powers and other critical international entities, as is the case with Switzerland, whose neutrality was recognized by the great powers by signing the Declaration of Swiss Neutrality, at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 (Fischer 2013, 43–44). Austria also received a guarantee when the Soviet Union, by signing the State Treaty with Austria in 1955, practically recognized its neutrality (more in Frischenschlager 2013, 59–61). Also, by signing the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union in 1948, Finland secured some recognition of its neutral status by the USSR (Salonius-Pasternak 2013, 55).

The previously discussed uncertainties regarding the internal and international legitimacy of the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia open up opportunities for exerting political, security and economic pressure on Serbia. In times of crisis, such as the War in Ukraine, the aforementioned pressure can escalate into a hybrid and low-intensity confrontation, with the application of various non-military instruments and mechanisms, such as the policy of conditionality, economic sanctions, the incitement of political instability and civil unrest, as well as various forms of demonstrations of military force.

The aforementioned pressure is possible because military neutrality, as an essential defense interest, is connected and conditioned by the realization, or rather the preservation, of other national and defense interests of the Republic of Serbia, especially the aspiration towards membership in the European Union, the preservation of territorial integrity, as well as the realization of economic development and overall social prosperity (see SNB RS, 12–14; SO RS, 8–9).

The war in Ukraine has dynamized the process of challenging the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia and its sovereign right to conduct an independent security and defense policy about military alliances and significant powers. Although, for the time being, there is no direct political pressure and immediate threats of non-military coercion, the leaders of the European Union and leading European states have intensified their diplomatic efforts, dominated by the “expectations” that the Republic of Serbia should harmonize its foreign and security policy with that of the EU, i.e. introduce sanctions against the Russian Federation, if it wants to demonstrate sincere intentions in its progress towards full membership in the European Union. In more detail, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, representatives of the European Union, the US, Germany and the UK have intensified their visits to Belgrade to exert political pressure on the Republic of Serbia to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation and take significant steps to normalize relations with the so-called “Republic of Kosovo”.

The conflict between the West and the Russian Federation, which sharply escalated with the Russian military intervention in Ukraine in February 2022, indirectly affects the issue of resolving the problem of Kosovo and Metohija. The non-alignment of the Republic of Serbia and, to a lesser extent, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on one of the sides in the war in Ukraine, is interpreted in the West, and especially in the Western Balkans, as the result of Russia's projection of a “malign” influence to cause instability in the region (see Deutsche Welle [DW] 2022; Vukičević 2022).

Indirectly, the neutral status of the Republic of Serbia concerning the war in Ukraine was exploited to fuel old fears about Serbian claims in the region and to strengthen the perception of Serbia as a traditional ally of Russia, to portray it as a factor of instability and a country with revisionist intentions that does not accept the Western political and security order for the Balkan region (see Joseph et al. 2022, 4–5; International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS] 2024, 91; International Crisis Group [ICG] 2024b, 3–4; Gurakuç 2024, 12). For this reason, representatives of the USA, the European Union, Germany, France and

the United Kingdom intensified their diplomatic efforts to accelerate negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina.

The Albanian political elite from Kosovo and Metohija took advantage of the inertia and favouritism of a part of the international community, preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, as well as the deterioration of the global position of the Republic of Serbia, to aggravate relations and escalate the conflict with Belgrade, to complete the statehood and strengthen the legitimacy of the so-called “Republic of Kosovo” (see report International Crisis Group [ICG] 2024a). In more detail, the abandonment of Kosovo’s political, judicial and security institutions by Serbs was provoked. The reaction of the local population, in the form of violent protests and armed conflict in Banjska, was utilized to establish firm political and security control over the territory and the Serbian population, as well as to gradually dismantle the remaining elements of Serbian institutions in the north of Kosovo and Metohija (more in Barišić 2024, 89–90).

This proposed process of “normalization” of relations between the Republic of Serbia and the so-called “Republic of Kosovo” essentially reflects the priorities of the “Collective West,” which is primarily focused on the security stabilization of the Western Balkans, with little emphasis on finding long-term, sustainable, and mutually acceptable peace solutions. (Barišić 2024, 90). Additionally, the “stabilization” of the situation in Kosovo and Metohija, one of the potential flash-points in the Western Balkans, diminishes the arguments of the Russian side to use the “Kosovo precedent” to justify military intervention in Ukraine (Anđelković 2022).

