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Serbia in Light of the Global Recomposition

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ABSTRACT

The article assesses the effects of the current global geopolitical recomposition on Serbia, especially in the light of the multidimensional consequences of the current war in Ukraine. The effects of the dominant policies of the main external factors—i.e., the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China—have been analysed from a geopolitical perspective, with the argument put forward being that, following the war in Ukraine, Serbia will find itself on the western side of a New Iron Curtain, which will fall across Europe from the Baltic to the Black Sea as the main geopolitical consequence of current conflict in Ukraine. The aim of the article is to contribute to the existing scholarship in the field by the exploring issues yet to come into the focus of geopolitical analysis in the Serbian context: ‘green’ initiatives, energy and climate change, and COVID-19 vaccines. All these have become extensions of the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the key global powers in their efforts to position themselves as best they can in developing a multipolar world.

KEYWORDS

global recomposition; Global Gateway; Green Agenda; geopolitics of vaccines; geopolitics of energy; Serbia; Switzerland of the Balkans

Introduction

Historically, Serbia has always been a vital point of interest for key global geopolitical actors, due to its position within the Balkans. The region represents the Euro-Asian point of contact, and is therefore very important geo-strategically. The diverse interests of the Anglo-Saxon, Central European and Eurasian countries have had centuries-long impacts upon the Balkans, with this region simultaneously acting as a meeting point of three major theologically-based civilizations: Western, Orthodox, and Islamic. Due to its central position upon the Balkan Peninsula, Serbia is a country whose history, economy, security features, domestic and foreign policy have always been determined by its geographical position, as this is a territory upon which different civilizations and religious influences intersect, and the differing conflicting strategic and geopolitical interests of seaborne empires (thalassocracies) and land forces (tellurocracies) have come into conflict.¹ It is an area in which transportation arteries are of extreme importance not only for the Balkans itself, but for the entirety of Europe and Asia as well. In more recent years, it has also become the main channel for the inflow of refugees from the Near East, the Middle East, and the South Asia to the European Union (EU), and

now, as a result of even more recent circumstances, a part of the southern channel for the refugees' inflow from Ukraine to South-Eastern Europe.

The interests of external actors have had—and will continue to have—major impacts on the political, strategic and economic position of Serbia. Its status has become particularly sensitive due to the current geopolitical recompositioning of the global powers, as well as—especially pertinent since 24 February 2022 – the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The end of unipolarism, accompanied by global conflicts like this latest in Ukraine, commands the world's attention. The process of shrinking of the unipolar world under the dominance of the United States coupled with the (re-)emergence of a multipolar globe spearheaded by a more aggressive Russia and a wiser China as other key players, has become increasingly apparent over the past decade, and even more so since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, with the beginning of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 making it starkly obvious to all. Trends involved in this escalated after the withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021: The costly wars in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq have undermined American political and economic dominance, although, in the military sense, it continues to be the world's most powerful country. Fouskas and Gökay argue that the US's power has been in decline since the late 1960s, with it having lost a degree of its economic power in relation to others, who have, in turn, gained significant influence.² In their book *The Fall of the US Empire: Global Fault-Lines and the Shifting Imperial Order*, these authors assert that the most important developments over the last two to three decades have not been the collapse of the USSR or 9/11. Rather, the key variable affecting long-term trends in the international system has been the transition of China and Russia to capitalism and free trade.³ However, we are yet to see what Russia's status may be within the system of global capitalism in the wake of the start of the war in Ukraine. And all of this has significant geopolitical consequences globally, including for the Balkans.

The rise of China and shifts in the distribution of power and wealth to the non-Western world reinforce the sense that an end to the era of the US's unilateral dominance has been nearing.⁴ Mionel, Negut and Mionel note that humanity has entered 'a new geopolitical cycle in which China's centrality cannot be ignored'.⁵ According to Ikenberry, the US's leaders face two options: retrenchment or engagement; in both of these scenarios, the question remains as to in what way and to what extent the US would remain engaged and move to share its power and privileges with other states.⁶ It may be expected that either scenario would have significant effects on the position of Serbia in the future. The main and largest US military base in the Balkans, Camp Bondsteel, is located in Kosovo*.⁷ The army base is able to host more than 7,000 troops on site, and is administered under the KFOR (Kosovo Force) mandate. It was established in June 1999 after the 78-day NATO bombing of the (then-)FR Yugoslavia, ostensibly to provide safety and security in the region. In reality, however, its function has been primarily that of supporting US geostrategic interests in Europe. In the wake of the outbreak of conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, the Balkans has lost something of its status as a priority area for US engagement, but this superpower still has vital interests in maintaining a presence here; that of countering the rising political and economic influences of Russia and China, especially since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, which has accelerated the tussle for influence between the geopolitical powers in different areas of the world.

