

## Rethinking Serbia Foreign Policy: Case of Open Balkan Initiative and EU Accession

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### **Abstrak:**

Jurnal ini mendiskusikan terkait posisi Serbia dalam perjanjian multilateral yang disebut dengan *Open Balkan*. Penulis menggunakan metode kualitatif untuk menganalisis narasi dari Barat dan Timur yang berakibat pada arah kebijakan luar negeri Serbia. Keberadaan integrasi ekonomi melalui *Open Balkan* dapat berdampak pada *Berlin Process* yang telah diinisiasi oleh Uni Eropa, khususnya untuk negara-negara WB6. Tanggapan negatif dari Kosovo dan ketiadaan minat Montenegro dan Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH) bisa menjadi batu sandungan bagi para anggotanya. Selain itu, untuk mencapai kepentingan nasional, Serbia harus menyeimbangkan dengan Barat dan Timur. Pada periode ini kebijakan luar negeri empat pilar diuji. Penulis membahas strategi kebijakan luar negeri Serbia dan bagaimana Serbia dapat menyeimbangkan kepentingan dengan Barat dan Timur pada proses pembentukan perjanjian *Open Balkan*.

**Kata-Kata Kunci:** Serbia, Open Balkan, Uni Eropa, WB6, Kebijakan Luar Negeri 4 Pilar

### **Abstract:**

This journal discusses Serbia's position in a multilateral agreement called Open Balkan. The author uses a qualitative method to break down and analyze the narratives from the West and East that impacted Serbia's Foreign Policy trajectory. The existence of Open Balkan economic integration can impact the Berlin Process as a precursor established by European Union, especially for the WB6. The negative response from Kosovo and the unenthusiastic of Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) can be a stumbling stone for its members. In addition, to achieve Serbia's national interest, Serbia must be balanced the West and East. In this period Four Pillars Policy is tested. The author discusses the Foreign Policy strategy of Serbia in this issue and balancing deviances with the West and East process of establishing the Open Balkan agreement .

**Keywords:** Serbia, Open Balkan, European Union, WB6, Four Pillars Foreign Policy

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## Introduction

The initiation of the Open Balkan in 2019 was pushed by the dilemmatic act of several Western Balkan states on the European Union (EU) accession issue. Some scholars have criticized the fact that the creation of the Open Balkan can overlap with the Berlin Process, especially with the EU accession. Donika Kamberi believes they need to follow the umbrella of the EU as a "normative framework." She also provides a further argument in the conclusion that the Berlin Process is the only obligation Western Balkan countries aspiring to the EU should follow rather than conduct another institution (Kamberi,2021,p.66).

The dichotomous policy of Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania can create new problems in the previous integration initiatives known as the WB6 group (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia). This group was formed officially by the Berlin process, and the EU constructed it to maintain the stability and conflict disputes in WB6 and the EU enlargement policy. Furthermore, citing Edward P. Joseph, Open Balkan is competing for the crucial steps toward integration in Western Balkan that already has various institutions and projects to assist in coordinating and promoting actual actions, such as the Berlin Process, Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA), and the Regional Cooperation Council (Elezi,2022). In another article, Joseph also viewed that Open Balkans brings Aleksandar Vučić the opportunity to achieve the illusion of joint stability in the Balkans while creating the conditions for chaos (Joseph,2022).

From Serbia's perspective, the discourse about "Serbia as the stability of Balkan region" was campaigned by Aleksandar Vučić when he officiated as the former prime minister of Serbia. In the European parliamentary assembly 2015, he conveyed that the EU was the critical partner in Serbia's foreign affairs. "When that question is asked, the response is always the European Union. That is why we are dedicated to that path" (European Parliamentary Assembly, 2015). Moreover, the manifestation of this statement reflects Serbia's foreign policy, which adopted the Four Pillars agenda to gain diplomatic relations with the European Union, Russia, the United States of America (USA), and China. It is the

continuity of foreign policy doctrine from Boris Tadic's administration in recent years ago.