On the other hand, the intensification and escalation of the “energy war” between the West and the Russian Federation seriously threatens the energy security of the Republic of Serbia. Due to the Russian ownership structure of “NIS”, the import of large quantities of oil and gas of Russian origin, its continental geographical position, and the insufficiently developed and connected oil and gas transport infrastructure in the region, Serbia has limited possibilities for relatively rapid diversification of its supply (Božić Talijan 2022). Further tightening of sanctions against the Russian Federation concerning the export of crude oil, oil derivatives, and gas to Europe would lead to a substantial

rise in the energy prices in Serbia, directly jeopardizing its economic growth and the social standard of its citizens.

For the above reasons, the introduction of sanctions against the “Oil Industry of Serbia” and the request of the American side to altogether remove Russian influence from this company in the short term represents one of the most significant challenges to the energy security of the Republic of Serbia (NIN 2025). Considering that the Russian company “Gazpromneft”, a subsidiary of “Gazprom”, has a 56.15% stake in NIS and covers 70% of the Serbian market’s needs for oil derivatives, as well as controlling the Banatski Dvor gas storage facility, any solution to squeeze out Russian interests will require great diplomatic skill and significant financial resources (Marić 2022; Vlada Republike Srbije [VRS] 2024, 5).

The interruption of oil supply due to the financial blockade of the company “NIS” would cause a serious energy and economic crisis in the Republic of Serbia, given that it is not possible to quickly replenish the supply, infrastructure and processing capacities of the aforementioned company. In the long term, a potential crisis due to the shortage of oil and its derivatives would seriously affect the economy and the population’s standard of living. On the other hand, the purchase of the entire Russian share in the company “NIS” would require additional financial borrowing by the Republic of Serbia, given that the Russian company “Gazpromneft” invested significant financial resources in the purchase, but also in the development of the processing and sales capacities of the company “NIS”. It is unrealistic to expect that the Russian side is willing to sell its stake in the company “NIS” at the price it purchased in 2008. On the other hand, by nationalizing the company “NIS”, the Republic of Serbia would likely lose the support of the Russian Federation regarding the issue of Kosovo and Metohija and the possibility of supplying relatively cheap natural gas.

On the other hand, a prolonged refusal to impose economic sanctions on the Russian Federation would have negative consequences for Serbia’s European perspective. It would likely lead to a freeze in membership negotiations, restrictions on access to European Union funds, the creation of a hostile investment climate for investing in Serbia, restrictions on trade, as well as difficulties in the flow of capital, goods

and people, which could have significant economic consequences for Serbia, considering that around 60% of total foreign trade is carried out with the European Union (Republički zavod za statistiku [RZS] 2022).

The efforts of the Republic of Serbia to preserve its military neutrality status are evident, as it still refuses to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation. However, condemnation of Russian aggression, supply of ammunition to Ukraine, and announcement of the purchase of French aircraft and Israeli weapons and equipment may indicate to the Russian side that Serbia is no longer militarily neutral.

Additionally, the recent conclusion of energy agreements with the USA and France in 2024 and the increasingly close cooperation with these nations in developing renewable energy sources and nuclear energy may serve as a clear indicator of the rapprochement between Serbia and leading Western countries. This development could particularly influence Serbia's relations with the Russian Federation, especially considering that Russia is the world's leading producer of nuclear facilities and signed an agreement with Serbia in 2019 for cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy. However, unlike those with the American and French sides, there have been no concrete forms of collaboration. The absence of a new multi-year bilateral gas agreement may also suggest a potential cooling of relations between the Republic of Serbia and the Russian Federation, which, in light of the recent introduction of US sanctions on the company "NIS", could represent a significant turning point in Serbia's foreign, security, and energy policy.

CONCLUSION

The war in Ukraine has brought about significant changes in the security environment of the Republic of Serbia. In the wake of the Russian military intervention in Ukraine, relations between the West and Russia have escalated into open political and economic conflict, carrying the alarming potential for this confrontation to evolve into a military and nuclear conflict. Russia has faced unprecedented, comprehensive sanctions, and the conflict has extended into the information sphere, marked by the implementation of broadcast bans and the stigmatization of dissenters.