The EU—Serbia relationship is well-documented and explored from all aspects, including that of broader geopolitics.⁸ In such analyses, however, it is important to consider that the EU is often also taken as a (near-)synonym for NATO. The pro-Western new states that emerged from the former Yugoslavia have been accepted into both the EU and NATO, ‘and for the remaining states a “quarantine” has been defined, under the fictitious name Western Balkans’.⁹

The political, geopolitical, and economic aspirations of the EU towards this region are reflected in the construction of the term ‘Western Balkans’. It was gradually incorporated into the political discourse of the West after the break-up of the former Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in 1991 as the SFRY *minus* Slovenia *plus* Albania. The aim was to keep these states in store for a Euro-Atlantic expansion and for the unique action of the EU.¹⁰ However, the geographical map of the region differs significantly from the (geo)political map. Geographically, the western part of the Balkan Peninsula includes Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the western part of Montenegro. Serbia does not fall on the western side, but occupies the very central part of the peninsula. Stepić considers that the EU introduced this term in the postmodern vocabulary to ‘reserve’ and mark this space as ‘the West’, although it does not belong there geographically, ethnically, nor geopolitically.¹¹ According to this author, this is the outcome of the monocentric globalist neoliberal experiment of ‘peripheralization’ and ‘re-colonization’ of the Balkans.¹²

After Croatia became an EU member in 2013, the EU ‘erased’ this country from the map of the Western Balkans, ‘replacing’ it with Kosovo*, so that the number of countries remained at six. The principle: *minus* Croatia *plus* Kosovo* has been used in this new context. The replacement of a sovereign state, Croatia, with Kosovo*, still under the UN General Assembly Resolution 1244, is an obvious manifestation of the EU’s soft political pressure on Serbia to recognize the independence of its seceded province, Kosovo and Metohija. Besides this ‘soft’ pressure, Brussels has used direct pressures on the EU members (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) that have not recognized the independence of Kosovo* to do so, as it is highlighted in the European Parliament resolution of 25 March 2021.¹³ Under these circumstances, the position of Belgrade within various EU projects (e.g., the Green Agenda) has become increasingly sensitive and caught between the two aspirations: to continue the diplomatic combat against Kosovo’s* independence on one side, and to attain EU membership on the other. Besides, there has been a growing divergence between the EU and Serbia on various issues, as well as on aligning to the EU Global Strategy and its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which includes legally binding initiatives such as sanctions, especially now against Russia, with whom Serbia has an important connection in the energy sector, making sanctions against Russia a ‘mission impossible’ for Serbia. The European Commission reported that in 2020 Serbia’s alignment rate with the High Representative’s statements on behalf of the EU and Council Decisions in terms of foreign and security policy was 56%.¹⁴ In particular, Serbia has deviated from the EU line on issues related to Russia by not joining the sanctions against it and voting against the UN General Assembly resolution concerning the militarization of Crimea in December 2020. The European Commission has also not taken a kindly view to certain other activities undertaken by Serbia, such as its participation in the annual tripartite military exercise with Russia and Belarus (‘Slavic Brotherhood’) in June 2021, and the

visit of the Chinese Minister of National Defence to Belgrade in March 2021. After the start of the war in Ukraine, it has become completely clear that Serbia will not be able to maintain its current level of cooperation with Russia and that it will have to adapt more thoroughly to the European context, but also that this certainly cannot happen overnight, and that it is therefore optimal for the European Union to give Serbia sufficient time to revise its strategic position according to the new circumstances that have arisen in the wake of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. In this sense, the optimal 'idealistic' strategic position for Serbia would be that of a 'Switzerland of the Balkans', meaning that Serbia would be a part of the European strategic architecture, but without NATO membership, which would still be too much to ask of Serbia at this moment in time.

China, as well, is a new external factor in the Balkans and heavily influences Serbian domestic and foreign policy. The 'One Belt, One Road' Initiative, inaugurated by President Xi Jinping in 2013, has placed Serbia in the middle of the Chinese path towards the core of Europe. Serbia became a part of Beijing's massive and geopolitically influential network of transport and infrastructure investments used to link Chinese exporters to Western markets. This endeavour is also linked with the '16 + 1' initiative established in 2012 as a multilateral platform to facilitate cooperation between 16 countries of Central & Eastern Europe and China. Serbia has benefited from China's capital investments, particularly the Budapest-Belgrade-Skopje-Piraeus (BBSP) corridor, as well as planned new bridges, highways, national power grid developments, airport cooperation, power plant reconstructions, and many other projects.¹⁵ The geopolitical significance of the BBSP corridor is immense, as it connects the Chinese heartland to Central Europe by both land and sea, facilitating access to the most productive and economically dynamic regions of Europe.¹⁶ Recently, China has moved forward in fostering cooperation with Serbia by impacting the country's higher education through investment in universities and a diversification in the approach to education and academic cooperation. This new phase of cooperation is seen as a part of Beijing's cultural diplomacy to help spread a 'Chinese narrative' on global affairs.¹⁷