In 2018, prime minister Ana Bnarbić declared that joining Serbia in the European Union could be reached in 2025 as possible. It can be seen when Tim Sebastian interviewed her at the DW conflict zone session. She said, "we are not ready to join the EU; we all actually implement all the reform of that as a society, politically, and economically to become fit with the EU" (DW News,2018). Her reason is based on the reality that some members of the EU could not compete very well. According to this statement, the author believes that Open Balkan can be a tool for Serbia to prepare and increase its capability before joining the EU.

In this paper, the author will discuss Belgrade's position in the Open Balkan and whether it can maximize this multilateralism as a backup of economic interest before joining the EU. Besides, the author analyses Four Pillar's foreign policy as Serbia's trajectory in international relations to perceive some challenges in the Open Balkan agenda, especially its relations between the West and East. The main argument in this paper is that to secure the Open Balkan initiative, Serbia needs to maintain relations with its neighbor in Balkan, especially with Kosovo as the main obstacle to Serbia's foreign policy. It is a primary step to initiate Southeastern Europe integration on Open Balkan or Serbia membership in the EU. In addition, Serbia must articulate foreign policy with the West and the East clearly.

## **Overview and Development of Open Balkan**

Before figuring about Open Balkan, the author describes previous economics and regional integration in Western Balkan, especially Berlin Process, which already constructed the WB6 group as an arena to conduct dialogue before joining European Union. The realization of the Open Balkan can be risky to the Berlin process, which existed in 2014. It has the primary function to stabilize this region before joining the European Union; at the civil society level, it has succeeded in integrating youth through the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO). The main goals of RYCO are improving youth cooperation, overcoming inter-ethnic distancing between youth in the region, and participating in intercultural exchange programs. Moreover, another project in the Berlin process

scheme is called the Balkans Youth Laboratory (WB6 Lab); this program focuses on incubators for entrepreneurship and innovation for born young leaders.

Furthermore, based on the research from the Balkans Policy Research Group, the WB6 group has equal standing at the Berlin Process, even for Kosovo. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have profited the most concerning funding projects. Despite Kosovo gaining the R10 railway project, it is not taking the opportunities in this dialogue (Balkan Policy Research Group, 2018). Berlin process has four main goals, (1) resolution of outstanding bilateral and internal issues, (2) achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region, (3) enhancing regional economic cooperation, and (4) laying the foundations for sustainable growth (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, 2018).

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz prioritizes the Common Regional Market and believes that the Berlin Process is a forum that brings the region's countries into the EU. However, he has no statement indicating support for the Open Balkan initiative. Scholz affirmed that the Western Balkan is a part of Europe, and the Berlin Process should be their priority. In the Berlin Process 2022, which Ana Bnarbić visited, he stated that "Europe without the Western Balkans is not complete, and the countries of the region should have confidence in the Berlin process" (European Western Balkan, 2022a).

In October 2019, three Western Balkan states initiated the Open Balkan. The President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania, Edi Rama, and the Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, signed a declaration of intentions to establish "Balkan Mini Schengen" between the three countries in Novi Sad. On this occasion, they also invited the other countries of the WB6, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo, to sign a declaration. This new regionalism has some missions to ensure the free movement of capital, goods, labour forces, services, and people. This cooperation was adopted in the passport-free zone of the EU initiative.

At the first summit, Sarajevo, Podgorica, and Pristina refused to participate in this economic integration. When the first conference was held, Aleksandar Vucic said, "What has been agreed is of immense benefit for our

citizens in all three countries because we are convinced that the citizens deserve a better future, higher living standard, and the incomparably lower unemployment rate" (General Secretariat of The President of The Republic Serbia,2019). More, Zoran Zaev convinced the critical statement, "Balkans is not a gunpowder barrel anymore but rather the region of peace, stability, and economic development, the region of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, committed to a better life".

This statement also reflects this region's vital agenda of peace and stability. However, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted this meeting in 2020, and the development of Open Balkan continued in 2021. In July, the three countries conducted physical meetings in Skopje (North Macedonia), and the name of "Balkan Mini Schengen" was changed to "Open Balkan." Since the end of 2021, the initiative's focus has progressively changed to enable total freedom of movement, especially for labour and products. Five main agreements were already signed in Tirana; the agreements between the three countries covered labour market access, the interconnection of electronic identification schemes, and cooperation on veterinary medicine and food safety. Two more agreements on economic cooperation were signed: one with Serbia and one between North Macedonia and Albania in the next meeting (Sinoruka,2021).