The geopolitical conflict between the West and the Russian Federation has led to significant changes in the security and defense policies of the European Union and NATO member states, marked by substantial increases in their military spending budgets, the accession of Sweden and Finland to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a historic rise in NATO's military presence along its eastern borders, and extensive military, humanitarian, and financial support for Ukraine's war efforts.

In the energy sector, the energy "de-russification" process in Europe is nearing completion. The remaining European countries still importing Russian oil and gas will be compelled to swiftly diversify their supplies to alleviate the potential economic repercussions of disrupting Russian oil and gas imports.

The war in Ukraine has initiated and intensified a significant process of political, security, and economic realignment in Europe and beyond. As a result, the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia has come under severe pressure from key international actors to align with one of the parties involved in this conflict.

The military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia represents a legitimate security and defense option that plays a vital role in deterring potential adversaries. However, the uncertainties regarding the legitimacy of the military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia create space for exerting political, security and economic pressure, as this

vital defense interest is intertwined with the essential national interests of the Republic of Serbia, particularly its aspiration for European Union membership, the preservation of territorial integrity, and the safeguarding of energy security.

Due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, pressure from major Western nations has intensified for Serbia to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation, align its positions with the foreign and security policy of the European Union, and expedite the process of “normalization” with the so-called “Republic of Kosovo”.

The war in Ukraine has led to a decline in Serbia’s geopolitical standing, which has been leveraged to worsen relations and escalate the conflict between Belgrade and Pristina. This aims to establish firm political and security control over the territory and the local Serbian population by the so-called “Republic of Kosovo,” gradually dismantling the remaining elements of Serbian institutions in northern Kosovo and Metohija. Simultaneously, the “stabilization” of the situation in Kosovo and Metohija significantly diminishes Russia’s capacity to invoke the “Kosovo precedent” as a rationale for military intervention in Ukraine.

On the other hand, the escalation of the conflict between the West and the Russian Federation in the energy sector poses a serious threat to Serbia’s energy security, as it has limited options for relatively rapid diversification of its supply. The recent imposition of sanctions on the company “NIS” represents one of the most significant challenges to the energy security of the Republic of Serbia, as it is not feasible to quickly compensate for the potential loss of supply, infrastructure, and processing capacities of the aforementioned company. Acquiring the Russian stake in the company “NIS” would necessitate additional financial borrowing by the Republic of Serbia, and nationalization would likely lead to the loss of Russia’s support in addressing the issue of Kosovo and Metohija.

However, considering the extent of foreign trade with the European Union, the ongoing refusal to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation could have detrimental effects on Serbia’s European and economic

prospects. Conversely, the Republic of Serbia strives to maintain its military neutrality by politically balancing between the conflicting parties while demonstrating a significant foreign policy, security, and energy alignment with the West, which may be seen as a shift away from military neutrality.

The war in Ukraine is evolving into a prolonged armed conflict of attrition, where neither of the warring parties can achieve a swift and decisive victory. The West will aim to politically isolate and economically deplete the Russian Federation by conducting a “special military operation”. Russia’s isolation will persist through the enforcement of political and economic pressure on neutral states to impose economic sanctions and sever trade with the Russian Federation. Western financial sanctions will continue to tighten, particularly in areas critical for financing and logistical support of Russia’s military efforts.

In military terms, the West aims to impose a prolonged and exhausting war on Russia based on their assessment that the Russian Federation, under the weight of comprehensive and intensive sanctions, is unable to sustain a long-term military campaign against the technically inferior yet combat-motivated Ukraine, which the US and its allies consistently equip and generously support both materially and financially.

In this new, global, and exhausting “war of materials,” along with the tightening of political, security, and economic relations, the Republic of Serbia will face a particularly challenging and complex foreign policy position. This is due to its ongoing efforts to maintain good relations with the West while engaging with the Russian Federation, which is essential to its policy of military neutrality.

One of the primary challenges to the sustainability of military neutrality is its relationship with the issues surrounding the preservation of Kosovo and Metohija and the prospects for European Union membership—both vital national interests that, given the current tense geopolitical climate, are difficult to reconcile. In other words, finding a compromise and a sustainable solution seems unlikely. Conversely, any alignment or non-alignment concerning sanctions against the Russian Federation will have significant repercussions for the resolution of the

Kosovo and Metohija issue and the energy and economic security of the Republic of Serbia.

In any case, Serbia has been left with one of the hottest spots in these times of crisis and uncertainty.

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