This article aims to assess a number of effects of the current global geopolitical recomposition on Serbia. The effects of the dominant policies of its main external factors—the US, the EU, Russia, and China—have been analysed from a geopolitical perspective, arguing that Serbia could become, in a time of tension between the aforementioned quartet of global geopolitical powers, and especially following the beginning of the war in Ukraine, a kind of 'Switzerland of the Balkans', which would stand within the European strategic architecture, but with useful ties to other geopolitical blocs, especially China, and serve as a useful link between different interests of the East and the West, just as Switzerland has done for years. But it must be stressed here that this framing of Serbia as a 'Switzerland of the Balkans' is little more than a useful metaphor of a desirable strategic position for Serbia itself, and is not the main thesis of our work, which instead primarily aims to contribute to the existing scholarship in the field by exploring a number of issues that have as yet not been the focus of geopolitical analyses in the Serbian context; 'green' initiatives, energy and climate change, and COVID-19 vaccines. Indeed, the differences between Serbia and Switzerland in historical, geographical and institutional senses, especially in terms of recent history, in which Serbia was embroiled in the whirlwind of wars in the Balkans in 1990s, perhaps preclude any ambition of Serbia as a truly 'neutral' state in the present or near future, and instead

the phrase ‘Switzerland of the Balkans’ pertains rather to a desired neutral status in light of the current global recomposition. The article is divided into three parts, with each of these presenting the findings of an analysis of each of these three factors from a geopolitical perspective. We argue that the Balkans, with Serbia as its integral part, has become a chessboard upon which the Big Power game is being played out, as was predicted by the former High Representative/Vice President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Federica Mogherini in 2017.¹⁸

The Geopoliticization of ‘green’ initiatives

The US did not fully understand the significance of expanding state power via foreign infrastructure development until it witnessed the rapid economic growth of China in the last decade. Recognizing China’s success in this respect, the Biden administration has looked to implementing the same model to stop the downward trajectory of the US’s economic, military and political influence at the global level. As a result of internal discussions pertaining to strategic competition with China, the US launched a new global infrastructure initiative ‘Build Back Better World’ (B3W) at the G7 Summit in June 2021. The US announced that it would seek to mobilize the full potential of its financial development tools, including the Development Finance Corporation, USAID, EXIM, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and the US Trade and Development Agency. In doing so, the US aims to complement domestic infrastructure investments in the American Jobs Plan and develop new opportunities to demonstrate US competitiveness abroad and create jobs at home.¹⁹ It has been claimed that the B3W initiative will contribute up to USD 40 trillion worth of infrastructure in lower income countries by 2035.

The United Kingdom (UK) contributed to the American move by launching its own plan, the so-called ‘Clean Green Initiative’.²⁰ The initiative was launched at the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP26) in Glasgow in November 2021. It is aimed at supporting green technology and infrastructure projects in developing countries with over GBP 3 billion of financing across the next five years.

This British initiative was immediately followed by one from the EU: ‘Global Gateway’ was launched by the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on 1 December 2021. They announced that this new European Strategy would boost smart, clean and secure links in the digital, energy and transport sectors, and would strengthen health, education and research systems across the world.²¹ According to the European Commission, the Global Gateway initiative represents ‘sustainable and trusted connections that work for people and the planet, to tackle the most pressing global challenges, from climate change and protecting the environment, to improving health security and boosting competitiveness and global supply chains’. The plan is to mobilize up to EUR 300 billion in investments between 2021 and 2027, to underpin a lasting global recovery that considers the EU’s partners’ needs and the EU’s own interests. Economic and Investment Plans for the Western Balkans are included in this.

Obviously, all three Western green initiatives are responses to China’s new Silk Road. Nevertheless, there are major differences between their approaches and contents. The Belt and Road Initiative (B&RI) is designed based on mutual cooperation and mutual benefit, and the policy does not include interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. On the other hand, the Western green projects are value-based models, meaning

that investments would be in-line with the rule of law, human rights and other Western values and standards. The leading principles of the EU's Global Gateway include democratic values and good governance, as they have been understood by the European Commission.²² In other words, their green schemes would include conditions related to policies across a variety of sectors (including, but not limited to, the economy and education) within a recipient country, as has always been the case with Western investments. This is a clear display of the West's intention to prevent and suppress any political influence that China may have in the countries under the B&RI. A closer look at the tools, sources and mechanisms of financing and key areas of partnership indicate that, actually, there is no new plan *per se*, but rather pre-existing initiatives relating to the green and circular economy have simply been repackaged with new, attractive branding.