In 2022, two MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) were signed, such as cooperation in tourism in the Western Balkans and collaboration in culture. The successor of Zoran Zaev, Kovačevski, conveyed that the Open Balkans has the vision to accelerate the European integration of the Western Balkan countries. In addition, it can contribute to each of its lands on its path to membership in the European Union within a reasonable period (European Western Balkan,2022b).

### **Internal and External Debates of Open Balkan Initiative**

In this part, the author divides the term internal and external groups. The internal group consists of the WB6 group, and the external group is apart. The external group comprises the EU, USA, Russia, and China, as the priority of Serbia's important partners. From Serbia's perspective, this agenda is significant to de-escalate the dispute with Kosovo. Aleksandar Vucic said, "we have differences relative to Kosovo [...] has nothing to do with the flow of goods, people, services and capital" (Simić,2019).

Regarding the Open Balkan initiative, the struggle for economic integration was encountered by some WB6 members. Likewise, the refusing Kosovo to join Open Balkan has a further question, how goods and people can freely move from Albania to Serbia? So far, Kosovo is the primary protester regarding establishing an Open Balkan, the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, figured the idea of the economic integration initiative is a "trap," even though they convinced some agendas for achieving specific political and financial goals. Kurti (in Agić, 2021) said, "Open Balkans is more like the Balkans several open influences from the East, especially from Russia and China, as well as open to autocracy, corruption, and war criminals. It contradicts European values of democracy and the rule of law".

There is still no significant result in the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina since 2017. Thus, it creates a big question according to the interest of the European Union in Western Balkan. This criticism has remained a solid message to Serbia, which has a concentric circle of foreign policy with Russia and China. It is possible to make some segregation between WB6 which have been reached the harmonization relations in the Berlin Process initiative.

Moreover, the government of Montenegro still does not give an accurate statement about either joining or not. As an observer, even Podgorica joined the summit with Sarajevo in Skopje in 2022. In November 2022, the minister of the European Affairs of Montenegro said, "Bearing in mind that the Open Balkans is still in the experimental phase, without concrete data on the project's success, Montenegro should not make a decision" (Durović,2022). In addition, she also argued that the Open Balkan relies on the circle of "charismatic leaders." The document underlined that the Open Balkans initiative is based on the ambitious agenda of creating a common regional market modeled after the EU single market. It also coincides with the existing regional cooperation framework established by the Berlin Process.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the complexity raised from their entities and the supportive message was mainly gained by the president of the Serbian entity. Bosniak leader member Šefik Džaferović and the Croatian Željko Komšić, who was elected to that body by the votes of the Bosniaks, were always against this agenda (Radio Televizija Vojvodine,2022). Several problems in this new

regionalism in Western Balkan cannot be separated from the historical trauma of the Yugoslavia era. Trust and belief from all members are necessary. Citing Dragan Đukanovic (2013) et al., recovering and strengthening steps to maintain Serbia and BiH with trilateral cooperation between Turkey-Serbia-Bosnia and Herzegovina, it established in 2009 had the main goal to deepen relations in the region of Southeast Europe, especially bilateral relations between Belgrade and Sarajevo. Serbia and BiH relations are vital to encourage the development of transport and railway infrastructure between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which would economically revive border regions in the two countries (Đukanović et al.,2013,p.112). According to the vision of the Open Balkan initiative, it will increase the mobility of both countries, and the resources already remain. They decide whether integrate or not.

In the external group discussion, Open Balkan has the support of the US administration, which said that the entire region should be involved in the initiative to be more successful, based on the official statement from Antony Godfrey, the former USA ambassador in Serbia (N1,2021). Additionally, Christopher Hill, the substitute USA ambassador in Belgrade, attended Ohrid on 8 June 2022 and suggested that Kosovo join Open Balkan. He stated, "I would like to see Kosovo in it. That will be up to them " (N1,2022). This statement reflected that normalization with Pristina should concern Serbia, even though it is challenging.