The onset of the war in Ukraine is expected to have a major impact on the implementation of these green agendas of the EU, US and UK. It may be expected that their 'green' priorities will change, due to their need to respond to the deepening crisis in Ukraine. The realization of these green agendas is strongly linked to the planned transformation of energy sectors and transitions to renewable energy sources. The Ukraine war has caused difficulties regarding the EU's supply of natural gas from Russia, which is of crucial importance to its economy. In the Versailles Declaration, adopted on 10 and 11 March 2022, EU leaders stressed their commitment to reducing dependence on Russian gas, oil and coal imports, and to bolstering the EU's defence capabilities and building a more robust economic base.²³ To mitigate the economic impact of a energy shortfalls on EU companies, sectors and households, on 23 March 2022 the European Commission adopted the Temporary Crisis Framework.²⁴ The measures contained within this framework are aimed at addressing problems in the gas market and ensuring security of supply at reasonable prices for the next winter and beyond.

Undoubtedly, the unprecedented situation in Europe provoked by the war in Ukraine will have a major impact on both the Serbian economy and broader policymaking, bearing in mind the country's strong ties with both the EU and Russia. Serbia faces additional difficulties due to the EU's expectations that it impose sanctions on Russia in line with those that the EU itself introduced after the outbreak of the war.²⁵ However, such sanctions against Russia would significantly weaken Serbia's economic base and energy sector, as is elaborated in the next section of this paper. Therefore, before Serbia lies the hard task of preserving its own economic interests, while at the same time averting provocation of any discontent from the Brussels bureaucracy.

Geopoliticization of energy and climate change

In this part of the article, we examine the 'green' policy presented to Serbia by the EU from the geopolitical perspective, as well as the roles of Russia and China in the country's energy sector. In November 2020, Western Balkan leaders agreed to fully endorse the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and expressed their commitment to the implementation of the action's five pillars: (1) climate, energy, mobility, (2) circular economy, (3) depollution, (4) sustainable agriculture and food production, and (5) biodiversity.²⁶ The agreement is based on the previous conclusions of the Berlin Process Summit held in Poznań in July 2019 and the Ministerial Declarations endorsed in Podgorica (2016), Bonn (2017) and Skopje (2018) in which the Balkan leaders expressed a willingness to

contribute the efforts of the EU in fighting climate change and develop low-carbon economies. The Green Agenda is backed up by the Economic and Investment Plan, the largest investment plan for this region, earmarking close to EUR 9 billion in finance for projects in the areas of the digital transition, renewable energy and the transition from coal, road and railway connections, the creation of a common market, inclusive growth and EU accession-related reforms.²⁷

The Green Agenda is a part of the European Green Deal (EGD), the EU's new growth strategy, the main goals of which include a net-zero carbon EU by 2050 and a decoupling of economic growth and resource use.²⁸ In order to analyse the geopolitical implications of the Green Agenda for Serbia, first we have to take a look at the EGD from geopolitical perspective.

The EGD includes a set of proposals to make the EU's climate, energy, transport, and taxation policies fit for reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. To reach this target, greenhouse gas emissions from buildings need to be reduced by 60%, and energy consumption lowered by 14%.²⁹ The key areas include decarbonization of heating and cooling, and the ending of fossil fuel subsidies. This European Green Deal will be financed from within the EU's next seven-year budget cycle, as well as by the one-third of the EUR 1.8 trillion allocated to the Next Generation EU Recovery Plan for the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak that has been earmarked for greenification.³⁰ A wide array of measures by which to transform European consumption and economy patterns has been planned; while these measures are yet to be implemented, many authors have observed that they will have profound geopolitical consequences, some of which are likely to have an adverse impact on the EU's partners.³¹ For example, a massive reduction in energy product imports will affect its major gas supplier, Russia, but also other oil- and gas-producing countries from the Middle East, North Africa, the Caspian and Central Asia, which base their economies on fossil fuel rents and exports.³² Given the size of the European economy, repercussions for global energy markets are likely to be significant. There are also arguments that Russia—as a major natural gas (i.e., 'clean' fuel) supplier—may benefit from the EGD in its current format with a 2030 timeframe, as countries would opt for natural gas as a fast, cheap and uncomplicated transition away from coal. However, it remains to be seen what Russia's position will be in all of this, subsequent to the war in Ukraine with its now-weakened place in the global economy.

However, one of the major European energy security concerns, especially since the onset of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, has been a reduction in its dependence on Russian natural gas. This energy security risk has become increasingly evident through Russia's cutting-off of the gas flow through Ukraine in 2006 and 2009, as well as more recently in late 2021, and especially after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. At the beginning of winter 2021, Europe experienced an energy shortage, with energy prices simultaneously soaring. Supply shortages and political tensions have continued to rattle energy markets, keeping prices high. Moscow has been accused of using the volatile situation to launch the newly built Russian pipeline under the Baltic Sea, Nord Stream 2, a move criticized by the US and Ukraine.³³ The current European energy crisis has been fuelled by the Ukraine and Crimea crisis (which escalated to open warfare in February 2022), Russian—American tensions, and Washington's efforts to hinder any economic partnership between Moscow and Brussels, or, more pertinently, between

Moscow and Berlin. Bearing in mind that the overwhelming majority of EU member states are also members of NATO, the situation has a clear geopolitical dimension and, in the wake of the onset of the war in Ukraine, the dreams of a so-called ‘European strategic autonomy’, i.e., the possibility of merely trading with Russia, have vanished. While the Kremlin has been directly accused of using Russia’s vast reserves as a political weapon against the West and its allies, the Russian government has strenuously denied this.³⁴

The situation is similar when the repercussions of the EGD on the EU’s geopolitical partners are considered. Regional and global trade and markets will be deeply affected, including the global players—the US and China—who are, at the same time, the key actors in Serbia. Therefore, it is inevitable that the EU’s ‘green policy’ for the Western Balkans would be interwoven with a political agenda.

Namely, their biggest challenge is related to the imposed mode of energy sector reform. Moving away from coal and diversifying the region’s electricity mix are seen as critically important. Apart from Albania, where hydropower dominates, the other countries of the Western Balkans rely heavily on solid fuel to generate electricity. Serbia’s energy security is currently based on coal. In 2018, 65% of electrical energy was generated by thermal power plants and 31% by hydropower. In 2019, the level of energy dependence of Serbia was only 35.6%, in comparison to 60.7% for the EU (Table 1). All Western Balkan states were generally less dependent on energy imports than the EU, whose net energy import dependency level has reached a 30-year peak.³⁵ Between 2009 and 2019, the energy dependency rate increased in North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo* and Montenegro (by 19.3%, 7.0%, 4.9% and 1.0% respectively), while in Serbia it decreased by 3.7%.³⁶

In line with the EGP, Serbia drafted the Strategy on Low Carbon Development with accompanying Action Plan, and adopted the Law on Climate Change,³⁷ the Law on Efficient Use of Energy,³⁸ and the Law on Usage of Renewable Energy Sources,³⁹ committing itself to achieving the goals set out in the Green Agenda. The most ambitious among the four mitigation plans is an envisaged drop in greenhouse gas emissions of 26.4% between 2010 and 2030, and a whopping 80% in total by 2050, compared to 1990 levels. However, it is virtually impossible to achieve such deep emission cuts in the next 30 years in a cost-effective manner with the currently available technologies.

However, the lack of resources devoted to the search for alternative fuels to coal gives rise to fear that an overly hasty mass closure of thermal power plants could cause energy shortages, leading to a surge in energy imports, increased energy dependency and massive layoffs of workers. That situation would negatively impact the economy and

Table 1. Energy dependency, in %, 2008, 2013 and 2019.

	2008	2013	2019
EU-27	60.3	55.4	60.7
Albania	49.8	25.5	31.5
Bosnia and Herzegovina	n/a	28.2	27.4
Kosovo*	27.1	21.8	30.5
Montenegro	46.2	23.5	32.9
North Macedonia	46.3	46.7	58.5
Serbia	37.7	24.1	35.6

Source: Eurostat. Enlargement countries – energy statistics. < https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement_countries_-_energy_statistics#Energy_trade> (2 December 2021).

living standards of the population, increase energy poverty levels, and—at the domestic level—exacerbate problems with heating homes in winter. In 2017, Serbia already announced plans to shut down eight thermal power plant blocks by 2023 and develop renewable energy capacities,⁴⁰ but that has proven to be mission impossible to date. Coal remains the dominant energy source in spite of its environmental impact, largely as a result of efforts to maintain energy security. Instead of shutting down thermal plants, in June 2020 the Government announced the construction of two new lignite-fuelled power plants⁴¹ and in May 2021 went a step further by stating that coal-fired thermal power plants would continue to work until 2050.⁴² The planned new capacities would mostly consist of mid- and large-sized hydropower plants, gas-fuelled power plants, solar and wind power plants, which are expected to be financed by the EU's Green Agenda resources.

Given the substantial amounts of money and loans that have been promised to this end, this seems to be a golden opportunity through which Brussels would be able to further expand its soft political influence on Belgrade.⁴³ Obviously, the Green Agenda is partially the European response to the danger of losing influence vis-a-vis other countries such as Russia, Turkey and, above all, China.

Due to the B&RI, China has become the main player in shaping the region's energy sector. China has long been investing heavily in coal-fuelled power plants in the Western Balkans. In Serbia, China has invested in the Kostolac B thermal power plant and fitted it with desulphurization equipment, with the facility having been built by the China Machinery Engineering Corporation and financed by the Exim Bank of China.⁴⁴ There have also been announcements of large Chinese infrastructural projects in power generation and renewable energy, to a total value of EUR 17 billion, in Serbia's mining and energy sector.⁴⁵ These plans were announced after Xi Jinping's pledge that China would no longer fund the construction of coal-fired power plants overseas at the General Debate of the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021.⁴⁶ Thus, China was criticized for its double standards regarding its continuous hindrance to Serbia's diversification away from fossil fuels, and breaching EU environmental laws in the region.⁴⁷ China has also been accused of disproportionate investment in the metallurgy, mining, energy and transport sectors, with most such projects being accompanied by allegations of corruption, exploitation and environmental harm.⁴⁸ The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), financed by the European Commission, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and several governmental development agencies and foundations from the EU, has identified 135 Chinese-linked project in the Balkans, worth more than EUR 32 billion, few of which have been realized without any controversy. Out of the total number of projects, almost half (45%) are in Serbia.⁴⁹