Another positive support is also given by European Union officials, including the Commissioner for Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi, who has repeatedly welcomed the project. At the same time, the European Parliament expresses caution towards an initiative that does not include all six countries, believing that it should be based on the rules EU and contribute to the processes of European integration. In the last conference Summit in Belgrade, he stated, "The agreement reached last week on the free movement between Serbia and Kosovo gives a sign of hope that the Open Balkans may soon be implemented in the whole region" (European Commission,2022).

Recently, in the EU-Western Balkan summit, based on the Tirana declaration, the EU fully supports the integration in this area; in the first point written that "the leaders of the EU and its member states, in consultation with the

leaders of the Western Balkans, held a summit for the first time in the Western Balkans region and concluded that the escalation of Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine threatens European and global peace and security."

This declaration also mentioned Belgrade and Pristina issues. EU and member state leaders appealed to both states to engage in constructive dispute resolution and to refrain from unilateral and/or provocative actions that could lead to tension and violence in point number 2, the acceleration of the accession process should do immediately (Council of the European Union, 2022). Tirana Declaration has 33 points; in these articles, the EU remains the closest partner, the prominent investor, the trade partner, and the largest donor for the region. They also encourage the importance of reforms and emphasize that they will support the commitment of the Western Balkans partners for inclusive regional cooperation and the strengthening of good neighbor relations. Moreover, Dragan Đukanović and Milan Krstić (2021) argued that the historical condition of regional cooperation post-Yugoslavia era could not improve the initial consolidation of relations in the post-Yugoslav area because the states remained predominantly focused on numerous problems arising from the wars.

The phrase many have marked as the transition from post-conflict stabilization to accelerated European integration also implied the remodeling of regional cooperation. Multilateral forms of cooperation in the Balkans, over the past two decades, aimed initially to somehow introduce the region into a new stage of post-conflict stabilization after the armed conflicts in the area of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. However, skepticism about the Yugoslavia conflict remains.

Regarding the previous explanation about Open Balkan and its challenges, Serbia must struggle to achieve regional interest and should posit a clear trajectory between "East" and "West." The author uses the term West and East because they relate to Serbia's local media and public opinion assertions. Otherwise, the author tries grouping in the next chapter. West consists of Serbia's relations with the European Union and the United States of America. In comparison, the East is composed of Russia and China. Both groups are the main priority in Serbia's four pillars of foreign policy. The realization of the Open Balkan can create a new problem after reaching the necessary steps in Berlin



Process from 2014 until now. The segregation and debate between WB6 will raise turbulence among the WB6 group. The unfocused four pillars of foreign policy are too blurry to define Serbia's national interest. Serbia prioritized the EU but needs to balance another priority with the USA, Russia, and China, respectively. Without support from external partners, the Open Balkan could face more challenges in the integration process, especially the West in the EU enlargement and the East as Serbia's traditional allies.

### **Serbia and The West**

The EU has been the main focus of Serbian Foreign Policy since 2004 at the European Council in Thessaloniki. The Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) was confirmed as EU policy for the Western Balkans. The European Council officially opened this process in October 2004. The Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with Serbia was signed in 2008. In 2009, the visa for Serbian citizens traveling to Schengen countries was abolished. During the same year, Serbia officially applied for EU membership in Boris Tadić's administration (Delegacija EU u Srbiji, 2021).

In March 2012, Serbia received the status of a candidate for EU membership. The Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and Serbia entered to force the following year. Seven years later, 18 negotiating chapters have been opened. The Serbian authorities have announced that the process will continue using the new methodology agreed upon at the beginning of that year. Based on the polling from the Ministry of European Integration of Serbia in 2021, the public primarily supports this integration trend from 2016 to 2021. The main question is, "If there was a referendum tomorrow with the question: "Do you support the accession of our country to the European Union" how would you vote?"