Alongside China, Russia has also made significant investments in the Serbian energy industry and other energy-intensive sectors, such as construction and mining, while also being the main exporter of fossil fuels to the region. The natural gas pipelines from Russia to Europe are considered a major geopolitical issue, especially since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Serbia succeeded in obtaining gas supplies via a new route across Turkey and Bulgaria from January 2021. This TurkStream gas pipeline, stretching from Russia to Turkey across the Black Sea, also distributes gas to Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the ultimate intention being for it to also deliver natural gas to Hungary, Austria and Romania, via Serbia. However, the Russian distributor in Serbia, Gazprom, was accused

by the EU of holding a monopoly within the Serbian market. Thus, this endeavour was met with a critical reaction from the Energy Community, which deemed it a violation of EU law, which Serbia is obliged to apply as a member of the community.⁵⁰ Balkan politicians, particularly Serbian ones, have been often accused of using Russia as a trump card in their relations with Brussels in order to extort support.⁵¹ In this regard, it is almost certain that the European Commission will—in the not-too-distant future—be forced to respond to Serbia's announcement of discussions regarding the construction of a nuclear power plant in cooperation with a Russian state nuclear construction company Rosatom.⁵²

This analysis indicates that the EU's policy response to climate change is, in fact, more a method of controlling states and societies.⁵³ It is also aimed at increasing the EU's power in Serbia, which is far from being on par with its (financial) investment in the country. The lion's share of total investment in Serbia in the period 2010–2020 was from the EU, i.e., almost 70%, amounting to over EUR 17.4 billion.⁵⁴ Foreign direct investments (FDIs) from Russia amount to only 9.33% of the total, and from China only 4.28%, but the political influence of these countries in Serbia has been much higher, and continues to rise. For the EU, the Green Agenda is a soft geopolitical tool to secure its supply chains and suppress the influence of Russia and China in the country.

Geopoliticization of COVID-19 vaccines

In this section, we analyse key geopolitical aspects of the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines manufactured in the United States, the EU, Russia and China, and how their distribution has reflected manufacturing countries' geopolitical interests regarding Serbia.

A global overview of countries by the types of COVID-19 vaccines they have used confirms a sharp West-East divide.⁵⁵ Current geopolitical relations are mirrored in vaccine types that have been approved and used (Table 2); Western countries have not only preferred 'their' vaccines, but have not even recognized those produced by 'the others'. Some countries have even gone so far as to justify their choices in terms of political motives. For example, Lithuania refused to accept the vaccine offered by Russia, explaining that it considered the vaccine to be a geopolitical tool.⁵⁶ In a statement given following the rise in the tensions between Iran and the US at the beginning of 2021, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, banned imports of US- and UK-developed vaccines into the country.⁵⁷

The European Medicines Agency (EMA) has approved only 'Western' vaccines for use within the EU.⁵⁸ In practise, this means that people who have received 'Eastern' vaccines are treated by and within the EU as non-vaccinated, and are not allowed to freely travel to and across the bloc. The only EU member state that has administered Russian and Chinese vaccines in the face of the EMA's regulatory reticence is Hungary. This 'disobedience' of EU rules and regulations by Hungary acts as a reminder of the constant clashes between Brussels and Budapest under the Presidency of Viktor Orbán on various issues, including—but certainly not limited to—the migrant flow, and, more recently, sanctions on Russia in the wake of the war in Ukraine. The uptake of Russian and Chinese vaccines is also in line with a Hungarian foreign policy that has been marked of late by a warming of relationships with these two countries.

Table 2. COVID-19 vaccines administered by manufacturer and by country, as of 25 December 2021.

	Pfizer/ BioNTech	Oxford/ AstraZeneca	Moderna	Johnson & Johnson	Sinovac	Sinopharm/ Beijing	Sputnik V
USA	X		X	X			
UK	X	X	X				
Russia							X
Belarus						X	X
China					X	X	
EU	X	X	X	X			
Hungary	X	X	X	X		X	X
Albania	X	X			X		X
Bosnia and Herzegovina	X	X			X		X
Kosovo*	X	X					
Montenegro	X	X				X	X
North Macedonia	X	X			X	X	X
Serbia	X	X				X	X

Source: H. Ritchie et al., 'COVID-19 vaccine doses administered by manufacturer, country'.. Published online at OurWorldInData.org, 27 December 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations> (27 December 2021).

Both Russia and China have been mentioned as undertaking 'vaccine diplomacy' on the global stage. This term refers to governments' attempts to increase their political, economic, military and geopolitical influence by donating COVID-19 vaccines to other countries. Russia and China seized on the opportunity, and stepped up to provide the developing world with their own vaccines, particularly in Latin America and Africa, which had the effect of bolstering their positions as global powers, and may 'bring unpredictable consequences for alliances and geopolitics for years to come'.⁵⁹ These countries have also been criticized for using the pandemic to strengthen their geopolitical and geo-economic aspirations in the Balkan region.⁶⁰

Serbia became an early leader in terms of vaccine roll-out, not shying away from its good relations with Russia and China, while at the same time balancing its relationship with the United States and the EU, by remaining 'neutral' in the 'geopolitics of vaccines'. The country thus ranked among the global leaders in terms of successful vaccination campaigns in its early stage. It was also among the very few countries that had at their disposal all leading vaccine types from both Western and Eastern manufacturers: Pfizer/BioNTech (USA), Oxford/AstraZeneca (United Kingdom), Sinopharm (China) and Sputnik V (Russia). By mid-February 2021, the share of the Serbian population that had received at least one dose of the vaccine was almost ten times higher than the EU average (11.51% in comparison to 1.53%).⁶¹ Simultaneously, according to the rate of second-dose-per-capita, Serbia occupied the pole position in Europe. These results were claimed as a great political success by the Serbian government. As well as the delivery of vaccines, the Chinese government facilitated Serbia's acquisition of medical supplies and equipment. A team of its most eminent experts, who had fought the coronavirus in Wuhan, was deployed to Serbia as a part of the assistance programme. This team was welcomed in person by President Vučić in the presence of China's ambassador to Serbia.⁶² Russian and Chinese assistance was continuously promoted,⁶³ and this was not well received by the European Commission.⁶⁴ However, the EU should recognize that it also contributed to the rising power of China and Russia in Serbia during the pandemic, as it was slow to address immediate needs and was seen as failing to react to emergencies with sufficient haste, in spite of being the biggest donor to the country.

As Isabelle Ioannides has observed, the geopolitics of COVID-19 vaccines has exposed a number of perennial weaknesses in EU foreign policy.⁶⁵

Serbia's policy was presented by Western politicians and media as a 'vaccine diplomacy' aimed to increase its soft power, credentials and prestige, although the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikola Selaković denied that geopolitical interests had been involved.⁶⁶ Having a surplus of doses at a time when they were scarce in the EU, Serbia invited foreigners to come to the country and receive a free vaccine, with more than 300,000 foreign citizens taking up this offer and participating in 'vaccine tourism'. The production of Sputnik V in Serbia started in June 2021 as a direct outcome of the meeting between two Presidents, Vučić and Putin. The country also signed the memorandum with China and the United Arab Emirates to build a factory for the domestic production of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine that was planned to start in March 2022.⁶⁷ Serbia has donated 230,000 doses of vaccines to countries in the region, and a further 570,000 doses to Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Tunisia, Iran and other countries in Africa and Asia.⁶⁸

Western politicians further framed the activities of the Serbian government as part of its campaign to reclaim Kosovo*, as recipients of Serbian generosity were states that had not recognized the independence of Kosovo*.⁶⁹ Additionally, they were interpreted as an attempt by Serbia to restore its (or—more aptly—Yugoslavia's) former role as a leading nation among the Non-Aligned Movement, and an attempt to recover some of the markets it had lost with the collapse of Yugoslavia.

A geopolitical interpretation of vaccine distribution indicates that the key global players have used their 'vaccine superpower' to strengthen their economic, political and geopolitical interests worldwide. In 2021, the world became divided in two 'vaccine blocs', with Serbia being a notable exception to this. The country succeeded in crossing borders and forging 'vaccine partnerships' with both the West and the East, remaining 'neutral' in the specific 'geopolitics of vaccines' of our time. This leads us to the conclusion that such a neutral position, which has already proven effective for Serbia in the specific 'geopolitics of vaccines' context, could be equally effective when it comes to its overall strategic position, making it a kind of 'Switzerland of the Balkans', i.e., a part of the European strategic architecture, but with a formally neutral military status, direct democracy and balanced diplomacy, just like Switzerland has been for years, being at the same time independent, and a safe and reliable partner to the international community.

Conclusion

The article presents an assessment of trends and impact of the current American, European, Russian, and Chinese policies on Serbia from the geopolitical perspective. Due to its geographic position, Serbia may be considered a litmus test of the global geopolitical multipolar tendencies. This Balkan country has become a chessboard upon which the major power game is played out, and even more so since the outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022. The current state of affairs may be taken to reflect a re-composition of the global political map towards a multipolar world: a softening of US power, the insufficient capacity of the EU to lead a unified foreign policy and position itself as a global geopolitical player, Russia's abrupt return to the very core of geopolitical combat by starting the war in Ukraine, and the rise of China with its global economic ambitions, including those in Serbia.