If there was a referendum tomorrow with the question: "Do you support the accession of our country to the European Union", how would you vote?(by survey cycles)

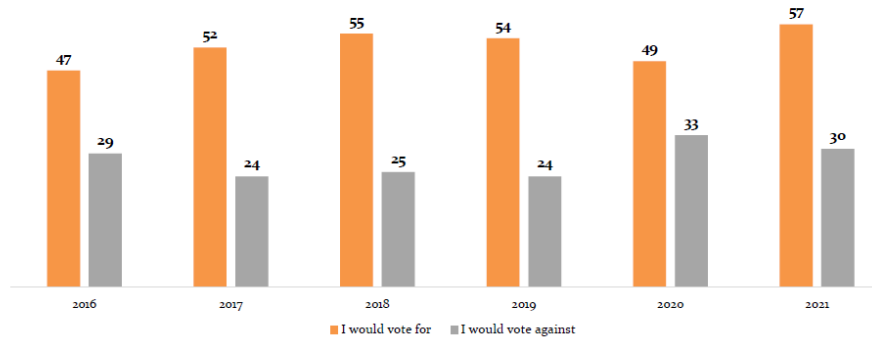


Figure 1. Public Opinion on EU Accession (Ministry of European Integration Republic of Serbia,2021)

The author believes that to maintain relations with the EU, Serbia needs to obtain support from another partner, especially USA. According to the USA integrated country strategy to Serbia, the USA fully supported Serbia in EU accession. In this document, a threat that Washington perceived because Belgrade has deepened its strategic partnership with Russia and China (US. State Department,2022). Serbia must use this opportunity and state directly. During the Open Balkan summit in Ohrid 2022, Vučić said that the Open Balkans benefits all countries in the region and is not a substitute for anything, not even the European Union, but a unique initiative of the Balkan people (Danas,2022a). In the Tirana summit, Serbia reflected that it is a clear sign of the EU's strong commitment to the Western Balkans and their path towards the EU (EU in Serbia,2022).

However, the idea of the new initiative could distort the harmonization WB6 already made in Berlin Process. The main problem and EU accession are the unwilling Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to support the Open Balkan Initiative. The narrative about Open Balkan which "monopolized by the charismatic leader." Thus, Serbia needs to normalize internal actors (WB6) before focusing on the EU.

## Serbia and The East

Discussing Serbia's relations with Russia during the Ukraine crisis, the complexity also impacted Serbia. Uniquely, Serbia is the only state that refuses

to impose sanctions on Russia, and this event also impacted the narrative of open Balkan which the West and East interfered. The Foreign Minister of Russia, Sergey Lavrov, admitted at a press conference on the occasion of his failure to arrive in Belgrade, since Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Montenegro banned his plane from flying over, that "NATO and the EU want to turn the Balkans into their project called 'closed Balkans'(Danas,2022b). Moreover, the main thing, he added, is that "no one will be able to destroy relations with Serbia."

He stated that Brussels did not want Lavrov and Serbian officials to discuss "our rapidly developing strategic partnership, as well as international affairs. Brussels leaders did not want us to confirm Russia's position on the Kosovo, Bosnia, and Herzegovina issue, express support for Belgrade's Open Balkans initiative, and discuss improving relations between the countries of the region". It could be threatening the cohesiveness of WB6, which already function.

Based on the research by Beograd Center for Security Policy, Russia's local perception is highly positive, with China in second place. The objective result came from the historical representatives according to Kosovo Independence and NATO bombing in 1999, the China embassy was attacked, then raised Serbian sympathy.

	Good influence	Bad influence	No influence	I do not know, I cannot assess
<b>Russia</b>	72	7	21	
<b>United States (America)</b>	32	59	5	4
<b>European Union</b>	24	68	7	1
<b>China</b>	87	4	9	
<b>Germany</b>	37	55	4	4
<b>Hungary</b>	70	18	8	4
<b>Turkey</b>	49	26	20	5
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	41	22	21	16

Figure 2. Public opinion on the question "How would you rate these actors' impact on Serbia?" (in %) (Beograd Center for Security Policy,2020)

China and Serbia had close relations since Boris Tadic's administration when it declared four pillars of foreign policy. It can be traced to when president

Tadic visited China from 19 to 25 August 2009. China has become a significant partner of Serbia, which is at the forefront of Serbia's industrial and logistical geopolitics; the Silk Road initiative positions Serbia at the center of the deployment of Chinese enterprises in Europe. Moreover, the strategic partnership signed by China-Serbia Joint Commission on Economic and Commercial Cooperation encourages the two countries' enterprises to cooperate. In this diplomatic visit, China respected Serbia's sovereignty and territory after the unilateral declaration of Kosovo (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, 2009). Serbia has signed an agreement regarding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Memorandum of Understanding on Jointly Advancing the Belt and Road Initiative (2019) and the Plan for Bilateral Cooperation under the Framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (2018).