In these new geopolitical circumstances of a multipolar-but-conflicted world, Serbia has two strategic choices: the first is to side with one of the geopolitical blocs against the other, while the second is to remain neutral in the midst of their competition, albeit with a natural strategic alignment to the continent on which it is situated, i.e., Europe. Having in mind the geographical position of Serbia, its traditions, its strategic culture of being 'East in the West and West in the East', as well as its strategic environment, undoubtedly the best solution for Serbia in the new geopolitical circumstances is to remain formally neutral, developing its own specific position as a 'Switzerland of the Balkans'. Such a position is undoubtedly in the national interest of Serbia, but the question remains as to whether it is sustainable, given the current global geopolitical challenges and the increasingly tense situation between the global geopolitical blocs, especially since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. However, we must reiterate here that labelling Serbia as the 'Switzerland of the Balkans' is but a metaphor of a desirable strategic status for the country, and the concrete and realistic sustainability of such a position is to be the subject of future research, providing that circumstances—above all the outcome and consequences of the war in Ukraine and the eventual division of spheres of influence in its wake, which we currently cannot know—continue to support this thesis.

In the context of new global challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis and climate change, new geopolitical tools are being seen to emerge: vaccines, 'green' agendas, and decarbonization policies. These have all had a strong impact on Serbia. The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans is an extension of Brussels' soft influence on Serbia through geoeconomic and geopolitical means. The European strategy of decarbonizing the economies of the Western Balkans seems to be in conflict with the interests of Russia and China, which have both made significant investments in the energy sectors of Western Balkan states. Although China's presence in the region is a very recent phenomenon, being barely a decade old, the country has already become Serbia's main non-Western economic partner. Considering that the country unavoidably lies upon the route of China's New Silk Road, Serbia's benefits are expected to grow, particular regarding transportation corridors and energy supplies. The newcomer to the Balkans has also strengthened Serbia's political position with respect to Kosovo*, since now there are two powerful economic partners that oppose the recognition of its unilateral proclamation of independence from Serbia. However, one of these partners, Russia, since starting the war in Ukraine, has shifted its attention from European (geo-)politics to those of Asia, leaving Serbia to its own strategic destiny inside its own geopolitical neighbourhood.

Finally, in this changing multipolar world, Serbia cannot 'sit on two chairs', balancing endlessly between the US, EU, Russia, and China, but it can be a part of a European strategic architecture with the possibility for economic cooperation with Russia and China remaining open, just as with Switzerland, while simultaneously being a significant part of Europe led by Germany and France. From the standpoint of a small country with prominent economic difficulties, the best option for Serbia is to stay open to different global geopolitical powers while existing within the European strategic architecture, all the time strengthening its economy through re-industrialization, economic and social development, protection of resources, and preservation of national sovereignty.

In this paper, we have metaphorically termed this neutral strategic position of Serbia that we advocate 'Switzerland of the Balkans', although in another article⁷⁰ we have described the significant differences that exist between Swiss neutrality, which is traditional and

recognized by all world powers, and the neutrality of Serbia, which for now merely manifests itself as little more than a legitimate wish of a small country to preserve its stability in an unstable world, but which still requires affirmation by the great powers in order to be truly sustainable in the long run. Serbia and the Balkans no longer lie—as they often did during the 19th and 20th centuries—within the innermost circle of interest of any great strategic power—the US, Russia or China—since the main geopolitical battles of the 21st century are being fought elsewhere; in Ukraine, the South China Sea and the Middle East, which can be considered the primary regions of geostrategic interest for these major geopolitical powers. At present, only the European Union has exhibited a heightened interest in the Western Balkan region, but the EU is not a hard and rigid geopolitical force in the traditional sense of the word, and this allows Serbia, while remaining primarily part of the EU’s strategic architecture, to maintain its economic relations with other geopolitical blocs through a wise foreign policy, as a kind of Balkan link between the West and the East; just as Switzerland has for centuries acted as a link between different geopolitical parties. It will certainly be more difficult in the circumstances that have arisen in the wake of the war in Ukraine, but it is not an impossible feat. While our work does not pretend to definitively position Serbia as a ‘Switzerland of the Balkans’ it does present this as a geopolitical idealistic normative notion that would be highly beneficial for Serbia and for the entire Balkan region, because any radical strategic status of Serbia, in which it would be either exclusively pro- or anti-NATO oriented, could create instability in Serbia itself, and, bearing in mind its immediate past and its geographical environment, this could well be mirrored in the stability of the entire Balkans.

But aside from all wishes for Serbian neutrality among the Great Powers, of which only time can be the final judge, this article has realistically described the position of Serbia in the light of the current global recomposition, without prejudging its final strategic staAll Western Balkans, which realistically depends more on the Great Powers than on Serbia itself.

Notes

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