Recently, as COVID-19 spread in Serbia-China cooperated in resolving this problem. It brought intimate relations. In February 2022, Vučić conducted a diplomatic visit to Beijing; Xi Jinping stated that China and Serbia have an "iron-clad friendship" and that the high-level mutual political trust between China and Serbia has endured in recent years (Huld and Zhou.2022). Since 2012, Beijing has initiated a vision to expand its business and investment opportunities with 17 countries in Eastern and Central Europe, in 2021 ,Lithuania pulled out from this bloc and renamed into the 16+1 mechanism. In terms of the Chinese, establishing an integrated economic space in the direction of their economic expansion is advantageous. The Balkan region is close to the EU, allowing Chinese enterprises to access European markets readily.

On the relations with Kosovo, China did not recognize Kosovo's declaration of independence, its presence in Serbia (as in the rest of the Western Balkans) has remained primarily economic, and Chinese support for Serbia has not been widely publicized. In the absence of significant policy changes and far more direct EU influence, Beijing's growing overall influence may challenge the spread of good governance in the Western Balkans. In turn, it may undermine the possibility of EU enlargement and its benefits for the EU and residents of Western European countries.

However, there is no engagement of China in Open Balkan narratives. So far, Beijing relies on the previous strategic cooperation with 16+1 for promoting

BRI initiatives; this format has been widely used to fund infrastructure projects in the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, Serbia needs to posit the relations of China with the EU and the USA. Washington led the EU to be a part of the anti-Chinese coalition. In contrast, Duško Dimitrijević (2020) argued for China, Serbia is a critical functional component of the EU's integration process. The EU's sizable single market, which has a strong buying power, maybe the perfect location for Chinese investment and its goods and services deployment. China thus fosters Serbia's economic move towards market liberalization and supports Serbia's ambitions for full membership in the EU. China, in some parts, could be a partner in a bilateral context, in the contrary Serbia's Foreign Policy should notice its relations with the west.

## Conclusion

Open Balkan initiative is an essential agenda for Serbia before joining the EU. Regarding Ana Bnarbić's statement, it will help Serbia to survive after joining the new integration regime in 2025. However, Berlin Process was stated by Scholz as the main dialogue as WB6 before accessing the EU indicated antithesis. Surprisingly, at the Berlin Process summit 2022, Ana Bnarbić supported this dialogue; it was a blunder statement. Moreover, Berlin Process succeeded at the civil society level. In addition, continuing Open Balkan in the future is very harmful, engendering skepticism among their members. The supportive act from Kosovo, Montenegro, and BiH need to be rethought again by Serbia as the initiator of the Open Balkans. The normalization with these states is the first step for Serbia before asking them to join this initiative.

Furthermore, Serbia needs to act clearly through the dynamics of the great powers (the USA, Russia, and China) surrounding the discourse of Open Balkan and its initiative, which aims to construct prosperity and harmonization in Western Balkan. Moreover, the ambiguity of the four pillars of foreign policy should be re-shaped. Belgrade needs to decide whether it aligns with the West or East. The poll public opinion believes that East is a close ally of Serbia. The complexity of the Ukraine crisis triggered the EU to balance Russia when the EU commission declared it at the Tirana summit in 2022.

This summit can be an opportunity for Serbia to align with the West, and the credibility of the EU is tested to save Western Balkan from East, Russia, and China. The increased engagement of the USA, Russia, and China will be critical, particularly in the Kosovo dispute, the EU accession, and the Open Balkan initiative. Last, Belgrade should decide the priority of its foreign policy, either focusing on an inward-looking orientation (maintaining relations with Western Balkan states, especially Kosovo) or an outward-looking (aligning with West and East).

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